The Cultural Economy of Postconsensus Television

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This article analyzes the production and popularization of current iconic televisual fictions from a cultural economic point of view. It argues that postconsensus shows, where social meanings are renewed rather than reproduced, are both symptom and cause of the emergence of a new type of media landscape, where the cultural articulation of the dynamics of exclusion and incorporation are key. The article defines and provides evidence of these dynamics in relation to the main economic trends of the industry and considers the potential future of this trajectory in the context of the Internet culture.

Keywords: television industry, cultural analysis, globalization, television fiction, meaning-making

Introduction: What Is Postconsensus Television?

The new media ecology is transforming and being transformed by the new role of television as the central institution for modern storytelling (Fiske, 1987; Silverstone, 1994; Thompson, 1995). Before the advent of the so-called information society, commercial television shows presented, with few isolated exceptions, more or less sophisticated variations of a "consensus narrative": a (analytically singular) story that articulated, in a widely accessible language, society's central mythologies and values, providing continuous rehearsal and testing of the moral codes of particular civil spheres (Alexander, 2006; Thorburn, 1987). The cultural economy of the consensus narrative was dominated by the organizational imperative to appeal to the broadest possible "market" (DiMaggio, 1977). The acceptance of a relatively unproblematic relationship of causality between televisual content and the quantity of viewers became internal to the formation of the reality of the consensus television industry, and this had profound consequences for televisual fiction's structures and contents.

Overall changes in the current television ecology have been mainly explored from classic, institutional, and political economic points of view, giving preeminence to "technological change" as the key factor explaining the transition (Lotz, 2007). In these perspectives, the process of "fragmentation of audiences" tends to be naturalized as the paradigmatic underlying trend of the new mass-media landscape (Curtin & Shattuc, 2009). Regardless of the empirical and conceptual support for the fragmentation thesis,

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which I have discussed elsewhere (Sanz, 2011), this article takes a different tack, more cultural in character, and situates the emergence of a (still massive) postconsensus narrative as the key overall change in the mass-media environment.

The transition from the consensus narrative to a complex postconsensus system of production and reception of televisual mythologies was facilitated by the emergence of a fresh economic language within the industry. The new cultural economy of the industry appeared in close relation to the technological transformation of the field of mass communication (Castells, 2009), the deregulation and liberalization of the market (Harrison & Woods, 2007), the globalization of products and audiences (Lash & Lury, 2007), and the digitization of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006).

But the key changes in the system of cultural production are ultimately a transformation of the cultural realities assumed by the key participants, including the viewers. These realities are not only conductive to new forms of cultural production but very much contained by the postconsensus narrative itself, which super-exists the whole system. Taking this trajectory as its premise, this article analyzes the cultural economic dimension of iconic fictional forms of the current postconsensus media landscape.

Commercial and cultural production in the new postconsensus media world have a particular regularized relation of dependence and autonomy that, nonetheless, leaves room for outlining a grounded definition of what postconsensus fiction is and is not from the specific point of view of its form and content (Geraghty, 2003; Paget, 2004). At least five conditions, taken together, distinguish postconsensus from consensual television narratives as defined in this article. At their most basic level, postconsensus television fictions imply a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of slowly unfolding serial narrations, approximating them in format and flavor to the European novel of the 19th century (Mittell, 2006). They are not, however, televisual adaptations of other forms of cultural products (theater, novels, film) such as, for example, the types of shows that the BBC popularized during and after the 1960s. Postconsensus shows and their producers are strongly influenced by other fields of cultural production, but they follow an aesthetic trajectory that reweaves traditional cultural codes of older, consensus television series, with which they are purposely associated to convey particular meanings (Santo, 2008). What becomes clearly distinct is that postconsensus television serializations demand a much more active involvement on the part of their public, a type of involvement that parallels the one required by dense fictional books, movies, or plays. This is also necessary to establish the second proposed condition.

Post-consensus televisual forms circulate new meanings that differentiate them from the modern mythologies of consensus narratives. They display and produce moral ambivalence and follow an ideal typical analysis of postconsensus meaning structures. Initially, postconsensus narratives appear as rationalistic or as realistic as the ideology of their background culture. They project empirical verisimilitude referential of particular historical and local contexts. To reinforce this aspect, audiences are paradoxically encouraged to suspend their judgment about stoic, generally unlikable characters who, nonetheless, retain the poetics of the modern man. No one is harshly judged, nor left completely innocent or virtuous. At the same time, everyone in the show appears to have a highly sophisticated and attractive intelligence à la Euripides, no matter his or her position in the social structure. This is what drives the identification between significant segments of the audiences and fictional characters—what keeps the audiences'

interest at the beginning of the series is a rationalistic aesthetic that poeticizes and localizes the coldest aspects of the modern world.

Due to the narrative possibilities, which are specific of the long televisual format (time, number of actors, storylines, coded realism, medium's theoretical coolness, etc.), the rationalistic story is pushed to the limits. Generally framed within classic television genres, the moral binaries of televisual consensus narratives are dramatically reconfigured and rendered transparent in particular ways. At one point, conflicts seem to lose their moral significance as good against evil. Everything is pure power. Stories become exaggerated game-theoretical narratives. Nothing is sacred, everything is profane and profanity. Social structures crystallize as a succession of actions motivated by created interests and little else.

However, when all the possible rational approaches to the show´s main plot are exhausted, and moral rationalistic binaries appear to be dissolved and denaturalized, the postconsensus series use the show's climatic catharsis to suddenly inject a strong emotional component into the internal logic of the story. They shift gears from the modern objectivism exhibited during the narrative toward an experience where characters embodying new social meanings are individuated, and the spectator identifies not with the hero but with the collectivity. During a short time, polarities between culture and institutions, emotion and rationality, society and individual are understood and reconciled at both the narrative and the reception planes. Depending on the standpoint of the creators, morally ambivalent televisual forms employ a Brechtian distancing effect to remind the audiences about the changing character of their reality. However, postconsensus series are not television adaptations of Brechtian plays; rather, they hope that the viewer will become addicted to a televisual experience that locates, by means of its underlying premise, characters, and plot, old secular meanings on a new socially transcendental plane (Bloom, 1998, p. 388).

The third condition of typical postconsensus fictions is that the figure of the creator of the show—which, for the moment, is rather unique in the U.S. television industry—takes a prominent and indispensable role. From the point of view of the content, the creator, who is often the executive producer of the show, is the social actor in charge of securing the consistency of internal and external structures of meaning of the whole series. There is certainly an important economic dimension in this reemergence of the romantic figure of the auteur in the improbable field of television productions (Caldwell, 1995) as well as in the field of motion pictures (Hadida, 2009). But our ethnographic observation suggests that certain television creators indeed play the role of ritual-like organizers during the production of the show (see the Method section below). In a particular mix of utilitarian attachments, collective rites, and individualized attention, they invest a significant amount of time pursuing the moral union of the whole crew. They not only have to create a morally (and visually) consistent fictional tale, but they need for the production team to share certain moral values as well. Building a show inside a show is the only way for them to implement their artistic visions within a collective endeavor that has to be sustained during an extended period. In turn, their increased social reputation allows executive producers to become key holders of the means of symbolic production of the whole industry.

The fourth related condition refers to the rhythms and end dates of the series. The economic language of the consensus narrative was traditionally made transparent to viewers through sudden

cancellations justified by the dropping of ratings or the "in-authentic" continuation of shows that had exhausted their narrative lines (Jiménez, 2011). The changing status of the executive producer transforms the negotiation process regarding when to finalize a series. When ratings are publicly downplayed as a factor affecting such decisions, a new process of distinction and consecration initiates, shaping both the narrative and the commercial possibilities of the series. Yet postconsensus series rhythms and duration have, as discussed below, more to do with the cultural capacity of writers and producers of controlling, in their creative process, the subtle influences of the industrial infrastructure than with new political economic forms of consecration.

Finally, the fifth condition refers to the conscious exploitations of the new modes of television viewing that emerged in the context of the new media ecology. Since the mainstreaming of cable and VCRs in the early 1980s, a plethora of distribution technologies and business models has enabled viewers to choose when and where they want to watch a program. Moreover, the rise of the Internet and of the culture of convergence has shifted the balance of power toward viewers, who can now discuss, create, re-create, and publicize television series and characters as if they were both real and their own creation at the same time. Viewers can now consume long hours of television fiction with no advertisements. This is not only true for postconsensus fictions but has a fundamental effect on its cultural codes. When consumed at chosen rhythm and with no interruptions, the instrumental perception of the show's content is separated from the viewer´s experience. It is ritualized (Becker, 1995). This is probably maximized when the show is downloaded and viewed for free over peer-to-peer Internet software, a massive practice among the world's young generation. Any acceptable ad, Marshall McLuhan explained, is a vigorous dramatization of communal experience. If ads are consumed with the show, they not only inject conscious and unconscious patterns of modern instrumentality into the viewer's experience but compete (and more often than not coordinate) with the series to project and capture certain shared feelings of the entire community. Postconsensus narratives bypass this essential feature of the consensus narrative televisual world, achieving a potentially much deeper level of emotional impact.

Theoretical Framework: From Cultural Production to Cultural Economy

Whether this impact can be called art is a matter of both feeling and analytical inquiry (Gans, 1999; Scardaville, 2009). Cultural production, following the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), is normally conceptualized as a power struggle between economic agents competing for the artistic consecration of certain cultural products (Kuipers, 2011).

> The struggle in the field of cultural production over the imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production is inseparable from the struggle within the dominant class (with the opposition between "artists" and "bourgeois") to impose the dominant principle of domination (that is to say—ultimately—the definition of human accomplishment). (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 41)

It is perhaps this overwhelming dominance of the instrumental aspect of the production of culture, which is indeed a distinctive feature of the television field, that leads Bourdieu not only to exclude television from the very possibility of producing art but to assert that television poses a "serious danger for all the

various areas of cultural production—for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law" (1996, p. 11). The most important issue in point is the implantation of the market logic within the dynamics of the television industry. Bourdieu detects a contradiction between the production of new meanings and their massive dissemination throughout market structures. Due to its structural attachment to audience ratings, television is profoundly subject to market pressures, making it incapable as an institution to affect the symbolic order of how we see and think: "If a vehicle as powerful as television were oriented even slightly toward this kind of symbolic revolution, I can assure you that everyone would be rushing to put a stop to it" (1996, p. 45).

Bourdieu's framework is clearly incomplete for understanding the current state of affairs in the production of postconsensus television fiction. In fact, if we acknowledge the emergence of distinctive productions within the field, Bourdieu's framework gets further exposed to what is perhaps its most powerful criticism, one that points out that Bourdieu reserves to culture and taste only purely conservative roles (the reproduction of inequalities being the most prominent of them) rather than recognizing their aptitude for inspiring institutional and artistic innovations (Honneth, 1986). Bourdieu enters himself, quite brutally, in the struggle of what deserves, and what does not deserve, to be culturally consecrated by portraying a superficial image of the social settings in which television programs are produced and received, where receivers and especially producers are considered as "no subject" (1996, p. 25) vis-à-vis the market, incapable of properly understanding and creatively structurating the "invisible" power relations of their own institutional field. Thus, for Bourdieu and others, cultural content in all fields of production, but especially in television, is of little importance (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), for it will invariably express the cultural codes that legitimate the dominance of social groups.

Recent theoretical innovations and empirical research in the field of cultural analysis (Alexander, 2006; Bielby & Harrington, 2008) and cultural economy (Du Gay & Pryke, 2011) can help us understand the undergoing transformations of the television industry in a more sophisticated way. Cultural economics is broadly understood as the branch of economics that studies the relation of cultural variables to economic outcomes (Cowen, 2008; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Mauss, 1923; Throsby, 2010; Towse, 2003). It has an acknowledged sociological and anthropological dimension, so it also can be considered as an epistemic branch of these disciplines. Instead of reducing all that matters in the field of television production to its business "logic," a cultural economic approach impels us, first of all, to recognize this logic as a language game, with no other reality than the one it represents. In methodological terms, this implies that the analysis presented must be sensitive in understanding and explaining the structural trajectories of the industry also as symbolic games. Cultural textures around economic concepts are interiorized and made meaningful in particular, strategic ways, creating opportunities for the commercialization of new shows and series.

Within this framework, the analytical autonomy of the cultural product can be better understood, making it possible to investigate how the cultural object is in fact constituent of the industrial dynamics. Seen this way, the televisual product will have both a cultural and an economic (or political) dimension with regularized patterns of bidirectional dependence. The cultural textures and rhythms of the series briefly described above in an ideally typical fashion, will be involved in complex ways in the social setting of its reception and its commercial production.

Method

The analysis here is based on shows such as *The Sopranos, The Wire, Deadwood, Six Feet Under* (HBO–USA), *Mad Men, The Killing* (AMC–USA), *Crematorio* (Canal+–Spain), and *Forbrydelsen* (DR1–Denmark). These shows differ in their subjects and countries of origin and reception, but they reflect the postconsensus format defined above. They have experienced commercial success and continuity, they have been highly influential within cultural industries and creators, and they have been treated as "artistic" pieces by a significant diversity of commentators. Selection of these cases does not imply a solid artistic rupture with what was occurring before *The Sopranos* (certainly, *Twin Peaks* and *Hill Street Blues,* for example, present post-consensual features), and even less that these shows are better than others. What these shows do is epitomize a broader postconsensus structural landscape. They are iconic condensations of a new, widely internalized reality of the media landscape.

Apart from the secondary quantitative and qualitative material quoted below (basically news and journalistic interviews, professional and amateur reviews, documentaries and extras on the shows, and publications in the trade press) the analysis is also based on a period of participant observation, done between August and October 2008, in the artistic production and post-production of a show that is not included in the list above but that was created by one of the key executive producers of postconsensus format. During this period, I conducted five unstructured interviews with the producer that lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, participated in some of the series' writers' discussions and exercises, attended most of the filming of one episode, and observed the final editing sessions of this same episode, the essential "producer's cut." In addition to this ethnographic research, I was granted access to thousands of pages of transcripts of the sessions on the initial conception of the show, where premise, plot, characters, and their relation with commercial strategies are extensively discussed by the executive producer. The interview quotes in this article are exclusively from the executive producer and are marked "Executive Producer."

With all these sources of information, I analyze how the agents involved in the commercial production of postconsensus series appropriate the main trends of the global media market (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Castells, 2009; Einav, 2010), how the webs of meaning of postconsensus shows are intertwined with their specific commercial strategies, and how, in turn, these cultural strategies contribute to the meaning-making process of the series and its potential success in the global/local media market.

Concentration, Decentralization, and Diversification in Postconsensus Fiction

The transition toward postconsensus formats is related to the increased volume and scale of global mergers and constantly changing strategic alliances involving media players (Doyle, 2002). Concentration of ownership, led by U.S. firms, is structurally involved with the mobilization of discourses around the advantages of economies of scale and economies of synergy at both national (the United States has a straight competitive advantage due to the size of its internal market) and global levels. Currently, Walt Disney, News Corp., Time Warner, Viacom, CBS, CC Media Holdings, Live Nation, and Entertainment were the world's biggest media players, operating in oligopolistic conditions and holding privileged positions in their capacity to network with other global and regional players.

The generation of new business models within the highly concentrated global media industry depends on operational decentralization, which in turn depends on the generation of spaces for cultural transformation, distinction, and communication inside these same industries. The production of postconsensus format and the consolidation of the symbolic value of its distribution network require bringing this decentralized organizational model to its maximum expression, up to a point where the organizational autonomy of the different agents involved in the creation of the series becomes inseparable from their commercial appeal.

Interestingly, all the major media conglomerates have had some sort of direct or indirect involvement with postconsensus formats, organized around decentralized units or specific strategic partnerships. Home Box Office Inc. (HBO), which is part of Time Warner, is widely considered as the cultural economic agent that initiated the emergence of the postconsensus media landscape (Edgerton & Jones, 2008; Leverette, Ott, & Buckley, 2008). A network that was conceived in the 1970s as a new form of subscription-based television dedicated to broadcasting theatrical movies, HBO grew from a domestic channel to a global brand and an international cable and satellite network, mainly known for its production of original series.

The internal actor that reflects the cultural logic of decentralization is the executive producer. The executive producer of postconsensus format becomes a creator, whether he or she likes it or not. Chris Albrecht, former chairman and CEO of HBO and currently at Starz, publicly declares "the Writer/Producer is King. They're the one that holds the keys to the throne, to the crown. If it's not in their head, it's never going to be on the screen" (Albrecht, 2010, p. 15). Executive producers are culturally produced as authors in such a compact and elegant way that the communicative strategies of their consecration seem a direct consequence of the pragmatic lessons of Bourdieu's sociology of culture. The price of holding certain creative autonomy in such a powerful medium (autonomy which indeed *exists*, at least at the level of practical consciousness of the creator) is the submission to a particular form of mass-market demand, one that, as discussed below, likes to see itself as "distinct." However, the commercial elevation of the status of the creator also increases dramatically those resources by which he or she can influence the cultural structure of the industry itself and, in turn, build further autonomy for cultural creation through ritual exercises.

Television is an egocentric medium, in the sense that its economic and institutional constraints and possibilities are enormous, bringing to the forefront a series of interests and social forces that greatly affect the production process. But this is not to say that cultural production in television operates in a Bourdieusian way. The challenge of a beginning postconsensus television writer, according to one executive producer I interviewed, is to realize that "you do not have an absolute discipline, an absolute ability to sort of neutralize your consciences or egoistic intentions in relation to the materials" (Executive Producer). To meet this challenge, new writers are trained through various exercises "to break down the ego" (Executive Producer) like of example "not to let yourself know what you are writing beforehand" (Executive Producer).A new form of television writer's identity is ultimately expected to emerge through these exercises:

The ego doesn't say, "Jeez, you are a great guy." What the ego says is, "Who are you kidding? You can't do this. Don't you want to go out and do x, y, and z?" Thinking about x, y, and z could be, "Let me think about what an asshole my office mate is, or what about my monetary situation, or how does this further my career?" All of that stuff separates you from the materials." (Executive Producer)

The fusion of writer and character as the mechanism of decentralized meaning-generation in postconsensus format needs to be sustained, according to one executive producer, through individualized ritualistic practices that move the process beyond institutional constraints and deadlines:

Once you are so far in that at the most superficial level, you got a production date, but more than that in terms of the internals of it, you say, "Jeez, I kind of see who this guy is. I kind of see what the dynamic of the relationship between the girl and guy is. The characters are there waiting for me rather than sort of like as deflated balloons that I got to blow up every morning." At that point you have to strike because the longer that they are alive and you do not sustain them you don't achieve a substantive connection with them. You don't give them your spirit, then a different series of inauthentic motivations begin to organize your behavior. "They want it longer, they want it shorter. . . ." It doesn't have anything to do with the living soul of the piece. (Executive Producer

The cultural engine of the consensus narrative's television bureaucracy does not differ much from that described by Max Weber—secrecy and strong sense of property, and structural aversion to the risks that accompany innovation. The decentralized postconsensus television organization is created in part by executive producers and, by extension, by their television narratives. Both are granted access to the means of symbolic production of the industry itself. Shows are publicly praised and taken as narrative models for other series and converted into cultural icons by museums of modern art. Executive producers are interviewed in globally and locally influential newspapers. They are profiled in literary supplements. They are the objects of academic writing. They are allowed major discursive time in DVDs extras. They are granted a voice in major departments of sociology and congresses. Using these and other means of cultural production, executive producers of postconsensus series, almost invariably, invoke a similar anticivil cultural code (Alexander, 2006) to describe and isolate certain television executives as "fear-based. It's all about covering their ass, so 'if it fails I won't be blamed'" (Wallas, 2010, p. 1). This quote is part of a journalistic interview with Alan Ball, the creator of HBO's *Six Feet Under*, but it is also already in place as a key narrative circulating internally within the industry (within the U.S. industry) and as an underlying premise of *The Wire* and of other postconsensus format shows. Postconsensus executives tolerate this discursive strategy because it contributes to the symbolic distinction of the network: a risk-based company that presents itself as aligned with the positive codes of solidarity, art, and social consciousness of the civil sphere. Although this fact has led some scholars to question the "economic rationality" of the production of postconsensus series (Santo, 2008), these changes must be seen as proof of the transformation of the cultural economy of the television industry.

The production of iconic postconsensus narratives is generally based on the formation of cultural and technological gates around different sorts of telecommunications networks. These gates are the basis of the subscription-based type of television that sustains the business models normally associated with postconsensus series. As discussed below, due to the openness of online platforms, the transition toward Web-based forms of television of postconsensus production firms is more problematic than that of the rest of the industry.

Several features of this diversified but technologically closed business model significantly influence its content and vice versa. Postconsensus producers rely much less, or in some cases not at all, on advertising revenue (Kelso, 2008). When they do, normally through product placement or ads shown before or after the series, commercials' narrative codes are subordinated to the creative content of the show, for the bargaining power between producers and the advertisers is clearly unbalanced toward the former. Besides impacting audience segmentation–based strategies (see below), the shows' content becomes structurally detached from broad mental frameworks stimulated by consensus programming. There is no need to revive simplistic frameworks to accept that consensus television was a subtle carrier of consumerism ideology and technological determinism. The executive producers of iconic postconsensus narratives such as *Mad Men, The Sopranos, The Wire,* and *Crematorio* consciously rework these cultural codes to turn them into anticonsumerism and postmodern mythologies. These reweaved televisual narratives work as forms of cultural distinction for the series and for the companies—but their final effect is not necessarily anticommercial.

The closed character of postconsensus televisual technologies makes it easier to restrict children's access to certain content, a major concern of Western civil societies and institutions. With closed technologies, the rationale for state-based content regulation is weakened. Strong language, nudity, and explicit violence become almost invariably part of the postconsensus narrative, thus creating, in quite a direct way, opportunities for changing the standards and conventions of what constitutes televisual realism (Fiske, 1987). These opportunities are indeed exploited by the executive producers of the shows, who usually win the competition for the perception of the relative authenticity of the televisual message, thus obtaining access to means of massive symbolic innovations. For example, when profanity is fused with genuine acting, particular rhythm, and narrative meaning, such as in *Deadwood,* the same strong, anticivil language achieves a transcendental status, ultimately denouncing, by symbolic association, the cultural effects of rationalized regulation in the production of culture.

Post-consensus television constructs and takes particular advantage of another closed and more diversified (Kompare, 2006; Walls, 2010) distribution platform: the DVD and Blu-ray box set. The digitization of content and its compression has improved the quality of sound and image and opened up new possibilities of material distribution and cultural appropriation. Before the popularization of the DVD in the late 1990s, it was a luxury to collect (and sell) the many hours of video contained in a television series. DVDs and Blu-ray discs have made it possible to store complete series in relatively small box sets that are usually made into book-like shapes and sold online or in department stores. It is difficult to estimate the revenue from the selling of these box sets, but they are probably becoming one of the key streams of income for postconsensus narratives. The box sets of these series become objects of intense feeling themselves (Lash & Lury 2007), visual in-home reminders of the strong emotions felt during a

(normally collective) watching experience. They are, at the same time, postulations for posterity—a commercial and cultural expression of the perceived long-term value of the cultural product.

Fragmentation, Globalization, and Localization in Postconsensus Fiction

Digital television has freed up more spectrums for new channels, and broadband video is growing quickly around the world. The *idea* of the fragmentation of television audiences has in part disarticulated the cultural economy of the consensus industry, based on the need to reach large audiences with a single program to make advertising revenue cost-effective. The postconsensus television industry gives narrative preference to both the sustainability of subscription-based models and the qualitative value added of targeted advertisement, with Internet companies leading the transition toward this new cultural economic logic.

However, the new cultural economy of the industry is not necessarily tending toward atomization of products and audiences. Television remains a social artifact. Culturally, television viewing offers a sense of membership (Dayan & Katz, 1992) that is not likely to diminish (Adriaens, Van Damme, & Courtois, 2011).In fact, the increasing use of social networking sites to comment live during simultaneous programming seems to be strengthening rather than diminishing the connection between the medium and the cultural structures of the civil sphere. Yet the terms of this connection are indeed becoming more complicated.

If the transition toward a postconsensus narrative system does not erode the televisual foundations of social solidarity, it does transform the playing field in which commercial strategies are purposely designed. The marketing of iconic postconsensus narratives involves a discursive shift from an emphasis on universalism and inclusion to difference and separation, a strategy that would have seemed highly unproductive under the consensus ecosystem but that is plausible in an era of fragmented audiences. HBO successfully marketed its original programming as "not TV," delicately excluding those (billions) who had a taste for TV. This was the charismatic headline of a broader narrative of iconic postconsensus productions, elaborated by commercial agents with a talent for and background in fictional storytelling. At one level, the narrative offered a new commercial space for the cultural "distinction" between dominant and subordinated (TV) classes—a space that, in any case, contradicts the unidirectional social determination of aesthetic dispositions by highlighting its short-term constructivist possibilities. But while alienating a significant part of the audience, the industry, and television critics against the company, the discourse of radical cultural differentiation provides, more than anything else, a legitimation for innovative programming. It does so by exploiting the opportunities generated by the fragmentation of the mass-media landscape, no longer needed to fuse idealized and real version of the civil sphere to generate legitimated televisual productions. Postconsensus TV is TV, but not consensus TV. It builds its symbolic representations around the space generated by the tension between the ideal and the real to produce what ultimately appears to be a transformative symbolic representation of social life.

The cultural economic logic of iconic post-consensus TV depends on critics (and academics) enthusiastically joining this transformation narrative. Professional cultural critics, especially those who are not specialized in the television medium, have been fundamental agents in the reconciliation of the

opposite languages of distinction and mass diffusion of postconsensus series—a reconciliation that is ultimately necessary for the commercial viability of the shows. Critics have done so by giving themselves an air of being missionary carriers of the postconsensus series' messages (e.g., see reviews of *The Wire* in *El País* and *The New York Times*), which in essence, goes against their own rationalistic position in the field of cultural production. This is an indication of the powerful multidirectional generation of meaning in the commercial production of postconsensus TV. The distinction of high and low culture and high and low cultural criticism is blurred (Levine, 2008), HBO and other iconic postconsensus companies have institutionalized the objectification of good reviews as the main input for deciding whether to continue or terminate the production of a given show. If the good/bad reviews game becomes part of the external and internal discursive strategy of the company, then it is because renowned critics have accepted playing a subordinate role in this symbolic process—the role of bridging technological and cultural gates to benefit the continuation of a postconsensus system in which they have faith.

As the autonomy of the creator and the cultural production increases, so does the time lag that is necessary for television products to diffuse the new meanings embodied by their characters' suffering. As one executive producer put it: "Every one of the characters that you found unlikeable in the first episode over the course of time will be revealed to be likeable. It's just that you haven't generated enough emotional associations with them" (Executive Producer). Hence, the slow-unfolding narrations never seen before in television. The postconsensus narrative requires initial (not sustained) intellectual effort. The commercial postconsensus narrative describes this effort as an elevation of the true intellectual measure of the audience. Critics are also crucial in this reconciliation; they use their privileged access to the means of symbolic production to validate this narrative, postulate faith in the creator, and suggest patience to the audience and to the industry when confronting the messages of the product. Having enjoyed the aesthetic reward of the postconsensus series, the audience, the critics certify, will not be able to stand inauthentic productions that give away their consensus message without suffering.

This cultural core of the economics of postconsensus format also incorporates a distinctive narrative about the commercial role of audience ratings and market studies. At a time when fragmentation, segmentation, and participation are stimulating profound innovations in the audience measurement business, iconic postconsensus shows purposely and publicly downplay the importance of traditional ratings for deciding about the series' futures. Ratings and audiences are not just conceptualizations that emerged around the consensus narrative industry; they are part of the story. Through cancellations and news reports, audiences have become so much aware of the cultural and economic force of ratings that the threat of immediate cancellation is inevitably fused with consensus television experience in all its dimensions, as if the legend of Damocles is somehow being permanently told, only with slight variations. A similar phenomenon occurs with market studies that attempt to classify taste and identification, and bring this knowledge back to the storytelling. Consensus market screenings involve acceptance of the instrumentalization of primary identities (age, sex, race, ethnicity, religion) through a set of questions about the liking of plot and character. Therefore, these questions, and the persons involved in these questions, are never neutral. The wording and form of the questions are oriented toward the already expressed interests of an increasingly small segment of the public. They are so to reassure the consensus industry about the viable future of a narrative that, be it new or old, has already been culturally processed. The postconsensus industry emerges in part due to the sociological

refusal of the encapsulation of identity and taste. By trusting the reassuring but flawed extrapolations of ratings and market research, the remaining section of the consensus industry has entered in a spiral of self-destruction based on the permanent and massive cancellation of its own products and the annihilation of its own reputation. In the meantime, we have entered in a new media ecosystem in which, if both ratings and market research appear too clearly in the symbolic representations of the narrative, the sense of authenticity that marks the mid- and long-term postconsensus success is completely lost. Executive producers are subsequently hindered less in their creative process by the threat of cancellation (although they still are) and more by the ambivalent relationship they necessarily maintain with their precursor and competitors. The increasing pollution of the rating culture means the birth of the anxiety of influence in television, clearly palpable in its changing production context.

Iconic, postconsensus narratives occupy the global market as part of the strategy of big media conglomerates, but within the bounds marked by discourses of distribution (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, pp. 144-174) and the changes that the new post-consensual landscape itself triggered. Postconsensus series currently participate in the massive flow of sales of U.S. programming toward international markets. According to the European Audiovisual Observatory (2011), more than 59% of the series watched in Europe have a U.S. origin, a percentage that would probably increase should the data incorporate peer-to-peer and DVD series consumption. *The Sopranos,* the most iconic of the postconsensus narratives to achieve mainstream recognition, is directly broadcast by HBO to more than 150 countries. Together with syndication and digital viewing, the series, whose finale was watched by 12 million viewers in 2007 in the United States, has a de facto global reach. Second, postconsensus commercial agents try to culturally reprogram the original production of local markets toward formats that facilitate the connection of its commercial flows (Moran, 2009). *Crematorio* is, for example, explicitly commercialized as an "HBO type" of series by Canal+ Spain. *The Shadow Line* is the BBC's *The Wire*. This dual strategy creates the referential basis for the extension of the main trends described above to the global level, even when the distribution of the cultural products is not vertically integrated in the media conglomerate. In 2010, HBO reached a five-year broadcasting agreement with the UK and Ireland cable channel BSkyB, owned by the multimedia conglomerate News Corporation. All new HBO original series will air on a technologically closed basis before airing on open television channels. HBO has a similar deal with Spain's Digital+.

Other U.S. cable channels deploy a more open commercialization strategy, such as the one that HBO used to deploy. Postconsensus format series are sometimes sold in broader commercial bundles to the global market during industry gatherings such as the National Association of Television Program Executives, MIPCOM (Marché International des Contenus Audiovisuels et des Contenus Numériques) and MIPTV (Marché International des Programmes de Télévision). However, this implies opening up the discursive codes of the series, affecting the ways in which the essential differentiation narratives travel and get diluted through the global commercialization processes. Thus, the trajectory is one that pursues global commercial distinction and that ultimately affects the commercial flows of the entire industry.

In their work on television global distribution strategies, Bielby and Harrington (2008) stress, contrary to other sociological approaches, that global distribution strategies in the television industry have a significant amount of analytical autonomy from the actual product; one can separate the content of the shows from their global commercialization. This autonomy is in fact energized by the postconsensus media

system, where the space of places and the space of flows (Castells, 2009) become significantly detached from each other.

While consensus television is produced mainly along the global codes of Hollywood studios (Scott, 2004), the codes of authenticity of postconsensus narratives are based on the local, and there is little negative corporate interference with this cultural/commercial logic. What I observed in the production processes of postconsensus television shows were local themes, local actors, local sensibilities, and deep investigation and understanding of local historical roots and identities. One executive producer confirmed: "All politics are local. Whatever people talk about, the national things, everything is finally, fundamentally one to one. All the politics of this show are finally local" (Executive Producer). The use of uncensored local language in the scripts and relatively unknown actors in their performance is made meaningful precisely with reference to the structural connection between celebrity-based consensus narratives and the ideology of globalization (Ashuri, 2009). Executive producers are specialists in (dis)articulating such connections, and because of their privileged perception acquired over a career, they are also able to clothe language and actors in a way that makes the moods and motivations of the televisual characters (and their producers) seem uniquely realistic and local beyond the traditional voyeuristic attitude favored by consensus dramas. An executive producer explains:

> The appeal to the audience's expectation is you are going to get to visit a very different culture. But don't worry, it's the story you always see about different cultures which is "Oh, they are exactly the same as us. But the bonus is that we get to hear different accents." Only laterally do you realize that it is quite different from a comedy of manners but it can accommodate that expectation and the viewer only realizes subsequentially that is rather a different thing. The analogy to use is that this is not the boy next door but this project can talk to the boy next door. (Executive Producer)

If the postconsensus television occurs in a conscious space of places, where form and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of a locale, then its global commercialization happens in the space of flows. Here, the discourse shifts completely, stressing function (ratings, cultural influence, distinction) and universality (of character and of premise) over the local components of the product. The global TV's marketplace is organized around the cultural codes of managerial elites, the heroes of which emerge from the social construction of the successful buyer. European television buyers, according to Kuipers (2011), are moved by the codes of their global field rather than their cultural origin, and build their reputation on their presumed capacity to separate their judgment of what constitutes quality television from their personal tastes. The international commercialization of postconsensus narratives depends on their commercial agents being able to operate in a particular symbolic environment that crystallizes in massive ritualized television executives' gatherings around the globe. Thus, the global commercialization of postconsensus shows can proceed autonomously due to the particular symbolic sociospatial hierarchies of the market. The relatively secluded space of the cosmopolitan television industry elite (yachts in the Cote d'Azur, The Fontainebleau in Miami Beach, the Viceroy in Santa Monica, as seen in *The Sopranos*) allows planning the global commercialization of the local product while avoiding, to a certain extent, mutual pollution.

Conclusion: **Dynamics of Incorporation and Exclusion in the Postconsensus Market**

The mainstreaming of postconsensus televisual fictions, where meanings are renewed rather than reproduced, is then both symptom and cause of the emergence of a new type of media landscape where the commercial articulation of the dynamics of exclusion and incorporation are key. The vertical integration of the media industry is followed by its internal decentralization, an organizational process that tends toward giving more autonomy to the creators of televisual fiction. The ability to construct the figure of the television author is crucial to translate creative autonomy into a unifying commercial/cultural code for the industry. The digitization of content, the massive diffusion of the Internet, and the proliferation of platforms run parallel to the private enclosing of communication networks at the basis of the current subscription-based business model. This time, the unifying commercial/cultural code becomes one that frames negatively the cultural effect of advertising and regulation. The segmentation of audiences due to the proliferation of content is coupled with aggressive strategies of cultural differentiation. The postconsensus television industry counts on the appropriation of the commercial/cultural message by the modern institutions of cultural canonization, especially cultural critics, in charge of bridging the technological, temporal, and cultural gates to guarantee the commercial viability of the postconsensus symbolic system. Finally, the postconsensus industry relies on the augmented authenticity of the local in conditions of mediated globalization. In this context, the strategic capacity to switch the postconsensus codes with the symbolic structures of the global television market is based on the relative autonomy of the television business dynamics and their favorite locales.

These dynamics of incorporation and exclusion are, however, far from representing a stable end point. An essential source of unsteadiness comes from the open character of the Internet and the Internet culture. The digitization of content introduces its potential massive "spreadability" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) through a diversity of channels. This is different from its viral diffusion, a marketing strategy (and a business-oriented concept) that the postconsensus industry tends to master. The spreadability of digital messages contrasts with both the "stickiness" of the centralized control over distribution and with the attempts to maintain control over the cultural codes of the product. Whereas the notion of viral assumes functionalist passivity, spreadability suggests that the structuration of the message is embedded in the same process of reception and diffusion. The potential Internet spreadability of the televisual message diminishes the commercial fundamentals of the postconsensus industry at a stroke. The figure of the author gets materially and culturally diluted as a unifying principle. The closeness of the communication networks at the basis of the subscription model becomes difficult to sustain. The internal codes of the shows are reformatted when received in broader and more open cultural contexts, where distinction strategies become a potential source of massive cultural pollution. Professional cultural critics play an initial role in the reproduction of the postconsensus system, but the modern institution of criticism itself suffers when it's called to embrace the most contested and popular of the mediums, adding an essentially empowering cultural layer to the technology-driven proliferation of online commentators and social networks, those in charge of spreading (and appropriating) the word.

Of course, Internet openness is a changing and contested issue in itself. But as things stand, the question becomes: Is the future of the postconsensus television industry viable in the context of Internet openness and the global economic crisis? Has the postconsensus industry been a historical anecdote, only

explicable by the initial features of the transition toward the information society? Is the system transitioning back toward an Internet-mediated consensus system, or finally exploding into an analytically intractable fragmentation?

There are already indications of a certain change within an industry that shows more self-awareness, and thus rational and commercial control, of the factors affecting the language of the postconsensus system, which has proven to be extraordinarily profitable. Such rational formulations limit the creative possibilities of the media system, which, in any case, will not be able to escape cultural economic productivity cycles. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the Hollywood star system, also taking advantage of the fears associated with the economic crisis, has used its dominant position to claim its presence in the reputable postconsensus television ecology, thus colonizing important budgets, destabilizing key principles of the system, and blocking the emergence of the new pull of postconsensus writers who have been so carefully mentored by the pioneers.

Yet the postconsensus system is here to stay in at least one fundamental respect: The consensus narrative can no longer be revisited from consensus lenses. Even if the industrial production of televisual fiction does not or cannot fulfill the high expectations of the postconsensus ecology, then the viewer/producer, operating in a spreadability context, will always be in a position to reenergize old mythologies in the postconsensus world. For the postconsensus narrative is not simply the script of a number of series; it is the script of our remediated social life.

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