VOLUME IV, Nº 02 · WINTER 2018

SERIES

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
TV SERIAL NARRATIVES

INVESTIGATING THE CW. GUEST EDITED BY MÉLANIE BOURDAA, CLAIRE CORNILLON AND SHANNON WELLS-LASSAGNE

* Elseworld's finest : Supergirl&Batgirl coverpage 1998.

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA · UNIVERSITAT POLITÈCNICA DE VALÈNCIA

VOLUME IV, No 02 · WINTER 2018

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This is a joint project by the Universitat Politècnica de València (Escola Politècnica Superior de Gandia) and the Università di Bologna.

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PUBLISHED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
ABIS – AlmaDL, Università di Bologna

E-MAIL ADDRESS seriesjournal.org@gmail.com

HOMEPAGE series.unibo.it

ISSN 2421-454X

DOI
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/v4-n2-2018

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EDITORIAL

INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING THE CW

MÉLANIE BOURDAA
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Scholarship focusing on channels like HBO (Jones 2008, Leverette et al. 2008), MTV (Banks 1996, Denisoff 2017), or Lifetime (Newman and Witsel 2016) – not to mention the rapidly developing cottage industry of Netflix analyses (Keating 2012, Barker and Wiatrowski 2017, Jenner 2018) – reveals the degree of academic interest in television's post-network niche marketing. While television studies has focused on subscription cable and streaming productions, free-to-air network shows have largely been left aside, particularly in France, where all our contributors are based. This is one of the reasons we decided to organize a symposium on the latest of the American networks, The CW, and to publish some of the more exemplary examples from that research in this issue of *Series*. The aim of this collection is to understand the importance of The CW in the American televisual landscape today, and to point out both the specificities of this network and the extent to which it functioned as echo and indeed harbinger of television's rapid evolutions. Very little work has been done on this network's series, despite being among the most innovative in terms of marketing and audience relations, and thus worthy of study in their own right. A case study of The CW allows us to analyze these little-studied series, and to blend approaches that may help us understand this type of fiction.

Formed in 2005 from the merger of The WB and UPN (under the aegis of CBS and Warner Bros., the C and W of its moniker), The CW initially seemed to take on the identifying

SERIES VOLUME IV, Nº 2, WINTER 2018: 05-08
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TV SERIAL NARRATIVES
DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8809
ISSN 2421-454X

characteristics of its predecessors. Both networks followed FOX's lead in creating content suited for a niche market, a strategy made profitable by the fragmentation of the market with the rise of cable television. The WB thus "target[ed] programming specifically to teens and young adults", while UPN "adopt[ed] 'black block' programming" (Ross and Stein 2008: 15) and the new network initially broadcast shows from both channels. As our contributor Anaïs Lefèvre-Berthelot reminds us, this dual focus soon grew even narrower, as the network broadcast fiction intended to appeal to young women[1], before new president Mark Pedowitz chose to focus programming on the wider audience available in superhero fictions based on DC comics, a change detailed in the article by Charles Joseph. Over the years of its existence, The CW has indeed come to establish its own identity; Florent Favard uses the sole example of programming that pre-dates the channel itself – long-running scifi/horror show *Supernatural* – to chart the channel's evolution from its earliest days.

The upstart network's ongoing commitment to niche audiences was accompanied from its foundation by transmedia marketing. Indeed, given its inception as a market for ancillary advertising of content owned by the same conglomerate – such as Warner Bros.'s ownership of DC Comics – we could say that transmedia programming is inherent to The CW's very nature. In many cases, this transmedial strategy relies heavily on new digital media and social media, making the network one of the more successful adaptations to the ever-changing context of television, especially with the rise of VOD and streaming services. There has been ample documentation of the way these two aspects pushed the television industry to reorganize itself, and it is clear that we are now only at the beginning of these changes. The CW seized this context as an opportunity and negotiated the transition towards the release of content on the Internet and towards an increasing dialogue with audiences. It did so by making its youth-oriented shows available on The CW's own streaming platforms, cwtv.com, and pay streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime; by making its archives and web-exclusive shows available on streaming platform CWSeed; and by multiplying the presence of content creators on social media and bonus materials online. Through innovative broadcasting choices and ground-breaking deals with Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, The CW has found an efficient model in the quickly changing environment of contemporary television.

Analyzing the history of The CW and its principal fictions reveals that the network has built a specific identity. It is an identity based less in genres, formats or style, but more in the network's way of addressing its specific and very engaged audience. The CW is perhaps the most successful network in recent history to have created content associated with cult television (with its attendant benefit of loyal fans). As Catherine Johnson reminds us, this has long been a strategy for broadcast and cable networks:

> Increasingly, network US television has actively attempted to create cult television with programmes and marketing strategies designed to encourage and reward loyal viewing and active participation. As such, cult television and fan audiences are no longer understood by the industry as marginal, atypical, or simply irrelevant. As the example of *Lost* demonstrates, the networks appeal to the 'fan' in all viewers, encouraging fan activity and loyalty as a part of television spectatorship in an era when multi-media participation is increasingly becoming the norm. (Johnson 2010: 144)

Definitions of cult objects vary, from Umberto Eco's ideas about quotability and archetypes (Eco 1985) to Matt Hills's suggestion that cult objects are dependent on hyperdiegesis and an endlessly deferred narrative (Hills 2002). However, in line with the narrowcasting that has dominated the television landscape in a post-network era, The CW seems to have chosen to foreground content that provokes fan participation, creating a cult network. This proximity to its viewers (or rather, the proximity of viewers to their content) is characteristic of this drive, as Philippe Leguern reminds us. "Whereas the museum presents objects removed from private appropriation and intended for appreciation at a distance," he writes, "cultism entails intervention by the audience, where the show takes place as much in the auditorium as it does on the screen" (Leguern 2004: 10). As such, The CW perhaps succeeds in creating the "cult culture" Eco spoke of in 1985 (Eco 1985: 12). The diversity and originality of its programming has attracted an audience that is perhaps smaller than those garnered by the larger networks, but which has proven itself fiercely loyal to the channel. Indeed, by being the only channel to have renewed the entirety of its series in 2016, The CW staked its future on reinforcing this relationship with its fans.

1 "The three-year-old television network is betting its future on the whims of young women, almost to the exclusion of everybody else. By designing a schedule that appeals to them, the CW hopes to build an identity where there really hasn't been one in the three years that it's been operating" (Bauder 2009).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8809
ISSN 2421-454X

One of the ways The CW has ensured such brand loyalty is through programming that foregroundes diversity, a fact that distinguishes it from other networks where this representation is often minimal. Under Pedowitz's tenure, the network expanded its target audience beyond young women, showrunners foregrounding race, gender, and sexual orientation in their discourse with viewers. Although this identification with gay characters in particular has not been without blunders[2], The CW's progressive programming has, overall, successfully appealed to what Ron Becker has termed "slumpies" – socially liberal, urban-minded professionals (Becker 2006) – who make up a significant portion of its viewing audience.

Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt remind us that, in contrast to cult films,

> Cult TV fandom [...] focuses on ideas and imagination, rather than on taboo material. This leads to a language based on originality and invention instead of independence, subversion, or resistance, and results in a tendency to draw on the legitimate rather than the avant-garde, particularly as regards literary values. The persistent interest in scripts and the ways in which they develop characters and story lines shows the insistence on literary values, as does the concern with the devices and techniques of storytelling. (Jancovich and Hunt 2004: 35)

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that The CW has distinguished itself in its serial narrative innovations. By expanding the DC Comics television universe with five series in production concurrently (chronologically, *Arrow, The Flash, Legends of Tomorrow*, *Supergirl* – which left CBS for the CW in the fall of 2016 – and, most recently, *Black Lightning*), the channel has also created a complex and ambitious fictional and narrative universe. Recent cross-over events have proven the vast possibilities of this fictional universe and the capacity of The CW to showcase its originality. In so doing, the channel recreated the notion of event television that was a pillar of the industry in the 1990s, ensuring that in order to follow the whole of the story, viewers were keeping their appointments with their favorite channel.

This creation of fan engagement through narrative innovation is coupled with a similar engagement through interaction with the shows themselves. As Catherine Johnson reminds us, "one of the defining features of a cult text is that it becomes a cult through its context of reception rather than through its context of production. It is not possible to produce a cult text. Ultimately texts can attain the status of a cult only through the activities of their fans" (Johnson 2010: 135). The case of *Supernatural*, in many ways the channel's flagship program, is a good example of the relationship between production and reception, as the engagement of the self-appointed "SPNFamily" is particularly striking. The network clearly tried to generalize what happened organically around *Supernatural* to all its new shows, especially with the *Arrowverse* and *Riverdale*, with some success. All of the channel's most popular series are very active on social media and the production of the show is well-documented for the fans day after day.

Choosing to focus on a television channel as a subject of study is necessarily an exercise in associating market forces and financial concerns with more aesthetic and artistic aims. The three articles chosen for this dossier consist of case studies, but which combine narrative analysis with production contexts in a way that allows us to better understand not only the series they discuss, but also the channel they represent. Anaïs Lefèvre-Berthelot's work on *Gossip Girl* foregrounds the woman-centric network typical of Dawn Ostroff's leadership, as well as the establishment of the transmedial processes that would later come to characterize the channel. Charles Joseph's analysis of the CW's *Arrowverse* focuses on the Pedowitz era of the network, the synergy of the primetime lineup and its efforts to stoke fan engagement. Finally, Florent Favard's article on the different periods of *Supernatural* in relation to the program's changing showrunners ultimately could be seen as a fiction emblematic of the channel as a whole, constantly reinventing itself as well as its approaches to television narrative. This dossier by no means pretends to be exhaustive in its approach to the fledgling network. We hope, however, that these articles provide a perspective on a channel that combines cable marketing strategies with network broadcast, and whose innovations remain underappreciated by a larger academic public.

2 Ironically this strategy of social progressiveness was the cause of some turmoil: in 2016, a lesbian character in *The 100*, Lexa, was killed by a stray bullet intended for her lover, Clarke. This event shocked the LBGTQ fanbase of the show for two reasons, one industrial and one narrative. First, showrunner Jason Rothenberg and his team queerbaited the audience on social media and forums, making Lexa the poster girl for season 3, and inciting fan debate around the couple. Narratively, killing this character was an example of the common television trope "Bury Your Gays", where homosexual characters are killed for the benefit of heterosexuals, conveying the message that homosexual relations necessarily end tragically. This specific event was a call for action for the lesbian fanbase who raised money for the Trevor Project and wrote a pledge asking for better representation in the media. But the CW's 2016 lineup famously maintained this narrative trope in its other shows like *The Vampire Diaries*, *Jane the Virgin* and *Supernatural*, though it has since been more attentive to these concerns.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8809
ISSN 2421-454X

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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8809
ISSN 2421-454X

GOSSIP GIRL AND THE CW: DEFINING A NEW NETWORK

(YOU'RE NOBODY UNTIL YOU'RE TALKED ABOUT)

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KEYWORDS
The CW; Gossip Girl; post-network era; audience commodity; feminist television criticism.

ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes how the teenage soap *Gossip Girl* was crucial to the gendered strategy by which The CW (2006-2012) defined itself in the post-network era. The CW relied on narrowcasting, branding, and transmedia to attract and keep a very specific share of the audience in order to create a viable fifth network. Analyzing The CW's early years through *Gossip Girl* casts light on the evolutions that shaped US television industry's during this period, from the renewed interest in female audiences to economic and technological convergence.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

In 2014, CW president Mark Pedowitz proudly declared that The CW was no longer "the *Gossip Girl* network" (Holloway 2014). This statement points to the successful re-branding of the network, which it pursued by diversifying its program schedule. Pedowitz's claim also suggests that The CW, created in 2006, now finally appealed to male viewers after targeting young women for several years. This paper argues that this initial branding strategy was based on the success of *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), which allowed the network to survive during its first years, while experimenting with ways to engage viewers in an era characterized by convergence and the rise of digital media.

The CW was launched in 2006, emerging from the fusion of UPN and The WB. The network's original head was Dawn Ostroff, who came from UPN. *Gossip Girl* first aired in September 2007 – it was created by Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz, who adapted the program from a successful book series. The series is named for the anonymous blogger within the fiction, who chronicles the lives of its protagonists: privileged teenagers living on New York City's Upper East Side. *Gossip Girl*'s final season aired in 2012 while Mark Pedowitz replaced Ostroff in the spring of 2011. Pedowitz endeavored to reassure the network affiliates and the parent companies, and set out to transform the network into a viable enterprise (Littleton 2016). This paper focuses on the period between Ostroff's nomination in 2006 and the final season of *Gossip Girl* in 2012 to analyze the gendered strategy adopted by the CW to find its place in the post-network era.

With an approach anchored in media studies, this case study relies on primary sources concerning the role of *Gossip Girl* in the market strategy of The CW during its early years. These sources include official and promotional statements by network executives; analyses and reports by trade publications; and the evidence of the network's programming strategies, together with the textual content of the programs themselves. The study aims to show that the teenage soap *Gossip Girl* was key to the definition and the very survival of the network. In doing so, it builds upon Valerie Wee's analysis of The WB's construction as a "teen brand" (Wee 2010: 142–65). The CW's strategies further illustrate the US industry's evolution in the post-network era in terms of branding, convergence, and transmedia storytelling. The CW differs from its predecessor, however, in the way it targeted the even narrower demographic of women aged 18 to 34.

By examining how The CW evolved during the *Gossip Girl* years (2007-2012), we can see the network's changing relationship to its female audience. Moreover, *Gossip Girl* was part of a franchise, so its analysis demonstrates how media convergence influenced the network's marketing and narrative strategies during the "digital turn". Ultimately, thinking about *Gossip Girl* in these terms helps to throw light on The CW's more recent market strategy.

1. **THE CW: A NEW BRAND FOR A NEW GENERATION**

The CW is the product of a series of evolutions that have transformed the TV industry since the mid-1990s. In a larger context of deregulation, the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules were abolished in 1993. After two decades, broadcasters could again have financial stakes in the programs they aired, which allowed Paramount Network and Warner Bros. Entertainment to launch UPN and The WB in 1995. Hoping to reproduce the success of the Fox network (created in 1986), the newcomers adopted narrowcasting strategies and addressed the 12-34 demographic. The similarity between the two networks is evidenced by the fact that UPN acquired *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Roswell* in 2001 after The WB cancelled them. Valerie Wee's case study of the WB shows how the network competed with the big four by targeting a younger demographic (Wee 2010: 145). This proved a viable strategy for launching a new network in the post-broadcast era, allowing a new brand to be established, and affording experiments with multi-media synergy (Wee 2010: 153). In the long run, however, UPN and the WB did not manage to attract enough viewers and advertisers to become profitable (Learmonth 2006).

In 2006, when Warner was supposed to renegotiate its contract with its affiliates, CBS and Time Warner seized the opportunity to – in the words of Bruce Rosenblum, president of Warner Bros. TV group – "build a true fifth network and make it competitive with the Big Four" (Learmonth 2006). So in September 2006, the newly formed network, a joint venture between CBS Corporation and Warner Bros. Entertainment, a division of Time Warner, made its debut and aired the most popular programs from UPN and The WB. From the very beginning, the aims were clear: to create a profitable network and to reap benefits from new programs (Carter 2006b). As Wee points out, the CW faced the same challenges that the WB had experienced ten years before (Wee 2010: 162).

The creation of The CW coincides with what Amanda Lotz calls the "multichannel transition" and the beginning of the

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

"post-network era" (Lotz 2007). The abolition of the Fin-Syn rules and the multichannel transition led to increased competition and declining audience shares. Because of this situation, networks adopted strategies such as counter-programming and narrowcasting that used to be specific to cable networks. From Fox to The CW, newcomers in the TV industry thus targeted a smaller portion of the audience than the Big Three, to find their place in a redefined television industry. This is what UPN and The WB tried to do as well, but the target group was too small to be shared, hence the decision to merge the two networks. As Amanda Lotz explains, "the competition arising during the transition to a post-network era has made it more profitable for programmers to cater to niche audience tastes, which was less advisable when networks sought universal appeal" (Lotz 2006: 26).

Any network constructing a niche audience still needs to consider the economic model that continues to define advertiser-supported TV. That is, the niche audience must be large enough and/or include enough "quality" consumers to be of value to advertisers. Dawn Ostroff, the new president of entertainment at The CW, insisted that her network should at first court a particular audience profile: the CW was to target viewers aged 18 to 34. This group was valuable for the network because of its size – 72 million potential viewers under 25, according to Ostroff (Carter 2006b) – and because of its economic power: in 2005 American teenagers spent $159 billion (Prah 2006). Coming from UPN, Ostroff sought to implement a similar strategy to "brand the network as a popular site for older teens and young adults" (Wee 2010: 162).

To attract these viewers and the advertisers who wanted to reach them, The CW first aired the most successful shows from UPN and The WB: *Gilmore Girls*[1] (The WB 2000-2006; The CW 2006-2007), *Smallville*[2] (The WB 2001-2006; The CW 2006-2011), *Veronica Mars*[3] (UPN, 2004-2006; The CW, 2006-2007) and *Everybody Hates Chris*[4] (UPN, 2005-2006; The CW, 2006-2009). From the beginning, The CW programmed a very limited number of daytime hours compared to the other broadcast networks. Apart from the wrestling show *WWE Smack Down* that aired until 2008, the network's primetime schedule relied on scripted series, and a couple of reality shows, most of them short-lived and starring flight attendants (*Fly Girls*), fashionistas (*Stylista*), or ballet dancers (*Breaking Pointe*). The only really successful reality programs on the network were *America's Next Top Model* (2006-2015) and *Beauty and the Geek* (2006-2008). Both of these fit seamlessly with the scripted programming, which focused on teenage protagonists, and suggested the construction of a young and diverse audience.

Initially, The CW's programming suggested that social and cultural diversity of the 18-34 demographic was key to the network's strategy. As CBS executive director Leslie Moonves declared in 2006: "The CW is going to be a real competitor – a destination for young audiences and diverse audiences and a real favorite among advertisers" (Learmonth 2006). This is why, originally, programs centered on white teenagers coming from The WB were balanced by the more ethnically and socially diverse casts of UPN shows.

Even though it also targeted a younger audience, the CW's branding strategy differed from that of the WB. In opposition to the WB's "conservative, idealistic, teen identity" (Wee 2010: 147), the network presented itself as a site of opposition to parental authority. In 2008, the Parent Television Council, a parental advocacy group, protested the representation of sexuality on *Gossip Girl* and described it as "mind-blowingly inappropriate" (Parents Television Council 2007). The network embraced the controversy and launched a provocative advertising campaign to signal the series' return after the writers' strike. The campaign featured the text message "OMFG" superimposed on images of the characters kissing. Both Ostroff and then-marketing director Rick Haskins consider this a pivotal moment for the network's image:

> Ostroff: As controversial as it may have been, the campaign set the tone for the network and the brand.
>
> Haskins: That's when *Gossip Girl* went from 60 to 120 miles per hour. We planted a very strong flag in the marketplace, and to this day we're known as the "OMFG network." (Bruce and Rose 2012)

This strategy allowed the network to gain publicity, and so it was pursued during the following season. To advertise the second season of *Gossip Girl*, the network used scandalized reviews as headlines over images of the characters in intimate situations (Ivie 2017). Adopting a more irreverent position than UPN and The WB was a way for the new net-

1 *Gilmore Girls* focused on the relationship between Lorelai Gilmore and Rory, the daughter she had when she was sixteen and raised on her own far from her wealthy parents.

2 *Smallville* told the story of Clark Kent before he became Superman.

3 Created by Rob Thomas, Veronica Mars starred Kristen Bell as a student who worked as a private investigator.

4 *Everybody Hates Chris* was a sitcom focusing on the life of Chris, an African-American teenager, whose adventures were based on the life of comedian Chris Rock.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

work to define its own identity. The less cautious approach was probably made possible by the evolution of community standards regarding indecency. Despite the vocal opposition of groups like the Parents Television Council, The CW took a calculated risk at a time when the decline of broadcasting networks and the rise of premium cable helped to make violence, sex and obscene language on screen more acceptable to the general public. By courting charges of indecency, and by aligning its content with the kind of boundary-pushing displayed by premium-cable networks like HBO and FX, The CW constructed its core audience as more mature than the teens targeted by its predecessors.

Targeting young adults was not only meant to attract advertisers in a competitive market, it was also a way for CBS Corporation and Time Warner to reach a potential audience for their own productions. For instance, the network was supposed to air commercials for movies produced by Warner Bros.' film division (Carter 2006a). However, The CW failed to establish itself as a distinctive brand during its first year, "as the shows were largely linked to the now defunct WB and UPN" (Wee 2010: 162). While Wee argues that The CW's main strategy was then to launch original shows and play on multi-media synergy to tap into the "target demographic's commitment to the internet" (Wee 2010: 162), I want to emphasize the gendered strategy adopted by the network when it faced its first challenges[5].

2. REMEMBERING THE LADIES

During its first two years, The CW network did not attract as many viewers as Leslie Moonves (CBS) and Barry Meyer (Warner) had hoped. But with the second season of *Gossip Girl*, ratings started to improve: Monday nights attracted 41% more viewers in 2008 than in 2007 and, most significantly, the network went up 143% among women 18 to 34 (Carter 2008). This had consequences for the brand identity the network constructed in the years that followed.

With its excessively rich, privileged, and mostly white characters, *Gossip Girl* did not really fit in the original plan to construct a network brand that would appeal to a young and diverse audience. Shortly after the first episodes aired, however, the series became the centerpiece of The CW's schedule, and the show's success played a major part in the definition of the network's identity until 2012. *Gossip Girl* seemed to confirm Ostroff's intuition that "Fame and opportunity are really important to young adults" (Atkinson 2006). Following the success of a soap that addressed all viewers as "Upper Eastsiders," the network ordered a number of shows that catered to a fascination with the insanely rich and successful[6]. The very titles of shows such as *Privileged* (2008-2009)[7], *Easy Money* (2008-2009) and *The Beautiful Life* (2009) point to the new strategy adopted by The CW from the 2008 season. Under Ostroff, the network also kept trying to capitalize on *Gossip Girl*'s success by programming the 2010 reality show *High Society*, which followed a Manhattan socialite and her friends.

Targeting specific segments of the population implies that the network constructs its intended audience. Network executives, advertisers and marketers rely on gendered stereotypes to construct gendered audiences. Choosing to adapt a book series rife with scandal and romance and already popular with young women helped define the generic characteristics of "the CW show." *Gossip Girl* participated in the construction and the gendering of the CW's audience commodity during the first years of the network.

As shows from the parent networks were slowly removed from The CW's schedule, the newcomers were mostly variations on the soap opera, focusing on glamorous characters and their relationships. In 2008, *90210*[8], *Privileged*[9], *Valentine*[10] and *Easy Money*[11] were scheduled; the following

5 Narrowcasting went hand in hand with changing representation of specific demographics: the value of viewers for networks and advertisers depends on their purchasing power. Since the 1990s, these logics have benefited audiences that used to be neglected by the Big Three: young people and women –and other minorities to a lesser extent. As early as 1949, when the short-lived fourth network, Dumont, was launched, it was the first to broadcast daytime programs to target housewives (Spigel 1992: 76). Counter-programming was generally seen as a way to compete against the leading networks. From the late 1960s until the 1990s, CBS aired female-centered shows to compete with ABC's Monday Night Football. Fox also adopted this strategy with *Ally McBeal*.

6 It is probably no coincidence that this trend coincided with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

7 This show was adapted from a novel published by Alloy Entertainment, the book packaging company that also published the Gossip Girl series.

8 In 2008, the *Beverly Hills*, 90210 franchise was revived with this drama that focused on the lives of wealthy students in Beverly Hills.

9 *Privileged* was based on a book published by Alloy Entertainment titled *How to Teach Filthy Rich Girls* (Zoey Dean, 2007) and focused on a Yale graduate who found herself tutoring two wealthy teenagers and enjoying the privileged lifestyle that goes with her new job.

10 This short-lived show followed the lives of Greek Gods who lived on earth and tried, with the help of a romance novel writer, to bring soulmates together.

11 In the eight episodes produced before it was cancelled, *Easy Money* told the story of the Buffkin family and their successful high-interest short-term loan business.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

season, *Melrose Place*[12] and *The Vampire Diaries*[13] confirmed Ostroff's plan: to brand The CW as "a destination for young women" (Carter 2008) by promoting shows set in a privileged environment and that generally focused on romance.

Catherine Johnson writes that, "as the television landscape has changed, the role of the channel brand has come under pressure" (Catherine Johnson 2012: 38). While more recent developments at the CW certainly support this conclusion, launching a new network in the mid-2000s still required the construction of a distinct channel identity, mostly in order to attract advertisers. In this case, it seems that *Gossip Girl*'s program brand was the basis for the construction of the CW brand.

The 18-34 female demographic is a very small niche. For such a narrowcasting strategy to be viable, the network needed to convince advertisers, affiliates and both parent companies that the viewers would be "advertiser friendly". In order to sell this "audience commodity" (Smythe 1981) to advertisers, the network constructed a channel brand identity that revolved around "consuming desires" (Naomi Johnson 2010)[14]. This is not to say that The CW tried to reach obscenely rich urban young women who bought designer clothes in order to seduce everyone around them. Rather, this strategy relied on the aspirational model typical of fashion magazines. The network promised advertisers access to viewers willing to consume stories glorifying success, luxury, wealth and beauty, and to spend time and money to acquire them. *Gossip Girl* focused on teenagers whose main concern was the way their lives would look on the titular character's blog. The series' narrative – especially its depiction of social media – thus reinforced a model of sociability based on reputation, mirroring the lifestyle and aspirations of the network's target audience.

The ways in which The CW constructed its audience of young women during its first years finally point to the impact of the digital era on the definition of channel brands. Catherine Johnson explains that, "the communicative ethos of broadcasting is shaped by the relationship between broadcasters, listeners/viewers and other stakeholders" (Catherine Johnson 2012: 119). As The CW was launched, the challenge was not simply to sell programs to viewers, but also to sell the attention of viewers to advertisers. The advent of digital media and the dissemination of programs on a variety of platforms have tended to weaken the importance of channel brands for audiences, but the definition of a channel brand remained crucial for a young network that wanted to compete with the Big Four. While narrowcasting was not an innovation, the decision to brand the CW as a destination for women 18-34 was partly the consequence of *Gossip Girl*'s success.

3. CONVERGENCE AND TRANSMEDIA: *GOSSIP GIRL* AS A SUCCESSFUL FEMININE BRAND

The CW targeted younger viewers, who, as Ostroff put it, "are early adopters. They're going to be the first ones trying out new things" (Grego 2010). Thus the network especially had to anticipate and work with the new modes of television consumption being adopted by young audiences in the post-network era.

Early on, The CW faced a conundrum: *Gossip Girl* was clearly popular with many more people than the Nielsen ratings suggested. Moonves complained: "It seemed like I was hearing from more people personally who were fans of *Gossip Girl* than seemed to be watching it, according to the ratings we were getting" (Carter 2008). This created tensions between Ostroff and Nielsen as the network's head argued that the ratings were no longer capturing new modes of media consumption. Ostroff explained:

> Nielsen doesn't have a great grasp on measuring younger viewers. You couldn't go anywhere in the country without finding people obsessed with the show. Where *Gossip Girl* ranked No.100 on the Nielsen list, it was No.13 when you looked at the power-content ratings—a combination of Nielsen ratings, traffic online and buzz. (Bruce and Rose 2012)

Gossip Girl therefore also signaled a break in the economic relationships between networks, audiences, and advertisers, and brought into question the relevance of the A.C. Nielsen Company, the ratings monopolist. The decision to order a full season after airing the first episodes was not based on Nielsen ratings, which were very low, but on DVR numbers and the show's success on iTunes – three weeks after the first

12 This show was the sequel to the 1992 Fox soap opera of the same name.

13 Based on a book series of the same name, *The Vampire Diaries* lasted for eight seasons and focused on the relationship between Elena, a teenage girl, and two vampires.

14 In this article, Naomi Johnson studies the books by Alloy Entertainment, the company that created the Gossip Girl concept. She writes that these books "create specific links between specific brand names, romance, and sexuality."(Naomi Johnson 2010: 59)

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

episode aired, *Gossip Girl* was in the top 5 list of the platform's most downloaded episodes (Adalian 2007).

Gossip Girl illustrates how The CW struggled to find ways of improving the show's ratings, and adapt to the digital turn. At first, the network tried to force viewers back in front of their TV set by removing *Gossip Girl* from its streaming platform. This strategy failed as viewers turned to illegal downloading websites, and the bump in the ratings was limited. The episodes were soon back on the CW website for streaming, as the network did not want to lose those fans and viewers coming to the site (Grossman 2008).

Indeed, taking the digital turn was essential to the success of the new network. The CW was born two years after Facebook, one year before the first iPhone, at a time when — as the narrative of *Gossip Girl* itself shows — people's lives and their relation to audiovisual content were deeply transformed by digital media. Part of *Gossip Girl*'s appeal was the way its narrative included social media and new ways to consume stories. While the goods consumed by the characters often remained inaccessible to the viewers, their online practices were being adopted by the target audience. As Rick Haskins explained:

> Online is one of the most important things for the demo [adults 18-34]. The timing of this network is so right; if this had happened a year ago, it would have been too soon because what was happening in the wireless and online space was just beginning to jell. It just seemed to happen at the right time to incorporate new media and old media together in a new brand. (Nordyke 2006)

Digital development was always a goal for The CW. During the first upfront presentation for advertisers in 2006, Ostroff's speech clearly took into account emerging practices, as she announced that viewers would be "able to view CW shows and related content thorough the Web, cell phones and on Apple's iPod media player", and that "The CW's Web site [would] feature several interactive and social networking elements catering to the network's mostly younger audience" (La Monica 2006). As viewers were texting, Facebooking and later Tweeting about the show even as they were watching it in the same room, *Gossip Girl* threw light on new ways to consume media content.

Those new practices were taken into account to offer advertisers better access to the show's audience. As DVRs enabled viewers to skip through the traditional commercial breaks, advertisers and broadcasters had to develop new ways to reach viewers. In addition to the ubiquitous product placement and long-term partnerships with brands such as Verizon (Steinberg 2007), the network also experimented with an original form of promotional content, echoing the historical relationship between soap advertisements and the soap opera as a genre (Steinberg 2009). In 2009, Dove co-produced a short program titled "Gossip Girl: real NYC stories Revealed." Jessica Szohr (who played Vanessa Abrams on the show), hosted these "Cwinger Ads", the first part of which aired during the show's commercial breaks while the end was available online. The Dove Cwinger Ads presented young women who resembled characters on the show (the African American filmmaker; the gorgeous socialite; the independent fashion designer) and thus used the *Gossip Girl* brand to sell a lifestyle – and deodorant. By encouraging viewers to switch from one platform to another, the CW perfected "cross-corporate promotional tie-ins", which The WB had experimented with in the late 1990s (Wee 2010: 154–55). These examples suggest that being the "*Gossip Girl* network" was not only about defining a genre – it was also about devising new strategies that embraced the influence of digital media.

In this context, the show also illustrates the cultural, technological and economic convergence that has characterized the media industry for the past decade. The origins and developments of the *Gossip Girl* brand demonstrate how the TV industry adopted transmedia strategies made possible by the development of digital media, supported by increased corporate consolidation and conglomeration, and fueled by the resulting desire to promote synergy (Le Fèvre-Berthelot 2015).

Gossip Girl is a good example of a transmedia franchise: first, because it depends on new practices associated with digital media and social networks (Derek Johnson 2013: 30); second, because it illustrates the relations that characterize media franchises where conglomerates have stakes in several outlets. In this case, Time Warner owned Alloy Entertainment and Warner Bros. Television (which coproduced the show) and The CW (which distributed it). Considering *Gossip Girl* as a media franchise includes not only top-down extensions created by the entertainment industry, but also bottom-up productions created by consumers, an essential dimension of convergence as defined by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2008: 18).

The increased consolidation that has characterized the media industry for the past few decades is clearly visible in the way Time Warner controlled the various entities involved in creating, producing, and distributing *Gossip Girl*. The franchise issues from what Amy Pattee calls a "conceptual

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

commodity" owned by the book packaging company Alloy Entertainment (Pattee 2006: 155). The concept was developed in 2000, when 17th Street Productions became Alloy Entertainment, after it was purchased by Alloy Media (Alloy, Inc.) – a direct marketing company that creates and develops content targeting women 12-34. Alloy was then bought in 2010 by Zelnick Media, a private equity firm that, in June 2012, sold Alloy Entertainment to Warner Bros. TV (a division of Time Warner). Apart from the intervention of Zelnick Media, all other mergers confirmed the links that already existed between the various entities: 17th Street had worked with Alloy to promote *Gossip Girl*, and "five Alloy properties [were] produced and distributed by Warner Bros. TV" at the time (Goldsmith 2012). The CW is central in this scheme because the network was created in part as an outlet for content produced by Time Warner.

The transmedia development of the *Gossip Girl* narrative is also striking. There are multiple extensions of the *Gossip Girl* franchise, linked by three major elements: the title, the themes, and the tone. The guiding thread is indeed Gossip Girl herself (the names and storylines associated with the characters may be different depending on the extensions). No matter the platform, the blogger's posts are key to the narrative and the tone adopted is very specific.

The original elements of the franchise are the 14 books created by Alloy Entertainment, the first of which was published in 2002, and which proved popular (Nussbaum 2005). But the success of the franchise mostly relies on the teen soap that aired on The CW from September 2007 until December 2012. The TV series borrows its main characters and its narrative principle from the books. The franchise also encouraged viewers and fans to engage with the show's universe and to play with its narrative principles across various digital platforms. As Louisa Stein points out, these digital extensions, from official games to fan blogs, questioned the viewers' relationship to digital media (Stein 2013), thus reinforcing one of the show's major themes. They also tapped into the interests of the younger demographic. Indeed, as Stein puts it, the franchise depicts "a digital culture shared by *Gossip Girl* characters and viewers, in which digital tools offer the powers and pleasures of access, networking, and intervention" (Stein 2013: 339).

Games such as *Gossip Girl on Second Life* (2007-2009) or the "Social Climbing" Facebook app (2011-2012) did not just reinforce viewers' engagement with the show, they also turned viewers into consumers who could either buy clothes (whether for their avatars or themselves) or "spotted points" to belong to a virtual elite.

Countless fan websites and unofficial blogs also participate in the dissemination of the franchise across the web. The boundaries between fan and official content were blurred as the case of Karissa Bowers shows: Bowers wrote a blog called "Gossip Girl Fashion" that listed clothes worn by the characters and suggested similar items that could be bought to get the *Gossip Girl* look – in 2013, she was featured as a weekly columnist for the official *Gossip Girl* website.

The economic success of the franchise – and its presentation as a franchise rather than just a stand-alone teen soap – helped establish the legitimacy of the show and the network. As Derek Johnson writes, "franchising offered a significant narrative through which the presence of the feminine within patriarchal institutional structures and strategies could be imagined as intelligible and strategically rational" (Derek Johnson 2013: 62). The results validated the decision to target young women. When Ostroff left the network to join her family in New York, the network was "up 7% in total viewers, the biggest gain for any English-language broadcaster" (Andreeva 2010).

The CW experimented with the *Gossip Girl* franchise to help find a viable business model in the post-network era, illustrating how technological, economic and cultural convergence transformed the media industry and shaped the new network.

4. AND NOW, FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT?

In 2018 it seems that the fifth network has managed to rebrand itself and to acquire a cultural legitimacy that was out of reach for its teen soaps. From DC superheroes to *Jane the Virgin*, the generic category of the "CW show" has undergone major transformations. Mark Pedowitz was partly right: The CW no longer is the *Gossip Girl* network.

The first element that has changed is that rather than teen soaps, the network is now associated with shows based on DC comics superheroes (*Arrow*; *The Flash*; *Legends of Tomorrow*; *Supergirl*) and the glamour and rich teen trend seems to have faded. The second element of the network's transformation is that "The CW is one of the most even of the broadcasters, with 51 percent of the viewership female and 49 percent male" (Madler 2016). Of course, this has to do with the major change in programming, itself the result of the network's desire to break out of its niche. It is not unusual for networks to target the female demographic when they

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

are in a weaker position. Eileen Meehan explains that "the audience" has generally been defined as male (and mostly white). She writes: "networks that couldn't draw the audience counterprogrammed for niche audiences, meaning women, or women and children, or African Americans, or Hispanic Americans, or some combination thereof" (Meehan 2002: 216). She also argues that "noneconomic assumptions undergird beliefs about what sorts of people ought to be the audience and that those assumptions follow familiar patterns of discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, and age" (Meehan 2002: 217). *Variety* – one of the major trade publications – has praised Pedowitz for broadening the audience in terms of gender, suggesting that for reasons which are not necessarily economic, male viewers are more valuable than female ones.

Yet, it must be noted that while the gender balance has changed, the changed schedule has introduced new female-led shows that challenge not only the generic category of "CW show", but also the stereotyped representations of femininity that the network used to convey. From the diverse cast of *Jane the Virgin* (2014-) and its three generations of women, to the mentally ill singing and dancing Yale lawyer of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015- 2019), The CW is now praised for:

> an array of women that are a little bit square, and who still get to be challenging, flawed, and surprising. [...] women [who] don't have time for certain kinds of drama, yet [whose] adventures are so often crisply entertaining. (Ryan 2016)

As for the issue of cultural legitimacy, the network seems on the right track: *Jane the Virgin* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* both won Golden Globes in 2015 and 2016, a first for The CW.

Despite these major transformations, The CW's first years were not just a draft waiting to be tossed by Pedowitz and his team. The CW today is still the *Gossip Girl* network: key elements that are part of today's success emerged from the experiments with *Gossip Girl*. Ostroff's strategy relied on narrowcasting, branding, and transmedia to attract and keep a very specific share of the audience in order to create a viable fifth network at the beginning of the post-network era. The network's first years demonstrated that serialized shows are better adapted to a television economy less reliant on syndication re-runs than it once was. Pedowitz and his team (which includes Rick Haskins and Kevin Levy, who have been part of the network's executive team since it launched in 2006) have benefited from the network's early experiments, as tendencies that were emerging then have since redefined the structure of the television industry.

The CW's digital strategy has thus expanded, the network multiplying the number of platforms on which its programs are available. It no longer fears losing viewers, and now encourages them to switch between platforms such as The CW website or The CW app for day-after viewing; Netflix to binge entire seasons once they've aired on the network; or YouTube for extra content associated with the shows. While the network tries to "keep its content in-house on its own website longer" (Madler 2016), it also takes advantage of the specificity of each platform. For instance, the YouTube channel of Rachel Bloom (co-creator of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*) is used to provide viewers with uncensored versions of the show's songs, each clip ending with a reminder that the show is on Mondays at 8/7c on The CW.

The network's sudden interest in DC Comics superheroes is not only linked to the great narrative potential of the DC universe, but also to the way this potential can be exploited across "all of Warner Bros.' businesses" (Rogers 2009). DC Comics has belonged to Warner since 1969. Pedowitz was called to The CW only two years after the creation of DC Entertainment as a division of Warner Bros., "a new company founded to fully realize the power and value of the DC Comics brand and characters across all media and platforms" (Rogers 2009). The superhero shows are thus part of the synergy encouraged by conglomeration.

One tagline for *Gossip Girl* was: "You're nobody until you're talked about," and it could sum up The CW's strategy since it launched in 2006. While all that mattered at first was to be talked about, even if it meant becoming the OMFG network, it is now essential that the network control the narrative. Based on its programming and digital strategy, The CW has been trying to brand itself as a legitimate player in the TV industry. Its evolution points to the efficacy of a strategy shaped by economic, cultural and technological convergence in the post-network era.

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Stylista (2008)
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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8190
ISSN 2421-454X

ANGELS, DEMONS AND WHATEVER COMES NEXT: THE STORYWORLD DYNAMICS OF *SUPERNATURAL*

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KEYWORDS
Storyworld; narratology; writing; ethos; showrunner.

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the narrative dynamics of the fantasy television series *Supernatural* (2005-) in order to better understand how this particular program has become a backbone of The CW network. Combining formal and contextual narratologies, it blends a close-reading of the series with an analysis of its writing, production and reception contexts, and divides the long-running series into four eras, each defined by a specific showrunner. It starts by exploring the context of the series' creation, before cataloguing the shifting dynamics of the storyworld during the four eras: the 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke; the complex reconfigurations of the Sera Gamble era; the 'mythology reboot' of the Jeremy Carver era; and the ever-increasing stakes and expansionist dynamics of the Andrew Dabb era. The aim of this paper is to show how 'periodising' a long-running series by using close-reading and studying the dynamics of a storyworld can expand and complete analysis focused on audiences and the genesis of the text.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
ISSN 2421-454X

The Apocalypse has just been averted. The Winchester brothers, Sam and Dean, hunters of monsters and demons, thwarted Lucifer's plans and put him back in his cage in the deepest levels of Hell, at the cost of Sam's life, imprisoned with him. Chuck Shurley – God in disguise – is narrating the events while writing on his computer: "No doubt, endings are hard. But then again... nothing ever really ends, does it?" He smiles before disappearing into thin air. Later, unbeknownst to Dean, Sam is back from Hell, watching his brother from afar.

The last scenes from "Swan Song" (5.22) encapsulate urban fantasy TV series *Supernatural* (2005-), from a storyworld point of view as well as a real-world point of view: this is not the first time, nor the last, that one of the brothers dies and comes back to life. The end of season five, and the disappearance of writer Chuck Shurley, also echoes the departure of series creator and showrunner Eric Kripke. Since that first Apocalypse, the series has garnered a loyal fandom and, after thirteen seasons and four showrunners, shows no signs of wear. Along with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Criminal Minds* (2005-) or *NCIS* (2003-), this is one of the few scripted primetime television series of the mid-2000s still on the air. It is a relic from another time, before the rise of SVoD content producers, when networks and cable channels alike aimed for niche markets and an increasing narrative complexity, which "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell 2015: 18). Any series reaching more than ten seasons may begin to look like a Ship of Theseus, rebuilt over and over again to renew interest: *Supernatural* is particularly interesting in that the only original 'nail and plank' of the ship are the Winchester brothers, around whom the whole storyworld recombines itself season after season.

This paper will explore the narrative dynamics of *Supernatural* in an attempt to better understand its longevity, and the way it reinvents itself writing-wise. Combining formal and contextual narratologies (see Shen 2005), I will blend a close-reading of the series with an analysis of its writing, production and reception contexts, using Thomas Pavel's (1988) and Lubomír Doležel's (1998) works on possible worlds theory applied to fiction, along with what Marie-Laure Ryan would call *storyology*, "the study of the logic that binds events into plots" (2009: 73), and finally, Raphael Baroni's research on narrative tension (2007). I will also draw from my own work on long-term serialized narration on television (Favard 2014, 2015, 2016a) – this paper being part of an ongoing research on the shape, structure and dynamics of narratively complex television series' storyworlds and plots (Favard 2016b, 2017). In the following pages, the term "storyworld" will be used to underline the fact that "interpreters attempt to reconstruct not just what happened [...] but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved" (Herman 2002: 13-14).

From a methodological point of view, I acknowledge my status as a scholar-fan (Hills 2002), and the down-to-earth philosophy of storyology, which Ryan reminds us is "mostly [produced by] scriptwriters and authors of 'How to' manuals", although she cites Thomas Pavel, Vladimir Propp, Claude Bremond or Emma Kafalenos as examples of academic 'storyologists'. This paper will then deal with, on the one hand, the complex balance between "the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject" and personal investment in the series (Hills 2002: xxvii), between "the need to understand [the text] more fully" and "a sustained and committed investigation" (Cardwell 2006: 74); and, on the other hand, the need to face evaluation rather than trying to avoid it, while keeping in mind that, in television studies, "scholarly arguments are not statements of fact, but rather assertions to be discussed and debated" (Mittell 2009: 123). *Supernatural* will not be evaluated in absolute and definitive terms in the following pages; the arguments presented are open to debate and will bring more questions than answers.

The 'showrunner eras' dividing the series into four segments are inspired by Paul Booth's work about periodising long-running science fiction series *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-) (see Booth 2014). Those eras are also used by the fandom, for example on the collaborative encyclopedia website *Supernatural Wikia*[1]. This website has been a useful source during the writing of this paper and will be called upon from time to time, as wikis are an integral part of "participatory fandom" (Mittell 2012). Even one scholar-fan is no match for a fandom's "collective intelligence" (Jenkins 2008: 4), especially since the "fictional encyclopedia" (Doležel 1998: 177-81) of the show has become increasingly complex over the years.

I will proceed chronologically, beginning with the 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke, followed by the complex reconfigurations of the Sera Gamble era; I will then analyze the 'mythology reboot' of the Carver era, and finally the ever-increasing stakes and expansionist dynamics of the Dabb era.

1 Available online at http://supernatural.wikia.com.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
ISSN 2421-454X

1. **"... AND THEY HAVE A PLAN": ERIC KRIPKE AND THE *CLOSURE PLEDGE* TREND**

Initially aired on The WB, *Supernatural* foregrounded the 'procedural drama' aspects of *Buffy* (1997-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006): firmly grounded in the real world and their era rather than in the mystical world, the three series center their formula on the investigation that needs to be conducted prior to fighting evil. The high school library of *Buffy* and the Book of Shadows in *Charmed* are clearly echoed in the way the Winchester brothers – especially Sam – have to 'hit the books' and 'check the lore' when working on cases; the fact that they usually impersonate federal agents emphasizes this procedural aspect, which can be traced back at least to *The X-Files* (1993-2002).

Supernatural therefore clearly behaves as an episodic procedural drama during its first seasons, with the only serialized aspects being the goals the brothers set themselves: finding their father John in season one, killing the demon Azazel in season two. These goals are macro-questions that call for closure (Carroll 2007). In the context of television series, I call them *iterative macro-questions* (Favard 2015), as they typically ask a yes or no question that can be called upon by any number of episodes without giving an answer. Yet they sustain a narrative tension (Baroni 2007) beyond the scale of the episodes themselves: will the brothers find John? Will they kill Azazel? Iterative macro-questions have been the standard of even the most episodic television series since the 1960s, and the ever-delayed conclusion of *The Fugitive* (1963-1967): will Richard Kimble find the one-armed man? Those questions are also of a *biographical* nature rather than a *cosmographical* one, as they deal with family and revenge: such questions are 'easier' to use as they only affect the network of characters rather than the entire storyworld. 'Easy' does not mean 'uncomplex'. In fact, as we will see, cosmographical questions are harder to use mainly because they can be a writer's nightmare: when answered, they can alter the structure of an entire fictional world. An example would be: will the Colonials ever find Earth in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009)? Answering the question positively would resolve the entire plot of the series, as the writers did only when the time came to end the series (Favard 2015).

This episodic trend, however, is slowly counterbalanced by serialized narrative threads, as it is in most narratively complex contemporary television series (Mittell 2015), such as J. J. Abrams' *Alias* (2001-2006), which struggled to find the balance between the episodic and the serialized (see Örnebring 2007). Moreover, showrunner Eric Kripke repeatedly said he "had a plan", just like the evil Cylons do in *Battlestar Galactica*: early interviews already point towards a three- to five-year plan (2007). *Supernatural* may have been influenced by a 2000s trend that I call the *closure pledge*, embodied by shows such as *Battlestar* and *Lost* (2004-2010). The closure pledge consists in making explicit, in the first episodes, a macro-question that, if answered, would either collapse the entire plot on itself and end the series, or force the writers to 'reboot' the program and change some of its core elements: what would *Lost* be if all the characters had left the mysterious island at the end of the first season? At the same time, despite the "infinite model of storytelling" (Mittell 2010) driven by economics and a show's success, a model that will make said closure anything but *imminent*, a closure pledge television series will repeatedly stress the *immanence* of its denouement (Kermode 1967: chapter 1).

Supernatural is not a closure pledge series *per se*, but it may have been read like one because of Kripke's frequent references to his "plan". To this day, *Supernatural Wikia*, among other sources, still refers to the "five-year plan" when detailing the Kripke era, even suggesting that "the show was supposed to end at this point"[2]. The said 'plan' is not made explicit until the beginning of season four, when the macro-questions leading an increasingly serialized plot become more and more cosmographical: high-ranking demon Lilith plans to free Lucifer and bring on the Apocalypse, the end of the (story)world. Interestingly, everything the brothers went through during the first four seasons is then presented as a necessary sequence of events leading up to the Apocalypse: Azazel corrupted Sam *to prepare him* to be possessed by Lucifer, and the brothers were *predestined* to be vessels of the archangels Lucifer and Michael for their final battle. Just like *Lost* and other highly serialized television series, *Supernatural* transforms *contingency* into *necessity* (see Peck 2011: 78), emphasizing "regressive causality", driven by structuralist analysis of 'closed' forms of narration such as a novel, over the "principle of prospective economy" used by most progressive, ongoing, open forms of narration (see Escola 2010). Did Kripke really have a plan? He himself confesses that he and the writers had to compromise: "Some things were accelerated and other stories took longer to tell than I thought, but overall, we're on track" (2007). I have shown elsewhere that this type of discourse is common nowadays: while it is first

2 See « The Kripke era », available online at http://supernatural.wikia.com/wiki/The_Kripke_Era.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
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and foremost reinforcing the writers' ethos – "the author's image built through metadiscourse" (Amossy 2009, my translation) – and their importance in the production process of television series, these plans may at least offer a guideline for the writing room (Favard 2015).

Whether Kripke did plan the entire first five seasons or not is another matter; most probably, the writer aimed at five seasons to pass the syndication threshold and ensure the show's continuation from an economic standpoint. What interests me here is that Kripke succeeded in telling a five-year story that does offer, in "Swan Song" (5.22), that "point of view from which the story can be seen as a whole" (Ricœur 1983: 130, my translation), emphasizing the difference between story (the order of events) and plot (the causal links between events). A seemingly episodic television series became what writer Damon Lindelof would call a "stealth serialized" show (Bennett 2014: 79), underlining its serialized storyline as it was answering its most important, cosmographical, teleological macro-question: will the Apocalypse, planned by angels and demon alike for eons, be averted? The answer was yes. Kripke, feeling the show was "reaching the end of this five-year storyline" (and emphasizing subsequent readings of the show in that fashion, including mine), decided to step down as a showrunner, and let another "open a new [chapter]" (Ausiello 2010). But as God says himself in the season five finale, "nothing ever really ends".

2. HOW TO KEEP GOING AFTER THE END: SERA GAMBLE'S RECONFIGURATION OF THE MODERN MYTH

An even greater challenge greeted Sera Gamble, promoted to showrunner before the beginning of season six: telling what happened after the Apocalypse was averted. Her two-season reign over the writing room is perhaps one of the most complicated eras of the show. She continued to profess the existence of an "over-arching storyline" (a required declaration for television writers nowadays), but stressed that

> We were very aware that we had gone as big and epic as we could go, so we didn't want to just slot in another big bad. We didn't want to deal with a new story in that way because it would feel like a cheat. I don't think you can go bigger than Lucifer and excite people (Radish 2010).

Beyond the need to avoid bringing in a new "big bad", as *Buffy* and *Charmed* did every season, I argue *Supernatural* was confronted with a specific situation inside its storyworld: the Apocalypse storyline allowed the realms of Heaven and Hell to collide with Earth. Over the first five seasons, the storyworld slowly "saturated", as it accumulated determinate facts surrounded by indeterminate, implicit facts (Doležel 1998: 182-3). It expanded the "circle of light" into the darkness that is the inherent incompleteness of all fictional worlds (Pavel 1988: 120). But this saturation led the storyworld to evolve from a classical, dyadic, mythical structure, into what Doležel calls the "modern myth". The realm of the supernatural and its omnipotent entities, once clearly separated from the world down below, became a hybrid, homogeneous world in which hierarchies between entities lost part of their meaning (Doležel 1998: 186-7). For example, Crowley, a low-ranking demon introduced in season five, suddenly becomes King of Hell in the ensuing seasons. Angels and demons alike emphasize a visual and thematic blend between realms already started as soon as season four: they are portrayed as everyday business men and women dressed in three-piece suits, while both Hell and Heaven are structured like the greedy corporations of our late capitalist era.

It is particularly interesting that the sixth season may be the only one without a single, clear, season-defining plot, emphasizing both Gamble's difficult task, and the confusion in the aftermath of the Apocalypse. The season is instead parsed with discrete mini-arcs, from Sam needing to recover his soul to the hunt for "Alpha monsters" and the quick rise and fall of Eve, a potential big bad who barely lasts from 6.12 to 6.19. The angel civil war over who gets to rule Heaven now that God has "left the building" is treated stealthily at first, before the conflict escalates between the angels and the demons over who will harness the power of the souls in Purgatory.

The Gamble era is peculiar in that, beyond adding Purgatory to the structure of the storyworld, it does not alter it significantly; the character network, however, is deeply affected by some bold decisions, such as the death of Bobby, a father figure for the brothers; Sam's instability following his time in Hell; as well as Castiel's temporary status as antagonist, when he is possessed by Leviathans, the main antagonists of season seven. Seasons six and seven are usually low in the rankings of the best seasons made by fans or entertainment websites. Audience-wise, they only confirm the slow decrease in viewers, averaging 2 million US viewers according to *TV by the numbers*. This slow decline is common

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for long-running series, and one should note that after the Gamble era, the numbers held steady. It is not my place to evaluate Gamble's artistic choices; however, it is interesting to note that both the storyworld and the show itself went through uneasy reconfigurations after the Kripke era.

3. THE CARVER ERA: REBOOTING AN EXPANSIONIST MYTHOLOGY

When Jeremy Carver stepped in as showrunner, it is worth noting that many of his initial declarations seemed meant to reassure the fans about the 'mythology' of the show. As I have tried to show elsewhere (Favard 2018: 57), the term 'mythology', used by writers and fans alike, can be traced back to *The X-Files*, and usually refers to the macro-questions driving the serialized plot, but also to the dynamics of the storyworld and the characters' network. It should not be seen as a substitute for terms such as 'canon' or 'continuity', focused on already established, determinate facts – the 'mythology' looks both backward and forward, especially when it comes to the saturation of the storyworld and its evolving structure (Favard 2015, 2018). On the *Supernatural Wikia*, Jeremy Carver is presented as someone willing to restructure the mythology, with highlighted quotes underlining the work that needed to be done, reinforcing his ethos as the show's reformist. A quote from entertainment website *TVLine* is particularly explicit:

> The one thing that struck me [while] watching Season 7 was I felt like the show got a little bit buried under its mythology," he says of the year that found Dick Roman trying to start a Leviathan takeover of the human population. "It became a little hard to tell exactly what was going on at times. The longtime fans all deserve intricate plot, but it felt a little burdensome (Gelman, 2012).

The Carver era, composed of four seasons, is almost as long as the Kripke era, and brings back season-wide, clear-cut story arcs, and a slow expansion of the storyworld. Seasons eight to ten could be seen as setting up the increasingly expansionist dynamic of latter seasons; but in order to work, according to Carver, this expansion needed to begin with a "reset". Carver, as many showrunners do when they are handed a show they did not create, wanted to set the series in a new direction: his own. The Carver era is not a reboot *per se*: *Supernatural* is not rewritten from scratch, but its loose threads and intricacies are 'surgically' removed in order to give new momentum to clear-cut serialized arcs. Season eight is then centered on the brother's finding a way to close the gates of Hell, while in Heaven, the civil war concludes. The "reset" also takes the form of an ellipsis: after having been sent to Purgatory at the end of season seven, Dean Winchester comes back to Earth a year later, and the brothers have an uneasy reunion. During this year gap, they both lived a meaningful relationship outside of their brotherhood, and flashbacks detail Sam's romance with Amelia, and Dean's friendship with Benny, a vampire he met in Purgatory. It echoes *Alias* and *Battlestar Galactica*: both used this classic narrative device not to 'reboot' themselves, but to allow the characters and plot to move in new directions, discarding 'burdensome' intricacies.

Carver's "reset" of the storyworld is also manifested through a change in setting: following season seven's destruction of Bobby's headquarters, the brothers, in season eight, find out about the Men of Letters, a secret organization dedicated to fighting evil, with ties to their own family. The Men of Letters no longer being in activity, the brothers move into one of their bunkers, which is full of magical artifacts and books, and carry on their legacy. Compared to Bobby's, the Men of Letters' bunker is a setting full of promise and potential narrative leads; it also underlines the fact that the stakes are rising. Heaven and Hell, once impenetrable realms in a dyadic structure, are now fuel for endless conflicts; protagonist Castiel and antagonist Crowley allow the plot to visit, on a regular basis, what can no longer be considered a mystical part of the storyworld. Season nine sends all the angels into exile on Earth, while Dean temporarily becomes a demon: the alignment and nature of individual agents becomes more complex. This hybridization of the storyworld is completed by a wider array of relationships explored by the show in season ten: beyond the Winchester's brotherhood, a core element since season one, Crowley, the King of Hell, is slowly sucked into a domestic nightmare as his mother, the powerful witch Rowena, saps his authority in Hell; meanwhile, Castiel is looking after Claire Novak, the daughter of the man he uses as his 'vessel' to walk the Earth.

If the Carver era is a "reset", it is a careful one, marked by power conflicts and an expanding set of core protagonists: the promotional material, limited to the brothers in early seasons, now counts Castiel and Crowley as an integral part of the show. The storyworld itself, though hybridized, remains steady. It is mainly through a potential spin-off series that

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
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Supernatural tries to renew its approach of space and stakes. "Bloodlines" (9.20) centers on a police academy trainee, hunting demons in Chicago, offering a different dynamic by focusing on one city (while the Winchesters travel on the roads across the United States) and conflicts between powerful families of monsters (as opposed to the epic clashes between Earth, Heaven and Hell). *Bloodlines* was not picked up by The CW for the subsequent season.

The eleventh season, the last of the Carver era, sees the seasons' big bads making their return, reinvigorating a dynamic the series had not picked up since the Kripke era. The Darkness, a formidable foe older than God himself, is released at the end of season ten. *Supernatural* renews ties with its WB predecessors, *Charmed* and *Buffy*, in this storytelling tradition of the season's overarching antagonist – but with a twist. While the Kripke era used suspense as well as curiosity to drive the plot, allowing the audience to make prognoses about what is going to happen (will Lucifer be set free?) as well as diagnoses about what already happened (why did Azazel need Sam?), the Carver era's narrative tension is pure suspense, a continuous rush forward, with surprises along the way when the consequences of the brother's actions are unexpected (Baroni 2007). In the era of increased narrative complexity, each antagonist is a consequence of the former being destroyed, tying the seasons in a causal chain. The series slowly fosters a new "intrinsic norm", playing with the audience's "operational knowledge" (Mittell 2015: 167): whatever the brothers do to get rid of the big bad, they are setting the necessary conditions for the arrival of the next one.

This configuration is indeed quite common nowadays in narratively complex television series and does not even require a 'plan': all the text needs to do is to present every new event as a clear consequence of the last one, insisting on *plot* rather than on *story*. *Supernatural* is making no closure pledge, but its overarching plot goes beyond the scale of the seasons to pledge something like 'ever-increasing stakes'. Fantasy series of the 1990s and 2000s did try such retroactive plotting: for example, *Buffy* presents the emergence of The First, the 'big bad' of season seven, as a direct consequence of Buffy's resurrection in season six, an event that upset the balance between good and evil. But *Supernatural*, like many contemporary series, makes this retroactive plotting an integral part of its long-term storytelling dynamic. This continuous rush forward, however, risks turning the storyworld into a maelstrom of repetitive conflicts; to renew interest, it needs space to expand in unpredictable ways.

4. THE DABB ERA: BRINGING BACK THE DYADIC STORYWORLD THROUGH EXPANSION AND REVISION

Andrew Dabb, promoted to showrunner before season twelve, follows Carver's steps with a twofold expansion of the storyworld, acting both on the periphery of the world to seek new territories, as well as on the inside, through the "implicit texture" of the storyworld, an area rich with "plastic indeterminate facts" (Doležel 1998: 183). As the British Men of Letters try to aggressively take over the operations of the United States branch, Lucifer is jumping from vessel to vessel, just long enough to conceive a Nephilim – a human-archangel hybrid. Meanwhile, the network of characters is again disrupted with the resurrection of Mary Winchester, the brother's mother. Season twelve is all about redefining the show one more time by going back to its roots, bringing back actor Mark Pellegrino, a fan favorite, as Lucifer, and seemingly restarting the Apocalypse… to subvert it once again.

It is too soon to look back on the Dabb era as it only consists of three seasons, but a clear dynamic may already be at work. At the end of season twelve, Jack, the son of Lucifer, opens up a rift to an alternate reality where the Apocalypse did happen, shifting the storyworld from a "classical cosmology" to a "plural cosmology" (Ryan 2010: 66). This allows the text to explore another possible road not taken by the overarching plot in season five. This highly reflexive shift is coherent in a show that already displays a rich intratextuality and frequently breaks the fourth wall (Macklem 2014). Season thirteen plays with this alternate reality and other, briefly explored universes, coding those spaces as near-impenetrable and full of unknown and powerful entities – including a giant Godzilla-like monster – thereby reinstating a dyadic structure in a profoundly altered storyworld. But the Apocalypse alternate reality stands apart from the others, as it gives a detailed and counterfactual account of how the Kripke era of the show could have turned out if Lucifer had won. The character of Bobby is still alive in this universe, and this father figure is reintroduced into the 'main' universe, reconstructing, along with the resurrection of Mary Winchester, an extended family around the brothers. While not technically a form of retroactive continuity (the 'real' Bobby did die), alternate realities allow Dabb to potentially revise any decision made by his predecessors, thanks to the storyworld now being "plural". Through expansion into parallel universes, the Dabb era is not only returning to a dyadic configuration, but also using a form of palimpsestic revision

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
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of the text, while playing with the fan's encyclopedic knowledge of the show.

Season thirteen is also going back in time another way. If the Carver era introduced the Darkness, born before God, the Dabb era went further and confronted Castiel to the Empty, the nothingness before all creation ("The Big Empty", 13.4). The Empty has yet to appear again. If we are to follow the series' intrinsic norms, however, the fact that Castiel is the only one able to escape the Empty means it is likely being set up as a future 'big bad'. Unless, that is, we are to see the emergence of a new dynamic within the storyworld.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I tried to underline the shifting dynamics of the long-running series *Supernatural*, in order to explain, at least in part, how it became one of The CW's signature programs. The 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke gave the show internal coherence in its first seasons and illustrates how it may have been influenced by the closure pledge trend. Reception and author's discourse cannot encapsulate on their own the complexity of the Gamble era; I hope I have shown how a formal approach to the storyworld can add to the analysis of redefining moments in a television series. While the Carver era illustrates how a show's mythology can be partially 'rebooted' – in fact, given a new direction – the Dabb era is interesting because it reverts the entropic shift from a dyadic configuration to a hybrid one in many fantasy series. It remains to be seen how long *Supernatural* will last. But like other long-running television programs, the time may have come to undertake a 'periodisation' of the series, in Booth's terms, to better understand it from a storytelling point of view, beyond production and reception.

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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8164
ISSN 2421-454X

THE CW ARROWVERSE AND MYTH-MAKING, OR THE COMMODIFICATION OF TRANSMEDIA FRANCHISING

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KEYWORDS
The CW; DC comics; Arrowverse; transmedia; convergence; superhero; myth.

ABSTRACT
The CW's influence over the American network television landscape has never ceased to grow since its creation in 2006. The network's audience composition reflects The CW's strategies to improve its original content as well as diversifying it, moving away from its image as a network for teenage girls. One of the key elements which has supported this shift was the development of the Arrowverse, a shared narrative space based on DC-inspired original series which provided the network with a fertile groundwork to build upon. The CW did not hesitate to capitalize on its not-so-newfound superhero brand to induce a circulation of myth, relying on these larger-than-life characters at the heart of American pop culture to fortify its cultural and historical bedrock and earn its seat along the rest of the Big 4. This paper aims to decipher how The CW pioneered new technology-based tools which ultimately changed the American media-industrial landscape of the early 2010s, putting these tools to the test with the network's superhero series. It will thus also address how the Arrowverse set of characters has triggered cross-media and transmedia experimentations, how The CW stimulated rapport with its strong fan base, as well as how the network has been able to capitalize on the superhero genre's evocative capacities.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

Ever since Mark Pedowitz succeeded Dawn Ostroff at the head of The CW in 2011, it is not uncommon to see the Big 4 (CBS, FOX, ABC, NBC) turned into a Big 5, adding The CW to the 4 historical juggernauts. Under Pedowitz's direction, the very structure of The CW changed, differentiating itself from the rest of the Big 4, most notably through cross-media partnerships that have now changed the landscape of American TV. In 2012, the CW was the first network to become associated with Nielsen Online Campaign Ratings in order to produce precise statistics and data for its viewership on all platforms, based on their targeted audience, the highly coveted 18-49 niche[1]. They changed the way that we have become accustomed to analyzing viewership – all US networks now collaborate with Nielsen to provide them with a very precise and occasionally confusing landscape of their viewership. On top of this analytical partnership, the CW's Executive Vice President of Marketing and Digital Programs Rick Haskins reaffirmed in 2012 the network's digital ambitions at the forefront of their developing strategies, all of which were in tune with converging media platforms and which highlighted the role of social media (Wallenstein 2012). As a result, they also started to collaborate with the now-closed Immersive Youth Marketing company, "a full service agency that helps motivate consumers to action"[2]. The company's website described the objective as follow:

Warner Bros. Entertainment Group was interested in tapping into the power of fandoms, influencers, ecommerce and social media of viewers who were watching Millennial centric television programming on The CW Network. Immersive was partnered with a social media entertainment start-up, code named Kumbuya, that was spun out of the Warner Bros. Media Camp accelerator program, to gauge the power of online fan communities, influencers and the viability of turning fan energy and interest into sales revenue. The founding philosophy was to create the ultimate online gathering place where The CW Network could partner with and empower influencers with a forum where they can share fan art, UGC, view premium show content, build a robust fan community and connect with the stars of their favorite CW programs (Immersive Youth).

On the one hand, the fact that this then-innovative strategy was launched by the Warner Bros. studios reasserted the historical filiation of The CW, but on the other, it mostly proved that the network understood from very early on the benefits of a convergence-centric approach. Even if The CW has not been able to maintain its leadership with the 18-49 target audience, the network is, however, still ahead in terms of funding for its programs thanks to the streaming partnerships it was able to conclude. In 2011, The CW signed unprecedented deals with both Hulu and Netflix, putting the network's original programs on the platforms once the season was over. These partnerships came to an end in June 2016 when The CW renegotiated their streaming offer solely with Netflix with a new deal which changed many things for the network's ad-revenue strategy[3]. The network cultivates its edge in order to better fit the evolving marketplace of network television and always seems to pre-empt its competitors. In doing so, it also leaves its imprint on American TV history with its strategic choices setting it apart. Mark Pedowitz understood how this approach would prove to be a strong asset for the changing network business and used the hybrid nature of The CW as one of its strongest qualities:Since the initial landmark deal in 2011, The CW's programming has enjoyed tremendous success and increased exposure through Netflix, and our new agreement not only continues but enhances this valuable relationship. The CW has positioned itself for the future by transforming into a true hybrid network, rooted in broadcast while fully embracing the digital and streaming habits of the viewers (Prudom 2016).

This very hybridity of the networks is what seemed to motivate The CW's ongoing media conglomeration blueprint, leading to the network's increasing presence on social media, the launch of the web-based CW Seed, the pro-

1 "The CW is the first TV network to sign on with Nielsen Online Campaign Ratings for complete measurement of its online ad inventory, tagging every online video ad and using the solution to offer advertisers demographic guarantees for every online campaign during the 2012-2013 season." Nielsen's official website (2012). http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2012/the-cw-to-use-nielsen-online-campaign-ratings.html (last accessed 12-05-18)

2 "We're Immersive Youth Marketing, a full service agency that helps motivate consumers to action. Our hybrid model is focused on authenticity–combining brand strategy, social technologies and engaging real world experiences that resonate with young people and parents. Immersive projects impact targeted audience segments to create a long-lasting and profoundly connective bond between consumers and your brand. Immersive delivers personalized solutions designed to create awareness, inspire conversation, generate sales lift, and increase retention." (Immersive Youth) Marketing official website. http://www.immersiveyouthmarketing.com/agency (last accessed 12-05-18)

3 "The CW is structured like a broadcast network, with affiliated stations across the country and a set weekly primetime schedule. It does not, however, operate very much like its fellow broadcasters. Thanks to a very generous streaming deal with Netflix — which allows complete seasons of shows to stream just eight days after their on-air seasons end — the pressure to chase ratings and ad dollars is arguably lower at The CW than at other networks. The deal is reportedly worth up to $1 billion per year. By comparison, the network's upfront ad sales last year totaled about $500 million." (Porter 2017)

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

grams' accessibility through Netflix as well as noteworthy participation in fan-oriented events such as ComicCon. This plan of action follows rather precisely what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green wrote in 2013 in their collective monograph *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, especially how it highlights the value of media engagement[4]. For instance, this media engagement can refer to the need for the network to take into account how the audience members relate to the network's series; how fans, outside of just sharing their impressions, are also given the opportunity to engage directly with the network's content. The CW has encouraged this through the many live chats with actors, script writers and producers on Facebook or Twitter at the end of some episodes, as advertised at the bottom of the screen while the episode is being broadcast. Through this media conglomeration and its diverse sources of revenue comes media consolidation, reinforcing both the network itself as well as its circuit of influence. The comfortable financial net provided by this cross-media policy also allows the network to apprehend the future with relative security, explaining why The CW tends to announce its renewals and cancellations earlier than do other American networks.

But the CW's somewhat comfortable situation has come under fire and has led several critics to deplore the network's lack of originality in its programming, referencing the franchising of superhero-themed TV series which followed the appearance of *Arrow* on the network's schedule in 2012. The overwhelming presence of several DC franchises, namely *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, *Supergirl* and *Black Lightning*, has been perceived as colonizing the network's programming grid as well as anesthetizing its creativity:

> With the way its business is set up, it would seem The CW has a chance to take some bigger swings with its programming. The network's #brand is superheroes right now, and it was teen dramas before that. But it doesn't have to be. It might do well to follow the lead of channels like FX, which has a well-established rep for supporting its show creators, or the similarly young adult-focused TBS (Porter 2017).

Not only did The CW expand its DC titles up to 5 superhero-themed TV series, but their original status can also be questioned given the long history these characters have had with the audience. If *The Flash* and *Supergirl* can be considered remakes (the former first adapted by CBS in 1991, the latter made into a 1984 feature film), *Arrow* could be considered as both a spin-off and a reboot of the character following *Smallville*'s cancellation, while *Black Lightning*[5] is the first adaptation of the comic book character and *DC's Legend of Tomorrow* the only original series. Because of the franchising process induced by the network, each series blurs with the others, as it becomes increasingly difficult to clearly differentiate a reboot from a remake or even, at times, from an adaptation. As argued by Anat Zanger in *Film Remakes as Ritual and Disguise*, all remakes rely on "the dialectic of repetition, the dialectic between old and new, before and after, desire and fulfillment" (Zanger 2006: 9), characteristics that all DCTV series seem to share as they rely on the same setups and tropes, as well as the same proportion of intertextuality and cross-casting to both reinforce and showcase a coherent shared universe. People are usually surprised upon learning that *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* is actually an original title created by The CW which DC Comics turned into a comic book a few months later, even further challenging what reboot, remake or adaptation mean or imply for the network. But what truly binds the DCTV series together would be the dialectic of "desire and fulfillment," forces that are consistent with the goals of any TV series: to gain momentum and generate a faithful viewership, no matter its original status.

In every DCTV series, the intertextual play of repetition and difference becomes integral to the viewing experience and instills a certain depth to both form and content, elements that could benefit The CW's objective of rivaling the biggest historical networks. Grounding many of its original programs on the superhero phenomenon that has taken over the American film industry in the past decade was also carefully thought out. The case of The CW DCTV series is thus interesting because it has been instrumental in helping the network to secure a higher position within the U.S. media-industrial landscape. In doing so, it also demonstrates how the transmedia franchising strategies surrounding the Arrowverse of the CW ultimately helped the network to strengthen its brand, if not write its own myth. Relying on

4 "The television industry's gradual evolution from an appointment-based model to an engagement-based one reflects shifts occurring across the media industries, as networked communication makes visible the once invisible work of active audiences in creating value and expanding engagement around media properties. The logic behind purchasing an imagined mass and passive audience is breaking down, and demographic segmentation by age and gender is being questioned. In this environment, marketers will have to find new ways to account for audiences and to value the purchase of advertising space. Any new system must respect the importance of surplus audiences and the role active audience members play as grassroots intermediaries shaping the experience of other audience members." (Jenkins et al. 2013: 152)

5 It should be noted here that because Black Lightning was developed by a different team, and is still fairly recent on the network, fewer attention will be given to it in this paper, even though it is part of The CW DC-TV properties and part of the Arrowverse.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

such well-known characters – landmarks of American pop culture – allows The CW to be easily identified by anyone while simultaneously not straying too far from its historical brand. This provides the network with more than enough myth to emulate that of the Big 4 and earn its place among a new Big 5.

1. **PURSUING THE MYTH**

Since 2011, The CW has sought (and succeeded) to find a more mature and more masculine audience through its superhero brand, with *Arrow* and *The Flash* serving as the network's flagships of the genre. *Supergirl* was a valuable addition when it moved to The CW for its second season, balancing out the genre with a more feminine-targeted superhero-themed program, relying on more romance/drama-oriented narratives which the network has been known for. In this respect, gender-based audience shifts have been one of the main prisms through which the Arrowverse has been apprehended and analyzed (Foggi 2015, Levin 2015, Holloway 2017, Francisco 2018). With a total of 5 superhero-themed programs, The CW can feel a bit overcrowded by its DC properties, but the superhero genre is nothing new to the network's history. *Smallville* (2001-2011) ran for 5 seasons on The WB and 5 more on The CW, a series that is, to date, the most successful superhero TV show of all time. *Smallville* was a truly pivotal show that contributed to smooth over the WB-to-CW transition. Over the course of its 10 seasons, this remake/adaptation of one of the most beloved (as well as recognizable) comic book characters of all time can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, focusing on Clark Kent's youth was the best way to go for a network mostly focused on teenage drama, but it also allowed the network to detach itself a little from the weight of the many other iterations of Superman either in comic books, cartoons, other TV series or films, all focusing mostly on the full-fledged adult superhero. In choosing to focus on Clark Kent's high school years, the series had materials to draw from with the *Superboy* comics, but they could also use this origin story to their advantage. As they addressed the coming of age of a mythic cultural figure, they could also draw from the already existing superhero mythos of Superman and, as they did, benefit from the radiation provided by the star-packed gallery they could choose from.

Smallville was not really about creating a myth of its own, it was about pursuing an already significant mythology that many Americans were familiar with, especially those outside of the teenage audience niche that the network was then known for. The value of media engagement was clear in the WB-CW's strategy with *Smallville*, as they grounded the casting of the show, especially its guest stars, in constant reference to the existing Superman multimedia archives. The series thus related to its audience on many different levels: on the one hand, the teenage drama resonated with the usual network's viewership, while on the other, the precise references to Superman's mythology echoed to a more mature (and male) nostalgic audience who grew up with the comics, cartoons or films of the Kryptonian superhero.

Smallville broke new ground with intermittent type or cross-casting, and it heavily relied on the presence of illustrious guest stars in its storytelling, with actors and actresses that were all linked either to the Superman mythos or to Science Fiction. While typecasting implies that these guests portrayed characters that would echo their previous roles within the superhero genre and thus be used as metanarrative tools, cross-casting is rooted in marketing objectives, using the actor's or actress's persona to attract his or her audience. This strategy aimed for the added value brought about through typecasting, as argued by Richard Dyer in *Stars*, a value which he explains when discussing how stars function as meaningful signs for audiences to decipher (Dyer 1998: 87-150). Denise Mann's argument of the "spectacularization of everyday life" and how the recycling of stars impact television shows is also insightful when dealing with typecasting (Mann 1991: 333-360)[6]. Among the many prestigious guests was Christopher Reeve, cast as Dr Virgil Swann, a founding member of the Veritas Society who swore to protect the Traveler, a.k.a. Clark Kent. The most well-known cinematic Superman was a protecting figure for 2 seasons, until the actor's death in 2004. Teri Hatcher, Margot Kidder, Dean Cain, Lynda Carter, Terence Stamp, Michael Shanks, Carrie Fisher and Michael Hogan all played emblematic roles in the series, roles that would in some way refer to their historical affiliation with the genre and characters they portrayed before. With these casting choices, The CW did not shy away from the fact that they were not reinventing serial narratives since everyone knew from the start how a young Clark Kent series would end, but the network also experimented on casting choices driven by narrative, meta-narrative, and marketing motives. All these references induce an intertextual play within pop culture, with hints anchored in science fiction franchises or other comic book adaptations. Including these

6 Denise, edited by Jeremy Butler, 333-360.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

references in the series' narratives also enables the audience to play with them according to the shared knowledge that the writers appeal to. In *Smallville*, the network introduced legendary actors for the 'virgin' viewers who were unfamiliar with their previous roles in the Superman mythos, but simultaneously it intended to play and/or reinvent these roles for the people aware of the icons that they are. Building on the persona of the actors and of the characters they previously played also grants them a symbolic dimension serving as triggers for different levels of interpretation: Christopher Reeve is a fatherly protective figure for Tom Welling's Clark Kent, whereas Dean Cain who portrayed Superman just a few years before in *Lois & Clark* (ABC, 1993-1997), is cast as a rival to Tom Welling's portrayal of the character.

With *Smallville*, The WB/CW began playing more and more with intertextuality outside of the source material the series was adapted from. The series did hint at the comics, but the most efficient references (in terms of the largest number of people in the targeted audience who would get them) were not comic book-related, but based on the Superman mythology that had already been adapted to the silver and TV screens. Capitalizing on *Smallville*'s success, it came as no surprise that The CW would somehow lean on a similar intertextual pattern for its superhero series to come.

Even more so, with the creation and development of the Arrowverse, the very process of making the DCTV series reflected convergence through the new collaborations and partnerships that were put in place between different actors of the entertainment industry, convergence made more visible with the franchising plan of action launched by The CW:

> Media franchising extended this logic of industrial connectivity, not merely offering iconic brands across multiple markets, but also formalizing collaborative production across boundaries of market, production culture, and institutional identity to reproduce culture over time and across media sectors. (Johnson 2013: 233)

In his concluding remarks, Derek Johnson identifies how franchising enables an infinite series of remakes ("to reproduce culture over time") but also how franchising is now supported by innovative ways of collaborating that are themselves precipitated by notions of convergence. The converging dynamics behind the CW's reboot of DC titles following the cancellation of *Smallville* were also shaped by the fact that the comic book industry and the network were brought closer together, notably through the concretization of an 11th season of *Smallville* in comic book format which was published by DC Comics in 2012. This transmedia collaboration influenced, in turn, the production team behind The CW DCTV series which has been helmed by Greg Berlanti, but he surrounded himself with people from the comic book industry in order to create and develop the different series of the Arrowverse. Berlanti partnered with Marc Guggenheim[7] and Andrew Kreisberg[8] for the development of *Arrow*, with Kreisberg and Geoff Johns[9] for the development of *The Flash*, with Kreisberg and Ali Adler for the development of *Supergirl* and with Guggenheim, Kreisberg and Phil Klemmer for the development of *Legends of Tomorrow*. While Berlanti is still a producer of *Black Lightning*, the series itself was developed by comic-book enthusiast Salim Akil. The collaboration with comic book professionals is also perceptible through the different writers who scripted some Arrowerve episodes: Guggenheim, Kreisberg, and Johns but also Bryan Q. Miller, Ben Raab, Kevin Smith, Sterling Gates or Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, etc. Through this close collaboration with comic-book writers, The CW made sure that it would have the support and find the acclaim of both the industry as well as comic book culture consumers. The network thus also ensured that the series' story-arcs would not depart too far from the original material. But the network also largely included comic book professionals in order to successfully translate a shared narrative universe through a franchising system that is commonplace within the comics publishing industry. The arrival of Arrow on The CW also coincided with an event which occurred at DC Publications, the New 52. While reboots and remakes are now a commonly known strategy in television and cinema, they are also used to maintain readership by the comic book industry. With storylines sometimes beginning in the 1940s, these reboots invite new readers to join without having to take into account more than 70 years of previous publications. Following the "Flashpoint" story-arc, DC's New 52, which happened in August 2011, reinvented all its comic book titles, *Green Arrow* included, a strategy that would set off the subsequent adaptations of The CW and generate a

7 Guggenheim wrote for several Marvel comic book titles such as The Amazing Spider Man, Young X-Men, Wolverine and The Punisher as well as DC Comics titles such as Aquaman.

8 Prior to Arrow, Kreisberg wrote for several DC comic book titles such as Green Arrow and Black Canary as well as Batman Confidential.

9 Geoff Johns is a well-known comic book writer who collaborated mainly with DC comics on The Flash, Superman and Green Lantern but also for Marvel comics on The Avengers title.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 1. ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY'S COVER DATED NOV. 18, 2016 AND A POSTER FOR ABC'S *SUPERFRIENDS* (1973).

cohesive business model across different media. In doing so, DC mimicked the already successful design of the Marvel Cinematic Universe/Marvel publications conglomerate, but preceded it in regard to the TV series, as Marvel developed its first TV series with ABC and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* in 2013.

The development of the Arrowverse on The CW – which began with *Arrow* in 2012 – thus seemed as a logical next step for the publisher's titles. The multiple references to the number 52 in both *Arrow* and *The Flash* emphasize the crucial importance that the publisher's reboot had for the CW series, while reminding the audience that the New 52 comics books were there for them to dive into, should they want an extra dose of superhero stories. Appealing to nostalgia while also presenting something new in a genre that was already popular, The CW relied even more directly on cross-media references, ones that magazines such as Entertainment Weekly caught on and used, inducing an atmosphere of cross-media circulation through franchising perspectives.

The magazine's cover can be read on three different levels. First, the actors are in costumes but clearly not in character. Even if *Arrow*'s Oliver Queen became friendlier over the past few seasons, he would never hug his teammates or grin like that. These are Grant Gustin, Melissa Benoist and Stephen Amell playing around, dressed as their characters, all conveying the friendly CW vibe of the Arrowverse that they also advertise on their respective Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. As we are confronted to the actors themselves, we are thus presented with a cover showcasing production, not narration. Second, the cover's marketing intent was not to display a fun photoshoot among the three leads, as it was released to promote the upcoming massive crossover entitled "Invasion", the first time that any network orchestrated a crossover unfolding over a week and 4 different series/episodes: *Supergirl*, *Arrow*, *The Flash* and *Legends of Tomorrow*. It thus promoted most of the DC series at once but also The CW, commanding respect for its unprecedented shared-narrative achievement.

Finally, another level of intertextual play is rampant with the "Superfriends" caption. The original "Superfriends" show was a Saturday morning cartoon lineup produced by Hannah Barbera and broadcast on ABC from 1973 to 1986. Many young Americans grew up with these Saturday morning cartoons and remember that the Superfriends were all based on DC comic book characters, primarily those from the Justice League. This reference is made to appeal to viewers who are now right at the core of the 18-49 target audience of The CW shows and who, if they are not already watching the show, might tune in to revive some childhood memories.

In choosing to articulate the network's expansion and new cross-media ventures on superhero narratives, The CW capitalized on a genre that was already associated with the network as well as already popular worldwide, but it also implied a mythical collective imaginary which could, in turn, serve The CW's brand. Supported by the network's playful multimedia marketing and narrative strategies, and inspired by the converging aspects now linked to the original medium, the elements were aligned for a franchising strategy that had never been seen before on American network television.

2. REBOOTING THE MYTH

Because superheroes have been around for a long time and in many different forms on American television, it could be argued that they represent the epitome of what remakes or reboots stand for. Jonathan Gray's argument in the concluding remarks of *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, reinforces this idea:

> The worlds of Marvel and DC Comics can at times appear to be conducting a colonial occupation of the summer box office, while simultaneously developing strong presences in televised animation, videogames and merchandising. Marvel and DC have trained audiences to expect infinite reboots and alternate uni-

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

> verses, a strategy that allows James Bond-like ease of movement across media venues, but also restricts the prospects for a continuing narrative to be told across those venues (Gray 2010: 214).

The Arrowverse is completely rooted in that pattern. Not only did *Arrow* air a year after the end of *Smallville*, but it also occurred on the same network, thus addressing the same audience. If anything, Gray's notion of audiences 'trained' to the idea of the reboot for superhero narratives can take the Arrowverse as a case study. But the strategies behind The CW's reboot of DC titles following the cancellation of *Smallville* took the intertextual play even further. Because the character of Oliver Queen/Green Arrow was an integral part of *Smallville*'s plot, it made the reboot of the character and the launch of *Arrow* more complicated, yet not impossible.

From very early on, the network took the decision to produce a reboot rather than a spinoff as they were acutely aware of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's success in movie theaters, and knew they could eventually head in the same direction with a shared universe on television, for which *Arrow* would be the starting point. Since no other well-known live action series showcasing the character had been made outside of *Smallville*, Greg Berlanti and Andrew Kreisberg knew they would need to scout for a brand new cast, allowing them the blank slate needed to start something new. This tabula rasa situation consequently started a cross-casting/typecasting conundrum for the network, which tried to balance meaningful intertextuality with The CW's interests.

The cast of *Arrow* was thus fairly unknown for The CW audience. The male lead, Stephen Amell, who appeared as a guest in The CW series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) and *90210* (2008-2013), was mostly known for his role of Jason in the third season of *Hung* (HBO, 2009-2011). As far as typecasting goes, Stephen Amell does correspond to the superhero archetypes (handsome and muscular white man), but as far as intertextual typecasting, *Arrow* took a risk and chose novelty. The series did, however, resort to cross-casting practices. Adding John Barrowman as Malcolm Merlyn to *Arrow*'s original casting call was a marketing-conscious choice since he was well-known for his role as Captain Jack Harness in the popular 2005 revival of *Doctor Who* (BBC 1, 2005-) and its *Torchwood* spinoff (BBC1, 2006-2011), thus peaking the interest of a sci-fi superhero-friendly audience[10].Because the series' tone was a lot grittier and darker than what The CW had been known for until then, the audience they attracted was the one they wanted to draw to the network: older men. No wonder the network sought to adjust the target audience for the subsequent series that would form the CW Arrowverse. *Arrow*'s fans and critical acclaim of its first season gave momentum to the shared universe project and provided a solid base, also allowing The CW more freedom in the casting choices for the following projects. Therefore, the network decided to resort to a more forthright approach to cross-casting with the second superhero series *The Flash*, as The CW gave Grant Gustin the title role, an actor who was known for his role as Sebastian Smythe on Fox's *Glee* (2009-2015) and Campbell Prince in The CW's reboot of *90210*. The actor thus appealed to the core viewership niche of The CW, which has now become a champion of cross-casting the same actors in the different series of the network. Because The CW favored cross- to typecasting for Barry Allen, many fans were surprised by the network's choice, and turned to forums and social media to share their doubts about seeing the actor properly filling the shows of the 'scarlet speedster'. *The Flash*'s casting call became a lot more intertextual when they decided to typecast the original televised Barry Allen on the show.

John Wesley Shipp was added to the cast of *The Flash*, a casting choice that made sense on both cross- and typecasting fronts. Marketing-wise, he played the role of Mitch Leery, Dawson's father in Kevin Williamson's *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003) thus appealing to the historical audience of the network. And narratively speaking, he portrayed the 1990 velvet-costumed Flash in the CBS series which aired in 1990-1991, a logical referential father figure for a reboot. As the series went on, the writers played around with the actor's persona. In *The Flash*, he plays 2 versions of Barry Allen's father: On Earth 1 he is Henry Allen, Barry Allen's biological dad, but on Earth 2 he portrays Jay Garrick. Jay Garrick is also known in comic book lore as the original Flash, which, in and of itself, John Wesley Shipp actually is since he was the first actor to ever portray the Flash in a TV series.

Even if *Supergirl* was on CBS for its first season, the producing team behind the show is exactly the same as the rest of the DCTV properties of The CW, which made the transfer from one network to the other a lot easier. The recipe behind

10 It should also be noted that the third season of Arrow introduced the character of Ray Palmer who would later join the cast of Legends of Tomorrow, portrayed by Brandon Routh, the Superman of Bryan Singer's 2006 Superman Returns and one of the 7 evil exes in the 2010 film adaptation of Scott Pilgrim vs. The World.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

Supergirl's success remained exactly the same. A cross-casting choice for the title role with Melissa Benoist, *Glee*'s Marley Rose in the title role of Kara Danvers which raised the same doubts that Grant Gustin did a year before. Typecasting, however, was already quite strong in the first episodes of *Supergirl*, as if to solidify its raison d'être, with Dean Cain and Helen Slater as Jeremiah and Eliza Danvers, Kara's adoptive parents on earth. The typecasting of Laura Vandervoort as the villain Indigo was also a nod to Superman's televised mythology, since Vandervoort was the actress who portrayed Supergirl in *Smallville* a few years back.

In terms of cross-casting, a choice meant to attract adjacent audience targets was that of Mehcad Brooks as James Olsen, who was in *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) and *Necessary Roughness* (USA, 2011-2013), which were also directed at the 18-49 target audience. When the show moved to The CW in 2016, the series had to come out strong since they knew they would lose fan-favorite Calista Flockhart as Cat Grant due to the changing location for the series' shooting. That is why Lynda Carter was typecast as the alien President of the United States Olivia Marsdyn, over-emphasizing intertextuality within the Superman mythos. To ensure its newcomer series would have the best possible chance to integrate the superhero roster of the network, The CW resorted to some more cross-casting. Chris Wood thus integrated the series as Mon El from Daxam for the second season. Wood had been cast as the villain Kai Parker in 2014 for the sixth season of *The Vampire Diaries*, where he quickly became a fan-favorite. Casting him in *Supergirl* would thus help the show to gain momentum within The CW brand as well as some more 18-49 female viewers.

Supergirl lost more than half of its viewership from its move to The CW, which prompted the network to rely once more on illustrious guests to compensate, hoping that typecasting would bring older viewers back to the series. Cast as Mon El parents – who were key characters for the second half of *Supergirl*'s second season – were Teri Hatcher as Rhea, Queen of Daxam, and Kevin Sorbo as Lar Gand, King of Daxam. The CW clearly brought heavy artillery with *Lois & Clark*'s Lois Lane and *Hercules*' Hercules (syndication, 1995-1999) as well as *Andromeda*'s Captain Dylan Hunt (Global TV, 2000-2005) to portray Supergirl's in laws. The typecasting strategy did not work as the ratings for these episodes were the lowest numbers for the season, maybe a sign that Jonathan Gray's "trained audiences" might not be so oblivious to these stunts anymore.

FIGURE 2. POPULAR MEME CREATED BY THE FANS WHICH CIRCULATED ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHORTLY AFTER THE 19TH EPISODE OF THE FIRST SEASON OF *SUPERGIRL* WAS BROADCAST.

If cross- and typecasting references work similarly between the different series of the Arrowverse through their casting choices, crossmedia intertextuality does not work equally between them. While some series are filled with references, they are more sparse in some others. For instance, because the casting call of *Supergirl* takes up a substantial part of intertextual references, the other jokes about pop culture are more sporadic or the series would appear as nothing more than a cheap palimpsest. The one character of the series that brought an ongoing flow of references was Cat Grant during the series' run on CBS, who was dropping celebrity names every other episode, sometimes mocking them or even making fun of herself as a celebrity, thus slightly disrupting the episodes' narratives and cracking the fourth wall.

This reference taken from the 19th episode of the first season became a viral sensation and a meme, as Calista Flockhart is actually married to Harrison Ford. Both *Arrow* and *The Flash* are a lot more crowded with pop culture references than *Supergirl*, and the two series work similarly in terms of pop culture intertext. These pop hints are mostly dropped by the comic-relief/tech-type of characters, namely Felicity Smoak for *Arrow* and Cisco Ramone for *The Flash*, even if other characters sometimes use them too. For example, in *The Flash*'s third season, Tracy Brand amusingly compares herself to Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984). But the one character who set the tone in terms of pop culture references is undoubtedly Felicity Smoak, a tech-savvy former gothic *hacktivist* dubbed "queen of the nerds". She is fluent in pop-culture references which she drops constantly

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 3. SAMPLE OF DIFFERENT ONLINE THREADS DISCUSSING THE OBVIOUS SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO CHARACTERS (BASILE 2016, ANU 2014 & SORA 2014).

in her fast-paced monologues, references that ultimately permeate the series' narrative.

But this intertextual play is a very useful marketing tool to make the target audience click, to hook them to the show, as if the series itself were telling them: It's ok, you're part of the gang, we know you know, we're part of the same world". This very inclusive strategy is reinforced by the pop reference-vectors in the series. These techies are valuable allies for the superheroes, precious associates who stand on the sidelines and who act as identification anchors for the aficionados of the genre. The nerd/geek community is not only the one reading comics, but they are also very receptive to the many sci-fi and pop culture references dropped here and there in the series. The CW decided to capitalize on this aspect, easing-in new viewers of the network, letting them know that they are on familiar terrain. These characters are reminders that everyone is part of the collective imaginary that many of the viewers share, setting up a cultural community in which to engage, an objective clearly delineated by the Immersive Youth/CW partnership.

Yet sometimes, the references can also lead to an oversaturation of the initial narrative, and playing on archetypes and half-disguised references can come back to haunt the series. It is the case with Felicity who has been compared time and time again to *Smallville*'s Chloe Sullivan, but the subject has been trending on fan forums a lot more since the "Overwatch" code name was revealed. Indeed, the latter is more than reminiscent of that of Chloe in the last seasons of *Smallville*: Watchtower. Not only do the code names sound a lot alike, but the narrative purpose and characterization of the two blonde women are also very similar, something the viewers noticed.

The CW's perfect example of an oversaturated intertextual narrative is unquestionably their *Legends of Tomorrow* collective spinoff series. The superheroes constituting the team of the Legends are all secondary characters that have first appeared in *Arrow* and/or *The Flash*, making their central characters already referential to the series they are extracted from. Moreover, the series' basic plot line revolves around time travel, a narrative hinge that is in and of itself, also very referential. This mix thus results in characters who are referring to those from *Arrow* and *The Flash* in order to tie it all in, plus puns and jokes referencing the different periods of time that the team is travelling to. In *Legends of Tomorrow*, pop culture references are plenty, still delivered by the same archetypal characters: the tech-genius (and Felicity Smoak's ex) Ray Palmer and well-read historian Nate Heywood. Yet another referential level has been added to *Legends of Tomorrow*, with a metatextual dimension that pervades through the acting, direction, and tone of each episode, depending on the era they are in: a laid-back-fun-and-goofy-episode when they're in the '70s, a perpetual-technological-wonderment-episode when they're in the future, a racial-themed episode when fighting a zombie Confederate army during the Civil Car, a remake of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* when they're in the Wild West, a film noir-like episode when they're in Al Capone's Chicago, a Tom Cruise *Last Samurai* copycat episode when they're in feudal Japan, and so on.

Cross/typecasting as well as the different levels of pop culture intertext integrated in these shows all aim at supporting the rebooting movement of the network's DC titles. While the superheroes' auras appeal to childhood nostalgia for some, the intertext is here to bring those characters up to

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

date and smooth over their transition from sometimes outdated or kitsch narratives to a 2.0 digital era of which The CW aims to be a spearhead.

3. **FRANCHISING THE MYTH**

Relevance and novelty were thus two pillars that The CW had to build upon, notions that are far from obvious when dealing with the expansion of an already existing franchise: DC Comics. What the network had to find was how to develop its own version of the mothership's characters and integrate them within The CW brand at the same time. Once it was successful with the sophomore reboot of *Arrow*, the network only had to expand on a shared narrative universe while encouraging intersectionality, franchising its own DC-TV universe. For the network, transmedia remains the most efficient way to activate the circulation of these shared narratives, such as the ongoing "The Chronicles of Cisco" Tumblr page which consists of gif or meme-illustrated blog entries of *The Flash*'s fictional character, Cisco Ramone. But another project took the network's transmedia course in another innovative direction through the launch of the CW Seed during the fall of 2013.

CW Seed is The CW subsidiary online branch with an emphasis on kid-oriented programs. It is a digital entertainment studio and website, providing original content in sync with the one developed for the network, but it also took convergence of media forms a lot further, relying on the network's superhero properties. The animated series *Vixen* debuted on CW Seed in August 2015, introducing the character to the Arrowverse, with Grant Gustin and Stephen Amell voicing their costume-accurate animated superhero alter-egos. Voicing the African-born female mystic superhero was Megalyn Echikunwoke, an actress who later reprised her role as Vixen/Mari, but this time in live-action during the fourth season of *Arrow* following her introduction in the Arrowverse through the animated series. This was transmedia prowess that had never been attempted before – it was the first time a character introduced in the animated version of a shared narrative universe appeared afterwards in the live-action section of that same universe, keeping the same actress in the process.

The very production of the CW Seed *Vixen* was built according to early consumerist habits of the genre, habits the network managed to translate into efficient franchising strategies. The early viewers of superhero cartoons are now old enough to be parents, and cartoons are, by definition, not intended for an adult audience. As it tried to lure the adult audience of the DCTV series with *Vixen*, the network played along the notions of guilty pleasure and transgression while maintaining the 'fun' side of the CW brand: Dare to defy.

This, again, is in line with the strategies developed decades ago by Warner Bros. for its DC properties. Indeed, Warner was the first to ever brand a cartoon with a subtitle that would change its very nature. When launched on Fox Kids in September 1992, the new Batman cartoon was entitled: *Batman: The Animated Series*. This semantic change prefigured the studio's long-term branding strategies that it would further develop on The WB and The CW.

Freed from unnecessary guilt for still watching superhero cartoons, older viewers could keep on watching them a little longer or occasionally. Such shifts in the very nature of these programs are also what paved the way for the huge successes of the live-action superhero genre both in cinema and on television.

Those kids who grew up in the 1990s are now adults in their early 30s, probably young parents, and if they tune in to watch *Vixen* in order to get their additional fix of CW superheroes, their kids might also enjoy what mom and/or dad are watching. Such kid-friendly programs could thus provide family-viewing time, and being an online service, CW Seed is accessible through phones or tablets, now a kid-favorite tool to watch cartoons everywhere. Capitalizing on this transmedia asset thus allows The CW to reach its target audience before they come of age, presenting them with an entry point to the network while at a very early age. Introducing a new character in the animated series format is not only efficient in referential terms with notions of remediations and/or transmedia ramifications, but it is also efficient in trans-generational marketing terms.

The introduction of *Vixen*'s lineage in *Legends of Tomorrow*, with the inclusion of Amara in the series' second season, is just a continuation of this strategy. As the Legends travel back in time, they welcome Mari's grandmother, Amara, to the team. Including *Vixen*-related content in *Legends of Tomorrow* is also rather consistent in franchising logics since it is the lighter in tone of the CW Arrowverse roster, and the most kid-friendly. The network has continued to develop animated versions of the Arrowverse. In December 2017 it released *Freedom Fighters: The Ray*, this time focusing on Ray Terrill who was introduced a few weeks before during the "Crisis on Earth X" four-episodes crossover. The CW Seed animated series again ventured in un-

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 4. THE ANIMATED/CUSTOMIZED DC/WB LOGOS APPEARING AFTER THE END CREDITS OF THE DIFFERENT CW SUPERHERO SHOWS.

charted territory as it was the first time that a superhero animated series showcased a gay man as its central character. *Constantine: City of Demons* was released in March 2018, serving as a follow-up to *Legends of Tomorrow*'s third season finale, stressing once more the transmedia ramifications of the CW Seed platform. After NBC's cancellation of its live-action series *Constantine* (2014-2015) after only one season, The CW bought back the episodes that have been since added to the network's online streaming catalogue. Fan-favorite Matt Ryan who portrayed the DC Comics master of the occult in the NBC series reprised his role first in several episodes of *Arrow*, before appearing in *Legends of Tomorrow*, thus using the character as another binder for the expanding transmedia DC-TV universe.

The franchising mode of production of DC Entertainment is perceptible through the transmedia Arrowverse developed by The CW/CW Seed duo, but it is also very visible for each of the live action TV series of the network. Image being at the core of the original medium, Warner Bros. studio created logo visuals that would also emphasize the series' shared affiliation.

These are the different animated logos created by the network to conclude the end credits of each episode. These customized logos relying on the visuals developed by The CW are fun twists denoting attention to detail, but they are also revealing of The CW strategy regarding its superhero series. Playing upon imagery is something the aficionados of the genre will respond to particularly well since the series are all based on a highly visual medium: comic books. The fact that they did not create one single DC-WB logo for all the superhero series of the network, but created one for each, taps into collectability, a consumer habit strongly associated with the genre.

Comic book readers don't read just one title of comics, so playing around the visual singularity of each series superimposes the comic book format to that of the shows. It thus reinforces the parenthood of the two mediums, strengthening it through identifiable visuals that are appealing to audience reading practices, inciting them to reproduce these practices as viewing ones, cementing the link between readership and viewership through the genre it is stemming from. This might seem trivial, but the emphasis made on character-based visuals such as these is symptomatic of The CW's willingness to activate intersectionality within cultural practices. If the viewer wants to be able to truly decipher and apprehend the fictional world of The DCTV, then he or she will need to collect all of its narratives, from the live-action CW series to the CW Seed animated series, playing around with the dialectic of desire and fulfillment previously mentioned by Anat Zanger.

This notion of collectability works particularly well with that of the remake. As Zanger argues, "the remakes, the se-

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

quels, and even the trailers all participate in a pleasurable game of repetition which has contributed to turning the film into a fetish" (Zanger 2006: 16). Franchising comic book adaptations operates along similar forces, as the remake/reboot process creates a system of narrative objects which, through marketing and merchandising strategies, develop a distinctive visual identity that will not stray too far from the original. As a result, for the reimagined version to work it should not subvert the original character since it has become, in and of itself, a sort of fetish with its rules and canons to abide by. These superheroes, now branded as icons of American culture, trigger collecting impulses, by which new films and series are turned into narrative objects to be collected as well, apprehending them through the prism of memory, through recollection. These new stories are meant to be part of these characters' multimedia archives along with their comic books, films, series, video games and even life-like resin statues[11].

A more direct approach to transmedia narratives was also experimented by the network for the Arrowverse, following in the footsteps of successful comic book follow-up seasons of series such as Dark Horse's seasons 8 through 11 of *Buffy*, a WB alumni series, or comic book transmedia preques,l as with WildStorm's *Supernatural: Origins* (2007) and *Supernatural: Rising Son* (2008) of the cult CW series. The CW's first joint endeavor with DC Comics to produce a transmedia title started after the cancellation of *Smallville*. DC Comics published a 35 issue first volume titled *Smallville: Season 11*, a sequel to the series that was mainly penned by Bryan Q. Miller and which was published between July 2012 and May 2015, with no plans (as of yet) to keep the comic book title active.

Whereas Smallville's transmedia strategy was linear, with a comic book volume serving as a sequel, *Arrow* and *The Flash*, however, can be considered as tie-in transmedia series, since DC comics released comic books of the title heroes' new adventures that were integrated within the series' narratives. A 13-issue first volume for *Arrow* was published between January and December 2013, while a 12-issue second volume titled "Season 2.5" was published between December 2014 and November 2015. The 12-issue "The Flash: Season Zero" was published after the series premiered on The CW between December 2014 and November 2015, a misleading title since the volume is not a prequel to the series. Instead, the comic book volume unfolds between the pilot episode and episode 2 of the first season, thus consisting in the very first missions of the Flash. The same strategy was adopted with *Supergirl* and the release of the 6-issue comic book *The Adventures of Supergirl*, published between July and September 2016, exactly when the series switched networks, moving from CBS to The CW. But these transmedia experiments – pursuing the franchising efforts of the Arrowverse in comic book format – were not successful enough for the publisher to consider pursuing future digital publications for CW-inspired comics of their existing characters. However, these transmedia comic book tie-ins, occurring during each series' early seasons, reinforce the strong links the series share with the original medium of the genre. And even if they were not as successful as the network had hoped, these transmedia narratives strengthened the franchising impulse of The CW.

The network however, primarily triggers media circulation through faithful story arcs and costumes adapted from the comic books, but it is never more successful than when it is supported by the different crossover events between the shows, reminding the viewers that, just like in the comics, these characters belong to the same world, to the same global narrative, to the same franchise. The spinoff pattern gave birth to *The Flash* as Barry Allen was first introduced in *Arrow*, and the same logic applied to the creation of *Legends of Tomorrow* since the Legends themselves are non-other than secondary characters from both *Arrow* and *The Flash*. But *The Flash* introduced a key notion that would make the network's franchising possibility limitless: multiversity. In *The Flash*, the theory of the multiverse is crucial to the series' narrative, but it is also one that is key to the before-mentioned reset storylines of comic book publishers. In this multiverse, each Earth has a number and is its own reality – a multiverse through which Barry and Cisco Ramone/Vibe can travel at will.

This notion enabled The CW to create new series narratively disconnected at first from the Arrowverse, to include them afterwards by stating that they were simply occurring on an alternate Earth of the DCTV multiverse. This has been the case for *Supergirl* and *Black Lightning*[12]. *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Arrow* are all taking place on Earth 1, while *Supergirl* is unfolding on Earth 38. No official indication has

11 A line of DCTV collectible statues was recently launched by Sideshow Collectible, the world leader in the pop culture collectible industry. https://www.sideshowtoy.com/collectibles/dc-comics-the-flash-dc-collectibles-903600/ (last accessed 21-10-2018) https://www.sideshowtoy.com/collectibles/dc-comics-black-lightning-dc-collectibles-903419/ (last accessed 21-10-2018).

12 No official plan has been made to orchestrate any crossover between Black Lightning and the rest of the Arrowverse yet, but references to Supergirl and Vixen in the series were here to open up the possibilities for it to happen down the line.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

yet been given for *Black Lightning*, but references to Supergirl in the series indicate that it might be also set on Earth 38. The essence of the multiverse itself as the ultimate franchising excuse was displayed on January 19, 2016 on The CW in a two-part one-hour special program composed of "Their Time is Now: DC's Legends of Tomorrow" followed by "DC Films Presents: Dawn of the Justice League", hosted by Kevin Smith and Geoff Johns (the then Chief Creative Officer of DC Entertainment).

The first part of the program was a rather usual promoting sequence presenting the series that would premiere the following week, while the second was a 30-minute promotion for *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* and other upcoming DC-themed films such as *Suicide Squad*. The most interesting part of that presentation was how Geoff Johns justified the presence of this program on The CW, as he stated on several occasions that what happens in movie theaters is, in the end, nothing more than an alternate Earth, different from the ones showcased in the DCTV series. Given what the audience knew of multiversity through *The Flash*, the argument presented was absolutely valid, but it simultaneously legitimized exponential versions (reboots, remakes or adaptations) to be told, justifying it with a narrative twist which has immensely complicated the comic book industry. At first, "multiversity" – part of the comic book jargon, now used by television and to some extent cinema[13] – has become nothing more than a new production model concordant with the business standards of multimedia franchising. The fact that it was hosted by two very emblematic and well-respected figures of the comic book industry also had an impact.

The production culture discourse is also revealing of the industry's intentions. As Caldwell notes:

> The fact that a great deal of what viewers see in film/TV critically mediates or deconstructs other forms of screen content may suggest that the newly convergent industry now leads by hyping its theoretical and critical sophistication to viewers. But this is not always the case. In fact, although deep texts and on-screen practices show a constant churn of critical and theoretical ideas among practitioners, actual spoken disclosures by industry players, in public, commonly deny or disavow any agency or intellectual pretense. Far from being crass movers and shakers who exploit critical trends or cultural ideas, industry players tend to talk about themselves as being simple, honest, and direct; screenwriters as being in touch with the universalism of Aristotle's three-part drama and well-rounded characters; producers as responsively creating what the common person wants; executives as couching even the lowest-common denominator programming as opportunities for reflection, consensus, and therapeutic escape (Caldwell 2008: 317)

Calling upon Kevin Smith and Geoff Johns to host this program was the network/studio's best bet to be heard and understood by most. While the status as well as the very laid-back attitudes and non-conforming outfits of the two hosts appealed to the comic book culture fans, the duo's enthusiastic yet didactic explanations about the developing strategy for DC superheroes on and off The CW were clearly set. The given arguments were anchored in narrative terms rather than based on a production discourse, yet in the end, the multiverse argument has a lot more to do with production than it does with narration. Through this maneuver, The CW thus found another way to communicate that the producers of the DCTV series are first and foremost fans of the DC characters they are in charge of, thus crediting the network's production teams behind the series with both impeccable skills and undeniable devotion.

4. MARKETING THE MYTH

The favored tool used by The CW to consolidate the Arrowverse TV series as a cohesive whole balances out the multiversity argument's inherent contradiction of production vs. narration: the crossover event. These events reached an all-time high during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 seasons with a major story arc that unfolded across the four Arrowverse series. While the 2016-2017 "Invasion" arc did not fully include *Supergirl*, the 2017-2018 "Crisis on Earth X" fully integrated the four series in a storyline during which the characters are transported to an alternate earth where Nazis have won WWII. As these crossovers have become somewhat of a pre-Christmas hiatus tradition and are awaited impatiently by the audience, The CW does not necessarily need to advertise them anymore.

13 Sony and the way it has dealt with its Spider Man films and reboots is one such example, especially instrumentalizing and emphasizing multiversity while promoting Venom (2018). Similar arguments were used repeatedly by the Fox Studio about their Marvel film franchises X-Men and Fantastic Four.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 5. SELECTION OF PROMOTIONAL POSTERS FOR *THE FLASH*'S "DUET" EPISODE.

They are nevertheless key ingredients of the Arrowverse that tie the series' narratives together, but also very important marketing tools. While giving meaning to the DCTV franchise, crossovers also force the audience to watch the different superhero series of the network. Indeed, in order to see the entire crossover story-arc from beginning to end, the audience must tune in and watch the crossover episode for each series, thus inciting people to perhaps also start watching *Supergirl* if they weren't until then. The crossover practice thus serves a useful marketing stunt since the crossover events' peak ratings for each series clearly show that different people follow the four core DCTV series. While most definitely beneficial for the network in terms of revenue, the crossovers' narrative scopes and unbridled fun surpass the production's cruder interests[14].

But the crossover tool can also prove to be a little too heavily marketed at times. The cross-casting of *Glee* alumni Grant Gustin and Melissa Benoist inevitably led to the preparation of a musical-themed episode for the 2016-2017 season. Even though the episode itself, entitled "Duet", was part

14 The December 2018 crossover entitled "Elseworlds" will again serve a double purpose. On the one hand, Kate Kane a.k.a. Batwoman will be introduced (an adaptation here of the critically acclaimed and fan favorite New 52 comic book), and on the other, the crossover will be a springboard to assess how the audience responds to the character, as plans are already in motion to develop a solo series for this new Arrowverse character.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

of the third season of *The Flash*, it was set up in *Supergirl*'s "Star Crossed" episode the night before as well as heavily influenced by the *Legends of Tomorrow*'s tone, a series whose second season was broadcast at the same time. In this single crossover episode, the circulation of intertextuality was perceptible as aligned more with The CW's marketing strategies than with the narrative demands of the different series.

Pop culture intertext saturated the "Duet" crossover episode. The fantasy musical world created by the Music Meister is set in a neo-noir tone but the meta-narrative dimension stemming from the actors contaminated the entire episode. The crossover's aesthetic promoted through various character posters and trailers completely took over the narrative aspect and clearly distanced the series from the superhero genre to fully ground itself into the realm of the musical genre.

This episode had been expected to happen ever since Melissa Benoist had been cast as Supergirl, with everyone aware that the two leads could sing – but not just the 2 of them. Before portraying Winn in *Supergirl*, actor Jeremy Jordan played rising Broadway musical superstar Jimmy Collins in the second season of ABC's musical series *Smash* (2012-2013). *Arrow* and *Legends of Tomorrow*'s John Barrowman has released 8 studio albums. Jesse L. Martin, who plays detective Joe West in *The Flash*, was the original Tom Collins in the Broadway musical *Rent*, while Carlos Valdes/Cisco Ramon and Tom Cavanagh/Professor Wells both came from musical theater as well. Almost all of the characters chosen to appear in "Duet" sing in some capacity outside of their acting careers, and the episode showcases these talents, setting off an intertextual play with ramifications completely eclipsing the explored storyline.

The CW knowingly played with and advertised around these cross-casting references, turning the "Duet" episode into more of a marketed pretext than a seamlessly integrated collective story-arc. On the crossover's main poster is inscribed "Dynamic Duet", which is not the actual title for the episode, but which was the title of *Glee*'s seventh episode of its fourth season. During this episode, the *Glee* misfits decide to get inspired by the power of superhero narratives to develop self-confidence, an episode in which Melissa Benoist's character Marley invented her superhero alter ego: Woman Fierce. Another alter ego developed in this episode of *Glee* was particularly relevant for the "Duet" crossover episode. Nightbird was Blaine Anderson's made-up superhero, the character portrayed by Darren Criss who also plays Music Meister in the crossover. Here, the dynamic duet is a complete double-entendre since it can refer to Supergirl and the Flash teaming up, but it could also very well refer to the actual "dynamic duet" reunited: Melissa Benoist and Darren Criss. The references are both aggregated and superimposed in this episode, so much that it seemed as if "Duet" was nothing more than a marketing coup for the network, and the resulting imagery as well as the actors' personas ended up bypassing the compelling storyline that would have required a superhero team-up.

Yet what can sometimes feel like corporate opportunism by the network can also be generated by the audience itself in the now many ways that it can engage with pop culture serial objects. As a result of The CW's collaboration with Immersive Youth, the network has also been able to activate intersectional fan engagement as an alternative to costly ad campaigns. Whether on social media or fan forums, the other shows of The CW have managed to pervade through platforms or events that were initially solely dedicated to the superhero genre. For instance, one of the biggest websites of the genre, Comicbookmovie.com, has had weekly entries and articles written by the viewers for the viewers about *Supernatural*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals* and *The 100*, even if they are not superhero or comic book-related, at least not initially. Another striking example is The CW's overwhelming presence during the different ComicCons across the U.S., even for shows that have nothing to do with comic book culture or science fiction, such as the different *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* panels held during several San Diego Comic Conventions. These examples are perfect illustrations of what Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd explain as

FIGURE 5. THE CROSSOVER POSTER AND THE COMIC BOOK IT WAS INSPIRED FROM, *SUPERMAN* #199, 1967.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

the core of participatory cultures, with narrative objects that are bridging across genres according to the will of the active audience (Jenkins et al. 2016: 184).

Another tool at the network's disposal, to spark what Javier Lozano Delmar has coined "fanadvertising," is the insertion of social issues and concerns within the DCTV series narratives. With the inclusion of problematic issues about gender, LGBTQI, and police brutality, fans engage online and generate debate and discussion about the series, providing the network with a greater online presence, mostly through the diverse array of social media, suggested through the "#" branding system often visible on the network logo inserts of the program.

The first ever crossover to occur for *Supergirl* was with *The Flash* in March 2016. During the episode "World's Finest" (1.18), a friendly rivalry between the two superheroes is palpable, rivalry which inspired the poster to promote the crossover event. Intertextuality is obvious in this case with the poster reproducing very precisely the cover of *Superman* #199, substituting the "fastest man alive" with "fastest person alive".

This crossover substituting Superman with Supergirl is also revealing of the network's decision to politically charge some of its narratives, using the allegorical figures of the superhero to address sometimes vivid contemporary issues. The DCTV series thus insert metaphorical subtexts for the viewers to hold on to while strengthening the series' credibility and relevance within the American broadcasting landscape. *Supergirl* has notably had its moments to promote female empowerment and feminism with women in leading positions. The same can be argued with *Legends of Tomorrow*, with women clearly taking the ascendant in leading and powerful positions in the team, with Sara Lance assuming the role of team captain from season 2 onward. LGBTQI representation, which has always been a cornerstone for The CW shows, has also been integrated in the series' narratives: Alex Danvers and Maggie Sawyer as a lesbian couple in *Supergirl*, Anissa Pierce/Thunder as an African-American lesbian superheroine in *Black Lightning*, Curtis Holt/Mr. Terrific as an African-American gay character in *Arrow*, Sara Lance, Ava, and John Constantine as bisexual characters in *Legends of Tomorrow*.

The political subtext, especially developed in *Supergirl* and *Arrow*, supports a similar purpose to solidify the series' pertinence. In Trump's America, the alien registry storyline in *Supergirl* clearly attempts to tackle divisive political issues with many plot points revolving around notions of asylum, refugees and immigration. While *Supergirl* is more metaphorical in its approach, *Arrow* is a lot more straightforward in its political stands. Starling City has always been depicted as having a fractured urban landscape which in turn created a fragmented society, leading to unequal urban development, insecurity and ghettoisation. This ongoing theme has evolved over the seasons, always putting the local and federal institutions at the center of the series' narrative: from the exploration of local government through the election of Oliver Queen as mayor, to the survey of the U.S. carceral situation through Oliver's downfall, convicted for vigilantism and an incarcerated felon in season 7. These plotlines open political grounds for the series to explore and in the episode "Spectre of the Gun" (5.13) *Arrow* tackled head-on a pressing issue in the US: the right to carry a gun[15]. The same issue of social fragmentation has been addressed by *Black Lightning*, but the series also explores in-depth endemic racism, opening its second season with a fake live-coverage of a police brutality incident. The CW does not hesitate to use its popular series as platforms to address these problems and question them, bringing the debate to the American youth, thus fortifying both its credibility and position as an influential network.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been argued repeatedly that superhero fatigue would first plague Hollywood and then the general audience which, if it were true, would be an ominous sign for The CW, whose programming grid is showcasing a vast array of superhero-themed series. If fatigue is supposed to come, it might very well originate from the fact that DC, whether on film or on TV, is showcasing similar characters, multiplying different versions of the Flash or Superman. But with the network maintaining its focus on the Green Arrow, Supergirl, the Legends and Black Lightning, it avoids repetition as these are not the studio's A-list members of the Justice League. The CW *Black Lightning*'s mid-season debut in January 2018 has been met with critical acclaim and very positive ratings. It may have benefitted from the overall hype surrounding the February release of Marvel's *Black Panther*, and an increased awareness for the need of a more diverse representation in the genre, but the series' first season, as it relied on The CW recipe, was mostly a success with story arcs and a back-story that did not shy away from a very political season-long storyline. Freeland,

15 The whole episode revolves around the polarizing debate about gun control.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

a predominantly African-American poor and ghettoized community, saw the rise of super-powered individuals because the government inoculated the population in the mid-60s with a vaccine that was supposed to make them more docile, keeping the civil rights agitation and protests to a minimum. Only time will tell if *Black Lightning* will crossover with the rest of the DCTV series in its future seasons, but given the show's success, it seems unlikely that it will remain an outsider to this universe, adding yet another level of complexity for the audience to dive into and decipher:

A new paradigm of television storytelling has emerged over the past two decades, redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. By exploring the formal structure of this mode of storytelling, we can appreciate connections with broader concerns of media industries and technologies, creative techniques, and practices of everyday life, all of which resonate deeply with contemporary cultural transformations tied to the emergence of digital media and more interactive forms of communication and entertainment (Mittell 2015: 53).

The CW's Arrowverse exemplifies Jason Mittell's main argument in *Complex TV* which contends that complexified serial narratives in American television have strengthened audience engagement but they have also cemented complicity (if not collusion) between producers and prosumers, notions that further pursue Henry Jenkins' convergence theory (Jenkins 2006). The CW viewer is no longer perceived as passive or as a static consumer but as an implicated agent, involved into elaborating his or her own culture: this cross- and transmedia agent does whatever he wants, and goes as far as she is willing to go, even taking part in the myth by contributing to it through fan fiction, fan art or vidding. Dealing with superheroes implies dealing with iconic and widely popular characters who are deeply rooted in the collective imaginary. They have been around for more than 80 years and the emotional appeal they trigger should not be underestimated. With the Arrowverse, The CW is building on the positive affect superheroes inspire, trying, through all possible means, to engage with the programs' targeted audience members, making them the active cultural agents the network knows they are. Through television and the recurring patterns of seriality, the viewers get to experience a new level of intimacy with these characters and this universe. Even more so, with the changing production practices induced by streaming platforms such as Netflix, and the different narrative forms they engendered, the structured seriality associated with a more classical broadcast pattern of network television appeals to the viewers' comfort zone and nostalgia, a sentiment which echoes the ones motivated by the superhero motif.

The CW, in the very way that it has built its development strategies, has been a pioneer in activating effectively the sleeper agents that its viewers are. The Arrowverse and how it has been articulated by the network/studio conglomerate in marketing and narrative terms goes on to show how The CW has worked toward the biggest possible inclusion of its viewership, leaning onto a game plan which placed multimedia franchising at its core. The puns and jokes and references are all there to invite the viewers, to draw them further in to these narratives and engage with the appealing myths The CW revitalizes. Putting superheroes front and center has allowed the network to enjoy renewed success through fan and critically acclaimed series while expanding its audience base, but without distorting its DNA.

The multiverse argument also played a significant part of the franchising success of the Arrowverse as it plunged the entirety of DC characters into transmedia. This strategy was itself backed by the carefully chosen names of its different media iterations, making sure that they would not be limited by any media constraints: the Arrowverse and not the DCTV universe, the DC Extended Universe and not the DC Film Universe. As of 2009, DC Comics itself became a subsidiary of DC Entertainment and in October 2013, DC Comics moved from New York City to the Warner Bros. headquarters in Burbank, California. The launch of the streaming platform DC Universe in September 2018 offering the entire DC comic book catalog in digital format, as well as all the feature films, animated films, series, cartoons or animated series ever made about the DC properties tied into that strategy. DC Universe is the ultimate consumers' point of convergence to enter the realm of the DC transmedia multiverse. DC Entertainment was able to rebrand its archives through multiversity and now argues that all these versions are *meant* to exist alongside one another, and are not to be considered as reboots or remakes that would replace the originals, but simply new versions of these characters and narratives. Accordingly, the Studio's intent for the DC franchise appears as no longer questionable as it dismisses any profitability motives through multiversity, concealed by the fact that what could have been perceived as cross-media franchising paralyzing creativity, has now become transmedia story-telling for an augmented superhero imaginary.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

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Arrow (2012-)
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Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016)
Black Lightning (2018-)
Black Panther (2018)
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003)
Constantine (2014-2015)
Constantine: City of Demons (2018-)
Dawson's Creek (1998-2003)
DC's Legends of Tomorrow (2016-)
Desperate Housewives (2004-2012)
Doctor Who (2005-)
The Flash (1990-1991)
The Flash (2014-)
Freedom Fighters: The Ray (2017-)
Glee (2009-2015)
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)
Hercules (1995-1999)
Hung (2009-2011)
The Last Samurai (2003)
Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman (1993-1997)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (2013-)
Necessary Roughness (2011-2013)
The Originals (2013-2018)
Smallville (2001-2011)
Smash (2012-2013)
Suicide Squad (2016)
Superfriends (1973-1986)
Supergirl (1984)
Supergirl (2015-)
Supernatural (2005-)
Superman (1978)
The 100 (2014-)
The Terminator (1984)
Torchwood (2006-2011)
True blood (2008-2014)
The Vampire Diaries (2009-2017)
Vixen (2015-2016)

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8177
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

ABSTRACT
For several years now, both television critics in the feature pages (Diez and Hüetlin 2013) or in trade magazines (Zarges 2015) and television practitioners (Stuckmann 2015) have been discussing the state and quality of fictional series from Germany. Very often, they have made out considerable deficits in comparison with supposed 'quality TV' from the US or Scandinavia (e.g. Förster 2014). Why is there no (more) corresponding content in German television and particularly on the financially strong public-service channels? This question is repeatedly asked not only in often polemic feuilleton debates, but also within the television sector. My paper takes a closer look at this industry discourse on 'quality series' within the German context and explores it on the basis of participant observations at industry workshops and expert interviews with scriptwriters, producers and commissioning editors (*Redakteure*). As will be seen, these actors of story development negotiate and define 'quality series' in a transnational manner, particularly by comparing TV fiction from Germany with such productions from the US and Scandinavia and focussing on their supposed features of storytelling. The TV makers' discourse, furthermore, bears historical traits as they trace the current state of series from Germany back to historical developments and structures. Thereby they diagnose the 'local' and 'national' of German series. Transnational and 'glocal' dimensions can also be found in their discussion of production cultures. It is suggested by several practitioners that specific traditions and hierarchies would complicate the broader establishment of 'quality series' and their alleged production modes.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

1. **INTRODUCTION**

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

'Quality series' are not primarily understood as 'good', clearly definable texts, but rather as a discourse within the heterogeneous and changing television (and film) industry in Germany, an aspiration and a tendency in its recent series productions. Several shows such as *Bad Banks* (2018-), *Babylon Berlin* (201), *4 Blocks* (D) or *Dark* (2017-) are contemporary approaches to 'quality series' and point towards more comprehensive alterations of the German TV landscape: lately, it has 'transnationalized' in accordance with broader European developments (Bondebjerg 2016) as well means of digital distribution (Mikos 2016b, Leuschen 2017) and expanded due to new broadcasters and platforms. Among the new commissioners are not only transnational, US-dominated SVOD providers such as Netflix, but also a range of other networks and channels, whether public-service (ZDFneo, FUNK), advertising-funded (e.g. Vox), or subscription pay TV (TNT Series, Sky Germany). My production study[1] attempts to cover different areas of the contemporary television series industry in Germany (Krauß 2018) and, in this way, different voices in the transnational discourse on 'quality series'. In what follows, I discuss the interim results of this research.

2. **METHODICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO 'QUALITY SERIES' AS A TRANSNATIONAL INDUSTRY DISCOURSE**

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

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

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

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

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Seeinterviews 10 and interview 3.

4 See interview 1.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

The transnational references to Danish, US-American and sometimes British series often come with a comparison to German TV fiction, wherein the discourse bears glocal traits. Often, the German cases work as the other, the counterpart to 'quality TV'. The dependency on the other in the conceptualization of 'quality' (Frizzoni 2014) as well as Michael Billig's *banal nationalism*, according to which every form of imagined community and national identity contains a dimension of "us the nation" and "them the foreigners" (Billig 1995: 61), might be seen in this confrontation. Besides the argumentation that Germany lags far behind the foreign 'quality' content, there are is also praise for the high value of German television among some practitioners, possibly defending their own work. Here, 'quality TV' is at least seen as an also German field and transferred in a national context.

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

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

5 Interview 5.

6 Interview 9.

7 See interview 6.

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

9 Interview 4.

10 Interview 12.

11 Interview 1.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

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

The practitioners' transnational discourse on 'quality series' is widened to a discussion of Germany's television past. The historical dimensions are used to locate series from Germany and to explain their current state and quality. At first, historical references can be found out in the mention of older 'quality' productions. Sometimes, this citation challenges and relativizes the deficient impression. "What annoys me, in the discussion on series' quality: one does always one-sidedly take the BBC examples and the American ones into account, not seeing that, indeed, there are approaches to quality in German series history", the commissioning editor by NDR states. He points to some former instances such as *Acht Stunden sind kein Tag* (*Eight Hours Are Not a Day*, 1972) by Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, or, in particular, *Kir Royal* (1985) and *Monaco Franze – Der ewige Stenz* (1983), parodies of Munich's jet set life in the 1980s, associated with director Helmut Dietl[13]. Looking back, the interviewed scriptwriter, involved in the early development of *Die Stadt und die Macht*, addresses a certain attitude and touches upon former production conditions: "Germany as a TV nation has been braver and more ahead" than today, he assumes in reference to the West German science fiction media satire *Das Millionenspiel* (1970). Interestingly, the writer names a TV film, but not series. In respect to today's fiction programmes, he correspondingly states: "the German TV film, there is really excellent stuff"[14]. Again, the single piece is regarded as the main quality area in German television.

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

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

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

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

12 Interview 5.

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

14 Interview 4.

15 Interview 6.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

> is educational theatre, whereas Shakespeare integrates popular theatre to a great extent[16].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

16 Interview 5.

17 Interview 5.

18 Interview 10.

19 Interview 9.

20 Interview 5.

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ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

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

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

5. PRODUCTION CULTURES OF 'QUALITY SERIES'

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

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

21 Interview 1.

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ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

22 Interview 5.

23 Interview 5.

24 Interview 7.

25 Interview 9.

26 Interview 6.

27 Interview 1.

28 Interview 6.

29 Interview 2.

30 Interview 11.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

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

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

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

Like this interviewee, many practitioners bring up economic factors in their 'quality series' discourse. The script development and particularly its very early phase are underpaid these voices suggest, again drawing a transnational comparison. Several times, practitioners hint at the comparably low amount of money spent on story development and scriptwriting within the German television industry. For instance, the *Deutschland 83* writer-producer names "his own reckoning" according to which Germany approximately two to three per cent of the budget are spend on story development, "in contrast to approximately seven to eight per cent in Scandinavia or ten per cent in the US"[33]. This comparison illustrates the often visible tendency to idealize production conditions in US 'quality series', a tendency known from other European production contexts (cf.Pjajčíková and Szczepanik 2016). Still, this statements underlines the relatively precarious position of the writer within the German system. Furthermore, this argumentation points towards broader dimensions of the practitioners' discourse on 'quality series', reaching beyond quality valuations of content.

6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

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

31 Interview 1.

32 Interview 1.

33 Interview 6, also interview 9.

34 See interview 8.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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

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

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

35 Interview 5.

36 See interview 1 as well.

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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

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Babylon Berlin (2017)
Bad Banks (2018-)
Berlin Alexanderplatz (1980)
Blackout – Die Erinnerung ist tödlich (2005)
Breaking Bad (2008–2013)
Das Boot (1981-1985)
Dark (2017-)
Deutschland 83 (G 2015-)
Dogs of Berlin (2018)
Eichwald, MdB (2015-)
Im Angesicht des Verbrechens (2010)
Kir Royal (1985)
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Ku'damm 56 / 59 (2015 / 2018)
Das Millionenspiel (1970)
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Polizeiruf 110 (1971-)
SOKO (1978)
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You Are Wanted (2017-2018)
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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8282
ISSN 2421-454X

QUALITY TV AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION: AN EXPERIMENT ON HOW COMPLEX TELEVISION SERIES VALORIZE THEIR USERS

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KEYWORDS
Quality TV; TV series, theory of distinction; symbolic capital; cultural capital.

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the question as to whether serial quality TV has the potential to valorize its fans. We draw on Bourdieu's theory of distinction, assuming that the demonstrated preference for a specific cultural taste has consequences for the attribution of capital endowment overall, and especially within an adept group. These assumptions are tested via a 3 (preference for high-culture vs. conventional television vs. quality TV series) x 1 online experiment with between subject design plus control group (N = 389). Results showed that conspicuously favouring serial quality TV has the potential to function as a distinctive sign – at least to some extent. Significantly more cultural capital is ascribed to a quality TV fan than to a person showing a preference for conventional television. Within a certain group of connoisseurs, a quality TV taste is even worth as much as a preference for high-culture. Implications are discussed with regard to the theory of distinction and quality TV series as the object of investigation.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

For more than ten years HBO featured the slogan "It's not TV, it's HBO". By this, the cable channel tried to mark out its programs. HBO, this slogan signified, is more than television (see Lavery 2006, Feuer 2007, Leverette et al. 2008). Just as with other pay TV channels like Showtime (*Dexter, Nurse Jackie*), AMC (*Breaking Bad, Mad Men*), or FX (*The Americans, Sons of Anarchy*), HBO's original content (series like *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*) does not aim at the lowest common denominator in audience taste but aspires to be high-class television content. US-American TV critics called such programming 'quality television'. The term was introduced into academia by Thompson (1996, see also McCabe and Akass 2007). Based on Schlütz we draw on the following definition of quality TV for our line of argument:

> Serial quality TV is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters quality series appear authentic. Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality TV addresses a special, highly autonomous audience segment. As a meta-genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value. (Schlütz 2016a: 101)

Quality TV can be seen as both art and merchandise (Bignell 2007) because it is demanding in terms of content, aesthetically ambitious and therefore attractive for certain target groups. Beside several other gratifications, Schlütz (2016b) assumes that these programs offer the profit of distinction by valorising their users. The study at hand focuses on the symbolic value quality TV series supposedly offer by empirically addressing the question as to whether they have the potential for social distinction.

We built on the premise that while television is often frowned upon for being an inferior pastime (Neuhoff 2001, Goldbeck 2004, Mikos 2006, Levine 2008), watching quality television might be acknowledged as a cultural activity for connoisseurs. That is why the brand 'HBO' functions as a unique selling proposition in first-order market relations where goods (like books) are sold directly to the customer (Rogers et al. 2002, Scherer 2015, Schlütz 2015). Whereas from a distributor's standpoint this label works as a branding device, from an audience's perspective it serves as a meta-genre.

1. QUALITY TV AS META-GENRE

Commonly, television genres are taxonomic categories with descriptive and organizing character (Creeber 2008) that are culturally and historically bound (Feuer 1992). They are typically deduced from textual traits and/or production standards. Quality TV series, however, "fit no discernible genre at all – except quality" (Martin 2013: 271). We might therefore understand quality TV as a meta-genre designating complex narratives, authenticity, and signature style (Schlütz 2016a). According to Mittell (2004) genres are discursively constructed in a cultural context:

> [T]elevision genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operations across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. ... Thus, genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function. (Mittell 2004: xii)

Thus, genres are constructed by being publicly talked and written about (Reeves et al. 2007) – be it within academia (Cardwell 2007), among television critics (Nussbaum 2009), in social media forums (Jenner 2016, 2017), or in the marketing departments of TV channels like HBO (Anderson 2009: 38). The constructing discourse usually consists of three phases: definition, interpretation, and evaluation (Mittell 2004: 16). With regard to quality TV, evaluation is paramount as this is where the meta-genre is positioned in relation to other genres: "The historical and cultural practices working to constitute genre categories are formative of notions of taste, making hierarchies salient both within and between genres" (Mittell 2004: 102).

This process of constructing meaning is dominated by power; the power to interpret and, later, to naturalize concepts such as the meta-genre quality TV. The term 'naturalizing' refers to the process by which formerly subjective judgments become facts, and assessments are framed as legitimate hierarchies (Newman and Levine 2012: 6). Thus,

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

symbolic production is the "power to *name* and to make-exist by virtue of naming" (Bourdieu 1985: 729). The product of these power struggles is a logo (Bourdieu 1985: 739) like, for instance, 'Quality TV'. In other words: a certain quality TV series is produced directly (physically) by its creator who is the showrunner or executive producer. Indirectly (symbolically), it comes into being by the "producers of the meaning and the value of the work" (Bourdieu 1983a: 318). As value (like beauty) always lies in the eye of the beholder, other agents like critics, scientists, and bloggers are necessary agents in order to "produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such" (Bourdieu 1983a: 319). The aim of symbolic production is not only to classify a text but also to position it and, thereby, distinguish it from others; to consecrate certain producers and products (Bourdieu 1983a: 323) and to devalue others. This process has factual consequences on both social and individual levels: To label a text as quality TV raises its symbolic value and builds reputation (Sewell 2010). Moreover, by constructing such a consensus groups are formed (Bourdieu 1985: 729).

Quality TV signifies a specific cultural status of television content (Newman and Levine 2012: 21) as opposed to conventional programming, understood here as content with mass audience appeal (often) indicated by high ratings. This cultural status is equipped with surplus value as regards the audience (Santo 2008: 33) because watching HBO (or other channels offering quality TV series, for that matter) may help to accumulate cultural capital (Schlütz and Schneider 2014, Schlütz et al. 2017) and by this reputation – reputation embodied by the meta-genre quality TV. These processes may be better understood based on Bourdieu's (1987) theory of distinction.

2. THE THEORY OF DISTINCTION

Bourdieu (1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1987) describes society as a multi-dimensional social space. This space is constructed on the basis of differentiation based on properties. As a symbolic system, social space is organized according to the logic of distinction (Bourdieu 1985: 730). The distinctive position one acquires within this space of social relationships is paid for in work, effort, and time (Bourdieu 1985: 725). The social differentiation generates groups. Thus, the system functions as a set of groups characterized by different life styles. Individuals and groups are defined by their relative position within this space as a "set of power relations" (Bourdieu 1985: 724). Groups share similar dispositions, interests, practices, and tastes including media repertoires (Lindell 2018, Lindell and Hovden 2018, Ohlsson et al. 2017). These similarities, in turn, reinforce the social affiliation: "position helps to shape dispositions" (Bourdieu 1983a: 341).

2.1 Forms of Capital

In his theory of distinction, Bourdieu argues that taste is related to social position. Social position, in turn, is dependent on capital resources (Bourdieu 1983b). Agents are distributed within the social topology to the overall volume of the capital they possess on the one dimension and to the composition of their capital assets on the other (Bourdieu 1985: 724). According to Bourdieu (1983b, 1987) the economy of cultural goods consists of three forms of capital that are convertible into each other: economic capital (i.e., financial means), social capital (i.e., relations), and cultural capital (skills and knowledge). Each form can be accumulated. Variations in taste can be traced back to different capital resources: "Select groups feel themselves to be distinctive in culture and thus choose cultural goods (of all kinds) to affirm their status" (Nelson 2007: 44). Media choice and evaluation, for instance, is influenced by cultural capital and mass media use is related to social capital (Straubhaar 2007: 202-3). Symbolic capital is a superordinate concept. Symbolic capital can be any other form of capital that is recognized by another knowledgeable agent as important and, therefore, valuable. Thus, distinction is a symbolic transfiguration of de facto differences that are perceived and assessed as significant (Bourdieu 1985: 731). Symbolic capital is "another name for distinction" (Bourdieu 1985: 731).

Agents construct the representation of the social world by managing impressions of themselves. They constantly produce classifications in their ordinary existence through which they seek to modify their position (Bourdieu 1985: 727), for instance by managing the social media impressions of themselves. Thus, the visible consumption of specific cultural goods helps to mark the individual's social position: "Social groups mobilize taste to include and exclude, to identify members and keep boundaries. You are what you like ... Social identity is produced through differences not only in economic or social circumstances, but in aesthetic preferences" (Newman and Levine 2012: 7). Visibility of a specific aesthetic taste is created, for instance, by follow-up communication on a quality TV series (i.e., in online forums) or self-characterization as a quality series aficionado (i.e., in a social media profile). Studies show that certain public ut-

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

terances (such as Facebook profiles) are suitable for identity building and distinction (Zhao et al. 2008). Apparently, not only the act of consumption is apt for distinction but also the communication of this act to other agents. In Bourdieu's terms, to demonstrate a set of specific interests on a social media thus functions as a *distinctive sign.* When the sign is recognized, acknowledged, and approved of, then (and only then) it also functions as a *sign of distinction* (Bourdieu 1985: 730). The accumulation of symbolic capital and the associated prestige offers the profit of distinction only if the symbolic value is acknowledged by relevant others: "[W]orks of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized" (Bourdieu 1983a: 318). Objects of the social world and their meanings are not determinate. Rather, they are variable in time and open to interpretation. Thus, the symbolic value of utterances such as the preference for quality TV series varies between groups (Bourdieu 1985: 728). This is because the perception of the social world always implies an act of construction. This act depends on the social position or, more precisely, on field-specific capital:

> [S]ocially known and recognized differences only exist for a subject capable not only of perceiving differences but of recognizing them as significant, interesting, i.e., only for a subject endowed with the capacity and inclination to *make* the distinctions that are regarded as significant in the social universe in question (Bourdieu 1985: 730).

Thus, only agents familiar with the concept of serial quality TV would acknowledge and value such a taste as a sign of distinction.

This act of distinguishing oneself works because the visible preference of valuable cultural goods, and the judgment of taste that goes along with it, allows for other people to infer the capital resources someone has at his or her disposal. This has been shown empirically for the audience of repertory cinemas (Scherer et al. 2009). Moreover, genre preferences are used as proxies to assess other people. As the perception of the social world is structured according to language-based schemes that are the product of previous symbolic struggles (Bourdieu 1985: 727) – such as the construction of the meta-genre quality TV – the derived symbols may function as heuristics to judge other people: the more valuable the taste, it follows, the higher the esteem (indicated by the amoung of attributed symbolic capital) for the person or group in question.

2.2 **Distinction via Quality TV**

As argued, quality TV can be understood as a culturally bound, discursive construct that functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience, and possible effects of entertaining quality TV (Schlütz 2016a). Like a traditional genre, it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Moreover, quality TV's claim to artistic status by an awareness of connoisseurship adds value to the viewing experience. Therefore, watching serial quality television can be perceived as being more valuable than watching conventional TV because of its quality designation that carries cultural status (Newman and Levine 2012: 32). Thus, we argue that quality TV comes with symbolic value. Its use and appreciation marks the self-proclaimed connoisseur – in his or her own view and at best in the view of relevant others as well – as distinct from the 'ordinary viewer'. In this vein, quality TV consumption and follow-up communication build reputation (i.e., symbolic capital) if this action is acknowledged by relevant others. If in former times TV was only suitable for distinction if one did *not* watch it, with the advent of quality TV this has changed: "one *could*, in fact, be a snob and still admit to watching [quality TV series]" (Thompson 1996: 17). This 'not-TV' discourse helps to market quality content as something special and suitable for distinction:

> HBO must continuously promote discourses of 'quality' and 'exclusivity' as central to the subscription experience. These discourses aim to not only brand HBO, but its audiences as well. In this manner, pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television. (Santo 2008: 20)

According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural (or artistic) production is the "arena par excellence of struggles" (1983a: 342). Due to its lack of institutionalization, the field offers several positions open to symbolic challenge (Bourdieu 1983a: 341-2). Consequently, the cultural field is extremely permeable, dispersed, and full of conflicts between rival principles of legitimacy (Bourdieu 1983a: 324). It is one of the indeterminate sites in the social structures as opposed to, say, the economic field. Furthermore, the artistic field is the site of a double hierarchy (Bourdieu 1983a: 319). This hierarchy is differentiated by two principles with varying degrees of public success (Bourdieu 1983a: 320): On the one

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

hand, the heteronomous principle is to do with success and economic profit; on the other hand, the autonomous principle is to do with consecration and artistic prestige. Lack of success, however, is not automatically a sign of election, as some "box-office successes may be recognized, at least in some sectors of the field, as genuine art" (Bourdieu 1983a: 320). Within the artistic field, heteronomous arts that appeal to the masses (like conventional television) are – more often than not – symbolically devalued, whereas autonomous arts are high in esteem. Distinct cultural activities are spread along this continuum between autonomy and heteronomy. High-culture appealing to an elite audience is placed closer to the autonomous principle (pure art or "art for art's sake", Bourdieu, 1983a: 321), and conventional television ("popular art for ordinary consumers", Bourdieu, 1983a: 332) is positioned closer to the heteronomous principle. We argue that quality TV (comparable to "bourgeois art", Bourdieu 1983a: 321) should lie somewhere between the opposing poles as it is comparable to artistic artefacts in terms of structure and the surrounding quality discourse (Schlütz 2016a, 2016b).

As discussed above, the meta-genre of quality TV serves as a discursively constructed heuristic for framing and assessing entertainment experiences. In this manner, quality entertainment offers a rewarding experience – rewarding in the sense that it offers both direct effects and indirect outcomes. The direct impact is an entertainment experience. Indirectly, quality TV provides symbolic value and thus offers the profit of distinction. This is possible because the discourse by which quality TV as a meta-genre is constructed is to do with hierarchization and consecration. When talking about their cultural tastes, viewers draw on characteristics of the texts in question with respect to certain cultural values. By demonstrating their judgment of taste, they position themselves within the social system (Mittell 2004). Thus, the communicated preference of quality TV serves as a distinctive sign. It only works as a sign of distinction, though, when other agents know how to decode it and to judge its value. The cultural value of quality TV has to be acknowledged and accepted in order for it to be distinctive. The characteristics of quality TV as an aesthetic artefact, as well as its construction as a meta-genre, are – if accepted – ideal for this.

The overall question thus guiding our research is whether the visible consumption of specific cultural goods marks an individual's social position (H1) in the eye of relevant others (H2). More precisely, we ask whether the display of a specific taste is recognized by others as distinctive. Based on the discussion above we propose the following hypotheses:

— *H1.1:* A demonstrated cultural taste (distinctive sign) functions as a sign of distinction that affects the ascription of capital endowment. More precisely, a demonstrated preference for high-culture leads to higher amounts of ascribed a) economic, b) social, and c) cultural capital than does a demonstrated preference for conventional television.
— *H1.2:* A demonstrated preference for serial quality TV (distinctive sign) leads to an amount of ascribed capital endowment located between the opposing poles of high-culture and conventional TV.
— *H2:* A demonstrated preference for serial quality TV (distinctive sign) functions as a sign of distinction within an adept group only, i.e., it leads to a higher amount of ascribed symbolic capital within a group high on field-specific capital.

3. METHOD

The aim of the study is to test whether serial quality TV is apt for social distinction. More precisely, we want to find out whether a demonstration of a specific cultural taste as a distinctive sign impacts on the assessment of an individual in terms of his or her capital endowment and, thus, functions as a sign of distinction.

3.1 Experimental Design

To test our causal hypotheses we designed a 3 (preference for high-culture vs. conventional television vs. quality TV series) x 1 online experiment with between subject design plus control group, manipulating the cultural preferences presented in a (fake) Facebook profile. The study was conducted online in June/July 2015. The sample of $N = 389$ (63.2 % women, $M_{age} = 33.6$ years) was realized with the help of a (non-student) scientific access panel with participants from all over Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. As compensation, the respondents could win one out of three retail vouchers worth 20 Euros each.

The respondents were assigned randomly to one of the groups resulting in an evenly distributed sample. A randomization check showed no significant differences between the groups with two exceptions: The perceived authenticity of the Facebook profile that was used as a stimulus (see below) differed significantly between groups ($F(3/375) = 3.092$; $p = .027$). The quality TV profile was perceived as slightly more

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

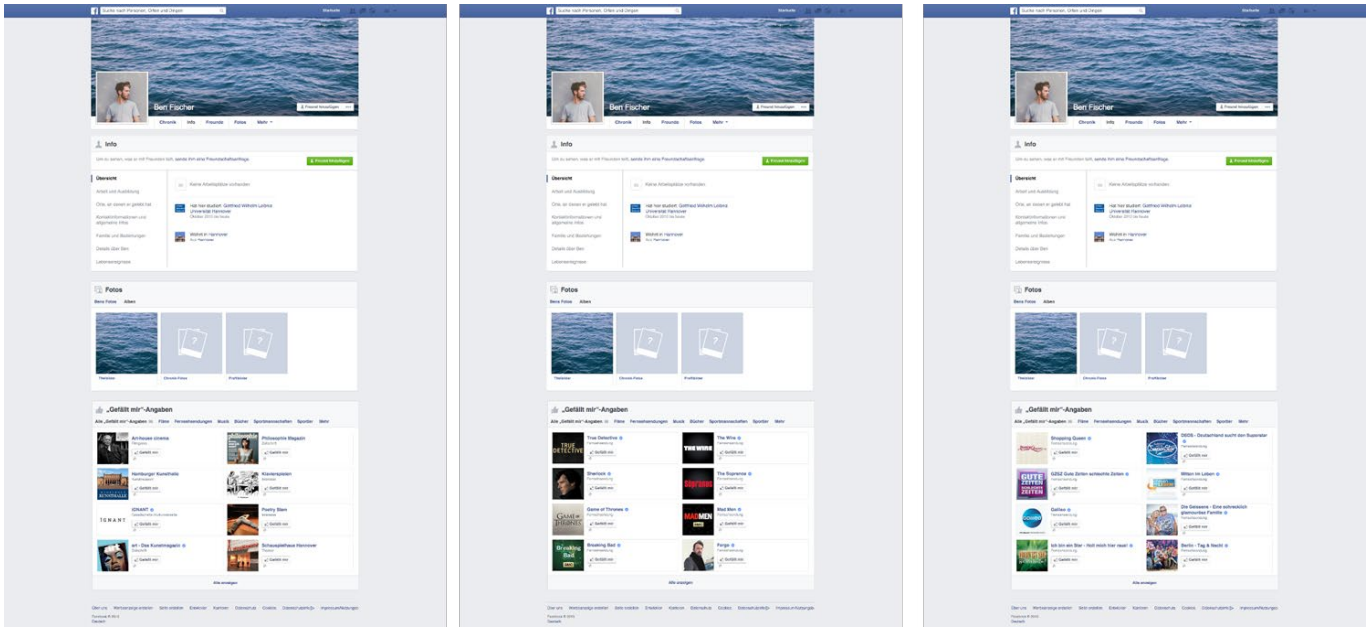


FIGURE 1. DEPICTED STIMULUS' VERSIONS. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HIGH CULTURE, QUALITY TELEVISION, AND CONVENTIONAL TELEVISION PLUS CONTROL GROUP WITHOUT PREFERENCES (NOT DEPICTED)

authentic ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.84$) than the other profiles ($M_{highcult} = 3.44$, $SD = 0.86$; $M_{conventTV} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.01$; $M_{control} = 3.58$, $SD = 0.87$). When additionally considering the field specific capital, age also produced significant group differences ($F(7/374) = 5.584$; $p = .001$). These variables will be used as covariates in further analyses in order to account for a possible influence.

3.2 **Stimulus and Procedure**

For the experiment, we designed a fake Facebook profile for a young man named Ben Fischer[1]. The profile was created in four different versions that featured varying cultural activities such as watching television and visiting cultural events. For each alternative activities were chosen as to demonstrate a specific cultural taste. We designed three different cultural profiles for the experimental groups: high-culture, quality TV series, and conventional television as well as a control group without preferences. With Bourdieu (1983a: 312) we assumed that the positions of these activities were relatively situated to each other within the cultural field. More precisely, we presumed that the positions formed a hierarchy with high cultural activities being perceived as more prestigious than watching conventional television. Serial quality TV as a new quasi-artistic utterance should, according to theory, be positioned between these opposing poles. Thus, the stimulus was created according to these three competing principles of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1983a: 331; see Figure 1).

The high-culture profile featured interests in art house cinema, philosophy, art, theatre, and poetry (see Bourdieu 1983a). Following Bourdieu (1987: 416-462) the choice was attuned to the preferred cultural activities of people high on cultural but low on economic capital – such as profound movies or challenging art exhibitions – in order to match a (German) student's interests.

The list of quality TV series in the second version of the profile contained *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-), *True Detective I* (HBO, 2014-), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), and *Fargo* (FX, 2014-)[2] The list was based on six different rankings from

1 We used a fictitious male profile as most of the chosen quality series had a higher share of male viewers. We did not add another stimulus version with a female protagonist in order to avoid complicating the factorial design further. Randomization ensured that the respondent's gender did not influence the analyses.

2 We used US American or British series only for two reasons: First, they are considered quality television and second, they are much more popular among aficionados than German productions (Schlütz and Schneider 2014) regardless of their different cultural origin (Schlütz et al. 2017).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

critics (Metacritic), experts (Writers Guild of America) and lay people (like IMDb, Moviepilot) alike. Thus, the selection mirrors different perspectives: critics, producers and national as well as international audiences. From each ranking, the top ten titles were chosen and assigned 10 to 1 points in descending order (with 0 for titles that did not make the top ten of the ranking in questions). After summing up the values a new ranking was calculated from which the above named top eight series were chosen.

For the third category of conventional TV we chose popular exemplars from scripted reality TV, casting shows, daily talk shows, and the like, that were held to be low on quality in Germany (Mikos 2006: 33). Finally, the control group was presented with the same profile without preferences.

The intended effect of the stimulus material was ensured by a treatment check at the end of the questionnaire: Participants were asked which interests they remembered from Ben's profile. Only respondents who identified the stimulus version they were presented with correctly remained in the sample.

After presenting the stimulus profile, respondents were asked to look at it thoroughly in order to form a personal impression about Ben Fischer. Subsequently, Ben's perceived capital endowment was measured as dependent variable (see below).

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were thanked and debriefed as to the true nature of the experiment.

3.3 **Measures**

All concepts specified below were measured by multi-item Likert-type scales ranging from 1 'do not agree' to 5 'agree completely'. After testing for reliability and reversing items with negative polarity mean scores were calculated for subsequent analyses (for a comprehensive list of items, mean scores, and values see appendix, table A1).

Capital endowment. The three basic forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural capital) as dependent variables were operationalized by individually phrased items with regard to Bourdieu (1983b). The concept of economic capital was captured by four items that unfortunately failed to yield sufficient reliability (M = 3.22, SD = 0.58, α = .547). Results have thus to be treated with caution. Social capital was measured with four items. To enhance reliability one item was omitted from the final mean score (M = 3.21, SD = 0.73, α = .727). For the same reason, only five out of seven items of the cultural capital scale were used for the mean score (M = 3.37, SD = 0.92, α = .889).

Distinction. To grasp the concept of distinction, we measured symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 731) according to Wojciszke et al.'s respect scale (2009) (M = 3.08, SD = 0.84, α = .712). We renounced the slight improvement of the alpha score by omitting one of the items in favour of the original three-item scale.

Field-specific capital. To identify respondents adept in the concept of quality TV we measured field-specific capital, that is knowledge about and appreciation of quality TV series in the style of Rössel and Bromberger (2009). Three out of five items were used for a reliable mean score (M = 2.41, SD = 1.14, α = .729). For further analysis, the score was dichotomized into low (1.0 to 2.9) versus high (3.0 to 5.0) within-field knowledge and used as a quasi-experimental factor.

Further measures. Additionally, we recorded sociodemographics such as age, gender, and educational background.

4. **RESULTS**

H1 assumed that the demonstrated preference for a specific cultural taste functions as a distinctive sign with respect to the attribution of capital endowment. More precisely, we presumed that a preference for high-culture leads to higher amounts of ascribed social and cultural capital than a preference for conventional television (H1.1). The assessment resulting from a preference for quality TV, we predicted, is located between the two opposing poles (H1.2). In response to that, we performed several ANCOVAs with cultural preference as independent factor and the different forms of capital as dependent variables (table 1).

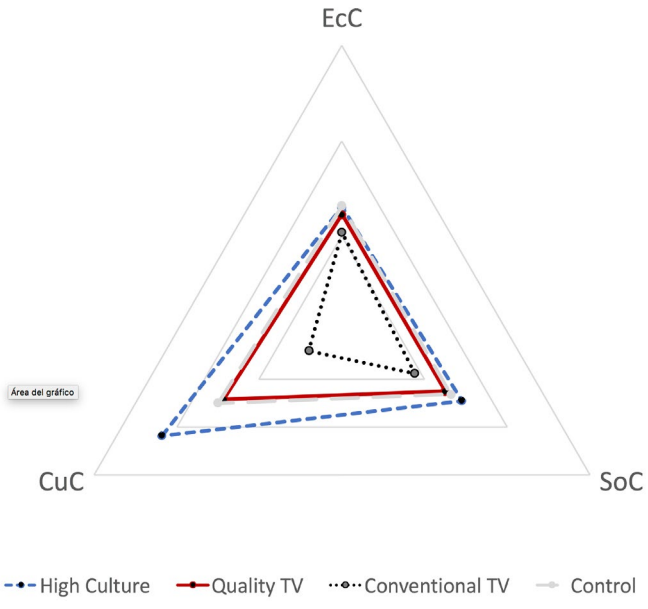
All analyses yielded significant results with the presentation of cultural preferences being more influential for the attribution of cultural capital (η^2 = .490) than social capital (η^2 = .088). A closer look at the group means revealed that the presentation of high culture preferences generally lead to the highest amount of ascribed capital, while network TV accounted for the lowest assessment of economic, social, and cultural capital. Figure 2 shows considerable differences of the cultural preferences in terms of ascribed forms of capital (i.e., the capital profiles). High culture as the outmost profile enclosed the others with network TV at the center of the web.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

TABLE 1. ATTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE (ANCOVA)

	Cultural Preference			
	High Culture (n=95)	Quality TV (n=96)	Conventional TV (n=96)	Control (n=102)
Dependent Variables	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Economic Capital**[1]	3.31 (0.57)[a]	3.23 (0.61)[ab]	3.04 (0.65)[b]	3.32 (0.44)[a]
Social Capital***[2]	3.45 (0.67)[a]	3.25 (0.75)[a]	2.88 (0.75)[b]	3.32 (0.60)[a]
Cultural Capital***[3]	4.18 (0.54)[a]	3.43 (0.63)[b]	2.40 (0.85)[c]	3.50 (0.52)[b]

Note. N = 338 – 375.
One-way ANCOVAs with demonstrated cultural preference as independent variable, forms of capital as dependent variable, and perceived authenticity as covariate.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
Scales from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.
Groups with different letters differ significantly according to post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni (p < .05).
[1]F (3/364) = 4.475; p = .004; η^2 = .036
[2]F (3/343) = 10.935; p < .001; η^2 = .088
[3]F (3/370) = 118.072; p < .001; η^2 = .490



Note. N = 338 – 375.
Scales from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.
EcC = economic capital, SoC = social capital, CuC = cultural capital.
For mean values see Table 1.

FIGURE 2. CAPITAL PROFILES AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCES

The profiles of quality TV and the control group (no preferences) were almost congruent. As expected, quality TV was ranging in between.

Post-hoc analyses indicated, however, that not all groups differed significantly from each other (see table 1). In general, both forms of capital were rated significantly lower when participants were presented with preference for conventional television compared to the high-culture Facebook profile. Thus, hypothesis 1.1 was supported. Quality TV, on the other hand, only differed significantly from both high-culture and conventional TV preferences with regard to cultural capital. Thus, hypothesis 1.2 was only partly supported.

H2 presumed that the demonstrated preference for quality TV functions as a sign of distinction only within a specific group of aficionados high on field-specific capital, that is knowledge about the meta-genre quality TV and its exemplars. To account for this we performed a two-way ANCOVA with cultural preference and field-specific capital as independent variables and symbolic capital as dependent (see table 2). The results show a significant main effect of cultural preference on symbolic capital and, more importantly, a significant but small interaction effect with regard to symbolic capital (F(3/323 = 3.081; p = .028; η^2 = .028). Accordingly, the attribution of symbolic capital as a function of demonstrated cultural preferences seems to differ with regard to field-specific capital.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

TABLE 2. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL (ANCOVA)

Symbolic Capital	df	F	η^2	p
(A) Cultural Preference	3	7.148	.063	<.001***
(B) Field-Specific Capital	1	0.027	.000	.870
(A) x (B)	3	3.081	.028	.028*

Note. N = 331.
Two-way ANCOVA with cultural preference and field-specific cultural capital as independent variable, symbolic capital as dependent variable and perceived authenticity and age as covariates.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

TABLE 3. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL (DESCRIPTIVE VALUES)

	Cultural Preference			
Field-Specific Cultural Capital	High Culture (n=95)	Quality TV (n=96)	Conventional TV (n=96)	Control (n=102)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Low	3.32 (0.87)a	2.85 (0.73)b	2.81 (0.89)b	3.34 (0.79)a
High	3.35 (0.72)a	3.26 (0.85)a	2.65 (0.60)b	3.05 (0.80)ab

Note. N = 338. Scale symbolic capital from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.
Groups with different letters differ significantly according to simple effects post-hoc comparisons for low and high field-specific cultural capital using Bonferroni (p < .05).

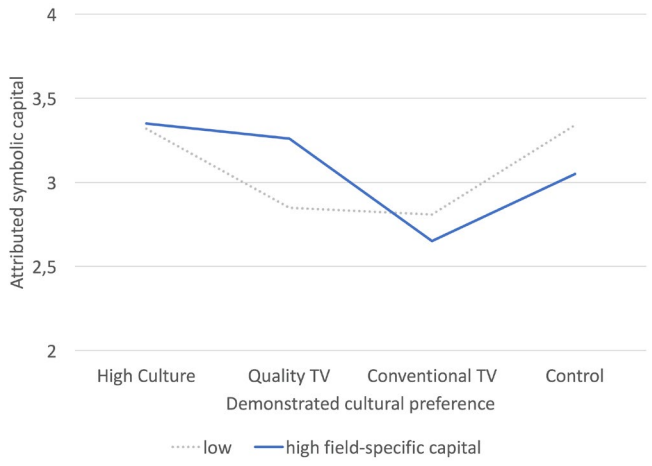


FIGURE 3. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL

Subsequent simple effects analysis showed that respondents with low field-specific capital (i.e., non quality TV aficionados) attributed significantly lower levels of symbolic capital to Ben when presented with a quality TV profile compared to his high-culture profile (p =.015; see table 3 and figure 3). Instead, the amount of ascribed social capital was comparable to the conventional TV profile. However, within the adept group of participants in possession of high field-specific capital (i.e., quality TV fans), respect for Ben the 'quality TV viewer' was almost as high as if he favoured high-culture activities, and significantly higher than as a response to the conventional TV profile (p =.037). In sum, the more field-specific capital a respondent had at his or her disposal the higher his or her regard for a person pursuing this kind of cultural activity. Therefore, H2 was supported.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

5. **DISCUSSION**

This paper drew on Bourdieu's theory of distinction with regard to a contemporary media phenomenon – serial quality television. To deal with our research question – quality TV's aptitude for distinction – we applied a sociological theory to individual agents and their behaviour. By empirically testing the theoretical claims we contributed to knowledge about the eligibility of media use to add to the forming of groups in social space. Furthermore, the study shed light on the effects of a discursively constructed quality logo like the meta-genre quality TV.

Our paper was based on the presumption that serial quality TV can be understood as a meta-genre that influences production, distribution, and, most importantly, reception of media artefacts by adding symbolic value to the entertainment experience. Quality TV series were chosen as new quasi-artistic utterances suitable to open up the space of possibilities of the cultural field (Bourdieu 1983a: 314). And indeed, the experiment showed that conspicuously favouring quality TV has the potential to function as a distinctive sign – at least to some extent. Significantly more cultural capital (almost one scale point) was ascribed to a quality TV fan than to a person who showed a preference for conventional TV. The quality TV fan was not granted more cultural capital, though, than the control group and less in comparison to a high-culture devotee (H1). Within a certain group of connoisseurs, however, a quality TV taste is worth nearly as much as a preference for high-culture. This is shown by an almost even attribution of symbolic capital by respondents who themselves were quality television aficionados (H2). Respondents low on field-specific capital, on the other hand, ascribed more symbolic capital to Ben when he showed an interest in high-culture activities. Thus, to cherish quality television is perceived and assessed as a significant de facto difference that is symbolically transfigured into a distinctive cultural status. Consequently, this status can be used to modify an individual's social position.

These results suggest that distinction can be understood as a symbolic transfiguration of differences in cultural taste that are assessed as significant (Bourdieu 1985: 731). More precisely, they indicate that a certain 'bourgeois' taste can be perceived as equally distinctive as a preference for pure art whereas popular art is lower in esteem. With regard to the theory, these results insinuate that changes of the structure of the field of cultural production are perceivable but not, at least not as of now, of society as a whole. On an individual level, quality TV apparently adds symbolic value to the entertainment experience – at least in the eyes of relevant others. By conspicuously consuming quality TV, symbolic capital is earned. Consequently, the aficionado is re-positioned within the social field.

It is worthwhile to consider the implications on the macro level in the light of our results as the rise of quality TV might be understood as a "re-ordering of the hierarchy of genres" (Bourdieu 1983a: 335-6). The establishment of quality TV as a meta-genre is a consequence of the transformation that the US-American television market went through during the last half century (Jenkins 2008, Lotz 2007). These changes influenced financing, production, distribution, marketing, as well as media use and content reception. Especially the rise of premium cable channels fostered the development of quality TV as a meta-genre (Schlütz 2016a). At present, we have reached a phase that Martin (2013: 9) termed the "third golden age of television". This era is characterized by high quality television content and highly competent users, participants, fans, prosumers, co-creators, etc. who successfully compete with other stakeholders in the cultural struggle. Within this struggle, symbolic capital is a means of power (Bourdieu 1983a: 731).

The era is also the age of cultural convergence (Jenkins 2008: 2) where television use has changed "from flow to files" (Mittell 2010: 422, Schlütz 2015). By purchasing (digital) quality TV content directly (on DVD or by subscribing to a premium pay-TV channel) the audience's taste is fed back into the market. This feedback is much more reliable than audience shares and ratings. The demand is met with a fitting supply by new market players like streaming platforms that are able to customize shows to a specific niche audience and still make money by catering for the 'longer long tail' (Anderson 2009) with distinctive programming. The new players are equally competent and powerful – not only with regard to producing and distributing high quality content but also with respect to constructing quality TV as a meta-genre. Thus, what we witness might be understood as a change of power relations in the cultural field (Bourdieu 1983a: 338) with the audience becoming more influential in a market dominated by first-order-relations. Other stakeholders high on symbolic capital may profit from the development as well. As Bourdieu himself puts it:

> Every field is the site of a more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the field. ... the symbolic strength of the participants in this struggle is never completely independent of their position in the game, even if

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

> the specifically symbolic power to nominate constitutes a strength relatively independent of the other forms of social power. (Bourdieu 1983a: 734)

Thus, non-professional media agents like bloggers, fans, online community members, and the like may become more influential in nominating and naming. The power to impose one's own view of the social world on others is less dependent on social capital (and maybe also economic capital) because the field has become more accessible. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, might substantiate formative claims to valorisation. Referring back to the individual plane, though, our results suggest that this process is still under way.

Despite the cohesive findings of our study, we have to address some limitations. First, we applied experimental logic to test Bourdieu's theory of distinction. This may seem somewhat unorthodox. Wanting to test the causal effects implied within the theoretical framework we nevertheless found this to be appropriate (cf. Scherer 2013). Second, for the empirical study we worked with an access panel where the panellists could decide for themselves whether to take part in our experiment or not. Because of self-selection bias and small sample size, we cannot make representative claims about society as a whole. We are confident, however, that the experimental design offers insights into significant correlations of the variables in question. Further research should address this shortcoming, though. Another limitation is that the study was conducted in Germany, a country where high-culture is traditionally regarded as prestigious whereas television usually is not (originally Horkheimer and Adorno 1971; cf. Gans, 1999, Goldbeck 2004, Kausch 1988, Mikos 2006). Peterson's (1992, 1997) thesis of the US American "cultural omnivore", i.e. the notion that an exclusive taste for high culture has lost its social function, does not hold true for Germany (Neuhoff 2001, Rössel 2006) or Great Britain (Friedman 2012). Thus, the results may not be applicable to other countries where television is ascribed a different cultural status. Cultural differences should be investigated in replication studies. Finally, there is another aspect that warrants future investigation: One important premise of our argument was the existence of a meta-genre quality TV, although we cannot provide empirical proof for this claim. Thus, we need to design studies to capture "the work of producing and imposing meaning" (Bourdieu 1983a: 730), for instance by systematically analysing media content dealing with the meta-genre quality television (like, for instance, reviews). Harlap, for instance, shows this for the critical discourse with regard to *BeTipul* (HOT3, 2005-2008; English: *In Treatment*, HBO, 2008-2010) that "transformed BeTipul from an 'industrial television product' (targeting mass audiences) into an 'work of art'" (2017: 59). Levine (2008: 406) showed a similar effect for live TV broadcasts that were articulated with "not TV" discourses. Hence, we should try to systematically identify 'the professional producers of objectified representations of the social world or, more precisely, of methods of objectification' (Bourdieu 1983a: 730). By doing so, we could further observe cultural operations linking media products to cultural value and assumed audiences and gain insight into the formation of social groups by the power struggles of competing principles of legitimacy and the valorisation of audiences due to their media use.

Despite these limitations, our research adds to the existing literature in several ways: From a methodological point of view, we successfully applied an experimental design to Bordieu's theory of distinction. We thus extended existing empirical approaches by testing the distinctive potential of a specific media repertoire representing a certain cultural taste. From a theoretical point of view, our study showed that while TV in general has a rather low cultural status, the quality TV genre has the potential to function as a distinctive sign. Hence, we would argue that a more nuanced look at "television's cultural capital in the age of media convergence" (Levine 2008: 405) is a promising pathway for scholarly engagement.

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ISSN 2421-454X

TV SERIES CITED

BeTipul (HOT3, 2005-2008)
Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013)
Dexter (Showtime, 2006-2013)
Fargo (FX, 2014-)
Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-)
In Treatment (HBO, 2008-2010)
Mad Men (AMC, 2007-2015)
Nurse Jackie (Showtime, 2009-2015)
Sherlock (BBC, 2010-)
Sons of Anarchy (FX, 2008-2014)
The Americans (FX, 2013-2018)
The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007)
The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008)
True Detective I (HBO, 2014-)

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

APPENDIX

TABLE A1. PERCEIVED FORMS OF CAPITAL

	M	SD	n
Economic Capital			
Ben is presumably from a wealthy family.	3.50	0.84	365
I think that Ben is going to have a well-paid job in the future.	3.49	0.81	368
Ben has to spent his money economically.	2.75	0.82	351
I think Ben has an expensive lifestyle.	2.65	0.89	356
Index	3.22	0.58	378
Cronbach's Alpha		.547	
Social Capital			
I think Ben has a large circle of friends.*	3.53	0.95	363
If Ben was in need of help he could count on his family and friends.	3.46	0.84	329
Ben's social environment presumably consists of many highly appreciated people.	2.92	0.93	338
If Ben was in financial trouble he would be supported by his social environment.	3.25	0.85	339
Index (without flagged item)	3.21	0.73	355
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged item)		.727	
Cultural Capital			
I think that Ben is interested in cultural affairs.	3.44	1.27	377
Ben is aware of cultural events (like theatre plays and readings).	3.06	1.23	370
Ben is well-informed about world affairs.	3.20	0.93	370
I think Ben is well-educated.	3.78	0.92	378
Ben seems to be intellectual.	3.35	1.08	373
Ben couldn't join in a conversation about current issues. [r]*	2.40	0.93	365
I don't think that Ben is literate. [r]*	2.59	1.15	369
Index (without flagged items)	3.37	0.92	384
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged items)		.889	
Symbolic Capital			
I respect Ben.	3.76	0.99	329
Ben deserves admiration.	2.49	0.92	299
He could serve as an example to others.	2.74	0.93	304
Index	3.08	0.84	304
Cronbach's Alpha		.712	
Field-Specific Capital			
I keep informed via websites relevant to series (like serienjunkies.de or serieslyawesome.TV).	1.79	1.18	389
It can happen that I read up on content and characters from a certain TV series after watching it.	2.64	1.53	388
I prefer to watch US-American TV series in my leisure time.	2.81	1.49	388
I prefer to watch US-American TV series in the original version.*	2.62	1.62	379
I prefer US-American TV series in the dubbed German version. [r]*	2.92	1.50	370
Index (without flagged items)	2.41	1.14	389
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged items)		.729	

Note. Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8216
ISSN 2421-454X

THE WIRE AND THE DEMOCRACY OF FICTION

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KEYWORDS
The Wire; Fiction; Realism; David Simon; Mise-en-scène.

ABSTRACT
Beyond its oft-praised "realism", *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) – precisely because of its closeness to non-fiction – explores the modalities and functionalities of fiction and investigates what fiction is and what fiction can do. The series above all reflects on the ethical stakes of fiction-making. In the game it establishes with its non-fiction antecedents, and in its meta-narrative story arc in season 5, the show reflects on the fictional process and on the different media which filter reality to try and represent it. This article analyzes how *The Wire* explores the moral implications of fiction-making and the different meanings of the term, from fiction as counter-fact, or counter-truth, to fiction as experimentation. Through the case study of the final season, we see how the series plays out its ambivalence toward fictional codes and advocates a mode of critical fictional representation as an alternative to the current, devious modes of safety policy and journalism. This article demonstrates how, by delegating fiction-making to characters as it does, more particularly in season 5, *The Wire* inscribes itself in what Jacques Rancière calls "fictional democracy".

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

It is a truth universally acknowledged that *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) is a realistic series, based on a close observation of the reality of Baltimore by its co-creators David Simon and Ed Burns. A proof of this often-invoked realism is that the series has entertained a relationship of "mutual fascination and reciprocal legitimation" with sociologists, who have used it in their classes on urban poverty for instance (Fassin 2014: 131)[1]. But the adjective "realistic" – implying close referential precision – is in essence ambiguous, since it is merely a set of "discursive and textual conventions", the realistic convention being just as arbitrary as any other, whether it applies to literature, cinema or TV series (Pavel 1988: 145). In the case of *The Wire* indeed, "realism" is often supposed to imply a closeness to situations that the creators witnessed directly, but variations in reception are likely to counter this, as shown by Sudhir Venkatesh's experiment of watching an episode of the show with high-ranking members of the New York drug trade who questioned the verisimilitude of its representation (Venkatesh 2008). Then, "realism" also applies to the aesthetics of the show, implying a lack of embellishment, the reliance on linear time, the refusal of non-diegetic music or explanatory voiceover, and the presence of many "effects of reality" (Barthes 1968) for instance – but the series does not limit itself either to what is often considered as "documentary" (or faux-vérité) aesthetics (we seldom find shaky handheld shots, for example)[2]. Most of the time, on the contrary, mise en scène, lighting and sound design are precise and elaborate, and the screenplay and casting choices offer a complex mix between "real" references and fictional treatment, rather than an attempt at "seeming real". Having first established himself as a journalist, showrunner David Simon came to television late and almost by accident; the series reflects his ambivalent attitude towards fiction. In interviews, Simon demonstrates little patience for fan reception of the show and tends to shift attention away from fictional elements (such as characters or story arcs) to focus on "real" issues such as poverty, ghettoization, or the damaging excesses of corporate neoliberalism (Wickman 2012). But reflection on the show should not limit itself to Simon's plethoric discourse. In a meta-narrative dimension which culminates in the final season, the series does indeed explore the moral implications of fiction-making and the different meanings of the term, from fiction as counter-fact, or counter-truth, to fiction as experimentation, in the line of the diversity of meanings explored by the major studies of fiction which have multiplied in the past decades (see for instance Pavel 1988, Schaeffer 1999, Cohn 1999, Caïra 2011, Rancière 2014, 2017, Lavocat 2016). I will suggest that the series does more than blur the lines between fact and fiction. It more deeply participates in the investigation of what fiction, in the form of TV series, can do. Precisely because of its closeness to non-fiction, *The Wire* can explore the modalities and functionalities of fiction and suggest a functionalist conception of fiction, as Linda Williams has shown: "it does not transcend its mass culture bases in city desk journalism and television drama; rather, it is woven out of this very cloth"; for her, *The Wire* is literally a product of the "warp and weft of the nonfictional and the fictional elements" (Williams 2014: 4).

This article will focus specifically on season 5 – the least studied, and the most critically debated season – because it integrates a specific metanarrative reflection on fictional practices and on the different media which filter reality to try to represent it[3]. Season 5 follows the same logic as the previous ones, by adding a new fold to the story: in this case, the written press, and more precisely the corporate mutations of *The Baltimore Sun*, which echo the turmoil that David Simon lived through and is prone to ranting against. By setting issues of reporting and fact-checking in parallel with a fiction constructed by detective McNulty (who makes up a fictional serial killer in order to attract media attention, and consequently sufficient funds to do "real police work"), this last season brings home the point that *The Wire* is not only about "politics, sociology and macroeconomics" (Sheehan and Sweeney 2009: 3) – it is also about storytelling and fiction-making. One of the central metaphors of *The Wire* is that of "the game", a term which designates the parallel economy of the drug market, and social interaction more generally. In a reflexive way, the recurrence of the term can also apply to another parallel economy – the narrative and aesthetic economy that the series builds to try to represent the specific reality of Baltimore at the dawn of the 21st century. Thus, the series thematizes the difference between fiction and lies, implicitly advocating an ethical conception of fiction as sense-making in a world which increasingly vanishes behind

1 Such as the course taught by Anmol Chadha and William Julius Wilson at Harvard. The latter, who specializes in social and racial inequality in the United States, wrote *When Work Disappears*, a book quoted by David Simon as one of the influences for season 2 of *The Wire*. See Bennett (2010), Chadha and Wilson (2010, 2011).

2 Which were the aesthetics chosen for *The Corner*, the HBO adaptation of David Simon's second non-fiction book.

3 Other metanarrative aspects have notably been previously studied by Sheehan and Sweeney (2009).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

distorted or biased representations, behind "rigged games". By placing fiction at the heart of season 5, *The Wire* encourages the audience to reflect on the processes and moral stakes of fiction making. We will first show that however close the series may be to the reality of urban poverty in Baltimore, it is also the result of a succession of re-mediations (Bolter and Grusin 1998) and fictional games, which make it an object lending itself to multiple perspectives – not just sociological, but also aesthetic, literary and filmic (see for instance Busfield 2009). Despite its dark subject matter (the decline in working-class labour; the failure to reform; the ways in which systems smother individual initiative), we will suggest that *The Wire* never becomes coldly cynical (Atlas and Dreier 2008), partly thanks to its metafictional dimension, to its ability to question the form it uses – not in an intellectualized or theoretical reflection, but rather in a playful engagement with its own mode of representation. Through the case study of the final season, we will see how the series plays out its ambivalence toward fictional codes and advocates a mode of critical fictional representation as an alternative to the current, devious modes of safety policy and journalism.

1. **PLAYING "THE GAME" OF THE REAL**

Mapping out the connections between *The Wire* and its real antecedents in Baltimore is a substantial enterprise, one which was successfully completed by both Linda Williams (2014) and Jonathan Abrams (2018). We will select a few elements to demonstrate how the series deliberately plays on the confusion between what could be considered as real, and the fictional process that integrates these allegedly "real elements" into the œuvre, so that it encourages the audience to question issues of representation rather than merely aspire to catch a sense of an underlying "reality". It is well known that the two co-creators of the series, David Simon and Ed Burns, do not belong to the televisual world originally, but for years worked in direct contact with police activity in Baltimore. After serving in Vietnam, Ed Burns worked as a homicide detective in the Baltimore Police for twenty years, and then became a teacher – an experience that inspired the story arc of character Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) in season 4. David Simon worked as a journalist for the *Baltimore Sun* from 1982 to 1995, specializing in criminal matters. Both came to TV fiction almost by accident. David Simon distanced himself from the *Baltimore Sun* when a large conglomerate bought the paper, and the new managers of the newspaper, longing for a Pulitzer Prize, encouraged a spectacular treatment of news and a narrow focus on individual stories rather than the "broad sociological approach" that Simon values (see Williams 2014: 28). He then spent one year embedded in the homicide department, an experience he relates in his non-fiction book *Homicide* (1991), whose numerous characters and "real" facts nourished the NBC series of the same name, adapted by Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson (1993-1999). Simon participated in the enterprise, first as a consultant, then as a screenwriter in season 2, and finally as a producer in season 6, thus deliberately leaving the *Baltimore Sun* behind and frequently insisting on his disillusionment and anger towards what journalism had become (Hornby 2007).

When he decided to spend one year in the heart of one of the poorest, drug-ridden neighborhoods in Baltimore, this time to chronicle the other side of what he had represented in *Homicide* (addicts and small-time dealers), he asked Ed Burns to join him. Both men had met when Simon had spent a year with the homicide police. This led to the publication of *The Corner* (Simon 1997), which Simon then adapted for HBO in the form of a miniseries. *Homicide* and *The Corner*, books and series, would deeply shape *The Wire*, which was the outcome of long years in close proximity with Baltimore urban poverty and crime. The series also manifests the belief on the part of its creators that televised fiction now allows more freedom, more accuracy and greater impact than modern forms of journalism.

A great number of characters or elements of the plot of *The Wire* are inspired from facts that David Simon or Ed Burns themselves witnessed, or heard about from direct participants. They were then remodeled through the collective creation which TV series rely on. This close adherence to the real has led many commentators to wonder about which parts of the series were "true", so that Simon felt obliged, at some point, to write a brief article in the *Baltimore Sun* to comment on the fictional status of the series, and remind viewers that it would be pointless to try and establish a strict concordance between the characters of "real Baltimore" and what would be their "HBO equivalents" (Simon 2004).

Beyond the more or less "real" origins of characters and facts (which can actually apply to a great number of fictional works), the series stands out for using non-professional actors for many secondary roles – whether they be former Baltimore cops, members of the criminal world, or simply people having lived in these neighborhoods[4]. Thus, drug

4 See notably Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows (2011).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

lord Avon Barksdale, the kingpin in the first three seasons, is a fictional character that is also an amalgam of real men – in this case, "Nathan Bodie" Barksdale who dominated the drug trade in Baltimore's West Side for several years (and who later had his own docudrama, see Lefait 2013) and gang leader Melvin Williams, on whom David Simon wrote a series of articles in *The Baltimore Sun* in 1987[5]. The same Melvin Williams, who spent several years in jail for crime and drug trafficking following a police investigation led by Ed Burns, plays a secondary character in the show, that of the mild-spoken, benevolent deacon in seasons 3 and 4. Likewise, Omar Little, the gay, manly Robin Hood of the West Side who only robs drug dealers and never harms "citizens", is also drawn from several "real" figures, among them Donnie Andrews, who had been arrested, then helped by Ed Burns for his reintegration. Donnie Andrews himself plays a minor character (called Donnie), in the last two seasons. The correspondence between reality and fiction is deliberately blurred when the series chooses to give the name "Jay Landsman" to one of the fictional detectives, the name of one of the policemen in the unit Simon joined as an embedded journalist, and whose "real" counterpart also joined the team of *The Wire* and played a secondary role from season 3 onwards (that of lieutenant Dennis Mello). Why so many mixes and false equivalents? Should we see this as a treasure hunt set up for viewers willing to research the production context and the connection with Baltimore history? The audience is indeed encouraged to launch their own investigation, to find information via other sources (for instance in non-fiction antecedents *Homicide* or *The Corner*). In the digital age, the series also exists as a possible version, a fiction caught in an intertextual game with other sources of information, which encourages us to explore the distinction between fiction and reality, between journalistic documentation and narrative construction. David Simon unequivocally explains this when asked about *Treme*, his series on post-Katrina New Orleans that also closely weaves together facts and fiction:

> "Fuck the exposition [...]. Just *be*. The exposition can come later [...]. If I can make you curious enough, there's this thing called Google. If you're curious about the New Orleans Indians, or 'second-line' musicians—you can look it up." The Internet, he suggests, can provide its own creative freedom, releasing writers from having to over explain, allowing history to light the characters from within. (Nussbaum 2010)

This complex game between real antecedents and fictional treatment thus allows the series to question what we mean by "realism": by deliberately integrating "real" names, and non-professional actors, in the cast and storylines, the series enhances its critical, social, and ethnological ambition[6]. Long before *The Wire,* many crime shows had found the source of their characters and stories in real police cases, and relied on precise documentation to chronicle social issues. As early as Jack Webb's series such as *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951-1959) or *Adam 12* (NBC, 1968-1975), "cop shows" were inspired by true facts, used precise police lingo in the dialogue, and stressed the administrative aspects of the job rather than any great, spectacular action. Later on, *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) and *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) also explored the moral ambiguities of their characters, and stressed the daily routine of police work. What distinguishes *The Wire* then, is the special combination of all these factors: its attention to detail and procedure, its refusal of Manichean logic, its emphasis on the intricate connection between the different institutions, and the link between individual (or institutional) decisions and their repercussions, far beyond their initial circle of application. This construction is made possible by the long duration and expansive scope of the serial form, and by the fictionalizing process which, in a quasi-experimental manner, creates model forms of the phenomena that Simon, Burns, and other screenwriters observed in real life. Sometimes, this modeling process veers away from realism to implement what Grégoire Chamayou calls "quasi-utopian sociopolitical experimentations," as in season 3 when Major Colvin legalizes drugs in a circumscribed Baltimore neighborhood (Armati 2011). In the way it adheres to realistic principles as well as when it moves away from them, the series constantly questions issues of representation, placing this interrogation in an ethical framework. It implements fiction as a condition of experience (close to mathematical fiction), that allows sense-making. In this way, the conception of fiction demonstrated in the series strongly relies on what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls a "specif-

5 Reading Simon's 1987 *Sun* series, entitled "'Easy Money': Anatomy of a Drug Empire," is akin to viewing the organs of *The Wire*'s first-season wiretap investigation." (Abrams 2018: 2). See also Williams (2014: 11).

6 I chose the term "ethnological" rather than "sociological" according to the distinction that considers the latter to use "quantitative method" whereas the former rather resorts to "qualitative methods" such as long-term field study and participatory observation, using the researcher's subjectivity as a basic component of their work. See Poirier (1984: 6).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

ic, epistemological conception of non-fiction"[7], based on a strong belief in truth and fact-checking. Conversely, fiction is depicted as an epistemological tool in social and human experimentation. This tension between the rich, experimental nature of fiction, and the circumspection towards the dangers of distorting representation, culminates in the final season, which presents fiction as dangerous when it is performed out of place, notably in the journalistic or police context. But rather than considering this last season as a mere dismissal of the dangers of fiction, we will see how this precise representation of fiction making actually reflects on the overall project of *The Wire*.

2. **POLICE-GENERATED FICTIONS: INVERTING REALITY**

Let us briefly summarize the premise of season 5: Jimmy McNulty, a maverick detective who doesn't hesitate to disregard chain of command, agrees to come back to a special investigation unit (he had been almost absent in season 4, back to being a beat cop), after the new administration of young mayor Tony Carcetti has promised "a new day". Hoping for a breakthrough in the fight against organized crime, McNulty is thus back in the special unit investigating the gang led by Marlo Stanfield, the current kingpin in Baltimore's West Side. Season 5 opens with bitter disillusions. The city is in dire financial straits, and as a consequence the special unit investigation is suspended. Policemen work in deplorable conditions: unpaid extra time, unrepaired service cars (at some point McNulty is reduced to taking the bus to go to a crime scene) – morale is low and anger is growing. At the *Baltimore Sun,* the situation is not much better. After the newspaper was bought out, the new management launches a drastic redundancy program, often laying-off the most experienced (and best paid) journalists. The new managers' obsession is to obtain a Pulitzer prize, even if it means adopting a looser code of journalistic ethics, and privileging narrow perspective on individual stories rather than shedding light on systemic causes.

A fiction is going to bring police and press together when McNulty, revolted by the inaction of his hierarchy and the lack of funding of "real police work", has an idea. Called to witness the death of a homeless man, who obviously died of natural causes, he decides to tamper with the scene in order to turn it into a crime. He will then link it with similar cases to manufacture the fiction of a serial killer who attacks homeless men, in the hope that these sensational cases will lead the administration to allot new credits to the homicide department, which he intends to use to secretly pursue the investigation on Marlo. Media coverage is necessary for his story to work, for authorities to consider it a priority and allow substantial funding. But this media coverage exceeds McNulty's expectations when Scott Templeton, one of the *Sun* journalists, pretends he spoke with the serial killer on the phone – a scoop which, he hopes, will finally set him in the good graces of the new managers and bring professional recognition.

This use of invention and storytelling to produce more effects and bypass the limits of reality allows season 5 to build a meta-narrative reflection on the fabrication of the series itself. Verisimilitude may be seen as a problem here because this specific narrative arc relies on an extreme, somewhat incredible act (see for instance Hoad 2017), but this also materializes the interrogation, throughout the series and mostly in this final stage, of an aspiration to a "fair" representation, and the danger of compromise by fiction. It also associates police work and representation, and stigmatizes the media's reliance on the spectacular. If Templeton is an absolutely negative character, whose motivations are never clearly revealed, McNulty's invention is presented as "the only solution" to try and change things for the better. Nicolas Vieillescazes associates these characters with two distinct philosophies: McNulty would be "Hegelian, considering that the false is a moment in the true", while Templeton would follow Guy Debord's diagnosis "for whom, today, the true is only a moment of the false"; he seems to have understood that "the spectacular and bureaucratic society is nothing else but the reign of the false" (Vieillecazes 2011: 140). But the act of bringing the two characters together also signals that, in spite of the noble cause he tries or pretends to be serving, and although his stratagem does work up to a point, McNulty does not escape the logic he is opposing, and the system finally catches up with him – thus, his fiction is represented through many images of inversion, which question identities and subvert the policeman's project.

The most obvious phenomenon of inversion is that which transforms the policeman into a murderer. McNulty has just learnt that if strangulation takes place shortly after death, it can produce the same symptoms as if it had been the cause of death. He thus decides to strangle the homeless corpse himself (5.02), then another body later on. Even if these

7 Preface, in Caïra (2011: 11).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 1. MCNULTY STRANGLING THE ALREADY DEAD HOMELESS MAN (2.02).

bodies are already dead, the sober, precise mise en scène of these two sordid scenes shows us McNulty in the position of a strangler.

Turning into a stage-manager and set designer of his own fictional crimes, McNulty also plays the part of the murderer he pretends to investigate, which creates a feeling of gnawing schizophrenia. In episode 8, he is forced to go to Quantico, the FBI's behavioral unit, where he listens to the agent's description of the alleged murderer, a description which fits McNulty so closely that it seems to work as a form of indirect therapy: the killer is "a white male between 25 and 40, suffering from a superiority complex, having problems with authority, probably a tendency to drink too much". For most of the agent's speech, the camera stays on McNulty, gradually moving closer to him and revealing barely discernible movements of his eyebrows, eyes and mouth, or variations of breathing, indicating that McNulty recognizes himself in that description, as do we. The use of the slow camera pull in makes him appear literally framed by that description.

This logic of inversion also applies to the way the series proposes, through this specific story arc, a mirror image of the absurdity of the statistical logic of efficiency which dominates police work as depicted in season 3. The obsession with statistics leads city officials and police management to "juke the stats", that is, to reconfigure the way crime is categorized to make it appear on a downward trend, whereas in reality the trend remains flat. Here, McNulty applies the same logic, only he inverts it. He "jukes" the bodies to shift them from one category to another, from "death from natural causes" to "homicide". But reality catches up with him when his fiction generates real facts. In 5.10, once the truth is out and his scam has been revealed, a new murder of the alleged serial killer takes place – and this time it is a real murder, the work of a copycat. The simulacrum has replaced reality so well that now reality is imitating the simulacrum. This late twist leads to a resolutely non-realistic solving of the whole story arc: it brings McNulty back to his initial identity as a policeman, and to a sense of ethics. He is the one to find and arrest the murderer, in a resolution that is as swift as it is improbable. We can see this specific story arc as an ironic commentary on the frequent use of serial killers in TV series (at the time season 5 aired, season 2 of *Dexter* was running and was highly popular

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

FIGURE 2. THE MORGUE AS STUDIO (5.03).

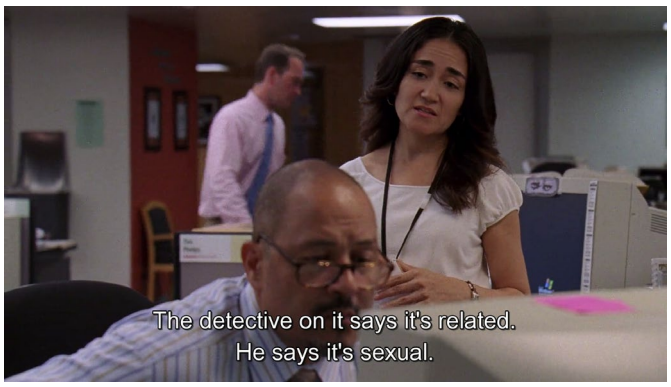
on *Showtime*, and is probably referenced by Dukie in 5.09 ("Dude you gotta see this! There's a serial killer but he only kills other serial killers!"), as is shown also by the frequent references to screenwriting and mise en scène. This specific story arc in the last season thus shifts the focus away from verisimilitude to develop a metanarrative reflection on the very project of the show itself.

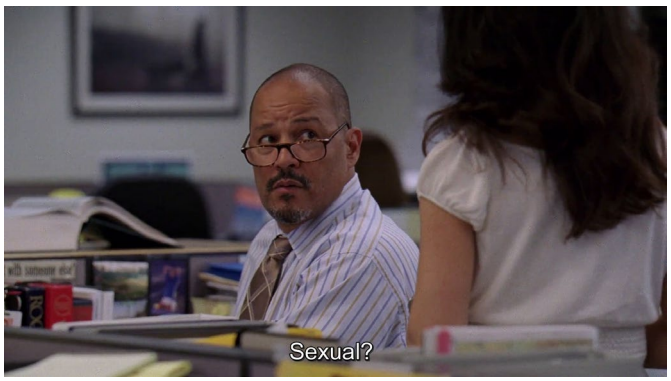
3. **REFLEXIVITY AND META-NARRATIVE DEVICES**

The metanarrative dimension has been a strong feature of the show from the beginning[8], but it climaxes in season 5 in the way McNulty is depicted as the screenwriter and producer of his own work, a device that enhances the ambivalence of the series itself. First, it is a means to target the mediatization of some police actions more than others. The interdependence between the police and the media is enhanced by the use of parallel editing connecting, for instance, a speech from the lieutenant to his troops, and a similar motivational speech from the editor in chief to his journalists. Above all, this season criticizes the flawed selection of what matters, and of what does not, in terms of media coverage and public funding. The press and the police constantly miss out on important things – a perverted effect of the connection between the spectacular dimension of criminal cases and the funds the police will obtain. McNulty is thus an amateur screenwriter who gradually learns his trade, and fleshes out his story with alluring detail. His fiction is elaborated as a series would be. In order to be produced, he needs to pitch it. After the first "murder" at the end of 5.02, he explains to his baffled partner Bunk, "There's a serial killer in Baltimore. He preys upon the weakest of us all. He needs to be caught". McNulty then becomes a director and prop man – when he ties the red ribbon (his serial killer's trademark) around the wrist of the corpse, a long shot literally transforms the morgue into a studio, with lights and a camera on a tripod.

8 See Sheehan and Sweeney (2009) for other instances of the metanarrative trend in the show. For them, "[r]arely, if ever, has a television drama constructed a narrative with such a strong thrust to metanarrative".

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X





FIGURES 3 AND 4. GUS HAYNES STARTS PAYING ATTENTION WHEN HE LEARNS ABOUT THE SEXUAL NATURE OF THE KILLINGS.

But a good screenplay cannot be written alone – you need a writing team and a writer's room, and writing needs to be collaborative. Thus detective Lester Freamon becomes the perfect co-screenwriter from season 3 onwards. When McNulty presents the facts to him, he doesn't resent the idea of that fiction (unlike Bunk, who considers the whole thing disastrous madness), but the details of the plot, which he thinks need to be sexed up. All along the season, Lester is the *script doctor* who advises edits, improves the story, and encourages McNulty to "stick to the script" (5.07). This collaborative effort bears fruit, since Gus Haynes, the *Sun*'s editor in chief, starts paying attention only when he hears about the sexed up detail.

Ethical issues aside, McNulty and Freamon's fiction indeed turns out to be effective. They are allotted a substantial budget which allows them to pursue their investigation on Marlo. Even if McNulty's actions are subverted by the show's defiance towards any form of deceit, one can see how the series' authors strongly identify with a character who, when faced with an untenable situation, resorts to fiction-making, as David Simon did in his own life. When McNulty goes beneath the freeway overpass to question real homeless people, he is appalled by the absurdity of his situation, carrying out a real investigation on an imaginary premise. Lester's response then contains not a lesson on how to achieve spectacular effect, but a screenwriting principle which can apply to *The Wire:* "Work it like a real case, it will feel like a real case... most importantly it will read like a real case". Verisimilitude and closeness to the real will guarantee the quality and the efficiency of the fiction.

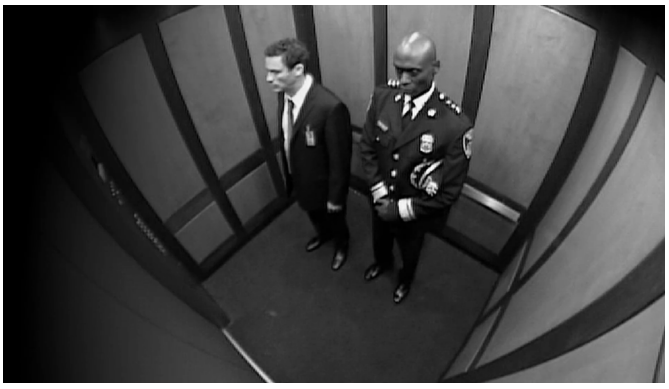
Simon and the creative team thus introduce an ironic counterpoint to their own series, since *The Wire* is often considered as situated somewhat outside the narrative and aesthetic norms of mainstream series (no car chases or gunshots, little suspense, no Manichean opposition between right and wrong, no flashbacks or flash-forwards, no real cliffhangers, a quasi-systematic sticking to diegetic music, a general refusal of spectacular effects). The series also criticizes the scripting of some police actions, the main goal of which is to be spectacular (often referred to in the series as "dope on the table"), rather than having a long-term effect on crime or the drug trade. The media are also targeted, especially the written press as it was remodeled by corporate restructuring, budgetary constraints and acute competition. Several years before the age of "fake news", the show represents how the prime focus on sensational news has led the press to sometimes disregard the frontier between fact and invention, as Scott Templeton's success indicates.

Sensationalism is a recurrent target in season 5, notably when the simplifying elements of sensationalism seem to contaminate the language of some of the characters. McNulty's motivation, for instance, is reduced to unsophisticated, binary logic when he explains his reasons to Bunk: "Marlo: he does not get to win. We get to win". This simplistic rhetoric is also used by Deputy of Operations Daniels when he is asked to comment on the massive arrests taking place at the end of episode 9: "It's a good day for the good guys". Beside these Manichean remarks, Daniels later on uses a vocabulary specific to seriality in 5.10. At that point, McNulty knows that his superior found out what he did, and they find themselves alone for the first time in an elevator. The scene is a single take by the security camera of the elevator. They do not speak nor look at each other until Daniels gets out of the elevator, turns around towards McNulty and declares just before the doors close: "to be continued".

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

This works as an ironic cliffhanger in a series that is strikingly devoid of them. By appropriating the fictional register, Daniels implies that McNulty is no longer the only one writing the script.

When the screenplay escapes the original author's control, or clashes with other versions, it leads to utmost confusion, as the end of the season demonstrates. The fiction becomes a machine which no one knows how to stop. In episode 7, Mayor Carcetti has been convinced by his advisers to use this serial killer story as a main theme of his campaign for governor. He had then considered this new element as an interesting, unpredictable twist to his own story. The final episode of the series opens precisely when he has been told the truth. We see him speechless for nearly thirty seconds, an exceptional thing for Carcetti who is generally eloquent and talkative. The politician at that point does not know his lines any more. He thought he was controlling his own storytelling but realizes someone else had been writing his part without him knowing. Among the other characters present, only Norman, his ironic, critical adviser, is amused by the dramatic and fictional quality of the situation: "They manufactured an issue to get paid. We manufactured an issue to get you elected governor. Everybody gets what they want through some make-believe [...] It does have a certain charm to it". He will conclude the scene expressing his regrets that he is not a journalist any more, and so cannot write about it for posterity. There is too much to lose in the political and police circles – McNulty and Freamon will be discreetly dismissed, without any legal action, without ever revealing the true facts to the public.



FIGURES 5 AND 6. AFTER AN AWKWARD ENCOUNTER IN THE ELEVATOR CAPTURED BY THE SECURITY CAMERA, DANIELS' OMINOUS COMMENT BORROWS FROM THE VOCABULARY OF SERIAL FICTION.

If McNulty's fiction is presented as flawed and doomed, its antithetical counterpart is journalist Mike Fletcher's article on Bubbles' story, based on the time Fletcher spent with him at the soup kitchen, at NA meetings, or distributing newspapers. Bubbles's story becoming a successful non-fiction narrative (it seems implemental in helping Bubbles complete his rehabilitation at the end of the show) emphasizes the circularity of the exploration of fiction in *The Wire*, a fiction which started in non-fiction (with Simon's journalistic work), and points back to non-fiction in its final moments.

Season 5 was criticized by disappointed viewers and critics for this serial killer arc, considered "too implausible" (Kois and Sternberg 2008), because unacceptably breaking with the aesthetic and narrative norms of the series. More recently, however, reviewers have acknowledged the enduring relevance of this thematic focus on fact and fiction:

> Rewatching it, the McNulty-Will-Kill-Again swerve stands out a bit less as a conspicuous drop in standards, perhaps because fabrication has gone mainstream. Fake News is now a trademark and – caught in the social-media hothouse – we all understand the conditions under which it has run rampant. (Hoad 2017)

Season 5 indeed demonstrates the seduction and efficiency allowed by the spectacular dimension of well-scripted "fake news" – although the term is of course never used in *The Wire*, which ended long before it became widespread from the 2016 election onwards[9]. Watching season 5 again today, in the light of recent political questionings of truth vs. deceitful, spectacular fabrications, especially as spread by social media, allows us to take some distance with the

9 See Lazier et al. 2018.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

phenomenon. Fake news is far from being a new phenomenon, and has always been characterized by its "sensationalist and extreme" nature, often leading to dismal, violent consequences[10]. In season 5, our attention is rather drawn to the common responsibility we share when dealing with fiction-making or what is shown to be a necessary companion: fact-checking. Of course *The Wire* is neither the first nor the last series to develop a metanarrative discourse. From *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB/UPN, 1997-2003) to *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) or *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), and more recently, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) or *WestWorld* (HBO, 2016-), the form of the TV series has become increasingly self-referential, multiplying elements of screenplay and mise en scène pointing to the constructedness of the narrative or the fictional status of the characters, for instance. But the use of fiction-making in *The Wire* stands out for its openly political agenda: it demonstrates not so much a mistrust towards fiction, but an ethical conception of fiction-making and the responsibility it entails. McNulty's fiction follows other fictions devised by the characters of *The Wire* to attempt to change things for the better. These individual fictional enterprises (Frank Sobotka's dream of revitalising the port activity and Major Colvin's legalization of drugs in Season 3 are other examples) participate in what Fredric Jameson has called the series's "Utopianism" (Jameson 2010) which defies the tragic dimension that David Simon often brings up (Alvarez 2009). Although the series is overwhelmingly dark, and although these individual enterprises do lead to spectacular failure (Frank's death, Major Colvin's retirement, McNulty's dismissal), they do still manifest a belief in the fact that an unacceptable situation should be changed, and acknowledge the inventiveness of the humain brain to come up with alternate ideas, however flawed they may be. Linda Williams has already argued that the shift from the op-ed (David Simon's writings in *The Baltimore Sun*) to the serial form strengthened the political impact because the distribution of "discourse among a plurality of voices" avoided the "sanctimonious tone that we find in op-ed pieces" (Williams 2014: 27-36). Just as the series manages to "disperse and interweave narrative threads so thoroughly through so many different worlds that it becomes difficult to distinguish between A, B, C or D levels", or to "to say who is a main character" (Williams 2014: 49), the delegation of fiction-making to some characters in season 5 demonstrates that *The Wire* is inscribed in what Jacques Rancière calls "fictional democracy".

The metafictional dimension indeed places *The Wire* in a literary tradition that now also encompasses TV series. Rancière showed how the changes in novelistic fiction during the 19th century played a major role in the type of knowledge specific to humanities and social science. He explains the role that modern literature played in questioning the binary split between (poetic) fiction and (historical) reality, and in implying the idea of the superiority of fiction as the realm of necessity and universality, whereas reality would be the realm of particularities and contingency. *The Wire*, by its explorations of the "edges of fiction" (be it through the play between real names, non-professional actors or closeness with the journalistic reality of Baltimore, or through metafictional story arcs, especially in season 5) embodies a similar notion of fictional democracy that attempts to account for the sensible experience of anonymous lives, for the common experience shared by numerous characters, however separate and opposed they may be. Through its egalitarian attribution of discourse to all characters, its refusal of Manichean dichotomies, its turning away from the individual hero, and its preference for the common sharing of fictional and narrative space, the series, like Balzac or Flaubert's novels, negates the separation between the heroic and the common, and refuses to privilege some forms of life over others. This is true on the level of the screenplay as well as in terms of editing, framing and mise en scène, or sound treatment (see Hudelet 2014, 2016). *The Wire* can thus be seen as an example of a televisual equivalent to Rancière's "democratic revolution of fiction", which according to him is not "the great arrival of the masses on the Historical stage", but "the process by which those who were nothing become everything [...] That is to say, to become the fabric within which – through the weft and warp of which – events hold on to one another" (Rancière 2017: 152). Just as for Rancière, fictional democracy "implements a very specific form of equality" (Rancière 2014: 34), *The Wire* chooses to distribute its political discourse through the "common breathing" of all characters, all placed on the same narrative level.

The concept is particularly effective for *The Wire*, with its openly "socialist" agenda, in David Simon's own words (Simon 2013), but it does not set it against the bulk of other TV show so much as it sheds light on the common ground it shares with other shows characterized by their ensemble cast and equal sharing of multiple storylines, demonstrating a "strict equivalence of the represented subjects" (Rancière 2014: 23-4; 84-5). Compared with a cinematic production increasingly dominated by heroes that stand out from the common folk (Marvel, DC, *StarWars* or *Lord of the Rings* franchises),

10 See Soll (2016) for a historical perspective on fake news.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

a certain type of TV series – *The Wire* in particular – stands out because of this place they have acquired in our cultural environment as inheritors of the modern novel, in the way they enact a form of equality, "the egalitarian power of the common breathing which animates the multitude of sensible events" (Rancière 2014: 34).

CONCLUSION. "THE CERTAIN CHARM" OF FICTION

Rather than being uniformly "realistic", *The Wire* interrogates the very notion of realism and most importantly, of what fiction is and what fiction does. Rather than aspiring "to fracture the image to reveal reality itself, as such, beyond all mediation", to achieve a sort of "representation without representation" (Vieillecazes 2011: 130), the last season of the series demonstrates the fact that fiction is not dismissed but explored and analyzed. Simon often evokes the influence of Frederick Wiseman and of his "observational cinema", a documentary approach devoid of narrative voiceover, of diegetic music, or direct interviews in front of the camera, which represents reality as closely as possible, with a mix of empathy and humor. But this Wisemanian influence concerns mostly an ethical conception of aesthetics rather than confusion between documentary and fiction. As season 5 indicates (and sometimes to the displeasure of some viewers), the series acknowledges the impossibility of absolute realism and salutes the "certain charm" of fiction. *The Wire* encourages us to enjoy the pleasures of fiction while constantly questioning the codes of the spectacular which tend to trigger our empathy or identification.

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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

TELEVISION SERIALS

Adam 12 (NBC, 1968-1975)
Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013)
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (the WB/UPN, 1997-2003)
Corner (The) (HBO, 2000)
Dragnet (NBC, 1951-1959)
Fringe (Fox, 2008-2013)
Hill Street Blues (NBC, 1981-1987)
Homicide (NBC, 1993-1999)
Lost (ABC, 2004-2010)
NYPD Blue (ABC, 1993-2005)
Westworld (HBO, 2016-)
Wire (The) (HBO, 2002-2008)

SERIES VOLUME IV, Nº 2, WINTER 2018: 77-90
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TV SERIAL NARRATIVES
DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335
ISSN 2421-454X

CLASS CONCERNS IN A HERITAGE SETTING: VIEWERS' RESPONSES TO *DOWNTON ABBEY* ON IMDB

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KEYWORDS
Heritage films; class; audience response.

ABSTRACT
This article examines the TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) from both a class and a reception perspective. *Downton Abbey* belongs to the heritage film genre with its claims to detailed historical accuracy, and is thereby separated from conventional costume drama and period TV series. 'Official' books on the series, written by Julian Fellowes's niece and others, will be important references in the article. *Downton Abbey* comes close to presenting a conservative defense of the values and lifestyles of the aristocracy, but this vision of the elite and its values is challenged by some of the series' (re)viewers. Non-professional reviews posted on the website International Movie Database include very critical opinions on class struggles and aristocratic privileges. Some respondents are satiric and forcefully oppose the values and interests of the propertied classes in the series; other reviewers in the same vein present analyses of power and class aspects in the series. These comments and criticisms are relevant to today's class issues in Britain and elsewhere.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The six seasons of the British period drama *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) were produced by Carnival films for ITV. The series was mainly written by Julian Fellowes. The first episode in the first season, aired on ITV in September 2010, had an audience of 9.2 million viewers (Sperati and Schreiner 2013: 5). The first season as a whole took a Guinness World Record for the best critical review ratings for a TV series, as it scored 92 % on Metacritic (a site that aggregates reviews), making it the highest-scoring reviewer-rated British TV series ever (Rowley 2013: 271-2). In 2014 the series had been seen by at least 270 million people worldwide, and was boastfully dubbed by Jessica Fellowes as "the most successful British-made television export ever" (Fellowes 2014: 38)[1].

The man who can be ascribed most of the winning formula is Fellowes. He was credited as the show's creator, writer as well as executive producer. It is well known that Fellowes has for years supported the Conservative Party in British politics, and has been part of a speech-writing team for the conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith. Fellowes was made a life peer in 2011 by the Cameron government, and took a seat in the House of Lords. His official title is Baron Fellowes of West Stafford, and he is officially addressed as Lord Fellowes. He is a longstanding friend of the Carnarvon family at Highclere Castle in Hampshire, the location for the imaginary estate and grand house Downton Abbey (Sperati and Schreiner 2013: 30).

Downton Abbey is a multifaceted universe which nurtured conflicting reactions and interpretations. In this article I will first present the genre to which *Downton Abbey* mainly belongs, and the claims to "authenticity" the genre makes. The "truthfulness" and the visual splendour in the genre tend to hide the ideological grounds on which *Downton Abbey* is built, i.e. the moral and political world view the series carries, its underlying political values. My main concern is some viewers' negative reactions to the series' sumptuous presentation of privileged upper class life in Britain. Some viewers had the will and energy to write about their reactions and opposition in the User Reviews on the Internet Movie Database pages, which is open to everyone for comments on movies and TV series. I have studied a large sample of these reviews and chosen 35 that have some common traits in wanting to "strip" the series of its pretentiousness and point out its ideological bias. These 35 reviewers directly oppose the world of privilege we follow at Downton. My presentation and analysis of these reviews will focus on three discursive strategies used in the attacks on the series. These strategies are: reversion, historical abstraction and contemporalization. The quotes from some of these reviews will cast light upon *Downton Abbey*'s connection to today's British class society and power issues in the eyes of the reviewers.

The series is clearly founded in a sort of realism and a sense of historical accuracy. This makes György Lukács's concept "triumph of realism" a useful idea. Panoramic, realistic universes can be thoroughly scrutinized from very different perspectives (for example feminist, anthropological, Marxist) and give a lot of information from any of these angles – which, according to Lukács, is due to an inherent quality in realism as a creation strategy. That producers neglect to emphasize certain themes (in the case of *Downton Abbey* class injustice and exploitation) does not matter. The reader or viewer is able see social realities and conflicts that seem unimportant or are relatively invisible to the Author because of his or her political preferences. The realistic universe triumphs over its Author's biases and "his pet ideas" (Lukács 1964: 91). But what is the main pet idea in *Downton Abbey*?

2. **HERITAGE FILMS**

In the 1980s, Britain started producing films that today make up a genre of its own, called "heritage film", which is distinct from conventional costume drama. Heritage films demand many historically correct details, with meticulous historical accuracy a considerable part of its production arrangements and visual display. Heritage movies and television series "recreate with anthropological zeal the fashions and objects of the periods" in which they are set (Vidal 2012: 10). This (relative) historical trustworthiness gives the films a special aura, different from the traditional, more inaccurate Hollywood and European costume dramas. In heritage dramas many of the buildings, interiors and sometimes even clothes, jewels and other details, are authentic from the period in which the action takes place. Perfect authenticity is of course an unreachable ideal, but the aspiration towards it is shown in the extra material on DVDs and Blu-ray discs about the careful, demanding and expensive research behind the details in a heritage movie production. According to Belén Vidal, these dramas usually have "an opulent if static mise-en-scène exhibiting elaborate period costumes, artefacts, properties and

1 "Downton Abbey was more than just a television series: it was nothing less than a cultural phenomenon" (Chapman 2014: 133).

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

heritage sites." (2012: 8) In the end, many of the movies display both a "museum aesthetics" and a luxurious visual "grand style"[2]. The viewers typically experience life in "an English stately home in all its splendor, decorated in the riches of its aristocratic past" (Rowley 2013: 36). The everyday habits, mentality and lifestyle is as important as the big events in the family circle and in national or world history.

Most heritage films tell stories of aristocratic or upper-middle class social circles, of people with an existence full of privileges unavailable to the common lot. We usually get to watch iconic images of aristocracy and empire, especially grand houses and palaces. According to Andrew Higson, the English heritage films represent a highly selective vision of Englishness: "At the level of the image, narrative instability is frequently overwhelmed by the alluring spectacle of iconographic stability, permanence, and grandeur, providing an impression of an unchanging, traditional, and always delightful and desirable England" (Higson 2003: 78). In spite of this, sensitive themes like adultery, domestic abuse, homosexuality, desperation for a male heir, bribery and fortune hunting are often included in the plots. Some film researchers therefore pinpoint the *gap* between form and plot: the form is visually pompous and nostalgic, while the plot certainly often contains social critique and irony towards the upper classes, even a revisionist perspective (Higson 2003: 149, Monk 2012: 102). There tends to be a discrepancy between the glorious and nostalgic visual display, and some sad and harsh themes. Several heritage dramas are seemingly progressive by exposing "neglected" groups in history, like women, homosexuals and servants (Monk 2012: 19). Still, the audience might experience a kind of "good old times" from the plots, with the slow pace of life in in a more "civilized" age, with moral certainties containing a vision of an aristocratic, morally and socially *Great* Britain. So there are several ambiguities, open to interpretation in every particular film or series.

3. **LIFE AT DOWNTON ABBEY**

Downton Abbey is a heritage drama, but also a soap-like, melodramatic production[3]. Here are sisters who hate each other, manipulating servants, bribery, economic fraud, fortune hunting by marrying rich heiresses, a secret childbirth in the aristocracy, a murder, rape and other social scandals. These intrigues are essential to the show, with dramatic situations playing to the taste of a mass audience. The series contains a web of stories about a big house with many lives in work and idleness. One of the most central figures in this ensemble production, Robert, the 7th Earl of Grantham, is the "pater familias" for everybody on the estate. His actions and dealings should make him easy to like for most viewers. The series presents him as a particularly good "specimen" of the aristocracy. He is kind, loyal, sensitive, just, thoughtful, relatively humble, as well as friendly and fair to his many servants. So the series credits him with a lot of sympathy, very much in contrast to the evil, lustful Sir William McCordle in Altman and Fellowes' movie *Gosford Park* (2001). Once in the series (2.07) Robert comes very close to being unfaithful to his wife, Cora, but it seems he is seduced by a female servant, rather than himself being the seducer. He saves his butler from a blackmailer (1.02), showing the audience on this and several other occasions how miserable the world would be without an aristocrat in charge. He is no snob, and imagines himself having crossed the class divide by hiring his former comrade in arms, John Bates, as his valet (Fellowes and Sturgis 2012: 25). Still, later in the series Robert tries to pay off his chauffeur and future son in law, because the man is not an aristocrat (2.08).

The countess Violet Grantham, Robert's mother, represents the aristocratic elite's rigidity in the period covered by the series (1912-1925), with her ultra-conservative values and principles. She is concerned with impeccable appearances and keeping with traditions. She has a very clear sense of aristocratic distinction: regional power over hands and minds, accumulated cultural capital, and economic wealth. More than any other in the series, she represents a society obsessed with respectability – at least on the social surface. She relies on social certainties, but is portrayed with more than a touch of satire. The same applies to Downton's butler, Charles Carson. He firmly invests his existence in the established social order, with the monarchy and the aristocracy at the top (Fellowes and Sturgis 2012: 38). He has based his whole life on upholding standards of loyalty and discretion. Carson is head of all the servants at the big house, and he finds no problem with the class system at Downton or in the society, being in thrall to his employer. He wants a humble and grateful staff. "The more sympathetic characters below stairs, such as the maid Anna Smith and valet John Bates, tend to be those who accept their place in the social order" (Chapman 2014: 139).

2 The latter being called 'eye-candy' in an anonymous review of *Downton Abbey* on International Movie Database (by 'lhhung_himself from United States' on January 21th 2012).

3 The series is classified as a (period or costume) soap opera in Byrne 2015: 1 and Leggott and Taddeo 2014: 59.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

The viewers can frequently watch the frenzied preparations downstairs by the servants, contrasted with leisure activities among the aristocrats upstairs (where Robert's daughters are often bored). Brian Percival, who directed the series' first episode, compared the contrast between upstairs and downstairs with the concealed effort that underpins the graceful glide of a swan across a lake. Fellowes' niece has used the same striking metaphor: "much as Downton Abbey likes to appear calm, just below the surface the action is as frantic as a swan's paddling feet" (Fellowes 2014: 32).

4. **IDEOLOGY AND CLASS**

Some revealing comments on the ideology, values and class aspects in the series have come from Alastair Bruce, the historical advisor who is responsible for the authenticity of the details in the series. Bruce is a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, a royally ordained honour, and has several other close connections to royal Britain. In an interview, Bruce tried to explain some of the attractions of a series like *Downton Abbey*. "Although the stratification depicted at Downton is intrinsically unfair," Bruce says, "everyone had a place and felt that they were contributing to the great scheme of things." He continues: "People long for the strong bonds of courtesy that feed through it all [...] [the audience] embrace it in all its splendor, as it appears in *Downton Abbey*" (Boyes 2014). According to Bruce, the old aristocratic society we see in the series conveys a kind of anchoring for today's audience, in a culturally and aesthetically admirable way. But, we have to add, there is an ambivalence in the series, which emerges by viewing all those privileges in the society of the early 20th century, a period when democracy and meritocracy became ideals in society at large. Old and new principles clash.

The aristocrats at Downton like to conceive of themselves as the moral backbone of society, setting the standard for a decent, respectable life. Their enormous economic privileges are legitimized by this, and by giving employment to large staffs of servants. They are hardly able to see that their unproductivity and extravagance is the opposite of meritocracy, in a deeply unfair class system (Liptay and Bauer 2013: 52). Some are born to money, others to hardship, but the aristocracy still has a vital role to play: keeping up standards and traditions. The world of *Downton Abbey* takes these aristocratic values of the early 20th century to an audience in the 21th century. And the audience of today can see a part of the system still living on, as Britain and other European countries – together with the USA and probably all other modern (and postmodern) countries – remain class societies. There are "prevailing barriers created by money and privilege [that] encourages the wealthy to flourish at the expense of others" (Val Gillies in Atkinson et al. 2012: 92)[4].

Judgments of films and series like *Downton Abbey* tend to follow political lines, which Higson states:

> For Norman Stone and those on the right, heritage films are to be celebrated for their joyously patriotic take on a traditional, authentic, indigenous Englishness. For Tana Wollen and those on the left, the same nostalgic take is problematic for the way in which it promotes the out-moded and elite cultural values and social relationships of a country-house version of Englishness, 'a certain sense of Englisness that ... should have no place in the future'. [...] it is perfectly possible to read these films as decidedly ironic perspectives on traditional Englishness and the culture of privilege, rather than as straightlaced celebrations of those values. (2003: 75)

Costume dramas and heritage films can expose or falsify (often both in a combination) truths about injustice and a lack of opportunities, about oppression and exploitation. It can be politically revealing for the audience to see power patterns that last over centuries, as well as historical conflicts with clear connections to today's class struggles, and thereby with political implications for today. As Katherine Byrne writes in her analysis of the series:

> the Abbey itself deliberately functions as a microcosm for the state, and it is difficult to ignore the implication that twenty-first century Britain would be more successful if it were organised in the same hierarchal and patriarchal way, even if that is not 'necessarily right' to the modern mind [...] Its critics have received it as an ideological tool of the Right, a conservative nation in microcosm that puts forward traditional values of loyalty and order (Byrne 2013).

4 In *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*, Will Atkinson et al. (2012) describe class aspects in Britain today, with class inequalities and different opportunities to make a good living ("difference in life chances"; p. 2). Class and social division play a large part in the patterning of economic income, education, lifestyles, etc.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
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5. **SAMPLE AND METHOD**

My sample consists of 133 viewer responses at www.imdb.com to all the seasons of *Downton Abbey*. They are dated from 2010 to 2017, and make up all the viewer responses posted in this time span. The responses contain reactions, opinions, evaluations, criticisms, observations, comments, reservations, analyses, interpretations, and judgements. They vary in length from a few words up to 986 words. This material was produced independent of any research, not produced for any systematic examination, and not in any way (to my knowledge) influenced by a researcher's questions or sampling. The 133 respondents' identities are usually unknown, and the majority use a nickname. A nickname like '(outerprint)' gives us no clues to the person's identity. Even full and "normal" names cannot be taken as actual names, but could be a hiding strategy[5]. However, some respondents have uploaded portrait pictures, and their age and country are given in the post's heading (but the profile pictures are small and it may be difficult to see age indications or whether it's a man or a woman). How reviews are written – whether based on brooding, or in the spur of the moment – it is impossible to say for sure, but the language tends to be somewhat colloquial.

Research challenges with using reviews at IMDb have been commented on, for instance by Jahna Otterbacher (2011 and 2013) and Karen Boyle (2014). User-generated content like IMDb reviews tend to come in messy bulks with little information about the respondents. A few IMDb reviewers establish personal profiles, which can be read by clicking on the username. In the *Downton Abbey* reviews there are reviewers who write small essays about their film taste and about their personal background (family, education, illnesses, etc.), but hardly anything, for instance, about their political views and values. The following two personal comments are typically short and vague: "Just a welsh girl – who loves films and telle – especially period stuff!!", and "I am just me. That's all that matters". The tendency is to post a view on the series, and then leave the site without being challenged by other comments. If a reviewer don't read other comments on the site, the possibility of them reflecting upon different reactions – and upon different aspects and interpretations of the series – is reduced. The responses to *Downton Abbey* at IMDb do not really create a reviewer community, but consist of a lot of isolated reactions. A further element here is the large number of responses, which can easily overwhelm a reader. The reviews appearing first, at the top of the list, are of course more visible and readily available and likely to get more attention than those further down in the list. Interestingly, 'tieman64', with his/her long and harsh comments on the political aspects of the series, is one of the first to appear, and is therefore a rather visible review (in March 2018, 74 out of 122 persons had found that review useful).

None of the reviewers have written more than once, unless their names/nicknames have been changed[6]. Each of them has given the series or a specific season their judgment by assigning stars from 1 to 10. There is some indication of how their opinions have been received by other reviewers because of a "useful or not" function at the end of each post (which will indicate for instance "64 out of 101 people found the following review useful" – provided by a click, not containing a comment)[7]. Most of the 133 reviewers come from the USA and the UK, but there are also respondents (assuming their own information is correct) from Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Macedonia, New Zealand, Palestine, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey. Some of these persons have reviewed other films or series on IMDb as well (which can easily be found because their names/nicks are hyperlinked), so it would be possible to create a profile of their taste, and perhaps their worldviews. This has not been undertaken for the purpose of this article. According to Monk, the period film audience is not a homogenous group, but a number of "overlapping, dynamic groups, positioned in varied relationships to both commercial and art cinema, who make sense of the films from a variety of cultural-political perspectives" (2012: 167).

It is conspicuous that only one of the 133 responses refers to other respondents in the list, stating that "I didn't find it a bit draggy (as I have read in another review here)"[8]. These viewers and reviewers seem to write as though unaware of each other. There is no real dialogue, negotiation or mutual communion, except of course for a shared interest in the series (positive or negative as the case may be) and perhaps clicking on the "useful" or "not useful" buttons. I have divided these 133 "solitary" responses into two categories, based on my own reading or interpretation of them: those that directly touch upon the class/power aspect in the series, and

5 We can assume that names like 'Neil Doyle' and 'susan worden' are real names, but cannot be certain.

6 In one single case there is not given any name or nickname at all.

7 These click responses could be given by anybody visiting the IMDb web pages.

8 Written by 'mtl-9' on November 14th 2010.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
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those that do not. The first category contains 35 responses (far from all are quoted below in this article); the second category contains 98 responses, but these are not coherent categories. The 35 responses that openly discuss class/power are my focus material, but I make no comment on whether they are representative of opinions held by other viewers. The whole sample (i.e. the 133 responses) cannot be taken as statistically representative of anything, even though I make weak general claims concerning the focus sample. My research is qualitative, studying subjective audience reactions in a subjective, analytic way, making abstractions and pinpointing ideas through quotes from a few of the reviews. No demographic variables are considered.

The concepts of class, power, injustice, exploitation, etc., are socially, historically and subjectively experienced. Still, it is meaningful to study the series and the responses to it as a "vehicle for messages". Among the reviews there are many individual differences in how class and other aspects are commented upon. There is a continuum from short comments to long analyses, and from anger to admiration. The way a given character or incident in the series is described varies to a great extent. The respondents are creating meaning, generating significance, making different interpretative "moves". I have tended to notice those voices that are (in my opinion) especially well articulated. I have also noticed especially those that mention Julian Fellowes explicitly (his name appears 42 times in the 133 responses) and show interest in Britain today, and find the contemporary significance of the series to be at stake. I am particularly interested in the views and arguments against admiration for the family at Downton and other aristocrats today – voices from critical minds not seduced by the grand display of the rich and elegant.

6. **REACTIONS IN IMDB**

The interesting thing is how and why the reviewers feel provoked, their moral and social judgements, and why they do not write writes eulogies about the series, its actors and Fellowes like the majority does. In the 35 selected viewer responses we can directly, but mostly indirectly, study viewers struggling to come to terms with all the beauty and grandeur in a series that handles what might easily be seen as a socially unjust, oppressive system. Some reviews are markedly polemical, even aggressive attacks. An example is the person 'superh13 from United States', who on 17 October 2013 comments:

> If had lived in those times and under those circumstances, first thing I'd done would have been to kill myself. [...] Is it middle-aged lord Fauntleroy (Earl Robert Crawley), whose only concern day in day out seems to be what to wear, when to wear it and how to wear it. Seriously, what's with that uniform he wears from morning to evening, it's hilarious :) Thanks to this show I now understand better why the french needed guillotines :)

The handling of Robert in the series – as a gentleman inside and out – is here turned on its head. Wearing a uniform during the WW1 when he was not actually fighting is ridiculed by the reviewer. So aristocrats like Robert deserve to be executed – maybe not for their oppressiveness, but for their pompousness and stupidity. And these aristocrats do not belong to the past according to 'Mouth Box (mail@mouthbox.co.uk) from United Kingdom' (19 September 2012): "It still seems incredible, doesn't it, that in some circles, even in this day and age, people like Carson dress people like Lord Grantham every morning, and then undress them and put them to bed every evening." And when Robert may have to sell Downton because of a bad investment (season 3, episode 1) he gets no sympathy by 'gkeith_1' (4 February 2013), rather he is being gloated over: "Robert, don't miss a spot when you mop those floors." A reversed situation is imagined with glee. It seems like a revenge to imagine the lord doing the dirty work, and it is certainly a reversion of the elegance in the series.

Reversal is a discursive strategy used in several of the 35 reviews. They mock *Downton Abbey* by pointing out the less honorable elements, like wearing a war uniform for show or self-deception, or imagining a new situation, like the lord mopping a floor. The admiration is reversed to contempt or glee. It's the kind of reversal we know from satire and parody. The reversals of the situations in the series, by mocking characters we are supposed to like and admire, is a simple discursive strategy. The two other I will focus on, concern the ideological function the series performs.

In the comment by 'Mouth Box', we have an example of another discursive strategy in the criticisms: what I will call contemporalization. Parallels are drawn to our own, contemporary society. The agenda is to compare in order to criticize. This is clear in statements like these: *Downton Abbey* is treating "the class warfare that existed in the U.K. then and now" ('Neil Doyle' from USA'; 11. December 2011); "in the post-modern world we get the Edwardians re-invented by

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
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a modern snob as perky progressive aristocrats" ('Guy from UK'; 16 October 2011); "the Edwardian class structures are softened a bit for modern audiences" ('lhhung_himself from United States'; 21 January 2012); "It deals with social class issues, womens issues that we actually deal with today" ('Masha Dowell from Los Angeles, CA'; 2 May 2012).

The already mentioned swan metaphor paints an image of a beautifully gliding swan above the surface, and the heavy throttle below the surface, unseen by the admirers. The reviewer 'jchodyka-712-409893 from Canada' (4 October 2013) wants to undermine this aesthetic surface of the show – the display of grandeur that is admired by most fans, and point to the ugly hardships on the underside:

> I had a few conversations with fans of the series and they all pointed to beauty of interiors, elegance of costumes, splendid manners, life of ease and comfort, and superiority of aristocratic classes... What those people ignore is the fact that behind all of this charm there was poverty forcing people to work in service due to lack of other options, awful conditions of work: low pay, no free time, extremely hard work, poor accommodation, child labour etc... It only means one thing: history goes in circles. [...] Beauty can't ever be justified by almost slave work of poor. And I thought that it was established long time ago but apparently not and there is still some nostalgia for class society and underpaid servants.

The claim here is that most people ignore the oppressive structure in the class system seen in the series. The harsh social conditions that the lifestyle of the rich relies on are neglected because the world of the rich is so beautiful, posh and impressive. Do we still admire the rich and glamourous, even if they are oppressors? In that case aesthetics and ethics are in conflict, and people are fooled into admiring the aristocrats. For 'jchodyka-712-409893' the contemporalization also includes criticism of social hardship today, like poor accommodation and child labour (cf. hall boys at Downton), and the fact that misery can generate nostalgia in the TV audience.

The third discursive strategy is defiant abstraction. The severest critics tend to focus on social class, vulnerability, work, freedom and other general concepts. The word "class" is central in many of those reviews that dislike and contest the series. The discursive strategy is a kind of abstraction where hardly any character names are mentioned, but macro level concepts like "class", "system", "power", "poverty" and "privilege". The series' characters are in several of the reviews not seen as individuals, but as representatives of a class, a system, etc.

How the characters act in Julian Fellowes' series are based on *individual choices, not primarily on social obligations and limitations within their class*. This is, in my opinion, the "pet idea" of the series, to use Lukács's term. *Downton Abbey* is conservative-liberal in the sense that a person's life is mostly defined by his or her personal choices and private morals. The characters in the series are first and foremost unique persons who make their own choices and face the consequences of their individual agency. So the individuals are very much responsible for all their actions, even if they may have had a harsh upbringing like the homosexual servant Thomas. The film researcher Gill Jamieson connects the series to the way conservative and liberal politicians in the Cameron government stressed "personal responsibility" (in Stoddart 2018: 210 and 218). In her analysis, the series carries "a liberal conservative ideology" (2018: 211) with evident political implications: "*Downton Abbey* privileges charitable giving as the preferred course of action from the more fortunate to the less fortunate." (2018: 212)

The harshest criticism in the 35 reviews oppose this individualism by focusing on historical, social and class related dependency, restrictions and determinism. In these reviews the characters in the series are not seen as free to create their own lives, regardless of the more or less moral choices they take. The series for these reviewers is not about a person's moral character, but historical, collective and structural causes that constrict individual lives[9]. It is more about conflict and fight in a historical perspective than just an instance of a family's challenges and problems. This defiant abstraction is an alternative perspective, in a counter discourse to the series.

One of the reviewers admits that Fellowes is rather balanced in his depiction of class society. The person, calling himself 'grendelkhan from Xanadu' (22 October 2012), formulates critically and with distaste that *Downton Abbey* is about "a system designed solely to benefit the privileged", but s/he must admit that "Fellowes is a cagey writer. Just when I want to take him to task for romanticizing an oppressive system of privilege, he goes and has characters do just that."

9 We are close to a "blame game" and recognize a right-left dichotomy: Who is responsible for the misery we face – the individual or the society? The persons who act, or the system who defines who we are and how we can act?

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
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Some persons in the series explicitly pinpoint the unfairness of the system, and the audience is free to feel that they are right in their judgement. But in the end "opponents" like Tom Branson and Thomas Barrow "come around" to be happy with their possibilities *within* the system.[10]. In the series it comes down to *personal choices*. "The overall mood of the series is thus one of celebration where at least regular characters seem to know their place and accept it" (Baena and Byker 2015: 267).

A clear intent to reveal the "abstract" forces behind the persons' lives is evident in the review by 'tieman64 from UK' (1. January 2013), who has written a long, almost academic essay on the class relations and exploitation, including the ideological manipulation of presenting the aristocrats as "sage and caring":

> "Downton Abbey's" written by Julian Fellowes, a Tory peer, Baron, monarchist and husband-to-royalty, so right away you know it has a clear agenda. Restorative nostalgia to the max [...] In "Downton Abbey", the class system exists for the benefits of those at the bottom, and proves as bothersome to those unfortunate few at the top as it does those lower down the social hierarchy. [...] They [i.e. the aristocrats] are benign despots, all-powerful, their authority final, but more sage and caring than any elected politician could ever be. The rich, in other words, are socially responsible father figures. They are invested in their households, in their communities, and provide a far reaching social benefit; without the rich to mercifully protect them, the poor would be forced out into the cold to fend for themselves. Indeed, Fellowes frequently has his rich folk sacrifice their bodies, their status and their wealth for the servant class (joining war efforts, taking on limping servants etc). The message – rife with false binaries – isn't only that servants should be content with their roles, but that one, regardless of class, cannot and should not avoid servitude. Even the rich are servants to their fellowman.

The reviewer is pinpointing "the rich man's burden" as it is carried by Lord Robert and the other aristocrats. Between the rich and the poor there are bonds of loyalty that – according to the aristocrats – take care of social needs better than any elected politician or official institution could. As Byrne formulates it: "This show states that everyone has their place in the world, and is strongly didactic about the need for obedience and loyalty [...] hierarchies give security, loyalty is rewarded, and the patriarch knows best" (2015: 9-10). There are personal bonds that condone the system's unfairness. The individuals on each side of the big class divide serve each other, so in a way economic and political justice is insignificant. The important thing is to be good-hearted. The class divide is, according to 'tieman64', presented as "natural", and therefore not in need of change. Then 'tieman64' goes on to scrutinize the situation for oppressed groups to which some heritage films give sympathy, claiming that in *Downton Abbey* they are exposed as villains (which is open to debate). The reviewer claims that conditions were far harsher for the real servants in actual history – a damaging critique if this is the case because of the series' and the heritage dramas' aura of historical correctness. As 'tieman64' writes:

> Significantly, the series' villains are all either homosexuals, socialists or members of the servant class. In the second series, villains become figures of new wealth; modern capitalists who don't respect the supposedly loving, symbiotic relationships of late aristocracy. As the series focuses on an individual household rather than systems, the nobility and selflessness of Fellowes' aristocrats justify the system in which they spin. It's a very classically conservative notion of history (in actuality, servants couldn't look at, let alone speak to their masters), a proudly hierarchical world in which all social conflicts and tensions are resolved without any restructuring of class relations. Stratification is posited as being natural, optimal and only the deviant or repellent are incapable of adapting or finding accommodation within it. [...] This is a benign, liberal aristocracy, for an age of "caring" capitalists.

The reviewer ends the essay by asking why the series is so popular:

> But why would a series which glorifies the class system, posits class hierarchies as inherently benevolent and idealises master/servant bonds, be suddenly so very popular? Why would a series about

10 The footman Thomas "is not a popular character, but this is due to his personality" according to Boyd (2016: 256). So his problems may come from a character flaw – or the reasons for his unsympathetic personality may go deeper.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

> inherited privilege, ineluctable servitude, be popular in an era of Occupy, Austerity, Bank Bailouts and massive corporate tax dodging? Perhaps because "Downton" presents a Utopian version of the past for the purposes of painting, and thereby bolstering, a contemporary system capable of weathering any upheaval or shock. Or perhaps it's simply a severe form of Stockholm Syndrome.

The claim is that the series bolsters confidence in the class society we live in today. Organizations like Occupy and United Front Against Austerity have an agenda of democratic justice, but the rich and powerful are (of course) still fighting for their privileges and a series like *Downton Abbey* is a kind of weapon. The reviewer's indignation is clear. S/he is interested in "how and why this power is structured, created and propagated in the first place" as written elsewhere in the review, i.e. in an analysis of power structure.

This example of counter discourse is focused on principles and general concepts ("class", "the privileged" etc.) and draws lines between the series and our own time ("Occupy, Austerity, Bank Bailouts" etc.). The series is lifted *up* above or even *out* of its concrete historical setting. It's taken as a sign for something far larger than characters in a historical drama striving to come to ends with their own lives. Marxist thinking seems obvious in a statement like "The point isn't only that there were no clean transition from feudalism to aristocracy to capitalism as such, but that power proves capable of propagating itself." Or maybe the views of 'tieman64' can be said to combine Marx and Nietzsche, claiming that the power finds its ways through history to suppress and oppress for the benefit of the strong and resourceful. This is hardly a view which Fellowes would condone when it concerns his TV show, but its realism gives insight into mechanisms he does not see or does not want to see. As 'dragokin' (27 May 2013) states, in accordance with the world view of the producers of *Downton Abbey*, "the revolutions of the twentieth century appear as unnecessary whim of lower social strata". *Downton Abbey* does not give us a vision of history that supports democracy and equal rights for everyone. But the blind zones are not invisible to everyone.

As 'nybill53 from New York, United States' (24 January 2013) states about Fellows and the other creators of the series: they try to "inject 21st century political correctness and thought into early 20th century upper class society. [...] The show is a fanciful creation of what the author wishes the period he was writing about was like. It is too bad he felt the need to inject so much of his own political/cultural ideology into the show through the dialog and actions of the characters." Or in the scathing comment by 'steven-222 from Berkeley, CA, USA' (14 June 2011): "Superbly made, if you want to enjoy reactionary family-values propaganda from that old Tory, Julian Fellowes."

All the 35 reviewers I have focused on in this study see – to some degree – "through" *Downton Abbey*'s desirable image of the past to the social and economic injustice. In the series the mechanisms of power, money, social dependency etc. are hidden behind the sympathetic characters. The elegance in the series functions as an allure to overlook the repression and exploitation that the upper classes were (and are) responsible for. Most of the 35 reviewers are partly respectful, but largely confrontational in what may seem as, in several cases, a politically leftist perspective. Some of them not only expose what to them seem to be "anachronistic values", but notice how a rather idyllic image of the past class society is being projected into our own time. There is a repressive continuity with the past, but this matter is hardly addressed by Fellowes/ITV. The reviewers tend to agree with Higson and others who claim that films like this "function to maintain the values and interests of the most privileged social strata" (Higson 2003: 46).

7. **CONCLUSION**

Hardly any of the respondents tell their readers whether they politically are oriented left or right. We could speculate that persons who are politically left-oriented would be more provoked by the series (and the politics and ideology of Fellowes) than right-oriented persons, and that leftist viewers therefore would feel a stronger urge to "dissect" the series, exposing its "hidden agenda", like some of the reviewers do. If you fundamentally disagree with something, it will generate opposition. But even though some reviewers can imagine to "see through" the manipulation of a series like *Downton Abbey*, the series is both *opaque and visible* in different ways for different (re)viewers.

The past as seen in films and series like *Downton Abbey* should not be left in its past-ness. Visual historicism has relevance for how we think and feel today about several issues, with political implications. Every image of history is a construction, and the audience should be aware of the potential for visual and ideological seduction in *Downton Abbey* and other "historically correct" heritage dramas. The lavishness

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

in visual display can easily spill over to how we evaluate morals and values of the aristocracy. Accepting *Downton Abbey* without reservation is to be seduced to accept a nostalgic vision of class society, a system of class power and privilege that should be met with critical consciousness and resistance. As the reviewer 'Mena Reno' asserts (29 July 2015): "The manipulative power of a lavish and popular TV production such as Downton Abbey should not be underestimated."

The striking swan metaphor springs from nature and could suspiciously be said to signal a natural order. The gracious luxury among the nobles is driven forward by unseen, hard work – if it didn't, it could not exist. In my opinion, Percival and Jessica Fellowes' swan metaphor should critically be paralleled with a metaphor based on the series' logo. In the logo we see the grand estate mirrored in a shiny surface. This mirror image of the building signifies the upstairs and downstairs theme, but it is actually showing upstairs twice. The series has all in all the point of view of the upper classes – where the main interest is the estate's grandeur and splendor. The upper class mirror their own glory, and are unable to see the realities in what is going on underneath them. The series gives not a mirror of society, but a mirror of glory for the wealthy few. The hard labour by their servants is relatively invisible and insignificant in the series. The focus in *Downton Abbey* is on the "good, old" respect and loyalty upwards and downwards, and this "harmonic" cooperation between the classes is presented as an ideal, even though it hides deep social and political injustices. All viewers of the series should be aware of this, as they will be for instance by reading the reviews on IMDb.

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DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
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TV SHOW

Downton Abbey (2010-15)

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/7960
ISSN 2421-454X

"WHEN YOU SEE ME AGAIN, IT WON'T BE ME". *TWIN PEAKS* FROM THE MULTICHANNEL ERA TO THE DIGITAL ERA

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KEYWORDS
Twin Peaks; audiovisuality; storytelling; TV series; David Lynch.

ABSTRACT
On its debut in 1990, David Lynch and Mark Frost's TV series *Twin Peaks* aired during the "multichannel era" on the broadcasting channel ABC, one of the three free-to-air US TV networks at the time. ABC imposed major plot developments, e.g. the revelation of Laura Palmer's murderer early in season two, which the two creators intended to keep the mystery unsolved for a much longer time. For the revival of *Twin Peaks* (2017, during the digital era), distributed by Showtime, Lynch and Frost created a more complex audiovisual product. The *Twin Peaks* revival was realized with far more authorial liberty, due to the indisputable celebrity of Lynch and the possibility—fostered by the subscription-based premium cable platform Showtime—of aiming at a niche audience, a possibility that George Gilder foresaw in 1990. As a result, not only *Twin Peaks – The Return*'s plot is much more complex than in the first two seasons, but it also proves how television in the digital era can lead to the creation of audiovisual narratives that fully exploit every audiovisual semiotic level.

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

Acclaimed as the best 2017 movie by the *Cahiers du cinéma*, the third season of *Twin Peaks* is far more than a '90s TV series revival: it represents one of the highest points of contemporary audiovisual storytelling. Its co-creator David Lynch defined it "a feature film in 18 parts" (Jensen 2017), with a continuing storyline and nothing like episodic closure. Being created with various levels and strategies of defamiliarization, *Twin Peaks* demands a cognitive effort that stretches the concept of interpretative cooperation theorized by Umberto Eco (see Eco 2016). The whole series is a complex narrative mechanism that can be only partially understood, being shaped around a Möbius strip (which is shown in Part 17); but its third season is much more challenging as to its visual and auditory levels, and as to its plot structure, thus compelling the audience to re-examine clues and leads from the beginning of the story, twenty-seven years ago, when *Twin Peaks* imposed itself as a game changer despite being burdened with several constraints.

1. *TWIN PEAKS'* FIRST LIFE IN THE MULTICHANNEL ERA: DISCOVERING WHO KILLED LAURA PALMER

On its debut in 1990, David Lynch and Mark Frost's TV series *Twin Peaks* aired on the broadcast channel ABC, one of the "big three" US TV networks at the time, along with NBC and CBS (see Landau 2017)—FOX having entered the television arena shortly earlier. Even before its airing, *Twin Peaks* was saluted as "The Series That Will Change TV", as Howard A. Rodman's article on *Connoisseur* was titled. Rodman pointed out that:

> *Twin Peaks* [...] does not signal its punches; you are not told whether you should laugh or cry, be frightened or reassured. There are corpses, but it is not a melodrama; there is a pair of mismatched cops, but it is not a buddy series; there are moments of excruciating humor, but it is not, by any means, a comedy. (Rodman 1989: 143)

In 1990, television was in its second golden age (see Rossini 2016), the "multichannel era" (see Lotz 2007), characterized by structural changes in storytelling: "during the 80s, something changes: the TV series form grows wiser, becomes more ambitious and begins to be considered as an object worthy of attention and analysis" (Rossini 2016: 58, my translation).

When the two *Twin Peaks* creators met, Mark Frost was a television screenwriter who had worked on *Hill Street Blues*, a series which serves as an example of the origins of multistrand plot development (see Rossini 2016: 59); "in [*Hill Street Blues*,] stories were allowed to overlap, to continue, to meander through several episodes, with an 'A,' 'B,' and 'C' plot. The conventions were up for grabs" (Rodman 1989: 144).

On the other artistic hand, Lynch had been shaping his image as a director of strange movies with big-cheeked ladies living and singing in a radiator (*Eraserhead*), deformed and lonely human beings (*The Elephant Man*) and young men attracted by evil (*Blue Velvet*). As Lynch recalled,

> Well, Mark and I have an agent named Tony Krantz, who encouraged us to get into TV and do this kind of thing. We sort of had these ideas, these kinda feelings about a story with a background, a middle ground, and a foreground. Well, the background was a crime. The middle ground was eight or ten characters in a small town. (Rodman 1989: 141)

Twin Peaks achieved resounding success and earned Lynch a *Time* cover, the *Entertainment Weekly*'s main title *The Year's Best Show* and a growing audience—that was, obviously, ABC's first concern and the main reason for having financed a risky project involving the bizarre director of *Eraserhead*. As Mark Frost noted in 1990,

> It's amazing that no one thought to do anything like this until fairly recently. I think that now the networks are so concerned about losing their audience they're willing to take these kinds of risks. I don't know that we would have been able to sell this series three or four years ago. (Rodman 1989: 142)

In 1984, Lynch had experienced the intrusiveness of production logic in film: after being hired as the director of *Dune*, an adaptation of the fantasy book by Frank Herbert, Lynch could not release a director's cut version of the movie. As a result, from the initial four-hour length, the final running time was 136 minutes, and Lynch was far from proud of the result (see Rodley 1998). ABC's intrusiveness caused constraints in *Twin Peaks*' plot as well, and of primary importance. The period between the 1980s and the end of the twentieth century is called by Amanda Lotz (2007) "the multichannel era"; it followed "the network era", and was characterized by an increased number of channels and the consequent improve-

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

ment of the quality of TV shows. In *Life After Television* the "media futurologist" (as referred to by David Foster Wallace in Wallace 1993: 185) George Gilder noted that, during the first decades of TV programming, "Television act[ed] as a severe bottleneck to creative expression, driving thousands of American writers and creators into formulaic banality or near-pornographic pandering" (Gilder 1994: 47). Twenty-five years later, in a retrospective analysis, Jason Mittell expounds the same scenario:

> For decades, the commercial television industry was immensely profitable by producing programming with minimal formal variety outside the conventional genre norms of sitcoms and procedural dramas [...] with more legitimated prime time offerings *avoiding continuity storylines* in lieu of episodic closure and limited continuity. (Mittell 2015: 32, emphasis added)

One of the reasons why continuity storylines were avoided was that "Reruns distributed by syndicators might be aired in any order", and "this lucrative aftermarket" rested on episodic closure (Mittell 2015: 32).

Twin Peaks was pivotal in the process of creating TV series with a running plot, as Mark Frost had learned the ropes with *Hill Street Blues*' multi-strand narrative and David Lynch had brought his cognitive-demanding approach to stories. As Frost recalls:

> For *Twin Peaks*, we've talked about possibly carrying one story all the way through the season, at a background level, and then doing two-parters, four-parters, six-parters, so that they're in effect kind of little miniseries. And of course modular stories inside each episode. It's an interesting kind of balancing act. (Rodman 1989: 144)

Notwithstanding the great amount of innovation Lynch and Frost introduced on television with *Twin Peaks*, ABC imposed major constraints to the two creators of the series. After the first season's finale in 1990, there was no clue as to who could actually be Laura Palmer's killer. Several people induced suspicion: the weird psychiatrist Dr. Jacoby, the ruthless businessman Ben Horne, the odd Log Lady; they could all be culpable, like almost every other character—even Laura's best friend Donna Hayward was suspected by some fans posting hypotheses online (Jenkins 1995: 58). Television in the 1990s was more complex than in the previous network era. Nevertheless, one of its imperatives, as Neil Postman noted in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, was "Thou shalt induce no perplexity" (Postman 2006: 147). Quoting John Ellis, David Lavery noted that "TV is required to be predictable and timetabled; it is required to avoid offense and difficulty" (Lavery 1995: 5). Consequently, ABC pressured the series' creators to solve the mystery and finally reveal who had killed Laura Palmer; a choice regretted in different times by both *Twin Peaks*' creators. As Mark Frost recalls,

> David always felt we made a mistake early on, giving in to heavy network pressure to solve Laura's mystery as soon as we did. I agree with him now. We let their fears become ours and it cracked the magic. The dream would have lasted longer, most likely, if we'd struck to our guns. (Frost in Lynch 2011: v)

Twin Peaks' plot, as a detective story (even if a de-rationalized one, see Hague 1995), was based on the "whodunnit" mechanism. The ABC producers thought the identity of "who" killed Laura Palmer eventually had to be discovered, in order to positively influence audience ratings that had been falling during the first season—to an extent due to ABC's decision to schedule the show on Thursday night, in direct competition with NBC's beloved (and plainly episodic) comedy *Cheers* (Lavery 1995: 2).

As a consequence of "the heavy network pressure" (to use Frost's words), Laura Palmer's murderer was revealed during the second season's eighth episode. Not only did audience ratings not grow (the show placed 85th out of 89 shows in the ratings), but the series was also put on hiatus immediately after the second season's 15th episode aired. The series, now scheduled on Saturday night, would return to Thursday night for the last six episodes (see Lavery 1995: 2) and would not be renewed for a third season. The second season's finale ended with a major cliffhanger that showed Special Agent Dale Cooper possessed by the demonic creature BOB; furthermore, the destiny of Cooper's love interest, Annie, was unknown; the series' nymphet Audrey Horne was the victim of an explosion, and Leo Johnson's fate was literally hanging.

After the forced revelation of Laura Palmer's murderer, many storylines had become sloppy and weirder—but far from in the Lynchian way. In Mark Frost's *The Final Dossier*, for example, teenage biker/Laura's lover James Hurley's storyline in the second season is summarized and criticized in a

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

way that looks like an epitaph: "[he] stumbled into the role of hapless patsy in a murder scheme straight out of noted noir novelist James M. Cain" (Frost 2017: 87). As he was on the set of *Wild at Heart*, Lynch was no longer directly involved in all aspects of the development of *Twin Peaks*, therefore the quality of the episodes' scripts changed. As pointed out by Desta,

> Season 2 is widely regarded as an absurd derailment of the show's excellent first season, a campy affair that has long been ridiculed by critics. Lynch, who was still attached to the series at that time, directed Season 2's first two episodes and the finale. He largely blames the show's original network, ABC, for ruining the second season. [...] "It got very stupid and goofy in the second season; it got ridiculous," Mr. Lynch said. Per the *Times*, Lynch "was not involved with the show after Laura's killer was revealed." (Desta 2017).

Due to entertainment industry constraints, the two 1990s *Twin Peaks* seasons did not reach their full potential, and yet they became the starting point for a new way of conceiving television storytelling. *Twin Peaks'* novelty benefited, in its first life, from the multichannel era improvements, such as VCRs, as Jenkins highlighted:

> As one fan remarked just a few weeks into the series' second season, "Can you imagine Twin Peaks coming out before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!" Lynch's cryptic and idiosyncratic series seemed to invite close scrutiny and intense speculation enabled by the fan's access to these technological resources. Another explained, "Video-recording has made it possible to treat film like a manuscript, to be pored over and deciphered". (Jenkins 1995: 54)

Already in 1990, George Gilder foresaw that improvements in technology and a future interactive form of television could lead to a greater freedom in creating quality products: that is what is actually happening with satellite channels and on demand platforms such as Showtime, which gave *Twin Peaks* a third season and a second life. *Twin Peaks – The Return*, as a revival, continues the previous plot, but, even if it is the same show, it has deeply changed, as if to fulfill The Man from Another Place's enigmatic statement in the finale of Season 2 : "When you see me again, it won't be me".

2. LAURA PALMER IS DEAD. LONG LIVE LAURA PALMER. *TWIN PEAKS'* SECOND LIFE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Twenty-six years after the second season's finale, *Twin Peaks* returned for a third season on Showtime from 21 May to 3 September 2017, with one episode a week—except for the first two episodes, which were released together on the same night. Instead of using the Netflix distribution model, which involves publishing every episode of a season at the same time, thus allowing the audience to binge watch all the episodes, *Twin Peaks*' creators chose to release it weekly, thus expanding the storytelling duration and, accordingly, the audience's enjoyment and their cooperative efforts in making sense of the story.

The time was ripe for creating an audiovisual narrative with fewer constraints—among which the unavoidable ageing and passing away of some actors. The original cast had suffered several losses during the years in which the idea of a revival seemed far from conceivable. For example, Jack Nance died in 1996; therefore his character, Pete Martell, would not be able to wear the green glove that would prove crucial in defeating killer BOB, the malignant entity who had possessed Dale Cooper after being responsible for Laura Palmer's murder through her father Leland. (Lynch wrote "I had the green-glove idea from long ago and originally Jack Nance was going to wear it, and that would've been a whole different thing" [Lynch, McKenna 2018]).

Production constraints, even if limited, were poorly received by Lynch, who even complained about the necessity of scheduling shoots and location, as made clear by one of the special feature videos contained in the DVD of *Twin Peaks – The Return*:

> Why we only have two days? We own the stages. Why do we have to do this in two days? [...] The thing is that [...] that fucking really pissed me off, it really does [...] I'm not working in this fucking way, ever. This is absolutely horrible. We never get any extra shots, we never get any time to experiment, we never ever go dreamy, or anything. We barely fucking make our days. I could have spent a week in the Fireman's, I love that place, and dream all kinds of stuff. You know, this is sick, this fucking way to do it, you don't get a chance to sink in anything. It's not a way to work. [...] You tell me I got two fucking days to do all these things, this is just BANG

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

> BANG BANG, it's like a fucking machine. (*David Lynch Reacts to Time Constraints*)

David Lynch directed every episode of the third season, and is also credited as sound designer. As a Renaissance man-like author (see Wallace 1996), Lynch masters different semiotic codes (he is a musician, painter and author of comic strips) and is capable of building an audiovisual narrative that relies on the superimposition of various levels. *Twin Peaks – The Return* is a complex narrative object that stands to a detective story in the same way as a cube stands to a tesseract, and that involves both the content and the storytelling mode.

As to the content, the plot level seems shaped around the Möbius strip, a geometric figure obtained by half twisting a paper band and re-attaching its ends in order to obtain only one continuous surface:

> Start at any point on the surface, and draw a line in one direction which does not cross the edge. Keep going, and half-way through your journey you will pass the point you started from, but on the other side of the paper, and after another circuit you will be back to your starting point. (Wells 1991: 152)

Lynch seems to have already used this plot structure in *Lost Highway*, in which the main character, Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), turns into Peter Raymond Dayton (Balthazar Getty) and, from that point on, is on the other side of the looking-glass, where he also finds his wife's alter ego (Patricia Arquette). In the same way, in *Twin Peaks – The Return*'s finale, Special Agent Dale Cooper and his former secretary Diane Evans (Laura Dern) find themselves on the other side of the narration, turning into the characters of Richard and Linda—as forewarned by The Giant/The Fireman in Part 1 ("Remember: 430. Richard and Linda. Two birds with one stone"). While in *Lost Highway* the character changed both in his aspect and identity, in *Twin Peaks – The Return*, the two of them only change identity as if their original bodies were injected into two different lives; shortly thereafter, their memories fade and they act as if fulfilling a destiny, doomed to play their new roles. The "newborn" Richard finds Laura Palmer, only she goes by the name of Carrie Page and has aged, instead of being killed as a teenager. As a result of moving to the other side of the Möbius strip, the story we have been watching until that moment is rewritten and fades from the diegesis: a 1990 Pete Martell reappears, but this time he doesn't find Laura Palmer's body "wrapped in plastic" like in the iconic image from the first season's pilot—as if the whole *Twin Peaks* had ceased to exist, even if the audience remembers otherwise.

Lynch's cinematic approach is immersive and he always refuses to provide answers about his creations: in *Twin Peaks – The Return* as well, the plot is never explained nor clarified, and even the meaning of the actions of Richard, Linda, and Carry Page remain obscure. In the season finale, Cooper/Richard asks, "What year is this?" Both character and audience are taken aback, and the ending is open to speculation.

The ending provided by Mark Frost in his book is far more explicit. *The Final Dossier*, which was published as a collection of files organized by the names of *Twin Peaks*' characters, provides explanations for many unresolved stories. In the series, for example, the decades-lasting love story between Big Ed and Norma Jenkins culminates in Part 15 with a passionate kiss and a retro song (Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long"). In *The Final Dossier*, Frost describes their wedding and how a great part of Twin Peaks' townspeople attended:

> You'll be pleased to learn, I think, that Ed and Norma got married not long after, James played a song he wrote on his guitar during a civil ceremony conducted by the Big Log near the old train station. All of their friends—half the town, it seems—were there. Andy Brennan bawled more or less throughout, and I'm told even Deputy Chief Hawk got a tear in his eye. His old friend Big Ed's Hurley Luck had finally turned. (Frost 2017: 90)

The need for an ending that characterizes readers' approach to a huge portion of novels (see Kermode 1967, Brooks 1984) is pivotally fulfilled in *The Final Dossier*. As far as the ending of the whole *Twin Peaks*' story is concerned, while in the series Lynch suggests possible interpretations through sounds and images, in *The Final Dossier* Frost illustrates what happened to Laura Palmer, her mother and father:

> **Laura Palmer did not die.** [...] Laura Palmer disappeared from Twin Peaks without a trace—on the very same night when, in the world we thought we knew, it *used to be said* she died—but the police never found the girl or, if she had been killed elsewhere, her body or made a single arrest. In every subsequent mention in an edition of the Post, the case is still listed as open and pending investigation. [...]

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

> The following year, on February 24, 1990—the one-year anniversary of her "disappearance"—Leland Palmer committed suicide. [...]
>
> After Laura's disappearance, Sarah experienced bouts of severe depression and was treated for it, as previously reported. In the years since—at least in the version where her husband committed suicide—according to medical records she has battled alcoholism, addiction to prescription drugs, and social isolation. (Frost 2017: 132-137, emphasis in original)

Even if Frost provides an ending, this cannot be considered as a decisive one, since, when questioned about Frost's book *The Secret History of Twin Peaks*, Lynch answered "I haven't read it. It's *his* [i.e. Mark Frost's] history of Twin Peaks" (Hibberd 2017).

Twin Peak's plot, multilayered since the first two seasons, becomes much more complex in the 2017 revival, and makes greater demands on its audience's attention and memory. If the 1990s series had A, B, and C plots, and all of them took place in the small town of Twin Peaks, Washington, the third season's plotlines involve a larger number of locations, such as New York and Las Vegas, but also the desert of New Mexico. If the first two seasons show the otherworldly and iconic Black Lodge, the third season also explores The White Lodge, The Convenience Store, and a nuclear explosion site (Part 8). The events depicted in the ABC seasons had developed chronologically, whereas the Showtime season has a jumbled chronology whose oddity is hinted at even in the different times displayed on the screens of the characters' mobile phones. A comparison between the multichannel era seasons and the digital era one highlights how televisual narrative changed; not only did the plot level change, but also did the sounds and images accordingly.

3. "LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS"

Twin Peaks' sound level punctuates the narrative and gives hints to the audience. As to *Twin Peaks – The Return*, the complexity of the plot transforms the revival in what a tesseract is to a cube, since its form is a multi dimensional expansion of whichever geometric figure the plot is really shaped on. The sounds designed by David Lynch are part of the narrative: for instance, the same peculiar crackle can be heard in the first episode (during which The Fireman warns "Listen to the sounds") and in the last, when Cooper travels back to 1990 and saves Laura Palmer. That sound seems to punctuate the shifting of the timeline, thus becoming a full-fledged part of the narrative, like colors and film editing. In her study "'Disturbing the Guests with This Racket': Music and *Twin Peaks*", Kathryn Kalinak points out how, in the ABC seasons, Lynch tended to blur the borders between fiction and reality through sounds and music, by fostering the confusion between diegetic and non-diegetic levels.

> The scene begins with Audrey Horne swaying dreamily. We are let to believe that she is responding to some inner voice that we are not privy to since the music on the soundtrack is a theme we've already heard dozens of times before as non-diegetic accompaniment and Audrey is given to enticingly sensual behavior with little or no provocation. Suddenly her father enters. A change of camera placement reveals a phonograph. We have been tricked: what we thought was non-diegetic background music is, in fact, diegetic and Audrey's odd and alluring display becomes justified by the music she hears. (Kalinak 1995: 85)

In *The Return*, this attempt to blur borders through the music is intensified: every Part contains a live performance on the stage of the Roadhouse in Twin Peaks: Chromatics, Nine Inch Nails, The Veils and many other groups and singers play the tracks of the soundtrack in the diegesis, even if it is quite difficult to suspend one's disbelief to the point of believing that a small town in the northeast of the United States could offer such a variety and multitude of famous artists' concerts. As to Audrey, in Season 1 she appeared in an iconic scene in which she danced dreamily at the Double R diner; that scene became later known by the name of "Audrey's dance". In *The Return*, a confused and contradictory Audrey goes to the Roadhouse and is invited to perform "Audrey's dance" —a name never used and never supposed to be known in the diegesis.

4. BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Instead of using frame composition, cameras and film editing only to record a scene in which facts and dialogues make the story go on, David Lynch—whose hand seems much more visible than Frost's in this season—makes images and sounds

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

become fully part of the narrative, each one conveying a particular meaning.

As in the film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, to which Lynch often refers (a 1990 commercial of *Twin Peaks* had it as an explicit paratext [Lavery 1995: 2], and in *The Return*, Jane E wears red shoes), black and white images are signals for other levels of reality. In *The Return*, Gordon Cole (played by David Lynch) recounts his dream in which Monica Bellucci (as *herself*) says: "We are like the dreamer, who dreams and then lives inside the dream"; the audience is allowed to see Cole's dream, and it is in black and white, since it represents another level of reality.

One of the special features in the DVD of the first two seasons of *Twin Peaks* is called *Between Two Worlds*. The first part is filmed in black and white: Lynch interviews the characters of Laura, her mother Sarah and her father Leland, and there is no other sound to be heard apart from their voices. Then, the scene switches to a color version and the audience can also hear the background sounds; now Lynch interviews the same people, only they speak as the actors Sheryl Lee, Grace Zabriskie and Ray Wise. Colors and sound definitely connote different levels of reality.

In *Twin Peaks*, otherworldly places are characterized by peculiar colors and film editing: the Black Lodge has, since the multichannel series, a geometric black and white floor and red tents, and the characters that live there move and talk in reverse. In the digital era season, otherworldly places multiply: there is a White Lodge (filmed in black and white, with the same reverse backward feature as in The Black Lodge) and a Purple Room surrounded by a purple sea in which the character Naido (Nae Yuuki) is portrayed through frantic image editing and speaks an incomprehensible animal-like language. The Convenience Store is filmed in black and white, its editing is quickened, glitchy and with disturbances and grating resonances; here the soundtrack is a shrill violin sound. The scenes set around the Convenience Store are intermittently lit, which results in a disturbing experience for the viewer. Moreover, in Part 8, the White Lodge, the Convenience Store and the Purple Room are collocated in a nuclear explosion site, into which the camera seems to enter, totally disorienting the viewer.

In order to try and position events and scenes in what could be the right place in space and time, the audience has to take full advantage of the hints left on various semiotic levels; but these are not given as "flashing arrows" (such signs, writes Johnson, "reduce the amount of analytic work you need to make sense of the story. All you have to do is follow the arrows" [2005: 74]). On the contrary, they are hidden, which triggers the audience's hermeneutic fervor on various Internet platforms and networks, such as Reddit. David Lynch's well-known obstinacy in refusing to give any explanation for his works fuels his audience's willingness to get to the bottom (or on top) of the entire mystery.

Twin Peaks' third series changed TV for the second time, proportionately to the mutated context, a television landscape that had been deeply influenced by the first two seasons in terms of plot construction and screenwriting, and that will most likely be influenced by "the best 2017 movie" as well.

As George Gilder foresaw, the digital era freed networks from the obsession of aiming at an indistinct mass audience; audience's fragmentation fostered the network's inclination to finance shows which could be appropriate for niche audiences.

Blamed for fostering hyper-simplification and serving as a crucible for the basest forms of entertainment, the televisual medium has instead proved itself much more flexible than initially thought, with the growth in the number of channels offering increased space for superior products. *Twin Peaks* represents an example of both multichannel and digital era's constraints and fully exploited possibilities, and the superior result of *The Return* can be related both to technological improvements and to David Lynch's "authorship by responsibility", as Jason Mittell refers to film authorship. According to Mittell, TV series usually follow the model of "authorship by management", which means that the responsibility for different aspects of the final product are scattered between a large number of professionals (Mittell 2015: 88). Even if, among the many professionals, the showrunner emerges as the person in charge of coordinating different aspects, his or her role is different from that of the director in a movie or, even more, the author of a novel. Being director and sound designer of each part of *Twin Peaks – The Return*, Lynch succeeded in controlling almost every aspect of *Twin Peaks'* third season, and this unity of vision resulted in the creation of a narrative which perfectly fits T.S. Eliot's definition of a classic:

> [...] what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the completely new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of

DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X

> novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot 1958: 23)

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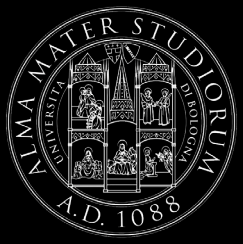
DOI https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8362
ISSN 2421-454X



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SERIES · VOLUME IV, No 02 · WINTER 2018