

# EDITORIAL: CANNED TELEVISION GOING GLOBAL - THE TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF READY-MADE CONTENT IN TELEVISION

The international distribution and circulation of audio-visual content is one of the most relevant in recent debates in media and television studies: in the “age of plenty”<sup>1</sup>, distribution presents innovative features relating to both the introduction of new digital platforms and the diverse strategies developed by traditional and innovative players (including public service broadcasters, commercial, pay broadcasters and OTT global services such as Netflix and Amazon Video). As scholars have observed, contemporary media ecosystems are characterized by a “distribution revolution” that affects the media and entertainment business in many different ways<sup>2</sup>.

This area has been the subject of much previous scholarship, particularly in terms of the relevance of TV formats, their centrality for the medium and its economy, and different practices of adaptation and “localization”<sup>3</sup>. However, much less attention has been devoted to so-called “ready-made content” (or “finished content”) and its circulation among different countries and markets. “Canned” programming is typically the output of a specific national TV and media system, but it spills across borders when licensed into different territories, sometimes even globally. Ready-made content has a long tradition of international selling and distribution: it has provided a crucial element in the offers and strategies of various national broadcasters, and has moreover contributed to the definition of network identity and brands in many different media contexts.

From a historical point of view, international markets have long been dominated by north-American ready-made programs (particularly in the forms of drama series, TV movies and, of course, films produced by the Hollywood industry). In certain periods, however, specific poles of production and exportation have also emerged elsewhere, for example in South America (particularly in the case of the “telenovela”) or Japan (historically an important centre for TV animation)<sup>4</sup>. Within Europe, the situation has been more fluid, with many examples of pre-sales and even co-production of series strongly rooted within a single culture, but subtly adapted to wider European audience tastes. Over the past fifteen years, the success of Danish drama or “Nordic Noir” (as in the cases of the international successes *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen*) is relatively a recent example of this tendency. This trend of European ready-made drama that gains an international, almost global distribution has been strengthened during the last decade or so: between 2008 and 2020, scripted-series production in Europe underwent a succession of major changes, prompting what has been termed a “European television fiction renaissance”<sup>5</sup>. Titles that have acquired a sizeable international audience and at least as much critical attention – such as *The Crown*, *The Returned*, *The Bureau*, *Gomorra*, *The Young Pope*, *Babylon Berlin*, *Deutschland 83*, *Cable Girls* and *The Wolfpack* – can be seen as the outcome of a progressive change involving a series of factors in the European TV industry. First and foremost among these is the role played by traditional pay broadcasters (such as Sky Europe or Canal+) or OTT platforms, which have increasingly led big budget co-productions that often become successful ready-made content, exportable to various countries and territories.

More in general, multi-channel and new forms of distribution have created new markets for ready-made programming, from successful experiments like UK Channel 4’s “Walter Presents” (now being rolled out across Europe and United States) to niche channels that show multiple variants of the same format from different cultures (for example the

different national versions of *Masterchef* distributed and broadcast abroad). Indeed, the current state of development of global players like Netflix and Amazon could also be seen as pan-world providers of traditional American “canned content”. But at the same time, as mentioned, they are increasing their strategies to develop “local” content that can nonetheless circulate widely. Consequently, the European context can be interpreted dually, as a place where ready-made programming has been imported from other countries (the USA, but also from other emerging markets, such as Israel or Turkey), but also as one for the production and diffusion of original content in different genres (particularly, but not only, scripted series), within and beyond the continent.

This special issue of *VIEW* focuses on the international circulation and distribution of ready-made content, in the form of scripted products. The following essays share an interest in considering the nuances in power dynamics (adaptation, localization, revision) that are bound to any transnational movements<sup>6</sup>. They also address a fruitful variety of problems and points of view that signal the wider potential of this field of research: the transnational circulation of TV content and the currently used market strategies; common ground and cultural proximity in certain cultural groups and/or regions; the role of European countries and markets in the development of international distributed content and its impact beyond the continent; the emerging role of OTT services in the internationalization of programming; the growing role played by curation and personalization in order to gain a competitive edge; the functions of “niche” content (such as arts programming) and or particular audience groups (such as the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies), and how these adapt to border-crossings; co-productions, but also co-distributions between different countries (such as China and the UK); processes of localizing and adapting foreign ready-made content, for example through dubbing, subtitling and voice overs; and the role of bottom-up circulation.

Following the standard for *VIEW*, the issue is divided between “Discovery” and “Exploration” articles.

The “Discovery” articles of the issue begin with Marta Perrotta’s essay, “*Master of Photography: Investigating Transnational Creative Exchanges in the Production of a Ready-Made Talent Show*”. The photography talent show on which she focuses, co-produced by an Italian company but distributed across Europe on Sky Arts channels, provides an interesting entry point to a series of valuable questions about transnational adaptability of canned products. The case both challenges and confirms the notion of the Italian production market as a “sleeping giant” (a big market, but with limited ability in exporting its content).

The same core question is continued in Lisa Lin’s article, “*Beyond Canned Television: BBC Earth’s Global Community Building and Coproduction Adventure in the Case of Tencent Video*”, albeit with an entirely different focus: “BBC Earth Tribe” on China’s Tencent Video streaming service. The service provides access to BBC documentaries for Chinese audiences, but also a space for fan communities, discussion and access to the filmmakers. Thanks to what Lin calls “technologically-empowered screens”, this case study illustrates how canned content, progressive distribution strategies and technological advances can help to forge new, transnational audiences.

Elena Prati’s article, “*From the West to the Kremlin and Back. Development Paths of Foreign Products on Russian Television*”, focuses on another different and little-analysed context: the Russian television environment. Prati expands on foreign, ready-made content by following its movement along three paths: adaptation, localization, and “Russification”. In particular, the Russification process is the most curious. The article provides some key concepts to help understand this phenomenon, through the analysis of several case studies like *The Nanny*, or Russian remakes, for instance of the popular US sit-com *How I Met Your Mother*.

In “*Transnational Television Distribution and Co-Production Challenges: A KirchMedia and Sony Pictures Television Case Study*”, Paul Torre explores the production and distribution process for television co-productions and explains the potential benefits and risks, compared to other media joint ventures. Analysing the co-production agreement between a German rights trader (KirchMedia) and a Hollywood studio (Columbia/Sony), the article focuses on production and distribution challenges and complex contractual arrangements within the context of global media trade. As the author states, “co-productions are situated in between acquiring rights to scripted and completed television programs on the one hand, and acquiring rights to format and adapt a television property on the other”. In this context, co-productions can certainly allow for increased creative control and profit sharing.



The final article of the “Discovery” section is entitled “Why So Successful? Audience Research on Turkish TV Series in Greece”. In her study, Eleni Pothou deals with a specific set of practices found in Turkish drama series that enable them to be cross-culturally consumed, focusing on their success in Greece. The international circulation of Turkish fictional television programs has increased, crossing over to wider audiences of different cultural regions. The audience research presented in this paper indicates cultural proximity as key to Greek consumption.

The “Exploration” section of this issue begins with Tim Raats and Catalina Iordache’s article, entitled “From Nordic Noir to Belgian Bright? Shifting TV Drama Production and Distribution in Small Markets: The Case of Flanders”. Raats and Iordache’s research provides specific insight on one of the most interesting aspects of the “European Renaissance”. Following the model of the “Nordic Noir”, and facilitated by relevant changes related to the digitization and internationalization of European production in the 2000s, Flemish TV drama has emerged from the Belgian TV ecosystem as one of the most interesting example of a small media market that is able to flourish in ready-made content.

In “Canned Adaptations and the International Success of Turkish TV Series”, Deniz Zorlu recalls a crucial issue that emerges in Pothou’s article (but from a different point of view). This article examines Turkish TV series’ recent success as canned programming primarily in newly developed and developing countries, with a close textual analysis of several popular Turkish adaptations. The author argues that Turkish series’ emphasis on nostalgic and melancholic narrative frames make these products particularly appealing in regions like Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia and South America. This is because, as Zorlu states, these series deal with relatable circumstances of swift and traumatic changes under neoliberalism.

In “The Curated TV Experience with ‘Value Added’: Walter Presents, Canned TV, Curation, and Post-Production Culture”, Kenneth Longden interprets the process of Walter Iuzzolino’s curation as a “post-production” process that establishes a competitive model for canned TV today, in a globalized context where audiences are seeking extra layers of value in their viewing experiences.

In their article “Lip-Sync for Your Life (Abroad). The Distribution, Adaptation and Circulation of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in Italy”, Luca Barra, Paola Brembilla, Linda Rossato and Lucio Spaziante explore one of the most intriguing cases of transnational circulation of a ready-made content: the global phenomenon of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The authors analyse the franchise from the point of view of its Italian distribution, adaptation for the local market and reception: their research clearly shows the relevance of national mediation and the fact that the Italian cult success of the show is also dependent on the local factors of this mediation as much as on the intrinsic quality of the product.

The issue of cultural and local reception of canned TV is also the focus of Bridget Kies in her article “A Vicious Viewership: Transatlantic Television Audiences and LGBTQ Identities”. While in the adaptation of formats gender expressions can become one of the elements that are reinterpreted from one nation to another, this process is not possible for ready-made content: rather, in this case, culturally-specific aspects of characters and stories relating to gender and sexuality raise questions about how viewers in different nations consume and interpret representations. Kies makes this clear through the British TV drama *Vicious*, which broadcast on American network PBS, and whose reception by LGBTQ communities change from one side to the other of the Atlantic, outlining again – as in the case of the Italian reception of *Drag Race* – the relevance of national and cultural mediation.

In their article “From *Parenthood* to *Tutto può succedere*: Ready-Made Elements and Cultural Translation”, Stefania Antonioni and Chiara Checcaglini frame the issue of remakes of scripted formats, analysing the case of an Italian version of the US TV drama *Parenthood*. Even more strongly than in the case of ready-made content, in scripted formats localization is a relevant issue: with this experiment, traditional Italian public broadcaster RAI tries to balance attention on younger, “slippery” viewers with the necessity to keep a general, mainstream audience.

The issue concludes with Florian Krauß’s article, “When German Series Go Global: Industry Discourse on the Period Drama *Deutschland* and its Transnational Circulation”. Krauß uses the case of *Deutschland 83/86/89* as a vehicle for

further reflections on the potential to export of quality German TV abroad. Combining interviews with the producers of the show and analysis of its content and promotion, he illustrates how this case demonstrates some potential, but also signals a series of inescapable tensions between national and transnational distribution tendencies.

In the light of the rich analyses contained in this issue of *VIEW*, it is certainly clear that the research field of international circulation of content offers new and significant opportunities to understand both the progressive and increasingly urgent push for globalization – which affects audiovisual media and their capacity to travel via traditional channels and digital platforms – and the complex, subtle, resistant processes of “mediation”, where not only the various media systems and contexts but also different national cultures continue to have great relevance.

Damiano Garofalo, Dom Holdaway and Massimo Scaglioni

## Notes

1. John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).
2. Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, eds, *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).
3. Cf. Albert Moran, *New Flows in Global Television* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009); Jean K. Chalaby, *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016).
4. Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006).
5. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds, *A European Fiction Renaissance. Television Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).
6. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2010): 7–21.

## MASTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

### INVESTIGATING TRANSNATIONAL CREATIVE EXCHANGES IN THE PRODUCTION OF A READY-MADE TALENT SHOW

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**Abstract:** Italy plays a peripheral role in the global market of ready-made shows, for historical reasons that pertain both to the marginality of the Italian language and to the scarcity of cultural and economic investments in the globalization of its products. This essay focuses on the analysis of *Master of Photography*, a talent show produced since 2015 by the Italian indie B/Arts for the pan-European production hub that Sky Limited conceived to produce suitable content for the group's national art channels (UK, Ireland, Germany, Austria and Italy). By situating this research within media production studies, the article will focus on the creative and production work needed to create and circulate a talent competition on art photography, a TV show belonging to a genre which usually licenses and exports formats adaptable to each country. The main outcomes highlight interesting forms of creative negotiation between two of the three main components of the coproduction, with results that push the show towards a broadening of the horizons of a now classic television genre.

**Keywords:** format, canned show, art television, co-production, pan-European, talent show, documentary

#### 1 No Country for TV Export. The Uncomfortable Role of Italy in the Transnational TV Market

In the global panorama of the TV industry, Italy plays a peripheral, problematic role both in terms of the production and international licensing of products – documentaries, series – and of the distribution of original formats to be adapted. Already in 2009, the FRAPA TV Formats of the World report defined Italy as a “sleeping giant” in the global TV market,<sup>1</sup> and in 2016 an Italian study conducted for the APT (Association of Television Producers)<sup>2</sup> highlighted the country's limited ability to develop an international-level TV creativity, despite the presence of transnational interests at different structural levels in the industry.<sup>3</sup>

Even more than linguistic and creative, this marginality is, above all, cultural and economic. The creators do not invest in the globalization of their products, deeming the national market safer – this choice is often inevitable – than the international one. This pushes the development of entertainment modes which rely on non-exportable elements (such as, personalities and talent) rather than “formattable elements (the shows' mechanisms)”<sup>4</sup> which could take the programs outside national borders. Besides emphasizing public television's missed opportunities to serve as “the driving force of the entire country's production apparatus”,<sup>5</sup> research has pointed out a substantial lack of structural policies supporting a globally conceived TV content, the absence of “professional figures who could garrison the international market”,<sup>6</sup> and, at the same time, the inability on the part of producers and especially broadcasters to act in synergy, in searching for advantageous protocols regarding international exploitation rights.

It is not a coincidence that Jan Salling, FRAPA's co-chairman and format distribution consultant, defines Italy and other Southern European countries such as Spain and Greece 'chickenshit' countries: not only "do they export almost no new ideas, but are not even first movers. They don't buy anything that hasn't already been sold in at least ten countries. [...] If you're not a first mover, it's hard to become a creative hotspot".<sup>7</sup> The lack of international innovation is a problem that can be handled only by those who take on the risk of investing in new projects and choosing the unbeaten path.

In this essay, I aim to problematize this issue by analyzing a TV show that, in Italy, appears as unique and innovative under many respects. It originated from the creative coproduction of three European countries (Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany), and was broadcast as a ready-made product on these countries' Sky Arts channels, as well as in Ireland and Austria. The show was also sold in several other markets, but is still marked by strong Italian production roots, thanks to the work of Ballandi Arts (B/Arts, today a part of Ballandi)<sup>8</sup> on behalf of the pan-European Sky Arts Production Hub (SAPH).<sup>9</sup>

The show is neither a documentary nor a drama series – two genres that are "the new normal"<sup>10</sup> for international coproduction and ready-made distribution – but rather a photography talent show meaningfully entitled *Master of Photography* (hereafter, *MoP*). The title is evidently inspired by the most successful of cooking show formats: in this show, a panel of expert judges selects the best among a group of photographers, both professional and amateur.

By locating this research study under the heading of media production studies, I will focus on the creative and production work needed to create and circulate a TV show belonging to a genre which usually licenses and exports formats adaptable to each country.

## 2 Literature Review and Research Questions

So far, the studies that have examined the television flows between the local and the global have given great importance to analyzing the format system,<sup>11</sup> one which, though nearing the latter part of its industrial life cycle,<sup>12</sup> is still an essential part of the TV business and provides a vantage point on the relationship between different production cultures, local adaptations, and national identities.

This research highlights the complex relationship between the features of a given media system – with its broadcasters, its market dynamics, its specific programming politics – and the socio-cultural, mindset, as well as the differences in perception between one country and the other.<sup>13</sup> Once combined, these elements often produce substantially different results in format adaptations. That is why studies of formats have focused mainly on their localization in different contexts, in the dialectic between homologation on universal modes encouraged by the globalization of the TV industry, and local spaces of cultural heterogeneity, in terms of content and production modes. Among the most studied cases, there are examples of observational reality programmes, game shows and talent competitions like *Survivor*,<sup>14</sup> *Big Brother*,<sup>15</sup> *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*,<sup>16</sup> *Pop Idol*<sup>17</sup> and *Masterchef*,<sup>18</sup> as well as some scripted formats like *Ugly Betty*.<sup>19</sup>

Within a debate that was previously dominated by a dialectic between cultural imperialism and local identities, the theme of transnational television has recently emerged. This lens brings emphasis towards the "intensification of connections between national industries and multinational conglomerations",<sup>20</sup> and the numerous forms of cross-border exchanges of "TV programmes but also knowledge, practices, creative ideas, financial means and personnel" – of which the formats are the most important demonstrations.

At the same time, a considerable part of transnational television – which has received lesser attention, in favour of the format phenomenon – is made up of often coproduced ready-made products meant for international distribution, like dramas and documentaries. This area of investigation has existed since television itself and, as the study by Nordenstreng and Varis has pointed out,<sup>21</sup> has been dominated by the focus on the United States and their exportations, later complemented by the attention on the emergence of other select production centres such as Australia, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, and few European countries,<sup>22</sup> always keeping an eye on potential cultural imbalances and the risk of homogenization among countries.

But, even if research on the global import-export of TV shows is less up-to-date and articulate, it has nonetheless been prompted by two interdependent factors. First, the role played by “non-traditional distribution over digital platforms”, which, as Hilmes remarks, directed the attention of audiences and scholars (especially in the US and UK) to serial products all over the world: “programs in their original forms, complete with subtitles”, which in the past would have been ‘re-versioned’ or simply not considered for programming.<sup>23</sup> The second factor is the international success of Nordic Noir in the form of Scandinavian crime series, and above all the Danish *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-2012), which demonstrated the potential of local products distributed abroad, as well as its strength facing adaptations:<sup>24</sup> “The Nordic Noir success of the past years has shown that audiences can gradually grow accustomed to watching foreign fare on national screens and that part of the fascination of these series can be the “exotic” element of learning more about another country and culture”.<sup>25</sup>

This success has encouraged scholars to reflect upon transnational production modalities, with nationally-grounded productions consequently re-considered in global terms:

[T]ransnational coproduction in the current era includes not just cofinancing or presale of distribution rights (i.e., putting money into a series upfront, but contributing very little creatively to the production): it also involves a creative partnership in which national interests must be combined and reconciled, differing audience tastes considered and, often, the collision of public-service goals with commercial expectations negotiated.<sup>26</sup>

Although Hilmes analyses the evolution of production partnerships between the US and UK in the field of serial fiction, I am interested in applying her research questions to creative coproduction in the case study that I propose.

The *MoP* experiment is an artistic skill competition belonging to the talent show genre, which in turn belongs to the wider category of reality entertainment. As the numerous local versions of *Idol* and *Masterchef* show, it is very rare that a product of this kind is proposed as ready-made to different national publics: it is easier and more effective to localize it through characters, stories, language, and cultural traits. From an empirical viewpoint, this study integrates different qualitative methodologies, conducting a formal analysis of *MoP* through the identification of its narrative structures and the highlighting of its most salient stylistic aspects. In addition to this, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in different sectors of the show’s Italian production, from key executives to authors and producers. Through the critical analysis of *MoP*’s form, and the contextualization of its style within the structural conditions of its production, my study looks at the writing, creative, and managerial processes that allow for the making of this product, focusing on the delicate issue of creative control.

In what way do international partners manage the creative process and negotiate between the need for national specificity and the necessity of a global appeal? How was the narrative engine assembled for a show that shares the same traits as several other international formats – the tasks, the expert judges, the aesthetic evaluation, the prize money – and yet not be customized and domesticated for different local versions but rather sold as ready-made? What are the challenges of a skill competition conceived for an international public?



### 3 The Challenges of a Ready-Made Talent Show

Ballandi is a leading production company in the field of entertainment in Italy. It was founded by one of the most important Italian producers, Bibi Ballandi – who passed away in 2018 – a man that made several television hits of the last decades, including *Ballando con le stelle*, 2005-, (the Italian adaptation of *Strictly Come Dancing*, 2004- ), which reached its 14<sup>th</sup> edition in 2019. With the launch of the Italian channel Sky Arte (2012), Ballandi has developed more than 100 hours of original productions about fine arts filmed in English and with a foreign-friendly style, filling the channel's schedule with many titles: *Masterpieces Unveiled* (2013-), a series looking for secret or unconventional messages in the works of great masters, hosted by the actress Greta Scacchi; *Seven Wonders* (2013-), a documentary series that presents innovative views of Italian landmarks (with an early use of flying drones); *Artists in Love* (2016), a docu-series that looks at love affairs between painters, musicians, writers and film directors and their muses; *Mystery of the Lost Paintings* (2018-), a seven-episode documentary on masterpieces that were destroyed, stolen or lost during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and above all the award-winning<sup>27</sup> talent show *MoP* (2016-), now in its fourth season.

*MoP* can be seen as a pivotal case in the evolution of Italian production routines, given the complexities and challenges presented by the creative coproduction (Italy, UK, and Germany) which was managed by SAPH. *MoP* brings together two TV narrative modes which are usually polar opposites: it is both a contest among photographers and a documentary that allows the public to view the whole process behind the making of a picture. It is also a way for the contestants to narrate the very reality that they need to document. This is possibly the first of the show's many unique elements which I aim to point out.

The mechanism of *MoP*, however, is far from original, and it demonstrates – already answering one of my research questions, at least partially – that its narrative engine is not any different from that of many other locally adapted talent shows. A group of photographers with varying backgrounds and skill levels, compete for a significant money prize.<sup>28</sup> The contest involves tasks where the photographers are required to work with different genres, from studio portraits to street photography, from reportage to nudes, from animal pictures to archaeological landscape, dealing with subjects that can be either picked or assigned. The editing of photos is supported by a professional who changes every time,<sup>29</sup> but the last word pertains to a jury that is made up of three internationally renowned personalities in the photography world: the innovative but controversial Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani, the British curator and cultural historian Mark Sealy, and visual editor Elisabeth Biondi, who was born in Germany.<sup>30</sup> The jury is tasked with making the contest progress by eliminating one contestant after another, until a winner is designated.



Figure 1. Frame from episode 'Sanctuary,' 3: 8.

The format of *MoP* originates from the collaboration of three people, two of whom are connected to Sky: Roberto Pisoni, head of Sky Arte Italia and SAPH, and Barbara Frigerio, showrunner and editorial responsible for SAPH, and therefore the link with the other countries that broadcast the show. The third person is Mario Paloschi, CEO of B/Arts, who was in charge of the executive production from the very first steps in the editorial development of the original idea. This creative core lay the foundations of the show's identity, and they have the final word anytime that issues regarding aesthetics, style, and content needed to be settled.

The genesis of the format coincides with the birth of SAPH in 2015 and with Sky Limited's idea to produce suitable content for any national art channel. Technically, *MoP* is not a coproduction that uses the three countries' resources, but rather a specific, experimental budget which 'is registered in Italy, where the Hub is located, but is licensed by the mother-company in the UK. Naturally, for fiscal reasons, there is a framework agreement in place, as well as a licensing contract which allows us to distribute the show to the other countries' channels. It would be too complicated to have three different budgets, as is the case in coproductions. It is, rather, a creative coproduction'.<sup>31</sup> This presents very interesting aspects in terms of the collaboration among subjects:

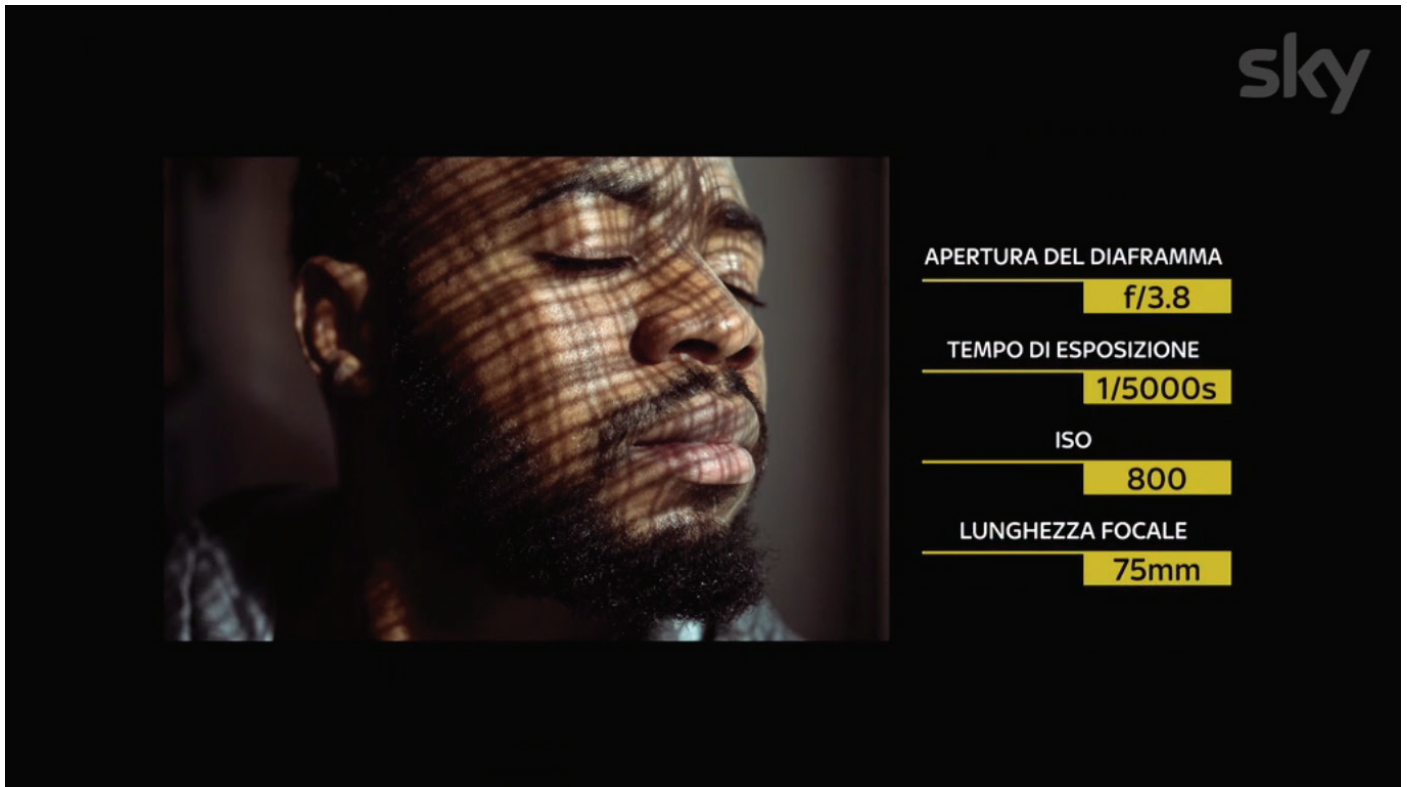
[E]ach country has its own television taste. Putting together all of these tastes and creating something that everyone likes, or that at least the commissioning editors of the three Sky Arts channels like, that was a real challenge. One that, as far as I know, had never been tried before.<sup>32</sup>

*MoP* is, therefore, the first project by SAPH to be conceived for a transnational public, along with two other documentary series (*Italian Season* and *Artists in Love*, also produced by B/Arts): "it was the most daring experiment, aiming to propose something that did not exist (a photography talent show) and in a previously untested way: a pan-European,<sup>33</sup> or even 'stateless' format".<sup>34</sup>

Photography is both a noble art and a widespread practice. The difference in choosing this, rather than cooking or dance, as the main theme in a TV talent game, lies in the extreme popularization and disintermediation of judgment, which can vary based on the aesthetic sensitivity and the background of the viewer, but that is still immediate and possible for the naked eye, with no need of an expert to, for instance, taste a dish and give their opinion. This aspect, too, is to be regarded as a unique element, one that possibly allows the show to go beyond local borders and cultural specificities.

At the same time, the format wishes to speak to the Sky Arte public, a world made up of art lovers: these are people who go to exhibitions, who read more than six books a year, who have a high income and advanced education. For this very selective (and restricted) public, the formula devised by Sky Arte Italia, for instance, plays on the difficult balance between cultural investigation and popularization,<sup>35</sup> that conjugates dense cultural contents with the language of mainstream television in an experimental way.<sup>36</sup>

The format presents a classical structure with horizontal narrative lines which run through the whole series, and a vertical narrative for each episode, which is always divided into two equal parts: one that takes place on location presenting the task, the other in the studio, featuring the photographs and the jury's evaluation. Within the frame of the talent show, emphasis has been placed on photographic technique, highlighting details without making it too hard for the public who may not know what a shutter is. The photograph is shown through a still frame, with graphics describing its main features (iris opening, exposure time, iso, focal length), while the editing showcases the moments in which the contestants verbalise, also on a technical level, their creative processes. The same is asked of the judges who, in their evaluation, are required constantly to explain technical elements employed in their aesthetic judgments, with the aim of making expert opinions entirely accessible and providing the audience the tools to develop an aesthetic competence in photography.



Figures 2, 3. Frames from episode 'Sanctuary,' 3: 8.



*MoP* is unique also because it is a talent show with no performance. There are no songs or dances, no moments in which the artists express themselves before the judges. During the episode's task, the contestants take hundreds of pictures, but when the time comes to present them, they need to select, depending on the task, from one to a maximum of five images for the judges to evaluate. Only at this stage (or after) can the video recording of the moments when the pictures were taken be viewed (provided it was caught on camera).



Figure 4. Frame from episode 'Sanctuary,' 3: 8.

From a production standpoint, reconstructing the narrative of those instants requires hours of filming (for a 45-minute episode, more than 70 hours are filmed, multi-camera):

[T]his means having a camera, a mic, and a logger-author on each contestant asking them what they are doing, so that sometimes we also get a contestant who turns around and replies 'I'm trying to frame that window over there, waiting for a change in light which might create a nice effect'. The problem is, you can't do this for every shot.<sup>37</sup>

This limitation becomes an opportunity, and each photograph shown is told through the reconstruction of the thoughts and feelings of the person who took it, keeping in mind that we are dealing with a very peculiar human material: contestants that tend to 'snub TV even though, like everyone else on talent shows, they are motivated by vanity'.<sup>38</sup> Besides, the artistic component of the tasks makes it very hard to manage contestants in the perspective of narrative:

The art that the photographers need to express cannot be directed by the authors. What the reporters do is make sure that all the material which will potentially constitute the vertical line and will give elements to the horizontal one was filmed.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 5. Frame from episode 'Sanctuary,' 3: 8.

This is an innovative element in the genre's language, one afforded by the singularity of the subject of the skill competition: it requires an approach that reduces the sensationalism of talent shows through the analytical tools of documentaries. "The dynamics of photography", Barbara Frigerio remarks, "is very solitary. The contestants interact very little, and even their exchanges with the judges are short and emotionally neutral. We focus more on the photo and on the photographer's activity, leaving aside the details of his feelings".<sup>40</sup> The contestants' identities, their nationalities, their emotions, and their competitiveness are almost cancelled, while the creative process, with its intimate, poetic nature, are emphasized.

#### 4 Anatomy of a Production Process

In its first season, at least, the format suffered from necessary fine-tuning between creative and production agents. Specifically, the first problem for the CEO of B/Arts was to hire a team of Italian people who were fluent in English: "It took us three years and numerous productions, but in the end the team was 'distilled', leaving only the people suited for the job, either for linguistic or methodological reasons".<sup>41</sup> The definition of work methodology in an international coproduction is the first complex decision-making process encountered:



It is a constant reporting. When you have each country's commissioning editor seated at one table, every step needs to be clear to each involved party, that is, over one hundred people in five countries. Deciding upon the most efficient file storage order in the cloud – from script to direction and production notes, each with its modifications and respective people in charge – took us six months.<sup>42</sup>

The complexity is proportional to the aptitude to this *modus operandi*:

Forcing Italians to adopt this mindset was a difficult job, because no one in Italy teaches it to those who enter the professional world. It was very tough, a real process. Now we can do it, but we only do it in international productions, because we have to. This has not taken root in our Italian productions.<sup>43</sup>

This latter aspect of the work's organization highlights elements that, by contrast, pertain to the productive relationships with Italian broadcasters, with which negotiations take place in informal contexts ("with RAI, it's about sensations", Paloschi says) or, as Scaglioni remarks, according to "less than transparent procedures".<sup>44</sup> The volatile relationship between buyers and producers is also mirrored in the creative room:

[In Italy] we are not used to dissecting the creative process to such a degree. Often, it is all kept in the minds of authors and directors, who are there, see each other, and talk. No one ever writes anything until they are forced to, because a schedule needs to be prepared for recording.<sup>45</sup>

All the interviewees highlight the complicated sequence of approval steps at every level of the production chain, from concept development to the selection of artists and contestants, from the treatment to the episode scripts and all editing phases:

We've had to introduce a preview even before the rough cut, so as to anticipate potential structural changes without then having to upset the editing once the work was finalized on a semantic and conceptual level. Each phase – rough cut, fine cut, pic lock – needs triple approval. It's a constant debate.<sup>46</sup>

A substantial agreement emerges from the sample of interviewees regarding their views on the experience of mediation among the different national components:

There is a bizarre decisional democracy which is sometimes positive and sometimes not, because it is influenced by the time variable. We need a lot of time in order to find a formula that works for everyone, but time is money, and so we need to learn to make do with things that we consider unsatisfactory.<sup>47</sup>

In this process, the three national souls should have equal weight, although the interviewees have often remarked that the UK enjoys a heavier 'symbolic' one, while Germany seems to step back in discussions, waiting for others to agree.

In fact, the channel Sky Arts UK has a much longer history,<sup>48</sup> a pool of subscribers which is almost twice as large as the Italian one,<sup>49</sup> an editorial direction calibrated for British television – where art shows are few but important, also on network TV<sup>50</sup> – and therefore aware of the necessity to stand out. Let us also think of *MoP*'s primacy in being the only show entirely made in Italy by Italian workers and Italian writers to be broadcast on British TV:

Maybe it's also due to the fact that Germans make far fewer decisions and seldom speak their minds, but the actual struggle takes place between Italian aesthetics and British pragmatism. With the addition of some detail requested by the Germans, such as "we need another German guy".<sup>51</sup>

As confirmed by the German senior producer,

[T]he decisions about hosts, guests and candidates were made together at production meetings in Rome. We always tried to make it as European as possible, with equal candidates from each Sky Country (the UK, Ireland, Germany, Austria and Italy) and “extra” candidates from other countries like France.<sup>52</sup>

If the Germans’ concern was making sure that nationalities were represented, for the British and their company policies the casting was not deemed complete if at least two equally skilled contestants with black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME) were not chosen and at least a woman and a non-Caucasian judge were not appointed:

This policy seems to force reality, but in the end it is liberating. Because we are building an imagery, it is essential that the human material reflects the demographics of the channels’ audiences and that it gives visibility to usually underrepresented identities. Of course, Italian society lacks the multiethnic composition of Germany and the UK, so we had to find an agreement on this as well. But in the end, this mediation gave the show an international scope.<sup>53</sup>

## 5 Cross-Cultural Adjustments in the Creative Room

If *MoP*’s format had been adapted in each of the countries involved in its coproduction, the resulting versions would have likely been quite different. Specific formal and stylistic elements have more than others been the object of controversy among the project’s creators, especially between the Italians and the British. Some of these include the choice of a particular narrative formula, which the Italians interviewed have labelled ‘British-style’, the close control on the emotional temperature of the show, the realistic approach that avoids, or at least limits, the dramatization of the contestants’ stories, and lastly the identification of themes for each task.<sup>54</sup>

The first aspect, that is the narrative model, is explained well by the CEO of B/Arts:

Italians enjoy going to a restaurant, having the waiter describe each dish, and then decide whether to order steak or fish depending on his facial expression. The British read the menu from outside the establishment, and if it’s not there, there’s a chance they won’t even walk in. The same goes with storytelling: if you don’t have an initial statement, a British show will not work. You have to explain everything within the first two minutes, uncover details that will be shown at the end, and expose how the narrative will be structured, otherwise the British viewers won’t get caught up. Conversely, Italians feel like they have already seen everything and lose interest.<sup>55</sup>

This is a great difference which has led to substantial changes during the editing process, proving that it is difficult to negotiate such an essential stylistic element.

Among the other examples gathered during the interviews, I would like to point out the attention to keeping the show’s emotional temperature low, contradicting the usual rules of the talent show, where the task serves as a means to increase competitiveness among contestants and expectations about results, until the ‘dramatic, tearful ritual’<sup>56</sup> of the elimination:

The British view this as a problem. That’s why the judges will never be able to evaluate pictures too harshly or say the words ‘you are eliminated’. The judges can’t even tell the contestant ‘this is the worst picture’, but rather tend to use more delicate phrases, such as ‘this is the least successful picture’. This speaks volumes about Anglo-Saxons and their fixations.<sup>57</sup>

It is interesting to note how research on the adaptations of British talent shows, as opposed to those from other countries, highlights opposite dynamics in dramatic construction and the judges’ emotional response. If we consider *Pop Idol* and the role of judge Simon Cowell, research has shown that his harsh comments were deemed

unacceptable for the Asian versions of the format, in which the jury had taken on a ‘much more polite’ attitude, following ‘local customs and traditions’.<sup>58</sup> Looking at the case of *Masterchef*, on the other hand, it has been noted how, despite keeping their authority and competence, judges were more low-key than in the US or Australian versions, and embodied the stereotypical cultural value of ‘emotional reserve’<sup>59</sup> associated with British culture.

A compromise among the differing visions is sought right until the recording time, when

writers meet with the networks and read the script together, check the main turning points, the way in which the tasks are presented, the episode’s key-terms, with suggestions as to which words are to be inserted into the judges’ script – such as ‘masterclass’ – and which ones are to be avoided – the British, for instance, can’t stand the word ‘challenge’. It’s a work that is done in close contact with the other networks, in English, and on each single word.<sup>60</sup>

This way, the judges are pushed to always express a positive opinion on the pictures that they eliminate, explaining what does not work and why. ‘It’s difficult to keep Oliviero Toscani within these boundaries’, claims the series producer, pointing out that the famous photographer is closer to Gordon Ramsay in *Hell’s Kitchen* than he is to the impassionate, diplomatic character seen in *MoP*:

The judge can’t say that he doesn’t like a picture without giving an explanation. This is something that other Italian talent shows treat with lightness. We have developed techniques that allow the judges to say things that the British thought were important, without directing them or their choices, which is instead the case in most talent shows, *Masterchef* included.<sup>61</sup>

The British partners’ need to control the judges’ communication style has prompted the Italian authors to find ways to interact with them without losing the authenticity of their intentions.



Figure 6. Frame from episode ‘Sanctuary,’ 3: 8.

A third clash that has required mediation is due to the fact that the British privilege realistic situations, with little emphasis on characters, rather than the dramatic charge of talent shows beloved by the Italian public.<sup>62</sup> “The Italian-style talent show rests upon the stories of the contestants, while the British don’t appreciate the confessional,<sup>63</sup> which is an element that we’ve had to give up on”,<sup>64</sup> also due to the contestants’ restrained personalities. Consequently, instead of diving deep into the personal backgrounds of the contestants and of building dynamics based on their most distinctive character traits and rivalries,<sup>65</sup> the resulting narrative focuses on the subjects of the tasks: the importance of the themes proposed allows the contestants to narrate the pasts of the people and places photographed.

Alongside classical architectural masterpieces, season after season, the photographers have been asked to show the hidden sides of famous places, such as Rome’s multicultural Torpignattara neighbourhood.<sup>66</sup> They photographed transgender people, Paralympic athletes, women in traditionally male positions of power, celebrity look-alikes, as well as unconventional subjects, such as working animals – dogs helping firefighters rescue people from the rubble, or donkeys doing pet therapy. For each of these themes there were viewpoints connected to the features and sensibility of each nationality:

There are countries where you can be sued if you show animals in captivity, and others where this is not a concern. In the episode on transgenders we walked on eggshells so as not to hurt anyone’s feelings. And even when we wanted to joke a little on something, the British would send us notes saying ‘this kind of humour is not funny to us’. Television is one of the elements that shapes, accompanies, and reflects the culture of a country, and during this project we have seen this extensively.<sup>67</sup>

Regarding this aspect, it bears pointing out that the game of mirrors between a culture and its TV representation was not particularly effective for the Italian public. Despite meeting Sky Arte’s goals, the Italian reception of this show was lukewarm, unlike in the UK, where viewers’ engagement was more than satisfactory.<sup>68</sup> The Italian public has possibly suffered from cultural and linguistic distance, something increased especially by the use of re-voicing which, despite lending greater realism to the dubbing by keeping the original voices and tones available in the background with a slight delay, paradoxically assimilates the program to the majority of ready-made factual documentaries:

When you watch *MoP*, you do not get the feeling that it is an Italian show, because it isn’t. It’s a show that’s conceived to be international, and therefore what it does tell you about Italy is only visible in three aspects: the Italian contestants, the presence of Toscani, and the locations, which for production reasons are almost entirely Italian.<sup>69</sup>

But perhaps this was not enough for the Italian public to become fully involved.

## 6 Conclusions

According to one of the key-people interviewed for this research, *MoP*, the ready-made show produced in Italy by SAPH and B/Arts for the Sky Arts channels of five European countries, and destined to the wider distribution arm Sky Vision,<sup>70</sup> is ‘what the Greeks would have defined a *hapax*, a word or a phrase that only occurs once within a work’, more precisely, within the work of an artist or within the entire literary production in a given language.

Through interviews to professionals involved in every stage of the production on the Italian side, and through a careful analysis of the narrative structure and stylistic aspects of the show, this research has highlighted its uniqueness. The analysis has also brought attention to a certain resistance to change displayed by some Italian production modes. None of the interviewees failed to mention how, despite positive personal and professional aspects, this creative collaboration was difficult, elaborate, tiring: “the problem is also having to decide, time after time, which compromises to make, with the awareness that the more one ‘yields’, the more the product becomes distanced from the Italian public”.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, the interviewees reveal that during the creative process considerable attention was paid to satisfying the expectations of the target audiences, rather than to creating a product that could travel beyond the borders of Italy, Germany, and the UK. Certainly, the coproduction has emphasized elements that could be relevant for all cultural identities involved in the project, and that could make it appealing to transnational audiences, but in this process of exchange and negotiation the British played the most decisive role in dramatic construction, where their pragmatism prevailed over the Italian aesthetic.

This was the case when opting for a narrative formula in which the opening statement briefly outlines the whole content of the episode, forcing important editing changes on the planning and elaboration of the opening segments. This was also the case when dealing with the emotional aspect of the show, which resulted in the loss of pre-eminence of the contestants' personal stories in favour of a focus on the photographic process and the contents of each task. Lastly, the same phenomenon shaped the role of the jury – always a strong localizing factor in worldwide talent shows – which, in this program, was devised to be specialized and understandable, authentic and believable, but also representative of different cultural sensitivities, because “what is defined as authority varies from culture to culture”.<sup>72</sup> Even without stressing the individual judges' identities, a jury comprising professionals with different nationalities and backgrounds offered the viewers a varied range of entry points to the experience.

As far as Italy is concerned, the strategic value of *MoP* is its having been the test bench for an innovative, original creative and production process – one never tried before and never replicated after – even despite the lengthy times required by the coordination of all national parties, growing budget cuts and quality expectations for the product.<sup>73</sup> The high aesthetic quality of cinematography, sound and direction, which are the central elements of the Italian television style, was highly appreciated by the British and the Germans – “our aesthetic competence has often surprised our international partners”<sup>74</sup> – becoming one of the main strengths of the Italian production in the overall creative process. *MoP* recently won the Royal Television Society Award in the category ‘Crafts and Design – Multicamera Work’ and has managed to fascinate those who work in television, becoming “one of the favourites among cameramen, directors of photography, directors, writers – to the point that those who don't work on it say that they would like to”.<sup>75</sup>

Lastly, this coproduction's transnational collaboration gave birth to a show that was able to widen the horizons of a now classic TV genre: “sharing ideas about producing television will result in common production practices, values and standards, and in the end this can be expected to reflect in the techniques used and in the overall style of TV programmes”.<sup>76</sup> In fact, *MoP* is a docu-talent show, enriched with a strong educational ambition, where attention to style has left the narrative engine almost completely unaffected and adhering to the “basic skilled-challenge-judgement-elimination engine”.<sup>77</sup> Educational and documentary elements, however, do find a space in the show, also thanks to B/Arts' experience in the production of art documentary series: “*MoP* teaches the viewers how to have an artistic taste, or rather an interpretive taste regarding an art form. Today, this is unpopular because TV education has been replaced by the tutorial mania. But we did it regardless”.<sup>78</sup>

This research cannot accurately measure the consequences of an experience of creative coproduction on the development of the production and distribution of Italian ready-mades in the world. Certainly, the establishment of transnational goals and the possibility, for an English-speaking Italian innovative show to be presented by televisions across Europe and the world have allowed B/Arts and the creators of this show to experiment with a different production model, one that has had positive effects on the company's international reputation and on the personal growth of professionals involved. Thanks to the production's constant reporting, each writer, filmmaker, and producer involved was able to break down their contribution within the process and to distinguish it, thus gaining awareness as to how much their work depends on previous decisions and influences in subsequent phases. This was an exercise in mediating and understanding the aesthetic sensitivities of international partners: an experience which is rare in national productions and that is even more limited when adapting a global format to local contexts.



## Notes

1. FRAPA, *The FRAPA Report 2009. TV Format to the World*. FRAPA. 2009. *The FRAPA Report 2009: TV Formats to the World*. Cologne, 63.
2. Research conducted by Ce.R.T.A. (Centro di Ricerca sulla Televisione e gli Audiovisivi of the Catholic University in Milan) with the aim to understand the strengths and weaknesses of national television entertainment production.
3. Among Italian independent TV production companies, the main ones, EndemolShine Italy, Banijay, and FermantleMedia, are part of international groups. Moreover, since its inception in 2003, Sky has played a key role as the only pay TV in the nation, re-shaping the power balance within Italian TV and reaching a position of equal relevance to the two historically dominant broadcasters, the public RAI and its private free-to-air competitor Mediaset.
4. Massimo Scaglioni, "Distratta Italia, [Forgetful Italy]" *Link. Idee per la televisione. Distretti produttivi emergenti* 21, (2017): 239, <https://www.linkideeperlatv.it/intrattenimento-in-italia/>
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Francesco Morstabilini, "Intervista a Jan Salling. Come si crea un format che può circolare nel mondo" [Interview to Jan Salling. How to create a format that can circulate around the world], *Link. Idee per la televisione. Distretti produttivi emergenti* 21, (2017): 73, <https://www.linkideeperlatv.it/intervista-jan-salling/>
8. *B/Arts (Ballandi Arts)* was born in 2012 as the documentary division of *Ballandi Multimedia*, a production company specializing in entertainment and big TV events. It became an autonomous company in 2016 thanks to Bibi Ballandi (entrepreneur, producer, and founder of his namesake company) and Mario Paloschi, with the aim to produce cultural programs and 'the mission to enhance and promote culture in the widest sense and the Italian patrimony through a strongly international narrative approach'. In 2018, after Bibi Ballandi's death, the two companies have merged again to form a joint company, Ballandi, under the leadership of the 'veteran producer' Mario Paloschi.
9. Launched in Milan in 2015, the SAPH is led by Roberto Pisoni, also head of Sky Arte (Italy). Building on Sky's long-standing strategy to bring together pay TV operators from strategic European markets, this overlapping of roles bears witness to the platform's willingness to make Italy the center of production companies interested in the creation of quality contents for the group's art channels, complementing the works produced and broadcast in each country: Sky Arts UK & Ireland, Sky Arts Germany & Austria, and Sky Arte Italia.
10. Michele Hilmes, "Transnational TV: What Do We Mean by 'Coproductio' Anymore?," *Media Industries Journal* 1, no. 2 (2014): 11.
11. See Albert Moran, ed., *TV Formats Worldwide. Localizing Global Programs* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009); Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf, eds., *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Jean K. Chalaby, *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2015); Karina Aveyard, Pia Majbritt Jensen, and Albert Moran, eds., *New Patterns in Global Television Formats* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2016).
12. See Paul Torre, "Television Formats and the United States: New Developments in Production and Distribution," *International Journal of Digital Television* 8, no. 1 (2017): 117-41.
13. See Pia Majbritt Jensen, "How Media System Rather Than Culture Determines National Variation: Danish Idols and Australian Idol Compared," in *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format*, eds. Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 27.
14. Matthew Smith and Andrew Wood, eds., *Survivor Lessons: Essays on Communication and Reality Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).
15. Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones, eds., *Big Brother International: Formats, Critics and Publics* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004).
16. Anne Cooper-Chen, "A World of 'Millionaires': Global, Local and 'Glocal' TV Game Shows," in *Global Entertainment Media: Content, Audiences, Issues*, ed. Anne Cooper-Chen (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 237-51; Lauhona Ganguly, "Global Television Formats and the Political Economy of Cultural Adaptation: Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? in India," in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders*, eds. Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 323-45.
17. Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin, eds., *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Lauhona Ganguly, "Global Television Formats and Their Impact on Production Cultures: The Remaking of Music Entertainment Television in India," *Television & New Media* 20, no. 1 (2019): 20-35.
18. Tasha Oren, "On the Line: Format, Cooking and Competition as Television Values," *Critical Studies in Television* 8, no. 2 (2013): 20-35.
19. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds., *TV's Betty Goes Global. From Telenovela to International Brand* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).
20. Jolien van Keulen, "Aesthetic Proximity: The Role of Stylistic Programme Elements in Format Localisation," *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 5, no. 9 (2016): 96.

21. Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis, "Television Traffic, a One Way Street? A Survey and Analysis of the International Flow of Television Programme Material," Reports and Papers on Mass Communication 70 (Paris: Unesco, 1974).
22. Daniël Biltreyst and Philippe Meers, "The International Telenovela Debate and the Contra-flow Argument: A Reappraisal," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2000): 393-413; Andrea Esser, "Audiovisual Content in Europe: Transnationalization and Approximation," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 15, no. 2 (2007): 163-84; Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI, 2006); Daniel Mato, "The Transnationalization of the Telenovela Industry, Territorial References, and the Production of Markets and Representations of Transnational Identities," *Television & New Media* 6, no. 4 (2005): 423-44.
23. Hilmes, "Transnational TV", 11.
24. Think of the international success of Bron/Broen (*The Bridge*, 2011-2018), the Danish original, and the lukewarm reception of its remakes (*The Bridge* for the US and Mexico; *The Tunnel* for the UK and France, 2013). See Annette Hill, "Push-Pull Dynamics: Producer and Audience Practices for Television Drama Format *The Bridge*," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 8 (2016): 760.
25. Ib Bondebjerg, Eva Novrup Redvall, Rasmus Helles, Signe Sophus Lai, Henrik Søndergaard, and Cecilie Astrupgaard, *Transnational European Television Drama. Production, Genres and Audiences* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 251.
26. Hilmes, "Transnational TV", 12.
27. In 2019 the director of MoP, Giuseppe Bianchi, won the coveted award of the Royal Television Society Award in the category '**Crafts and Design - Multicamera Work**'.
28. 150,000 euros in the first season, 100,000 euros in the following ones.
29. MoP has hosted many guests: in the latest season alone, Paolo Pellegrin, Martin Schoeller, Brenda Ann Kenneally, Jérôme Sessini, Chris Buck and Rankin. In previous seasons, international stars Sebastião Salgado and Steve McCurry were also guests.
30. From 2016 to today, only Toscani was a regular in all four seasons. In the first season, he was joined by Simon Frederick and Rut Blees Luxemburg, and by Caroline Hunter and Darcy Padilla in the second one. The first season had Isabella Rossellini as the presenter, but her role was removed from the format starting from the second season.
31. Roberto Pisoni, Interview with author, July 8, 2019.
32. Davide Corallo (series producer), Interview with author, July 5, 2019.
33. As Bourdon remarks in his reconstruction of the efforts to cultivate European identity through television, the experiments concerning pan-European entertainment shows are very few. Among these, besides the Eurovision Song Contest, we need to mention the famous *Jeux Sans Frontières*, a competition among teams from different European countries, which aired in Eurovision for several editions starting in 1965. See Jérôme Bourdon, "Unhappy Engineers of the European Soul. The EBU and the Woes of Pan-European Television," *The International Communication Gazette* 69, no. 3 (2007): 263-80.
34. Mario Paloschi (CEO of B/Arts), Interview with author, July 12, 2019.
35. Pisoni, Interview.
36. Among the examples of this experimentation are the choice of a presenter or a narrating voice-over, of a genre (the talent show highlighting the artists), or of a recognizable narrative style (Carlo Lucarelli's noir biographies, such as in *Muse inquietanti*).
37. Paloschi, Interview.
38. Corallo, Interview.
39. Ibid.
40. Barbara Frigerio (showrunner SAPH), Interview with author, October 25, 2019.
41. Paloschi, Interview.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Scaglioni, "Distratta Italia", 239.
45. Paloschi, Interview.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Sky Arts in the UK (originally, *Artsworld*) was born in 2000, Sky Arte in Italy in 2012, and Sky Arts in Germany was launched in 2015 as an on demand service, becoming a linear TV channel the following year. In 2019, it went back to being an on demand service.
49. In late 2018, after Sky Limited was acquired by Comcast, the pay TV subscribers in the UK were roughly 9,54 million (source: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/dec/23/netflix-to-overtake-sky-satellite-tv-subscriptions-by-end-of-year>), excluding the approximately 1,5 millions subscribers of the streaming platform NowTV. At the end of the year, Sky Italia counted over 5 million subscribers (source: <https://www.milanofinanza.it/news/sky-italia-sfonda-la-soglia-dei-5-milioni-di-abbonati-e-trascina-il-gruppo-201901242108026140>).
50. In 2014, just one year before the launch of the SAPH, "Sky declared a new era of growth for Sky Arts, facilitated by a budget increase and better placement on the electronic programme guide". However, as the Ofcom data presented in the article reveal, "art television is a genre 'at risk' of disappearing, as relatively small audiences are unable to offset production costs". See Cairiona Noonan and Amy Genders, "Breaking the Generic Mould? Grayson Perry, Channel 4 and the Production of British Arts Television," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 13, no. 1 (2018): 80.
51. Paloschi, Interview.
52. Matthias Emmerich (senior producer Sky Deutschland [3rd Season]), Interview with author, August 16, 2019.

53. Margherita Principe (executive producer SAPH), Interview with author, October 11, 2019.
54. Ostensibly, these evaluations suffer from the fact that the sample of interviewees is almost completely circumscribed within Italian borders, but it was impossible to reach out to people connected to the British channel.
55. Paloschi, Interview.
56. Guy Redden, "Making over the talent show," in *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, ed. Gareth Palmer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 137.
57. Corallo, Interview.
58. Sukhpreet Singh and Martin Kretschmer, "Strategic Behaviour in the International Exploitation of TV Formats: A Case Study of the Idols Format," in *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format*, eds. Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin (Ashgate: Farnham, 2012), 21.
59. Louann Haarman, "MasterChef. Cooking Competition across Cultures," in *Values and Choices in Television Discourse. A View from Both Sides of the Screen*, eds. Roberta Piazza, Louann Haarman, and Anne Caborn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 179.
60. Fabrizio Guiducci (senior reporter), Interview with author, April 10, 2019.
61. Corallo, Interview.
62. "Italians want more carnage. They want to see blood flow!," Ibid.
63. The confessional is the tool through which details of the lives of the show's protagonists are revealed.
64. Pisoni, Interview.
65. There is only one episode in the format ('Home Sweet Home') in which the contestants talk about themselves: the last three photographers still in the game go back home to photograph the place from which they come and make a self-portrait.
66. The majority of these tasks takes place in Italy, because the budget allowing contestants to travel across Europe is ever shrinking. On the one hand, this is an instance of the negotiations among different parts of the production chain highlighted by many interviewees. On the other hand, however, this provides an occasion to show the country in a way which few were familiar with.
67. Corallo, Interview.
68. Essentially, these are the remarks that emerged during the exchanges with Sky stakeholders, based on proprietary qualitative studies. Ratings are not available because the Sky Arts channels have no rating measurement.
69. Corallo, Interview.
70. Today folded into NBC Universal's Global Distribution unit following Comcast's \$39 billion purchase of Sky Limited.
71. Pisoni, Interview.
72. Karen Ross and Doug Wood, "Competition and Cookery in a Global Cultural Format," in *Values and Choices in Television Discourse. A View from Both Sides of the Screen*, eds. Roberta Piazza, Louann Haarman, and Anne Caborn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 226.
73. Many interviewees remark about the systematic budget shrinkage from one season to the next.
74. Paloschi, Interview.
75. Manuela Calabrò (production supervisor), Interview with author, April 18, 2019.
76. van Keulen, "Aesthetic Proximity", 97.
77. Tasha Oren, "On the Line", 28.
78. Corallo, Interview.

## Biography

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# BEYOND CANNED TELEVISION

## BBC EARTH'S GLOBAL COMMUNITY BUILDING AND COPRODUCTION ADVENTURE IN THE CASE OF TENCENT VIDEO

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**Abstract:** The October of 2018 saw the creation of BBC Earth Tribe, a global online brand representing BBC Natural History Unit (NHU)'s programming on Tencent Video, one of China's leading online streaming services. Besides providing over 650 hours of BBC documentaries to Chinese online audiences, BBC Earth Tribe delivers unprecedented access to creators from BBC NHU through interactive screen forms and offline events. This article offers a study of BBC Earth's global strategies in its partnerships with one of the largest Chinese digital platforms, Tencent, in terms of coproduction and online community building beyond traditional canned television distribution. It examines *Project Penguin*, which has formalised coproduction partnerships between BBC Studios and Tencent Online Media Group (OMG) since October 2018. The distribution partnerships involve not only pre-sales of BBC Earth's flagship documentaries but also coproduction and online community building on Tencent-run platforms, from streaming services to social media platforms. By examining BBC Earth's distribution strategies in the Chinese media landscape from the early 2000s, the paper aims to theorise distribution strategies between BBC Studios and Tencent Video and its socio-cultural implications on television distribution in the digital, multiplatform era of convergence.

**Keywords:** BBC Earth, documentary, coproduction, distribution, BBC Studios, Tencent Video, Internet television

### 1 Introduction

Media industries across the globe have been undergoing a digital shift in their organizational structures, industry strategies and programming practices. Digital technologies have disrupted the traditional logics of media production and distribution. Interactive media technologies have led to a proliferation of opportunities for media makers to reconceptualise linear programmes into online interactive content. Online streaming services, from Netflix and Amazon Prime to YouTube, have significantly transformed and disrupted the logics of production, distribution and reception of international documentaries. Television, as a business, has been heavily influenced by distribution technologies, deregulation and privatisation across different countries.<sup>1</sup> With the fragmentation of audiences, platforms and revenues,

broadcasters across the globe have been struggling to navigate the new media landscape, maintain online relevance and monetise their content across territories and platforms. Major media players have been adjusting their business models and rethinking the ways that media content moves through “space (flows) and time (windowing)”.<sup>2</sup>

Recent decades have seen a momentous growth in international co-production and the sales of formats where international television companies are heavily involved in a range of businesses, including co-production financing, the licencing management of format production, intellectual property, licensing merchandise and branding marketing across multiple platforms and markets.<sup>3</sup> Having acknowledged the limitation of traditional canned distribution, broadcasters and production companies have started exploring the potential of co-production partnerships and format trades. Public service broadcasters have come to rely on revenues from international sales to aid in production budgets as an integral part of their public service remit.<sup>4</sup> Having faced the licence fee crisis, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has been seeking new business opportunities through co-production and distribution with non-European territories. Merged with BBC Worldwide in 2018, BBC Studios, the focus of this study, was the commercial arm of the public service broadcast which monetised media content through international sales and coproduction. As Alastair Fothergill, Senior producer at the BBC Natural History Unit, argued in 2012, “I think the principal achievement of landmark wildlife series is a celebration of the natural world for a very, very large audience”.<sup>5</sup> NHU wildlife programmes have, as Morgan Richards<sup>6</sup> states, evinced the tensions between “the BBC’s public service values and the need for these series to appeal to global television markets”. I would argue that these tensions could be balanced out through international sales, which generate revenues in order to supplement production budgets upon the slump of license fee.

In order to contribute to an extension of current debates on the shift beyond canned television distribution, this article explores the new models of international co-production partnerships and online community-building between BBC Studios and Tencent Video. Firstly, it will review recent scholarships on television coproduction and the impact of digital streaming services on the existing models of production and distribution. The second section elaborates on the research methods employed during the fieldwork, a combination of ethnography and industry and textual analysis. Thirdly, the study examines the coproduction partnerships between the BBC and Tencent Video in the case of Penguin Project and BBC Earth Tribe, followed by an examination of online screen forms on Tencent Video. In particular, I focus on three forms of what I define below as ‘technologically-empowered screens’: (1) BBC Earth’s official fan page BBC Earth Tribe on Tencent Video; (2) BBC Earth’s social media account on Wechat platform; and (3) on-screen Chinese bullet comments on BBC documentaries. Having adopted an integrated method that combines television and digital media studies, political economy of communication and global media studies, this paper aims to reconceptualise television distribution in the multi-platform, streaming era.

## **2 Rethinking Television Coproduction between the UK and China**

With regard to international distribution, a majority of media scholars have focused on the circulation of film rather than the distribution of television content, “let alone television content that is not produced in the US”.<sup>7</sup> This article aims to fill in a broad research gap in television distribution between the UK and China with a case study of BBC Studios and Tencent Video. Television coproduction has helped western media corporations to circumvent control or to collaborate with Chinese media players, whilst preparing them to adapt to the changing values and local tastes of the new generations in China.<sup>8</sup> International television distribution has taken place traditionally between companies (distributors) that have content to license and buyers (from broadcasters to online players) who need licensed content to satisfy their broadcast schedules and streaming services.<sup>9</sup>



The international television distribution models have changed in recent decades upon a range of factors, from the longstanding backdrops such as commercialisation and deregulation to digitalisation and the rise of alternative distribution platforms. Jeanette Steemers has pertinently theorised the transformation into two phases. The first transformation in distribution, according to Steemers,<sup>10</sup> took place in the 1980s and 1990s, when deregulation and satellite television led to a momentous expansion in the number of television channels (a ‘multi-channel era’, to use Lotz’s term). As she continues, moving forward to 2014, the creation of new digital channels and on-demand services has dramatically altered the television distribution market, which in turn disrupts old distribution patterns and provides access to new content from new players.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike most western counterparts, Chinese television currently has strict state censorship as well as a limited number of state-owned broadcast channels. Under the four-tier radio and television broadcasting structure at the county, city, provincial and national levels, Chinese television is characterised by a strong public service media culture with relatively low service costs, which arguably focus predominantly on “a narrowly defined ‘basic cultural right’ of access to broadcast media and on social equalization between urban and rural access to broadcast networks”.<sup>12</sup> To control the foreign content distributed on broadcast channels, the Chinese government has banned all foreign channels from broadcasting in mainland China, excluding five-star hotels and some regional areas in Guangdong province. With international OTT players (such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime) and western satellite channels (such as the BBC, Fox International Channel, Discovery and CNN) banned in mainland China,<sup>13</sup> Chinese television has, instead, been dominated by the technological ascendancy of its state-led ‘digital champions’.<sup>14</sup> The current decade has seen the rise of Chinese online video platforms and new business models (particularly the platform model of data-driven commercially-run digital giants such as BAT, Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent), which have not only disrupted the existing Chinese broadcast model but have also provided an alternative space for creative expression.

Upon the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China’s Reform and Opening-up policy (1978–2018), many observers labelled the Chinese economic boom ‘miraculous’, one in which hi-tech has featured heavily (e.g. Mackerras, 2018).<sup>15</sup> An array of state-led OTT services and online streaming platforms have disrupted and transformed the Chinese media landscape. From Baidu-run streaming service iQiyi, Alibaba’s Youku/Tudou to Tencent Video, Chinese internet-distributed television has reshaped viewing experiences among Chinese viewers, especially the younger generations. During my fieldwork at the Asian Television Forum (ATF) in Singapore in December 2016, the newly-emerged Chinese digital players (such as Tencent Video, iQiyi, Youku, Sohu, Bilibili) dominated several large sections on the market floor which provided a stark contrast to the broadcast-centred floor plan a decade ago. With State support, Tencent has been allowed to diversify and expand its businesses ‘without the level of scrutiny or competition you might see in western countries’.<sup>16</sup> Tencent operates its integrated Internet services across four main sectors (media, communications, online games, utilities) and seven business operations,<sup>17</sup> including social media and online video production. The success of Tencent Video can be attributed to the massive number of MAU Wechat users (Wechat reached 1.08 billion MAUs up to the third quarter of 2018)<sup>18</sup> who log onto Tencent Video directly through Wechat in-app scanning with monthly subscription fees automatically paid through Wechat Wallet. Launched in April 2011, Tencent Video has become one of the first-tier subscription-based video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms in mainland China, with 457 million mobile monthly active users (MAUs) as of October 2017.<sup>19</sup>

Recent decades have seen burgeoning collaboration between Chinese and British broadcasters. The coproduction deals between the BBC and Chinese television can be traced back to 2008, when the BBC and CCTV, the Chinese national broadcaster, coproduced the natural history documentary series *Wild China* (BBC Two, 2008) in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.<sup>20</sup> The strategy behind coproduction has been glocalisation: a blending of the foreign and the local.<sup>21</sup> According to Jo Sermon, the then BBC Worldwide director of content strategy, the production process – including 57 filming trips in some of the most remote regions of China, with 20 camera men – could not have been created without a local partner organisation to negotiate the bureaucratic hoops which it had to jump through to gain

the access to unveil China's mix of ancient and modern cultures.<sup>22</sup> David Weiland, the Executive Vice President of BBC Studios Asia, stated in a press release for *Seven Worlds, One Planet* (the BBC Studios Natural History Unit's (NHU) latest landmark natural history series) at BBC Media Centre in 2019:

We are excited to extend our long standing and mutually beneficial relationships with CCTV and Tencent. By partnering with companies of this calibre we are able to bring the BBC's world class natural history to Chinese audiences and invest in the next generation of landmark natural history programmes.<sup>23</sup>

*Seven Worlds, One Planet* features remarkable animal behaviour from the baking plains of Africa and the frozen waters of Antarctica to Asia, the biggest of all continents. Although faced with the bureaucratic and political barriers during the coproduction process, both executives believed the partnership had proved critically and financially lucrative.<sup>24</sup> As the BBC's Director of Content Strategy stresses, the partnerships made the filming possible and secured the location permissions from 18 separate Chinese government authorities.<sup>25</sup>

Compared to mature UK-China film coproduction treaties (e.g. BFI and BAFTA coproduction funds, tax reliefs), British and Chinese broadcasters and television producers have been facing a relatively young system of international coproduction. Collaborations between Chinese and British broadcasters saw a significant growth upon the launch of the Belt-Road-Initiative (BRI) in 2015. The BRI provides not only an infrastructure-based initiative and legislative framework but also a range of cultural policy initiatives which allow governments to issue media policies and initiatives that facilitate cooperation and coproduction among different creative industries. The official visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to London saw the commencement of the UK-China Television Coproduction Treaty, which has since delivered an annual fund of around £55 for the UK television industry to access the Chinese market.<sup>26</sup> Together with agreements in other creative sectors (partnerships with British Museum, British Library, Tate Britain and Durham University), the coproduction treaty has facilitated the creation of *Secrets of China's Forbidden City* (Channel 4, 2017), *Genius of the Ancient World: Confucius* (BBC Four, 2017) and *Chinese New Year: The Biggest Celebration on Earth* (BBC Two, 2016).

### 3 Methodology

Taken as a whole, from the early years of political-economic studies, a considerable number of television scholars have embraced macro-level political economy studies on television distribution.<sup>27</sup> Film scholars employing a political-economic approach have explored the global media business through rights management and exploitation with their top-down examinations of media policy, corporate reports and trade publications as primary sources.<sup>28</sup> Television scholars have taken more of a cultural studies perspective considering the cultural dimensions of distribution decisions in television industries.<sup>29</sup> Global media studies scholars, such as Michael Curtin's 2007 study on the globalisation of Chinese film and television, have investigated how local, regional and global distribution networks are structured and how media content flows through regions and across platforms.<sup>30</sup> Macro-level studies can by no means reveal how media institutions actually function, such as "who makes decisions, how various divisions interact, or what level of centralized coordination and control might exist".<sup>31</sup> There is little media scholarship that examines the micro-level genesis behind the top-down national and institutional strategies. This article thus aims to contribute to this gap in the research in coproduction deals beyond canned television distribution.

From the 1970s, the BBC Natural History Unit (NHU) has produced some of the most powerful and iconic visions of wildlife and nature with its commercial potential being exploited across a range of formats, including international television sales, books, DVDs, merchandising and online distribution rights.<sup>32</sup> These commercial operations were formalised with the creation of BBC Earth since 2009, a global brand representing BBC wildlife content outside

the United Kingdom across all platforms, including DVDs, licensed consumer products, feature films, live events, websites, Twitter, Facebook and programming on international satellite channels.<sup>33</sup> According to the BBC Press Office (2012), the mission of BBC Earth is “to inspire audiences globally with the BBC’s outstanding natural history content, sharing the same values and driving credit back to the BBC”. In doing so, BBC NHU programmes have established a large fan community in the Chinese market.

By adopting Caldwell’s integrated industrial analysis,<sup>34</sup> this paper traverses three levels of production studies to address how innovation strategies and new technologies foster conditions for new production cultures of creativity which have, in turn, engendered new screen forms. Drawing on trade fairs, corporate reports, trade press, and digital screen forms collected between 2017 and 2018, this paper examines BBC Earth’s distribution strategies with Tencent Video in mainland China. In doing so, it aims to address the following research questions:

1. In what way have digital platform operators like Tencent Video changed old distribution patterns by providing new funding models through coproduction partnerships and online distribution for broadcasters like the BBC?
2. How has internet distribution affected the ways that BBC documentaries are distributed and consumed in the Chinese context?
3. What new screen forms have emerged as distribution methods shift with the arrival of digital technologies?

In this way, this article situates BBC Earth’s global strategies within what I term the technologically-empowered screen (TES) forms on Tencent Video, which promise a connected and collective viewing experience among its online fan communities<sup>35</sup> through its hybrid tech model. Online fan community pages are argued to become important information propagation tools for media brands.<sup>36</sup>

## 4 Project Penguin: Online Community Building beyond Canned Television

Prior to 2011, Tencent Video largely streamed free, undifferentiated content, acquired from both domestic and foreign broadcasters and film studios. This period established a number of partnerships between Tencent Video and Chinese broadcasters in both coproduction and content acquisition. With the establishment of the Chinese Copyright Alliance, Tencent Video began to acquire authorised premium content from international corporations and broadcasters, from Hollywood studios and European broadcasters to Japanese public service broadcaster NHK. From the launch of Tencent’s Original Strategy in 2012, Tencent Video has shifted its production strategies from providing free and undifferentiated content (as ‘publisher’) to producing community-orientated personalised original content (as ‘producer’) to premium users, with its revenue model shifting from advertising-funded ‘freemium’ to subscription-supported premium. Tencent Penguin Pictures have produced a wide range of original Chinese documentaries. Having recently joined Tencent Video as Vice Chief-Editor<sup>37</sup> and Head of Documentary Lab<sup>38</sup> in 2018, Chen Xiaoqing, a former CCTV veteran, has created more than eight Tencent original documentaries, including *Once Upon a Bite* (Tencent, 2018; acquired by Netflix in 2019), *Flavourful Origins* (Tencent/Netflix, 2019).<sup>39</sup>

Partnerships with Chinese broadcasters and digital players can facilitate the access to the local market for western-based broadcasters most of whom have acknowledged the specific political, social and cultural frameworks in the Chinese landscape. These partnerships have enabled western broadcasters to acquire location permission and manage local negotiations with China’s National Administration of Radio and Television and the State Council Information Office (SCIO). Western media corporations “self-adjust and refine themselves in concert with the requirements of Chinese state ideology” in the hope of a smoother means of ingress.<sup>40</sup> The influx of culture into China must conform to the political prescriptions of the ruling Communist Party. Chinese and international broadcasters and companies are thus obliged to consider ‘politics’ before ‘economics’.<sup>41</sup> SCIO’s China International

Communication Centre (CICC) was responsible for not only promoting Chinese culture globally but also supervising and issuing filming permission to international broadcasters and media companies. International documentary projects must acquire permission before filming starts (Fieldwork Note, 2016). Due to the strict political censorship by the party state, news production has been strictly controlled under the CPC leaderships which sees little creative freedom in the daily production practices. Instead of issuing legislation about media control, which would provoke “debates over the meaning of the constitutional guarantee of press freedom at the National People’s Congress”, the Chinese government has chosen to legitimate its media structure by administrative “regulations”.<sup>42</sup> Volatile and unpredictable media regulations, rather than clear-cut legislation, has led to a grey area in apolitical genres such as comedy, drama and documentaries. As a result, documentaries, rather than news and factual content, have been the main genre Chinese media institutions acquire from BBC Studios, with a focus on natural history and cultural documentaries.<sup>43</sup>

As Lexian Zhu, Deputy Director of Documentary Content Management Centre at Tencent Video, commented:

**BBC Studios is the premium documentary content provider in the world and our partnership in co-production reflects Chinese audience’s interest in top level productions. We will continue to work with BBC Studios to bring best-in-class programmes to digital viewers in China.**<sup>44</sup>

The BBC’s Natural History Unit (NHU) presents its “natural history film-makers as discoverers and natural history footage as discoveries”, implicitly presenting itself as a producer of genuine knowledge of the natural world.<sup>45</sup> Similar to previous coproduction deals, the coproduction partnerships have not only secured the distribution deals but also facilitated the production process with location access to the landscapes and wildlife in mainland China.

As part of ‘Project Penguin’ launched by Tencent Online Media Group in October 2018, the partnership between BBC Studios and Tencent involves not only pre-sales and distribution deals but also incorporates the imagination and expectations of Chinese audiences into BBC documentary production. The partnership with TCL (China’s largest television maker) has expanded Tencent’s entertainment and live sports content from mobile screens to smart, internet-connected TVs in living rooms through over-the-top (OTT) services, further contributing to the connected and collective viewing experience that Tencent promises its premium subscribers.<sup>46</sup> The next section will examine the screen forms on BBC Earth Tribe, which are empowered by the technological ascendancy of the indigenous digital platform.

## **5 BBC Earth Tribe: Collective Viewing Experience through Technologically Empowered Screen Forms**

BBC Earth Tribe’s official account was launched on Tencent Video in 2017. The case of BBC Earth Tribe demonstrates the potential of not only distributing ‘canned content’ but also building a fan community through what I term technologically-empowered screen (TES) forms. These TES forms represent both a technologically-deterministic production and a regulatory culture that aligns creativity with the incessant march of technology. Tencent’s hybrid model has empowered its online video business with a collective viewing experience and potentially fostered conditions for greater interaction and participation among its users in the case of BBC Earth Tribe. I argue that Wechat’s integration into ordinary life help produce a television experience with greater creativity and connectivity through technologically-empowered screen forms (UGC, live streaming and bullet comments). Tencent Video’s interface is an attempt to integrate PGC and UGC, narrative and database logics, the publishing model and the flow model, and connectedness and connectivity,<sup>47</sup> embodying both commercially-driven and politically-compliant characteristics.

With the perception of BBC natural history films as reliable sources of knowledge of the natural world, Chinese online users have enjoyed BBC documentary series on Tencent Video. In addition to over 650 hours of BBC Studios' natural history and documentary programmes broadcast to Tencent VIP subscribers, BBC Earth Tribe seeks to deliver unprecedented access to the series' creators – via live streaming interviews with the award-winning producers of BBC Studios' Natural History Unit. Similar to the multi-platform programming on BBC iPlayer available to British domestic audiences, BBC Earth Tribe on Tencent Video provides not only streaming services of its flagship documentaries but also a range of para-textual interactive services that extend the programme narrative. These interactive services include mini-episodes of BBC's natural history programmes, online quizzes, interactive surveys to live streaming services directly from production locations. On the landing page for BBC Earth Tribe, seven well-known BBC documentary series are displayed (see Figure 1). Figure 2A shows an interactive quiz about the BBC documentary series *The Planets* (BBC/PBS, 2019), asking questions such as 'how many terrestrial planets are there in the solar system?' and 'which is the largest terrestrial planet that has so far been discovered?'. Tencent users who give the correct answers (Figure 2B) will be awarded with one BBC Documentary-made notebook (Figure 2C).



### 代表作品

更多作品 >



Figure 1. BBC Earth Tribe's official account on Tencent Video (Screenshot as of 6th September 2019).



行星启航 探索旅行

## 行星·趣味问答

Q1: 太阳系有几颗类地行星?

A. 2颗 B. 4颗  
C. 6颗 D. 8颗

Q2: 下面四个选项里哪个不是“类地行星”?

A. 火星 B. HD 85512b  
C. 土星 D. 开普勒-22b

Q3: 人类在太阳系外发现的第一颗类地行星是:

A. Corot7b B. Gliese581C  
C. 比邻星b D. Kepler-186f

Q4: 宇宙已知最大的类地行星是:

A. 水星 B. 格利泽667C  
C. 金星 D. 开普勒-10C

Top Comments

强哥 10  
我看过很多BBC的纪录片，每部都是经典。（人类星球-家园-地球脉动1.2-冰冻星球-王期-蓝色星球1.2-海洋-野性都市-鸟瞰地球-人类我们的姑事等很多。我是个BBC迷

京华辅料纽扣（邓村28号）年轻... 2  
C去一万一米地底探索，那个笔记本是博思星人定制版呀

小生 1  
三种方式要我选择的话肯定是第一种漫步毕竟和心爱的人漫步太空别提有多浪漫了

拣尽寒枝 1  
我都不意思问啦，非会员可以看看吗

| Author 1  
下周三就可以看啦

梦 1  
如果可以，我都要试一次

Comment

在本文下留言答案，纪同学将从答对的同学中选3位送出BBC专属定制笔记本↓

这个本儿给我一年也写不完，很厚

Figure 2A. An interactive quiz on Tencent's social media platform Wechat about BBC documentary series The Planets (BBC/PBS, 2019).

Figure 2B. Tencent users answered the questions regarding planets in BBC's Wechat official account in order to have the chance to win the BBC notebooks.

Figure 2C. Winners of the interactive quiz would get one of the BBC notebooks.

Together with its in-house social media platforms, Tencent Video has promised a collective viewing experience in our relatively alienated/atomised modern society. These screen forms include official fan page, data visualisation, bullet comments and UGC (user-generated-content) on Tencent Video. David Attenborough, the trustworthy natural history filmmaker as a branding figure in BBC's NHU has been designated an official Doki account on Tencent Video, where users can watch his works as well as fan-generated short form content on Tencent Video (Figure 3). Another form of technologically-empowered screen forms has been video feeds on BBC Earth Tribe's official Tencent page. Figures 4A-D shows a series of video feeds featuring clips from BBC flagship documentaries such as *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*. For instance, the first video feed in Figure 4B is mimicking an animal posture from BBC NHU series with a popular selfie pose among Chinese users: 'So happy! I found a perfect angle for selfie!'; the user of the first post in Figure 4D posts a range of selfies to urge the general public to protect wildlife which echoes the themes of most BBC NHU series.





Figure 3. David Attenborough's Tencent Doki official account (Screenshot as of 6th September 2019).

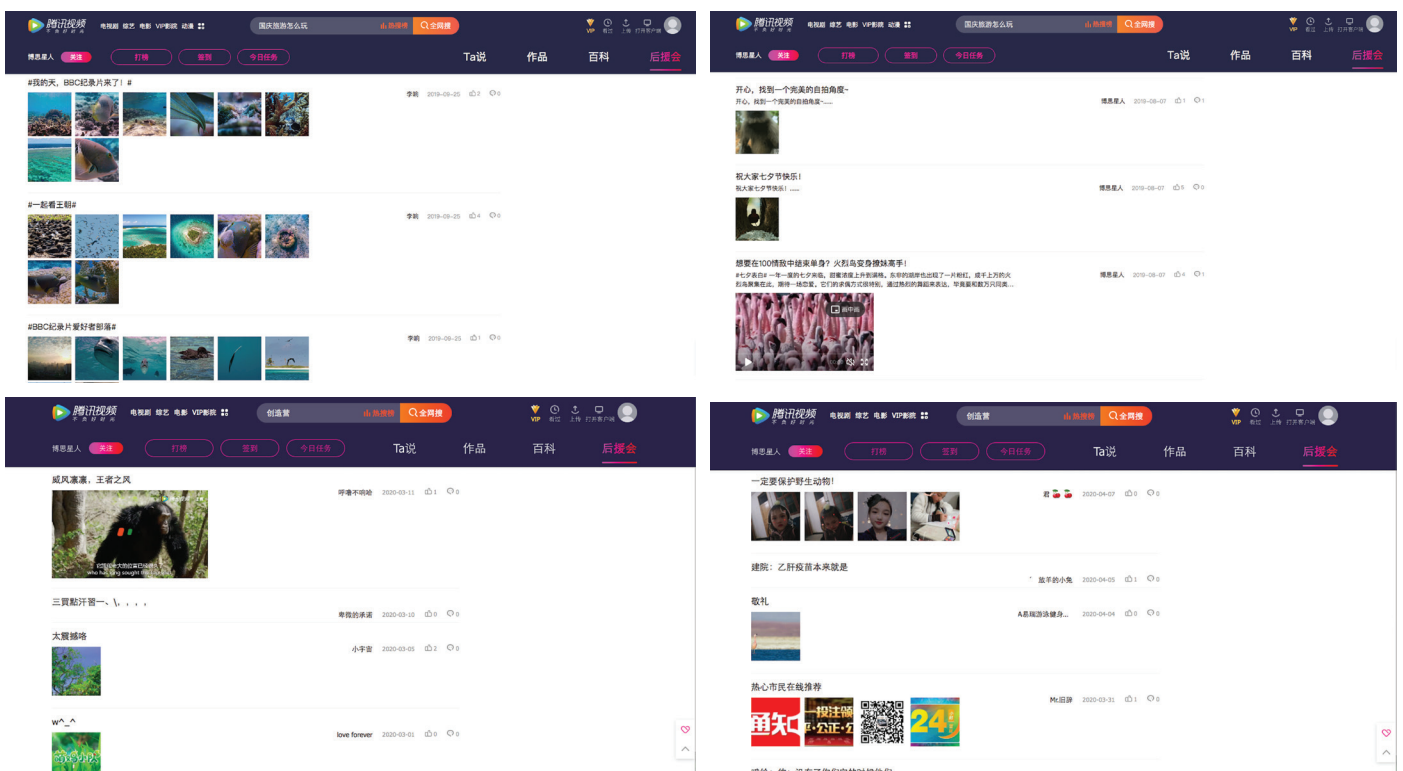


Figure 4A-D. BBC Earth Tribe's video feeds on its official Tencent Video account (Screenshot as of 7th April 2020).

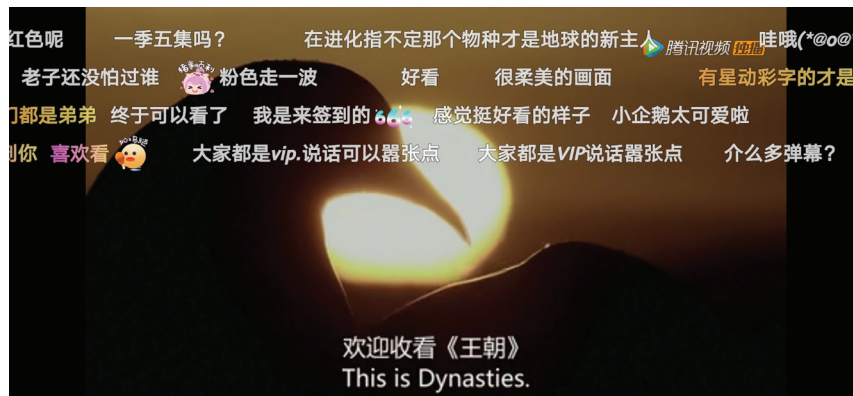


Figure 5A-D. Online streaming services of the first episode of *Dynasties* (BBC, 2018) on Tencent Video with real-time user-generated bullet comments on screen (Screenshots as of 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

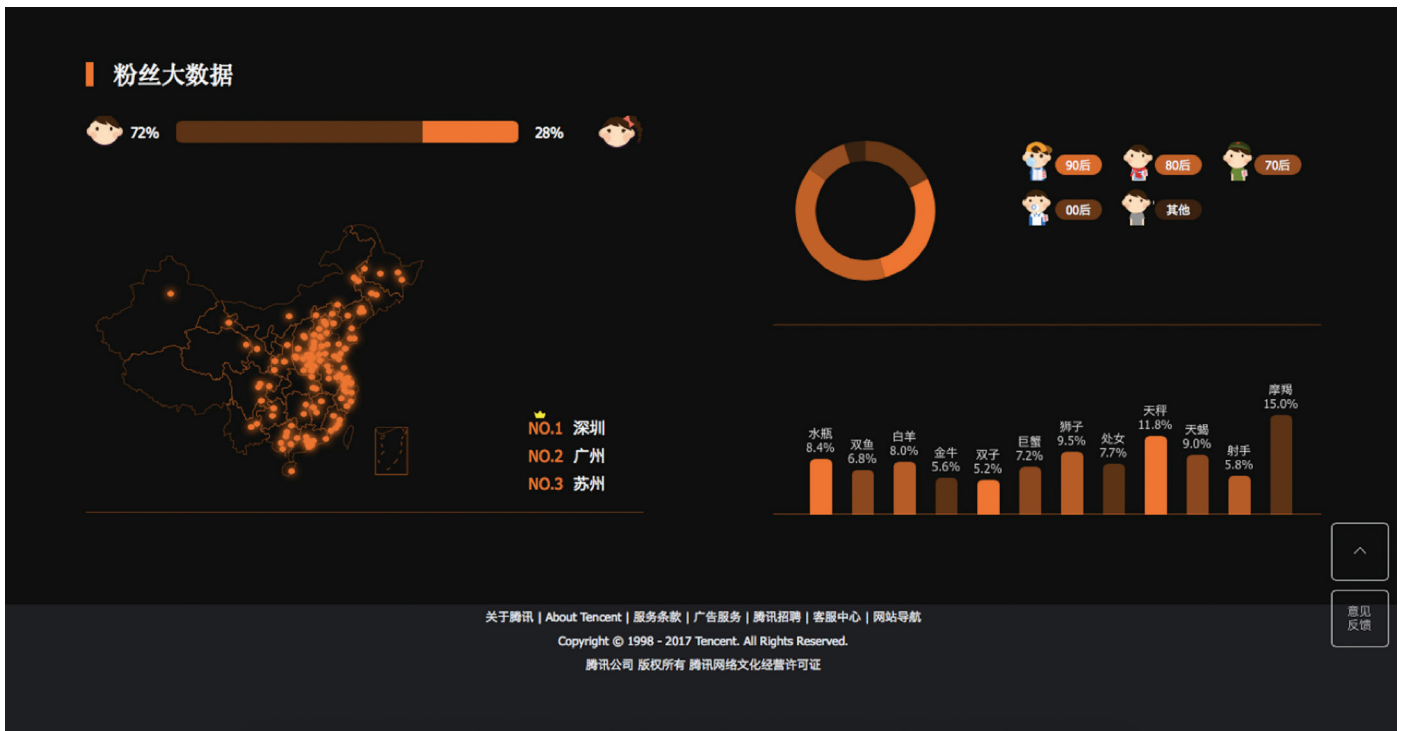


Figure 6. Audience data visualisation at the bottom of the Tencent Video website (including region, age, gender, astrological sign).

Epitomising the participatory culture of the Chinese digital generation, *Danmu*<sup>48</sup> enables users to see live streaming videos and other users' messages while interacting with each other simultaneously (agree, disagree, criticism or volunteering subtitle foreign content) with a high degree of real-time online interactions and grassroots participation. *Danmu* provides a discussion arena to debate social issues in real time, at the specific screen time of the video, engendering a collective viewing experience among Chinese online communities in the atomised society. What differs Tencent's interface from other digital streaming services lies in the integration of social media services<sup>49</sup> in the video aggregator platform, allowing users to share the comments, viewing histories and screenshots easily with their friends on Wechat.

Online streaming service of *Dynasties* with real-time *danmu* on Tencent Video has reached 260 million clicking rates as of 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020. The on-screen comments enable individual online users to create a collective viewing experience through real-time interactivity, such as comments in Figure 5A-D: 'Great documentary production team', 'I like the familiar voice from Sir David Attenborough', 'We are all VIP users. Let's be bold!', 'David Attenborough is the guarantee of quality', 'David has dedicated his whole life in national history documentaries', 'I've finished watching the episode without fast-forwarding one second'.

Online users can access the visualisation of the audience matrix at the bottom of the programme's website, including users by region and by demographics such as gender, age, and even astrological sign. As such, Tencent users are able to access the data visualisation and get to know their peer viewers who are interested in watching specific documentary series. Public access to user demographics is a gateway not only for viewers to form collective viewing experiences and get to know fellow viewers, but also for potential sponsors and advertisers to access online performance of Tencent programmes (IV19, 19/12/2017, Beijing). Similar to the official fan pages and on-screen bullet comments, data-driven visualisation of viewers' matrix (see Figure 6) further enhances the collective viewing experience in the fast-paced urban cities. *Danmu* provides a discussion arena to debate real-time on criticism social

issues at the specific screen time of the video, engendering a collective viewing experience among Chinese online communities in the relatively isolated, modern society. Big data not only provides detailed viewing data statistics for producers who are eager to understand daily viewing habits, but also generates new screen forms and production methods that incorporate online statistics. These TES forms maximise the potential of real-time interaction empowered through digital technologies, which not only allow audiences real-time interaction but also help media companies like BBC Studios and Tencent Video grasp users' preferences without time delays.

## 6 Conclusion

This article analysed the 'Project Penguin' launched by Tencent Online Media Group in October 2018, which has formalised industry partnerships between BBC Studios and Tencent Video in not only distribution deals but also coproduction and online community building for BBC Earth's flagship documentaries. After tracing the history of coproduction between the BBC and Chinese media institutions since the early 2000s, this article theorised what the coproduction between BBC Studios and Tencent Video may yield and what its online presence suggests about global television production and distribution in the digital, multiplatform and convergence era. It is through the coproduction process that BBC Studios manages to incorporate the cultural appetites and expectations from Chinese audiences into documentary production which has been shaped by a set of commercial, technological, local and global forces in play.

Within the ecology of SVOD streaming services, Tencent's online community building strategies have created a high degree of interactivity and participation through a range of technologically-empowered screen forms. BBC Earth Tribe's interactive services on Tencent Video have redefined television coproduction models in the streaming, multiplatform era. Transnational television channels are arguably de-territorialised in line with their multinational audiences, cross-border coverage and international production operations.<sup>50</sup> BBC's partnership with Tencent Video can be read as a reflection of its global strategies in the post-Brexit era, exploring potential partnerships beyond the European sphere. It can be also understood as a shift in the BBC's distribution strategies from linear broadcasting to digital streaming services. Unlike analogue mass media distribution, online streaming services add a new dimension to the production, distribution and consumption of the BBC's legendary documentaries, shaped by big data, platform capitalism and grass-roots online communities.

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## Biography

Lisa Lin is an Assistant Producer of StoryFutures at Royal Holloway, University of London. Before joining Royal Holloway, she worked as a Lecturer in Media Studies at the School of Arts, University of Kent where she led Podcasting Production and Media Audiences as part of BA Media Studies programme. Lisa holds a PhD in Media and Communications, an MA in International Broadcasting at Royal Holloway, University of London and a Diploma in Factual Television Production at the National Film and Television School. She has worked as a television producer in the UK, China and Singapore with expertise in factual and documentary production, including producing works for National Geographic, Channel 4 and Channel News Asia. Having been an ethnographer of television and digital media production, her research interests revolve around the correlations between technology and creativity and how digital technologies have transformed and disrupted the traditional logics of media production and distribution between the Western and Eastern contexts on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Her goal across these research projects is to politicize the digital transformation of media industries and practices at the margins of the digital and analogue. Lisa is developing research projects on the impact of big data and algorithm on viewing experiences and data surveillance in the post-network era. Lisa is the Principal Investigator for a GCRF-funded project 'How to Employ Environmental Documentaries as Visual Evidence to Engage a Wider Debate on Social Injustice Behind Air Pollution in Jingjinji (China) and Delhi (India)' in partnership with Sussex University and Beijing Normal University. She is currently in the process of publishing her ethnographic study on Chinese convergence-era television as a monograph that examines the shifting production cultures and convergence strategies in post-TVIII China.

# FROM THE WEST TO THE KREMLIN AND BACK

## DEVELOPMENT PATHS OF FOREIGN PRODUCTS ON RUSSIAN TELEVISION

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**Abstract:** In the last years the arrival of international OTT providers and the development of national online digital platforms have deeply changed the Russian television environment. The constant need of both national self-affirmation and new contents has led to the development of different paths of content creation. In particular, foreign ready-made content follow three paths: adaptation, localization and ‘Russification’, depending on their genre. The ‘Russification’ process is the most peculiar one and consists in the re-creation of a foreign product with local resources. The article will give the reader some key-concept to understand some of the most popular ‘Russification’ attempts, from the very first (*The Nanny*) to the most contemporary (*Adaptation*).

**Keywords:** TV series, remake, Russian television, global TV

### 1 Introduction

Nowadays television plays a key-role in the Russian mass communication media system.<sup>1</sup> The industry defines itself as a dynamic sector in continuous evolution and the development of digital technologies brought an unprecedented market growth and the number of channels, as remarked by PWC’s focus issue on the Russian market.<sup>2</sup> But, along with this growth, there was a lack of new ideas and programs.<sup>3</sup> This situation forced Russian producers to deal with their foreign colleagues and to buy and adapt their formats for the national market.

Today, TV programs based on foreign format adaptations are an integral part of the Russian schedules. Furthermore, national channels’ tendency is more to import products than to export them. Adaptation for the Russian audience has always been a producers’ responsibility, based on their intuition. For this reason, there are no general characteristics or rules about a product performance on the national market. This is not a clear nor standard process.

In Russia, channels can be divided into terrestrial (DTT) and non-terrestrial (satellite, IPTV and cable). However, due to the geographical conformation of the country, it is not possible to consider terrestrial channels ‘exclusively terrestrial’. Many regions are indeed reached only by satellite signal and, for this reason, according to the Russian law, a channel can be considered federal when it is aired in five different regions. The most popular federal channels are Perviy Kanal, Rossiya and NTV and these are often used to broadcast fundamental information to the public.

The Russian television system presents many similarities to the European one, concerning PBS and commercial channels. Public and commercial channels air a wide variety of programs, including movies, TV series, TV shows, information and research programs. What these channels have in common is that the TV series aired are dated and do not interest young adults; in particular, those who have generally already enjoyed this content on different platforms. On the other hand, commercial channels are structured to attract a specific audience, in order to maximize incomes.<sup>4</sup> For example, there are thematic channels for students like Shkol'niki TV; channels dedicated to male young adults, that mostly air anime and cartoons, like 2x2, and channels literally dedicated to housewives, like Domashnyi.

The analogue cable has been the most common type of reception in Russia until 2019 when the analogic signal was officially turned off (much later compared to the EU). Russian pay-TV's are divided into two macro-categories, depending on the approach to assessing the number of users/subscribers. The first one is specific of the 1990s (when pay-TV's in Russia essentially took place): at that time, in the largest Russian cities, operators took over the management of the analogue connection of entire apartment blocks at no charge.<sup>5</sup> All the flats would then receive a better signal and more channels from pay-TV, for a higher aerial communal standing charge, but without a subscription. Nevertheless, these households are considered into the total amount of pay-TV services. The second approach is more related to the contemporary market shape. It includes, indeed, only those households which have a contract with an operator. Geographically speaking, Russian pay-TV's market shows two different tendencies: the highest saturation is located in the Central and Northwestern districts, while the fastest growth rates are observed in Siberia, Central Russia and Far East.

Although its capillary distribution, analysts register a stagnation in the cable pay-TV segment, due to a great expansion of satellite and IPTV. In 2011 the first "online cinema" service was launched in Russia, Okko, that now includes 35.000 titles (films, cartoons and TV series) and has 17 million subscribers and 1,5 million viewers per month. In 2012 iTunes and Google Play launched in Russia and in 2013 arrived Amediateka, the official Russian distributor for HBO contents. Starting from 2014-2015 Russian mobile networks started to develop their own OTT platforms: MTS TV and Megafon TV were the first companies offering access to TV channel packages and film catalogues, including the libraries of the former independent VoD services Stream and Trava.ru as part of the mobile TV service. In 2016 arrived Netflix and Amazon Prime Video and, with them, the legal framework for foreign ownership of TV channels and the operators in Russian territory completely changed.

Conceptually, I will outline my theoretical framework by historically placing Western products (in particular, TV series) in the Russian schedules, describing how and when they arrived and in which cultural and economic environment. Then, I will map how a foreign product is 'treated' in order to be broadcast on television and argue that different treatments lead to different results, writing about the quality of the product and its success among the public. In this part I will also present to the reader some examples of products broadcast over the years on Russian television. This will be followed by a case analysis presenting an example of a successful program and of an unsuccessful product, that will be examined more thoroughly. This will be followed by concluding remarks.

## **2 Importing Foreign Programmes: From 'Russification' to the Contemporary 'National Answers'**

In the history of Russian television, foreign content started being broadcast after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. There are two reasons why Western content arrived in Russia so late: one is socio-political, the other is cultural.

Before 1991, the Soviet Union was evidently closed to the West and its television was thought of as a propaganda instrument.<sup>6</sup> TV only had to spread Soviet information and secondly entertain: schedules included very few (and bad quality) programs, such as news, talk shows and crime series. The rise of television contributed in maintaining the Soviet ideal and still has this role in modern Russia, as highlights Josh Nadeau.<sup>7</sup> During Perestroika (the last period

of the USSR, was characterized by an initial opening to the Western world), though, the first foreign films were shown on TV: for example, in 1986 the Italian movie *La Piovra* seduced the Russian public.

After the dissolution of the USSR everything changed and, from a socio-political point of view, Russia opened to the West and started importing new TV programs, responding to a national need for content, because of the birth of commercial television. In the first years it was mostly imported unscripted formats, with a preference for game and 'alea' shows; then, in the 2000s, TV serials started being imported and a new era for Russian television began.

As Zvereva states, the closure of successful independent channels and TV-journalist projects in the 1990s, which occurred within the framework of underdeveloped cable networks and the absence of other alternative options, led to the disappearance of political discussion shows.<sup>8</sup> TV channel directors wanted to achieve economic success and this led to the rise of entertainment-driven projects. Gradually the viewers got used to the foreign consumeristic world presented by the increasing advertising and began to pursue a higher quality of life, especially the new middle class, who did not have to concern themselves about survival. This shift is shown well by the new TV serials produced by Amedia, *Moya Prekrasnaya Nyanya* (My Fair Nanny, 2004-2009) and *Ne Rodis' Krasovoy* (Better Be Born Lucky Than Fair, 2005), that contributed to the construction of new norms of everyday life, in line with this new consumer-oriented television. They were followed by a number of 'lifestyle programs' that became incredibly popular, such as *Snimite eto nemedlenno!* (Take It Off Immediately!, 2004) and *Shkola remonta* (The School of Décor, 2011-).

These new programs opened to a completely unknown world for the viewer, who had to be guided into it. What the viewer did not know, was not only the geography of a city or the stereotypes connected to a specific country, but also a completely new way of living.

From a cultural point of view, the importation of foreign serials led to the need of re-elaboration, in order to make them understandable and remarkable for Russian spectators. This process was (and still is nowadays) made through three different paths: adaptation, localization and 'Russification'.

The concept of 'adaptation' is generally considered as an intersemiotic translation from a medium (usually a tale or a novel) to another (usually a movie) of the same narrative content.<sup>9</sup> But Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* defines the adaptation as "a recognized transposition of one or more recognizable works; a creative and interpretative act of appropriation and recover".<sup>10</sup> This means that a translated copy that becomes a representation of the original can be considered an adaptation.

On the other hand, localization is the transposition of a global format (both scripted or unscripted) into the destination culture. It is a product that contains meanings, inferences and implications concerning daily life, political institutions and traditions that must not be taken for granted.<sup>11</sup> The latter one is the most significant and peculiar in the history of Russian television and was almost naturally born, due to economic and cultural aspects to be preserved.

'Russification' begins as a localization but ends in a process of remake of a foreign product, where the general storyline is maintained while the setting, cast and cultural details of the plot are changed to fit the national market and public expectations. It can be considered a pioneering idea of a scripted format, but, in reality, mostly economic reasons led to its birth.

The first foreign products arrived on Russian TV after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the birth of the Russian Federation, in an economically devastated country where each aspect of everyday life had to be re-thought and re-organized. Television started being considered an entertaining instrument and schedules needed to be diversified, through the broadcast of news, game, talk and rudimentary talent shows and through TV serials.

Economically speaking, remaking a foreign product was far cheaper than buying its rights of reproduction. In these conditions 'Russified' products were born, with a subtle aura of illegality. Culturally speaking, the Russian Federation had just opened to the West, so many aspects and details told in the foreign (especially American) products were

completely unknown to the public and, consequently, incomprehensible. Although already part of the collective imaginary in Europe and the US, these aspects had to be changed for the Russian public, not only to allow them to be understood, but also to be successful. As a representation of a new lifestyle, aesthetic symbols of wellness and richness had to be desirable for the viewers and so they had to be part of the Russian culture of that time. Showing a more or less expensive foreign car, such as a Ford, would not have given a sense of desire to the public, as Fords were not available or known in Russia. They simply had to be substituted with their Russian equivalent.

In these conditions, remakes became part and tradition of Russian television history. Some of the most popular Russian remakes concern equally popular American TV series, but their success was not always the same. Among these 'Russified' products we can list both sitcoms and dramas.

One everlasting success is **Voroniny** (2009-2018), the Russian remake of American *Everybody loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005) on channel STS, the most important on DTT for American sitcoms. It started being broadcast in 2009 and, contrary to the original, it is still on air on Russian channels. The first 10 series were based on the originals; the following ones have been written from scratch, with the initial help of the American creators and writers. *Voroniny* now counts 23 series and this number represents a very typical aspect of Russian television industry: in a year multiple seasons of one title can be produced and broadcast.

In an organizational perspective, all the episodes of a series are shown subsequently, not creating a weekly schedule, but a daily one on the same channel at the same time every day until they are all seen. Furthermore, in general, Russian series have more episodes per season than Western ones: *Voroniny* counts 455 episodes so far. Its success is determined by the capacity of writers and creators to maintain the general wit of the original series, changing the family habits in order to better represent a typical Russian family. Otherwise, the Barones' habits and characteristics would have been completely incomprehensible to a Russian viewer. Thanks to its success, a documentary about the behind the scenes of the Russian exportation and remake has been produced and broadcast with the title *Exporting Raymond* (2010). The documentary shows not only the production moments, but also American and Russian writers and creators working together, especially accepting compromises, to create the best product for everyone. A series that will not lose its original irony, and still be able to represent the middle class of the national market where it is broadcast.

Another American sitcom remade in the Russian Federation, but with far less success, is **Schastlivy vmeste** (*Married... with children* – FOX, 1987-1997). It was broadcast on TNT channel, another DTT channel whose programming is based on American shows, but with a lower audience compared to STS, from 2006 to 2013. The Russian version is temporarily set after the dissolution of the USSR and tells of the birth of the middle-class in Russia. It is made of 6 seasons, with a total of 365 episodes. The original series is composed of 11 seasons, that in *Schastlivy vmeste* were condensed in the first three seasons. This sitcom is an example of being unsuccessful because there were many socio-cultural items of the original series that have not been 'translated' into the Russian one. For example, a two-floor apartment is now a house that only a rich family living in the city center of a big city could afford in Russia, not a middle-class family in the first years after the dissolution of the USSR. Another point against the Russian remake is that between 1990s and 2000s channel TV-6 Russia aired the original season, that, even if culturally difficult to understand for the Russian public (as many typical American aspects assumed for the European public were completely unknown), it was still more credible than the Russian version.

Two interesting examples of drama remakes are the ones for *House M.D.* (FOX, 2004-2012), Firstly, *Doktor Tyrsa* (2010), which was an unofficial remake that aired only one season in 2010 and closed due to low ratings and public dissatisfaction. And secondly, **Doktor Richter** (2017-), which is the official Russian remake, that aired in 2017 on Rossiya 1 and has two seasons.

Over the last few years a new development path has started in the Russian TV industry. As many OTT players, both national and international, have appeared in the television environment and, consequently, a lot of foreign content has become available for the Russian public, the 'Russification' process has reduced its importance to give space to new content.



Especially in the last two years, Russian TV studios have started producing a 'national answer' to many foreign shows involving Russia in their plots. It all started with the creation of *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018), where the protagonists are two Russian KGB spies living in the US during Cold War. As a national remake would not be possible, a Russian answer to it has been created, in order to give the world their version of the story. The Russian answer to *The Americans* is entitled **Adaptatsiya** (*Adaptation*) and it aired in 2017 and 2018 on the TNT channel, counting two seasons so far. It is the story of an American spy perfectly speaking Russian, but not completely aware of the culture and the habits, that has to seep in Gazprom Company. It has an ironic subtext, absent in *The Americans*, and many referrals to the contemporary political situation (not without a critical streak). In general, its plot is based on the idea that Russians are smart and winners – Americans are naive and losers.

Covering the current situation, the latest news is that next year channel NTV will show the Russian answer to HBO *Chernobyl* (2019), since Russian pro-government press declared that the show was "a caricature, not the truth".<sup>12</sup> The story is based on the idea that the nuclear disaster in Pripyat was caused by a CIA agent. Although there is no evidence of it even in the official documentation, show director Alexei Muradov declared: "One theory holds that Americans had infiltrated the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and many historians do not deny that, on the day of the explosion, an agent of the enemy's intelligence services was present at the station"<sup>13</sup>. As of today, despite the critics and the government blame, *Chernobyl* is available on Russian OTT Amediateka, whose claim is 'Home of HBO'.

### 3 Case Analysis: The Remakes of *The Nanny* and *How I Met Your Mother*. What Worked, What Did Not?

As already mentioned in the previous paragraph, many examples of 'Russification' can be found in the history of Russian TV. Some of them successful, some of them not, but each of them is important to understand what worked, what did not and why.

One of the most successful and popular series in absolute terms in Russia was *Moya Prekrasnaya Nyaya* (My Fair Nanny), a remake of the worldwide popular American series *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-1999). It was the very first sitcom aired in the Russian Federation and it was broadcast on STS channel from 2004 to 2006, with a new season in 2008. It was produced by Amedia and Sony Pictures and the executive producer was Fran Drescher herself, as in the original one. It is divided into 7 seasons, one more compared to the *The Nanny*, for a total of 173 episodes.

As *The Nanny* obtained a great critical success worldwide, many national versions of it have been created over the years, not only in Russia but also in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Greece, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Poland and Turkey. In *Moya Prekrasnaya Nyaya* the storyline has not been changed, but producers and writers have teamed up to best localize the most important cultural aspects (including setting, food, jokes and clothing) to create a product that could work for the public.

Since the Russian public at the time was not used to the American environment and stereotypes as it was to the European one, *Moya Prekrasnaya Nyaya* is located in Moscow (instead of New York), where the difference between upper and lower class works perfectly. Another unchanged aspect regards the professions: the male character is still a theatrical producer and the female character is a door-to-door make-up seller. But, on the contrary, names have been deeply localized: Maxwell Sheffield became Maksim Viktorovich Shatalin and Fran Fine became Viktoria Vladimirovna Prutkovskaya. Viktoria lives in the suburbs and comes from Ukraine, that is a very typical expedient narrative. The comparison with the close Ukraine is a fundamental part of the majority of the stories, while the Jewish line was cancelled as it is not so much into the Russian culture, as in the American one. The geographical comparison between Russia and Ukraine is more similar to the narrative used in the Italian version of *The Nanny*, *La Tata*. Here the female protagonist is called Francesca and she has Italian origins, representing the Italian community in New York.

Another 'topos' that cannot be ignored is love. Most of the romantic Russian stories (especially those broadcast on television) follow the idea of 'the rich man marrying the poor but beautiful woman'. This is a storyline present even in the original series, but from the fifth season. Russian writers introduced it early on, in order to capture the interest of women whose audience numbers were bigger than the men's, but whose preferences did not include sitcoms, up to that moment.

The seventh season was created from scratch by Russian writers and producers, working together with the American team. They developed a whole new season, but they wanted to end the series as the original one, so at the beginning of the seventh season the viewer discovers that the end of the sixth was only a dream and the story continues.

Even the visuals played a very important role in the creation and success of the series: while the **theme** has not been changed, from the very first scene the environment is different and typically Russian. The clothing, the architecture, the store signs have all been changed to fit the Russian imaginary, to create a connection between the reality of everyday life and the series.

One of the most well-known failures in the history of Russian remakes is represented by *Kak ya vstretil vashu mamu*, a remake of the American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2014). It is an unsuccessful example, because it is based on a literal translation of the original version, starting from the title, which is the exact transposition of the English one.

In this case, writers and producers have maximized their efforts to create a product that was totally similar to the original, starting from a visual point of view. They chose actors that physically resembled the American ones and re-created the setting in order to make it as similar as possible to the original, ignoring that many items (such as those machines where you can catch stuffed animals) are not part of the Russian culture.



Figure 1. A physical comparison among Russian and American actors.

*Kak ya vstretil vashu mamu* was aired on the STS channel in 2010, but the original *How I met your mother* was aired in the same period on Pervyj Kanal. As many years have passed from the arrival of the first American sitcom on TV, viewers are now more used to the American style and the possibility to compare the series declared the death of the Russian one. Critics were so negative that a petition was opened by the fans to close down the series.

The comparison evidenced that many aspects connected to acting, translation and setting did not work in the Russian version, because it was too close to the original product and not to the reference culture.

From a linguistic point of view, jokes have been literally translated from English, but they do not have sense in Russian. This prevents a non-speaking English viewer from understanding the dialogue and an English-speaking viewer from appreciating the dialogue, because it cannot be understood.

From a narrative point of view, geographical references have been changed without a logic: in episode 'Sweet taste of liberty,' 1: 3, Ted and Barney are in Philadelphia and call Marshall to join them from New York City - the distance of 96 miles is believable if travelled by car during the night. In the Russian equivalent episode 'The taste of a cultural capital,' 1: 3, Dima and Jura are in St. Petersburg and call Pasha to join them from Moscow. He gets in the car and reach them in a couple of hours, but the distance between the two cities is 714 kilometers.

In *Kak ya vstretil vashu mamu* the Ukrainian 'topos' too, is as an example of a successful transposition. In episode 'Aldrin Justice,' 2: 6, Lily is working in an Hawaiian restaurant and, while serving her friends, they make fun of her with jokes about Hawaii. In the equivalent Russian episode, Lyusa is working in a Ukrainian restaurant and her friends joke around the fact that Russians do not pay for gas coming from Ukraine. The result is funny and believable, a real effort to approach the destination culture, but this seems to be more a chance attempt, than a rule.

What has evidently worked in *Moya Prekrasnaya Nyaya* is the effort of the production to create something understandable and appreciable by the public. Maybe due to the historical moment and the role of the first foreign product adapted for the Russian television, the care taken in producing, writing and adapting the series has led to a national success, still ongoing nowadays. The quality of the writing balances the lack of production resources and the research on the storylines in every episode and season make the series stand out among its peers in the Russian television schedules. Its success is connected to the will of creating a suitable program for the public and not to the exploitation of a globally popular series. These characteristics seems missing in *Kak ya vstretil vashu mamu*, because the series looks for a maximum similarity to its original, as Vyacheslav Murugov (STS Media executive producer) declares in an interview about the series: "When we worked on this project with GoodStoryMedia producers we decided to make the characters close to the originals".<sup>14</sup> Even if the program has been submitted to a public who are already used to Western audiovisuals, its resulting 'packaging' was an hybrid that did not match the tastes of non-familiar viewers (because it presumed too many details of the American lifestyle) and the tastes of familiar viewers (because it resulted as an 'aspiring' American product while in reality it was not).

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## Biography

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# TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION DISTRIBUTION AND CO- PRODUCTION CHALLENGES

## A KIRCHMEDIA AND SONY PICTURES TELEVISION CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** This article explores the production and distribution process for television co-productions and explains the potential benefits and risks compared to other media joint ventures. Using a detailed case study of one television series within a larger co-production agreement between a German rights trader and a Hollywood studio, the author analyzes production and distribution challenges and complex contractual arrangements within the context of global media trade. Co-productions are situated between acquiring rights to scripted and completed television programs, and acquiring adaptation or television formatting rights. The author suggests that potential difficulties in co-productions has led television producers to seek contexts with more predictable and successful distribution outcomes. There has been an evolution in the structure of co-productions, with new models, new contracts and new production practices.

**Keywords:** television co-productions, transnational media distribution, scripted television, joint ventures, television formats, business models

## 1 Introduction

In this case study, I examine the dynamics of production and distribution for a U.S.-German television co-production, unpacking the many difficulties the German partner encountered. This complicated and unsatisfying joint venture differs from the simplicity of acquiring finished content on the one hand, and the likely reliability and risk mitigation of licencing adaption rights on the other. In light of these built in risks, and mindful of a checkered past, as television producers and broadcasters contemplate joint ventures they are careful and cautious in evaluating the potential costs and benefits of transnational production arrangements.

This case study involves one television series, within a larger co-production arrangement, nested within an even broader output agreement, between a German rights trader and a Hollywood studio. I analyze the television production and distribution challenges, and also the complex and risky contractual arrangements that contributed to the implosion of the German media company.



The television series in this case study was *V.I.P.*, a syndicated action series produced from 1998 to 2002, starring *Baywatch*'s Pamela Anderson.<sup>1</sup> The Hollywood studio was Sony Pictures (via Columbia-TriStar International Television, later renamed Sony Pictures Television International). The German media company was KirchMedia, and when Germany's second largest media conglomerate plunged into insolvency in 2002, it sent shockwaves through the German and global media economies.

When compared to the acquisition of a typical finished product, television that is scripted and completed, co-productions are designed to provide increased creative control and profit sharing opportunities to the parties involved. But there is the potential for uncooperative co-production practices, and dodgy and deceptive accounting, especially when one partner controls more of the production and distribution apparatus, and then disregards the good faith pledge of a joint venture. There can be conflicts over the creative process during production, and there might be disagreements over financial management and accountability, and so the potential benefits of a co-production can be reduced, leading to creative discontent, and financial troubles. In the conclusion we will discuss a resurgence in transnational television co-productions, where the contracting parties are mindful of potential pitfalls and work towards joint venture success, both creatively and financially.

## 2 Co-Producing Television Series

When Germany's KirchMedia agreed to co-produce the Pamela Anderson series, *V.I.P.* with Columbia/Sony in 1997, it anticipated another European success story, along the lines of its profitable co-production of *Baywatch* (All-American/Pearson, 1991-2001). As a part of its long-term output deal with Columbia/Sony, KirchMedia funded half of the production costs in exchange for half of the worldwide distribution rights. Beginning with the 1998-1999 season, Columbia/Sony produced four seasons of the series, and *V.I.P.* was a modest U.S. syndicated television success.

The international reception was far different, however, as *V.I.P.* launched poorly around the world, and was a financial disaster for KirchMedia, in Germany and across Europe. In addition, because of disputes over the creative direction, production costs and accounting, and marketing cooperation, this and other co-productions were a particular sore point in its overall output deal with Sony. In a memo from October of 2001, Klaus Hallig, the President of KirchMedia US, presented a bottom line:

Having examined the history of our co-productions with Columbia, we must conclude that they screwed us the same way that they treat their other profit participants, by inflated expenses, phantom budgets, the hiding of product placement monies, etc. If all of the above taken together does not make for the enhancement of the ugly Hollywood image, I don't know what else we would have to add to it.<sup>2</sup>

Failed contract renegotiations and threats of legal actions around the Sony contract and other media product output deals with the Hollywood studios, contributed to KirchMedia's collapse into bankruptcy in 2002.

I have published about transnational distribution of finished programming previously, drawing on my professional experience as a development, production and distribution executive for German broadcaster, producer and rights trader KirchMedia.<sup>3</sup> In my research, I have unpacked large-scale output deals, between German television companies and the Hollywood studios, and examined the launch of the German pay-television satellite service that relied upon U.S. programming packages.<sup>4</sup> I have also written about the U.S. market for television formats.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will follow this arc of research, tracing transnational television distribution, with finished, co-productions, and television formats, as variations.

Media companies around the world may acquire finished television programming from regional sources or from the Hollywood studios, but media outlets have also chosen to enter into co-production agreements to share risks, access audiences, and exercise some measure of control over the production process and the final product. In the past few decades, the Hollywood studios and associated television distributors have expanded the range of their sales methods beyond scripted and completed productions and co-productions, to include formatted television productions as well.<sup>6</sup> In the world of transnational media joint ventures, there have been cyclical transitions between trends of favoring traditional television co-productions or formatted programming.<sup>7</sup>

A traditional international co-production involves two or more countries. Within the pan-European context, for instance, this can allow for fulfillment of quotas and investment via government subsidies. European media outlets can join together to co-produce television or feature films and such *treaty co-productions* allow for larger production budgets and potential audiences.<sup>8</sup> Co-productions may afford a budget capable of elevating production values, allowing for distribution in territories beyond those of the specific partners.<sup>9</sup> A German and French co-production may travel throughout Europe, whereas one produced by one or the other may see more limited distribution across borders.

Through co-productions, television industries across Europe have also banded together to provide a counterweight to American industrial muscle. Over the years, European co-productions have found success, being less expensive and widely compatible, and have served to reduce European acquisition of American programming.<sup>10</sup> The turn to format sales and treaty co-productions over the last few decades has decentered media trade, allowing other media producers to more effectively compete with American television distributors.<sup>11</sup>

In decades past, American television programming has proven highly desirable for a variety of reasons, including consistently high production values. As a result, so-called *output deals*, where studios deliver the bulk of their product for television to a broadcaster, have been a popular, though problematic, economic arrangement between many television companies and television program producers at the Hollywood studios.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 1990s, German broadcaster and rights trader KirchMedia was licencing finished series for sale to German broadcasters (or to broadcasters across Europe in some cases) via output deals with multiple studios. Such five- or ten-year output deals, or other limited deals, included dozens of new and library television series for terrestrial broadcast throughout Europe, or satellite broadcast on KirchMedia's newly launched satellite service, Premiere.<sup>13</sup>

For example, KirchMedia acquired broadcast rights to *Dawson's Creek*, *Just Shoot Me*, *Party of Five*, *Seinfeld*, and many other series from Columbia/Sony; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (and *Angel*), *Dharma and Greg*, *The Simpsons*, *The X-Files* and other series from Fox; *Charmed*, *Diagnosis Murder*, *Frasier*, *JAG*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Sex & the City*, *Will & Grace*, many *Star Trek* series and many other series from Paramount; *ER* and *Friends* from Warner Brothers; *The A-Team*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Highlander*, *Knight Rider*, *Kojak*, *Magnum P.I.*, *Miami Vice*, *The Rockford Files* and many other series from Universal. KirchMedia sold rights to all of these series in Germany, primarily to ProSieben and SAT.1, broadcasters KirchMedia controlled. KirchMedia sold rights to some of these series to terrestrial broadcasters throughout continental Europe as well.

In addition to these many and various output arrangements for finished series, KirchMedia entered into a series of co-production arrangements with Hollywood studios, beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s. KirchMedia sought to include a co-production piece into its output deals as a way to mitigate the dependency (and economic damage) of such expensive output deals.<sup>14</sup> The mixed results of such co-production strategies – in product and profit – have caused rights traders and media importers to reevaluate their product mix, and encouraged a turn to formatting, which afforded a production process that is even more easily controlled and customized.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The Logic of Co-Productions

In past decades, German private television companies turned to television and feature film co-production activities with the Hollywood studios to exert more influence over the American product they were receiving. Non-treaty co-production endeavors, like those with the United States, do not carry the pan-European cultural and financial benefits of treaty productions, and yet the dual advantages, of American production expertise and American distribution prowess were attractive.<sup>16</sup> Those who enter into co-productions with Hollywood are familiar with the accompanying caveats, and may recognize that what they consider to be a 'co-production' may have aspects of a 'co-financing' deal.<sup>17</sup>

In many co-productions with an American-based studio or American independent production entity, the foreign partner joins the agreement precisely because of traditional American strengths in production and distribution, and the American partner may control much of the production and distribution system as a result. This means that the foreign partner is usually coming at the project from the outside and has to adhere to certain restrictions regarding access and influence. Even if the contract allows for creative input, history and practice may run against such input.

This is further complicated by the fact that the foreign partner represents one position within a complex, interdependent process. For television co-productions, first there is the production itself, involving producers, writers, cast, crew, sets, locations, etc. Second, there is a lead production entity (e.g. a major studio) with various creative executives, publicity and marketing executives, lawyers, etc. Third, there is the American outlet (a network, syndication distributor, or streaming services), with their set of executives. There is often another layer made up of advertisers, who may be involved in storylines or other production considerations from a product placement perspective. Finally, there is the foreign partner or partners and their executives. This complex hierarchy, or layering of co-production players, remains a significant factor, even as co-production contracts, practices, partner assets (financial and creative), and categories and conceptions (i.e. where does "foreign" fit into a transnational media market?) have shifted and evolved over the last few decades.

While the ability of a foreign partner (in a U.S.-initiated joint venture) to influence the production and promotion processes is related to the extent of its financial participation, there is often no precise calibration to determine its impact on the production. In addition to the willingness to assume greater risks in the hope of reaping greater rewards, the logic behind co-productions, therefore, is the determination on the part of the foreign partner to exercise control over both the creative and the financial aspects of a co-production project.

In a 1997 publication, Hoskins et al. laid out a series of *benefits* and *costs* of international co-productions, discussing how co-production partners may avoid some risks, but often encounter others.<sup>18</sup> They point to multiple benefits, or positive results, of co-productions, including the pooling of financial resources, access to foreign subsidies, access to foreign markets, access to foreign projects and talent, access to foreign facilities and locations, access to production expertise, and possible reduced production costs. Hoskins et al. define multiple costs, or negative results, including costs of corporate coordination, increased shooting costs, loss of creative control, as well as:

*Opportunistic behavior by the foreign partner (Cheating).* There is the possibility that the partner may 'cheat' by under-allocating resources to the international co-production in the hope of a 'free ride,' or by providing misleading information regarding the level of costs or revenues to be shared. However, there are considerable deterrents to such behavior since producers can ill afford to acquire a reputation for opportunistic behavior. Not only are the consequences of being caught cheating serious but also, we suspect, the likelihood of the word spreading is high.<sup>19</sup>

Despite potential deterrents, however, Hollywood studios have occasionally engaged in ‘opportunistic behavior’ without regard for ‘being caught cheating,’ through notorious accounting practices, for example. A foreign media company may take on a Hollywood co-production in order to buy into increased financial participation and influence the creative outcome, and yet, in some cases, neither of these goals is met.

#### 4 KirchMedia Co-Productions with Columbia/Sony

In the spring of 1998, as a part of several arrangements including broader output deals, KirchMedia was co-producing four different television series, with two of these set to premiere in the fall. First, KirchMedia was contributing \$400,000 per episode towards the ongoing Paramount produced, UPN action series, *Viper*. This arrangement was little more than a co-financing arrangement within the much larger output arrangement with Paramount (though KirchMedia had some input into casting, along with distribution rights for continental Europe). Second, KirchMedia was launching a co-production of *Air America*, a syndicated action hour starring Lorenzo Lamas, with independent production company Franklin-Waterman. Third, KirchMedia had entered a new co-production of a CBS network series, a remake of *Fantasy Island* starring Malcolm McDowell, with Columbia/Sony. And finally, KirchMedia was launching a co-production of Pamela Anderson’s syndicated action hour *V.I.P.*, also with Columbia/Sony.

*V.I.P.* was aired in syndication in the United States and sold to multiple broadcast companies and independent stations, including the Fox owned-and-operated station group. KirchMedia’s output deal with Columbia provided the context for multiple co-productions (see Figure 1 below). The first co-produced television network series between Columbia and KirchMedia was *Dark Skies* (1996), a short-lived sci-fi drama. The co-production agreement required series selections from Columbia’s often limited offerings, with run-of-series commitments carrying all renewals forward.<sup>20</sup>

Columbia/Sony-KirchMedia Co-productions of TV Network Series				
Season	Title	US Network	# of Seasons	# of Episodes
1996-1997	<i>Dark Skies</i>	NBC	1	20
1997-1998	<i>Sleepwalkers</i>	NBC	>1	9
1998-1999	<i>Fantasy Island</i>	ABC	>1	8
1998-2002	<i>V.I.P.</i>	Syndication	4	88
1999-2000	<i>Secret Agent Man</i>	UPN	>1	12
2000-2001	<i>Young Americans</i>	WB	>1	8
2001-2002	<i>Pasadena</i>	FOX	>1	13

Figure 1. Network television co-productions between Columbia and KirchMedia.<sup>21</sup>

The terms of these arrangements divided the world in half, with Columbia having the United States and Canada as its so-called home territory, and KirchMedia being granted Continental Europe as its home territory. The rest of the world was designated the Shared Territory, where Columbia distributed for both parties. Shared Territory revenues for the television series were pooled and divided, but only after Columbia deducted a 15% distribution fee and any additional distribution expenses. For *V.I.P.*, the rights granted for these co-productions were, ‘for all media, now known or hereafter devised (except theatrical exhibition), and to exploit the ancillary rights in and to the Series, including without limitation, merchandising and music publishing rights (but excepting book publishing rights) for a term commencing on the date hereof and continuing in perpetuity’.<sup>22</sup>

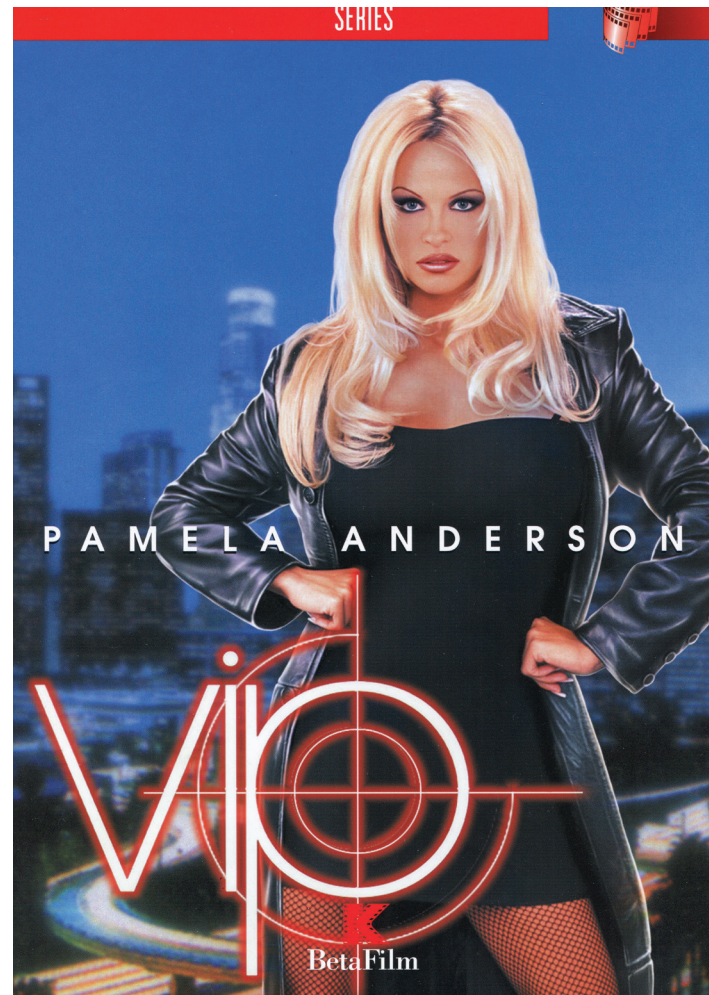


Figure 2. KirchMedia International Sales Brochure for *V.I.P.*<sup>23</sup>

## 5 The *V.I.P.* Co-Production

When KirchMedia agreed to co-produce Pamela Anderson's new series, *V.I.P.*, it anticipated another European success story, along the lines of its profitable co-production of *Baywatch*. KirchMedia provided half of the production costs in exchange for a half-share in worldwide revenues. *V.I.P.* was picked up by Columbia's syndicated television division, and offered by Columbia's international television division to KirchMedia as a co-production opportunity in the spring of 1998. The production budget was set at €1.56 million (US\$1.42mil) per episode, with KirchMedia's share being €781,000 (US\$710k) per episode, 50% of the cost of each episode. Sony/Columbia produced four seasons of the series, for a total of eighty-eight episodes (22 episodes per season).

After agreeing to the *V.I.P.* co-production, KirchMedia was eager to exploit the series throughout Europe and commenced its sales operation. It was believed that the series would sell well and play well in the same territories where *Baywatch* had performed strongly.



<b>Select KirchMedia Sales for <i>V.I.P.</i> Season I</b> (As of November 2001, US\$1 = €1.1)		
<b>Territory</b>	<b>Sales (in €)</b>	<b>Sales (in US\$)</b>
Germany	5.5 mil	5 mil
Poland	3.9 mil	3.6 mil
Italy	2.4 mil	2.2 mil
Spain	1.7 mil	1.6 mil
France	1.3 mil	1.2 mil
Denmark/Norway/Sweden	1 mil	914k
Russia	390k	357k
Portugal	260k	238k
Netherlands & Luxemburg	240k	219k
<b>Total Sales (including all markets)</b>	<b>€18 mil</b>	<b>US\$16.5 mil</b>
<b>Total Per Episode</b>	<b>€810k</b>	<b>US\$740k</b>

Figure 3. Approximate sales for *V.I.P.* by select territory.<sup>24</sup>

As Figure 3 indicates, European markets signed on across the continent and initial sales for *V.I.P.* were promising. At the time, €810,000 converted to US\$740,000, which covered KirchMedia’s license fee of US\$710,000 per episode. Since KirchMedia was to hold distribution rights in perpetuity, the *V.I.P.* co-production appeared to be heading for success.

## 6 ‘The Right to Consult’

According to the *V.I.P.* Co-Production Contract (1999), KirchMedia had the ‘right to consult’ with Columbia regarding the direction of the series on an ongoing basis:

[KirchMedia] shall have the right to consult with [Columbia] with respect to all major creative elements of the Series and [Columbia] will give good faith consideration to any and all suggestions by [KirchMedia] with respect thereto; provided that [KirchMedia] acknowledges that [Columbia’s] decisions shall be final over all aspects of the production of the series.<sup>25</sup>

Though KirchMedia had this ‘right to consult,’ prior to the *V.I.P.* co-production, this ill-defined right had not been exercised beyond the initial pitch meeting, where the project was described in broad terms, and a cursory review of a preliminary budget. Columbia had carefully complied with final delivery requirements, sending all necessary elements for dubbing (digital video masters, separate music and effects tracks, copies of the scripts, etc.) to KirchMedia’s headquarters in Munich.

If Columbia provided scripts before this final stage, however, they were sent over after the episode had already been shot, and when final cuts were supplied, they were available only after they were locked. The ‘right to consult’ clause was interpreted to mean that KirchMedia was presented with an initial pitch and encouraged to submit a wish list of guest casting suggestions. Columbia had done little else to solicit input from their co-production partner. For the foreign partner working with Hollywood, however, the purpose of a co-production was to better affect the outcome of the broader acquisition process, and in 1998 KirchMedia sought to more actively co-produce *V.I.P.*, in order to exercise more control over the creative content of the series.

There were certain aspects of the initial *V.I.P.* pitch—about a ‘bodyguard to the stars in Hollywood’—that made the project especially interesting. Pamela Anderson was considered an internationally known sex symbol. Many television series projects lack immediately identifiable stars, and worldwide appeal is an even rarer commodity. Pamela Anderson provided a name that would make for easier marketing and sales throughout the KirchMedia territories. *V.I.P.* promised a combination of action and sex, an ideal recipe for success in transnational media distribution.<sup>26</sup> These factors were considered crucial to an initial sales and marketing campaign.



Video 1. *V.I.P.* Opening Credits, Season One.

Production of season one of *V.I.P.* began in May of 1998. KirchMedia solicited and received outlines and scripts, dailies and rough cuts. In return, KirchMedia submitted a series of notes encouraging certain creative choices. Columbia’s creative executives functioned as a filter between KirchMedia and the producers and writers on the set, as notes went through them. Very soon after production commenced, KirchMedia expressed concerns about the creative direction of the project. KirchMedia executives were pleased with the “slick, sunny, and colorful” look of the pilot and early episodes, and felt that certain characters were appealing, but they also thought that the episode suffered from a “confusing and implausible plot with no real villain,” and noted that “the show is trying too hard to be funny,” with “numerous one-liners that fall flat”.<sup>27</sup>

The domestic ratings were strong at launch, but the demographics were unusual, with the predictable audience of young men, but also including teenage girls and young women. The prevalence of the latter demographic was seen as connected to an emphasis on scenes with the predominantly female cast. At that time, the perception was that these scenes would appeal more to teenage girls and young women, and potentially alienate young male audiences. KirchMedia had signed onto the production expecting a solidly male-skewing action series, but it soon became clear that the series was appealing to different demographics (i.e. girls 12-17), which might make it more difficult to program and receive advertiser support.<sup>28</sup>

By the second season, KirchMedia felt that the humor in *V.I.P.* had become too sarcastic, filled with inside jokes, and that this poorly executed humor threatened to overpower the more straight-ahead action dimensions of the show.<sup>29</sup> The concern over these perceived weaknesses in the series continued to increase, especially when Columbia did not seem able to direct the producers to shift the direction of the series in response to their co-production partner's requests.



Video 2. *V.I.P.* Opening Credits, Season Two.

By the end of season two, KirchMedia had come to realize that *V.I.P.* was quite different than *Baywatch*. On the level of casting, *Baywatch* was attractive to KirchMedia because of David Hasselhoff, who was popular throughout Europe because of his previous series *Knight Rider* and his European music tours. Pamela Anderson did not join the cast of *Baywatch* until the third season, and even then, she was part of a larger ensemble. In *Baywatch*, the characters were

heroic; they were lifeguards who literally saved lives. The melodramatic plots (i.e. 'schmaltz') encouraged viewers to identify with the various interpersonal predicaments that the characters faced.

In contrast, the overall tone of *V.I.P.* was much less heartfelt, lighter in tone, even sarcastic and cynical. The characters of *V.I.P.* were more hip than heroic, in part because the dangers they faced were not realistically presented. As *V.I.P.* Season III approached, KirchMedia requested a major reevaluation of the creative aspects of the series, asking that *V.I.P.* re-emphasize several key elements:<sup>30</sup>

- The Bodyguards as Heroes.
- Strong Adversaries and Sympathetic Victims.
- Early Introduction of High Stakes.
- Plausible and Schematic Plots.
- Consistent Action Beats.
- Humor within an Environment of Tension.

Following industry practices at that time, the dubbing process for pan-European distribution commenced only after the first full season of episodes was shot and completed in the U.S. Therefore, there were no television ratings for *V.I.P.* from any of territories on the continent to provide direct evidence of the appeal, or lack thereof, until well into in the series production process. In this case, *V.I.P.* did not launch in Germany and other European territories until many months into production of the second season. As a result, executives at KirchMedia had to wait for more than one year to see how the series would perform in their territories.

## 7 The Unvarnished Truth about *V.I.P.*

In September of 1998, Doris Kirch, the head of acquisitions at Germany's SAT.1, and daughter of KirchMedia founder Leo Kirch, wrote an enthusiastic letter to Los Angeles-based Kirch representative, Klaus Hallig saying, "We have just received the first version of *V.I.P.* and I wanted to let you know that I think it looks just great! We will definitely air it in our best primetime slot on Friday at 8:15pm".<sup>31</sup>



Figure 4. Publicity for Germany's SAT.1 Television Network.<sup>32</sup>

One year later, when *V.I.P.* actually launched in the Fall of 1999, SAT.1 was less bullish on the series' prospects. *V.I.P.* debuted in the German market in a primetime slot on a Friday, but was almost immediately shifted to a much weaker timeslot on Sunday afternoons. SAT.1 cancelled the series before broadcasting the entire first season. Elsewhere in Europe, the news was even worse, with a consistent pattern of low ratings and cancellations. France cancelled after ten episodes, Norway after eight, and Sweden after six.

Columbia's ratings for the international territories, where they were distributing for both co-production partners, were no better: Australia cancelled *V.I.P.* after eight episodes, and the United Kingdom's satellite broadcaster SKY1 was drawing few viewers to the series. In South America, *V.I.P.* was distributed via Sony's own, but small satellite channels.<sup>33</sup>

In November of 1999, the author collated ratings from the KirchMedia territories, and sent a memo to Columbia with overseas ratings information for the first season of *V.I.P.*:

The unvarnished truth is that *V.I.P.* is far from a success—though it has performed well in the United States, it has performed poorly in almost every major territory throughout the rest of the world. On the one hand, such poor performance is surprising—who knew Pamela Anderson would be a flop in countries that love *Baywatch*. On the other hand, I have been raising warning flags for the past six months about certain overall weaknesses with the show that appear to be exacerbated in the European territories.<sup>34</sup>

As these initial, disastrous ratings from Europe and around the world were coming in, *V.I.P.* was shooting the final episodes of its second season. In addition, Columbia had just contracted with the Fox O & Os and other syndicated stations to produce two more seasons. As the KirchMedia-Columbia co-production contract stipulated a *run-of-series* commitment, KirchMedia was to be burdened with the rights to at least eighty-eight episodes of *V.I.P.* The European networks were eager to buy a Pamela Anderson series, but most were cautious enough to sign up for one season only. KirchMedia was not able to extract run-of-series or even long term contracts from its European clients.

In some cases, KirchMedia was forced to renegotiate contracts as part of the packages they had sold. As a result, subsequent seasons of *V.I.P.* were extremely difficult to sell. France's TF1 cancelled the series and did not renew. KirchMedia's world sales division did manage to place the series with the smaller French network, M6, but the per-episode license fee from France dropped from €59,000 (US\$55,000) to €13,000 (US\$10,000). Figure 5 details the sharp decline in revenues from season one, to season two, to season three.

Select KirchMedia Sales for 'V.I.P.' Seasons 1-3 (as of November 2001, in €)			
Territory	Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
Germany	5.5 mil	1.4 mil	1.4 mil
Poland	3.9 mil	520k	540k
Italy	2.4 mil	1.2 mil	---
Spain	1.7 mil	---	---
France	1.3 mil	285k	285k
Denmark/Norway/Sweden	1 mil.	---	---
Russia	390k	---	---
Portugal	260k	---	---
Netherlands & Luxemburg	240k	90k	90k
Totals (all current markets)	€18 mil	€5.4 mil	€2.3 mil
<b>Totals Per Episode</b>	<b>€810k</b>	<b>€245k</b>	<b>€104k</b>

Figure 5. Approximate sales numbers for *V.I.P.*, season 1-3, by country.<sup>35</sup>

KirchMedia had contracted to pay €781,000 (US\$710k) for each episode of *V.I.P.*, and the first season, sold long before the series aired in any European market, brought in a solid €810,000 (US\$740k) per episode in sales. After the series launched, and after it performed poorly or was cancelled in multiple markets, sales for season two plummeted



from €810k to €240k per episode, with season three bringing in just over €100k per episode. And, in the fall of 2001, there was little movement on Season 4 sales, and KirchMedia was on track to recoup just €25 million (US\$23mil) of a €68 million (US\$62mil) investment in the four-season *V.I.P.* co-production.

In this case, at least, the realities of a U.S. television series failure overseas went unacknowledged by boosters in the press. In the Fall of 1999, Time Magazine (inaccurately) noted:

The international market can't seem to get enough of buxom women in bikinis who enjoy a little kick-boxing on the side. Following the lucrative example set by *Baywatch*, which airs in 144 countries, these action shows have gone global, and many of the new arrivals are joint productions of American and overseas companies. "The international market is what makes these shows work," says Jeff Dellin, vice president of research and program strategy for Studios USA, which produces and distributes *Xena: Warrior Princess*. "Domestic is the gravy". *V.I.P.*, for instance, is already translated into 10 languages.<sup>36</sup>

When the first European ratings indicated that *V.I.P.* was not working in Europe, KirchMedia went back to Columbia to re-emphasize its critique of the series' creative direction.<sup>37</sup> From KirchMedia's perspective, the series was poorly produced and lacked necessary promotional support. Multiple memos and meetings were not effective in convincing Columbia to change course.

## 8 Financial Accountability in Co-Productions

There are two goals for those who would enter into a co-production with Hollywood, and both entail taking on greater risk in the pursuit of greater reward. First, the foreign partner puts up more money up front in order to get a larger rights package, meaning broader distribution territories, merchandising rights, a longer license term, etc. This demonstrates optimism about the prospect of doing business with Hollywood. And second, the foreign partner seeks greater creative and financial control over the product that they are getting from Hollywood. This demonstrates caution about the challenges of dealing with the Hollywood studios and what they produce.

After it was clear that *V.I.P.* was going to be an ongoing, and incredibly expensive failure, and after Columbia refused to adjust the series creatively, KirchMedia began a concerted campaign to minimize the overall costs of the co-production. In memo to KirchMedia US lawyers in August of 2001, Wolfgang Hahn wrote:

It seems to be time to revisit our *V.I.P.* and potentially other co-financing agreements. Columbia seems to subsidize our shows more and more with product placements, the revenues of which should be deducted from the overall budget and benefit both partners...I am under the impression that Columbia is currently creating the plots for *V.I.P.* around the brands of boat manufacturers, car dealers, and soft drink companies. Firestone Tires is probably already negotiating for a revised image campaign. We are being taken to the cleaners. Let us take care of the ironing.<sup>38</sup>

KirchMedia questioned the budgetary information that Columbia had provided, and asked about the numerous product placement deals which suddenly exploded onto the screen in the second season.

In March of 1998, Columbia had delivered to Kirchmedia a 'Preliminary Budget' for *V.I.P.* and production was slated to begin in May of that year.<sup>39</sup> Typically, television productions compile a *pattern budget*, which covers the total expenses for each episode, and an *amortization budget*, which breaks out one-time costs for the season (like the standing sets). Preliminary pattern and amortization budgets go through several revisions up until the start of production, and then, after each episode is completed, a final episodic budget is generated and compared to the pattern budget blueprint, to ascertain whether a particular episode was over or under standard budgeted costs.

KirchMedia had a brief meeting with Columbia to discuss the original, preliminary pattern budget which indicated costs of €1.56 million (US\$1.42mil) per episode, but never received any further budgets as production began for *V.I.P.* season one. Initially, concerns about the budget were secondary, with KirchMedia concentrating on negotiating a working relationship with Columbia regarding fulfillment of launch publicity requests, and the creative direction of the series – getting rough cuts delivered to KirchMedia allowing time for notes, for instance, was a major issue during the majority of the first season.<sup>40</sup>

It wasn't until the next to the last episode of the first season, when creator and executive producer J. F. Lawton mentioned episodic costs of just €1.38 million (US\$1.25mil), that the possibility of Columbia's budget inflation became an issue worthy of exploration.<sup>41</sup> As preproduction on the second season of *V.I.P.* began, KirchMedia asked for the new pattern budget. Months later, after continuous follow-up with the producers and with domestic and international executives, Columbia finally provided another budget. The most noticeable difference between the original preliminary budget of March of 1998 and the version presented in June of 1999, was that Columbia was claiming that costs for *V.I.P.* had risen by exactly 5%, from €1.56 million (US\$1.42mil) to €1.64 million (US\$1.49mil) per episode, the precise maximum increase that the co-production agreement allowed for.<sup>42</sup>

In the June 26, 1999 issue of *TV Guide*, Pamela Anderson boasted about her role in the production of *V.I.P.*:

**“I'm in charge,” Anderson says, matter-of-factly. And she is. As an executive producer, she is involved in most aspects of production, including casting, budgets, hairstyling, costumes, and even the overall look of the show. “I am really educating myself on how much things cost. We have a \$1.3 million budget, and it is such a big budget for a one-hour syndicated show”.**<sup>43</sup>

In addition, Russ Krasnoff, President of Programming and Production, volunteered the fact that union regulations prohibited the *V.I.P.* budget from rising above US\$1.3 million (€1.43mil) an episode.<sup>44</sup> KirchMedia asked for current and continuous information, but Columbia maintained that no other seasonal budget or final episodic budgets were available.

As the second season production began, KirchMedia was keeping a close eye on the production values of each episode of *V.I.P.* In several cases, for instance, Columbia wanted to shoot episodes in four or five days, instead of the standard seven days. Such proposed 'bottle' or 'clip' shows included flashbacks to previous episodes, to the point where half the pages of the 'new script' had already been shot for earlier episodes.<sup>45</sup> KirchMedia's position was that it didn't make sense to be paying twice for the same footage, especially as KirchMedia executives believed that they were being charged for half of an artificially inflated budget.

Another major issue of financial accountability concerned Columbia's use of product placement in *V.I.P.* (and in the *Young Americans* co-production as well), as a way to lower production costs.<sup>46</sup> As co-producers of *Baywatch*, KirchMedia was familiar with the cash-or-kind transactions that accompany product placement. The challenge was to dig for information, or otherwise compel Columbia to share full details of the actual costs of production, and how product integration factored in.

Beginning in the second season, script pages started including key *mentions* of brand names, and rough cuts featured close-ups of Aquafina water, or Corona beer, of the front grill of the new Cadillac STS, or an extended, two-minute montage sequence of a cast member riding the 'new Ducati 990 race bike.' KirchMedia asked for information on this practice, “[i]n the last few episodes it has become clear that *V.I.P.* is stepping up its utilization of Product Placement to reduce its production costs. We are ready and willing to discuss how these savings will be passed along to us”.<sup>47</sup>

Over the course of four seasons of *V.I.P.* products placed included automobiles from Daimler/Chrysler and GMC; boats from Donzi; motorcycles from Ducati; electronics from Apple, Sony Ericsson and Nokia; firearms from Heckler & Koch and Glock; clothing from Calvin Klein, Candies and Versace; food/drink products from Pepsico, Snickers and Corona; and a variety of home and health products. Columbia was persuaded to provide some information for about

a dozen of the product placement arrangements, although none of the information Columbia made available covered money or *quid pro quo*. Columbia maintained that ‘we do not receive any cash compensation in exchange for this product placement, nor does such product placement reduce our production costs’.<sup>48</sup> This did not satisfy KirchMedia’s quest for answers, given incomplete information regarding product placement agreements, and Columbia’s refusal to provide final budgets by episode.

In January of 2001 and in response to the accumulation of financial questions, Wolfgang Hahn notified KirchMedia headquarters in Munich that, “[w]e are in discussions in regard to the correct budgets and overall status of the series. Please stop any payments for *V.I.P.* until further notice”.<sup>49</sup> By the summer of 2001 the overall relationship between KirchMedia and Columbia was strained, and the various co-production issues remained unresolved, with each side maintaining a hardline position. In the middle of production of *V.I.P.*’s third season, KirchMedia felt it necessary to confront Columbia more directly:

Unless Columbia provides us with immediate access to the necessary information (including without limitation episodic budgets and product placement/advertising information), as has been requested numerous times over the past nine months, we will be forced to initiate an audit covering all production and distribution aspects of *V.I.P.* We are disappointed that months of conversations and meetings have led us to this low point in our co-production relationship, but we are no longer able to accept Columbia’s unilateral dictates with respect to our co-productions, which are not in accordance with the spirit or the letter of the parties’ agreement.<sup>50</sup>

Columbia’s response was to point directly to KirchMedia’s failure to fund their *V.I.P.* co-production:

It has always been and continues to be [Columbia’s] objective to make our co-productions work as smoothly as possible...In the spirit of co-operation, please note that KirchMedia has thus far not provided any payment for its share of Season 3’s production costs. The receivable balance for Season 3 of *V.I.P.* now stands at \$15.8 million.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, KirchMedia’s account balance for all Columbia product had soared to over €77 million (US\$70mil), and both parties were contemplating lawsuits.

KirchMedia, however, was already embroiled in lawsuits with Paramount Pictures and Universal Studios, and the company did not look forward to another expensive legal action against another Hollywood major studio.<sup>52</sup> In an effort to avoid a lawsuit, negotiations were ongoing to extricate KirchMedia from its ten-year output deal with Columbia. Columbia had offered various *buyout* numbers to KirchMedia, calculating lost revenues for the remainder of the term. Columbia proposed payments totaling €220 million (US\$200mil) over a few years, claiming that this reduced KirchMedia’s obligations by more than €550 million (US\$500mil). In this broader context, KirchMedia’s complaints regarding financial mismanagement of €11 million (US\$10mil) for the *V.I.P.* co-production was portrayed to be a smaller point.

In March of 2002, Columbia and KirchMedia seemed to be reaching a mutually agreeable solution, having hammered out an Amended and Restated Term Sheet after many months of negotiation.<sup>53</sup> The original term of the output arrangement, of five years, plus a five-year renewal option, was reduced to seven years total. For this adjustment, Columbia required a €66 million (US\$60mil) payment as a ‘contract restructuring/termination fee,’ immediate payment of outstanding invoices totaling some €165 million (US\$150mil), and adherence to a strict payment schedule for further balances of approximately €193 million (US\$175mil) by the end of the year.<sup>54</sup>

Among other sweeping changes, the contentious co-production portion of the output agreement was gutted and reversed, stripping away the broad distribution and merchandising rights and reducing the arrangement to a de facto co-financing agreement granting television rights for Germany only. All previous co-production rights, which KirchMedia had held within their continental European territories in perpetuity, were returned, and any pre-existing sales contracts were transferred to Columbia. KirchMedia and Columbia signed the revised agreement on March 17,

2002. KirchMedia failed to meet the immediate €66 million (US\$60mil) obligation, and the revised contract did not go into effect. KirchMedia declared bankruptcy a month later, on April 8, 2002.<sup>55</sup>

## 9 Confronting the Risk of Co-Productions

By the summer of 2001, it became clear that KirchMedia's co-productions with Columbia were a losing proposition. For KirchMedia, there was no upside, and the inevitable downside was a huge drain: the co-produced series and television movies sold poorly, and KirchMedia contended that Columbia had 'abused the relationship'.<sup>56</sup>

Part of the attraction of a co-production for the foreign partner is the opportunity to take on more financial risk in exchange for the possibility of more financial reward. KirchMedia contributed half of the money for their co-productions with Columbia in exchange for half of the world. More precisely, KirchMedia distributed the various series throughout continental Europe, and Columbia (which held North America) distributed the series throughout the rest of the world, the 'shared territory', for both parties.

By 2001, five years after the initial *Dark Skies* co-production with Columbia, KirchMedia had received very little in revenue from Columbia's distribution of that series in the shared territories. The contract stipulated a 50-50 split for the shared territories, but allowed Columbia to collect a distribution fee of 15% of the 50%, and also to claim various additional distribution expenses. As a result, KirchMedia's share of the *Dark Skies* shared territory revenues equaled just 30% of the revenue for this first co-production in the agreement. At the end of five years, and including seven television series co-productions, KirchMedia's net of shared territory revenues was just €2.2 million (US\$2mil), or just 13% of all shared territory revenues collected. A charitable interpretation was that shared territory revenues took many years to collect, and were much smaller than expected. KirchMedia was convinced, however, that Columbia was either managing the territories poorly or misrepresenting revenues.<sup>57</sup> KirchMedia was pouring tens of millions into a co-production agreement, and hundreds of millions into an output arrangement, even as their financial stability was steadily eroding in a number of respects.<sup>58</sup>

KirchMedia's optimistic sales materials for *V.I.P.* described Pamela Anderson's character as having "the street smarts to nab the bad guys, and a natural buoyancy that keeps her afloat whenever she's in hot water".<sup>59</sup> Well, 'natural buoyancy' or not, the series sank like a stone in Europe. In sum, *V.I.P.* was a financial disaster for KirchMedia, and because of the disputes over the creative direction, production costs, and marketing cooperation, the series was a particular sore point in their expensive programming output deal with Columbia/Sony.

The poor performance of *V.I.P.* and of other co-produced product, and multiple conflicts within the entire output agreement signaled an imminent breakdown in the economic relationship between a Hollywood studio and its primary trading partner in Germany. As KirchMedia's Hahn noted, 'Columbia and KirchMedia did not succeed in the creation of a mutually beneficial co-production business, and are unlikely to agree on a proper form of accounting, and should therefore call it a day'.<sup>60</sup> Whatever the potential advantages of a co-production with a Hollywood studio, this Columbia/Sony vs. KirchMedia case study, concerning *V.I.P.* and much more, reveals a harsher reality, where anticipated benefits can become a major liabilities.

## 10 Mitigating Risk in Transnational Television Joint Ventures: Lessons Learned

This specific case study of a co-production agreement between KirchMedia and Columbia/Sony examines a range of potential benefits, and an especially wide variety of risks in co-productions between media companies and across

borders. Co-productions are situated in between acquiring rights to scripted and completed television programs on the one hand, and acquiring rights to format and adapt a television property on the other. When compared to the simple licencing of finished product for transnational distribution, co-productions can allow for increased creative control and profit sharing.

As explored, however, the potential for opportunistic behavior exists, especially in hierarchical arrangements of co-productions, where one partner controls all of the production and much of the distribution system. There is substantial potential for uncooperative co-production practices and dodgy accounting. There can be conflicts over the creative process during production, and there might be disagreements over financial management and accountability, and the potential benefits might evaporate and the risks might rule the day.

Those acquiring media content might prefer to secure television formatting rights in order to receive many of the benefits of a co-production, but also to avoid potential risks involved in transnational joint ventures<sup>61</sup>. Formatting has become popular in the media trade business, as it allows more opportunity to calibrate creative consultation and shared control of the production and distribution by the respective partners<sup>62</sup>. Formatting can deliver proven success for lower cost, and formatting always and directly contributes to the local production infrastructure, creating the conditions for further media industry growth<sup>63</sup>.

There are many, and better, ways to structure co-productions, of course. Patterns from the Hollywood studios have been overwritten and revised in recent years, with new models, new contracts and new production practices. Since Hoskins et al. from 1997, there have been other estimations and calculations of the benefits and drawbacks of co-productions<sup>64</sup>. Certain central factors remain, like spreading economic risks and (hopefully) sharing financial success, and also overcoming the challenge of finding and delivering on a shared creative vision. Some satisfaction will be found with projects that have equal relevance in multiple markets because of the show's setting or shared cultural history, though this is not necessary to successful joint ventures. Norway's interest in co-productions began in the mid-2010s, as Scandi-noir content previously considered domestic fare found select audiences around the world<sup>65</sup>. According to a 2019 Scripted Series Report, from Mediamétrie's Glance, crime series accounted for 41% of prime-time series worldwide, up three percentage points on the 2017-18 season<sup>66</sup>.

The pursuit of new models, new contracts and new production practices includes joint ventures that pair television producers outside the U.S. with American broadcast/cable companies, for distribution domestically and abroad. France-based Gaumont, opened a U.S.-based production studio in 2011, and co-produced *Hannibal* with NBC, beginning in 2013<sup>67</sup>. The BBC has a long-standing partnership with AMC Networks, as the two organisations co-own the BBC America channel, which broadcasts much of the corporation's programming to American audiences. Their partnership extends to co-productions as well, with *The Night Manager*, a limited series released in 2016 on AMC<sup>68</sup>. The BBC, via its BBC Studios Los Angeles, also launched a joint venture with Lionsgate in 2018 to co-develop and co-fund scripted formats and original IP for the US market.<sup>69</sup> In these joint ventures, each of which showcase the high standard of television production from Europe, we see a reversal of the flow, and a de-centering of a transnational co-production process. Successful co-productions match partners that have a shared vision, similar production processes and, most importantly, a mutual trust that each party will honor the contract and work towards shared creative and financial benefits.

## Notes

1. Only Season 1 of *V.I.P.* was released on DVD (2006). Episodes can be found on YouTube in English via fan channels and aggregators, like [V.I.P. Forever!](#) There are also various dubbed versions, [in German](#), for instance.
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## Biography

Paul Torre received his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. His media industry experience includes positions in film and television development, production, marketing, distribution and legal affairs. He served as Vice President of Programming and Production for the German media conglomerate KirchMedia, working in Hollywood and overseeing television co-productions and arranging international distribution with the major studios. His research and publications explore entertainment industry structures and practices, media regulations and policies, the interplay between U.S. and global media markets, and how new technologies are shaping the media business models of the future.

## WHY SO SUCCESSFUL?

### AN AUDIENCE RESEARCH ON TURKISH TV SERIES IN GREECE

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**Abstract:** The circulation of Turkish fictional television programs among different countries worldwide has been increased crossing over to wider audiences of different cultural regions. Over the last years there has been a rising production of Turkish series dealing with the foundation and the history of the Ottoman Empire, militaristic series as well as drama series that run in parallel to the country's trade expansion in the region, foreign policies, Neo-Ottoman ideology and recent political events.<sup>1</sup> This study deals with a specific set of practices found in Turkish drama series that enable them to be cross-culturally consumed with the example of their success in Greece. The audience research presented in this paper indicates cultural proximity as a succorer for this consumption.

**Keywords:** popular culture, cultural proximity, Greek audience, Turkish TV series, Greece

#### 1 Turkish TV Series: An Example of Popular Culture

The Turkish TV series have entered the international market of selling and distribution of TV entertainment programs, claiming a counter flow to the dominant American TV products in the last decade. Only in 2017, Turkey was the second country worldwide in television series exports after the U.S, gradually entering the European market too. Turkish content is available on different platforms worldwide, while Netflix launched its first Turkish original series in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The exports of Turkish series were only \$10M in 2008 reaching a ten times higher revenue of \$100M in 2012<sup>3</sup> and \$350M in 2018<sup>4</sup> targeting to reach a revenue of \$1B by 2023.<sup>5</sup> Undeniably this makes Turkish TV a successful product of the current popular culture and Turkey the main distributor of cultural commodities in the region of Eastern Europe and near Middle East. Apart from that, Turkey is now entering Spain and Italy,<sup>6</sup> expanding its activity in Western Europe.

The patriarchal representation of family, the seldom – if any – scenes of intimacy and the traditional cultural expressions are some of the characteristic elements which construct Turkish drama series' idiosyncrasy. The distinctiveness of its example lays on the fact that it is found in a limbo between modernity and conservatism that is apparent in patriarchal family structure, gender roles and collectivism as expressed in the series together with a number of Islamic rituals.

## 1.1 The example of Greece

One of the most successful and interesting examples of the distribution and the popularity of this Turkish canned content within the European context is Greece. Its idiosyncrasy lays on the sensitive Greek-Turkish relations and the establishment of a negative representation of Turkey in the Greek public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Starting from 2005, when the first Turkish series (*Yabancı Damat*) was aired on Greek TV, Turkish TV series started entering the Greek market, and from 2010 onwards are among Greek audience's choices.<sup>8</sup>

This study adopts the structuralisms and post-structuralisms approach of signifying practices and suggests that in order to understand Turkish TV series' success in Greece, we should focus on the concept of cultural proximity defined by Joseph D. Straubhaar as the tendency "to prefer and select local or national cultural content that is more proximate and relevant to [the audience]".<sup>9</sup> The main idea of the concept is that audiences do tend to choose programs with which they feel more culturally relevant and proximate.<sup>10</sup> Cultural proximity has multiple levels which correlate with people's multilayered, complex cultural identities.

Research on soap operas and telenovelas has pointed out that the audience engages on different levels of proximity with the cultural content depicted depending on their cultural capital. Moreover, Straubhaar notes that melodrama as a genre enables an easier trespass of regional national borders due to the archetypes entailed in it.<sup>11</sup>

Focusing on the Turkish dramas, it can be argued that they compose a hybrid genre, because it does not only consist of the characteristics of romantic drama and melodrama, soap opera and telenovela,<sup>12</sup> but it also diverges from them. Oztürkmen suggests that Turkish drama series have now established itself as a genre of its own, starting from the mid-1990s and shaping in the 2000s, proposing the word *dizi*, namely "series" in Turkish, as the name of the new genre. Taking into consideration that genres "are constructed *a posteriori*",<sup>13</sup> the diversity of Turkish drama series' content and format, the confusion of categorizing them under a specific genre and the viewing patterns of foreign audience which differentiate according to the airing time and the product's format constitute an idiosyncratic text.

Thus far, the research made on the Turkish TV series' in Greece justify its success as a symptom of exoticism, soft power diplomacy, nostalgia and economic crisis, in which identity negotiation occurs.<sup>14</sup> Numerous articles written in Greek newspapers also tried to explain the audience's preference. Some of them focus on Turkish TV series' success as an escapism from financial crisis<sup>15</sup> while other articles argue that it is a tool of soft power diplomacy<sup>16</sup> or justify their success by drawing parallels with the family values of the Greek and Turkish society,<sup>17</sup> wondering what is the common factor between an Arab and Greek audience<sup>18</sup>. It needs to be highlighted that in many of the above-mentioned articles the entrance of Turkish TV series in Greek TV is described as an 'invasion' constructing a bias against them.

While there are sufficient and strong elements that can support these approaches, the purpose of this study is instead to focus on the interplay of cultural proximity. Apart from language, factors that can determine cultural proximity can be gender images, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, values, education, family, personal and group networks, travel, religion, and organizational affiliations.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, in the quest of understanding the reasons behind a Greek audience's preference for Turkish drama series, this study explores two factors as indicators of cultural proximity that positively influence a Greek audience's preference; family values and interpersonal romantic relationships.

This leads to two hypotheses:

H1: A Greek audience that prefers to watch Turkish drama series affiliates with the depiction of conservative family values as an indicator of cultural proximity.



Under the term conservative family values, a portrayal of a conservative family structure, practicing rituals is considered. Eating breakfast all together, listening to the advice of the elders, rarely/never talking back or disrespect the parents, protecting the honor of the family are some examples of these rituals. The conservative family structure refers to a patriarchal structure, where men are in charge of the family, leaving little if no space to the women to take responsibilities that concern serious family decisions. Males protect the females. Mother figures can be intervening but do not play a decisive role. Important terms in this concept are 'namus', namely the honor of the family members and especially the girls and 'sahip çıkmak', namely the obligation that the male members of the family have to protect and defend their family whatever the cost.

H2: A Greek audience that prefers to watch Turkish drama series affiliates with the romantic depiction of interpersonal relationships between men and women depicted as an indicator of cultural proximity.

Under the term romantic depiction of interpersonal relationships between men and women, a conservative, romantic depiction of gender relations is considered. Even though there is a portrayal of an emancipated woman protagonist, when it comes to romance conservative gender roles revive. The protagonist's character embodies both a romantic, sensitive side and a possessive, jealous side, which can also be expressed in a violent way in order to protect the female protagonist. The female protagonist on the other hand like Penelope waits faithfully for her Odysseys to overcome the difficulties before they can be together. She might help him overcome the difficulties but stays always one-step back. Intimacy is implied but never shown. Important terms in this concept are 'yuva kurmak', namely to start a family, which entails that the couple should get married in order to start living together and 'sahip çıkmak', which, within this concept, has the meaning of the male protecting his romantic relationship from aspirant suitors.

## 2 Methodology

In order to understand and explain the reasons behind this engagement a survey was conducted from 23/10/2017 to 26/02/2018. The mixed-methods analysis was based on a semi-structured questionnaire, whose qualitative open-ended questions were optional except for one open-ended question included in the demographics. Open-ended questions were optional in order to further understand the feelings, the attitudes and the opinions of the interviewees without obliging them to answer so as to minimize the chances of completely missing values. The proportional spread of the 708 respondents throughout Greece gives a representative sample to this study.

The type of administrative method applied to this survey was web-based and was posted on the online survey software Survey Monkey. Victory Entertainment S.A., the main distributor of Turkish TV series in Greece, shared the survey on different pages of their administration via Facebook. It was also posted by the researcher on a Facebook fan page of Turkish series with a large community of active members.<sup>20</sup> 4 popular Turkish TV series have been selected: *Endless Love* (2016-2018) (*Kara Sevda*; *Turkish broadcast: 2015-2017*), which won the award for Best Telenovela at the 47<sup>th</sup> International Emmy Awards, *Black Money Love* (2014-2015) (*Kara Para Aşk*; *Turkish broadcast 2014-2015*), *Love and Punishment* (2011-2012) (*Aşk ve Ceza*; *Turkish broadcast 2010-2011*) and *One Thousand and One Nights* (2010-2011) (*Binbir Gece*; *Turkish broadcast 2006-2009*).<sup>21</sup>



Video 1. *Endless Love (Kara Sevda)*, Emmy award winner for Best Telenovela in 2017, Promo video from the official YouTube channel of the production company.

These series were drama series aired totally or partially on different Greek television channels between 2011-2017. By partially we refer to the practice of airing only the first episodes. The price of the rights of distribution and reproduction that the Greek distribution company gets are higher if all the episodes are aired on television. Therefore, in order to maximize the profit, the first episodes of a Turkish series are aired on TV and then the rest of the episodes are distributed through weekly television magazines or through individual DVD-box sets. It is worth to noting that the length of the episodes are generally being readjusted to the Greek viewership standards of a 45-60 minutes episode instead of the original Turkish episode, which can last up to 2:30 hours. The prices for a DVD box set of 20 readjusted episodes can reach up to 88 Euros, as in the example of the price for the first DVD box of *Endless Love*.<sup>22</sup>



Video 2. Example of the DVDs sold in weekly television magazines. The series' spots are produced by the series' distribution company in Greece and are reproduced both in TV and through Social Media.

Scenes from the selected series were extracted and used in the questionnaire. There were two parameters for the selection; the variables in question would clearly be defined in the scenes and the respondents were not expected to have prior knowledge in order to understand what the scenes were all about. Five from the selected scenes refer to the family values and three to romance. The videos for family values were outweighed, because of it being a composite issue, therefore it needed to be investigated from different perspectives. Each participant was asked, after having watched the video, to rank their preference on a 3-point Likert scale. Providing their preference, participants were asked to optionally justify their level of agreement or likeableness to eight scenes extracted from the series through an open-space where they could write their comments.



Video 3. *Love and Punishment (Aşk ve Ceza)*, episode 18. An example of the scenes included in the survey that were upload to my personal YouTube channel.

## 2.1 Scenes selected

**Family values Q1, *Love and Punishment (Aşk ve Ceza)*, episode 18:** In this scene, the mother tells her daughter that “when you get married to someone you have to accept his/her family too”. This expresses a belief that the families can exercise authority in the marriages as a continuation of the traditional contract made between them<sup>23</sup>. The aim was to measure the extent to which families’ complicity in a couple’s marriage is agreeable.

**Family values Q2, *Love and Punishment (Aşk ve Ceza)*, episode 33:** The man uses a Turkish proverb, namely that “the hands which mess with flour (women) should not mind men’s business”. That establishes a conservative patriarchal family structure where men are expected to be dominant and women obedient<sup>24</sup>. The extent to which this is agreeable was measured.

**Family values Q3, *Black Money Love (Kara Para Aşk)*, episode 28:** In this scene, the older woman advises the young man to leave the house because “it is not proper” since her nieces are still unmarried. This reflects the negative connotation of males cohabiting with females. The extent to which the family interferes in individual’s social activity<sup>25</sup> by constraining them because of gender roles is likeable was measured.

**Family values Q4, *Endless Love (Kara Sevda)*, episode 3:** In this scene, the son tells his father that he will never do something that would dishonor him and the family, expressing his deep respect to his father and the values inherited by him<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, the extent to which respecting the father and the values inherited by the family is likeable was measured.

**Family values Q5, *Endless Love (Kara Sevda)*, episode 7:** In this scene, the mother is preaching to her daughter about the dangers that exist in life. This is an example of how family indicates the social behavior of their children<sup>27</sup>. The extent to which the mother’s guidance to her daughter’s social behavior is likeable was measured.

**Romance Q1, *Love and Punishment (Aşk ve Ceza)*, episode 41:** In this scene, the male makes a romantic surprise to his beloved one. Verbal intimacy is expected to be carried out by males, because of the gender roles presented and the concept of modesty for women<sup>28</sup>. The aim was to measure the extent to which the romantic way a man is expressing this love is likeable.

**Romance Q2, 1001 nights (Binbir Gece), episode 10:** In this scene, the male makes a marriage proposal accompanied a highly romantic love confession. It is the male that is supposed to carry the verbal intimacy, while the female is expected to be quiet<sup>29</sup>. In this way, the extent to which a romantic marriage proposal is likeable was measured.

**Romance Q3, Black Money (Love Kara Para Aşk), episode 13:** In this scene, the girl's boyfriend expresses to her his jealousy in a dominant way by pulling her out of the restaurant. The extent to which a dominant behavior of a man expressing his jealousy towards his girlfriend in public is likeable.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 Demographics

The vast majority of the sample was women (Table 1). The majority of the respondents ranged from 45 to 54 years old with a small representation of people older than 65 years old (Table 2).

Table 1. Gender of the respondents

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Woman	662	93.5
	Man	27	3.8
	Total	689	97.3
Missing	System	19	2.7
Total		708	100.0

Table 2. Age of the respondents

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	18-24	96	13.6
	25-34	129	18.2
	35-44	140	19.8
	45-54	187	26.4
	55-64	128	18.1
	65+	23	3.2
	Total	703	99.3
Missing	System	5	.7
Total		708	100.0

As the Table 3 shows, the significant majority (approx. 70%) were High School, Vocational Training or Technological Educational Institute graduates. Moreover, the majority of the respondents were working in the private sector (24.7%), as civil servants (14.1%) or was self-employed (12.4%).

Table 3. Education level of respondents

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Elementary School Graduate	19	2.7
	Junior High School Graduate	47	6.6
	High School Graduate	193	27.3
	Vocational Training	120	16.9
	Technological Educational Institute	193	27.3
	BA / College Graduate	69	9.7
	Master's Degree	54	7.6
	Doctorate Degree	9	1.3
	Total	704	99.4
Missing	System	4	.6
Total		708	100.0

As the Table 4 shows, the majority of the sample was living in big urban regions, namely Attica or Thessaloniki, which are the most densely populated regions in Greece. Regions with a Turkish population or regions close to Turkey were categorized within the same group in order to examine if the geographical proximity would indicate any differentiation in the results. Comparing the sample with the last population census made in 2011 in Greece<sup>30</sup> the proportional spread of the sample throughout Greece has a strongly representative value.

Table 4. Residence of the respondents

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Attica [Athens, Periphery and Peiraias]	289	40.8
	Thessaloniki	127	17.9
	<b>Orestiada, Kavala, Aleksandroupoli, North Aegean, Dodecanese, Komotini, Ksanthi</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>8.3</b>
	Central Greece [Aitolokarnania, Voiotia, Evoia, Evritania etc]	16	2.3
	Peloponnese	39	5.5
	Crete	19	2.7
	Thessaly, Epirus, Ionian Islands	43	6.1
	Rest of Macedonia	45	6.4
	Abroad	32	4.5
	Total	669	94.5
Missing	System	39	5.5
Total		708	100.0

### 3.2 Viewership Profile

The results in this section indicate a strong engagement of the audience to the Turkish series in question. With the exception of *Black Money Love (Kara Para Aşk)*, a big majority of the respondents had watched the series selected for this research (Table 5), ranking *1001 nights (1001 Gece)* first in order of preference followed by *Endless Love (Kara Sevda)* (Table 6).



Table 5. Viewership percentages of series in question

	Valid Percent
1001 nights (1001 Gece)	75.5%
Love and Punishment (Aşk ve Ceza)	60.4%
Black Money Love (Kara Para Aşk)	41.0%
Endless Love (Kara Sevda)	69.7%

Table 6. Preference of the series

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	1001 Nights (1001 Gece)	257	36.3	37.5
	Love and Punishment (Ask ve Ceza)	120	16.9	17.5
	Black Money Love (Kara Para Ask)	53	7.5	7.7
	Endless Love (Kara Sevda)	255	36.0	37.2
	Total	685	96.8	100.0
Missing	System	23	3.2	
<b>Total</b>		<b>708</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

As depicted in Table 7, the vast majority was watching other Turkish series as well. The open-ended question following this question indicated that the series *Istanbulu Gelin*, *Anne*, *O Hayat Benim* and *Içerde* were watched the majority at the time the research has been conducted.

Table 7. "Are you currently watching any other Turkish series?"

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Yes	555	78.4	79.5
	No	143	20.2	20.5
	Total	698	98.6	100.0
Missing	System	10	1.4	
<b>Total</b>		<b>708</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

As Table 8 indicates, approximately 65% was accessing Turkish series free from the Internet or was buying DVDs included in weekly magazines or directly from the distributor. At this point it would be noteworthy to remember the policy of the distributor of Turkish series in Greece, namely that in order for the profit to rise, the first episodes of a Turkish series are aired on Greek TV and then the rest of the episodes are distributed through weekly television magazines or through individual DVD-box sets. Therefore, the high percentages of these accessing methods highlighted a big engagement to the Turkish series.

Table 8. “How to you access Turkish series?”

	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
TV	343	35.3%	49.4%
Free from Internet	483	49.6%	69.6%
From DVD's in Weekly Magazines	122	12.5%	17.6%
From DVD Boxset bought from distributor	25	2.6%	3.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>140.2%</b>

a.Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Moreover, “Scenario” and “Cast” were respondents’ most favorite elements of Turkish series.

Table 9. “What do you like most in the series?”

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Scenario	1	6	<b>2.76</b>	1.585
Cast	1	6	<b>2.82</b>	1.548
Scenes of Istanbul	1	6	3.30	1.785
Production	1	6	3.43	1.366
Turkish Language	1	6	3.54	1.745
Other	1	6	3.94	1.878

Note. SD = Standard Deviation

### 3.3 Family Values

Table 10. Results of responses on Family values

	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree
<b>Q1</b>	35.7	29.9	34.4
<b>Q2</b>	11.0	69.9	19.1
	Like	Dislike	Neither Like or Dislike
<b>Q3</b>	14.6	59.1	26.4
<b>Q4</b>	61.4	4.8	31.1
<b>Q5</b>	44.1	25.1	30.9

As Table 11 demonstrates for Q1, the majority agreed with the family intervening in a couple’s marriage and exercising authority in the marriages and the life of their children. From the comments extracted, it is noteworthy to highlight that even when individually disagreeing, the audience agreed that this practice is also to be found in Greece. This indicated that while individually disagreeing, watching Turkish series is not something “exotic”, but something culturally proximate, even if not agreeing with it or believing it is dated. Moreover, the majority of the comments indicated that, the audience recognized a cultural proximity, accepting this truism as representation of a well-established reality:

*(n90) “If the mother in law does not like the bride then it will turn her life into a torture until the couple gets divorced”*

The illustrative Bar Chart below shows that when results of this section are examined in association with age, then there is a variation in the results of the audience aged 18 to 24. The respondents aged 18 to 24 tended to disagree with the scene, while in the other age categories' respondents tended to agree. Still, the variation is not significantly different. from the main results.

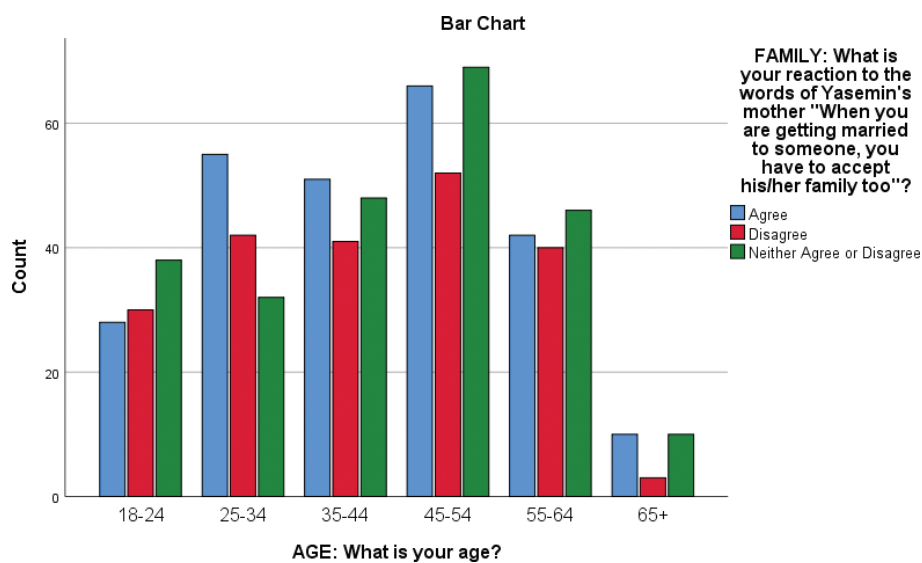


Figure 1. Family Question 1: Results according the age of the sample.

In Q2 a large majority disagreed with the representation of a patriarchal family structure where woman are obedient and gender issues arise. The majority of the comments following the question indicate that this representation was found “discriminative”, “sexist” and “outdated”.

In Q3 a large majority disagreed with the representation of the extended family interfering in an individual’s social activity by constraining them because of gender roles. The representation of gender issues and women-oppression raised the rates of disagreement significantly. From the comments extracted, it was indicated that the representation of a traditional, women-oppressed lifestyle is not in consonant with the audience’s perception; on the contrary, the comments highlight that it was found “outdated” and “conservative”.

In Q4 a large majority liked the representation of respect to the older members of the family. From the comments extracted, it can be further stated that respecting the older member of the family was regarded as an important, embedded, realistic value.

*(n98) “I like it because it underlines values like the father-son relationship, the honest expression of emotions and being proud for your origins”.*

In Q5 the majority agreed with the representation of the family guiding the social behavior of their children. The majority of the comments further indicated that this representation was found realistic.

*(n97) “Typical mother. It doesn’t diverge from what every human is wishing and it saying to his/her child.”*

### 3.4 Romance

Table 11. Results of responses on Romance

	Like	Dislike	Neither Like or Dislike
Q1	75.9	3.2	20.9
Q2	78.3	7.8	13.9
Q3	35	32.2	32.8

A significant majority liked the romantic way a man is expressing his love and the representation of a romantic marriage proposal in Q1 and Q2. From the comments extracted, it can be stated that an important factor for liking the scene was the representation of the expression of emotions.

*(n198) "Like most of the Turkish series they have dialogues that create intense feelings in the soul.*

*However romantic a Greek series might be they never have such dialogues that create such an intense shiver in our soul."*

In Q3 a small majority liked the representation of the dominant behavior of a man expressing his jealousy towards his girlfriend in public. The analysis further indicated a variation of the results within the sample.

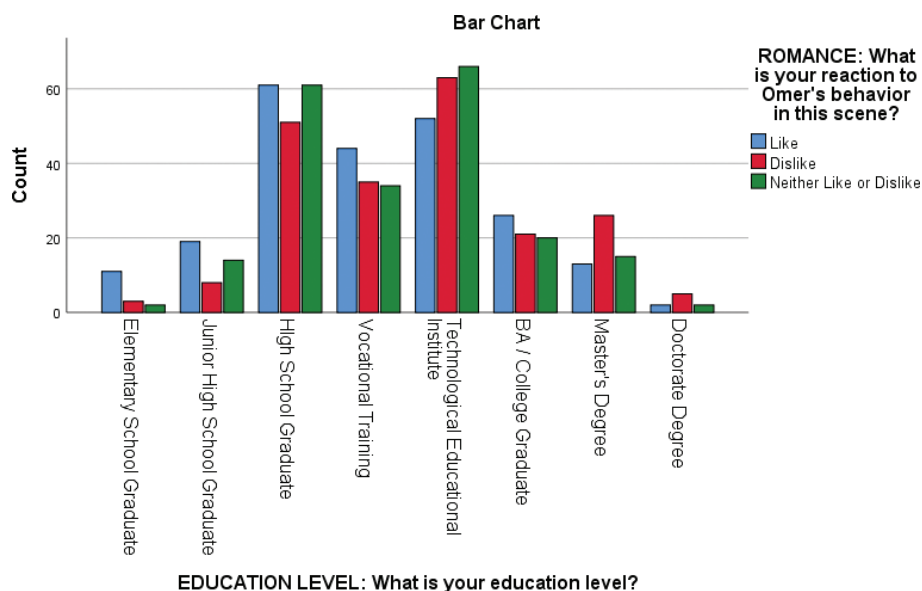


Figure 2. Romance Question 3: results according to the age of the respondents.

The illustrative Bar Chart below shows a variation of the results when analyzed in association with the age of the audience. The majority of the respondents aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 disliked or neither liked or disliked the scene, while the majority of the rest of the respondents liked the scene.

Moreover, as reflected in the Bar Chart below, there was a variation of the results when analyzed in association to the education level of the audience. The majority of those holding a Master's or Doctorate Degree as well as the graduates from Technological Educational Institutes disliked the scene.

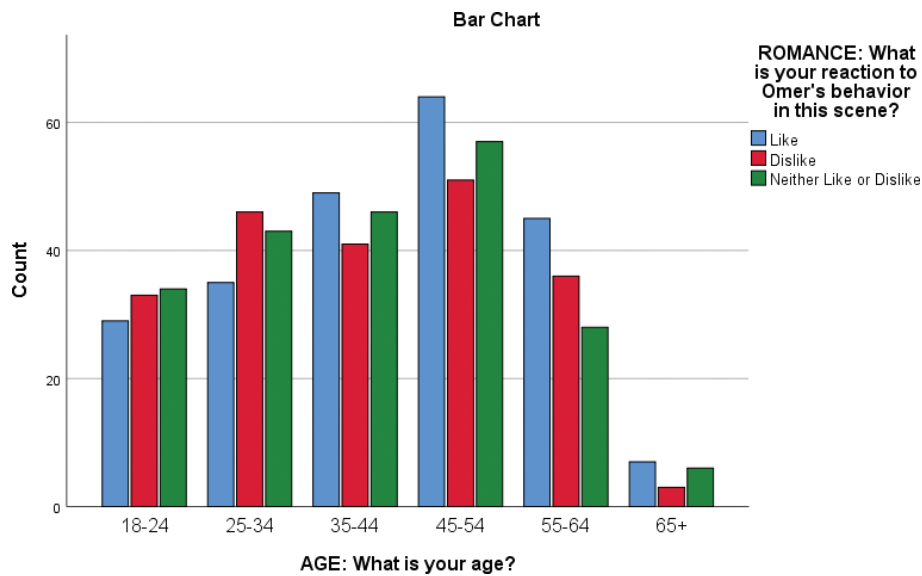


Figure 3. Romance Question 3: results according the education level of the respondents.

Additionally, the majority of the sample who was accessing Turkish series from the Internet and through DVD’s liked the scene, while the majority of the respondents accessing Turkish series from TV disliked the scene.

Table 12. Romance Question 3 results compared with the medium accessing Turkish series

Access Turkish series from:	Like RQ3	Dislike RQ3
TV	98	117
INTERNET	172	130
DVD weekly	51	26
DVD distributor	9	2

### 3.5 Family Values, Hypothesis 1

A small majority (36%) agreed with the family intervening and exercising authority in the marriages and the life of their children. From the comments extracted, it is noteworthy to highlight that even when individually they did not agree, the audience was recognizing that this practice is also to be found in Greece. Moreover, the majority of the comments indicated that the audience recognized a cultural proximity, accepting this truism as a representation of a well-established reality.

A big majority (64%) liked the representation of giving respect to the older members of the family. Moreover, the majority (44%) agreed with the representation of the family guiding the social behavior of their children. From the comments extracted, it can be further stated that respecting and honoring the older member of the family was regarded as an important, embedded, realistic value.

The representation of gender issues and women-oppression raised the rates of disagreement significantly. A big majority disagreed with the representation of a patriarchal family structure where women were obedient and gender



issues arise (70%) and with the representation of the extended family interfering in the individual's social activity by constraining them because of gender roles (59%). The majority of the comments following the question expressed the belief that this representation was found "discriminative", "sexist" and "outdated". From the comments extracted, it was indicated that the representation of a traditional, women-oppressed lifestyle is not in consonant with the audience's perception; on the contrary, the comments highlight that it was found "outdated" and "conservative" for the Greek standards. Yet again, an amount of the comments indicated that even if not agreeing, they recognized that this representation is still to be found:

*n677 (NAND): Because it reflects a mentality of the older generation. I do not agree with it but I recognize that it still exists.*

Therefore, H1 was partially verified.

### 3.6 Romance, Hypothesis 2

The results indicated that the representation of men expressing their love in Turkish series appealed more than any other variable of the research to the respondents raising questions about the genre proximity that will be discussed in the next section. The comments of the respondents who agreed indicated that the way emotions were expressed engaged them with these scenes. However, the results indicated that when this representation enclosed dominant behavior against women, then the percentage of agreement plummeted.

Moreover, differences between the samples arose in the third question. Young respondents and respondents with higher than secondary education degree disliked the dominant representation of romance. On the other hand, respondents with bigger engagement to Turkish series, mentioned that they accessed Turkish series through the Internet or from DVD's, liked the scene, while respondents with smaller engagement who were accessing Turkish series through TV disliked the scene.

Still, apart from the variations in the results of Question 3, the results of the other questions when analyzed in association with the age, the education level, the city of residence and the methods of access no significant difference was to be found.

Comparing the results of this section with the results of the questions associated with family values, it can be indicated that when gender issues arise and discrimination against women is at stake, the preference of the respondents tended to be negative in both variables.

Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was also partially verified.

## 4 Conclusion

Cultural capital turned out to be an important factor towards (family) or away from (gender) cultural proximity to the Turkish series. The representation of family structure and hierarchy in the scenes as well as the authority exercised by the family members tended to be culturally proximate to the respondents' views, because of the agreement of the signifying practices depicted and the family practices and family networks of the respondents. Even when some of the respondents did not individually agree on the signifying practices depicted, they still acknowledged their existence in their own culture as expressed in the comments.

When the representation of the conservative family structure encapsulated gender issues and depiction of gender discrimination, the results plummeted. Considering that, the majority of respondents were female, a representation of obedient women, whose family members have the right to interfere in their social activity was depicted, increased cultural distance and decreased cultural proximity. The conservative representation of gender issues led to a chasm between the audience and the signifying practices depicted. Therefore, gender turned out to be an important variable that influenced the results. Moreover, age also indicated that the affiliation of younger participants with the gender representation tended to differentiate from the rest of the sample, yet this differentiation was not consistent and significant.

The results concerning the variable of romance lead on to the question of whether it was the genre proximity that enabled the affiliation of the audience to these scenes. Yet, even though on its surface it covers a big range of cultures, genre proximity cannot solely explain the results, since, apart from Turkish series, Spanish and Italian telenovelas were also aired on Greek TV, but could not have an equal or lasting success.

Consequently, the question raised is why the audience continues to be engaged to the Turkish series even when not affiliated with the representation of gender, which is an important element of cultural capital. Conditions of dependency may explain this engagement. If countries do not have the ability to produce their own content then the audience's "second best option" would rather be content with which they could affiliate, from "nearby or similar cultures".<sup>31</sup> Therefore, even though the audience was partially cultural proximate to the representation in Turkish series, it was more proximate than the equivalent products available at the time.

Cities and regions that had a Turkish minority population or were close to Turkey have been separately examined in order to test if geographical proximity would have caused differentiation of the results. Surprisingly, there was no differentiation from the main results, indicating a homogeneous sample on the one hand and no geographical proximity on the other.

Existing research has focused on different notions to explain the success of the Turkish drama series in Greece, such as Soft Power Diplomacy, Nostalgia, Exoticism and Economic Crisis. Certainly, there are sufficient and strong elements that can support these approaches; still as a multilayered phenomenon the interplay of cultural proximity should not be ignored.

This study suggested that, the notion of Soft Power Diplomacy comes into contradiction with the established negative representation of Turkey in the Greek public sphere and therefore cannot solely explain the audience's preference even if coexisting with Turkey's distribution of cultural products and cultural hegemony in the region of Eastern Europe and the near Middle East. As Papailias states "the soap phenomenon shows a fragile cultural engagement between two nations, and a recognition of their fraternal similarities alongside their deep historical grievances".<sup>32</sup>

The notion of Nostalgia cannot also solely explain the preference, since the results of this study point to no significant generational difference among the participants. Nostalgia for the "Missing Byzantium"<sup>33</sup> specifically and/or towards the days before modernization<sup>34</sup> can possibly explain the proximity of the older participants but not of the younger ones. Moreover, "Scenes of Istanbul" came third in preference (Table 10) indicating that even if important, it still was not the most important reason for the audience's engagement.

The comments of the respondents indicated that even when not agreeing to the representations depicted, they recognized their existence as "common truth", putting into question the notion of exoticism. The notion that Turkish TV series' success was a result of the economic crisis in Greece, where in favor of lower cost Greek production has moved to the distribution of Turkish TV series explains the entrance of Turkish TV series in the Greek media but cannot solidly explain the reasons behind their success, especially when considering the results of the research which show that the audience has access not only through television but also through the Internet, DVDs and weekly magazines, highlighting an engagement to them.

The essence of this engagement lays on the fact that for whatever the reason the distribution of Turkish series in Greece has been started, it has been successfully consumed by the Greek audience to this day. This preference is located, as this research proposed, also in elements of cultural proximity. Therefore, the present research presents sustainable evidence that can lead to further research, paving the way to an unexplored terrain in the literature.

The present study examined only two variables as indicators of cultural proximity of the Greek audience to the Turkish series; further research on more indicators is needed. Moreover, there is an inconsistency between the theoretical definitions of cultural proximity and its operationalization.<sup>35</sup> Further enrichment on the literature of the operationalization of cultural proximity will enable more accurate research on this topic. Lastly, this survey was limited to a computer literate sample with Internet access. A problematic coverage error because of the Web based survey may be raised; still it is reasonable to believe that the results might represent the tendency in the computer-illiterate population of older aged groups. The homogeneous sample and its overall consistency can confirm this notion.

Whilst Turkish series are popular, the research made on this field is not proportionate. Yet, the results of the existing ones can indicate that Turkish series may act as a transnational conveyor of different cultural proximities in different countries, which at a glance would not seem proximate to each other outlining a miscellaneous transnational audience. For instance, the cultural proximity for the Qatari audience seems to come along with the notion of modernity,<sup>36</sup> while for the Greek audience with the notion of conservatism. As Turkish series continue to be internationally popular in this rapidly shifting media environment, researching different audiences' engagement will help us further comprehend this phenomenon.

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21. The selection of these series was based on multiple factors. Firstly, the year of their broadcast in Greek television was taken into consideration. In order to have a better understanding of the viewership throughout the years that Turkish series are being broadcasted in Greece and to understand if any relation between "old fans" and "new fans" is to be found. The series that have been broadcasted with an interval of at least one year on Greek television were selected. Secondly, all series are taking place completely or mostly (*Aşk ve Ceza*) in Istanbul. This decision was taken, in order to understand if there is any correlation with the depiction of Istanbul as a key factor of Greek audience's preference. Moreover, series with a historical background or a historical plot were excluded from the research, i.e. *Suleiman the Magnificent*. This could be a distracting factor while measuring the variables of family values and romance due to the possible connotations of the historical framework in which the stories took place. Furthermore, *Ezel* and *Karadayı* were also eliminated, because their script was based on the male character rather than the relation between him and the female character. Finally, *Aşk-ı Memnu* was not included since the issue of adulterous relationship between a married woman and the nephew of her husband could have created misleading connotations. Taking into consideration the ratings and the popularity of the series left, the final selection was made and then verified by Victory entertainment S.A., the main distributor of Turkish series in Greece. During our collaboration, there has been a debate over two series, namely *Kara Para Aşk* (*Black Money Love*) and *Kaderimin Yazıldığı Gün* (*The Day My Destiny Was Written*). Both have been of a great success and they have been broadcasted the same year in Greece, still *Kara Para Aşk* (*Black Money Love*) had an intertemporal success even after starting being distributed only through DVDs. Except for that, *Kaderimin Yazıldığı Gün* (*The Day My Destiny was written*) deals with the issue of surrogacy, which could distract the orientation of the research.
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## Biography

Eleni Pothou holds a B.A. in Greek Philology with major in Linguistics from Kapodistrian University of Athens and an M.A. in Media and Communication Systems from Istanbul Bilgi University. Her M.A. dissertation focused on the success of Turkish TV drama series in Greece under the scope of cultural proximity. Her research focuses on issues of popular culture, collective memory, and identity.



# FROM NORDIC NOIR TO BELGIAN BRIGHT?

## SHIFTING TV DRAMA PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION IN SMALL MARKETS: THE CASE OF FLANDERS

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**Abstract:** Shifts in audio-visual production, distribution, and consumption have increased pressure on broadcasters as main financiers of domestic content in Europe. However, within the context of internationalisation and digitalisation, there are also new opportunities for the export of European content. By taking a close look at the evolution and increasing popularity of Flemish TV drama, this article identifies key explanatory factors for the export of content produced in a small media market. The analysis also discusses the extent to which the rise in exports may contribute to the increased sustainability of a small and fragile, yet vibrant audio-visual industry.

**Keywords:** Flanders, Belgium, distribution, co-production, transnational television, small media market, TV drama

### 1 Introduction

Non-linear viewing, cut-backs at the level of public service broadcasting, a shift in advertising spending from legacy media to online players, and the introduction of over-the-top players like Netflix or Amazon have put significant pressure on existing TV drama financing and on broadcasters, the main financiers of domestic content in Europe.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly the case in smaller television markets, which are traditionally more dependent on public support,<sup>2</sup> have a limited domestic market, and less potential for export.<sup>3</sup> However, new platforms and services also increase opportunities for export and recoupment of TV drama investments. The popularity of European series on Netflix or services like UK's Walter Presents clearly show the cross-border potential of small markets. In that regard, it was the global success of Danish drama produced by public broadcaster DR that paved the way for other small markets. What the success of Danish drama revealed was the importance of distinct strategies that prioritise screenwriting within the production process,<sup>4</sup> as well as co-production and co-financing partnerships with European distributors and other broadcasters.<sup>5</sup>

Strategies like these have been picked up widely, not in the least in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Similar to the Danish case of *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-2012),<sup>6</sup> it was the programming of a crime drama

(*Salamander*, 2012-2018) on BBC Four's Saturday night slot in 2014 that initiated international attention for Belgian drama. Since then, Flanders has seen a spectacular uptake in the export of its television drama, with titles like *Hotel Beau Séjour* (2017-), *Tabula Rasa* (2017-), or *Professor T.* (2015-2018) being sold and remade internationally.

This article adopts a political economy approach,<sup>7</sup> which enables a holistic, macro- and meso-level approach, in order to contextualise the shift in Flemish TV drama strategy from a purely domestic to an international focus. This did not only result from the increase of distribution outlets, but also from the interplay between broadcasters, producers, cable distributors, and the Flanders Audiovisual Fund. The research was motivated by a gap in existing literature, particularly focused on strategies and exports of the genre, originating in small media markets. To this end, the article first addresses the context of small markets and identifies the key strengths of the Danish drama model, which clearly influenced the strategic shift in Flanders. The research questions addressed are, firstly, 'what are the key factors in explaining the increased export of Flemish TV fiction?', and, secondly, 'to what extent does increased export also contribute to increased sustainability of a small and fragile, yet vibrant, audio-visual industry?' The case study then provides an analysis from 'Nordic Noir made in Flanders' with *Salamander* (2012-2018) in 2014, to Belgian drama being picked up internationally as 'Belgian Bright' or 'the New Scandi-Noir'.<sup>8</sup> It subsequently focuses on four components explaining the uptake in exports: (i) increased availability for non-English TV drama; (ii) a focus on high-concept genre; (iii) a focus in policy supporting the export of drama; (iv) co-productions as the new standard for high-end drama. The case study analyses a variety of data, including production information (volume, budgets, sales/territories), press statements, policy documents (management agreements, vision notes, etc.), complemented by a series of expert interviews, conducted between April 2016 and May 2019. Interviewees include independent producers, the management of the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, commissioning editors at VRT and private broadcaster DPG, and VRT business strategists. The article primarily focuses on Flemish drama, although broader discussions on canned export of Walloon (French-speaking Belgian) drama are also included in the paper for increased context, but not analysed in-depth, as the two Belgian markets are quite different. As such, this study both fits within a growing case study-based research on small television markets,<sup>9</sup> as well as recent literature strands within media economics focusing primarily on the sustainability of television markets.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 Exporting Television Content in Small Media Markets

### 2.1 How 'Smallness' Affects Export Capabilities

In order to set the scene for the Flemish case, it is worth examining the characteristics of small markets, with a focus on those that impact the export of content. There is no consensus on which indicators precisely define a television market as 'small', and various aspects such as the number of domestic players and turnover might affect its 'size'; but usually, population is used to demarcate the difference between small and large markets.<sup>11</sup> In line with Puppis' definition of 'small states',<sup>12</sup> we consider markets with a population of less than 14 million inhabitants as small. In practice, bar exceptions such as the UK, Poland, France, Spain, and Germany, most European states could be considered small markets. According to Eurostat data from 2019, the region of Flanders has approximately 6,5 million inhabitants.

The first important factor relates to budget. Small television markets are characterised by a limited number of players, with the public service broadcaster often playing a key role as the driver of the television ecosystem.<sup>13</sup> Small markets also have a lower number of independent commissioners which are often stuck between the challenge of limited outlets (given the small number of broadcasters) to provide content for, and limited capacity to increase profit margins by recouping funds. The latter has to do with the size of the domestic market. This in turn negatively affects the revenue of private broadcasters, due to limited advertising income; the resources allocated to public broadcasting funding and audio-visual funds; and the interest of domestic pay-TV services to invest significantly in domestic production. As such, exporting content becomes part of increasing the sustainability of small markets.

Moreover, investing in original TV drama is highly expensive compared to acquiring foreign rights for content.<sup>14</sup> Small markets generally produce smaller volumes of TV fiction. This impedes the potential of export as a constant flow of high-quality TV drama on the international market, which is often considered crucial for buyers. For Flanders, research indicates that purchasing a foreign drama is eleven times cheaper than investing in a domestic TV drama.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the production budgets of foreign series are up to nine times the size of the budgets of Flemish series. In consequence, small markets show a particular dependence on public funding,<sup>16</sup> either directly from subsidies or from investments made by the public service broadcaster. Moreover, recent years have brought additional insecurity in the shape of non-linear viewing, which has also increasingly put pressure on the viewer ratings and advertising income of broadcasters.<sup>17</sup> Media use has shifted towards transnational subscription-based video-on-demand services (SVOD), whose quality offerings for a monthly subscription compete directly with the offerings of traditional broadcasters. Scale advantages allow these new players to compete with relatively cheap subscription fees but significantly larger catalogues, consisting primarily of foreign content.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, platforms like Google and Facebook are also competing with domestic players for advertisement revenue. A recent study<sup>19</sup> found that more than half of all online advertisement in Europe flows to U.S. corporations Google and Facebook, revenue that does not get re-invested in the production or distribution of original European content. Nevertheless, European players produce and release an increasing number of European TV fiction<sup>20</sup> and films, dwarfing U.S. output for film.<sup>21</sup>

The result is that domestic audio-visual production is characterised by limited budgets. In theory, the lack of budget scale limits the opportunities of export on the international market, where small-budget productions are competing with big-budget international offerings. Larger budget usually allows for higher production quality: more shooting days, resources for script development, shots on location, visual effects, etc. Therefore, in order for content to be exported, more money must be invested; at the same time, more money can come from export. This takes the form of a 'catch-22'. Strategies to counter these competitive disadvantages include first exploring opportunities to enlarge the scale of a production by co-producing with other broadcasters or involve co-financing, in which a third-party distributor provides a 'minimum guarantee' on the distribution revenue. Overall, there need to be additional forms of financing involved to work as a lever in generating this return. In the case of small markets this often comes in the form of co-financing collaborations such as Nordvision in the Nordic countries, tax levies, and public broadcasting investments.

A second strategy is to prioritise screenwriting and high-concept TV fiction, with the aim of developing distinctive, and thus more attractive, original content, which may be picked up for international remakes. The Swedish-Danish crime drama *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, 2011-2018) was exactly that: a business model driven by an ambition to expand the domestic market beyond Sweden and provide a bigger budget production.<sup>22</sup> This resulted in a co-production with two broadcasters (SVT and DR), and a high-concept premise that made *Bron/Broen* a lucrative concept for remakes, resulting in six localised versions and a seventh one currently in the making. Therefore, small budgets do not necessarily imply less potential for export.

The third factor relates to cultural specificity and language, which can also form an important barrier for content export.<sup>23</sup> The popularity of Scandi-noir is based in part on the fact that series in the Nordic countries can secure higher budgets due to the Scandinavian geo-cultural market, which results from a traditionally higher cultural proximity<sup>24</sup> between these countries. This increases the chance that a Swedish series, for example, is picked up by Norwegian and Danish viewers.<sup>25</sup> But using a 'similar language' is not necessarily the basis for success. In Flanders and the Netherlands, for example, despite sharing the Dutch language, films and television series are often remade,<sup>26</sup> rather than imported and watched in their original form. Moreover, small markets that share a language with a neighbouring larger market (Austria, Ireland, Wallonia) have struggled to develop a sustainable domestic content industry, given the popularity and high market share of content imported from these foreign players. Original drama productions are often so-called 'minority co-productions' in which the small market only has a limited stake. On the other hand, once a series receives critical acclaim, there is a substantial potential to bypass these structural barriers. In that regard, one of the most promising developments over the past decade comes from Wallonia, where a joint public broadcaster and government fund (Fonds RTBF-FWB) started to produce 100% domestic TV drama. The government support ensured the funds for the series to be produced, and language proximity helped in the series being picked up immediately in France and by streaming services such as Netflix, as in the cases of *Ennemi Public* (*Public Enemy*, 2016-), *La Trêve* (*The Break*, 2016-), and

*Unité 42* (*Unit 42*, 2017-). As no French co-producer was involved, the revenue flowed back to Wallonia, in turn determining a significant rise in local production volume, based on a strategy that has international export at its core. The fragmentation of the European market, characterised by significant differences between large and small Member States, and myriad cultural communities and languages, has traditionally forced European players to mostly focus on domestic markets. The tradition of focusing on domestic content also partly resulted from the fact that TV drama production was often left to public broadcasters, as broadcast monopolies were only broken up at the end of the 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2 Flanders – An Atypical Typical Small Market

As cultural industries and media consumption are completely separate in the French and Flemish communities, what constitutes the ‘Belgian audio-visual sector’ is in fact two separate markets, portraying the characteristics of small television markets. Flanders demonstrates the limits of a small television market: limited audiences and thus limited potential for return on investment, limitations on export due to language and lack of scale, and a limited number of players.<sup>28</sup> The public service broadcaster VRT and two private broadcasters (DPG and SBS) are the main commissioners and producers of TV drama in Flanders. Since 2014, digital television providers Telenet and Proximus have been increasingly investing in television fiction as well, partly by funding preview, transaction- (TVOD) and subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) rights to enlarge their pay-TV subscription catalogues, and partly because they are forced by the government to invest in audio-visual production following the launch of the so-called Stimulation Decree (2014). The independent production industry is scattered across more than 60 companies, of which an average of 8 are consistently involved in TV fiction production.

Despite its limited scale, the television market in Flanders is a vibrant one, characterised by a significant proportion of domestically produced television content, due to its enormous popularity. In 2019 alone, a total of 16 television fiction series (including high-end drama, children’s fiction and sitcoms) were broadcast on television.<sup>29</sup> The main struggles to sustain television production follow from the increased percentages of delayed viewing, especially in the genre of TV fiction, which puts considerable pressure on both private broadcasters to sustain the genre. In 2018, 17.5% of the total viewing was time-shifted in Flanders, going up to 32.7% for the age group 18-54 for commercial broadcasters, the primary target group for advertisers.<sup>30</sup> Added to that is the competition from non-domestic SVOD services such as Netflix. Audience research showed that 21% of the Flemish population has Netflix, and within the age groups of 16-24 and 25-34-year olds, respectively, 55% and 59% had access to Netflix in 2018.<sup>31</sup>

## 3 Export of Flemish Drama: An Unnecessary Evil? (1990s-2010s)

Unsurprisingly, Flemish TV fiction export patterns follow the trends of most small media markets, with limited exports especially due to language specificity. An exception here is the Dutch market, which has always been the most, and often only, buyer of Flemish fiction, followed by Wallonia. Up until private broadcasting was established in 1989, the Belgian public broadcaster BRTN developed a long-standing co-production tradition with the Netherlands for TV drama, amongst others supported through the Dutch-Flemish ‘Cobo-fund’.<sup>32</sup> Collaborating was considered a financial necessity in the first place, yet productions were often criticised for their arbitrary production choices following a complex financial model. Aside from these co-productions, sales of canned fiction programming were quite limited.

From the 1990s onwards, private broadcaster VTM has actively invested in TV fiction production, primarily for the domestic market. The public broadcaster, struggling with the enormous popularity of commercial television, increased its own TV drama volume and focused on more popular domestic TV drama as well, especially with hit crime series such as *Witse* (2004-2012) and *Flikken* (*Cops*, 1999-2009), and contemporary family sagas.<sup>33</sup> The purely domestic focus on TV drama also resulted in little interest and effort to invest in export potential or promotion. Series that

managed to secure worldwide distribution were always the result of the producer's efforts. Titles include *Vermist* (*Missing*, 2008-), which was the first Flemish series to be sold to France (2008-), followed by 92 other markets,<sup>34</sup> and *Matroesjka's* (2005-2008), of which both seasons were sold to over 60 countries, including large territories such as Germany, UK, France, Brazil, and Australia.

The broadcasters' purely domestic focus also increased pressure on the genre, which led to different forms of government support that exist today to sustain TV drama and encourage broadcasters to keep investing. Aside from a subsidy mechanism (Mediafonds) of the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) and the abovementioned investment obligation for distributors, the fiscal incentive of the tax shelter has been of crucial importance in sustaining high levels of production. Estimates reveal a tax shelter adds over 85 million Euro to audio-visual production.<sup>35</sup> The availability of these additional funding mechanisms reduced the necessity to attract co-production or co-financing support from foreign markets.

Interestingly, in most of the interviews we conducted, various producers pointed to examples of so-called 'Europudding' productions as reasons to avoid co-production and co-financing deals. The result was a strengthening of the domestic focus of TV drama production in Flanders, a growth of the production industry that depends almost entirely on the commissions of three big players, and a continuous pressure on these broadcasters to keep financing sufficient volumes. Another result was that, following two decades of audio-visual professionalisation, increasing turnover and companies, domestic audio-visual production was still considered 'precarious' and 'under increasing pressure'. And yet, something has clearly changed since 2014.

### 3.1 Salamander and 'Nordic Noir from Belgium': An Uptake in Exports

In 2012, VRT broadcast the 10-series crime drama *Salamander* (VRT and Skyline, 2012-2018) on its Sunday evening prime time slot. The series enjoyed high domestic popularity but, aside from its higher production budget, it was not significantly different from earlier Flemish TV drama projects. The series was sold in 2013 to BBC which broadcast it on its BBC Four Saturday night foreign drama slot in 2014. Following this, *Salamander* was also sold to numerous other markets, including the U.S. The sale of *Salamander* kick-started the expansion of worldwide sales of Flemish TV fiction and opened the door for the sale of *Cordon* (*Containment*, VTM and Eyeworks, 2016), which was also picked up by BBC and later got an, unfortunately unsuccessful, remake on the U.S. channel The CW Series. Since then, we have witnessed a spectacular rise in exports, with 2018 marking an important momentum in terms of popularity, as Belgian drama on international television markets as well as in public was coined the next 'Scandi-noir'.<sup>36</sup> Since 2016, visibility of Flemish TV drama at international markets and festivals has markedly increased, with titles being selected, nominated and/or winning in Cannes Series (France), Serie Series (France), C21 (UK), or Series Mania (France), and the International Emmy Awards (U.S.), where labels such as 'Belgian Bright' or 'Flemish Noir' were coined to promote new drama productions.

The table below provides an overview of the uptake in exports of Flemish series, showing examples of various TV fiction series from all broadcasters since 2012. The table is based on data collected through press releases, VRT/VAF annual reports, and stakeholder interviews. Based on the mapping below, a number of lessons can be drawn. First, all productions belong to a Flemish production company in co-production with a Flemish broadcaster. In most cases, it is the production companies that took the lead in exploring international interest. Second, most of the series were sold immediately after the first (or only) season, the lack of large volumes having prevented further foreign sales.<sup>37</sup> Third, part of the export deals (e.g. Netflix) were negotiated by the producers, and part were sold through external distributors. Another important outlet was the Channel 4 streaming service Walter Presents, which picked up Flemish fiction not only for UK viewers, but also included them in their international territory offerings, such as *13 Geboden* (*13 Commandments*, 2017-), *Spitsbroers* (*The Score*, 2015-), or *Professor T* (2015-2018). For Flanders, just like for Denmark,<sup>38</sup> ZDF Enterprises formed an important partner for several TV drama productions. Finally, in terms of genre, unsurprisingly, most series are crime fiction, which is also in line with scholarly findings on the popularity of the crime sub-genre for export.<sup>39</sup>



Table 1. Overview of Flemish television series and territories sold (Source: data obtained from various production companies by the authors). For *Hotel Beau Séjour* and *Dertigers* a second season is currently in production; for *Over Water* and *Undercover* a second season will be released in 2020.

Title	Year of broadcast	Seasons	Producer	International distributor	Territories
Salamander	2012 2018	2	VRT & Skyline	Beta film	Wallonia, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Russia, Czech Republic, Poland, Switzerland, German speaking territories, Luxembourg, France, French Oversees territories, Andorra, Monaco, Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, U.S., Australia, New Zealand & Canada, Azores, Serbia, Montenegro, Brazil.
Als de dijken breken (the Swell)	2016	1	VRT & EO, Menuet & Joco Media	Dutch. Features	Netherlands (co-production), U.S., Wallonie, Spain, Russia, Germany, many
Tytgat chocolat (Team chocolat)	2017	1	VRT & DeMensen	Wild Bunch	Netflix (Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Norway, Italy, Germany, France, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Greece, Turkey). Remake rights sold to the UK and Spain
Spitsbroers (The Score)		2	Mediaalaan & DeMensen	Lagardère	U.S.
Highway of Love (Chausée d'Amour)	2016	1	Telenet & VIER	ZDF Enterprises	a.o. Germany
Callboys	2016 2019	2	FFO, VIERS & Woestijnvis	Lagardère	Remake rights sold to the Netherlands
Gevoel Voor Tumor (Sense of Tumour)	2018	1	VRT & Sylvester Productions	Red Arrow	The Netherlands (NPO) & Netflix (Belgium and the Netherlands), Wallonia (RTBF); Remake rights sold to the Czech Republic and France, potential remake in India

Table 1 (Continued). Overview of Flemish television series and territories sold (Source: data obtained from various production companies by the authors). For *Hotel Beau Séjour* and *Dertigers* a second season is currently in production; for *Over Water* and *Undercover* a second season will be released in 2020.

Title	Year of broadcast	Seasons	Producer	International distributor	Territories
Professor T	2015-2018	3	VRT & Skyline	Beta film	Remake rights sold to France (TF1), Germany (ZDF), the Czech Republic, Netherlands, Spain, U.S., Andorra, Australia, Latin America, Caribbean, Ireland, Bahamas, Bermuda, New Zealand, Poland, Luxembourg, Italy, Romania
Beau Séjour (Hotel Beau Séjour)	2017	1	VRT, DeMensen	Lagardère	France, Germany, UK, Brazil & Netflix (worldwide) Remake rights sold to U.S., Russia, UK & France
Tabula Rasa	2017	1	VRT, Caviar, ZDF Neo	ZDF Enterprises	Netflix (worldwide), Germany and UK
De 13 Geboden (13 Commandments)	2018	1	VTM, Menuet	Attraction Distribution	UK (Walter Presents)
Over Water	2018	1	VRT, Panenka, Telenet	ZDF Enterprises	Germany
De Dag (The Day)	2019	1	Woestijnvis, FFO, Telenet, SBS and ZDF Neo	Dynamic Television	32 countries
Undercover	2019	1	VRT, DeMensen, & Netflix		Netflix (worldwide), Germany
Dertigers	2019	1	VRT & Eyeworks	VRT Sales	Remake rights sold to Netherlands
Grensaianders (Floodland)	2019	1	VRT 8 Eye works	Federation Entertainment	Netherlands (co-production)
De Twaalf (The Twelve)	2019	1	VRT and Eyeworks	Federation Entertainment	Worldwide (Australia, New Zealand, Spain, France, Switzerland, Portugal, Poland, UK) etc.
Black-out	2020	1	VRT & Jonny De Po ny	Lagardère	

## 4 Explaining the Success of Flemish TV Drama Exports

### 4.1 Increasing Capacity of Outlets for Non-English Language Drama

A first explanation for the increasing success of Flemish drama is the general increase in outlets for non-English language drama. In Europe, programming of non-national European television fiction has always been limited, bar exceptions for English-language (in practice BBC content) or content from countries sharing a language (Wallonia-France, Austria-Germany, etc.). Exceptions that paved the way for foreign language drama were the Nordic crime dramas, which were, amongst others, kick-started with the sale of *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, 2007-2012) to BBC Four as the first non-English language programme to be broadcast in its crime drama slot.<sup>40</sup> Scandinavian drama and its foreign success helped create the appetite for foreign drama, which is amongst others visible in various crime dramas emulating the pace and storytelling of crime noir (see *Hinterland/Y Gywyll*, 2013-2016),<sup>41</sup> with series like *Salamander* (2012-2018) even explicitly branded by its distributor Red Arrow as 'Nordic Noir from Europe'. However, it wasn't until international TV streaming services took off in Europe that export of non-English language European TV fiction increased. This had several consequences.

First, this increased outlets for sales on international streaming platforms but also for pay-TV offerings of European TVOD and SVOD services (e.g. Sky, Canal+, Telenet). Second, this allowed for new specialised services for European drama to appear (e.g. Walter Presents). Third, it intensified the race for rights and content on the European market with streaming channels, with players like ZDFe looking increasingly beyond Nordic countries at what could be the next big hit and getting involved in productions at a much earlier stage in order to already secure rights (similar to the strategy of some transnational streaming players). Fourth, in competing with these foreign platforms to retain domestic audiences, it also incentivized broadcasters to reposition themselves amidst streaming giants, amongst others, by investing in bigger budget productions in order to meet quality and audience expectations and exploring co-productions with other broadcasters, which in turn led to increased export capacity.

For content producers, the advent of these distribution services theoretically provided an additional outlet for expanding budgets, and valorising return on investment. Yet, in practice, various media professionals and policymakers feared an increasing fragmentation of financing, and a return that did not compensate for losses incurred from direct competition with platforms. The rise of these distribution outlets also partly nuances the importance of Flanders as 'the next big thing', given the fact that various countries have seen an uptake in exports following the explosion of available catalogues across Europe (see, for example, the success of French-speaking Belgian, Israeli, or Italian drama).

### 4.2 A Focus on Exportable Genre and Theme

A second explanatory factor for the success of Flemish drama is the rise of crime drama and high-concept drama. There is a common understanding among the industry professionals we have interviewed of what more 'attractive' high-concept series are. They often refer to universal themes, in combination with local flavour, a high-concept pitch, and building on the success of proven concepts (such as Nordic noir). Crime travels well, humour hardly so.<sup>42</sup>

Industry professionals have emphasised that high-concept premises and screenwriting are in demand, as viewers are used to edgier, more daring content. Therefore, Flemish broadcasters were encouraged to take a leap and move away from the 'comfortable' genres. The fact that this type of content lends itself to export was considered of secondary importance, although producers emphasised that it was increasingly taken into account. For public and

private broadcasters, these daring concepts also constituted a risk. Storytelling that was too complex, controversial themes or genre crossovers of horror and crime were considered risky for domestic audiences, especially for private channel VTM.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, producers and screenwriters emphasised the importance of local authenticity to raise a production's profile, often referring to Scandi-noir examples in motivating their answers. Cases like *Hotel Beau Séjour* (2017-), that sets out from a high-concept premise of a girl investigating her own murder as a ghost, are integrated in a typically local Flemish setting, with actors speaking local dialect and a theme song in the Limburg dialect.<sup>44</sup> Series that attempted to look too 'U.S.-like', as one producer called them, were considered more likely to fail due to their lack of authenticity.

### 4.3 A Policy Focus Privileging Exportable Content

A third factor that explains the success of Flemish exports lies in the combination of government and film agency policies supporting exportable TV series, a trend that can also be seen at EU level through the setting of a new agenda and raising awareness amongst domestic policymakers and industries about the consequences of transnational media platforms entering European markets.<sup>45</sup> One of the aspirations of the previous Flemish government, responsible for media policy, was an increased focus on internationalisation and return on investment. Policy vision statements included commitments to: (i) sustain or increase the quality of TV drama; (ii) strengthen the business model; (iii) invest in new formats; (iv) increase attention given to screenwriting; (v) increase the export of Flemish TV content.<sup>46</sup> Heavily inspired by the success of the Danish TV drama model, and following various claims by broadcasters and independent producers, the government's goal to increase commercial return translated into a slight increase in the budget of the Flemish Media Fund (VAF). The management contract 2018-2021 (negotiated with VAF) included some changes that would form the translation of this strategy. In order to boost the quality of screenplays, screenwriting grants went up from 25,000 to 75,000 Euro, while production support for exportable high-end drama went up from 800,000 to 1,125,000 Euro, and the second series of successful titles would be awarded Media Fund grants. However, the criteria for what qualified as 'exportable' was not defined, therefore existing quality measures, such as screenplay quality, budget, crews, international co-financing are still considered when selecting eligible projects.

The result was a 'less is more' strategy: fewer high-end TV drama projects would be funded with the existing budget of the Media Fund. At the same time, the fund increased efforts to put screenwriting more at the centre of its training and networking initiatives, launching a bi-yearly 'Storycon', adding screenwriting coaches for more inexperienced writers, as well as launching a 'Concept Atelier Scenario', which allowed young talent to develop good concepts in collaboration with acclaimed showrunners. Since 2017, the film agency also hosts Connex, an annual event which brings international buyers to Belgium to showcase the latest Flemish productions.

Finally, the public broadcaster VRT also put exportable content at the forefront of its TV drama strategy, and increasingly explores business opportunities on the international market, on its own. The latter has resulted in tensions with producers, who feel the broadcaster is poaching too much on their territory and feel they are best suited to exploit the rights of their own productions internationally.<sup>47</sup>

### 4.4 The TV Drama Co-production as the New Normal

A fourth explanation for the success of 'Belgian Bright' lies in the gradual rise of co-productions, which is, in fact, a consequence of the increasing international popularity of Flemish TV drama. For example, the success of *Salamander* (2012-2018) allowed the involvement of Beta Film as a co-financing partner in the second series. ZDFe, which has

been increasingly interested in Flemish drama since 2016, took minimum guarantees in some series (*Over Water*, 2018-; *Tabula Rasa*, 2017-) or directly invested as a co-producer in others (*De Dag*, 2018). Other co-production partners include ARTE, or the Dutch public service broadcasting organisations.

In 2019, the first 'Netflix original' *Undercover* (2019-) was co-produced with VRT and DeMensen. Despite coining it as a Netflix original, it was in fact a deal where Netflix co-financed, from the onset, and received worldwide exploitation rights in return. While various interviewees still consider co-productions a burdensome 'necessary evil',<sup>48</sup> they do form a highly welcome source of input which helps overcome insufficient funding. When co-financiers are involved, creative autonomy still lies with the producer. In the case of actual co-production partners, interviewees indicated that they try to negotiate to keep as much autonomy as possible in Flanders.

For producers, involving a third-party co-producer helps increase the budget of their series. Averages show budgets have grown from 3.4 million Euro in 2015 to 5.2 million Euro in 2017.<sup>49</sup> Involving a third-party co-producer also reduces the percentage of investment made by the broadcaster, putting producers in a more favourable position to negotiate rights and revenue splits. On their side, broadcasters would favour selling canned export rather than co-finance TV drama for the same reasons, as recoupment can immediately be split between broadcaster and producer, without having to cover distributors' minimum guarantees. In interviews, producers who have invested in TV drama currently see the involvement of non-Flemish co-production or co-financing partners as a core strategy to keep domestic Flemish drama competitive on international markets.

## 5 Conclusions

This article discussed the factors involved in the uptake of Flemish TV fiction exports. Rather than pinpointing one specific reason, a combination of factors has been identified as having contributed to this rise and helped label Flanders as a market of particular interest for international buyers. The international attention for Flemish content was initiated by the broadcast of a Flemish crime drama series by BBC Four. The availability of distribution outlets grew internationally both in over-the-top offerings and domestic pay-TV catalogues, which, despite the dominance of Anglo-Saxon content, also increased the offerings of fiction from small markets. Subsequently, more internationally appealing content was produced, with broadcasters and producers aiming to secure higher budgets. A more central focus was given to screenwriting and to more universal themes and high-concept premises. This led to the involvement of foreign funding either in the form of co-production partnerships or pre-financing deals with distributors. A clear outward-looking strategy of producers and broadcasters was formulated, in order to explore export potential, with an eye on return on investment in the project choices made. Investments were made in the promotion of TV fiction at international buyers' markets, following years of investing solely in film promotion. And finally, higher production grants were awarded for high potential TV dramas by the Flanders Audiovisual Fund.

Interestingly, the explanatory factors have a lot in common with the international uptake of Danish TV drama, which was also initiated by the success of *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012) on BBC; involved securing higher budgets, amongst others based on partnerships with other Nordic countries (through Nordvision), and the involvement of ZDF as a production partner; involved DR Sales in securing part of the budget in order to raise export potential; and focused on high-quality screenwriting. However, there are also a number of differences as demonstrated in the works of, among others, Sparre and From, Hansen and Waade, Jacobsen and Redvall.<sup>50</sup> Danish TV drama strategy set off from a common vision that was initiated by DR, with a clear focus to secure funding internationally by limiting resources on a specific volume of titles, thus reaching higher budgets and clear international appeal. They also placed the screenwriter at the head of production, installing writers' rooms, and included double narrative screenwriting involving combinations of authentic domestic and universally appealing themes, which allowed for keeping a tight grip on creative and production considerations.



In Flanders, despite the public broadcaster being more actively involved in assisting and overseeing screenwriters throughout the development process, there was no common public service broadcasting strategy; this was set according to the production company, as they usually took the creative lead. A second fundamental difference is the fact that the adjustments made in media fund grants, budgets and VRT's outward focus can be seen more as a result, or at least a form of anticipation of continued success, rather than a cause. A third important difference is in the development of the Flemish TV drama 'brand'. Despite reviewers<sup>51</sup> identifying a specific surrealism in the tone and pacing of Flemish drama, there was no common brand or aesthetic form to support its popularity. Other research, including the project 'What Makes Danish TV Drama Travel?'<sup>52</sup> revealed that these typical creative features – lighting, pace, dark, female protagonists – were considered core 'ingredients' in Nordic Noir, which created expectations and reduced risk for buyers due to the consistency in style.

As a final point, despite the previous Flemish government's focus on export and internationalisation as part of making audio-visual content more sustainable, available figures and input from our interviewees also clearly showed the additional income was by no means sufficient to make TV drama in Flanders sustainable without government support. Over the past two decades, more government support did result in higher volumes and profits for producers and broadcasters, but it did not succeed in making the genre itself more sustainable. In recent years, motivations to invest more in TV drama have gradually shifted towards more cultural objectives, with screen agencies, governments and stakeholders increasingly emphasising the cultural value of displaying local content amidst the global streaming wars.

Exports allowed for larger budgets through foreign investments and led to higher productivity; however, the uptake in volume did not significantly lead to more sustainability given the continued dependence on even more tax and public funding support mechanisms. To this end, canned export sales provided important additional revenue for larger production companies like Caviar, DeMensen, and Woestijnvis, allowing more financial leeway to develop new content. Exports have also brought broadcasters an increase in revenue, pushing services such as the VRT to actively look for more opportunities in this area. In terms of market sustainability, exports have actually increased competition; higher production volumes require higher budgets, and they also add more pressure on creative talent and production crews, all this while reinforcing the dependence on public money. This is somewhat different from findings in earlier research on Danish drama, where co-productions and co-financing through funds like Nordvision did provide stable resources and income. However, the clear strategy of DR, which still produces most of its content inhouse, and the fact that only a limited number of players produce fiction in the market, did not lead to an explosion of new series. Nevertheless, the case of Flanders resembles multiple small markets which have seen an uptake in TV drama volumes, yet almost always due to support through additional funding schemes.

With an eye on the future, there are some considerations that policymakers and the industry could take into account. A first one relates to the role of private broadcasters in TV drama production. The fact that VRT is embracing more daring, high-end TV drama concepts, and has managed to secure stable funds for their projects, makes producers increasingly consider VRT as the prime outlet for their drama productions. This puts pressure on the position of private broadcasters in contributing to a flourishing and dynamic TV drama environment. Secondly, a common focus on internationalisation for broadcasters and producers has not reduced existing tensions between the two. The current focus on internationalisation and high concept can only work in accordance with maintaining content authenticity, in order to sustain domestic success and avoid compromising on quality. In interviews, broadcasters have claimed that they strive on matching high-end narratives, themes, screenwriting and production design with expectations from the broad Flemish audience. Thus far however, more daring concepts have not resulted in lower domestic success, on the contrary.

A final observation is that, whereas all branches of TV drama production over the past years have professionalised, screenwriting still proves challenging.<sup>53</sup> Due to the high-speed production of Flemish drama, and the necessity to keep filming crews on set, production companies try to remain pragmatic. This often results in screenplays going into development or production too soon, but, as research has also shown, time to re-write and script edit is pivotal in

developing successful TV drama.<sup>54</sup> Further investment in screenwriting at the level of higher education and overcoming existing fragmentation among film schools in Flanders, as well as investing in script doctor/script editing training could add to increasing screenwriting expertise and investment in talent.

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# CANNED ADAPTATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS OF TURKISH TV SERIES

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**Abstract:** This article examines Turkish TV series' recent success as canned programming primarily in newly developed and developing countries in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia, and South America through close textual analysis of a particularly popular Turkish adaptation, *Bizim Hikaye (Our Story)* (2017-2019) in comparison with its original, *Shameless* (2011-). I argue that Turkish series' emphasis on nostalgic and melancholic narrative frames make them particularly appealing in these regions, as they deal with relatable circumstances of swift and traumatic changes under neoliberalism. However, female protagonists are allowed only a limited range of roles because of the reliance on nostalgia, thus, ultimately serving to re-legitimize patriarchal relations of domination.

**Keywords:** neoliberal culture, nostalgia, melancholia, Turkish TV series, melodrama

## 1 Introduction

Turkish TV series have been screened in over 150 countries in the last decade, achieving resounding success in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, East Asia, and South America. Adaptations constitute a growingly notable part of the Turkish television industry,<sup>1</sup> which adapts foreign television programs to local cultural priorities, while also successfully exporting them across the globe. This article focuses on the socio-cultural factors causing Turkish TV series to become successful ventures of canned television through close textual analysis of an adaptation, *Bizim Hikaye (Our Story)* (2017-2019) in comparison with its original, *Shameless* (2011-). In reformulating foreign scripts, Turkish adaptations resort to similar narrative and thematic formulas, which emphasize a nostalgic and melancholic longing for authenticity and purity. I argue that the textual characteristics of Turkish series render them specifically appealing for newly developed and developing countries, as they deal with relatable circumstances of rapid economic and socio-cultural transformations under conditions of neoliberalism.

*Our Story* is adapted from American *Shameless* that is, in turn, an adaptation from British *Shameless* (2004-2013). *Our Story* received high ratings in several countries and was voted as the best Turkish series of the year by viewers in Peru, Argentina, and Chile in 2019 at the Latin American Turkish Series Awards.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the most successful television series of the year in a major market for Turkish television series is an adaptation.<sup>3</sup> *Our Story* copies every major plot element of its originals, while thematically re-structuring them. The close comparative textual analysis of *Our Story* demonstrates in a crystallized manner the thematic particularities of Turkish adaptations and the reasons



for their success as canned programming in a wide region of the world. I argue that the Turkish series' international appeal rests on the nostalgic and melancholic imagination, stressing the fragments of life that appear untouched by the currents of neoliberal socio-cultural change. Thus, Turkish canned television successfully packages and exports to newly developed and developing countries the nostalgia and melancholic attachment for an imaginary time of purity, simplicity, and authenticity.

I also demonstrate through the analysis of *Our Story* that this excessive reliance on nostalgia negatively affects Turkish series' gender politics in allowing only a limited repertoire of roles for their central female protagonists. It is argued that the Turkish TV series' appeal is partially caused by their strong female protagonists, who struggle against aspects of patriarchal relations of domination.<sup>4</sup> The stories of these female protagonists, it is argued, provide a notable source of inspiration to women who can relate to their circumstances of life. The social realism of Turkish dramas, thus, constitutes a crucial aspect of their allure as canned programs. Yet, I argue that, despite their valuable yet partial criticisms of patriarchy, the nostalgic glorification of the large family and heterosexual romance, common themes of Turkish serials, severely delimit the representational possibilities of female protagonists, ultimately serving to re-package and re-legitimize patriarchy.

Myriad explanations are put forward to explicate the rising popularity of Turkish TV series, and nostalgia is an often-mentioned cause in many analyses. I believe these studies neglect crucial aspects of this common nostalgic and melancholic characteristics of Turkish TV series, as they do not focus on the contemporary stream of events that lay the groundwork for the global affliction with nostalgic and melancholic narratives. In alignment with the literature on nostalgia, which posits that it is, in essence, a fascination with a largely imagined past created out of the needs of the present,<sup>5</sup> this article identifies swift neoliberal socio-economic and cultural transformation as a common thread in explaining Turkish TV series' popularity. Furthermore, nostalgia is typically perceived as a positive or politically neutral attribute of Turkish TV series; thus, it is left unscrutinised. This article, however, would identify it as a major culprit for the politically regressive aspects of Turkish TV series, especially when it comes to the portrayal of female protagonists.

I have chosen to focus on *Our Story*, as it is one of the internationally most successful adaptations in our current era when Turkish television tends to be predominated by adapted TV series, but more importantly, because the sharp thematic and narrative divergences of *Our Story* from its original *Shameless* allow us to distinguish some of the central characteristics of Turkish television series. After a brief overview of contemporary Turkish television, the political culture of neoliberalism and nostalgia, the first part of the textual analysis would focus on the major similarities and differences of *Our Story* from *Shameless* in order to pinpoint the centrality of nostalgia and melancholia in the series' narrative frame, and also to investigate cultural implications of their audience appeal in neoliberal times. The second part is dedicated to the critical investigation of nostalgia and melancholia in Turkish TV series regarding the ways they serve to romanticize and celebrate repressive gender roles.

## 2 Rising Popularity of Turkish Television Series

Turkish TV series have reached unprecedented popularity over a wide region, and Turkey emerged as the biggest TV program exporter after the USA in 2014.<sup>6</sup> Revenues from TV exports increased from 100 thousand dollars in the early 2000's<sup>7</sup> to over 400 million dollars.<sup>8</sup> Despite the political turmoil and rising economic problems of recent years in Turkey, export revenues and global viewership of Turkish TV series continued to rise.<sup>9</sup> In total, more than 150 Turkish series have been screened in more than 140 countries, reaching an estimated audience of over 400 million people.<sup>10</sup> These staggering statistics prompted substantial academic and journalistic interest in studying Turkish TV dramas. It is argued that in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, Turkish TV series have a nostalgic appeal with their portrayal of strong family bonds and groundbreaking love stories, serving as reminders of lost values.<sup>11</sup> It is also suggested that a major source of appeal for Turkish television series is their strong female protagonists, who serve as sources of inspiration and role models for young women who encounter relatable circumstances in their lives.<sup>12</sup>

Marwan Kraïdy and Omar Al-Ghazzi argue that two essential charms of Turkish TV series in the Middle East is that they “conjure up an accessible modernity” that incorporates Islam, and they produce a “counter-hegemonic narrative that puts Middle Easterners in the role of heroes.”<sup>13</sup> It is also widely argued that a major source of the appeal of Turkish TV series is the “cultural proximity” Turkey shares with the countries in the Middle East and the Balkans.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis claim that it is Turkey’s ambivalent identity, situated between the West and the East, and its fragile fusion of various identity markers that allows it to be simultaneously successful in the Middle East and Balkans.<sup>15</sup>

It is not a feasible scholarly endeavour to fully account for the cultural work of every one of over 140 exported Turkish TV series due to their considerable political, thematic and stylistic variations. There are also outliers like *Fatmagül’ün Suçu Ne?* (2010-2012), which has obtained record-breaking fame in Spain by 2018, enlarging the Turkish series’ zone of influence outside of the Global South and Eastern Europe. Previous studies enlighten different facets of the Turkish TV series’ rising international appeal. This article, likewise, does not propose a holistic explanation for Turkish TV series’ international success, which is naturally a multifaceted phenomenon but focuses on a neglected aspect of the cultural work they undertake in an effort to explain their contemporary popularity.

Previous studies on Turkish TV series primarily rely on interviews or audience ethnography, as they focus on investigating the differing audience responses to Turkish TV series.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the industrial and political-economic factors are also investigated to explain the rising global popularity of Turkish TV series.<sup>17</sup> Though certainly revealing, these prior studies do not pay significant attention to the textual fabric of Turkish TV series. As Michelle Phillipov indicates, ethnographic and interview-based methods reveal aspects of popular media that can be verbalized and articulable; however, it is the close examination of textuality that provides insight into a more complex terrain of interconnections between media texts and the socio-cultural phenomena.<sup>18</sup> I believe we can best identify the narrative and thematic particularities of Turkish TV series that allow them to resonate with the desires of a contemporary international audience base through close textual analysis. To study an adaptation as a form of canned programming is important not only because of the increasing number of adaptations in Turkish television, more so because, it is in their differentiation from their originals that the particularities of Turkish TV series crystallize for analysis.

Contemporary Turkish TV series largely follow in the tradition of Turkish audio-visual productions, extending back to the early days of the film and television industry in Turkey. The emphasis on virtue, family and the sacralization of heterosexual love have been some of the central thematic concerns of the Turkish film industry.<sup>19</sup> In fact, highlighting of moral good and virtue is the central pillar of “melodramatic imagination”<sup>20</sup> or melodramatic mode of storytelling,<sup>21</sup> and is widely encountered in the global mediascape. Thus, the current massive international popularity of Turkish TV series is not caused by the invention of new narrative strategies or filmmaking techniques, and, in that regard, Turkish series offer no substantial novelty. To understand their appeal, we should relate the Turkish TV series’ thematic concerns with contemporary global socio-cultural processes of change and alienation in neoliberal times. Hence, this article examines *Our Story* in correspondence with the culture of neoliberalism as a major unifying factor of the diverse regions of the world, and as a key reason for the contemporary popularity of Turkish TV series.

### 3 The Age of Nostalgia and Melancholia Under Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is based on the free market and entrepreneurial values, and it has been the dominant socio-economic and political paradigm in an increasingly globalized economic system.<sup>22</sup> Accompanying the operations of the global capital, we see a concomitant increase in the promulgation of cultural values associated with the functioning of the

neoliberal economy. Neoliberalism should be considered as a political project of embedding market values in domains of social, cultural and political life.<sup>23</sup> The ideal neoliberal subject is conceived as “a free and autonomous atom of self-interest”<sup>24</sup> and neoliberalism operates by fostering the belief that every individual is capable of achieving success and satisfaction through their individual and self-seeking efforts.<sup>25</sup>

It is argued that the current historical moment can be described as an age in which the “predominance of the individual over the collective” reaches its high point.<sup>26</sup> It is even argued that we have been witnessing “a social Darwinist reconfiguration of priorities, policies and outcomes,” that implicitly endorses the notion that only the fittest and the most competitive can succeed.<sup>27</sup> Referred to as neoliberal “ethics”<sup>28</sup> or “neoliberal culture,”<sup>29</sup> this dominant cultural paradigm enhances contest and competition as the main principles of governance of individual and social activity.<sup>30</sup> Turkey has also undergone a rapid wave of neoliberal restructuring that dramatically reshaped cultural life.<sup>31</sup> Since the 1980s, a society of consumerism and instant gratifications has come into being.<sup>32</sup> Rapidly changing cultural norms have led to post-1980 generations in Turkey often being equated with neoliberal consumerism and self-interestedness.<sup>33</sup>

A major negative effect of putting personal benefits ahead of social and communal concerns is that often it appears as if “social relationships are reduced to temporary coalitions and use.”<sup>34</sup> Garth Stahl argues that living in the neoliberal world means a constant interplay between “uncertainty, survivalist strategies, unrealistic expectations and new searches for respectability and authenticity.”<sup>35</sup> I believe the contemporary rise of nostalgia in various regions of the world, and nostalgic popular narratives referencing simpler, more innocent times and better days should be seen as a search for “respectability and authenticity,” caused by neoliberal economic and cultural restructuring. This search for authenticity in the neoliberal age, I argue, is the prime reason for Turkish series’ popularity for the countries and regions that have undergone a particularly dramatic and rapid socio-cultural change.

It is often argued that there has been a recent boom in sentimental narratives about the past, and a general “media obsession with nostalgia” in the global mediascape.<sup>36</sup> Nostalgia can be defined as a complex affective, emotional and cognitive process that serves to bridge and fuse past and the present.<sup>37</sup> Its emotional appeal is based on the purveying of individual and collective memories that engender a sense of warmth and stability.<sup>38</sup> Nostalgic tales can be regarded as protective fictions, providing comfort, especially in times of rapid change.<sup>39</sup> As Andrea Deciu Ritivoi puts it, “when the present is fraught with pain or discomfort... nostalgia can be a source of relief, an escape into a much happier past symbolically contained in a secure place, the home.”<sup>40</sup> However, even though built upon the memory of a past age, nostalgia ultimately concerns present desires and needs rather than the historical reality of the past.<sup>41</sup>

Akin to nostalgia, melancholia can be defined as the human “imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, nostalgia was initially theorized as a form of melancholy produced by the absence of a well-remembered home.<sup>43</sup> Melancholia is different from nostalgia because it typically has no fixed referent; it lacks an easily and directly observable object of loss.<sup>44</sup> We can also distinguish melancholia from mourning, in which the subject acknowledges the irretrievable nature of the missing object.<sup>45</sup> In melancholia, the subject is captivated by “a yearning that refuses to conclude.”<sup>46</sup> In that regard, melancholy paradoxically “intertwines possession and loss.”<sup>47</sup>

Turkish canned television is often saturated with melancholia about an unspecified lost object. In *Our Story*, the narrative takes place in the present moment without any direct reference to Turkey’s history or contemporary political conundrums, which facilitates their export as canned productions. The series takes the form of an implicit lamentation for a prior age of warmer and more intense human relations. This is achieved not by referring to a past epoch, but by concentrating on a central protagonist’s untainted morality, which can be delineated from her surrounding environment that cherishes above all self-interest and wealth. The character is portrayed as a residual trace of an unspoiled moral foundation that contains and safeguards the essential morality of the polity. In this narrative, reluctance to change and

adapt to the ways of the neoliberal world calls forth the hope that the melancholic object of loss is still present in a residual form and can be recovered fully in an indefinite future.

#### 4 *Our Story* and Turkish Canned Adaptations

In *Shameless* and *Our Story*, the story centres on the female protagonist's challenging life. Burdened by her dysfunctional, alcoholic father and absent mother, she raises and looks after her five younger siblings. A defining characteristic of *Shameless* is the notion that the series provides an explicit and non-judgmental portrayal of drug use, sex, and the petty crimes of the Gallagher family.<sup>48</sup> There is no time for, nor any need for shame in the hurried and difficult living conditions, as the Gallagher family struggles for survival in the city. *Our Story*, however, dramatically shifts this thematic emphasis to stress the morality of the 'Elibol' family, resting on the shoulders of the central protagonist Filiz Elibol (Hazal Kaya). The Elibol family effectively represents a melancholic attachment to an imaginary past due to its remarkable moral difference from an increasingly corrupt world. In this thematic re-adjustment of the scenario, it is the female protagonist, Filiz, who squarely shoulders the responsibility of being the moral linchpin, not only of the Elibol family but also of an increasingly decadent community.

The title of the series, *Our Story*, doubly signifies that this is both the untold story of under-privileged and invisible sections of society, but also a story that differs from its original, *Shameless*. In the first shot of the series, Filiz announces that: "This is our home... and here is our neighbourhood that resembles a village... you wouldn't believe when you see it, but we are in the centre of Istanbul."<sup>49</sup> As Filiz utters these sentences, the camera first shows their poverty-ridden neighbourhood, before swiftly moving up, panning to reveal that their house is very close to an internationally recognizable spot: the Bosphorus Bridge connecting the two halves of Istanbul. The image of the Bosphorus Bridge with a Turkish flag flying in the middle of the frame opens and closes each episode, serving as the main marker of the series' Turkishness. Thus, this is "our story" in the dual sense that it is the story of the underprivileged, but, additionally, a story different from its original. After the Bosphorus Bridge, the camera swiftly approaches their house again, this time, entering from an open window. The camera opens a window into the life of this poverty-stricken and struggling family, however, instead of providing an explicit depiction of moral complexity, as *Shameless* does, the intention is to provide a lesson in morality and purity.

In *Shameless*, the central romance between Fiona Gallagher (Emmy Rossum) and Steve Wilton (Justin Chatwin) starts in the first minutes of the first episode. A stranger steals Fiona's purse in a night club. Steve, watching her dance from above the stairs, gives chase only to fall and injure himself, rather than helping the damsel in distress. Starting with a comedic twist to an oft-repeated conventional melodramatic plot element, their romantic affair continues as more humorous than dramatic, unlike the plot in *Our Story*. After having casual sex with Steve, Fiona appears uninterested in his further romantic advances, largely because she considers him as rich and spoilt. When she later learns that he earns a living stealing luxury sports cars her attitude changes. Hence, in another significant contrast with *Our Story*, the male lead's criminal activities are not a big issue for Fiona, rather, they make him more desirable.

Gender relations are a particularly sensitive topic in adaptations.<sup>50</sup> *Our Story* significantly deviates from *Shameless* in the representation of femininity and masculinity. Filiz meets Barış, Steve's counterpart, as she walks to a traditional pre-marriage female-only event, only after her closest friend's insistence. A thief steals her purse as the two are walking on the street. Thus, unlike Fiona, Filiz is not shown dancing and enjoying herself, and throughout the series, no sexual life is portrayed. It is only in the fifth episode that she kisses Barış for the first time. In their first encounter, unlike Steve, Barış catches and beats the thief, and returns Filiz's purse, sidestepping comedic twist of *Shameless* in favour of a more traditional narrative. The actor portraying Barış is also taller and more muscular than Steve. Hence, narratively and visually, he is portrayed as more of a conventionally protective male lead.

Filiz never does a morally questionable or 'shameless' deed. For instance, unaware that Barış lives by stealing and selling cars, she naively believes his story that he is a valet. It is a major blow when she finds out several episodes later, as any type of criminal activity is completely unacceptable to her. *Shameless*' Fiona often appears to be torn between the impulse to follow her personal desires and her responsibilities towards her younger brothers and sisters, but, for Filiz, no such personal confusion exists; she is always self-sacrificially committed to the well-being of her family. She is portrayed as the moral high ground that draws everyone to her higher level. She saves Barış from himself and his troubled past, to create a law-abiding citizen, who abandons his criminal life behind. In a speech in episode 13, accompanied by a dramatic score, Barış tells her that:

It is by you that I learned about thinking others ahead of yourself... All of you think of others and other things before your own best interests. A single smile of your siblings, their happiness is way more important to you than your own happiness. This, this is so important; money, wealth, nothing matters to you. This is such a marvellous, and such an important thing, it is like a miracle. It is something that I have never seen, and never experienced."<sup>51</sup>

There are plenty of such moments when the moral virtue embodied especially by Filiz is contrasted to a social order that privileges wealth and self-interest. Other members of the family may go morally astray, but it is with her help that each eventually recovers. In episode 14, she is utterly devastated on learning that the eldest of her younger brothers is sitting maths exams in place of others for money. Her brother says that he does it for the family and her. She tearfully replies: "No, this is not how I raised any of you. My brothers cannot do such things. This is theft, counterfeit, this is!"<sup>52</sup>. Her brother replies sardonically that they will soon go hungry with this logic. She rises and slaps his face, and he storms out, berating himself in the streets for hurting his sister's feelings. From that moment on, he never repeats this or gets involved in any other illegal activity.

This is a dramatically different portrayal of the central female protagonist when compared to *Shameless*' Fiona, who, for instance, in the third episode of the second season, treats her siblings to dinner with 500\$ stolen from an unattended handbag she finds in the subway. She briefly discusses selling the bag on eBay with the eldest of her younger brothers, before eventually deciding to return it to its owner. Rather than a non-judgmental look into moral complexity, Filiz is marked by her unmatched moral values, which turns her into a standard-bearer of morality for a community in the process of moral degeneration. She is the solid moral cornerstone of the family, and the community shaken by the waves of socio-cultural change. In Filiz, we glimpse a nostalgic and melancholic vision of moral purity we believe may have existed in some imaginary time before, for the loss of which we can melancholically lament, and still hope for its eventual return.

There is a visual and narrative match between the opening shot of *Our Story* in the first episode and its last shot, which concludes the series, in episode 70. In the first episode, the camera slowly approaches the Elibol family's house in their deprived neighbourhood and enters through an open window. In the last scene, the entire family sit together and laugh in unison, despite facing many ordeals. By the ending, Barış and Filiz are married, most other members of the large family find the love of their life, and even their alcoholic father is redeemed. The camera retreats slowly and leaves their house from an open window as in the beginning. From an above shot, their unidentifiably common house appears to signify that this is, after all, the story of one lower-class family, similar to many others across the city.

In theorizing the experience of modern tourism, Dean MacCannell argues that traveling abroad in modern capitalism serves the purpose of catching "a glimpse of" authenticity reflected in the simple "chastity or purity of others."<sup>53</sup> Likewise, *Our Story* offers the audience a voyage into the house and life of the Elibol family. As we enter and leave their house, their story allows us to catch a glimpse of purity that we melancholically believe is missing in today's world, but we have never completely lost. The Elibol family's story, thus, becomes "our story," in the sense that even though virtue and authentic human bonding are in decay under the neoliberal pressure of intense competition and hyper-individualism, the series indicates that the object of loss, the authenticity, remains recoverable.



## 5 Nostalgia and Patriarchal Re-Framing in Turkish TV Series

Both *Shameless* and *Our Story* are mixed-genre productions, typical of long-running TV series, but we can observe a greater emphasis on drama rather than comedy in *Our Story*. The resulting somber tone, a common feature in Turkish adaptations, enables a greater focus on contemporary social issues, mainly the patriarchal oppression and domestic violence. The emphasis on patriarchal oppression is often considered as a prime reason for the popularity of Turkish adaptations as canned programming. However, as can be observed in *Our Story*, melancholic and nostalgic attachment to an imagined past result in sacralizing hetero-sexual coupling and the large family as women's ultimate sources of commitment, disregarding that these have often been their main sources of oppression.

It is argued that the Turkish series have positively impacted gender relations, especially in the Middle East.<sup>54</sup> Labelled as a “game-changer,” it is claimed that as a direct result of Turkish dramas' popularity, “the number of reported rape cases has grown [and] women are increasingly asserting their right to divorce in unhappy marriages.”<sup>55</sup> However, Turkish dramas are also criticized for representing violence against women as exceptional states caused by the actions of some callous men, and that women are often able to escape the cycles of violence through the help of a benevolent male lead.<sup>56</sup> In this regard, violence against women is represented as an aspect of life beyond the contours of everyday normality, erasing from view the fact that what is deemed as normal entails various and little-mentioned acts of violence and oppression.

In *Our Story*, we can find traces of engagement with these public and academic criticisms of the Turkish TV series. Patriarchal oppression is represented as a pervasive aspect of life that affects all major female characters. In the first episode alone, there are five scenes of verbal and physical violence against women by their abusive boyfriends, husbands, or ex-husbands. The series also tends to blur the boundaries between callous men who harm, and benevolent men who protect or save women. For instance, the series points out that the central character, Filiz, suffers because of the actions of men in her family. In the final minutes of the first episode, Filiz's father and younger brothers all yell at Barış to get out of Filiz's life. Filiz sadly tells him that: “Can't you see, I don't have a life of my own... We cannot be together.”<sup>57</sup> Rather than a brute outsider, it is her male siblings, otherwise sympathetically portrayed, who cause her substantial suffering in delimiting her life.

In a different storyline, one of Filiz's young brothers falls in love with an older, married woman, herself a victim of domestic violence. He dreams of the day when he will save her from that terrible man and marry her. One day, she abandons her abusive husband, taking refuge in a new house. Hikmet buys her many presents with his hard-earned money; a bouquet of roses, and even an engagement ring. In episode 24, as Hikmet falls to his knees to propose, she angrily slaps the ring out of his hand. This is the first time that we see the long-abused woman yelling: “I want neither you nor Asim [her husband]. What is the difference between you and him? Enough! Go! Why don't you understand from no?... Have you asked me if I want any of these things?”<sup>58</sup> Hence, the series does not always rely on a neat separation between the callous men and the good male leads, but rather gestures towards an understanding that everyday life activities of well-meaning men can also be a source of oppression for women.

The opening narrative voice in the first episode of *Our Story* belongs to Filiz, marking her centrality to the story from the beginning, whereas in *Shameless*, we first hear Fiona's father Frank introduce the members of his large family to the audience. Additionally, in *Our Story*, the narrative appears more focused on Filiz with greater screening time for her in comparison to Fiona. However, as can be frequently observed in Turkish TV series, Filiz's celebrated puritanical and self-sacrificial portrayal is bent towards restricting women's life choices, largely excluding them from the material and sensual pleasures of life, ultimately, making it very easy for women to be labelled as immoral antagonists unless they follow a very rigid code of conduct in regard to personal morality. For instance, Filiz is regularly contrasted with female antagonists, who are typically young, wealthy and well-educated women in Barış' entourage. Unlike Filiz, these women have a sexual life, and they are depicted as overly concerned with the material aspects of life.

Furthermore, Filiz's portrayal gets a more conservative edge as the story progresses. Patriarchal re-framing is an intrinsic characteristic of the romance as a genre,<sup>59</sup> and, similarly, we witness Filiz's gradual transformation from an independent and somewhat rebellious person to a docile and obedient lover through her romantic attachment to Barış. It is ultimately the nostalgic and melancholic attributes of the narrative that severely limit the representational possibilities for Filiz as the central protagonist. Hence, even though female-centred Turkish canned TV series open up a space for the representation for patriarchal oppression, bringing it into the forefront of public debate, they, nonetheless, reproduce conservative standards and patriarchal relations of domination in allowing its female protagonists only a limited repertoire of roles through sacralizing a nostalgic fixation with large patriarchal families and committed heterosexual relationships.

## 6 Conclusion

Turkish series' international success has multiple socio-cultural, political and industrial reasons. In this article, I focused on and examined one major and previously neglected frame of analysis in order to explicate their appeal in such diverse regions as Eastern Europe, the Balkans, South America, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. I argued that it is the culture of neoliberalism that creates a demand for Turkish TV series. As people from newly industrialized and developing countries have a harder time to come to terms with the socio-cultural effects of neoliberal hyper-individualism and increased pressure for competitiveness, it is primarily in these regions that Turkish series have attained success. With their nostalgic and melancholic narrative frames, Turkish TV series respond to this collective sense of unease in the face of swift and uprooting socio-cultural change in the age of neoliberalism.

In his seminal study, Peter Brooks argues that melodrama emerged "in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question."<sup>60</sup> In response to swift societal change, the melodramatic mode of storytelling relies on the "staging, unearthing or the rediscovery of innocence"<sup>61</sup> and it corresponds to a "search for identity, social order, and clear moral values."<sup>62</sup> As demonstrated in this article, *Our Story* is primarily a melodramatic narrative about the staging and the rediscovery of innocence, and contemporary Turkish series do not, in essence, diverge from the narrative tradition of melodrama, which has historically been the primary basis of storytelling in Turkish cinema and television. Turkish series' charm for the international audience stems from a renewed desire for consuming melodramatic tales for people living under the pressure of neoliberal culture of hyper-individualism and competitiveness. Thus, it is their conventionality, rather than novelty, which distinguishes Turkish TV series in a changing global mediascape.

Even though *Our Story* copies every major plot element of *Shameless*, it thematically re-structures the story into a melodramatic tale of innocence, virtue, and redemption. Through its sharp differentiation from its original that we can isolate central distinguishing characteristics of Turkish TV series. The Turkish television industry uses a relatively limited number of actors who often portray similar characters across several popular TV series. News reports indicate that audiences in South America eagerly awaited the broadcasting of *Our Story* as Hazal Kaya's new show.<sup>63</sup> Shortly after the final episode, she appeared in the leading role in another Turkish series, portraying a similar character. Hence, even when reproducing the script of foreign shows, Turkish series are still thematically more akin to each other. With actors successively portraying similar roles in a somewhat closed-circuit of multiple series, the Turkish TV industry tends to recurrently offer the international audiences nostalgic and melancholic narratives.

Previous studies on Turkish TV series often emphasize the notion of "cultural proximity" and the ambivalent nature of Turkish identity to explain the Turkish series' popularity in the Middle East and the Balkans.<sup>64</sup> In this article, I do not completely negate the cultural proximity theory, instead, I argue that the international popularity of Turkish TV series in multitudes of countries beyond the Middle East and the Balkans necessitates re-consideration and re-framing of the

concept. Rather than geographical closeness or historical ties, it is the swift neoliberal transformation that should be identified as a major thread of cultural proximity, uniting the regions where Turkish series have achieved remarkable success. Hence, I argue that the common link between these wide apart regions is their experience of swift neoliberal transformations, and the resulting cultural dilemmas generate a desire for nostalgic and melancholic tales provided by the Turkish television industry.

We should, nonetheless, be cautious in approaching Turkish TV series' critical potentials against the culture of neoliberalism. Nostalgic and melancholic attachment to an imagined epoch of strong familial bonds, authentic human ties, and passionate heterosexual romances also means central female protagonists are allowed only a limited range of roles as the cornerstones of collective morality. As one recent extensive study on the representation of women in Turkish television series indicates, despite similarities in the visibility of female and male protagonists, women are typically relegated to secondarized roles and are associated with family, emotionality, and housekeeping.<sup>65</sup> Even when the Turkish series explicitly criticizes aspects of patriarchy as *Our Story*, they fail to touch on some of its root causes, for which, nostalgic and melancholic narrative frames that endorse conservative understandings of femininity should be identified as major reasons. Therefore, despite containing critical potentials against contemporary neoliberalism and patriarchy, Turkish TV series ultimately serve to re-legitimize patriarchal relations of domination.

## Notes

1. A partial list of recent boom in Turkish adaptations of foreign TV shows would include *Ufak Tefek Cinayetler* (2017-2018), *Umutsuz Ev Kadınları* (2011-2014), *Kadın* (2017-), *Küçük Sırlar* (2010), *İntikam* (2013-2014), *Medcezir* (2013-2015), *Bir Aile Hikayesi* (2019), and *Avlu* (2018-), which are adapted respectively from *Big Little Lies* (2017-), *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), *Revenge* (2011-2015), *The O.C.* (2003-2007), *This Is Us* (2016), *Woman* (2013), and *Wentworth* (2013-). Turkish TV producers also adapted over thirty South Korean dramas in recent years, such as *Paramparça* (2014-2017), *Hayat Şarkısı* (2016-2017), *Adını Feriha Koydum: Emir'in Yolu* (2012), *Bir Aşk Hikayesi* (2013-2014), and *Anne* (2016-2017), which are adapted from *Autumn in My Heart* (2000), *Flames of Desire* (2010-2011), *The Man from Nowhere* (2010), *I'm Sorry I Love You* (2017), and *Mother* (2018).
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## Biography

Deniz Zorlu has been teaching in the Department of Media and Communication and in the Department of Cinema and Digital Media at Izmir University of Economics, Turkey since September 2018. He received his Ph.D. from Queen's University Cultural Studies program at Kingston, Canada in November 2017. In his doctorate thesis, he analyzed the ways popular Turkish television series engage with and affect the processes of socio-cultural change in Turkey. His primary research interests include the examination of popular media productions with a specific focus on Turkish television series and the political uses of social media sites in contemporary Turkey. His articles on television and social media are published or are slated for publishing in peer-reviewed journals such as *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* and *Masculinities: A Journal of Culture and Society*.



# THE CURATED TV EXPERIENCE WITH 'VALUE ADDED'

## WALTER PRESENTS, CANNED TV, CURATION, AND POST-PRODUCTION CULTURE

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**Abstract:** Canned TV has been a television industry practice almost from the start of television itself and was a way in which local/nationally-produced television programmes gained extra revenue by travelling, under licence, around the world. As well as providing extra revenue, this process also provided, often unintentionally, various opportunities for branding – both at the broadcaster level and at the national level. However, using Channel 4's OD platform, Walter Presents, this essay will consider the state of canned TV in more contemporary terms related to global and transnational ideas where television in general, and canned TV in particular, describe a transformed media culture.

**Keywords:** Walter Presents, curation, postproduction culture, value

### 1 Introduction

Canned TV has been a television industry practice almost from the start of television itself, and a way in which local/nationally-produced television programmes gained extra revenue by travelling, under licence, around the world. In these respects, we can think of canned TV in terms of post-production practices, practices that have evolved along with new technologies, new commercial opportunities, and new strategies aimed at audiences, production, and consumption in television. For some, these processes of post-production have become more significant in recent years. For both Verevis<sup>1</sup> and Bourriaud<sup>2</sup> significant changes in the production and consumption of TV can be described in terms of a 'Postproduction Culture' – a culture where ready-made, or existing media products, texts, and concepts are given new life, or 'added value' through their re-appearance and consumption elsewhere, often experienced in a different context from their original conception, or in some cases, experienced as remakes or reboots. The aim of this paper is to show how the concept of Postproduction Culture can be applied to Channel 4's AVoD platform Walter Presents, and to an understanding of contemporary canned TV, its evolution and development, and its relationship to contemporary practices in the television industry.



Figure 1. Walter Presents: "Want More World Drama?"

Using Channel 4's OD platform, Walter Presents, this essay will consider the state of canned TV in more contemporary terms related to global and transnational ideas where television in general, and canned TV in particular, can be used to examine and describe a transformed media culture.

This paper, therefore, will examine how Walter Presents not only describes change in contemporary TV, but changes in the concept of contemporary canned TV. It will examine how Walter Presents highlights acts of curation in contemporary TV, with particular reference to Amanda Lotz's *Portals*<sup>3</sup> and new industrial practices related to streaming services, SVoD, TVoD, and AVoD. In these respects, we can examine how the concept of canned TV can be understood in this new television landscape. It will also examine how Walter Presents and the concept of canned TV can be understood as part of a pervasive Postproduction Culture, and therefore subject to new technologies that have manifested into contemporary practices of streaming and internet-distributed television. It is worth pointing out that for both Bourriaud and Verevis the concept of Postproduction Culture specifically refers to phenomena and practices arising out of digital change, and therefore refers to a specific critical-historical period in the media landscape. Using the UK's Channel 4 online AVoD platform Walter Presents as an example, it will examine the complexities of contemporary canned TV in the contemporary television and media landscape, and its potential relationship to a Postproduction culture.

## 2 Canned TV

Historically, canned TV was largely a commercial opportunity, an opportunity which took advantage of new technological developments that allowed TV to be recorded, stored, and re-transmitted. As well as providing extra revenue, the practice of canned TV also provided, often unintentionally, various opportunities for branding – both at the broadcaster level and at the national level. As Werbach<sup>4</sup> observes, when we talk about canned TV, historically we talk about business models and syndication, and the main driver of syndication and canned TV, in the early days of television, was American television. Werbach notes, "without syndication the American mass media as we know it would not exist".<sup>5</sup> Werbach's description of syndication is in essence a description not only of the historical development of canned TV, but also the practices of Walter Presents. For Werbach syndication "involves the sale of the same good to many customers, who then integrate it with other offerings and redistribute it. The practice is routine in the world of entertainment". Significantly, Werbach sees syndication as "the ideal way to conduct business in a networked, information-intensive economy".<sup>6</sup>

However, as Bielby and Harrington observe, the global market for canned TV started with the export of syndicated American TV shows, launched in the mid-1950s.<sup>7</sup> In fact, such was the ubiquity of American TV programmes on TV channels around the world, canned TV arguably became a form of cultural imperialism, although it is worth noting that in the era of the 'Big 3' US networks – ABC, NBC, and CBS, from 1950s to late 1970s – transnational concepts of canned TV in particular, and of TV in general were not a focus. Instead, canned TV was just another form of the international trade of goods. As Bielby and Harrington further observe, it was only with the introduction of global technologies such as cable and satellite TV, the subsequent increase in competition, and the erosion of the domestic network dominance of TV, that canned TV and syndication became a more significant transnational element of the TV industry and market with global dynamics.<sup>8</sup>

These changes and developments continue apace today, revitalised mostly by streaming services in need of a substantial catalogue of popular and diverse TV programmes, that are often curated by media professionals to meet the demands of a competitive and diverse TV market.

Historically, canned TV highlighted the production and consumption of domestic network TV, and the dynamics of network TV syndication, a dynamic that is particularly important to the unique selling point of Walter Presents. However, it is worth noting that Walter Presents is not a Broadcaster, but a content provider, and therefore historical concepts of syndication in TV go only so far in explaining Walter Present's business model. Canned TV still plays a large part in network TV schedules, and perhaps even more so in a diverse and competitive TV market. But this dynamic has arguably changed as a result of competitive transnational flows in television, and as a result of technological change. The British public service channel, Channel 4, itself born out of big changes in the TV industry in 1982, has become synonymous in Britain with diversity in programming, diversity of audiences, and syndicated, canned TV programming, sold on the back of the quality TV phenomenon. In fact, Channel 4 has not only embraced digital, technological, and market force change in ways that other public service channels have not, it has arguably recontextualised the canned TV experience through its adoption of Walter Presents who provide viewers with the local/domestic TV experience as experienced elsewhere around the world, and arguably as part of a Postproduction culture.

### 3 UK's Channel 4



Figure 2. The Channel 4 Logo.

Channel 4 is a commercially funded public service broadcaster in the UK with a remit to provide innovative programming not found on other UK public service channels. Its past success has largely been attributed to its practice of showcasing unusual and 'challenging' original programming, but it has also gained a reputation for broadcasting

imported (mainly US) 'canned' quality TV dramas. In this last respect, its long-standing association with HBO has been significant to its brand allowing it to showcase exclusive content such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1997-2007), and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), amongst others. Channel 4 also boosted its brand and reputation by broadcasting, under licence, ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010), which subsequently became a flagship show for the channel.

However, as Catherine Johnson has observed, this practice of showcasing imported canned TV dramas from America has tended to clash with "Channel 4's remit to represent the diversity of British society, and to support the independent production sector in Britain".<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Channel 4 launched a series of digital partner channels, most notably E4 and More 4, as a means of fulfilling its remit, whilst at the same time still providing an outlet for imported, canned foreign programming. One result of this has been Channel 4's adoption of Walter Iuzzolino's curated international AVoD platform Walter Presents, made available on Channel 4's All 4 online platform.

As a case study, Channel 4's Walter Presents provides an unusual example of contemporary canned television – the transnational circulation of ready-made, and typically national/local television content for global consumption – whilst at the same time mirroring similar practices of other content providers in the TV industry who have made use of new digital, streaming technology. As Lotz, Lobato and Thomas<sup>10</sup> have observed, among others, in regard to change in TV as a whole, the key to the development of canned television in recent years has been the advent of internet-distributed television services worldwide. In this and other respects we can consider both Walter Presents and canned TV in relation to wider industry developments in television, and more visibly prominent examples of internet-distributed television. If we are to understand Walter Presents, and canned TV in terms of a postproduction culture, then this does not only describe change at the textual or programme level, but also at the economic and industrial level. The most obvious example of dynamic change in television is the disruption of what Raymond Williams described as television "flow",<sup>11</sup> by new technologies, in this case TiVo, streaming services, and various VoD, SVoD, and AVoD services, the most prominent contemporary example being Netflix. As Lobato explains, "Schedules are obviously different from catalogues in that the former are linear sequences of programmed content and the latter are interactive, curated databases".<sup>12</sup>

## 4 Canned TV and Portals

Whilst the practice of canned television has been around from the earliest years of television, more recent practices describe a contemporary television landscape that has taken full advantage of emerging digital technologies, and potentially serves to describe the dynamics of transnational flows in the contemporary media landscape. As Lotz, Lobato and Thomas observe, "The rapid growth of internet-distributed television services worldwide" has not only changed consumption and production practices in television, but also "presents an array of research opportunities, challenges, and possibilities of transnational comparison".<sup>13</sup> Although Lotz only tacitly refers to Netflix in her study *Portals*, any discussion of Walter Presents in relation to new industrial and commercial models impacting on canned TV, requires some reference to Netflix. However, as Lobato observes, "It should be emphasized that Netflix is not a typical case".<sup>14</sup> He argues that "it is no longer feasible to speak of 'a' single Netflix, understood as a service offering the same content and the same experience everywhere; it is now more accurate to describe Netflix as a series of national services linked through a common platform architecture".<sup>15</sup> This is different to Walter Presents as its reach



was never designed for world domination. Despite Walter Presents moving beyond Channel 4's All 4 platform, striking deals elsewhere – launching as a SVoD platform in America, with pay-TV service Foxtel in Australia, and more recently in Italy with Discovery's Nove, Giallo, and Dplay channels – the same choice of content and the same type of content (foreign domestic TV dramas) is provided. This is different to Netflix. Both Walter Presents and Netflix are alike in that they offer a body of licensed or owned content distributed by their respective platforms at a given time. As Lobato observes, “In the case of SVoD services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, catalogues are essentially revolving collections of licensing agreements”.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3. The Walter Presents Selection.

As such, contemporary ideas of canned television have potentially come to describe certain new technological innovations and production practices, new expectations and practices in TV viewing, and new academic approaches to understanding the complex dynamics and veracities of the transnational in the contemporary media landscape. As Bielby and Harrington observe in their study of *Global TV: Exporting Television Culture in the World Market* (2008), and of the big 3 (ABC, NBC, CBS) in American network TV in particular, although canned TV originally described the selling and distribution of national programmes in international markets, it is only since the 1990s, with “transformative developments” in television such as the “proliferation of cable, satellite, internet, and mobile systems of distribution”<sup>17</sup> that canned TV has come to be described in global and transnational terms.



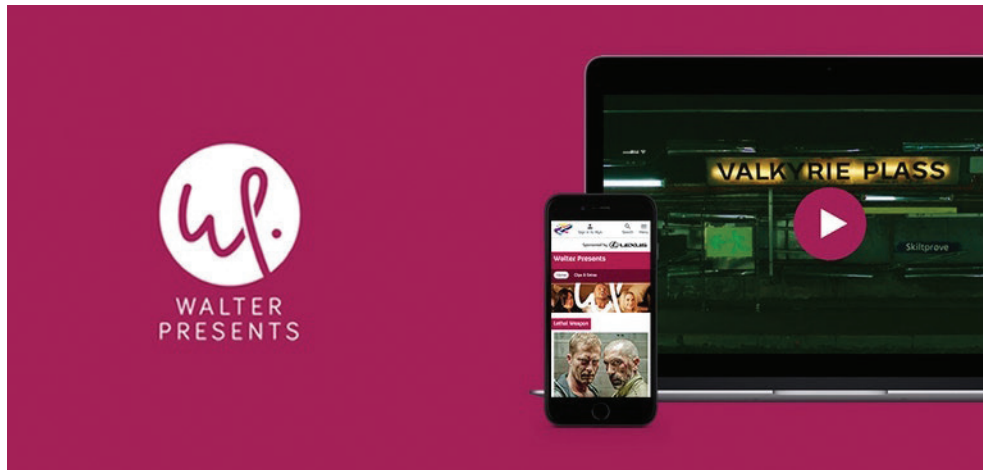


Figure 4. The 'Walter Presents' Portals.

As just one example, Channel 4's Walter Presents epitomises how new technologies have introduced global and transnational dimensions to the television experience. Interestingly, however, it places a lot of emphasis on the national television experience. In this respect, Walter Presents draws attention to practices usually associated with canned TV. Walter Presents has become successful in securing the rights of shows that were either not valuable or appealing for other players on the market, or just simply ignored due to their local/national, or even parochial flavour. With traditional industry practices concerning canned TV changing, largely due to digital technology and the advent of internet-distributed television, it is important to identify the nature of that change. Walter Presents, for example, highlights contemporary acts of curation in internet-distributed television in ways that other similar services do not. In this respect Amanda Lotz's work on *Portals* (2017) is significant. For Lotz, "Portals accomplish the central function of collecting – or curating – cultural goods"<sup>18</sup> and with the rise of internet-distributed television, SVoD, TVoD, and other similar television platforms, television has seen the rise of new creative professionals able to curate and identify 'valuable licenses' suited to curatorial aims.

Walter Presents exemplifies these new practices and, unlike other similar platforms and services, Walter Presents deliberately draws attention to the creative professionals and processes behind them via the eponymous Walter Iuzzolino. If Lotz's work on *Portals* aims to describe a changing television landscape, this examination of Walter Presents aims to highlight how these changes have re-articulated the concept of canned TV through acts of media curation. Similarly, these acts of curation introduce the potential of examining canned TV and Walter Presents through the concept of a Postproduction Culture. For both Bourriaud and Verevis, Post-Production Culture describes and promotes the idea of 'value added'<sup>19</sup> as part of new production/consumption strategies, strategies that have become evident in curation strategies and part of the new creative professional tool kit. It is important, therefore, not only to identify the significance of curation in certain areas of contemporary television, and in relation to canned television, but also to identify the nature of this concept of 'value added'.



Figure 5. The 'Walter Presents' Logo.

## 5 Walter Presents

Walter Presents is Channel 4's online streaming platform which offers viewers "the best in world drama" (Channel 4, 2019) through the curation and streaming of a variety of foreign/national TV dramas from around the world.

One of its selling points is that the platform both curates and presents the national for transnational consumption. In other words, it acquires nationally broadcast TV dramas from various countries, curates them into a library of TV content, then provides access to these dramas via the Walter Presents platform. However, in terms of the national and the transnational this dynamic is complex. For example, it provides something similar, yet very different to Valaskivi's concept of 'Cool Nation Branding' (2015). As Valaskivi observes, the aim of cool-nation branding for national Broadcasters is to construct "a national identity for consumption by transnational, if not global, markets".<sup>20</sup> It can be argued that Walter Presents does promote the pleasure of watching national/local TV dramas and does so for global and transnational consumption, but because their library of content is canned TV the concept of cool-nation branding is done by proxy, if at all.

Walter Presents is not the original national broadcaster for these various TV dramas, it is merely a content provider, but it does promote the pleasures and cultural kudos of watching Swiss crime dramas (*10*, TSR1, 2010), or Israeli comedy romance (*Beauty and the Baker/Lehiyot Ita*, Keshet Broadcasting, 2013-) over more globally constructed products as seen on HBO or Netflix.



Figure 6. *Beauty and the Baker/Lehiyot Ita* (2013-).

Further, and perhaps more significantly, none of the TV programmes available on Walter Presents were created with global distribution in mind, or at least, not originally with a global audience in mind. Walter Present's showcasing of Belgium TV dramas is a case in point. As Mark Lawson of *The Guardian* points out, "When Iuzzolino first made inquiries about the foreign rights to Belgian shows, he met surprise from the distributors: "Until Walter Presents, they had no real foreign interest at all".<sup>21</sup>



Figure 7. *Code 37* (2009-2012).

Again, this is different to the Scandi-noir television phenomenon, where Scandinavian television producers have recognised the global market for their product, and have responded accordingly. It is this particular feature that Walter Presents promotes as a USP – that these TV dramas are usually restricted for local/national audiences.

It is perhaps with this example where contemporary ideas concerning 'canned' or 'finished' TV becomes significant to understanding global flows in television. As Bielby and Harrington observe, although "the television industry is now global in scope, it is, first and foremost, a domestic industry born out of local concerns"<sup>22</sup> and produced with distinctive national broadcast remits and systems. Walter Presents, therefore, provides something different in the current global TV landscape by shunning global trends of producing TV that is globally exportable, and focusing instead on these distinctive local and national idiosyncrasies that are less well-known or well-travelled.

That these national/local TV dramas have not been made for global consumption and not usually viewed, except by indigenous/local audiences, tells us something about Walter Presents, television production, and canned TV in the contemporary media landscape. Local and national products and concerns still exist, and local culture still thrives in TV. Local culture, as provided for by local/national TV has become attractive to the global TV market and Walter Presents recognises that. Walter Presents draws attention to the local/national, and viewers are promised and provided with an 'authentic' local experience and not one created/branded originally for a global audience. In this last respect, Walter Presents also draws attention to previous incarnations of national TV consumption for global audiences, in particular the scandi-noir experience, a genre and aesthetic that has become all too globally familiar and pervasive. Walter Iuzzolino has recognised the scandi-noir phenomenon, recognised its global dimensions, and has decided to offer something different. These features of Walter Presents alone could form part of a post-production promise of 'value added'.

Walter Presents therefore does brand these national TV programmes, as indicative of national tastes, culture, etc., but in doing so the platform also makes a point of their potential exoticism. Walter Presents changes the original context of these dramas – a key feature of Post Production Culture - by branding these nationally produced dramas as part of an exclusive, cultural, transnational television viewing experience. This change of context is facilitated by digital technology and new industrial practices that have embraced transnational and global dynamics. Walter Presents offers to provide national TV dramas that are indicative of 'normal', local scheduled TV. It provides access to content and a viewing experience usually reserved for local audiences but changes the context in which they were first produced and first experienced by local audiences. In all of these respects, we can consider Walter Presents in terms of a post-production culture.

Walter Presents, therefore, represents and constructs the national, transnationally, by proxy and in a variety of interesting and highly symbolic ways. Not least, Walter Presents offers an opportunity to consider transnational flows and canned TV in terms of a Post-production culture that Verevis describes as suggesting 'value added'. This idea of 'value added' is significant to the curated, 'canned' television experience.



Figure 8. The 'Walter Presents' Catalogue.

## 6 Post-Production Culture

Serving as just one example, Channel 4's Walter Presents not only represents and constructs the concept and practice of contemporary canned television, but how this practice can also be understood in terms of what Bourriaud (2002), and Verevis (2016) describe as a 'Post-production culture'.

As both Bourriaud and Verevis observe, Post-production culture describes "a combination of forces – conglomeration, globalization, and digitization"<sup>23</sup> – that has contributed to a new critical-historical period in the media landscape. Whilst this concept of a Post-production culture has been used to describe the pervasiveness of remakes, reboots, and spin-offs, both in film and TV, it can also serve to describe the practice of contemporary 'canned' TV, but only where existing TV texts are re-situated or re-purposed in new markets and geographies for new audiences; the prime example being curated content libraries for streaming services. These post-production practices have been described as "intermedial, transnational, post-authorial, and characterised by proliferation and simultaneity".<sup>24</sup> Whilst television streaming services/SVoDs such as Netflix and HBO have been the go-to examples for studies of internet-distributed television, and could arguably be considered for an examination of contemporary canned TV, Walter Presents offers an example where Moran's observation of the canned TV programme being a "product of the national level of television"<sup>25</sup> is not only more visible and apparent, but forms a key part of the strategy employed by Walter Presents. This national/local dynamic of canned TV has, if anything, become even more significant to an understanding of global flows of television, and it also serves to highlight how Walter Presents has identified a Post-production culture whereby canned TV has arguably been shaped by intermedial, transnational, and post-authorial concepts in a media landscape characterised by proliferation and simultaneity.

As indicative of a Post-production culture, therefore, Walter Presents arguably describes a transformed media culture where existing television texts are reproduced (translation/subtitles), recontextualised, repurposed and resituated to



meet the commercial and cultural pressures of contemporary media consumers and producers. If we examine each of these claims in more detail, we not only highlight the commercial and cultural development of canned TV, but the dynamics of a Post-production culture as envisioned by Verevis, Bourriaud, and Constandinides.<sup>26</sup>

If we consider how the drama series' showcased on Walter Presents could be described as being re-produced in accordance with a ideas of a Post-production culture concept, then we need to see how these dramas may have changed in the transition from their original broadcast space, to the space of the Walter Presents platform. One detail concerns the act of translation and the use of subtitles.

## 7 Translation, Subtitles, and Post-Production Culture

Re-titles, subtitles, translations and new publicity (paratexts, etc.) not only show a re-modelled and re-produced product, but describe “a digitized, globalized... [TV landscape] in which multiple versions proliferate and co-exist”.<sup>27</sup> Translation and subtitled content, whilst more common in contemporary TV (think of Scand-Noir), has traditionally been a barrier to exporting TV due to language barriers as well as cultural content. This has been especially true of America, where the tendency has been to remake TV content rather than import the original version. As Moran has observed, despite large amounts of imported programming, frequently requiring dubbing or subtitling, “television programs in vernacular languages continue to anchor a sense of cultural belonging and function as a privileged site for the reproduction of nations”.<sup>28</sup> This has not always been viewed as a good thing where canned TV has been concerned. However, Walter Presents makes the most of this, indeed, making it a selling point emphasising what Moran (2009), quoting Waisbord, sees as television “keeping nationhood alive by flagging spoken languages and drawing and sustaining linguistic boundaries”. Translation and subtitles involve acts of cultural negotiation. Whilst cultural negotiation has always been part of the processes behind canned TV, it has not always been as visible or as promoted as it is through Walter Presents.

This concept of a Post-production Culture can act partly as an analytical framework, to explain the dynamics of Walter Presents, its significance to understanding change in the contemporary television landscape, and how it may offer insights into the evolution of canned TV.



Figure 9. Walter Iuzzolino.

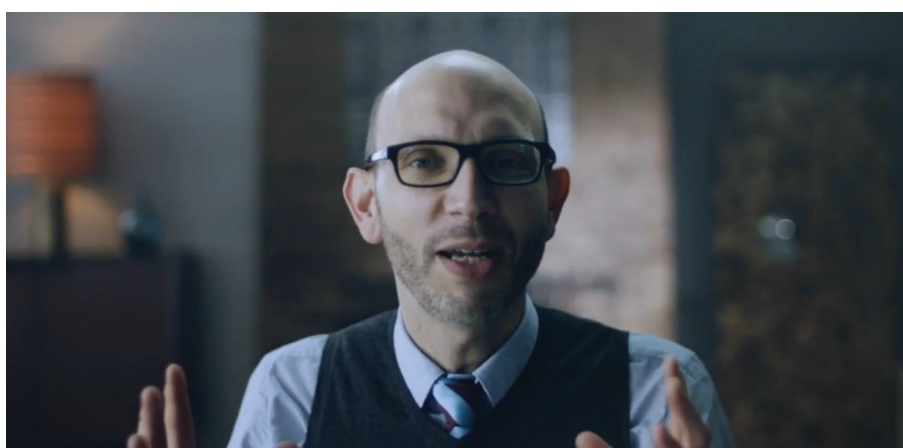
## 8 The Curated Experience

As with many other streaming services, Walter Presents provides a curated library of content, according to Lotz who describes it as a “particular curation tactic”,<sup>29</sup> and it is at the curation level where Walter Presents argues to be different to other streaming services. As Wendy Mitchell observes, in her interview with Walter Presents’ Walter Iuzzolino, “concerns about how the streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon are flooding the market” are not just about the amounts of money they spend, but a lack of distinctive programming.<sup>30</sup> Walter Presents aims to deliver distinctive programming by typically avoiding “globally-conceived titles that are actually culturally non-distinctive”. This is a tactic designed to avoid copying the Scandi-Noir look-alike boom of a few years ago, and the television streaming tactic of trying to emulate the HBO ‘quality TV’ recipe.

Instead, the curated experience of Walter Presents has gone back to local/national terrestrial TV in its search for distinctive programming. Whilst it can be considered a niche market curation tactic, it is interesting to note that the curated content on offer via Walter Presents was never intended to be as such; rather it was produced locally as typical, standard (if high quality) scheduled TV programming.

For streaming services, producers, and for audiences, the concept and practice of curation, has become more significant to contemporary TV production and the viewing experience, but it has also become a key feature of the contemporary media landscape in general. For Rosenbaum, “Curation is the act of individuals with a passion for a content area to find, contextualize, and organize information”.<sup>31</sup> The “act of individuals” is particularly significant where Walter Presents is concerned as the platform is promoted and fronted as the selection of choice titles by Walter Iuzzolino. We can therefore consider Walter Iuzzolino and Walter Presents as an example of television imitating the success of the pro-am fan that has come to prominence in media circles due to the rise of platforms such as YouTube.

The example provided here is typical of how Walter Iuzzolino introduces new dramas to the audience. We can see the passion Iuzzolino invests in his introduction to the series, but significantly he also provides a context for a Swiss crime drama, the sort of national TV drama we would not expect to see outside Switzerland. It is niche, obscure, exotic, and suggests exclusive viewing, but the programme is also sold as typical scheduled Swiss television fare.



Video 1. Walter presents: 10.

Iuzzolino’s introduction is important. It acts as a guarantee of quality as well as fan viewing. As Rosenbaum observes, the “emergence of the curation economy creates a greater need” not only for “trusted sources”, but trusted curators.

Curation is “the new role for media professionals”,<sup>32</sup> therefore although the eponymous Walter Iuzzolino attempts to replicate the personal endeavour of the average YouTuber, his professional background as a TV producer ensures he has the experience of what Diana Crane observes in terms of her “Television’s Culture World”, a professional ‘gatekeeper’ – “cultural authorities who designate a programme of sufficient quality or innovation that is worthy of the viewers’ time”.<sup>33</sup> In their study of TV historians and archivists, McKee and Dore identify the ‘Pro-am’ curator and describe them in terms of:

“The freedom to curate only programmes and genres that interest them”<sup>34</sup>

“That ‘weird child’ who was obsessed with gathering information and objects related to television”.

“Pro-am curators are not passive consumers, but active and participatory”.

Further, Kate Abbot of *The Guardian* describes Walter Presents and Walter Iuzzolino in similar terms:

“This project is British TV’s highest-profile case of the currently fashionable concept of ‘curated programming’. The sell to viewers is that Walter Iuzzolino...has made a personal selection of his favourites from 3,500 hours of foreign-language box sets”.<sup>35</sup>

For Kaplan, “Curation, in media circles, has come to mean the thoughtful gathering of information produced by others for presentation to (yet) others”.<sup>36</sup> Examples abound, and not just in television. Citing the example of Pinterest, Rosenbaum describes a contemporary culture of the “noisy web”, where “a variety of seemingly disparate texts are taken out of their original context, to be curated and rebroadcast in dedicated sites that suggest a connection”. This description may well serve to describe Walter Presents and the state of curated canned TV.

It is here that we might be able to see not only how curation has become significant to the contemporary internet distributed television, but also how post-production culture and practices have provided a sense of ‘value added’ to these examples of local/nationally-produced programmes.

## 9 Value Added

When talking about Walter Presents as an example of new media practices that can go towards a description of a Post-Production Culture, we should also discern how Walter Presents offers the idea of ‘value added’. Walter Presents is a streaming service that encapsulates the dynamics of contemporary television practices in all its complexities, complexities that have impacted upon contemporary canned TV. As Moran has observed, “thanks to new technology, deregulation and privatization”, plus the increase in broadcast channel capacity, “the world picture of canned program production and export had become more complicated”<sup>37</sup>. This has led to a more competitive market and as such greater competition in the TV market has therefore led to what Moran has described as “innovative forms of financing, fresh ways of imagining the audience, novel forms of content, and new constructions of the television commodity”<sup>38</sup>. All of these factors have not only influenced the creation of Walter Presents, but draw attention to a small but significant aspect of Post-production culture. For Verevis, Post-production practices and products are often described or promoted as having ‘value added’. As Hanson, Waade and Jensen observe in their research on *What Makes Danish TV Drama Series Travel*, value creations happen at all stages of TV production, but a ‘value added’ element in relation to a post-production culture and post-production practices could involve elements such as “cultural branding, economic and societal values... hype... [and] paratexts”<sup>39</sup>. This aspect of ‘value added’ has also been discussed in relation to subtitles and translations, and whilst there are some who would view these as problematic or elements that deter audiences, the USP of Walter Presents suggests they could be indeed be key elements in offering a different sort of TV viewing experience.

But there are other elements, some discussed already, where we can identify and consider aspects of value added. The individual local/national TV dramas that Walter Presents provide, have changed in ways that were not imagined in their original creation and production, and certainly not anticipated or experienced by their original target audience. These dramas have become niche, potentially exotic, and almost certainly deemed rare in the sense they have not been previously available to British/global audiences. Whilst we could argue that in the early days of canned TV, American TV dramas had a certain allure for largely the same reasons, they were chosen or bought by local broadcasters because they were deemed suitable for normal scheduled TV, both because they shared a common language, but also a largely common ideological message and familiar culture. This is not always the case with Walter Presents. In fact, the value-added concept largely revolves around ideas of difference, the unusual, and exotic.

## 10 Conclusion

This concept of 'value-added', as indicative of a Post-Production culture can also be considered in relation to contemporary curated TV, and in relation to canned TV as a whole. By using Walter Presents as an example, contemporary canned TV needs to be discerned through a transformed media landscape where contemporary television has not become less local or national, but where these elements have become lucrative and appealing. Through a transformed media landscape, local and national TV, as evinced by Walter Presents, has become the object of the transnational circulation of ready-made, and typically national/local television content for global consumption.

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## Biography

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# “LIP-SYNC FOR YOUR LIFE” (ABROAD)

## THE DISTRIBUTION, ADAPTATION AND CIRCULATION OF RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE IN ITALY

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**Abstract:** The article aims to critically explore and understand the ways both RuPaul’s star persona and its show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, are distributed in Italy, circulate across, and impact on the Italian television industry and media culture. It also aims to express how many forms of national mediation, professional negotiation and audience reception deeply modify, and re-shape the TV product. To tackle the manifold facets of this case, four aspects will be analyzed: (trans)national distribution; adaptation and dubbing; global/local stardom; reception and cultural impact. Over a decade, the Italian edition and distribution of the show have changed, together with the national media landscape and its audiences.

**Keywords:** Italian television, media industries, reception studies, dubbing, stardom, celebrity

### 1 Introduction

*RuPaul’s Drag Race* is a TV show, a reality competition with drag queen contestants performing and being evaluated by expert judges, which has reached the eleventh season and given birth to several extensions and spinoffs. In the US, the program has long been broadcast on linear channel Logo (2009-2016), and has then moved to VH1 (2017-), which is part of the same company, Viacom. The show, aimed at singling out “America’s next drag superstar”, has increasingly

obtained recognition and success, contributing to the strengthening of RuPaul's star persona, as well as to the establishment of other drag celebrities and buzzwords. Over the years, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (henceforth *RPDR*) has also slowly become a global phenomenon, in terms of both wide media discourses and cultural influence. The show is a relevant international ready-made content, which is still being acquired, adapted and repackaged in many countries. Moreover, given its subject, it is also a significant cutting-edge and thought-provoking program, impacting on different national markets and cultures in manifold ways.

Italy has been one of the many countries where first RuPaul, and later his signature show, have arrived. However, the process has not been fast or easy. On the contrary, the Italian path of *RPDR* is a good example of the many layers of a complex "national mediation"<sup>1</sup>: as soon as it enters another national market, the foreign TV show is changed, directly or indirectly, in order to be watched by a different audience. What is commonly referred to as a 'ready-made' product, actually, is not ready to be broadcast at all, but often needs to be re-framed, and sometimes re-shaped. As revealed by media industry studies and research on production cultures, working routines and professionals strongly impact on television shows and other media products,<sup>2</sup> and this is true also for imported programming. The acquisition stage defines from the very beginning the ways the foreign show can be or cannot be employed in another country.<sup>3</sup> Processes of translation, adaptation and dubbing strongly or lightly modify each programme.<sup>4</sup> Scheduling decisions on traditional broadcasting, release choices through on demand platforms, as well as promotion and marketing strategies<sup>5</sup> frame the show differently for distinct national audiences. Along this mediation process, issues are raised and somehow taken care of, and both critical reception and audience success (or failure) are dependent on this as much as on product quality.

*RPDR* is an important example of such national mediations and constant negotiations, with false paths, trial and errors, a complex life cycle and a stratified reception. Therefore, we will address this case history through different lenses, with the aim of better showing these processes and their results at work. In the first part, a national distributive history of *RPDR* is reconstructed: some seasons were shown on a satellite female-oriented channel, then all the series were made available on Netflix, in both cases the series were provided with a differentiated Italian "packaging". In the second section, the focus will be on the Italian dubbing and subtitling of the show, and on the many challenges of adapting the jargon, domesticating drag culture and packaging the episodes for a national audience. The third section will delve into the reception of the show, exploring the ways *RPDR* has shaped the perception of drag culture in Italy, bringing also to the fore the controversies of commercializing a sub-culture. Lastly, in the fourth section, the cultural effects of *RPDR* on some parts of the Italian society and on the drag community are examined, with an interest on matters of visual representation and language.

## **2 From Failure to Cult Success. The Italian Distribution of the Show**

The distribution history of *RPDR* on Italian television and digital platforms is an interesting example of how national media industries are constantly shaping – or, at least, trying to shape – foreign ready-made products, to better reach local audiences and take into account their specificities. A strong, constant negotiation is at play between the evolution of the product in the source market (and in its international distribution) on the one hand, and the changes happening in the national media industry on the other. License rights and acquisitions, scheduling choices and marketing strategies are not neutral factors, but can strongly affect, and at least partially define, the life cycle of the show and its national success.

First, the arrival of the show was not happening inside a void. In the digital era, some portions of the foreign, English-language debates were reaching at least a portion of the Italian audience, building attention and hype. Moreover, RuPaul was already quite well known to a mainstream national public. His first Italian television

appearance dates back to February 1994, when he was onstage at the most relevant musical, televisual and social event in the country, the annual week-long *Festival di Sanremo* (1951-), performing 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' in a duo with Elton John, and creating a huge sensation.



Video 1. Elton John performing 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' together with RuPaul in the 1994 edition of *Festival di Sanremo*.

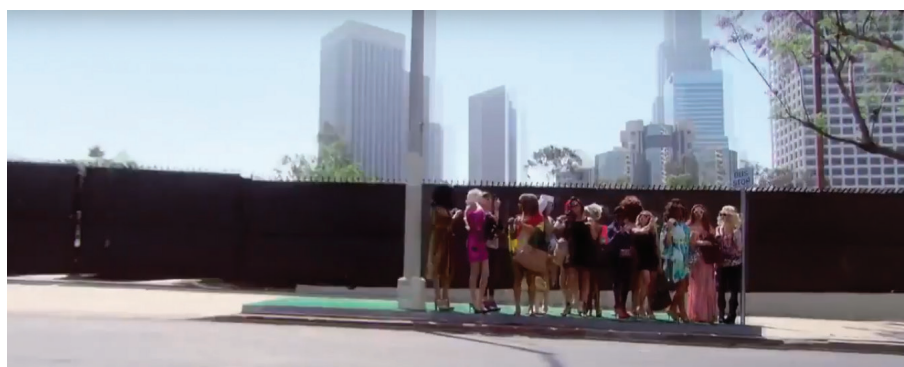
Some years later, in October 2001, RuPaul was also appointed to judge a drag queen contest within the television show *Tacchi a spillo* (*High Heels*, 2001) aired on commercial network Italia 1. With eight performers singing, dancing and acting, evaluated by a group of celebrities, the program was cancelled after only two episodes, due to low ratings and several protests by conservative associations and family pressure groups. However, this fact is an indication of the lasting Italian fame of RuPaul's TV personality; and it is curious to note how the Italian show was based on very similar mechanisms to the ones employed by *Drag Race*, which only started many years later, in 2009 (although many accounts date back RuPaul and his producers' idea to the mid-Nineties).<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the first attempt to import and broadcast *RPDR* on Italian television was made in 2011, two years after the launch of the US first season on Logo. The show was picked up by the Italian branch of Fox International Channels (then owned by NewsCorp.), and broadcast on premium channel Fox Life, mainly targeting a female audience, and included in the Sky Italia pay satellite bouquet.<sup>7</sup> The Italian distribution started from the third US season, scheduled with a weekly episode from July 13, 2011, on a Wednesday, first on the second portion of the prime time (at 21.55), then quickly moved to a later slot (at 22.45). The fourth US season was broadcast from July 24, 2012, on Tuesday evenings, at 23.35. The fifth one was screened from July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, on Monday evenings, at 23.15 – and made available to subscribers on non-linear platforms Sky On Demand and Sky Go. The decision to skip the first two seasons, and to acquire the license to broadcast from season III onwards, was mainly due to the need to keep the 'freshness' of the show, rather than the completeness of a reality competition: in the eyes of the programmers entertainment shows are generally not valued as a whole complex serial product, but they are perceived as functional parts that can be used separately according to what is deemed most appealing to the local audience; as a result, *RPDR* episodes were broadcast in Italy just a handful of months after the US transmission. At the same time, however, the scheduling choices made for these episodes – i.e. the summer broadcast, the lowest season for Italian TV; the increasingly late night slots – clearly show how the channel employed the show as a minor asset. The originality of the reality competition was not enough to compensate its perceived riskiness for the national audience, with contradictory decisions that ultimately led, as often happens in the television business, to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*RPDR*, as broadcast by Fox Italia, included many other variations. The title of the show was 'translated', using another English title, into *America's Next Drag Queen*: the name of the creator, despite his previous national celebrity, was erased, and a direct connection to another reality competition show, *America's Next Top Model* (2003-), broadcast by the same pay TV platform, was established instead<sup>8</sup>; a stronger connection to fashion was also a clear hint by the channel's executives and programmers towards an important aspect of Italian national culture, more familiar to national audience than a LGBTQ+ angle. The episodes were dubbed, with simil-synch techniques, slowing the process and increasing the costs. Moreover, the promotional campaigns struggled to find a right key to present it to Italian audiences, in a trial and error process. The third season promo, following the choice of the Italian title, was built in order to suggest and strengthen a strong association with the fashion industry and its main rituals ("the top model era is over"). The fourth season promo stressed even more this factor, building on a consumerist approach ("It doesn't matter who you are. What matters is that what you're wearing fits you wonderfully"). The fifth season is marketed as a competition, highlighting the savage dynamics that *RPDR* shares with other reality shows, with contestants 'up for anything to win'. Also in the promos, RuPaul's star persona stays often in the background: differently from other countries, as the US or the UK, where the celebrity status and public image are a crucial part of the show's success, Italian pay TV's programmers and marketers choose to drop this identification between the show and its host from the title and promos in the initial launch strategy, probably in the effort of "normalizing" at least partially the reality competition, yet also underestimating the previous, long lasting local popularity of RuPaul.



Video 2. Italian promo on Fox Life (2011).



Video 3. Italian promo on Fox Life (2012).





Video 4. Italian promo on Fox Life (2013).

If the expectations were not high in the first place, *America's Next Drag Queen* had even lower results. The show gained some press recognition, with articles presenting it as "the craziest show of the year",<sup>9</sup> but failed to find an Italian audience. Not only were the first two seasons not caught up, but also the linear broadcast was discontinued after these three years, creating then a long pause in the national (legal) availability of the show for its most loyal fans. Only a few months after the official launch of Netflix in Italy (on October 22, 2015),<sup>10</sup> and exactly in February 2016, a new Italian window for *RPDR* finally opened. As a part of a larger, global deal (outside the US), the series was released in all its seasons, except the first one, and made available in its English-language version, with Italian subtitles; starting from season eight, an Italian dubbed version, with simil-synch techniques, was added too.

The show got back its original title and, despite not being marketed specifically to platform subscribers (no trailers or promotional content was developed, other than the cover images and short presentation texts), it obtained progressively more recognition, through press and word-of-mouth. Once again, its availability was tied to license contracts, at a global and national scale. On March 30, 2018, the previous batches disappeared, and only season eight and nine stayed on Netflix Italia, while all the others moved to the library of WOW Presents Plus, a VoD service launched by World of Wonders, the production company *RPDR*. An acquisition issue, due to an attempt to capitalize from an increasing global popularity (excluding the US, where the show had passed from Logo to VH1 the year before, in 2017), resulted thus in a perceived disappearance, once again, from the country: this decision "comes as Netflix's rights deal for the episodes expires. [...] Netflix's status as the home of *Drag Race* [has] been met with competition from other platforms who have vied to pick up the rights".<sup>11</sup> But this was just a temporary stunt, and some months later, in December, all the seasons were once again available on Netflix Italia, including the previously unseen season one. Also, some of the spinoffs<sup>12</sup> were released: the four seasons of *RPDR All Stars* (2012-), a Christmas special *RPDR: Holi-slay Spectacular* (*Spettacolosamente Natale*, in Italian; 2018). Thanks to the availability on non-linear digital platforms (and to the strength of the Netflix brand), *RPDR* has finally been able to reach its Italian niche-yet-relevant audience. Despite the lack of ratings and data, a proof of this improved positioning in the national arena is the presence, for the first time, of four Italian live dates (in Milan, Rome and Bologna) inserted in the *RuPaul's Drag Race Werq the World Tour*. After some struggles, and several changes in re-packaging its presentation to the national audience, this reality competition has now gained a deserved cult show status. Its recognition and audience base is progressively growing stronger, although its presence limited to Netflix, an on demand service with a total of two million subscriptions in Italy,<sup>13</sup> and the lack of discussion on the most popular media outlets, still keeps it quite far from the "actual" national mainstream.





Video 5. Trailer of *RuPaul's Drag Race: Werk The World Tour 2019*.

### 3 Speaking Like a Queen: Adaptation and Dubbing of the Show into Italian

*RPDR* contestants' use of slang terms, acronyms, neologisms and fanciful catchphrases seems to be an essential component of the exotic appeal of the original show. Outlandish expressions like "Water off a duck's back" – meaning a criticism which does not affect the criticized person – or rhetorical questions like "How is your head?", with a clear sexual innuendo, or the pervasive "to spill the Tea", a back formation for letter T, which stands for "the truth", referring to gossip, news or simply the truth, have all become buzzwords populating blogs and social media after having been extensively used by drag performers on the show. From "Absolutely" by Gia Gun, a contestant on season 6, to "Backrolls" by Jade Jolie, a contestant on season 5 who referred it to another contestant, Alyssa Edwards, distinctive drag culture expressions are generally referred to on the net as *Drag Race* memorable quotes<sup>14</sup>. Although some of these terms already belonged to the niche language of drag and queer subcultures, the success of this reality show has contributed to bringing them more into the "mainstream". Moreover, *RPDR* contestants' talk is permeated by expressions and descriptions of how it is to speak like an American drag queen, thus also revealing how marginalized populations use a sort of "speech code" to construct rules of conduct for a coherent identity.<sup>15</sup>



Video 6. Mashable's 'RuPaul's Drag Race queens teach us the language of drag'

As for the Italian LGBTQIA+ queen and queer communities, some of the most popular expressions of the show have entered common parlance in their English version as for example 'Sashay away', although in the first translated version (subtitled) RuPaul's catchphrase to eliminate a contestant had been adapted into 'ahi, ahi, te ne vai' ('oh dear, bye, you go away'). The opposite expression to invite people to stay 'Shantay you stay' and other expressions as 'throwing some shade', meaning criticizing, or 'sickening', meaning fabulous, or 'no tea, no shade', meaning no disrespect, are used in English on Italian blogs.<sup>16</sup> Other expressions like 'adhoroo', have been Italianized but have acquired a hybrid spelling in the process, and some expressions are used as English acronyms like C.U.N.T, with a clear double meaning, but they are spelled out in Italian 'Carisma, Unicità, Nervi Saldi e Talento' ('charisma, uniqueness, good nerves, talent') as the key factors a drag queen needs to have to be a superstar. Comments on *RPDR*'s peculiar language are to be found not only in academic papers but also in Italian newspapers and weekly magazines. *Io donna*, an Italian women's magazine and weekly supplement to the moderate conservative daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, devoted an article to RuPaul's invitation to the 2019 Met Gala, the annual Metropolitan Museum of Art's fundraising event, whose main theme in 2019 happened to be 'Camp: Notes on Fashion'. The journalist discussed RuPaul's participation to the fashion event pointing out that RuPaul was the first drag queen ever to be invited to the glittering event. RuPaul was described as an icon of Camp style who progressively acquired his celebrity status through the success of the 11 seasons of his reality TV show, which is very popular not only in the US but also in the rest of the world, including Italy. The long and detailed fashion column, mentioning RuPaul's early career and rise to success, highlighted how, over the years, the language of the show had moved from niche drag subculture to more 'mainstream' gay slang, enriching it with new expressions which, according to the journalist, can now be easily understood from Brazil to Italy, thanks to the global circulation of the show via television, Netflix and the web:

Drag Race has become a very popular phenomenon of the American Television, and thanks to streaming and the web, also in the rest of the world. It has by now reached a mainstream audience [...] It has launched the career of many and filled up the net with both a supplement of gossip and a new language, a dictionary of expressions which from drag subculture has moved to much of the young gay community, and is comprehensible from São Paulo to Verona.<sup>17</sup>

As for the Italian version of *RPDR*, the show has obviously undergone a translation and adaptation process before reaching the target audience. The dubbed version, prepared at first for the Fox Life broadcast and later on for the Netflix release of the last seasons, has been made with a technique termed 'simil-sync' (literally sync-similar) or 'semi-sinc' (literally half-dubbing), which is becoming more and more frequent in the adaptation of non-fiction series into Italian.<sup>18</sup> This form of audiovisual translation (AVT) is a low budget version of conventional dubbing with no lip synchronization, in which dubbing actors do not simply lend neutral voices to their characters, as in documentary film voice-over, but they tend to add some acting as in classical dubbing, while the original dialogue is still slightly audible in the background to provide a sense of authenticity and naturalness. This type of hybrid dubbing, which is considered more cost effective and less time consuming than traditional dubbing by the AVT industry, is also deemed more user-friendly for Italian audiences who are not used to reading subtitles, Italy being traditionally a dubbing country.<sup>19</sup> Yet, this audiovisual translation mode has been received with ambivalent if not contradictory reactions by audiences and scholars alike,<sup>20</sup> whose opinions do not seem to be always as positive as the AVT industry would possibly expect, and is generally criticized by some experienced dubbing professionals, who are convinced this translation practice might be to the detriment of quality lip-sync dubbing<sup>21</sup>. As will be discussed in the following examples, in the case of *RPDR* the simil-sync translation mode may even lead to odd, exaggerated, quirky outcomes or unwanted humorous or censoring effects, due to the specific subject of the show.

By reading some of the online comments about the clips in Italian which are available on YouTube, we can infer that most Italian viewers are also familiar with the original version of the show, or at least with the original voices of the *RPDR*'s queens and the dubbed version has definitely a negative impact on their appreciation of the Italian version.<sup>22</sup> This non-standard type of dubbing relinquishes audience's traditional suspension of disbelief, thus probably leading to spectators' lack of appreciation of this form of translation and even fierce criticism.<sup>23</sup>

1. - *Alyssa in italiano mi ha traumatizzata.*<sup>24</sup>  
- I was traumatized by Alyssa in Italian.
2. - *Oddio che voce di merda che hanno in italiano.*  
- Oh my Gosh what a shitty voice they have in Italian.

Some comments are subtly ironical:

3. - *I doppiatori che tentano di fare la voce da gay sono meravigliosi.*  
- Dubbing actors trying to perform gay voices are amazing.
4. - *La risata di Jade (Emoji of a skull).*  
- Jade's laughter (Emoji of a skull).

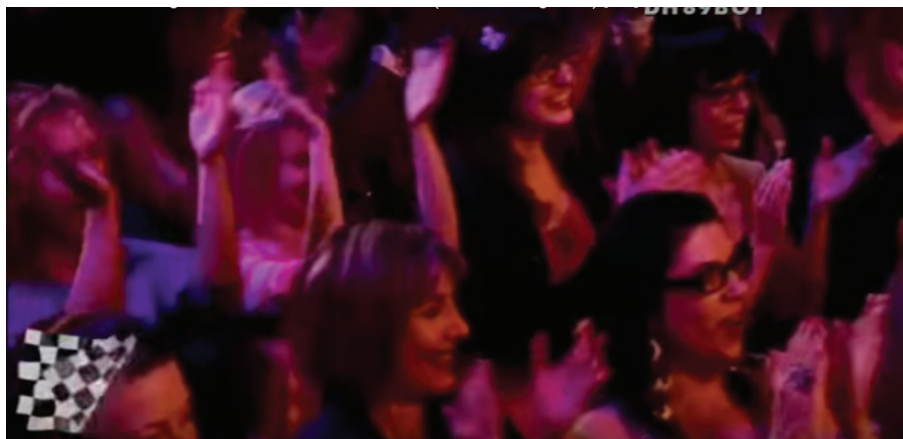
Some other Italian viewers are very negative on the translation and adaptation choices:<sup>25</sup>

5. - [...] *Si perde TUTTO quello che è la serie, le battute sono storpiate o mancano proprio, la delivery dei doppiatori non fa capire un cazz- E davvero bisognava tradurre "queen"? Cioè se non traducete "drag" perché dovrete tradurre "queen"? Io boh.*  
- [...] EVERYTHING of the gist of the series is lost, gags are either distorted, or omitted completely, dubbing actors' delivery doesn't make anything understandable. Was it really necessary to translate "queen"? If you do not translate "drag" why should you translate "queen"? I don't get it.

However, leaving aside the opinion of some dissatisfied viewers, what emerges from a more thorough comparative investigation of the original show and of its Italian dubbed version is that the quality of translation and adaptation underpinning its re-voicing is often very poor. Apart from the fact that low budgets are generally available for translation and adaptation of non-fiction programming, reality TV is typically unscripted, and hence more difficult to decode by translation professionals, to the detriment of the overall quality of the dialogue adaptation. Moreover, much of the entertainment potential of the *RPDR* show is based on verbal and cultural humour, which is undoubtedly very difficult to translate effectively even in scripted comedies.<sup>26</sup> On top of that, in the Italian version of the show taboo language and sexual content are unpredictably toned down or omitted, thus reducing both the humorous potential of some of the jokes and their multi-layered cultural implications. Examples of taboo language or sexual allusions that are misinterpreted, toned down or overlooked are numerous in the series. We have just selected here a few examples, extracts from a RuPaul's roast competition in Season 5, Episode 7:

6. - Alaska: You can take a girl out of New Jersey, but you can't keep a girl from giving blow jobs to homos in New Jersey.  
- Alaska: *Michelle Visage, una donna può scappare dal New Jersey, ma non puoi impedirle di andare in giro a regalare tette nuove ai senza tetto per il New Jersey.*<sup>27</sup>  
- Alaska: Michelle Visage, a woman can run away from New Jersey, but you can't keep her from going about to give away new tits to homeless people in New Jersey.<sup>28</sup>
7. - Jinkx Monsoon: Michelle Visage is a woman so full of semen... period. Seriously, she's a whore.  
- Jinkx Monsoon: *Michelle Visage è una donna così piena di... sperma. Dico sul serio è una puttana.*<sup>29</sup>  
- Jinkx Monsoon: Michelle Visage is a woman so full of... sperm. Seriously, she's a whore.

In excerpt 6, the Italian adaptation substitutes the connoted term 'girl' with the general term 'woman', and arbitrarily changes 'blow jobs to homos' with 'new tits to homeless people', completely losing the hint to the ambiguous sexual identity of Michelle Visage. In excerpt 7, the pun around the word "period" is lost, and so is the gag on Michelle Visage's gender uncertainty.



Video 7. An example of Italian language's simil-sync of *RPDR*

To sum up, despite the complexity of the language and of the cultural issues covered by *RPDR*, the overall translation and adaptation strategy suffers from a lack of quality standards that are granted to fictional and more in general to mainstream programs. This in turn has may have caused many Italian unsatisfied viewers to watch the original version. However, the niche audience the program targets probably does not allow for the adoption of a different, more expensive, translation policy by broadcasters.

#### 4 The Pop Side of Drag: The Italian Reception of the Show

*RPDR* is a complex product, one that operates on many industrial levels, impacting on cultural and even political ones. This brings us to ask one important question: what to take into consideration when examining its reception? Aside from its institutional presence with official accounts on the main social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), it has become a phenomenon in popular culture, suffice it to cite the meme-isation of its most famous catchphrases. However, in this section we want to focus on another, more unique aspect of the show, that is its more practical effects on the visibility and perception of the drag and LGBTQIA+ community in Italy.

In cultural analyses of the show, debates have sparked on matters as representation, subjectivity, subversive subcultures and mainstream popularity. On the critical side of reception, *RPDR* has been accused of gender-bending exploitation,<sup>30</sup> neoliberal appropriation of drag culture, and a general loss of the drag community's political agency.<sup>31</sup> It must be noted that drag as a subversive force is not a flawless notion in itself, as Judith Butler points out with regards to gender performativity within hegemonic structures.<sup>32</sup> About that, Eir-Anne Edgar argues that *RPDR* does not properly recognizes or rewards the complexity of drag performances, ultimately limiting its scope to entertainment without providing any further progress for drag culture.<sup>33</sup> However, among those who praise the show, the main argument is that it "has served to propel drag culture from the obscurity of the gay bar/club scene to the mainstream of reality television. It has also helped to transform common views of drag as subculture into drag as art and as a valid profession".<sup>34</sup> In fact, the series aims at raising awareness by tackling current issues of bigotry and oppression and by incorporating some of the milestones of American LGBTQ history into its episodes. Also, we get to know some of the contestants' personal histories of marginalization, with a clear political aim of equality for LGBTQIA+ people. Importantly, on this matter Brennan and Gudelunas argue that:

Despite its US-centrism [...] *[RPDR]* has made drag queens and drag culture infinitely more accessible to American and global audiences. For American LGBTQ viewers located far from the gay meccas of New York, Chicago, San Francisco or Los Angeles, and for straight viewers who would not consider attending a drag act, *[RPDR]* provides an up-close, even technical view of what drag entails.<sup>35</sup>

The overflow of *Drag Race* into reality puts a new spotlight on drag culture and steered the discourse towards positivity, inclusivity and empowerment – especially on the press that targets precise audience segments, broadly, those interested in new media, pop culture, entertainment world, and so on. For instance, on *Wired Italia*, Paolo Armelli talks about it as a soul-soothing talent show, one that not only redeems the reality TV genre but that also stands as a lesson against homophobia – it is not by chance that the article was published on the International Day Against Homophobia.<sup>36</sup> Simone Stefanini, on *Daily Best*, underlines its authenticity and overall message of respect for diversity, on top of its being inherently entertaining.<sup>37</sup> On *The Vision*, Jennifer Guerra duly retraces the milestones, achievements and difficulties of the drag community and recognizes that the series is problematic when it comes to race representation; however, she describes it as an honest show that finally, in Italy too, raised awareness on the drag culture in all its aspects.<sup>38</sup>

Whether *Drag Race* fostered a new sensitivity towards the drag and LGBTQIA+ community in Italy is yet to be determined. However, as part of a larger global pattern that sees increasingly sensitivity and awareness towards LGBTQIA+ issues and that is also promoted by shows like *RPDR*, there is no doubt that the show resulted into at least two observable social phenomena, although still confined within a niche-reach (that will be better explored in the next section). On the one hand, there is a ‘celebrity-factor’, that is winners and contestants of the series becoming marketable celebrities. It is the case, for instance, of Sasha Velour, the winner of the ninth edition, that hosted a sold-out show at Club Q21 in Milan on September 2018. The event became a must-see for the show’s fans and the gay press, above all, devoted a great deal of attention to it, with interviews and enthusiastic critical reviews.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, once the celebrity-factor poured into drag culture (and the club culture, especially in Milan), it gave way to a popularization of drag art and performances, turning them into a sort of “genre” for thematic events. In 2015, the Arizona 2000 balera (a club devoted to dancing nights) in Milan started offering, every two weeks, a special event called La Boum, which has now gained a prominent spot in the Milan nightlife culture. Every Friday, La Boum offers drag performances within a dancing party scored by hit-pop music. The nights feature different themes, but with the common thread of glam, irony and a willingness to bring people together in a diverse social event, ideally with no labels attached.

Caught worldwide between the ‘Yes Team’ and the ‘No Team’, in Italy *RPDR* has been received by the media in a positive way, mostly as a new outpost for inclusivity and empowerment. When it comes to the general audience, it seems to polarize fans of the show, a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and people just looking for a special, out-of-the-ordinary night – especially with events such as La Boum, that combines drag culture and the Milanese nightlife. Although the most critical views of the show persist, in Italy *Drag Race* seems therefore more bent towards the mainstream than the subversive, by showing a “pop side” of drag based on marketability and glamour, in a naturalized relation between the (sub)culture, the show’s brand and consumption practices, without losing a certain social relevance.

## 5 Cult Following: Italian LGBTQIA+ and Drag Cultures

The reputation of RuPaul as the most famous drag queen of all times is internationally undisputed. As for Italy, he is less well known than elsewhere, but it is quite manifest – as emerged from some sources interviewed for this article<sup>40</sup> – that he represents a reference model for the Italian LGBTQIA+ and drag culture, although his role needs to be explored in further detail.

As seen in a previous section, the very first appearance of RuPaul on Italian TV dates back to 1994, so partly explaining the Italian attention to *RPDR*. He participated to the Italian song contest *Festival di Sanremo*,<sup>41</sup> singing in a duo with Elton John. Back then, Italian media framed him as a “transvestite” – the word *drag* not being used yet – while the host, Pippo Baudo, a well-known Italian presenter, visibly embarrassed, uttered the English expression “Life is strange!” after the performance. Despite his increasing success and popularity, especially after Netflix acquisition of



*RPDR*, the data emerging today show that in Italy *RPDR* has a cult following, but quite limited, starting from the narrow availability – on the Internet and on visual social media – of particularly frequented fandom places. Some Italian YouTube make *RPDR* a topic of discussion and sharing: Matteo Fumagalli (@mattfumagalli) is one of the most well-known Italian book influencers (or booktubers), and he has dedicated more than one video, as well as various Twitter posts, to *RPDR*.



Video 8. Matteo Fumagalli on *RPDR*.

In the video, we can listen to a free conversation about the show, where Fumagalli shows an in-depth competence, describing several characters. It could be considered a vision suggestion for newbies, but at the same time it is evident that he is sharing something which is widely known by his followers, as demonstrated by the large number of comments to his post. Or we have Queergin, a youtuber explicitly connected to a queer point of view, who has long been making his own reviews on *RPDR*, calling them *Queeruvies*. At first those reviews were presented in Italian, but since the last season they are in English.



Video 9. VergineDiOrecchie's *Ruviews*.

These are real, detailed reviews: each episode is devoted a video and the comment is accompanied by some clips of the show. However, these videos have a limited follow-up: on average, only a few thousand views. There are also some female youtubers talking about the subject, such as BarbieXanaxFactory or Ruby Rust. Overall, though, these events reach very limited numbers.

Video 10. A Ruby Rust's video on *RPDR*.

The scarce reputation of *RPDR* often becomes, with regret, an explicit issue in the comments of the viewers. Predictably, it is within the LGBTQIA+ culture that the show finds the largest response. Evidence shows that the program's popularity within the LGBTQIA+ community is such that some of its buzzwords have recently been used with a political agenda. During the Roma Pride Parade, held on 8 June 2019, various choirs "Sashay Away", the expression used by RuPaul to say to a competitor to get off the catwalk,<sup>42</sup> were dedicated to Matteo Salvini, former minister and the political leader of an Italian right-wing party: "Salvini Sashay Away!". Moreover, Nocoldiz, a well-known comedian youtuber, devoted a so-called YouTube *Poop* to Salvini again<sup>43</sup>, titling it "Salvini's Drag Race", using edited *RPDR* scenes ironically, and dubbing RuPaul with fragments of aggressive and politically incorrect language extrapolated from Salvini's speeches.

Video 11. *Salvini's Drag Race* ironic video.

It is clear here that the provocative juxtaposition of the two characters is widely shared, due to their opposing positions with respect to identity policies. This proves that RuPaul has also taken on the role of an LGBTQIA+ icon in Italy, and therefore this very area may be further researched.

*RPDR* is mentioned as a show that promotes LGBTQIA+ rights within university associations' websites,<sup>44</sup> as the program is valued in LGBTQIA+ culture sites, such as BitchyF, usually dedicated to media and gossip contents. The reverse happens with "opponents" such as conservative associations, which identify RuPaul with moral degradation and the imposition of what they call a "gender diktat".<sup>45</sup> This further reaffirms RuPaul's iconic role as a representative of the entire LGBTQIA+ world, from every opposite perspective<sup>46</sup>. In a recent interview published by an association for the promotion of cultural diversity, an Italian drag queen, Carla Stracci, summarized her vision as follows:

*RuPaul's Drag Race is the world's most famous talent show for drag queens. It was born in America, in a culture often far from ours. We ourselves as Italian drag queens look at the show, and we follow it to inspire us and see what the trends are. [...] RuPaul made a contribution in terms of openness and pop visibility regarding the figure of drag queens. When he came to Italy with Elton John at the Sanremo Festival to present a song, he was partly scandalous because for our country it was a "novelty" but at the same time helped make this phenomenon more "pop".<sup>47</sup>*

The point of view of Italian drag queens is very relevant, and on this topic it is interesting to acquire first hand sources, with an ethnographic approach. In this respect, a work dedicated to Milan's drag queens, carried out by Marcello Francioni in 2013, is worth mentioning. The researcher managed to be progressively accepted by the drag queen community (as a fan of the show) and to conduct a participant-observation study on Milan's drag queens relational, artistic and political life.<sup>48</sup> From his research work, it clearly emerges that, for Milan's drag queens, *RPDR* constitutes a sort of reference performance format, from which inferring the trends, both in terms of visual lay-out, and presence on stage. RuPaul himself represents a sort of unattainable model everyone looks to for inspiration, going so far as to affirm that *RPDR* is a sort of "dream of life".<sup>49</sup> Francioni notes today<sup>50</sup> that current media visual communication is leading to a sort of style standardization in drag queens, especially for the younger ones, who tend to look more and more like media models that, starting with *RPDR*, proliferate individually through their social media profiles, such as on Instagram.

The issue was also mentioned in an interview we had with Mario Di Martino,<sup>51</sup> who gave us another interesting point of view on RuPaul's reality show, starting with the popularity of *RPDR* on a mainstream level.<sup>52</sup> Approximately, until the fifth and sixth seasons – Mario affirms –, the show was hyper-targeted and strongly community-based, also employing a specific *camp* language, with internal LGBTQIA+ culture themes, in particular drag and trans, even triggering internal criticism within the same community for an excess of transphobia. The transition to the more mainstream VH1 network changed its character, but at the same time greatly increased its notoriety, making *RPDR* the reference "bible" for drag queens, hence the discussion on the opportunity to use a media reference model with its inevitable downside of uniformity and standardization. Expressing one's own individual creativity is a constituent part of the DNA of performance drag, as well as their popular and radical roots, closely linked to specific local 'scenes', or to the tribe of a single club. But all this is denied by the affirmation of universal reference models.<sup>53</sup> For drag queen communities *RPDR* represents a real model of life, keeping in mind that doing drag is a very complex and variable process depending on the different choices, but that involves a very profound identity mode that goes beyond mere dressing up.<sup>54</sup>

However, the show maintains in Italy a strong following that has also been passed on to the new generations, although these forms of fandom are hardly visible. Much of the hype on the show, indeed, goes through social networks such as Telegram or Whatsapp, used to share information and opinions on new episodes, in a way specifically designed not to be publicly visible.<sup>55</sup> That confirms the hypothesis of a show extremely followed by a restricted community. Moreover, in the final episode of the last season, RuPaul explicitly dedicated a tribute to the community to which he owes his success, declaring himself pleased that *RPDR* is a "show of queer people, by queer people and for queer people [that] has won nine Grammy Awards" (season 11, episode 11).

RuPaul and the show are currently the object of a real cult in Italy, still followed by a very narrow niche of audience,<sup>56</sup> while the reality competition has not yet intercepted a wide interest. As shown in the previous section, this is also

evidenced by many recent articles in which shrewd Italian columnists continue to strongly urge the public to notice this "hidden treasure", considering, already in the titles, the necessary use of strict 'deontic' modalities ("we all *should* see" or "everyone *should* look at").<sup>57</sup> Followers, however, tends to grow, as shown by the tours that some drag queens emerged from *RPDR* are making around the world, Italy included.

## 6 Conclusions

TV show, reality competition, global phenomenon, celebrity-factory, catchphrases-maker, neoliberal appropriator of drag culture, empowerment outpost: throughout this article, we have referred to *RPDR* in many ways, ranging from its television genre to its political charge and significance regarding contemporary society and drag culture. Indeed, given all these aspects, the analysis of the show called for a diverse perspective, trying to consider not only its multifaceted nature, but also its transformation when it comes to global circulation – and, in our specific case, when it comes to Italian distribution.

With an in-depth look at the paths of circulation and processes of mediations that led RuPaul and *RPDR* to cultural credibility in Italy, the first two paragraphs have brought to the fore one important issue: that of the TV genre. Reality television, in its various forms and formats, has always been a deprecated genre, one connected to traditionally commercial television, a schedule-filler not worth of critical attention or scrutiny. Things are changing and many cases have proved this conception wrong.<sup>58</sup> Particularly at the beginning of its Italian journey, *RPDR*'s genre seemed to be to its detriment – along with the still untested effect of its content on the contemporary Italian audience. As broadcast by Fox Italia, the show was initially employed as a minor asset, with summer schedules, late night slots and a change of title to make it catchier. As a consequence, as it pertains to dubbing (or better, simil-sync), like the most of imported reality shows, *RPDR* suffered from a lack of quality standards that are generally granted to fictional mainstream products – a quality that usually grants them more accessibility among a wider audience. Furthermore, much of the entertaining potential of the *RPDR* show is based on verbal and cultural humour, which is hard to properly translate (and to communicate) in Italian.

Despite this, the third and fourth paragraph have highlighted the show's relevance and persistence within a niche following, one that is familiar with the original version of the show and that, arguably, was loyal even before its Italian debut. Despite still being at the centre of a debate regarding the loss of the subversive power of drag culture within mainstream popularity, *RPDR* has proved to be an asset for the visibility of drag performers and for the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as a successful marketing tool for related events, like the contestants' shows and the rise of places like La Boum, for which *RPDR* constitutes a sort of reference performance format. What we have called the "pop side" of drag, however, does not entirely collide with its political charge, as *RPDR* is valued in LGBTQIA+ culture sites and some of its buzzwords have been used to criticize the political agenda of former minister Matteo Salvini, during the 2019 Roma Pride.<sup>59</sup>

As we have seen, the national mediations of *RPDR* (and everything the show stands for) has been challenging and had to go through industrial, social and cultural variables. In fact, let us remind ourselves again that RuPaul's relation with Italy actually started well before the show itself, with his underappreciated appearance at the *Festival di Sanremo* in 1994. Along with the failure of the program *Tacchi a spillo*, that untimely Italian debut would be enough to explore the dynamics of a television industry and a society that were still not ready (or ripe enough) to understand what back then was not only a new and transgressive kind of entertainment, but also a mocked one. Certainly, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has proved that a lot has changed on many levels, also in Italy, and that critical reception as well as audience success are dependent on external factors and national mediation processes as much as on product quality.



## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

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59. This consideration also suggests that there might be a lot more to be said about audience studies, and especially about how, in Italy, RuPaul as an individual has come to eventually represent the show, but how this was achieved through audience activity rather than promotional strategies – as it was the case of the UK and the US.

## Biographies

Luca Barra is Associate Professor at Università di Bologna, Department of the Arts (DAR). He teaches courses of Radio and TV History and Digital Media. His main field of research is Media and Television Studies with special interest in industrial, production and reception aspects. He published three books (*La sitcom*, 2020, *Palinsesto*, 2015, and *Risate in scatola*, 2012) and co-edited *Taboo Comedy. Television and Controversial Humour* (Palgrave, 2016, with Chiara Bucaria) and other collections.

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# A VICIOUS VIEWERSHIP

## TRANSATLANTIC TELEVISION AUDIENCES AND LGBTQ IDENTITIES

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**Abstract:** This paper uses the series *Vicious* (2013-2016), which aired on the British network ITV and the American noncommercial network PBS, as a case study in transatlantic reception for LGBTQ content. I draw on critical reception for the series, the star personae of lead actors Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen, and studies of American perceptions of British masculinities. The varied reception for the series, understood through the networks' economic models and cultural constructions of masculinities, reveals how notions of "quality" and "social progress" change as canned television travels to different national contexts.

**Keywords:** transatlantic, *Vicious*, sitcom, PBS, gender, LGBTQ

### 1 Introduction

In recent years, the U.S. and U.K. both faced landmark social changes on same-sex marriage legislation and other civil rights issues related to gender and sexuality. At the same time, both nations have experienced an increase in visibility and representation of LGBTQ characters on television. In the summer of 2013, the United States Supreme Court determined that the national restriction on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, leaving the legality of same-sex marriage to be determined by each state; this decision paved the way for the 2015 court ruling that required same-sex marriage to be made legal in all fifty American states.<sup>1</sup> At nearly the same time, the Marriage Act of 2013 was passed by the British Parliament, granting same-sex couples in England and Wales the right to marry in early 2014. These moves coincided with greater visibility for LGBTQ characters and stories on television. The American organization Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (now just known as GLAAD) reported the highest ever recorded number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters on scripted primetime television in the U.S. in 2012.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the BFI celebrated three new queer programmes from television producer Russell T. Davies and praised the U.K. as having a "commendable record of excellent gay cinema" that was equally mirrored in British television.<sup>3</sup>

While it is tempting to focus on the similar political and cultural developments regarding LGBTQ issues, these concurrent events are more significant because of the numerous differences between the U.S. and U.K. One of the principle tenets of gender and sexuality studies is that the meaning of sex and gender are specific to social contexts.<sup>4</sup>

As I will demonstrate in this article, American perceptions of expressions of British masculinity are troubled with misunderstandings about the correlation between machismo and heterosexuality, which leads to the impression that less macho British men are gay. For television formats, gender expression can become one of the elements that are translated or reinterpreted from one nation to another to avoid these misperceptions.<sup>5</sup> For canned television, however, such aspects of characters and stories as gender and sexuality raise questions about how viewers in different nations receive culturally-specific elements. How are critical and popular reception for television series with LGBTQ characters shaped by different cultural norms surrounding gender and sexuality in each country? Or is a focus on culture overly deterministic, ignoring differences in television networks, audience demographics, and other industry-related factors?

This paper uses the ITV series *Vicious* (2013-2016), which was rebroadcast on the non-commercial network PBS in the United States, as a case study in how reception for LGBTQ television content varies across national contexts. Following its initial premiere in the U.K., the series was panned for its low-budget aesthetics, campy characters, and melodramatic acting. In the United States, critical reception tended to emphasize the prestige of the series' principal actors, Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen, and its clever sense of humour at depicting ageing gay men. Importantly, the programme itself did not change as it was licensed in the U.S. Drawing on studies of American perception of British masculinities and Jacobi and McKellen's star personae as 'luvvies' – a term for expressive stage actors – this paper argues the different critical and popular responses to *Vicious* are less about the series' quality, narrative, and aesthetics. Instead, differences in reception can instead be understood as a result of different perceptions about masculinities and network brands from one nation to the next. As a case study in global reception, *Vicious* reminds us that perceptions of 'quality' and 'social progress' vary dramatically as canned television travels across national contexts.

## 2 Critical Responses to the Premiere

When the sitcom *Vicious* first aired in the U.K. in 2013, many reviews were bleak. As a multi-camera domestic sitcom in which most scenes take place on one living room set, the series appeared to be a throwback to an earlier model for the television sitcom. Its humour was reliant on jokes in which characters insulted each other's vitality and sexual desirability, delivered loudly by the actors. In contrast, many popular contemporary sitcoms rely on awkward situations, complex plotlines, and editing for humour, rather than verbal punchlines. Shot in front of a studio audience and featuring a laugh track, *Vicious* further emblemized retro sitcoms while its most critically acclaimed contemporaries, such as *Modern Family* (2009-2020) in the United States, were single-camera productions with no live audience or canned laughter. Because of this retro style, many television critics found the series to be a throwback to an earlier kind of comedy, which they deemed non-humorous and uninspired. Benjamin Secher of the *Telegraph* opened his review with the question: "What were they thinking?" and called the series the "least funny new sitcom in recent memory".<sup>6</sup> Morgan Jeffery found the show to have an "uncomfortable blend of coarse humour and a 70s-sitcom style cosiness".<sup>7</sup> Writing for the *Mirror*, Kevin O'Sullivan described *Vicious* as the "criminally old-fashioned pet project" of stars Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen.<sup>8</sup> Art critic Brian Sewell offered the most specific censure, calling the series premiere a "spiteful parody that could not have been nastier if it had been devised and written by a malevolent and recriminatory heterosexual" and lambasting the series for what he saw as a regressive representation of gay men.<sup>9</sup>

*Vicious* tells the story of two ageing lovers, Stuart (Derek Jacobi) and Freddie (Ian McKellen), who constantly insult each other. Stuart is responsible for domestic affairs and, despite living with Freddie for nearly fifty years, has not told his mother about their relationship.





Video 1. In a promo for the series premiere, Freddie and Stuart bicker about coming out.

Freddie is a struggling actor who has only ever played bit parts in contrast to McKellen's renown. A much younger man, Ash (Iwan Rheon), moves into the flat above theirs, and Stuart and Freddie set about to determine if he is gay through a series of questions that rely on gay stereotypes and insinuations ('Pilot,' 1:1). The entirety of the pilot takes place in Stuart and Freddie's dark and overly decorated living room, giving the episode a claustrophobic, theatrical, and old-fashioned feeling when compared to the trend of modern single-camera sitcoms that began with *The Office* (2001-2003). The delivery of dialogue is loud and often directed toward the studio audience. Given that Jacobi, McKellen, and Frances de la Tour, who plays their oversexed friend Violet, all have extensive backgrounds acting for the stage, it is easy to dismiss the aesthetics and style of *Vicious* as theatrical.

The series debuted to an audience of more than 5.5 million viewers, which was the highest comedy premiere on U.K. television that year, but by the second episode that number was down to 3.5 million.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, these numbers were enough for the series to earn a DVD release, renewal for a second season on ITV, a deal for broadcast on the publicly-funded American network PBS, and rumours about turning the series into a format through the creation of an American version.<sup>11</sup>

Following the American premiere in June 2014, critics were more praiseworthy than the British press had been. J. Bryan Lowder of *Slate*, for instance, argued that Freddie and Stuart's biting humour and lack of demonstrations of affection were predicated on camp humour.<sup>12</sup> As Susan Sontag explains in her study of camp, it has "a peculiar affinity and overlap" with homosexual taste that derives from the desire for gay men to integrate into society based on their exceptional aesthetics.<sup>13</sup> David Halperin examines this point in more detail, arguing that the sometimes vicious quality of camp humour "is about cutting everyone down to size" and "remembering that all queers are stigmatized and no one deserves the kind of dignity that comes at the expense of someone else's shame".<sup>14</sup> Halperin finds that "forms of social stratification that continue to structure our world" and "a host of contemporary hypocrisies and pieties" are incorporated and then resisted within gay male relationships.<sup>15</sup> For Freddie and Stuart of *Vicious*, this is achieved by role-playing a patriarchal heterosexual couple – Freddie the intended breadwinner, Stuart the intended domestic – and constant reminders to each other and to the audience that both have failed at these roles. In his review of the series, Lowder criticized other reviewers for what he saw as a predictable distaste for the "unapologetic embodiments of the venerable swishy, 'bitter old queen' archetype" archetype that could be attributed to contemporaneous gay male representation on television as younger, more contemplative, and far less humorous.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Lowder argued, a more nuanced reading of the series should recognize that Freddie and Stuart fell in love at a time when they could not be openly gay, and their catty exchanges are a coded form of affection to each other that also allow them to express honest disappointment at growing older.

U.S. publications were also quick to mention *Vicious* creator and producer Gary Janetti, a writer and producer who had also worked on the American sitcom *Will and Grace* (1998-2006, 2017-2020).<sup>17</sup> Like *Vicious*, *Will and Grace* was a thirty-minute domestic sitcom with many scenes that take place in the living room and shot in front of a live studio audience. The title character Will (Eric McCormack) was an openly gay man who lived with his single female best friend Grace (Debra Messing). The series was frequently nominated for Emmy awards, winning a total of eighteen in its initial run. Its success with critics and popularity with audiences has been attributed to several factors, including recognition that gay and lesbian audiences were a previously untapped market for advertisers, greater acceptance of LGBTQ characters and stories by straight audiences, and a push from LGBTQ writers, producers, and executives in the American television industry for greater representation on screen.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the cause, it is indisputable that *Will and Grace* was one of the most popular sitcoms of the late 1990s and early 2000s and many Americans associate with it the representation of gay men. By reminding potential viewers of *Vicious* that Janetti had been associated with the popular *Will and Grace*, the press created a lineage for the series that established its place among canonical American LGBTQ programming.



Video 2. A primetime broadcast sitcom with two gay men as main characters, *Will and Grace* was credited with changing American attitudes toward homosexuality by Vice President Joe Biden in an interview in which he announced his public support of same-sex marriage.<sup>19</sup>

### 3 The Political Economy of American and British Television

The distinctions between the British network ITV and the American PBS shape critical and audience reception for transatlantic television series like *Vicious*. In 2015, during the second season of *Vicious*, ITV's top programmes were reality competition series *Britain's Got Talent* (2007-present) and dramas *Broadchurch* (2013-2017) and *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015). With a less broad range of subject matter, *Vicious* could not expect to be mainstream entertainment like the *Got Talent* formats. By nature of its multi-camera sitcom format, it was also poised to be received as a series of lesser quality than a serial mystery like *Broadchurch* or costume drama like *Downton Abbey*. The American PBS has a more targeted audience than ITV, typically conceived as educated and affluent. On PBS *Vicious* aired alongside other British serial dramas as well as educational programming and global newscasts (including *BBC World News*) that lend PBS an aura of elitism and intellectualism. These different national contexts, understood through the economic models for the two networks and their contemporaneous offerings, contributed to different reception for the same series.

Broadly summarized, the American and British television industries have differed in their regard for art. As Elke Weissman explains, the UK system “remains dedicated to the creative vision of the writer/creator, who is often perceived as artist and hence given reign over the development of a story” whereas in the United States the industry has historically been “based on economic incentives and hence restricts the creativity of the artist in favour of well-established rules and conventions”.<sup>20</sup> In recent years popular criticism in television scholarship of American television has become more attentive to exploring the role of the showrunner and comparing it to the cinematic auteur.<sup>21</sup> Although this is not an entirely new approach to American television, it has gained visibility in the twenty-first century with the expansion of subscription cable and streaming services that are less reliant on ad revenue and that have longer production schedules. The series named as having exceptional creation and production are usually aired on premium cable networks, for which viewers pay a premium on top of regular subscription fees. By contrast, American broadcast networks remain funded by an advertising-based revenue system in which advertisers hold significant power to shape what content airs. By necessity, the artistry of series on these networks must be secondary to concerns about attracting the widest possible audience – or at least the best audience to satisfy advertisers.

PBS (short for Public Broadcasting Service), the network on which *Vicious* airs, was created with a non-commercial mission to provide quality educational programming to the public. PBS is partially funded by the national government but also donations from corporations, charitable foundations, and individual donors. When the network launched in 1970, its model for public funding and programme distribution distinguished it from the existing American broadcast networks. Originally chartered as a national educational service, PBS was uniquely poised to offer programming free from the influences of sponsors and advertisers. In 2018-19, the Nielsen Media Research Group found that 80% of American households watched some content on their local PBS station over the course of the year.<sup>22</sup> Despite this, Laurie Ouellette argues that PBS programming caters to an audience that is disproportionately white, upper middle-class, and highly educated, an argument she bases on archival research into government hearings about PBS’ funding, newspaper articles about the network, and even comments about the network made by television characters on other networks.<sup>23</sup> As PBS caters to the exclusive tastes of the cultural elite, watching it is often associated with having sophistication and cultural capital.

Throughout the history of broadcast television, American networks have imported British programming and vice versa. Since the launch of PBS, British programmes have aired predominantly on PBS, along with a few niche cable channels, where they attracted a “relatively small, if elite, audience”.<sup>24</sup> The long-running anthology PBS series *Masterpiece* (1971-present) for example, presents mini-series produced by the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4. Often these programmes are based on classic British novels like *Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*, and *Jude the Obscure*. Episodes are introduced by acclaimed actors such as Laura Linney and Alan Cumming. In her study of the history of U.K. imports for *Masterpiece*, Simone Knox notes that PBS favoured British heritage drama and this was emblemized by the original title *Masterpiece Theatre*, which the preferred British spelling (‘theatre’, instead of ‘theater’). Knox finds that popular conception of *Masterpiece*, and the network PBS by extension, is that it is historically minded, intellectual, and avoidant of political controversy.<sup>25</sup> Through a closer investigation of how distribution and importing have been tied to television regulation in the United States, Knox argues that this is a simplistic impression of *Masterpiece* and finds historical examples of controversial and commercial material imported to PBS. Despite these realities, the overall impression of the network parallels the impression of *Masterpiece*, one of its longest running series.

It makes sense that *Vicious* would find a home and an appreciative audience on PBS. The hierarchies of taste and culture in the United States tend to privilege British television and film as more culturally elite or sophisticated. U.K. theatre has an even more prestigious status. Jeffrey S. Miller argues that the prevalence of British programmes on American television should not be construed with British cultural imperialism, since viewers may resist and reject the ideology contained within a programme.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the programmes change meaning in a different national context just as the audience may change from viewing to viewing in their relationship to culture, politics, and history.<sup>27</sup>

As Miller puts it, the “story of British television and American culture, then, is a story of assimilation without final control, a story in which difference matters as it helps de- and reconstruct the familiar”.<sup>28</sup> Michele Hilmes similarly acknowledges how the industries and audiences in both nations have historically constructed their image of the other:

Sometimes the presence of the ‘other’ was real and material, as when imported programs competed with national production economies; more often it was symbolic, as each nation constructed an image of the other in terms that suited the particular circumstances of the day.<sup>29</sup>

On PBS, the image of the U.K., whether drawn from any reality or purely constructed by the audience and network context, is an image of prestige and class.

Under this hierarchy in which British television and heritage actors have greater value, canned series like *Vicious* offer viewers the possibility to deconstruct their perceptions of the familiar and often denigrated sitcom format while participating in culturally elite viewing. *Vicious* is elevated above the status of an American sitcom on a broadcast network. Watching becomes an exercise in taste and appreciation for British culture and theatre. A discerning PBS viewer would be called upon to recognize the ways the series fits the pattern of a conventional domestic sitcom while appreciating its socially progressive subject matter and its aesthetic style as a choice, rather than a production necessity.

In fact, that *Vicious* is a thirty-minute comedy, rather than an hour-long drama, is at the core of the tension in its reception. The aesthetics and production style that traditionally characterized the sitcom are central to the perception of the series as outdated on the one hand and freshly sharp on the other. Aesthetic evaluations are fraught between a tension for an *a priori* delineation of ‘quality’ or ‘artfulness’ and popular interpretation. For Matt Hills, paying closer attention to popular aesthetics can “open up debate and dialogue [...] *between and across different cultural groups’ aesthetic judgments*”.<sup>30</sup> Elke Weissmann similarly argues that, just as genre and showrunner feature into how we discern quality television from mindless entertainment, aesthetics and style are also “connected to traditions of discourses that constantly affirm hierarchies of value”.<sup>31</sup> For some viewers in the U.K., *Vicious* may appear to be a low-budget filler programme out of step with the higher production values of some contemporaneous series. On PBS, however, the series’ style may reference classic (and well-respected) single-set sitcoms, as well as traditional proscenium drawing room comedies and televised plays popular on the network, plays it is easy to imagine Jacobi and McKellen performing in.

In the first season, the living room functions as the primary set – in fact, the entirety of the first episode takes place here – with only occasional scenes happening in the kitchen or other locations. In response to criticisms about the series’ claustrophobic feeling, each episode of the second season opens with Freddie and Stuart walking down the street, and there are more scenes set in other locations. Their living room remains the central narrative space, however.

The series’ humour relies on verbal sparring and witticisms that further hearken the drawing room comedies of theatre and, perhaps, PBS. There is some physical comedy, such as a scene in which the characters try to learn ballroom dancing and are terrible at it (‘Ballroom,’ 2:3). Most episodes, though, are dialogue-heavy. The rapid pace of verbal exchanges and affectionate but brutal honesty expressed by the characters call to mind the plays of Noel Coward or 1930s screwball comedies in which the characters’ dialogue reveals their intimacy before any physical expression does. The ‘low’ aesthetics of *Vicious*, when seen in this different cultural context, take on a higher cultural signification.

On the commercial network ITV during primetime hours, *Vicious* was expected to achieve the high ratings of other successful series like the crime drama *Broadchurch*, whose time slot *Vicious* took, and to appeal to a wide range of viewers and audiences. In the U.S. market, the series airs on a publicly-funded network which caters to a niche audience presumed to be culturally elite. PBS’ donor-funding model, reliant upon a combination of individual contributors and corporate underwriters, allows the network to broadcast series that may not garner the giant



audiences of commercial television. The star powers of Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen and the series' British setting and production give *Vicious* cultural cache. And the series' portrayal of gay men – older gay men – factors into this cultural cache; an American viewer can watch two esteemed British actors on PBS play ageing gay characters and feel tolerant of sexual identity, supportive of the elderly, and worldly in one setting.

#### 4 Laughing at Luvvies

As actors whose careers originated on stage, Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen are both examples of 'luvvies', a term that *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* describes as a term that is "entertaining, if less than respectful, informal, and originally British word for 'an actor or actress, especially one who is particular effective or affected'".<sup>32</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* traces the origin of this spelling (as opposed to 'lovey' and 'lovie', which have slightly different meanings) to a reference to actor Stephen Fry in 1988.<sup>33</sup> Although his career began in comedy, rather than drama, Fry has the same gravitas as Jacobi and McKellen as an older British actor (though Fry is nearly twenty years McKellen's junior). All three men have in recent years become more open about their homosexuality and have taken the lead in various LGBTQ pride celebrations. If Fry is the original 'luvvie', Jacobi and McKellen are fitting successors to the term.

In its popular use, the term 'luvvie' is contested, sometimes understood as a playfully affectionate way of referring to actors who overemote and sometimes seen as an insult to legitimate craft. Research of popular use in the British press shows a tendency to associate 'luvvies' with leftist politics more than a particular age range.<sup>34</sup> More traditionally, though, the term is used to describe actors who are older or senior citizens. After several actors were described as 'livid luvvies' by a politician for protesting the construction of a new supermarket in Hampstead, actor Tom Conti argued that the use of the term was as offensive as a racial slur: 'It's pejorative, denigrating, and demeaning'.<sup>35</sup> While the term 'luvvie' may be alternatively affectionate or derisive, it is not a term with any popular meaning in American culture. For the PBS audience especially, perception of Jacobi and McKellen may simply be that they are venerable stage actors who are also openly gay.

A British review of the Christmas episode of *Vicious* was subtitled: "Old luvvies act with gay abandon in a classic festive sitcom".<sup>36</sup> This subtitle conflates 'luvvie' affect with gay flamboyance, and the words 'classic' and 'festive' have positive associations. Critic Ellen Jones describes Jacobi and McKellen as "two theatre luvvies" and notes that McKellen has a tendency to "project to the people in the cheap seats".<sup>37</sup> In a study of British and American actors on television, Trevor Rawlins finds that American actors make more subtle choices and are often better trained and suited to screen acting; British actors, by comparison, often exhibit greater reverence for the script and make choices better associated with stage acting.<sup>38</sup> *Vicious* trades on Jacobi and McKellen's star personae as luvvies (which is humorously contrasted with Freddie's failure as an actor), rather than downplaying their performances. The intimate set, the live studio audience, and dialogue all encourage overemoting and overenunciating, which become part of the flamboyance and camp of the characters.

As a series with a gay male couple at the forefront, performed by two openly gay actors, *Vicious* provides an interesting examination of how masculinity and homosexuality are performed and received across national contexts. In recent years, men's studies scholars and sociologists have begun to challenge the conventions of what was previously described as 'hegemonic masculinity', a term for masculinity that coincided with heterosexuality, patriarchal attitudes, and often homophobia.<sup>39</sup> Recognizing that attitudes toward women and gay men are changing among heterosexual men in the twenty-first century, sociologist Eric Anderson undertook a study of British and American young men in a variety of cultural spaces from the traditionally hypermasculine (football teams) to the traditionally feminised (cheerleading squads). Through these ethnographic studies, Anderson argues that today's young men "are increasingly accepting of, perhaps even desensitized to, homosexuality".<sup>40</sup> Alongside same-sex marriage legislation and other cultural changes affecting British and American impressions of LGBTQ people and



rights, “many of the long-held codes, behaviours, and other symbols of what separates masculine men from feminized men are blurring, making behaviours and attitudes increasingly problematic to describe as masculine, feminine, gay or straight”.<sup>41</sup> Anderson terms this ‘inclusive masculinity’ and sees it as a distinctly generational shift in British and American cultures.

Although definitions of masculinity change across geographic and cultural contexts, a recent survey of British and American men by the British market research firm YouGov indicates a common generational shift in which younger men perceive themselves to be less fully masculine than older adults.<sup>42</sup> While the causes for this shift are numerous, greater acceptance of non-normative masculinities and sexualities plays one role in both the U.S. and U.K. However, within the same YouGov survey, American men tended to self-identify as more fully masculine than British men.<sup>43</sup> The potential causes and implications for this are too numerous to examine in detail here, but this statistic might explain larger cultural misunderstandings in which Americans presume British men to be gay because they express less machismo. Consider, for instance, a 2010 question on a popular message board discussing a game in which participants try to determine if men are gay or British based on their mannerisms.<sup>44</sup> A meme of the central question ‘gay or British?’ has circulated the internet, and the plot to an episode of the American television series *Manhattan Love Story* (2014) centred on a British man whose romantic interest in a man and woman who have been casually dating each other causes complications.<sup>45</sup> In an interview with the LGBTQ news site Out.com, British actor Daniel Radcliffe commented on the presumption Americans have that British men like him are gay and offered the explanation that British men do not feel compelled to prove their masculinity in the same way that Americans do.<sup>46</sup> As masculinity studies expert Michael Kimmel has explained, heterosexual masculinity “must be proved, and no sooner is it proved than it is again questioned and must be proved again – constant, relentless, unachievable...”<sup>47</sup> When British (and other men) opt out of this constant struggle, others may assume that they are not masculine and/or not heterosexual.



Figure 1. A meme featuring the dilemma Americans face over regarding British masculinity.

*Vicious* capitalises on the presumed link between a lack of machismo and Britishness in its use of Derek Jacobi and Ian McKellen as Freddie and Stuart. McKellen has been openly out since 1988 and is regularly involved in supporting LGBTQ rights groups. Jacobi is also openly gay. In 2015, the two served as Grand Marshals for the New York City Pride Parade, which coincided with the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark same-sex marriage ruling.



Video 3. In a short Vine, Jacobi and McKellen toss confetti and congratulate the U.S. Supreme Court for its decision on marriage equality laws.

Part of the humour of the series is in how Jacobi and McKellen portray Freddie and Stuart's sexuality: largely absent is any meaningful sexual desire but instead through a series of coded gestures and inflections. When Freddie finally lands an audition for a part as an extra on *Downton Abbey*, he preens around like a queen ('Audition,' 1: 3). Stuart is the more effeminate of the two who becomes shrill and hysterical when he does not get his way. These qualities are stock characterizations seen in many portrayals of gay men on television historically, which is cause for some critiques of the series as retro or offensive. The humour lies in the contrast between Freddie and Stuart's flamboyance and McKellen and Jacobi's more tempered, more politically correct performances of their sexual identities on social media and in public appearances.

Upon meeting their younger neighbour Ash for the first time, Freddie, Stuart, and their friend Violet set about determining whether Ash is gay or straight. As they discuss his various mannerisms and grooming habits, they refrain from using terms like 'gay' or 'homosexual', instead asking, 'Is Ash...you know?' ('Pilot,' 1: 1). In early television history, these terms were similarly avoided, and codes for reading and interpreting homosexuality were instead based on speech, appearance, and mannerisms – the very qualities that Freddie and Stuart think will reveal Ash's sexuality.<sup>48</sup> It is clear within the scene that Freddie and Stuart desperately want Ash to be gay like them, but despite living in a same-sex household for more than forty years, they remain uncomfortable with the terms that describe them and their lifestyle.

In the second to last scene of the episode, Ash, who understands their mission, declares, 'By the way, I'm straight' before making his exit. The episode wants to frame Freddie and Stuart's unwillingness to name homosexuality as a by-product of their advanced age in contrast to Ash's more youthful inclusive masculinity. Freddie and Stuart discovered their sexuality around the time the U.K. was just decriminalizing homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> Ash's openness, on the other hand, is

a product of his inclusive masculinity, emblematic of millennial attitudes. Ash is never seen judging Freddie and Stuart for not being rugged and macho men, and he seems unruffled by their flattery and attention. Violet's constant propositions bother Ash. When the two wake up together one morning after drinking, Ash is disturbed at the possibility they were sexually involved ('Stag Do,' 2: 4). In contrast to the benevolent affection Freddie and Stuart give, Violet's clumsy come-ons help reiterate how extremely unthreatening gay men can be.

## 6 Conclusion

The ITV/PBS series *Vicious* provides one example of the significant role cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality play in the success or failure of canned television in a global context. The act of watching in an American context induces the viewer to reflect on the differences between American and British television and acting, the star powers of Jacobi and McKellen, and the way masculinities and sexual identities are culturally constructed and performed.

Similar discourses that surround gender, television, and humour – all often described as culturally and historically specific, yet with elements that are global. Just as television is increasingly crossing borders and transplanting to new cultural contexts, so too are changes in Western cultures asking us to reconsider LGBTQ rights. While television formats may respond to the tensions between the global and local by adapting elements of a series, canned programs like *Vicious* reveal how critical and popular reception can be shaped by socio-cultural expectations, perhaps more than it is shaped by aesthetic and narrative analysis.

## Notes

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## Biography

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# FROM PARENTHOOD TO TUTTO PUÒ SUCCEDERE

## READY-MADE ELEMENTS AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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**Abstract:** In our article we propose an analysis of the Italian TV series *Tutto Può Succeedere* (2015-2018), a remake of the American TV series *Parenthood* (2010-2015). The Italian remake precisely reproduces some *Parenthood*'s ready-made elements: the two series share the main plot, many storylines and characters' personalities, dealing with the ups and downs of a large family, formed of four siblings, their parents and their children. We will focus on the differences and similarities of the two shows from several perspectives, such as formal and content divergences, and their cultural, social and production implications. On the one hand, the Italian remake loses the distinguishing style and the faster pace of the original series to adjust to Rai's more basic aesthetics; on the other hand, Rai chooses to focus on specific plots and characters that match its own purposes. Indeed, we can assume that the youngest characters are the means by which Raiuno tries to connect with younger viewers, and the same function is assumed by the role played by music in the series and by the on-screen presence of young Italian musicians.

**Keywords:** cultural translation, remake, adaptation, serial narratives, *Parenthood*, *Tutto Può Succeedere*

### 1 Introduction: Format Remake, Format Adaptation, Format Translation and the Amount of Ready-Made

Our article analyses the Italian TV series *Tutto Può Succeedere* (2015-2018), which is an outstanding case in the Italian television panorama, being the first remake by the Italian Public Broadcasting Service of an American TV show, *Parenthood*. It aired on Raiuno, the main TV channel of Italian PBS Rai, known as the most conservative and mainstream among Rai channels.

*Tutto Può Succeedere* is not the first Italian remake of a foreign TV show: there are many successful examples of Italian adaptations of formats or series, such as, just to quote a few, *I Cesaroni* (Mediaset), adapted from the Spanish series *Los Serrano*, *Raccontami* (Rai) inspired by *Cuéntame Cómo Pasò*, *Braccialetti Rossi* (Rai) from the Catalan format *Polseres Vermelles*, *Un Medico in Famiglia* (Rai) adapted from *Médico de Familia*.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned series are all Spanish productions and formats: the recurring presence of Spanish adaptations in Italian programming could be explained by the audience (and broadcasters) perception of a common cultural ground shared by Italy and Spain. On the contrary, *Tutto Può Succeedere* stands as a different case, being the first Rai remake that confronts the style, the innovations and the achievements of 2000s U.S. serial storytelling.

We will argue that *Tutto Può Succeedere* represents a peculiar case of a remake that intertwines a ready-made approach, imitating *Parenthood* storylines, characters, even the spatial structure of the set, with culturally defined elements, such as locations, and specific choices aimed to appeal to younger generations. We will assert that the peculiar focus of the storylines on the younger characters and the soundtrack, that picks from contemporary indie Italian music, are part of Raiuno's strategy to refresh its brand image and, in the meantime, to widen and rejuvenate its audience.

Before starting our analysis, it is necessary to illustrate our theoretical basis, which are clearly rooted in the field of format studies stream, widened and well established in recent years. Even though our aim is not to recall the history of television content production and distribution, it is useful to evoke Albert Moran's pivotal distinction between canned and format programmes. The former, appearing at first in US network television at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, refers to a type of programme that "has been broadcast and recorded for transmission in another time and place",<sup>1</sup> whose international circulation begun in the '1950s thanks to dubbing and subtitling. As for the latter, "a TV format is a complex, coherent package of industry knowledge that is licensed to facilitate the making of another version of program in another television market. Thus, the devising and development of the program can occur in one place before a package of know-how is assembled, so that the program can be put together again in another territory".<sup>2</sup>

The 1990s were a watershed for both categories of programmes: the production of the canned ones changed, and their distribution could no longer be described as a one-way from the US to the rest of the world. On the other hand, at the end of the 1990s, three of the most successful and popular formats aired and began circulating worldwide: *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. Particularly, as underlined by Mats Nylund, "the rise of the format industry is related to several changes in the television industry in the last 20 years. Digitalization, globalization and commercialization come across as key tendencies".<sup>3</sup> As for several decades the mostly commercialized format genre was the game show, at the turn of the millennium it was the turn of factual shows; only in recent years scripted formats became booming business.<sup>4</sup> The late development of drama genre formatting is due to the complexity of content that requires an attentive work of cultural adaptation, not to mention its expensiveness and riskiness. Therefore, the reactualisation of scripted formats for new de-territorialised audiences must be particularly sensitive to local viewers' culture, values, ideals and even tastes. According to Albert Moran and Karina Aveyard's metaphor, a format can be seen as a template, in the sense that it "allows the programme to be adapted and produced for broadcast in other territories"; at the same time "these templates are also flexible – capable of being moulded to suit the particular social inflexion and cultural nuances of the broadcaster and territory for which it is remade".<sup>5</sup> In other words, elements of the template can be considered ready-made parts of the narrative, reproducible in other cultures, while other elements must be adapted and customised to become familiar to different audiences, and rooted in a given territory.

This swinging between dichotomies gave rise to format glocalisation, indigenisation, domestication, but also to a parochial internationalism<sup>6</sup> or to translocalisation<sup>7</sup> all concepts underlined by different theoretical approaches, and it is made clear that this type of programme tries to integrate universal elements (that are repeated) and peculiar traits (that are locally and continuously replaced). Therefore, we can assume that "when a television series is remade in another country, the universal elements of that format will interact and dialogue with the

local factors that arise from its new local context [...] all of its elements must be transformed according to the defining coordinates (whether they are historical, sociocultural, political or related to the broadcasting industry) of this new context”.<sup>8</sup>

Among the universal elements that can make a scripted format successful, we find the sense of “cultural proximity” underlined by Joseph Straubhaar,<sup>9</sup> namely the characteristics reflecting the traditional, regional and cultural values of a people, usually applied in cultural translation. Subsequently, the same author widens his understanding of cultural proximity, stating that common values, images, archetypes and themes across cultures allow programmes to flow beyond cultural boundaries.<sup>10</sup> This type of cultural proximity is consistent with what can be called the universal, ready-made factors that are saved and retained in the process of cultural translation.

Another key element assuring the true success of a TV series remake is its transparency, that is to say “the capability of certain texts to seem familiar regardless of their origin, to seem a part of one’s own culture, even though they have been crafted elsewhere”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the quality of narrative transparency can be leveraged by certain poignant global formats in their journey across different markets.

Coherent with this process of cultural continuity is the adaptation following the so called “transposed narrative” strategy, where “narrative structure, content and sequencing remain largely unchanged, with modifications merely to certain aspects of the story to enhance cultural proximity, such as location, actors, cultural, institutional and historical references”.<sup>12</sup> As we will see in the next paragraphs, our case study *Tutto Può Succeedere* mostly followed a transposed narrative strategy, even though some changes were needed to adapt the series to the perceived Italian cultural context, as we will outline thereafter.

## 2 *Parenthood* and *Tutto Può Succeedere*: Ready-made Elements and Transposed Narrative

*Parenthood* is an American TV series developed by Jason Katims, loosely based on the 1989 film of the same name, directed by Ron Howard, and its television adaptation as a sitcom in 1990. *Parenthood*’s six seasons aired on NBC from 2010 to 2015, with each season presenting thirteen to twenty-two 40-minute episodes.

*Tutto Può Succeedere* is produced by Cattleya and Rai Fiction and aired on Raiuno. Its first season aired from December 27, 2015 to March 13, 2016, its second season aired from April 20 to June 29, 2017, and its third and final season aired from June 18 to August 6, 2018. *Parenthood* revolves around the ups and downs of the large Braverman family, which becomes the Ferraro family in the Italian remake. The two series share the main plot, many storylines and characters’ personalities, dealing with a variety of problems, issues, conflicts among the family members, formed of four siblings, their parents and their children. The series especially focuses on the intergenerational exchanges and clashes among grandparents, parents and siblings.

While the composition of the family is the same, the location and the context are obviously different: *Parenthood* is set in Berkeley, California, *Tutto Può Succeedere* is set in Rome.

*Tutto Può Succeedere* website reads:

*Tutto Può Succeedere* is the first Raiuno remake of an American TV series. It is an Italian adaptation of *Parenthood*, created by Jason Katims and aired successfully on NBC for five years. The Italian setting required a remarkable rewriting, that tried to preserve the energy, the pace and the modernity/Zeitgeist of the original, thanks to a brilliant team of actors and the direction by Lucio Pellegrini.<sup>13</sup>

This summary underlines a conscious attempt to throw a connection with American quality television, recalling some features specifically linked to the original series - being captivating, innovative, connected to the present - but it also highlights the reworking effort that differentiates *Tutto Può Succeedere* from *Parenthood*.

Building on Edward Larkey et alii definition previously quoted, we will argue that *Tutto Può Succeedere* is a case of transposed narrative, because the main narrative structure, content, and sequencing mimic the original one, and the adjustments concern only a few aspects of the story, such as location, actors, cultural and social references.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike television formats, which are “systematically and consciously assembled to facilitate the future adaptation”,<sup>15</sup> the possibility of a remake is not necessarily expected, nor prepared. When a remake like *Tutto Può Succeedere* occurs, it activates the ready-made potential of the original narrative elements. On the one hand *Tutto Può Succeedere* mimics the original in many ways: plots and subplots are the same, as well as the sequence of events and the characters’ design. On the other hand some details significantly change, following the need of both a cultural and a production-distribution adjustment.

The most striking similarities concern some basic elements of the series. First, the characters’ names are translated whenever possible: Sarah (Lauren Graham) and Sara (Maya Sansa), Kristina (Monica Potter) and Cristina (Camilla Filippi), Julia (Erika Christensen) and Giulia (Ana Caterina Morariu), Max (Max Burkholder) and Max (Roberto Nocchi), Amber (Mae Whitman) and Ambra (Matilda De Angelis). Second, the opening titles sequence uses the same visual and conceptual device of the original: images of the actors and characters are superimposed on real photographs from the actors’ childhood, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, echoing the themes key to the series, like family relationships, youth, adulthood and the flowing of life from childhood to old age. It also highlights the emotional involvement sought by the two series.



Figure 1. *Parenthood* (left) and *Tutto Può Succeedere*'s (right) opening titles.

The episode structure is also the same, even though apparently the two series differ in episode length, 45 minutes for each *Parenthood* episode, 100 minutes for *Tutto Può Succeedere*'s. However, the Italian remake merges more episodes at a time, according to the TV scheduling of Raiuno prime time, based on two hours slots (ads included).



First, we will explore the narrative world of *Tutto Può Succeedere* dwelling on settings and characters comparison. Second, we will analyse the different approach to the topics addressed by the series, ultimately focusing on *Tutto Può Succeedere* distinguishing marks.

## 2.1 Narrative Comparisons and Inconsistencies

As we mentioned above, the action takes place in Rome, specifically in the neighbourhood of Fiumicino, which is a completely different location compared to Berkeley, California. However, the authors tried to reproduce the symbolic value of the original settings and spaces. Sometimes the adapted space works thanks to a cultural correspondence of the use and purpose of the set. The big grandparents' house represent the connection point for all the family members: a messy, but comforting environment, with a spacious green kitchen (the same color of *Parenthood* grandparents' kitchen), a patio full of plants and vegetation. The ritual Bravermans gatherings around the table to eat all together adapts particularly well to the Italian tradition of family lunches and dinners, therefore, unsurprisingly, such moments keep their dramatic purpose conveying a range of emotions, from convivial, joyful occasions to misunderstandings and outbursts of rage.



Figure 2. The green kitchen.

Other times the repurposing looks a bit more forced. Both younger brothers Crosby (Dax Shepard) and Carlo (Alessandro Tiberi) in the first seasons live on a boat; in Carlo's case, it is a floating house with a bar underneath, serving as both his home and his workplace.



S. Antonioni and C. Checcaglini, From *Parenthood* to *Tutto Può Succedere*



Figure 3. Crosby's (left) and Carlo's (right) houseboats.

Although it's not impossible that someone would live on a boat on the Tevere river, it still seems more unlikely than in Crosby's Berkeley houseboat. Other inconsistencies concern secondary details in characterisation: older brother Adam (Peter Krause) usually surfs in the ocean when he needs a break from everyday problems and stress. It seems much less plausible when Alessandro (Pietro Sermonti) does the same thing in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

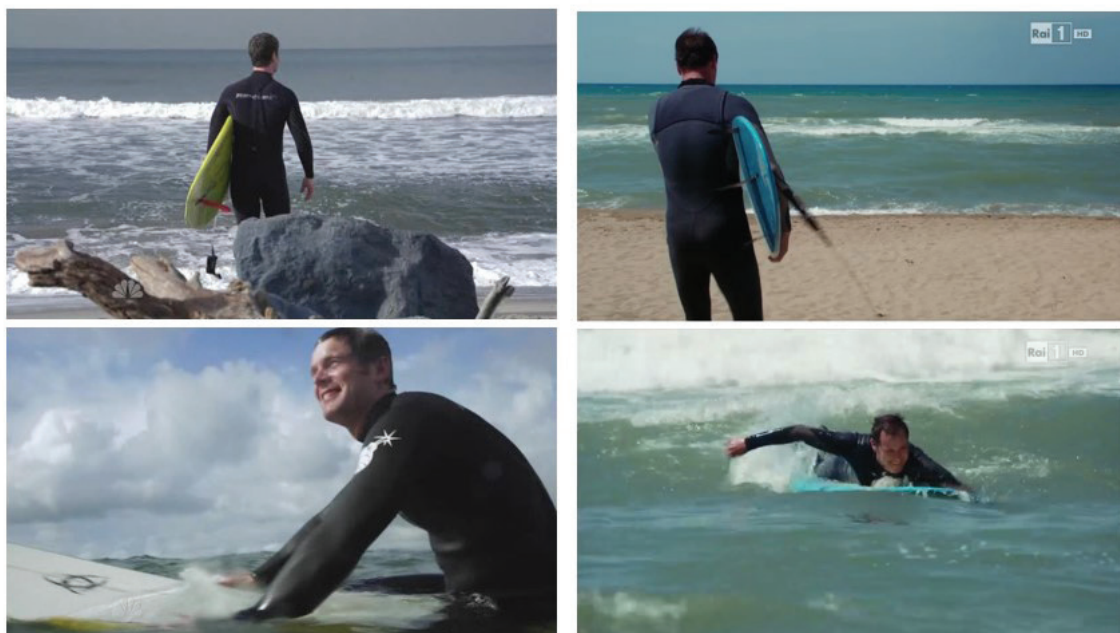


Figure 4. Surfing in the Ocean (left) and in the Tyrrhenian Sea (right).

As for characters' look and attitude, the grandmothers Camille (Bonnie Bedelia) and Emma (Licia Maglietta) share a similar personality and an aesthetic resemblance, with their curly hair and boho-chic style. *Tutto Può Succedere* also chooses to keep the cultural and ethnic difference between Carlo and his partner Feven (Esther Elisha), just like Crosby and Jasmine (Joy Bryant) in the American version. On a broader level, we see that each one of these details appear more polished in the stylistically conventional Rai remake.



Figure 5. The grandmothers: Camille (Bonnie Bedelia, left) and Emma (Licia Maglietta, right).

The functioning similarity between the two series couldn't have been pursued if it wasn't for a common ground of values, purposes and themes. We can better understand it borrowing the concept of "multiple layers of cultural proximity",<sup>16</sup> taking into account that "'Culture' in cultural negotiation refers to a wide range of meaning-making processes within production, text, and reception, and includes both material and symbolic aspects":<sup>17</sup> *Parenthood* is a family drama, a television genre that is particularly suitable to Italian audiences and specifically to Raiuno's target audience. In the show, the family is represented as a large, diverse group of people, showing different kinds of nuclear units, including single parenting and, further on, divorced parents. However, at its core it is still a patriarchal structure led by grandfather Zeek (Craig T. Nelson)/Ettore (Giorgio Colangeli), where men and women take on traditional gender roles. Such roles are mildly questioned in single mother Sarah/Sara storyline, and through the recurring motherhood vs. career dichotomy, that surfaces in different ways both in Julia (Erika Christensen)-Joel (Sam Jaeger), that is Italian Giulia-Luca, and Kristina-Adam (Cristina-Alessandro) marriages, as we will see further on.

Moreover, the centralizing force represented by the grandparents perfectly adapts to the relevance of grandparenting in Italian culture, where grandparents' presence in raising children is common.

In spite of marital problems and a frequent lack of communication, Zeek-Camille and Ettore-Emma stand as the reassuring cornerstones of the family, equipped with opposite and recognizable personalities: Camille and Emma are sympathetic women, excellent cooks, good listeners, wise advisors; Zeek and Ettore are hot-tempered, rather chauvinist alpha males who struggle to empathize with their spouses and children; nonetheless they are able to occasionally change into better human beings.

Rifts, conflicts and disagreements among family members are regularly recomposed through emotional storylines that tend towards happy endings, or at least towards resolutions and closures.

As previously asserted, Scott Olson's definition of narrative transparency seems to be well suited to the case of *Tutto Può Succedere*:

Transparency is the capability of certain texts to seem familiar regardless of their origin, to seem part of one's own culture, even though they have been crafted elsewhere. The commercial advantage to a movie or television program of his type is that it has the potential to garner a large global market. A media product that lacks transparency has much more limited commercial possibilities.<sup>18</sup>

Narrative transparency allows a cultural product to better blend into other cultures, and grants it a competitive advantage over other potentially exportable commodities. *Parenthood's* sense of familiarity is sustained by topics and plots that resonate with local understandings, and are therefore more easily transposed to Italian public service.

## 2.2 Repetition Without Replication: Something Has to Change in *Tutto Può Succedere*

Although we have traced ready-made traits characterising the two series, *Tutto può succedere* needs to differentiate from the original according to local requirements. The differentiation is twofold, with regard to the formal-aesthetic aspects on one level, and to the content on the other. Specifically, the Italian version went through a standardisation process that normalised *Parenthood's* distinguishing style as well as softened potentially controversial plot elements. This happens taking into account that "divergence/modifications occur at particular moments due to culturally different interpretations of certain contentious issues such as religion, domesticity, sexuality, womanhood, taboos, and social stratification".<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as Jolien van Keulen argued, the "exchange of knowledge, technologies, ideas and production practices" that characterises transnational television also concerns its aesthetics, "defined as the combination of technical elements of a television programme: cinematography, editing and sound"<sup>20</sup>: as well as narrative preferences and expectations, television aesthetics - such as camera angles, editing choices, and so on - need to be relocated according to culturally determined tastes and standards.

As for the formal-aesthetic aspects, *Parenthood* is characterised by camera movements, fast paced editing, quick and rich dialogues, substantial and signifying use of camera focus. While *Tutto Può Succedere* keeps an overall sense of movement that, especially in choral sequences, expresses the messy everyday life of a numerous family, stylistically speaking the series reduces the pace, levels out the richness of the camerawork, and avoids visual and voices overlapping.

When it comes to contents and plot, *Tutto Può Succedere* resorts to typify its characters in a softened, stereotypical fashion, smoothing and simplifying every debatable topic. Sometimes the Italian version chooses to ignore some plot points or underline others. For instance, *Tutto Può Succedere* skips details aimed to drive the conversation and to emerge as a cause for reflection for the characters and audience. Here are some emblematic changes or modifications to the storylines.

The age difference between Sarah and the much younger teacher she dates in *Parenthood* is often addressed by the characters as something both unusual and to joke about, while in *Tutto Può Succedere* it is barely mentioned, and not so clear in the actors' look, therefore the series loses the opportunity to depict an atypical take on age difference in couples, more commonly represented the other way around.

Sarah is also a single mother of two, who struggles with a difficult past and financial problems. In *Parenthood*, she unapologetically works as a bartender while taking occasional jobs. In *Tutto può succedere* Sara finds a job in a

bookshop, and in the third season in a photographer's studio, choice that sounded probably somehow more acceptable in the mind of the authors, as if Sara's already harsh life needed to be dignified by a more respectable workplace.

Julia and Joel Graham are defined by reverse gender roles: Julia is a career woman and the breadwinner of her family, while Joel is a stay-at-home dad and the main caregiver of their daughter Sydney. In *Tutto Può Succeedere* such features are kept, however, Luca is more troubled than Joel in accepting this arrangement. Luca's reluctance and his consequent arguments with Giulia, as well as Ettore's mockery and misogynistic remarks (he calls him "la donna di casa") reframe the family in a slightly reactionary 'battle of the sexes' vibe that lacks the nuances of the original.

Facing a personal crisis, grandma Camille-Emma decides to get back some space for herself. In *Parenthood* she turns to painting, in *Tutto Può Succeedere* she joins a tennis club, counterposing an upper class habit to Camille's hobby, that better suits her bohemian, post-hippy style.

It's worth noting that in *Tutto Può Succeedere* issues about sexual health and sex education tend to disappear. At the beginning of the series, Crosby's fear of commitment and responsibility is briefly addressed through his girlfriend's desire to have a baby using IVF, a plot detail that never occurs in *Tutto Può Succeedere*. When Julia's daughter Sydney asks her mom to explain where babies come from, Julia put aside the surprise and explicitly tell her the truth with words suitable for children. When Giulia's daughter Matilde does the same, the Italian series cautiously removes the interesting child-friendly sex education lesson that Julia gave, showing Giulia whispering something inaudible in Matilde's ear. This case in particular illustrates Rai overcautiousness about what their audiences can or cannot bear, and what they can or cannot be bothered about.

Rai's normalisation effort demonstrates the ways Rai interprets the adaptation process, and intends to appeal a generalist audience, smoothing over potentially controversial details. However, two aspects define *Tutto Può Succeedere* and differentiate it from *Parenthood*.

Firstly, the soundtrack. *Parenthood* often uses pop and rock classics or contemporary indie music, while *Tutto Può Succeedere*'s soundtrack is composed by Italian musicians only. This choice fulfills two sets of purposes. On the one hand, it enhances a sense of national specificity: original score is composed by Paolo Buonvino and performed by Negramaro and Raphael Gualazzi, but the soundtrack also features many songs by Italian singers or bands. On the other hand, we see some Italian bands and singers actually perform diegetically in Carlo's bar (A Toy Orchestra, España Circo Este, Calcutta among others), serving a mutual promotional purposes for both the musicians and the series, appealing the bands' fans and, more broadly, younger audiences.

Secondly, in season one of *Tutto Può Succeedere* Ambra is briefly romantically involved with her schoolmate Giada, with whom she forms a music duo. In *Parenthood* a same-sex relationship occurs later in season five, and it involves another character, Haddie (Federica in *Tutto può succeedere*). As we previously said, Rai usually plays safe and avoids unconventional plots, therefore addressing an LGBT storyline can be considered an unusually bold choice, especially for the first channel, the most traditional and mainstream of the three PBS channels. However, it is worth noting that, first, it is fair to suspect that switching to Ambra reveals the prejudice that a hint to bisexuality would be more acceptable when referred to the reckless troublemaker of the family. Second, quickly dismissing the storyline lessens the relevance of the topic, while Haddie and Lauren's relationship in *Parenthood* is more deeply explored.

### 3 Conclusion

Just to give a quick overview about the process of domestication underwent by *Parenthood* in its Italian remake, we argued that some of the characteristics defining its cultural proximity made it the perfect TV series to adapt for Italian



audiences. As a matter of fact, the family drama genre is particularly well suited for the Italian culture, as well as for the Italian television programme production tradition, being one of the most popular in the history of Italian TV. Although recalling the entire history of Italian television seriality is not a purpose of this article, we highlight that one of its characteristics has always been a mimetic approach with a routinisation of the stories, tending to familiarisation and reassurance, even when the storytelling deals with dramatic issues.<sup>21</sup> We can also argue that Italian TV narratives revolve around a few recurring types of storytelling, such as crime/cop drama, biopic, comedy, family drama, and period drama focused on historical events that were crucial to civil society's memory and sensibility.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the central role of the family in Italian culture has been recognized by Milly Buonanno:

Apart from the undeniable changes occurred in the family structure and sense in the last two or three decades, Italy is the western country where in this peculiar sphere the elements of continuity with the past are manifold and stronger: from the solidity of the family bonds, to the enduring ties, to the extended cohabitation through generations, to the reciprocal support within the family ties.<sup>23</sup>

We can extend this argument underlining that one of the peculiarities of Italian TV series mainstream production is the insertion of family and interpersonal relationships themes in many different TV serial genres, as recalled by Daniela Cardini:

Some prevalent themes emerge from Rai fiction. In contrast to U.S. storytelling, which is based on complex plots where characters' relationships are usually pertinent to the public sphere or to the workplace, Italian plots revolve around domestic issues and interpersonal connections among family members and those closest, related by love, friendship and other forms of relationships that are pertinent to the private sphere.<sup>24</sup>

For this reason, many aspects and themes of the original plot dealing with family bonds, everyday life and events were replicated in *Tutto Può Succedere*, and they can be conceptualised as ready-made elements that maintain the original template of the original TV series. But following what characterises the average process of format adaptation, the Italian version made some aesthetic and content adjustments. Such changes were strategic not only because they aimed at making the product perceived as 'local', rooted in Italian culture, but also because they responded to Rai goals and strategic targets. Besides the idea of "shielding" a traditional audience (or better to say the perception, the image of a traditional audience) from issues that might be too problematic and divisive, Rai also aimed to get closer to a younger audience who usually avoids Rai television schedule. As a matter of fact, Rai and every other mainstream broadcaster share the problem of the ageing of its audience and the related loss of younger audiences, which therefore becomes a particularly important target to be pursued. Rai chased the goal of engaging such reluctant segment employing various strategies, such as uploading the preview of *Tutto Può Succedere*'s third season on Rai streaming platform Rai Play, one of the first experiments with this mode of release. According to Gian Paolo Tagliavia, Rai chief digital officer, the results were positive, with 2.5 million views collectively.<sup>25</sup>

The appeal to a cross generational audience of *Tutto Può Succedere* is testified on the one hand by the mixed audience of the series that includes younger segments, as underlined by head of Rai Fiction Eleonora Andreatta;<sup>26</sup> on the other hand it is confirmed by the protests raised by the unexpected cancellation of the series after the third season, resulting in social media campaigns and even a petition on Change.org to renew the series for a fourth season. The audience numbers fluctuated between 4.2 million viewers and 19% share in season two and 2.7 million viewers and 14% share in season three. The cancellation was justified with the low ratings of season three, which aired in summer 2018 and suffered from the competition with the popular show *Temptation Island* and the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

In conclusion, we believe that in *Tutto Può Succedere* we are witnessing the realisation of a paradox: on the one hand the normalisation of differences and controversial details, constructing a more traditional storytelling; and on the other hand, the desire to appeal to an audience that, by definition, is untraditional.



## Notes

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## Biographies

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# WHEN GERMAN SERIES GO GLOBAL

## INDUSTRY DISCOURSE ON THE PERIOD DRAMA *DEUTSCHLAND* AND ITS TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION

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**Abstract:** The article takes a closer look at the current industry discourse on the transnational circulation of German series. At its centre is a case study of the 1980s period drama *Deutschland* (2015-2020), based on interviews with key executives and creatives. What is it that makes such ready-made TV fiction go transnational, according to the involved practitioners and in this specific case? Textual factors in particular are examined, such as the thematic and aesthetic extension of the historical-political ‘event’ miniseries through *Deutschland*. Furthermore, the article explores factors in respect to production, including screenwriting and financing, in the context of the dynamic TV landscape in Germany and Europe.

**Keywords:** German television, television series, television production, global television, television scriptwriting, European TV series, period drama, German TV fiction

### 1 Introduction

‘Showrunners and Antiheroes – What Does the German Series Need for International Success?’<sup>1</sup> was the title of an industry panel held adjacent to the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival, or Berlinale, at which the first season of the espionage coming-of-age drama *Deutschland* (2015-2020) premiered. Also during the festival, its sale to the US – a market particularly valued in a Western, transnational context – was announced. The unofficial Berlinale event, where industry attendees applauded this news, and the following media coverage on the US export of *Deutschland 83*,<sup>2</sup> are just a few examples of the recent, ongoing discourse on the transnational circulation of German TV drama. In the last decade, similar discussions have been raised in the television industry and trade magazines,<sup>3</sup> as well as in television criticism and the feature pages of newspapers.<sup>4</sup> These negotiations have continued earlier debates on German cinema and its arguable lack of ‘international’ appeal<sup>5</sup> and have been accompanied by an evaluation discourse on so-called quality TV. Besides German-language academia<sup>6</sup> and the feuilleton,<sup>7</sup> German TV professionals have taken up the discussion of such television and the Anglicism linked to it.<sup>8</sup> Public statements by practitioners<sup>9</sup> and papers that circulate in the industry<sup>10</sup> indicate that ‘quality TV’ has been especially understood through textual characteristics of certain US series and through their reported production methods, which are said to differ from the ones used in Germany. The above-quoted title of the panel certainly reflects these emphases by containing two examples: ‘showrunners’, describing the leading writer-producers with ‘managerial oversight’,<sup>11</sup> on the side of production; and ‘antiheroes’, as a textual feature.

With a corresponding focus on production-specific and textual aspects, my article takes a closer look at the current industry discourse on the transnational circulation of German series. At its centre is a case study of *Deutschland*. What is it that makes such ready-made fictional television go transnational, according to the involved practitioners and in this specific case? This show, which follows an East German spy in the West German Armed Forces during the Cold War, is a particularly fruitful example to explore this question. *Deutschland* has helped to initiate a taste for German TV fiction in English-speaking markets and potentially kickstarted what has been termed a ‘German TV Renaissance’ by the *Guardian*.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the series has transnationalised in its own course of development, as we will see.

Methodologically, this article relies on expert interviews.<sup>13</sup> Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted them with key executives and creatives involved in *Deutschland*: Jörg Winger, the leading writer-producer, or creator;<sup>14</sup> Ulrike Leibfried, the commissioning editor for the commercial channel RTL for its first season;<sup>15</sup> Joachim Kosack, CEO of the production house UFA;<sup>16</sup> and two of the directors, Edward Berger<sup>17</sup> and Florian Cossen.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, and in connection with a broader production study,<sup>19</sup> my participant observations at multi-day industry workshops<sup>20</sup> on series production (from 2015 to 2019) are taken into account. These observations are a vital complement to the interviews, as they ensure the researcher does not (co)produce the analysed industry discourse too much. Furthermore, Winger and others discussed *Deutschland* in lectures at these events and helped the researcher remain up to date regarding this series’ advancement. In interpreting the interviews with methods suggested by Ulrike Nagel and Michael Mauser<sup>21</sup> and Hanne Bruun,<sup>22</sup> and, more generally, with perspectives from critical media industry and production studies,<sup>23</sup> the protocols on the participant observations are also used.

The article first locates *Deutschland* in the broader TV fiction industry in Germany. Subsequently, textual factors are examined which, according to interviewees, have helped *Deutschland* travel to other markets. Finally, factors in respect to production, including screenwriting and financing, are explored. Thus, the paper analyses the case study in several directions, which corresponds to a multidimensional series analysis influenced by the circuit of culture<sup>24</sup> and related concepts,<sup>25</sup> even though the perspective of the practitioners remains firmly foregrounded. The textual and production-specific aspects indicate different areas in which border crossings and exchange processes – summarised under the term transnationalisation<sup>26</sup> – can take place, including in divergent, contrary ways.

In this context, the interpretations of interviews with television professionals can be linked to the dimensions of global flow, as described by Arjun Appadurai.<sup>27</sup> Although Appadurai has in mind the metaprocesses of globalisation when delineating mediascapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes and ethnocapes,<sup>28</sup> one can also find such routes and practices of transnationalisation in the single case study explored here. For instance, some production methods and cultures approached in this project can be seen as transnational practices and techniques, and in this sense considered technoscapes, while the transnational exchange of involved people points to ethnocapes. Appadurai’s ‘-scapes’ also provide a productive theoretical basis for the analysis of ready-made content from Germany, because they help keep possible contradictions and aspects of localisation in mind. ‘Globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization ... that are absorbed into local political and cultural economies’, Appadurai states.<sup>29</sup> Concurrent to its transnational circuit and the influence of ‘quality TV’ series from the US on it, *Deutschland* is rooted in such a local context, which, first of all, requires closer inspection.

## 2 The TV Fiction Industry in Germany

For certain, the German TV fiction industry cannot be understood as a completely closed, solely national space. On the contrary, overlaps with other producing countries are obvious, for instance because of institutional involvement in transnational media groups,<sup>30</sup> through co-financing and co-production,<sup>31</sup> in relation to format adaptations in the context of an Anglo-American-dominated TV format trade<sup>32</sup> and through exports. German TV fiction has been sold to non-German markets in several cases other than *Deutschland*: the long-running soap opera *Sturm der Liebe* (Storm of Love, 2005-),

licensed to twenty stations worldwide, and the crime procedural *Derrick* (1974-1998) are well-known examples. *Heimat* (especially *Heimat – Eine deutsche Chronik* [A Chronicle of Germany], 1984) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) were critically acclaimed beyond West Germany as well. However, a substantial part of German TV fiction serves primarily a national, or at least German-speaking, audience. Due to its relatively large size, the need for further export sales is lower than in smaller European countries. Edward Berger, one of the directors of the first season of *Deutschland* (*Deutschland 83*), spoke in the interviews, with a critical undertone, of ‘a complacent market’.

In the production study on *Deutschland*, again and again the relation to the national or German-speaking market was reflected when the interviewees discussed broader tendencies and characteristics of German TV fiction. Joachim Kosack, producer and managing director of UFA (one of German TV’s biggest production houses), suggested an initial approach to series production in Germany that separates it into four fields: first, ‘industrial series’, with 250 episodes per year and a fixed production method based on the division of labour;<sup>33</sup> second, the ‘weekly series’ with twenty-six, and in exceptional cases fifty, annual episodes and a set core team; third, the ‘local primetime series’, with thirteen episodes per year and a clear focus on national broadcasting slots; and finally ‘high-end’ productions.<sup>34</sup> The latter is characterised by higher budgets and a link to the tradition of the ‘event film’. Such hybrids of television films and miniseries, consisting of two or three ninety-minute parts and mostly dealing with historical issues, have been associated in particular with the production company UFA Fiction, as well as its former subsidiary teamWorx,<sup>35</sup> and have frequently managed to be broadcast in several countries (see, e.g., *Die Flucht* [March of Millions], 2007, or *Dresden*, 2006).

Although omissions can be found in Kosack’s list (such as long-running, somewhat serialised collections of TV films in the style of *Tatort* [1970-]<sup>36</sup> and low-budget series from emerging talents), it proves helpful in classifying and locating *Deutschland*. At first glance, this project clearly belongs to the ‘high-end’ segment, for which foreign sales are increasingly an economic necessity, according to Kosack. But to some extent, it also fits with the more local and regularly produced series, as Jörg Winger and other involved practitioners came from the long-running crime procedural *SOKO Leipzig* (*Leipzig Homicide*, 2001-), one of now ten spin-offs of the German-Austrian format *SOKO* (1978-), which reflects Germany’s federalist structures and regionalism in some TV content.

Kosack attributed the merging of different production fields and people to restructuring within the UFA production company and to collaboration between individuals, corresponding to the tendency towards personalisation in TV professionals’ talk or ‘industrial self-theorizing’.<sup>37</sup> The personal networks that likely led to the emergence of *Deutschland* also include individual decision makers on the side of RTL, an advertising-financed broadcaster which, like UFA, belongs to Bertelsmann’s RTL Group. Coinciding with the development of the screen idea for *Deutschland*, Frank Hoffmann, then the new head of RTL, wished for an event programme such as *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (*Generation War*, 2013). This frequently criticised – but in Germany also acclaimed – three-part drama about a group of five German youths and their different experiences during World War II was a big audience hit on public-service channel ZDF in 2013, and sold to various countries. In reference to this show, several interviewees indicated textual characteristics and traditions which might also have helped *Deutschland* to go transnational.

### 3 Textual Factors for Transnational Circulation

Through the production company UFA Fiction and the at least indirect influence of *Generation War*, *Deutschland* ties in with the multipart ‘historical-political event film’,<sup>38</sup> which frequently concerns National Socialism in the arguably very problematic form of melodramas with ‘ordinary’ Germans as protagonists.<sup>39</sup> Kosack argued that the success of *Generation War* in different countries paved the way for *Deutschland*’s transnational travel. Florian Cossen, one of two directors of its second season, *Deutschland 86*, more generally ascribed a ‘narrative power’ to *Generation War*, which might have helped to initiate the rise of ‘quality TV’ series with greater transnational compatibility. But the immense criticism that *Generation War* met with, especially in Poland<sup>40</sup> and the US,<sup>41</sup> and the accusation of revisionism could



of course also be interpreted as a problematic perception of German television abroad. In this respect, such mediascapes and ideoscapes, beyond just the UFA company, might not altogether have helped promote the transnational circulation of German TV drama.

Even among the interviewed production members of *Deutschland*, there emerged somewhat critical voices on this kind of fictional history television on National Socialism. Partly, the fear of a thematic narrowing was expressed – which is by no means a new or television-specific discussion, if we consider West German film history. ‘Movies dealing with Nazi themes had been of the largest export successes’, as Robert C. Reimer et al. state,<sup>42</sup> but they often also met with criticism. *Deutschland* points to a thematic extension, with a focus on the period of the Cold War and the division of Germany in the 1980s, although especially the latter has become a frequent subject of contemporary television films and series from Germany (e.g. *Weissensee*, 2010-2018; *Preis der Freiheit* [Prize of Freedom], 2019; *Wendezeit* [Time of Change], 2019).

To some extent, *Deutschland* also stands for a different narrative and aesthetic approach by avoiding the claim of realism and authenticity that still dominated *Generation War* and many of its paratexts. According to Jörg Winger, producer and creator of *Deutschland*, East German fashion magazines from the 1980s and the Coen brothers’ spy comedy *Burn after Reading* (2008) provided inspiration for the show’s stylised, only partly realistically depicted setting. Instead of historical accuracy, the focus turned more to pop-cultural references<sup>43</sup>, that are arguably easier for non-German viewers to decode (e.g. Nena’s song ‘99 Luftballons’, featured several times in season one).

However, according to Winger, the corresponding reconfiguration of the historical event/high-end miniseries from UFA was not centrally planned. This supposition corresponds to the tendency that ‘industrial self-theorizing and sense making frequently pose as *unintentional and effacing*’, as John Thornton Caldwell has argued.<sup>44</sup> At the very least, Winger took into account the contrast to other German period dramas when he wondered if lightness and popular culture did not go over well with parts of the German audience, which may prefer ‘history’ and ‘a certain gravity and seriousness’. Here, Winger also discussed possible reasons why audience ratings for broadcasting on RTL in 2015 fell short of expectations.

On the textual level, *Deutschland* also differs from the previous ‘historical-political event film’<sup>45</sup> or miniseries by having more episodes and being more serialised. In this respect, the show probably has become more transnationally connectable by contrasting strongly with the single TV film. The latter still forms a core component of German television fiction today.<sup>46</sup> Some TV professionals involved in *Deutschland* considered the single TV film to be a separate route, a *Sonderweg*, and a problematic one, since it is considered outdated. Furthermore, they argued that this format deviates from the standards of other TV markets, making it difficult to connect to them and hampering an ongoing serial dramaturgy.

For years, such storylines spanning across several episodes have been a point of discussion in the German TV industry. Often broadcasters approached them only through the well-established two- or three-part ‘event’ miniseries with ninety-minute episodes, which again reflects the relevance of TV films in German TV fiction. Even with *Deutschland*, these traditions are indicated if one takes the distribution, excepting direct textual characteristics, into account. On RTL, the first season was broadcast in double episodes, a scheduling strategy used for other German and European serials (see, e.g., the political drama *Die Stadt und die Macht* [The City and the Power], 2016, and the co-production *West of Liberty*, 2019). In this way, the serial is somehow turned back into an ‘event’ television film with ninety-minute parts. Regarding the first season, *Deutschland 83*, some interviewees reflected critically on such scheduling practices, revealing a certain tension between, on the one hand, transnationally circulating ‘quality TV’ and, on the other, linear, nationally shaped distribution and programme patterns.

Linked to the overarching serial narration, in *Deutschland*, the goal of a ‘quality TV’ serial was pursued. Winger’s anecdotal assessment that ‘this kind of quality series’ has not existed in Germany before can surely be countered by various examples, especially from public-service broadcasting (e.g. *Im Angesicht des Verbrechens* [In the Face

of Crime], 2010,<sup>47</sup> and *KDD – Kriminaldauerdienst* [Berlin Crime Squad], 2007–10<sup>48</sup>). Nevertheless, various production stakeholders voiced that *Deutschland* was a deliberate attempt to implement ‘quality TV’ in German television. During a lecture at an industry workshop, Anja Käumle, director of PR and marketing at UFA, who recently joined the German Netflix team explicitly pointed out that in her public relations work on the show, she took up the press topic of whether ‘we Germans’ can do ‘quality TV’. In this context, the ‘quality TV’ serial as an American concept and transnational television trend has become a growing part of the national discourse, reminiscent of Appadurai’s argument mentioned above that, in processes of globalization, “instruments of homogenization ... are absorbed into local political and cultural economies”.<sup>49</sup> In the case discussed here, the local cultural economy particularly relates to the commercial broadcaster RTL. It is associated more with ‘trash’ than with ‘quality’ TV in the public media discourse.<sup>50</sup> *Deutschland* was intended to overturn this existing image, not least for the interests of advertisers, who reward an attractive environment when booking commercials. However, Ulrike Leibfried, commissioning editor for the first season at RTL, also ascribed to the series an orientation towards mainstream tastes and popularity. Textually speaking, such reasons can also be discussed as to why *Deutschland* went transnational: arguably it was the show’s mainstream appeal and its ‘light moments’ (appreciated, for example, in a *New York Times* review)<sup>51</sup> that proved to be transnationally connectable, in addition to the tendencies for overarching storylines and serial ‘quality TV’.

The ‘quality TV’ serial and its discursive negotiation in Germany remained important when practitioners involved in *Deutschland* discussed their roles as well as broader production conditions. It is also in this area of negotiation where one might find further factors enabling German TV drama to travel.

#### 4 Production Factors for Transnational Circulation

In the industry discourse on German ‘quality TV’, practitioners often engage in negotiations about which (and if) production modes lead to a higher ‘quality’, therefore enabling the transnational circulation of German serials. Similar to the text-based discussion, professionals have often identified deficits in relation to production.<sup>52</sup> The position of writers especially has received much criticism<sup>53</sup> and has been reflected upon critically in approaches to the showrunner and the writers’ room.<sup>54</sup> As in other European contexts,<sup>55</sup> these production techniques – or technoscapes, in Appadurai’s terminology – have been more recently negotiated in the German TV fiction industry. Showrunners as top writer-producers are supposed to guarantee coherence, especially in respect to dramatic continuity, which is why the industry discourse has linked this role to the overarching narration of ‘quality TV’ serials.

Such issues and priorities were clearly reflected in the interviews with production team members of *Deutschland*. Jörg Winger in particular brought up the issue of the showrunner by giving himself this ‘elevated’ job title. With the *Deutschland* project, an adaptation of the showrunner role can be discussed since Winger, the producer of numerous *SOKO Leipzig* episodes, and his American wife, Anna Winger, the head writer of the series and with experience as a novelist and journalist, combine the competences of writing and producing. Still, other production members sometimes questioned this categorisation, saying that Anna and Jörg Winger were hardly present on set, whereas the showrunner usually would be. “Jörg Winger was a producer, Anna Winger was a writer and I was a director. That would be a correct description of our jobs”, Edward Berger summed up.<sup>56</sup>

Whatever the actual status of the showrunner for *Deutschland*, the interviewees touched upon this production mode again and again. Starting from that issue, Jörg Winger addressed the distribution of power in production networks, which, in his view, has to change for Germany to catch up with other countries in terms of ‘quality TV’ series. In particular, he pointed toward the often weak status of scriptwriters and reflected critically upon the ‘special position’ of the director in German TV fiction, which he traced back to the tradition and importance of the single TV film. By contrast, he said, series are much more of a ‘writer’s medium’. “The director is a very central creative in TV series production, too, but usually not the final decision maker, as in most films”, Winger explained in an email.<sup>57</sup> Florian

Cossen, director of *Deutschland 86*, said that he had not yet reached a conclusion on the subordination of his guild's role in the wake of the turn towards the showrunner. More clearly than his predecessor Berger, Cossen agreed that *Deutschland* was produced "on the American model ... according to the showrunner principle", which is why he concentrated only on the shooting in this project. Berger may have another perspective on the production process because, after *Deutschland 83*, he started to direct episodes of the British-American project *Patrick Melrose* (2018) and the American *The Terror* (2018-), for which the showrunner role may be more significant. But it is also possible that the work on *Deutschland* has gradually moved closer to the 'showrunner principle' identified by Cossen for the second season, since the project is also said to have changed in terms of the time spent together in the writers' room.

Often, this collective writing arrangement has been identified as a possible answer as to how series from Germany could gain in 'quality' and become more successful transnationally.<sup>58</sup> However, an exclusive commitment of several writers over a longer period of time and their actual collaboration in a room have for a very long time remained the exception in German TV production, at least beyond the story departments of 'industrialised' daily soap production.<sup>59</sup> But in the 'high-end' area, as Kosack named it, tendencies towards more collaborative scriptwriting and the more comprehensive involvement of screenwriters are now clearly visible, as the *Deutschland* case study can illustrate.

According to the interviewees, the alleged writers' room for the first season consisted of the German-American couple Anna and Jörg Winger and four additional writers of different nationalities, accounting for why ethnoscaapes can be discussed in the screenwriting process to some extent. Winger called two of the writers 'old hands' and two 'quite inexperienced'. He stated that a junior producer and an intern were also involved in the collaborative development. The integration of junior staff is also known from other approaches to the writers' room in Germany and seems to be motivated above all by economic factors and the hope for 'fresh' ideas.<sup>60</sup> As in other projects, in the case of *Deutschland 83*, the writers came together for several multi-day meetings only. For the second season, *Deutschland 86*, the time frame of this joint work was said to have been temporarily extended.

Before the first so-called writers' room meeting, Anna Winger, with the cooperation of her husband, had already written a spec script and rough storylines for seven episodes. During collaborative development later on, the additional four writers partly acted as advocates of individual characters and were responsible for different special subjects. Each individually wrote the first and the second drafts for the same two episodes. But, in the end, Anna Winger took over, writing all final drafts. According to Patricia Phalen and Julia Osellame's study of the writers' room in Hollywood, that situation is 'not an optimum scenario, given the production demands on the showrunner's time'.<sup>61</sup> But for German series, which usually have fewer episodes than their American counterparts, such a return to the head writer seems to be common, if we look beyond the case study discussed here to other projects, such as, for instance, *Dark* (2017-2020).

In the end, economic factors are the main reason why the writers' room and probably also the showrunner have been practised in only a rudimentary form for *Deutschland* and other German series productions.<sup>62</sup> At the observed industry workshops, again and again, limited production resources in the German television industry were highlighted. In the case of *Deutschland*, at least from the second season onwards, the writers were paid for their time in the room. This meant they did not have to pursue other parallel projects, as is often the case in the German TV fiction industry, where writers usually receive most of their clearing only for the final script. In sum, payment models are indicated that are closer to those in other markets and that might make it easier to produce transnational series content.

More directly, however, it was decisive for the transnational circulation of *Deutschland* that the draft scripts and linked development papers were written in English. Only at the end did Jörg Winger translate the final scripts into German. Via contacts at Fremantle, the international television content and production and distribution subsidiary of RTL Group and parent of the UFA production company, English scripts reached the British Film Institute, and eventually the American pay-TV channel SundanceTV, too. The sale to SundanceTV, announced during the Berlinale film festival, was therefore already supported by English-language scripts, although Winger claimed that from the beginning *Deutschland* was planned as a German series and not as a transnationally circulating one.

Gradually, the script development of the *Deutschland* project appears to also have become more transnational, as new distributors and partners came on board and started giving editorial feedback, albeit to a much lesser extent than for previous German television series. These changes in the screenwriting process reflect the transnational expansion of financiers. In this context, one might discuss financescapes, to adopt Appadurai's vocabulary once more. What once was an image-building programme for the nationally operating network RTL has increasingly become subject to mixed financing from partners from different countries. SundanceTV and Hulu in the US, Canal+ in France, Sky in Italy and Channel 4 in the UK are distributors, which partly co-financed the further seasons *Deutschland 86* and *Deutschland 89* as well. A large part of the budget is said to have come from international sales, which were initiated by the Fremantle distribution company as part of the RTL Group. Further funds stem from the local film board Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, which has opened up to television series, especially such ones with transnational potential, as two funding executives pointed out at an industry workshop. But the new key financier from the second season on was Amazon Prime Video. In the end, such new actors in the German TV fiction industry and transnational partners were the decisive factors for the continuation of *Deutschland 83*. Indeed, Winger has argued, at an industry workshop, that should the show have emerged in 2008 and not 2018, there would probably have been no second or third season.

Linked to mixed transnational financing, *Deutschland* additionally represents a move away from the 'buyout model', traditional in Germany, and thereby a structural change which might encourage transnational circulation. In the concluding section, I touch upon such broader issues in respect to transnational distribution.

## 5 Outlook

To date in the German TV fiction industry, especially for series, broadcasters usually provide 100 percent financing and receive all rights as part of a so-called 'total buyout'.<sup>63</sup> This has resulted in the self-centredness of the television market, on which, as mentioned above, some interviewees have reflected critically. Furthermore, certain hierarchies in the project-based cooperation between broadcaster, production company and creative freelancers have been a consequence of this financing pattern.<sup>64</sup> The lack of additional income and format rights has prevented German production companies from penetrating foreign markets on the basis of successful programmes, as other competitors frequently have, Oliver Castendyk and Klaus Goldhammer suggest.<sup>65</sup> In the interviews discussed here, it was especially Joachim Kosack who (obviously against the backdrop of the interests of UFA) emphasised revenue shares for the producers beyond the pure buyout model and, in this context, income from international distribution. In this respect, the increasingly transnationally financed period drama *Deutschland* may be a trendsetting model.

However, when players such as Netflix acquire all rights for an unlimited licensing period for all distributions methods and territories for a fixed price, financing processes again move in the direction of the purely commissioned production and the total buyout.<sup>66</sup> Against this background, it is hardly surprising that at a 2019 industry workshop Jörg Winger mentioned as a recent trend in German television, besides the mixed-financing of series, productions that remain in one house, similar to the pre-1948 US studio system. For production companies, this can of course be a difficult scenario, as their scope of action is reduced rather than increased. Therefore, some interviewees indicated a critical view of Netflix. On the other hand, creatives with transnational aspirations might appreciate that, with that platform, transnational circulation is often guaranteed, and thus the chance of transnational attention increases considerably.<sup>67</sup>

In any case, it is not only the project *Deutschland*, with its development towards transnational mixed financing, that reveals ways in which series from Germany can go global. Netflix, an "aggressively international service",<sup>68</sup> points to further factors that were only touched upon in the present case study, such as the release of whole seasons in several Netflix territories, in different subtitles or even dubbed versions, and often even on the same starting date. For *Dark*, Netflix offers a dubbed English version – another PR stunt of that non-transparent provider, as an executive producer

of a competitor suspects,<sup>69</sup> or a further, possibly ‘trend-setting’ strategy to make German series travel more comprehensively? In any case, Netflix hints at the dynamic change happening in the global media and television landscape, which one might categorise as a mediascape, interwoven with other -scapes of the global flow, to pick up on Appadurai’s terminology. Transnational developments affect the German TV fiction industry. It is not least the increased transnational demand for content through streaming services that is responsible for the travel of German television series; it is arguably even more significant than the textual and production-specific factors highlighted and explored in this article and through the case study *Deutschland*.

However, this 1980s drama remains a fruitful example, as it helped to push the recent transnational expansion of the German TV (fiction) industry. Given the niche status of SundanceTV, the allegedly great success of *Deutschland 83* in the US in 2015 was partly a construction of PR work,<sup>70</sup> as some TV professionals lecturing at the observed industry workshop noted. Still, the miniseries was a starting point for the further transnationalisation of the German TV fiction industry and its individual actors. Edward Berger, leading director of the first season, has begun to work for the British and American industries, and Jörg Winger co-created the Romanian-German co-production *Hackerville* (2018) for HBO Europe and the German pay-TV channel TNT Serie. Furthermore, in 2020 he launched Big Window Productions, a new department at UFA Fiction that focuses on transnational projects (in either English or German). Anna Winger is the executive producer and co-writer of the Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox* (2020), which is shot in English and Yiddish, but still has personal and institutional links to the German TV industry.

The period drama *Deutschland* is interwoven both with corresponding changes towards transnationalisation and with German TV traditions, especially the multipart ‘historical-political event film’,<sup>71</sup> which had already found distribution beyond German-speaking markets several years earlier. On the textual and on the production-specific level, *Deutschland* indicates reformations, for instance by narrating German history with a lighter tone through pop-cultural references and by using the showrunner and the writers’ room, at least rudimentarily, in the screenwriting process.

In Germany itself, viewing figures for this slightly reformed German period drama were below RTL’s expectations – leading German media to regard the series as a flop after its broadcast in late 2015.<sup>72</sup> In respect to transnational circulation, this result is interesting as it shows that, other than in former scenarios, national success is no longer necessarily required for a German series to travel. Furthermore, the mediocre ratings point towards different tensions. The practitioners involved in *Deutschland* hinted especially at the gap between commercial and public-service television, which turned out to be surprisingly large, if one takes into account larger viewing figures for historical miniseries and ‘event’ films at ARD and ZDF (see, e.g., the UFA Fiction production *Ku’damm 56/59*, 2016/2018, and *Generation War*). Criticism regarding RTL’s online distribution of *Deutschland*<sup>73</sup> indicates a tension between internet-based ‘catch-up’ TV and ‘classical’ broadcasting shaped by nationally and historically grown broadcasting slots. Linked to such different concepts of television, tensions between a national and a transnational distribution also come to light. While German ‘quality TV’ in the shape of *Deutschland* functions in a transnational comparison as ‘subtitled drama’, and thus as niche programming, German broadcasters with their comparatively large audiences often still rely on a mainstream, mass-audience approach and on linear broadcasting. When looking at German series that travel transnationally, corresponding tensions and national framework conditions must not be overlooked.

## Notes

1. “Showrunner und Antihelden – Was braucht die deutsche Serie zum Internationalen Erfolg? [Showrunners and Anti-heroes – What does the German Tv series need in order to achieve international success?], panel presented by TOP: Talente and BAVARIA Film, Vertretung des Freistaates Bayern beim Bund [Representation Office of the Federal State of Bavaria], Berlin, February 9, 2015.



2. E.g. Alan Posener, "Von jetzt an geht Fernsehunterhaltung anders" [From Now on Television Entertainment Works Differently], *Die Welt*, November 25, 2015, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article149229922/Von-jetzt-an-geht-Fernsehunterhaltung-anders.html>
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5. E.g. Pierre Gras, *Good bye, Fassbinder! Der deutsche Kinofilm seit 1990* [Goodbye, Fassbinder! The German Motion Picture since 1990] (Berlin: Alexander, 2014), 22-31.
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8. Florian Krauß, "'Quality Series' and Their Production Cultures: Transnational Discourses within the German Television Industry", *Series – International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 4, no. 2 (2018): 49-51, <https://series.unibo.it/article/view/8282/8713>
9. E.g. Stefan Stuckmann, "Wie man keine gute Serie macht" [How One Does Not Produce Good Series] *stuckmann.de* (blog), September 3, 2015, <http://stefanstickmann.de/?p=81>
10. E.g. DJ Frederiksson [Anonymous], "Die ausbleibende Revolution" [The Missing Revolution], *d-trick* [blog by director and scriptwriter Dietrich Brüggemann], February 4, 2014, [http://d-trick.de/wp-content/uploads/die\\_ausbleibende\\_revolution.pdf](http://d-trick.de/wp-content/uploads/die_ausbleibende_revolution.pdf)
11. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 90.
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15. Ulrike Leibfried, Interview with author, June 16, 2016. At the request of the interviewee, the conversation was not recorded; instead, it was written down by hand during the interview.
16. Joachim Kosack, Interview with author, January 29, 2019.
17. Edward Berger, Interview with author, November 26, 2018.
18. Florian Cossen, Interview with author, October 30, 2018.
19. The research project 'Quality Series' as *Discourse and Practice: Self-theorizing in the German TV Series Industry*, funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [German Research Council], University of Siegen, Germany, 2018-2021.
20. *European TV Drama Series Lab* and *Winterclass Serial Writing and Producing*, workshops, Erich Pommer Institute Potsdam, Potsdam and Berlin, 2015-2019.
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27. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), <https://we.riseup.net/assets/102142/appadurai.pdf>
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