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WHO'S IN CHARGE?: CHANGING CHARACTER AGENCY IN EARLY *DOCTOR WHO*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of production process upon character agency in early *Doctor Who*, focusing on the period between 1963 and 1966, during which time William Hartnell starred as the Doctor. As originally conceived by Sydney Newman, Verity Lambert and David Whitaker, it is debatable to what extent the Doctor could be regarded as the 'hero' of the narrative, as this role was often better fulfilled by his human companions, initially represented by teachers Ian Chesterton (William Russell) and Barbara Wright (Jacqueline Hill), who provided a ready point of identification for viewers. This situation changed significantly during Hartnell's tenure, but the shifts in agency that occurred were so radical as to seem almost *ad hoc*, reflecting industry pressures that typified television drama of the time. The extent to which these changes were influenced by the programme's rapid turnaround are examined here via a combination of textual analysis and historical production research, before being briefly contrasted with the modern version of *Doctor Who*, starring Jodie Whittaker, whose production context allows for more considered development of long-term character arcs.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Originally launched on the 23rd of November 1963, *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 1996; 2005-) is one of television's most enduring examples of continuing drama. Focusing on the adventures of a mysterious alien known only as 'the Doctor', who journeys through space and time in a dimensionally transcendental ship known as the TARDIS,[1] the series quickly became a mainstay of the UK's Saturday evening television schedule. The programme's longevity was assured by the introduction of the concept of 'regeneration', through which the actor playing the Doctor could physically transform into another when required. In this manner the programme periodically reinvented itself over the twenty-six years of its initial run, before being 'rested' in 1990. Aside of a US co-production in 1996 the hiatus lasted until 2005, when the programme was successfully re-launched, achieving levels of popularity and critical acclaim that arguably surpassed even those of the original in its heyday.

As a result of its longevity, *Doctor Who* has received extensive academic attention. Two key texts have examined the impact of changing production process upon the programme's development: John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado's *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* (1983), which covers various aspects of the show's production and reception over its first twenty years; and Matt Hills' *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), which examines the 2005 re-launch. These demonstrate the extent to which the 1963 iteration of *Doctor Who* and its 2005 successor were designed by their respective production teams to maximise their appeal to audiences of the day. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are several commonalities between the two. In each, recognisably contemporary human characters (teachers Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright in the original; shop assistant Rose Tyler in the re-launch) are initially introduced in their work environments, providing ready-made points of identification for the viewer, before being spirited away at the end of their introductory episode by the Doctor (William Hartnell and Christopher Eccleston, respectively) in the TARDIS. However, the very different production eras in which these versions were made also result in direct contrasts in terms of how stories and characters are conceived, particularly with regard to the type of 'agency' allocated to the Doctor, and the extent to which narratives revolve around this character.

This article will draw upon A.J. Greimas' actantial model to investigate the impact of production context on the type of agency exercised by the character of the Doctor in early *Doctor Who*, focusing on William Hartnell's tenure from November 1963 to October 1966. While any character can possess agency, i.e. the power to influence events, the aim here is to examine how behind-the-scenes production factors influenced the extent to which the Doctor can be regarded, in Greimas' terms, as fulfilling the role of the 'subject': the central agent or protagonist. It is the mystery surrounding the Doctor's identity that provides the programme's title, which ostensibly indicates that s/he[2] should be regarded as the central character. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, in both 1963 and 2005, William Hartnell's and Christopher Ecccleston's names appear first in the on-screen credits. However, the central character need not necessarily equate with the subject in Greimas' sense, and in both versions of the programme the characters of the 'companions' play extremely proactive roles. Although, as custodian and pilot of the TARDIS, the Doctor could be read as the chief narrative driver, it is the companions' curiosity about him and his ship that provides the inciting incident for their adventures together. In the original series the question of which character is being designated as subject is arguably less apparent than in 2005, when Eccleston's Doctor, though enigmatic, is overtly pitched as a heroic figure battling clearly defined antagonists, even if the audience initially experiences these narratives through the eyes of Rose the companion. In the 1960s this positioning of the Doctor as subject is less straightforward, and the type of agency exercised by the character shifts significantly during Hartnell's three years in the role. As will be seen, in the first year of production the subject role was frequently better fulfilled by companions Ian Chesterton (William Russell) and (to a lesser extent) Barbara Wright (Jacqueline Hill), while the second year saw a transition as the Doctor began to adopt a more conventionally heroic position. In the third year the Doctor's agency, despite the character having been more clearly positioned as the subject, was again reduced, due to Hartnell's failing memory and poor overall health, and his heroic duties largely devolved to a new companion, space pilot Steven Taylor (Peter Purves). These shifts in character roles and agency were at times so radical as to seem almost *ad hoc*, reflecting the industrial pressures that characterised television drama production of the time.

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1 Time And Relative Dimensions In Space.

2 From 2018 the Doctor was played by female actor Jodie Whittaker.

2. DEFINING THE SUBJECT: AGENCY AND CHARACTER ACTANTS

H. Porter Abbott defines agency as "the capacity of an entity to cause events (that is, to engage in acts). Characters by and large are entities with agency" (2002: 187). Elsewhere, semiotician A.J. Greimas' actantial narrative model provides six fundamental character 'actants', which are outlined in three binary pairings: subject/object; sender/receiver; and helper/opposer (1983: 197-221). The subject is typically the hero, who embarks on a quest at the behest of the sender. The opposer, opposition or opponent is a character or entity that attempts to hinder the subject, and the helper the person or entity that assists the subject in achieving their object; the receiver is the beneficiary of the subject's successfully completed action. When that action is complete, the subject can be seen to have ultimately exerted a greater degree of agency than the opposer, even if they were reliant on the agency of a helper to achieve this. *Doctor Who* seldom features a clearly demarked sender in Greimas' sense,[3] but though the subject, opponent, helper, object and receiver functions can be applied to early episodes, their allocation is not always along the lines that might be expected. The central focus here will be on the question of whether the character of the Doctor can be regarded as the subject in *Doctor Who* when compared with the companion characters, and the extent to which his position as central agent (or otherwise) was influenced by production factors.

3. PRODUCTION CONTEXT

Doctor Who was originally produced by BBC Drama's Serials department, and the on-going nature of both its television narratives, which are best understood today as a series of serials, and its production process provide a marked contrast with the more carefully managed schema of the modern production, which follows more of an episodic series format.[4]

In the 1960s each 25-minute episode of *Doctor Who* was pre-recorded on videotape, usually around a month prior to transmission. Episodes were broadcast on a weekly basis for more than ten months of the year. If an actor was unavailable for studio recording days due to illness or being away on holiday, the character could be written out for the episode(s) in question, or their scenes pre-recorded on 16mm film (typically used for location work and special effects sequences) that would then be inserted during the studio videotape recording.[5] This means that in some 1960s episodes the Doctor is entirely absent, due to Hartnell being unavailable for recording.[6] This situation is difficult to imagine in the modern era, when episodes are recorded much further in advance of transmission, and actor schedules can be more carefully planned around. Following the 2005 re-launch it was not unusual to include 'Doctor-lite' episodes in which the Doctor featured less prominently, in order to allow the lead actor some respite from the production schedule without removing the character entirely. For example, in "Father's Day" (1.08) and "Turn Left" (4.11) the narrative is largely driven by, respectively, the companions Rose and Donna Noble (Catherine Tate), while in "Love & Monsters" (2.10) and "Blink" (3.10) the guest character of Elton (Marc Warren) takes on the subject role for the majority of the episode, before the Doctor appears towards the close as a *deus ex machina* to facilitate episodic resolution.

The rapid production turnaround and high number of episodes recorded in the 1960s, although extremely pressurised by modern standards, were typical of their time, and provide a marked contrast with the 2005 production, for which just thirteen 50-minute episodes and one feature-length Christmas special were recorded in a single year. The 1963 production team consisted of Head of Drama Sydney Newman, producer Verity Lambert, associate producer Mervyn Pinfield and story editor David Whitaker, though Newman adopted more of a watching brief after the first two serials, leaving Lambert and Whitaker to commission scripts from a pool of freelance writers. In 2005 the series was re-launched by executive producers Julie Gardner and Mal Young and producer Phil Collinson who, along with fellow

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3   An exception is the "The Key to Time" series (16.01-26), which sees the Doctor dispatched on a mission by the White Guardian.

4   While individual *Doctor Who* serials were not given titles until 'The Savages' in 1966, this article refers to them by the names under which they were subsequently released on DVD.

5   Examples include Carole Ann Ford's appearance in "The Warriors of Death" (1.28) and "The Bride of Sacrifice" (1.29) ("The Aztecs"), and William Russell's in "Guests of Madame Guillotine" (1.38) and "A Change of Identity" (1.39) ('The Reign of Terror').

6   Hartnell was on holiday during recording of: "The Screaming Jungle" (1.23); "The Snows of Terror" (1.24); "The Search" (2.28); "The Meddling Monk" (2.37); "The Sea Beggar" (3.23); "The Hall of Dolls" (3.31); and "The Dancing Floor" (3.32). He also missed "The End of Tomorrow" (2.07) due to injury and "The Tenth Planet: Episode 3" (4.07) due to illness. His appearance in "The Singing Sands" (1.15) was reduced due to being ill during rehearsals. Other episodes in which he was present for recording but did not, for reasons unknown, feature prominently are episodes "The Abandoned Planet" (3.20) and "Destruction of Time" (3.21) of "The Daleks' Master Plan" and episode three (3.40) of "The Savages".

executive and 'showrunner' Russell T. Davies, were responsible for the commissioning of stories and overall shaping of series (also known as 'seasons'). The modern showrunner also writes the majority of the stories, arguably resulting in an increased sense of authorial 'voice' and greater opportunity for the long-term crafting of characters than was possible in 1963.

4. YEAR 1: 1963-1964

For the first series of *Doctor Who*, broadcast from November 1963 to September 1964, the regular cast comprises (in typical order of billing): the Doctor, Ian, Barbara, and Susan (Carole Ann Ford), the Doctor's granddaughter, who it is indicated is also an alien. According to Stephen Heath's interpretation of Greimas' model, a single actant function can be performed by more than one agent, while one character can perform multiple actant roles (1981: 179). This is useful when considering which of the regular quartet can be considered the main subject (or subjects). While it has since become an established trend in *Doctor Who* lore to refer to any regular other than the Doctor as either a 'companion' or an 'assistant' – literally a 'helper' – it is debatable to what extent Ian and Barbara are confined to this role in the early adventures, which also see the Doctor frequently acting in opposition to them. The title of the first episode, "An Unearthly Child" (1.01), suggests that the otherworldly Susan will be the focus, yet Susan has little or no agency in the story; a pattern that continues for much of Ford's time on the series. It is Susan's advanced academic abilities – and occasional lack thereof – that spark her teachers Barbara and Ian's curiosity, prompting them to follow her home one evening in the hope of meeting her mysterious grandfather. When Susan seems to disappear inside a junkyard owned (according to a sign on the door) by an I.M. Foreman, the teachers follow her inside, only to encounter the Doctor, who caustically evinces ignorance of Susan's existence until her voice is heard from inside a police telephone box in the yard. The Doctor's attempts to prevent Ian entering the box are unsuccessful, and he and Barbara force their way into what transpires to be the TARDIS. The Doctor refuses Susan's entreaties to release her teachers, and instead sets the craft in motion, taking the quartet away from twentieth century London and into Earth's prehistoric past.

Character agency in this episode is divided primarily between Barbara and Ian, characters conceived by the production team to provide the viewers' entry into the time travellers' world and chief point of identification, and the irascible and condescending Doctor. As the audience first encounters the teachers in their reassuringly normal school environment, it is they who can most clearly be recognised as the subjects – at least for this first adventure – with Susan and the Doctor cast as mysterious outsiders; the 'other' or uncanny. It is, after all, the teachers' attempt to uncover the mystery surrounding Susan that leads them into the TARDIS, and ultimately to a series of wanderings through time and space. When first introduced the Doctor is playing the role of opponent, attempting (unsuccessfully) to deflect the teachers' curiosity in the junkyard, and mocking their lack of comprehension after they force their way into his craft. The Doctor's agency as opponent is limited to giving Ian a brief electric shock when he attempts to touch the TARDIS control console, and then setting the machine in flight when he decides against releasing the teachers. However, this act is partially sabotaged when Susan tussles with her grandfather in an attempt to stop him, resulting in a turbulent take-off.

There is little indication in "An Unearthly Child" (1.01-04) that the Doctor is intended to be read as a heroic figure, and while it is his control of the TARDIS – or lack thereof – that drives the majority of subsequent narratives, it is debatable whether this represents the agency of a subject. In addition, a brief overview of the early stories makes it clear that the Doctor's efforts to influence events frequently produce results opposite to his intention. In the second serial, "The Daleks" (1.05-11), the Doctor's ruse of pretending to have run out of mercury in order to engineer a visit to the alien city discovered by the crew results in them becoming genuinely stranded when its inhabitants, the eponymous Daleks, relieve him of the fluid link: a vital component of the TARDIS's drive. In "The Keys of Marinus" (1.21-26), the Doctor's more altruistic defence of Ian on a murder charge merely serves to further convince the court of his guilt. In contrast, when examining the roles of companions Ian and Barbara, it becomes clear that in series one it is often their efforts to resolve the situations in which the Doctor has placed them that are most effective, arguably situating them as the subjects, and the Doctor as either their opponent or helper.

This trend first appears in the second episode of "An Unearthly Child", "The Cave of Skulls" (1.02), in which the TARDIS crew are captured by cavemen. Whereas the Doctor seems ready to surrender to their fate as captives, Ian takes the initiative and strives to free them from their bindings. Only after a terse exchange with Ian does the Doctor begin

contributing suggestions that might aid him. Throughout this adventure it is Ian's and to a lesser extent Barbara's decisions and actions that achieve the group's goal of escape and return to the TARDIS, the Doctor only reluctantly acquiescing in order to ensure his and Susan's safety. At times the Doctor also acts (albeit ineffectually) to frustrate the teachers, once more fulfilling the role of opponent. When Ian and Barbara interrupt their escape to help the wounded tribe leader Za (Derek Newark), it is implied that the Doctor is prepared to murder the caveman to effect a getaway. Ian blocks this move, and the bond that is consequently formed between Za and the travellers ensures their survival, albeit as his prisoners. It is also Ian's decision to share the secret of fire with Za that enables the latter to regain leadership of his people, making him the story's primary receiver and once again guaranteeing the continued safety of the TARDIS crew. Interestingly, the act of agency that facilitates a return to the ship comes from Susan, who suggests lighting a fire under the skulls in their cave prison to deceive the tribe into thinking they have died. This inspiration, which positions Susan as helper to subjects Ian and Barbara, allows all four travellers to escape in the resulting commotion, but is of a type that will prove increasingly rare for Susan.

The pattern of the companions taking the initiative while the Doctor hinders them – or does little to provide effective assistance unless his or Susan's safety comes under threat – is continued in "The Daleks". This story revolves around a binary between the 'evil' Daleks and the 'good' Thals, offering a seemingly straightforward opponent/helper structure[7] in which the Thals' battle against the Daleks is triggered by the arrival of the Doctor et al, who convince them that an attack on the Dalek city is necessary to rid them of their oppressors. Here, Ian is clearly cast as subject/hero. Significantly, he attempts to inspire the Thals to take up arms against their enemies even before the loss of the fluid link is discovered. The Doctor, however, acts first as opponent, mocking Ian's initial failure to win them over, and then reluctant helper, devising a plan of attack only when he realises that the travellers will need the Thals' assistance to retrieve the fluid link. Throughout the serial, Ian and Barbara demonstrate the agency of subjects; while their arduous mission to infiltrate the Dalek city is a success, the frontal assault led by the Doctor and Susan only results in them being taken hostage.

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7 This opponent/helper binary can be applied to the various characters encountered by the TARDIS crew, whether visiting alien worlds or scenarios from Earth's history.

The differing agency accorded to the regulars in these early stories is reflected in the casting of the male leads, which was in turn influenced by the initial series concept. Written in March 1963, BBC Script Department writer C.E. 'Bunny' Webber's earliest notes for what would evolve into *Doctor Who* list just three main characters: "THE HANDSOME YOUNG MAN HERO (first character) ... THE HANDSOME WELL-DRESSED HEROINE AGED ABOUT 30 (Second character) ... THE MATURER MAN, 35-40, WITH SOME 'CHARACTER' TWIST (Third character)" (Howe et al. 1994: 169-70). By May Sydney Newman had significantly revised this list, which now comprised 'Dr. Who' (who had clearly become the main character in Newman's mind) (Howe et al. 1994: 43), 15-year-old Biddy (later Sue, then Susan, included at Newman's behest), Miss McGovern/Lola (later Barbara) and Cliff (later Ian) (Howe et al. 1994: 174). The primacy given here to the male characters is not untypical of the time, other popular evening drama productions of the day being focused around male protagonists, e.g. *Maigret* (1960-1963); *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (1962-1970); *Z-Cars* (1962-1978). However, there is clearly already a conceptual tension between the central character and the 'hero'. While 'Dr. Who' is "senile but with extraordinary flashes of intellectual brilliance", Cliff/Ian is "physically perfect, strong and courageous, a gorgeous dish" (Howe et al. 1994: 43). This contrast is reflected in the casting of Williams Hartnell and Russell. Although Hartnell, who as already stated received top billing, had a higher profile in terms of film roles, he had not truly been a 'leading man' since appearing in a series of light comedy shorts in the 1930s, and was seldom cast in a traditional heroic mould. His film work in the 1940s and 1950s largely consisted of second leads and supporting character roles, whether playing police detective Harris, tracking down Rex Harrison's 'innocent on the run' in *Escape* (1948), or gangster Darrow, villainous second fiddle to Richard Attenborough's Pinkie Brown in *Brighton Rock* (1948). On television, Hartnell was best known as the short-tempered Sergeant Major Bullimore in the first and last series of *The Army Game* (1957-1960). Here he received top billing on screen as a member of a sitcom ensemble, but his status as lead actor is compromised by the fact that, when he opted not to appear in series two, the programme continued successfully without him. By contrast, while William Russell lacked Hartnell's extensive film experience, his television work consisted of leading roles in popular series and serials such as *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (1956-1957), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1957) and *St Ives* (1955; 1960). If Hartnell was a respected character actor, Russell represented a more typical

heroic lead, and it could be argued that this status is reflected in their respective characters' agency in the initial stages of *Doctor Who*'s production. Even if the Doctor was the main character, Ian was clearly conceived as the subject/hero.

Playing Barbara, Jacqueline Hill was also a well-established television actor, having had major (though not leading) roles in serials such as *Joyous Errand* (1957) and *The Six Proud Walkers* (1962). She had also starred in a number of acclaimed single dramas, including the British version of *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (*BBC Sunday-Night Theatre*, 8.13, 1957), opposite a young Sean Connery. Perhaps reflecting this range, the character of Barbara is accorded greater agency in some stories than others, her background as a history teacher proving useful during adventures set in the past. She is also arguably given greater depth of characterisation than most other original series characters. There are, for example, hints of a romance with Ganatus (Philip Bond), a Thal helper, in "The Daleks", followed by an implied attraction to Leon Colbert (Edward Brayshaw), a French Revolution opponent posing as a helper, in "The Reign of Terror" (1.37-42). However, these character subtleties largely disappear in the second series, when Barbara and Ian begin sharing subject agency more equally with the Doctor. The series one serial in which Barbara is given the greatest scope for subject agency is "The Aztecs" (1.27-30). After landing in fifteenth century Mexico, Barbara is mistaken for the human incarnation of the goddess Yetaxa. Drawing upon her extensive knowledge of the period, Barbara determines to use her newfound influence to encourage the Aztec people to break away from the tradition of human sacrifice. Throughout the serial it is Barbara's determination to pursue this aim, despite the Doctor (now acting as helper) warning her of its futility, which drives the narrative. Barbara ultimately fails to achieve her goals, despite the potential agency her knowledge gives her, and at the close of the story she is seen to acknowledge that the Doctor in fact knows best. It is interesting to consider the allocation of agency in this story from a gender perspective. Despite the fact that Barbara is given the lion's share of narrative action in "The Aztecs" and – like the Doctor in earlier stories – is unable to influence events in the way she would wish, her failure here is predestined; a fact the Doctor is first to point out.

As stated earlier, Susan was conceived as a character for younger viewers to identify with and 'get into trouble' and is seldom allowed a significant degree of subject agency by writers. Although she is, like the Doctor, an extra-terrestrial, possessed of far greater technological knowledge than Ian

or Barbara, hers is the character most frequently placed in jeopardy, either through curiosity, a reluctance to follow advice/instructions, or physical weakness or injury. Only in "The Sensorites" (1.31-36) does Susan's latent telepathy provide her with a significant degree of influence over events, due to her ability to communicate with the titular aliens. However, this power is later revealed to be largely a result of her proximity to the Sense Sphere, and deserts her at the serial's conclusion. In these ways Susan, who arguably has greater potential as a subject than either Ian or Barbara, is instead frequently positioned as a less than entirely competent helper, and thus sets a precedent for many of the female juveniles that would succeed her in the original series run. Again, this provides a contrast with the 2005 production, in which the character of Rose is conceived by Russell T Davies as a far more proactive and independently minded female character than was seen in the 1960s.

Although the Doctor is given a less clearly heroic role than Ian and Barbara in early stories, he possesses far greater agency than his granddaughter. The teachers often rely on the more knowledgeable Doctor as helper to provide the resolution to their dilemma, as in "The Aztecs" where he eventually devises a means of gaining access to the tomb containing the TARDIS. On some occasions the Doctor alone is able to take the lead; in "The Edge of Destruction" (1.11-12), he is first to understand the cause of the jeopardy in which the TARDIS has placed the crew. It is notable that in the later stories of series one the Doctor begins to take a more consistently proactive subject role. In "The Sensorites" it is he, not Ian, that makes the vital discovery of who has been poisoning the aliens' water supply when they visit the Sense Sphere. "The Reign of Terror", the final story of the series, sees him working capably and independently of his companions, and one of the pleasures of this adventure is the comparative ease with which the Doctor, posing (significantly) as an authority figure, a Regional Officer of the Provinces, manages escapes and disguises with ease while the other regular characters spend much of the story as prisoners and refugees. In hindsight, these later series one stories pave the way for the future development of the Doctor's actantial role.

It is important here to highlight the fact that the writers commissioned for the first series of *Doctor Who* would have been working initially to the original character briefs, along with whatever guidance was provided by the production team, particularly story editor David Whitaker. As early as the unscreened 'pilot' of "An Unearthly Child", Sydney Newman had provided notes on the need for the Doctor to

be more humorous and less abrasive. While there is no surviving written evidence that the production team deliberately chose to make the Doctor into more of a helper than opponent after "The Edge of Destruction", it is this story, scripted by Whitaker, that provides a clear turning point. However, later incoming writers such as Louis Marks, Bill Strutton and Glyn Jones had the opportunity to watch those stories from series one in which Hartnell's character was both more altruistic and proactive, making it more likely they would write to this 'template'. Therefore, while a character 'arc' of sorts emerges for the Doctor over series one, it is not the carefully pre-planned type of the 2005 re-launch, in which Russell T Davies conceived the gradual mellowing of Eccleston's Doctor as a process that unfolds gradually over thirteen episodes. While Davies' journal *Doctor Who: The Writer's Tale: The Final Chapter* (2010) makes it clear that the conception of characters in the 'new' series can also be subject to unforeseen pressures, these are typically dealt with long before episodes go into production; a far cry from the rapid turnaround of the 1960s series.

5. **YEAR 2: 1964-1965**

The second series of *Doctor Who* was broadcast between October 1964 and July 1965. In the on-screen narrative the character of Susan departs at the conclusion of "The Dalek Invasion of Earth" (2.04-09), to be swiftly replaced in "The Rescue" (2.10-11) by Vicki (Maureen O'Brien), Ford's contract not having been renewed.[8] The penultimate serial of the year, "The Chase" (2.30-35), then sees Ian and Barbara depart, Steven Taylor joining Vicki as the Doctor's companion.

In this series the emphasis on Ian and Barbara as subjects is significantly lessened, and many of the subtleties of characterisation seen in earlier stories are lost, as for example the occasional romantic attractions between Barbara and supporting characters. In addition, stories increasingly feature a more equal division of narrative labour between the Doctor, Ian and Barbara – though not Susan or her replacement, Vicki. It now becomes more common for characters to separate early in each adventure, leaving the Doctor to follow his own narrative thread instead of accompanying Ian and/or Barbara. As a result, the Doctor takes an increasingly prominent subject role. While still irascible and flawed, by the time of Ian and Barbara's departure he has become the heroic protagonist, with new companions Vicki and Steven clearly fulfilling the role of helpers.

The reasons underpinning these changes could be twofold. Carole Ann Ford's departure was an early indication of the many cast changes that would subsequently occur with increasing frequency. While William Russell and Jacqueline Hill opted to remain for the majority of the second series, when they left they were replaced with a single character, Steven Taylor, played by Peter Purves. Although Purves later achieved fame as a long-serving *Blue Peter* (1958-) presenter, at this time he was not a high-profile television performer, and it could be argued that – unlike Russell and Hill – he was no match for William Hartnell in terms of 'star' reputation. The actor/character hierarchy, less clear during the first year of production, was now more comprehensibly defined. The Doctor was not only the central character, but also the subject/hero. For his part, Hartnell showed no indication of wishing to leave a high-profile role in what had become an extremely popular series. With this in mind, the gradual shift in narrative focus onto the Doctor is understandable.

Secondly, the departure of story editor David Whitaker after "The Dalek Invasion of Earth", combined with Sydney Newman's gradual withdrawal as he focused on other areas of BBC Drama, meant two key figures in terms of shaping the original characters were no longer involved. While producer Verity Lambert remained with the show for another year, she did not take a direct role in the writing process, and Whitaker's replacement, Dennis Spooner, brought a more populist approach. It is notable that, under his aegis, the series also became more generically fluid. The historical adventures began venturing into the realms of comedy with "The Romans" (2.12-15) and "The Time Meddler" (2.36-39), and while viewing figures indicate that *Doctor Who* continued to be a family favourite, much of the gravitas and depth of characterisation found in series one gradually dissipated. This can clearly be observed in relation to new companion Vicki. Following a strong introduction in "The Rescue", in which Maureen O'Brien offers subtle shades of characterisation, the character is thereafter frequently positioned as the Doctor's acquiescent helper, and like Susan is rarely accorded subject agency.

Following Dennis Spooner's arrival *Doctor Who* arguably becomes a more formulaic adventure serial, while still

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8   Ford has claimed she left the series due to frustration at Susan's lack of character development: "I don't think they knew how to write for me as they did for Jackie and Russ [William Russell]. And in a way I lost my direction too when all my lovely ideas about what I hoped to do were smashed down, leaving only a shell: a two-dimensional character instead of a many-faceted character, which would have been more interesting to watch and more interesting to do" (cited in Bentham 1986: 205-206).

retaining certain of the basic patterns established in the first year. The balance between science fiction serials and historical stories continues, and the Doctor's inability to pilot the TARDIS remains the inciting incident for each story. However, the model of Ian and Barbara as subject/heroes, embroiled in a situation for which the Doctor's knowledge or ingenuity is required to extricate them, is largely replaced by one in which the Doctor, Ian and Barbara each become involved in a central story strand, taking the role of separate subjects. This pattern of the TARDIS crew splitting up early in the narrative first appears in Susan's final two stories, "Planet of Giants" (2.01-03) and 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth', and can later be seen in "The Romans", "The Web Planet" (2.16-21) and "The Crusade" (2.22-25). In each of these the Doctor follows his own narrative path, usually apart from Ian and Barbara, before the regulars reunite in the final episode. Whereas series one typically featured characters working together to resolve narrative enigmas, perhaps with one split away from the others, in series two they spend less time as a team. An exception is "The Space Museum" (2.26-29), in which the crew remain together throughout the opening instalment. However, after the first episode the pattern of division and re-pairing is then repeated.

The result of this separation of the regulars is that the Doctor is not relegated to the position of helper as often as in series one. This role is instead fulfilled either by Susan, who is paired with the Doctor for much of "Planet of Giants" and "The Dalek Invasion of Earth", or Vicki, who accompanies the Doctor in "The Romans", "The Crusade" and, in its latter segment, "The Web Planet". Even those episodes from which the Doctor is absent still demonstrate his agency. In episode three of "The Space Museum" he is removed for preparation as an exhibit after resisting Morok governor Lobos's (Richard Shaw) attempt to cross-examine him, thus preventing his antagonist from obtaining access to the TARDIS, and so directly influencing the course of events. These stories also typically see Ian and Barbara separated early on, as in "The Romans", "The Web Planet" and "The Crusade". These companions are now rarely paired with the Doctor, who now has his own narrative to follow, whether maintaining his imposture of lyre player Maximus Pettulian in "The Romans" or counselling King Richard in "The Crusade". Only in "The Web Planet" does the Doctor become reliant on his companions after he and Vicki are captured by the Animus, necessitating their rescue by Barbara and Ian.

In this way, the subject agency previously accorded to Ian and Barbara is now shared equally between them and the

Doctor. Only in their final adventure together, "The Chase", do the travellers again work together for the majority of the story, in which the TARDIS crew is pursued by the Daleks. This story is notable for the fact that the Doctor's piloting of the TARDIS for once takes centre stage, rushing from one planet and time period to another in order to elude their pursuers. Given that writer Terry Nation would have been aware of the need to provide Ian and Barbara with a definitive exit at the end of the serial, it is perhaps not surprising that in "The Chase" they primarily play the role of helpers, and the Doctor is now clearly positioned as the central subject. Even Ian and Barbara's return to their own time using the Dalek time capsule can only be facilitated by the Doctor reluctantly programming it; his companions, formerly the subject/heroes, are now wholly reliant on his agency.

In 'The Time Meddler', the final story in the second series, the character of Steven replaces Ian and Barbara, and the TARDIS crew becomes a trio; a pattern that would be maintained for the next four years.[9] Theoretically this reduction in the number of core characters allows for a more equal allocation of narrative action, but in fact the decrease only serves to reinforce the centrality of the Doctor. Steven, initially positioned as a brash 'action man' figure, soon clashes with the Doctor, who is irritated by his refusal to believe they have travelled in time. As a result, the Doctor spends little time in this story with his new companion, who is instead paired with Vicki. Although the Doctor is absent from episode two due to Hartnell being on holiday, he is again the main narrative driver of the serial, vigorously uncovering a plot by the Monk (Peter Butterworth), a member of his own race, to alter the Battle of Hastings. While the Doctor is foiling this plan, helpers Steven and Vicki spend the majority of the serial either attempting to locate him or being outfoxed by the Monk. Their actions have little impact on the final outcome, in which the Doctor strands his rival in the eleventh century. This scenario would be difficult to imagine for the more proactive Ian and Barbara just one year earlier, and it demonstrates the extent to which the Doctor has been repositioned as subject at the expense of his companion/helpers.

By the conclusion of series two the Doctor has clearly become the primary subject in *Doctor Who*, not only in terms of providing the central enigma, but also as an agent capable of independently overcoming narrative obstacles and influ-

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9   A reduction of the regular cast had been considered in May 1964, when Head of Script Department Donald Wilson suggested dropping Barbara and replacing Susan with a younger character (cited in Howe et al 1994: 258). From 1970 the Doctor was typically accompanied/assisted by a single female companion.

encing events. Whether this was a deliberate narrative innovation on the parts of Dennis Spooner and Verity Lambert, or a pragmatic response to the departures of Ford, Russell and Hill, it was a pattern that seemed set to continue into the third series. However, the question of character agency soon became complicated due to further developments behind the scenes.

6. **YEAR 3: 1965-1966**

The third series of *Doctor Who* was broadcast between November 1965 and July 1966, and proved to be an unsettled one, numerous personnel changes taking place both on-screen and behind the scenes. After the third series, Hartnell then appeared in two stories from series four, "The Smugglers" (4.01-04) and "The Tenth Planet" (4.05-08), before being replaced by Patrick Troughton in November 1966.

In narrative terms, the early departure of Vicki in "The Myth Makers" (3.06-09) is followed by the introduction and near-instantaneous removal of companions Katarina (Adrienne Hill) and Sara (Jean Marsh), followed by the arrival of Dodo (Jackie Lane) in "The Daleks' Master Plan" (3.10-21). Both Steven and Dodo are then written out before the end of the year, to be replaced in "The War Machines" (3.42-45) by Ben (Michael Craze) and Polly (Anneke Wills), who oversee the transition from Hartnell to Troughton; the first example of 'regeneration' (though it is not yet referred to as such).

This period also saw Verity Lambert step down as producer, replaced first by John Wiles and later by Innes Lloyd. Dennis Spooner had handed the story editing reins for "The Time Meddler" to Donald Tosh, who was then replaced by Gerry Davis. Both the Wiles/Tosh and Lloyd/Davis teams had definite (and contrasting) ideas about the direction the programme should take, resulting in a high turnover of new companions. These changes proved a source of irritation to William Hartnell (Carney 1996: 163), while the arteriosclerosis that would eventually curtail his career had also begun to impair his ability to memorise lines, making him increasingly difficult to work with. Verity Lambert sent director Richard Martin a memo protesting at the substantial changing of lines in rehearsals as early as February 1965, though Hartnell is not specifically named as a culprit (cited in Howe et al 1994: 283-284). However, her successor later recalled problems in this area: "It may well have been that [Hartnell] was physically not in the best of health and so could not learn the lines. Consequently studio days could be absolute purgatory for ev-

eryone" (Wiles 1983: 7). The idea of recasting the Doctor was first mooted by Wiles for "The Celestial Toymaker" (3.30-33), in which the Doctor was temporarily made invisible. Wiles was overruled on this occasion, but replacement producer Innes Lloyd, while enjoying a better working relationship with Hartnell, soon decided that it was time for his tenure to end (Howe et al. 1994: 316).

As a result, the type of agency allocated to the regular characters varies significantly over series three, and it is at this point that the pressures of the programme's weekly production turnaround become most apparent. At the outset, it seems clear that the production team intend the Doctor to continue as subject. He is accorded a significant share of the action in "The Myth Makers", and in "The Daleks' Master Plan" takes, if anything, a more proactive role than has formerly been the case. Until now the Doctor's function has been to respond to the peril in which he and his companions find themselves – a reactive role – but here it is he who decides to take the fight to the Daleks, announcing his intention to warn Earth of the galactic alliance that he has uncovered on the planet Kembel, and stealing the core of their Time Destructor in a bid to thwart their plans. This incident demonstrates the change that has taken place since "The Daleks", when the Doctor was prepared to abandon the Thals to their fate. In the next story, "The Massacre of St Bartholomew's Eve" (3.22-25), the Doctor is absent for two episodes. It is in this serial that Steven first takes on the role of subject, driving the narrative from episode one onwards. However, this is not due to Hartnell being incapacitated or unavailable, as the actor instead plays the Doctor's villainous double, the Abbott of Ambois, whom Steven believes to be the Doctor in disguise. Then, in "The Celestial Toymaker", the Doctor literally disappears while playing the Trilogic Game with the titular mandarin (Michael Gough). Although the narrative retains the character as mute and invisible while Hartnell is away on holiday, there is now a more obvious absence at the story's core, meaning that Steven and Dodo transcend their usual helper roles to become subjects, forced to play the Toymaker's games in order to retrieve the TARDIS. While the Doctor is reasonably proactive in "The Ark" (3.26-29), "The Gunfighters" (3.34-37) sees him deprived of agency by the characters of Wyatt Earp (John Alderson) and Doc Holliday (Anthony Jacobs), who adopt subject roles as they take on the Clanton gang for the infamous gunfight at the OK Corral. As a result, the Doctor is forced, like Steven and Dodo, into a combined role of helper and provider of light comic relief (which former comedy star Hartnell capably

performs). In "The Savages" (3.38-41) the Doctor is again absent from much of the narrative after being subjected to an energy transfer process, and Steven once more takes on the subject role – perhaps naturally, this being Purves' final story. "The War Machines" then introduces Ben and Polly as the Doctor's new helpers, and the former carries much of the narrative as he assists the Doctor in battling super-computer WOTAN.

This gradual diminution of the Doctor's subject role is perhaps best explained by Donald Tosh's claim that Hartnell was increasingly unable to cope with lengthy dialogue, which meant much of his exposition now devolved to Peter Purves: "[Peter] was absolutely solid as a rock, frequently at the last minute, because Bill would suddenly cut something, and you'd think 'Nobody is going to understand the next episode at all unless this line goes in.' So one would slide down onto the floor and very quietly slip a note to Peter" (Tosh 2011).

It could be argued that, while ostensibly positioned as the Doctor's 'helper', in series three Steven begins to assume a subject status similar to that of Ian and Barbara in the early stories. This trend continues with the arrival of Ben and Polly, and in "The Tenth Planet", Hartnell's final story, Michael Craze and Anneke Wills are left to drive the narrative throughout episode three, as the ailing Hartnell was unable to attend rehearsals and recording. It is clear here that Hartnell's absence is unplanned, as some of the Doctor's dialogue is awkwardly parcelled out to other characters.

7. AN ALTERNATIVE AGENT?

Before concluding, there is another aspect of agency in early *Doctor Who* deserving of consideration. As already stated, much of the Doctor's agency, either as opponent, helper or subject, derives from his piloting of the TARDIS. However, the fact that the Doctor is unable to accurately control his craft is regularly reinforced, and his efforts to return Ian and Barbara to twentieth century Earth usually result in them arriving in the wrong time zone, whether past ("The Aztecs", "The Reign of Terror", "The Romans", "The Crusade") or future ("The Dalek Invasion of Earth"). This still represents agency, in that the Doctor is able to influence events; however, it is not in the manner he intends. Perhaps as significantly, it is the TARDIS's arrival at each new location that provides the trigger for subsequent narrative developments, and many adventures in the first series revolve around the fact that the Doctor and his friends have either been physical separated from their ship

("The Aztecs", "The Reign of Terror") or deprived of access to it ("Marco Polo" [1.14-20], "The Keys of Marinus"). Drawing on Heath's assertion that an agent need not be visible, present, or even a human being (1981: 179), it could be argued that the TARDIS in fact possesses the greatest degree of agency in *Doctor Who*. In Greimas' terms, this makes the TARDIS the sender, regularly dispatching the Doctor subject and his companion helpers on their latest adventures, and while the concept of the TARDIS as a sentient being, later made evident in stories such as "The Doctor's Wife" (6.4), is not fully developed at this stage, it is interesting to consider that this element was implicit from the outset.

8. CONCLUSION

At the time of writing, the re-launched *Doctor Who*, now with Chris Chibnall as showrunner, is launching its twelfth series. The thirteenth Doctor, played by Jodie Whittaker, is accompanied by three 'friends' (as opposed to 'companions' or 'assistants'), Graham O'Brien (Bradley Walsh), Ryan Sinclair (Tosin Cole) and Yaz Khan (Mandip Gill), on whom she has proved more than usually reliant – again raising questions with regard to the allocation of subject and helper roles. While the developing relationship between Graham and step-grandson Ryan provided series eleven's emotional spine, fan protest at the perceived under-use of Yaz has resulted in Chibnall promising the character a more prominent role (Jeffery 2018). While in modern *Doctor Who* this kind of character arc can be carefully planned more than a year in advance of transmission, the production context of the 1960s meant such considered developments were simply not possible, as reflected in the on-going adjustments to the type of agency accorded to the Doctor. Hartnell's character began as an antagonistic opponent to subjects Ian and Barbara, before then becoming their helper, and ultimately taking on a subject role that continued throughout his second series. In his third year, while still ostensibly signalled as subject, his agency diminished, meaning companions Steven and Ben increasingly undertook responsibility for carrying the narrative. This article has aimed to demonstrate that this fluctuation in agency type was due primarily to the production pressures that typified the UK television industry of the day, and provides a fascinating historical snapshot of a programme that evolved character and narrative on an almost impromptu basis – particularly when compared to the more considered, long-term approach employed in the twenty-first century.

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'THE SECOND WHAT'. SCIENCE, TRAGEDY AND THE MENTAL ABYSS IN *FORENSIC FILES*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a few episodes of the television series *Forensic Files* (1996-) as a means of explaining connections between mind reading, the tragic and true crime. The tragic as a concept and the challenges of mind reading are described in order to explain the role assigned to science in the series. *Forensic Files* is a homage to science and forensics, but some important aspects of the retold crimes are often disregarded. This article problematizes the role of thoughts, feelings and intentions in *Forensic Files*. The aim is to underline the significance of the lack of attention paid to the psychological dimension of true crimes in the series, as well as to expose the tragic range of these retold fatal crime stories. A crucial gap in the process of understanding and judging a perpetrator is named 'the second what', a factor that demonstrates an essential connection between true crime cases and our ability to read minds.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of readers and viewers are fascinated by stories about crimes that have actually been committed. In recent years, there has been an abundance of true crime novels, films, TV series, podcasts and blogs, spanning a wide range of formats and subgenres. A true crime series was launched in 1996 that has been produced for almost 25 years under three different names (*Medical Detectives*, *Forensic Files*, *Forensic Files II*). In the hundreds of episodes that have been made, forensic scientists are revered as heroes in the fight for truth and justice. Almost all of the episodes end reassuringly with an arrest as a consequence of meticulous, methodical and scientific scrutiny. There is a blind spot, however. The mental life and psychology of the perpetrators are largely neglected in the *Forensic Files* episodes, despite this element of 'inner life' being of fundamental importance to justice being served, with regard to a murderer's soundness of mind, guilt and responsibility.

The context for my comments and analysis of some of the episodes (accessible on YouTube) is the tragic as a concept and, to some extent, tragedy as a genre. The true crime stories always have victims and are marked by a sense of tragic loss. The grandeur and depths of tragedy are present in many of the *Forensic Files* episodes: a sense that some metaphysical scheme is playing with us humans and making us suffer for small mistakes, such as ignoring warning signs or mistaken trust in someone the victim thought she or he knew very well. People are punished for not reading the mind of the person who wants to harm them, for being blind. The tragedies are not only caused by coincidences and mishaps, but by mind-blindness, the failure to see what was going on in another person's mind.

1. *FORENSIC FILES* AND CRIME DOCUMENTARIES

True crime narratives often focus on particularly gruesome murders, with vivid details of cruel killings, dead bodies and forensic finesse. During the process of narrating the events, true crime not only focuses on the criminal acts and investigation, but also on motives, intentions and psychology. We need to understand what was going on in the minds of those involved, whether they were the perpetrators, victims, relatives or police detectives, in order to appreciate the crime story. The perpetrator's state of mind is particularly import-

ant for whether he or she acknowledges guilt, but these inner, mental states are complex and frustratingly hard to grasp. It seems plausible that cognitive psychology, or the theory of mind reading, can provide some insight into the 'inner reality' of a crime. Although we can never actually see directly into another person's mind, we can learn something about the human mind via implications and probabilities, and point to some crucial challenges for the acknowledgment of guilt and ensuring justice is served.

Forensic Files was originally produced by the American television production company Medstar Television and distributed by the television company and streaming network FilmRise. The episodes in the series have been distributed on platforms such as Netflix, The Roku Channel, HBO, Pluto, Amazon, Apple, and YouTube. The series started in 1996 (initially under the name *Medical Detectives*). There are more than 400 episodes, with each lasting for approximately 20 minutes. The series continues under the name *Forensic Files II* since February 2020. Every episode focuses expressly on the role forensic science plays in solving a crime, usually a murder. The series is presented as follows at the International Movie Database:

> Police increasingly utilize scientific laboratory analysis to solve crimes. This program reviews and re-enacts dramatic cases from around the world in which forensic scientists find and examine previously undetectable evidence. Through their hard work, criminals are brought to justice and the innocent are set free.[1]

The viewers witness how investigators and scientists use "cutting-edge forensics to crack the most baffling criminal cases".[2] The science behind the crime is often shown by portraying conscientious scientists in ways that set out to impress the viewers, showing them using high-tech equipment diligently and with precision. The investigators and forensic scientists are usually shown as heroes, by convincingly proving how a crime was committed, however seemingly unsolvable. The *Forensic Files* stories are anchored in science.

The *Forensic Files* episodes are so-called "reenactment programs" (Murley 2008: 109), which mix actors' reenactment of events with interviews with real victims, witnesses, family members, investigators, examining magistrates, pathologists,

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1 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0247882/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (last accessed 07-05-20).

2 https://nb-no.facebook.com/forensicfiles/ (last accessed 17-02-20).

lawyers and even occasionally the criminals. Actors and actual participants in the crime cases appear one after another in a reenactment/interview montage format using documentary techniques such as voice-over, simulations, interviews, still photographs, and authentic footage of detectives and forensics experts at work. In the semi-fictional techniques employed in these episodes, the actors do not always look like the actual persons involved, and what actually happened at the murder scene might be based on supposition. Time is compressed, and the action speeded up. Camera angles and music can heighten the tension, at times reminiscent of horror films. A soundtrack often cues the viewer's emotions to the appropriate feelings, such as fear or sorrow.

All the *Forensic Files* episodes are based on real life cases, usually in the USA, and use real personal and geographical names, exact dates, locations, everyday details, and often intimate minutiae. As is common in true crime, forensic science procedures take up a considerable part of the story. In the intro sequence to each episode, we watch a collage of scientific instruments and several scientists operating, indicating intriguing scientific precision. Forensic tools and scientific equipment, such as fingerprint brushes and microscopes, "prove" that science will find the answers. In almost all of the episodes, tiny details are studied and provide vital clues to catching the culprit. It may be a hair, a small fiber, blood splatter on clothes, traces of fingerprints, dental records, or DNA left on the dead body. The implied message is, as is common in true crime, that "science can conquer the irrational and extract order from chaos" (Murley 2008: 132). The murderer may be an enigma, but his or her actions are placed within a framework of science and objectivity (Murley 2008: 81), or what is called "the medico-scientific discourses of the forensic examination" (Biressi 2001: 161). As is common in true crime, there is "an ongoing dialectic of murder as both mystery and a collection of scientific facts" (Murley 2008: 151).

The reenactments are always interpretations of events, usually produced several years after the killings, and unreliable for this and other reasons. Recreated situations might always be contested, as they are based on police reports or witness testimonies, or even conjecture. Enormous amounts of details are unknown, and much is intentionally left out. There is often excessive attention to a few details that were crucial in solving the crime – but all the details have to be interpreted. Authentic video footage made by the police or journalists is not entirely trustworthy, for it is often unclear what the events and details we see, actually *mean*. What do they prove? There is "always unsafe divisions between fact and fiction", declares Anita Biressi, an expert on the true crime genre (2001: 57). Often in true crime "[f]acts are selected, shaped, and twisted to fit the crime formulas being used" (Fishman and Cavender 1998: 154). Many criminals in the episodes are judged on circumstantial evidence, and we know that convicted felons are sometimes subsequently proven innocent. As several of the *Forensic Files* episodes can testify, even a confession from a suspect might be false.[3]

The tendency in crime documentaries is to individualize. Very little attention is assigned to social structures that may lead to crime. The focus is on individual agency. "In most true-crime narratives, the act of murder is isolated and presented as entirely separate from any social forces apart from the grave flaws in the killer's family origin, and eventually the demented characteristics of the killer himself/herself" (Murley 2008: 153-4). This tendency may derive from the conservative-liberal agenda of the media companies that produce such documentary series, holding individual persons responsible for misdoings rather than society as a more or less deterministic system. An additional factor is that it is easier for the audience to relate to, and identify with, individuals than with groups or systems:

> The terms of the genre are pity, sadness, a sense of futility, sympathy with the victim and the victim's family, suspicion, instability, fear, and disengagement and alienation from others, all directed and focused on the alleged killer rather than at the system that creates and sustains fatal violence (Murley 2008: 147).

It is about evil acts, but with "an understanding of evil that is by turns subtle and sophisticated, lurid and vulgar, obsessively focused on the individual and always engaged with extremes of feeling, experience, and existence itself" (Murley 2008: 161).

The crimes depicted in the documentaries are usually fatal, and actually took place. Real people are dead. This leads repeatedly to the question of whether true crime gives "consumers" ethically unacceptable thrills, turning gruesome murders into "entertainment and spectacle" (Murley 2008: 104). Is it a "voyeuristic fascination" (Biressi 2001: 196) that makes the genre popular? Are we using other people's suffering for titillation, exploiting horror and sorrow out of curiosity?

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3   For instance in "Dueling Confessions" (8. 36), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9dxwA5F-go (last accessed 10-06-20).

"[T]here is something truly distasteful in the notion that one person's extreme pain and infortune serves as another's entertaining diversion. [...] Critics of the genre may very well ask, 'Does true crime have a moral center?'" (Murley 2008: 159). The details of the dead body are often important, resembling to some extent pornography: "In pornography the look may be illicit but in true crime the invitation to look, and look closely, at a display such as this is legitimized by the objective discourse that frames it" (Biressi 2001: 161).

True crime as a media product is defended in numerous ways. Those fascinated by the genre can understandably "feel a need to justify their viewing pleasure by overemphasizing the educational, public service elements [...] like members of a caring society and not like voyeurs" (Hill 2000: 206 & 209). The tragedies on screen may also have a cathartic effect, because "we get to look danger and death in the eye and walk away" (Murley 2008: 132), relieved and maybe a little wiser. Watching the stories can provide crucial insights, which in some cases, might save lives – as fans of true crime like to believe (Vicary & Fraley 2010). *Forensic Files* plays up to this belief on several occasions. In the episode "All Butt Certain" (12.19), a wife who is convinced her husband is innocent of rape and murder starts watching *Forensic Files* episodes on TV in order to learn how to investigate.[4] In "Soiled Plan" (10.05) a cold case detective gets the idea of using plant DNA to prove a killing from watching a *Forensic Files* episode.[5] In "A daughter's journey" (13.09), a daughter starts to investigate her mother's disappearance by learning from the true crime series.[6] However, true crimes are also telltale stories about the literally vital role of mind reading. People are murdered because they are unable to read the murderers' minds and escape.

2. THEORY OF MIND

People's minds are constantly preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, intentions, motives, desires, and beliefs. We might be able to guess or understand some of those thoughts and feelings based on a specific situation, but since it is impossible to see into another person's mind, our assumptions may

be completely wrong. However, we try to make deductions using a kind of social logic based on context and experience. We listen to what is said and notice a range of different signs, such as actions, gestures, facial expressions, and paralinguistic signals. We try to hold a person's mind in our own mind, and understand something from her or his view. This ability hopefully enables us to communicate in an adequate manner with others, and predict what they might say or do. In metaphorical terms, we try to 'read' other people's inner worlds, their thoughts and intentions, because social life makes such mind reading necessary. It enables us to make sense of the social world. Among other things, mind reading can help ensure we make an acceptable or socially successful impression, or even avoid certain minor or major threats. However, people will always have thoughts that they want to keep hidden, locked inside, which can be very hard to decipher.

Theory of Mind, also called mentalizing and social cognition (Apperly 2010: 2), is an advanced cognitive capability. Humans constantly – because of what has been called our "cognitive hunger" (Lisa Zunshine in Leverage et al. 2011: 64) – project ourselves into the minds of others, trying to find out what is going on in their heads and hearts, looking for reasonable explanations for their actions. We seem to be genetically predisposed or programmed for such mind reading, as we are able to detect minor signs of anger, fear, joy, sadness, happiness, guilt, shame, and a broad range of other mental states (Apperly 2010: 4). Even small children can (to some extent) detect fake feelings, such as false smiles (Song et al. 2016).

When we enter the mind-space of others, foraying their inner lives, we start to produce many hypotheses. Most of the hypotheses, interpretations and inferences are subconscious, and we know that a range of possibilities could explain a person's state of mind, motive etc. People express themselves through their words and bodies in different ways, with different meanings, which our theory of mind has to navigate. The socio-cognitive complexity of this can be exhausting, because we continually have to reevaluate the truth value we thought we had secured a moment earlier. Some people hardly express any feelings at all, while others overdramatize, or use a lot of irony, or act, or lie. We lie to others, and may even lie to ourselves, denying something that we, on another psychological level, know to be true. Our imaginations may also carry us off in the wrong direction. We have clearly not mastered the art of mind reading. There is always uncertainty, which is particularly evident in social interaction involving several persons. Humans are mind readers who are prone to mind misreading and mindblindness.

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4   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LODGuGufEwI (last accessed 11-06-20).

5   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEto85Rlnms (00:11:06) (last accessed 22-06-20).

6   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMEnkLdHx78 (00:07:14) (last accessed 12-06-20).

We constantly have to deal with speculative and partial interpretations, as well as incomplete and uncertain suggestions. Most of our interpretations are probably inaccurate and defective to some degree: "[I]n the quotidian world we adults are good at Theory of Mind, but not that good" (Leverage et al. 2011: 15). Having known a person privately for a long time naturally helps, as we build mental models of people we interact with frequently, i.e., we 'know' them, but we still have no guarantee against lies, manipulation, deception, distortion, and very personal secrets. Some of those secrets may be very dark, and even life threatening. In no other media genre is there so much at stake in understanding other people's minds as in true crime. Reading someone's mind wrong has often proved fatal, but the mindset of a murderer can be extremely difficult to grasp.

3. TRUE CRIME AS TRAGEDY

The basic concept of tragedy defined by Aristotle is a series of dramatic events with an unhappy ending, events that are emotionally moving because they involve misfortune, pain, suffering, and destruction. In a tragedy, there is always loss, waste, ruin, and the sorrow, bitterness or anger that follows from it. There is agony and suffering. Something good, beautiful or very promising has been lost. Why do these events happen? The answer is always unclear and evasive in a tragedy, never straightforward or easy to explain. There is a cognitive mystery. In Greek drama, the Gods, Fate or Destiny turns the table, and these forces have also subsequently been called chance and casualty. An outcome appears to be 'determined' beyond what humans can know. The tragic outcome is not justifiable in human categories, it belongs to "a kind of primal chaos" that we can never control (Steiner 1990: 96). "Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited [...] There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd" (Steiner 1990: 8-9). This is also transferable to tragedies that take place in real life. It concerns not only "tragedy as art", but "tragedy as life" (Eagleton 2003: 17).

Random events such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur continually. However, they are not tragic in the sense assigned to tragedy as a genre by the Greeks. Humans cannot control when an earthquake happens. Tragedies on the other hand involve *some* element of human mistake and guilt, at least the guilt of being blind, oblivious, unaware of danger, and therefore misjudging a situation. Writing about Greek dramas Jacqueline de Romilly explains in *La tragédie grecque*

(1982) that the tragic has two parallel causes: the human and the not-human. The tragic hero always finds it hard to see the catastrophe coming. The uneasy signs of the approaching calamity are often repressed to an unconscious level. However, the signs are there, so the victim cannot only blame the tragedy on destiny, accidental events, or other people. There is always something, however minor, the victim should have seen and acted upon. The calamity that strikes the protagonist is both just *and* unjust. In Geoffrey Brereton's words: "the notion of tragedy attaches neither to a foreseen result due to a deliberate act, nor to the effects of pure chance; neither to the clearly expected nor to the totally unexpected" (1968: 9). The events did not have to unfold as they did, there is an element of freedom, of better choices that could have been made before it was too late and it can depend heavily on mind reading, which is a difficult and sometimes risky business.

The tragic hero's freedom cannot save him. The individual is to some degree to blame for his own demise, although it feels incredibly unfair that a small mistake or minor error in judgment should have an enormous consequence, beyond every expectation. "[T]here are in the world mysteries of injustice, disasters in excess of guilt, and realities which do constant violence to our moral expectations," maintains George Steiner (1990: 133), while Anne B. Richard (2010) claims that the tragic plots pull the carpet from under humans' feet, exposing a world where there are no trustworthy answers to why the calamities took place. We never get the last say on our position in the great scheme of the universal powers. We never get to know if there is any meaning behind human existence, suffering and death. In the end, "[t]ragedy is a deliberate advance to the edge of life, where the mind must look on blackness at the risk of vertigo" (Steiner 1990: 168).

Most tragedies end in death. Death – which is irrevocable, irreparable also for the bereaved – represents our insecurity, vulnerability and exposure to forces beyond our control, the fragile and temporary in life (Jankélévitch 1977: 69). It is the most radical of changes, and also subsequently leads to the suffering of others. "The wounds are not healed and the broken spirit is not mended" (Steiner 1990: 129). The fact that often-crucial questions remain unanswered adds to the pain, particularly in actual, real life criminal cases, as opposed to fiction. In crime fiction,

> ultimately the mystery will be fully explained. What makes suspense largely unpleasant in real life is that there is no guarantee that we will ever get a complete, or even a partially true, answer to any

perplexing question. We can thus enjoy being lied to in the highly structured world of murder mystery because it offers us a *safe setting* in which to relieve our anxieties about the uncertainties and deceptions of real life" (Zunshine 2006: 122).

In staged, fictional tragedies, the greatest suffering comes from hate and killings within a family or between a couple. Family members who live together are supposedly able to read each other's minds. However, the tragedies prove them wrong. This is the case in many true crime documentaries, where close family members are revealed to have unknown thoughts and shocking feelings, and a mental abyss thus exists. In some cases, after days, weeks or even years of manipulation and machinations, a callous husband, wife, son or daughter carries out, sometimes for hours, despicable, gruesome acts against their closest relatives: "As a register of current social fears, true crime now seems to insist on the dangers of the ordinary, the trusted, and the prosaic. Danger is now figured as residing in the most usual of circumstances" (Murley 2008: 159).

4. THE TRAGEDIES OF *FORENSIC FILES*

Many of the episodes of *Forensic Files* are based on crimes that happened in domestic life, in private homes, involving spouses, sons, daughters, or cohabitants. There is victimization within the family or circle of friends, as in many fictional tragedies, which adds to the emotional tension and the sense of "personal suffering and despair" which characterize true crime (Biressi 2001: 5). The *Forensic Files* episodes could in most cases be characterized as "televised intimacy" from a private domain (Murley 2008: 121), which arguably makes the crimes more monstrous than the killing of strangers. The domestic murders seem to undermine fundamental trust in the people closest to us. There is misplaced confidence among people who should love and cherish each other, there is hate among family members who should be intimate and caring. Thus the brutality comes as an 'expected shock' for the viewer – again and again, in episode after episode. The story plots are reminiscent of gothic horror stories, and of melodrama with their sharp contrasts between good and evil packaged in an emotional story about a family circle.

In *Forensic Files*' first episode (1.01), called "The Disappearance of Helle Crafts",[7] Richard and Helle Crafts are a mar-

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7   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWzyrCXGYkI (last accessed 22-06-20).

ried couple with three children. Their marriage has started to crumble, and when Helle realizes that her husband is having an affair, she wants a divorce. Helle suddenly disappears, and her husband comes under suspicion. He passes a lie detector test, although all the clues point to him. Despite never confessing, he is convicted of murder. The episode offers a step-by-step reconstruction of what he most probably did: he killed his wife in their bedroom with a hard blow to her head and then placed her corpse in a freezer. He then drove at night to a river where he used a chainsaw to dismember the dead body, putting every part of her in a wood chipper he had brought with him, and disposing of the remains of his wife in the river. Several of these remains were found in the water proving what had been done to the corpse. The whole operation took Richard Crafts several hours, and gives the viewers a glimpse into the darkest places in the human psyche, and sets the dissonant tone for the rest of the series. The crime is solved because forensic science possesses the tools to prove Richard Crafts' guilt, and the episode provides a sense of closure. The most difficult element to get to grips with is what was going on in Richard Crafts' mind as he chopped the mother of his children to pieces. What did he think and feel? This is an important question because his state of mind indicates his degree of guilt, and because speculating about what he was thinking and feeling also adds to the horror of the story. He spent hour after hour cutting up the body of a person he had been so close to in life, maybe feeling no guilt, but only contempt and hate. The fact that he passed the lie detector test indicates a very cold and calculating person. A literally deadly mental abyss had opened up between the spouses, and it resulted in horror, loss, and probably lifelong trauma for their children.

A criminal may officially proclaim that he is sorry for his deeds, and beg people and God for forgiveness. However, we can never know for certain whether he really, deeply, acknowledges his guilt and the injustice done. Any sign of remorse may be false, and not at all heartfelt. The criminal may feel sorry for himself, sorry for being caught, playing the repentant. For him, the killing might not be a moral outrage, but an act of revenge he can justify to himself, without a guilty conscience. The criminal's acts may also be explained by a range of mental disorders that leave him without full control over his actions. We may understand the motive (such as financial gain, lust for power, revenge, sexual gratification), but nonetheless never really understand what was going on in the murderer's mind – as opposed to crime fiction where the detective or narrator reveals everything. Not knowing

what happened inside the killer's mind is deeply unsatisfactory, for there is, as testified by the popularity of true crime, a "gut-level human desire to comprehend the irrational [...] the need to comprehend the 'incomprehensible', to look full-on at the worst of human behavior, accept it, and carry on with the business of living" (Murley 2008: 160).

Even if a case is solved, the sense of loss and tragedy remains, and the 'forensic security' cannot compensate for all the mental uncertainty. Some of the *Forensic Files* episodes make this particularly plain. In an episode called "A Bitter Pill to Swallow" (7.18),[8] death occurs almost at the very end of the story, not at the beginning as in the usual formula. This episode is a psychological drama where forensics is reduced to confirming what a victim has already proven. It is also an episode about mind reading problems, alternating between trust and suspicion. At the end, the perpetrator makes an enigmatic statement, which points to the mental condition behind the events, although the criminal motive is established, and the case solved.

A young woman living in Ohio is introduced to a newcomer in town: Michelle Baker is a paramedic and firefighter; Maynard Muntzing is a doctor. The voice-over narrator tells us that they soon fall in love. Baker herself appears several times in the episode, narrating parts of her story to the camera, stating (at 00:01:26): "I was the happiest woman in the world at that point. I mean, he was every woman's dream. He was very successful, very good looking." Muntzing is present by way of authentic photographs, real video footage and reenactments by an actor, but the story is from Baker's point of view. Her joy becomes complete when she becomes pregnant, and the couple plan to get married. They travel to Florida to wed, but Maynard then suddenly demands that the wedding is postponed, arguing that his family has to be present. Michelle, in her own words, "felt devastated" (00:02:30). However, she faces further problems and disappointment in the next few weeks. Soon after, Maynard tells her that he still has feelings for a previous girlfriend, Tammy Irwin. The voice-over reveals that Maynard soon begins to visit Tammy regularly without Michelle knowing, and that he has not told Tammy that he is living with a woman who is pregnant with his child.

The introduction to this crime story (00:00:01-00:00:36) establishes a clear contradiction between the flow of clichés and what we suspect will be a narrative about a very serious crime. The first shot is of a beautiful woman posing glam-

orously in a photo. The focus here is on the person's visual qualities, her attractiveness. From the beginning, the love story appears to be based on visual attraction, not on an understanding of each other's characters. The tempo of the narrative in the introduction is fast, illustrating how Michelle was swept off her feet. There are no warning signs or red flags. It thus comes as a surprise to Michelle, and, to some extent, the viewer, when Maynard changes his mind about the wedding. However, the reason he gives does not come across as reprehensible and selfish. We are supposed to believe that Maynard thinks that the wedding would not be complete without his family present (he has two sons from a previous marriage). We read Maynard's mind and find his motives acceptable, although the decision was sudden and unexpected.

The next development is the first real shock in the story. That same evening, at a beach restaurant, Maynard poisons Michelle. We later learn that he uses Cytotec pills, a drug that is likely to trigger an abortion. What is going on in Maynard's mind? What kind of regrets does he have? He continues to administer poison over the next few weeks, but Michelle believes her symptoms and illness are stress-related (00:07:45), and so does her doctor (00:08:15). Michelle keeps 'misreading' the signs, but her mindset toward Maynard is in the process of changing from love and gullibility to suspicion and fear for her own and her baby's life.

Later on, Michelle finds Maynard at Tammy Irwin's house. In retrospect, Michelle remembers that "I was devastated. I just couldn't believe that somebody could be that deceiving and appear to be something that they are obviously not" (00:06:33). Maynard subsequently begs for forgiveness and "seemed very sincere" (00:06:57) in his apologies. He promises Michelle that the affair with Tammy is over and is "affectionate" (00:07:53), but he very soon poisons her again.

Because of her inexplicable illness, Michelle's suspicions remain. The viewer is told by the voice-over that Maynard has secretly married Tammy Irwin. From this point onward, Michelle falls ill every time Maynard serves her a drink. This slowly leads her to suspect that he is behind her illness, and she sets out to prove or disprove that he is harming her by setting up a hidden camera in her own kitchen, as a trap. She is still in a phase of self-deception and denial: She does not want to suspect Maynard, but does so nonetheless. Even when she spies on him and hears him tell Tammy that he will get rid of Michelle's baby, she is in doubt about what to think: "My heart dropped and it was at that point that I realized that

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8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzKy7SWeKzs (last accessed 03-06-20).

something might be going on" (00:10:10). She hopes she is wrong, but fears she is right.

The hidden camera reveals that Maynard is putting something into her drinks. A sample is submitted to the police and analyzed by a bewildered forensic chemistry expert. His first reaction is: "You gotta be kidding me. We have no idea what [drug] we're looking for here. [...] So where are we going to even start?" (00:13:36). Forensics is close to falling short, and it is only a "hunch" (00:13:51) that leads to the medication being identified. The glorification of science in this episode is further hampered by the fact that the police doubt Michelle's story, but are prohibited from using a lie detector test because she is pregnant (00:10:54). Science is, if not negated, certainly in trouble. But *Forensic Files* holds on to science, validated in this episode by the complicated explanation of how Michelle's soft drink was scrutinized by the chemists (00:14:14)[9].

Maynard's plan was probably to terminate Michelle's pregnancy by causing a miscarriage. He employed dangerous means in an attempt to reverse time: to go back to his former girlfriend and get rid of his fiancée's unborn child. We are told by the voice-over that he was out to kill the child, but nobody knows for sure whether he wanted to kill both Michelle and their child. Michelle certainly accuses Maynard of trying "to kill the baby and kill me" (00:17:01). Maynard only admits to the police to wanting to get rid of the baby. Calamity strikes shortly before the trial when Michelle gives birth to a stillborn daughter. The little dead body represents tragedy, causing sorrow, pain and agony. The sense of destruction and loss is strongest when the stillborn girl, who Michelle names Makayla, is passed around to family and friends in the hospital and "we all told her how much that we loved her" (00:19:24). Contrary to the tradition of tragedy where kings and princes die, Eagleton states:

> [Tragedy] did not vanish because there were no more great men. It did not expire with the last absolutist monarch. On the contrary, since under democracy each one of us is to be incommensurably cherished, it has been multiplied far beyond antique imagining (1993: 94).

Michelle is left in a bewildered mental state with unanswered questions:

I have a lot of anger and a lot of hurt, and a lot of questions. And, you know ... And it doesn't matter how much counselling I go to, they can't answer any of those questions. And it's ... it's difficult (00:20:58).

Her anxiety and sense of terrible loss remain. In contrast to this lament, Maynard Muntzing attempts to mystify and bewilder in order to get leniency. Outside the court room, he twice says "the truth will come out soon" (00:18:45), the first time with a smile. What does he mean? No explanation is provided in the episode. Could there be a completely different interpretation of the events? Or is he even more cunning than we supposed?

The problem of mind reading has fatal consequences in other episodes as well. In "Bed of Deceit" (8. 28),[10] a daughter says at her mother's trial:

> I don't understand why this had to happen to us. We had a good family. My father was a good man. And I thought my parents had a very loving relationship. And I ask that you give the maximum [penalty for my mother] (00:19:06).

In "A Leg up on Crime" (10.14),[11] a policeman lives a double life. After picking up prostitutes for years, he kills two of them. His wife apparently had no suspicion and considered him "a great family man" (00:16:50). A colleague tells us that "I trusted him with my life" (00:15:54) and another that "he seemed to have fooled everybody in his life" (00:20:56). In "Disrobed" (12. 23),[12] a 16-year-old girl kills her parents because they will not let her see her boyfriend: "Sarah's relatives thought she was being a normal teenager, pushing against authority, until they noticed her unusual behavior after the murders" (00:09:55). "Invisible Intruder" (4.01)[13] is about a mother who kills two of her three children in their sleep: "they painted this picture of the perfect family [...] but the family life was an illusion" (00:20:05). Video footage a few days after the children's funeral shows the mother smiling contentedly. It was this footage that led the police to suspect who was really behind the stabbings.

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9   In a few *Forensic Files* episodes, the crime is never solved and forensics can only eliminate some suspects and give vague promises of a future solution.

10   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgYru64PwFM (last accessed 16-04-20).

11   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3Kc7yoL9AM (last accessed 22-06-20).

12   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEbtQKs_860 (last accessed 09-06-20).

13   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxmofCk8v5g (last accessed 22-06-20).

5. THE SECOND *WHAT*

What happened? Some cases may be reconstructed fairly accurately, laying bare the series of events that took place before and during the crime, based for instance on a confession. However, there are two '*whats*'. The first 'what' is the facts of the events. The second 'what' is what happened in the mind of the killer – a 'what' that is unobservable, opaque, hidden, unprovable. The consequences of mental states, which in these cases are fatal actions, can be observed or proved, but not the thoughts and feelings behind the actions. *What* took place in the killer's inner life when he or she killed, breaking perhaps the most fundamental law of all? This is an important question with implications for the suspect's soundness of mind, guilt, responsibility, and subsequently the verdict. There could be mitigating or aggravating circumstances depending on the suspect's state of mind, even if the death of the victim is horrible. However, *how* horrible it is depends on how you look at the case. We do not blame a psychotic person in the same way as a person of sound mind. There is also a big difference between a murder being committed in sudden passion or based on a calm and calculated intention to kill.

The main question about a crime is often presumed to be *why*, although it is often relatively clear why a person killed. The motives can be money, sex, revenge, the hate that can come from rejection, a mental illness or another explainable reason.[14] However, as with the two 'whats', there are also two 'whys'. The second 'why' is the metaphysical 'why'. It is the question of destiny, found in the tragedy genre, as opposed to human freedom. Why did this calamity 'need' to happen? Terry Eagleton refers to the heartbreaking cards or posters where what I call the second 'why' is asked: "The flowers reverently placed by mourners on the spot of some appalling catastrophe – a shooting at a school, a fire in a nightclub – are sometimes accompanied by a card inscribed with the single, bewildered word 'Why?'" (2003: 28). For Eagleton, this is hardly a metaphysical question, as he immediately translates it into the first 'why', like when a school massacre is carried out by "a psychotic youth neglected by harassed social services" (2003: 28). This may not be the '*why*' intended by the card writer. It is rather the 'why' asked by the father of a raped and murdered girl in "Calculated Coincidence" (13.14): "I had

no idea how this could happen and why it would have to be Stephanie. [...] There was no reasoning for any of this at all".[15]

The first 'why' and the second 'what' are closely connected, but there is a crucial difference. The first 'why' provides a pragmatic truth that is the foundation for the verdict, while the second 'what' remains outside the court's knowledge. The offender cannot provide a trustworthy explanation about his state of mind. He can lie, have forgotten or tell the court what he thinks is the truth. As we learn from Theory of Mind, our hypotheses about mental states are notoriously untrustworthy. This fundamental element of uncertainty is crucial in a criminal case where a person's sentence is at stake, as well as the need for truth and closure for victims, next of kin and society in general. The longing for truth, order and justice is strong. Because of this, evidence and forensic science play an important role in securing society and restoring law and order and safety, giving the impression that objective truth and sound justice have triumphed. However, there is always a void: 'the second what'.

This void or gap, the bottom of the mental abyss, should ideally be a foundation for justice. Without a trustworthy 'second what', the courts administer a pragmatic justice and fairness based on what we can actually know, disregarding the blind spots. The uncertainties must be considered, including when a person is clearly guilty and proven guilty of committing the crime. Justice is a principle for the courts, and justice is based on both acts and intentions, plans, determination, and mental condition. Even the accused does not necessarily know any more what he was thinking when the crime was committed. This makes it impossible to know the exact degree of guilt and therefore to accurately define justice in each case. There can be a thin line between different court sentences, for instance assigning the criminal full responsibility in some countries results in the death penalty, while in others, the criminal is found in need of care in a mental hospital. In some true crime stories, this need for good judgment can be presented in a very frustrating manner, as in *Forensic Files'* "Calculated Coincidence" (13.14),[16] where a young man who has raped and killed a young woman refuses to talk and even walk in the court room, lying on a stretcher with his eyes closed all the time and thereby silently refusing to take any part in the court proceedings (00:19:03). He had earlier in the episode been described as "a strange bird" (00:07:49) and "a very reclusive

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14   Mental illnesses leading to crimes can be diagnosed with some certainty, as in the episode "Broken Bond" (3.12) where a woman suffers from the rare condition Munchausen's syndrome by proxy – and makes others suffer; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkr-P2u8V2o (last accessed 14-05-20).

15   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89WCNcVRVQs (00:01:55) (last accessed 02-06-20).

16   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHPXCRI4tro (last accessed 02-06-20).

individual" (00:08:04), whatever that implies. He subsequently goes on to commit suicide in prison before the final trial.

There is a divide between the 'objective' facts in a crime case (such as names, precise times, street names etc.) and what goes on inside the people committing a crime or, for that matter, its victims. A true crime story needs to hold on to something that is certain, and in *Forensic Files,* criminology scientists guarantee certainty. This scientific perspective stands in stark contrast to everything we do not know about the inner life of the perpetrators. In his book on evil, Terry Eagleton refers to the view that calling an action evil means "that it is beyond comprehension. Evil is unintelligible" (2010: 2). Science, on the other hand, is by definition intelligible, dealing with the testable or provable. If someone does evil for evil's sake – what Immanuel Kant called radical evil – then they should definitely be punished harder that a man who kills his wife out of jealousy in the heat of the moment. Eagleton quotes the philosopher John Rawls: "What moves the evil man is the love of injustice: he delights in the impotence and humiliation of those subject to him and relishes being recognized by them as the author of their degradation" (2010: 94). Such a person deserves harsh punishment. That would be justice. For justice should be done, but how can it be done when there is a gap in the 'formula' for administering justice and punishment? The gap is 'small', and the complex 'formula' for justice in a court room is long, well founded and based on long-established traditions. However, this gap can make a huge difference for some people.

6. LESSONS LEARNED?

On the night Helle Crafts was murdered, she would not have gone to sleep in her and her husband's bed if she did not fundamentally trust her husband. A trust that had fatal consequences. Michelle Baker's relationship with Maynard Muntzing slowly went from trust and love to distrust and fear. She and Muntzing lived together, and, in her mind, were emotionally close. Both of these crime stories are disturbing in numerous ways, not least because the women's homes were in fact danger zones. True-crime author Ann Rule reminds her readers:

> [I]t is the home, rather than the street, which represents the greatest danger to women, physically and emotionally; rather than fear the ruthless predatory stranger, women are now exhorted to fear – and flee from the bondage of – the bad boyfriends,

lovers, and husbands, men who should be protecting us (cited in Murley 2008: 74).

Two men, Richard Crafts and Maynard Muntzing, had literally become strangers to their partners. The circle of trust and emotional closeness was broken. The intimate space for love, understanding and relatively easy mind reading had disappeared.

The implication from many of the *Forensic Files* episodes is that 'it could happen to anybody', that everyone is more vulnerable than we like to think, even in our own homes: "The notion that 'it couldn't happen here' competes with the equally powerful idea that 'it could happen anywhere'" (Murley 2008: 119). True crime is about a sort of negative cognition, i. e. the fact that the opposite of what you believe about a person *could* be the case, and

> by learning the motives and methods of murderers, people learn ways to prevent becoming their victims. [...] we might expect women to be more interested in true crime books because of the potential survival cues contained therein. [...] Such understanding might increase a woman's chances of detecting the signs that a jealous ex-lover [...] [being given] potential life-saving knowledge (Vicary and Fraley 2010: 82 & and 84-85).

Ann Rule has said that she "considers her work to be a kind of public service to women, warning them against sociopaths and dangerous romances" (Murley 2008: 75).

The mental abyss is dangerous, but also fascinating. According to Anita Biressi, we want to know what is in the perpetrator's head, what his or her thoughts and feelings are, in the same way that we want an entirely truthful confession and full repentance. We crave explanations, maybe because we silently believe that "the 'cold blooded' murderer has an esoteric relationship with and knowledge of the forces of life and death which is somehow more 'authentic' than anything that may be inferred from everyday life" (2001: 190). In this area – the enigmatic mind – 'objective' science is out of its depth.

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Forensic Files (a.k.a. *Medical Detectives*) (1996-2011)
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SHONDA RHIMES'S TGIT: REPRESENTATION OF WOMANHOOD AND BLACKNESS

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

For the first time in television history, Shonda Rhimes, a Black female showrunner, obtained an entire prime time programming block on American broadcast television. She has been recognized as one of the most successful and influential TV showrunners and her shows are celebrated for promoting a strong feminist agenda that tends towards equality regardless of gender, race, class, religious belief or sexual orientation. Concentrating on ABC's prime time night "Thank God It's Thursday", our analysis focuses on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-) and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), respectively a medical, a legal and a political drama. The main goal of the paper is to propose a hybrid methodology to investigate which aesthetics, identities and relationships of race and womanhood are represented in these three case studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Concentrating on ABC's prime time night "Thank God It's Thursday", which features Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-) and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), our paper proposes a novel hybrid methodology to investigate which relationships, aesthetics, and identities of race and womanhood are represented in these three TV series. We chose to focus our analysis on Shonda Rhimes' productions because her shows are celebrated for promoting a strong feminist agenda that tends towards equality regardless of gender, race, class, religious belief or sexual orientation (Kinane 2017).

Within the *peak TV era*, the offer of audiovisual content is continuously increasing; in 2019 alone the U.S. scripted 532 original series (Goldberg 2020). The rapid proliferation of TV series is deeply affecting the contemporary media landscape as well as the public consumption of audiovisual content in mainstream television. This topic has been the focus of scholarly attention since the early 2000s (Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), and since then numerous studies have investigated how the construction of womanhood and Blackness has evolved in fictional products (Carson and Llewellyn-Jones 2000, Helford 2000, Brooks and Hébert 2006, Akass and McCabe 2006, 2007, McCabe and Akass 2006, 2007, Tasker and Negra 2007, Holmlund 2010, Holtzman and Sharpe 2014, Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), in advertising on prime time TV (Mastro and Stern 2003, Collins 2018), as well as in adolescents' consumption of media content (Brown and Pardun 2004, Ellithorpe and Bleakley 2016).

In this era of TV series abundance, women have had a numerically inferior presence in the media industries' top positions. Considering the latest "Boxed In" report from Lauzen and the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film (Lauzen 2019), overall, women accounted for 31% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes positions, which represents a recent historic high, besting the previous high of 28% set in 2016-17 (Lauzen 2019: 2). This data is relevant in as much as across platforms, "programs with at least one woman creator employed substantially greater percentages of women in other key behind-the-scenes roles and featured more female characters in major and speaking roles than programs with exclusively male creators" (Lazen 2019: 4).

With regard to racial diversity in the television industry, an investigation conducted on 50 showrunners working for the five main American networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CW) during the 2016-17 television season "reveals that 90% of showrunners are White, and almost 80% are male" (Ryan 2016). Conversely, "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2019" report reveals that during the 2017-18 season the number of women and people of color directing episodes of entertainment TV shows hit a record high for a second consecutive year. According to the Directors Guild of America, "Women directed 25 percent of all episodes, a rise of 4 percentage points from 2016-17; men directed 75 percent. Minorities directed 24 percent of all episodes, a rise of 2 percentage points from 2016-17".[1] However, non-White female showrunners are still a minority, thus, we decided to explore the production of one of the few successful Black female showrunners: Shonda Rhimes.

Shonda Rhimes is considered one of the most powerful women in the world of entertainment and media (Forbes 2018). She has won numerous awards and she is the wealthiest female showrunner in the U.S. (Berg 2018). In a 2016 TED Talk, Shonda Rhimes in describing her work revealed:

> Three shows in production at a time, sometimes four. The budget for one episode of network television can be anywhere from three to six million dollars. Let's just say five. A new episode made every nine days, times four shows—so every nine days, that's 20 million dollars' worth of television. Four television programs, 70 hours of TV, three shows in production at a time, sometimes four, 16 episodes going on at all times. That's 350 million dollars a season. My television shows are back to back to back on Thursday night. Around the world, my shows air in 256 territories in 67 languages for an audience of 30 million people (Rhimes 2016).

Her serial products are a worldwide success. In 2017 Shonda Rhimes signed an estimated $100 million four-year contract with Netflix making history as one of the first showrunners to ink an exclusive deal with this streaming service. This contract with Netflix is not the first historical turning point for Shonda Rhimes, in fact, she was the first African American showrunner ever (female or male) to obtain an entire prime time programming block of three consecutive hours (8-11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time) for three different shows in one night which ABC branded "Thank God It's

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1 "Directors Guild: Count of female, minority TV episode directors hit all-time high", *The Status of Women in the* U.S. *Media 2019*, p. 108. https://tools.womens-mediacenter.com/page/-/WMCStatusofWomeninUSMedia2019.pdf (last accessed 28-01-20).

Thursday" (TGIT). The serial products of ABC's prime time Thursday constitute our corpus of investigation. Through our hybrid methodology, in the following sections, we show how, in our cases studies, Rhimes delivers numerous post-feminist, strong, independent, and complex female characters that persist through the various seasons. In regard to race, the corpus displays a colour-blind representation of the characters. Although racial issues are mostly neutralized, the corpus is dotted with episodes that specifically deal with issues of racial inequality and are relegated mostly to the past.

2. CORPUS OF INVESTIGATION

In this work, we chose to focus primarily on broadcast television as it still reaches the largest number of television viewers (Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), and since 2005 it aired 20 legal dramas (45% created by female showrunners, 45% by male and 10% by mixed teams), 58 legal dramas (9% created by female showrunners, 76% by male and 15% by mixed teams) and 7 political dramas (29% created by female showrunners, 57% by male and 14% by mixed teams).

Our corpus of investigation consists of the TGIT triptych, the three ShondaLand's[2] dramas are *Grey's Anatomy* (a medical drama), *How to Get Away with Murder* (a legal drama) and *Scandal* (a political drama).[3] All three TV series frequently dominate the top ten list of shows viewed by African Americans (Nielsen 2015).

Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005-) has become the longest prime time medical drama in the U.S., breaking *E.R.*'s record (NBC, 1994-2009). The series tells the story of a group of doctors who learn how to interact with other people and themselves while learning and performing medical procedures. Surgeries and treatments here become the substrata that serves as a setting to the personal lives of the characters. The multistrand narration is shaped by three isotopies: the medical cases plot, the professional plot and the sentimental plot (Pescatore and Rocchi 2019).

How to Get Away with Murder, even though it was only produced by Shonda Rhimes and actually created by Peter Norwalk, it is a show that fully fits within the ShondaLand brand and follows the same distributive strategies of the oth-

er two case studies (Everett 2015: 35). Furthermore, this TV series reflects Rhimes' trademark in the form of legal drama: twisted plotlines, endless lies, sex scenes, mad characters, fast dialogues and a leading brilliant woman at the center of it all. It is a successful legal drama that takes place in law firms, courtrooms, penitentiaries, etc. The characters (lawyers, law students, clients, etc.) have to deal not only with a specific case in each episode (vertical detection) but also with the horizontal detection storyline: the main protagonist Annalise Keating,[4] with five of her students, becomes entwined in several murders. The parallel relationship between two distinct plotlines (i.e., vertical and horizontal detection) in *How to Get Away with Murder* is the most distinctive aspect when compared with *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal.*

Scandal, which has been acclaimed as "the most feminist show on TV," featuring "the first Black female lead on network TV in almost 40 years" (Tanzina 2013), is a political drama set in Washington DC that follows the predicaments of Olivia Pope,[5] a brilliant Afro-American woman who becomes one of the most influential and skilled crisis managers in town. After running, and winning, the presidential campaign of Republican candidate Fitzgerald Grant, she is hired as White House Communications Director, a position that she gives up due to her adulterous romantic relationship with President Grant. She starts her own practice as crisis manager: 'Olivia Pope and Associates' where, in each episode (vertical detection), she handles the indiscretions of dignitaries and politicians, rehabilitating their public image. Through the seasons, the handling of the single cases is increasingly replaced by the horizontal detection storyline: the main protagonist's romantic and political involvement with the White House.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology we adopted to conduct this study is situated at the intersection between two approaches: a quantitative analysis combined with the analysis of a selection of textual elements. The findings are then problematized within the existing scientific literature that explores the post-feminist and post-civil rights debates in the media in general

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2   ShondaLand is the name of the television production company founded by Shonda Rhimes.

3   During the 2018/2019 television season *Scandal* has been replaced by *Station 19* (ABC, 2018-).

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4   The performance of Viola Davis in this role earned her an Emmy in the category of Outstanding Leading Actress in a drama series (she was the first African American woman to win it) and many others.

5   The series won numerous prizes and in particular for its leading actress Kerry Washington, who was nominated at the Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for her interpretation of Olivia Pope.

(Hurtado 1989, Lotz 2001, 2006, Patton 2001, Dubrofsky 2002, Mosley and Read 2002, McRobbie 2004, Brooks and Herbert 2006, Snyder 2008, Lazar 2011, Horbury 2014, Rottenberg 2014, Gill 2016, Gomez and McFarlane 2016) and on Shonda Rhimes' productions in particular (Long 2011, Horbury 2014, Erigha 2015, Everett 2015, Warner 2015a, 2015b, Williams and Golin 2017, Brüning 2019). The distinctiveness of the methodology we employed, consists in creating a dialogue between mixed approaches applied not only to the first seasons, as it has been done in other studies so far, but for the long haul: *Grey's Anatomy* is at its sixteenth season and *Scandal* is currently finished – allowing to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ShondaLand's peculiarities.

Therefore, firstly, we mapped the main characters for each case study, calculating the percentage of male and female presence in each series. Secondly, we explored the persistence of each female main character, that is, we weighted their presence throughout all the seasons of each series. The persistence is calculated on the number of seasons in which a main character appears. For instance, if a x_i female character is present in N seasons her persistence is N_i. Thus, when adding all the persistences of the k female main characters (where k is the total number of female main characters) we find that the total persistence of female characters is $\sum_{i=0}^{k} N_i$. Thirdly, to the wide-ranging vision that this mapping offers us, we coalesced an analysis of a selection of textual features from each case study to shed light on the effective representation that Shonda Rhimes gives of these women, and in particular of women of color. Lastly, we confronted our findings with the existing literature.

4. RESULTS
4.1 Representation of Womanhood

We investigate the representation of womanhood across the corpus considering multiple aspects. We firstly explore the female presence through quantitative analysis. Our findings reveal that out of the 31 main characters that populate *Grey's Anatomy*, 52% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (54%) in the seasons placing this series at the top among our case studies (Figure 1). Considering *How to Get Away with Murder*, out of the 14 main characters, 43% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (42%) in the series placing the show in second place among our case studies (Figure 1). *Scandal* places last, indeed the quantitative research discloses that out of the 15 main characters only

33% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (36%) in the series (Figure 1). Considering the latest "Boxed In" data on speaking female characters on broadcast network programs (44% in 2018-2019), *How to Get Away with Murder* can be considered in line with other broadcast shows; *Grey's Anatomy* has a higher percentage and *Scandal* a lower one (Figure 1).

Considering textual elements within the sample, we have a variety of representations of womanhood. *Grey's Anatomy* for example is characterized by a group of strong and independent women (Wilks 2012). During the twelfth season the viewer is transported into a women-run hospital: Miranda Bailey finally becomes the hospital's first-ever female chief of surgery, and she is assisted by Callie as head of orthopaedics, Arizona as head of paediatrics, Maggie as head of cardiology, and Amelia, who runs the neurology department. As Callie points out (12.02): "badass... ladies, this place is run by ladies... it's ladies place". *Grey's Anatomy* shows powerful and driven women, but who are also inexorably damaged, falling therefore within the anti-heroine category, a standard character within television series (Inness 2004, Lotz 2006, Tally 2016, Buonanno 2017). For instance, the protagonist, Meredith, de-
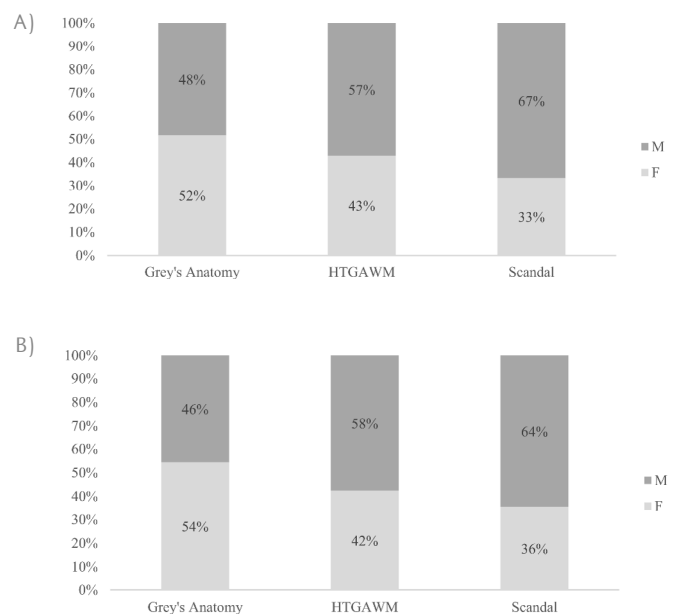

FIGURE 1. GENDER REPRESENTATION: (A) PERCENTAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE PRESENCE; (B) PERCENTAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE PERSISTENCE.

scribes herself as "dark" and "twisty". She has to cope with child traumas when she was ignored and unappreciated due to her mother's medical career. Amelia is another character who had to fight her way through life. Professionally, she lived for a long time in her brother's shadow: always being identified as the other Dr. Shepherd and never receiving the praise and respect she deserves. Furthermore, in season 14 she is faced with a complicated case of brain tumour that seems impossible to remove, especially without Derek's help. By successfully removing it she proves to everyone, including herself, that she can stand on her own two feet. This moment of empowerment and independence teaches Amelia not to doubt herself and speaks volumes about the potential of women in general. There are also women that have to fight against prejudices (e.g., Izzie must defend herself revealing that she posed as an underwear model to pay for her college debt, 2.04) and against social expectations connected to womanhood and motherhood (e.g., Cristina and Owen disagreement over having children, 8.01; Bayle's difficulties in reconciling family life with her hospital career).

In *How to Get Away with Murder* everything revolves around the charming character of Annalise Keating, its career-driven female protagonists. She is a dynamic character who is both strong and vulnerable, confident and frightened. Black feminist scholars emphasize the relative invisibility of Black women in American media (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, Collins 1991, 2004, Hooks 1998, 2002) and how they are often conceptualized as "good only for their bodies". In fact, Black women are frequently represented as difficult, unattractive and undesirable, sexually immoral and hypersexualized (Hooks 1992, Nagel 2003, Collins 2004, Springer 2008, Morales and Bejarano 2008, Feagin 2013, Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, Slatton 2015). *How to Get Away with Murder* challenges this one-dimensional characterization breaking down many common stereotypes and allowing viewers to meet a multifaceted protagonist. However, the portrayal of Annalise Keating also exposes some downfalls: she constantly tries to mould her persona to fit a White heteronormative prototype despite being a queer Black woman, and she manipulates other marginalized characters. In addition, Toms-Anthony (2018: 66-73) points out how Annalise Keating's portrayal also shows three main stereotypical depictions of Black women: the Mammy, which refers to a "motherly, self-sacrificing Black female servant who is responsible for domestic duties and taking care of those around her" (Reynolds-Dobbs et al. 2008: 136); the Jezebel, which refers to a "fair skinned or mulatto woman" considered "a shapely, tempting seductress,

who uses her body and sexuality to get her way" (Reynolds-Dobbs et al. 2008: 137); and the Angry Black Woman.

Considering *Scandal*, its main female character, Olivia Pope, has become an icon and is acclaimed as "the strongest female leading character in TV history" (Putnam 2014). She is an unusual and revolutionary television character from at least two points of view. First of all, she is "an African-American woman [...] a non-mixed-race, or non-fairskinned, Black woman" (Everett 2015: 37) who is both romantically and sexually desired by powerful Caucasian males, first among them the President of the United States, thus challenging the stereotypes surrounding Black femininity and interracial romances. Secondly, she is a successful, independent and highly educated woman who is outspoken about women's rights "calling out sexism whenever she sees it" (Donahue 2014). She is ambitious, even ruthless in carrying out her job and trying to stay at the top of her game. She doesn't cook, she doesn't feel the urgency to settle down and have a family, and her interracial love affairs are complicated and at times co-dependent; these features combined have attracted a diversified and devout fan base (Chatman 2017, Clark 2015, Everett 2015). Olivia's character opens up another discussion, namely the iconic elegance and femininity of Rhimes' female characters. Olivia Pope in fact exercises her strength and power through stiletto heels, Prada handbags and expensive designer clothes. As Paola Brembilla (2016) suggests, some identification trends can be observed by the audience, not so much with the glamor of celebrities who play successful female characters, but through an identification with the characters themselves who "mediate the symbolic values of the pieces of fashion they wear, becoming icons of style that foster a desire for imitation" (Brembilla 2016: 37). Let's take Michelle Obama, who at the 2016 State of the Union Address wore a dress designed by Narciso Rodriguez, the same that Olivia Pope had worn only three weeks earlier. As Michelle Obama wears this dress, she aligns with the meanings and values connected to the *Scandal* universe and identifies herself as powerful, professional, intelligent and resolute as Olivia. It is no coincidence that in 2014, Olivia Pope inspired a fashion line sold by The Limited, which launched the styles of the big designer garments worn by the protagonist at affordable prices for the spectators (Brembilla 2016).

Another central topic in the representation of womanhood concerns the power relations between women and men involved in sexual and romantic relationships. In particular, while Philips (2000) investigates the representation of women in the medical profession, Jubas (2013: 127) con-

nects "professional categories of identity to other categories of identity, notably gender, as well as race and sexuality" in *Grey's Anatomy*. Indeed, this series presents the complex affair between Meredith and Derek since the first episode. At play in this liaison there is not only a romantic connection, but also an asymmetrical professional power relationship (Derek was her boss, 1.01). In *How to Get Away with Murder* this topic emerges in a different way because the professional power relations involved are those of the doctor-patient relationship – Annalise and her husband met when she was his psychotherapy patient. In *Scandal,* Olivia Pope is portrayed as strong and resolute in her profession, although in her love life she is vulnerable. Her illicit relationship with the President is dominated by an unequal power dynamic: the "resulting resemblance of a master/slave mistress situation" (Brüning 2019: 469).

Within the power relation topic, the theme of women in male-dominated professions (Nelson 2000) emerges both in *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal*. In the former, it emerges both through the character of Annalise, an exceptional and competent lawyer who excels in what was once an exclusively male profession, as well as through her colleague Bonnie. The theme of women in male-dominated professions develops also in smaller examples referring to the anthology plot (e.g., Marren owns one of the main commercial companies, 1.04). Often, women are represented as judges, lawyers, as well as the president of the university (i.e., Soraya Hargrove, a Non-White woman). All this is the norm, there is neither the presence of White privilege, nor male privilege, the only privilege is for those who work hard. In *Scandal* both Olivia and Mellie Grant face the male-dominated American political scene which become even more apparent during Mellie's presidential campaign.

Finally, taking into account the representation of different sexualities across the three cases studies, the quantitative analysis reveals that in *How to Get Away with Murder* 36% of the main characters are LGTBQ, and the lead female protagonist is bisexual. The 2014 "Where We are on TV" report, released by media monitoring organization The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), disclosed that out of 813 prime time broadcast series, 3.9% of the series regulars characters were LGBTQ. The same study conducted on the 2019/2020 television season revealed that out "of the 879 regular characters scheduled to appear on broadcast scripted prime time television this season, 90 (10.2%) are LGBTQ". Considering the LGBTQ representation, *How to Get Away with Murder* is placing at the top among

our case studies, followed by *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*. In particular, despite the fact that *Grey's Anatomy* has a good attitude both towards gender and LGBTQ themes (e.g., the lesbian wedding between Callie and Arizona, 7.20), it fails to delve deeper into gender issues. 35% of its relationships (sentimental and sexual) are interracial (Matthews-Hoffman 2016)[6]. This conspicuous presence, however, is not accompanied by a deep investigation of the complexities connected to interracial relationships. In fact, the characters' roles are essentially neutral from a racial point of view. Therefore, the relationships are characterized by couples' personalities and ongoing private (and medical) dramas rather than racial and cultural differences. In *Scandal* LGBTQ themes are addressed through the relationship between the Chief of Staff (and subsequently Vice President) Cyrus Beene and his husband, James Novak, and after his death to Michael Ambruso. In the *Scandal* universe, Cyrus is an influential politician and openly gay Vice President.

4.2 **Representation of Blackness**

In our corpus, *How to Get Away with Murder* is the series that mostly supports an intersectional feminism. Kathy Davis (2008: 68), referring to the concept of "intersectionality", points out how it relates "to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcome of these interactions in terms of power." Indeed, this show exemplifies Rhimes' deliberate use of racial and sexual diversity: the main cast highlights the presence of female figures and also characters' diversity, considering both different sexualities and ethnic background. Annalise is a Black woman, her husband is White, her male lover Black, her White lover a woman. Her two employees are White; considering other interns, Wes and Michaela are Black, Laurel is Hispanic, and Connor is gay. Our quantitative research reveals that 57% of the characters are Non-White and there is a consistency in their persistence (59%) in the series placing *How to Get Away with Murder* at the top among our case studies (Figure 2). Among the Non-White main characters 50% are female and 50% male and only two are Black and persist throughout all the series (Annalise Keating and Nate Lahey). Regarding the race issue, the cast of *Grey's Anatomy* has been heterogeneous from a racial point

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6   Comparatively, according to Parker et al. (2015), in 2013 U.S. interracial marriages had reached a record level of 13%.

of view since its inception in 2005. Indeed, in 2006 the civil rights groups gave to ABC the highest overall score among the four main networks (A-), thanks also to shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* (Long 2011: 1067). This heterogeneity results from the colour-blind casting adopted by Shonda Rhimes. She decided not to assign any physical description to her characters except for gender. This strategy allowed her to create a racially different imaginary world. The choice to "neutralize" the race issue is therefore an intentional one. However, we see how the presence of Non-White characters in *Grey's Anatomy* is lower than in *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal* (Figure 2). Our quantitative research reveals that out of the 31 main characters that populate *Grey's Anatomy*, 32% are Non-White and there is a consistency in their persistence (37%) in the series (Figure 2). Among the Non-White main characters 50% are female and 50% male and the only two who persists throughout the seasons from the beginning are Black: Miranda Bayle and Richard Webber. *Scandal* presents only 4 Black main characters: Harrison Wright, that does not last beyond the third season; Olivia's father, Eli Pope, that becomes a main character only from season 5 onward; and Marcus Walker, a character that joins Olivia's firm from season 5 onward. This leaves Karry Washington as the only Afro-American female main character that persists throughout the series. The latest "Boxed In" report (Lauzen 2019) shows that race and ethnicity across platforms underline that in 2018-19 70% of female characters were White. Our quantitative analysis reveals a lower percentage of White main characters across the three case studies (Figure 2).

The issue of racial discrimination is rarely addressed in the first five seasons of *How to Get Away with Murder*[7], and when it arises it is to underline the lack of female solidarity or to underline episodes of racial discrimination that occurred in the past. Let us think for example about the episode "Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania" (4.13). In this crossover episode with *Scandal*, Annalise Keating, while involved in a class action regarding the mass incarceration of Black people in the United States, declares "racism is built into the DNA of America. And as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins."

Conversations addressing the discriminations that women and Black people face within the medical profession are

FIGURE 2. RACIAL REPRESENTATION: (A) PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND NON-WHITE PRESENCE; (B) PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND NON-WHITE PERSISTENCE.

marginal also within *Grey's Anatomy* and refer mainly to a past time. For example, in "The Time Warp" (6.15), through various flashbacks that narrate the life of those who are now senior surgeons we find for example a still specializing Bailey, who was continually subjected to discrimination by her attending, partly due to jealousy. We also find the storyline of Ellis Gray and Richard Webber, interns in the 80s, that reveals discrimination both against women and Non-White doctors. Ellis Gray was not only called a nurse in a derogatory tone (e.g., "This is no job for a nurse!", says her boss, to which she retorts, "You know very well I'm not a nurse!") but sometimes she was even addressed as "sugar" insted of her proper name. Richard Webber was told that 10 years earlier he would not even have been allowed into a surgical program.

Shonda Rhimes places the experiences of discrimination on the workplace either in a far-removed past when racial inequality still needed to be surmounted, or in single separate episodes. However, in "Something Against You" (12.07) there is a discussion about what it means to be a Black woman. Patients assume Maggie Pierce, the female African American chief of cardiology, is the assistant of the newly hired cardiologist (Nathan Riggs, a Caucasian male). Maggie complains about this problem with her Caucasian sister-in-law Amelia Shepherd, and tells her that the reason she felt like Riggs'

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7   During the sixth season, in "Let's Hurt Him" (12.06), Annalise brings up the race issue as central point during a press conference in order to attract attention and drop the death penalty.
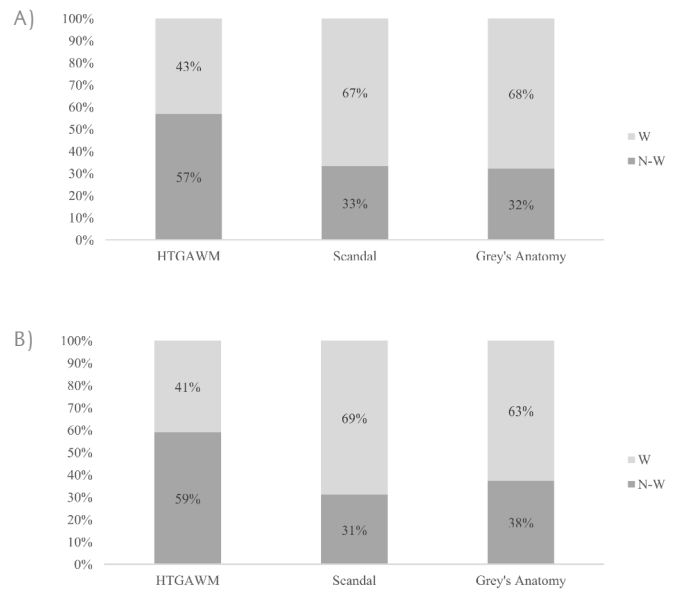
shadow is because: 1) he is a man; and 2) he is White. Amelia, certain that racism was dead, is shocked to learn that race still matters. Afterwards, a short conversation follows between the two about the centrality of race in contemporary society. This leads Amelia to remember when she sided with one of the hospital residents Jo Wilson (White female) instead of Stephanie Edwards (Non-White female). Clearly Amelia is not a racist, however she seems oblivious of the privileges that her social status affords. It is no accident that Maggie tells her: "If you feel uncomfortable having done it, check your White privilege and don't do it again". Through these examples we realize that Shonda Rhimes in her intent to create a diverse and post-racial narrative does not forget nor ignore that White privilege and racial inequality still persist in today's society.

Sandra Oh, an actress of Korean ethnicity who played doctor Cristina Yang for 10 seasons, after leaving the series confessed to the magazine *KoreAm* to be frustrated by her character's lack of cultural specificity (referring to the few words hinted in the first seasons about the fact that she was raised Jewish): "it bummed me out because I feel like, this could be a great story idea, or even like a joke. But [*Grey's Anatomy's* producers] would not go for it, because it was a show choice" (quoted in Press 2018). Although some critics (Warner 2015a) considered its color-blind casting a way to erase cultural specificity, and although it stimulates diversity in hiring practices, it doesn't fully grasp the implications of socioeconomic disparities and racial inequality.

In *Scandal* the issue of race is raised by Olivia's father who often reminds her that she has to fight and work twice as hard due to her skin colour. Also in this case, the discourse on racial inequality is stirred by the older generation who was involved in the civil rights movement. Discussions about race are also circumscribed to specific episodes, such as in the "Dog-Whistle Politics" episode (5.04), the "Trump Card" episode (5.20) and "The Lawn Chair" episode (4.14), which is particularly emblematic. Here Olivia is involved in a case of unjustified excess of police violence against a Black boy. In a dialogue with an African American "neighbourhood activist" graduated cum laude in Georgetown, Marcus Walker, the disavowal of Olivia with respect to the African American community emerges strongly:

> Marcus – Nice purse. What? Prada?
> Olivia – What's your point?
> Marcus – Probably worth a year's rent at my place, 'cause I live right around the corner. This block, these people are home.

> Olivia – Uh-huh.
> Marcus – We live in the same city, Olivia, but this is probably the first time you ever stepped foot on this block. Probably never been to this neighbourhood except to get grits from Reggie's or chicken and Greens off of Wade Street.
> Olivia – You have no idea what I'm about.
> Marcus –You're about getting a White Republican President elected twice. Excuse me if I don't buy you're a real down-ass chick.

This is just one telling example uncovering one of the critical issues surrounding the productions of Shonda Rhimes: the representation of a post-racial society in which Blacks and Whites work together constructively, positioned beyond the problems of racial inequality. *Scandal*, despite depicting Black characters in prominent positions is still able to maintain an intimate closeness to White viewers as they follow the dictum "Black but not too Black" in order to circumvent the Racial Empathy Gap (Seewood 2014). In Rhimes' production, African American characters remain isolated from an African American community and distanced from a Black experience of the world, hindering the potential to germinate a Black identity embedded in a socio-political collectivity and conscience (Erigha 2015: 11, Guerrero 1993).

Finally, we consider some insights from the analysis of the audience's discursive production and reception within the corpus connected with the representation of both womanhood and race. Williams and Golin (2017) have demonstrated how *How to Get Away with Murder* allows the creation of discursiveness and a privileged entry point into a shared cultural history of Black femininity. *How to Get Away with Murder* is a particularly useful case thanks to the representation of Annalise Keating, a Black woman with markedly Afrocentric traits that contrast to common contemporary portraits of Black femininity on television, which typically depicts Black women with lighter skin and curls or straight hair (e.g., *Girlfriends*, UPN 2000-2008; *Scandal*; *Blackish*, ABC 2014-; *Empire*, Fox 2015-). Williams and Golin (2017) focused their analysis on the scene when Annalise takes off her makeup and wig (1.04): this ritual has given rise to passionate debates on Black Twitter, "watching a Black woman remove her straight wig to reveal her natural kinky hair on national television was cause for discussion" (Williams and Golin 2017: 993). The authors highlight how the word "real" is used several times by Twitter users who comment the scene in which

Annalise takes off her wig and makeup. Showing natural hair is associated with Black pride and rebellion against traditional White norms (Miller 2016).

Viewers of ShondaLand's programs can identify with Olivia Pope, and with other Non-White characters since the texts don't directly address "African American themes, [...] showcase African American cultural traditions, or highlight black vernacular" (Erigha 2015: 13) or deal with issues related to inequality that still permeates American society. Akin to *Grey's Anatomy*, in fact, the characters in *Scandal* undergo a "neutralization of race" (Warner 2015a: 632). Shonda Rhimes' texts depict "a fictional United States where Blacks and Whites work together constructively" (Erigha 2015: 11), where race fades in the background and does not play a role in the interactions between characters. Let us think, for instance, about Olivia's relationship with Fitz. In this interracial relationship, race is downplayed in the affair at the expense of an emphasis on Olivia's struggles as a post-feminist woman to reconcile her independence and strength in the workplace with her vulnerability in her love for Fitz (Brüning 2018: 470). Furthermore, in line with a colour-blind post-feminist agenda, emphasis is placed on Olivia's elitist education that allows her to access environments typically dominated by Caucasian males, achieving what her father defined as his "quest to do the impossible: raise an African American girl who felt fully entitled to own the world as much as any white man" (5.04).

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Through the hybrid methodology that we adopted in this study it was possible to integrate a more classic textual analysis with quantitative research in the investigation of the representations of race and womanhood in Shonda Rhimes' TGIT TV series. This approach allowed us to ascertain that for all three case studies, the presence of female characters is well represented and persistent through all the seasons, confirming what has been underlined by the literature and critics. However, this presence is not consistent through all of our case studies: *Grey's Anatomy* has 52% of female characters, followed by *How to Get Away with Murder* with 43%, and *Scandal* with the lowest female presence of 33%.

Thus, it is safe to say that in Rhimes' texts, women are numerically relevant. Furthermore, through a more careful textual analysis, we understand that these women are not only powerful, intelligent and resolute, but also elegant, feminine, sensual and dangerous. They overcome what Kathleen

Hall Jamieson (1995) calls double binds, that is, constraints that limit women's agency through an essentialization of the complexity of female diversified experiences: either brain or womb, immodest outspokenness or ignored silence, feminine or competent (Hall Jamieson 1995: 16). Such dichotomies curb women's potential, restricting their choices to either one or the other. Instead, following the "profound increase in programming explicitly targeting women [that] occurred on U.S. television at the end of the 20th century" (Lotz 2006: 6), which saw with *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) the inauguration of TV seasons with an "unparalleled proliferation of dramatic series featuring women protagonists" (Lotz 2006: 6), Shonda' women are multifaceted, complex, strong but also flawed.

However, at a closer look, these women embody the "post-feminist singleton" discourse promoted in TV series such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) in which the female characters "want it all" while struggling to find balance between the different spheres of their lives (Moseley and Read 2002, Lotz 2006, Brüning 2018: 466). The post-feminist woman "refuses to dichotomize and choose between her public and private, feminist and feminine identities" (Genz 2010: 98). This being said, however, within the post-feminist agenda representations of Black people are still problematic. The post-feminist tendency of commodifying racial differences is reducing the Black female body and culture into consumable goods in American media (Springer 2007, Brüning 2018), which in turn is reducing "Blackness to a visual characteristic devoid of political or historical meaning, thus allowing Black women to be portrayed in line with post-feminism's traditionally white vision of femininity" (Brüning 2018: 467).

This last consideration brings us to the second theme discussed in our paper: the representation of race in Rhimes' TGIT productions. Based on numbers alone, *How to Get Away with Murder* presents the highest percentage of Non-White characters, followed by *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Furthermore, if we look at the representation of race from the standpoint of textual analysis, *Grey's Anatomy* still places last due to the strong neutralization of race and the blind casting strategy adopted by Rhimes. Conversely, *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* emerge as the two productions that predominantly depict elements recognizable by audiences as attributable to the experience of Non-White women. Let us think for instance about the iconic scene in which the protagonist Annalise takes off her wig, which elicited an animated discussion on Black Twitter, or the passionate discussions on the sentimental relationships be-

tween Olivia Pope and Fitz. Conversely, in *Grey's Anatomy* the race-blind casting strategy allows cast members to play roles independently of racial characterizations, obliterating, however, any specificity caused by their racial difference in favour of a feel-good sentiment. The elision of these specificities delivers us de-contextualized characters, separated from their groups of origin, downplaying power relations and experiences of marginalization and structural inequalities in favour of a representation of a post-civil rights society that has left racial discrimination and inequality in a long-forgotten past (Doane 2014: 15, Brüning 2018: 467). A similar argument can be made for the LGBTQ representations of queer couples getting married and co-habiting, which, as Jay Clarkson (2008) would argue, normalizes a post-queer representation that lacks the same cultural specificity that the Non-White characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are deprived of. In colour-blind television, racism is considered surpassed and Non-Whiteness is no longer an obstacle to climb the social ladder, conception that has also been expressed by Rhimes herself in an interview in *The New York Times* (2005): "I'm in my early 30s, and my friends and I don't sit around and discuss race. We're post-civil rights, post-feminist babies, and we take it for granted that we live in a diverse world". However, as Brüning eloquently points out in accordance with Kristen J. Warner, just because there is an increasing presence on screen of racial diversity doesn't necessarily mean that networks are responding to a wish arisen from Black people's "desire to be seen as much as they are responding to what and how much white viewers want to see of black life" (Warner 2015a: 634 quoted in Brüning 2019: 468).

Shonda Rhimes has undoubtedly achieved "unparalleled success for a Black female creator of prime-time television on a major broadcast television network" (Erigha 2015: 14) and should be commended for bringing "black characters in prominent positions" (Erigha 2015: 12). However, at the same time, we should be cautious of any quick identification of Rhimes' productions either as a reliable depiction of a supposedly post-racial American society or as a truthful depiction of Blackness as "mainstream television appears [only] to accept one version of black life –crossover blackness– but not a diversity of blackness" (Erigha 2015: 14).

Our analysis of the three case studies represents just the first step of a larger research project aimed at building a framework to analyse which aesthetics, identities and relationships showrunners depict and produce on the female representation and the race issue in contemporary U.S. serial products. Our future intent is to initiate comparative research to investigate the politics of representation characterizing Rhimes' shows in relation to the three macro genres: medical drama, legal drama and political drama.

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Ally McBeal (Fox, 1997-2002)

Blackish (ABC, 2014-)

E.R. (NBC, 1994-2009)

Empire (Fox, 2015-)

For the People (ABC, 2018-2019)

Girlfriends (UPN, 2000-2008)

Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005-)

How to Get Away with Murder (ABC, 2014-)

Scandal (ABC, 2012-2018)

Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004)

Station 19 (ABC, 2018-)

HOLLYWOOD (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF ARABS AND THE MIDDLE EAST FROM A PRODUCTION PERSPECTIVE – THE CASE OF FX CHANNEL'S *TYRANT*

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Arabs; Muslims; Middle East; Orientalism; stereotypes; clichés.

ABSTRACT

Very often, scholars and cultural critics regard Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East as stereotyped, clichéd and, in some cases, downright offensively racist. Yet, there are very few scholarly works that investigate this issue from a production perspective. Drawing from theories on cultural production and creative personnel, and combining them with fieldwork I conducted on the set of *Tyrant* (2014-2016), FX Channel's Middle Eastern drama, this article seeks to contribute to this literature by exploring the complexities of the accurate representation of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East when working with a mixed cast in a series intended for a diverse audience, which by necessity also deals with politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Building on the solid foundation of postcolonial literary studies in general, and Edward Said's approach to "Orientalist literature" in particular, a growing body of academic literature has investigated Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East (Aguayo 2009, Georgakas 1989, Kozlovic 2007, Mandel 2001, McAlister 2001, Semmerling 2006, Shaheen 2008). Discourse analysis and textual analysis are among the principal methods when exploring issues of (mis) representation. One notable exception, opting for a production perspective, is Kyle Conway's *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2017), based on fieldwork conducted on the set of the Canadian sitcom (2007-2012) focusing on a Muslim community in a fictional prairie town.

Very often, scholars and cultural critics regard Hollywood's preferences in portraying Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East as politically loaded, biased, stereotyped, clichéd and, in some cases, downright offensively racist. Many cultural critics viewed *Tyrant* (2014-2016), FX's Middle Eastern drama, along the lines of this discourse. Set in a fictional country in the midst of upheavals, with a plot rich in obvious references to the Arab uprisings of 2011 and beyond, the first season of the series received harsh critiques. In 2015, the production of seasons 2 and 3 was relocated from Israel to Hungary, an emerging location for Hollywood runaway productions (Sayfo 2020) where I had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork and to study the preproduction and production process. I spent hundreds of hours on the set and conducted around ten semi-structured interviews, alongside informal conversations with more than twenty above-the-line creative personnel, while investigating the birth of clichés and (mis)representations.[1]

Through the case study of *Tyrant*, this article seeks to contribute to the meagre body of literature on Hollywood's representation of Arabs, Muslims and the Middle East from a production perspective. In the first part of the article, I will discuss the show's stereotypical representations of Arabs and the Middle East, then provide insights into the production culture, discuss the complexity of production practices and dynamics, cover the creators' considerations about the (assumed) demands of the audience, the importance of the

writers and directors and their cultural backgrounds, the involvement of American Muslim organizations in the production, and investigate the problems of "accuracy". The goal of the article is to answer the following questions: What are the pitfalls faced by a non-Arab crew working on the representation of Arabs and the Middle East? Are clichés and (mis)representations necessarily intentional and forced from top-down, as many might assume? How are long-established clichés reproduced? And, finally, what are the possible professional considerations behind the choices of two highly sensitive issues, namely accent/language and the representation of women?

2. *TYRANT,* THE "MOST ANTI-ARAB" PRODUCTION EVER SEEN ON TV

Echoing the academic discourses cited above, journalistic criticism often regards Hollywood as biased in its portrayal of Arabs and Muslims; bias that is often attributed to geo-political considerations allegedly served by Hollywood. *Tyrant* attracted a fair amount of this type of criticism (Newbould 2014, VanDerWerff 2014). Borrowing its theme from *The Godfather*, the 2014 show by Israeli producer Gideon Raff and American Howard Gordon revolves around Barry/Bassam Al-Fayeed (Adam Rayner), the younger of the two sons of the brutal dictator of Abuddin, a fictional Middle Eastern country. Having run from his past for over twenty years, Barry, a pediatrician, lives in the United States with his American family. However, when he decides to return to the country to attend his nephew's (Cameron Gharaee) wedding, he is unwillingly drawn into a political crisis caused by the death of his father and finds himself in the midst of a growing popular revolution against his brother Jamal (Ashraf Barhoum), the new self-appointed president of Abuddin. Barry, an advocate of democratic values, soon confronts Jamal and attempts a coup. As the coup fails, Jamal leaves Barry to die in the desert. Fortunately, Barry is found by Bedouins who shelter him in their village, where he meets Daliya, his host's wife. Very soon, the army of the Caliphate (an ISIS-style terrorist group) occupies the village, and Barry recruits a revolutionary group of tribal people as well as urban liberals to confront and defeat the radicals. After hard battles and a victory won with the army's support, he returns to the palace to reunite with his family and is forgiven by the increasingly paranoid Jamal. After Jamal is shot, Barry takes over the presidency with the intention of building a free and democratic Abuddin.

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[1] Interviews were conducted with Howard Gordon (executive producer), Gwyneth Holder-Payton (co-executive producer), Christopher Keyser (showrunner), Attila Szalay (cinematographer), Addison McQuigg (writer), Anna Fischko (writer), Lee Gordon (set decorator), Ray McNeill (property master), Julia Patkos (costume designer), Adam Rayner (actor), Khaled Abul-Naga (actor).

However, as tensions grow, he is drawn into an alarming spiral of becoming a tyrant similar to those he previously despised.

Soon after the debut of the pilot and throughout season 1, some of the critics labeled the show as hateful and racist, accusing producer Howard Gordon of "brainwashing" the American people (Hanina 2015). One of the most outraged commentaries came from Jack Shaheen, an academic and public writer who monitors Hollywood's representations of Arabs, and who blamed the show for providing "some of the most racist anti-Arab images (I have) ever seen on American television" (2014). Shaheen accused *Tyrant* of presenting Arab characters as barbaric types – "backward, rapist, warmongers, rich and spoiled" – and of even depicting an "Arab child as a murderer" (2014).

Other reviewers regarded the show as a parallel to American Middle East policies, which cast Bassam as an "American savior" of the Arabs, who are depicted as "uncivilized power-hungry Bedouins, whose only refuge from secular dictatorships and Islamic fundamentalism is liberal democracy" (Hussain 2015). Some agreed with this criticism and assumed *Tyrant* to be a part of "Fox propaganda", noting that "Raff and Gordon have merely produced a fictional and glorified account of how the Obama administration would have liked to have dealt with the Arab Spring and Syria in particular" (Jones 2014). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee denounced *Tyrant* for "its deeply entrenched racism against Arabs and the Middle East", demanding that FX cancel the show. Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) likewise voiced his concerns, for "in *Tyrant*, even the 'good' Arab Muslims are bad" (ADC 2014).

This harsh reception was by no means unexpected, particularly in view of the creator's previous works. In 2004, CAIR accused Howard Gordon's *24* (2001-2010) of perpetuating stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, and objected to the persistent portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the context of terrorism (Alsultany 2012: 18). Later, Gordon was also extensively criticized for his controversial show *Homeland* (2011-2020) revolving around terrorism and the Middle East. Although Gordon declared that he strove to create nuanced characters and to tell the story of *Tyrant* from an "Arab point of view", many critics pointed out stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims as defined in the relevant literature: the "Three B-s", the Belly Dancers, Billionaires and Bombers (Qumsiyeh 1998); Villains, Sheikhs and Maidens (Shaheen 2003); the "dangerous" Muslim man, the "imperiled" Muslim woman, and the "civilized" European (Razack 2008), along with other clichés such as chaotic Middle Eastern streets, Bedouin romance, and other "Orientalist fantasies". Even though some critiques seemed to ignore the creators' lofty goals, clearly, there is a tension between producer's intentions and the actual textual outcome, which, as we shall see, can be in part be explained by paradoxes in representation faced by the creators during the production process.

3. THE ASSUMED DEMANDS OF THE AUDIENCE

Speaking of the representation of Arabs/Muslims on American television, Alsultany (2012: 27) asserted that the primary goal of commercial television networks is not education, social justice, or social change, but to generate profit by keeping as many viewers glued to screen for as long as possible. Caves (2000: 3) contended that in the film industry, uncertainties about success often pushes companies to devote immense efforts to gain a sense of what audiences actually want, as an attempt to control high levels of risk. Cantor (2011: 26) notes that producers of television series communicate not only to the viewing audience, but also to "those in control of the medium, the network executives and advertising agencies". Critics are also in position to financially make or break a series, while ad agencies usually threaten to jump ship to other networks when superior ratings are found elsewhere (Caldwell 2008: 89). Therefore, the (assumed) demands of the audience as consumers should be considered as a major force that shapes the text.

Although aware of international markets, Hollywood is liable to make TV series for principally domestic audiences, and only secondarily for foreign ones, which, as Alford (2009) concluded, can be seen as one explanation for a tendency to focus on political narratives that are familiar to Americans, as existing knowledge and a sense of familiarity reduce the risk of having to deal with the audience's ignorance. In the case of *Tyrant*, the producers, directors and writers I interviewed agreed that the American audience's (assumed) desires and expectations should not be ignored. The competition for viewers was immense, as some four hundred scripted shows were aired on American networks in 2015 (Koblin 2015). Knowing that almost 80 percent of all new shows fail and are canceled each year due to low ratings in American television (Caldwell 2008: 23), the pressure on producers was high.

The political environment, coupled with Hollywood trends and the audience's (assumed) demands and knowledge,

has the potential to affect representations. Investigating the representation of North American Arabs/Muslims since 9/11, Alsultany (2012: 21-31) describes the tendency towards "simplified complex representations", a set of improvisatory strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they offer are complex. Exploring the issue from a production perspective, Conway (2017) defined two paradoxes: the "synecdoche", where one person stands in for a group of people; and "saleable diversity", the dilemma of representing Muslim communities in a diverse way, which is nevertheless understandable to a general audience. Set in the Middle East with Arab/Muslim characters standing in for all dramatic roles, the producers of *Tyrant* faced a paradox that I would define as the "problem of saleable accuracy" in the sense that producers set a limit for the depth of the characters and the environment in order to meet the (assumed) demands of the audience.

According to producer Howard Gordon, even the very concept of offering a principally Arab perspective was regarded as a risk factor that could potentially exclude a certain part of the American audience, and considerations regarding the audience's demands set certain constraints on creativity and, ultimately, on cultural accuracy.[2] As FX CEO John Landgraf put it, "It's not that you can never show something that looks like a street riot a la Tahrir Square. It's that, generally speaking, all of it has to have this kind of formalistic exotic beauty to it, because if we can't seduce people into this world, then we fail" (Rose 2014b). Therefore, the plot of *Tyrant* intentionally summons countless clichés and an even greater number of references to actual events shown in American news in order to give the audience a sense of familiarity and hence reduce the risk of rejection. On the other hand, it should be noted that Hollywood does have a history of using an imagined audience for authorial justification (Caldwell 2008: 223).

Some of the harshest criticism leveled at *Tyrant* came after the premiere of the pilot. As some critics correctly pointed out, the first episode mustered a set of stereotypical and clichéd characters of "cultural capital" (Alsultany 2012: 27) like the Americanized Arab (Barry), the dictator's misbehaving son (Ahmed), the brutal Arab (Jamal), and the abused Arab/Muslim woman (Nusrat). Neither were the luxurious palaces, chaotic streets and poor neighborhoods particularly authentic or nuanced, and the plot itself, showing Barry returning with his American family from the United States

to the Middle East for a "short visit", recalled a cliché long established in Brian Gilbert's *Not Without My Daughter* (1991).

However, clichés of this type can be explored within the frame of economic logics. In 2013, when *Tyrant*'s pilot was prepared, FX ordered about half a dozen pilots of different shows from affiliated producers to select the ones to be funded and developed into a series. In other words, the producers' primary goal was to secure a foothold by gaining the applause and approval of the studio's testing audience, representing different ages and ethnicities, and to convince the decision-makers at FX to invest in the production of the season. Therefore, the creators decided to minimize the risk of rejection by building on the audience's knowledge about the Arab world, assumed to be minimal and to be based on previous Hollywood productions and superficial news reports at best. At the same time, the pilot also involved broad characterizations in order to keep options open for further changes and evolutions.[3]

4. CREATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE PROBLEMS OF WRITING ON ARABS BY NON-ARABS

The "accuracy" of any representation of any group of people is hardly measurable, given that it is highly subjective and depends on the speaker's notions. Therefore, rather than investigating the "accuracy" of *Tyrant*'s representation of Arabs and the Middle East, my main question was as follows: What did the creators regard as being authentically Arab and Middle Eastern, and who had the authority to decide what is authentic and what is not during the production process?

People working on the show agreed that due to his reputation for blockbusters like *Homeland* and *24*, producer Howard Gordon was given complete creative freedom by FX. For seasons 2 and 3 of *Tyrant*, Gordon's concept was to avoid hurtful representations of Arabs and Muslims, and to construct a fictional Middle Eastern country as realistic as possible. So what went wrong with Gordon's plan?

Producers of TV shows are cultural producers and television is a "producer medium" (Newcomb and Alley 1983), as its three major creative parts – story, cast and editing – are largely controlled by the producer (Cantor 2011: 5). Others have argued that executive producers (showrunners) have a fundamental role in television (Wild 1999). Caldwell (2008:

199-202) noted that the logic of authorship in contemporary television is institutional rather than personal, therefore it is negotiated and collective. In this sense, producers represent collective rather than individual above-the-line interests. In general, scholars analyzing "cultures of production" largely regard cultural production as a messy, fragmented business that provides major space for creative autonomy (Fowles 1996, Du Gay 1997, Hesmondhalgh 2002, Banks 2010). I found that collective authorship and creative freedom were key factors in the (re)creation of clichés, stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Tyrant's crew included less than a handful of Arab creative personnel, mostly actors.[4] Therefore, Abuddin was constructed by creative personnel of diverse backgrounds with wholly different sets of artistic and economic priorities, who had but a limited interest in Middle Eastern affairs or Arab-American issues other than what concerned their actual job. For roughly one-half of those I interviewed, the lines between Muslims, Arabs, and other ethnicities of the Middle East were blurred, and the categories were even interchangeable. In this regard, British creative personnel, socialized as they were in multicultural London, and Israelis generally had a deeper knowledge of the people of the Middle East. Cultural consultants' suggestions were respected, but often regarded as secondary to other considerations. Observing the preproduction and production phases, it was striking to see how a large number of stereotypes, clichés and cultural inaccuracies are not forced from the top, but are proposed during the creative process by creative workers such as directors, writers, actors, and designers as a consequence of their aesthetic autonomy as well as of their professional priorities, absent from the viewers' eyes.

As the set of season 2 of *Tyrant* was located in Hungary, creative management was partly split between Gordon/Keyser in Los Angeles and co-executive producer Gwyneth Holder-Payton on the set. Given the nine hours' difference between Hungary and Los Angeles, and bearing in mind the producers' demands, both assumed and genuine, Holder-Payton had the authority to make all day-to-day and immediate decisions, work with creative personnel of diverse backgrounds and priorities, and to select minor actors and supporting cast members.

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4   When speaking of creative personnel, I follow the definition proposed by Hesmondhalgh, and mean workers such as writers, actors, directors and musicians; craft and technical workers such as camera operators, film editors and sound engineers; creative managers such as television producers, magazine editors and A&R personnel; administrators; executives; and unskilled labor (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013: 9).

As is usual for American TV series, each season of *Tyrant* was supervised by a showrunner who had the authority to decide the overall concept and storyline. In the hands of Gideon Raff, the first season was basically a soap opera, with the main focus on personal relations and family affairs. In season 2, supervised by Howard Gordon, increasing attention was paid to social and political issues. Season 3, supervised by Christopher Keyser, retained some of its focus on family affairs, but offered a much broader canvas of Middle Eastern societies, political movements and organizations.[5]

Each season had a group of seven writers participating in the creation of the overall story and episodes, with each of them personally in charge of writing a particular episode.

Caldwell (2008: 206) pointed out how "low-culture" Hollywood embraces "high-culture" graduates from elite universities who practice "downward cultural mobility" by affiliating with Hollywood. This was particularly striking in *Tyrant*'s writer's team, set up by white Americans, mainly graduates of drama schools and the English faculties of renowned American universities, with no personal or educational connection to the Middle East at all. This background largely affected their priorities when writing and also limited the cultural depths of their texts. In our personal discussions, the writers all claimed that their first and foremost goal was to "tell a good story" in terms of a narrative that would potentially attract audiences, while simultaneously contributing to their professional capital. They all agreed, at least in principle, that the story should be as authentic as possible in terms of culture, history and the actual dynamics of the real world, but they also pointed out that even the most authentic story can fail if lacking in dramatic strength, a strong storyline or a failure to address the audience. Nearly all of the writers also admitted that personal focuses of interest, and even viewpoints on certain social and political issues, could be reflected in the texts, even though it should not be at the expense of the professional considerations of storytelling. Yet, the way the scripts were written and worded often suggested that some culturally sensitive scenes such as Islamic prayers, funerals and political arguments, were generally preceded by some research and/or discussions with consultants. When I inquired about the limits of the depth of cultural accuracy, most writers took it for granted that the American audience have no or only limited knowledge of actual events in the Middle East. This belief prompted them to construct narratives inspired by actual events that would

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5   Christopher Keyser, personal interview. 15 June, 2016.

be legible for the widest audience possible, hence making the overall production marketable.[6]

Even though, as Gordon claimed, *Tyrant* ultimately espoused an Arab perspective, the writers had an American audience in mind, which ultimately led to the inclusion of culturally inaccurate phrases in order "to make the audience feel a certain way".[7] One case in point is a scene in season 2 showing Jamal's discussion with Sheikh Taymullah (Dimitri Andreas), a moderate Muslim cleric, about his personal fears of death. At one point, the sheikh says: "Everyone dies". When I asked the episode's writer why he did not choose a Quranic quote that would have been more authentic for a sheikh, he explained that he had been unable to find an appropriate quote that expressed the message he had in mind. In a number of cases, the lines of Arab characters included quotes from English and American literature, Shakespeare, Yeats's poems and Frederick Douglass that were regarded as being better suited to communicating a certain idea to the audience. The dramatic potential of the story would often prevail over cultural accuracy, as for example in the blossoming romance between Barry and Dalyah in season 2, something that could hardly happen in a Bedouin environment where the spaces of men and women are strictly separated.

5. PRESENTING SUBJECTIVE NOTIONS OF ISLAM AS OBJECTIVE

The criticism that followed the pilot of *Tyrant* had the potential to damage the reception of the first season and thus its economic success. As Arabs are an "invisible minority" in the United States, split along national and sectarian lines (Tehranian 2009), it was not the Arab-American, but the American-Muslim lobby that was powerful enough to be recognized, which pushed FX to reassure American Muslim organizations that the show would be respectful towards Islam (Chasmar 2014). Howard Gordon requested consultations with the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) and Muslims on Screen and Television (MOST), and he also hired a Palestinian filmmaker to serve as a consultant for the first season's set in Israel (Yahr 2014).

From the beginning, inviting American Muslim groups to act as consultants was seen as a chance to become involved in the creative process of representing their communities by

Hollywood (Rosenberg 2014). The cooperation was beneficial for both sides. With Muslims on their side, FX and the producers hushed some of the critical voices and took an important step towards the potential market of American Muslims. As for MPAC and MOST, they improved their reputation in Hollywood as a moderate organization of authority over Islamic affairs, paving the way for further cooperation. This is very much in line with Alsultany's assertion (2012: 28) about the trend of simplified complex representational strategies that reflect the commodification of the civil rights and multiculturalist movements in the United States.

Although the story of *Tyrant* is located in the fictional country of Abuddin in the Eastern Mediterranean, certain cultural representations often came second. The main priority for MOST and affiliated American Muslim consultants was not an authentic depiction of the Arab Middle East, but a favorable portrayal of mainstream Islam and the characters who represent it: Fauzi (Fares Fares), a moderate pro-democracy journalist; Halima (Olivia Popica), a feminist pro-democracy student; Sheikh Taymullah (Dimitri Andreas), a government-friendly elderly cleric; and Sheikh al-Qadi (Khaled Abdul-Naga), a moderate Islamist cleric supporting the democratic transition of Abuddin. Alsultany (2012: 14-15) pointed out that in an Arab-American context, what makes a Muslim "good" or "bad" is not his or her relationship to Islam, but rather to the United States. In the case of *Tyrant*, set in a Middle Eastern environment, the difference between "good" and "bad" Arabs/Muslims is not their relation to the United States, but to American values such as freedom, democracy, and the like.

American Muslim consultants had no objections to casting the fictional, ISIS-inspired terrorist group, the Caliphate and its members in the worst possible light, even if these representations were inaccurate and bore little resemblance to any real-life Islamist group. Therefore, while breaking with many clichés of previous representations of Arabs in general, the terrorist characters appearing in *Tyrant* share features as described in some academic studies and by cultural critics. Viewed from another angle, unrealistic representations were of little concern to the authors as the Caliphate was intended to fill the dramatic role of a group of unnuanced villains.

Even though not all advice was accepted, consultants were in general regarded as sources of authentic knowledge by the producers and the creative personnel. Therefore, their specific, often non-Middle Eastern approach to and understanding of Islam made its way into the texts, and their personal views were presented as being authentically Middle Eastern, again

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6   Howard Gordon, personal interview, 20 April, 2016.

7   Christopher Keyser, personal interview, 15 June, 2016.

re-affirming Hollywood's intellectual tradition of regarding the categories of Arabs and Muslims as interchangeable.

6. CREATING AN ARAB COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE BY NON-ARABS

Although hired by the producer, the director still has a broad level of authority and autonomy as the highest-ranking creative personnel on the set. Almost each episode of *Tyrant* was directed by a different person. While Holder-Payton had the ultimate word in conceptual decisions, it was interesting to see how each director had their own work style, priorities and focus of interest. Cultural accuracy or dealing with stereotypes and clichés was not always among their top priorities.

The directors of seasons 2 and 3 were Americans and Britons of diverse background. When I asked about the reasons for excluding Arab directors (and writers), I was told about the lack of suitable Arab professionals with an experience in Hollywood production. In a personal interview, Holder-Payton explained how she intentionally wanted to compensate for the absence of Arab directors by involving as many directors of minority backgrounds as possible, as she assumed that individuals who had experienced marginalization in the world of directors dominated by white men would be more open towards the sensitivities of other marginal people (Cunningham 2015).

Indeed, when seeing the directors at work, I had the impression that the ones with some sort of minority background, like Polish-Jewish Alex Zakrzewski, African-American Earnest Dickerson, Black-British Alrick Riley as well as women like Deborah Chow, Charlotte Brandstrom and others tended to be more sensitive and open regarding suggestions on cultural nuances than male directors of majority background. When shooting "Faith" (2.03), Zakrewski even decided to completely redesign a set (originally as a living room) on the day of the shooting to make it culturally more authentic as a place where male members of an Arab family gather for a funeral wake. On another occasion, he accepted minor suggestions made by some of the extras of Middle Eastern background, when rehearsing the scene of a Bedouin feast. In a scene that supposed to feature Abu Omar, the leader of the Caliphate making sex to his wife and two slave women at once (something unrealistic for a hardcore Islamist), it was Ernest Dickinson who took the ultimate decision to leave Jane out of the scene and to instead have Abu Omar making love to the two slave women only. In contrast, the majority white male directors tended to have stronger visions, accepting more important

suggestions based on cultural concerns mainly in cases involving highly sensitive issues that could have caused serious problems for the show's reception. Personal considerations occasionally played a role too. In season 2, a scripted scene showing Jamal flogging himself was deleted not only for being problematic for evoking a Shia Muslim tradition in a – presumably – Sunni Muslim environment, but also because director Peter Weller personally objected: as a PhD in Mediterranean culture, he regarded it as a Christian ritual that would be incompatible with a Middle Eastern Muslim milieu.

At the time the pilot (1.01) was released, Gideon Raff claimed that Abuddin was mainly inspired by Syria (Willmore 2014). Later, Howard Gordon described the country as fictional and the plot as a mash-up or collage of all Arab countries (Rose 2014a). During seasons 2 and 3, the palace and some interiors sets were set up in a studio, while the village and town sets were built in a sand quarry on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary, while a few scenes were shot in exterior sets. Being entirely constructed, the sets largely reflect the designing authors and creative personnel's personal visions of the Middle East.

Alsultany (2012: 29) highlighted that fictionalizing Arab and Muslim countries tends to add to the conflation and generalization of Arab and Muslim identities. As I myself observed, this fictionalization has an impact not only on perceptions of the text, but also on its creation. Given the fictiveness of Abuddin, set designer Ricky Eyres, set decorator Lee Gordon, prop master Ray McNeill and costume designer Julia Patkos enjoyed a relatively broad aesthetic autonomy to create the visuals of the show. Therefore, they used elements from Morocco to the Middle East and the Gulf as inspiration, despite the fact that the concept of Abuddin would rather have called for a Levantine-style design. The craft of set building and set design call for extensive forms of focused analysis, conceptualization, and aesthetic distinction, however, working conditions can potentially disturb the process (Caldwell 2008: 118). Budget constraints and the availability of elements for "authentic decoration" were a concern throughout the preparation process of *Tyrant*. The ultimate excuse for inaccuracies voiced by set and costume designers was that they were "not making a documentary", which provided a large space for creativity, allowing them to focus on professional and economic priorities rather than on cultural accuracy.

In the case of *Tyrant*, design was a site where the reproduction of existing clichés and misrepresentations was indeed striking. Designers agreed that even though they were undoubtedly influenced by earlier trips to various Arab countries (mainly Morocco, Dubai and Jordan), they drew their main

inspiration from online research and from previous artistic productions, including paintings, films and TV reports on the Middle East. They also concurred that some of their concepts and ideas could have been subconscious, inspired by designs they had come across some time earlier in life. Subconscious or not, some of the orientalist fantasies – criticized by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* for being a representative of power relations between the West and the Orient – were partly reproduced in *Tyrant*. According to Julia Patkos, the costumes of the actors playing Bedouins were indeed based on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European paintings by Frederick Goodall, Emile Vernet-Lecomte, and John Singer Sargent, which according to Edward Said invoked racial hierarchies. Some twenty similar artworks were hung on the walls of the presidential palace set. Unaware of the academic discourse on Orientalism, Patkos explained to me how she was aesthetically enchanted by the clothes in the paintings, and felt it was a professional challenge to create costumes by using particular elements. Similarly, Gordon's intention was to create a "romantic" atmosphere for the palace, which led him to choose Orientalist paintings. McNeill also added an economic perspective, noting that one rationale was that these pictures were available on iStock and were royalty free.

Another example is the dilemma of camels in season 3. Holder-Payton was generally enthusiastic about having animals on the set, since including animals, and especially camels – strongly criticized by Shaheen (2003) – was regarded as visually strong and would also enhance the value of the show. However, the Jordanian artist who was commissioned to prepare some of the graphics for the show warned that the presentation of camels would be racist towards Arabs. At the other end of the spectrum, consultants argued that having camels in the show was not racist, but rather stereotypical and clichéd. Unlike racist representations, stereotypes and clichés were not seen as presenting a potential to risk to the show's economic success, and the camels were eventually given the green light.

7. AN ARAB COUNTRY INHABITED BY NON-ARABS

In season 1, Arab-Israeli Ashraf Barhoum was the single Arab actor in a main role.[8] Although Egyptian-American actor Omar

Metwally was considered for the lead role of Barry al-Fayeed, there were concerns about his ability to lead a show (Rose 2014b). Therefore, Adam Rayner, an actor of American and English background was chosen, drawing strong criticism. For some, it recalled Hollywood's old racist practice of blackface, while others explained the choice with the weak lobbying power of Arabs in Hollywood (Fienberg 2014). Responding to the critics, the producers noted that they had chosen to westernize Barry by making Amira, his mother, a Briton.

Howard Gordon and other producers explained that the relative exclusion of Arab actors could be ascribed to limited resources, as both pre-production time and the pool of Arab actors capable of playing the full emotional gamut of the English language was limited.

However, as time passed, increasingly more actors of full or partial Arab origin were cast in response to critics. In season 2, Egyptian-British actors were cast for minor roles, while in season 3, Egyptian Khaled Abul-Naga was cast for a major role, and Arab-Israeli Ashraf Farah, together with a number of young European actors with some sort of Arab background for minor roles.

Actors had a certain measure of autonomy in their roles, as they consulted with writers and directors, and occasionally even contributed to the development and evolution of their characters. For non-Arab actors, the depth of cultural engagement was largely an individual/artistic choice. While about half of them felt it was enough to improve their Arabic accent, others went to great lengths to develop a cultural understanding in order to make their character's personality and motivations as authentic as possible.

While for non-Arab actors, an accurate portrayal of their characters was an abstract responsibility, for Arab actors it was a more emotional affair as well as a matter of professional capital in their own countries. Ashraf Barhoum and Khaled Abul-Naga both claimed a strong cultural authority over their characters, and reacted sensitively when some of their suggestions were rejected by the writers for dramatic or other professional considerations. One case in point was the first draft of "Fathers and sons" (2.08) that showed Jamal getting mentally confused and seeking advice from a soothsayer, described in the script as a woman with exotic looks. After reading the script, Barhoum expressed his concerns that any kind of soothsaying was un-Islamic, hence offensive to Muslims and persuaded the writers to replace the soothsayer with a sheikh, counteracting thereby the writer's intention of highlighting Jamal's mental crisis and loss of sanity. In other cases, Barhoum and Abul-Naga were relatively free to add

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8 Fares Fares who played Fauzi explained to me in a personal conversation that even though he has a Lebanese Christian background, he was socialized in Sweden, and hence regards himself as Swedish.

lines, often in Arabic, in order to make their characters more authentic.

Given the sensitive nature of his role as a moderate sheikh, Khaled Abul-Naga had even more power over his character and often changed his lines. This is best illustrated by the contrast with Greek-British Dimitri Andreas, who also played a moderate sheikh, who did not change his lines even when it was culturally inaccurate (see the example of the quote "Everyone dies", discussed above).

A liberal political activist himself, Abul-Naga, even managed to influence the overall plot.[9] After the release of season 1, Naga was disappointed by the show's focus on Islamist extremists as the main opposition to the rule of the president and suggested to Howard Gordon that a greater emphasis should be laid on youth and student activism, which he believed had triggered the Egyptian and other uprisings of 2011. As a consequence, in seasons 2 and 3, the storyline of liberal student Halima and her fellow student activists was added.[10]

Playing the role of Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the Caliphate, Israeli-Arab Ashraf Farah had little responsibility for the accurate portrayal of an ISIS-like terrorist, hence he was mostly unaware of culturally inappropriate representations, like Abdullah, an Islamist, quoting from Yeats's poems rather than the Quran or some other religious text. Altogether, in a number of cases, Arab actors were regarded by the producers and directors as sources of authentic knowledge on Arabs and the Muslim world.

8. THE STORY OF A BILINGUAL ABUDDIN

In film and cinema, accent is a primary indicator of otherness and national identity (Naficy 2001, Lawless 2014). In her work on Indian accents in American films, Shilpa S. Davé (2013: 3) argues that accent "can mark or distinguish someone or something in relation to something else" as it "can create contrast by its very difference". In the context of Hollywood's representations of Arabs, accent is often regarded as a means of highlighting the speaker's otherness, and, in some cases, of racial profiling. Among others, Disney's *Aladdin* was criticized for showing villains speaking

an accented English, while heroes spoke in American dialect (Artz 2004).

Targeting primarily American audiences, the language of *Tyrant* is American English in the case of American characters (as well as in the case of some protagonists such as the Americanized Arab Barry and his family), while the other characters imitate an Arabic accent. Reviewing season 1, *Time* magazine suggested that the use of more Arabic could add to the complexity of the show and would contribute to underscoring how Barry's character "has to straddle two worlds." The article also accentuated that having "Arabic characters" speaking to each other in heavily accented English alienates Middle Eastern characters from the audience and positions them as "Others" in a story that was supposed to be told from their perspective (Poniewozik 2014).

From a production perspective, the approach was both economic and practical. For season 1, the show hired a dialect coach in order to standardize the actors' dialects. For seasons 2 and 3, incoming actors of American, British, Israeli, Iranian, Italian, Romanian, and other backgrounds worked individually on their accents by asking the advice of Arab friends or watching relevant YouTube videos. Using more Arabic with the given cast was regarded as an unnecessary challenge, given the fact that most of the actors as well as the vast majority of extras in seasons 2 and 3 did not speak Arabic. Gordon also believed that replacing English with another language would have increased the risk of rejection by the audience, hence having the potential of economic risk. These considerations pushed producers to regard English spoken with an Arabic accent as an indicator of Arab identity. As the show took an Arab view as its main perspective, and both heroes and villains spoke an accented English, producers and writers were convinced that in their case, accent could not be an indicator of "otherness," even more so since the characters speaking American English, including Barry himself, are not consistently shown in a positive light as the story moves forward.

Occasionally, the writers included Arabic phrases such as prayers in the lines and Arabic chants of various crowds in the script. As these included government soldiers, pro-democracy demonstrators, and terrorists alike, Arabic could hardly be regarded as an intentional symbol of vilifying people. The choice of whether the crowd of extras should chant English or Arabic slogans during demonstrations and other crowd scenes was ultimately the director's decision that was often made in the last minute, on the set. This approach ended up with a "bilingual" Abuddin, randomly speaking English or Arabic.

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9   In late January 2011, Abul-Naga participated in the demonstrations of Cairo's Tahrir Square, having signed liberal Mohamed El-Baradei's manifesto for political reform on March 28, 2010.

10   Khaled Abul-Naga, personal interview, 22 June, 2016.

9. THE LIBERATED WOMEN OF ABUDDIN

Scholarly works have often highlighted that Muslim women are depicted as racialized women who are the subjects of multiple hierarchies of power. As Myra Macdonald observed, Muslim women are often portrayed as a homogenous group of victims denied their voice (Macdonald 2006). Writing on press representations, Yasmin Jiwani (2005) agreed that coverage of Muslim women stresses the "binary oppositions between the liberated West and the oppressed East", leaving women "silenced and objectified". It was even suggested that the portrayal of Arab and Muslim women as un-free was a tool of twentieth-century American cinema to justify the war on terror (Maira 2008).

Some critics of season 1 regarded *Tyrant*'s women as "hyper-exotic creatures" who were "exploited and dehumanized" by Arab men, most probably referring to Nusrat (Sibylla Deen) being raped by her father-in-law on her wedding night (Chamseddine 2014). In response to these criticisms, in seasons 2 and 3, the producers empowered some of the female characters: Dalyah evolved from the second wife of an elderly Bedouin man into a freedom fighter and politician; Leila (Moran Atias), the First Lady, stepped out of her husband's shadow and ran for presidency; Halima, a student, became a freedom fighter and then a political activist; and Nafisa, wife of a cleric, had a powerful influence on her husband's political decisions.

These portrayals and evolutions can be explained by a number of factors. The first might be described as political, as the writers ultimately believed – a belief also shared by MOST and other American Muslim cultural consultants – that Muslim women are not as oppressed as many in the West might believe. Therefore, they portrayed women as active individuals, rather than as mere objects of men. This could certainly be understood as an engagement in the discourse over Muslim women and their preferred role in their societies. I observed a political engagement of this type in an argument over the first version of the script of "A Rock and A Hard Place" (3.05), which included a scene showing Halima making love to her boyfriend. After reading the script, two female consultants of Arab-American Muslim background argued that the portrayal of Halima in such an "immoral" way would ruin her character in the eyes of many Muslim viewers, and hence taint her message of democracy and liberal values. Understanding their concerns, the writers deleted the original love scene and instead included a dialogue between Halima and her boyfriend discussing the hardships of being a young liberal woman in a conservative society.

Writers and producers were also driven by professional considerations such as passing the Bechdel Test.[11] An equally defining factor was the general trend in Hollywood television series' portrayal of women: many blockbuster shows of the period such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *House of Cards* (2013-2018), and *Vikings* (2013-) reflect a trend of including strong female characters with political ambitions in the story (O'Keeffe 2014). However, specific representations had multiple aims. One example is showing Leila, wife of the ex-dictator Jamal, becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, then running for presidency in season 3, which could be seen as a political statement on the writers' part, as an important element of the storyline, and also as a response to the dominant trends of Hollywood. The script of "Ask for the Earth" (3.08) described Leila as a "present-day Benazir Bhutto", which again shows Hollywood's perspective of regarding the terms of Arab and Muslim as interchangeable.

Muslim women's bodies, especially their covered bodies, are the markers of their communities' place in modernity (Razack 2008: 16). The veil in particular has been deployed as a symbol of the victimhood of Muslim women and as a means of derogating Islam (Kumar 2005, Alsultany 2012: 72). Challenging some Western assumptions, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) insists that the veil can mean very different things to different women, with most of them being far from oppressive. Nevertheless, different types of veils such as the hijab and the niqab are regarded as an indication of the status of Muslim women.

Writers, directors, and costume designers of *Tyrant* regarded the veil more of a matter of aesthetics than as a symbol of power. Therefore, the fact that the majority of the female characters in *Tyran*t were not or were only veiled part-time can hardly be explained by a "colonial obsession with unveiling" (Macdonald 2006). Still, in some cases, the veil was nevertheless a symbol of politics and ideology. Halima's portrayal without a veil was an intentional symbol of her liberal political views. Similarly, Leila, shown largely unveiled in seasons 1 and 2, became veiled in season 3 for narrative considerations, as she started her own political career in coalition with a Muslim cleric. In season 2, Daliyah was introduced wearing a loose veil, leaving some of her hair visible, an outfit largely inspired by orientalist paintings. Later, she lost her scarf in the rush when she was rescued from her captivity in the Caliphate. The showrunners' decision not to re-veil her was explained by her personal transformation into a strong woman, which in turn

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11   Addisson Mcquigg, personal interview, 22 May, 2016.

could be perceived as an "obsession with unveiling", although it could equally well be seen as a way of presenting Daliyah as a young and sexually attractive woman in order to attract a male audience, hence enforce the show's economic success.

The presentation of Caliphate women like Jane (Caitlin Joseph) was also liberal by Islamist standards. Although women of such an ISIS-like group wear the niqab, covering their faces except for the eyes, producers and writers decided that the face of the actors should be uncovered, otherwise audiences would not recognize them. Therefore, Jane was covered in black while her face was left visible. These concerns did not apply to the extras playing the role of Caliphate women who wore a proper niqab.

In general, choosing and designing the costumes was a matter of aesthetics, often leading to heated debates and compromises between producers, directors, costume designer, and the actors themselves, because of their clashing aesthetic, professional and personal priorities and preferences.

10. (MIS)REPRESENTATION AS AN UNFORTUNATE "BUSINESS AS USUAL"

The production process of *Tyrant* largely undermined the high-minded goals of the producers to create an "authentic" representation of Arabs and the Middle East. Firstly, producers, showrunners and writers had to grapple with the paradox of "saleable accuracy", as Hollywood, in its capacity as a creative industry, has its own logic and practices in storytelling, and creators focused on the (assumed) demands of the American market as its primary audience. Stereotypes and clichés were often used by authors as a tried and tested way of creating a sense of familiarity for the audience, hence ensuring the project's economic success. Following this logic, they actively contributed to the reproduction of the stereotypes and clichés established by former literary and cinematic works. At the same time, a number of clichés were reproduced unintentionally by taking artistic and economic considerations, and personal preferences first.

Ultimately, (mis)representations, at least in the case of *Tyrant*, can also be linked to the relative absence of Arabs in the Hollywood industries and the ignorance of some creative personnel. As the number of Arabs and Muslims working in American creative industries is extremely low, their images are mainly constructed by creative personnel of diverse backgrounds, and they are often driven by aesthetic and professional rather than cultural considerations.

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Not Without My Daughter (1991)
Tyrant (2014-2016)
Vikings (2013-)

ANALYSING SEMI-SERIALIZED TELEVISION FICTIONS: THE ETHICAL STAKES OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT

The power of episodic television shows such as *Columbo* (NBC, 1968-1978; ABC, 1989-2003), in which each episode tells a full story, has been highlighted by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2017: 107-28), who compares them to cubist works, whose universes become denser over time. Yet, surveys evidence that audiences generally prefer watching serial television shows whose narrative arcs develop over numerous episodes (Glevarec 2012, Combes 2015). Series such as *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *Angel* (The WB, 1999-2004), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016) and *Awake* (NBC, 2012), which are the focus of this essay, negotiate a "balance between episodic and serial demands"

(Mittell 2015: 20), as they include episodes that both stand on their own and advance various long-term narrative arcs. These semi-serial shows display a writing which, season after season, feeds on the very tension between their episodic and serial aspects, between short-term and long-term features. This tension raises ethical stakes, particularly an ethics of care, which this essay will attempt to bring to the fore, drawing from the work of Sandra Laugier (2014: 261). Laugier's work invites us to understand how television shows, through their durations and the various kinds of attachment they elicit, may educate viewers morally and make them attentive to what seems to be unremarkable within ordinary life. Her recent work on TV series (2019) focuses on their representational contents – situations, dialogues, gestures, dilemmas, identity politics and (political or moral) choices made by (groups of) characters – but it does not take into account the way specific narrative structures may encourage spectators to adopt a particular ethical view. The purpose of this essay is precisely to focus on the ethics of care invoked through serial narrative structures. By analyzing several examples, we will show that semi-serial shows thematize their own narrative negotiations within the story world and, even if they construct strong serial arcs, maintain the importance of the episodic form as a metaphor of human beings in their very individualities and specificities.

The power of formula television shows such as *Columbo* (NBC, 1968-1978; ABC, 1988-2003), in which each episode has a certain form of autonomy, has been highlighted by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2017: 107-28), who compares them to cubist works, whose universes become denser over time. Yet, surveys evidence that audiences generally prefer watching serialized television shows whose narrative arcs develop over numerous episodes (Glevarec 2012, Combes 2015). TV series such as *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *Angel* (The WB, 1999-2004), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016) and *Awake* (NBC, 2012), which are the case studies chosen for this essay, are semi-serialized shows since they all negotiate a "balance between episodic and serial demands" (Mittell 2015: 20) and include episodes that both stand on their own and advance various long-term narrative arcs. On a narrative level, *Lost* may look, at first sight, like a pure serial show but the episodes generally follow a structure centred on a character and his/her past or future, making them *at the same time* units with some closed plots. This formal repetition was especially needed because, during the first three seasons, no ending had been negotiated with the producers, so that writers had to make the show last as long as possible. Conversely, a series like *ER* may look like a pure medical procedural drama with autonomous stories each week, but in fact its episodes reveal how the medical cases have lasting consequences on the recurring staff of doctors and nurses over seasons and even the entire series.

This essay relies on a specific terminology in French serial narratology developed over the years (Cornillon 2018, Favard 2018, Lifschutz 2018, Hatchuel and Thiellement 2019) and on previous articles written on the relationship between ideology and serial narrative structures in different TV series – for example, on *Angel* (Cornillon 2017), on *Awake* (Hatchuel 2014), or on *Lost* (Hatchuel and Cornillon 2016). This essay represents an attempt to draw a synthesis and a theoretical frame from these previous works in order to elaborate a new methodology to study television series, especially semi-serialized shows, and to share our first results with the international community working on serial narration and aesthetics.

The terminology used here makes a distinction between formula shows (such as *Columbo* or *CSI*), serialized shows (such as *Stranger Things* or *The Handmaid's Tale*) and semi-serialized shows (such as *ER* or *Lost*, as we have just seen). The latter category is the one we are going to explore to understand precisely how its structural hybridity is a frame for its ideological and ethical content. Among those semi-serialized shows, and the examples chosen in this essay, we find two

main sub-categories (Cornillon 2018), leading to a more nuanced understanding of television seriality:

1. *Formula* semi-serialized shows (such as *Angel, Person of interest* or *ER*) : in this sub-category, different story arcs are developed throughout the entire season or series (regarding plot elements, the relationships between characters or the evolution of these characters) but every episode is structured around the same formula. It is based, for instance, on the case of the week, the patient of the week or the monster of the week.

2. *Episodic* semi-serialized shows (such as *Lost*): in this sub-category, each episode serves a long-term narrative plot but also features a certain form of autonomy based on a particular theme or linked to a character's specific viewpoint. However, contrary to what happens with the formula semi-serialized show, *episodes do not follow the same narrative pattern each time*.

Therefore, a very serialized show such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) does not operate in the same way as *Lost* since its episodes have no thematic or formal specificities – they could be considered as parts of a very long film. On the continuum that exists between episodic and serialized television, *Stranger Things* tends to be more serialized while *Lost* has a more balanced structure between the two poles (Cornillon 2019).

The variety of structures that can be found in TV series has thus to be acknowledged in a more complex way than just a binary opposition. One has to think in terms of tension, negotiation, hybridity and continuum instead of strict opposition. Semi-serialized shows (whether formulaic or episodic) display a writing which, season after season, feeds on the very tension between their episodic and serialized aspects, between short-term and long-term features. This tension raises ethical stakes, particularly an ethics of care, which this essay will attempt to bring to the fore.

Sandra Laugier's work (2014: 261) has invited us to understand how television shows, through their durations and the various kinds of attachment they elicit, may educate viewers morally and make them attentive to what seems to be unremarkable within ordinary life. Her recent work on TV series (2019) focuses on their representational contents – situations, dialogues, gestures, dilemmas, identity politics and (political or moral) choices made by (groups of) characters – but it does not take into account the way specific narrative structures may encourage spectators to adopt a particular ethical view. Other volumes (Skorin-Kapov 2019, Watson and Arp 2011) engage with ethical issues *through* film or televi-

sion, but fail to address the very ethics *of* film or television. The purpose of this essay is precisely to focus on the ethics of care *implied by the shows' narrative structures*. Through four case studies (the number of which is necessarily limited by the scope of an academic essay), we will test a new methodology to analyse semi-serialized fictions, revealing how these shows thematize their own narrative negotiations within the story world. Even if semi-serialized shows construct strong serial arcs, they seem to maintain the importance of the episode as a metaphor of human beings in their very individualities and specificities. Our four examples are taken from network television, a source of serial narratives which has generally been discarded or underestimated in terms of innovation and complexity. For instance, Dunleavy's 2018 volume on complex seriality focuses on cable and multiplatform television only. Yet it is crucial to underline that subtle and complex narrative structures can also be found on network TV.

Each type of audiovisual serial narrations opens up a specific space for ideological and ethical negotiation, especially in terms of the status of the characters. In formula semi-serialized shows (Cornillon 2017), many characters appear each week just for one episode. What part do they play? How do they function within the narration alongside the returning characters? A television series such as *ER* fundamentally deals with this issue: the emergency room appears as a mise-en-abyme of the semi-serialized formulaic template, in the sense that it is a hosting space for strangers, whom the main characters will have to take care of. The doctors, just like the viewers, learn to know them within this brief temporality, but they also have to let them go at the end of the day and of the episode. The doctors stay, but patients are just passing through, a fact which is acknowledged countless times by the characters themselves during the fifteen seasons. The patient of the week is consequently a true guest star, structuring the space of the episode which is devoted to him or her. Revealingly, the most memorable moments in the show are not necessarily the heavily serialized episodes (with some exceptions, such as Mark Greene's and Lucy's deaths). All along the fifteen seasons, most of the dear memories we keep from *ER* are memories of patients: the pregnant lady who dies after an awful night and whom Mark Greene fails to save; the businessman who has a heart defect and has just one more night to live. The show is in fact about opening a narrative space capable of welcoming each time another human being in his or her specificity, individuality and life story.

This is the reason why *ER*, like so many formula semi-serialized shows, is particularly suited for the appearance of famous actors, that is to say, guest stars. The narration leaves room for these characters to be the centre of one episode. For instance, James Woods appears in season 12, in which he plays a professor who is completely paralyzed; Forest Whitaker appears in season 13, as a patient whose state deteriorates rapidly during his stay in the emergency room and who will sue Luka Kovac for malpractice. Serialized narrative arcs progress for their part, but doctors always have to readapt their points of view to be more sensitive to their patients' own perspectives. Several episodes actually adopt a patient's point of view in order to thematize an ethical issue both for doctors and viewers. It is notably the case of an episode in season 11, which is focused on a mother, played by Cynthia Nixon, one of the main actresses from *Sex and The City* (HBO, 1998-2004). She has a stroke that leaves her paralyzed. During most of the episode, the camera adopts her point of view while the viewer can hear her thinking in voice-over. The use of the subjective camera lets us discover what the patient sees and especially the doctors working around her. She does not fully realize that she is paralyzed in the first place; she first thinks that she is speaking before understanding that the words are just her thoughts and that she is unable to communicate, trapped as she is in her own body. Through this technique, the viewers are invited, during these scenes, to move their attention away from doctors and to build an empathetic link with the patient. They experience her situation, making this episode a very hard one to watch.

The hybridity of the semi-serialized formulaic form makes it a site where heterogeneous elements constantly interact with and echo one another. *ER* thus creates a shift in points of view as it works at maintaining, at least in its first seasons, a balance between the different types of characters, between the main and supporting casts. Moreover, even if some doctors end up leaving the show, nurses are presented as the real pillars of the emergency service. They are always present, and they keep the place running, whoever the doctors or the patients are. It is precisely through the place given to everyday life at the ER, and not only to the major story arcs, that these kinds of characters can find a space to thrive within the diegesis. Consequently, the series' discourse can be found in the specific narrative space it constructs, which acts like a rhetorical frame (Soulez, 2013). The very fact that the series creates a balance between serialized storylines and formulaic ones asserts an ideological position regarding alterity and empathy. In the space of the episode, what we already know (about the doctors or the nurses) and what we do not know (about the new patients) are articulated: we are encouraged

to care for "others" in order to evolve. In a medical show, whose point is precisely to take *care* of patients, in the usual but also philosophical sense of the word, this aspect becomes even more crucial.

Political and ethical questions are thus not limited to issues of representation such as those studied by Sandra Laugier (for instance the representation of sexual or racial minorities): they are also embedded in narrative and aesthetic structures that host and shape these representations. Showrunner Joss Whedon understood that very well, as he turned all his shows into spaces of ideological negotiation, putting at their core a series of ethical questions about power, choice and responsibility. *Angel*, another formula semi-serialized show and a spin-off of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* which was created by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt and broadcast on The WB network from 1999 to 2004, is a series in which these questions are addressed very explicitly. As in *Buffy*, the characters in *Angel* have to face evil and fight to survive in a context which has been predetermined for them. Buffy is the chosen One, although she did not want to be; Angel has been cursed, turned into a vampire and is eventually the object of a prophecy claiming that he will go back to his human form if he performs enough good deeds to redeem himself. Buffy and Angel are both, at first, the subjects of stories that have been told about them and for them without their consent. Yet both their journeys are ones of community-building, and of collective emancipation from structures of power that want to confine them within a path of destiny.

Angel begins as a very formulaic series, whose episodes work similarly with story arcs that are closed at the end. Each episode focuses on an investigation regarding a supernatural phenomenon and then the fight to destroy it. But these storylines are quickly put into perspective because they come from the "Powers That Be", eternal powers who have enrolled Angel as their Champion. He accepts the missions they give him with the aim of becoming better and redeeming himself. The formulaic aspect is thus embedded into a larger scheme which is serialized. The serial aspect, in this show, can be found in the long-term narrative structure of destiny and of prophecies, which introduces a causal link between every event in the characters' lives. The characters act under the gaze of a power above them, from which they cannot escape. They cling to these narratives and prophecies because they give meaning to their lives and they try to build a future upon these foundations. But these narratives are deceptive. Season 3 and 4, the most serialized seasons in the series, are also the most apocalyptic, because these framing narratives

are manipulated by forces of evil who want nothing else than death and destruction. Wesley is led to believe that Angel is going to kill his son, Connor, and, because of this belief, he chooses to help Angel's worst enemy kidnap Connor. In season 4, Jasmine seems to be the converging point of all the storylines that took place before, but she is at the origin of a world of false happiness where there is no free will. As a matter of fact, the characters have attempted in vain to create a utopian world without evil – an idea linked to the equally utopian wish for Angel's final redemption, upon which the entire series is built. But as soon as season 2 starts, this project and this teleological view of the story are revealed as impossible. In episode 15, Angel has to find the origin of evil, the Home Office of Wolfram and Hart lawyers' corporation, but the elevator leads him to his starting point – our world. Evil is nowhere and everywhere at once, from all times, and in every one of us. It is not possible to annihilate it, but it is possible to fight against it, and that is the point of the whole show.

In this context, the end of the series redefines the narrative and ethical configuration for the benefit of the formulaic (Cornillon 2017). Because evil can never be completely defeated and because there is no final destiny, Angel eventually chooses, in a daring bet, to oppose these forces of evil, knowing that he and his friends will certainly die in this battle. He therefore waives the prophecy of a promised happy life as a human and frees himself from his destiny. He does so to underline what seems more important to him – the ethical choice which has to be made again every second and every minute of our lives. As soon as in "Epiphany" (2.16), Angel asserts: "If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do. Cause that's all there is. What we do. Today". After the serialized disasters of season 3 and 4, the series becomes formulaic again in its fifth season; but, instead of trying to help individuals and save lives, as the characters used to do with their small detective agency, they now enter a system at the core of power, the Los Angeles branch of Wolfram and Hart. This branch, via the senior partners, represents the long-running plots: it is the place from which larger narratives emerge. So the main characters are again caught away from the questions they should deal with. They are trapped in a pattern in which they take the risk of becoming mere puppets and which they will have to reject at all costs.

The series ends with a radical break as it reintroduces an attention to the present, to an always renewed moment in which one makes a choice – the moment where true heroism can be revealed. In a sense, what Angel tries to demonstrate in the story world is that the champion's real action lies within the formu-

laic aspect, embodied by the agency's client of the week, who needs to be defended and protected. Yet, precisely, this ending will not be an end, because the series has been continued in the form of comic books, in which some of the original characters reappear. Everyone has changed but the world has not: it is still a battleground between good and evil. *Angel* may thus be read as defining a space of negotiation in terms of narration and ideology which ends in an ethical coup. Fred, in "Offspring" (3.07), encapsulates this idea when she cries out "Screw destiny". The show is about understanding formal constructs (in life and in fiction) that confine us so that we can resist them. That is why the particularly constraining form of semi-serialized shows happens to be an ideal frame to showcase questions of free will, determinism and relations to institutions.

Another formula semi-serialized show, *Person of Interest* – created by Jonathan Nolan – also starts as very formulaic, and progressively injects many serial arcs into the narrative. Inside the diegesis, the mysterious billionaire, Harold Finch (Michael Emerson) has created a mass surveillance system for the US government in order to avoid 9/11-type terrorist attacks. His hyper-connected Machine can predict terrorist acts thanks to the recordings of surveillance cameras, phone calls, social networks, etc. The Machine also spots crimes that may be committed by ordinary citizens. Since the government prefers not to take those into account since they are considered too numerous and minor, it is Finch who receives each day, from the Machine, the social security numbers of those "persons of interest". The show's formula does not change for a while: with the help of his team of mercenaries, Finch tries to find these persons and discover rapidly if they are victims or perpetrators, in the hope of preventing crimes from happening.

During the first season, so that the Machine's data can't be stored and misused, Finch wipes out the Machine's memory at the end of each day at midnight. The Machine is thus halted in its development – which reflects the initial narrative format in which each episode is devoted to a given "person of interest" and the plot seems to stand still on a macroscopic level. But Finch soon discovers that the Machine has found a way to keep its memories by printing daily data on actual paper. The Machine's efforts to become self-reliant and autonomous echo the series' developing storyline, which becomes more and more complex and serialized. It includes narrative arcs focusing on the Machine's original creation, the way it progressively acquires self-awareness and is then endangered by Samaritan, a new hyper-connected surveillance mega-system, that is much more aggressive, interventionalist and imperialistic than the Machine itself.

The more the series advances, the more it challenges what is generally considered "minor" (the formulaic aspects) and "major" (the serialized aspects), at the same time by the characters within the story world and by the audience outside the fiction. Samaritan only sees the key stakes of global terrorism: it develops a specific logic in which the end justifies the means and the big picture makes possible the killing and sacrificing of thousands of people. On the contrary, the Machine never forgets individual stakes and always attempts to minimize human loss, even when "ordinary" citizens are involved. The fight between the two super-computers can be said to reflect the tension between the two major dynamics at work in serial writing – that which favours the macro/serial arc with its recurring, evolving heroes and that which concentrates on the micro/formulaic arc hosting many non-recurring characters, for instance in the form of guest stars. In this case, the "persons of interest" come to represent and anchor the viewers themselves within the story world. In this process, the expression "person of interest" is invested in a new meaning: beyond the usual meaning of "person being looked for" or "potential suspect", it can signify, in the context of the series, "important person", "person that we care about", "person that we cannot give up on".

While the series unfolds serial arcs that build a true mythology for the series (Favard 2018: 272), *Person of Interest* also goes against the viewers' preferences by preserving and even emphasizing its most formulaic aspects. In its last season, at a point when the heroes would like to fight exclusively against Samaritan, the Machine keeps sending them the social security numbers of unknown individuals whose lives may be in danger. When Sameen Shaw (Sarah Shahi) cries out that she is fed up with the "numbers", she expresses out loud what viewers may be feeling. Our desire to experience a pure serial narrative, freed from the usual "case of the week", is constantly frustrated. But the strength of the series is also to inspire in us a commitment and attachment to the formulaic format, because if we reject the numbers, if we disparage the week's "person of interest", we become exactly like Samaritan, endorsing a dehumanizing ideology in which some individuals count less than others. *Person of Interest* thus creates a tension between our wish to see the Machine evolve (and the narrative become more complex) and the necessary awareness that each life (each episode) is invaluable. The show appears, therefore, as an ethical justification of formulaic repetition versus the powerful forces of evolving seriality.

Created by Kyle Killen and Howard Gordon, the television series *Awake* even goes so far as to thematize the narrative

tension between standstill and progression through a point of view informed by both love and grief. The series includes 13 episodes – a single season due to its cancellation by NBC in May 2012. The show's pilot lays the groundwork for the serial narration. Detective Michael Britten (Jason Isaacs) describes to his therapists the incredible situation he is experiencing. A few weeks beforehand, he was driving at night with his wife Hannah (Laura Allen) and their teen-aged son Rex (Dylan Minnette) when their car fell off a cliff. Since then, when he wakes up in the morning, he finds himself in a reality where his wife has survived but his son is dead; when he falls asleep at night, he immediately wakes up in another reality that seems as real as the first, in which his wife died and his son is alive. Each dimension works as the other's dream, creating a mental Möbius strip where echoes and coincidences arise between the two "universes".

Even though the fictional dimensions are double (even triple), their frames are never sealed: in what stands as constant metalepsis, the story needs to oscillate between worlds to progress. As a semi-serialized series, *Awake* shares common points with the classical, self-contained, procedural drama with Michael investigating cases as a detective in Los Angeles, the only difference being that there is no longer one but *two* cases per episode. Clues echo from one dimension to the next: Michael has crucial intuitions to solve each case, which are, in fact, generated by the other reality in which he also lives. In a pattern that repeats itself from one episode to the next, Michael needs to come up with credible explanations to justify his astounding inspiration to the other police officers. However, as a semi-serialized narrative, *Awake* creates suspense with two issues at stake. The first, "Was the car accident really an accident?"—a question which amounts to wondering whether Michael was the victim of a conspiracy – underlies the narrative arc that runs through the whole first season. The second, "What is the nature of each dimension?", was designed to maintain the suspense over the course of the whole series, if it had not been cancelled.

The diegetic swaying from one reality to the other takes part in a narration that itself oscillates, from the pilot onwards, between the notion of progression/evolution and that of repetition/cyclicity. The first questions that therapist Dr. Lee asks Michael reflect this tension:

> *Dr. Lee:* And then, what?
> *Michael:* Then I go home
> *Dr. Lee:* And then, what?
> *Michael:* I wake up.

If the therapist's questions call for linear progression, reflecting the spectators' desire to know what happens next, Michael's answers take us back to a monotonous daily routine that seems to negate any kind of suspense, only to eventually introduce doubt, ambiguity and originality within routine itself.

While we may expect from a pilot that it focuses on the themes of opening, change and evolution, the emphasis is, in fact, on the hero's absence of movement. From the first episode, we learn that Michael's wife would like to cope with her son's death by changing everything – painting the house, quitting her job, moving out, having another child. On the contrary, Michael does not want to stop being a detective or to move house. He fears that any kind of change might make one of the "survivors" disappear from his life. As he tells Dr. Lee at the end of the pilot:

> The thing is, Doctor, yes, I still see my wife *and* my son. But I've also watched both of them lowered into the ground. And when you see a loved one buried, your one thought over and over and over again, is that you'll do anything, *anything*, to get them back. So if you're telling me that the price for seeing them, feeling them, of having them in my life, is my sanity, it's a price I'll happily pay. Now I'll come and see you and talk to you as long as they make me, but trust me, when it comes to letting one of them go, I have no desire to ever make progress.

Reflecting this "one thought" that repeats itself "over and over and over again", the series promises to deliver a fiction closed on itself. Paradoxically, there will be some evolution but only between two dimensions clearly identified from the start. Alternation is combined with stability; the formulaic form merges with seriality, notably in an attempt to keep audience ratings stable since the semi-serialized structure allows spectators to continue following a story even when they have missed one episode. Yet this creates a challenge: the lack of progress(ion) promised by Michael may hinder narrative events, thus weakening our interest in the series. Contrary to Michael, who is obliged by his hierarchy to consult a therapist regularly, spectators do not constitute a captive audience. They need to be won over every week.

From the very first episode, we are given leads as to how the story could end. Michael rephrases what Dr. Lee has tried to make him understand: "You're saying that as soon as I decide which one is dead, then they'll stop showing up in my dreams?". The series should, therefore, stop when one of the

dimensions is revealed to be a dream or when Michael's mind no longer copes with the situation. Dr. Lee claims in the first episode: "While your brain should be resting, recharging, your subconscious is using it to hold up a detailed and complicated alternate reality. If we don't deal with that, this situation will ultimately become unsustainable". The situation that is deemed "unsustainable" sends us back reflexively to the idea that the series' viability might be threatened by the repetition of similar episodes and might disappear prematurely.

However, *Awake*'s originality lies in the fact that the show's propensity to serial narrative is rejected and fought from the start by its main character – because, in this case, what could be perceived as narrative *progress* (i.e. the revelation of where the "true" dimension lies) would in fact mean an awful emotional *regression* both for Michael, who would then lose either his wife or his son, and for the spectators, who would lose one of the protagonists they have grown to care for. Because the series never had the opportunity to provide a final word, it has preserved the bewildering mystery of its images: throughout the whole series, what we think is a dream could be real and what we think is real could be a dream. *Awake* finally denies the possibility of ever reaching a reality that would discredit what the viewers (through Michael) have experienced. But the series even goes further: it invites the viewers to think about their desire for narrative advance when progression and epiphanic revelation would necessarily result in the death of a loved one. Here, the formulaic storyline and the narrative standstill thus become the only means to preserve and cherish life.

In *Lost*, an episodic semi-serialized show in which the elaboration by showrunners Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse of a long-running mythology (around the island, its history and its successive inhabitants) is prime, the status and autonomy of the episode still remain strong. The plots are generally centred around one of the main characters and, in each episode, the present regularly echoes the past, the future, or another dimension. This resistance of the episodic form is thematized in season 2 through Desmond (Henry Ian Cusick)'s specific action, which has to be repeated every 108 minutes. Desmond's mission is to enter a series of precise figures in a computer and press "Enter" in order to reset a countdown timer inside the Swan Station, in the hope of preventing a major electromagnetic incident which could destroy the island and maybe the whole world. Through the resetting of the timer, the series' narrative mode is revealed in a *literal* way: the series avoids linearity, playing as it does on rewriting, repetition in variation, revival in instability – a process that reaches its

climax in the seasons' opening sequences (which mirror each other) and in the flashsideways sequences in the last season (which repeat the whole story with differences) (Hatchuel 2013). Just like the characters who wonder whether pushing the button every 108 minutes is crucial or not, each spectator of *Lost* is invited to ponder if pressing "Play" every 42 minutes to start a new episode is eventually worth it.

When John Locke (Terry O'Quinn) tries to convince the other survivors that they need to stop believing in the countdown system, he urges them to refuse being "slaves": for him, they can't be free as long as they choose to push the button. Locke can then be read as the one who opposes the persistence of the episodic form and who wishes the story to move on quickly, freed from the limited, confined space of the Swan Station: he thus represents a viewer who resents the narrative being linked to the repetition of a single gesture. However, after having the audience believe that Desmond's repetitive gesture was at best useless and at worst some sort of psychological experiment, the series ends up legitimating and endorsing the decision to continue pushing the button. This action turns out, in fact, to be *essential*. As soon as the characters stop believing in its crucial necessity, they pave the way to the implosion of the Swan Station at the end of season 2. The energy of the serial plot is then partly released but the human price to pay will be dire. *Lost*'s episodic features can be likened to the fail-safe key that Desmond himself represents throughout the whole series.

This essay's agenda is not to assign a specific ideology to a specific form but rather to think about serial narration as a space of negotiation and articulation between different narrative structures. To understand the ethical scope of these series, it is necessary to think about the way representations appear within their narrative frame. Semi-serialized television shows, through the way they bring value to each episode, embed an ethical vision within their own narrative structures. In our four examples, the formulaic and episodic aspects seem to invite viewers to consider repetitions as fruitful instead of static, as empathetic instead of emotionally dry. In *ER*, *Angel* and *Person of Interest*, the formulaic/procedural aspects encourage us to see individual lives as precious and worth fighting for, whether they be the lives of anonymous people or loved ones. In *Lost*, the episodic aspects remind spectators, through Desmond's repetitive but determined actions, that we may all need a home port, a loved one and a mission to accomplish. Every semi-serialized show actually draws its own specific space that engenders meaning in terms of ideology and ethics; actions represented in these narratives and charac-

ters evolving in them interact constantly with the series' specific narrative rules. The showrunners might be aware of these ethical negotiations or they might not; what, in fact, matters is to understand that semi-serialized shows imply, through their very hybrid narrative structures, such ideological tensions. This essay, as a work in progress in need of development through further case studies, has exemplified a new approach to understand and analyse semi-serialized tv shows, merging ideological and formal studies. Very little research has yet been conducted on this perspective and we wish to continue this reflection, exploring narratological patterns through the lens of ethical issues. We wish to analyse the way different narrative configurations may ideologically converge or diverge within hybrid semi-serialized form, in a viewership and media context that still tend to create hierarchies among broadcasting channels, serial formats, types of stories and characters. The analysis of other examples in the future may perhaps lead us to more nuanced conclusions: in some other semi-serialized shows, the interpretation of narrative structures may be different (the serialized aspects may be those inspiring empathy and ethical awareness, although this remains to be seen) but the methodology leading to these interpretations will be the same. This methodology may also be used to engage with other types of fictions (whether on television or even in the cinema): other formats will certainly raise different ethical issues and tensions. In any case, the question of what we must look at and care for in a show remains a crucial issue in itself.

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TV series cited

Angel (1999-2004)

Awake (2012)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003)

Columbo (1968-1978; 1989-2003)

CSI (2000-2015)

ER (1994-2009)

Lost (2004-2010)

Person of Interest (2011-2016)

Sex and the City (1998-2004)

Stranger Things (2016-)

The Handmaid's Tale (2017-)

THE STREAMING WARS IN THE GLOBAL PERIPHERY: A GLIMPSE FROM BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT
Considering the current proliferation of video streaming platforms as a worldwide phenomenon, this article analyzes how countries in the global periphery are adapting to this effervescent scenario, characterized by the expression "streaming wars." This research offers a glimpse of Brazil's audiovisual industry and tries to understand how American streaming companies are penetrating this market and how the local media conglomerates are reacting. In order to maintain their dominance in the region, free-to-air networks, pay-tv networks, and Brazilian telecommunication companies are using different strategies, either creating their own platforms or partnering with pre-established ones in favor of strengthening themselves. Given Brazil's particular television organization, based largely on a few broadcast networks, local media conglomerates have fostered a mutualistic relationship with their streaming platforms. The largest national streaming company, Globoplay, has stood out in the local market: not only making TV Globo's productions available but also producing original content and offering foreign series exclusively. Because traditional television consumption is deeply rooted in the country, several different strategies are required if TV Globo aims to transform viewers into Globoplay subscribers. The Brazilian case study reveals nuances and strategies from a media industry in the global periphery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decade, streaming services have become increasingly popular as a form of entertainment across the globe. Currently, however, the largest ad-free services in the world[1] are both American companies: Netflix, with over 167 million subscribers,[2] and Amazon Prime Video, with just over 150 million subscribers.[3] Nevertheless, with the increase in the consumption of internet-distributed television, this market in the United States is rapidly becoming crowded with media conglomerates investing in their own platforms. In 2019, Apple TV and Disney+ launched their services in the U.S., whilst Warner Media and NBCUniversal are poised to launch theirs in 2020. Many television critics and media insiders have framed the rise of multiple platforms in the country's audiovisual industry as the so-called "Streaming Wars". Considering the combative notion of "war" is well placed, in this paper we will focus on the battles being fought in a prominent peripheral market, specifically the clashes between local media conglomerates and the arrival of American-based streaming companies in Brazil.

The literature has approached the popularization of American streaming services and the rise of new competitors in the country's audiovisual landscape (Sanson and Steirer 2019; Snyman and Gilliard 2019). Yet, there has also been academic interest in the disputes between the local and the global when it comes to the expansion of internet-distributed television around the world. Some authors have taken a more general and globalized approach (Jenner 2018; Lobato 2019), others have focused on certain regions/countries as in Latin America (Baladron and Rivero 2019; Straubhaar, et al. 2019), Australia (Rios and Scarlata 2018), Israel (Wayne 2019), India (Fitzgerald 2019), among others. Through a review of the literature and a revision of trade press coverage that touch upon the strategies used by streaming companies in Brazil, this paper strives to contribute to these discussions and to broaden the understanding on how U.S. based streaming companies are penetrating the Brazilian market, disrupting its audiovisual industries and how the local media conglomerates are fighting in the streaming wars.

In sheer numbers, Brazil is the second-largest economy in the Americas, second in population with approximately 210 million people in 2019,[4] and fifth in internet users.[5] The biggest country in Latin America, Brazil is an important player in the global peripheries. Since the 1960s the country has become known for its *telenovelas*[6] that are exported and consumed around the world (Hamburguer 2011, Mattelart and Mattelart 1989). Brazil is the only Latin American country present in the 2019 index of the thirty largest Soft Power countries in the world.[7] Despite its demographic size, the television industry in Brazil remains centered on just a few free-to-air networks and its cable TV is still limited to a small portion of the population (Reis 1999). Although there was a considerable rise in cable subscriptions from the mid-2000s to 2014, when they reached an all-time high with 19.6 million subscribers,[8] these have been in decline given the country's current unemployment and financial crisis and the growth of the cord-cutting trend. Currently, cable television in Brazil is still one of the most expensive pay-TV services in the world and reaches 15.9 million subscribers, according to the *Associação Brasileira de Televisão por Assinatura* (Brazilian Pay-TV/ Telecom Association).[9]

Relatively inexpensive compared to pay-TV subscriptions and with catalogs filled with desirable foreign con-

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1 We recognize that there are streaming platforms with more users than Netflix and Amazon Prime Video in the world. China's iQiyi for example, has 600 million non-paying subscribers, but only 100.5 million paying users. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/26/WS5d130de5a3103dbf1432a5fe.html. Yet, here, we are only considering those that are ad-free (last accessed 21-06-20).

2 As of January 24, 2020, Netflix had 167 million subscribers worldwide. https://www.businessinsider.com/netflix-market-share-of-global-streaming-subscribers-dropping-ampere-2020-1?fbclid=IwAR07v4av1q_LZBUaUc14DgY3WLLaTRGanW1fHHSLVjesksyVoeOGzVSQ5k8 (last accessed 21-06-20).

3 As of February 3, 2020, Amazon had surpassed 150 million subscribers of its prime membership, which includes access to prime video. https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-surpasses-150-million-prime-subscribers-2020-2?fbclid=IwAR2L-g9Gfk3ZULjekOxQPcXVcRMWJi1F6yDfsDOkv0fR0qrFtrhh8DvT8OsI (last accessed 21-06-20).

4 https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/en/agencia-press-room/2185-news-agency/releases-en/25283-ibge-divulga-as-estimativas-da-populacao-dos-municipios-para-2020 (last accessed 21-06-20).

5 https://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm (last accessed 21-06-20).

6 The choice for the Latin term *telenovela* is purposeful. According to Hamburguer (2011), unlike the American soap operas that last for years, the *telenovelas* produced in Brazil and in other Latin American countries are limited works, staying on the air on average seven to nine months, with daily episodes and not divided into seasons. Added to this, the place of *telenovelas* is of great importance on the Brazilian television channels: prime-time is reserved for them, which again differs from soap operas, that are mostly shown during the day-time.

7 The "Soft Power 30" ranking is released annually by the Center of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California and Portland Communications since 2015 and lists the countries with the greatest potential for soft power in the world each year. According to the ranking released in 2019, Brazil improved from the 29th to the 27th position. For more information: https://softpower30.com/ (last accessed 21-06-20).

8 http://www.abta.org.br/dados_do_setor.asp (last accessed 21-06-20).

9 http://www.abta.org.br/dados_do_setor.asp (last accessed 21-06-20).

tent, streaming services as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video quickly became popular with Brazilians. The first arrived in Brazil in 2011, whilst the latter became available only in 2016. Since then other streaming platforms have launched in the country, such as HBO GO and Fox Play, both associated with pay-TV channels. Despite the growing number of competitors in Brazil, Netflix is still the most popular and largest streaming service in the country, with roughly 10 million subscribers.[10] Given the streaming market's great potential in Brazil, local conglomerates, striving to maintain their dominance, have started to launch their own platforms. Some are attached to local broadcasting networks, as Record TV's Play Plus. Others are triple-play services associated with telecommunications companies, as Telefonica Brasil's Vivo Play. Despite the multiple services available today, Brazil's largest media conglomerate, the Grupo Globo, has launched its own service called Globoplay, currently the largest native platform in the country. In order to fight in the streaming wars, Globoplay has a catalog filled with national content from TV Globo, original shows just for subscribers and foreign exclusive content. It is noteworthy that this particular streaming service has at its disposal the broadcast channel TV Globo, the country's largest network, and uses the channel to promote shows available in its catalog.

To understand the present case, we start-off presenting a brief overview of Brazilian television. Next, we analyze the arrival and popularization of foreign streaming platforms in Brazil. Lastly, we evaluate how local media companies have dealt with this popularization and the disruptions caused by these foreign streaming services in the local market. Because of its size and ties to the Grupo Globo, we will be focusing our analysis on Globoplay.

2. THE LAY OF THE LAND

Television is strongly present in the everyday life of Brazilians since its arrival in the 1950s. It's also a part of the history of the country's national integration since the formation of a distribution network and the construction of the television industry were essential to the development of the country's national and media integration (Mattelart and Mattelart 1989). Brazil has a market-oriented television system,

where private companies have public concessions for their free-to-air channels. After two decades of development, a major change in the structure of free-to-air networks in the Brazilian TV can be observed: in 1965, TV Globo was inaugurated after the dictatorship's regime intervened in its favor (Mattelart and Mattelart 1989).

The Grupo Globo began to consolidate itself as the largest Brazilian media conglomerate in the country (Becerra and Mastrini 2009), dominating the radio and television system, especially investing in *telenovelas*. There is no denying this format's strength in the country, which not only has daily episodes but also dictates trends and puts social discussions in vogue (Lopes 2009). The *telenovelas*, not only in Brazil but also in Latin America in general, point to stylistic codes, as well as cultural tones (Mazziotti 2006), which represent national diversities in their fictional representations that circulate especially in the regional market.

The *telenovela* is the most popular and lucrative genre on Brazilian national television (Lopes 2009, Mattelart and Mattelart 1989). Brazil was the first country in Latin America to air its *telenovelas* during prime time, giving these productions prestige and a wide audience. This genre addresses several themes in its narratives, dealing with issues related to the country's daily life. Characterized by their many chapters and by being open-ended narratives, these productions are expensive, but they achieve the prodigy of uniting the country within an idea of a linguistic and social plan, something impressive given that Brazil has more than 200 million inhabitants and an impressive cultural diversity due to its territorial extension and immigration history (Martel 2012).

Nevertheless, there are other serial narrative formats in the history of Brazilian television programming, such as the *teleteatro* and, most notably, the miniseries. The latter aired after 10 pm on TV Globo and approached themes more critically with the objective of reaching a more segmented and affluent audience than those of the *telenovelas* (Silva 2012). This same time slot is also shared with sitcoms, such as *A Grande Família* (2001-2014), and workplace dramas, such as *Força Tarefa* (2009-2011). The so-called "*superseries*",[11] such as *Onde Nascem os Fortes* (2018), are also part of the new

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11   *Superseries* is a term strategically used by TV Globo between 2017 and 2019 to refer to serial narratives shown daily at 11 pm. The format was an attempt at a more concise *telenovela*, which brought together elements from both miniseries and *telenovelas* and lasted, on average, 3 months. The *miniseries*, in turn, were different than telenovelas because they sought a more segmented audience and had fewer chapters (generally lasting between two weeks and a month).

styles and formats Globo had been testing in its weekly programming until 2019.[12]

Currently, there are seven large free-to-air networks in Brazil. In addition to TV Globo, there are four other prominent private broadcasters: Record TV, Rede Bandeirantes, Rede TV! and SBT. Added to these, there are also two other large public broadcasters: TV Brasil and TV Cultura. To challenge Grupo Globo's strength, Record TV and SBT structured their programming especially around foreign audiovisual products, such as Mexican *telenovelas* and American series (Nantes 2018) and, more recently, Rede Bandeirantes bet on Turkish dramas. Japanese television products were also notable on Brazilian TV from the 1960s to the 1990s (Urbano 2018).

It was only in the 1990s that pay-tv expanded in Brazil. In a short time, multiple channels emerged, each following specific themes: sports, news, religion, musical, children's, among others. With a greater variety of programs, cable television allowed the public to access new content with different formats and languages, addressing other forms of entertainment for a more targeted audience. However, unlike the United States (Lotz 2007), cable TV has never been central to the Brazilian television experience, considering the fact that, for a long time, the subscription fees were not accessible to a large part of the population (Reis 1999).

In this scenario, franchises of foreign channels such as HBO and ESPN became popular. At the same time, the Grupo Globo developed Globosat – the branch responsible for operating several cable networks. Each of these channels is focused on a specific niche audience, which allowed the media conglomerate to compete with foreign companies. For example, in the film segment, the Telecine channels represent a direct challenge for HBO in Brazil (Straubhaar and Duarte 2005). We highlight here the relevance of foreign television fiction in this scenario, mainly, American fictional series. Although they have been present on Brazilian television for decades, they were often used to fill empty spots in the scheduling. For those who had access, these broadcasters offered alternatives to the prime-time of the free-to-air networks, which was filled with *telenovelas* (Gomes 2016). According to Straubhaar and Duarte (2005: 247), the existence of niche markets is notable for both sitcoms and American action series.

As much as Brazilians were already familiar with American TV series, the exponential growth in the circulation of these products occurred in the mid-2000s with the popularization of the internet in Brazil, especially after the introduction of the broadband model. This technology facilitated the pirated consumption of foreign series. It is also in the digital environment that we observe the emergence of specific sites and communities that share episodes and subtitles autonomously. This process contributed to the existence of an audience that regularly consumes these products in Brazil (Mendes Moreira de Sá 2014).

Undoubtedly, the *telenovela* remains the main television product for domestic consumption and overseas trade. Many countries import Brazilian *telenovelas*, an impressive feat, given that Portuguese is a language with little penetration in the world, making Brazil a global center for the production and reference of this content. Brazilian *telenovelas* continue to be an important factor in the formation and maintenance of the national identity; however, the Brazilian public is multifaceted and interested in different television productions from around the world, which is explained by the national consumption of international shows.

Despite the popularity of *telenovelas* in Brazil, the asynchrony in the airing of foreign TV shows on Brazilian television (broadcast and cable) and the expensive price of cable subscriptions, Brazilians' taste for these productions has only grown. Today, especially online consumption of American, Spanish and German series, as well as Japanese anime and South Korean TV dramas, have become part of a universe of affection for the Brazilian public, who seek other options of television fiction besides those produced locally. This interest in transnational productions is behind Netflix's commitment to establishing itself in Brazil.

3. **SHOTS FIRED**

Given the particularities of Brazil's television industry, its demographic size and the popularization of the internet in the country, the market potential for internet-distributed television in Brazil was considerable. In fact, the streaming market has grown significantly in the last five years. According to Lopes and Lemos (2019: 91), there are currently seventy-eight video-on-demand (VoD) platforms in the country, divided in those owned by telecommunication operators, broadcast networks, cable channels and those non-associated to television channels. They carry media libraries with more than seventy-two thousand films and over twelve thousand TV

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12   In 2019, the Grupo Globo decided to discontinue the *superseries* format in order to dedicate themselves to the original Globoplay series, considering this format was difficult to sell in the international market since they were not as small as classic miniseries and not as big as traditional *telenovelas*.

shows. Granted this number is impressive, it is still smaller than other Latin American countries, like Mexico (with 94 platforms) and Argentina (with 99 platforms). Of these seventy-eight platforms, Netflix has 18% of the market share, the highest percentage of any single service in the country.[13]

Netflix arrived in Brazil in 2011 and currently has its own office in São Paulo and is investing heavily in original content with Brazilian independent production companies. Initially, the company had to deal with a number of cultural and structural factors that encumbered its growth, including, but not limited to, the low use of credit cards, the company's limited catalog, the fact that Brazilians did not have the habit of paying for access to online content and, more importantly, the poor quality of the internet connection in Brazil during Netflix's first years of service. However, over the past five years, the platform has attracted the attention of consumers of TV fiction and foreign films. Netflix took advantage of this existing public who frequently had to resort to illegality in order to consume foreign productions. The service is relatively cheap when compared to pay-tv packages in Brazil, with the basic subscription costing R$21.90 (approximately US$ 5) and the most expensive, with multiple screens and HD quality, which can cost up to R$45.90 (approximately US$ 9).[14]

In an attempt to gain local subscribers, Netflix has employed several strategies. First, it made available in the Brazilian catalog the complete seasons of popular series that occupied the programming schedule of free-to-air and cable networks for many years, such as the sitcoms *Friends* (1994-2004) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). Second, Netflix partnered with free-to-air networks. In 2015, the company started licensing successful native productions from Record TV, such as its biblical *telenovelas*.[15] The streamer also made deals with local networks to air some of its original shows, specifically *Stranger Things*' pilot episode (1.01) on SBT[16] and licensed full seasons of *Orange Is the New Black* to Rede Bandeirantes.[17] Netflix also made deals with Brazilian

production companies and included many native films in its catalog. Third, it has used social media, mainly Twitter and Facebook, to foster a sense of kinship with its Brazilian subscribers (Castellano et al. 2018).

Furthermore, Netflix, through international distribution deals, makes titles available that have not been shown on Brazilian TV yet, which is an essential strategy when we observe the public outcry for the reduction of the asynchrony in content distribution between the country of origin and Brazil (Meimaridis and Oliveira 2018). That is, the reduction of time between the original airing of new episodes and the availability of these episodes in Brazil. Currently, this asynchrony can be of days, weeks or months. These circumstances have led fans to piracy in order to consume their shows in a timely manner. Netflix, on the other hand, is meeting this demand for agility by making content available in a shorter time span. An example of this can be observed with the distribution of the comedy *The Good Place* (2016-2020), which was broadcast by NBC on Thursday nights in the United States and on Friday mornings the show was available on Brazil's Netflix.

A similar strategy was used for non-American shows that already have a consolidated niche audience in the country. As mentioned earlier, South Korean TV dramas have been attracting fans in Brazil for many years (Urbano 2018), but these productions rarely air on Brazilian television. Netflix has invested in acquiring the distribution rights of these shows. In less than five years, the number of South Korean productions available in the company's Brazilian catalog went from less than ten to more than one hundred (Mazur 2018).

Likewise, Netflix started to invest in the production of local series with independent Brazilian audiovisual companies. In 2016, Netflix released the sci-fi drama *3%* (2016-). Although it received mostly negative reviews in Brazil, [18] especially involving technical issues such as the quality of the acting, writing and costume design, it did become quite popular internationally.[19] The drama stood out for foreign audiences because it presented a dystopic future through peripheral lenses. In the same year, the company doubled the number of Brazilian subscribers from three to six million.

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13   https://bb.vision/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Map-Pay-TV-Multiscreens-Market-2018-ENGLISH.pdf (last accessed 21-06-20).

14   For all the values mentioned in this paper, we used the exchange rate from the first week of April 2020. 1 Brazilian real was approximately 0.20 cents of the dollar.

15   https://natelinha.uol.com.br/noticias/2015/11/13/netflix-disponibilizara-producoes-biblicas-da-record-94153.php (last accessed 21-06-20).

16   https://noticiasdatv.uol.com.br/noticia/series/em-acao-inedita-netflix-exibe-primeiro-episodio-de-stranger-things-no-sbt-17439 (last accessed 21-06-20).

17   https://observatoriodatv.uol.com.br/noticias/2020/01/band-adquire-orange-is-the-new-black-e-netflix-tera-primeira-producao-exibida-em-tv-aberta (last accessed 21-06-20).

18   For criticisms concerning *3%*, please consult: http://g1.globo.com/pop-arte/blog/maquina-de-escrever/post/primeira-serie-brasileira-da-netflix-3-e-redundante-e-previsivel.html; https://www.505indie.com.br/cultura/serie-brasileira-da-netflix-3-redefine-os-limites-de-ruindade-em-ficcao-cientifica/ (last accessed 21-06-20).

19   For a comparison of the criticism of *3%* by the Brazilian and international press, please consult: https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2016/12/08/O-que-diz-a-cr%C3%ADtica-nacional-e-estrangeira-sobre-a-primeira-s%C3%A9rie-brasileira-original-da-Netflix (last accessed 21-06-20).

Since then, Netflix has released several fictional shows, as *O Mecanismo* (*The Mechanism*, 2018-), *Samantha!* (2018-2020), *Coisa Mais Linda* (*Most Beautiful Thing / Girls from Ipanema*, 2019-), *Sintonia* (2019-) and *Super Drags* (2018). These local productions play an important part in the company's growth in Brazil because they stimulate new subscriptions through cultural identification.

The rapid growth attracted the attention of Netflix's CEO, Reed Hastings, who in an interview said, "Brazil is a rocket" (Guaraldo 2017). In this sense, the different strategies being implemented by the company point to an attempt to cater to different sectors of the Brazilian audience. According to Castro et al. (2019), media consumption habits are permeated by class issues, such as socioeconomic status and education level. While the Brazilian working class and middle class tend to prefer regional or national content, the upper-middle class and the elite have a preference for international programs, especially American productions (Straubhaar 1991, 2003). By making foreign content available and investing in the production of local content, Netflix expands its range in Brazil. Between 2019 and 2021, the company plans to make available R$ 350 million (approximately US$ 68 million) in Brazilian content, which corresponds to about thirty different productions divided in series, films, and documentaries (Lotufo 2019).

Regardless of being less popular than Netflix, Amazon Prime Video has become a relevant player in the country's streaming market. Amazon arrived in Brazil in 2016 with the standard subscription costing R$14.90 (approximately $ 3). However, it brought its prime membership to Brazil in 2019. For only R$9.99 (approximately US$ 2) a month the subscriber gets access to several benefits including free shipping and the Amazon Prime Video service. The platform has made available the complete seasons of successful U.S. shows that aired on free-to-air networks and cable channels in the country, as *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) and *House, M.D.* (2004-2012). One particular eye-catching show on the Brazilian catalog is the Mexican comedy *El Chavo del 8* (1971-1980) or *Chaves*, as it's popularly known in Brazil. The comedy has aired on the free-to-air network SBT since 1984. Amazon's strategy with *Chaves* is to become more palatable to local subscribers through a show that has become an important part of Brazil's pop culture for decades. Amazon, just like Netflix, has also added several native productions to its Brazilian catalog as reality shows, fictional series, and films.

In 2019, Amazon publicized plans to open its first office, related to streaming, outside the U.S. in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro (Rosa 2019). With this move, the company intends to intensify its competition for the country's streaming market. In 2020, Amazon will start producing original shows outside the U.S. In Brazil, the company will release six original programs: four fictional series, one reality show, and one documentary. All of these productions are made through partnerships with local production companies as Conspiração Filmes, O2 Filmes, and Los Bragas (Strazza 2019). In this sense, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are directly influencing businesses in the local audiovisual industry. This process, however, is not unproblematic.

Despite their growing number of subscribers in Brazil, neither Netflix nor Amazon have to follow any specific legislation for the type of service they are offering. These global streaming services "have been very lightly regulated in terms of public interest responsibilities for what is carried in their systems and in terms of market competition and anti-monopolistic behavior" (Fitzgerald 2019: 91). Recently, several debates have taken place regarding the regulation of these companies in Brazil. In October 2019, a bill was introduced in the Brazilian Senate for a public hearing aimed at stimulating new rules for internet-distributed television. Similar to the *Lei da TV Paga* (Pay-TV Law), which obliges pay-tv broadcasters to air a quota of Brazilian audiovisual productions in their weekly schedule, the project foresees that the streaming platforms must have a portion of national content in their catalog, in addition to having to pay a percentage on the available content, the so-called Condecine fee[20]. Despite the local audiovisual industry's support, some Brazilians fear this legislation will raise the cost of subscriptions.

Just as in the case of the Pay-TV Law the project expresses a certain fear that global companies like Netflix may stifle the local market, especially when we consider that some companies not only distribute content but also actively participate in its production. In fact, the regulation of streaming platforms has become a standard in many countries, given the monopoly of U.S. companies. The creation of these measures "is needed for eliminating barriers to entry and creating regulatory stability, as well as for delivering social benefits such as pluralism, diversity, affordability, interconnection and access (socio-cultural objective)" (Iosifidis 2016: 20). In Brazil, and in other peripheral markets, this issue becomes particularly relevant considering the asymmetries existing in the local audio-

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20   It is a fee charged to the production, airing, distribution or commercial licensing of audiovisual content. The amount collected makes up the Fundo Setorial do Audiovisual (Audiovisual Sector Fund) and is reverted to national productions.

visual industries. It is important to note, though, that Brazil has been leading the streaming services regulatory agenda in Latin America (Baladron and Rivero 2019).

Due to the current financial recession and the low cost of streaming platforms, pay-tv subscriptions have been in decline since 2014, whilst SVoD subscriptions have been consistently growing. Also in decline is the free-to-air networks' viewership. From 2007 to 2014 the participation of broadcast networks in the audiovisual sector shrank from 63.7% to 41.5% (Izel and Oliveira 2016). In hopes of regaining viewers and profit, local media conglomerates have ventured into the streaming wars to fight battles with their own services, a movement already seen in other countries (Rios and Scarlata 2018; Turner 2018).

4. LOCAL CONGLOMERATES FIGHTING FOR THE COUNTRY'S STREAMING MARKET

Brazil's audiovisual market today reacts to the popularization of foreign streaming platforms. Almost ten years after the arrival of Netflix, free-to-air networks, cable television, and telecommunication companies are investing in their own streaming services and positioning themselves in the streaming wars. Several broadcasters in the country have tried to create profitable business models in the digital environment since the mid-2000s (Antoniutti 2019). According to Massarollo (2015), as of 2007, numerous attempts to experiment with transmedia narratives began to emerge, which mixed the traditional television flow with the internet. Yet, at that time, the possibility of transmitting high-quality videos quickly online was still difficult.

Currently, most of Brazil's streaming services associated with free-to-air networks combine catch-up content with other productions exclusive to their services. However, it is interesting to note that smaller free-to-air networks have a peculiar relationship with YouTube. Broadcasters such as Rede TV! and Rede Bandeirantes do not have their own platforms and make most of their successful programs completely available on YouTube free of charge. Although SBT launched in 2019 its own portal, called SBT Videos, it also uses YouTube. Granted these companies have found a way of providing their content online inexpensively, they are restricted by YouTube's distribution models and affected by changes to its services. In 2017, for example, Record TV had to discontinue its paid YouTube channel, called R7 Play, when the social network

ended its paid channels service. The solution came months later when Record TV announced its new service: Play Plus, a subscription platform owned by Record TV. Play Plus provides Record TV's programming and other content from cable channels, such as ESPN.

Cable networks have also transitioned into the internet-distributed television business. Currently, there are 40 streaming services associated with pay-tv channels (Lopes and Lemos 2019), some are local broadcasters and others are Brazilian versions of foreign channels already established in the country. Many of these platforms are used by pay-tv networks in an attempt to separate themselves from the expensive subscriptions sold by service providers as Sky Brasil and NET. HBO and its other channels, for example, are only included in premium packages and, therefore, have little penetration in Brazil (Meimaridis and Oliveira, 2018). However, some of the company's most famous productions, as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), are extremely popular in the country. During its run, the drama was one of the most pirated shows in Brazil. The company made its HBO GO service available in 2017 through a direct subscription that is cheaper than most pay-tv packages.

Alternatively, streaming services associated with telecommunications companies are sold precisely by aggregating content. In Brazil, these are triple-play companies, i.e. the same company that provides pay-tv channels also distributes the internet and telephone services, their platforms contain all titles licensed by the channels that are part of the service provider's packages. Currently, NOW, Vivo Play and Oi Play are references in the segment. However, it is worth mentioning that Tim, the only one of the large Brazilian telephone companies that does not operate in the triple-play model, recently partnered with Netflix. By subscribing to a specific telephone package, the user has unlimited access to a Netflix account.[21]

Although the number of streaming services has grown exponentially in recent years, the main Brazilian player is undoubtedly Globoplay. Costing R$21.90 (approximately U$ 4.50), the platform is one of Grupo Globo's major investments. Like other services derived from the traditional television industry (Lotz 2017), it benefits from vertical integration to expand the distribution of its content. Most of its catalog consists of productions made by Globo, such as daily news,

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series, and *telenovelas*. Among Brazilian streaming services, Globoplay is one of the few that develops exclusive productions for the platform, especially, fictional series. However, it is also worth noting the strong presence of foreign licensed titles, in particular, American series.

Globoplay, however, was not the first streaming service launched by the Grupo Globo. Globosat had its own streaming service, called Muu, which was later renamed Globosat Play. There was also the Globo.TV platform, which launched in 2012. The platform allowed users to access excerpts from TV Globo's programming and other Globosat channels for free. Months later, a premium version of the service, Globo.TV+, was announced, which for the first time allowed subscribers to watch full versions of productions out of the linear flow (Antoniutti 2019). These experiences allowed the Grupo Globo to debut Globoplay in November 2015. The platform uses the Freemium model to attract audiences. It is possible to watch the linear transmission of the TV Globo's programming and some short videos of programs from the broadcaster free of charge, yet, access to the complete catalog of the channel's productions is restricted to subscribers.

One of the service's main challenges is to transform the audience that already watches TV Globo's daily programming into paid subscribers. In this sense, *telenovelas* play an important role. Although the access to the complete chapters is only through paid subscriptions, Globoplay releases highlights from episodes and also distributes smaller scenes. This strategy is interesting because even today these fictional narratives are some of the highest-rated shows in Brazilian television. Of the ten most-watched fiction productions of 2018, seven are *telenovelas* and all of them are from TV Globo (Lopes and Lemos 2019).

To promote other titles in the catalog, Globoplay has used different strategies. According to Mungioli et al., between 2016 and 2018, the Grupo Globo used different tactics in order to "enhance the acquisition of the streaming audience through the diffusion of its products in the broadcasting system" (2018: 61). In the beginning, the company used an online-first model, in which episodes of new productions were available on the streaming platform before airing on TV. The time gap could last for days, weeks or months, depending on the program. For example, among the 12 episodes of the thriller *Supermax* (2016), 11 were released in advance on Globoplay. The last episode, however, aired live on TV Globo. Nevertheless, this strategy did not seem to have much effect, given the low-ratings the final episode received and the subsequent cancellation of the drama.

The Grupo Globo has employed other strategies, though. Instead of guiding the audience to the platform and then pulling them back to linear TV, the company is trying to take advantage of its large viewership to attract subscribers. As a result, Globoplay has been using a specific block of programming called *Tela Quente* that has been on TV Globo's schedule since 1988. This block used to consist of films on Monday nights. Nevertheless, *Tela Quente* started to air the first episode of shows on Globoplay's catalog. This strategy works like a free sample, in the hope that the viewer will be enticed to subscribing to the service to gain access to other episodes. The strategy has been used to promote series produced by Globo, such as the drama *Assédio* (2018) as well as foreign productions as the American medical drama *The Good Doctor* (2017-).

Another approach has been to promote Globoplay's content during TV Globo's *telenovelas*. During the Wired Festival Brasil 2019, head executive of Globoplay, Erick Brêtas, celebrated the campaign made by the streamer to promote the American show Manifest (2018), which aired on *Tela Quente* in October 2019. During the week of Manifest's debut, characters from the *telenovelas A Dona do Pedaço* (2019) and *Bom Sucesso* (2019-2020) commented about the show and explained to the viewers how to continue watching on the platform.

Brêtas views Globoplay's unique relationship with linear television as the streamer's main strength. He also disavows the combative framing of television's current moment: "they are calling it a streaming war, but I would say it's a streaming party" (Brêtas cited in Galdo and Matsuura 2019). The executive's view is based on the notion that consumers now have more options. However, we consider it controversial to characterize a moment of intense competition amidst local and foreign conglomerates as a "party", predominantly in view of the company's recent history. This can be seen in the return of Brêtas, who resumed his position at Globoplay in August 2019, because João Mesquita, who months earlier held the position, was poached by Amazon Prime. This action was deemed troublesome, to say the least, given Mesquita's insider knowledge about Globoplay's data and market research.

In 2020, the Grupo Globo will invest R$ 1 billion in Globoplay.[22] The investment is part of the "UmaSóGlobo" (Only One Globo) project, which is a new management model

that unites different companies in the group into one company, just named "Globo." This is a direct reaction to the competition from foreign companies, like Netflix and Amazon, which collect data and consumption habits from their users and foster a differentiated bond with the consumer, something that Globo aims to achieve, given the existing potential in its daily reach of one hundred million Brazilians.

Recently, the Grupo Globo announced that the first country to receive Globoplay outside Brazil will be the United States. According to executives, the decision was made due to the experience acquired in the American market[23] and the large number of Brazilians present in the country.[24] This strategy is different from that employed by the Mexican media conglomerate Televisa with its service Blim, which has expanded throughout Latin America and is currently available in 17 countries (Rios and Scarlata 2018). Only time will tell which strategy, if not both, will work. For now, we emphasize the fact that in Brazil and in several other countries in the global periphery, local media conglomerates are looking for strategies to stay relevant in a moment where, increasingly, the experience of television consumption is found fragmented and deterritorialized.

Brazil, an essential part of what is known as the global periphery, presents itself as one of the countries with the greatest prominence in soft power on the international stage. One of its most effective instruments of mild influence is culture. Latin America as a whole is positioned as a major hub for the production of fictional narratives that are capable of developing soft power potentials in the world, helping to create new international perspectives on these countries. Currently, the global periphery searches for space and dialogue, in order to feed its strength against the center. For this reason, the fight in the "streaming wars" is extremely significant for Latin America and, especially for Brazil, since this is the biggest name in soft power in the region. These platforms present themselves as effective spaces for making local content available and disseminating it. Local and peripheral platforms such as the Chinese iQiyi, Mexican Blim, and Brazilian Globoplay are spaces not only for the flow of foreign products but also for the creation and distribution of local productions, which contribute to the strengthening of the global peripheral resis-

tance amidst the international environment that still values American companies and content.

5. CONCLUSION

The Grupo Globo is interested in regaining an audience that has distanced itself from free-to-air television and that is interested in foreign productions. The conglomerate seeks, through Globoplay, to position itself in the growing streaming market and also to maintain or, perhaps, even elevate its place in the ranking of the largest media companies in the world (currently in 14th place). We identified that Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have become major competitors within Brazil's media system and, therefore, it is important for the Grupo Globo to establish its place within this new environment. This process also revealed new peripheral strategies aimed at challenging and positioning local conglomerates in the global media environment, considering the strength of the local market and also the historical obstacle of the western "universality" presented by the American competitors.

Currently, the content available on local and foreign platforms has become the most valuable war power in this dispute. While foreign companies try to win subscribers by reducing the asynchrony in the distribution of content and with attractive catalogs with transnational productions, local conglomerates, in turn, have presented a variety of programs traditionally recognized and highly consumed by the Brazilian public. Nevertheless, local and foreign companies have sought products that maintain cultural proximity. In the end, the decision is not necessarily about which service is the best, but which (and how many) services the Brazilian public will be willing to pay. Among local and foreign conglomerates, the options are many and Brazil again proves its importance in the global streaming market, given its large number of potential consumers and, also, its strategic position of influence in Latin America. However, we emphasize that Globoplay and other local platforms, mainly those associated with free-to-air networks, face difficulties in competing with foreign companies, since the local market itself is already used to consuming *telenovelas* through linear television and are used to having access to this content for free. In contrast, international streaming platforms become the locus for the consumption of international films and series that, by other means, would be difficult for the public to access quickly and legally.

Lastly, we emphasize that the arrival of foreign streaming platforms triggered a transition process in Brazil that

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23 Since 1999, the Grupo Globo has owned TV Globo Internacional (TVGI) in the United States, a cable channel.

24 Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that there are 1 million Brazilians residing in the United States. https://epocanegocios.globo.com/Mundo/noticia/2018/08/mais-de-1-milhao-de-brasileiros-vivem-nos-eua-segundo-o-itamaraty.html (last accessed 21-06-20).

affected several sectors of the national audiovisual industry, both in the scope of production and distribution. While the Brazilian television market is still very centralized in the hands of some conglomerates, the streaming wars have enabled a certain transition to a more diverse, transnational and multiplatform market. Furthermore, due to the great plurality of influences and the very competitiveness of this market, there is evidence of an acceleration of Brazil's audiovisual industry through partnerships between foreign companies and local independent producers. This process is also happening between large Brazilian conglomerates and small independent companies. Alternatively, the presence of platforms has also changed the way in which Brazilians consume foreign productions in particular and television in general. Therefore, the Brazilian case study reveals a scenario of global television consumption that is increasingly complex and that points to new agents from the global periphery on the rise in the dispute for more potential consumers around the world.

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TV series cited

3% (2016-)
A Dona do Pedaço (2019)
A Grande Família (2001-2014)
Assédio (2018)
Bom Sucesso (2019-2020)
El Chavo del 8 (1971-1980)
Coisa Mais Linda (*Most Beautiful Thing
     / Girls from Ipanema,* 2019-)
A Dona do Pedaço (2019)
El Chavo del 8 (1971-1980)
Força Tarefa (2009-2011)
The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990-1996)
Friends (1994-2004)
Game of Thrones (2011-2019)
The Good Doctor (2017-)
The Good Place (2016-2020)
A Grande Família (2001-2014)
House M.D. (2004-2012)
Manifest (2018-)
O Mecanismo (*The Mechanism,* 2018-)
Onde Nascem os Fortes (2018)
Orange Is the New Black (2013-2019)
Samantha! (2018-2020)
Seinfeld (1989-1998)
Sintonia (2019-)
Stranger Things (2016-)
Super Drags (2018)
Supermax (2016)

CASTING
MY BRILLIANT FRIEND'S AUTHENTIC STARDOM

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ABSTRACT
Using the HBO/Rai co-production *My Brilliant Friend* as a case study, this essay addresses the understudied arena of casting, particularly in relation to the creation of the "authentic stardom" of the child and adolescent nonprofessional performers. Drawing from personal interviews with Laura Muccino and Sara Casani, two of Italian television's most important casting directors, excerpts of which are included throughout the essay, I consider the gendered practices of casting in relation to Muccino and Casani's epic search for the four nonprofessional child and adolescent girl performers who made the characters from the novel come to life. I focus on the casting and reception of the child and adolescent female actors in the series. In particular, this essay engages with performances of adolescence, as these performances relate to the productions' desire to represent an authentic experience of youth in postwar Italy that is exported to transnational audiences.

"Casting is important but highly under-researched because, despite the willingness of scholars to interrogate the ideological content of representations available on television, they have expended relatively little effort to penetrate beyond final product to examine the process by which actors come to inhabit these roles and how these industrial practices transfer dynamics from the street to the screen" (Warner 2015: 19).

"To find the four girls and adolescents ('bambine') and all of the other young actors ('bambini') in *My Brilliant Friend* we saw about 9000 kids, it was a huge undertaking. It took us nine months and we are still in shock, because the fifteen of us were all scattered all over Naples, searching in every school" (Laura Muccino, Personal Interview with Sara Casani and Laura Muccino).[1]

1. INTRODUCTION: CASTING *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND*

The HBO/Rai co-production *L'amica geniale* (*My Brilliant Friend*) is the first installment of a four-part series adapting Elena Ferrante's internationally popular Neapolitan novels, which have been translated into forty-two languages, and of which more than 10 million copies have been sold (Amore 2019). The series premiered on HBO and on Rai in November of 2018 and has attracted a sizable viewership and fanbase internationally, with broadcast rights sold in more than 150 countries (Market 2019).[2] *My Brilliant Friend* is a transnational hit, thanks to its high production values, socio-political relevance, intriguing filming locations, international distribution and marketing model, and innovative practice of casting young female performers. Shot in Italian, and frequently in Neapolitan dialect, the series was distributed both in Italy

and internationally with subtitles. This is a first for HBO, and implies that the network suspected that US viewers were finally "ready to break through their historic resistance to reading the screen" (Gilbert 2018).

The eight-episode series places a focus on female friendship, and charts the complex bond between Raffaella "Lila" Cerullo and Elena "Lenù" Greco as they grow up in the 1950s in a small, violent, and impoverished tiny town (or "rione") outside of Naples. The series opens with a much older Elena, now an established author, learning the news that Lila has disappeared without a trace, and the entire tetralogy returns back in time to share Lenù's narrative account of Lila and Lenù's long and complicated friendship. In the first two episodes of the series, Lila (Ludovica Nasti) and Lenù (Elisa Del Genio) are young girls who bond over their dolls and a passion for reading. At the beginning of episode 1.03, Lila (Gaia Girace) and Lenù (Margherita Mazzucco) transition into teenagers, and these older incarnations bear a striking resemblance to their younger selves. As discussed by many critics, these four characters are also faithful to those in the novel, which adds to the series' much-discussed "authenticity," which is a key focus of this essay (Zarum 2018).[3]

Indeed, when the trailer, posters, and publicity photos emerged for the series, I, probably like many, was struck by the faces of the girl and adolescent performers. I asked, "Who are they? How did the actors get the part? How did the casting directors get the right fit? They look like I had imagined they would, maybe a little different," which reflects Amy Cook's statement that "The job of the casting director is to match the actor with the character" (Cook 2018: 3). Enter two of Italian television's most important casting directors, Laura Muccino and Sara Casani. Muccino is sister of both actor Silvio Muccino and well-known director Gabriele Muccino, and has already made a name for herself casting, among other things, the films *Latin Lover* (Cristina Comencini, 2015) and *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2015) and the series *Gomorra* (2014-), *Suburra* (2017-), *Romanzo criminale* (2008-2010), *ZeroZeroZero* (2019-) and *Luna nera* (2020-). Casani worked collaboratively with Muccino on almost all of these projects. The more I read about Muccino and Casani and their casting process, the more fascinated I became. For one, they are exceptional at finding "the authentic face" – a dictum frequently handed down to them by the showrunners with whom they work, as I discuss below.

2   The series played well in the US, the UK, and Italy: The Rai premiere garnered a 29% share with more than seven million viewers. In the UK it is discussed as "the best performing foreign-language drama since 'Babylon Berlin'" and averages 500k viewers per episode, while in the US is averages one million viewer per episode (Vivarelli 2018a).

3   There exist many articles that declare that the series' is a faithful adaptation of the novel. For one example, see Zarum 2018. For a discussion of the series' visual fidelity to the novel, especially in terms of the faces of protagonists, see Popkey 2018.

Using *My Brilliant Friend* as a case study, this essay addresses the understudied arena of casting, particularly in relation to the creation of the "authentic stardom" of the child and adolescent nonprofessional performers. It looks at casting practices and how casting is achieved at home and received and sold abroad. I am indebted to Pamela Robertson Wojcik, who argues that taking casting into consideration

> helps deepen and expand our understanding of film acting. First, casting needs to be seen as an interpretive process. A consideration of casting could complicate current models of authorship and of stardom. Examining casting helps acknowledge not only the way roles are characterized but also the ideologies about identity they embody. In addition, a consideration of casting helps show changes in performance styles as only one part of what constitutes acting on screen. We need to relate performance styles more consciously to casting practices and take into account political, cultural, and labor issues at the time of performance (Wojcik 2003: 144).

In turn, and drawing from personal interviews with Muccino and Casani, excerpts of which are included throughout the essay, I consider the gendered practices of casting in relation to Muccino and Casani's epic search for the four nonprofessional child and adolescent girl performers who made the characters from the novel come to life. I focus on the casting and reception of the child and adolescent female actors in the series. In particular, this essay engages with the "difficult negotiations and performances" of feminine adolescence (Driscoll 2012: 7) as these performances relate to the productions' desire to represent an authentic experience of youth in postwar Italy that is exported to transnational audiences.

2. CASTING AND "GENDERED LABOR" (HILL 2014)

Scant scholarship exists in film and media studies that focuses on casting broadly considered, including casting directors, locations, and processes.[4] Yet casting affects so much

on screen, from the film's tone to its position on charged categories like race and gender as Martin Scorsese points out in an interview: "More than 90% of directing a picture is the right casting";[5] or, according to Kristen J. Warner, casting is a "vital practice" because casting directors are in such close contact with actors, and are repositories for "important cultural notions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality" (Warner 2015: 34).[6]

Most library database searches for material on casting reveal how-to books.[7] For example, the marketing materials for *Casting Revealed: A Guide for Directors* promise that readers will "gain a fuller understanding of the misunderstood art and craft of casting actors for film and video production".[8] Initially, scholarly treatments of casting focused on the casting process, and of particular interest is a group of essays by Joseph Turow who discusses stereotyping in casting, and acceptable casting standards.[9] More recent studies approach the question of casting in film and television tangentially, focusing on typecasting, gender, casting and cognitive science, colorblind casting, casting gay characters as relating to race, sexuality and identity politics, and antidiscrimination regulations.[10] Of particular interest to my project on "authentic casting" is an internet article that focuses on casting the HBO smash hit series *The Wire* (2002-2008) which looks at casting as related to performance and authenticity, especially concerning how race is represented and received by audiences when characters are interpreted by nonprofessionals (Kelly 2009). The commitment to authentic casting is underlined by Muccino, who notes that, in order to identify nonprofessionals who can interpret characters who viewers consider authentic, she and her team work to broaden the pool as much as possible (Casani and Muccino 2019).

I find it fascinating that the face behind the onscreen face is frequently out of the picture, as made clear by past multi-year President of the Casting Society of America, Richard

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4   However, scholars in Italy have examined Italian cinema and television through the lens of coaching and actor's training. Much attention has been paid to nonprofessionals in neorealist cinema, and youthful nonprofessionals in Italian cinema more broadly. See for example, Arnocida and Minuz 2016; Carluccio and Minuz 2015; Dagrada 2008; Pierini 2015; Pierini 2018; Pitassio 2007; Pitassio 2010; and Scandolo 2012.

5   Cited in an interview in the documentary *Casting By* (Tom Donahue, 2012).

6   The vast majority of casting scholarship is related to casting in the theater.

7   For a sampling, see: Catliff and Granville 2013; Cerasola and Taggi 2011; Cutrona 2018; Davies 2019; Kendt 2005; Kondazian 2000; and Schell 2016.

8   You can find the publicity material here: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781315667799. (Schell 2016). As Cook maintains, "Books on casting, which are often aimed at actors who are trying to figure out how to get hired, provide wonderful behind-the-scenes stories of great auditions or terrible audition gaffes" (Cook 2018: 10).

9   Earlier studies of casting include: Yoakem 1958; Turow 1978; and Turow 1984.

10   See, for example: Cook 2018; Hill 2014; Knox 2018; Martin 2018; Robinson 2007; Warner 2015; and Wojcik 2003. The book *Casting Masculinity in Spanish Film* does not mention casting at all, even though "Casting" appears in the title. (Hartson 2017).

Hicks, who explains why casting directors may be "short-changed in terms of creative respect." He notes: "The job is so dynamic and so hard to pin down, and so rife for areas in which other people can take credit for it".[11] According to Casani and Muccino, it is the director who most regularly takes the credit for a successful casting process. This is because, they maintain, the casting director is "incredibly connected with the director," and the director tends to declare in interviews that they were the one responsible for "finding, choosing, and seeing" the actor (Casani and Muccino 2019).

Historically in the industry, significant contributions of casting directors have been downplayed,[12] a mentality that is still in play today in Hollywood as demonstrated in an interview with former President of the Directors Guild of America, Taylor Hackford, who states: "The reality is that you cannot call them a director, because they aren't a director, and we take exception to them being called directors, you are a casting person, you are 'casting by,' but I do not call them directors, because they are not".[13] Hence, although casting directors are integral to the success of a film, television show, or theatrical production in working on the front lines in coordination with directors and showrunners, they "rarely enjoy the limelight like other film professionals receive" (Toto 2010). For example, there is no Academy Award for best casting (there is an Emmy category), and in the Italian context, in 2014 the National Union of Italian Film Journalists created a "Best Casting Director" award at the Nastri d'argento competition.[14] Muccino, who is Vice-President of the Unione

Italiana Casting Directors, notes that the group fights hard for recognition as a trade union ("sindacato") and always campaigns to have casting directors recognized on the awards circuit (Casani and Muccino 2019). Amy Cook makes an interesting point about why casting might be undervalued:

> There is no Oscar for best casting—the assumption seems to be that there is a simple matching procedure: connect the description in the text to the description of the actor [...] Perhaps one of the reasons casting directors have not received the creative credit they deserve is the assumption that there is a character that precedes the actor who will embody it (Cook 2018: 12-3).

Rare efforts have been made to re-centre the significance of the casting practice in the profession, especially with regards to its gendered dimension. Tom Donahue's 2012 documentary *Casting By* features several blockbuster stars and directors who pay homage to the profession, such as Oliver Stone who notes: "Casting has been severely neglected over the years." The documentary focuses on the work of pioneer female casting director Marion Dougherty who is credited for revolutionizing the casting process as she listened "to her instincts about actors over typecasting them based solely on looks" (O'Keefe 2015). Dougherty has seventy-nine casting credits to her name (seven of which are uncredited) including *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969, uncredited), *Slaughterhouse Five* (George Roy Hill, 1972), *Lenny* (1974, Bob Fosse), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), and *Immortal Beloved* (Bernard Rose, 1994). Dougherty is credited with "discovering" actors such as James Dean Warren Beatty, Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, and Glenn Close. Casani and Muccino also spoke with me at length about the centrality of intuition in their casting practice (Casani and Muccino 2019).

According to director Tom Donahue, casting is a "female driven profession" and Ronna Kress notes that the Academy still sees casting directors as "secretaries" without a function (O'Falt 2015).[15] Although as Russell K. Robinson suggests, despite "the subordinate and feminized nature of this job, some casting directors have significant influence and try to diversify the casting process" (Robinson 2007: 6, note 15), which can happen through casting practices

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11   Hicks cited in Kendt 2005: 158. Accordingly, Warner describes the casting process as a "jigsaw puzzle organization" (Warner 2015: 34).

12   For example, in 1960 an issue arose regarding the on-screen credits for the film *Naked City* (cast by seminal female casting director Marion Dougherty) when a memo circulated from the Directors Guild stating "there is a limit set as to how many people can get the title '— Director.'" (cited in the documentary *Casting By*, Tom Donahue, 2012).

13   As cited in the documentary *Casting By*. Later in the documentary, the hosts of the television program *The View* discuss the possibility of creating a best casting award for *Grey's Anatomy*, and Bette Midler retorts: "then we get out of hand. Then the garbage collectors have to be awarded." The documentary then cuts to an interview with *Grey's Anatomy* casting director Linda Lowy, who states, "Hundreds of colleagues and myself would be hurt by that comment, but we wouldn't be shocked by it. I think that there is a common misperception and a common underestimation of what casting directors do."

14   The Nastri d'argento Casting Director Winners are:
2014: Pino Pellegrino for *Allacciate le cinture* (*Fasten Your Seatbelts*, Ferzan Ozpetek)
2015: Francesco Vedovati: *Maraviglioso Boccaccio* (*Wondrous Boccaccio*, Paolo e Vittoriano Taviani)
2016: Barbara Giordani: *Perfetti sconosciuti* (*Perfect Strangers*, Paolo Genovese)
2017: Anna Maria Sambucca *The Young Pope* (Paolo Sorrentino)
2018: Francesco Vedovati: *Dogman* (Matteo Garrone)

15   Erin Hill notes that casting directors are still treated like "glorified secretaries." Quoted in an interview in Robinson (2007).

called non-biased casting, blind casting, integrated casting, or nontraditional casting. Indeed, the "gendered practices" of casting are particularly interesting when considering casting's historical evolution, a topic that Erin Hill has worked upon extensively.[16] Earlier Hollywood casting was considered male-dominated, which, in the words of Hill, was "symbolized by the 'casting couch,' a euphemism" for sexual harassment (Hill 2014: 142-43). Casting was a patriarchal industry until the 1970s (Hill 2016: 196). More recently, the vast majority of casting directors are women: 78% of Italian casting directors are women, as listed on the "chi siamo" page of the "Unione Italiana Casting Directors",[17] and data from 2012 shows that the Casting Society of America lists 131 male members and 390 female members, with women representing close to 75% of all CSA members (Hill 2014: 162) who have, according to Hill "reformulated post-studio casting into the women's creative field it is today" (Hill 2014: 144). In turn, my project considers casting directors as "cultural agents" who "shape and refashion their [own] identities in the process of making their careers" (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009: 9).

When I spoke with Casani and Muccino, Casani told me that they had been thinking for quite some time about my question with regards to why casting is a profession that is principally female. Casani revealed her own theory, which has to do principally with power. She notes, "It is probably because up until recently [the profession] is not or was not viewed as powerful within film and television [...] Maybe in the past casting directors chose for the director, gave the director advice, but were not as central as they are starting to become now." Further, Muccino denies the "sensitivity argument" – e.g., more women are drawn towards casting as they are maternal or sensitive. Instead, she points out that in the world of film and television production, casting is a much more accessible profession for women who have a family or plan to have one, in particular as casting directors have much more control over their schedules than assistants to directors, for example (Casani and Muccino 2019).

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[16] See Hill 2014 and Hill 2016, in particular pp. 195-212. Linda Seger's *When Women Call the Shots* includes hundreds of interviews surrounding the role of women in the film industry (Seger 1996). The problematic gendered discourse surrounding casting crops up in an interview with past Casting Society of America president Richard Hicks, who states: "I liken us to old girlfriends. You have a really intense relationship with the actors and the producers and then they go off and have e really intense relationship with other people they make the movie with" (cited in Kendt 2005: 154).

[17] Further, ten out of the eleven casting assistants listed are women.

3. AUTHENTIC ADOLESCENCE

In writing my recent book on the cultural fascination with criminal antiheroes in contemporary Italian television series, I was intrigued by explicit comments from reviewers, showrunners, fans, and, actors, debating the "authenticity" of representations of organized crime, representations that sparked polemics while drawing in millions of fans (Renga, 2019). Reviewers and fans of *My Brilliant Friend* also laud the series' particular take on female friendship and give praise for a "realistic" depiction of 1950s Naples. The series' "authenticity" is a key feature of the vast majority of Anglophone reviews which make mention of the use of Neapolitan dialect and the casting of nonprofessional actors, which contribute to the process of manufacturing an "authentic" experience from the novels.[18]

For example (all emphases mine):

– "It's an *authentic* Italian production that was made in conjunction with HBO" (Bleznak 2018)
– "Notably, the show was shot in Neapolitan dialect to make it as *authentic* as possible to the books" (Anderson 2018).
– "I asked why an American network should care about the accuracy of a language if their audiences would be watching the series with subtitles. They replied that they wanted the series to be *authentic* [...]. Such attention to detail and *authenticity* is relatively new in the United States" (France 24 2018).
– "The pressure to remain true to the book and the author's vision was enormous; anything less than *authentic* might trigger the wrath of the Ferrante faithful" (Press 2018).
– "HBO has patted itself on the back for its devotion to *authenticity*" (Wanshel 2018).
– "This *authentic* take on the first Neapolitan novel is the most honest and vivid portrait of the lives of young girls ever brought to TV" (The Guardian 2018).

The following comments refer principally to casting and performance:

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[18] The obsession regarding the series' authenticity extends as well to its reception in academic scholarship. For example: "It seemed inauthentic to watch 1950's school boys in My Brilliant Friend get together as a gang to throw stones at a girl for the sole reason that she beat a boy in a classroom academic contest, or to see the father of the smart girl throw her out of a second-story window because she wants to go to middle school" (Dika 2018: 93).

– "In a throwback effort at *authenticity*, producers are looking for amateur child actors — two sets of girls in 8- and 15-year-old iterations, and then a large 'Annie'-esque supporting cast of hard-knock lifers" (Horowitz 2017).
– "The show, with roughly 150 actors and 5,000 extras, makes its push for *authenticity* clear in an early scene when Lila throws Elena's doll into a dark cellar with both daring and treachery" (Gamerman 2018).
– "Then, on top of that, you have to find actresses who speak in the Neapolitan dialect, because that was the only way to bring this to life in an *authentic* way" (Sarner 2018).
– "In case you haven't noticed by now, the directors of *My Brilliant Friend* are all about *authenticity*, so their casting process was no different" (Daw 2018).

This anxiety around authenticity could be explained in part by the anxieties around the authenticity of the identity of the novels' author, about which much work has already been done.[19] However, clear in reviewer and fan reactions to the series, the stakes for getting it right are high. And the majority of critics and fans (in the many sites I consulted) tend to agree that the adaptation is a success.[20]

A striking amount of criticism on the series references the series' neorealist qualities or precursors. *Vanity Fair Italia* defines *My Brilliant Friend* as "una serie 'neorealista' che De Sica, De Santis, e Rossellini avrebbero fatto a gara per dirigere / a neorealist series that De Sica, De Santis, and Rossellini would have fought it out to direct" (Manca 2018). And series director Saverio Costanzo compares the series' elaborate casting process to the plot of Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951), a film that foregrounds female performance and precarity, and the potential perils of film casting (Horowitz 2017). The critical discourse of *My Brilliant Friend*'s neorealist legacy brings up, as Catherine O'Rawe has argued in her discussion of the nonprofessional child performer, the "legitimating label of neorealism" (O'Rawe 2018).

The vast amount of reviews of *My Brilliant Friend* that emphasize the series' realistic elements, authenticity, or neorealist genealogy, further underline Italian cinema's (and television's) limited international circulation practices. With some exception, those products that appeal to viewers outside of Italy's borders evidence a prevailing "ignorance of and prejudice towards contemporary Italian Cinema [and television]

wherein 'quality' still equals Neorealism" (Hipkins and Renga 2016: 381), or some other socially engaged representation. *My Brilliant Friend* places a focus on poverty, access to education, physical and sexual violence, and physical and mental abuse. This focus on "serious" issues places *My Brilliant Friend* in line with other "serious" Italian films and television series that found international audiences.[21] One critic considers the series important because it "faces outward, asserting Italy's place in the world," in particular because of its anti-Trump, anti-populist, and anti-nationalist message regarding the potential of overcoming barriers, and of breaking down walls.[22]

The series also stands out to reviewers thanks to its placing "brilliant, ambitious, and complicated women" at the narrative core (Horowitz 2018). These women, Horowitz maintains, are nowhere like the "Berlusconi-era adornments" from earlier television programs characterized by the "velina" or television showgirl, a term that "redefined popular culture," particularly because many Italian television showgirls featuring on Mediaset's channels followed ex-premiere Silvio Berlusconi into politics after his party's 1994 victory, a win that launched him into office as Prime Minister (Wolff 2009). Aside from a joke here or there, television showgirls do not speak, and they spend their screen time dancing, sometimes singing, or silently standing by, aiding the star persona. As Danielle Hipkins has shown, the media has a history of vilifying girls who work towards stardom through performance. Ironically however, the "figure of the showgirl is the most internationally notorious trademark of Italian television" (Hipkins 2012: 154-55), a national emblem most likely created in the media as a result of the many global scandals associated with Berlusconi involving young and under-aged women, many of whom made their breakthrough in television whilst working as showgirls. Contrary to the much-maligned television showgirl, Lila and Lenù are viewed as embodying an "authentic" adolescence that appeals to both local and global audiences.

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19   See, for example: Savoy 2018; Tizzi 2018; and Bojar 2018.

20   One critic praises the series, even in its "alluring artificial[ity]" (Grisar 2018).

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21   See Hipkins and Renga 2016. For example, with regards to which productions are taught in Anglophone countries: "The 'new canon' of our title refers to the way in which a surprisingly rigid canon of contemporary cinema and television has already emerged in the Anglophone curriculum, one that maintains Neorealist and political auteur films preoccupation with 'serious' issues" (388). Further, the majority of the corpus that informs the "International Circulation of Italian Cinema" project is composed of films that have as a focus engaged issues such as immigration, terrorism, World War II and the Holocaust, sexual violence, the mafia, the clergy, or the prison system (International Circulation of Italian Cinema). My 2014 study on Italian screen studies in the anglophone context concludes that "Neorealism and auteur/director specific studies still appear to be the bread and butter of the publishing business" (Renga 2014: 246).

22   However, I disagree that *My Brilliant Friend* narrates the *overcoming* "of ignorance, sexism, and provincialism" (Horowitz 2018).

4. **AUTHENTIC FACES**

I am particularly intrigued with the casting of the series as related to the so-called authenticity of the child and adolescent characters and the actors who interpret them. In the words of one Italian critic, the four nonprofessionals find themselves, "Tra il sogno di Hollywood e l'ombra di Gomorra / Between Hollywood and the shadow of *Gomorra*" (Rep tv 2017). This transnational status of the four actors also applies to the casting, reception, and fandom around Lila and Lenù, as I discuss further on. I asked Casani and Muccino if their casting practice was at all influenced by the status of *My Brilliant Friend* as a co-production, and whether they chose actors who could "represent" 1950s Italy to a broad audience. Muccino responded that their choices were not at all influenced by how American audiences might imagine the characters, "who maybe saw them as prettier, more folkloristic." Instead, they relied upon instinct backed by an incredible amount of labor on the part of the production and casting teams (Casani and Muccino 2019). *My Brilliant Friend* is of course not the first Italian production that casts nonprofessionals. The series joins multiple other film and television series who look locally for talent, a practice that goes back to neorealism, and before. For example, Muccino and Casini have a history of casting nonprofessionals, for example in the series *Gomorra,* and Muccino was told by Sollima to only cast fresh faces in the series *Romanzo criminale.*

As Warner explains, "selecting the best person for the role has weighty implications" (Warner 2015: 12), and the stakes are particularly high when working with an adaptation of a highly successful source text. The series' strict fidelity to the novel is underlined by Casani and Muccino. Casani bluntly notes that when casting the series "there was no freedom," and Muccino adds that they "had to be very faithful [to the novel...] that was the biggest challenge, to try to convey the sensation 'I imagined it like this'" (Casani and Muccino 2019). Costanzo underlines that when casting *L'amica geniale* he was looking for "classical faces" (Press 2018) and he and his team were clearly willing to put in the effort to scour Naples and surroundings looking for the right fit. In casting the four key faces of *My Brilliant Friend*, Muccino, Casani, and crew interacted with over 9,000 nonprofessional female children and adolescents over a period of seven months, all of whom were required to be from in and around Naples.[23] Muccino notes

that they worked with a team of fifteen or sixteen, which is quite large (they note that most casting ensembles involve three or four people). Casani, Muccino, and company scoured Naples, in particular educational institutions and theatrical and acting schools, which are numerous in Naples because of Campania's "rich theatrical culture" (Casani and Muccino 2019). One critic dubs the casting process "epic" and notes that it was "akin to the *Gone with the Wind* search for Scarlett O'Hara" (Press 2018). The casting call for the first season declares: "we will meet children, girls and boys exclusively from Campania that have not yet come to a similar casting call recently" (Facebook 2017). This casting process is similar to the early Hollywood casting and neorealist casting patterns called "face casting" where "the director procured actors wherever he could, sometimes off of the streets or wherever he happened to be shooting his film" (Yoakem 1958: 36). According to Warner, face casting is having a comeback in Hollywood (and clearly in Italy), as both face casting and contemporary casting processes are "concerned with what look best fits the role" (Warner 2015: 16). Casting practices that focus upon the performer's face are not new trends in the business, as discussed in a 1958 article on Casting in *Film Quarterly*: "No matter how elaborate the system became, one basic factor prevailed: the accent was always on the face" (Yoakem 1958: 36), a casting technique underlined by Muccino: "It is almost automatic when you are reading a screenplay to think of the face" (Berbenni 2018). However, she maintains that "it is not a question of beauty or ugliness, instead what is important is expressivity, impact, and communicating with the face" (Muccino and Casani 2019).

With *My Brilliant Friend*, the best look was one unassociated with established actors. Muccino has a long, successful history of casting nonprofessionals dating back to her work on *Romanzo criminale. La serie*, which Muccino describes as "her first job that was so free" that did not rely upon famous faces to draw in the audience. With regards to her collaboration with Stefano Sollima, she notes that the showrunner insisted, "'I do not want anyone who is even somewhat known' [...] That was the first job with a lot of freedom and clearly that entailed a huge amount of work, because it requires more research, and therefore, many many many screentests, months and months, a year of work" (Casani and Muccino 2019). And later in casting Sollima's 2015 film *Suburra*, Muccino notes that Sollima "did not want known faces," and explains that she finds "new faces" all over the place: "In amateur theater companies, in acting schools, at the cinema, even on the street" (Berbenni 2018). They do note that many of the ac-

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23 Vicki Mayer speaks to the "alienated labor involved in many, if not all, casting calls. Quite simply, a lot of time and effort goes to waste in finding 'real people' that could just as easily be found next store, at the super market, or at the shopping mall" (2009: 22).

tors that they cast do have professional theatrical training (Casani and Muccino 2019).

In an article entitled "The Faces of Ferrante," Miranda Popkey (2018) puts forth that Muccino and Casani "got the faces right," populating the series with faces that are "sloppier and saggier, more wrinkled and more weathered and more crooked than many American readers will have imagined for these characters." She goes on to discuss how bedraggled, wild, and infirm in particular the women look, noting that Muccino and Casani understand what poverty looks like (Popkey 2018).[24] Popkey's emphasis is on the choice of faces that express an authentic experience of 1950s Neapolitan destitution. Here, the burden of corporeal decay is placed primarily upon the women surrounding Lila and Lenù, who, in the books and series, are beaten, mentally unstable, and subjugated to the men in their lives. This ensemble cast of vanquished women speaks to the casting director's reliance upon what Turow defines as standards for acceptable casting: credibility and visual balance. The first ensures that the characters will be believable and will not distract viewers from the narrative, while the second regards how actors look in relationship to other actors, and how well they fit together.[25] The series' credibility and visual balance are underscored by one reviewer: "Young Elena and Lila dominate the series' first two hours so completely that none of the other characters in their orbit really stands out, which also means none of them stands out as fake or distracting" (Fienberg 2018). Further, Turow notes that minor characters are important because they "form a large part of the 'landscape of people' which unfolds daily on TV and helps anchor the dramas of 'real life' locations" (Turow 1978: 18-19).

One particular challenge in casting *My Brilliant Friend* is locating two *different* sets of nonprofessional female performers who would be credible and also visually balance with the series' extensive cast. In casting the series, a lot of it came down to luck, as is clear in this *Vanity Fair* piece on the discovery of the four focal actors:

The four stars they chose had no professional acting experience at all. Fifteen-year-old Gaia Girace, who plays the older Lila, is the only one who'd ever taken acting classes. Sixteen-year-old Margherita Mazzucco, who plays teen Lenù, auditioned after someone handed her a flyer at her school. Eleven-year-old Elisa Del Genio (younger Lenù) accompanied her brother to an audition and was chosen, while he was rejected for looking too Nordic. (He is still unhappy about that.) Twelve-year-old Ludovica Nasti, who plays the young version of Lila with a savage intensity (and who is equally magnetic in real life), said she approached the audition as if it were a game (Press 2018).

Typically, the nonprofessional actor adds a sense of "authenticity" to narrative as audiences are not distracted by familiar faces, and, in particular with nonprofessionals cast locally, can represent the lived vitality of a location. According to Pamela Robertson Wojcik, the nonprofessional creates a "realist effect," lending a "documentary touch" in fulfilling a "realist criteria for physical appearance, but also is taken to reflect and be typical of the reality represented" (Wojcik 2003: 230-31).[26] And this is even more so with the child nonprofessional, who can be considered a blank slate and who just gushes realism and emotion. Unlike "star casting", which can lend "visibility and status" to a product while drawing in viewers (Knox 2018: 311), the child nonprofessional, as Catherine O'Rawe notes, "becomes a kind of 'star attraction' on the festival circuit, an object of curiosity and a marker of authenticity for a cinephile audience" (O'Rawe 2018). Muccino underlines the commitment to legitimacy and authenticity in the casting of the series: "Our priority was to be faithful to these descriptions, not only from a physical point of view, but also from a psychological and behavioral one" (Reilly 2018).[27]

The process of narrowing down the list of potential Lilas and Lenùs was extensive, and every evening at about six o'clock, the team would meet up and compare notes, preparing a list of candidates for Costanzo, who then provided in-

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24   The full citation reads: "The women fare no better. Lila's mother's face is pocked with acne scars. The lips of Gigliola Spagnuolo are twisted into a perpetual sneer. Melina Cappuccio, a widow in frail physical and mental health, has skin leathered before its time and a nose like the blade of an ax. Even Lila, a stubborn stick of a child who matures into an unequivocal beauty, wears her sex appeal like a weapon. The teenage Lila is all cheekbones and eyes and hidden teeth. Her hair appears, until a fifth-episode visit to Naples proper, never to have been combed" (Popkey 2018).

25   Turow defines credibility as: "A caster's perception of what most people think someone in a particular occupation or role looks like" While visual balance implies: "the caster's perception of how well actors fit next to one another from an aesthetic standpoint" (Turow 1984: 171-72).

26   See also an insightful article on casting the television series *The Wire* with several nonprofessional local actors who speak in the Detroit accent: "The appearance of real-life locals who have experienced many of the problems and issues dealt with in the narrative only lends this credibility [... The series is less] concerned with the acting abilities of the supporting cast than with conveying their everyday reality" (Kelly 2019).

27   Such a casting practice goes against the "English speaking fantasy casting suggestions" for the imagined Hollywood remake of the series (Bromwich 2016).

put. Such a collaborative process that evolves over time helps shape characters physically and emotionally, up until "you have ten Lilas and ten Elenas, and then four, and then two, and finally one" (Casani and Muccino 2019). In deciding the final faces of the younger dyad, Muccino notes that they looked for something within the child actor that resembled the character. For example, "Ludovica Nasti is Lila, she has the same temper, the same force, and is also a bit masculine at times. She plays soccer, she fought hard in life as she had leukemia, so she is determined and strong just like Lila," while Elisa del Genio "was exactly Elena, more reserved, always observing, who was always one step behind, never knowing until the last moment that she would make it" (Casani and Muccino 2019).

More frequently than not, after a memorable debut, nonprofessional young performers fall out of view and are rarely cast in another role (O'Rawe 2018).[28] However, this is not the case for Mazzucco and Girace, who star in the second season of *My Brilliant Friend: Story of a New Name*. This is also not the case for Nasti, who has been compared to Sophia Loren, and who currently has a role in Italy's longest running soap opera *Un posto al sole* (*A Place in the Sun*, 1996 -), features in *Rosa, Pietra e Stella* (Marcella Sannino, 2019), and plays Anne Frank in the short *Il nostro nome è Anna* (*Our Name is Anne*, Sergio and Sara Martinelli, 2019). Indeed, Muccino points out that Nasti was a natural on the set, as during the screen tests and call backs she instinctively knew where the camera was while it was moving around her, an intuition that professional actors are incapable of (Casani and Muccino 2019). This insistence on unrehearsed naturalness recalls Karen Lury's contention that a "preference for untrained children seems to be consistent, regardless of the film's genre or its production context." This is because the child nonprofessional's "apparent spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness" translates into a naturalistic performance that is more difficult for those "who have been trained to 'act'" (Lury 2010: 160).

5. CONCLUSION: *MY TRUE BRILLIANT FRIEND*

Promotional material around the series foregrounds in particular Girace's and Mazzucco's status as nonprofessionals. For example, Carissa Cappellani's 2018 documentary *La mia amica geniale* (*My True Brilliant Friend*) focuses on Girace and Mazzucco, and how they prepared to play Lenù and Lila, their

experience while filming, and the series' aftermath at festivals and premieres.[29] The English translation of the title, with the addition of the word "True," stresses authenticity, in this case, authentic friendship. Much of the documentary focuses on Mazzucco and Girace's offscreen friendship and on how, in the series, documentary, and in real life, Girace and Mazzucco perform girlhood, for example in slumber parties with castmates and in discussions with family members about their future, and whether they will continue in school. At one point, viewers watch Girace as she has her braces removed, the camera voyeuristically hovering just above her mouth as it is manipulated by the dental equipment.

The documentary helps to promote the series through the focus on female adolescent behavior. Central to nonprofessional performance is the acting coach who no doubt aids in manufacturing Lila and Lenù's "authenticity." Antonio Calone and Anna Redi are the two coaches behind *My Brilliant Friend*, and they spent substantial time with the actors in rehearsals and training sessions. *My True Brilliant Friend* represents on how childishness and adolescence are coached and performed in and around the series, and received by audiences and fans, which speaks to how child performers are often "over-determined" by those who surround them (Lury 2010: 10), and how the casting and coaching of child and adolescent performers is "crucial" to the production practice (Pierini 2015: 14).[30]

Mazzucco's over-determination is clear in an exchange with Costanzo, who attempts to coach her on how to get into character. He tells her,

> Your job is simpler but also much more difficult. You have to be the main protagonist without being the main protagonist. She [Lila] needs to work on the tremendous nuances of her performance. But at least there is a text. You have to do the same thing, but invisibly, without devices. It's much more complicated. You must approach it altruistically [...] Take a vacation from yourself, Margherita. Take a vacation... from your cynical defense mechanisms. Take a vacation and you'll see what an amazing journey awaits.

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28   Also at issue is the question of pay as nonprofessionals come cheap.

29   The documentary was originally available as an extra on HBO and RaiPlay, and at the time of writing can be purchased on Amazon Prime.

30   I follow three of them on Instagram (Mazzucco has yet to accept my request, and does not have any posts), where they are incredibly active in promoting seasons one and two of the series.

FIGURES 1-2

This interaction between director and actor reveals, how "the body of the actor and his/her history is always on stage with the character" (Cook 2018: 13). Also, in the words of Catherine Driscoll, Costanzo's coaching underpins the "difficult negotiations and performances of feminine adolescence" (Driscoll 2002: 9) as these performances relate to a desire – on the part of many stakeholders – for a representation of an authentic experience of youth.[31] In this example, Mazzucco's authenticity comes at the cost of her self-abnegation, which undermines Lury's argument regarding the inherent realism of the child nonprofessional. Also relevant is Mariapaola Pierini's statement regarding the difficult task of the acting coach, which falls between "authenticity-virginity and knowledge" (Pierini 2015: 15).

In *My True Brilliant Friend*, and also in interviews and red-carpet appearances featuring the quartet,[32] it is clear that the child actor's self-presentation is conditioned by a transnational film/television industry which places young actors in situations that are profitable for the product, and potentially precarious for the girl. And this sense of precarity is apparent in two of the most widespread images from the series (Figures 1-2).

In the first, headless girls are shown running towards a threat, or from an enemy. In the other, they appear listless and glum as they read. Precarity is etched on their faces and bodies, and this sense of imminent peril recalls series director Saverio Costanzo's assertion: "Naples is an open-air theater.

Probably to defend themselves from violence they always have to wear masks. Everyone there is an actor" (Vivarelli 2018b); or, as Amy Cook argues, "Some bodies pass more seamlessly than others" (Cook 2018: 9). Knowing a bit about the family lives of some of the four female actors, in particular Mazzucco, who is from one of Naples' wealthiest neighborhoods, this is a loaded claim, and it appears that Costanzo understands authenticity as theatricality. And Costanzo's remarks on authentic peril – or how growing up in the streets of Naples translates into an authentic performance of poverty –resonates with this comment from co-producer Lorenzo Mieli: "We couldn't imagine American actresses playing Italian schoolgirls in poor areas of Naples in the 1950s" (France 24 2018), or also this comment from a mother of two children who auditioned for the series, but did not make the cut: "Acting is in the Naples blood" (Horowitz 2017).

This essay explores such loaded claims regarding the mechanisms by which an "authentic" Italy is exported to transnational audiences. For example, if, as Mieli claims, the team could not imagine American actresses in the roles of Lila and Lenù, how could they imagine wealthier Italians doing so? In the end, it comes back to the face, as Muccino explains. When I asked how Casani and Muccino prepared for the casting process of *My Brilliant Friend*, Muccino excitedly responded that Casani is "the queen of the mood board." Casani elaborated: "Luckily we were working with a period in history right after the Second World War. We began by looking at photographs, cinema, art." Muccino added that her mother was born in 1944 in Naples, and she "took all of her mother's photo albums, that included faces that were truly 'those.'" Muccino points out they were confronted with the challenge of finding faces that corresponded to the characters who had

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31 I am indebted to Danielle Hipkins' work on performances of girlhood in relation to casting and precarious adolescence. See: Hipkins 2017a and Hipkins 2017b.

32 For example, Nasti and Del Genio are coached by an interviewer on how to look at the camera when answering questions (YouTube 2018).

entered the "collective imaginary of the reader" and hence they spent a lot of time researching "the appearances and the faces of the epoch" and thinking about "the thinness of the postwar period" (Casani and Muccino 2019), which underlines how casting directors are "cultural producers" (Martin 2018: 294). In one reviewer's opinion, Del Genio and Nasti have "the unforced naturalism of the best of juvenile neorealist stars" (Feinberg 2018). Ultimately, *My Brilliant Friend*'s casting process and its reception are anchored in a postwar neorealist aesthetic that has a proven transnational appeal.

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Un posto al sole (1996-)
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ITALIAN FICTION AS VIEWED FROM A DISTANCE. ANOMALIES IN THE CORRELATION BETWEEN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the regional consumption of mainstream Italian TV series, covering the four-year period from 2016–2019. It underlines the great heterogeneity of television fiction consumption across Italy, and it demonstrates how the correlation between national and regional success is often subject to the influence of factors that can produce anomalies. The most important factors responsible for anomalies appear to be the regions where the series are set, and the broadcasting channels. The article also compares and quantifies such phenomena to understand how the national success of Italian series can benefit from the polarization of consumption happening in the various regions of the country. As a matter of fact, the popularity of Italian mainstream TV series appears to be the result of the mutual entanglement of different regional patterns of taste and consumption. Moreover, audience consumption behaviors, while being interesting from an economic point a view, can also be good indicators of the level of socio-cultural fragmentation of a country.

This paper is aimed at contributing to the study of those factors that determine the success of Italian fiction. The term "fiction" indicates here mainstream TV series, and more in general televisual storytelling of national production, following an Italian tradition started about thirty years ago and that continues to thrive. The term "fiction", initially surrounded by an aura of positive connotations, used to allude to a breath of fresh international air for the original production of the country after the collapse of the public monopoly. Nowadays, the meaning of the term has almost been reversed, and it has come to indicate, rightly or wrongly, the hardly-developed aesthetic and narrative character of national mainstream scripted contents.[1]

This paper ought to be included in the domain of *entertainment science* (Hennig-Thurau and Huston 2019). Oftentimes, we have believed that the success of audiovisual contents (and in general, of entertainment) is in fact fortuitous and unpredictable, and that the reasons behind it are pretty much impossible to know – *nobody knows anything*, as William Goldman famously said. Here, the attempt is made to go in the opposite direction, in the conviction that we actually *do know something*, and that by using data and analyzing phenomena from a certain perspective and with some strong hypotheses in mind, we might be able to understand and predict some (though not all) of the reasons underlying the success of audiovisual products in Italy.

The focus will be on the regional success of original productions in mainstream TV series, a subject to which the author already dedicated a previous article (Avezzù 2019). This article was the result of an initial investigation aimed at verifying whether TV series set in given Italian regions have greater audience success in those precise regions. This new paper shall tackle the same issue in a more systematic way, by proposing a solution that allows to visualize the different types of "success" of the products taken into account, in order to determine their relevance, and to obtain an overview of how consumers in each region relate to TV series. Italian free TV series are a hugely popular phenomenon, attracting millions of viewers every night, and few other products are comparable to them in terms of national audience engagement in the history of national – but also international – entertainment. In order to better understand the specificities

of their success, we shall now look at them from a distance, as Franco Moretti suggested doing with literature (and cinema).[2]

The outcomes of the mentioned initial study were that different tastes exist across different regions, and that TV series audiences are heterogeneous. This made it difficult to systematically analyze the phenomenon. For this reason, the decision was taken to look into various indicators: the absolute value of national audience share and regional audience share, the difference between these values, the difference between regional audience share and regional average audience share for all the audiovisual products considered, etc. These indicators had different values across different regions (according to the popularity of TV series in general in certain regions), and they had to be discussed one by one, also considering one TV series at a time. In this article, such indicators will be tentatively analyzed all together, and they will be applied to all series titles at the same time, region by region. The aim is to demonstrate as precisely as possible whether and how the setting of Italian mainstream TV series is relevant to their regional – and national – success, and whether the setting of a certain audiovisual product is to be considered the only factor – or the main factor – able to shape regional audiences' preferences, or whether additional factors need to be taken into account in this regard.

The specific attention paid to the regional characteristics of TV series is motivated by the fact that it has recently become increasingly important in the Italian production to set the storyline in a precise location. This aspect, which, of course, is to be partly attributed to regional film commissions, has oftentimes been acknowledged as well by TV commissioners themselves.[3] Rai seems to be justifying said

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1 As proof, we may note how the series *Il processo* – an above-average quality TV series – was added to Netflix's catalogue ("in 4K and without ads") after it was broadcast on Canale 5 without success, only to be commented upon on Instagram by director Stefano Lodovichi with the hashtag *#serienonfiction* [*#seriesnotfiction*].

2 See Moretti 2005. Moretti's attempt to apply this way of looking at cinema is in Moretti 2001. Among others, Marta Boni has tried to look at the social discourses on TV series "from afar", most recently in Boni 2018, yet focusing on different forms than those that will be analyzed here, and (consequently) on very different forms of audience success. However, it is in no way claimed here that a *distant reading* is superior compared to other approaches to the study of TV series, and to more traditional textual approaches. The title of this article should not be considered to be in controversy with approaches that take a "closer" look at the subject, e.g. Cardini 2017.

3 The situation has changed considerably since the 2000s. For example, in the 2005-2006 season (therefore ten years before the beginning of the period on which this analysis is focused), Italian TV series were much more Rome-centric, and 40% of the total series were set in Lazio; see Gelato 2007: 121. The percentage of series set in Lazio today, in the sample considered in this article (2016-2019), is instead considerably lower (slightly higher than 20%). Lazio still remains the region with the largest percentage of filmed series, but the settings seem overall better distributed throughout Italy: in 2005-2006, the second region for number of filmed series was Lombardy (10%), while in the last four years it has been Sicily (14%, only 2% in 2005-2006).

importance by highlighting its social mission as public service broadcaster: extending filming locations of TV series to various settings across the country responds to the actual need of giving visibility to all regions (Guarnaccia and Barra 2018: 8). As a matter of fact, as it can be noted by looking at an advertisement from *Tivù*, a business-to-business magazine [Figure 1], while choosing various settings with the aim of differentiating its products, Rai Fiction declares to be following a strategy aimed at valorizing the country as a whole.

The scenographic and – to some extent – the geographic aspects play a more prominent role within the new mainstream production, probably also due to the competitiveness of quality pay TV production and SVOD platforms.[4] Indeed, a product whose geographical features are more highlighted is often thought to be richer in production value and in quality. Even if we consider them to actually have an influence on the characteristics of free seriality, the original productions of pay TV have, and will always have, a much narrower audience than free TV. Hence, pay TV and VOD services shall not be taken into consideration in this analysis, as the evaluation would be biased by differences in earnings and technological infrastructure availability across the country.[5]

Recognizing the role played by the setting as a success factor for Italian TV series at a regional level has a strategic relevance mainly in relation to product marketing, as well as editorial and ad schedule marketing. On the one hand, defining the importance of the setting – as well as that of other factors that contribute to directing the success of a certain series towards a specific region – allows scheduling and counterscheduling optimization; on the other hand, it helps to trace an audience profile. Therefore, it becomes

FIGURE 1

possible to actually *design* a type of audience, starting from the planning of certain content features, like the setting: the latter is in fact a characteristic that can be shaped at one's own preference. Clearly, some of the local audiences are more strategic than others, richer than others, more or less exploited or permeable than others. A broadcaster that is aware of both the average geographic segmentation of its audience and the potential of a certain content in a given area shall be able to decide whether to adapt its schedule for the benefit of its most affectionate portion of the audience; this way, most of its scripted contents shall be rooted in that part of the audience. On the contrary, the broadcaster can also try to intercept different audiences from *unusual* regions, in order to try and maximize the audience share or simply to rebrand.

Although most of the academic analyses on the geography of Italian TV series focus on the topic of *movie-* or *tv-induced tourism*,[6] the heterogeneity of the geographic segmentation related to the consumption of those series leads to understand how the setting is not only linked to territorial marketing, and hence to touristic promotion. The correspondence between setting and local success shows a completely different phenomenon: a sort of socio-anthropologic need of self-representation and mirroring, expressed by an audience that is more interested in watching stories set in locations they are able to recognize, rather than in radically different settings.[7] The viewer apparently prefers to be an *insider* than

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4 Another reason may be that mainstream original productions often appear in the catalogs of AVOD services of the same free TVs (RaiPlay, Mediaset Play), which inevitably have to compete in quality against some of the best known SVOD platforms. On the other hand, mainstream productions often end up in major SVOD platforms, also for regulatory reasons that impose a share of Italian titles in the catalogs: it is not uncommon to find Rai and Mediaset titles on Netflix and on Amazon Prime Video.

5 In a broader sense, the scope of this article is not solely limited to a media sphere often (yet wrongly) perceived as about to disappear. In fact, the Italian mainstream TV series probably replicate in scale consumption dynamics that can be found all over the world, and also those of the video streaming platforms. The importance of the existence of local tastes in audiovisual consumption is a topic of great relevance today, also in the field of studies regarding digital distribution and its global geographies (see Lobato 2019). The fact that it is possible to have reliable and official data on the success of the Italian mainstream TV series – while there are no public or certified data on the audiovisual consumption of streaming platforms – allows to directly verify the scale of a phenomenon, i.e. the "friction" of local taste, that today, in the academic field of digital distribution, can only be indirectly inferred.

6 See Graziano e Nicosia 2017, and Lavarone 2016.

7 See the concept of "cultural proximity" by Straubhaar 2007.

just the *outsider*[8] who is merely looking for the next holiday destination.

The study of the factors that can determine local success, even if the scope here is limited to the Italian context only, can help us remember that TV series of any origin necessarily contain some more or less geographically localized features, and, more particularly, that these features can foster specific and likewise localized patterns of consumption. It can be useful to keep this in mind, especially in the present scenario, characterized by the strong prominence of VOD platforms in social and academic discourses. Indeed, such prominence may induce us to think that most TV series have an international or global appeal, in terms of both aesthetics and consumption. On the contrary, not only can it certainly be said that a national production persists, but it is even possible to identify large or small segments of sub-national and regional audience. On the importance of proximity features different from those discussed here, including their impact on local, regional and (especially) national audiences, and on the possibility that TV series reinforce territorial identities and a sense of belonging, see e.g. Dhoest (2004, 2013), Castelló (2007, 2009), Castelló, Dhoest and O'Donnell (2009), Peris Blanes (2016), Alonso (2018).

1. DEPICTING THE REGIONAL SUCCESS OF ITALIAN SERIES

114 complete seasons of Italian TV series were considered, constituting all the first original releases of broadcast channels with more than one episode per year, from January 2016 to the end of December 2019. This is approximately the period from the advent of Netflix in Italy to the shift to the publication of *total audience* data by Auditel – which broadened its outreach also to digital devices, apps and online TVs. The Auditel data considered here (total Live + VOSDAL individuals) were provided by Mediaset, as part of a broader research by the Strategic Marketing Department regarding successful narrative factors in Italian TV series.[9] More specifically, the *average minute rating* expressed in percentage (AMR%) was considered: this is a metrics that is called in Italy *penetration* (of a certain content). Such penetration, which is also com-

monly referred to as TVR (*TV rating)*, compares the number of "viewers per average minute" with a pre-defined target – *that is, in our case, with the stable reference universes of the national population and of the single regions according to ISTAT* (the Italian National Institute of Statistics). By doing so, it makes it possible to perform a more reliable comparison and an easier, faster quantification of success compared to a more traditional metric used in Italy, which is the *audience share* (SHR) metric. In the latter, indeed, data continuously change according to the total viewing audience (Casetti and di Chio 1998: 43ss). Two episodes that, on two different nights, have registered the same average minute rating – that is the same number of average viewers per minute – have the same penetration, but not necessarily the same audience share. If, for instance, on one of the two nights considered, a football game had attracted viewers on another channel, the episode on air that same night would have registered a lower audience share compared to the other. The analysis will not parametrize success on the total viewing audience, but rather it will report it in terms of fixed parameters (regional or national ones) that allow a more stable overview on the phenomenon, thus allowing a more balanced comparison.

Arguably, the best way to represent penetration data is by means of scatter plots as illustrated below [Figure 2]. This solution allows to synoptically observe the regional consumption of Italian TV series "from a distance"; to compare it to national consumption data; to highlight any incongruities in the regional distribution of the success of single products; and to identify the factors that underpin said incongruities. Each graph refers to a single region, each dot corresponds to one season of a given TV series.[10] The horizontal axis refers to the national penetration of each series title, while the vertical axis refers to the regional penetration. The graphs are to be interpreted as follows: the closer a title locates itself to the right margin, the more national success it achieved; the closer it is to the upper margin of the graph, the more regional success it achieved. The assumption is to find – if not a complete coincidence – at least a positive correlation, more or less strong, between national and local penetration; each region should theoretically replicate on a local scale the national success achieved by a certain title. For this reason, all titles should generally arrange themselves along the diagonal of the square (in case of a perfect coincidence), or along a straight line just above or below said diagonal, that is along

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10   *L'Aquila – Grandi speranze* has changed channel – from Rai 1 to Rai 3 – and appears twice in the graphs: the dots in each graph are 115.
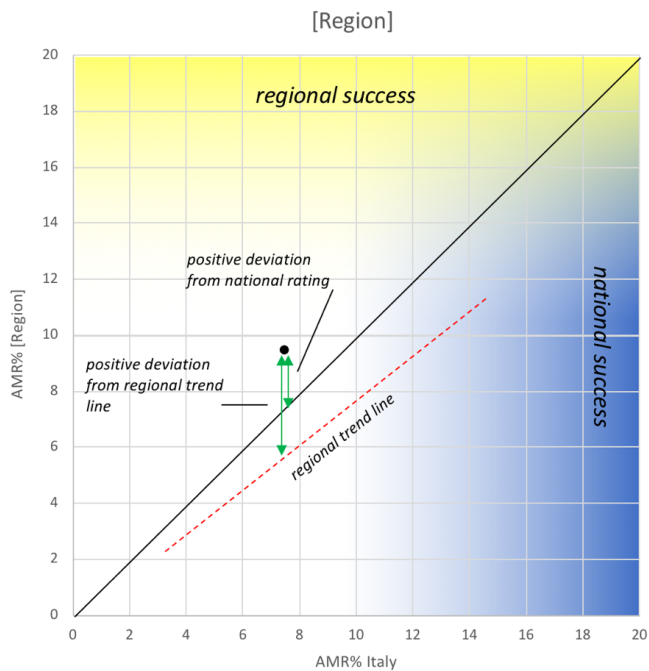
FIGURE 2

the trend line[11] describing the specific regional correlation: the space above the diagonal refers to regions with a higher consumption of TV series, that below the diagonal refers to the rest of the regions.

Nonetheless, what is particularly interesting about these graphs is that *incongruities* clearly stand out in them. More attention will be devoted to outliers than to titles that arrange themselves linearly in the graphs, as the aim is understanding what defines differences between local consumption and average national consumption. In addition to ordinary regional differences in the average TV series consumption, there are some factors that produce huge incongruities between national and regional penetration; said incongruities allow some titles to appear above or below the diagonal in the graphs, and above or below the trend line that describes the specific correlation in each region. Naturally, the higher a title is positioned above the diagonal, the more positive is the deviation of its regional penetration from its national penetration. And the higher a title is positioned above the regional trend line, the more positive is the deviation of its regional penetration from the standard tendency of TV series consumption in the same region.

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11   That is the straight line that minimizes the sum of the squares of the deviations of all points with respect to itself.

Once having identified the coordinates for each region that can pinpoint an ideal median series (M) on the graph, that is a dot whose *x* value is the median national penetration value of all the TV series considered, and whose *y* value is the median regional penetration of the same titles, values are obtained that can be represented as straight lines dividing the graph between *stronger* and *weaker titles* in the region or the whole country [Figure 3]. Therefore, it will be possible to observe some graph areas representing TV series that in each region perform above or below the national median figure and/or above or below the regional median figure. Each of the four quarters created with the intersection of the two straight lines will be named by using a labelling system composed of pairs of letters: the first letter indicates whether the quarter is occupied by hits (A) or weaker titles (B) on a national level, while the second letter indicates whether the quarter is occupied by hits (A) or weaker titles (B) on a regional level. The top-left quarter – the one dedicated to *regional hits only* – shall hence be labelled BA (hits performing only in the region considered, but not at national level); the bottom-right quarter – the one dedicated to *non-regional hits* – shall be labelled AB (national hits not performing as well in the region considered); the top-right quarter – dedicated to *national and regional hits* – shall be indicated as AA; and lastly, the bottom-left quarter – *weak titles* at both national and regional level – shall receive the label BB.

At the same time, when considering the diagonal (or the regional trend line) it is possible to perfect the partition into quarters by taking into account the regional deviation as considered from *national data of each title*. AA titles can present a positive (AA+) or negative (AA-) deviation in relation to their corresponding national penetration value. Together with BA titles, AA+ titles are the titles to be considered real local hits. AA- titles are regional hits *although* their local penetration is below the national median value, that is, *they are more national than regional hits*. Among the weak BB titles, it is possible to distinguish between *weak titles yet strong on a regional level* (BB+), and *weak titles also weak on a regional level* (BB-). These titles have achieved poor or modest audience success within the region and at national level compared to all the titles considered, and present a positive or negative deviation in relation to their penetration in Italy. As a consequence, BB+ titles are to be considered of interest to value regional success, together with BA and AA+ titles: said titles have in fact been able to penetrate a certain regional audience more than they have penetrated the national audience, albeit more weakly than other products. AA-, AB, and BB- TV
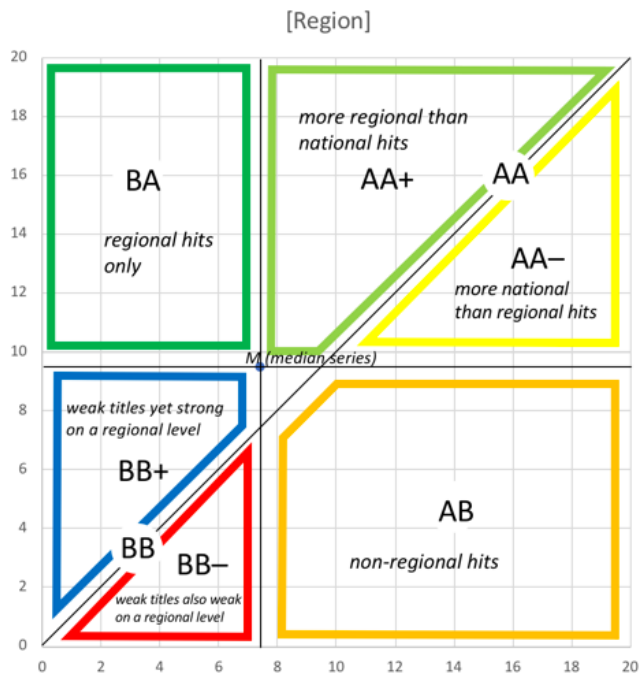
FIGURE 3

series are also interesting because, regardless of the entity of their success, they express a negative local penetration. AB in particular is worth a closer look, because it includes titles that are strong at national level yet disappointing from a regional point of view; at the same time, AA- titles will be considered strong titles at regional level as well, but they will not be considered full hits, as they express a lower penetration value compared to the rest of the country.[12]

2. THE SETTING AS AN ANOMALY-PRODUCING FACTOR

After this introduction, useful to understand how to read the graphs, the analysis will start by focusing on some regions. A northern, a central, and a southern region will be considered: Veneto, Umbria, and Sicily. These regions display three different consumption habits [Figures 4-6]. Considering

12   The diagonal of the graph necessarily intersects also AB (in the case of regions with an above-average TV series consumption), or BA (in the opposite case). However, the small triangular area that is thus formed near the ideal median TV series of the region is – precisely because it is necessarily small and very close to the center of gravity of regional consumption – poorly characterized and not very interesting for the purposes of the analysis. Therefore, it does not appear to deserve a specific label.

a national median of 6.50%, the median penetration of the 114 titles in Veneto is 5.00%, in Umbria it is 6.03%, and in Sicily it is 8.44%. For this reason, almost all titles find themselves below the diagonal line as far as Veneto is concerned; if considering Sicily, almost all titles are above the diagonal, while Umbria displays an almost average distribution, even if slightly more scattered than in the other regions, which shows how the correlation between national and regional penetration is not as strong as in the two other regions at stake. It can also be noted that these first three regions already display a general phenomenon, which the rest of the graphs will only confirm: the farther south the region, the higher the TV series consumption.

In Veneto, only one TV series can be found that moves away from the regional trend line. This series, *Di padre in figlia,* is set in Veneto. More precisely, it is set around the cities of Vicenza and Padua, and together with *Un passo dal cielo* (season 4) – filmed on the Dolomites between Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto – it is the only real regional success that exceeds national penetration (AA+ region of the graph). It is also to be noted that the two most negatively shifted titles in Veneto compared to their national success (AA- and AB) are two distinctly southern series: *Io non mi arrendo* (Campania) and *Boris Giuliano* (Sicily).

In Umbria, the most evident positive deviation regards *Luisa Spagnoli* (AA+). This series, set in the regional capital Perugia, expresses a wider variance than *Don Matteo* (season 10), set in the same region, which sparked much analysis on territorial marketing and film-induced tourism. *Don Matteo* has achieved great success in Umbria, but not much more than in Italy as a whole, where it still is one of the most loved TV series.

As in Umbria and in Veneto, in Sicily as well all the major deviations from national penetration and from the regional trend line – *Il commissario Montalbano, I fantasmi di Portopalo* and many others – are attributable to the setting. Within the examined period, Sicily is the region where most of the products considered in our analysis were filmed, second only to Lazio.

To distinguish at a glance the titles filmed in the region considered, in the following scatter plots the corresponding dots will be colored orange [Figures 7-26]. In fact, as it can be observed, the outliers that positively deviate from national data or from the regional trend line are often the orange dots. The situation appears to be similar in all regions, from Valle d'Aosta to Calabria. Clearly, in absolute terms each region has a different weight, but viewers everywhere are invariably
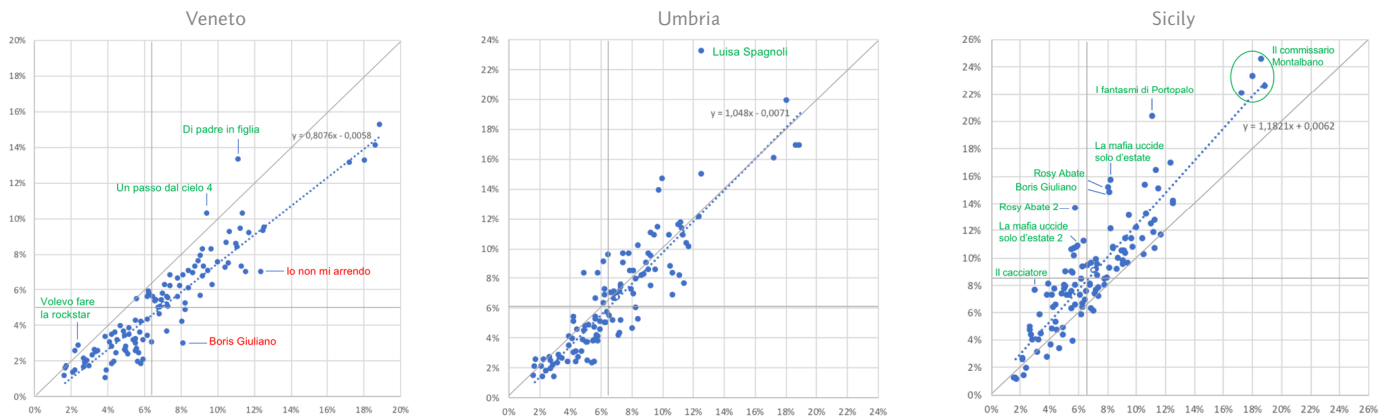
FIGURES 4-6 (VENETO, UMBRIA, SICILIA)

attracted by local TV series, which end up becoming more regional than national hits (AA+), regional hits only (BA), or weak titles with a strong regional connotation (BB+).

The analysis will now move to some of the most evident regional hits (and flops), as shown by the graphs.

In the AA+ area, including the titles that have achieved success across Italy as a whole but mainly in the regions considered, it is possible to note a great number of series set in regional environments: *Fabrizio De André* in Liguria, *Provaci ancora prof!* (season 7) and *La strada di casa* (season 2) in Piedmont, *La compagnia del cigno* in Lombardy,[13] *Di padre in figlia* in Veneto, the 2019 season of *Montalbano* set in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (the first episode is partly set near Udine), *I Medici* (seasons 1 and 2) and *Pezzi unici* in Tuscany, *Luisa Spagnoli* and *Don Matteo* (season 10) in Umbria, *Scomparsa* and *Che Dio ci aiuti* (season 4) in Marche, *Una pallottola nel cuore* (seasons 2 and 3) and *L'allieva* in Lazio, *Sotto copertura* (season 2), the two seasons of *I bastardi di Pizzofalcone*, *Sirene*, *Io non mi arrendo* and *L'amica geniale* in Campania, *Il capitano Maria* and *Io non mi arrendo* in Apulia (set in Campania but filmed in Apulia), *Sorelle* and *Imma Tataranni* in Basilicata, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*, *Montalbano*, *La mafia uccide solo d'estate*, *Boris Giuliano*, *Maltese* in Sicily, *L'isola di Pietro* in Sardinia.

Concerning the BA area, dedicated to regional titles only, more products can be found that are set in a regional environment, often showing a surprising variance between regional and national success. At stake here are the three seasons of *Rocco Schiavone* set in Valle d'Aosta, *Questo nostro amore 80* in Piedmont, *Il confine* and the two seasons of *La porta rossa* in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *L'ispettore Coliandro* (seasons 5 and 7) in Emilia-Romagna, *I Medici* (season 3) in Tuscany, *Tutto può succedere* (season 2) in Lazio, *L'Aquila* (part I) in Abruzzo, *Rosy Abate* (season 2) in Campania, *Baciato dal sole* in Apulia, the two seasons of *Solo* in Calabria, *Liberi sognatori*, *Catturandi*, *L'onore e il rispetto* and *La mafia uccide solo d'estate* (season 2) in Sicily, *L'isola di Pietro* (seasons 2 and 3) in Sardinia.

In the BB+ area, which includes weak titles that have achieved greater regional than national success, the TV series that present the most variances are set regionally: the two seasons of *Non uccidere* in Piedmont, *Volevo fare la rockstar* in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *L'ispettore Coliandro 6* in Emilia-Romagna, *L'Aquila* (part II) in Abruzzo, *Il cacciatore* and *Romanzo siciliano* in Sicily.

When considering series that have *not* achieved audience success at a local level, it becomes clear that the territorial element continues to play a key role in defining the poor results obtained in a given region. In fact, the setting emerges as a factor that can justify both the positive deviations in the correlation between national and local penetration, *and* the negative deviations. Some strong titles at national level that are set in southern regions do not perform equally well in northern Italy, and vice versa. Within the AB area, the *non-regional* hits, among the products with negative variance are *I Medici* in Sardinia and in Basilicata, *Sorelle* and *Sotto copertura* (season 2) in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, *Boris Giuliano* in Veneto, *L'amica geniale* in Valle d'Aosta, and *Rosy Abate* in several northern regions.
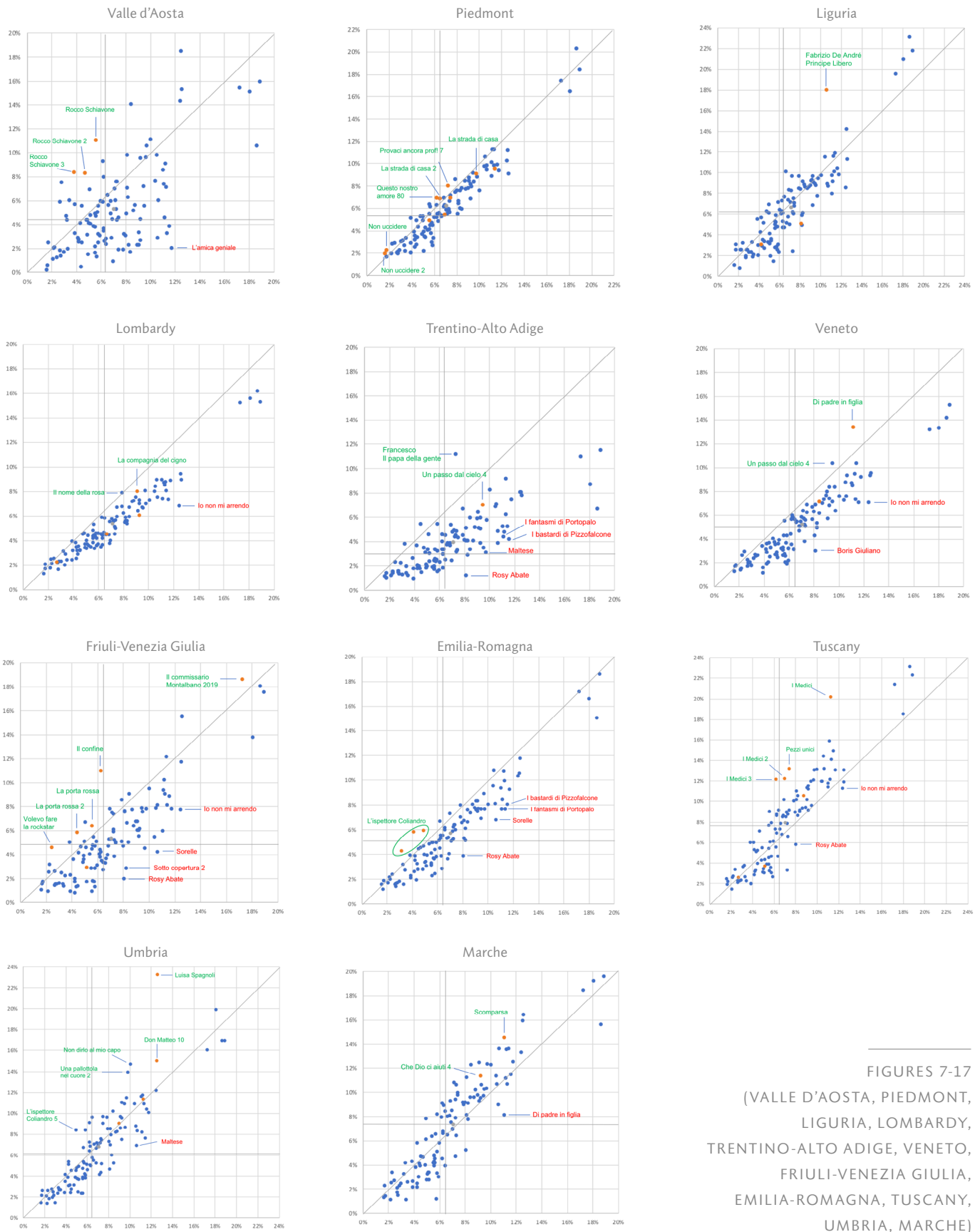
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13   As a matter of fact, the national values are almost never exceeded in this region (the only exceptions are *Non uccidere* and *I topi*, while *Il nome della rosa* has achieved an almost perfectly identical success compared to the national average). For this reason, we consider the regional trend line and not the diagonal in order to define the AA+ area in the Lombardy scatter plot.

FIGURES 7-17
(VALLE D'AOSTA, PIEDMONT,
LIGURIA, LOMBARDY,
TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE, VENETO,
FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA,
EMILIA-ROMAGNA, TUSCANY,
UMBRIA, MARCHE)

FIGURES 18-26 (LAZIO, ABRUZZO, MOLISE, CAMPANIA, APULIA, BASILICATA, CALABRIA, SICILY, SARDINIA)

The presence itself of various titles within the AA- area, that is the area of regional hits that have nonetheless performed below the national median, can be justified by the distance separating the region examined and the region where a particular series is set. This is the case of *Io non mi arrendo* in Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli and Tuscany; *Montalbano* and *Bastardi di Pizzofalcone* in Veneto, Trentino and Emilia-Romagna; *Fantasmi di Portopalo* in Trentino and Emilia-Romagna; *Maltese* in Trentino and in Umbria; *Sorelle* in Emilia-Romagna; *Di padre in figlia* in Campania and in Marche; *Fabrizio De André* in Apulia; *I Medici* in Sicily, etc.

It is now possible to create a recap plot [Figure 27]. The vertical axis now measures penetration in the regions where a certain series is set, while the horizontal axis measures the
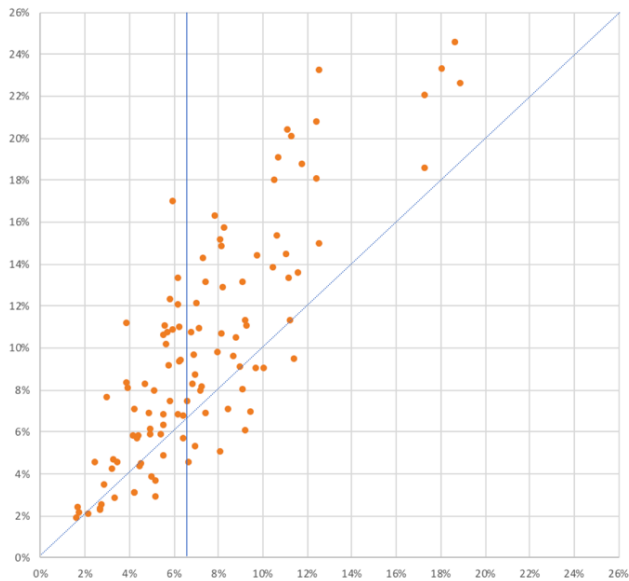
FIGURE 27

national penetration. It becomes clear that, of the two triangles formed by the diagonal line, the lowest one is much less populated – and the right side is completely free. This shows how the setting almost always influences positive variances on the national performance.

3. OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ANOMALIES

Clearly, the setting plays a key role in favoring the regional success of Italian mainstream TV series. However, is this the only conclusion that can be drawn from the presented graphs? It would be appropriate to try and explain the reason why the last one still shows some dots – even if just a few of them – located below the diagonal that divides the titles with positive deviation from those with negative deviation. It is necessary to explain why such deviation is *almost* always positive, and not just *always* positive. Surely, the graph cannot explain everything. As it was already noted, different regions present different habits in terms of TV series consumption, and it is possible to find some titles above the regional trend line (which cannot be represented in the unified recap graph) and below the national trend diagonal at the same time: this is the case of *Mentre ero via* in Veneto. The performance of the series in the graphs can also be subject to the degree

of granularity of the data. If considering *Mentre ero via* and checking the data referring to the penetration in the city of Verona, where the series is set, it emerges that the local success is more marked, even when compared to the success in the other main cities in Veneto. As a matter of fact, local and regional identities do not always match perfectly.

The recap graph does not report about TV series set in an extra-regional environment that have performed better than titles set in regional realities, that is the outliers with a positive deviation in a given region, but with a different setting. Such cases are rare, but sometimes – though not always – it is possible to explain them. The two seasons of *Rosy Abate* have performed well in Sicily (more or less like other series set there) because, even if the series itself is mainly set in Liguria and in Campania, its storyline deals with the Sicilian mafia. *Il nome della rosa* has performed better in Lombardy than in the southern regions because it is perceived as a high-quality title by an audience that is likely more attracted by series with more "evolved" and international traits. The great positive deviations of *Chiamatemi Francesco* in Trentino-Alto Adige – which has had a distribution in cinemas as well, as a film – should be related to Cinetel data that show a degree of complementarity: in cinemas, this title has had a lower penetration in Trentino than in any other Italian region.

Other positive variances that at a first might look inexplicable, might still have to do with the distribution of the regional success, even if not directly. The second main deviation in Umbria, after *Luisa Spagnoli*, concerns *Non dirlo al mio capo*¸ a series set in Campania (a moderate success in this region). This series might have achieved its success in Umbria thanks to the promotional crossover episode (set in Umbria) of *Don Matteo* (10.26), which has a just slightly higher regional penetration: in the last few minutes of the episode, which is also the last of that season, Don Matteo indeed meets the characters of the above-mentioned *Non dirlo al mio capo.* Therefore, it might be stated that when there is a chance to link two different titles – as it can happen by means of a crossover episode – the setting can become useful to shift the regional audience from a stronger and more regionally marked series to a weaker one with a less connoted setting.

To explain titles that have particular extra-local success, one should also consider the positive effects of a given regional setting on regions that are neighbors to that setting. In Umbria, titles like *Coliandro* and *Una pallottola nel cuore* can work almost as well as in Emilia-Romagna and Lazio, where they were filmed respectively; titles from Piedmont can obtain good success in Liguria, and so on. Furthermore, some

titles are set in multiple regional environments, and their success is distributed accordingly. This is the case of *I Medici* in Lazio and in Tuscany, and of anthology series presenting episodes with different locations, for which the success of the individual episodes would be worth considering. For example, the episode of *Purché finisca bene* set in Val d'Aosta (3.02) has had a much greater success in that region than the other ones. Lastly, it is appropriate to acknowledge the inevitable ambiguity surrounding the concept of setting itself. Some series are more regionally marked because the setting is relevant to the storyline, while others are not as clear in this regard – which is why they do not attract as much local public: there is more of Tuscany in *I Medici* than in *Sacrificio d'amore*.

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISPERSION AND POPULATION, AND AN EXCEPTION. THE CHANNEL AS AN INCONGRUITY-PRODUCING FACTOR

This investigation can still be brought some steps further. When looking for factors that produce anomalies in the link between regional and national success, it is possible to try and focus on a particular aspect of the graphs that were analyzed: that is, on their *degree of dispersion*. When looking at the graphs, one might notice that the cloud of dots in some areas is more scattered than in other areas, and hence it is less linear. As already mentioned, the denser and more linear the cloud is, the stronger the correlation between regional and national penetration is; whereas the more scattered and rarefied the cloud, the weaker the correlation. It can be predicted that these diversities depend on the size of population in each region: when a region is more populous, it becomes more representative of the national consumption, and it shows lower variances compared to less populous regions. As a matter of fact, there is more of Italy in Lombardy than in Valle d'Aosta. However, if this kind of relationship between dispersion and population was not constant, it would mean that new factors become involved in producing anomalies in the correlation between regional and national success, and that these other factors have a different effect on different regions. This is precisely what will be checked now. To understand this issue better, it is useful to calculate the correlation strength between regional and national success in each region. The Pearson correlation coefficient (R) is aimed at describing this aspect (since it is the covariance of the two variables divided by the product of their standard deviations)

and it indicates a perfect correlation in case R = 1. Despite being observed in every region of Italy (the value is always higher than R = 0.6), the coefficient shows that the correlation is strongest in the two most populous regions, that is Lombardy and Lazio (with respective values of R=0.965 and R=0.964), and it is weakest in the least inhabited regions – Molise and Valle d'Aosta (with values of R=0.754 and R=0.635, respectively). If the R values in different regions are organized in a graph (vertical axis) together with the respective populations according to ISTAT (horizontal axis), it can be verified that these two variables are correlated. The strength of the

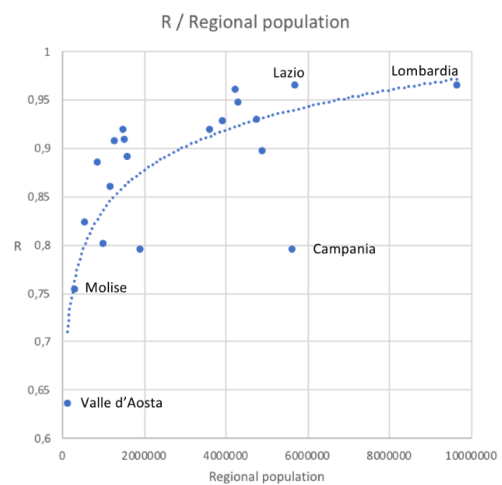| Region	Population	R
Lombardia	9679192	0,965
Lazio	5701518	0,964
Campania	5634106	0,795
Sicilia	4884559	0,896
Veneto	4748660	0,929
Emilia Romagna	4303326	0,947
Piemonte	4258066	0,960
Puglia	3935469	0,927
Toscana	3629729	0,920
Calabria	1899889	0,795
Sardegna	1608646	0,891
Liguria	1523503	0,909
Marche	1490027	0,918
Abruzzo	1281217	0,907
Friuli Venezia Giulia	1182294	0,860
Trentino Alto Adige	1021790	0,802
Umbria	861886	0,886
Basilicata	554149	0,823
Molise	301841	0,754
Valle d'Aosta	122817	0,635

FIGURE 28

correlation between regional and national success (R) has a tendency to increase together with the regional population size, and it does so at a very rapid pace until it stabilizes itself [Figure 28].

However, there is also an exception, which may be useful in order to highlight the presence of what is searched for here: that is, new factors capable of introducing anomalies in the correlation being analyzed. Campania, despite being the third most populous region in Italy and having almost the same population as Lazio (more than 5,6 million inhabitants), has a relatively low correlation coefficient (R = 0.795): even lower than Trentino-Alto Adige, Basilicata and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and higher *only* than Valle d'Aosta and Molise. In short, the consumption of TV series in Campania appears very different from the national one, and very much diversified within the same region.

Based on a simple analysis – in a new graph – of the extent of the penetration deviations compared to the average (and not of the absolute penetration values, which would hide this phenomenon), it is not difficult to isolate the element that determines this anomaly in the region at stake. As it can be seen, the factor that intervenes most powerfully in making the correlation between national and regional success in Campania more scattered, in addition to the setting, seems to be precisely the *broadcasting channel* itself. If the dots are colored differently according to the channel that broadcast the series, the Campania chart immediately takes on a much neater – that is, sensible – appearance than before [Figure 29]. The most viewed titles in Campania are still Rai titles – as for the rest of Italy – but those that present the strongest deviation from the national figure are inevitably Mediaset titles.

The affection of the Campania public for Canale 5 series, despite Mediaset setting only one title there in the 48 months considered, produces a clear divergence between the consumption of Canale 5 and Rai contents. On the other hand, Rai fiction in Campania shows data that appear to be pretty much in line with the national consumption, except for the titles that Rai 1 sets in that region, which are as many as 8. TV series with a local setting are now indicated with triangles in the graph. These series express – 7 times out of 8 – a significantly positive deviation when compared to the national figure and to the trend line of Rai titles, while still remaining below the trend line of Mediaset products. Therefore, Campania constitutes an excellent example of the influence of the two major anomaly-producing factors that were identified at the same time: namely, the region of setting and the broadcasting channel. Being a very populous region, the pen-
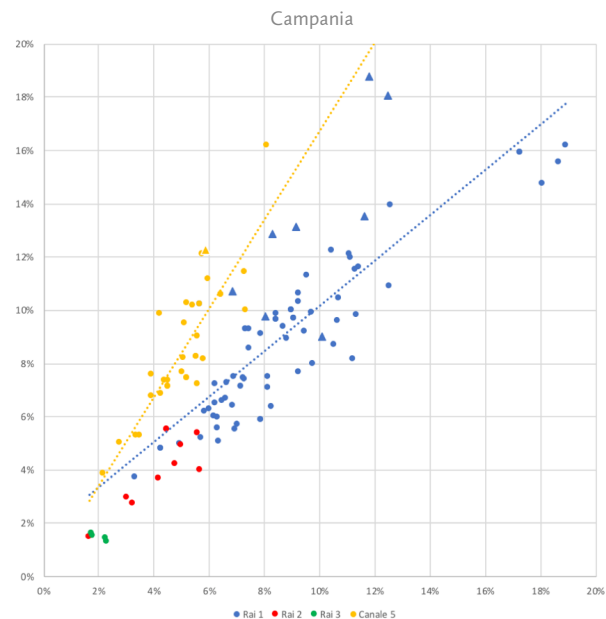

FIGURE 29

etration deviations in this case point at important numbers of viewers. For some years, Campania has been absent from the settings of Mediaset series. As a consequence, one can state that the Lombard broadcaster certainly did well when it finally set the second season of *Rosy Abate* in Naples in 2019 (also due to the Neapolitan origins of the actress Giulia Michelini),[14] given the various positive signs that came from that region – i.e. the huge local success of Mediaset series (and the success of the first season of *Rosy Abate* in particular), and the importance of the local setting as an attractive factor for the public, as shown by many Rai titles.

The case of the Campania is very interesting because it clearly highlights the existence of a divergence of regional audience behavior in relation to the broadcasting channel, even regardless of any content feature. However, to what degree is this phenomenon attributable to a specific region only? In Campania, it certainly takes on exceptional proportions, but on closer inspection it seems to characterize almost every region, even if with different features. It is almost equally highlighted (and showing the same features) in Calabria [Figure 30] – where Mediaset set two seasons of *Solo*, which has achieved

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14   Giorgio Grignaffini, editorial director of Taodue, cites this as the motivation behind the choice of the new setting, together with the success of the first season of *Rosy Abate* in the southern regions, the particular scenography of the Neapolitan capital, and its relative logistical convenience for a television production (Personal communication with the author, May 2019).
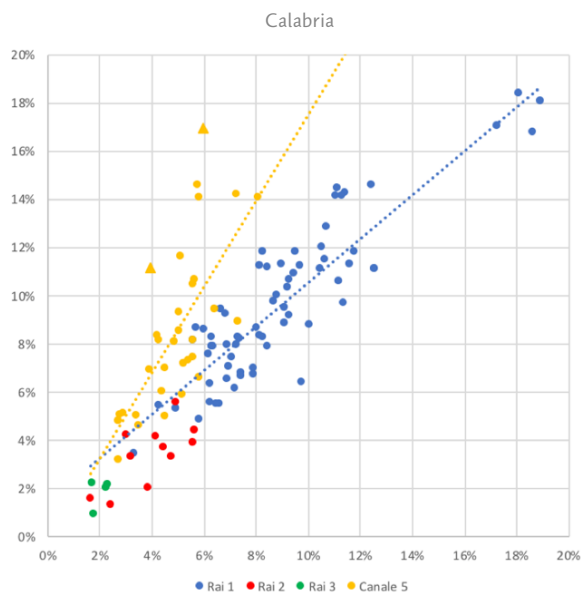
FIGURE 30

FIGURE 31

great local success. Even in Sicily a divergence of audience behavior of this type can be observed, which favors Mediaset series. A little less in Abruzzo, Sardinia and Apulia, where it seems however still present. Some regions do not really seem to show any significant divergence between Rai and Mediaset consumption trends (e.g. Lazio, Lombardy, Basilicata). Others instead show a divergence opposite to that of Campania, albeit less radical, which favors Rai fiction and penalizes Mediaset. This is the case for several regions in the north-central part of the country, especially Tuscany [Figure 31]. In Tuscany, Rai series attract more public than the national penetration of those same titles. Canale 5 titles, on the other hand, have a significantly lower penetration: a couple of Mediaset series set in that region (even if without too much marked characters), which otherwise would have appeared rather below the trend of overall regional consumption, actually appear to be perfectly in line with the regional trend of that channel.

If considering the relevance of the broadcasting channel as an additional factor capable of influencing the regional consumption of TV series, it is possible to account for the reason why sometimes the setting alone cannot explain some big deviations from the national average, or for the reason why the setting, in certain regions of Italy and for titles of certain channels, is not able to produce any significant difference. In Campania, for example, the enormous fidelity to Canale 5 series would have risked hiding the great attractive strength of the local settings of the Rai 1 series. Similarly, considering the different trends in the consumption of TV series relating to the different broadcasters allows to understand that sometimes the regional settings, while not producing any positive difference with respect to the national average or the overall regional trend line, are enough to produce a relevant difference compared to the local trend of the TV series of a regionally weaker channel. In Piedmont, for example, *Non mentire* (set in Turin), although below both the national and the regional median value, performs better than one could have expected a Canale 5 title to perform in the same region. One can also notice new anomalies when comparing the data to the channel consumption trends and not to the overall ones: in Tuscany, the Canale 5 title which shows the greatest deviation from the regional trend of the network is *Tutti insieme all'improvviso*, which is not set in that region but stars Giorgio Panariello, clearly considered a local glory. The regionalism of the actors can in fact constitute another factor capable of influencing consumption in the different regions of Italy.
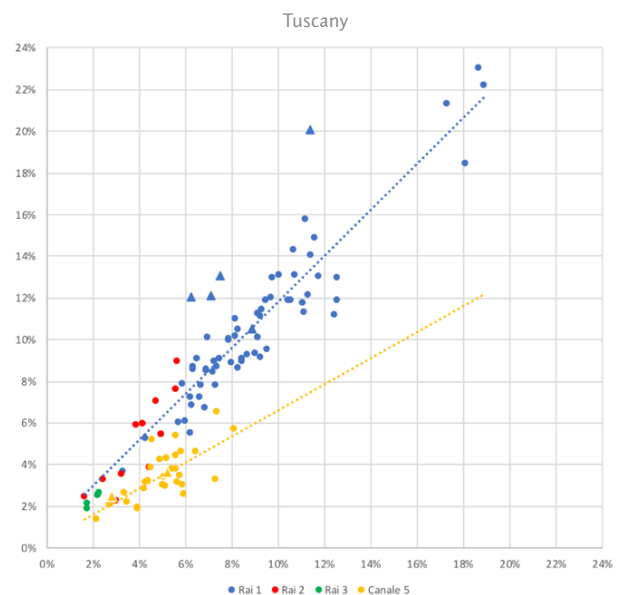
5. THE INFLUENCE OF REGIONAL ANOMALIES

The different population size of the Italian regions, in addition to affecting the strength of the correlation between

national and local success, implies as well that the same deviations in penetration in different regions correspond to very different volumes of viewers. Taking a look at a few selected titles can prove this. In Tuscany, the positive deviation of 8.72 penetration points for *I Medici* corresponds to more than 315,000 viewers – a very substantial number when thinking that it does not comprise all Tuscan viewers of that title at all, but it only represents those that have been added in that region to the national figure, attracted by the characteristics of that particular series. A 5.34 point deviation for *Rocco Schiavone* in a very small region like Valle d'Aosta, on the other hand, amounts to just 6,500 viewers. Instead, a much lower difference like that of 2.09 points for *Di padre in figlia* in Veneto is equal to almost 100,000 viewers – in addition to those that in that region correspond to the national penetration figure. However, one could also consider the fact that Veneto consumes less TV series than the rest of Italy, and recalibrate the deviation accordingly: calculating the deviation with respect to the trend of local penetration (and not compared to the national trend), *Di padre in figlia* (since the trend line equation is y = 0.8076x - 0.0051) shows a positive anomaly with a much higher value, which corresponds to over 225,000 extra viewers in the average minute.

At this point, one may ask: are anomalies in regional penetration such as those investigated here capable of driving the national success of serial titles, and to what extent? Sticking to *Di padre in figlia*: its positive deviation from the trend of local consumption alone measures 0.38% of national penetration for a title that has an overall AMR% of 11.22%. In terms of audience share, this means that the local setting of Veneto (and Veneto only, not extending the evaluation to neighboring regions) contributed with almost one point more to the success of a TV series that has an audience share of 26.75%. And this is certainly not a title with exceptional regional success: for example, *L'amica geniale,* in Campania, shows a positive deviation from the national figure that corresponds to over 390,000 average viewers, that is more than 0.66% of the national penetration – almost double than the title set in Veneto. This means almost 1.7 points of national audience share (overall *L'amica geniale* registered 29.53% in audience share) produced solely by anomalous success in Campania, which is added to the Campania "average" public.

One should not think that the attractiveness of the regional setting to the local public reaches sensitive dimensions in the most populated regions only or with the best known and most popular titles only. The deviation of almost 11 points of penetration with respect to the national figure

for *Solo* in Calabria is equivalent to 208,000 average viewers. Calabria is by no means one of the major regions of Italy, and yet for that title it is able to add 0.36 points to the overall national penetration figure. And it does so only with that chunk of public that adds to the average value of Italy as a whole – as it was seen, these numbers are close to those registered in a larger region such as Veneto for *Di padre in figlia*, a title that is much stronger at national level.

Though inevitably containing a certain degree of approximation, these calculations are useful for contemplating the scale of the phenomenon. It is not appropriate to dwell further on particular cases with specific calculations, because the graphs proposed above allow to get a clear idea of the volume of viewers more or less mobilized in each region compared to the national penetration. To quantify the number of viewers that correspond to the deviations on the vertical axis, it is necessary to keep in mind the size of the universe of regional reference according to ISTAT. As an example, one can consider Sicily: in this case, different bands were highlighted in order to indicate the volume of viewers who add or subtract from the national figure [Figure 32]. The unit of gradation of the grid is (as for all the graphs that have been built) 2% of penetration, which in Sicily is equivalent to 97,691 viewers. Therefore, each band corresponds to an increase (or a decrease) of viewers of equal size. It was also marked in the graph the number of extra viewers to which
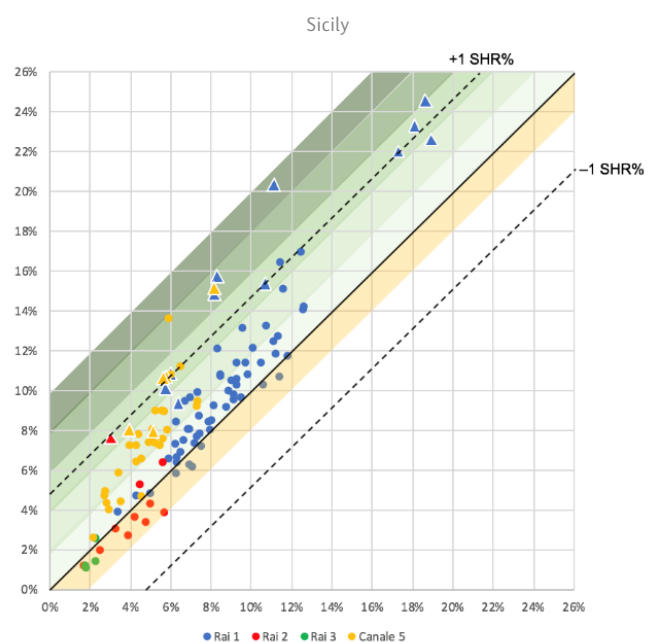

FIGURE 32

corresponds on average (considering the average total viewing audience of the evenings in which all the analyzed titles were issued) the addition of a national audience share point (about 237,000, or 4.85 Sicilian penetration points). From the graph thus highlighted, it is clear how a region like Sicily, with a large number of series set there, contributes promptly to fuel the national success of Italian TV series.

6. CONCLUSIONS

When looking from a distance at the television production covering a period of four years, this article has focused on the regional consumption of Italian mainstream TV series. It has proceeded to underline its heterogeneity and it has tried to distinguish various types of "success", by comparing how local and national audiences respond to every single title. It has demonstrated how the correlation between national and regional success is often subject to the influence of factors that can produce anomalies, even significant ones. It has highlighted that the most important – and most predictable – factors responsible for anomalies are the regions where a given series is set and the broadcasting channels, which can influence audience success at various degrees across Italy. Moreover, it has used some features (and metrics) that helped to compare and quantify the phenomena at stake, in order to understand how the national success of Italian TV series can benefit from the polarization of consumption happening in the various regions of the country.

The geography of consumption of Italian TV series is not really homogeneous across the country, as it shows – so to speak – several regional wrinkles. It may be very useful for a broadcaster to take this into account when designing a new series. In fact, similar variances are often largely predictable and controllable, being mostly the effect of a textual element that producers can master, such as setting. As it was observed, a strong regional performance can even reinforce national success. On the other hand, heterogeneity in TV consumption can also point at the presence of a plurality of cultures and identities within state borders. Therefore, audience consumption behaviors, while being interesting from an economic point a view, can also be good indicators of the level of socio-cultural fragmentation of a country.

Italian mainstream TV series have always achieved great popular success. However, their popularity appears to be also the result of the mutual entanglement of different regional patterns of taste and consumption. The case in Campania is

to be taken as an example, and – as demonstrated by other ongoing research on the subject – it finds perfect correspondence in the local form of film consumption. Such diversification of regional consumptions finds its roots in reasons that are very much alike: the need to imagine oneself in a certain setting, to see one's own landscapes represented on screen, to project local identities into stories set in a regional environment, in the *iconemes* of Italy – as Eugenio Turri[15] would put it. Such a widespread need, in a nation like Italy that presents so many internal differences, cannot but produce similarly different types of consumption.

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15 See Turri 2014. A complete mapping of the local *iconemes* in Italian TV series obviously exceeds the limits of this article, but it would be very useful in order to understand the different degrees of visibility of the national territory.

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REMAKING TELEVISION SERIES: NATIONAL CULTURE AND MEDIA SYSTEM THEORY

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Adaptation; series; national culture; media system; format trade; remakes.

ABSTRACT

This article explores strengths and weaknesses of common methods and frameworks in studying format adaptation, primarily in television series, but with some findings applicable for television entertainment formats as well. The article problematises the way scholarship on transnational remakes of television series, as well as studies of format adaptation in general, tends to focus on using text-based readings of cultural similarities and differences, or on explanations rooted in the media systems, such as a new channel's profile or norms and traditions in the programming interface of a particular channel or country. The article examines the dominant literature and theories on the subject, illustrating that there is an ongoing debate among researchers as to which framework is more powerful and precise in accounting for format adaptation. It becomes apparent that studies favouring the one approach greatly over the other are often comparing apples and oranges. Finally, the article aims to show how existing research most often compares original and remake in their final forms, overlooking the creation process, the dilemmas of the creatives behind the transformations, and the effect their preconceptions have on the finished results.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last 20 years, transnational remakes of television series have gone from a relatively rare undertaking to an integral part of the global and especially American television industry (Chalaby 2015). Successful examples of this include *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020), *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), based on *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (RCN Televisión, 1999-2001, Colombia), *Prisoners of War* (Channel 2, 2010-2012, Israel), *The Office* (BBC Two, 2001-2003, UK) and *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990, UK), respectively. Notice the versatility in both countries and genres, illustrating that very different scripted formats can be remade under the right circumstances. The concept of remaking an already proven success is alluring. Nonetheless, for every successful television series based on a transnational original show, there are a number of remake attempts, which – despite the original format's success – failed to connect with a new audience. Examples include AMC's *Feed the Beast* (2016), Kanal D's *Cinayet* (2014) and many others (see also Turnbull 2015).

Which deciding circumstances affect the adaptation of a television format from another country? In a situation where ideas and scripts for successful television series are a wanted commodity, and television broadcasters and streaming companies alike scramble to keep up with the demand for quality series, the answer to such a question would be of great value to both the academic field of media studies and the television industry at large.

However, while the question might seem simple at first glance, it is complex. Firstly, "television format" covers everything from an unscripted quiz show to an elaborate scripted television series. There can be considerable differences between genres in formats, which is not always reflected in adaptation research. Second, the transfer and translation processes involve considerations of the global-local paradigm. Third, television formats are produced by a great many people under a range of different circumstances, and the producers' choices must adhere to the media systems of which they are a part. These considerations do not diminish the challenge to identify which circumstances are pivotal when it comes to adaptation. This complexity has resulted in different suggestions as to how to identify the key aspects of format adaptation. In this context, I shall primarily focus on scripted formats, drawing attention to the significance of genre. I shall involve the global-local paradigm in a cultural perspective, and I shall consider the production system of which scripted

formats are a part, but first and foremost, I have found it illuminating to compare two dominant traditions in the area of remake studies. On the basis of a critical overview of these, the purpose of this article is to highlight strengths and weaknesses of each research tradition in order to assess their potential for complementing each other.

The two different traditions that seem to compete in the studies of format adaptation are the predominantly text-based readings of cultural similarities and differences, and the focus on the workings of media systems, such as, for example, an adapting channel's profile or norms and traditions in the programming interface of a particular channel or country. In their editorial for a special issue of *Continuum* on transnational television remakes, Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis (2015) introduce these two key theoretical frameworks in studies of transnational television adaptations, but with a slight emphasis on culture (2015: 677). My research seeks to add to adaptation and remake theory by critically revisiting the cultural and media systemic frameworks, which are suggested to be pivotal in explaining adaptation processes. I shall examine under which circumstances each framework can meaningfully be applied, and when such frameworks reach their boundaries and other factors should be considered. Before going into this, some clarification of terminology is in order.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

I use the term "remake" to describe a new version of intellectual property within the same medium, e.g. making a new television series based on an old one. According to that definition, a movie based on a book is not a remake. "Adaptation" also refers to new versions of intellectual property, but not necessarily within the same medium. "Adaptation" is used as an umbrella term covering all new versions of intellectual property, including movies based on books and television series based on other television series.

Culture is one of the most disputed concepts not only in media theory, but also in anthropology, sociology, etc. National culture and identity have been examined from a multitude of theoretical positions using very different methods. The literature on national culture and identity in general is vast (Billig 1995, Linde-Laursen 1995, Gaunt & Löfgren 1984) and, at times, divided (Hofstede 2011, McSweeney 2002a, 2002b). For the purposes of this article, national culture is regarded as a social construct, but one which cannot be

disregarded. Television series are full of national stereotypes as well as national myths and aesthetics, and for most television producers, national borders are very real (Gemzøe 2018). Furthermore, I discern between 'national' and 'local', with the former referring to a nation state, and the latter referring to an area or region within a nation state.

I use the term "media system" in the overall sense established by Denis McQuail:

> The term 'media system' refers to the actual set of mass media in a given national society, despite the fact that there may be no formal connection between the elements. Most media systems, in this sense, are the chance result of historical growth, with one new technology after another being developed and leading to the adaption of existing media. Sometimes a media system is linked by a shared political-economic logic, as with the free-enterprise media of the United States or the state-run media of China. Many countries have 'mixed' systems, with private and public elements, and these may well be organized according to a set of national media policy principles, leading to a degree of integration. (McQuail 2005: 220-221)

3. TRANSNATIONAL REMAKES OF TELEVISION SERIES – A BRIEF SURVEY

During the last twenty years, format adaptation and remake theory have received increasing attention in media research, corresponding to their increasing significance for the television industry. Format adaptation and remake theory have been addressed from macro-oriented angles, adopting historical and philosophical points of view. Examples include works such as Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), which seeks to develop a framework for *all* types of adaptations (theatre play to film, movie to television series, etc.). Moran pioneered format research with his influential *Copycat* TV (1998), which covers a wide range of types, from quiz shows to remakes of soaps. More specialised larger accounts also exist, such as McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (1996) or Verevis' *Film Remakes* (2006).

In general, works on film remakes provide inspiring insights (for example Greenberg 1991, Forrest and Koos 2002, Verevis 2006). Some of their points and taxonomies are appli-

cable for studying remakes of television series as well, such as Greenburg and Leitch's focus on the intentions and purposes of the remake; was it made as an update, homage or perhaps even as an attack on the original? However, while films and television series do share some notable features, they are also different in terms of production and form, which affects remaking processes. A television series is most often created for and funded by a specific channel with a specific target audience (rather than, say, a national cinematic release). Also, in case of a television series remake, the long form almost always results in fundamental dramaturgic deviation from the original. Academic interest in transnational remakes of television series has increased, however, and, at the time of writing, there are several accounts addressing the subject.

Kim Akass' piece on the transformation process from Danish TV-series classic *Forbrydelsen* (DR1, 2007-2012) into AMC's *The Killing* (2012-2014) illustrates how differences in media systems may affect adaptation processes. Akass suggests that problematic decisions in making the series fit the new media system caused the series' initial problems, as the makers stumbled in making the Danish original's two sets of ten episodes fit the American basic cable standard of thirteen episodes per season. Akass also argues that the American remake is changed so that it becomes one of many US media texts with narrative hostility towards bad mothers (2015: 748). However, her focus remains on the media system as the deciding factor in the story about how *The Killing* lost roughly half of its viewers after the first season and repeatedly struggled to be renewed. But are media systems really the appropriate primary context in studying *The Killing*?

Jennifer Forrest and Sergio Martinez's article on the transformation from *Broen* (DR/SVT, 2011-2018) to *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-2014) is completely different in its angle and methodology (2015: 718). Using textual analysis coupled with statements from the creators derived from the DVD commentary, the article in essence argues that the new location of the remake forces the series to change – stylistically and linguistically, of course, but also with regards to the central narrative in the series. It is an article on differences in geography, culture and history and the necessity of change created by these differences, and how *The Bridge* transforms and negotiates the original material to meet this necessity.

These two articles in essence represent the difference between cultural and media systemic approaches to remake studies and illustrate how both are practised in contemporary research on television remakes. Interestingly, choice of method is not discussed in either article.

Heidi Keinonen (2016) points to the methodological divide in format adaptation research as well and finds that a more holistic, synthesising approach is needed. I completely agree. Keinonen suggests 'cultural negotiation' as such an approach, looking at global influences, local/national television cultures, production cultures, broadcasting cultures and viewing cultures when analysing format adaptation. Such a viewpoint and method is needed and valid. However, Keinonen's work does not explain in which cases it may be more fruitful to emphasise one framework over another.

A book such as Wells-Lassagne's *Television and Serial Adaptation* (2017), which is centred on the same subject, convincingly covers different aspects of remaking television series. However, even in such a work, the conclusions are more philosophical in nature than decisive in singling out which factors affect the process of remaking a television series from another country. This is due to the study's historical, philosophical, macro-oriented nature, and the fact that it is primarily based upon analysis of the texts, lacking production analysis angles. In addition, the book encompasses a great many television series from a range of different countries and production cultures, broadening the arguments, but losing specificity. Wells-Lassagne also states in the conclusion that her work "is but a preliminary study" (2017: 189).

To the best of this author's knowledge, no published research systematically explores the strengths and weaknesses of national- and television system-based frameworks in accounting for format adaptation in the way that I intend to do in the following. In his canonical *Copycat* TV (1998), Albert Moran accounts for aspects of the international format trade while also looking to the textual properties of specific formats and the way in which audiences experience different types of adaptations. The study was ground-breaking, and many of the insights are still valid, as I shall illustrate below. However, it also has its limitations, not least due to its time of production. The study was conducted at a time quite different from the current global media landscape, the characteristics of which Lotz has described convincingly. She emphasises the increasing non-linear forms as well as the "complicated, deliberate and individualized" use of television in the "post network era" (Lotz 2014: 267). Considerations about the implications of choice of channel on specific formats could be expanded, and it does not contain any production studies of specific shows.

In *The Format Age* (2016) Jean Chalaby adopts a historical perspective and makes a key distinction between scripted television formats (TV series) and unscripted television for-

mats (gameshows, reality). He points to the fact that scripted television formats became popular later than unscripted television formats. Chalaby argues that this is a result of three circumstances: 1) They are more complex to adapt on a textual level, 2) they are more expensive to adapt, and 3) because they are more complex and expensive to adapt, they also fail more often than unscripted formats, increasing the risk investors run when financing scripted formats. Since the mid-2000s, however, the transfer of knowledge in scripted format trading has improved and thus more scripted formats have been successfully adapted, Chalaby proposes. He also attributes the rise of scripted drama to an increase in demand in the American television system in particular, and the fact that quality series suddenly emerged from, notably, Scandinavia and Israel. Consequently, Chalaby uses explanations related to culture to account for the differences between scripted and unscripted formats, and why the former did not travel successfully in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He uses explanations related to different media systems to explain why scripted formats did begin to travel from the mid-2000s and onwards. As such, Chalaby shows how cultural and media systemic explanations can complement each other on a macro historical level, but he does not properly discuss why the cultural approach is suitable in the one case, or why the system-based approach is best used in explaining the other.

All of this illustrates the need for a more in-depth consideration of the divide between explanations related to culture and television system when accounting for format adaptation, a qualified account of powers and weaknesses of each framework, and a discussion of which methods accompany each framework best. The following review focuses on literature about adapting scripted formats such as television series. However, a number of publications in adaptation studies, some of them canonical, deal with both scripted and unscripted formats such as game or reality shows. Thus, it is impossible to exclude some discussion about unscripted formats, and what the difference between adapting scripted and unscripted formats might be.

4. THE CULTURE ARGUMENT

There is a strong tradition of focusing on culture – and especially national culture – when analysing travelling formats. The research on unscripted entertainment formats is relatively extensive, however, and sometimes researchers will just assume or imply that the findings of this research can also be

applied to scripted formats. As will become apparent in the following, sometimes it can, while other times it cannot. In *Copycat* TV, Albert Moran starts off by emphasising the continued importance of the nation state (1998). He positions himself against a popular notion during the end of the last century, namely that a homogenised global culture dominated by powerful international businesses or, in some versions, US cultural imperialism, was dismantling national cultures (Moran 1998:2). If nation states were indeed dissolving and the world was turning into a giant, culturally uniform marketplace, there would be no need for local adaptations of formats. Moran argues that "...such claims seem exaggerated and premature, to say the least" (1998: 2). He points out that in terms of viewership, the 1998 market for internationally circulating television content is vastly inferior to that of programmes only receiving domestic circulation (a point still valid in 2014, see Moran and Aveyard 2014: 22-23), and that the whole international system of television broadcasting was made through agreements between nation states – not powerful corporations.

Moran is not blind to the powers of international commercial actors. Three chapters in *Copycat Television* are dedicated to analysing the international format marketplace and engaging in a case study of Grundy, an Australian-based format-driven company. Nonetheless, Moran makes an extensive study into the connection between format adaptation and sense of national belonging, quoting a wide array of studies dedicated to locating the "Britishness", "Danishness", or other nationality, of a certain version of a format (1998: 75-79). He also delves into his own study of the Australianness of *Prisoner – Cell Block H* (Network Ten, 1979-1986) and the corresponding Americanness of the US remake *Dangerous Women* (Syndicated, 1991-1992). Moreover, Moran touches upon the subject of genre. He contends that certain formats are less susceptible to changes caused by national preferences than others. A short-form game show is arguably less likely to change during format adaptation than a soap opera, which is also something I shall elaborate on below in my discussion of the studies of Beeden and de Bruin (2010), Jensen (2007) and Chalaby (2015).

The idea that national tastes and preferences are key concepts in understanding format adaptation is still widespread, and proponents of such a stance will often argue that effects of the allegedly increasing globalisation are overrated, as is also the case with Moran. Take, for example, Alexandra Beeden and Joost de Bruin's account of the differences between the British and American versions of *The Office*:

The way in which *The Office* has adapted to the institutional context, culture and humor of the United States, after its success as a British sitcom, illustrates that national identity is a vital part of the global television format trade. While it may appear that the growth of format adaptations reflects the increasingly globalized contemporary world, in fact, format adaptations encourage articulations of national identity and cultural belonging (2010: 3).

The case of *The Office*'s British and American versions is a compelling one, because English is the spoken language in both versions, pointing to the importance of culture and setting rather than language. The original format has been sold to 170 territories all over the world, so it can clearly be appreciated by non-Brits. Still, nationally adapted versions have fared better with audiences outside the UK (Osborn 2011). Beeden and de Bruin's analysis of *The Office* is convincing in its demonstration that the British version does indeed include aesthetics, references and a tone presumably tailored for someone living in the UK rather than someone living in the US, and vice versa with the US version. Having the relative success of the British *The Office* with the British audience and, vice versa, with the American version and its audience, it seems entirely plausible that some of the appeal of the format is indeed related to national tastes and preferences. Additional studies support this notion; Jeffrey Griffin arrives at conclusions similar to those of Beeden and de Bruin, systematically examining what he argues is an "Americanization" of setting, the boss, office staff and dialogue in *The Office* to create a version "steeped in American sensibilities" (2008: 162). Furthermore, *not* establishing a sense of a recognisable national or local setting has been found to be problematic. Sue Turnbull's study of another American remake of a British original, the transformation from *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-2017) to *Gracepoint* (Fox, 2014), illustrates this well. Building on Griffin's study of *The Office*, Turnbull notes:

> It may well be that the American *Gracepoint* failed to find an audience, not because it was so different from the original but because it tried too hard to be the same. In other words, far from being a drawback, the cultural specificity of the original *Broadchurch* in terms of the landscape, regional setting and accents, the background grumbles about the weather and politics, resonated with audiences in ways that are inevitably hard to estimate.

Gracepoint, however, failed to establish the same cultural specificity (Turnbull 2015: 714).

The question is what can be concluded from such studies. Beeden and de Bruin state the following: "Creating this 'cultural proximity' between the program and the national audience is a vital element in the success of any format adaptation, highlighting the importance of national identity in the international format trade" (2010: 17). Nonetheless, is this emphasis on national identity really "vital" to "any format adaptation"? For that matter, are British and American "national" preferences and references really so far apart? If they are, why does Hollywood successfully export thousands of movies to the British market, why do British television channels overflow with US television series, and why could a British movie about distinctly British historical events such as *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010) win the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2010 and earn 135 million dollars in the US (Box Office Mojo 2020)? Clearly, under some circumstances, national differences between the British and Americans are of little importance, simply do not matter, or might even be a selling point. Perhaps it was not in spite of its "Britishness", but rather because of it that *The King's Speech* did so well in the United States? As Weissman discusses, cultural difference can be seen as an attraction (2012: 39). The fascination and attraction of a different culture presented in familiar frameworks such as the "American" quality series and the crime genre has also been suggested to be part of the reason why Danish television series originals did so relatively well with foreign audiences (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2015:224).

One aspect missing from Beeden and de Bruin's account of *The Office* is more qualified considerations about the implications of genre. On the one hand, Beeden and de Bruin pay close attention to the issue, continuously discerning between the American and British sitcom genre traditions, pointing out that humour can be a locally based phenomenon (2010: 6), a point also found in Lothar Mikos' work on the German remake of *The Office* (Mikos 2015: 698). On the other hand, they use their one case study from the sitcom genre to make sweeping generalisations across genres about "any format adaptation." However, as Moran and Chalaby pointed out, in the differences between adapting a short gameshow and a scripted television series, genres matter a great deal in adaptation studies. To Chalaby, the difference between scripted and unscripted formats cannot be underestimated, with one of the key points being the knowledge transfer (2015). The buyers and sellers of unscripted formats

have developed models in which the transfer of knowledge is a relatively smooth process: "Across all unscripted genres, format buyers have access to full consulting packages that teach them all they need to know to duplicate a show successfully." (2015: 4). Scripted genres, in contrast, face serious challenges in the transfer of knowledge:

> Scripted genres are the most culturally sensitive, and a comedy or drama cannot be reproduced as mechanistically as a game show or talent competition. A straight adaptation of the original, such as a mere translation of the script, will not suffice to make a show palatable to local viewers. Any scripted format must go beyond copycat television and reactualize the script for a new audience. [...] It requires a great deal of talent – and a dose of good fortune – to capture the essence of a comedy or drama and make it work in another culture (Chalaby 2015: 4-5).

On the one hand, Chalaby shows caution in this quote, pointing to the difficulty of making a scripted format work in a new context. However, on the other, his work paints a picture of a television industry that has largely found the keys to successful remakes of scripted content. This is not quite accurate, as the varying success of Danish television series remade in the United States illustrate (Gemzøe 2018). Chalaby's own, primary example of a successful transfer of knowledge is not entirely convincing either. He uses *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-2014), the American remake of Danish/Swedish co-production *Bron/Broen* (DR/SVT, 2011-2018):

> The U.S. production team initially planned to reproduce the melancholic Nordic landscapes and planted the story between Canada and the United States. Once they realized where the essence of the drama lay, they transferred the story to the border between Mexico and the United States. The narco-trafficking between the two countries made the story more current and gave it darker undertones. All in all, the TV industry has a better understanding of the fundamental mechanisms that dictate successful scripted format translation (Chalaby 2015: 14).

The notion that the American production team captured the *essence* of the original drama and successfully adjusted

it to fit the new setting is a rosy-tinted version of the truth. This can, in part, probably be attributed to the fact that the source on which the notion is based is Lars Blomgren, one of the producers on both the original and the remake of *Broen*. The US version of *Broen* was cancelled after two seasons due to low ratings (Wayne 2016). The showrunner, Elwood Reid, does not think of *The Bridge* as a story of a successful remake. Furthermore, while he was indeed instructed in the nuances of the original format such as the characteristics of national stereotypes used in the series, he largely discarded this information (Gemzøe 2016). Whether or not placing the remake on the border between Mexico and the United States is, in fact, evidence of the television industry's better understanding of format adaptation is also an open question that has been explored elsewhere (Gemzøe 2018). The point is that, while more scripted formats do succeed, many still fail or struggle, and the transfer of knowledge is still a troublesome area. This does not, however, take away from Chalaby's convincing description of the differences between unscripted and scripted genres in format adaptation.

Beeden and de Bruin clearly emphasise national culture in their work on *The Office*, drawing on Moran's work, but also that of Joseph Straubhaar (2007). As previously indicated, they highlight Straubhaar's theory on cultural proximity in their article, quoting him for "Most audiences seem to prefer television programmes that are as close to them as possible in language, ethnic appearance, dress, style, humour, historical reference and shared topical knowledge." (Beeden and de Bruin 2010: 6). They use the quote to cement the importance of national culture in format adaptation, but in the 2007 work from which the quote stems, Straubhaar actually goes to some lengths to point out that his idea of cultural proximity is not nationally bound. The next two sentences in Straubhaar's text, following the quote above, did not make it into Beeden and de Bruin's article. They are: "

> This is not necessarily a national phenomenon. Audiences can be attracted or feel proximities to local culture, regional cultures within their nation, national culture, and transnational cultural regions or spaces" (Straubhaar 2007: 26).

Later in his book, Straubhaar goes on to further nuance the theory, pointing out how a nation can, in itself, be surprisingly diverse. 'American' is not one entity. People in Idaho might think *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998) is too New York in its outlook and cultural references, and people from Austin and Dallas, while all Texan, might not think of Texas in the same way (2007: 198). Straubhaar also expands and nuances the notion of cultural proximity with those of genre proximity, thematic proximity, value proximity and cultural shareability, all ways of explaining why audiences might appreciate media content that was not originally made for them (2007: 197-202). While Straubhaar's own account of cultural proximity is quite nuanced, at least in the 2007 version, it is often not used that way. Beeden and de Bruin's article exemplifies this, Andrea Esser thinks of it as 'reductive' (2015: 28) and, in Ksiazek and Webster's work on cultural proximity and audience behaviour, this summary of the term can be found: "The tale of cultural proximity, then, is usually told as the triumph of domestically produced media over the alien foreign media privileged in models of cultural imperialism and one-way flows" (2008: 488). The cultural proximity theory is powerful because it is easy to understand, especially in its less nuanced versions, and because it is, in part, proven by television ratings favouring national productions. It also has shortcomings. As Bondebjerg and Redvall point out: "In what way, for instance, can this explain that viewers in many European countries clearly prefer American products to those from closer, neighbouring countries?" (2015: 219).

Beeden and de Bruin also recognise that American sitcoms are widespread throughout the world, but they make no effort to explain why these sitcoms' allegedly "American" humour and cultural references resonate with audiences worldwide (2010: 6). This specific issue has received scholarly attention, however, for example by Scott Olson. He puts forward the notion that American television and film is successful worldwide because of the use of *narrative transparency*; the ability for any culture to project its own values and beliefs into the original text. Texts featuring attributes such as open-endedness, virtuality and production values, to name but a few, are, according to Olson, transparent and thus more prone to being appreciated by audiences from a variety of cultural backgrounds (1999: 94). Olson is not a format adaptation researcher, and his theory seems in opposition to the thought and practice of adapting content. Why does format adaption exist if it is possible to produce texts with *narrative transparency* and make them successful all over the world? However, it does appear unlikely that the American entertainment industry is dominating the global market solely due to higher production budgets and better marketing. The concept of narrative transparency might have some merit, and it has also been used outside of the context of omnipresent American media texts. It has even been argued that Danish

crime classic *Forbrydelsen* (DR, 2007-2012) to some extent did well with foreign audiences because it featured *narrative transparency* (Dunleavy 2014: 8). However, such a reading invites the question: If it was transparent, why, then, was it remade?

I shall end this overview of the position highlighting the importance of cultural and especially national categories with a few more points from Moran. In his 2009 article, "Global franchising, local customizing: The cultural economy of TV program formats", Moran fully acknowledges that "Home audiences are likely to be mixed, heterogeneous and diverse in their interests and tastes" (2009: 122). Still, in 2009, he continuously stresses the importance and relevance of national frameworks, rejecting notions of the regional or local, because adapting for a local rather than national audience does not make sense economically:

> The ambition is to gather the largest mass audience possible. Hence, even where specific choices have to be made regarding language, accent, ethnicity, religion and so on that will discriminate against various groups in a viewing population, format programming implicitly suggests that its address and appeal extend beyond local communities and attempts to talk to a national audience (2009: 122).

Moran turns to Michael Billig's widely used notion of *banal nationalism* to point to all the unobtrusive, subtle reminders of the national issue that, according to Moran, are present in national versions of formats – reminders, which help constitute a sense of nation, albeit an ongoing, constructed one: "...in an era of rapidly changing features of the television landscape, TV formats continue to anchor their adaptations in the ongoing reality of the national" (2009: 123-124).

This overview of recent attempts to account for format adaptation by using arguments related to culture, and especially national culture and belonging, can be summed up in the following way. Using culturally based explanations to account for changes through format adaptations is widespread in the academic literature on the subject, and paying attention to national culture, in particular, has been suggested to be a key concept in understanding format adaptation. These explanations are, in some cases, justified and powerful. For example, in the case of a format such as *The Office*, Griffin and Beeden and de Bruin's studies seem convincing in their argument that some of the appeal is indeed related to national tastes and preferences (2008, 2010). In other cases,

explanations related to national tastes and preferences fall short, or, in some ways, are misleading. The idea that national adaptations are necessary and will always do better than the original text is proven wrong by the texts that transcend their original contexts and do well with foreign audiences. Cultural difference can be an attraction and a selling point.

Whether or not explanations tied to national tastes and preferences are suitable also relates to questions of genre. Some genres are more culturally sensitive than others. It would appear that scripted formats and especially those based on humour are more dependent on regional and national variables than other formats. It is certainly possible to find markers for constructions of national culture in media texts. However, these markers vary in nature, from aesthetics with pictures of national (urban) geography, to mentions of national history, to references to ostensibly national pop culture. The effect of the versatility of these representations is not easily accounted for. In general, studying national culture in media texts presents an array of methodological challenges. For example, how does one sufficiently discern between local, regional and national levels? How does one even define national culture when a nation is filled with people of diverging opinions and experiences, some of them not even born or raised in the country they currently inhabit? The label "American" is generously used in the abovementioned literature, but how does that correspond to the fact that America is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse countries in the world? These nuances and methodological challenges are often only vaguely accounted for in the format adaptation research. Lastly, a great many of the accounts emphasising national culture as the deciding factor in format adaptation only vaguely or scarcely consider the implications of the specific broadcaster's profile and position on the national and international television market. For some researchers, all of this is sufficient reason to disregard national categories as a meaningful way of working academically with format adaptation. Clearly, other approaches are needed. I shall now explore an alternative way to approach the subject at hand.

5. **THE SYSTEM ARGUMENT**

As demonstrated above, a great many of the scholars emphasising the importance of national categories have positioned themselves in opposition to globalisation theories. What is interesting is that, in recent years, some format scholars are going back to various theories of globalisation. Globalisation

was harshly critiqued by Moran (1998: 1-9) and Beeden and de Bruin (2010: 3). However, these researchers are just as insistent in their critique of what, to them, appears to be a dominating discourse of cultural reductionism and essentialism in adaptation theory. For example, in their work on audiences of musical talent show formats, Andrea Esser, Pia Majbritt Jensen, Heidi Keinonen and Anna Maria Lemor are using frameworks of "glocalisation" and the transcultural, trying to find "an approach that avoids falling back on the unproven but widely accepted and perpetuated assumption that the audience appeal of format adaptations lies in the possibility they offer to be nationalized" (Esser et al. 2016: 297). Several of these scholars have published various critiques of national-based approaches on their own.

Andrea Esser, for instance, is adamant in her critique of the national positions. In her article "Defining 'the Local' in Localization or 'Adapting for Whom?'", Esser specifically refers to the abovementioned works of Beeden and de Bruin (2010), Moran (2009) and Moran and Aveyard (2014) as examples of studies that over-emphasise the importance of national categories in format adaptation (Esser 2016: 20). Likewise, Esser contends that the popularity of Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity is more a result of "deeply engrained cultural essentialism" than empirical findings (20). Esser does admit some potential concerns. She recognises that national frameworks can, in some cases, be relevant (30). She notes that public service broadcasters, for example, are entrusted to "reflect and build the nation" (23), that media policies are often national and that the television industry generously uses national labels such as, for example, "Danish drama". Esser's critique departs from the methodological challenges of using national frameworks that I have listed above, but also the observation that state and nation are not always the same thing. Equally, nation and language are not always intertwined.

The studies on which she builds her critique are varied in nature and cover both scripted and unscripted formats. She draws on Martin Ndlela's studies of the *Idol* format's various African incarnations: *Idols South Africa* (MNet, 2002-), *Afrikaanse Idol* (KykNET, 2006) and *Idols West Africa* (M-Net, 2007) as well as the *Big Brother Africa* (M-Net, 2003, 2007-) (Ndlela 2012, 2013). These adaptations were meant to transcend national borders and language barriers, Esser contends. Recognising that a postcolonial heritage and the emerging nature of the African television market obviously influences these findings, she points to Jensen's study about the effect of the media system in adapting entertainment formats and

a study Luca Barra conducted on dubbing of *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) in Italy (Jensen 2007, Barra 2009). *The Simpsons'* first two seasons in Italy were scheduled late at night and the adaptation/dubbing was 'gross and vulgar', targeting a mature audience, but, from season three and onwards, the show was broadcast in the daytime and the dubbing was changed accordingly, censoring, cutting or masking profanities (Barra 2009:516). Esser uses this example to highlight the importance of scheduling slots, implying that target audiences might be more important than national audiences. Esser continues with two German cases: *Betty La Fea* being remade in Germany with a substantially younger cast to cater for the Sat. 1 channel's youthful target audience and, similarly, *Germany's Next Top Model* (ProSieben, 2006-) being remade in an international, young and glamourous way to reflect ProSieben's channel profile. Lastly, Esser points out that studies show that, in particular, young people engage with multiple different versions of entertainment formats they like online, pointing to the importance of global rather than national audiences (2016: 26).

It is a completely valid point that the effects of channel profile, scheduling slot and media system should be accounted for. The question, however, is whether such factors are *more* important or relevant than the differences that can be explained by national frameworks. Esser's work implies that this is sometimes the case, and the examples with the African entertainment formats seem convincing in that regard. It would, however, be interesting to examine the European examples more closely. Take, for example, Barra's article from which Esser draws the scheduling example with the two Italian versions of *The Simpsons* (2009). That article, as a whole, is certainly not an attempt to question national frameworks in adaptation studies – quite the opposite. Barra consequently uses the term "Italianization" about the translation processes, along with "adapting nationally [...] in order to make them accessible to the domestic audience" (509). He demonstrates thoroughly how adaptation processes in Italy more often than not play on, and reinforce, national stereotypes (516) and also how adapters tend to translate even well-known 'foreign' references to something more 'Italian' in order to be safe and to reach a wider domestic audience (513). These are the primary findings of Barra's 2009 study. The scheduling case with *The Simpsons* is merely a slight nuance in the overarching impression of a distinctly *Italian* way of adapting media texts to fit domestic national screens. In a 2013 article, Barra updates the findings, pointing to a recent increase in maintaining original, foreign references (107)

which Esser also points out (2016: 27). Nonetheless, the national framework remains unquestionably dominant in Barra's 2013 piece as demonstrated by the continued use of the 'Italianization' term along with sentiments such as: "Especially with comedies and sitcoms, every joke must be adapted to the tastes and humour of the national public" (106). Barra's work, if anything, has its departure point in frameworks based on conceptions of national culture, and it is curious that it is used to argue against such frameworks. Moreover, one could question whether it was more important for the audience of the German adaptation of *Betty La Fea* that it had a youthful vibe or that it was 'proximate' in language, aesthetics, references and tone. Lastly, Esser does not fully consider the implications of the differences between scripted and unscripted formats. For example, young Europeans are watching *Canada's Next Top Model* (CityTV, 2006-2007, CTV, 2009) online, but are they watching Canadian drama formats to a similar degree? In fact, outside of countries with traditions of dubbing, are young Europeans watching any foreign non-US/UK drama formats to a noteworthy degree?

Esser writes about both scripted and unscripted formats, but two case studies argue for the importance of media system and especially channel profile in relation to remakes of television series. As mentioned, Akass argues that the change in media system had a substantial impact on *The Killing*, the American remake of *Forbrydelsen*, to which I concur (Akass 2015). Michael Wayne argues that in the adaptation process from *Bron/Broen* to *The Bridge*, the channel brand and strategic considerations of FX were more important than adapting to fit an 'American' audience's taste and sensibilities:

> ...producers were not attempting to repurpose *Broen/Bron*'s narrative for the American audience. Rather, the network wanted to provide its traditionally young and masculine audience with another 'muscular' crime series while appealing to additional demographics in the hopes of expanding the channel's overall viewership (2016).

Wayne's argument is that the adaptation focused on the violence in the series, and that this was supposed to appeal to the traditional viewership of FX. At the same time, the move towards the US-Mexican border and the female lead was supposed to lure in female viewers and a Spanish-speaking audience. However, this effort failed, he argues, because "an autistic female protagonist and a narrative centrally concerned with violence against women" ultimately did not appeal to FX's

young and masculine audience (2016). Wayne bases his analysis on excerpts from interviews with producers and showrunners found online. I have the following reservations about his analysis: While it is undoubtedly true that FX thought they could reach new markets by placing *The Bridge* on the US-Mexico border, it is misleading to frame that as evidence of the transforming power of FX's channel brand. My research, and, to some extent, Wayne's own data, indicate that FX was originally very keen to set the show at the US-Canada border and point to Elwood Reid, one of the two showrunners on the series, as the deciding factor in the move to the US-Mexico border (Gemzøe 2018). Moreover, Reid also argued that the shift was made because of reasons related to national culture. There was too little cultural difference between the United States and Canada, he felt: "Canada and the United States? There's no difference. What's going to happen? Are you going to have a debate about socialized health care?" (Reid, as quoted in Wayne 2016: 5). Reid, then, lobbied for the changes not out of considerations related to channel brand or target audience, but rather reasons based on his ideas of national culture and dramaturgy. The producers might have indulged Reid because they thought they could reach a larger (Hispanic) audience. But it is, from my perspective, misleading to use that indulgence as the basis for calling *The Bridge* a "channel adaptation". This does not mean that the channel's brand is of no importance. Wayne's demonstration that FX had a 'masculine' brand and his argument that FX also bought the rights to remake *Bron/Broen* to increase female viewership appears sufficiently convincing. However, it simply does not have any significant impact on the way the show was remade.

In the work on young audiences of musical talent show formats mentioned in the beginning of this section, frameworks of "glocalisation" and the transcultural were suggested as alternative approaches to national categories (Esser et al. 2017: 297). The question is whether transcultural and "glocal" approaches are useful to the same extent in examining scripted format adaptation, or if a "glocal" framework is, in fact, necessary to avoid cultural essentialism and reductionism. Moran and Aveyard would perhaps advise against it. "While the moment for parochial internationalism to achieve any kind of currency has long since past," they write, "it is also clear that the more popular global-local designations struggle to encapsulate the nuanced characteristics of television formats" (2014: 24). However, as discussed, national-based frameworks do fall short in a number of ways. Seen from a certain point of view, frameworks emphasising the local over the national suit the studies of scripted formats even better than those of un-

scripted ones. A great many of the most successful unscripted formats, such as *The X Factor* (2004-), *The Voice* (2010-), *Idols* (2001-), *Big Brother* (1999-), etc., in some cases may be better captured by national and international frameworks than local ones. They are set in studios that look the same across formats, pointing to the international. Judges, participants and contestants will speak a national language. They might have a local dialect or foreign accent, pointing to the local or the international, but the purpose/structure of the format will always be more important than location: to sing in a singing competition, to "play the game" in *Big Brother*, etc. Even if producers do try to give the format a 'local feel' by using iconic urban geography as a background for the judges, as it has been done in *American Idol*, the show does not need to be authentic in its depiction of the local in the same way that a scripted drama format does. *American Idol* is constructed not as a local, but as a national event – hence the name.

Contrary to this, *The Killing* is set in Seattle and, as a scripted format, it needs to deliver an authentic rendition of the local environment in which its story takes place. This is a huge task that includes accounting for local aesthetics, dialects, customs, laws, traditions, history, etc. Seen from this perspective, scripted formats are more local adaptations than they are national adaptations, especially when compared to certain unscripted formats. There are nuances to this, with formats such as *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009-2012) or *The Hills* (MTV, 2006-2010) being examples of unscripted formats that are, in some sense, based on the authenticity of their location. However, even such formats do not need to account for or consider the details of location in the same way that a scripted format does. If somebody has a British accent on *Jersey Shore*, for example, it does not necessarily need much of an explanation. If someone has a British accent in crime fiction series *The Bridge*, it would be strange if it was not accounted for or part of the story somehow. Having said that, *The Killing* and *The Bridge*, while in some ways tied to the local in story and aesthetics, do try to appeal to (certain segments of) a national audience.

This section has discussed the power of the media system, the channel profile, the scheduling slot and the potentially global audience. These perspectives and explanations have proven to be relevant and perhaps overlooked. Whether these perspectives are *better* than frameworks emphasising national categories seems questionable, however – the section illustrates that national-based approaches, while certainly reductive, still seem to hold significant explanatory power in some aspects of format adaptation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented and analysed pros and cons in dominant research traditions on format adaptation. Some researchers argue that nuances in format adaptation are best captured by frameworks based on differences in national culture, while others think "glocal", transcultural explanations rooted in differences in media systems best in accounting for adaptation processes. In some cases, the two schools of thought have positioned themselves against each other, sometimes rightfully critiquing shortcomings in the other camp, but at other times tending to exaggerate the explanatory power of their own framework. This article has demonstrated that exaggerations and troublesome generalisations could often be avoided with an increased genre awareness: The difference between scripted and unscripted formats is substantial, but is not always accounted for. Judging from the research this article has studied, it seems that frameworks with their departure point in national and local culture seem to have power when describing certain aspects of scripted formats, such as television series, namely issues of location, language and the characters' (and audiences') frame of references. It also becomes evident that frameworks with their departure point in media systems and the global format trade are nearly always relevant when looking at formats, but are rarely "better" than other frameworks. Rather, the different frameworks complement each other. Finally, in all of these frameworks, the power of individual agency is sometimes overlooked. A single powerful individual can shape an adaptation process immensely, which, as discussed previously, was the case with FX's *The Bridge*. In that adaptation process, Elwood Reid, showrunner on the adaptation, talked the network and his fellow showrunner into a radical change in locations, which fundamentally changed the tone and direction of the remake. This idea has been explored more thoroughly elsewhere (Gemzøe 2018). Researchers always need to show caution, and more nuanced frameworks and understandings related to industrial, cultural and national categories should be developed. This article should be seen as part of this effort, testing the boundaries of frameworks in format adaptation.

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Broadchurch (ITV, 2013-2017)
Broen (DR/SVT, 2011-2018)
Cinayet (Kanal D, 2014)
Dangerous Women (Syndicated, 1991-1992)
Feed the Beast (AMC 2016)
Forbrydelsen (DR1, 2007-2012)
Gracepoint (Fox, 2014)
Homeland (Showtime, 2011-2020)
House of Cards (BBC, 1990)
House of Cards (Netflix, 2013-2018)
Prisoner – Cell Block H (Network Ten, 1979-1986)
Prisoners of War (Channel 2, 2010-2012)
Seinfeld (NBC, 1989-1998)
The Bridge (FX, 2013-2014)
The Killing (AMC & Netflix, 2012-2014)
The Office (BBC Two, 2001-2003)
The Office (NBC, 2005-2013)
The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-)
Ugly Betty (ABC, 2006-2010)
Yo soy Betty, la fea (RCN Televisión, 1999-2001)

Entertainment formats

Afrikaanse Idol (KykNET, 2006)
Big Brother Africa (M-Net, 2003, 2007-)
Canada's Next Top Model (CityTV, 2006-2007, CTV, 2009)
Idols South Africa (MNet, 2002-)
Idols West Africa (M-Net, 2007)
Jersey Shore (MTV, 2009-2012)
The Hills (MTV, 2006-2010)

Films

The King's Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010)

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