

# INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY PROXIMITY FICTION

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The fiction series has been revealed to be an effective means of conveying – and possibly influencing – our sense of belonging to a group that shares at least a common language, set of cultural practices, climate and geographical space (Peris 2016: 127). Our proposed concept of “proximity series” thus refers to fiction produced by local networks with content related to a political-geographical-cultural reality that is generally smaller than a nation. In such series, the invariably close relationship of the story with the local reality is offered to the audience as a key element and main attraction, with the objective of conveying a particular set of cultural, social and political values (Fiske and Hartley 2003).

We could cite various examples of “proximity soap operas” that have demonstrated the success of this formula with audiences, such as *Nissaga de poder* and *Pobol y Cwm* (Moragas, Garitaonandía and López 1999: 19). The first of these, with 476 episodes broadcast between 1996 and 1998, was one of the most popular series on regional television in Catalonia; the second is a Welsh soap opera produced by BBC Wales beginning in 1974, which moved in 1982 to the Welsh channel S4C and continues to be in production today.

In these cases – and in others to be mentioned in this introduction and studied in this issue – language is a basic element of cultural proximity and a key to audience acceptance of the

series (Lacalle 2006; Peris 2015). The use of minority languages like Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Catalan or Flemish constitutes the element that most immediately and radically identifies the product with a particular region and community. For this reason, practically all proximity series are produced in regions with their own minority languages within the larger nations of which they form a part, with a strong linguistic identity of their own. One such region is Quebec, the only Canadian province with a French-speaking majority, where the most popular television products are locally produced and in French, as noted by Stéfany Boisvert in her article included in this issue. Chalmers and O'Donnell make the same observation in their contribution, noting that series produced in Irish or Scottish Gaelic represent a challenge to the status of English as the hegemonic international language *par excellence*.

In addition to language, there are characteristic features of local popular culture that facilitate the spectator's emotional engagement and empathy with the fictional universe through the recognition of experiences and events familiar to the local community. This emotionally charged connection is accentuated by the spectator's awareness that content so representative and defining of their local environment rarely appears on their country's television networks. The emotional value of proximity fiction may help to explain the popularity that many of these series enjoy. One example is a locally flavoured soap opera that was broadcast on Valencia's now-defunct regional station, Canal 9, from 2007 to 2013 (the year the station was shut down): *L'Alqueria Blanca* turned into a local phenomenon in the Valencian Community, on numerous occasions enjoying higher ratings than content on Spain's national networks (Peris 2015: 230). The series was filled with local references and strategies to elicit a sense of familiarity in spectators. The dialogue was mostly in Valencian, the local language that shares official status in the region with Castilian Spanish. The town that gives its name to the series was an iconic representation of the typical Valencian town (Peris 2015: 232) with its familiar places and customs reflecting regional traditions. The Valencian sports, locations, and all manner of regional symbols shown on the series evoke the literary tradition of *costumbrista* novelists like Vicente Blasco Ibáñez. At the same time, the storylines contain other highly stereotypical elements, such as family conflicts, land disputes, thwarted love, and the opposition between rich and poor, heroes and villains, all contextualized in the everyday life of rural Valencia in the 1960s.

Another obviously significant element of proximity fiction is the use of spaces that easily remind viewers of their

region. The town square with the church in the background in *L'Alqueria Blanca* references the main meeting place for locals in the towns of rural Valencia. Similarly, the fictitious Dutch town of Meerdijk, the setting for the longest-running and most famous soap opera in the Netherlands, *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden*, which combines all the features necessary for spectators to identify it with any number of towns in Holland. According to Peris (2016), landscapes, streets, buildings, or any other background may be used to orient the spectator's sense of familiarity in relation to the story. On numerous occasions, these spaces have historical significance, evoking the relatively recent past of the region in question. An example of this is the luxury hotel where wealthy Galician and Portuguese families spend their summer holidays in *Vidago Palace*, which is both the title and the main setting for the first proximity series co-produced by Galicia's regional television network in Spain and Portugal's national public broadcaster. On the other hand, the proximity effect can also be produced by showing contemporary spaces that are part of the everyday lives of both characters and audiences, as is the case in the Norwegian series *Skam*. This settings for this teen series are spaces in Oslo that are easily recognizable to the city's inhabitants, are linked to key moments in the development of the storylines.

We can thus conclude that proximity fiction triggers a geographical and communicative connection between the audience and its environment through television productions that are uniquely expressive of a language, a region, a history, and a set of shared popular traditions.

In view of the above, proximity fiction offers an opportunity for reflection on the apparent paradox that in a society technologically propelled towards globalization, contemporary media still hold serious possibilities of relating to audiences with elements from their immediate environment. This allows a space in which small channels can compete with the big media groups (Marzal and Casero 2009: 101) that dominate the audiovisual industry. And also related to this is the fact that major platforms with the biggest international distribution networks, like Netflix and HBO, have decided to take on productions at least with national if not local references.

Finally, technological advances and the possibility of accessing television content on different devices broaden the distribution options for these formats. An example of this is the proximity transmedia narrative, with experiences on Catalan public television in the form of the comic web series *Em dic Manel!*, in the Netherlands with the mobile app *Wie is Tim?* which follows a story based on a character from the

famous Dutch soap opera *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* or the aforementioned *Skam*, or *Vidago Palace*.

We can now access all kinds of online series from anywhere in the world at any time, a fact that inevitably raises a host of questions for a journal issue about the most local serial fiction possible. Is it possible today to defend audiovisual products that exhibit local elements (Dhoest 2013) in an effort to connect us to a community associated with a particular region, language and culture? Does it make sense for contemporary media, and specifically television, to engage in active policies promoting the cultural-linguistic reality of communities like the Welsh or Scottish in the United Kingdom, the Catalan, Basque or Galician in Spain, the Frisian in the Netherlands, the Breton or Corsican in France, the Gaelic community in Ireland or the French-speaking community in Quebec (Moragas, Garitaonandía and López 1999: 17)?

This issue will offer readers an overview which, although brief, may point towards some answers to these questions.

The article by Chalmers and O'Donnell presents an overview of the history of soap operas in minority languages like Irish or Scottish Gaelic, which are fighting for survival in a region whose hegemonic language is English. The authors offer a detailed analysis of the context of series production and distribution, with special attention to the circumstances that have made them emblematic examples of proximity fiction. This is the case of the well-known Scottish Gaelic soap opera *Machair*, which enjoyed great success in its first seasons due to the originality of the plotlines, becoming an iconic series for the Gaelic community. Another example is the Scottish series *River City*, which deals with the everyday lives of Scots free of the negative stereotypes that have historically characterized their depictions. These cases enrich the debate over the survival of proximity series, as they introduce contemporary social issues of importance to Scottish audiences.

For her part, Stéfany Boisvert examines proximity series in Quebec, Canada's only province with a French-speaking majority. Boisvert identifies and analyses the local elements present in two of the TV series with the biggest audiences in Quebec: *L'échappée* and *District 31*. The success of these regional French-language productions contradicts any suggestion that interest in local series has disappeared due to the extensive possibilities of access to national and international content offered by technology. On the contrary, as Boisvert argues, these domestic stories depict archetypes, cultural practices, social relations, norms, values and lifestyles that are perceived as familiar by their audiences. Moreover, the series' use of the French language, a feature that distinguishes

the inhabitants of Quebec from Canada's English-speaking majority, contributes decisively to their cultural specificity.

The third article in this special issue, by Jean Sébastien, analyses another Canadian series: the comedy *Mohawk Girls*. One of the points of greatest interest here is that this series was broadcast on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), which offers more than 40 hours a week of content in different indigenous languages. APTN is the first national public television station dedicated to Canada's indigenous population. Based on the documentary of the same name, the series addresses issues of race and attempts to challenge the racial and gender stereotypes that proliferate not only among members of non-Mohawk communities, but also within the community itself. Sébastien also explores the synergies established with the values of North America's "white" communities, in this case because the series is a sitcom featuring women that shares many elements in common with products like the US series *Sex and the City*. From this perspective, we can see how fiction productions targeting an indigenous community can display elements characteristic of that community, while at the same time claiming features representative of their integration into the contemporary mainstream.

We also feature two interviews that offer an interesting view of local television programming in Spain, a country with four co-official languages including Spanish, and 25 regional television networks with a wide range of local audiovisual productions, among which fiction series are especially prominent.

In the first interview, we talk to Javier Marzal, Chair of Audiovisual Communication, who offers an interesting exploration of the relationship between local television programming and politics. He also discusses the qualities of local television and its future in Spain in a context dominated by big media groups, and at a time when Valencia's public television station is going back on the air.

The second interview is with the screenwriter Rodolf Giner. He addresses issues related to local fiction series, including their distinctive features and the importance of language to such productions, whose main value lies in their ability to combine elements that are characteristic and identifiable for local audiences with more universal themes.

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