

# AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE SURVIVAL OF QUEBEC'S TÉLÉROMANS AS PROXIMITY SERIES

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## ABSTRACT

Quebec is a prime example of a province with a strong attachment to proximity series. Top-rated TV shows in Quebec are almost always of local provenance, and some productions even set world records for market penetration. Moreover, many long-running serialized dramas called *téléromans* still garner some of the highest ratings in the province. And yet, almost nothing has been written about these contemporary *téléromans*, since most studies

now focus on shorter high-budget TV series—the most legitimated fictions that may appeal to global audiences. In this paper, I provide a textual analysis of *L'échappée* (TVA, 2016-) and *District 31* (Ici Radio-Canada Télé, 2016-), two TV serials that attract some of the highest ratings every week. I shall determine the themes and “local elements” (Dhoest 2013) that may have contributed to their success with local audiences. The pervasive popularity of *téléromans* in Quebec seems to contradict—or, at the very least, complicate—the general assumption that due to the transnational circulation and digitization of “high end” TV dramas (Nelson 2007), people have lost interest in local/regional productions, and that TV series have therefore ceased to foster local/national forms of identification in smaller communities.

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Studies have shown that TV viewers usually prefer domestic fictions, mostly because they represent archetypes, cultural practices, social relations, norms, values, locations and lifestyles that are perceived as familiar (Straubhaar 2007, 2010), and that may therefore promote a form of everyday/banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Castelló *et al.* 2009; Dhoest 2013; Boisvert forthcoming). This finding undeniably applies to Quebec, the only Canadian province with a majority Francophone population. Quebec may indeed be considered one of the most telling examples of an attachment to proximity television. The popularity of local TV programs in this province is almost without parallel; while top-rated TV shows in English Canada are usually US programs, in Quebec, they are almost invariably of local provenance (see Raboy 1994: 71-2; Nguyễn-Duy 2012; Attallah 2013). Some local productions even attained world record ratings<sup>1</sup>. In 2017, some programs from the two most popular Francophone broadcast networks (Ici Radio-Canada Télé and TVA) still attracted between one and two million people, a very high number for a province of approximately 8 million inhabitants.

Among local successes, long-running serialized dramas called *téléromans* still garner some of the highest ratings. *Téléromans*—“Quebec’s distinctive TV fictional genre” (Picard 2011: 181)—are annual dramatic series (*séries dramatiques annuelles*), which means that they are yearlong TV dramas containing more than 20 episodes per season, and produced with lower budgets per episode. In terms of narrative structure, these fictions are similar to American prime-time soap operas and *telenovelas*. They are serialized fictions characterized by a large ensemble cast, a realist aesthetic and—at least traditionally—a focus on the private sphere (Ross 1976; Desaulniers 1996: 67). However, unlike American soaps, *téléromans* are always broadcast in the evening, in prime time. As a form of serialized drama, *téléromans* are made of open-ended episodes, and thus, to borrow Christine Geraghty’s definition of soap operas, “[t]ime rather than action becomes the basis for organising the narrative” (1991: 11). Apart from their high number of episodes and their lower budgets, Quebec *téléromans* are mostly filmed indoors, whether in studio or on location, even though they now regularly contain exterior scenes. Finally, not unlike American soap operas, which revolve

primarily around talk (Geraghty 1991; Allen 1995: 20; Gledhill 1997: 371), *téléromans* also perpetuate a traditional serialized form of TV narrative where *visuality* is “subjected to *orality*” (Barrette and Picard 2014: 116).

In a media environment defined by transnational flows of TV programs and the hegemony of US productions, the impressive popularity of Quebec *téléromans* might be explained by their “cultural proximity”. This notion refers to the commonly held assumption that these kinds of programs represent “shared history and cultural values” (Castelló *et al.* 2009: 3), which then explains people’s tendency to prefer these “local, nonimperial cultural products” (Straubhaar 2007: 26). In other words, the enduring attachment to local *téléromans* in Quebec has to be attributed, at least in part, to the audience’s perception that these TV fictions “are as close to them as possible in language, ethnic appearance, dress, style, humor, historical reference, and shared topical knowledge” (Straubhaar 2007: 26)—or, to be more accurate, are as close to them as possible in terms of how they *perceive themselves*. According to Alexander Dhoest, soaps (or their local equivalent) are even more frequently interpreted as “representations of ‘ordinary’, everyday life in the nation” (Dhoest 2013: 53).

And yet, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost nothing has been written about contemporary Quebec *téléromans*, since recent studies have disproportionately focused on shorter high-budget TV serials, usually referred to as local “Quality” dramas. By doing so, scholars have tried to legitimate the study of local TV fictions, but by the same token, they have tended to overlook long-running *téléromans* whose ratings still often surpass those of “Quality” short-running series. The study of Quebec *téléromans*, which was central to local TV studies until the 1990s but has significantly decreased since, appears more crucial than ever if we want to understand the complexity and multidimensionality of our current TV landscape.

In order to better understand the content of contemporary *téléromans*, this article provides a textual analysis of *L’échappée* (*The Breakaway*) (TVA, 2016-) and *District 31* (Ici Radio-Canada Télé, 2016-), two annual serial dramas currently broadcast on the most popular Francophone networks in Quebec, and which attract some of the highest ratings in the province every week. Through a close analysis of the stories, themes, and discourses provided by these popular fictions, I shall determine the “local elements” (Dhoest 2013) that may have contributed to their success with local audiences. These elements, such as the use of local stars, the representation of strong, assertive women and of regional identities, the

1 According to Gaëtan Tremblay: “A US TV series would need to be watched by 150 million people in order to top some Quebec TV hits from the 1990s, such as *Lance et compte* or *Les filles de Caleb*.” [my translation] (Tremblay 1993: B8; quoted in Bouchard 1998: 41) Original quote: “Il faudrait [...] 150 millions de téléspectateurs à une série américaine sur son propre marché pour équivaloir au succès de *Lance et compte* ou des *Filles de Caleb*”.

search for communal bonding, and references to real-life events could be interpreted as local characteristics of “proximity series”.

## 1. L'ÉCHAPPÉE AND THE DISTANT PROXIMITY OF THE QUÉBÉCOIS RURAL IDENTITY

Created by renowned *téléroman* author Michelle Allen, *L'Échappée* (*The Breakaway*) has been broadcast on the most popular network in Quebec (TVA) since 2016. Now in its second season – each containing 24 episodes – *L'Échappée* continues to garner some of the highest ratings in the province. It attracts approximately 1.3 million viewers per episode (Numeris), and therefore finds itself almost every week in the top 5 programs<sup>2</sup>.

*L'Échappée* may be described as a rural soap, centred on the lives of people living in the small fictitious village of Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski. The story revolves, first and foremost, around the character of Brigitte Francoeur (Julie Perreault), a forty-year-old singer who on the cusp of adulthood left her village for the big city of Montreal, following her dream to become a singer-songwriter. By doing so, Brigitte left behind her daughter Jade who got raised by her older sister Noémie. The story of *L'Échappée* starts twenty years after these events, when Brigitte comes back to her hometown to attend her daughter's wedding. However, soon after she arrives, her best friend Agnes is murdered, which forces Brigitte to stay in her village. The title of the series refers to the youth centre where many of the characters work, and where Brigitte will eventually find purpose by teaching music and dramatic arts to troubled, morally wounded kids. Therefore, even though the story is mostly focused on adults, *L'Échappée* devotes considerable time to some of the teenagers living at the youth center, and develops many story arcs around the dramas and existential crises of these kids coming from broken homes. According to creator Michelle Allen, one of the goals of this *téléroman* was to show that “kids in

youth centres all have terrible and complex stories, and parents who are either present, absent, well-intentioned or very clumsy [...]” [my translation] (Lemieux 2016). Incidentally, the choice to set the story in a youth centre was also motivated by the network's willingness to attract younger demographics (Baillargeon 2016).

On a different note, the main character is played by local star Julie Perreault, who is known for her work on popular TV series of the past 15 years, such as *Minuit, le soir* (2005-2007) and *19-2* (2011-2015). Quebec's rich star system is emblematic of the population's feeling of cultural proximity with local media (Straw 2010; Czach 2012, 2016; Attallah 2013; Lee and York 2016). Consequently, among other factors, the popularity of *L'Échappée* can be attributed to its main actress, and also, more generally, to its large ensemble cast made of familiar faces, many of whom had previously worked on other popular series or *téléromans*.

### 1.1 The representation of a “progressively conservative” woman character

As a specific TV genre, *téléromans* usually revolve primarily around women characters. The main character in *L'Échappée* (Brigitte) may be defined as a strong, assertive, and independent woman, a narrative choice that is probably attributable to the still-predominantly female audience for long-running serials, and, more generally, to the pervasive perception of serialized dramas as “feminine” genres (Brunsdon 1995: 58). Brigitte is indeed represented as a freethinking, autonomous, sexually liberated woman, and her professional aspirations as a musician are shown as something that distinguishes her from the rest of her family and friends at Sainte-Alice. Brigitte is also portrayed as impulsive: she often argues with relatives, and is not emotionally stable, although it will soon be revealed that her pregnancy twenty years ago was the result of a sexual assault. This dramatic element therefore provides moral reasons for her lack of emotional commitment and “maternal instincts”, at least at the beginning of the story.

Brigitte's existential narrative is therefore revealing of the kinds of ideological inflections regularly found in Quebec *téléromans*: these fictions have to appear progressive in their representation of strong independent women, while often re-promoting traditional gender norms in order to appeal to

2 *Unité 9* (*Unit 9*) (Ici Radio-Canada Télé 2012-) is an annual serial drama (*téléroman*) set in a prison for women, and is currently the most popular TV fiction in the province. However, for the purpose of this article, I have decided to focus on two other ratings hits, and mainly for two reasons: first, in order to study a *téléroman* from TVA, since this commercial broadcast network has usually been neglected by TV scholars. Secondly, unlike *L'Échappée* and *District 31*, *Unité 9* has already been the subject of some scholarly articles. For a detailed analysis of *Unité 9*, cf. Beaulieu 2016.

3 Original quote: “Les jeunes en centre ont tous des histoires terribles, complexes avec des parents présents, absents, bienveillants ou maladroits”.

a broader audience, a narrative convention that Mathieu de Wasseige has described as the “ideological balancing” (*balancement idéologique*) of broadcast networks (2013, 2014). By doing so, creators try to find some consensual middle ground in terms of the values embodied by protagonists. In *L'Échappée*, even though the main character is portrayed as an independent woman who has long been isolated from her family, the series starts when she comes back to her hometown and progressively reconnects with her relatives, especially with her daughter Jade. In that sense, the series focuses on a freethinking professional woman, all the while validating the traditional and essentialist definition of women as primarily “mothers”, since the main character will only achieve happiness once she finally acknowledges the importance of family, and makes peace with her identity *as a mother*. It is also through her volunteer work at the youth centre that Brigitte will find personal and artistic fulfilment. Indeed, as Jordan, her agent and ex-boyfriend, will confirm at the end of the first season, Brigitte has definitely found her “true voice” as an artist since she moved back to Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski:

[Jordan and Brigitte are having a beer and talk about their lives.]

**Jordan:** You haven't changed. [He laughs.] But your songs, they did!

**Brigitte:** You listened to them?

**Jordan:** Hmm hmm. Yeah. It's good. I was surprised.

**Brigitte** (smiling): Really?

**Jordan:** Hmm. Well, I don't mean that I was surprised your music was good, but...it's, hmm, it's more... raw. It's more sincere.

[Brigitte becomes suddenly serious, and she stares at the floor for a few seconds.]

**Brigitte:** No, but, I think this is what I needed: to come back here, with my family, with my daughter... after what happened to me. [my translation] (1.23)

At the beginning of the second season, Brigitte will also justify her desire to keep working with the kids at *L'Échappée* as a way to make up for her past failures as a mother. In sum, it is after she decides to stay in her village that Brigitte progressively commits to traditional values, such as family, communal bonding, generosity, or the love and devotion for others. In that sense, the character progressively aligns herself with values that are often considered “universal”, yet are also perceived as deeply rooted in the local Quebec culture, thus contributing to the popularity of this proximity series.

## 1.2 *L'Échappée* and the reproduction of a rural Québécois identity

The partial transformation of the main character's gender identity might have contributed to the “cultural proximity” of *L'Échappée*, yet its iconic rural setting is another important factor. Indeed, this *téléroman* represents rural communities as emblematic, in certain respects, of a traditional Québécois identity, most specifically through the representation of their capacity to create social bonds that seem almost impossible to reproduce in big cities. According to André Loiselle, Quebec films and TV series often rely on such a dichotomous view of the city and of rural regions; even today, in many series, “the rural continues to be constructed as either a salutary alternative to the chaos and meaninglessness of the modern city, or as historical evidence of an ontological identity for the *Québécois de souche*” (Loiselle 2009: 69). The choice to focus on Brigitte, the only character from the “big city” of Montreal, reinforces this opposition between Quebec's urban and rural identities. The fact that Brigitte will find emotional and artistic fulfilment in her village, not in Montreal, confirms this perception of rural areas as “salutary alternative[s] to the chaos and meaninglessness of the modern city” (Loiselle 2009: 69).

And yet, we should not jump to the conclusion that the village of Sainte-Alice is straightforwardly idealized in *L'Échappée*. As Loiselle (2009) argued, the representation of remote regions in Quebec dramas often oscillates between a form of idealization and demonization. Since the story focuses on crimes and broken youths, *L'Échappée* inevitably represents the downsides of living in a small community, where apparent solidarities can hide forms of prejudice and violent behaviours. For example, when Brigitte starts confessing to friends and relatives that she has been raped by David (one of the richest and most esteemed businessmen in the region), she realizes that some people do not believe her at first, and some even suggest she might be somewhat responsible because of her reputation as a “sexually promiscuous” woman. Moreover, since the story revolves around a youth center, this *téléroman* dedicates more narrative time to the stories of some of the teenagers, and by the same token, focuses on their violent, neglectful or distressed parents. As a result, this *téléroman* constructs the uncanny image of a village where almost no adult seems to be able to keep custody of their own kids. As is also typical of *téléromans* or TV soaps (Geraghty 1991), many male characters are portrayed as “villains” or, at the very least, as people whose gender identity is “toxic”

and patriarchal: for example, one recurrent character loses custody of his son because of his violent behaviour, while another is revealed to be a pedophile who sexually abused his step-daughter for many years. Moreover, David (Patrick Hivon) is clearly represented as the villain or “snake” of Sainte-Alice (Dumas 2017), a sociopathic, violent and murderous individual who is adept at manipulating everyone. Seen in this light, *L'Échappée* could barely be said to provide a one-dimensional, or idealized image of rural Quebec communities. Representations appear more ideologically ambivalent and critical, at once emphasizing the positive values of a close-knit community, while not diverting from social problems that happen in rural regions, as anywhere else. Moreover, the production company's official website describes Sainte-Alice-de-Rimouski as an “idyllic community with an immense talent for keeping up appearances” [my translation]<sup>4</sup>. By doing so, the series provides constant drama, a necessary feature of annual *téléromans*, while making sure that it might seem appealing both to rural and urban audiences.

However, even if we take these negative portrayals into account, the overall narrative seems to lean toward a validation of remote regions and of their capacity for cultural proximity. As mentioned earlier, Brigitte's personal journey conveys this vision of rural communities as more loving, caring, gratifying, “simple”, and genuine—in other words, more in line with “real values” and traditions. Similarly, during the first season, twenty-year-old Jade and Xavier complain about the massive migration of younger generations to “big cities”, which is interpreted as a form of betrayal of the land, a disregard for the socioeconomic survival of remote regions. Moreover, one story arc concerns a group of villagers who fight against a multinational gas company, Petrofor, which wants to exploit the region's fossil fuel reserves. According to a local journalist (Dumas 2016), this kind of story arc is frequently found in Quebec *téléromans* set in remote regions, as it helps to confirm their representation as altruistic communities that are more ecologically committed than urban ones.

According to Castelló and O'Donnell, local TV soaps often rely on iconic outdoor shots in order to attribute a specific identity to a national community: “these ‘moving pictures of the city’ [or village] produce what Giuliana Bruno calls a ‘haptic space’, ‘a tangible sense of space’ addressing ‘the movement of habitable sites’, trying to link motion to ‘emotion’” (Castelló and O'Donnell 2009: 57). *L'Échappée* contains such

outdoor shots, which help to localize the story, while poetically reminding us of the characters' attachment to the regional landscapes of the Bas-St-Laurent. Seen in this light, this contemporary *téléroman* confirms Loiselle's argument that:

[...] the rural space [has often been] constructed audio-visually, in films [...] as well as in television series [...], as the repository of the fundamental values of Quebec culture; where the real Quebec is situated. When the alienated urbanite goes back to the country it is to rediscover the values—embodied visually in trees and lakes and snow—that she has lost somewhere along the way through overexposure to the busy streets, noisy bars, inhuman office towers and foreign influences of the city. (2009: 68)

In sum, Brigitte's personal journey in *L'Échappée* seems to update—and thus to exemplify—the “proximity” narrative of a cultural and existential reawakening through the rediscovery of Quebec's rural “roots”.

## 2. DISTRICT 31 AND THE CULTURAL PROXIMITY OF DAILY TV SERIALS

On the very same day that *L'Échappée* was first broadcast on the commercial network TVA, the public service broadcaster Ici Radio-Canada Télé introduced an all-new daily *téléroman*, *District 31* (2016-). Broadcast during the first part of the evening, at 7 pm, four days a week, *District 31* is the most recent instalment in a long line of daily serials for the public network. Radio-Canada's two previous daily *téléromans*, led by renowned producer Fabienne Larouche, were set in a public school, and thus focused on the daily lives of teachers and teenagers. Counter to this narrative convention, *District 31* is a daily police drama focusing on the investigations of detectives working at the police station of the district 31. Once almost nonexistent in the province, police television dramas have become increasingly popular in Quebec since the 1990s, and led to some of the most critically acclaimed TV fictions of the past 20 years, such as *Omertà* (1996-1999), *Fortier* (2000-2004), *Le Gentleman* (2009-2013), and *19-2* (2011-2015). Seen in this light, the choice to create a new police daily *téléroman* could be interpreted as an attempt to galvanize what many considered to be a dying TV genre, in a context of cord-cutting, multi-platform and VOD practices. Incidentally, it is Luc Dionne, a renowned scriptwriter especially praised for his

4 Original quote: “[...] communauté idyllique qui a un immense talent pour sauver les apparences...” (Amalga, official website).

police drama *Omertà*, who created *District 31* and is now in charge of writing the scripts.

By choosing to adapt the crime genre to a daily format, all the while relying on a “quality” crew and a cast composed of well-known and promising young actors, the broadcaster and production company (Aetios) hoped to rejuvenate the popular form of the *téléroman*. Defying expectations, *District 31* soon became more than just another hit for the public broadcaster: it attracted the highest ratings ever for a daily *téléroman* (Therrien 2017), breaking records made during the so-called era of linear television. The series soon attracted a cult following: many people started to express strong emotional attachment for the series on social media platforms, passionately debating the latest developments regarding the love affair between the two main characters. This situation culminated during the hiatus between the first and second seasons. Fearing that the main characters would be written off the show, numerous fans threatened to stop watching if creators did such a thing, and some even signed petitions. The subsequent season-two death of Nadine (Magalie Lépine-Blondeau) (2.20), one of the two main characters, thus became one of the most talked-about TV events of the year.

### 2.1 Women-centric serials: the love of work... and the work of love

Even though the story is quite distinct from our other example (*L'Échappée*), the main character in *District 31* during the first season is also a strong, independent woman, Nadine Legrand (Magalie Lépine-Blondeau). Contemporary Quebec *téléromans* perpetuate a narrative convention shared by many other forms of serialized dramas, such as soap operas, which is to “[...] feature strong women in major roles [...]” (Geraghty 1991: 43). In *District 31*, within a few episodes, Nadine is indeed promoted as the new detective-lieutenant, which allows the series to focus on her extraordinary leadership despite her young age. Nadine thus embodies the archetype of the strong professional woman, while also displaying other gender traits traditionally attributed to women. For instance, even though she is the “boss”, and she is shown to be “tough” and exceptionally dedicated to her investigations, Nadine is also extraordinarily compassionate. Most importantly, she is authoritative yet always considerate, paying close attention to her colleagues and valuing their expertise. Her embodiment of some traditionally “feminine” attributes, such as a caring attitude, is condensely illustrated in a short scene during which she talks with the mother of a young boy who

has been abducted and later found dead. Even though the detectives were not able to save her son, the mother (Florence) insists on thanking Nadine for her caring support during the investigation. “You show such compassion for others,” Florence says, “and there is a gentleness in you that is so reassuring. Sometimes I tell myself that through all this drama, maybe it was my Theo who put you on my path. Almost as if he wanted to tell me, ‘With her, Mom, it’s gonna be okay. She’s gonna take care of you.’” [my translation] (1.44) This is followed by a close up shot of Nadine who is shown to be on the verge of tears.

At the beginning of the series, many scenes of dialogue also attest to pervasive prejudices against women in the workforce. Laurent Cloutier (Patrick Labbé), the former detective-lieutenant whom Nadine will replace, is shown to be extremely unpleasant, even aggressive towards her. Daniel (Gildor Roy), the sympathetic police commander, will accuse Laurent of treating Nadine differently because of her gender. The series thus seems to acknowledge social prejudices, such as gender inequality, in the professional sphere. That being said, the popularity of this daily serial drama is also attributable to the long love affair between Nadine and detective Patrick (Vincent Guillaume-Otis), also working at station 31. Comments on social media websites as well as in many articles reveal that the on-and-off love affair between the main characters was one of the main reasons for fans’ intense temporal and emotional investment. *District 31* thus recuperates popular archetypes of Quebec TV productions (the representation of strong-willed women and sensitive men) (Boisvert 2016), which may have contributed to its cultural proximity. However, the fact that the main character was a woman also probably motivated such an intense narrative focus on the characters’ love affair. Seen in this light, the series capitalizes on the audience’s request for strong women characters, and follows the long generic convention for soaps, which is to focus on changing relations “among [a] community of characters” (Allen 1995: 19). But by the same token, this *téléroman* also seems to rely on a pervasive gender stereotype: that series with a woman as the main character need to focus on the “relational” and “romantic” aspects of daily lives – even when the story takes place in a police station.

### 2.2 The “reality effect” of *District 31*

According to Alexander Dhoest, people have “strong ‘referential’ involvement with domestic fiction, which is more often connected to ‘real life’” (2013: 56). Quebec *téléromans* often

refer to such real-life events and news stories. This narrative strategy helps to settle the fiction as an integral part of the audience's daily life and media consumption. In *District 31*, many situations and investigations refer to current or recent real-life events that have been highly covered by local media, which create "reality effect" moments (Glevarec 2010) and contribute to its cultural proximity. According to Glevarec, reality effects result from temporary moments of junction or contact between a fiction and the "real world" (2010: 221). In our case study, some of the investigations depicted in *District 31* are clearly related to real-life events, such as the important story in the first season regarding the disappearance of a boy named Theo Gagnon. This story recalls the highly mediated case of a young girl who disappeared in Trois-Rivières in 2007, and whose body was only discovered 8 years later, in December 2015. The subsequent discovery of the dead boy in *District 31*, only a year after the tragic conclusion of the real investigation, therefore hit close to home for local audiences. It must also be mentioned that some fictional events have been written prior to similar incidents happening in the "real world" (Therrien 2017). In these cases, similarities between reality and fiction have been explained by the author's wide knowledge of all political and criminal matters in the province. These numerous "reality effects" (the geographical and cultural proximity of fictional events portrayed week after week) thus undeniably contribute to the series' familiarity for local audiences.

It has been argued that "[t]he main feature of [a] *proximity pact* or complicity between the audience and the broadcaster is the preferential attention paid to news contents concerning the territory of reference" (de Moragas Spà *et al.* 1999: 6). As I have tried to argue, this does not only apply to TV news, but also to TV fictions. In the case of *District 31*, the creation of a "*proximity pact* between the audience and the broadcaster" also seems to rely on the "temporary conformist" (Macé 2003) reproduction of consensual and commonsensical views supposedly shared by audience members. The notion of a "temporary conformism" (*conformisme provisoire*) (Macé 2003) implies that the views portrayed in the series are not necessarily those of the "real" audience: it is a conformist representation of what producers believe to be the audience's values, knowledge and ideologies. This is also in line with Robert Allen's argument that

[...] the worlds of open serials [...] do not express a particular ideological "message" [...] so much as they mark out more general normative territories.

At the center of this normative space are those values, attitudes, and behaviors implicitly or explicitly believed by producers to be held by the core group of intended viewers. (1995: 21)

In *District 31*, many scenes adopt an overtly pedagogical tone as a way to inform members of the audience about technical procedures or technological innovations that they are probably not familiar with. More importantly, characters often express value judgments during their investigations. These sweeping and sometimes normative judgments may appear rather simplistic, coming from experienced detectives. However, these comments seem to have been written in order to "reflect" commonsensical views about certain topics. In some cases, such as the abduction of the young boy in the first season, this leads to quite predictable statements about the immorality and "monstrosity" of such a crime. In other cases, though, it leads to more controversial statements. For example, in the first season, detectives will dismantle a juvenile prostitution network involving many adolescent girls. The narrative then mostly focuses on one of the girls, Audrey, and her mother, who desperately tries to convince her daughter to stop doing this exploitative work. Quite tellingly, the series focuses on a single mother, which leads to perplexing dialogues in which the girl's illegal activities are explained by her lack of a father figure.

**Marie-Andrée** (Audrey's mother): What did I do wrong?

**Nadine:** I don't think you should blame yourself for what happened.

**Marie-Andrée:** These kids don't have fathers, it's obviously something they're missing. They don't have parental guidance, I can't do it alone.

**Nadine:** Stop it, Marie-Andrée...

[Marie-Andrée interrupts Nadine.]

**Marie-Andrée:** What do you think she's looking for, Audrey? Throwing herself in the arms of men twice or three times her age? She's looking for her father, obviously. [my translation] (1.22)

Two episodes later, Nadine has a discussion with Audrey, which once again leads to similar comments about the lack of a "masculine presence".

**Nadine:** Are you sure this is a boyfriend for your mother you're actually looking for? Isn't it more

like a masculine presence with whom to talk at home?

**Audrey:** That would be a nice change! Because the last thing men want to do with me is talk. [my translation] (1.24)

In many respects, these dialogues could be interpreted as perpetuating prejudices against single mothers, while pandering to masculinist ideologies, which tend to take away men's responsibility when it comes to certain social issues, such as the sexual exploitation of girls and women, and instead explain these problems as the result of the diminishing power of men in Western societies. Although not everyone obviously shares this opinion about juvenile prostitution, these comments in *District 31* may nevertheless be related to popular discourses about a current "masculinity crisis", a rhetoric that is often used as a way to explain many contemporary social issues (sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, depression, the underachievement of boys at school, etc.). In that sense, it might be said that one of the main functions of daily serials such as *District 31* is to echo, for better or worse, popular assumptions and views supposedly shared by the majority of the audience.

### 2.3 The cultural proximity of urban narratives

Of course, it must be mentioned that unlike *L'Échappée*, *District 31* is an urban narrative. For this reason, it could be argued that the popularity of Quebec *téléromans* has absolutely nothing to do with their geographical settings. And yet, upon careful examination, *District 31* relies on a similar vision of urban areas as mostly impersonal and dangerous places. Even though they are narratively different, police dramas could therefore be said to replicate this dichotomy between urban and rural areas (Loiselle 2009: 67) through their constant representation of cities as places filled with countless crimes, and where people do not seem to have time for a personal life. Of course, *L'Échappée* and *District 31* appear radically different in many ways: they are not aired on the same network, their geographical location is different, and their stories differ considerably. Yet, at the same time, they might be said to share a strange proximity through their negative—though enticing—portrayal of "the cosmopolitan corruption of the metropolis" (Loiselle 2009). Consequently, both series emblemize this popular opposition between the city and the countryside, which many have said to be at the roots of the Quebec culture.

## CONCLUSION

Language is "the strongest marker of cultural proximity" (Dhoest 2013: 55), and is of course the main reason why local TV fictions in Quebec have always been so popular. Since Anglophone TV productions surround the province, Québécois have embraced French-language TV series since the 1950s as "local" stories that could help foster a sense of cultural specificity. However, as I have argued, the popularity of Quebec *téléromans* may also be attributable to other forms of "thematic" and "value proximity" (Straubhaar 2007: 202), such as the reproduction of ideologically ambivalent women characters, the polarizing representation of urban and rural identities, or frequent references to current affairs, popular opinions and shared values. For this reason, the "success story" of Quebec *téléromans* acts as a cautionary tale for TV scholars. In the same way that recent studies have shown that TV is not "dead" but persists as a popular form of communication, albeit in different forms and new platforms (Orozco and Miller 2016; Lotz 2017), we need to acknowledge that the rise of Quality TV dramas (McCabe and Akass 2007; Newman and Levine 2012) did not lead to the "death" of older forms of TV fictions. Of course, it has often been argued that the audience for *téléromans* tends to be older than for other TV genres, which would mean that their popularity would soon fade. And yet, the unexpected transgenerational popularity of *District 31* should at the very least make us look for other explanations. While the transnational genre of Quality TV is often praised for its high production values and cultural legitimacy (Newman and Levine 2012), Quebec annual *téléromans* are more often described as forms of "comfort food", guilty pleasure, or familiar narratives. For this very same reason, they also feel "close to home".

The pervasive popularity of Quebec's *téléromans* in recent years undeniably contradicts—or, at the very least, complicates—the general assumption that due to the transnational circulation and digitization of "high end" TV dramas (Nelson 2007), people have lost interest in local/regional productions, and that TV series have thus ceased to foster local/national forms of identification in smaller communities. Analysing Quebec *téléromans* therefore fills a research gap in recent Canadian TV studies. These series remind us that television's transnationalization may also reinforce a need for narratives of proximity.



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