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**Drama without drama:  
The late rise of scripted TV formats**

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**Abstract:**

This article revisits the history of TV formats - concepts of TV shows that are licensed for local adaptations – focusing on scripted entertainment. While the TV format revolution of the 1990s bypassed scripted formats, they have been catching up in recent years. This paper analyses both the reasons for this late rise and the factors behind the recent growth. It argues that the adaptation of scripted formats is more complex and risks remain higher than for other genres. The underlying economics of their production and distribution also differs from non-scripted formats. Stars came together when demand for drama increased worldwide, Hollywood studios began to mine their catalogues, new exporters and scripted genres emerged, and knowledge transfer techniques improved. Finally, this paper analyses the significance of the rise of scripted entertainment in the global TV format trading system.

**Keywords:**

Global television; Hollywood; scripted entertainment; transnational television;  
TV formats; TV genres

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**Introduction**

The history of TV formats - concepts of TV shows that are licensed for local adaptations - is now well documented. It has been established that the TV format trade started in the early 1950s and trudged along in the ensuing decades.

Formatting remained a practice confined to the fringes of the TV industry and, with a few notable exceptions, was restricted to a single genre: game shows. Most of them flew from the USA to the rest of the world and no more than a handful of firms were involved in this trade. In the late 1990s, the scheduling needs of fledgling TV channels and broadcasters across the world, the emergence of an independent TV production sector, and the global success of four ‘super-formats’ (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Idols*) all combined to make the trade explode. The number of formats in circulation grew exponentially, as did the number of countries they travelled to and the number of companies that distributed and produced them. The format business became a multibillion-dollar industry, growing to an estimated €2.1 billion per year between 2002 and 2004, and €3.1 billion between 2006 and 2008. The 2002/04 study counted 259 formats leading to 1,310 adaptations and 31,397 hours of formatted programming, while 445 formats led to 1,262 adaptations and a total of 54,383 hours in 2006/08 (Bisson *et al.* 2005, 11; Chalaby 2012a, FRAPA 2009, 8-13; Moran 1998, 2006, 2013a).

This article revisits this history focusing on TV formats in scripted entertainment. Formats that travel with a script are distinguished from those for

unscripted shows and cover a broad range of serials (including soaps and telenovelas) and a wide spectrum of TV genres, from drama and comedy to constructed reality programming. While the turn-of-century revolution bypassed scripted formats, their number has risen sharply lately; this article identifies and analyzes both the causes behind their late rise and their recent popularity. Among the factors that retarded the growth of scripted formats, it is argued that their adaptation is more complex than for other genres. The knowledge transfer cannot be as perfunctory as with formulaic formats and the reception of scripted entertainment being always uncertain, the risk remains substantial. The underlying economics of scripted formats also differs from those in non-scripted genres: scripted shows are the most expensive to produce and thus the investment needs to be recouped with finished tape sales before the format rights can be released. The last factor is organizational in scope, as it took a while for drama and comedy departments to get used to the idea of reproducing a recipe coming from abroad. The stars aligned for scripted formats when the number of drama buyers increased (particularly in the USA), Hollywood studios began to sell the remake rights of their global TV series, new format exporters and scripted genres emerged, and knowledge transfer techniques improved. This article aims to provide an analytical overview of the scripted format trade, focusing both on the causes and consequences of its late and sudden growth.

### **Scripted formats before the TV format revolution**

Although scripted adaptations were not uncommon in the era of sound broadcasting (see below), game shows prevailed in the first five decades of the TV format trade.

Most of these shows were American with titles such as *The Price is Right* and *The Wheel of Fortune* travelling widely (Cooper-Chen 1994; Moran 1998). Scripted formats, which were few and far between, were of two sorts: sitcoms and soaps.

The UK emerged as an early source of travelling scripts. In the late 1950s, Associated London Scripts, probably the first British independent TV production company, was headed by secretary-turned-director Beryl Vertue. Representing her writers' rights when selling series to the BBC, she began crossing out the contract clauses about foreign sales, correctly predicting that the BBC was not interested in selling them abroad (Vertue interview 2011). Not always being able to sell her shows as finished programme it later occurred to her that she could use these international rights and get broadcasters to make their own productions. Vertue first travelled to Germany, where she sold the remake rights of a Peter Yeldham play in 1960. The script of *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC Television, 1956-60) was acquired by a Finnish broadcaster the following year, and her first success came with a local adaptation of *Steptoe and Son* (BBC 1, 1962-74) in Holland in 1963 (ibid.).

Other European deals followed, notably in Sweden, but Vertue had set her heart on America. She had a pilot of *Steptoe and Son* made for NBC in the mid-1960s, which she qualified as 'quite dreadful' and subsequently not picked by the US network (Vertue 2011). Her breakthrough American hit came with *Till Death Us Do Part*. The BBC series (1965-75) could not be sold as a finished programme because of the Cockney accent and the local nature of the bigotries and prejudices the protagonists displayed. She settled for an adaptation and sold a format licence to CBS (ibid.). The sitcom was turned into *All in the Family* by Norman Lear and premiered in January 1971. It stayed on air until April 1979 and, as is well

documented, became one of the most successful and influential series in the history of US television (McNeil 1996, 26). Even the spin-off shows, *Maude* (CBS, 1972-8) and *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-9) traveled back to the UK where they were adapted as *Nobody's Perfect* (ITV, 1980) and *The Fosters* (ITV, 1976-7) respectively (Potter 2008, 51). On the back of *Till Death*, Vertue managed to sell the rights of *Steptoe and Son*, and the adaptation *Sanford and Son* debuted in January 1972 on NBC (ibid).

Allan McKeown, another British producer who worked for long stretches of his career in the USA, recalled doing 'a US pilot or series of just about every show [he] had done in the UK' (in Baker 1996, 25). McKeown's US remakes include *Birds of a Feather* (BBC 1, 1989-98) (*Stand By Your Man*, Fox, 1992) and *Porridge* (BBC 1, 1974-7), and pilots of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (ITV, 1983-6), *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 2, 1975-9), *Girls on Top* (ITV, 1985-6) and *Nightingales* (Channel 4, 1990-3) (ibid.).

In addition to British independents, the second source of scripted formats became the Sidney-based Grundy Organization. Grundy was an Antipodean production company that initially specialized in formatted game shows but took two Australian soaps to market, *The Restless Years* and *Sons and Daughters*, in the late 1980s. *The Restless Years* led to two long-standing adaptations that air to this day: *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* [*Good Times, Bad Times*] started on RTL in the Netherlands in 1990, and a German version, also on a local RTL channel, followed two years later. Attempts to sell adaptations in the USA and France were unsuccessful (Moran 1998, 56, 62). In all, six local versions of *Sons and Daughters* were produced (Moran 1998, 109; 2013b, 189-93).

## **TV genres and the TV format revolution**

During the TV format revolution, the fastest growing genre became reality programming (being understood as a broad category which includes talent competitions and factual entertainment shows such as makeover, coaching, life swap, etc.). Indeed, three of the four ‘super-formats’ (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Idols*) that helped bring about this revolution were reality programmes (Bazalgette 2005, Chalaby 2011, Esser 2013, Moran 2013a). In the early 2000s, game shows still constituted broadly two thirds of traded TV formats, reality less than a third and scripted only 6.6 per cent (Rodrigue 2007). Later in the decade, the percentage of game shows dropped to less than a third, while reality programming continued its inexorable march with more than 50 per cent of formatted episodes. It is at this stage only that the proportion of scripted adaptations among TV formats doubled to almost 15 per cent, representing a total of 8,941 adapted episodes in 2008 (Frapa 2009, 20).

This data set is among the latest available, but evidence suggests that scripted formats have pursued their upward trend in recent years. The following section attempts to explain why the turn-of-century TV format boom initially bypassed scripted entertainment.

## **Understanding the late rise of scripted formats**

Several reasons explain the delayed growth of scripted formats. First, scripted shows are among the most difficult to adapt, not least because of the complexity of the knowledge transfer. Across all unscripted genres, format buyers have access to full consulting packages that teach them all they need to know in order to duplicate



the show successfully. This includes detailed production bibles which can run to hundreds of pages and that contain information about run-throughs, budgets, scripts, set designs, graphics, casting procedures, host profile, the selection of contestants, and every other possible aspect associated with the show's production (e.g. European Broadcasting Union 2005). Buyers also have access to consultant producers who travel to oversee the production of the early shows and remain accessible via emails or over the phone once gone. Leading brands such as *Dancing With the Stars* and *The Bachelor* even organize international conferences for local licencees (Paice interview 2012). All in all, once an unscripted show has crossed a few borders, the transfer of expertise is extensive and the concept has been honed to perfection. Every flaw has been ironed out and every shortcut and saving has been squeezed out of the production process.

Although the knowledge transfer for scripted shows has improved over recent years (see below), the process cannot be as perfunctory as in other genres. 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 the mere translation of the script, does not suffice to make a show palatable to local viewers. Any scripted adaptation must go beyond copycat television and re-actualize the script for a new audience. More than for any other genre, a scripted adaptation is a new performance that 'interprets, actualizes, and redefines the format' in order to make it work in a new cultural context (Navarro 2012, 25). 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. The local production team must combine knowledge of the principles of script-

writing with an understanding of the show's vision and core values. This complexity explains why TV executives have long been hesitant about commissioning scripted formats, why success can remain elusive for scripted adaptations, why several attempts may be needed to re-version a script,<sup>1</sup> and why some comedies that are TV classics in their countries of origin never travel (e.g. *Fawlty Towers*, see below).

The entire premise of the TV format trade hinges on two benefits: cost effectiveness and risk management. Formats enable broadcasters to bring down costs by taking out the expenses involved with the development of a new show. This is realized with the delivery of a ready-made script that in all likelihood has taken a few years to develop, and the delivery of a method of production through the transfer of expertise. Above all, TV formats enable broadcasters to manage risk, as they acquire them on the basis of their ratings track record. Today's leading unscripted formats effortlessly pass the mark of 20 local adaptations and potential buyers can peruse ratings data that detail the show's performance in a large array of territories, scheduling scenarios, channels and audiences, before committing themselves. Although drama buyers turn to foreign scripts because it remains easier and cheaper to remake something they can see on tape, they take more risk than with any other genre. Whereas it can virtually be guaranteed that a game show with decent ratings in 20 territories will do well in the next ten markets, the reception of drama, even when formatted, is always difficult to predict. Not only does drama need to resonate more deeply than unscripted shows with which viewers may only engage with superficially, but success is more dependent on critical reception. In addition, the international ratings history is of less relevance, as scripted shows

never travel as extensively and rarely acquire an unblemished ratings record.

Second, trade in scripted entertainment has traditionally been dominated by finished programming. It is a sizeable business worth an estimated \$8 billion per year and dominated by six Hollywood heavyweights: Warner Bros, Twentieth Century Fox, Disney Media Distribution, CBS Studios International, NBC Universal and Sony Pictures Television (Guider 2013). These companies have long feared that formats might jeopardize their tape sales and, with the exception of Sony, their interest in the trade is recent (see below).

The last factor is organizational in scope. The TV format trade has traditionally been dominated by game shows, a daytime genre long perceived – even within the TV industry - as devoid of artistic merit and character. Game show producers never enjoyed much artistic independence and thus easily consented to re-produce pre-established formulas coming from abroad. Scripted entertainment entails authorship and drama/comedy producers and writers enjoy more autonomy and creative freedom (Nohr interview 2013). Thus the idea of importing a foreign concept remained incongruous in drama and comedy departments for longer than elsewhere. American broadcasters which, as seen above, have long adapted British scripts, are an exception to the rule. This is probably due to the fact that US scripts are developed by tables of writers, who thus have long been used to working on ideas that are not theirs. However, as the success of a scripted adaptation strongly depends on the local production team, broadcasters everywhere have no choice but to rely on a crew who purchase into a project and believe in it (Taffner Jr. interview 2013).

## **Out of the woods at last: the scripted format boom**

Data presented above and forthcoming evidence suggest that, since the mid-2000s, scripted adaptations are on the rise both in absolute number and in terms of percentage of trade formats. This section analyzes the causes and consequences of this growth.

### *Growth of US demand*

The premier factor is the sizeable expansion of the US market for drama. The overall demand for scripts has sharply increased in America because new players have developed an interest in scripted genres, joining the traditional purveyors of drama, the US networks. Following in the footsteps of HBO, fledgling cable channels such as AMC, Bravo, FX, Pivot, Showtime and TLC have been ordering series in order to get hold of exclusive content (see White 2013). In addition, subscription-based video-on-demand (SVoD) platforms such as Lovefilm.com and Netflix have also begun to order their own series.

For all these new players, scripted content is crucially important as TV series and movies only have enough pulling power to help them build their brand and make them distinctive, even more so if this content is exclusive. In the case of the SVoD platforms, only scripted content can justify a monthly subscription fee and the original series they commission act as marketing tools (see Kanter, Wiseman and White 2014). Faced with this renewed competition, the US networks themselves have been forced to increase their investment in scripted genres. Overseas scripted shows come in handy for US buyers who not only need more scripts but stronger ones. Indeed, while new content aggregators have boosted

demand, they have also intensified the competition for viewers. In such circumstances, all have turned to foreign scripts in order to get hold of solid concepts likely to sustain the interest of fickle audiences.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013 alone, Netflix commissioned its own version of *House of Cards*, originally a BBC 1 political thriller (1990-5), AMC produced *Low Winter Sun*, also a BBC 1 drama (2006), HBO opted for yet another BBC 1 drama, *Criminal Justice* (2008-09), and ABC Family looked further afield for *Chasing Life*, a Mexican series about terminal illness (*Terminales*, Channel 5 – Televisa, 2008) (Waller 2013).

The five networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and The CW) are showing mounting interest in scripted formats (Table 1). Every year they pilot scripted shows, out of which they pick about a third for the first season. 88 pilots were ordered for the 2011-12 season, 91 for 2012-13, 104 for 2013-14, and 100 for 2014-15, twelve more than three seasons ago despite the recent tendency of bypassing pilot production (Berman 2013, Waller 2012, 2014, White 2014). Table 1 shows that formats - both in absolute numbers and in proportion to the overall number of pilots and pilots commissioned into first season - are steadily growing. Formats passed from three among 37 new series in the 2012-13 season (8.8 per cent), five for 45 series in the following season (11.1 per cent) to six for 51 new series in the 2014-15 season (11.8 percent).

Table 1: Scripted formats ordered by US networks, titles and origin, 2012-15

	2012-13 season	2013-14 season	2014-15 season
ABC	<p>US remake: <i>Mistresses</i> Original: <i>Mistresses</i> UK/BBC 1/2008-10</p> <p>US remake: <i>Family Tools</i> Original: <i>White Van Man</i> UK/BBC 3/2011-12</p> <p>US remake: <i>Red Widow</i> Original: <i>Penzoza</i> Holland/KRO/2010-12</p>	<p>US remake: <i>Killer Women</i> Original: <i>Mujeres Asesinas</i> Argentina/Canal 13/2005-08</p> <p>US remake: <i>Lucky 7</i> Original: <i>The Syndicate</i> UK/BBC 1/2012-present</p>	<p>US remake: <i>Secrets and Lies</i> Original: <i>Secrets and Lies</i> Australia/Network Ten/2014-present</p>
CBS	/	<p>US remake: <i>Hostages</i> Original: <i>Hostages</i> Israel/Channel 10/2013</p>	/
FOX	/	<p>US remake: <i>US &amp; Them</i> Original: <i>Gavin &amp; Stacey</i> UK/BBC 3/2007-10</p>	<p>US remake: <i>Red Band Society</i> Original: <i>Polseres Vermelles</i> Spain/TV 3/2011-13</p> <p>US remake: <i>Gracepoint</i> Original: <i>Broadchurch</i> UK/ITV 1/2013 - present</p>
NBC	/	/	<p>US remake: <i>The Mysteries of Laura</i> Original: <i>Los Misterios de Laura</i> Spain/TVE/2009-14</p> <p>US remake : <i>Allegiance</i> Original : <i>The Gordin Cell</i> Israel/Yes!/2012</p>
The CW	/	<p>US remake: <i>The Tomorrow People</i> Original: <i>The Tomorrow People</i> UK/ITV/1973-9</p>	<p>US remake: <i>Jane the Virgin</i> Original: <i>Juana la Virgen</i> Venezuela/RCTV/2002</p>

Ever since Vertue's foray into the American market, US broadcasters have aired 119 scripted format adaptations, most of them originating from the UK (Waller 2014). British sitcoms that crossed the Atlantic includes Thames TV's *George and Mildred* (ITV, 1976-9) (*The Ropers*, ABC, 1979-80), *Miss Jones and Son* (ITV, 1977-8) (*Miss Winslow and Son*, CBS, 1979), *Keep It in the Family* (ITV, 1980-3) (*Too Close for Comfort*, ABC, 1980-3) and *Trippler's Day* (ITV, 1984) (*Check it Out!*, USA Network, 1988); LWT's *Two's Company* (ITV, 1975-9) (*The Two Of Us*, CBS, 1981-2) and *Mind Your Language* (ITV, 1977-86) (*What A Country!*, syndicated, 1986-7); and BBC's *Dear John* (1986-7) (*Dear John*, NBC, 1988-92) (Baker 1996; Potter 2008, 52; Taffner Jr. 2013). Some recent adaptations, in addition to those in Table 1, include *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-13) picked by Showtime in January 2011, *Skins* (E4, 2007-13) and *The Inbetweeners* (E4, 2008-10), both airing on MTV in 2011 and 2012 respectively.

In half-a-century of British imports, three adaptations became undisputed hits: *All in the Family*, Thames TV's *Man About the House* (ITV, 1973-6), which was turned into *Three's Company* for ABC (1977-88) and *The Office* (2005-13), whose nine seasons on NBC far exceeded those shown on BBC 2 (2001-03). Illustrious casualties, however, count *Ab Fab*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Life on Mars* and *The Vicar of Dibley* (Jackson 2012; Potter 2008, 52; Taffner Jr. 2013; Waller 2007).

The contrasting fortunes of these adaptations demonstrate that scripted formats do not afford risk management levels comparable to those offered by unscripted ones. In fact, US networks' worst performing series in autumn 2013 was a remake of *The Syndicate*, ABC experiencing a 55 per cent rating drop between *Lucky 7* and the show it replaced (Andreeva 2013).<sup>3</sup> Competition, though, forces broadcasters to

accept these risks, and the rewards for getting scripted content right is higher than in any other genre.

Inevitably, however, US content aggregators began to diversify their sources and adapt scripts from other territories. Two noted adaptations announced this trend and encouraged US broadcasters to mine new territories for intellectual property. *Yo Soy Betty, la fea*, Fernando Gaitàn's telenovela (RCN TV, 1991-2001) was adapted into *Ugly Betty* for ABC in 2006. The US version stayed on air for four years (85 episodes), sold in multiple territories and inspired its own local adaptations. In 2008, HBO aired *In Treatment*, a remake of *BeTipul*, an Israeli psychology drama, which won critical acclaim, was re-commissioned for three seasons and re-versioned in other HBO territories. In addition to an increasing number of scripted formats from Israel, Latin America and Scandinavia (see below), US broadcasters are ordering remakes from countries that had never sold them a scripted format, including Austria (ORF's *Fast Forward*, for CBS), Croatia (*Rest in Peace*, for Lionsgate), Spain (*The Mysteries of Laura*, for NBC), Norway (*Mammon*, a conspiracy thriller, for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television and Chernin Entertainment) and Turkey (*The End*, for Fox).

Conversely, British series are locally produced in an increasing number of markets. *The Office* (BBC 2, 2001-03) has been made in nine countries so far, and *Doc Martin*, the ITV series (2004-present), has reached its sixth adaptation in 2012 (Jackson interview 2012). *Yes Minister*, a BBC comedy about political life (BBC 2, 1980-88), has been re-versioned in India, Turkey, the Netherlands and the Ukraine.



### *Hollywood awakes*

While the USA is adapting scripts in growing numbers, it has also emerged as the world's second largest supplier of scripted formats (Waller 2014). This evolution was caused by a change of heart from the Hollywood studios which, as Paul Torre notes, have had to respond to trends that threaten their business model (Torre 2012, 181). Chief among these threats is the rise in local TV production and the emergence of strong regional production centres (Australia, Turkey, etc.) which have combined to slow down the global demand for US finished series. Although the big studios were reluctant at first to exploit their format rights, the inexorable rise in the demand for local programming led them to revise their assumptions and start mining their vast catalogues.

Sony Pictures Television was the only studio to anticipate the demand for local production and has been selling scripted formats since the turn of the century. Its most widely adapted title is the sitcom *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-9), which has been re-versioned in ten territories. More recently, *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005) was adapted in Holland, Israel, Russia and the Middle East (Pickard, 2011). Other adaptations include *Married With Children* (Israel) *King of Queens* (Russia) and *Rules of Engagement* (Poland) (see also Torre 2012, 189-90).

The other studios have followed suit. Within a few years, NBC Universal has cleared the format rights of series such as *Kojak*, *Magnum PI* and *Emergency Room*, and allowed adaptations of *Queer Eye* and *Meet My Folks*. It is, however, the franchise *Law & Order* that proved most popular with TV buyers. One of the longest-running US crime series (it reached 20 seasons in its final year on NBC in 2010) has seen adaptations in Russia (NTV, 2007), France (*Paris enquêtes*

*criminelles*, TF1, 2007-08), the UK (*Law & Order: UK*, ITV, 2009-present), and South Africa in 2012 (*Law & Order: Cape Town*) (Waller 2006).

CBS Studios International has put up for sale the format rights of more than 20 titles, including four sitcoms that span half-a-century: *I Love Lucy* (1950s), *The Honeymooners* (1950s), *The Odd Couple* (1970s) and *Caroline In The City* (1990s). Recent deals include *Cheers*, sold to Spain (Brzoznowski 2012).

Twentieth Century Fox Television's *Prison Break* (Fox, 2005-09) was adapted by Channel One in Russia, and *24* (Fox, 2001-10) was re-made in India on a big budget. Fox sold four titles to Russian broadcasters in 2012 alone: *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX, 2005-present), *Bones* (Fox, 2005-present), *Tru Calling* (Fox, 2003-05), and *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox, 2000-06) (Brzoznowski 2012).

Walt Disney was equally slow to enter the scripted format market but immediately struck gold with *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-12). Echoing some of the narrative techniques and themes of telenovelas, *Desperate Housewives* resonated particularly strongly with Latin American audiences where three adaptations were made (Argentina, Columbia/Ecuador and Brazil). In 2008 Univision, the Spanish-language US network, produced its own version, and three years later a Turkish series was made (Brzoznowski 2012). A sixth local version, *Desperate Housewives Africa* was announced in Nigeria in summer 2013. Other Disney series that were adapted include *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present) in Mexico, and *Revenge* (ABC, 2011-present) in Turkey.

Warner Bros. International Television Production was only established in 2009. The London-based division has tried to make up for lost time since by acquiring large European TV production companies. In the scripted space, *Nip/Tuck* (FX,

2003-10) was turned into a telenovela in Columbia, *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-12) became *Gossip Girl Acapulco* in Latin America, and *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-7) was adapted in Turkey (Zein 2014).

Hollywood studios entered the scripted format market belatedly and almost reluctantly, anxious as they were of hurting their finished programming sales. Although they have not thrown caution to the wind (see below), the size of their catalogue, combined with their international footprint and annual output, guarantee them a strong presence in the market for years to come.

### *Emerging territories*

The trade in scripted formats is booming because new suppliers are emerging and have begun to make their mark on the trade. As South Korea remakes Japanese dramas and Latin American telenovelas are adapted in China or Russia, the scripted format business has expanded but also become more multifaceted and diverse. From New Zealand came *Outrageous Fortune*, a comedy that was remade in the UK for ITV (*Honest*, 2008) and the USA for ABC (*Scoundrels*, 2010). A version of Radio-Canada's *Les Invincibles* (2005) was made in France for Arte in 2008. From Holland came *Penoza* which, as seen above, aired as *Red Widow* on ABC in 2013. A few scripted formats have also emerged from Italy, with Mediaset selling format packages for about 40 titles. Recent deals include adaptations of sitcom *Casa Vianello* [*Young Enough*] (Canale 5, 1988-2006) in Serbia, Portugal, Croatia and Turkey, and local remakes of soap opera *Vivere* [*Living*] (Canale 5, 1999-present) in Greece, Portugal and Poland (Fry 2013; Mediaset 2014).

Although the UK remains the leading supplier of scripted formats (Waller

2014), two new export territories have attracted attention: Scandinavia and Israel. Following success as finished programmes, many series of the ‘Scandi-wave’ are being re-versioned. *Wallander* (TV4, 2005-present), a Swedish crime series, was remade for the BBC (BBC 1, 2008-10), and Danish broadcaster DR’s *Forbrydelsen* [*The Killing*] (DR1, 2007) was adapted by Fox Television Studios and Fuse Entertainment for AMC in 2011 (Koranteng 2012). *Bron* [*The Bridge*] (SVT1, DR1, 2011-present), originally from Sweden and Denmark, has been adapted in the USA by Shine America and FX (FX, 2013-present) and in the UK and France as *The Tunnel* (Sky Atlantic and Canal Plus, 2013). Finally, a US version of Danish drama series *Park Road* (TV2, 2009) was being produced for US network NBC in 2013.

Israeli production houses have also developed a strong presence in this market. It began with *BeTipul* [*In Treatment*] which has been re-versioned in 14 territories since HBO aired the US remake. Following a few other adaptations and US projects that never came to fruition,<sup>4</sup> the next big hit was Keshet’s drama *Hatufim* [*Prisoners of War*] which is being adapted in four territories and whose US version, *Homeland*, which aired on Showtime, sold around the world.

Both Scandinavia and Israel have found a space in the scripted format trade, yet their approaches differ. As the Israeli market is too small to enable production companies to scale up, the Israelis are investing in an industry whose job is to tell stories that sell worldwide. Scandi-dramas are primarily aimed at a local audience and find success in that portrait. The sole ambition of Lars Blomgren, *The Bridge*’s Swedish producer, was to create a co-production that would also work in Denmark (while Swedish broadcasters bought Danish series and put them on prime time, the

Danish never bought anything from Sweden). The first *Bridge* told a story about two local police forces working across their borders, and it was only later discovered that it can be re-told in all countries that share interesting borders (Blomgren interview 2014).

Israeli producers are adept at putting all the chances on their side. Their initial budgets being low, their series can be remade on a small budget, ensuring a record number of adaptations for *BeTipul*. Israeli producers tend to be flexible and allow buyers any change they like as long as they understand the essence of the show. Keshet, for instance, let the US producers transform a family drama (*Hatufim*) to be transformed into an action series (*Homeland*).

While Scandinavian producers might prove equally accommodating, it is far from being the case across the industry, with the Hollywood studios being the least flexible. Andrew Zein, a senior executive at Warner Bros. International Television Production, recently stated that ‘The overall design concept of a scripted format is something that WBITVP takes very seriously. Our clients have to embrace the original design elements, including costumes, make-up, locations and studio set’ (in Stephens 2014, 298).

#### *New formatted genres: telenovelas and scripted reality*

Adaptations in telenovelas and scripted reality programming are bolstering the volume of scripted formats in circulation. Not taking telenovelas into account would leave unexplained the fact that Argentina has become the world’s third largest supplier of scripted formats (Waller 2014). Novelas were among the very first programmes to be translated in the sound broadcasting era and several Cuban

scripts for *radionovelas* travelled across Latin America in the 1940s and 50s. The trade was initiated by US advertising agencies interested in generating audiences for their clients and, as Joseph Straubbhaar argues, the telenovela genre is in itself a transnational proto-format that was engineered through a process of hybridization that blended a ‘base genre’ (the US soap) with local ‘traditions of serial fiction’ (Rivero 2009; Straubhaar 2012: 150-1).

In the television era, the telenovela industry developed in Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela, and soon these serials dominated the prime time schedules of broadcasters across Latin America. It was in the late 1980s that telenovelas began to be exported to other world regions (Mato 2005, 426). Albeit sparsely appearing on broadcasters’ schedules in developed markets, telenovelas have found viewers in great numbers in developing countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central and Southeast Asia (Biltreyst and Meers 2000, Mato 2005). Until the early 2000s, telenovelas exports consisted entirely of finished tapes, but scripts have progressively become popular with local broadcasters eager to develop their local production capabilities and respond to viewers’ preference for local content.

The game changer was *Yo soy Betty, la fea* [*Ugly Betty*] (McCabe and Akass 2013). Written by Fernando Gaitán, *Betty* aired on Canal RCN in Columbia between 1999 and 2001. It was an immediate hit and the series was picked up and adapted by neighbouring broadcasters. In 2006 ABC broadcast an US-made version produced by Reveille and Touchstone TV, confirming the soap’s status as a global phenomenon. By 2013, *Ugly Betty* had aired in more than 90 countries and at least 20 versions had been made (Gaitán 2010, Miller 2010).

Latin American media firms have since adapted their business model, adding formats units to complement their ready-made sales. Early movers include Caracol of Colombia, Telefe of Argentina, Televisa of Mexico and Venevisión of Venezuela, while TV Globo started its format business in 2009. These units' involvement varies from contract to contract, from simple script sales with experienced broadcasters to the full consulting package for those who are new to the genre. In a few instances, telenovela producers move further in the value chain by coproducing the series with broadcasters (Wasserman interview 2012).

Caracol Internacional's titles have been adapted 30 times so far, including the popular *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* [*Without Breasts There Is No Paradise*] (Caracol TV, Colombia, 2006) and *Vecinos* [*Neighbours*] (Caracol TV, 2008-09). Telefe International's scripts have passed 100 adaptations, with *Los Roldán* [*The Roldans*] (Telefe, Argentina, 2004-05), *Hermanos y Detectives* [*Brothers and Detectives*] (Telefe, 2006), and *Montecristo* (Telefe, 2006) exceeding ten versions each. Outside Latin America, the key markets for telenovela remakes are Central and Eastern Europe (particularly Poland and Russia), Asia, and Spanish-speaking USA (Franks 2013, Waller 2010).

Telenovelas have begun to be adapted for the English-speaking US market, the latest example being The CW's *Jane The Virgin* (Table 1). As demand is expected to grow, Televisa has opened a studio in LA and NBC Universal is developing English-language versions of shows that first aired on its local Spanish networks (Middleton 2014).

Constructed reality is an emerging genre that borrows story-telling techniques from soap opera and documentary, and broadly consists in shooting 'real' people in

managed situations and structured scenarios. Not all the genre's exponents use scripts. In the Anglo-American variant, producers construct settings but dialogues and story lines remain driven by 'real' characters. Genre highlights include MTV's *Jersey Shore* (2009-12), *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV 2, 2010-present), and *Made in Chelsea* (E4, 2011-present) (Woods 2014).

The second variant was pioneered by German TV production companies and involves the loose reconstruction of real-life events including distressing family incidents, crimes, murders, or court cases. These shows are based on scenarios played out by 'ordinary' people (who may not have necessarily been involved in these cases) and who follow a script in order to deliver the story. For instance, *Das Strafgericht* [*Criminal Court*] (RTL, 2002-present) and *Betrugsfälle* [*Wham Bam Scam*] (RTL, 2010-present), two constructed reality formats sold by Global Screen, a German distributor, have been picked by broadcasters in a variety of European countries (Smitherman 2013). The most widely distributed formats are those of Filmpool, an MME Moviement company, itself part of All3Media. 2,600 episodes of constructed reality shows such as *Zwei bei Kallwass* [*Two with Kallwass*] (Sat.1, 2001-13), *Verdachtsfälle* [*Cases of Doubt*] (RTL, 2009-present) and *Familien im Brennpunkt* [*Families at the Crossroads*] (RTL, 2009-present) have been produced in Europe so far (All3Media 2014; Brzoznowski 2013).

Telenovelas and constructed reality programmes may not be the most prominent genres but they matter in terms of volume and their transnational adaptations play a big part in the growth of the scripted format trade.



### **Improved knowledge transfer**

As noted above, scripted formats cannot be reproduced as mechanistically as concepts from other genres. Dramas and comedies are culturally sensitive and do not rely on format points and structures that can be duplicated in a routine fashion. There are always cases of game show rules having to be amended to fit a particular culture and scripts that are translated word-for-word, but as a general rule scripts need more adaptation than unscripted entertainment. While only the structures of unscripted shows travel, every word and scene of a drama needs to sound right to a local audience. Even if, in the best of cases, these modifications are cosmetic, the full package needs adaptation, including shoot locations, casting, costumes, and so on. As local versions of scripted shows tend to differ more from one another than in other genres, lessons learnt in a territory may not apply elsewhere.

Furthermore, in contrast to game shows for which knowledge transfer mechanisms (production bibles and flying producers) were routinized as early as the 1970s, until recently support practices were not as set for script buyers. Once in possession of the script, the latter could be left to their own devices. Without guidelines about what made the format work, many scripts ended up being dismembered by local broadcasters. Vertue remembers how US producers tried to do *Fawlty Towers* without malice between Sybil and Basil, and *Ab Fab* without the drugs and the drinking (Vertue interview 2011). She recollects her first attempt to adapt *Steptoe and Son*:

They hadn't understood what made *Steptoe and Son* work in the first place, what was the core of it? This love/hate relationship between the father, and

son, who the son who wanted to break away, but somehow couldn't and the father who stopped him, and they didn't really understand that, and so this pilot they were in really a lovely place they lived in and they didn't have a horse and cart, they had a van, which is fine, but I said to them I don't know why he wants to leave, it's lovely here, you know, where they lived and everything. And so it didn't get picked for series, but it made me myself think I must not do this again, I must only sell it when I can find the person who I think can see what makes it work, and so I put it in a drawer and I thought one day I'll do it, I'll get it out again (Vertue interview 2011).

The knowledge transfer has improved over recent years and has been catching up with practices common in other genres. Buyers receive more support from consultant producers and production bibles have expanded; they get both a story line *and* a method of production. Today's bibles can detail the series' premise and showrunner's vision of the original series (what is the story about), and include information about key characters, story drivers and dynamics, down to the shooting schedule. It is also increasingly common to see the original creative team included in a consulting package, enabling the adaptation team to hold conversations with the writer and/or producer of the original series (Jackson interview 2012, Nohr interview 2013, Stephens 2014).

Although knowledge transfer mechanisms have been improved by large distributors with a reputation to protect, scripted formats are even better handled when kept in-house by international production companies with facilities in multiple territories. Over recent years, Hollywood studios including Warner Bros.,

NBC Universal and Sony, and TV production super-groups such as FremantleMedia, ITV Studios, Red Arrow Entertainment or Shine have acquired numerous local companies in order to internationalize their production capacity (Chalaby 2012b). Wherever possible, these rights holders opt to adapt and produce their scripted shows themselves, a strategy that enables them to stay longer in the TV format value chain, protect their brands and control their IP.

*The Bridge*, for instance, was co-produced by Filmlance, a Swedish TV production company that became part of Metronome Film & Television, which itself was acquired by the Shine Group in 2009. Both the Franco-British and the American remakes were handled by Shine Companies, and Blomgren acted as executive producer for both adaptations. He read the new scripts and made some comments before becoming ‘a fly on the wall’ on the production set (Blomgren interview 2014). He ensured, however, that the changes went in the right direction. For instance, while the Swedes and Danes understand each others in the original series, linguistic and cultural tensions were introduced in the Franco-British show. In the US adaption, the script highlights cultural differences between police forces from an affluent society versus a developing country (Mexico). The US production team initially planned to reproduce the melancholic Nordic landscapes and planted the story between Canada and the USA. Once they realised where the essence of the drama lay, they transferred the story to the border between Mexico and the USA. The narco-trafficking between the two countries made the story more current and gave it darker undertones (ibid.)

All in all, the TV industry has a better understanding of the fundamental mechanisms that dictate successful scripted format translation. Any scripted show

has a kernel which is the engine of its success. While everything else can be touched, the essence of the story must remain across cultures or else the story crumbles.

### **Conclusion: A revolution complete**

For several decades, the TV format trade essentially revolved around game shows. Since the turn-of-century format revolution, it became the turn of reality and factual entertainment programmes to be adapted in great numbers. Scripted formats have become a booming business in recent years only. Stars came together when demand for drama increased worldwide - and in the USA in particular, Hollywood studios began to mine their catalogues, new exporters emerged, scripted genres developed, and knowledge transfer techniques improved.

Scripted formats have come to age but remain different from those in non-scripted genres. They require fuller cultural translation and the risk of failure remains substantially higher than in other genres. In addition, the underlying economics of their production and distribution differs. Non-scripted genres travel almost exclusively formatted and distributors strive to make them as ubiquitous as quickly as possible. Not so with scripted shows, for which finished tapes remain essential. These programmes are far more expensive to produce than non-scripted fare, and many are deficit-funded (requiring distributors to complete the investment from commissioning broadcasters). Since a large part of the funding comes from future potential sales, everything is done to protect the earnings from the completed tape. In consequence, the format rights of scripted shows are often released only once the original version has played out and the initial investment recouped. If and

when adaptations are produced, they are distributed in carefully choreographed sequences of holdbacks and releases (Jackson interview 2012, Nohr interview 2013). Hollywood studios remain equally careful and avoid releasing the format rights of series that are too recent, unless these have been cleared by the distribution team.

Finally, the issue of brand purity is particularly acute with scripted shows, as too many adaptations risk diluting a brand and a single poor one can kill a series. The rights holders of series such as *The Bridge*, *CSI* or *Sherlock* receive many more requests for local adaptations than will ever be produced (Blomgren interview 2014, Gilbert 2014, Nohr interview 2013, Vertue interview 2011).

Nonetheless, the late entry of scripted formats in the global TV format trading system is significant. It completes the turn-of-century TV format revolution and the trade, now spanning all genres, is no longer confined to the (lower) fringes of the TV industry. Scripted formats not only add volume and diversity to the TV format business but give it its *lettres de noblesse*. It also establishes that the TV industry has progressed and learnt to adapt any programme, from the most mundane and formulaic daytime game show to award-winning prime-time globe-trotting series.

Scripted formats demonstrate, better than those in non-scripted genres, that all TV formats are ‘ultimately contained in local and national meanings’ (Waisbord 2004, 380). They may be international to the industry but they need to be local to viewers. The only formats that cross borders are those that resonate in each and every territory in which they air. Formatting is a mechanism for structuring narrative and the best formats are those that are invisible platforms that disappear behind the drama they generate. Scripted entertainment displays TV formats at

their best: not as the Trojan horses of global culture, as some fear, but as platforms for local story telling.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, three pilots of *Three's Company* were shot before ABC picked up the show (see below), and more recently CBS piloted *The Ran Quadruplets* twice without commissioning the Israeli series.

<sup>2</sup> The 2007-08 Writers Guild of America strike, however, does not seem to have had an impact on demand for scripted formats (Esser 2010, 280).

<sup>3</sup> The same season (2014-15) the networks commissioned 51 new series, they also re-commissioned 16 unscripted shows, all of them trusted and tested international formats, including ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* and *Shark Tank*, CBS's *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, Fox's *American Idol*, *Hell's Kitchen* and *MasterChef*, NBC's *The Voice* and *The Biggest Loser*, and the CW's *Whose Line is it Anyway?*

<sup>4</sup> Including *The Ran Quadruplets* (Yes!, 2008-09), *Shkufim [False Flag]* (Channel 2, 2008-present)

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and *Haverot [Little Mom]* (Yes!, 2012).