

Transnationalising Genre: Netflix, Teen Drama and Textual Dimensions in Netflix

Transnationalism

In a 2019 commentary in *The Guardian* titled ‘Netflix’s *Sex Education* is about as British as a high-school prom’, Caspar Salmon heavily criticises the British *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-) for its general lack of incorporating the “national” or “local”. He reduces complex debates surrounding cultural homogenisation and heterogenisation, instead bringing back an old cultural anxiety, this time in relation to Netflix and its approach to transnational television. As much as debates surrounding what is often called cultural imperialism were common in the 1970s (Straubhaar 2007, Lobato 2019), Netflix’ market dominance and its business model of making self-produced originals available in all of its markets at once works to revive some of the debates, as Salmon’s criticism shows. This article focuses on the textual politics of Netflix’ self-produced originals, especially non-American texts framed via genre conventions predominantly developed in the US television system. A particular focus lies here on how Netflix *transnationalises* genre to make texts more palatable in all its markets. This is done here by discussing two teen drama serials, the British *Sex Education* and the German *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)* (Netflix, 2019-). The genre conventions of teen drama originate in the US and the countries discussed here have relied heavily on US imports of teen drama to address teen audiences. They also work as examples of how Netflix employs non-American genre texts to position itself transnationally.

Genre studies approaches tend to have a complex relationship with transnational television. Largely, genre studies has dealt with questions of how we define a genre or the analysis of specific genres and the features that define them, as the contributions in *The Television Genre Book* (2015) show. Genre theory often seeks to downplay the cultural specifics of the national

iterations of the genre in favour of creating inclusive categories. This does not mean that these specificities are unimportant, but it means that genre theory aims to provide definitions that can be applied across cultural contexts. This flexibility and inclusivity can be useful, but it can also serve to downplay the specific histories that shape a genre (see, for example, de Sousa and Trültzsch-Wijnen 2016). There is a visible shift with the recommendation system Netflix uses and its privileging of self-produced originals. Within the context of Netflix, genre has largely been analysed in relation to the company's recommendation algorithm's initial reliance on categories of genre, as laid out in an article by Alexis C. Madrigal in *The Atlantic* in January 2014 and later explored by scholars like Ed Finn (2017). What Madrigal describes is not just a system of genre, however, but one of micro-genres where a range of characteristics are tagged, such as actors, tone, or themes. This suggests that the individualised taste profiles the algorithm builds focus on more minute criteria than genre. Thus, as Netflix has accumulated more information about its subscribers and expanded, it has come to rely less on genre and more on individual taste structures. However, genre, sub-genre, and micro-genres have remained important aspects in the organisation of tags. On Netflix, the descriptions for self-produced originals do not mention language and texts are often not tagged according to this (though they are tagged according to national context, i.e. British cinema, Canadian television, etc.). Netflix provides English language dubbing for its self-produced originals and automatically plays trailers in the language the account holder usually consumes content in. Thus, non-American texts are recommended alongside American productions. While this de-emphasising of language is not unusual for countries that rely heavily on imports and dubbing, it is less common for English language countries. Further, as described later, the texts themselves work to remove the local. As such, the transnationalisation of television genre purported by Netflix goes further than established genre categories.

Discussions surrounding transnational television trade have often focused on questions of cultural hegemonisation and problems of cultural imperialism through (predominantly US) imports versus issues of domestication of texts into national television landscapes and through various alterations, such as editing or translation (see, for example, Appadurai 1996, Straubhaar 2007, Buonanno 2008, 85-118, Lobato 2019). It is hardly unusual for television to be constructed in a way that makes it easily “exportable” to foreign markets. Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington argue:

...while TV producers do not traditionally create programming solely for the export market, in the current economic climate they are motivated to develop programs and program concepts that speak to *both* local and global audiences. [...] One way local-global connections are manifested is through strategic efforts to internationalize (or deculturate) narrative content to enhance portability across cultural borders. (2008, 89, italics in the original)

The authors identify more ways in which these connections are made, such as textual properties, integration of different languages and programming decisions. Harrington and Bielby point to the importance of genre in transnational contexts. However, Netflix and its function as transnational broadcaster heightens genre’s importance in textual structures. Netflix publication models and the lack of a traditional schedule create different conditions.¹ The important shift Netflix brings with it is the publication of all its texts on at the same time in all of the markets it operates in. This shift is not to be underestimated: several texts are designed to be easily exportable and therefore aim to address themes that are considered “universal” across multiple cultural spheres. Netflix’ self-produced originals aim to be transnational *from the outset*, rather than in one domestic market before being exported. They may not aim to address all cultural spheres to the same extent, but as becomes obvious on a

¹ The lack of a traditional schedule does not mean that content is unscheduled) or that viewers are not nudged towards specific viewing behaviors, such as binge-watching (see Jenner 2018).

textual level, they heavily emphasise a certain level of “universality”. Sabina Mihelj explores what she terms grammars of nationhood, a term that describes the different ways in which nationalism is inherent and expressed in national media systems and the texts produced in them (2011, 70-92). I have previously inverted her concept to suggest the term grammar of transnationalism: this describes the ways texts, and specifically Netflix self-produced originals, aim to appeal to a transnational sensibility. This grammar of transnationalism suggests the use of textual characteristics that appeal in multiple markets (though hardly universally or globally) (Jenner 2018, 219-40). I have described some of the elements of this as genre, aesthetics, value systems and themes, and efforts towards linguistic diversity, especially in American texts that pre-dated wider efforts in translation by Netflix (via subtitles or dubbing). An example of this is the way *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) employs the conventions of the fantasy genre to underplay national history and culture, and to emphasise the transnational language of Hollywood cinema (see Couldry 2012, 160). Another example is the way *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-9) engages with internationally (but in no way globally) shared values of anti-sexism, anti-racism and anti-homophobia, as laid out in the UN Human Rights Convention. This article explores the aspect of genre in more detail, focusing particularly on thematic and aesthetic concerns of the contemporary teen genre. Yet, other aspects of the grammar of transnationalism are important in these texts, too. The focus here lies on the comparison of two Netflix series published in 2019, a few months apart, *Sex Education*, published on 11th of January, and *How to Sell Drugs...*, published on 31st of May. The fact that they were published in such close succession suggests that they didn’t influence each other (as the latter series was already in production when the earlier one was published). Yet, they are similar in significant aspects that are indicative of the ways Netflix employs genre to enable transnational communication. The teen genre is an interesting case study to explore this as, in western countries, the genre has been dominated by American imports and, therefore, local conventions have often developed in reference to the US genre.

Netflix and the Teen Genre

The teen genre, as an umbrella genre, is directed predominantly at teenage and young adult audiences. The teen genre is broadly divided into two strands: music television and scripted teen television.² The latter is the category described here, with a specific focus on scripted teen drama serials (here shortened to teen drama) or teen soap, to use two synonymous terms (as opposed to teen sitcoms or scripted reality TV).³ This is not to say that the different branches of the genre do not overlap and interact in significant ways, as described throughout this section. I will outline the structural conventions of the teen drama series here and will then move on to describe how Netflix has used the genre. To understand the teen genre on Netflix, I use Karen Petruska's and Faye Woods' terminology of the "false original" and the "self-produced original". This helps divide content into categories of licensed and commissioned original productions (2018, 51). For the teen genre, this distinction is relevant as Netflix continues to reap the reputational promises of successful teen dramas like *Riverdale* (CBS, 2017-), for which it is the distributor in a number of countries, seeking to attract and bind younger viewers to the platform. Its initial reliance on false originals has shifted into more and more self-produced original films and TV series. The self-produced teen dramas are often not American, positioning Netflix as a platform that enables transnational communication across countries while remaining indebted to American genre conventions.

To explore these conventions, I will move on to outline the teen drama genre, using the structural approach. In 1975, Douglas Pye suggested a list of textual criteria to determine (film) genre. He posits a list of local conventions that determine genre conventions: Plot,

² Music television is often discussed in different terms than teen TV, for example as sub-genres of contemporary reality TV (see Kavka 2012, Hill 2015).

³ It is not unusual for genre studies to have several terms encompassing the same meanings. Similarly, in crime genre, the terms mystery and whodunit describe the same kind of story.

Other Structural Features, Characters, Time/Space, Iconography, Themes. Pye's list makes a good starting point, but elements like narrative structures and soundtrack, both in film and television, also deserve to be considered. What Pye's structuralist approach also neglects is the sub-genres at work: the two dominant sub-genres, supernatural teen drama and teen soaps, can vary widely. Though the themes are similar, the narrative modes are different. A brief comparison of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2003, UPN, 2001-3) and *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003), which ran on the same network at roughly the same time, often scheduled on the same night, serves well as an example. Both have homosexual main characters, but the narrative mode requires a much more melodramatic coming out for Jack (Kerr Smith) on *Dawson's Creek*, where far-reaching family conflicts and detailed debates among friends are spread across a mid-season double episode (02/14 "To Be or Not to Be..." and 02/15 "...That is the Question"). Meanwhile, Willow's (Alyson Hannigan) coming out on *Buffy* is much more subdued, as more immediate concerns about Willow's werewolf-ex-boyfriend become central (04/19 "New Moon Rising"). More recently, teen thrillers have developed with series like *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC, 2010-7), *Riverdale, Baby* (Netflix, 2018-) or *Elite* (*Élite*, Netflix, 2018-). This structuralist perspective on genre is limiting in the sense that it reduces complex discourses that are at the intersection of audience reception and definitions, industry and technological discourses, and cultural discourses and histories to purely textual characteristics. Hence, the work of theorists like Jane Feuer (1992), and later Jason Mittell (2004) on discursive approaches that highlight the interplay of audience and reception, industry, and textual structures is important. These discursive approaches recognise that some genre texts are more easily understood via one discourse than the other: for example, "cult" TV is better understood via audience discourses than textual while the development of music television heavily hinges on industry discourses. As Valerie Wee (2010) outlines, industrial discourses are highly relevant to the development of teen drama and, thus, the genre's relevance for strategies of companies like Fox or the WB (later The

CW) cannot be underestimated. This highlights the importance of considering the interplay between different discourses. With these caveats in mind, Pye's list is still helpful in outlining the general structure of genre texts, particularly in the transnational context. The advantage of the structuralist approach is its "transportability" across cultures while acknowledging how some elements may be de-emphasised or changed, depending on national traditions. In teen television, the addition of texts focused more on the supernatural have shifted plot structures immensely. However, though the genre tends to be united on themes (as discussed below), there is less unity on plots than may be expected. Stories are usually focused on teen characters as they move through various events to build an adult identity, but the narrative tools that frame these plots (such as comedy or melodrama) are less unified. Other Structural Features may link to the daytime setting in teen soaps and the night-time setting in supernatural teen dramas or the common middle-class/upper-class divide that dominates many teen soaps. For teen drama, soundtrack is crucial as it operates as a guide to the particular time and offers relatively quick characterisation. American teen drama has often served to further marketing for contemporary rock and pop bands. Rachel Moseley (2015, 39) credits *The OC* (Fox, 2003-7) with having helped launch the career of The Killers and *One Tree Hill* (The CW, 2003-12) featured the lead singer of Fall Out Boy for several episodes. The publication of the DVDs of *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000) was significantly held up over a dispute over royalties with bands like R.E.M., before distributors settled on replacing the music entirely, pointing to how relevant contemporary music is in the genre.⁴ Characters are a group of teenagers, often starting out at the age of 15 or 16, though some teen soaps follow these characters through further education and adulthood. Importantly, teen dramas trace the

⁴ The most reliable sources to confirm this today are fan blogs (see <http://coldbananas.com/2010/02/television/on-the-beverly-hills-90210-dvds-the-song-doesnt-remain-the-same-and-thats-a-problem/>, <http://blog.thecaptainsofindustry.com/beverly-hills-90210/9-0-2-1-easy/>) and subreddits, largely because R.E.M.'s song 'Losing my Religion' featured memorably in the depiction of the romantic relationship between characters Dylan (Luke Perry) and Brenda (Shannon Doherty). The author's personal VHS collection also confirms this.

relationships of teenagers amongst each other. This sets the genre apart from a majority of sitcoms and dramas that depict family relationships and feature teenagers as part of this family, such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990-6) or *Gilmore Girls* (The CW, 2000-7). In fact, parents, with few exceptions (normally one couple within each series), are often absent or appear as marginal characters (see Banks 2004). The time is usually contemporary and common spaces are the school and the family homes of main characters, in American teen soaps often the family kitchen. Many teen dramas also involve clubs as regular “hangout” spots. Supernatural teen dramas also often include libraries or other research facilities. Iconography highlights rich colour schemes, as well as images of locations like school. The school cafeteria, hallways and lockers take on a particular importance, here. Supernatural teen dramas include images of monsters, whereas teen soaps are often centred around wealth and show a number of fetishised objects, such as cars. As this suggests, particularly the American teen soap tends to focus on the social inequality between the super-rich and the middle-class. While massive wealth is, thus, visually fetishised, middle-class families are positioned as places of moderation and idealised value systems. *Beverly Hills 90210* sets the template, but series like *One Tree Hill*, *The OC*, or *Gossip Girl* (CBS, 2007-12) have expanded on this. Furthermore, as Moseley argues, the thematic focus of teen drama is:

...the “teen problem”, including questions of identity, love, sex and romance, high-school hierarchies and family relationships, but also, in the process, on the teenager as problem, as a figure both troubled and troubling and in need of education and guidance. (2015, 40)

Yet, the focus is less the family in which this guidance is given, but, as mentioned above, the relationships between teens that allow for the exploration of boundaries.

Netflix' approach to the teen genre has remained relatively uneven since it has started to commission self-produced originals. This is at least partly due to the affordances of algorithmic culture and the need for texts to be "taggable". Netflix initially desired to associate itself with American "quality" television and "adult" themes, for example, through series like *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-8). Implicit in this is a relatively vague idea of the negative associations a teen soap like *Beverly Hills 90210* might suggest as the service was only starting to introduce itself to a broader audience. In line with its emphasis on adult themes, Netflix' approach to the teen genre went via the horror genre. One of its earliest in-house series was *Hemlock Grove* (Netflix, 2013-6), a graphic horror series created by Eli Roth, which featured teenagers as central characters. *Hemlock Grove* was generally overshadowed by the critical success of *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* and the critical attention given to season 4 of *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003-6, Netflix, 2013-).

In terms of its self-produced originals, Netflix' first foray into teen soaps was via *Degrassi: Next Class* (Netflix, 2016-), a continuation of previous iterations of the successful Canadian franchise. The series draws on a rich series memory of its own, with *Degrassi High* (CT, 1987-91) premiering in 1987. Elana Levine, in an article discussing the global-local dimensions of the 2001 iteration *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (CTV, 2001-15) identifies a specifically Canadian identity within the series by analysing it from an industry studies perspective. Since, in its American iteration, the teen soap is often remarkable for the whiteness of its main characters, *Degrassi's* discussion of race and its refusal to cast it as Other stands out. Its approach to racial diversity also explains much about Netflix' use of the franchise. As I have argued before, the success of *Orange is the New Black* appears to have guided much of Netflix' approach to its self-produced originals by highlighting female leads, representation of queer identities, and racial diversity. This kind of "Netflix diversity" (similar

to the “Netflix Feminism” Havas and Horeck describe in this volume) plays into (American) liberal value systems, highlighting American histories that lead to specific emphases in the representation of women, particularly women of colour, and African Americans (Jenner 2018, 161-82).⁵ It also speaks to the value systems inherent in the grammars of transnationalism and the way it links to interpretations of Human Rights shared across western countries. The *Degrassi* franchise’s approach to racial diversity may be specifically Canadian in the sense that racial histories are clearly indebted to Canadian history, but it also fits within a wider “Netflix diversity”, even extending this to include explicitly non-American racial identities. *On My Block* (Netflix, 2018-), which focuses on young Hispanic American teenagers follows this template quite closely, with teenage characters who are working-class and racially marginalised. This is furthered in the Spanish *Elite*, with its foregrounding of institutional Orientalism and Islamophobia through Muslim character Nadia (Mina El Hammani). Netflix’ strand of teen rom-com films also works well within these parameters. *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (Samuels, 2018), *Dumplin’* (Fletcher, 2018), *Tall Girl* (Stewart, 2019), and others all feature female leads and debate teenage angst, often surrounding body image issues in (usually white) teenage girls.

As its first American teen drama, *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-) aimed to address a teen audience by focusing on teen characters. Though heavily indebted to the American “quality” TV tradition of innovative narrative structures and cinematic aesthetics (see Dunleavy 2018), the series’ first season displayed a thematic focus rare for the genre. In this respect, it can be compared to *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13), a series invested with the “quality” TV label,

⁵ This is also visible in Netflix’ reaction to the international Black Lives Matter protests in 2020: the company responded by creating a Black Lives Matter category, which includes several self-produced documentaries, series, and films, as well as licensed content. Netflix even licensed a range of sitcoms featuring African American casts, like *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000-6, CBS, 2006-8), *Moesha* (Nickelodeon, 1996-2001) or *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994-5, WB, 1995-9).

which is focused on one specific issue: the criminal pursuits of its main character. This focus often happens at the expense of other storylines. *Breaking Bad* also functions as an important reference point as the international (same day) distribution of its final season in 2013 happened through Netflix in the UK and Ireland, a deal that helped establish the company as transnational television (Dent 2013). Several genre texts have explored serious issues like teen suicide and sexual assault, often through the more melodramatic soap structures. Yet, individual episodes usually mix melodramatic storylines with those more focused on comedy. Veronica Mars' (Kristin Bell) sarcastic voiceover often lightens the thematic focus on her own sexual assault and the murder of her friend Lily (Amanda Seyfried) in *Veronica Mars* (UPN, 2004-6). *13 Reasons Why* remains an exception in the way it frames sexual assault as not one singular event that leads to suicide, but rather a continued experience. In its second and third season, the series often becomes more conventional as a teen drama, though its tone remains relatively serious. Within a month of publishing *13 Reasons Why*, *Dear White People* (Netflix, 2017-), another Netflix self-produced original was published. The series operates on the fringes of what could be described as teen drama: *Dear White People* is set on a college campus, thus featuring young adults living away from the family and its restrictions, rather than teenagers. Similar to *13 Reasons Why*, it remains focused on one issue, in this case, race relations on a fictional US college campus. This means that *13 Reasons Why* and *Dear White People* are taggable across genre, functioning both as "quality" television and teen series (see also Jenner 2019, 311). This focus is enabled by the narrative structures of both series that foreground bingeability: in its first season, the narrative of *13 Reasons Why* is framed by 13 cassette tapes recorded by Hannah (Katherine Langford), who lists a harrowing series of instances of sexual harassment and assault that lead to her suicide. The framing of her suicide and ever-escalating sexual assault as a mystery propels the narrative forward, inviting viewers to binge the series (see also Horeck 2019). Later seasons involve more storylines and focus on more violent instances of sexual assault but remain focused on the issue. *Dear White People*

uses voiceovers, flashbacks and non-linear narrative structure. The non-linear structure can produce instances of enigmas where later episodes give more context to events happening in the background of other episodes.⁶ These series are very different for a range of reasons but remarkable for remaining focused on one specific issue, highlighting its complexity.

Transnationalising Genre: *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)*

There are some examples of non-English language teen series, such as the Spanish *Elite* or the Italian *Baby*. Both draw on established themes of the genre, especially regarding social inequality and the fetishisation of wealth. They follow the narrative mode of the teen thriller by drawing on predecessors like *Pretty Little Liars*. 2019 brought more non-American iterations of the genre that drew on a range of traditions and served to transnationalise the genre in the form of *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs*.... The transnationalisation of genre on Netflix is raised here in order to explore how genre conventions are used in the production of non-American Netflix texts, and thus enable transnational communication. The tradition both *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs*... draw on is American. However, this does not mean that the local conventions of the American iteration of the genre are somehow universal, but that the massive international success of series like *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Dawson's Creek* or *The OC* has made the conventions these texts employ internationally recognisable. Using the American genre conventions as template, the structuralist approach is used here to explore how *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs*... negotiate their allegiance to the American genre tradition and position Netflix as transnational television.

⁶ Tom Hemingway explores these 'mini-cliffhangers' further in his chapter on comedy and narrative structure.

The British tradition of teen drama is, as Moseley puts it, ‘more uneven [...] than its US counterpart’ (2015, 41). Teen-centred dramas have been as varied as *Hollyoaks* (Channel 4, 1995-), *As If* (Channel 4, 2001-4), *Skins* (Channel 4, 2007-13), *Hex* (Sky, 2004-5) and *The Inbetweeners* (E4, 2008-10), each indebted to different traditions of storytelling. Yet, some broader characteristics can be identified. While the US tradition tends to highlight social inequality, often visually fetishising displays of massive wealth in opposition to more moderate middle-class families, British series tend to focus on middle-class and working-class families without emphasising social inequality as theme. As Moseley argues, series are often underpinned by a realist paradigm, featuring swearing and discussion of masturbation, often for comedic effect. This tradition is carried on in *Sex Education*, which puts themes of sex at its centre, again often highlighting its more embarrassing aspects for comedic effect. Yet, the “uneven” nature of the genre also appears to lie in a refusal to follow established American genre templates and, instead, highlighting the local. This is linked to the requirements of British television for representation as well as an insistence on regional identity, often expressed via accents. On German television, it is the Public Service Broadcasting channels that also carry the responsibility of representation of different regions, though this engagement usually takes place in a different manner. The German tradition of teen drama is dominated by imports, often from the US. The soap *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* (RTL, 1992-), which focused on young adults, was launched in 1992 on commercial channel RTL. In the 1980s, the tradition of the so-called “Weihnachtsserie”, a format of mini-series in the run-up to Christmas targeting children and teenagers, featured a few dramas that focused on teen characters, such as the enormously successful *Anna* (ZDF, 1987) or *Ron & Tanja* (ZDF, 1990). However, the genre has been dominated by American imports and music television channels, such as MTV or Viva. The lack of clearly recognisable national traditions makes drawing on US genre conventions a relatively obvious choice. As such, neither *Sex Education* nor *How to Sell Drugs...* operates within a well-established national genre framework, even

though the UK has a more robust tradition than Germany does. *Sex Education* remains indebted to the UK tradition through its frank discussion of sex, but many British genre predecessors like *The Inbetweeners* have, arguably, relied more on cringe-worthy humour. *How to Sell Drugs...* is loosely based on the story of German teenager Maximilian S. and his online drug trade. Yet, the series avoids a realist mode of storytelling through stylistic means like fast editing or direct address.

Genre, on a transnational level, is a complex negotiation of different national traditions and the traditions of domesticated imports. As Mihelj argues:

Global standardization and homogenization, therefore, does not imply an obliteration of difference. To the contrary, [...] globalization requires – and in fact thrives on – differences, but constructs and organizes them in uniform ways. (2011, 29)

Thus, the transnationalisation suggested here is a complicated negotiation of the local and the transnational, though the context as texts that are transnational from the outset also means that they need to function within recognisable genre structures. Very simply put, neither *Sex Education* or *How to Sell Drugs...* aims to simply copy an American genre template. Yet, within the structures of Netflix' recommendation algorithm, these texts need to be taggable as part of specific genre, sub-genre, and micro-genre traditions, emulating a specific tone and style within these genres (see Arnold 2016, Alexander 2016). The use of dubbing into English (with American accents and in some cases done by the actors of the original version themselves) has made it easier for non-English language texts within the transnational Netflix ecology. Still, even countries with strong domestic productions (such as the UK and Germany), may only produce one or two self-produced originals for Netflix per year usually with seasons of around ten episodes. In the case of *Sex Education*, this is reduced to eight 45-

minute episodes while *How to Sell Drugs...* only has six 30-minute episodes in their respective first seasons. This context may make it more worthwhile for non-American Netflix texts to transnationalise genre by de-emphasising the local.

In terms of plot, both *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs...* challenge existing (American) genre conventions. However, this challenge plays out in remarkably similar ways that suggest the establishment of a new sub-genre. Both series play on familiar underdog stories by focusing on young male characters who turn to somewhat illicit and unusual businesses: a version of sex therapy provided by students for students, and online drug trade, respectively. Both become often so engrossed in their courtship that they neglect other relationships, especially with their (male) best friends. The relationship with their best friends is heavily emphasised within these series. Otis (Asa Butterfield) in *Sex Education* and Moritz (Maximilian Mundt) in *How to Sell Drugs...* engage in these practices to impress teenage girls, both blonde and fitting comfortably within contemporary beauty ideals for teenage girls. Both series also focus on one specific issue, similar to the way *13 Reasons Why* and *Dear White People* draw on *Breaking Bad*-style “quality” television to formulate their bingeability.

The characters of Otis and Moritz both fit a traditional concept of the “geek” within the genre typology, visually recognisable through a vintage striped jacket (Otis in red, orange and white and Moritz in different blue tones and white). Their haircuts are almost defiant of contemporary beauty standards for men, and both are often juxtaposed with more muscular male teenagers. Otis’ sex therapy business is run with Maeve (Emma Mackey), and Moritz begins to trade drugs to win back his ex-girlfriend Lisa (Lena Klenke). Otis and Moritz are both accompanied by their childhood best friends who, to put it reductively, both fit into a broad category of “diversity”. Otis’ best friend Eric (Ncuti Gatwa) is a queer black teenager

who participates in the sex therapy only marginally. However, his own storyline surrounding his negotiation of sexual identity features prominently. Moritz' best friend Lenny (Danilo Klammer) develops much of the online infrastructure for the drug trade and often collaborates with Moritz against his will. Lenny is wheelchair-bound as a consequence of a fatal disease and the first season makes clear that he may die within the next two years. Diversity is an often insufficiently broad concept, and the comparison of Eric and Lenny makes this especially clear as the storylines they dominate are distinct and their challenges different, in many respects, even opposite. Yet, the important point here is that both characters significantly challenge a norm of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class masculinity of teenagers within the genre. This, of course, fits into a broader concept of Netflix diversity, as discussed above.

There is a visible tendency to avoid any national specificity that would require long-winded explanations. School systems are a particularly important part of this. Though not offering detailed outlines, the tradition of American teen drama and films have created at least a passing understanding of the American school system for most viewers. Highlighting the distinctions, not only in terms of educational policy but also in terms of available facilities (lockers, cafeteria, swimming pools) would require lengthy explanations that are also of limited relevance to the narrative. Thus, place, or rather its denial, becomes an important factor in the transnationalisation of genre in these series. Language, and its role within often English-language national contexts, is of particular importance, here. As Robert Watts points out in his chapter in this section, language can often signal a certain level of "authenticity" that works well within transnational marketing discourses. For most UK texts, the linguistic "default" is what the British call a "posh" accent. Common for most British television drama as well as film, it has become the language of UK exports. For *Sex Education*, which is filmed

in Wales, the “posh” accent of its stars works to suggest a lack of regional specificity (never mind Welsh national identity), instead highlighting a general Britishness (or rather, Englishness). This points to the necessity for the series to appeal more broadly than a UK context, instead addressing audiences who have no desire or need to engage with issues of regional specificity. Though streaming in the UK is (at the time of writing) governed by EU media policy, there is no requirement to represent regional identities (or minority languages, as would be the case in Wales) within each country in the same way Public Service Broadcasting is required to do. On German television, the use of “Hochdeutsch” (High German) is common, no matter where it is set. *How to Sell Drugs...* describes its place as the fictional town Rinseln with a population of 28,734, of whom about two thirds have online access (“Life’s not Fair, Get Used to It”, 01/02). The series integrates scenes in Dutch, suggesting that Rinseln is located close to the German-Dutch border, but gives no further information.⁷ The series mostly settles on Moritz’ and Lisa’s desire to “get out” of the town, a sentiment that is shared by a large number of characters in small town set teen dramas. The linguistic world is expanded on, as the teenagers of the series are fluent in English as a “standard” language of the internet widely integrated in their colloquialisms and even text exchanges. The fact that the English-language dubbing is provided by the original German-language actors in Season 1 (including their German accents) works to lend even more authenticity to this. *How to Sell Drugs...* thematically emphasises the transnationalism inherent in online culture. Though this seems more relevant for the two main characters and their goal to sell illegal drugs online, significant parts of this online culture are linked to much less nefarious online behaviours like reading and sharing on social media. In the

⁷ Scenes between the German and Dutch characters are in English and the Dutch remains intact in the dubbing (subtitles specify language) to retain the sense of ‘foreignness’ suggested in these scenes. The case the story is loosely based on took place in Leipzig, which is a city located in eastern Germany whereas the Dutch border is at the opposite end of the country.

representation of the local, there is little outside of the national language to suggest place in *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs...*.

Perhaps the most significant addition to genre conventions over the last five years is the visualisation of online culture to represent the world teenagers inhabit. Of course, teen dramas are not the only ones that feature text bubbles to signify text messages or computer screens, but this feature has become almost integral to the genre, driving plots in teen films like *Sierra Burgess is a Loser*. The transnational nature of online culture makes its visualisation, perhaps, better suited than other genre conventions to signify the transnationalisation of the teen genre. Especially in *How to Sell Drugs...*, the use of English language in written online communication comes to signify its relevance to wider transnational teen culture. Other visual features both texts employ are the broad striped vintage jackets Moritz and Otis wear to signify their geek status. Further, both series feature the school and the main characters' homes (predominantly kitchen and teen bedroom) prominently. In showing the school, both highlight lockers in school hallways, even though they are not of prominent usage in the British and German school systems. It may be this element that most strongly invokes the reliance of the genre on American genre predecessors and the transnational nature of its visual language. Visually, both series avoid giving too much specificity in place. *Sex Education* has flyover shots of woods, signifying its rural setting. *How to Sell Drugs...* establishes some national specificity by showing letterboxes quite prominently, but, again, avoids being too specific outside of the national.

There is a thematic link to *The OC* and its emphasis on male characters. Both series' focus on male friendship and a geek male character's pursuit of a "popular" girl (though this category is reformulated in both series) is highly reminiscent of the storylines surrounding Seth (Adam

Brody). Yet, the narrative focus mentioned above means that both *How to Sell Drugs...* and *Sex Education* tie fewer storylines together and have smaller main casts. Both series deal with the subversive behaviour the main characters engage in, the significant difference being that selling drugs is illegal, while giving advice on sex is not. The behaviour, however, is not sanctioned by official authorities like teachers or parents, even though there is a general acceptance that teenagers will take drugs and have sex. For example, *How to Sell Drugs...*, justifies Lisa's (and other character's) drug consumption with her home life and a general anxiety about her future. The choice to take or abstain from drugs is seen as part of forming a moral identity, often in relation to home life. Moritz and Lenny both grapple with the morality of selling drugs linked with the capitalist implications of selling an inferior product (less moral questions of the conditions under which drugs are manufactured). Moritz is treated as anti-hero who is pushed to his actions by love (much like Otis) and pressures his best friend to go along. However, they do largely abstain from drugs themselves. The search for adult identities is universalised here and taken to mean sexual as well as moral identities. It is also linked to capitalist systems, establishing the desire and ability to build businesses as (supposedly) universally desirable.

Conclusion: Transnationalising Genre

The issue here is not merely the transnational use of genre conventions. As texts cross national borders, it becomes hardly remarkable that they influence each other on a transnational level. The dominance of US imports within the genre also makes it unsurprising that its local conventions are adopted elsewhere, particularly in western countries. Since, as Rick Altman (1999, 13-29) pointed out about film, genre functions as a means of communication between industry and audience, it makes sense that its language is adopted as universal by Netflix. Yet, what is remarkable is how these local conventions operate as a

grammar of transnationalism on Netflix. A significant feature here is the de-nationalization of texts by removing the local. For *Sex Education*, this means removing the regionality of accents and minority language (Welsh). In both series, the institutional specificities in the form of school systems are removed: while both series are set in schools, there is no real suggestions of what grade the characters are in or what kinds of exams they are likely to take – not even in the passing manner common for scripted television. Meanwhile, the imagery of lockers and the school setting remains important, no matter how common their use in national schools actually is. The visualisation of online culture by showing text messages or websites on screen stands in for a supposedly universal teen experience. In *How to Sell Drugs...* the dominance of English in coding and online culture in general also serves to momentarily bridge language gaps (though translation in different languages is provided as well). This call to the universal offered through genre conventions means that, structurally, *Sex Education* and *How to Sell Drugs...* serve as vehicles for transnational communication beyond American imports.

The transnationalisation of genre serves to highlight the position of Netflix as transnational broadcaster as well as the role of genre as a means of transnational communication. Perhaps the most significant addition Netflix offers to the transnational television landscape on a textual level is the design of texts that are transnational from the outset. This means that they are available in all of the markets Netflix operates in with different translation options. But it also means that they have to operate within an algorithmic category Netflix recognises, such as genre and have to thematically, aesthetically, and tonally align with texts that already exist. This offers non-American texts an opportunity to align with each other to find common ground through existing generic structure and, thus, effectively transnationalise genre. While this may also pose questions about cultural homogenisation, it is important not to revert back

to anxieties surrounding imports, but to recognise the ways individual texts negotiate the local and the transnational. Genre studies and a focus on the transnationalisation of genre in the context of Netflix provides opportunities to explore these complex negotiations as transnational, rather than only in relation to American contexts.

Bibliography

Alexander, N. 2016. "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's "Predictive Personalization" and the Mathematization of Taste." In McDonald, K. and Smith-Rowsey, D. (eds.) *The Netflix Effect : Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, 81-97.

Altman, R. 1999. *Film/Genre*. London: London : BFI.

Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn.; Minneapolis: Minneapolis, Minn. : University of Minnesota Press.

Arnold, S. 2016. "Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy ." In McDonald, K. and Smith-Rowsey, D. (eds.) *The Netflix Effect : Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, 49-62.

Banks, M. 2004. "A Boy for all Planets: Roswell, Smallville and the Teen Male Melodrama." In Davis, G. and Dickinson, K. (2004) *Teen TV. Genre, Consumption and Identity*, 17-28. London: BFI.

Bielby, D. and Harrington, C. L. 2008. *Global TV: Exporting Television and Culture in the World Market*, edited by C. Lee Harrington. New York ; London: New York University Press.

Buonanno, M. 2008. *The Age of Television Experiences and Theories*, edited by Jennifer Radice. Bristol: Bristol : Intellect.

Couldry, N. 2012. *Media, Society, World : Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge : Polity.

Creeber, G. 2015. *The Television Genre Book*. 3rd edition. London: Palgrave.

Dent, S. 2013. "Final Breaking Bad Season to Air on Netflix UK Right After US Broadcast." *Engadget*, 26.07. Available Online: https://www.engadget.com/2013/07/26/breaking-bad-netflix-uk-right-after-broadcast/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvLnVrLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALYUDiaqPCZDqDZUSzgLN5XRkQvuFcr9-u5LvQH8kb3OaTmiwp0CKEpgUFUiGNhyF8iAv64KrCf9zsOqVI20ShX2iHCKhKmj18FP_AxQhIR-QGjMvYMS4Rg90xMvyV_wC0WsqcW2_KVpxDJbAFuD1J7QDsKFNSRyjY9dh2jxW2R1, Accessed: 15.01.2020.

Dunleavy, T. (2018) *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. London: Routledge.

Feuer, J. 1992. "Genre Study and Television." In Allen, R.C. (ed.) *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, 138-60. London: Routledge.

Finn, E. 2017. *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gillan, J. 2015. *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid*. New York ; London: Routledge,

GrahamFunke. 2008. "9-0-2-1-Easy.", 07.09. <http://blog.thecaptainsofindustry.com/beverly-hills-90210/9-0-2-1-easy/>.

Hanson, J. 2010. "On the 'Beverly Hills, 90210' DVDs, the Song Doesn't Remain the Same (and That's a Problem) (TV Commentary)." , 10.02.

<http://coldbananas.com/2010/02/television/on-the-beverly-hills-90210-dvds-the-song-doesnt-remain-the-same-and-thats-a-problem/>.

Hill, A. 2014. *Reality TV* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Horeck, T. 2019. "Streaming Sexual Violence: Binge-Watching Netflix's 13 Reasons Why ." *Participations* 16 (2): 144-66.
<https://www.participations.org/Volume%2016/Issue%202/9.pdf>.

Jenner, M. 2019. "Control Issues: Binge-Watching, Channel-Surfing and Cultural Value." *Participations* 16 (2).

———. 2018. *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* Basingstoke, Hampshire : Palgrave Macmillan.

Kavka, M. 2012. *Reality TV*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press.

Levine, E. 2009. "National Television, Global Market: Canada's Degross: The Next Generation." *Media, Culture & Society* 31 (4): 515-531. doi:10.1177/0163443709335161.

Lobato, R. 2019. *Netflix Nations : The Geography of Digital Distribution..* New York: New York University Press.

Madrigal, A. C. 2014. "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/how-netflix-reverse-engineered-hollywood/282679/>.

McKinley, E. G. 1997. *Beverly Hills, 90210 Television, Gender, and Identity*. Philadelphia:: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mihelj, S. 2011. *Media Nations : Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mittell, J. 2004. *Genre and Television : From Cop shows to Cartoons in American Culture*. New York ; London : Routledge.

Moseley, R. 2015. "Teen Drama." In Creeber, G. (ed.) *The Television Genre Book*, 38-41. London: BFI.

Petruska, K. and Woods, F.. 2019. "Traveling without a Passport: "Original" Streaming Content in the Transatlantic Distribution Ecosystem ." In Hilmes, M. and Pearson, R. (eds.) *Transatlantic Television Drama : Industries, Programs, & Fans*, 49-67. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pye, D. 1975. "Genre and Movies." *Movie* 20: 29-43.

Straubhaar, J. D. 2007. *World Television : From Global to Local*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Trueltzsch-Wijnen, S. and De Sousa, W. 2016. "Watching the Hobbit in Two European Countries: The Views of Younger Audiences and Readers in Austria and Portugal." *Participations* 13 (2): 469-95.

Wee, V. 2010. *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

TV

13 Reasons Why, (2017-), USA: Netflix

Anna, (1987), GER: ZDF

Arrested Development, (2003-), USA: Fox, Netflix

As If (2001-4), UK: Channel 4

Baby (2018-), IT: Netflix

Beverly Hills 90210, (1990-2000), USA: Fox

Breaking Bad, (2008-13), USA: AMC

Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, (1997-03), USA: The WB, UPN

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, (2018-), USA: Netflix

Dawson's Creek, (1998-2003), USA: The WB

Dear White People, (2017-), USA: Netflix

Degrassi High, (1987-91), CN: CTV

Degrassi: Next Class, (2016-), CN: Netflix

Degrassi: The Next Generation, (2001-15), CN: CTV

Elite (*Élite*, 2018-), ES: Netflix

Fresh Prince of Bel Air, The (1990-6), USA: NBC

Gilmore Girls (2000-7), USA: The CW

Girlfriends (2000-6): USA: UPN, CBS

Gossip Girl, (2007-12), USA: CBS

Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten, (1992-), GER: RTL

Hemlock Grove, (2013-6), USA: Netflix

Hex, (2004-5), UK: Sky

Hollyoaks, (1995-), UK: Channel 4

House of Cards, (2013-8), USA: Netflix

How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast), (2019-), GER: Netflix

Inbetweeners, The, (2008-10), UK: E4

Jersey Shore (2009-12), USA: MTV

Moesha (1996-2001), USA: Nickelodeon

OC, The (2003-7), USA: Fox

On My Block (2018-), USA: Netflix

One Tree Hill, (2003-12), USA: The CW

Orange is the New Black, (2013-9), USA: Netflix

Pretty Little Liars, (2010-7), USA: ABC

Real World, The, (1992-), USA: MTV

Riverdale, (2017-), USA: CBS

Ron & Tanja, (1990), GER: ZDF

Sex Education, (2019-), UK: Netflix

Sister, Sister (1994-9). USA: ABC, WB

Skins, (2007-13), UK: Channel 4

Stranger Things, (2016-), USA: Netflix

Veronica Mars, (2004-6), USA: UPN

Film

Fletcher, Anne (2018) *Dumplin'*, USA: COTA Films

Samuels, Ian (2018) *Sierra Burgess is a Loser*, USA: Black Label Media

Stewart, Nzingha (2019) *Tall Girl*, USA: Wonderland Sound and Vision