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THE SYMBOLISM AND AESTHETICS OF THE WINDOW AS A VISUAL MOTIF IN THE TV SERIES *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* has been widely researched, most studies have addressed aspects like narrative, feminism, violence against women or visual and compositional elements, such as the use

of light and the symbolism of colour. However, there is still a dearth of scholarly works focusing on the analysis of the series' staging and art direction. Accordingly, a comprehensive enquiry is performed here into one such aspect, namely, the windows appearing in the first season of the series. The aim is to verify the aesthetic and staging resources used when windows appear on screen. Additionally, the intention is to analyse the visual codes and the diegetic universe apparent in the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to unravel the latent/symbolic meaning of the TV series. An analytical tool based on iconography is employed to examine three of the most relevant windows – those of June/Offred's bedroom, Commander Fred's study and Serena's bedroom – arriving at the conclusion that they are interwoven at a narrative and symbolic level in the main social values of the Republic of Gilead.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 there have been adaptations of the novel revolving around the character of June/Offred, a young woman in the theocratic Puritan Republic of Gilead, which only offers her one future: to be raped in order to bear the children of the Commander to whom she has been assigned. Before the release of the TV series created by Bruce Miller for Hulu, Atwood's dystopia had been made into a film directed by Volker Schlöndorff (1990), an opera composed by Poul Ruders, with a libretto by Paul Bentley (2000), a radio drama produced by John Dryden for BBC Radio 4 (2000) and a play written by Brendon Burns (2002). The release of the series was followed by the publication of the graphic novel, going by the same name, by Renée Nault (2019), an artist chosen by Atwood herself to adapt and illustrate her work, which promptly became a bestseller.

The fact is that of all the adaptations it is the TV series that has had the greatest impact on the popular imagination. To this should be added that it has fleshed out Atwood's dystopia with an iconography that has become so well-known that it has even been leveraged by different protest movements defending women's civil rights.

Most research on this TV series has focused on three main aspects: the storylines of the TV adaptation of the novel (Bece 2020; Wells-Lassagne and McMahon 2021; Gerrits 2022; Amina 2023); its sociological and political implications, including feminism and the repression of and violence against women (Cortés-Silva and Martínez-Guillem 2021; Ju Oak Kim 2022; Boyle 2023); and, lastly, visual elements like, for example, the composition of the shots and the use of light (Bejarano Petersen 2021; Roche 2021; Mayorga 2022), the symbolism of the costumes and the semantics of the use of colour as basic resources in the conception of Gilead (Martínez-García 2020; Gruber 2023; Tesone 2023). However, none of the analyses performed to date on the staging and art direction of the series have addressed an indispensable element of its visual and symbolic design: the window. It is the architectural element which the characters most interact with, especially June/Offred, and which has more time on-screen than others. Therefore, its symbolic, narrative and aesthetic study constitutes an unexplored way of approaching the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in a series that takes care of every aspect of its mise-en-scène. This paper is part of a broader investigation that, among other elements of the

mise-en-scène, addresses the staircases, doors and corridors of this TV series.

The window is a frequent visual motif in Western art, as discussed below, and one of the architectural elements most used in cinema and television. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, windows appear frequently in domestic settings, such as the different rooms of the homes of the Waterfords and the Putnams, as well as in Nick's apartment over the garage and in public or semi-private places like the food store Loaves and Fishes, the hospital, the Rachel and Leah Centre (unofficially known as the Red Centre), the Waterfords' car and a shop. When they become the focal point, they all give shape to a universe of windows as broad as it is varied because of their multiple uses and meanings in the narrative context of the series. Symbolically speaking, the iconography of the window is related to the idea of consciousness, especially when it has to do with the top of a tower (Cirlot, 2022: 354), something similar to where June is located. Moreover, it is also associated with vigilance, the possibility of distance, the rational and the terrestrial.

In light of the foregoing, the principal aim is to analyse the visual codes and the diegetic universe apparent in the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to unravel the latent/symbolic meaning of the TV series. As there are no previous studies or information in this respect, the following research question has been formulated: How do the visual and narrative codes that appear related to the use of windows in *The Handmaid's Tale* tie in with the latent/symbolic meaning of the series?

2. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *The window*

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a window is “an opening in the wall or roof of a building, for admitting light or air and allowing people to see out; esp. such an opening fitted with a frame containing a pane or panes of glass (or a similar transparent substance)”, in addition to “a space behind the window of a shop where goods are displayed for sale”. Its second meaning broadens the concept of window in relation to its spatial dimension to include an “area of a room behind or beside a window”. According to the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, its etymology, which dates back to the

thirteenth century, derives from the Old Norse term *vindauga*, from *vindr* (wind) and *auga* (eye).

Although basically an architectural element whose specific practical uses are linked to its etymological root, namely, “to look through” and “to air”, the window is a “stimulating object” (Eco 1989: 286) that can involve a process of communication, even if this is not the initial purpose for which it was devised. According to Eco, its mere placement on a façade and its shape can both connote an ideology and, consequently, “a particular conception of the manner of inhabiting” (1989: 291). This gives it a strong symbolic significance which, in the words of Cirlot, expresses “the idea of penetration, possibility and distance” (2022: 354).

As a visual motif, the window frequently appears in the arts, with very thought-provoking uses in its basic function of separating interiors and exteriors. Specifically, it marks the transition between both as a symbolic borderline and represents the duality between the private and public sphere, between the individual and the collective (Balló 2000: 21-2). Special mention should go to its communicative aspects, such as whether it is open or closed, for in the latter case it allows one to observe the world through its panes but not to connect physically with it. When it is open, in contrast, the reality beyond its limits can be perceived and felt with more of the senses. Furthermore, it is also conducive to fantasy, to mental and physical transport; as Pérez Cifuentes (2008) remarks, the window is associated with opening, with the beholder, wearing an expression of hope, looking out of it in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the future, regardless of what has gone before.

Given its ability to “coordinate the external world of places with the internal world of thought and feeling” (Kaplan 2002: 162), the window frequently appears in literature and painting. In autobiographical narratives it plays a relevant role as a metaphor (Fernández 2007), whereas in Baudelaire's prose poem, *Paris Spleen* (1869), emphasis is placed on the mystery surrounding a closed window illuminated by a candle: “In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers” (Baudelaire 1970: 77). In Romantic poetry, that same mystery, but this time melancholic and bleak, can be found in G. A. Bécquer's legend of *The Three Dates* (1871), depicting the phantasmal vision of a woman concealed behind the curtains of a window. As a metaphor of curiosity, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *My Cousin's Corner Window* (1822), the ailing main character observes a market from his vantage point, inventing the past of the people frequenting it. In Kafka's

Metamorphosis (1915), among other works of his, it embodies hope that is both distant and close.

As to painting, Western art embraced the conception of the picture as a window during the Renaissance; several artists of the period, including Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Van der Weyden, included window frames in their compositions. Later on, Vermeer van Delft made windows a recurrent feature in his paintings of pensive women, but without revealing to the beholder what they are observing outside, whereas other painters played with the aforementioned dual conception of the window, as something for gazing out of and as an architectural element (as can be seen in *Two Women at a Window*, Murillo, 1655-1660).

Those works including representations of windows have also resorted to the *trompe l'oeil* kind, which contributes to the creation of perspective and atmosphere (as in the case of its function in *Las meninas*, Velázquez, 1656). Although windows have appeared in paintings throughout the early modern age, it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century that they began to play a more autonomous role, while also taking on a new meaning (Grant 2021), subsequently influencing masterpieces like *Young Woman at a Window* (Dalí, 1925), which now does indeed show the beholder what the main character is observing through it.

The broadcasting industry has also frequently resorted to the window as an inspirational visual motif, being one of the most popular architectural elements. In this respect, the most iconic film is *Rear Window* (1954), by Alfred Hitchcock, in which all the visual planning refers to it repeatedly, framing the vantage point from where the main character observes his neighbours, with the action taking place outdoors. It also has a significant presence in melodrama, two of the most noteworthy films being *Gone with the Wind* (1939), by Victor Fleming, and *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), by Douglas Sirk, in which the characters reveal their innermost feelings next to windows. In contemporary series, together with the doorsteps of houses and other settings, windows continue to represent conflict and the absence of stability that have characterised these spaces in the imagination of modern-day TV audiences.

The window as a visual motif includes the specific case of the woman in front of a window, heir to those appearing in paintings and films, normally with a certain melancholic air about her. Contemporary series resort to this iconography because, moreover, it is associated with the destruction of the patriarchal model. This is why it not only appears in series drawing from Sirkian melodrama, as in many episodes of

Mad Men (2007-2015) and *Masters of Sex* (2013-2016), but also in film noir like *Ray Donovan* (2013-2020) (Balló and Pérez 2018: 19).

In other cases, however, it is also used as a metaphor of confinement, as in the case of Elizabeth II in *The Crown* (2016-2023), whose power contrasts with her slight human figure gazing through the windows of her palaces, where she secludes herself.

2.2. The Handmaid's Tale. *Visual identity*

The TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the eponymous novel that Margaret Atwood published in 1985. It is set in what the author herself calls a “theocratic dictatorship” (Atwood 2017: 12), to wit, a heteropatriarchy in which the obligations and rights of women are reduced to human reproduction. By contrast, men occupy all the positions of responsibility with complete control over women who, for their part, are confined to the domestic sphere. The first season of the series faithfully reproduces the novel's plot. Borrowing the concept of hyper-surveillance from *1984* (George Orwell, 1949), her source of inspiration, she revamps it while also including her own experiences after the Second World War.

The voice of the series – and also of the novel – is that of June/Offred, the female lead who, in an autobiographical way, recounts her experience as a Handmaid in the service of the Waterfords. The timeline of the plot includes flashbacks – which help viewers to understand how that totalitarian patriarchal theocracy has come about – and moments of the present that gradually acquaint them with the Republic of Gilead. These defining features of the totalitarian and extremely hierarchical regime, located in what used to be the United States, are progressively revealed. A coup d'état led by the Sons of Jacob has led to the construction of a state defending conservative values at the expense of the subjugation of women: the suppression of rights and freedoms, the subordination of women to men, a religious fundamentalism grounded in the Christian Bible, public executions and lynchings as exemplary punishments and total media censorship. The epitome of these extreme measures is the Ceremony, a biblical ritual in which the Handmaids are raped by the Commanders in the presence of their Wives on their fertile days to bear the children of these high-ranking families.

One of the most striking aspects of the series is its staging, painstakingly designed and implemented with this extreme narrative in mind. For instance, lighting and photography are used to illustrate the duality between past and

present: in those flashbacks in which June/Offred is still a free woman, the lighting is more colourful and intense, in contrast to the scenes set in the present inside the home of the Waterfords or the Red Centre, in which the Handmaids are housed and trained, where the lighting is much more sombre, in consonance with the dictatorial values of the new regime. This aspect is accentuated in the night scenes and when June/Offred shuts herself in the cupboard of her room as a form of seclusion. However, in the present these visual treatments differ depending on the space; the predominance of white in the scenes that take place in the health centre that June/Offred visits to see the gynaecologist (1.04) and when Janine is in hospital (1.09), plus public spaces like Loaves and Fishes (1.01 and 1.05), alludes to the aseptic nature of this futurist dystopia (Martínez and Rubio 2020).

One of the most relevant aspects of the definition of the characters, which is very effective for indicating their position in the social hierarchy, is colour, each group being associated with a different one. Specifically, the Commanders and the rest of the men in Gilead wear dark clothes, mostly black. For their part, the women are divided into two groups – legitimate and illegitimate – although they all possess the same inferior status and are subordinated to the men. The Wives, all high-class women married to the Commanders, wear blue. The Aunts, who are responsible for looking after and training the Handmaids, wear brown. Whereas the Marthas, infertile low-class women, wear green or dark grey. As can be seen, the members of these last two groups of women wear drab clothes that are a faithful reflection of the bleakness of Gilead. They are sombre colours that convey a sense of desolation and which contrast sharply with the robes of the second group, that of the Handmaids, which are red, a colour associated with the fertility that they embody.

As Handmaids should never be alone but always in groups or pairs, at a compositional level this creates a focal point of colour that lends an enormous visual weight to the images. On many occasions, they even form rows, circles or geometric blocks, which are exploited with overhead or high-angle shots in which symmetry stands out. This reflects their status as a uniform group forming part of an artificial reality, which is presented as fictitious through its visual treatment (Martínez and Rubio 2020). The costume designer, “settled on a shade that she dubbed “lifeblood”, similar to a red found in a photo of scarlet autumn leaves against a very dramatic overcast sky that has struck Morano as dark and Gilead-esque” (Robinson 2019: 35).

With respect to the composition, the director Reed Morano defines this clearly: “The aesthetic I had in mind for the show was always a mixture of graphic symmetry and Kubrickian framing with the freedom of a handheld camera” (Robinson 2019: 35). So, the former is characteristic of present-day Gilead and the latter of the time before the dictatorship. As Morano also notes, the Kubrickian style encapsulates beauty in a setting characterised by terror, which makes Gilead even more eerie and threatening, whereas the time before the triumph of the Sons of Jacob is even more determined by an aesthetics inspired by Terrence Malick, with more frenetic sequences and disconnected aspects (Robinson 2019: 93) depicting the way in which the characters remember that former period.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND CASE STUDY

3.1 Analytical tools

As to the procedure followed to conduct an analysis on the windows appearing in the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, screenshots of the frames with them were made of the ten episodes.

Following this, an initial selection of these windows was performed, including those that, because of their prevalence, play an important role in the series at a narrative and visual level, before finally choosing those of June/Offred's bedroom, Fred Waterford's study and Serena Waterford's bedroom. They are spaces that create a sort of symbiosis with the characters, thus making their study more worthwhile. In addition, a contextual description of the main house as a whole was performed, focusing on other secondary spaces, including the sitting room and the kitchen which, albeit not as important as the others, do indeed have a certain bearing on the narrative.

A methodology based on iconography has been used, which studies form and content. In 1939, Panofsky (1987) established three levels of meaning in a work of art:

- Pre-iconographic level: an analysis on the relationships between the formal elements comprising the images. A division is established between the scalar and morphological elements. This level also includes a narrative analysis.
- Iconographic level: recognizing conventional themes.

- Iconological level: identification of the symbolic values, that is, to see how the elements of the previous levels interact so that the latent meaning of the series appears.

Based on the methodological proposal of iconography, the following steps will be taken:

- Pre-iconographic and iconographic level: Description of the room – June/Offred's bedroom, Fred Waterford's study or Serena Waterford's bedroom. Description of the physical characteristics of the window; it is approached as an element separating interiors and exteriors, thus emphasising the concepts of surveillance and confinement. This involves a deeper level of meaning, analysing the role of the window in the action at specific moments in the series.
- Iconological level: Symbolic significance of the window, which is addressed in that it is an element linked to the personality of the characters and even to their parallel evolution in the plot.

3.2. Results and discussion

The home of the Waterfords, the main setting of the first season, is a Victorian mansion, built in Hamilton (Ontario, Canada) in 1892, known in the past as “Ingleneuk”. The low-angle shots of the building give the mansion a threatening presence, whose architectural grandeur also dwarfs the characters. Although the ivy partially covering the mansion's stone façade is original, this is not the case with other architectural elements, such as the fence surrounding the plot “to give the house an imposing, guarded feel” (Robinson 2019: 26), Nick's garage, the greenhouse and Serena's garden, which were all built by the production team. Most of the interiors appearing in the series are filmsets reproducing the rooms of the house, built at Cinespace Film Studios in Toronto; the only scenes filmed inside the mansion itself take place on the main stairs and in the hall and the dining room.

The mansion has three floors connected by two staircases, the backstairs next to the kitchen and the main stairs in the hall, with a window at the top of the first flight. The smaller window of the backstairs is leaded with some stained glass. On the whole, the rambling house and its smaller spaces, like the passages, trigger emotions like fear, anxiety and hostility. The interiors, furnished with antiques and whose walls are covered with dark wood panelling and where white is conspicuous by its absence, are meant to transmit the feel-

ing of oppression, confinement and darkness. This is heightened by the production design, the lighting and, of course, the windows of the rooms which are usually gloomy, “as if the sun itself were struggling to break through and shed some light inside the house” (Moldovan 2020: 116), in which the heavy atmosphere is palpable. Even during the daytime, when a few timid rays of light manage to slip through the heavy curtains or blinds, table and wall lamps are often turned on in the rooms, thus creating an even more suffocating atmosphere. In sum, it is a prison without locks and bars but replete with fear; a fear so intense that it makes any idea of escape impossible, at least in the first season.

The house itself tells the story of its inhabitants, especially in relation to the main characters, their personalities and emotions being reflected in the rooms to which they are linked, intimate spaces that serve as a metonymy and expression of their position in Gilead. This is combined with an axiological representation of vertical space: June/Offred above, Serena in the middle and Fred below, which, in the case of the Handmaid and the Commander inverts their positions in the perfectly defined pyramid of social stratification and power relations of Gilead. It is for this reason that the analysis of the windows focuses on those of the bedrooms of June/Offred and Serena, plus that of Fred's study.

In addition to these spaces there are others that are briefly covered here. Certain parallels can be drawn between the sitting room, where the first part of the Ceremony is held, and Serena's bedroom. Indeed, the fireplace is located in the same place as her bed on the floor above it and, on both sides, there are two floor-to-ceiling windows covered with heavy curtains which are always drawn. The famous paintings hanging on its walls convey the idea that they have been purloined by the Commander.

On the other hand, the kitchen has been expressly designed to represent the Draconian laws governing Gilead, whose lack of modern appliances signifies a return to the past. Additionally, it features a dining room specifically designed for the Handmaids and Marthas, separated by a glass door. This space stands out because the grid windows have no curtains, but are covered with plants, and there is a skylight. Its state of neglect contrasts with that of the rest of the rooms, thus underlining “Serena's attitude towards the household staff” (Robinson 2019: 32). With warm colours, the lighting of this room is very similar to that of June/Offred's bedroom.

June/Offred's bedroom

June (Elizabeth Moss), renamed Offred in Gilead, is the Waterfords' Handmaid, whose role is solely reproductive, being systematically raped by the Commander on her fertile days to this end. Aged 35, she has blue eyes and long blond hair which is gathered in a bun under the white bonnet of her uniform. Her subordination to the Waterfords is reflected in all the details of her room. Located on the mansion's top floor, it is reached by a narrow spiral staircase that leads to an equally narrow passage, all of which exacerbates the feeling of enforced isolation and confinement. Moss defines it as an autonomous universe (Robinson 2019), in which June/Offred constructs something of her own, after having been deprived of everything. Although Serena has given her the coldest, most secluded, abandoned and austere room in which there is nothing to entertain the mind, June/Offred has managed to convert it into a place of intimacy and reflection. In addition to the aforementioned connotations, the fact that the room is on the top floor of the mansion gives its windows a special symbolism, for it is an analogy of the human mind (Cirlot 2022).

The room has three windows and an ensuite bathroom. The windows of the bedroom are square and have net curtains, whereas that of the bathroom has translucent panes, below which is an old bathtub. June/Offred passes long hours in her room, especially next to the windows, seated on the sill of one of them in her confinement, as if it were a chair. She spends most of this time lost in her thoughts while surveying the activity outside.

The first time that June/Offred appears before that window is when she is presented as a Handmaid, following her violent capture. The scene is filmed from a limited number of highly aesthetic angles. The first is a long shot whose back-lighting accentuates the grid of the window, whose vertical lines evoke the bars of a cell, and makes it impossible to distinguish her features, only that she is wearing a dress and a bonnet (fig. 1). Sitting rigidly on the sill, her voice-over and the visual narrative, with the camera slowly zooming in on her, offer viewers a glimpse of her thoughts as she silently contemplates the sparsely furnished room, listing the few things that it contains and cursorily describing the window, ‘with white curtains, and the glass is shatterproof’.

As to the other two camera angles, the first is a semi-profile shot (first a long shot – fig. 2 – and then a medium, slightly low-angle one), showing her with her hands folded and eyes lowered, accompanied by her voice-over in which she addresses Gilead's fear of suicide among the Handmaids, be-

fore introducing herself: “My name is Offred. I had another name, but it’s forbidden now. So many things are forbidden now.” The forbidden things to which she is referring, without specifying them, are “reinforced by means of the room’s aesthetics and her wardrobe, she reinforces that she is oppressed as a woman. She also demonstrates that the Gileadean government has gone to great lengths to ensure she remains a subjugated object” (Hurley-Powell 2020: 97), a moment at which her dark thoughts are replaced by a flashback of her first encounter with Fred and Serena Waterford.

This combination of elements includes a highly pictorial treatment of light which is repeated in this same room at other moments in the series: the window as the only source of light, a soft, diffuse and golden sunlight whose density gives it an almost physical presence in the room. The idea of the director of the episode, Morano, and the director of photography, Colin Watkinson, was to create a “volumetric lighting as a way of keeping the audience’s experience of Gilead mysterious for as long as possible” (Yuan 2017).



FIGURE 1. EPISODE 1 (04:36)



FIGURE 2. EPISODE 1 (05:00)

In this first scene, June/Offred adopts a passive attitude while sitting on the sill, with the window behind her, in a re-interpretation of the aesthetic motif of the woman in front of the window depicted in the works of both Vermeer, owing to her position in the semi-profile shots, and Vilhelm Hammershøi, by virtue of the room’s simplicity, in which the architectural elements frame or enclose her in the long shot, thus emphasising the sense of confinement that is transferred from the series’ theme to its visual aspects. On this subject, it is worth noting, as Bastidas Mayorga (2022) points out, the coincidence of the clothes and colours worn by June/Offred with Vermeer’s *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* (1660), as well as the similarity of the light tone and the staging in other appearances of the window.

At the end of episode 1, June/Offred appears as before sitting on the sill in front of the window, but, although the staging is the same, there are a number of differences, including more close-ups and the fact that her attitude has changed. She is no longer sitting rigidly upright (except at the beginning of the scene in which the aforementioned initial long shot is reproduced) but leaning forward (figs. 3 and 4), while her voice-over now has to do with her struggle for survival for the good of her daughter Hannah and her husband Luke. She knows that she is being watched and that she has to keep up appearances, for which reason the initial staging is the same. Nonetheless, something has changed and that transformation is shown in a series of semi-profile shots (fig. 3), from the same side as before, after which she introduces herself again, this time calling herself by her real name: “My name is June.” In this sense, it is possible to talk about an arc of transformation from one window to the other.

The shots of June/Offred in front of, or next to, the window, when she is not interacting with it, are linked to moments of respite and reflection, often periods of idleness when confined to her room. Like, for instance, in the final episode of the season, when she is waiting to be punished for not having killed Janine, which precisely reproduces the first long shot of her in front of window in the series (1.10, 52:37), preceded by a series of short shots of its inside and outside, which aesthetically focus on the texture of the glass (1.10, 52:13). This contrasts with those moments when she uses the window to survey the surroundings, like when witnessing the arrival of the red van, preceded by the sound of its siren, in which the Handmaids are transported from one place to another (1.02, 09:19).

Her observation of the outside world through the window becomes narratively even more relevant when it leads to her



FIGURE 3. EPISODE 1 (53:14)



FIGURE 4. EPISODE 1 (53:20)

exchanging glances with a man. This occurs for the first time when she is watching Nick wash the car (1.01, 38:28), with the window as a physical barrier between the two. On the two occasions when they have interacted before then, without anyone else being present, there has not been any type of physical or visual impediment like a window. This scene is filmed with the shot/reverse shot technique with emphasis on the angle of observation and the presence of elements of the window in the framing, such as part of the net curtains. June/Offred is apparently driven by curiosity, but she is always careful not to be caught spying. This is why when Nick looks up at the window, he cannot see her, because the blind is sufficiently low for her to observe without being observed.

In the following episode, Nick and June/Offred swap roles, with the former now observing her through a slit in the window of the latter's bedroom where the lights are on, after night has fallen (1.02, 31:55); she returns his gaze (1.02, 32:08) before finally lowering the blind. In this case, the visual planning is different. There is no reverse shot of June/Offred, which underscores the fact that it is Nick who is looking at her while emphasising her own reaction, in which the low-an-

gle shot highlights the window as an illuminated opening at the top of the house, thus creating the perception of distance. This hammers home June/Offred's confinement, the surveillance that she is under and also the sexual tension that has emerged between both characters.

The window as a physical barrier between Nick and June/Offred disappears when they start sleeping together with the acquiescence of Serena, whose intention is to get the Handmaid pregnant behind her husband's back. A highly significant example of this is when the chauffeur visits her in her bedroom in episode 6; as per usual, June/Offred is at a loose end, sitting on the sill of the window closest to the bathroom, in a composition that clearly points to the influence of Hopper (19:35). In a two shot in which Nick is framed by the door, to the left, and June/Offred by the window, to the right (19:55), he tells her that Commander Waterford wishes to see her in his study. This physical distance between the two disappears when, in the doorway, they kiss passionately.

The frustration of the hope a pregnancy, at the end of episode 3, explicitly reveals why June/Offred is confined to her bedroom, which also includes the window: Serena drags her towards it, before finally throwing her to the floor and shouting, "You will stay here, and you will not leave this room. Do you understand me?"

With June/Offred confined to her room, the window appears more than ever to be that of a prison cell throughout the following episode, although she is not under lock and key. Closed for the first time, she is incapable of opening the shutters, which prevents her from looking outside. Pale-faced and unkempt, wearing a nightgown instead of her Handmaid's uniform, she looks like a prisoner who has been confined for some days, 13 in fact, as specified in her voice-over. The shutters also create a strong backlighting that emphasises the darkness of the room, whose rays penetrate through the gaps between the latticework (fig. 5). This effect creates pronounced lines like bars, thus intensifying the claustrophobic feeling of confinement, a stifling atmosphere to which the close-ups also contribute (fig. 6).

Still confined to her room, June/Offred puts on her Handmaid's uniform to visit the gynaecologist because there are only a few days to go before the Ceremony (1.04, 10:08). The shutters are still closed and she is looking forward to abandoning her confinement. But, in reality, this is prolonged by other window-related elements in the Waterfords' car in which she is being driven to her appointment, specifically the glass partition separating the chauffeur from the passengers and the red curtains covering the windows.



FIGURE 5. EPISODE 4 (01:55)



FIGURE 7. EPISODE 10 (09:05)



FIGURE 6. EPISODE 4 (02:06)



FIGURE 8. EPISODE 10 (09:25)

At the end of the season, Serena goes up to June/Offred room where she physically assaults her, for she has discovered that her husband has been taking her to the Jezabel, before forcing her to take a pregnancy test. While they are waiting for the results, there are alternating shots of June/Offred in the bathroom, kneeling with her forehead resting against the edge of the bathtub, and Serena in the bedroom, kneeling on the floor, next to the window, as if in supplication (fig. 7). The use of low shots with the absence of significant elements in the top part of the framing makes the window the focal point in both rooms.

In this last episode there is an outside shot of the window, partially opened, presented on two occasions, with the same basic composition. In the first one, only Serena's gift of her childhood music box appears (1.10, 11:22), with the ballerina moving to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*; in the second, June is introduced, exhaling air through the crack (1.10, 33:16). The both windows are narratively linked by the protection of the children: June/Offred's pregnancy in the first (as evidenced by caressing her abdomen while lying on the bed), and her

eight-years-old daughter's in the second (in the previous scene Fred was asked for protection for her from Serena's threats).

Lastly, it is important to underscore the use of golden light, the divine kind, pictorially speaking, which links some moments in the series to religiosity. This can be seen in the last shot of Serena, discussed above, whose attitude of supplication seems like a desperate attempt to commune with the most sacred.

In this respect, there is another scene, in episode 5, in which light is put to the same use, albeit involving a different window and space, also connected with the hope of a pregnancy. Serena and June/Offred return home after the latter has had sexual intercourse with Nick in the presence of the former. Through the window on the stairs in the hall, a ray of light emphasises the physical point of encounter between both characters, namely, the palms of Serena's hands resting on June/Offred's belly (1.05, 24:28). It is a moment that calls to mind the Christian iconography of the Annunciation, for Serena recites some verses of Jeremiah (1-5): "Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee. And before you camest out of

the womb, I sanctified thee, and ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

Fred Waterford's study

In the series, Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) is a member of the senior leadership and one of the founders of the Republic of Gilead. Although he appears to be a decent enough person, who normally wears a suit, the actions of 40-year-old Commander Fred, as he is also known, reveal the cruel inner man.

Commander Fred's study is the only room in the Waterford's house that is for his use only. Located on the bottom floor, practically in the semi-basement, it is construed as an extension of the character himself, associated with the values that he represents: iniquity, darkness, the closest thing to hell. The actor himself said as much in an interview: “He knows the impact it has for others, it's a display of power, indulgence and intelligence that is part of his amour [sic]” (Robinson 2019: 30). This space contains all the things that are prohibited for all the women of the house: books, games and all types of representations of knowledge. Moreover, there is a map painted on the ceiling, a symbol of his status of Commander (Robinson 2019).

By and large, this is where June/Offred and Fred have their illicit encounters during which they indulge in things that are morally deplorable in Gilead. For instance, in episodes 2 (34:03), 4 (39:26) and 5 (02:05) they play Scrabble together. In episode 5 (02:05), Fred gives June/Offred a fashion magazine, a rare and prohibited item. It is also, according to Julie Berghoff, a reflection of Fred's hubris: “I thought, “What would his character like to have in this room?” And the answer was, “I want to have everything in this room that no one else can have. And I'm going to be arrogant and show it to everybody.” And so it was sexual art, modern art, it was all the books of poetry and love.” In the study, June/Offred finds out about the demise of the previous Handmaid from Fred, they both kiss, she recriminates him for stroking her thigh during the Ceremony (1.05, 32:21) and the idea of going to the brothel together emerges.

In episodes 9 and 10, Fred's wife Serena finally appears in her husband's study. Her first appearance is her only daytime visit – as a metaphor of the fact that she has finally seen the light, for she now fully understands her husband's double standards – the study also being the place where information as relevant as the pregnancy of June/Offred is transmitted (1.10, 13:51).

The triptych window at the end of the room is the most noteworthy feature because its venetian blinds create the impression of being in an oppressive place, like a prison. This sensation is exacerbated above all because of the fact that all the scenes taking place in the study, except for one (1.02, 1.04, 1.05, 1.06, 1.09 and 1.10), are filmed at night, thus underscoring the illicitness of both the room and its contents. This window often serves as a frame, for Fred's desk is located just in front of it. The vertical lines of its grid convey the idea of greatness and firmness, whereas the horizontal ones give it the appearance of a cell, neither offering views of the outside nor letting anyone see what is within. The contents of this room enhance this hermetic and clandestine feeling.

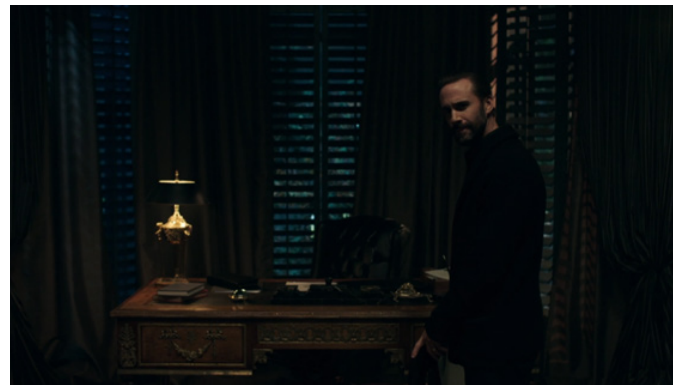


FIGURE 9. EPISODE 2 (34:03)



FIGURE 10. EPISODE 4 (39:26)

The only moment that light shines through that window is when Serena appears in the study for the first time (fig. 11), which implies a qualitative leap forward for the character: she has finally discovered her husband's real personality and has the ability to confront him in that space that is his exclusive preserve. From that moment on, Serena treats him as an equal, evidenced by the fact that when she next visits

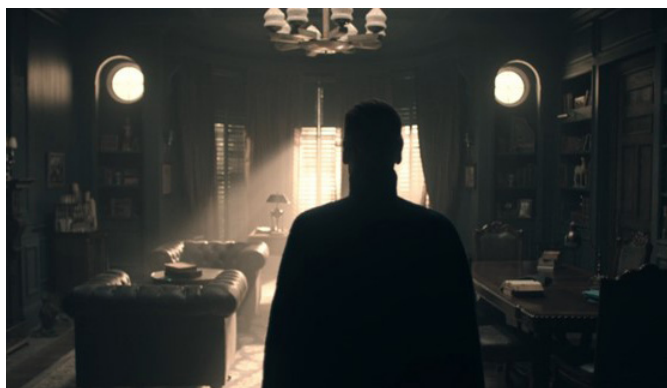


FIGURE 11. EPISODE 9 (43:55)

the study, this time at night (1.10, 13:51), she broaches subjects that have hitherto only been of Fred's concern, like her proposal to play Scrabble.

Serena Waterford's bedroom

Serena Joy Waterford (Yvonne Strahovski), Fred's wife, is an influential woman in Gilead and also one of the republic's founders. In her early 40s, she dresses like all the Wives of the Commanders: modest blue frocks and stockings, with her hair always in a bun. She is an intelligent woman who usually suppresses her emotions.

Her bedroom posed a challenge for the production designer because it had to serve as both a prolongation of her character and as the place where the second part of Ceremony is held. The room, located on the floor under that of June/Offred, in an intermediate position, is a practically empty space with very few personal belongings. Nonetheless, it complements that of her husband, both painted blue, although in a colder shade in the case of Fred's and a warmer shade in that of Serena's (Robinson, 2019).

The part of the room with the canopied bed, on which the Handmaid is raped, is flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides, covered with heavy curtains that make it almost impossible to see outside, reinforcing the idea of the house's oppressiveness and also its complementarity with the sitting room as the other space in which the Ceremony is held. It is important to note the composition of the angles from which the Ceremony is shot, with the symmetry of the windows contrasting with the grotesqueness of the moment (fig. 12).

Additionally, this bedroom has a living area with a semi-circular window covered with curtains which, as before, block out the outside world. Albeit similar to the area of Fred's study with the desk, in this case it is lighter (fig. 13). However, it is not as personal as the study, for Serena does not have

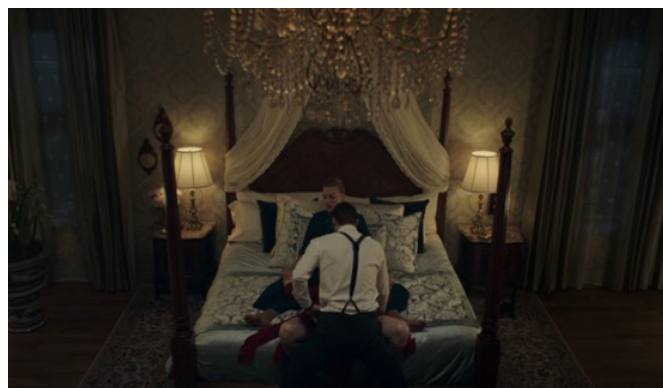


FIGURE 12. EPISODE 5 (27:23)



FIGURE 13. EPISODE 6 (36:52)

the opportunity to express herself here. It heightens the sensation that women are alienated and have completely relinquished their identity, hence the absence of personal belongings and cultural representations such as books.

4. CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, we can conclude that, although the house of the Waterfords is a home of sorts, it isolates June/Offred from the outside world, a confinement epitomised by her bedroom by means of the symbolism and aesthetics of the window. To this room should be added Fred's study and Serena's bedroom, where the other most relevant windows of the house are located in the first season of the series.

Each space analysed here is a metonymy of the character inhabiting it and an axiological representation of the mansion as a whole. In response to the research question, the windows are part of a very particular context, with seemingly implausible characters and plots, but which works profoundly for the viewer, that is, on a symbolic level, shaping spaces of

confinement and isolation from the outside world: as a prison for June/Offred, as a place for keeping prohibited objects for Fred and as a dehumanising space for Serena. In short, it deals with contemporary issues in a society that maintains patriarchy and perpetuates the alienation of women and their relegation to a reproductive role, which are the main social values of the Republic of Gilead.

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Films

- All that Heaven Allows* (1955)
Gone with the Wind (1939)
Rear Window (1954)

TV Shows

- Mad Men* (2007-2015)
Masters of Sex (2013-2016)
Ray Donovan (2013-2020)
The Crown (2016-2023)

OLD FEARS, NEW HOPES: FLEMISH TV FICTION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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TV drama, national identity, Flanders, streaming.

ABSTRACT

The overarching narrative about TV drama and TV more generally is one of continuous change. Taking a step back, in this paper I reflect on changes and continuities in the past 25 years. Starting in the late 1990s, I discuss the challenges facing European serial drama production as the market increasingly commercialised, digitised, and globalised. From a product typically associated with domestic markets,

popular mostly with national audiences, it turned into a transnational commodity, as U.S. drama had been for a long time. Taking the case of Flanders, a small region and TV market, as a starting point, I discuss how these evolutions had an impact on the quantity and quality of drama, with particular attention to the issue of national identity. I argue that, despite many changes and new challenges, including increasing competition, domestic fiction continues to occupy a privileged position in Flanders. Fears about the viability of Flemish drama are not new, but rather the reiteration of old worries, which have challenged the industry – and academics – for at least a quarter century now. Streaming, in particular, carries competition to a new level, but it also creates new possibilities for coproduction and transnational distribution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent and quick spread of SVOD platforms like Netflix and Disney+, the narrative about TV fiction and television more broadly has been one of rapid change, disruption and threat. Existing broadcasting models have been questioned, viewing behaviours have drastically shifted, and “television” as a medium seems to have shifted to a new model, that of “online tv” which (Johnson 2019) defines as “a subset of internet-connected video services that shares core characteristics with earlier forms of TV”, providing “access to editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-connected devices within a closed infrastructure, privileging viewing over other activities” (Johnson 2019: 33).

Undeniably, current “television” differs from former models in many respects, but taking a step back, there are many continuities and echoes from past hopes and fears. In this paper, instead of only focusing on the present, I want to take a longitudinal approach, starting in the late 20th century when linear television still ruled supreme. In this analysis, I focus on television fiction, a key programme category both in terms of quantity and in terms of centrality in discourses about television. In Europe, TV fiction has always been closely tied to issues of cultural and national identity, each country producing its own fiction to cater to local tastes (de Leeuw et al. 2008). However, TV fiction has also always been surrounded by fears in relation to American dominance, threatening both the quantity and quality of the local fiction offer (Buonanno 2008).

In this paper, I hope to provide a clearer view on continuities, thus counterbalancing the predominant narrative that everything is different now. Yes, things have changed, but no, television fiction is not dead nor is everything we witness today so new. In doing this, I will take the Flemish case as a starting point for a broader, European reflection. Flanders is a small region, with a population of some 6.8 million people, as part of the broader Belgian state. The official language is Dutch, which is shared with the Netherlands, but accents are quite different, so Dutch spoken in the Netherlands is perceived as somewhat of a foreign language, and vice versa. French-language Belgium has its own media ecology, which is more oriented to France and will not be further discussed. By focussing on Flanders, I want to do justice to the specificity of local contexts in Europe, while also reflecting on the position of smaller linguistic regions and nations in an increasingly globalised TV market. As elaborated among others by Raats and Lordache (2020), small television markets are characterised by smaller budgets and limited export possibilities.

2. FLEMISH TV FICTION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Flemish TV started in 1953, with a public broadcasting monopoly. In this period, which lasted until 1989, domestic TV fiction occupied a privileged position in the schedules. While single plays were strongly represented in early schedules, serial formats quickly became the norm, although mostly restricted to a single season. Some of the most popular productions of the monopoly period were serials. Not all that many shows were made, some 32 over a period of 36 years, but they occupied a central position in the schedules, and they carried a lot of the broadcaster’s prestige. While often popular in tone, they were inspired by strong wish to “educate” the viewers about their cultural heritage and national past. Hence, almost half of the productions in this period were literary adaptations (15 out of 32), and 20 were situated in the Flemish past (Dhoest 2004). Thus, as in many other European countries, in this early period Flemish TV fiction had a strong “national” flavour, helping to construct a sense of Flemish identity within the broader Belgian context (de Leeuw et al. 2008). This fitted within the Public Service broadcasting ethos, which was strongly inspired by the BBC and strongly oriented inwards, on the nation’s self-definition (Van den Bulck 2001).

In 1989 the first commercial channel, VTM, started to broadcast in Flanders, as part of the European wave of television liberalization and commercialization. One of the big fears, at the time and across Europe, was that commercial broadcasters would massively import cheaper, mostly American fiction, which would lead to a loss of national identity – in cultural terms – and harm national TV industries – in economic terms. Another fear was that increasing competition would impact ratings and make domestic fiction, one of the most expensive program categories, unprofitable. Or, alternatively, that it would lead to ever cheaper productions and lowering quality (De Bens 1991, Bondebjerg et al. 2008). Quite the opposite happened. Not less, but more serial TV was made, not only by the first commercial broadcaster VTM but also by public broadcaster VRT. Serial TV turned out to be one of the key “weapons” in the war for viewer attention among Flemish channels. Flemish serial fiction was also a key asset in the competition with the increasing number of international channels. Flemish fiction, in short, turned out to offer a unique selling proposition; beside a public asset, it also became a commercial asset. Viewers still preferred domestic fiction over international fiction, so Flemish serials continued to occupy central positions in the schedules.

However, there were some significant changes in the 1990s, most importantly an increase in serialisation. More episodes were made, in popular genres, in longer and multiple seasons. Daily soaps, the long-form serial format by excellence, were introduced, both on commercial broadcasting (*Familie*, 1991) and on public broadcasting (*Thuis*, 1995). These programs became the cornerstones of daily schedules, which they continue to be until today. In the “series” format, with self-contained episodes, the sitcom was the most popular genre. Many new shows were launched, and a few reached the status of “evergreens”, *FC De Kampioenen* (VRT, 1990, 21 seasons) and *De Kotmadam* (VTM, 1991, 25 seasons). Both are still repeated until this day. Finally, crime shows of all kinds were developed, often “serialised series” (Bignell 2004) offering the combined appeal of the “crime of the week” series and serials with continuing storylines throughout the entire season. As a result, from the 1990s Flemish domestic fiction was revitalized.

As to the fear about lowering quality, more popular, cheaper genres were produced, in contrast to the dominance of prestige heritage fiction in the monopoly period. However, the increased output led to professionalization of all aspects of TV fiction, with a steep learning curve and increasing production value, particularly in view of the relatively low budgets. More people wrote and made serial TV fiction professionally, getting the chance to hone their skills and gradually improving the level of scripts and production value. Moreover, the growth of popular productions was accompanied by a parallel stream of “quality productions”, often single season high profile serials with high ratings.

As to national identity, serial TV fiction remained strongly rooted in Flanders: it was written and produced in Flanders, for Flemish audiences, and was hardly ever exported, except to the Netherlands. However, compared to the monopoly period, the focus was less on cultural heritage and the national past. Rather, popular genres such as soaps and sitcoms focused on everyday life in contemporary Flanders, creating a sort of banal, everyday nationalism (Dhoest 2007). American fiction, which did increasingly appear in the schedules, was mostly limited to daytime TV or smaller commercial channels. The key positions in the prime-time schedules of the main channels, at that time, were occupied by Flemish fiction, which also topped the ratings.

To illustrate these evolutions, Table 1 lists the twenty highest rated programs on Flemish television in 2002 (twenty years before the time of writing). It features seven Flemish serial fiction productions (in bold face), with top ratings as

high as 1.6 million viewers (on a population of about 6 million) and market shares over 50%. The top 20 did not contain any imported fiction, and the highest rated international fiction that year was the British sitcom *Keeping up appearances* (1990), which occupied the 61st position in the rankings and was the only international series in the top 100 that year.

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	Eurovisie Songfestival	TV1	1,812,100
2	Eurosong	TV1	1,680,500
3	Stille waters	TV1	1,620,800
4	FC De Kampioenen	TV1	1,463,000
5	Via Vanoudenhoven	TV1	1,416,900
6	Hoe? Zo!	TV1	1,248,900
7	Flikken	TV1	1,237,500
8	Sedes & Belli	TV1	1,209,400
9	De Pfaffs	VTM	1,201,100
10	Recht op recht	TV1	1,171,000
11	Het leven zoals het is - Politie	TV1	1,064,600
12	1 jaar gratis	TV1	1,064,500
13	Sportpersoonlijkheid van het jaar	TV1	1,058,000
14	De kotmadam	VTM	1,053,200
15	Pauline & Paulette	TV1	1,043,500
16	De gouden schoen	VTM	1,039,300
17	Wie wordt euromiljonair?	VTM	1,034,500
18	Miss België	VTM	1,020,600
19	Telefacts	VTM	1,003,700
20	Verschoten & zoon	VTM	999,900

TABLE 1: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2002 (SOURCE: CIM).

3. THE 2000S: INCREASED COMPETITION

By the early 2000s, Flemish TV fiction had survived the arrival of commercial broadcasting, but new challenges and fears arose. The key theme, from then on, was competition.

First, there was the competition of *new genres*. In particular, the early 2000s marked the arrival and massive success of reality TV. The first Flemish season of *Big Brother* was produced in 2000, and as in other countries across Europe, it was a big event. Not only was it very popular, but it also directly competed with serial fiction. It offered viewing pleasures similar to those of the soap opera, with the extra appeal of “realness”. More generally, “real life soaps” or “docusoaps” became very popular at the time, and in many cases, they were cheaper to produce than fiction (Dhoest 2005). However, competitive elements became more and more prominent in reality TV, so it increasingly differentiated itself from serial fiction and became more akin to game and entertainment shows. Scripted fiction kept its privileged position as purveyor of drama, despite competition from new semi-documentary formats.

A second form of competition was that of *new channels*. On the national level, the first commercial channel VTM was joined by two more channels in 1995, VT4 (later VIER, now Play4) and Ka2 (later Kanaal 2, now vtm2). However, in a small market such as Flanders, with corresponding low commercial budgets, serial fiction was too expensive for most of them. Flemish fiction continued to be mostly scheduled on the main public channel TV1 (later één) and the main commercial channel VTM, which remain the market leaders to this day.

On the international level, Flanders has a history of early and strong cable access (some 85% in the mid 1980s; Saeys 2007) which in principle made it easy for viewers to switch to international channels. But while Flemish viewers did massively watch TV from the Netherlands in the 1980s, they returned to and stayed loyal to Flemish channels from the 1990s (Bauwens 2007). To this day, Flemish channels manage to attract most linear TV viewers. Language and culture, it seems, did remain important thresholds for viewers to switch to other national channels and content – so “cultural proximity” saved the day, the audience attraction to cultural products which are closest to their own culture (Straubhaar 2007).

In 2002, the year previously discussed in terms of fiction offer, the first public channel één had a market share of 26.4%, commercial channel VTM came second with 25.5% (Bauwens 2007). Dutch channels, which had a market share of up to 25% in the 1980s, fell back to 5% in 2002. In 2012, ten

years later, één had a market share of 34.4% and vtm 18.2%. Added up, all Flemish channels still had a market share of 80% (VRT 2013), which is higher than the European average of 70% (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023).

A third evolution increasing competition for the viewer’s attention was the rise of *digital TV* from 2005. Viewers could increasingly view what they want, when and where they want – also known as “me TV”. However, research shows that Flemish viewers were rather slow to pick up these possibilities, which for a long time were either hard to use (technologically) or expensive – hence inconvenient (Dhoest and Simons 2016). Several services were launched in Flanders, mostly with limited success and limited impact on viewing behaviour.

The 2013 Digimeter report, which gives an annual overview of media use in Flanders, showed that 86% of the total population had access to digital TV, but they mostly used it to consult the electronic programme guide, to skip ads, or to record programs for later viewing. Viewing on demand and streaming only played a marginal role at this time and were mostly used by younger viewers (De Moor, Schuurman, and De Marez 2013). The TV set was still the most popular device for watching TV content, for about 88% of viewers, and 42% only watched TV content on their TV set. Interactive, online extensions were only used by a small, mostly young part of the viewers.

4. THE 2010S: DIGITISATION

So, what was the impact of this increased competition and digitisation on serial fiction in 2012, ten years after the previous period discussed and ten years before the time of writing?

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	De pappenheimers	één	2,055,629
2	Witse	één	2,004,666
3	Tomteterom	één	1,740,998
4	Geert Hoste kookt	één	1,585,878
5	Salamander	één	1,538,554
6	Quiz me quick	één	1,535,627
7	Sporza: Cyclo-cross Koksijde	Canvas	1,512,261
8	Twee tot de zesde macht	één	1,463,415
9	God en klein Pierke - Piet Huysentruyt	één	1,419,337

Title	Channel	Rating
10 Thuis	één	1,404,099
11 Het 7 uur-Journaal	één	1,392,255
12 Scheire en de schepping	één	1,369,375
13 Soccer EC Finals Spain-Italy	Canvas	1,366,373
14 Colchester Zoo	één	1,364,637
15 Soccer EC Finals Spain-Italy	Canvas	1,360,794
16 God en klein Pierke - Erik Van Looy	één	1,342,077
17 God en klein Pierke - Daniël Termont	één	1,331,700
18 Man bijt hond	één	1,302,461
19 Danni Lowinski	VTM	1,269,303
20 Soccer WC Qualifications Belgium-Scotland	Canvas	1,246,971

TABLE 2: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2012.
RATING= LIVE+ 6 DAYS. (SOURCE: CIM).

As Table 2 shows, the 2012 top twenty still contains five Flemish fiction productions (down from seven in 2002), with ratings going over two million for crime show *Witse* (2004-2012), which is part of the strong Sunday evening fiction slot on public broadcasting. Again, no international fiction in the top 20, the highest ranked international production being *Flikken Maastricht* (2007-), a Dutch spin-off from a Flemish series, on 27; and again, *Keeping up appearances*, now on 76. There is no American fiction in the top 100, as in 2002. Quantitatively, in 2012, the domestic fiction production remains large, with 14 productions in the top 100 (compared to 15 in 2002).

As to the quality of productions, beside the generic fiction initiated in the 1990s, the 2000s and 2010s also were a period of revived “quality” fiction. Following the example of American “quality TV” such as HBO’s *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) as well as the success of “Nordic noir” such as *The Killing* (2007-2012), Flemish producers started to make more innovative and daring shows. More than before, they portrayed contemporary Flanders in ambitious and innovative productions. While the prime market remained the domestic one, some shows (such as *Salamander*, 2012-2018) were sold abroad and increasingly, the international market became a secondary target (Raats and lordache 2020). This testifies to the maturity of the industry, which despite its small size managed to compete on an international level. However, the domestic market remained small, so the focus remained on fiction appealing to a broad, mainstream

audience rather than niche audiences. These shows remained strongly anchored in the national, Flemish context, but became more varied as a range of local settings and dialects were featured, such as those of Occidental Flanders (*Eigen kweek*, 2013-2019) and Limburg (*Beau Séjour*, 2017-2021). Following the example of Scandinavian fiction, in particular, this local flavour was seen as an international asset rather than a drawback.

Parallel to this evolution, Flemish fiction also became more diverse. From the rather homogenous representation of Flanders in the 20th century, 21st century fiction became more varied. Beside rural settings, urban settings were also increasingly shown. Ethnic and racial diversity was added, although often through a limited number of “token” characters (Dhoest 2014). Sexual diversity was also increased, both in quality fiction and in mainstream productions such as soaps, which regularly featured gay, lesbian and occasionally trans characters in a “normalized” way (Vanlee et al. 2018).

Because of all these evolutions, in the early 2010s Flemish fiction was thriving in terms of quantity, quality and diversity. But then came Netflix, which became available in Flanders in late 2014. This was a game changer, opening the market for streaming video on demand (SVOD). Contrary to earlier ways of viewing on demand, it was convenient: relatively cheap, easy to use and offering a giant library of content. As in other countries, Netflix changed viewing habits in Flanders. Streaming partly replaced illegal downloading, which younger viewers had been doing for a while. It provided easy access to a large library of often quality American shows, which previously were mostly accessible on DVD (the HBO model) or, with a long delay, on linear TV.

5. THE 2020S: THE IMPACT OF STREAMING

Because of these evolutions, the Digimeter of 2022 shows a drastically changed viewing landscape. 66% of viewers have a smart TV, and 56% have access to one or more paying streaming platforms. Netflix is the market leader among SVODs (50%), followed by Disney+ (19%) and the local platform Streamz (12%). Monthly live linear TV viewing is down to 75%, while monthly streaming is up to 49% (and up to 79% for those between 24 and 35) (De Marez et al. 2023).

So, what does this imply for Flemish, and more broadly European, serial fiction? On the one hand, it revived old fears, as streaming is competition on steroids. There is so much

to choose from, in a wide variety of genres. The European Audiovisual Observatory counted 1324 titles, 23,844 episodes and 14,165 hours of audiovisual fiction produced in Europe in 2021, a clear increase since 2015. In 2021, global streamers released 115 original European series, about 75% of which were commissioned by Netflix (Fontaine 2023). In 2022, 324,646 cumulated TV seasons were available to EU customers in 497 VOD catalogues, 14% of which were of EU 27 origin, 12 other European origin and 51% of US origin (Grece 2022).

Most of this is serial fiction, which further strengthens its position as key asset in audiovisual services. Initially, most of the offer on Netflix was American, further strengthening the position of American fiction as the main competitor for viewing attention – much more than other fiction from other regions, including Europe. Increasingly, however, productions from other countries, including European ones, started to be popular beyond their national borders. In 2022, European works (film and TV seasons) made up 32% of VOD (Video On Demand) catalogues in Europe (EU27), while American works still made up 49%. Big countries like France, Spain, Germany and Italy produced the most exported content (Grece 2022).

Meanwhile, Netflix increasingly invested in local productions – partly because European regulations obliged it to, but partly also because these productions could help to conquer national markets. In all of this, however, a small linguistic region and market like Flanders initially stood at the side lines. Some Flemish productions were picked up in license deals (e.g. *Tabula Rasa*, 2017-) or co-produced by Netflix (e.g. *Undercover*, 2019-), but so far these were few and far in between, while “full” Netflix originals in Belgium remain scarce (Afilipoaie, lordache, and Raats 2021; lordache, Raats, and Afilipoaie 2022).

If viewers increasingly turn to Netflix and other international streamers, and if the content these provide is mostly international, does this threaten the strong position of Flemish fiction on the domestic market? Will audiences and budgets shrink further, thus reducing the production output and quality, which in turn would reduce audiences? Is what we experience now a “perfect storm” of shifting media use, financial cutbacks, decreasing advertising revenue and increasing global competition by streaming platforms, threatening the sustainability of TV drama in small markets, as argued by Raats and Jensen (2021)?

Indeed, as before, the position of Flemish fiction seems to be threatened, but there are also some positive continuities and new hopes. In 2022, despite growing national and inter-

national competition, Eén remained market leader with 32%, VTM following with 17.7%. Added up, Flemish channels still had a market share of some 80%, although it is increasingly spread over more and smaller players. While linear viewing became less popular, the same few national players did continue to dominate the market, with a central position of a strong public service media company.

Flemish fiction also remained an important part of the schedules. A massive 726 hours of Flemish fiction were broadcast in 2022 on the main channels één and vtm (including reruns), as opposed to 186 hours of American fiction (own calculations, based on VRT data). As Table 3 shows, the top twenty of 2022 contains four domestic fiction productions, again a slightly lower number (partly due to the soccer world cup), with top ratings near 1.6 million, which is down from the earlier peaks over 2 million. However, again, there was no international fiction in the top 20, and only two international serials far down in the top 100 (*Flikken Maastricht* on 91, and on 95 *Dalgliesh*, 2021-). In 2022, the average ratings for Flemish serial fiction in prime time (on één and vtm) are still about three times higher than those for imported fiction (519,993 versus 175,531), while the market shares are about twice as high (28,56 versus 14,54%; own calculations, based on VRT data).

	Title	Channel	Rating
1	The masked singer	vtm	1,905,330
2	WC Soccer Belgium/Canada	één	1,893,700
3	Taboe	één	1,767,680
4	WC Soccer Belgium/Morocco	één	1,764,070
5	WC Soccer Argentina/France	één	1,680,820
6	Factcheckers	één	1,604,290
7	WC Soccer Croatia/Belgium	één	1,597,930
8	Twee zomers	één	1,585,280
9	Chateau Planckaert	één	1,580,410
10	Reizen Waes, Nederland	één	1,469,670
11	De mol	Play4	1,422,800
12	Chantal	één	1,422,410
13	Soccer WC France/Morocco	één	1,380,430
14	Andermans zaken	één	1,349,320
15	Vrede op aarde	één	1,347,310
16	Reizen Waes, wereldsteden	één	1,336,500

Title	Channel	Rating
17 Thuis	één	1,310,840
18 Down the road	één	1,285,350
19 Undercover	één	1,260,640
20 Dwars door de lage landen	één	1,239,040

TABLE 3: TOP 20 TV PROGRAMS FLANDERS 2022.
RATING= LIVE+ 7 DAYS. (SOURCE: CIM).

There is also an interesting newcomer: *Undercover* (2019), a Netflix original co-produced with public broadcaster VRT, which occupied the 19th position in the 2022 ranking for linear viewing but also did well on Netflix, particularly in the Netherlands. Like Swedish-Danish co-production *The Bridge* (2011-2018), *Undercover* is situated near the border, in this case between Belgium and the Netherlands. This allows it to introduce characters from both countries in a credible manner, bypassing the big challenge for European co-productions, that of “Europudding” where all national flavour is lost (Buonanno 1998). *Undercover*, like many recent productions, is strongly “glocal”. On the one hand, it is strongly rooted in a national setting, thus remaining appealing to the primary, national market. On the other hand, it conforms to international genre and quality conventions, also rendering it appealing for the international market. This is increasingly important to recuperate the growing production costs in a hypercompetitive market. Moreover, as the success of Nordic Noir and Spanish productions like *La casa de papel* (2017-2021) has demonstrated, local flavour can actually be appealing to international audiences. In the attention economy, it allows productions to distinguish themselves from the pack – even if this often depends on playing out national stereotypes. As Bengesser et al. (2023) found, viewers in several European countries were attracted to (crime) fiction from other European countries because of national and cultural stereotypes.

All of this creates new opportunities for Flemish fiction, in co-production with other broadcasters or streaming platforms, to be exported and to circulate transnationally. Flanders, not having a clear national identity, partly surfs on the Nordic Noir wave of dark fiction, sometimes adding the Belgian cliché of surrealism. Consequently, some productions dare to deviate from social realism which has been the dominant norm throughout the history of Flemish fiction. Some elements of fantasy are introduced, such as the ghost of a dead girl in *Beau Séjour* (2017-2021) and the hallucinations of

the main character with amnesia in *Tabula Rasa* (2017), two productions that did well internationally on Netflix. Most recently, the first science fiction serial was broadcast, *Arcadia* (2023-), a Belgian-Dutch-German co-production and the most expensive Flemish fiction ever, with a budget of about 1 million euro per episode (Vergeyle 2023).

While continuing the focus on broad, mainstream audiences – which is necessary to be profitable in the small domestic market – some productions dare to be more edgy or focus on a specific audience segment. On the one hand there are more expensive, “quality” productions, often co-productions, increasingly in collaboration with streaming platforms, which explore genre boundaries and invest in narrative complexity and visual stylisation. This is in line with broader European evolutions, where more (but shorter) high-end series are produced, a 72% growth in number since 2015 (European Audiovisual Observatory 2023). On the other hand, there are also cheaper, more daring productions, emulating the success of shows like *Skam* (2015-2017) or *Euphoria* (2019-) in addressing “risky” issues. These target younger viewers and are mostly or only available online, such as *wtFOCK* (2018-), a *Skam* remake, and *Roomies* (2022), a lesbian serial. Both evolutions lead to a fiction offer that is less provincial, still strongly anchored in the national but offering a more diverse view and allowing more artistic freedom.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the overview above indicates, the past decades have been a period of continued fears over the future of Flemish TV fiction, in terms of both quantity and quality. Increased competition, whether national or international, from commercial channels or SVODs, has continuously challenged the established position of Flemish fiction. Competition is more present than ever, particularly for younger audiences who lost the habit of linear viewing and who predominantly use streaming, which is strongly international and still mostly dominated by US content. Therefore, average ratings for linear TV are declining, including those for Flemish TV. From an average of some 625.000 viewers in 2002, the average viewership of Flemish fiction (in prime time, on één and vtm) is now about 520.000 (own calculations, based on VRT data). Moreover, as noted by Raats and Jensen (2021), Flemish drama is particularly dependent on public funding, be it through the participation of public service media, through subsidies or tax cuts.

At the same time, there are continuities and new hopes. Public broadcasting has maintained a strong position in Flanders and Flemish fiction has remained a staple of broadcasting while increasingly, new opportunities arise for co-production, including with streaming platforms. This, in part, stimulates export of Flemish drama, which is also aided by the growing market for non-English drama as well as policies and producers focusing on high-end drama combining universal themes with local authenticity (Raats and Lordache 2020). Together, these evolutions give reason to hope that Flemish fiction will be able to reinvent itself yet again, particularly as audience engagement with fiction remains strong.

For a number of years now, observers have expressed their worry over “peak TV”: there is so much content around, much of it serial fiction, which created an unsustainable situation as it exhausts financial means, creative energy and audience attention (Porter 2023). To some, this leads to “peak redundancy”, different players in the market starting to adapt their strategies and reduce their output, although others point out that this also creates new opportunities, for instance leading to more inclusive and international productions (Berman 2021). Ultimately, I would argue, we currently experience a period of “peak seriality”, with an unprecedented number of serials, often with multiple seasons or spin-offs, constituting narrative “universes” stimulating familiarity and connection with audiences. For now, audiences keep investing time in, and engaging with, serial fiction. It is increasingly hard to attract attention, but for those shows which manage to jump out from the pack, audience engagement remains strong, which gives reason to hope for the future of TV fiction, also in small markets like the Flemish one. It will necessitate flexibility, adapting to a new media ecology and viewing habits, but past experiences have shown that the industry is resilient, continuously exploring new possibilities to tell captivating stories.

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TV shows

Arcadia (2023-)
Beau Séjour (2017-2021)
Big Brother (2000-2007)
Dalgliesh (2021-)
De Kotmadam (1991-)
Eigen kweek (2013-2019)
Euphoria (2019-)
Familie (1991-)
FC De Kampioenen (1990-2020)
Flikken Maastricht (2007-)
Keeping up appearances (1990-1995)
La casa de papel (2017-2021)
Roomies (2022)
Salamander (2012-2018)
Skam (2017)
Tabula rasa (2017)
The Bridge (2011-2018)
The Killing (2007-2012)
The Sopranos (1999-2007)
The Wire (2002-2008)
Thuis (1995-)
Undercover (2019)
Witse (2004-2012)
wtFOCK (2018-)

NATIONAL TEAM OF GREECE: GENDER, SPORTS, AND THE RECESSION

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ABSTRACT

National Team of Greece (2015) was a dramedy broadcast on Greek television revolving around a group of women's efforts to establish the first Greek women's curling team, amidst a number of personal challenges and societal obstacles, as much as against the backdrop of a country in deep political and economic crisis. Building on scholarly

approaches to the ideological role of popular culture in turbulent times, this article examines the infiltration of recession themes in the content of television fiction, while centralizing a gendered reading of the narrative of the case at hand. Specifically, it provides a critical reading of the main narrative strategies of the programme – the female narrator, the female ensemble, and the metaphor of sports – in order to register the ways that the series enters into a dialogue with familiar gender tropes, such as questions of female agency, coping, and empowerment. Finally, it discusses the concept of empowerment and the ways it is accomplished or impeded within television in the (post) recessionary cultural moment, by focusing on aspects of the series' production and reception.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Economic Crisis (hereafter GEC) and its regional and national manifestations since 2007 kept media scholars eager to follow the ways that moments of heightened societal tension find their way into media discourses. Entertainment in general and television fiction in particular have been consistently present in this endeavor focusing on the ideological dynamics created between a society in crisis and its representational footprint. The argument that television fiction constitutes a significant site for the negotiation of social issues, problems, or crises is not by any means original (see, for instance, Aitaki 2018a, Dittmer 2005, Wodak 2010). Television entertainment maintains a central role in both theoretical and empirical evaluations of how popular culture helps make sense of moments, events, and periods of exceptional societal tremors.

Scholars have elaborated on television fiction's "orientation role" by providing interpretative frames that help viewers understand ongoing political issues and controversies while also providing a sense of direction and purpose (Porto 2005). Specifically, recessionary film and television have been theorized as "a seismograph that registers the traumas of collapse, locating their artifacts along a spectrum of ideological fantasies, social erasures, and profound anxieties [...]" (Boyle & Mrozowski 2013: xii). Television fiction has also been addressed as accommodator and shaper of "hot moments", i.e. critical moments where a given society enters a state of introspection and self-reflection (Aitaki 2018b). These approaches are in line with a broader understanding of televisual stories as "interpretative practices" that essentially constitute a tool for people to make sense of "the flow of events that would otherwise be chaotic, and cognitively and emotionally out of control" (Buonanno 2008: 72).

In times of uncertainty, it is important to approach popular culture as complex texts, rich with ideological and cultural connections. Extant research has captured a variety of representational responses to GEC and recessionary culture, including the positioning of "the private" and the home as the epicenter of financial crises (Aitaki 2018c); the gendered politics of recession and austerity (Davies & O'Callaghan 2017), and the trope of the "failing man" and the "adaptive/coping woman" (Negra & Tasker 2014), as well as the moralizing of the recession through cautionary tales and melodramatic aesthetics (Schuyler 2015).

In line with the above critical approaches to the study of fictional narratives in times of heightened societal ten-

sions, this article offers a close reading of a series outside the usual analytical focus on Anglophone entertainment; it zooms in on a Greek television series, entitled *National Team of Greece* which was broadcast in 2015 – in the aftermath of the European debt crisis or during the "Greek crisis" as this period came to be known. The Greek crisis is widely understood as triggered by the GEC and marked by the implementation of heavy austerity measures, while also framed as a result of both structural weaknesses of the Greek economy and cultural "flaws" of the Greek people (Mylonas 2012, 2014). In terms of its research enquiries, this study looks at the intersections between fictional and real worlds through the lens of "gendered recession"; it is not only interested in the infiltration of recessionary themes and discourses in popular culture, but is also sensitized to the meaning of (representations of) gender for recessionary culture (Negra and Tasker 2014). As such, it contributes to ongoing debates around how complex depictions of gender within recessionary contexts can provide vehicles for feminist critique (Davies & O'Callaghan 2017) and problematizations of the notion of empowerment both on-screen and off-screen.

The section that follows constitutes a brief presentation of the show, introducing the reader to the fictional world under examination, as well as locating its place in the Greek television universe during the crisis years. The three analytical sections that come directly after are specifically dedicated to the dissection of the main narrative strategies of the show and their interpretation through the theoretical lenses of female agency, coping, and empowerment. The concluding section reflects more broadly on the concept of empowerment and the ways it is accomplished or impeded within television in the (post)recessionary cultural moment, focusing on key aspects of the series' production and reception.

2. NATIONAL TEAM OF GREECE: CASE AND METHOD

National Team of Greece (hereafter *NToG*) is the title of a television dramedy broadcast on Greek television between 13 January and 9 June 2015 by the private (commercial) broadcaster MEGA Channel. It ran for a total of 15 episodes and, although it was planned for a second season, unexpected circumstances related to economic factors forced the abrupt ending of the show on a cliffhanger, leaving audiences and critics without closure. Coinciding with the implementation of capital controls and banking restrictions introduced to the

country in June 2015, the production of the second season (including at least 8 more episodes) was eventually permanently cancelled.

NToG follows the lives of a heterogeneous group of women in their attempt to establish the first Greek women's curling team. Apart from curling not being a particularly popular sport in Greece, the aforementioned efforts are also impeded by a number of personal and societal obstacles at the backdrop of a country in deep political and economic crisis. The group consists of four women: Niki, Froso, Fivi, and Stallo. Niki is a divorced mother of two (a teenage girl and a younger boy with mobility impairment), who used to work as a fashion designer but lost her job as a result of personnel cuts in the beginning of the crisis; she is the one who takes the initiative and leads all the efforts to bring the team together, with curling becoming a vehicle for her to reset her life and get in touch with her goal-oriented former athlete self. Niki's sister, Froso, is a submissive woman in an abusive marriage with a racist man; Froso is the owner of a small hair salon and mother of two boys, one of which has joined the extreme right-wing party of Golden Dawn. Fivi is a popular actress whose status as rich and famous is compromised by the decadence suffered by the national star system, as well as a dark secret of the past; similarly to Niki, Fivi is enthusiastic toward the possibility of curling giving some additional meaning to her life. The fourth member of the team is happy-go-lucky Stallo who originally comes from Cyprus; her joining the team is consistent with her general philosophy of not taking life too seriously and, instead, enjoying every moment of it. The ensemble of four is joined by Christos, a former professional curling athlete and coach. Despite his initial resistance, Christos – a gay man raised in Canada by Greek parents – is not only convinced to teach the women how to master the sport, but also to join their fight against the corruption of the political system as it is reflected in the sports sector and to lead them to the participation in the European championship.

The show was met with positive reviews by local television critics, emphasizing the bold way in which creator and screenwriter Giorgos Kapoutzidis (also playing the role of Christos) manages to address a number of topics drawing from the reality of Greek society, including unemployment, domestic violence, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, the rise of extreme right-wing parties, political and media corruption, and more (Alexandris 2015; Ioannou 2017). Despite critical acclaim, *NToG* was not as popular as Kapoutzidis' previous series, a fact that was mainly attributed to the discrepancy between the heavier nature of the topics addressed in *NToG*

and light-hearted humor and goofy characters characterizing the creator's earlier works, *Savvatogennimenes* (2003-2004; transl. *Born Lucky*) and *Sto Para Pente* (2005-2007; transl. *In the Nick of Time*). *NToG* did, however, mark the creator's decisive shift toward difficult topics, as his most recent series, *Serres* (2022-2024) deals with the struggles of being a homosexual man in the Greek periphery and is currently one of the few Greek TV series featured on Netflix.

Interestingly enough, *NToG* was not the only instance of Greek television fiction drawing heavily from the social reality of a society in crisis. With Greece at the epicenter of the European economic crisis roughly between 2009 and 2018, narratives of the crisis were not monopolized by information media; they also circulated on prime-time slots through entertaining programming, mainly fiction (but also reality television). Notable examples include the family comedy *Piso sto Spiti* (2011-2013; transl. *Back Home*), which told the story of a family in serious debt who are subjected to domestic austerity measures by their creditor, the youngest son's German girlfriend, Angela (a rather unsubtle reference to Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany at the time); the comedy *Me ta Pantelonia Kato* (2013-2014; transl. *With Pants Down*), an adaptation of the Spanish programme *Con el Culo al Aire* (2012-2014), describing the everyday life of people of different backgrounds who decide to move to a camping site as a way to cope with the high cost of living in crisis-hit Greece; and the black comedy *Kato Partali* (2014-2015) following the adventures of a former golden boy in a village of the Greek periphery.

The close reading of case studies makes it possible for researchers to provide in-depth explorations of cultural products of unique sociocultural weight and/or national significance which can then contribute to identifying general patterns and contextual variations of the intersections between popular culture and recessionary times. The present study contributes to this effort by centralizing a case of heightened national resonance, in the hopes of illustrating how global phenomena transform into localized interpretative practices facilitated by popular culture. Following a critical dissection sensitized to intersections of recessionary themes and feminist criticism, the study provides an analysis of the main narrative strategies of the programme, i.e. the central pillars of its narrative construction as serialized fiction. From an empirical point of view, this is pursued primarily through an analysis of concrete narrative mechanisms and excerpts of increased relevance alongside a holistic reading of the series' 15 episodes; the latter is based on a wider contextual and in-

tertextual reading that includes the circumstances in which a cultural text is produced, broadcast, and consumed, as well as other relevant texts and genres.

In the empirical sections that follow, the analysis is structured around three inductively identified narrative tropes, i.e. the female narrator, the female ensemble, and sports as a metaphor; questions of female agency, coping, and empowerment are discussed in a way that combines empirical observations and theoretical anchoring, thus offering three self-contained, yet interconnected, takes on the ways that the programme enters into a dialogue with familiar recession and gender tropes.

3. NARRATING THE CRISIS: FEMALE VOICE-OVER AS FEMALE TAKE-OVER

The use of voice-over in *NToG* has a number of different functions relating to both narrative goals (such as introducing the characters and setting the tone) and ideological layering (emphasis on the female perspective). A close examination of some illustrative instances can provide an overview of the ways that voice-over works as a narrative mechanism, condensing background information about key characters and events, but also conditioning the reader into a particular mode of emotional engagement with on-screen events. The voice belongs to one of the female protagonists, Niki, who is the first person we see in the opening sequence of the first episode. The scene shows Niki in her bed in a dreaming state while the voice-over talks about dreams in a general, almost philosophical manner (most Greek viewers would be able to match the image of Niki with the voice of popular actress Smaragda Karydi, allowing no space for confusion about who the narrator is):

There are two kinds of dreams. The ones that we see in our sleep and are a sequence of images, memories, and feelings which create a baffling story. [...] And then there are the ones that we see when we are awake. We make them ourselves, consciously. They are our goals, the dreams that we strive to realize, the dreams we had – I had – when I was little. [...] Sometimes, they also form a baffling story. In many cases, the ones that come to life even without putting in too much effort are the dreams that come in our sleep, deep from our unconscious. Whereas the goals that we consciously dedicate

our whole life to remain an unattainable dream. That is so weird. And maybe unfair too!

Niki's narration is heard over a montage of scenes including Niki sleeping in her bed at night, having a nightmare where she encounters a committee of humans wearing animal masks, remembering her childhood dreams, back to sleeping in her bed, and waking up by her alarm clock at 7:36 a.m. The scenes that follow show Niki frantically getting ready for job interviews, with the rest of the episode focusing on her agony about landing a job and accentuating her disappointment over consecutive rejections. Additional scenes of the episode centering on the character of Niki inform the viewer about her broken marriage and her ex-husband's indifference and unreliability when it comes to responsibilities (and expenses) related to their two children, as well as young Niki's career as a handball player. Niki's voice-over also wraps up the episode and provides an overall evaluation of how she currently experiences life, i.e. in a state of complete lack of dreams and goals. At the same time, however, comes the realization that she needs to get back on her feet:

I had made a lot of dreams about my life. I saw some of them becoming true, some of them being forestalled, others falling apart. The worst was when the day came that I stopped having dreams. When the only dreams that I had left were the ones that were coming in my sleep. It's a weird thing about dreams after all. In order to see them, you have to fall asleep. But in order to live them, you have to wake up. I am awake.

The order of appearance in combination with the voice-over establish Niki as a *prima inter pares* character (similarly to the case of Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* [1998-2004]) who, although part of a character ensemble, appears to be assigned with additional roles. Generally speaking, narratologists have observed the "privileged status of narrators vis-à-vis narrated character: because the narrator's acts literally bring the story into existence, his or her word carries greater authority than the word of a character" (Lanser 2004: 127). However, Niki's status as a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. a narrator that is also actively involved in the fictional world, is a restricting factor when it comes to her knowledge about the inner universe of the other characters, as well as future events (Allrath et al. 2005). As a result, Niki gets to know the other characters together with the viewers, inviting them in

a collective decoding of their personalities; this usually takes place with an introductory description of a given character as a kind of a riddle which, by the end of the episode and after having observed the character's behaviors and actions in a variety of contexts, is enriched with additional data which hopefully contribute to a more comprehensive understanding about why they are the way they are. For example, in episode 4, Niki introduces us to Christos, providing some information about his routines:

I had known Christos Melitis for about a month. I knew that he never smiled. Or at least I had never seen him smile. And I also knew that he had imposed to himself a strict schedule. Every day, at the same time, he prepares his breakfast himself because he wants his diet to be perfect. Every day, at the same time, he exercises with consistent energy and discipline because he wants his physical condition to be perfect. And he meticulously chooses his clothes because he wants his outward appearance to be perfect. I also knew that he spent most of his time alone, in a perfect house, perfectly decorated by himself, listening to music, reading on his computer, cooking, watching a film, and going to bed at 12:30 sharp. Once a week he goes to a gay bar. He never flirts, he doesn't allow anyone to flirt with him, he has two drinks – never more – and returns home at 2 a.m. at the latest and always alone. Yes, I knew a lot about Christos Melitis. But I didn't know the most important thing, why he wanted to be perfect.

Niki's consistent presence in the role of the narrator shapes a more intimate attachment with the viewers, who become dependent on her for background information about the other characters. As Kozloff has argued, the voice-over then becomes a humanizing device, transforming an "impersonal narrative agency" into a familiar and trustworthy resource, addressing the viewers directly in a mode of intimate exchange, rather than by keeping them at a distance (Kozloff 1988: 128). This should be understood as a conscious creative choice, as the presence of such a narrator is meant to assign additional value to the story. Specifically, the narrator's gender offers the story a level of subjectivity, a perspective that associates gender with a particular view of the world. Such a gendered narrative analysis has been adopted in Stefanie Hoth's reading of *Sex and the City* where Carrie's voice-over

(alongside other narrative structures of the show) is associated with a particular focus on female issues, which Hoth identifies as the realm of the private encapsulated in relationships and friendships (2010). This is not the case for *NToG*, however, which does not appear to be that bothered about the female protagonists' experiences with love, romance, and sex, nor does it give space to one of the protagonists to unravel her self-indulgent personality. Rather it focuses on a journey of transformation and redefinition of the protagonists' place in a world that is in a state of flux. Placed within a (post)recessionary sociocultural context, Niki's voice-over captures the current emotional state of the characters which is meant to help the viewers decode the ways in which (some of) the on-screen individuals address the existential anxieties described in the main body of the episode and which are primarily caused by economic and political exigencies.

In some cases, Niki provides a psychoanalytically informed description of the characters by providing information about their childhood or more recent past, focusing on their thoughts, feelings, memories, and desires. Thus, in episode 1 we are introduced to her own feelings of frustration, in episode 2 we are informed about Fivi's emotional disconnection, apathy, and lack of sense of purpose, in episode 5 we find out about Froso's loss of *joie de vivre*, and in episode 14 we get a little more information on Stallo's perpetual positivity. The four women's unsatisfying lives, but also the need to free themselves from all kinds of (patriarchal) pressures and demands, as they are psychoanalytically framed through the voice-over and dramatized in the characters' interactions in the main body of the episodes, corroborate the foursome as the central focus of the story. Although the voice-over does not exclusively focus on the female protagonists – in fact each episode's voice-over is assigned to a different character –, the strategic placement of Niki as the leading narrative agency of *NToG* can be understood as a counterweight to the dominant narrative strategies adopted by other cultural texts circulating during recessionary times in Greece and abroad, namely the family comedy (Aitaki 2018b) or the man-centric sitcom (Leonard 2014).

4. THE FEMALE ENSEMBLE: COPING WOMEN IN RECESSIONARY TIMES

The previous section pointed out the gendered dimensions of the voice-over by registering the ways that a dominant narrative agency assigns specific subjectivity to the on-screen

characters and events, functioning at the same time as a channel for a gendered framing of the sociopolitical context of the series. This section focuses on the narrative trope of *the female ensemble* within the scope of the genre of dramedy, examining the ways that a constellation of female characters creates the space not only for the fictional reconstruction of the Great Recession as a collective (female) trauma, but also for the orientation toward decisive responses to critical crisis-related problems.

Generally, scholarship has studied the female ensemble in fiction as part of what Brunson has termed “heroine television” which is:

[c]entrally about female characters living their lives, usually working inside and outside the home, usually not in permanent relationships with men, sometimes with children, and ‘trying to cope’. It is this ‘trying to cope’ which is critical. These shows are all, in some fundamental way, addressing feminism, or addressing the agenda that feminism has made public about the contradictory demands placed on women (Brunson 1997: 34).

Building on this idea, Ball has concretized the core of the female ensemble trope as encapsulating “alternative lifestyles for women based upon meaningful social relationships with other women” (2012: 246). As O’Connor additionally explains,

The traditional female life course is normative, socialised and supported by the ideology of compulsory marriage and motherhood [...] The recognition of women’s ability to enjoy themselves with other women obviously implicitly undermines a romantic-love ideology which stresses that true pleasure is only possible in the arms of a man. It challenges social control over women’s behaviour, especially their access to public areas; it undermines the equation of femininity with maternity, domesticity and the private area, and the culturally legitimated tendency for women to base their identities on such ‘caring’ relationships (O’Connor 1992: 182).

In the case of *NToG*, the trope of the female ensemble is a central vehicle for action, but also a valuable ideological platform. The fact that the narrative terrain is mainly covered by female characters is self-evident since the story is centered around a women’s curling team. The primary foursome (Niki,

Froso, Fivi, and Stallo) constitute a character constellation, a sum of characters and relations, that can provide valuable information about “collective dispositions, problems, wishes and fears in a certain time and culture” (Eder et al. 2010: 27). The different class backgrounds that they embody allow for the presentation of the multiple ways women have been traumatized during recessionary times and multiple ways they have been failed by patriarchal structures and institutions. We see Niki struggling to find a job after 7 years of unemployment and lying about her age at job interviews because companies do not want to hire women of her age. We follow Froso’s painful everyday life, trapped as she is in an abusive marriage. We witness Fivi’s dependency on a celebrity culture that requires women to always look young and happy. And while Stallo is seemingly immune to such societal pressures and demands, she still sees her close friends struggling and empathizes with them.

Through their participation in the curling team, the four central female protagonists rediscover the joys and pleasures of having goals that are located outside the realm of family and romance. Even though Niki and Froso remain good and affectionate mothers, even though Fivi is romantically involved with a sports journalist, even though Stallo keeps dating new men all the time, the pursue of self-fulfillment primarily takes place through female companionship and a common sense of purpose. It is worth mentioning that next to the main female ensemble, a smaller constellation of characters contributes to the female take-over of the narrative space, involving Froso and her three friends: Grace, Raya, and Yue Yue. The four of them constitute an ethnically diverse group of working women in a central neighborhood of Athens who enjoy playing cards together, behind the back of Froso’s racist husband, Thodoras. While this secondary ensemble does not take up equal screen time as the primary one, it functions as a tool that diversifies the ways that coping women support and learn from each other. As such, the minoritized characters should not be read as a tokenistic strategy promoting the empowerment of the main (white) character, but rather as a necessary, active representational choice that highlights the interwoven networks of care and support found in female friendships.

These two versions of the female ensemble trope, blending class and ethnic backgrounds, form a synthesis of the coping woman in recessionary times, defined by ethnic and class diversity. Concurrently, the female ensemble functions as a system of empowerment through the notion of female friendship which is presented as a safe space where they can

reconnect with themselves and other women without the burden of any expectations. What is more, the female ensemble can be read as a mechanism for transformation, as the interaction with other women is depicted as having a positive impact on the foursome's attitude toward life. As a result, the characters evolve and, while their complexity remains, they often proceed to actions which are not entirely consistent with their initial presentation (provided through Niki's voice-over).

Dramedy is a form of storytelling known for, apart from the fusion of elements coming from drama and comedy, the particular attention it pays to character development. We described earlier how the voice-over can be understood as the first glimpse into the characters' current emotional state and backstory. *NToG* makes use of an additional narrative device in order to demarcate the starting point of a character's trajectory, that of *the featured character*. The featured character device constitutes a particular way of episodic organization of serialized television according to which each episode focuses on a given character. Without necessarily involving them in all of the sub-plots of the episode, the featured character is placed at the center of the narrative which is often communicated to the viewer through a blend of incidents from the character's present situation and flashbacks which provide insight into the character's past. In the case of *NToG*, the feature character device is facilitated by the voice-over which both introduces and wraps up the episode, contributing to the development of characters by processing and suggesting specific frames through which their personality traits, motives, and behaviors can be understood. It is important, however, to notice that the featured character trope provides only a tentative reading of how a certain past has contributed to the current state of the character; as the characters evolve, they are free to make choices and proceed to actions in the present that are not limited by the past selves.

Episode 5, for instance, is dedicated to Froso who, as we saw in the previous section, is depicted as unhappily married to Thodoras, an abusive man whose racist ideas often target his wife's immigrant friends. In this particular episode, Thodoras sees his wife at one of her usual evening get-togethers at the hair salon, playing cards with her friends, laughing and enjoying each others' company. When she returns home, he waits for her and as soon as she closes the door behind her, he punches her in the face. The episode also contains scenes where he verbally attacks and humiliates her, by asking her to go out and buy him some beers even though there are visible signs of abuse on her face. Thodoras also establishes a state

of fear in the apartment, by monitoring when Froso uses her phone and showing his disturbance whenever it rings. His abusive behavior causes Froso to keep her curling activities a secret, forcing her also to lie to her children and sister about what happened to her (even though she eventually admits the abuse to Niki). A few episodes later, in episode 14, we watch Raya, Grace, and Yue Yue closing down their stores in the middle of the day because a group of people associated with Golden Dawn are preparing one of their usual patrols of the neighborhood, handing out racist flyers and attacking immigrants. The three women seek refuge at Froso's hair salon, but instead of hiding them and laying low, Froso stands at the door of her store and fearlessly confronts the patrollers:

- PATROL GIRL: *We are the patrol team. I want to leave these.*
- FROSO: *I don't want them, thank you.*
- PATROL GIRL: *Why not?*
- FROSO: *Because I don't want them.*
- PATROL LEADER: *I see you have weird people in your store.*
- FROSO: *Is he talking about you, Lula?*
- LULA: *Please, leave me alone. I am just here to get my hair dyed.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Why don't you want this? It's about the patrol teams around the neighborhood. It won't cost you anything to read it, to open your eyes. It's our views written on this paper.*
- FROSO: *I am aware of your views and I don't want them in my store. This is my view.*
- PATROL LEADER: *And we may not want your friends in our neighborhood.*
- FROSO: *The neighborhood is not your own property so that you can decide who will come and who won't. But my store is.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Are you Greek?*
- FROSO: *Yes.*

- PATROL LEADER: *Yes? And are you not ashamed?*
- FROSO: *Now that I am looking at you, I am a bit.*
- PATROL LEADER: *No no stop it stop it! [A member of the patrol team breaks Froso's shop window using a Greek flag pole]*
- FROSO: *And now I am even more ashamed. Boy, I raised the Greek flag high. I don't use it as a weapon to break shop windows or anybody's heads. And now take your views and go with Godspeed. This time I will only call the glazier to fix the window. But next time I will also call the police.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Alright. Ok then. But, just so you know, I will be back.*
- FROSO: *You don't have to. Your hair is short. You don't need a haircut.*
- PATROL LEADER: *Let's go.*

It is worth mentioning that Froso's character is the only one involved in both aforementioned female ensembles, as well as in a sisterhood with Niki. The above excerpt constitutes a defining moment for her character development, the moment where she not only reaches the emotional strength to defend herself but also to protect others. Froso's newfound sense of empowerment is expressed in the ways that she takes control over her life and rediscovers who she is outside marriage and motherhood; her thirst to engage in play (in the context of the curling team), to experience joy (through newly defined goals and community with other women), and to stop living in a state of fear constitute an inspiring representation of how recent traumas caused by recessionary times and deeply felt failures by patriarchal structures can potentially be overcome.

5. THE METAPHOR OF SPORTS

Apart from the female narrator and the female ensemble, a third narrative mechanism that defines *NToG* to a large extent is *the metaphor of sports* and more specifically the trope of the sports team, evident already from the title of the show. The central idea of the trope is the collaboration

of a (typically heterogeneous) group of people, under the guidance of an experienced figure, toward the pursue of a common goal. The trope has appeared with various levels of centrality in global film and television history which can be explained by the fact that "sport offers everything a good story should have: heroes and villains, triumph and disaster, achievement and despair, tension and drama" (Poulton and Roderick 2008: 107). In that sense, sport in fictional narratives can be considered a central organizing principle for the structure of the story, a key frame for the construction of characters, and a catalyst for action. At the same time, sport is a powerful cultural code which corresponds to the affective modes of fiction. It has been argued that sport has "extraordinary affective and connotative power, making many people feel deeply moved and also encouraging them to translate sporting values and measures of success and failure to other spheres", while at the same time "can be used readily as the vehicle for the fictional handling of many pivotal social issues" (Rowe 2004: 193). Along these lines, sport is used as a springboard for addressing difficult or complex topics and as a tool for increasing audience engagement.

The aforementioned can be observed in a number of examples with important cultural footprint. In the cinematic realm, the iconic cases of *A League of their Own* (1992) and *Cool Runnings* (1993) could be identified as definitive shapers of the genre providing powerful iconography about the dynamics between the female sports team and the male coach in the former, or the underdog trope, embodied in the Jamaican bobsled team in the latter, while both cases are placed against the backdrop of issues of respect, pride, and glory. Contemporary television has most strikingly revived the above trope in *GLOW* (2017-2019), a Netflix dramedy focusing on a women's professional wrestling league (Chairetis & Aitaki 2023), as well as in the remake of *A League of their Own* (2022). Apart from the above globally resonant examples, Greek television fiction can also showcase the example of *Asteras Rahoulas* (2016-2017), the story of an underdog men's football team, which, under the training and direction of an idiosyncratic coach, manages to become an organic whole.

Existing literature has discussed the extensive utilization of sport as a metaphor for life, attributing it to the prominent theme of struggle and the perceived function of sport as a tool for triumphing over challenges (Crosson 2013). It has also exposed the metaphor of sports in film and television as a vehicle for maintaining patriarchal hegemony and hegemonic national structures (ibid). Sports can be understood as one of the central forms through which masculinities and mascu-

line action is represented (Whannel 2008), while the (male) coach and the style of coaching has been directly linked to styles of (Hollywood) masculinities (Hills and Kennedy 2013). Feminist perspectives on sports have considered the simultaneous function both as a “technology of power” signifying the disempowerment of the individual as a result of oppressive power and as a “technology of the self” as a strategy of resistance, transgression, and empowerment (Jones and Aitchison 2007).

NToG makes use of the metaphor of sports and the women’s sports team to connote a journey toward empowerment. The four women experience curling as a way to reinvent themselves and, through building a female network, to live more satisfying lives. Additionally, it is rewarding to explore the dynamics that develop between the female team and the male (gay) coach, especially since the two groups are often placed at the margins of sports culture typically characterized by hegemonic national structures:

Both the depiction of women outside the normative roles of housewives and mothers, or of gay men outside of the stereotypes of weak and effeminate ‘queens’, threatens to destabilise a national identity dependent upon the ideals of strong, active masculinity and frail, passive femininity. Indeed, it is precisely in this direct contradiction of their assigned role as ‘Other,’ and the display of physical and mental strength embodied by the athlete protagonist, that we find barely concealed fissures in the national fabric (Bonzel 2013).

The interplay of a variety of identity positions at the backdrop of the deceptively unifying concept of the nation is insightfully addressed at a dinner table discussion in episode 2. Niki, after Christos has rejected her more than once, finally gets him to come over to her place for dinner, joined by Froso and Fivi:

NIKI: *Will you take on? I know that we don't fulfill your expectations, but we are here to try. Even the fact that we achieved to make Safetas build a stadium for us shows how warmly we have committed ourselves to that. And we could have contacted a foreign coach. But we chose you. A Greek person who has done so well abroad, and above all, is aware of what it means to have a 'Greek heart'.*

CHRISTOS: *But I don't know what the Greek heart is about. I haven't heard its beat since I've been here. Nobody has opened their home to me. Everybody's considered me an outsider. I was cheated, I was mocked, when I was willing to help I had to deal with a swindler. I didn't find justice or meritocracy anywhere. I only found racism and inequity. I know from my parents and the way they raised me that there is such a thing as the Greek heart. But, here, no, I didn't find it. Unless 'Greek heart' is about going to the bouzoukia [Greek nightclubs] and throwing flowers to one another. If this is the case, it's not going to be useful for curling. We don't throw the stone and the flower the same way.*

NIKI: *Yes, you aren't wrong.*

CHRISTOS: *I know I'm not wrong. And also, in curling there is no such a thing as being wrong. There is no referee to check for any violations. It's you who must admit your fouls if you make any. Nobody checks on you beside yourself. It is a game of honesty, dignity, respect to any opponent, and courtesy. We shake hands before each game and at the end of it, no matter the result, we shake hands again. It is a very difficult game both physically and mentally, and so honest that I am really concerned that it might cause a heart attack to your Greek heart.*

In this scene, Niki attempts to build a common ground for the two sides to work on by playing the card of national identity and cultural exceptionalism. Her argument is that specific cultural values assigned to the ‘Greek heart’, such as insistence and passion, can function as proof of the team’s commitment. Christos is not impressed. Bringing up the question of incompatibility between the sport’s ethics and the lived experience of his stay in Greece, he aggressively shuts down the possibility of considering this particular sport as a metaphor for the Greek nation. The essentializing notion of the ‘Greek heart’ breaks down into pieces through Christos’ emotional reactions which reveal the non-inclusive dimension of national identity that he has experienced as a diasporic gay man. As such, he differentiates himself from the notion of the nation as it is implied in Niki’s discourse. The heated discussion is interrupted when Niki’s children return from the movies, say hello to the guests, and retreat to their rooms. Niki, evidently overwhelmed by Christos’ response, explains

to him that he is not the only one experiencing the consequences of injustice and inequality, but her way of coping is to keep fighting. In one of the following scenes, Christos rings Niki in the middle of the night to announce that he has decided to help the team without elaborating on the reasons of the decision. Eventually, the two of them seem to bond over sports as a vehicle to overcome structures of oppression and injustice. Leaving the idea of sports as a metaphor for the (patriarchal) nation behind, the team brings together coping women and gay men on the road to empowerment, with curling functioning both as a technology of the self, but also as a technology of community.

6. CONCLUSION: THE MANY FACES OF EMPOWERMENT

NToG was praised by television critics for its brave incorporation of difficult topics. In the previous analytical sections, we saw how this was not exhausted to a dramatic representation of a scene of domestic violence or a passing reference to the rise of right-wing ideologies and racist actions. Rather, *NToG* illustrated how such topics tapped into the reality of a country in deep societal crisis and proposed specific courses of action through the emphasis on the female perspective. However, TV ratings were considered disappointing; although they were not spectacularly low, they did not reach the viewership of Kapoutzidis' earlier works. Asked about the above in a personal interview roughly a year after the final episode aired, Kapoutzidis did not seem to be bothered about ratings, but admitted that he consciously differentiated *NToG* from his previous two shows, based on how he chose to position himself in relation to the sociopolitical context of the time:

Born Lucky and *In the Nick of Time* were [made] to entertain people. Not *NToG*, it starkly had a clearer message. [...] It was clearly empowering. It was other things too; castigating, judgmental, harsh with certain things. *NToG* chose its viewers and it didn't wait to be chosen by them. The series was made for you and the others don't need to watch it (Kapoutzidis 2016).

Commercial television's dependency on advertising revenue has traditionally made it a hostage to ratings. Successful recipes tend to be repackaged, recycled, and repeated while innovative ideas are often addressed as risks that producers

and channel executives are reluctant to take. As such, successful creators and actors are often trapped in non-creative cycles of production whose priority is to sustain their audience. By prioritizing innovation and differentiation, *NToG* could be read as a case that disappointed a part of Kapoutzidis' audience that perhaps expected to connect with the creator in the usual codes of entertainment.

Interestingly enough, apart from empowerment emerging in Kapoutzidis' discourse as his chosen type of fiction in times of societal turbulence, he also reflected on his own empowerment that came from freeing oneself from the tyranny of ratings:

[...] I tried to say some important things but not in a pretentious way. The specific channel showed that it wanted to take a few steps further. But I also gave them a specific suggestion. I did not go there fearing they might not accept and ready to make it more 'commercial'. I went there, I gave it to them and said, this is it, if you want it [...] You take a risk. There is no progress in playing it safe. If I wanted to play it safe, I could write a new comedy every year. So I do not share the opinion that the channels set the tone, no, you also have responsibility for what you offer to them. The truth is in the middle. Especially for people who have some successes under their belt, this is not true. They are just afraid of going the extra mile or losing their viewers. I lost my viewers, half of them. *In the Nick of Time* did 60%, *National Team of Greece* did 30%. It doesn't matter, this is what I wanted to do. I gained myself. And I gained something out of it. I wouldn't change it for the world. For my own empowerment and progress as a human being, [*NToG*] changed my world (Kapoutzidis 2016).

While recessionary themes gradually took a back seat toward the final episodes of the season, *NToG* remained a series about ordinary people surviving turbulent times and transforming thanks to a sense of common purpose. The main characters are seen evaluating what matters the most to them in life, with some of them making important decisions about their private lives (Fivi considers adopting a child), their professional lives (Froso and Niki explore new professional opportunities), as well as where they feel most at home (Christos feels the need to extend his stay in Greece). We will never know exactly how the characters' journeys would

have continued, as *NToG* was never completed. Broadcast by MEGA Channel during the years of the country's financial turbulence and during a period when both the quantity and quality of domestic television fiction was severely affected by low production budgets, *NToG* was cancelled but celebrated as one of the good moments of Greek television fiction. The analysis offered in this article zoomed in on the intersections between fictional and real worlds through the lens of "gendered recession" (Negra and Tasker 2014) and highlighted the ways that narrative tropes and mechanisms are used to facilitate interpretative practices centered on recessionary culture. By registering the ways that entertainment navigates (representations of) gender in recessionary culture, we can enrich our understanding of the cultural impact that turbulent times have on national (media) landscapes and creative processes. By extending beyond the Anglophone focus, we are able to capture how global transformative phenomena are worked through in less visible or extrovert media cultures, which in turn can inform broader debates around how popular culture is involved in processes of cultural introspection and empowerment.

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Me ta Pantelonia Kato (2013-2014)
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Sto Para Pente (2005-2007)

INSPECTOR MAIGRET AND THE TELEROMANZO: A CASE STUDY OF EARLY ITALIAN TELEVISION

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Maigret; Italian Television; Teleromanzo; Romanzo sceneggiato; History of TV Seriality

ABSTRACT

The *teleromanzo*, or *romanzo sceneggiato* (here translated as TV novel) is a most peculiar narrative genre of early RAI. It significantly shaped early Italian television, becoming a cornerstone of RAI's production from its mid-1950s inception. Broadcast from 1954, *teleromanzi* symbolized RAI's educational mission under Italy's state broadcasting monopoly, which lasted until 1972. Inspired by two of the three John Reith's public service broadcasting principles, *teleromanzi* aimed to educate and entertain, improving cultural literacy and public consensus aligned with the ruling party.

Teleromanzi are defined by three features: literary sources, theatrical staging, and installment structure. They adapted mainly 19th-century classics to entertain and teach Italian to a largely illiterate population. Early technical constraints necessitated theatrical staging, perpetrated by using stage actors known for clear diction

and cultural gravitas. The installment structure fostered a loyal audience, ensuring ongoing interest and value assimilation, particularly of Catholic values.

By the 1960s, RAI experimented with serial elements, also adapting works by authors like Georges Simenon into series such as *Le inchieste del Commissario Maigret* (1964-1972), directed by Mario Landi and starring Gino Cervi. This series hybridized *teleromanzo* and serial formats, maintaining installment narratives while introducing recurring characters and figurative stereotypes.

Its success underscored the effectiveness of *teleromanzo*'s blend of education and entertainment, influencing contemporary television narratives, while reflecting Italian television's evolution and societal changes, beyond demonstrating rare chronological progression and thematic coherence.

As a matter of fact, this Maigret series has much more in common with the *teleromanzo* and its cultural aura than with the rules of television seriality properly speaking, which were still unknown in Italy at that time. It testifies to an experimental phase of seriality, or a pre-serial seriality, whose most fertile aspect lies precisely in its capacity to integrate the formula of the *teleromanzo* and to enrich it with potentially serial elements, while retaining the auratic and humanist dimension imposed by the cultural educational project designed by early Rai of the monopoly.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The *telero romanzo* – a word that we could literally translate as telenovel, or TV novel – is one of the most important cultural phenomena in the history of Italian television. Among other things, it is also the narrative genre that dominated the fictional production of the Rai - Radio Televisione Italiana, since its very beginning for almost twenty years. Also called *romanzo sceneggiato* (literally: scripted novel), it appeared very soon, in the mid-1950s, at the official start of television broadcasts, dating from 3 January 1954, and it developed so much that it came to occupy an important place in the Italian history of the 20th century. Indeed, the *telero romanzo*/TV novel soon became the very symbol of the cultural, humanist and educational project of early Rai, which, at the time, was a beneficiary of a state monopoly thanks to a concession from the Italian government. The state monopoly granted to Rai the exclusivity of television broadcasting throughout the national territory until 1972¹; in exchange, it reserved to the government the full control of production and programming.

This cultural, humanist and educational project, which ruled all along the early years of Rai, was in tune with at least two of the three principles at the basis of the very idea of public service – to instruct, to inform, to entertain – as it had been conceived and formulated by John Reith², the first director of BBC. More exactly, it was characterized by a conception of television as a means of cultural elevation of the audience to whom it was addressed, i.e., the Italian population, in conformity with the goals of any other public service of that time. Concurrently, it aimed to exercise the maximum control over the same Italian population, in order to guarantee itself, or better, to guarantee to the government party, the consensus of public opinion³.

The *telero romanzo*/TV novel has been rightly defined as “an installment narrative television work of literary origin”⁴, placing emphasis on its installment structure and its literary origin. On my opinion, however, its main distinctive features are three⁵.

The first one is, precisely, its installment structure, i.e., a narrative pattern which refers not to a serial component, totally foreign to the *telero romanzo*/TV novel, but rather to the need of creating a television audience through the formula of the weekly appointment and, consequently, to guarantee its continued interest, as well as a better assimilation of the values transmitted. These values are essentially the Catholic values dear to the ruling party in Italy at the time, the Christian Democracy party, at Rai as elsewhere. Any literary adaptation for television imposes its transmission thanks to a code of self-censorship, the so called “Guala code”⁶, as meticulous as the Hollywood Hays code, which on the one hand eliminates the “evil” and on the other injects “good” values. Whether elite or popular, no suitable fictional source escapes it.

The second one is its literary source, presupposing a humanist and educational vocation. Indeed, for years the *telero romanzo*/TV novel plays the role of a traveling home library, which must entertain and educate, as well as teach its audience to speak Italian correctly. The *telero romanzo*/TV novel, in fact, also plays a role in cultural literacy, teaching to speak Italian to a population that is still mostly illiterate. It must refer to a literary source to carry out the task of a library, initially specialized in 19th century classics, the adaptation of which multiplies sales. And, finally, it must make a compromise between elite culture and popular culture, selecting targeted titles ranging from *Oblomov* by Ivan Gončarov to *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, without neglecting *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni.

1 On 26 January 1952, the Italian state renewed to EIAR (later become Rai - Radiotelevisione Italiana) the concession of radio broadcasting, and from 1954 also television broadcasting, throughout the national territory for a period of 20 years. The legitimacy of this monopoly, however, has been called into question and between 1972 and 1976 various judicial events put an end to it. On 28 July 1976, the Constitutional Court with ruling no. 202 liberalized local television broadcasts, maintaining the State's monopoly only on the national territory.

2 See Reith, 1924. On the specificity of the Italian path to public service see, among others, Monteleone (1992); Bourdon (2011); Scaglioni, Barra, Penati (2011); and Scaglioni (2015).

3 On the awareness of the importance of this topic in modern Western democracies, where public opinion can be better oriented through new media like radio and film – and, later, television –, see Lipmann (1922). In the mid-Fifties of the last century, Italy was a newborn Republic, resulting from a 1946 referendum through which Italians chose the end to the monarchy: a profound change in political and cultural Italian society.

4 In Italian: *opera televisiva narrativa a puntate di origine letteraria* (De Fornari 1990: 29).

5 In addition to the installment structure and the literary origin, also the theatricality of its staging, which De Fornari (1990) considers only as a peculiarity of the genre (like its Italianness), is a main structural and distinctive feature of the *telero romanzo*/TV novel, capable of affecting many aspects of its aesthetics and more. See Dagrada (2018).

6 See the *Norme di autodisciplina per le trasmissioni televisive* (literally: self-discipline rules for television broadcasts) adopted since 1954 and published for the first time by Arturo Gismondi in Gismondi (1958). These *Norme* (i.e., rules), drawn up by the newborn Centro Cattolico Televisivo (directed by Monsignor Alibno Galletto and designed on the model of the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, a direct emanation of the Italian episcopate), have long been associated with the name of Filiberto Guala, a convinced supporter of the educational mode and administrator of early Rai between 1954 and 1956, successively become a Trappist brother; see AAVV (2001).

The third one is the theatricality of its staging. This feature is certainly due to the technical constraints of the live broadcasting of the early years. Yet, it is also due to the use of actors and actresses of theatrical origin, whom the *teleromanzo*/TV novel often recasts in the same roles usually represented on stage. In order to play a role of cultural literacy, the *teleromanzo*/TV novel employs professional performers who speak Italian with an impeccable diction. It selects highly reputed prose performers as a means for the cultural elevation of its audience. And, whenever possible, it uses well-known professional performers, in order to contribute to the compromise between elite and popular culture already evoked.

All these traits also lay the foundation for the construction of an aesthetic of the genre *teleromanzo*/TV novel, which is consistent and necessary for the realization of the humanist and educational cultural project of early Italian television. In addition, rather than distancing the *teleromanzo*/TV novel from cinema, bringing it closer to literature and theater, this aesthetic brings it closer to early cinema (Dagrada 2018). In fact, as a primordial phenomenon of early Italian television, the *teleromanzo*/TV novel has a lot in common with early cinema, namely with early Italian cinema, but not only.

2. EPISODE V. INSTALLMENT

The first distinctive feature of the *teleromanzo*/TV novel is its installment structure. Far from being a marginal feature, it is on the contrary a characteristic which allows us to better understand the educational peculiarity of the literary adaptations carried out by early Italian television. In fact, although structured in parts, which could bring to mind a more or less primitive form of television seriality, the *teleromanzo*/TV novel is a primordial narrative genre of the monopoly's Rai production which has yet nothing to do with the rules of television seriality; these rules, actually, at the time in Italy simply did not exist. More precisely, the *teleromanzo*/TV novel belongs to an experimental phase of Italian television narration, located during the 1950s and 1960s, between the beginning and the apogee of the *teleromanzo*/TV novel on the one hand and the massive advent of American serial television on the other, favored over time starting from the 1970s by the new rules of the duopoly and of commercial television (on this topic see Innocenti, Pescatore, 2008).

While the English language can consider installment (*puntata*) and episode (*episodio*) as synonyms, the Italian language distinguishes between installment narration and episode nar-

ration. The latter is made up of episodes each being the equivalent of a complete micro-story, with its beginning, its progress and especially its end, because the episode which follows is another micro-story which has its beginning, its progress and its end, without implying a chronological connection with the preceding and following episode. The installment, conversely, in Italian language is the part of a narration which begins where the previous part left off, without concluding, and stops in turn without exhausting the story which will continue in the next installment.

Episode narration necessarily presupposes a serial structure, since each episode is supposed to repropose the same narrative formula as the preceding and following episodes, as well as the same characters, the same iconographic models, the same situations, and in most cases the same type of prologue, progress, conclusion and epilogue – i.e., like in situation comedies.

Installment narration, on the contrary, can involve either a narration subdivided into non-repetitive parts, broken down chronologically; or it can involve a serial narration, specific for example to *telenovelas* or soap operas. The latter, in fact, organize their installment structure in a serial manner, since the progression of their plot is only a false progression which repropose, part after part (installment after installment), the same situations, as well as the same narrative formulas.

At the dawn of Italian television, this distinction was neither codified nor predictable. The only installments that the Rai production department designed corresponded to ideal chapters of novels, conceived like the publication units of a *feuilleton*. That is, a narration normally subdivided into non-repetitive parts, broken down chronologically.

However, towards the beginning of the 1960s, following the popular trend already successfully broadcast on the radio, and happily experimented on television between 1959 and 1961 with the programme *Giallo Club* (which had a “serial” protagonist, Lieutenant Sheridan, always played by the same actor, Ubaldo Lay)⁷, the Rai production service start-

7 The fictional character Lieutenant Sheridan also became the protagonist of a very successful series, which however cannot be assimilated to the *teleromanzo*/TV novel as it is the result of an original screenplay (by Mario Casacci, Alberto Ciambricco and Giuseppe Aldo Rossi). At the time, an important distinction was made between original fictional production (called *originale televisivo*) and literary adaptation. According to a tradition which had already been specific to radio narration, early Rai favored the production of *teleromanzi* / TV novels in relation to the *originale televisivo*. The latter is an installment narrative television work which is not based on a previously published literary labour. The *teleromanzo*/TV novel, on the contrary, always features the adaptation of a previously published literary subject, in principle written by major writers. Only in this way, therefore, the *teleromanzo*/

ed to adapt the novels of more or less serial writers such as Georges Simenon, Rex Stout, S. S. Van Dine or Gilbert Keith Chesterton. And this, always having Inspector Maigret interpreted by Gino Cervi, Nero Wolf embodied by Tino Buazzelli, Philo Vance played by Giorgio Albertazzi and Father Brown personified by Renato Rascel. In doing so, it designed the production of single novel adaptations divided into installments, as part of a series of adaptations by the same novelist, with the same main title and the same protagonist character. Thus, it came to transform each novel into the hybrid formula consisting of *episodes narrated by installments*.

This leads Italian television to create an original television narrative genre that is both specific and marginal, destined to disappear during the 1970s, namely after the invasion of American seriality. This genre testifies to an experimental phase of seriality, or a pre-serial seriality, whose most fertile aspect lies precisely in its capacity to integrate the formula of the *telromanzo*/TV novel and to enrich it with potentially serial elements, while retaining the auratic and humanist dimension imposed by the cultural educational project designed by early Rai of the monopoly.

The results are series which have very little that is serial and aim above all to constitute themselves, episode after episode (installment after installment), into a unique, auratic and authorial work: i.e., the work of an author novelist. Or, rather, they aim to constitute themselves in a performer work, thanks to the recognizable icon of the great theatrical actors and actress employed.

3. HYBRIDATION AND CULTURAL AURA

One of the most popular and long-lived productions of this peculiar kind of series is composed of adaptations of the novels written by the Belgian writer Georges Simenon, having Inspector Jules Maigret as its protagonist⁸. It was broadcast in black and white between the end of 1964 and 1972. To be precise, the series is made up of four cycles: the first was widespread between the end of 1964 and 1965; the second

TV novel is able to instruct, in addition to entertaining.

8 Of all the characters born from the imagination of Georges Simenon, Jules Maigret is the one who has undergone the most rewritings by numerous screenwriters, who made him the protagonist of one of the most popular television series on the planet. Better: of a series of television series, since many countries have adapted Maigret for their own television. Among others, it happened in England, Germany, France, Italy, Holland, the Soviet Union, even in Japan, where Maigret (Kinya Aikawa) does not fail to wear a hat and smoke a pipe as if he were French.

in 1966; the third in 1968; the fourth and final cycle in 1972. All the cycles were united under a unique and same title, *Le inchieste del Commissario Maigret* (literally: investigations of inspector Maigret)⁹. All were entirely directed by Mario Landi. All were adapted by Diego Fabbri and Romildo Craveri, with the uncredited collaboration of Andrea Camilleri¹⁰. And all were interpreted by Gino Cervi as inspector Maigret, and by Andreina Pagnani as his wife Louise.

At first glance, it is a series that cannot be included in the realm of the *telromanzo*/TV novel, according to its canonical definition as «installment narrative television work of literary origin»¹¹. In fact, despite being of literary origin, these “investigations of Inspector Maigret” are not “a work”. They do not originate from a single book, but rather from numerous novels, which each tell a different investigation, being the source of each single episode of the series, with its own single title. Moreover, in each episode some main characters return identical from one episode to the next. This repetitive return implies a serial component, which is potentially incompatible with the *telromanzo*/TV novel. Nevertheless, early Italian television conceives these individual episodes as being divided in installments – as the *telromanzo*/TV novel would have it – and thus transforms the series into an interesting case of *episodes by installments* (*episodi a puntate*). In this way, it can create, maintain, entertain and educate television audiences; and it can conform the series to the rules of the *telromanzo*/TV novel, acquiring its cultural aura.

As a matter of fact, these “investigations of Inspector Maigret” have much more in common with the *telromanzo*/TV novel and its cultural aura, than with the rules of television seriality properly speaking, which were still unknown in Italy at that time.

To begin with, they *are* of literary origin. Right from the opening credits, they emphasize it reporting the title of the whole series *Le inchieste del commissario Maigret* followed by the addition *by Georges Simenon*. Just like in every *telromanzo*/TV novel, in fact, in the credits of the entire series we do not read «based on the novel by», but only «by». In this

9 Only the second cycle is also known as *Le nuove inchieste del commissario Maigret* (literally: new investigations of inspector Maigret).

10 The second cycle was also written in collaboration with Mario Landi; the fourth also with Amleto Micozzi.

11 See De Fornari (1990: 29), who excludes these Maigret adaptations from his study, as well as the other polar series produced by Rai at the time. Also, this series does not appear even in the catalog by Pinto, Barlozzetti, Salizzato (eds. 1988), which lists only the Rai fiction productions made entirely on film, including *sceneggiati* and series.

way, the novelist's authorship imposes itself as a distinctive signature prevailing over any other. This procedure, aiming to culturally legitimize the television medium, takes up a practice that already belonged to early cinema. For example, it happened in the filmic productions of the French Film d'Art or the Italian Film d'Arte Italiana (FAI), which at the dawn of the 20th Century were the first to promote and favor the masses' access to culture through its filmic adaptation, as well as through its installment distribution, thus also favoring the advent of the full-length film. At the very beginning of its history, early cinema had also already practiced both literary adaptation and the compromise between elite and popular culture, adapting literary masterpieces – in Italy, it should be remembered at least Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* or William Shakespeare's *Otello* – alongside popular melodramas¹². To all this, early Italian television adds the information that Georges Simenon's novels are published in Italy by the publisher Arnoldo Mondadori.

Regarding the third main distinctive feature of the *telero-**manzo*/TV novel, i.e. the theatricality of its staging, this series conforms to it too, especially because, as already mentioned, it is more appropriate to the needs of the television studio, initially subjected to the constraints of live broadcasting.

The most obvious consequence consists of the nearly total absence of real exteriors, sometimes replaced by painted sets, while all sorts of conventions of filmed theater abound (predominance of interiors, real time, succinct *découpage*). A specificity of this series is in fact its slowness¹³, inherited from the *telero-**manzo*/TV novel and preserved until the end, despite the liberation from live broadcasts after 1962, thanks to the introduction of the Ampex magnetic tape which very soon allowed the planning and editing of the shots almost like in the cinema. On the one hand, at this point in its history, the slowness of the *telero-**manzo*/TV novel had become a specific trait of the genre and transmigrates directly into its derivatives, of which the Maigret series is one example. On the other, this same trait, together with the installment structure – i.e., the first main distinctive feature of the *telero-*

manzo/TV novel – proves to be consubstantial with the early Rai educational vocation and favours a better assimilation of the values transmitted.

As for the co-presence of real external locations and interior (but also exterior) painted sets, it once more brings this series close to early cinema, both in terms of the mixture of sets reconstructed in the studio, real interiors and locations in *plein air*, and for the merely contemplative function acquired by the rare real exteriors, exhibited as pure visual attractions. Although starting from the second cycle it is already possible to edit the exterior views on film onto tape, the intrigue normally takes place indoors and the rare exteriors still consist of sequences of pure spectacle, independent of the action. Their narrative integration is slow, similar to that of the optical attractions of early cinema¹⁴, which mix with the action very leisurely and function for a long time like a sort of special effect, exploited solely as *plein* entertainment. Actually, all the opening credits sequences made in Paris on film are exhibited as an attraction in themselves. More precisely, they are exhibited as a kind of soft attractions (Dagrada 2018), which stimulate in the viewer an attitude that is both contemplative and amazed.

Yet, the link with the theater, as in the *telero-**manzo*/TV novel, is also in the quality of the text recited and of the acting itself, guaranteed by the massive presence of theatrical performers¹⁵. Thus, in the adaptations of Maigret, alongside the conventions of filmed theater, we find the undisputed glories of the Italian stage. Namely, we find the couple made up of Gino Cervi and Andreina Pagnani. Together, Cervi and Pagnani represented a true institution on the Italian scene, with their own company which between 1949 and 1951 was a harbinger of success and was directed, among others, by the same Mario Landi who directs them here in this Italian television Maigret series.

It is the fortunate theatrical combination Cervi-Pagnani-Landi that the pedagogical early Rai recycles, with the mediation of Simenon's novels. And it does so by creating serial productions that are foreign to the rules of seriality, which nevertheless lay the foundations for it while also accentuating its own actorial dimension thanks to the repetitive return of more characters: Cervi and Pagnani for Jules and Louise Maigret, of course; but also Manlio Busoni, who always plays

12 See the two *Inferno*: Helios, 1911; Milano Films, 1911. See also, as other examples, *Otello* (Ugo Falena and Girolamo Lo Savio, FAI, 1909); *La signora delle camelie* (Ugo Falena, FAI, 1909), based on *La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas; *Il dottor Antonio* (Mario Caserini, 1910; and Eleuterio Ridolfi, 1914). *Il dottor Antonio*, based on Giovanni Ruffini's novel *Doctor Antonio*, became also a *telero-**manzo*/TV novel soon in 1954. On this topic see Galvagno (2015).

13 On this aspect, the Maigret series produced by French television, starring Jean Richard as inspector Maigret, differs from the Italian one. On French television serial productions between 1949 and 1974 see Papin, Tsikounas (eds. 2018).

14 On the concept of cinema of attractions see Gunning (1986); Gaudreault and Gunning (1989); Strauven (ed., 2006). Naturally, even in television series, as in cinema, the attractions never disappear, but become specialized and, in a sense, serialized.

15 On the importance of performance in serial television see Logan (2015).

the character of the trusty Torrence; Daniele Tedeschi, who embodies Janvier; Mario Maranzana in top form in the role of Lucas; Gianni Musy interpreting Lapointe; Fanco Bucceri and Gino Pernice in the guise of Dufour and Jérôme respectively.

Not only that: very often, in the *teloromanzi*/TV novels, also the true link between elite and popular culture is embodied by the figure of theatrical actors and actress. Actually, theatrical performers play a pivotal role, being the authentic fulcrum on which is based the compromise pursued by early Rai, i.e., the compromise between the cultured matrix of the story narrated and the mass audience to which it is addressed. Not just any actor or actress, however, but rather well-known stage professionals, whom the television of the time borrowed from the most important Italian theaters, once again re-proposing a scheme already practiced in the early years of silent cinema, when numerous theater performers migrated to the big screen also in order to give it greater prestige, obtaining in exchange higher earnings and a notable increase in popularity¹⁶.

Gino Cervi too became an actor in early Italian television by virtue of his previous career, primarily theatrical. But he was also already well known to the general public thanks to his participation in numerous successful films. When he takes on the role of Inspector Maigret, invented by Georges Simenon at the end of the 1920s, he is sixty-three years old and decidedly at ease in the serial interpretation of a character who returns film after film, as happened with his interpretations of Peppone in the fortunate *Don Camillo* cinema saga¹⁷. He is therefore perfect for combining elite and pop-

ular culture, fully embodying the pedagogical Rai project of those years. His performance is an immense success¹⁸, to the point that the series produced by Rai is broadcast on French television too and gives life to a cinematic clone which is also the only Italian *Maigret* destined for the big screen, entitled *Maigret a Pigalle* (1967), by the same Mario Landi who directed the Italian television adaptations of Simenon.

Cervi admirably lends his Italian body to the Parisian inspector. He gives him his full face, clear eyes with a severe look, deep voice, robust build, imposing and austere, but communicative and generous, capable of ranging from gruff tones to more nuanced ones. He provides him with his professional yet never rigidly set acting, his firm but not plastered diction, his great personal charisma dosed with sobriety in all the titles that make up the series. In this way, he wonderfully counteracts the Italianization of Simenon's literary source, in his physical appearance as well as in his gestures and behavior.

4. ITALIANNES

A peculiarity of the *teloromanzo*/TV novel, in fact, is its Italianness. Although its literary source is often foreign¹⁹, its adaptation is subjected to a process of Italianization, so that it can legitimately aspire to participate in the development of a shared national identity, based on a common language, on a common literary culture and library, and above all on common moral values²⁰.

This Maigret series conforms to it and soon reduces Simenon's France to a simple background, often made of

16 Once again, this characteristic, which relates the *teloromanzo*/TV novel to early cinema, is entirely coherent with the educational project adopted by the Rai of the monopoly, aimed at culturally elevating its viewers in addition to directing their thinking. At the beginning of the Fifties of the last Century, cinema was not up to such a task, especially since it still had to ennoble itself by adopting more cultivated models. What's more, at the time the reputation of cinema was not the best among intellectuals who worked in television: it was considered too worldly and at the same time not sufficiently auratic, whereas theater is the subject of careful programming, based on an idea of television as a potential domestic stage. In early Italian television, under the direction (between 1952 and 1965) of the playwright and theater critic Sergio Pugliese (who had previously been an important manager of Eiar), Friday evening becomes a weekly meeting with prose theater. Furthermore, radio had already functioned extensively in this way and, all things considered, television is only continuing its mission. See, among others, Buonanno (2012).

17 The first film based on Giovanni Guareschi's novels, in which Cervi plays Peppone, the communist mayor of the Emilian village of Brescello, is *Don Camillo* (1952), directed by Julien Duvivier, with Fernandel in the role of the enterprising parish Don Camillo. The following year, Cervi and Fernandel are together again as mayor and parish in the film *Il ritorno di Don Camillo* (1953), always directed by Duvivier; then in *Don Camillo e l'onorevole Peppone* (1955), in *Don Camillo monsignore... ma non troppo* (1961), both directed by Carmine Gallone; and in *Il compagno Don Camillo* (1965), by Luigi Comencini.

18 The first cycle occupies ninth place among the top ten of 1965 and totals an average of 13.4 million viewers. Fourth was tenth in 1972, with an average of 18.5 million viewers (that year in eighth place was the original detective series, very popular since 1959, *Sheridan*, which averaged 19 million viewers). See, among others, G. (1965); V.B. (1965); and Tellini (2013).

19 In addition to pursuing a compromise between popular and elite culture, the *teloromanzi* / TV novels are often based on foreign novels, mostly French, English and Russian. On the reasons for this aspect see Buonanno (2012) and Dagrada (2018).

20 When the television broadcasts begin, Italy had been a unitary nation for less than a century, since national unification dates from 1861. Therefore, it was a nation still identity-disunited and culturally dishomogeneous. There was an enormous distance between the cultured part of the population, decidedly a minority, and its less cultured component, which not only was often illiterate, but also spoke only the local dialect. And, above all, despite the efforts made, including through cinema, the construction of a national identity was still *in fieri*. On the problematic nature of national identity for the Italian audience of early Italian cinema and television see, among others, Bettetini, Grasso (eds. 1985); Brunetta (1993); De Groot (2008); Scaglioni, Barra, Penati (2011); Galvagno (2015).

papier-mâché. In the first episode of the first cycle, taken from the novel *Cécile est morte* (translated in English as *Cecile is Dead*, or as *Maigret and the Spinster*) and divided into three installments united under the Italian title *Un'ombra su Maigret* (literally: a shadow on Maigret; the credits read “Novel in three installments”, i.e., *romanzo in tre puntate*), the massive icon of Gino Cervi immediately appears in the opening credit sequence, armed with a pipe and hat, intent on climbing the Eiffel Tower to admire the view of Paris. Despite this very French beginning, though, we would look in vain for other traces of the Ville Lumière during the episode, since beyond a few matching shots filmed on location (Saint Michel and its art nouveau subway; the plaque of Boulevard Richard Lenoir, where Maigret lives at no. 130) everything else is shot entirely indoors and, above all, in Italy. Cycle after cycle, we witness the progressive Italianization of the rare facades of the buildings in which the action takes place, of the songs that accompany the opening credits sequences, or even of the romances sung by Maigret in the secret of his office. Only a few sporadic clues remind us from time to time that the intrigue takes place in France: the map of Paris behind the Inspector’s desk, the names of the streets and of the characters, the newspaper headlines, the calvados... But, over the course of the cycles, episodes after episodes, installments after installments, these signs diminish drastically and the French ambitions of the first images of the series are decidedly contrasted, in the end, with the final credits of the last episode (*Maigret in pensione*, 1972, based on the novel *Maigret*, about Maigret’s retirement), where our inspector, instead of a French *baguette*, bites into a plump and very Italian padded *rosetta*, the most typical Italian bread.

This Italianization process is not the only alteration from the literary source recurring here. Also, an important chronology reordering recurs. Looking at these episodes in their order of diffusion, in fact, we note that this Italian television series brings some order back to the messy chronology of Simenon’s novels. The first episode evoked above, although taken from a 1942 novel, historically places the beginning of the fiction in 1938 (it is Inspector Maigret himself who indicates this date, one evening, while commenting on the vintage of a wine). The last one, in turn, based on a 1934 novel, but broadcast in 1972 with the title *Maigret in pensione* (literally: Maigret in retirement), is set in the early 1970s, like the entire last cycle. In other words, in the Italian television adaptation of the Simenon’s novels an important chronological progression is systematically pursued, foreign to classical episode serial narratives. Also with regards to the furnishings

of the rooms and the clothing of the characters, who gradually abandon their initial 1940s appearance to adopt, towards the end, miniskirts and long hair; or in the sets, where the old telephones are replaced by newer devices, a television bursts into the living room of Maigret during the third cycle, while in the last cycle the furnishings of the Judicial Police offices become decidedly modern, just as that of Maigret apartment.

This alteration, like the previous one, transgresses the “fidelity to the original”, a true watchword of the *teloromanzo*/TV novel, whose cultural aura depends also on the immediate recognition of its literary source. Yet, it is not a real betrayal, since, if in this way the episodes distance themselves from the source, they come closer to the formula of the *teloromanzo*/TV novel as a unitary and unique work, which narrates the investigations of Inspector Maigret in chronological order, suggesting its natural temporal progression. Thus, by way of this progression typical of installment narratives, these adaptations become through hybridization the subsequent chapters of a single and homogeneous work narrated in various parts, which testify to an evolution that has occurred in the meantime.

This evolution is also parallel to the liberalization of customs in Italian television (and, in a way, of customs in Italian history as well), where, for example, at the same time as the miniskirts, the first nudes also timidly appear. Also, it enriches it with a self-referential dimension, which rightfully belongs to seriality itself²¹. In the second episode of the first cycle (*L'affare Picpus*, based on *Signé Picpus*, translated as *Signed, Picpus*), during a boat ride Madame Maigret tells her husband that she has read the latest novel by Georges Simenon: a sly man, according to Maigret, who would have used the Inspector’s collaborators to get to know closely his adventures and transcribe them in his books.

5. A PRE-SERIAL SERIALITY

Normally, seriality itself concerns the structure of a work and is based on the repetition of a fixed situation, on its identical

21 The self-referentiality of the media, in the form of intertextual dialogue (i.e., *dialogismo intertestuale*), is included by Umberto Eco in his study dedicated to a typology of seriality (see Eco, 1984a and 1984b). In this perspective, the feature film *Maigret a Pigalle* (also released in France with the title *Le commissaire Maigret à Pigalle*), made on film between the second and third cycle, acquires the weight of a true *mise en abîme*. Furthermore, in some episodes of the Maigret series, director Mario Landi (who had also directed the series *Ritorna il tenente Sheridan* in 1963) appears briefly as Alfred Hitchcock did in his films.

and reiterated return. In a narrative work, it consequently presupposes the immutability of its deep structure and its surface manifestations. The Italian adaptations of Maigret, however, do not possess these characteristics: despite the return of a certain number of characters and main roles, they do not present narrative functions that return identically episode after episode, on the model of those found by Vladimir Propp in the Russian fairy tale, or by Umberto Eco in his study of the narrative structures of Ian Fleming's novels (Propp, 1928; Eco, 1966). Here, each investigation is identical only to itself.

If seriality presupposes some form of regularity, here there is none. Neither in the narrative formulas, nor in the staging. The duration of the episodes is unequal, since their division into installments is variable. *Un'ombra su Maigret* is made up of three installments; *Non si uccidono i poveri diavoli* (from the novel *On ne tue pas les pauvres types*, translated in English as *Death of a Nobody*) of two; *L'ombra cinese* (taken from *L'ombre chinoise*, known in English as *The Shadow in the Courtyard*, *Maigret Mystified* or *The Shadow Puppet*) of four; *L'innamorato della signora Maigret* (based on *L'Amoureux de Madame Maigret*, translated as *Madame Maigret's Admirer*) of only one...²² The length of the installments is also irregular, since at the time television programming was not yet rigidly regimented. Just as the setting of the action is variable, given that numerous episodes take place in different French provinces. Also, the opening credits sequences are constantly changing, while a strict rule of seriality requires them to always be identical to themselves, to allow the viewer to immediately recognize the series they inaugurate. Here, on the contrary, the opening credits of each cycle vary, as well as the images that accompany the opening credits of each individual episode and the song that accompanies them²³.

The only serial signs that return are the figurative stereotypes entrusted to the character of the inspector, such as pipe and hat, the return of his tics and his way of acting, or of those embodied by his docile wife and his faithful collaborators. Therefore, the very form of seriality to which this series can possibly come close is what Umberto Eco calls "saga" (Eco, 1984a and 1984b), which refers to a succession of events re-

lating to the historical course of one or more characters, in a way, as in the 19th century *Comédie Humaine* by the French writer Honoré de Balzac²⁴. That is, a 19th century seriality in its turn, where the characters grow old and die, putting an end to the series itself. The word "end", though, is nowadays a problematic one, since contemporary seriality is seen as inexhaustible, at least in principle, both in television and cinema (Dagrada 1993). On the contrary, the Italian Maigret ends, triumphantly, when the Inspector retires. Its admirable protagonist Gino Cervi, besides, dies about one year later, on 3 January 1974.

Is this why an educational, Catholic and humanist television, preferably oriented towards 19th century literature, chooses to adapt, among others, Simenon's novels?

There's no doubt that Inspector Maigret (not surprisingly like Nero Wolf and, in a way, Philo Vance) is much closer to the 19th century than his numerous colleagues, cinematographic and serial, who accompanied or preceded him, such as Zigomar, Juve, Nick Carter, or even Mabuse. The latter are perfectly at ease in the modernism that prolonged the positivist glories throughout the first half of the 20th century and could not exist outside a highly technological context. Maigret, on the contrary, although born after them, does not even know how to drive a car and has no relationship – if not negative – with technology²⁵. He is therefore perfect for embodying the values of a television that is close, in its conception, to the 19th century (like early cinema was culturally close to the 19th century). He embodies the rebellion against the advent of a modernity that is as execrated as it is inevitable, for example by showing himself intolerant towards radio sets which spread Beatles and rock music starting from the third cycle of the series.

The fact is that, after all, Simenon is not a real serial author either (just as Rex Stout is not with his Nero Wolf, S. S. Van Dine with his Philo Vance, Gilbert Keith Chesterton with his Father Brown... and Raymond Chandler is not with his Philip Marlowe). His novels are not serial in their narrative structure, nor even in the deep ideological structure. They do not envisage any "consolatory" solution (Eco, 1978), just as their Italian television adaptations do not envisage one either.

22 Overall, the four cycles that make up the series are composed of sixteen episodes, irregularly subdivided into thirty-five installments. Only in 1972 the fourth and final cycle, significantly, is composed by three episodes of two installments each.

23 The songs not only vary, but progressively become Italian and are performed by popular Italian singers including Luigi Tenco, who interprets the song that accompanies the second cycle, *Un giorno dopo l'altro*; and Tony Renis, who interprets *Frin frin frin*, in the third cycle.

24 It is no coincidence, of course, that in his studies on the typology of repetition, Eco evokes Balzac and his *Comédie Humaine* in relation to the kind of seriality he calls "saga" (see Eco, 1984a and 1984b).

25 Throughout the whole series, the only sign of modernity is a gigantic electronic map of Paris (also used in the film *Maigret à Pigalle*), which allows to view calls; but it is exhibited solely as a special effect, i.e., as an attraction, and soon abandoned.

Naturally, these adaptations impose several moral adjustments, in tune with the Catholic values that early Italian television intends to transmit to its audience. For example, in *La chiusa* (1968), made up of three installments from *L'Ecluse numéro 1* (a novel translated in English as *Lock number 1*), the infidelity of the protagonist Mimile is minimised, the homosexuality of his son entirely silent, and an invented dialogue is added in which Maigret persuades Mimile's daughter to love her father despite everything (as the Fourth Commandment prescribes). But, in spite of these inevitable as significant moral adjustments, the outcomes of the police investigations are never modified²⁶. Often, thus, the impotence of good against evil remains. In *Maigret in pensione* the murderer manages to escape and a prostitute character joins him; in *Il ladro solitario*, from *Maigret et le voleur paresseux* (known in English as *Maigret and the Lazy Burglar*, or *Maigret and the Idle Burglar*) the murderer is not punished; and in *L'affare Picpus* the culprit character is not even prosecuted...

It is also impossible to be interested solely in the police action, since the episodes cannot be reduced to their simple investigative mechanics. In *L'innamorato della signora Maigret*, for example, the detective intrigue does not even develop. And *Non si uccidono i poveri diavoli* is an example of *Comédie Humaine* in its pure state, without any suspense, any interest outside the psychology of the victims and the masterful acting of Gino Cervi. Often, and above all, the interest in the characters prevails over the simple investigative dynamics, sometimes inconsistent or uninteresting even for the Inspector himself, more inclined to delve into the dark sides of the human soul than to trigger action at all costs and snap the handcuffs.

These dark sides, in the daily lives of the characters, whether intense or miserable, overflow with cultural tensions and contradictions that make up an all-round *Comédie Humaine*, proving to be a perfect source of inspiration for inventing the hybrid and pre-serial formula of episodes by installments, consistent with the humanist and educational project of early Italian television.

26 Other examples could be given, but the aim of this study is not a detailed comparison between these adaptations and their literary source. Rather, it is to demonstrate that these adaptations tell much more about their "adapter" than about the adapted model – as very often adaptations do. Indeed, this peculiar series of adaptations conceived by RAI in the 1960s tells us about early Italian television, more than anything else.

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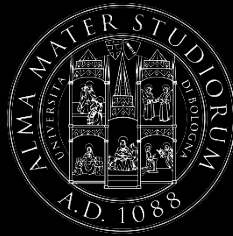
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