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## **Canned Television Going Global - The Transnational Circulation of Ready-Made Content in Television**

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# EDITORIAL: CANNED TELEVISION GOING GLOBAL - THE TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF READY-MADE CONTENT IN TELEVISION

The international distribution and circulation of audio-visual content is one of the most relevant in recent debates in media and television studies: in the “age of plenty”<sup>1</sup>, distribution presents innovative features relating to both the introduction of new digital platforms and the diverse strategies developed by traditional and innovative players (including public service broadcasters, commercial, pay broadcasters and OTT global services such as Netflix and Amazon Video). As scholars have observed, contemporary media ecosystems are characterized by a “distribution revolution” that affects the media and entertainment business in many different ways<sup>2</sup>.

This area has been the subject of much previous scholarship, particularly in terms of the relevance of TV formats, their centrality for the medium and its economy, and different practices of adaptation and “localization”<sup>3</sup>. However, much less attention has been devoted to so-called “ready-made content” (or “finished content”) and its circulation among different countries and markets. “Canned” programming is typically the output of a specific national TV and media system, but it spills across borders when licensed into different territories, sometimes even globally. Ready-made content has a long tradition of international selling and distribution: it has provided a crucial element in the offers and strategies of various national broadcasters, and has moreover contributed to the definition of network identity and brands in many different media contexts.

From a historical point of view, international markets have long been dominated by north-American ready-made programs (particularly in the forms of drama series, TV movies and, of course, films produced by the Hollywood industry). In certain periods, however, specific poles of production and exportation have also emerged elsewhere, for example in South America (particularly in the case of the “telenovela”) or Japan (historically an important centre for TV animation)<sup>4</sup>. Within Europe, the situation has been more fluid, with many examples of pre-sales and even co-production of series strongly rooted within a single culture, but subtly adapted to wider European audience tastes. Over the past fifteen years, the success of Danish drama or “Nordic Noir” (as in the cases of the international successes *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen*) is relatively a recent example of this tendency. This trend of European ready-made drama that gains an international, almost global distribution has been strengthened during the last decade or so: between 2008 and 2020, scripted-series production in Europe underwent a succession of major changes, prompting what has been termed a “European television fiction renaissance”<sup>5</sup>. Titles that have acquired a sizeable international audience and at least as much critical attention – such as *The Crown*, *The Returned*, *The Bureau*, *Gomorra*, *The Young Pope*, *Babylon Berlin*, *Deutschland 83*, *Cable Girls* and *The Wolfpack* – can be seen as the outcome of a progressive change involving a series of factors in the European TV industry. First and foremost among these is the role played by traditional pay broadcasters (such as Sky Europe or Canal+) or OTT platforms, which have increasingly led big budget co-productions that often become successful ready-made content, exportable to various countries and territories.

More in general, multi-channel and new forms of distribution have created new markets for ready-made programming, from successful experiments like UK Channel 4’s “Walter Presents” (now being rolled out across Europe and United States) to niche channels that show multiple variants of the same format from different cultures (for example the

different national versions of *Masterchef* distributed and broadcast abroad). Indeed, the current state of development of global players like Netflix and Amazon could also be seen as pan-world providers of traditional American “canned content”. But at the same time, as mentioned, they are increasing their strategies to develop “local” content that can nonetheless circulate widely. Consequently, the European context can be interpreted dually, as a place where ready-made programming has been imported from other countries (the USA, but also from other emerging markets, such as Israel or Turkey), but also as one for the production and diffusion of original content in different genres (particularly, but not only, scripted series), within and beyond the continent.

This special issue of *VIEW* focuses on the international circulation and distribution of ready-made content, in the form of scripted products. The following essays share an interest in considering the nuances in power dynamics (adaptation, localization, revision) that are bound to any transnational movements<sup>6</sup>. They also address a fruitful variety of problems and points of view that signal the wider potential of this field of research: the transnational circulation of TV content and the currently used market strategies; common ground and cultural proximity in certain cultural groups and/or regions; the role of European countries and markets in the development of international distributed content and its impact beyond the continent; the emerging role of OTT services in the internationalization of programming; the growing role played by curation and personalization in order to gain a competitive edge; the functions of “niche” content (such as arts programming) and or particular audience groups (such as the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies), and how these adapt to border-crossings; co-productions, but also co-distributions between different countries (such as China and the UK); processes of localizing and adapting foreign ready-made content, for example through dubbing, subtitling and voice overs; and the role of bottom-up circulation.

Following the standard for *VIEW*, the issue is divided between “Discovery” and “Exploration” articles.

The “Discovery” articles of the issue begin with Marta Perrotta’s essay, “*Master of Photography: Investigating Transnational Creative Exchanges in the Production of a Ready-Made Talent Show*”. The photography talent show on which she focuses, co-produced by an Italian company but distributed across Europe on Sky Arts channels, provides an interesting entry point to a series of valuable questions about transnational adaptability of canned products. The case both challenges and confirms the notion of the Italian production market as a “sleeping giant” (a big market, but with limited ability in exporting its content).

The same core question is continued in Lisa Lin’s article, “*Beyond Canned Television: BBC Earth’s Global Community Building and Coproduction Adventure in the Case of Tencent Video*”, albeit with an entirely different focus: “BBC Earth Tribe” on China’s Tencent Video streaming service. The service provides access to BBC documentaries for Chinese audiences, but also a space for fan communities, discussion and access to the filmmakers. Thanks to what Lin calls “technologically-empowered screens”, this case study illustrates how canned content, progressive distribution strategies and technological advances can help to forge new, transnational audiences.

Elena Prati’s article, “*From the West to the Kremlin and Back. Development Paths of Foreign Products on Russian Television*”, focuses on another different and little-analysed context: the Russian television environment. Prati expands on foreign, ready-made content by following its movement along three paths: adaptation, localization, and “Russification”. In particular, the Russification process is the most curious. The article provides some key concepts to help understand this phenomenon, through the analysis of several case studies like *The Nanny*, or Russian remakes, for instance of the popular US sit-com *How I Met Your Mother*.

In “*Transnational Television Distribution and Co-Production Challenges: A KirchMedia and Sony Pictures Television Case Study*”, Paul Torre explores the production and distribution process for television co-productions and explains the potential benefits and risks, compared to other media joint ventures. Analysing the co-production agreement between a German rights trader (KirchMedia) and a Hollywood studio (Columbia/Sony), the article focuses on production and distribution challenges and complex contractual arrangements within the context of global media trade. As the author states, “co-productions are situated in between acquiring rights to scripted and completed television programs on the one hand, and acquiring rights to format and adapt a television property on the other”. In this context, co-productions can certainly allow for increased creative control and profit sharing.

The final article of the “Discovery” section is entitled “Why So Successful? Audience Research on Turkish TV Series in Greece”. In her study, Eleni Pothou deals with a specific set of practices found in Turkish drama series that enable them to be cross-culturally consumed, focusing on their success in Greece. The international circulation of Turkish fictional television programs has increased, crossing over to wider audiences of different cultural regions. The audience research presented in this paper indicates cultural proximity as key to Greek consumption.

The “Exploration” section of this issue begins with Tim Raats and Catalina Iordache’s article, entitled “From Nordic Noir to Belgian Bright? Shifting TV Drama Production and Distribution in Small Markets: The Case of Flanders”. Raats and Iordache’s research provides specific insight on one of the most interesting aspects of the “European Renaissance”. Following the model of the “Nordic Noir”, and facilitated by relevant changes related to the digitization and internationalization of European production in the 2000s, Flemish TV drama has emerged from the Belgian TV ecosystem as one of the most interesting example of a small media market that is able to flourish in ready-made content.

In “Canned Adaptations and the International Success of Turkish TV Series”, Deniz Zorlu recalls a crucial issue that emerges in Pothou’s article (but from a different point of view). This article examines Turkish TV series’ recent success as canned programming primarily in newly developed and developing countries, with a close textual analysis of several popular Turkish adaptations. The author argues that Turkish series’ emphasis on nostalgic and melancholic narrative frames make these products particularly appealing in regions like Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia and South America. This is because, as Zorlu states, these series deal with relatable circumstances of swift and traumatic changes under neoliberalism.

In “The Curated TV Experience with ‘Value Added’: Walter Presents, Canned TV, Curation, and Post-Production Culture”, Kenneth Longden interprets the process of Walter Iuzzolino’s curation as a “post-production” process that establishes a competitive model for canned TV today, in a globalized context where audiences are seeking extra layers of value in their viewing experiences.

In their article “Lip-Sync for Your Life (Abroad). The Distribution, Adaptation and Circulation of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in Italy”, Luca Barra, Paola Brembilla, Linda Rossato and Lucio Spaziante explore one of the most intriguing cases of transnational circulation of a ready-made content: the global phenomenon of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The authors analyse the franchise from the point of view of its Italian distribution, adaptation for the local market and reception: their research clearly shows the relevance of national mediation and the fact that the Italian cult success of the show is also dependent on the local factors of this mediation as much as on the intrinsic quality of the product.

The issue of cultural and local reception of canned TV is also the focus of Bridget Kies in her article “A Vicious Viewership: Transatlantic Television Audiences and LGBTQ Identities”. While in the adaptation of formats gender expressions can become one of the elements that are reinterpreted from one nation to another, this process is not possible for ready-made content: rather, in this case, culturally-specific aspects of characters and stories relating to gender and sexuality raise questions about how viewers in different nations consume and interpret representations. Kies makes this clear through the British TV drama *Vicious*, which broadcast on American network PBS, and whose reception by LGBTQ communities change from one side to the other of the Atlantic, outlining again – as in the case of the Italian reception of *Drag Race* – the relevance of national and cultural mediation.

In their article “From *Parenthood* to *Tutto può succedere*: Ready-Made Elements and Cultural Translation”, Stefania Antonioni and Chiara Checcaglini frame the issue of remakes of scripted formats, analysing the case of an Italian version of the US TV drama *Parenthood*. Even more strongly than in the case of ready-made content, in scripted formats localization is a relevant issue: with this experiment, traditional Italian public broadcaster RAI tries to balance attention on younger, “slippery” viewers with the necessity to keep a general, mainstream audience.

The issue concludes with Florian Krauß’s article, “When German Series Go Global: Industry Discourse on the Period Drama *Deutschland* and its Transnational Circulation”. Krauß uses the case of *Deutschland 83/86/89* as a vehicle for

further reflections on the potential to export of quality German TV abroad. Combining interviews with the producers of the show and analysis of its content and promotion, he illustrates how this case demonstrates some potential, but also signals a series of inescapable tensions between national and transnational distribution tendencies.

In the light of the rich analyses contained in this issue of *VIEW*, it is certainly clear that the research field of international circulation of content offers new and significant opportunities to understand both the progressive and increasingly urgent push for globalization – which affects audiovisual media and their capacity to travel via traditional channels and digital platforms – and the complex, subtle, resistant processes of “mediation”, where not only the various media systems and contexts but also different national cultures continue to have great relevance.

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## Notes

1. John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).
2. Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, eds, *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).
3. Cf. Albert Moran, *New Flows in Global Television* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009); Jean K. Chalaby, *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016).
4. Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006).
5. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds, *A European Fiction Renaissance. Television Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).
6. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2010): 7–21.