

# 'QUALITY SERIES' AND THEIR PRODUCTION CULTURES: TRANSNATIONAL DISCOURSES WITHIN THE GERMAN TELEVISION INDUSTRY

FLORIAN KRAUB

**Name** Florian Krauß

**Academic centre** University Siegen, Germany

**E-mail address** florian.krauss@medienwissenschaft.uni-siegen.de

## KEYWORDS

German TV; quality series; quality TV; media industry studies; production studies; story development.

## ABSTRACT

For several years now, both television critics in the feature pages (Diez and Huetlin 2013) or in trade magazines (Zarges 2015) and television practitioners (Stuckmann 2015) have been discussing the state and quality of fictional series from Germany. Very often, they have made out considerable deficits in comparison with supposed 'quality TV' from the US or Scandinavia (e.g. Förster 2014). Why is there no (more) corresponding content in German television and particularly on the financially strong public-service channels? This question is repeatedly

asked not only in often polemic feuilleton debates, but also within the television sector. My paper takes a closer look at this industry discourse on 'quality series' within the German context and explores it on the basis of participant observations at industry workshops and expert interviews with scriptwriters, producers and commissioning editors (*Redakteure*). As will be seen, these actors of story development negotiate and define 'quality series' in a transnational manner, particularly by comparing TV fiction from Germany with such productions from the US and Scandinavia and focussing on their supposed features of storytelling. The TV makers' discourse, furthermore, bears historical traits as they trace the current state of series from Germany back to historical developments and structures. Thereby they diagnose the 'local' and 'national' of German series. Transnational and 'glocal' dimensions can also be found in their discussion of production cultures. It is suggested by several practitioners that specific traditions and hierarchies would complicate the broader establishment of 'quality series' and their alleged production modes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Surely, the talk of 'quality series', often taken-for-granted by the industry representatives, is problematic from the perspective of media studies. Robert J. Thompson (1996) tried to systematize 'quality series' with his well-known, repeatedly picked-up (e. g. Blanchet 2010), still controversial criteria many years ago. With justification and for many reasons (such as the lack of accuracy, the elitist and judgmental tendency and the bias in an analysis of television) the term has been criticized (Dasgupta 2012, McCabe and Akass 2007). Charlotte Brunsdon (1990: 73) demonstrated already in 1990 that notions of quality are linked to issues of power: "Quality for whom?, Judgement by whom?, On whose behalf?", she asked, highlighting a range of context-specific "contenders" (77) for defining quality television. The television industry in Germany dealt with in this paper is one discursive context connected to others: to other national and transnational TV industries (as many 'German' production companies or broadcasters are integrated into transnational or at least Western media conglomerates, Mikos 2016a) or to certain parts of German media (Koepsel 2015 on feuilleton debates) and academia that have been discussing and reproducing 'quality series'. Many recent academic publications in Germany have focussed on such TV productions from the US and developments of this market (Nesselhauf and Schleich 2016, Schlütz 2016), neglecting German and European cases to a great extent (see as an exception Hahn 2013, Gamula and Mikos 2014). My approach extends this research field by bringing in German television and including perspectives from media industry/production studies (e. g. Freeman 2016, Krauß and Loist 2018).

'Quality series' are not primarily understood as 'good', clearly definable texts, but rather as a discourse within the heterogeneous and changing television (and film) industry in Germany, an aspiration and a tendency in its recent series productions. Several shows such as *Bad Banks* (2018-), *Babylon Berlin* (201), *4 Blocks* (D) or *Dark* (2017-) are contemporary approaches to 'quality series' and point towards more comprehensive alterations of the German TV landscape: lately, it has 'transnationalized' in accordance with broader European developments (Bondebjerg 2016) as well means of digital distribution (Mikos 2016b, Leuschen 2017) and expanded due to new broadcasters and platforms. Among the new commissioners are not only transnational, US-dominated SVOD providers such as Netflix, but also a range of other networks and channels, whether public-service (ZDFneo, FUNK), advertising-funded (e.g. Vox), or subscription pay TV (TNT Series,

Sky Germany). My production study<sup>1</sup> attempts to cover different areas of the contemporary television series industry in Germany (Krauß 2018) and, in this way, different voices in the transnational discourse on 'quality series'. In what follows, I discuss the interim results of this research.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO 'QUALITY SERIES' AS A TRANSNATIONAL INDUSTRY DISCOURSE

"Interviews with exclusive informants" (Bruun 2016) conducted between 2015 and 2018 form the crucial basis of the following analysis of the practitioners' discourse. Hanne Bruun (2016: 142) has discussed this specific version of the expert interview in media industry / production studies as "meeting between professionals". Whereas the access to industry figures and to their knowledge on production modes remains a challenge, 'quality series' work as a common conversational topic I can both contribute to and use as starting point. By incorporating first findings and by researching on recent trends in German series production, I assume the expert's role to some extent as well, though at the same time I aim to step back and let the interviewees yield issues in the only roughly guided conversations.

The interviewed producers, writers and commissioning editors have been selected mainly through two case studies representing different practices and attempts of German 'quality series' and crucial production contexts. The historical series *Deutschland 83* (2015-) about an East German spy in the West German army travelled successfully, even conquering Anglo-Saxon markets. Its first season premiered on niche pay TV channel Sundance TV in the US, which was involved on the margins of the developing process, too<sup>2</sup>. Only several months later it started running on the ad-funded, commercial broadcaster RTL, with rather disappointing viewing figures for this mainstream context. The announced second and third seasons have been ordered by Amazon Prime. Thus far, *Deutschland 86* and *89* stand for emerging local, German content by transnational, US dominated SVOD and pay TV providers, new players in the German TV landscape.

1 Research project "'Quality TV Series' as Discourse and Practice: Self-Theorizing in the German TV Series Industry", funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

2 See protocol on the talk by the showrunner of *Deutschland 83* at the European TV Drama Series Lab 2016.

The second example, *Die Stadt und die Macht* (2015; the title means 'The City and the Power'), about an idealistic lawyer becoming mayoral candidate in Berlin's corrupt local politics is mainly viewed as a prime-time event mini-series within the federally structured public-service network ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten / Das Erste*). This production context has been frequently criticized in the 'quality series' discourse, but is still very relevant for German TV fiction due to its high production output (Krüger 2017). By intermixing political and family drama, *Die Stadt und die Macht* approaches rather rare genres in public-service series and hints at influences by internationally acclaimed political drama shows. Furthermore, it represents fictional, serial depictions of the German capital (Eichner/Mikos 2017) that have been discussed as a brand at the observed industry workshops and appears as main setting of German approaches to 'quality TV' (*Babylon Berlin*; *Im Angesicht des Verbrechens*, 2010; *You Are Wanted*, 2017-2018; *Dogs of Berlin*, 2018).

Both *Die Stadt und die Macht* and *Deutschland 83* served as case studies at *Winterclass Serial Writing and Producing* and *European TV Drama Series Lab*. Participant observations at these advanced training sessions by *Erich Pommer Institute* in or near Berlin enlarge my empirical inquiry. For my production study and, differently, for the 'professional' participants the workshops are contact zones, to put it with John Thornton Caldwell (in Vonderau 2013). As well as in other industry events on TV series producing in Germany and Europe (for instance *Racconti* by IDM Film Funding in South Tyrol), at *Winterclass* and *European TV Drama Series Lab* participants and experts from different countries assemble. Especially the *European TV Drama Series Lab* aims at "cultural encounters" (Bondebjerg 2016) within European industries—and beyond. Many of the lecturing experts come from the US and speak about production practices there.

Exchanges between people from different countries and television industries still often framed as national can proceed in production, for instance, when the advice of non-German producers is asked for. Speaking with Arjun Appadurai (1996), we can make out *ethnoscapes*, globalization processes in respect to people. The practitioners' negotiations and practices are potentially linked to *techno-, finance-, land- and mediascapes* as well: They partly conquer and adapt production techniques associated with non-German 'quality series', such as the writers' room. They deal with a financial globalization by referring to coproductions such as *The Team* (2015-) or hoping for new global outlets. And they discuss *landscapes*

with global appeal and still German specificity, such as, arguably, Berlin.

Appadurai's multi-dimensional globalization scapes is one theory that appears particularly fruitful to frame the analysed industry discourse and its transnationalism on different levels. Another one is the approach of *glocalization* (Robertson 1998, Esser 2014), as global or at least Western dimensions are accompanied by local and national issues, particularly when it comes to ascriptions and critical reflection on 'German' television and the issue of adaptation. Adaptations are explored in respect to contents, their programming and production modes. The simultaneity of global and local impulses does also characterize the practitioners' definitions, attributions and references of 'quality series'. I firstly want to discuss these attributions in greater detail before turning to the historical argumentations and, finally, the negotiations of production cultures.

### 3. 'QUALITY SERIES': DEFINITIONS, ATTRIBUTIONS AND REFERENCES

At the observed industry workshops, frequently the term 'quality series' or related ones such as 'high end drama series' are used. Correspondingly, a session with Annette Hess, well-known writer of historical drama series *Weissensee* (2010-) and *Ku'damm 56 / 59* (2015 / 2018), was titled 'developing quality TV in Germany' (Erich Pommer Institut 2016). In this respect, the industry events discursively reconstruct and reinforce such terminology (Habscheid 2009: 81) originating from the commercial context of US television industry (Feuer et al. 1984, Hißnauer and Klein 2012).

The interviewees are confronted by the term 'quality series' through my introduction. Sometimes they are critical of this wording or distance themselves from it<sup>3</sup>, but very often they use it with great naturalness. Very frequently, they associate these series with US-American ones, differing them from German productions. The examples they refer to and by which they indirectly define 'quality series' mostly include well-known ones, such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013)<sup>4</sup>. Corresponding 'prototypes' have dominated discourses in the feuilleton but also in the German-speaking academia (Gormász 2015). As transnational blockbusters (Eichner 2013) they are linked to *mediascapes*, the media in global cultural flows (Appadurai 1996).

3 See interviews 10 and interview 3.

4 See interview 1.

Such a transnational attention to US TV is hardly new but a crucial characteristic of (West) German TV history. As for many decades German and US-American series have been broadcasted simultaneously, it seems quite natural, that they have often been taken as main reference later (Bleicher et al. 1993: 38-9, Hickethier 1998: 356-7, Mikos 2016b). However, the glorification of US 'quality series' (not only within the TV industry) may be a rather young development. Whereas in former times, anti-Americanism or reservations of a commercial 'cultural industry' shaped the attitude towards US-American 'soap operas' in German society to a great extent (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2011, Lederer 2015), now admiration for US 'quality series' clearly seems to dominate. If these programmes are at all 'bad' – which is how the interviewed commissioning editor by NDR, Northern German Broadcasting (*Norddeutscher Rundfunk*) part of public-service network ARD, phrases it in his talk of "bad American examples"<sup>5</sup> – they are, insofar as their appreciation and supposed quality arguably puts a lot of pressure on TV makers in Germany, particularly on the ones in public service television. 'Quality' and 'culture' namely belong to the broadcasting mandate of public-service ARD and ZDF (Bundestag 2006, ARD 2015).

However, a conceptualization of 'quality TV' as a primarily public service as it could be found in former evaluations (e.g. Hickethier 1998, 451f.) hardly enters my inquiries. Rather, the supposed public-service aspiration for socially relevant issues can work as a negative criterion<sup>6</sup>. Often, public-service content is only indirectly included though Scandinavian, in particular Danish productions<sup>7</sup>. Such "Nordic Noir" (Gamula and Mikos 2014, Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015), that have actually often been co-financed by ZDF's subsidiary ZDF enterprise (Waade and Hansen 2017), underlines that the transnational dimensions of the 'quality' discourse in the German TV industry do not only affect US productions.

The transnational references to Danish, US-American and sometimes British series often come with a comparison to German TV fiction, wherein the discourse bears global traits. Often, the German cases work as the other, the counterpart to 'quality TV'. The dependency on the other in the conceptualization of 'quality' (Frizzoni 2014) as well as Michael Billig's *banal nationalism*, according to which every form of imagined community and national identity contains a dimension of "us the nation" and "them the foreigners" (Billig 1995: 61), might

be seen in this confrontation. Besides the argumentation that Germany lags far behind the foreign 'quality' content, there are also praise for the high value of German television among some practitioners, possibly defending their own work. Here, 'quality TV' is at least seen as an also German field and transferred in a national context.

The interviewed commissioning editor for ad-funded broadcaster RTL on *Deutschland 83* and now freelance producers for the following seasons classifies especially *Tatort* (1970-) as 'our quality TV' (whereby the implied we very likely stands for Germans)<sup>8</sup>. This long-running, highly popular format (Hißnauer et al. 2014, Eichner and Waade 2015, Göbel-Stolz 2016) consists of single, self-contained 90-minute episodes with different local investigation team and in almost each case concluded crime stories. Thereby, it exemplifies the *Reihe*, the hybrid of TV films and series and a specific characteristic of the German TV fiction. Several interviewees make out 'quality TV', if at all, in such *Reihen* as well as in single *TV films*, highlighting their relevance in the German setting<sup>9</sup>. A serial storytelling across several episodes appears less established, although slowly on the rise<sup>10</sup>.

Beside the ongoing dramatic continuity, the practitioners ascribe other features of storytelling to 'quality series', indirectly evoking Thompson's criteria (Thompson 1996). For instance, the development producer and dramaturg, involved in political drama *Die Stadt und die Macht* for production company *Real Film Berlin*, highlights character-painting: Protagonists would become more "ambivalent, unfathomable, complex, multifaceted and surprising". Furthermore, he detects a "dynamic of narration". Upon my request he explains this attribution: "By dynamic I mean one has to bring the audience much more to an emotional variety, creating amplitudes in the emotional addressing. To speed up, but then let the viewer alone". He arguably suggests that 'quality series' narrate in a more diversified, less formulaic and gridlocked way. The constituted "emotional variety" may be highly linked to the character painting emphasizing protagonists' crisis Achilles' heel. "But if you watch German TV series, often there will be such an assonance. Sort of you think, okay, it keeps on going, it does not make your blood boil", the development producer attributes to German productions<sup>11</sup>.

5 Interview 5.

6 Interview 9.

7 See interview 6.

8 Interview 3. I only paraphrase this interviewee as she did not allow me to record the interview.

9 Interview 4.

10 Interview 12.

11 Interview 1.

The commissioning editor by NDR argues likewise when he claims that many series in public-service ARD and ZDF would only be conducive "to viewers' need for harmonization". His accentuation of character painting as crucial narrative element of 'quality series' very much reminds us of the development producer's reasoning and comparison:

[...] the whole discussion about the brokenness of characters [...] meanwhile has arrived in the editorial offices. But if I remember, how we tried to remain the identificatory positive heart of characters particularly with series protagonists-. With figures how they are presented in *Six Feet Under* and, obviously, *Breaking Bad*: That is, of course, a totally different level, another, shall we say, brokenness, ambivalence, contrariness<sup>12</sup>.

In addressing this complexity, the editor seems to criticize narrative traditions and story development practices especially in the public-service television to which the personal pronoun "we" very likely refers to. Furthermore, he adds historical dimensions to his self-theorizing and -reflection: "If I remember". Having worked within different broadcasters of the ARD network for several decades, the recently retired commissioning editor himself is a personification of TV history. But he is not the only one bringing up former production conditions and traditions as reasons why the historical dimension of the analysed discourse needs further attention.

#### 4. GONE 'QUALITY SERIES' AND THE SINGLE PIECE: HISTORICAL ARGUMENTATIONS

The practitioners' transnational discourse on 'quality series' is widened to a discussion of Germany's television past. The historical dimensions are used to locate series from Germany and to explain their current state and quality. At first, historical references can be found out in the mention of older 'quality' productions. Sometimes, this citation challenges and relativizes the deficient impression. "What annoys me, in the discussion on series' quality: one does always one-sidedly take the BBC examples and the American ones into account, not seeing that, indeed, there are approaches to quality in German series history", the commissioning editor by NDR

12 Interview 5.

states. He points to some former instances such as *Acht Stunden sind kein Tag* (*Eight Hours Are Not a Day*, 1972) by Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, or, in particular, *Kir Royal* (1985) and *Monaco Franze – Der ewige Stenz* (1983), parodies of Munich's jet set life in the 1980s, associated with director Helmut Dietl<sup>13</sup>. Looking back, the interviewed scriptwriter, involved in the early development of *Die Stadt und die Macht*, addresses a certain attitude and touches upon former production conditions: "Germany as a TV nation has been braver and more ahead" than today, he assumes in reference to the West German science fiction media satire *Das Millionenspiel* (1970). Interestingly, the writer names a TV film, but not series. In respect to today's fiction programmes, he correspondingly states: "the German TV film, there is really excellent stuff"<sup>14</sup>. Again, the single piece is regarded as the main quality area in German television.

The tendency to the single TV film stems from more general, cultural traditions if we follow the historical argumentation by writer-producer of *Deutschland 83*:

This has something to do with the value pyramid in Germany [...] the supreme discipline has always been the cinema feature film, then the TV film some distance behind, then a long time nothing and then the series as object of utility. [...] If we sort by *E-Kultur* und *U-Kultur*, serious, high culture and entertaining, popular culture, series clearly were allocated to the later<sup>15</sup>.

The commissioning editor by NDR very similarly explains the tradition that "series do not play an essential role in Germany" with "cultural-historical reasons", as he puts it: "It has to do with German culture, with a certain incapacity to integrate entertainment into an understanding of culture as well". He continues by paraphrasing his former superior at *Radio Bremen* (a local broadcaster of ARD network) and confronting Germany with Great Britain:

If you want to know how German television is you have to look at the two great classics, in the UK and in Germany, Shakespeare and Goethe. Goethe

13 Interview 5. Some current 'quality series' approaches from Germany apparently attempt to tie on these traditions, instantly the announced sequel of feature film series hybrid *Das Boot* (1981 / 1985) or, more indirectly, *Babylon Berlin*, in rudimentarily echoing Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980).

14 Interview 4.

15 Interview 6.

is educational theatre, whereas Shakespeare integrates popular theatre to a great extent<sup>16</sup>.

The low regard for series within German television, possibly resulting from such a traditional differentiation from “low” entertainment, could be seen in their frequent context of access prime time in West German television history, beyond actual prime time. The interviewee highlights the relevance of this public-service *Vorabend* time slot (Hickethier 1998: 357). Until the introduction of commercial television in the 1980s, it was the only place for TV commercials and had a certain reputation if we follow him:

In the ad-funded TV sections then – I have been working in this area for my whole life – there was this nice saying: You, meaning we, are the whores walking the streets so that the older brother can study. Therefore, delivering money for programmes of a little higher quality<sup>17</sup>.

In these words (whose mode of expression seems to belong to a specific time and work environment), again, the low regard for serial TV fiction in Germany becomes apparent.

Beside historic-cultural traditions that may have been shaping series from Germany, the practitioners bring up more concrete policies and practices in the past, in particular a certain programme work and target group orientation. “There was a paradigm shift, towards absolute entertainment, mainstream and the mainstream capacity in the sense that the widest possible, mostly older audience is reached”, the WDR commissioning editor involved as executive producer for ARD joint editorial office (*Gemeinschaftsredaktion*) in *Die Stadt und die Macht* sums up<sup>18</sup>. Like others, he locates the crucial change in the 1980s and 1990s when commercial channels started to broadcast<sup>19</sup>. His former colleague from NDR thematises the strategy by Günther Struwe, programme director of ARD between 1992 and 2008, to counter the 14 to 49 target audience the commercial, ad-funded broadcasters, particularly RTL, have been focussing on:

Struwe with a view to the actual demography in Germany [...] confronted this consciously, through

*Degeto* films on Friday, the famous Neubauer dramas (*Neubauer-Schinken*) and things like that [...] the German series was shaped by this in a special way. One can see this on the Tuesday time slot very well. [...] The crucial pattern of the Tuesday series consists in a middle-aged woman losing her husband, then having a new existence again<sup>20</sup>.

Aside from 14 to 49 year olds as ‘advertising-relevant’ target group (now very often expanded up to 59 year olds) this statement contains other references to historically developed production conditions of German series: *Degeto* is an important subsidiary by ARD producing fictional films and series. It has often been associated with particular melodramas starring, among others, the formerly very popular actress Christine Neubauer, to which the interviewee refers with “Neubauer-Schinken”. The later expression is clearly negative. “Tuesday series” relates to ARD’s only weekly prime time slot for fictional series, apart from the Sunday night reserved for the crime shows *Tatort* and *Polizeiruf 110* (1971-), hybrids of series and single TV films. Alongside the aspect age and the linked consideration that ARD and particularly its “Tuesday series” address a rather old viewership, the aspect gender appears relevant in the quotation. The rather negatively assessed programmes, traced backed to the specific target group orientation, seem to be not only old-fashioned but at the same time ‘female’. Interestingly, the commissioning editor does not criticize the omnipresent genre of crime as other critics from the television industry do (Herzog 2012), but rather melodramas (represented by “*Degeto* films” and “Neubauer-Schinken”). This focus may tie on certain patterns to devaluate ‘female’ culture (Hipfl 1995: 155f). More concretely, it is due to the shape of ARD’s “Tuesday series”: Usually, these are not crime shows but rather light family series (Mikos 2016a: 171) with an episodic structure such as *Um Himmels Willen* (2002-), a very popular cheerful comedy about the constant battle between nuns and the mayor of a fictional Bavarian town.

The interviewed development producer who has worked as commissioning editor for commercial broadcaster Sat.1 several years ago, discusses a bygone target group and programme policy, too, that may have caused contemporary problems in producing ‘quality series’ and gaining a younger audience. However, his benchmark are rather commercial broadcasters in Germany and their intensive programming of licensed U.S. series in the 2000s (Mikos 2016a), what, again,

16 Interview 5.

17 Interview 5.

18 Interview 10.

19 Interview 9.

20 Interview 5.

points towards transnational and glocal traits of the industry discourse on 'quality series'. "[N]ot only among the public-service ones but among the ad-funded, too one realized much too late what a huge qualitative step was happening worldwide", he states in general and continues:

Series such as *Ally McBeal*, *The Sopranos* or *Sex and the City* tried to do new things, in their storytelling [...]. It remained a feuilleton phenomenon, [...] few people recognized. [...] Much too long one banked on the mainstream audience, what worked well a long time, in respect to viewing figures.

Some of the series named as instances for the allegedly higher quality were relatively successfully shown on German-speaking ad-funded free-TV in the early 2000s, a time when according to the development producer "particularly the commercial broadcasters started to purchase these new [...] US series"<sup>21</sup>. Other programmes, particularly the ones with an ongoing dramatic continuity and complex storylines, hardly gained a bigger viewership or remained totally unnoticed within linear TV. Still, the longstanding rule that audiences in Germany prefer German fiction content arguably stopped at this time (Schawinski 2008: 87-92). Furthermore, as Eschke highlights, the series imports were "much cheaper than in-house productions". So very likely, economic developments, in particular the orientation towards profit maximization by media conglomerates owning the ad-funded stations, and not only the 'quality' of some content, resulted in the negligence of German series aside public-service broadcasting.

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that at least rudimentarily the commercial stations, such as the public-service ones, tried to react to the supposed rise of US 'quality TV' by developing their own 'quality' content: Sat.1 instantly with crime miniseries *Blackout – Die Erinnerung ist tödlich* (2005) or ZDF with *KDD – Kriminaldauerdienst* (2007-2010), both experiments in the popular genre crime and in serial storylines within a primetime programme (Rothmund 2011). But mostly, such few programmes did not reach the expected audience. Possibly, they were too innovative at their time, the commissioning editor of *Deutschland 83* assumes in respect to *Blackout* and *Im Angesicht des Verbrechens*, later a highly-praised drama crime serial on the Russian mafia in Berlin, premiering at Berlin Film Festival but gaining rather low viewing figures in its public-service broadcasting. But it

21 Interview 1.

was arguably also the dominant practice in audience targeting, namely the relying on the big "mainstream audience" the development producer points out, that was part of these failures.

Combined with production conditions and traditions such as a certain target group policy the practitioners often deal with challenges and restrictions in story development. For instance, writers taking part or lecturing at the observed *Winterclass* exposed the problems of having to narrate in a very comprehensible way, to satisfy the supposed needs of an older audience. I want to discuss production cultures as a crucial object of the practitioners' discourse on 'quality series' towards the end of this paper.

## 5. PRODUCTION CULTURES OF 'QUALITY SERIES'

Much more than feuilleton debates, the practitioners deliberate the quality of production, besides content, when they negotiate 'quality series'. Here again, their discourse is transnational and glocal, as they negotiate German and non-German production modes and explore the adaptation of the later in a national setting. Drawing on Appadurai, the global flow is expanded to work methods and to techno-and financescapes. Particularly techniques in story and script development and the financing of this phase are explored. Surely, this focus results from the selection of my interviewees and the approach of the observed workshops: They mainly address writers and producers. But in general, particular modes of story development, above all the writers' room and the showrunner, the writer-producer hybrid recruiting and leading this collective (Redvall 2013, Phalen and Osellame 2012), are often regarded as crucial characteristics of 'quality TV' (Schlütz 2016: 85). In official versions or "publicly disclosed deep texts", to put it with John Thornton Caldwell (2008: 347), representatives from the German television and film industry have partly attributed the showrunner and writers' room to themselves, for instance in the case of *Deutschland 83* (Lückerath 2015). But more often, the practitioners' discourse is about the absence of these ways of story development and about different practices that are sometimes traced back to historically developed traditions.

The NDR commissioning editor describes the common work of most series writers in Germany as follows: "[T]hey usually work on something else, they have to fulfil a certain portfolio [...]. They write an episode of *SOKO* or a children's

series and so on"<sup>22</sup>. The crime format *SOKO* (1978–), now consisting of various local spin-offs, stands for the popular crime procedurals in German mainstream fiction. Such series with a self-contained plots per episode are still very often the normal case in serial TV fiction from Germany and can, unlike ongoing drama serials, be developed by one freelance writer, similar to TV movies (Schlütz 2016: 85). In this respect, the historically developed tendency to the single piece in German TV fiction has not only highly affected the dramaturgic structure of many series but also practices of story development.

The editor's words suggest that, furthermore, financial aspects are the decisive factor for such an individual, simultaneous work on different series episodes. He goes on: "So, a writer who concentrates on one project, led by a head writer [...] what would be necessary for such a writers' room [...] this is difficult to establish in Germany because of the production conditions for writers." They would have to be paid by another scheme, he adds<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, existing and common production practices and structures complicate the more collective mode of story development in the writers' room.

At the training sessions by Erich Pommer Institute and at other industry panels the writers' room and the associated showrunner have often been discussed and, sometimes, rudimentarily been tried and practiced. However, the head of the *Winterclass Serial Writing and Producing*, who sometimes consults series production on the collaborative development process, argues, that many "so-called writers' rooms in Germany" would not have much in common with their role models in the US and the systematic story development there<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, his further argumentation and my broader research suggest, that the showrunner is only rarely and rudimentarily implemented in the German television and film industry. The project networks characterizing series production there according to the former sociological analysis by Arnold Windeler, Antje Lutz und Carsten Wirth (2001) usually do not include the superior showrunner, but consist of producer, writer and director. Whereas beyond Germany the director is often regarded as secondary in respect to television series (Caldwell 2008: 16), he or she appears as crucial element in this network which, again, may result from the traditional tendency to the single TV piece.

22 Interview 5.

23 Interview 5.

24 Interview 7.

As other interviewees<sup>25</sup>, the writer-producer of *Deutschland 83* criticizes this key position of the director, very likely not at least from his background. "Series are clearly a writer's medium and no director's medium. Script developments are long-running [...], collective processes, powered by writers", he says. In reference to the tendency to the single play he laments, "we do not have a real writers' culture, *Autorenkultur*, in Germany, in the range of series"<sup>26</sup>.

The development producer of *Die Stadt und die Macht* refers to another actor, indirectly included in the project network according to Windeler, Lutz und Wirth (2001), namely the commissioning editor, representing the broadcaster. He or she who would crucially shape the development process in Germany and make a broader adaption of writers' room and showrunner difficult: "That would have to change, otherwise a showrunner will not make sense"<sup>27</sup>. Like this interviewee, the TV makers often regard writers' room and showrunner as production modes enabling a greater power and creative freedom for writers. The latter is also conceptualized as guarantee for the 'one vision' (Redvall 2013: 156-7), holding different episodes together and elaborating the 'core' of the project. For instance, the writer-producer of *Deutschland 83* argue correspondingly. "Theoretically, writer, producer, creator got to be the centre, [...] If the centre does not sustain, the series will fall apart and [...] and finally, in the best case, you will have a mediocre compromise", he states<sup>28</sup>.

Correspondingly, practitioners do often criticize the supposed lack of a showrunner and of a clear 'one vision' in many series productions from Germany. The emerging writer of low-budget politics satire *Eichwald, MdB* (2015-) even compares them with "Frankenstein's monster" in an interview conducted beyond the mentioned case studies: "everybody is sewing something together. The leg comes from the one, the hand from the other. Somebody is painting a head on it. And finally the director [...] makes his [or her] own thing out of it"<sup>29</sup>.

In respect to *Die Stadt und die Macht*, different involved TV makers reflect critically upon the corresponding tendency to compromise and the many voices in the development process<sup>30</sup>. For instance, the development producer who critically

25 Interview 9.

26 Interview 6.

27 Interview 1.

28 Interview 6.

29 Interview 2.

30 Interview 11.

discussed this case study at *Winterclass Serial Writing and Producing* 2015 declares:

Different visions of this series developed out of the editorial, this great construct [...] what is a problem for the creatives [...] to meet these different approaches [...]. Out of this some rotten compromises emerged which can be seen in the series<sup>31</sup>.

Production cultures do very much shape the series text we could conclude from this statement. Probably, the federal structures of broadcaster ARD intensified the multitude and complexity of the development process in the discussed case. In ARD respectively *Das Erste* up to eight commissioning editors could have a say according to the development producer who makes clear they did not speak with one voice in *Die Stadt und die Macht*.

The federalism visible in this production does generally shape public-service broadcasting and the television industry in Germany to a great extent. Thereby, it could be regarded as important peculiarity of production cultures as well as a challenge for approaches to 'quality series' there. However, a multitude of voices is frequently ascribed to more centrally, less federally structured institutions such as ZDF, too. Especially when it comes to expensive, ambitious 'quality' programmes, different parties are likely to be interested in taking part.

The development producer of *Die Stadt und die Macht* speaks of 'criminological, investigative skills' the producers must have to find out how much influence one commissioning editor has in each committee. According to him, the bureaucracy of public-service TV furthermore makes it difficult for the producers and writers to bring in new concept papers for series.

You have to wait until the committee comes together. It takes a lot of time [...] It is wearing you down [...] This is one reasons why relatively few money is paid for concepts. The risk is simply quite big. [...] The risk is shifted to the writers to some extent<sup>32</sup>.

Like this interviewee, many practitioners bring up economic factors in their 'quality series' discourse. The script development and particularly its very early phase are underpaid these voices suggest, again drawing a transnational comparison.

Several times, practitioners hint at the comparably low amount of money spent on story development and scriptwriting within the German television industry. For instance, the *Deutschland 83* writer-producer names "his own reckoning" according to which Germany approximately two to three per cent of the budget are spend on story development, "in contrast to approximately seven to eight per cent in Scandinavia or ten per cent in the US"<sup>33</sup>. This comparison illustrates the often visible tendency to idealize production conditions in US 'quality series', a tendency known from other European production contexts (cf. Pjajčiková and Szczepanik 2016). Still, this statements underlines the relatively precarious position of the writer within the German system. Furthermore, this argumentation points towards broader dimensions of the practitioners' discourse on 'quality series', reaching beyond quality valuations of content.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Particularly in the practitioners' critic of the production cultures it becomes apparent, that the discourse on 'quality series' serves as a starting point to deal with more general issues, including power hierarchies and economical questions in production networks. Obviously, it depends on each actor's point of view how the production conditions and modes are discussed and evaluated. Still, not only writers but also representatives of other professional groups emphasize the often marginal status of writers within television series production in Germany<sup>34</sup>. In addressing such concrete issues and challenges of the production process, the industry discourse on quality series is broader and more practice-led than many corresponding debates in the German feuilleton. Still, a focus on narration as well as references to US and, more rarely, Scandinavian series do also characterize the discourse within the German television industry. The practitioners tend to attribute certain features of storytelling to these mainly non-German productions, whereas they often perceive the German ones as backward and inferior. However, increasingly they identify a 'new wave' of German series, partly capturing PR narratives by production companies and broadcasters (Lückerath 2014), but also reflecting on crucial changes. Deficits, still diagnosed, are traced back to former developments and traditions. Hereby, the practitioners' discourse

31 Interview 1.

32 Interview 1.

33 Interview 6, also interview 9.

34 See interview 8.

bears historical and national traits beside transnational ones, which is why it could be labelled as glocal.

Ambitions to develop 'quality series', instantly coming to light in the observed industry workshops, are linked to transnational developments beyond Germany and react towards a certain crisis. "Discussions on quality are always opened if something is not successful", the NDR commissioning editor argues<sup>35</sup>. Well-known formulas in series from Germany often do not work anymore among specific, such as younger viewers. At the same time, the ongoing dramatic continuity characterizing most US-American and Scandinavian 'quality TV' remains a challenge for established broadcasters and their often rather conservative, historically developed programming policy. Many recent US production would be too special through their issues, settings or their focus on serial storytelling across several episodes to be shown in linear German mainstream TV, several lecturers from the industry point out at the observed industry workshops<sup>36</sup>. The practitioners' discourse on 'quality series' is led in the face of such developments beyond Germany, and, furthermore, deals with the potential travelling of German content, due to rather recent distribution options for 'subtitled drama' in non-German, Anglo-American markets.

Against the background of the shifted production market and transnational developments there currently may be the need for 'quality series' from Germany. But, besides aspirations for transnational markets, these media texts and their production are still very much shaped by a national orientation and distribution. The recent strategy many established broadcasters and especially the public-service ones pursue is to produce event-miniseries with relatively few episodes, such as *Die Stadt und die Macht*, *Das Verschwinden* (2017) or *Ku'damm 56*, and to broadcast them beyond regular time slots, frequently showing two episodes together. Economic reasons and broadcasters' / producers' fear to risk longer-running 'quality series' with an ongoing dramatic continuity may be the decisive factors for the corresponding hesitation in the approach to 'quality series'. Additionally, these sometimes very brief miniseries draw on the tradition of so-called *Mehrteiler*, TV films in usually two to three parts, and the "event television" (Cooke 2016). Again, the tendency to the single piece in German TV fiction becomes visible. 'Quality series' in the German context, we might conclude, must be examined in the light of such historical traditions. If we fol-

low the practitioners' discourse, it also due to historically developed production cultures that the production of 'quality series' remains a challenge for the television industry in Germany.

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35 Interview 5.

36 See interview 1 as well.

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*Breaking Bad* (2008–2013)  
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*Tatort* (1970-)  
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*Um Himmels Willen* (2002)  
*You Are Wanted* (2017-2018)  
*Weissensee* (2010-)

## INTERVIEWS

Interview 1, with development producer / now freelance dramaturg, Real Film Berlin, Berlin, October 6 2015.  
Interview 2, with freelance writer, Berlin, May 13 2016.  
Interview 3, with freelance producer / former commissioning editor for RTL, Berlin, June 16 2016.  
Interview 4, with freelance writer, Berlin (by phone, at the request of the interviewee), June 16 2016.  
Interview 5, with commissioning editor, NDR, Northern German Broadcasting, Hamburg, July 1 2016.  
Interview 6, with producer and writer / CEO UFA Fiction, Berlin, May 15 2017.  
Interview 7, with the head of Winterclass Serial Writing and Producing, Berlin, September 26 2017.  
Interview 8, with producer and CEO, Bantry Bay, Berlin (by phone, at the request of the interviewee), February 2 2018.  
Interview 9, with three freelance scriptwriters, Berlin, February 14 2018.  
Interview 10, with commissioning editor, WDR, Cologne, March 8 2018.  
Interview 11, with freelance writer, Berlin, March 15 2018.  
Interview 12, with commissioning editor, TNT Serie, Munich, March 20 2018.

