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The Grounds for a Renaissance in European Fiction: Transnational Writing, Production and Distribution Approaches and Strategies

Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni

1. A Decade of Systemic Change in the European Arena

During the 2000s, the critical, journalistic and academic debate on television series focused in particular on the development of scripted products originating in North America. The discussion has been framed both qualitatively – as a “new golden age” that emerged amid the new concepts of quality television and then complex TV (McCabe and Akass 2007; Newman and Levine 2011; Mittell 2015) – and quantitatively, with the notion of “peak TV” (as defined by John Landgraf, head of FX Networks, and measured by his team’s annual research reports). As Jason Mittell has observed, in the increasingly systemic approach adopted in TV studies, it is not very useful to study the development of the series macro-genre in solely aesthetic-cum-textual terms (Mittell 2015). The emergence of complex TV, for example, can be fully understood only when contextualised within the industrial, technological and consumer changes in recent decades, as television has transitioned from a network-centred to a fully-fledged “post-network” era (Lotz 2014). The on-going changes in the European arena over that timeframe have received rather less constant and systematic attention, partly because the scenario is more complex, being fragmented into myriad national markets. Some labels have indeed become established, underlining the vibrancy and growing international importance of some European production scenes, from “Nordic noir” (Hansen and Waade 2017) to the “Italian renaissance” (Vivarelli 2018). But the decisive step has not always been taken, namely linking the development of European series products to an array of changes that have swept across Europe in similar or different ways to the US.

A key factor in this transformation has been the gradual development of premium television – in the more traditional forms of pay TV and, later, in the emerging video on demand services, especially the SVOD (subscription video on demand) model. It was in this very period, especially on the cusp of the crucial second decade, that European fiction production saw an increasingly pivotal role emerge for the many pay players, from Sky Europe group (in Italy, Germany and the UK) and Canal+ (in France) to HBO Europe (in Scandinavia and Central and Eastern Europe) and the global SVOD services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and also Apple TV and Disney Plus. Premium television’s role in scripted-content production has played out more on a qualitative level, with new innovations in the product concepts and their “transnational ambition”, than in merely quantitative terms. For of the 922 fiction titles made on average each year in the EU, most are commissions by the traditional free-to-air broadcasters, especially the PSBs, led by some of the larger, more dynamic markets like Germany, France, and the UK (Fontaine 2017). This apparent continuity with the past – mainstream and free-to-air networks, whether public or commercial, still have a big hand in fiction production, largely for domestic consumption – conceals however a growing phenomenon. The subscription-based operators in particular are beginning to produce titles mainly for transnational niche audiences, with burgeoning budgets (and production values), medium-length formats (7+ episodes per season) and international co-productions. This change is instrumental in what may be termed a “European renaissance” in European-made fiction. In Europe as in the US, the 2000s saw significant growth in the number of players on the media market and a pronounced convergent trend. In the 2010s pay market, “traditional” satellite and cable operators (like Canal+ or Sky) tended increasingly to work with or compete against OTT players (especially Netflix and Amazon). There has also been a notable trend towards vertical integration in the market, involving many European groups too. Canal+, for example, controls the StudioCanal production company, while Sky Europe group, acquired by the US conglomerate Comcast in 2018, launched Sky Studios the following year. And numerous other integration initiatives have shaped Europe’s production scenario, such as the acquisition by Britain’s ITV Studios of

Italian production company Cattleya. Lastly, in an increasingly crowded field where once separate markets and platforms – media, telco and internet (PWC 2018) – are becoming more and more integrated, producing exclusive original content to sustain recognisable brands, foster customer/subscriber loyalty and catalyse prospective viewers has become a crucial competitive lever in the increasingly important direct-to-consumer arena (the offering financed at most partially by advertising).

This last factor brings us to the starting point of the research project on the production and distribution of scripted premium television series in various European countries over the last decade, run by Ce.R.T.A. – the Research Centre for Television and Audiovisual Media at Università Cattolica, Milan – as discussed in part one of this edited collection. In just ten years (2008–18), the dynamics of producing scripted content in Europe have undergone crucial changes, primarily regarding not the output volume but its aesthetic traits, production methods and chances of success overseas. A central plank of the study was the creation of a data set on all 172 productions commissioned by pay broadcasters and OTT operators in the years in question in the main national markets (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the UK). This information allowed us to analyse numerous issues: the progressive growth in annual production volumes; the main genres; the relationship between original content and adaptations from existing sources (novels, films, other media products, etc.); the products' degree of innovation and durability (measurable as the number of new titles per season and the number of series spawning further seasons); national and international co-productions; and how each country's products circulated in Europe and North America. Building the data set went hand in hand with a qualitative-research effort to flesh out the most significant case studies in the various countries and to interview professionals at different levels in the chain (commissioners, producers, authors and screenwriters). Using media production studies tools and paying due attention to media and television production cultures (Caldwell 2008), ethnographic observations were made (through structured in-depth interviews and more informal conversations), and promotional and press materials were studied (via interviews conducted for various purposes that often yielded other equally interesting insights into the various players' approaches and criteria).

The results will be discussed in detail in the next two chapters. Here, we examine the main common issues influencing developments in the writing of European fiction products, changes in production methods, and the reasons behind the strategies of the broadcasters and big media groups concerned. The picture emerges of a work in progress. The decade was certainly a crucial transitional period, as the main players revamped their strategies for an evolving market that was yet to bed down and would continue to change. The global OTT operators' role was growing in terms of European and global subscriber numbers and their investment in scripted content (Parrot Analytics 2019). But pay TV (and the traditional free-to-air broadcasters) were repositioning themselves to adapt to the new context, developing their stand-alone streaming on demand services to resist competition from the global players, while also broaching more or less tactical agreements, such as distribution partnerships with these very competitors. Undoubtedly, though, pay and subscription-based operators played an especially innovative part in fiction production during the decade. And to a large extent – and this is the book's core thesis – the contemporary renaissance in European fiction is rooted here. For the development of pay TV (on satellite, cable and digital), with the aforementioned need to commission high-budget, high-concept scripted products with supranational ambitions, triggered a process that then also impacted to some degree on the free broadcasters, which pivoted part of their own production output along similar lines in many countries. Examples include *My Brilliant Friend*, an unprecedented coproduction between HBO and the Italian public-service broadcaster Rai, and *Deutschland 83*, a partnership between Germany's RTL and the US channel Sundance TV. Before exploring each of the three main professional viewpoints involved in this European television fiction renaissance, prompted initially by the cable and satellite pay networks and then by the non-linear operators, some preliminary comments about the European scene may be opportune.

First, production volumes: in the five main markets (France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and the UK), pay output leapt from just 8 to 70 titles per year between 2008 and 2018. That still might not seem many, but the brands were highly recognisable, which began to boost European-made products' hitherto limited

international circulation. A second point concerns the link between the European TV and media industry and the growth in premium products for international circulation. There have been several significant developments. The classic pay arena saw the advent of Sky Deutschland, part of Sky Europe group, in 2009, and the 2015 launch of Movistar+ in Spain, a subsidiary of the telco Telefonica. Global OTT services gradually arrived in the main markets, starting with Netflix in the UK (2012), Germany and France (2014) then Italy and Spain (2015), followed by Amazon Prime Video (in the principal markets since 2016). Not to mention the subsequent amendments to the European Audiovisual Media Services directive in 2010 and 2018, with a gradual tightening of the promotion and production obligations on OTT operators (Bondebjerg et al. 2017). A third comment regards the characteristics of the scripted premium product compared to the free-to-air broadcasters' offering. While many of the classic formats are either very short (TV movies and miniseries) or very long (soaps), the pay product has the typical traits of high-end fiction. Hence the medium-long formats, the prevalence of drama, and original scripts often closely linked to national cultural mores or adaptations of intellectual property of an equally national flavour (like literature or film). A fourth point concerns these products' international circulation in the main European national markets, the wider continent (Central and Eastern Europe, Northern Europe and Scandinavia) and North America. Indeed, 55% of the series made by the pay networks graduate to these supranational contexts. There are various other common traits to note. The most active players were Sky Europe and Canal+, especially in the beginning, followed by Netflix in the second half of the decade. There were differences among the national markets, with France and the UK accounting for the most titles and hours (respectively 35% and 44% of the data set titles); Italy, meanwhile – with only 11% of the sample of premium series produced – saw its products enjoy wider international circulation, as a bridge between the most dynamic countries and the markets that began to thrive during the decade (Germany and Spain). Finally, European pay series became increasingly oriented to a North American “industrial” model: the number of returning series with multiple seasons rose, along with the co-productions and international partnerships.

2. Writing-Centred Productions: European Authors Move towards a Showrunner Model

As this overview clearly shows, the television and media environment in each European country changed profoundly in the years in question. And so did the languages and approaches of European TV fiction, led by the premium operators – first through satellite and cable and then with the non-linear platforms. The pay variety is “a totally different kind of fiction” (Scaglioni and Barra 2013) to what European audiences are growing familiar with. The next two chapters explore the results of the qualitative and quantitative study of scripted premium content production in the main European markets and its circulation abroad, but it is worth pausing first to examine some of the more general aspects of the changes afoot. They cut across the different European contexts while connecting them like never before. Using a media production studies approach and tools, together with in-depth interviews and more informal conversations, and by collecting other data, industrial materials and promotional and publicity texts, we can spotlight some of the methods, criteria, objectives, tactics and strategies deployed as the premium television fiction industry took up the challenge of complexity, and laid the foundations for this renaissance. Without claiming to be exhaustive or comprehensive, this perspective enables us to map out the still on-going changes both in the production routines for developing and packaging fiction and in the roles and relationships among the professionals involved. Some of the trends that emerge are especially significant and far-reaching. Simplifying a little, we can identify three perspectives in European fiction production in recent years that are rather different, yet always interdependent. First, that of the writers, and in general the creative figures developing ideas and projects and penning scripts, who were enjoying increasing editorial power and control. Second, that of the producers and production companies, the professionals who champion the strongest ideas, pursue finance and forge relationships at national and transnational levels, who manage and oversee fiction product development. Third, that of the commissioners of individual titles, the heads of TV networks, media groups and digital platforms, on a constant quest for distinctive original content to boost their brand and their public offering. These are the three nodes in a network of relationships where players

with different roles share creative and editorial responsibility for increasingly ambitious national and transnational fiction projects. And for each of them, the decade in question was one of experimentation followed by the establishment of new models.

An initial handful of trends emerged in parallel across Europe, then, regarding the professional roles more traditionally associated with the ideational and creative aspects of fiction: the writers. They come up with and refine a treatment, building outlines and scripts for the pilot and then the various episodes, in a direct or indirect dialogue with the director and the other creative figures. Following the US model, tailored though to the needs of markets and contexts of different sizes and traditions, the European fiction arena has invested these roles with new value over the last twenty years, turning them into a key driver of a profound and still on-going renewal. Indeed, the screenwriter has become the creator and head writer, sometimes in a fair approximation to a showrunner role, managing the entire project and keeping it on the right editorial track. As is frequently the case, this was no sudden change but a gradual shift, often proceeding by trial and error but always rooted in good practice, facilitating circulation from one country to another and embracing approaches proven to work elsewhere.

A strong differentiator in contemporary European fiction is the space afforded to the individual vision of a specific author: sometimes the director, more often the scriptwriter or screenwriter. After decades of TV fiction based on an assembly line of essentially interchangeable roles – where the personnel change from one episode or season to the next, feeding the “machine” even in the absence of an industry – lately an overall creative figure has gained greater freedom and, inevitably therefore, greater responsibility. In premium European fiction, there is often one voice and one alone. They do not compromise, or at least they try not to, and they often have the last word on the key decisions. The European paradigm is Scandinavian, from Sweden and Denmark in particular, where the so-called “single vision” is now a pillar of contemporary Nordic drama. The genre has travelled well all over the world (Bauer, Hochscherf and Philipsen 2013; Redvall 2013; Hochscherf and Philipsen 2017; Waade, Redvall and Majbritt Jensen 2020), and the premium operators in the UK and the main continental countries have taken heed.

In France, different episodes often feel different, depending on who is directing. We have always sought overall coherence; we wanted each sequence to belong to the same whole, and that has also impacted on how the work is organised. For example, with the second director, Frédéric Mermoud, it was clear from the outset that I would be overseeing his work. And that is fairly unusual here (Fabrice Gobert, head writer of *The Returned/Les Revenants*, in Morabito 2013, 92).

The person who comes up with the idea and develops it in practice provides a direction, a unique viewpoint that is clear and well-defined, and they can keep an overall beady eye on the story’s coherence. Where there are fewer episodes and seasons, a single creative role can closely supervise the whole project, guiding it, taking a broad view and making the crucial decisions.

A second and related key point is that the author gradually becomes a brand. Often, the main creative roles acquire additional value as champions and guardians of the product. What was long the province of the leading actors (and partly still is) – in helping to make the title immediately recognisable, forging a specific association with a genre and a character, attracting audience attention and building loyalty – is now also a task for the creators and concept people in contemporary premium European fiction. They too become a brand, a promise of quality, a validation of success. This is another reason why the writing stage (and later the product promotion) brings in the author of the novel, the multi-award-winning director, the public figures who underwrite the narrative’s truth with their social commitment, and above all the head writer who puts their authorial stamp on the whole operation. This adds an extra layer of value that underscores television’s social and cultural impact.

A third pan-European trend in premium fiction is screenwriters’ and scriptwriters’ acknowledgement of how television creativity is always subject to constraints and how you need to get your hands dirty if you want better results. In nurturing the idea and the unique vision of an author (who is already a brand or

anyway can become one), it is often the need to follow the rules (the genre traits, the breadth of the formats, the technicalities of casting, the set, the editing and the target audience in front of the screen) that actually makes for a more effective and fruitful creative effort. For where there are no limits to overcome – or at least to push up against – there is no creativity. Creating, developing and making a fiction product is a concrete, practical, operational matter. So the writer is increasingly present on set, often regularly, to closely oversee the making of what they wrote and to intervene when necessary:

The screenwriter's is not an abstract job. They don't just conceive a story and some dialogue; what they have, or should have, is an idea. We often work with directors who draw intelligently on the writing, who discuss things to develop a shared vision of the series together. Everything, though, is left to common sense, to how it feels in the moment: it would be hard to frame this prerogative in a contract. I couldn't shoot an episode: I have no technical training and no experience, and I am not sure I would even want to. But I do want to select the actors. I want to see the lighting that the director has in mind. I want to be there for the editing, for that is the last step in the writing. All this now is down to common sense, to the trust that builds between director and screenwriter (Stefano Bises, head writer of *Gomorra*, in Barra 2018, 27–28).

Making fiction is a complex job. It involves many heads, hands and faces, compromises and hitches, a trial of ambition by everyday realities and time ticking away. So the guiding principle is to simplify the difficult, finding a way to make the processes work and avoid useless loops. You can do anything as long as it does not make someone else's life harder: just be useful, and don't get in the way. On set, in the director's and producer's domain, screenwriters can lend a hand, in the right practical spirit, over and above their formal duties and established roles. And everyone wins.

Along with the ever-stronger recognition of the author's unique vision, their transformation into a brand, and their broader involvement in making a series, there is another observable trend: elevating the person with the idea (and the job of writing it) to the broader role of showrunner. Everything revolves around the creator figure, steadily helming a series made largely in their image, but the desire to claim the prestigious and glamorous title of showrunner chafes against the difficulty of pinning down its exact scope. Actually, showrunner is both a real operational role and another form of power (from creative control to having the last word on set) in an already complex power structure. Only sometimes do this label and this power correspond to a formal responsibility, founded on economic oversight of the project. Often, what creative figures, scriptwriters, screenwriters and directors really want (but can't have, perhaps fortunately given their dread of the accountability that goes with it) is control over budgets and resources. So in Europe, the transition to the American showrunner model is nearly always a compromise, with greater yet incomplete power for the screenwriter and a sharing of responsibility and credit with others.

These first four premium-fiction writing trends are processes that play out in parallel in the different contexts of the individual European countries to varying degrees, with a progressive adoption of what has already worked elsewhere. Other developments, though, spring from a gradual cross-fertilisation and stronger, better-developed mutual relationships. On one hand, the writers' rooms on major European fiction productions (and co-productions) are increasingly embracing a degree of multilingualism. Screenwriters with different languages and cultures are finding a place – in parallel, moreover, with the increasing diversity of casts and crews, chosen for their varied origins and multiple skills to facilitate the content's international circulation. Thus a tentative, precarious balance becomes established between domestic needs and opening up to other linguistic, political and sociocultural contexts and different traditions and approaches:

Language is not a major problem from a creative perspective. The stories speak a universal language already, so if you find people with the right sensibilities for working on a given kind of story, the shared language can be found, regardless of whether one person speaks mostly Italian and the other mostly English (Leonardo Fasoli, head writer on *ZeroZeroZero*, in Guarnaccia 2018a, 95).

The linguistic and cultural melting pot acts as a counterweight to the greater uniformity of European fiction written in the global *lingua franca*, English, for creative and operational reasons. A shared language undoubtedly simplifies the processes in the writers' room. It is often bound up with the ensuing need and desire for the actors to act in English. It interweaves with a parallel rediscovery of dubbing (including from other languages into English), enabled by digital platforms like Netflix and their need to target a broad (yet still premium) audience. And English facilitates dialogue with a global array of production companies and commissioners, allowing them to check the scripts, send notes and suggestions, and oversee the results. Here, too, the screenwriter has a larger role and greater responsibility. Their proven ability gives the platform a sense of security, as it works to catapult them from the national to the global stage:

An international focus means more responsibility for the screenwriter: when Cattleya hired us, Netflix asked particularly that the head writers create a certain number of episodes. Netflix is a player that says: "OK, these are the writers you say are good, so get them to write as many episodes as possible". That rather struck me, for it gives the writer much more power. And that's what makes the difference (Barbara Petronio, head writer on *Suburra*, in Guarnaccia 2018b, 155).

For European TV fiction writing, then, premium production has given screenwriters new value, as authors and brands, along with a renewed responsibility for creative matters as well as some operational ones. They take the role of head writer, bestriding a national and indeed global stage. On one hand, some processes are standardised for uniformity across the European markets, stateside-style. On the other, the individual titles become more particular and exceptional, based on what the projects and their commissioners require. On the creative side too, an overall drive has emerged towards a more industrial yet always judicious development approach that takes into account the primarily artisanal nature of the creative effort, always centred on prototypes and trial and error. But this sometimes works well, and the resulting hits become templates to copy elsewhere, in other markets.

3. Production Ambitions. European Indies Go Global

The development of a European premium series genre with its own defining traits stems from changes in writing practices and from the substantial decade-long metamorphosis in the landscape of production houses active in the continent's main markets. It is a two-way process. On one hand, some companies have made a supranational name for themselves through internationally popular products; on the other, Europe's production arena has been consolidated through various major international acquisitions. In particular, the process affects some producers that are prominent players in the emergence of European pay series. Italian production company Cattleya, for example, has made outstanding Italian renaissance titles, from *Romanzo criminale*, *Gomorra* and *Suburra* to *ZeroZeroZero* and *Romulus*. It was taken over in 2017, as a 51% stake went to ITV Studios group, one of Britain's biggest entertainment producers and a leading content exporter. Still in Italy, the production house Wildside – maker of *The Young Pope*, *The New Pope*, *Il Miracolo* and *My Brilliant Friend* – was acquired in 2015 by global group Fremantle (with a 62.5% holding) before splitting into two companies, Wildside and The Apartment. In the UK, the country with the strongest export tradition, many high-end series for international markets have emerged from the mega-indie Endemol UK. With its series of subsidiaries, it has produced drama with Zeppotron/House of Tomorrow (*Black Mirror*) and Tiger Aspect Productions (*Fortitude* and *Ripper Street*). *Riviera* is an Anglo-French coproduction between Archery Pictures and the French multinational Altice, which set up Altice Studios in 2016. German producer Wiedemann & Berg, the maker of *Dark* for Netflix, was established in 2009 with investment from Endemol Shine and acquired in 2019 by the media company Leonine Holding (formerly Tele München Group). In France, Atlantique Productions resumed operations in 2009, as part of the multimedia group Lagardère, for the international coproduction *Borgia*. Still in France, *Le tunnel/The Tunnel*, a remake of the hit Scandinavian series *Broen/Bron*, was coproduced by Kudos and Shine France, another Endemol subsidiary. These are all good examples of European production companies responding

to a changing media arena to develop a series of projects with international aspirations right from the start. They are a ready response to the needs that have gradually emerged in a pay-commissioning world that aims to build co-productions with high production values for transnational and increasingly niche audiences. Essentially, in the main European markets and especially those accustomed to producing domestic fiction with no particular supranational pretensions, these independent production companies are using their economic solidity (especially when subsidiaries of large groups) to meet the need to go global or to infuse their content with greater ambition. The relationship between a product's aspirations and its production journey is thrown into sharp relief by a producer:

You have to find the right level of ambition for the project you are holding. So you don't always start with one thing and get to America right away [as occurred, however, with the coproductions launched by Wildside between Sky Italia and HBO for *The Young Pope/The New Pope* and between HBO and Rai for *My Brilliant Friend*, ed.]. So the producer has a network of international relations composed of counterparts, or television stations with which they have a historical relationship. In Europe, in the "construction" phase, all the major television players are accessible to European producers. The problem is that, when you get there, you have to define a few elements: is this an Italian product that I am selling abroad *as* an Italian product, or is this an international product, with a star system? This is the great division that happens at some point (Mario Gianani, producer, Wildside/Fremantle, in Noto 2019).

A swathe of renewed European production companies, then, finds itself at a crossroads where all roads lead, one way or another, to an emphatic internationalisation of the content and production practices. One initial approach is something of a departure, in particular from the productions made on the continent (the UK, in contrast, is traditionally accustomed to transatlantic co-productions). This avenue involves major productions that follow the rules used in the world's most dynamic, complex and competitive market: the US. From this perspective, Wildside's Italian experience with titles like *The Young Pope/The New Pope* or *Il miracolo* is a major watershed, and not just for Italy. As the producer goes on to underline, the series by Oscar-winning director Paolo Sorrentino significantly changed some long-established practices:

The Young Pope came with an assumption that until then was unthinkable for any industry and broadcaster. It is customary that, when European talents – recognized by an Oscar and therefore with an international reputation and exposure – decide to make a more ambitious product, they remain in the US to do so. In other words, they are born in a country, they go to the States, and there they find the means, the possibilities to realize their product, especially if this product is in English [...]. Here the opposite took place: Paolo Sorrentino did all this with Wildside, in Europe. So what happened? He had an idea. An international idea. He tells a story of the Vatican and the Pope, of a world that is recognizable even abroad but, at the same time, is very Italian. He gave the protagonist a foreign, US point of view [...]. It was a very ambitious project in the way he wrote and imagined it; he didn't imagine a classic European production, since it was not a project for European broadcasters: once you've seen it, you cannot consider it a primetime show for Raiuno [Italy's primary PSB channel] but just a series for a pay TV broadcaster like Sky Italia. Nevertheless, Sky represents only a quarter of this product, so if Sky had been the only mover you would have made a different series – but not this one (Mario Gianani, producer, Wildside/Fremantle, in Noto 2019).

While *The Young Pope* is a new departure for the Italian market, many more projects are conceived in a local/national European context with supranational circulation in mind. First among these are co-productions involving various commissioners and/or production companies. This high-end content, often based on intellectual property from a given country and adapted to pay operators' needs, targets demanding niche audiences with often high-budget products. The producers stress how vital it is in the new market context to create projects with transnational ambition from the outset – from when an intellectual property is identified (or created) to be transformed into an end product. Cattleya founder Riccardo Tozzi underlines the profound differences from this perspective that are beginning to define this

particular production chain compared to the more traditional approaches used for cinema or products for the domestic market:

Considering new TV series, which are mainly produced for pay TV services and SVOD platforms but occasionally also for classic TV channels that are now changing their way of thinking about series, products are made for international release from the beginning, since these new forms of distribution are virtually region-free – as in the case of Netflix, Prime Video or Sky, which also spreads its products across the many countries where it is present. In fact, even when working specifically with Rai or Mediaset, products will have an international distribution. Series naturally have a global spread, since the platforms through which they are screened are already international, either because they work globally or because they have a global network. The same does not apply to movies, which are generally restricted to a national production workflow and require a huge effort to find distribution (Riccardo Tozzi, producer, Cattleya/ITV Studios, in Brembilla and Garofalo 2019).

A production company's work can be described as a “transformation” practice that tailors the intellectual property on a national, European or global scale to arrive at the finished product:

I always use the term “transformation”, because production work takes intellectual property – which is normally an idea, a script, various screenplays – and transforms them into a final product [...]. Of course, intellectual property is at the origin of everything. But intellectual property alone is not enough, because it has to go through a first degree of transformation. If it is a book – or simply an idea – it must have the right artistic “translator” who knows how to make it watchable and readable to others, how to make it immediately appealing. So far we are talking about purely artistic figures: there is a need for scriptwriters, directors, writers, etc. From this point of view, if you want to compete in an international market, you know that you are competing with an infinite number of projects that have very high quality standards [...]. To access these top professionals, be they writers, screenwriters or directors, you must present them with the potential for a product that suits their levels of quality and ambition. You then have to set up a distribution chain that allows you to finance a product that will keep up with these expectations – because size matters in our business. It's true that there are artistic expressions, especially cinematographic ones, that with little money can create great surprises, but they are increasingly rare. When it comes to television, it is almost impossible for this to happen. So it's hard for the industry to manage this. Normally you have to build things up to a certain level and, depending on the project's ambition, the professional figures you must involve are different. The fundamental thing is *to what extent* a product is appealing and *who* makes it appealing (Mario Gianani, producer, Wildside/Fremantle, in Noto 2019).

Over the last ten years, then, a series of new opportunities has opened up for European producers. On one hand, the European pay networks and an array of production companies are looking to set up international co-productions for high-budget projects; on the other, SVOD services like Netflix and Prime are starting to produce original content in several European countries. So while European producers need to have greater international aspirations, over-the-top operators have an imperative to localise. The latter need productions that can give their various catalogues a more national flavour while retaining a certain global appeal. (This is also essential given the local-production quotas required under the evolving European legal framework). Netflix has launched an ambitious programme to produce high-budget original series, working with numerous production companies active especially in the premium-content arena and even with free-to-air broadcasters. Adopting a creative and production model validated on *Romanzo criminale* and *Gomorra*, in partnership with Cattleya and the Italian PSB (Rai), Netflix took a hand in the production of *Suburra* in 2017. Similarly, Amazon Prime Video joined with Tiger Aspect Productions from Endemol UK group to produce two seasons of the BBC series *Ripper Street*. In short, the international expertise gleaned from a succession of European production companies found fresh expression in “more national” (even if not “exclusively national”) terms to meet global VOD operators' specific needs, as Mario Gianani observes:

In the local territory, they [the OTT global services] want a very strong identity and presence, for instance in Italian. Actually, they do precisely the opposite of what we would expect, when we say that they will lead to the internationalization of product tastes. No, they want to follow in the Italian product's footsteps; they follow the Italian audience. Then again, Netflix has a slightly younger audience, so they make *Baby* rather than other products (Mario Gianani, producer, Wildside/Fremantle, in Noto 2019).

The array of approaches and opportunities is varied. Pay and on-demand players are operating on the European markets, working with the producers to calibrate the international ambition of the projects launched (from high-budget affairs with global hopes, like *The Young Pope* or *The Crown*, to those more oriented to a continental European horizon, such as *Babylon Berlin*, *Gomorra* or *Les Revenants*, and those with a more markedly national-centric focus, with *Suburra* or *Las chicas del cable*). In this context, the pay and subscription-based output that ramped up considerably in the 2010s has some shared traits, which the various production houses have variously sought to modulate. First of all, there is frequent demand for titles with a “cinematographic” level of artistry. From Cattleya to X Filme Creative Pool, of *Babylon Berlin* renown, and from Wildside to Kowalski Films, which is behind the Spanish offering *La zona*, many production companies have a fine cinematic pedigree, backed by artists and technicians from the film industry. This quest for cinema-like quality is reflected in the use of major international film festivals as shop windows for their premium products. (In 2016, *The Young Pope* previewed at the Venice Festival, as did *The New Pope* in 2019). European production companies with international ambitions face a second challenge, about “scouting” intellectual property at national level with potential transnational appeal. Examples include Roberto Saviano's bestselling novels *Gomorra* and *ZeroZeroZero*, Volker Kutscher's series of stories for *Babylon Berlin*, and hit films remade as series like *Les Revenants* (the Robin Campillo-directed 2004 film), or other TV products, as with *Le tunnel/The Tunnel* or the Netflix reboot of *Black Mirror*.

4. Broadcasters' Responsibilities. Commissioning across Linear and Non-Linear Platforms

The profound changes in the 2000s have affected not only fiction writing and production but also its distribution. Faced with the establishment of a broad, plentiful multichannel offering from premium TV and the on-demand platforms, fiction has played a fundamental role in all European countries' schedules. It has proved a differentiating factor in the various offerings, reaching new audiences and adding distinctive value to national television series and the many projects with international appeal or conceived with transnational circulation in mind. Broadcasting developments are accurately reflected in a significant shift in the role of those who commission, oversee and air European fiction products, operating in an increasingly wide-ranging commissioner role. The television networks, media groups and digital services used to be more in the background before and after the product life cycle was completed, making their mark on the texts through the channel brands. Once again in recent years, the premium players have driven a rethink of the entire production chain, fostering the constant active engagement of those who make the productions possible and reap the outcomes, putting the product in touch with its viewers. From this perspective, the principal and widespread tendency has been a more prominent editorial and operational role for the brands behind the offering and platform. For Canal+, HBO Europe, Movistar+, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Sky (in its various European guises) don't just host the content; they shape it, lay down procedures and set guidelines, enabling texts and products that would not be the same – or might not even exist – without them. Commissioning has a “discreet charm”, a perennial presence. The networks and platforms don't just oversee; they contribute actively to the writing and production, maintaining a constant dialogue with the other professionals involved; they manage the entire product life cycle, from conception to airing and exploiting the subsequent windows (often internationally); and they use their enduring global relationship networks both to make the project possible with suitable co-financing and to extend its life afterwards, furthering its circulation overseas and outside the pay window. In this increasingly rich and complex scenario, the commissioner carves out a key role as a link, a weaver of threads. A TV fiction product is a living creature. Working on it is a journey of unexpected twists, turns

and subtle adjustments, a constant hive of activity lasting for months, even years, an ecosystem teeming with life. And in all this, the commissioner doesn't merely exercise power; they encourage dialogue. The art of negotiation, the power of discussion, reaching agreement, persuading others, defending your opinions or changing your mind: it is all about finding the best way forward – together. The dialogue is all the more fruitful when there is mutual respect, when the group has strong personal and professional bonds, often forged in the heat of previous endeavours. Beyond formal roles, this is what often makes it possible to blur the boundaries between the various tasks, enabling everyone to broaden their experience, including in more informal ways. As HBO Europe has shown, often it is the network that spurs the group to raise the bar:

Burning Bush is an important story about Czechoslovakia. It was shot in the Czech Republic, and they didn't try to make it anywhere else or do it in English. They wanted to safeguard its identity, to make something authentic and interesting, at least for that particular audience. Yet they developed the script to be accessible for other countries too, and I think this is a very positive thing (Agnieszka Holland, director and screenwriter of *Burning Bush*, in Carini 2013, 79).

On the production side, then, the commissioner is both the hub who coordinates many different requirements (often for numerous other projects at the same time) and the driving force who seeks and enables international dialogue, exposure to others' experiences, and the quest for new audiences and new markets. To do this, the broadcaster tends not to centralise control and responsibility, preferring to act as a project leader, as head of a consortium including other networks and producers. Thus all the complexity of a contemporary series' life cycle receives due consideration, now involving several phases both on the national market (free, pay, on-demand, first run and repeats) and internationally. Transnational projects are planned out right from the start, to leverage their appeal abroad, and the broadcaster brings in production companies and creative figures who are equal to the task along with other overseas players involved to a greater or lesser extent in the result:

We are developing *Diavoli*, adapted from a book by a leading financier who made it big in the City. It is the story of high finance that controls not only the financial market but the whole world. This is a good example where the central character is Italian, the story was written by an Italian author, Guido Maria Brera, and 80% of it is set in London, with a little in the USA. It is an international product with strong Italian roots. So there is an Italian production company with an Italian writing group, supplemented by two British screenwriters who adapt the bones of the series a little, and a director who will probably be British or American (Nils Hartmann, head of original productions at Sky Italia, in Guarnaccia 2018c, 119–120).

A similar openness to the international, initially almost by chance but then with increasing conviction, can be detected on the distribution side, as commissioners look to bring their productions to full fruition. Instead of putting everything into one market only – national free-to-air (as happened for decades in the traditional model) – with premium European series there are many income streams, large and small, taking account of both the stratification provided by digital and the symbolic and economic effects of global circulation. The network of relationships (sometimes with media groups and platforms active across several markets) enables premium fiction to reach different audiences in once unheard-of ways and to acquire truly transnational scope:

If you think of a series like *Babylon Berlin*, produced by our German cousins, which is a very realistic and historically accurate portrait of 1920s Berlin, then clearly there are possibilities. Many Italians watched *Babylon Berlin* for the same reason that many German and British viewers tuned into *Gomorra*. Here we have a production model where two directors, Henk Handloegten and Achim von Borries, worked together with the series creator, Tom Tykwer, who was also the showrunner, and everyone was on the same level. Once, it was hard to imagine that a German series might be seen in Italy, but things have changed. On the contrary, plenty of Italian productions go down very well abroad (Nils Hartmann, in Guarnaccia 2018c, 129).

In their triple role as creative, production and distribution support, the European pay TV media groups and global on-demand platforms have consistently contributed to developing, honing and establishing alternative fiction models, from finance to broadcasting, which have then spread within the individual national markets and overseas. In an industry made of prototypes, where every series has to be new and different, the best way to avoid mistakes (or to make fewer of them) is to learn from the best, from those who are already making the best job of something similar under similar conditions. That applies to the ideas and storylines, the genres and formats, the authors and actors, the creative figures and professionals. So contemporary European fiction production is a continual passing of the baton, with mutual inspiration and unexpected cross-fertilisation, whether from the Danes to the British or the Italians to the Germans and, similarly, from premium pay television to the free-to-air commercial and public-service offerings. It is not just about copying, but healthy competition that enriches the national production output and feeds symbiotically off European and transnational efforts, prompting more virtuous circles, always overseen by the commissioners.

This (gradual) production and distribution metamorphosis is not without repercussions, though, including for the content and the imaginaries. A common thread in contemporary European fiction is that it is about stories, settings and characters that share some globalising and some very local traits in order to adapt to the international market and be exciting not only to national audiences but also overseas. These products are bound up with imaginaries that may sometimes be stereotyped and crude but clearly evince the specific national characteristics with the local milieu and lifestyles. It is primarily the crime genre, in this context, that offers a common perspective with internationally recognisable themes, and provides room for personalising national elements and rethinking the local identity. And adaptations of novels, films and news stories, investment in major authors and actors, a careful shaping of the visual and aural style, and well-constructed dialogue and settings also help to connote the standard of an offering.

Over and above the themes common to the fiction circulating abroad as ready-made, though, the need to appeal to global audiences and stakeholders also entails a clear divergence of approach, as the ingredients of a mainstream national hit seldom work over the border. On one hand, then, premium titles – and ultimately all series in general – go for a “cosmopolitan generalism”, with just a few titles, big names, big budgets and broad appeal. On the other, other fiction productions settle for a smaller national audience share in a prized niche profiled and appealing to investors, as the commissioners look to augment these ratings with similar viewer groups abroad. For these are products for a tightly defined audience, echoing an US aesthetic tempered by a national flavour – or, even more often, by a British and Nordic *koine* that can elicit broad interest. And in between these polar opposites, there is huge scope for an array of nuances:

You have got to do something different, something rooted in a local culture but with global reach. It may seem rather a stupid word, but ultimately what sums this all up best is *glocal*. If you think of the European hit titles in recent years, they all have this trait, from *The Bureau* to *Les Revenants* to *Babylon Berlin* to *Deutschland 83*. They are all products that took a very local happening and made it into a global success (Scrosati 2018).

Aiming for the global market, then, helps to bridge the gap that has long separated the various European national outputs, making them weaker than and different from their US counterpart. If the texts, stories, writing and production processes change, then the production/distribution models and the broadcasters' goals must change too. And having an ever-stronger relationship with other European partners helps:

I see three kinds of product. An entirely local kind of fiction with only local promotion resources and a low budget. An event-product, where the brands are strong enough to attract ample resources across several markets: the audience is not niche; the series raises the network's profile; it's exclusive to you. The third kind is trickier: you have one investor but you need to find others on the market to fill the gap. We are trying to develop this direction, with products with a kind of language that goes down well abroad too (Daniele Cesarano, showrunner, *Romanzo criminale* and *Suburra*, then Mediaset commissioner, in Barra 2018c, 58–59).

In recent years, although the process is still under way, two contrasting ways of managing the work are coming together (and quite often clashing). In one corner is the centralised approach typical, for example, of the early days of the big global on-demand groups like Netflix and Amazon, which preferred to maintain strong oversight from the US even for their initial European productions, often drawing on what had already worked in the pay world. In the other is the localisation network model, where the big European groups use local management teams that talk to each other and are largely independent within a framework of supervision and shared guidelines. As with the content, so with the television commissioning and management models: the global ends up encountering the national in a variety of nuanced hybrids according to the companies' habits and favoured approaches.

To conclude, both the analysis of the state of play in premium European fiction production over a ten-year period (and in the immediately preceding and ensuing years) and the description of some shared across-the-board strategies for writing, production and commissioning clearly reveal all the complexity of a still evolving scenario that is seeking a stable model, while also needing to reckon with a much changed and continually evolving media and television environment. Both in single European countries and in shared transnational projects, in premium fiction (and thus, to a greater extent, in the rest of the audiovisual sector, too) authorship is increasingly plural, shared and multi-layered. A truly collective work inevitably has many authors, and on projects that can run for years there will be many people who can have a say. Depending on where the emphasis is placed – the “authorial signature” or the budget, the writing quality or the visual style, the production company house habits or the uniformity of offering across networks and platforms – plenty of evidence emerges in favour of each suspect. The authorial factor is a way to simplify a collective project. A creative work that is always collegiate, never individual, is therefore a fundamentally shared process. There is a single vision, of course, but there are also several stakeholders. At least in spirit, contemporary premium European fiction is a field where all the players are striving to put themselves in the others' shoes, to understand their respective needs. For the screenwriter, director, producer, and commissioner are the vertices of a structure that can take various forms, always with a shared aim in mind. And this dearly won yet fruitful harmony has brought about a European renaissance.

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