

# Transnationalization of Quality Programming

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Following critics' excitement over what they perceived to be a new Golden Age of television, scholars have used the term "Quality Television" to describe television programs deemed innovative in content and form, often presenting cinematic properties and/or tackling important social and political issues. Perfected by HBO's quality model, such programs emerged primarily from the American cable channels, which targeted niche and educated audiences in a branding effort to distinguish themselves from competitors in the multichannel television era.

Traditionally, with the notable exception of British products, the United States has been an exporter rather than an importer of television programs and formats, which has limited the conception of quality television to the domestic sphere. Although satellite technology and certain cable bundles have improved access to foreign content, they have largely remained niche products for the immigrant populations in the US and done little to challenge the closed nature of the American TV market. The few foreign series that have caught international attention, before the shift brought by streaming, reached American audiences primarily through adaptations. European and Nordic hit series *Forbrydelsen*, *Broen/Bron*, *Les Revenants*, and *Broadchurch*, have led cable channels AMC, FX, and A&E to produce the adaptations *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, and *The Returned*, and broadcast network Fox to produce *Gracepoint*. Interestingly, these adaptations have not necessarily met the success of their originals, as *The Killing* suffered regular threats of cancellation and both *The Returned* and *Gracepoint* were cancelled after their first season.

Although ABC's adaptation of the Colombian series *Yo soy Betty, la fea* or Showtime's adaptation of the British show *Shameless* have instead proven successful, they marked a move away from the original programs and suggest a hierarchical preference for American-based products. Adaptations of foreign television indeed disengage with the series' local aesthetics, structure, and narrative pace to privilege the high production style and recognizable format of American quality programming. While in the case of *The Bridge* or *Shameless*, adaptations can be justified by the desire to make the series more culturally relevant to viewers, *Ugly Betty* and *The Returned* rather indicate a reluctance to replicate the cheaper aesthetics and slower pace of telenovelas and the less sensationalistic narrative style of French television.

Conversely, digital television platforms have enabled further engagement with international content and engendered new transnational flows to the American market. Although different, streaming services like Amazon Video, Hulu, Netflix, and HBO Now and Go have greatly improved American access to foreign content.

While Netflix started original programming with an American adaptation of the British series *House of Cards*, its foray into original content production has taken a transnational turn in 2015 with the French series *Marseille*. It has since both produced originals and licensed content from several countries, including Japan, South Korea, India, Lebanon, Germany, France, Brazil, and Mexico. While differing licensing rights may impair the distribution of foreign content, international original programming is however occupying an increasing portion of the American catalogue. HBO also released six original programs from its international branches, HBO Latino, HBO Europe, and HBO Asia in December

2017 on HBO Now. Of all four, Amazon Video offers the most extensive streaming service for foreign content with a combination of content available to Prime subscribers for free and a large library of on-demand TV shows.

However, this shift in access, albeit promising, has so far failed to decenter the Americanness of the concept of quality. Foreign content remains marginalized by Amazon and Hulu's cryptic interfaces, which render navigation difficult and offer little recommendation. Their lack of investment in foreign originals also prevents potential international shows to compete in the awards ceremony, and therefore limits the critical reach of their foreign libraries. Netflix's algorithmic model privileges the reproduction of successful American shows' themes and generic traits, such as the German series *Dark*, which shares characteristics with *Stranger Things*, or *House of Cards*, which influenced the French series *Marseille*. As for HBO, its attachment to its brand identity hinders it from exposing American audiences to genres and formats that truly depart from its quality drama format.

Consequently, the rare foreign shows that find success in the United States through streaming are still predominantly crime and political dramas, suggesting that they reinforce rather than challenge the domestic conception of quality. Finally, both Netflix and HBO work primarily with known cinema directors, therefore privileging cinematic aesthetics and taking few creative risks in their foreign series.

However, such limitations can be overcome as Netflix collects more data from its international television catalogues and as HBO creates foreign originals that growingly embrace transnational generic, stylistic, and linguistic sensibilities. Besides Netflix's ongoing expansion of its foreign catalogues, Amazon Prime Video's internationalization in 2016 and HBO's upcoming development of a single global streaming platform all forecast potential shifts in the definition of quality programming.