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Quality television in the making : the cases of Flanders and Israel

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Abstract

This article discusses the properties of 'quality television' as constructed within the field of television production. It does so by analyzing the discourse of television creators and critics in two countries, Israel and Flanders, taking a theoretical approach based in part on Bourdieusian theory. Most academic work about 'quality television' concentrates on Anglo-American television drama series. In this paper we offer a different perspective by focusing on two small but prosperous television markets outside of the Anglo-American world. Our findings suggest that the quality discourse in both countries contains autonomous-artistic alongside heteronomous-capitalist ideological elements, apparently under the influence of the Anglo-American discourse of quality. Our findings also suggest that both ideological elements contribute to the cultural legitimation of the television drama series in both countries, though the capitalist discourse plays a more evident role among creators than among critics. Finally, we also discuss the differences between the Flemish and the Israeli discourses of 'quality television.'

Key words: Television Quality, Critics, Creators, Bourdieu, Art.

1. Introduction

Television and its products were historically regarded as cultural 'trash' (Bennett, 2006). In recent decades, however, side by side with the global expansion of the lowly 'reality' television genre (Couldry, 2008), there has been a growing attention to a corpus of serial TV drama many refer to as 'quality television' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

Despite having older roots, for instance in debates about quality in British television (e.g., Brunsdon, 1990), the current discourse about 'quality television' emerged mostly in the United States in the early 1980s (Feuer et al., 1984; Thompson, 1997; Newman and Levine, 2011). 'Quality drama' is usually defined as a unique television genre in which a large and socially diverse cast, complex dramatic narratives, and a cinematic aesthetic are combined with distinct television elements such as the narratives and forms of the soap opera (Hilmes, 2003: 99). This prevalent definition does not fully reflect, however, classifications of 'quality' as they are socially constructed within the field of television production itself (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Hence, a first objective of this paper is to explore how television creators and critics conceive quality drama, and how this relates to academic discourses on 'quality television'.

Moreover, most academic writing about 'quality television' to date has focused on American television drama (Newman and Levine, 2011; Mittell, 2014). While this is both reasonable and valuable given the enormous success and international sales of American drama (Kuipers 2011), it does limit the scope of research, leaving one to wonder whether similar processes occur in other countries and television markets. Furthermore, by focusing mostly on just one television market, the likely cultural specificity of quality discourses remains hidden from view and difficult to assess. A second objective of the current paper is thus to broaden our view of the way discourses on 'quality television' operate by comparing two television markets outside of the United States. Not only is the focus shifted beyond the Anglo-American world; by analyzing two cases it is also possible to transcend particular national discourses and explore underlying similarities.

As a result, the current paper is based on two separate studies conducted recently in the small but thriving television markets of Flanders and Israel (Author 1,

2015; Dhoest, 2014). It draws upon a definition of 'quality' television as socially constructed, based partially on Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993). From this perspective, the value of cultural works is a result of sorting struggles over definitions of quality between social agents, particularly creators and critics, in the field of cultural production itself (Bourdieu, 1993). The use of a Bourdieusian perspective in television studies may be controversial; indeed, it has suffered a fair amount of criticism over the past decades (Mittell, 2014). Nevertheless, as others have shown (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Couldry; 2007; Kuipers, 2011), we believe that the Bourdieusian approach continues to be significant for television studies in general, and that it can help us to better understand the workings of 'quality television' in particular.

Based on the above, the present paper addresses two main questions: (1) What are the properties of 'quality television' as constructed by television creators and critics in Flanders and in Israel? (2) How do the Flemish and Israeli discourses on quality compare to each other and to the globally influential Anglo-American academic and public discourses (Kuipers, 2011; Mittell, 2014; Thussu, 2007)?

2. 'Quality Television': History, Definitions, Theory

While British television has long been considered a supplier of 'quality', for instance by turning out such classics as the BBC mini-series *The Singing Detective* (1987), it was mostly around American television that discourses on 'quality television' gravitated in the past decades (Creeber, 2004). Until the early 1980s, television series were generally deemed incapable of stylistic or thematic innovation (Creeber, 2004: 2), of authenticity or autonomy, all attributes of quality in modern culture (Regev, 1994). American drama series first won academic and critical recognition with the success of *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), leading to the rise of the

so called 'quality' television series (Feuer et al., 1984; Mazdon, 2005; McCabe & Akass, 2007). Produced by the independent MTM (Mary Tyler-Moore) Enterprises, this police drama was central in shaping the concept of the 'quality' television series genre (Feuer et al., 1984; Creeber, 2001; Mazdon, 2005; McCabe & Akass, 2007). *Hill Street Blues* won broad critical acclaim, much of which was due to its pluralistic narratives, large and ethnically diverse cast, and liberal approach to political and social issues (Kerr, 1984). In addition, the show was characterized by what many television critics considered a cinematic rather than a television-based aesthetics (Feuer et al., 1984; Creeber, 2001; Mazdon, 2005).

Other television series followed in the footsteps of *Hill Street Blues*, including the lawyer drama *L.A. Law* (1986-1994) and the thriller *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) which uniquely fused such disparate genres as soap opera and low-budget horror (Creeber, 2001, 2004). In recent decades, the Anglo-American television production field has seen the evolution of drama series pre-branded as 'quality television' (McCabe & Akass, 2007), most prominently under the auspices of the celebrated cable channel HBO (Jaramillo, 2002; McCabe & Akass, 2007). The American television industry, within its predominantly commercial model, discovered the potential of serial dramas with a particular 'filmic' look and feel, sometimes even created by esteemed film creators. HBO's highly acclaimed drama series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) provided the first example of 'quality television' (Gray 2008; Miller 2008). It was soon followed by series such as *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), on a family of undertakers, and crime drama *The Wire* (2002-2008). Not having to please advertisers, pay channel HBO could be bolder and more innovative, tempting audiences, critics and academics with its daring, narratively complex, and visually rich programming (Jaramillo, 2002; McCabe & Akass, 2007).

One of the prominent attempts to list the defining characteristics of 'quality television' is found in Robert Thompson's book *Television's Second Golden Age* (1997). Some of Thompson's categories are textual (large ensemble cast, realism, clear narrative, etc.) while others are contextual, e.g. award winning, positive reviews, and catering to younger, educated audiences (Ibid.). To these characteristics others add that 'quality television' is produced by prestigious creators, whether in the television field itself or in 'higher', more classic and prestigious fields (Fricker, 2007).

When discussing 'quality television,' however, it is important to stress that the category itself is based not simply on a set of objective characteristics, but first and foremost on a process of cultural and discursive construction. In a recent study on American television, Newman and Levine (2011) provide a detailed sociological account of how television has become more culturally valued over the past decade and how this, in turn, has reinforced cultural hierarchies. Their study regards definitions of 'quality' as constructed through human interactions in the field of television production, without entailing intrinsic essence or substance.

It was Bourdieu who first called for such a sociological, non-essentialist way of examining definitions of 'quality' and taste in cultural fields of production. In his view, these concepts are the consequence of struggles over positions in the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). Applying the Bourdieusian stance to popular media such as television proves to be difficult, however.

In Bourdieu's view, the cultural field is divided into a field of 'mass' capitalist production, in which position holders fight over financial capital, and a field of 'restricted' artistic production, in which position holders fight over symbolic capital such as artistic recognition (Bourdieu, 1993). Placing television strictly in the former field, Bourdieu argues that television is not a free medium (Bourdieu, 1998), since it is constantly the object of acts of censorship coming from the political and economic

fields (Marliere, 1998, pp. 221). Bourdieu is pessimistic, then, about the media and about television's ability to produce artifacts which are socially regarded as showing artistic qualities. This pessimism made it difficult for some scholars (Mittell, 2014, Harlap, 2011) to accept the Bourdieusian stance on the media as a whole and on television in particular.

It was Nick Couldry (2007) who extensively outlined both the limits and the promise of applying Bourdieusian field theory to media studies. In light of the limitations of Bourdieusian studies on television, Couldry proposed using the concept of the field as a flexible tool adjustable to the needs of particular analyses. Moreover, prior studies which applied the Bourdieusian theory to fields of popular culture have shown that cultural industries such as rock music (Regev, 1994) and film (Baumann, 2001) can produce works socially constructed as 'art'.

In David Hesmondhalgh's view, the emerging academic and popular discussion of the 'quality' television series implies that the field of 'restricted' production, which for Bourdieu has an autonomous logic of practice that consecrates its products as works of art, is being reconfigured in the context of television production (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 222). For Hesmondhalgh, commerce and art conflict to a lesser degree than Bourdieu had supposed; the field's conception of autonomy can therefore give rise to criteria of 'good' television work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008).

Continuing this line of thought, Giseline Kuipers (2011) states that the production of cultural goods in television is not only about market shares, it is also about aesthetic criteria and forms of legitimation. Cultural production always entails a struggle over standards of 'quality,' even when those standards are considered thoroughly popular. Issues of quality and legitimacy at times supersede moneymaking and market shares. Even a field with as little autonomy as television is

characterized by a tension between the short-term logic of the market and longer-term efforts to strive for quality and artistic innovation (ibid., p. 543).

A similar approach is exhibited in Melissa Scardaville's work about the legitimation mechanisms of American soap operas. Scardaville's study shows how soap operas have gained legitimacy by becoming a viable way to conduct business around the globe (Scardaville, 2009). Scardaville also asked agents in the field of soap opera production in the United States (actors, producers, critics, writers, network executives, soap fans) to rank soap operas on the basis of their conception of quality (ibid., p. 369). The respondents almost unanimously agreed that U.S. daytime soap operas could be considered works of art, and expressed a clear and systematic preference for certain soap operas hailed as being of higher quality (ibid., p. 377). Scardaville concludes that aesthetic and economic considerations both helped legitimize some soap operas in the local market, granting them a measure of "aesthetic mobility" (ibid., p. 379).

A recent study of critical commentary about soap operas in the United States (Harrington, Scardaville, Lippmann & Bielby, 2015) has explored the artistic legitimation process of U.S. daytime soap operas from 1930 to 2010. According to this study, and similar to Bourdieu (1993), reviews and critical commentary play a significant role in the process of legitimation, with critics able to shift a cultural object from non-elite to elite status. Commentary about soaps in the United States has failed to do so, however (ibid., p. 15).

In summary, there has been extensive work analyzing the field of television production in recent years, using to some extent Bourdieusian insights. In light of this, we think it is useful to draw on Bourdieu and related studies of television. We will therefore apply to the television industry the Bourdieusian concept of the *field*,

which implies partial autonomy, and examine the supposedly conflicting autonomous and heterogeneous principles that govern it.

More concretely, in this article we consider television drama production as a 'sub-field' within the larger field of television production, where certain discourses on quality are constructed by social agents operating in this field. Therefore, rather than analyzing the so-called quality 'texts' and their characteristics, we analyze discursive practices presenting certain texts as 'quality drama.' We focus on two types of agents: on the one hand, *creators*, defined here as anyone involved in the production of drama, for example writers, producers and directors; on the other hand, *critics*, defined here as journalists and reviewers writing on television. Though members of the two groups occupy distinct positions in the field, they jointly construct discourses about 'quality television' (Bourdieu, 1993, 1995), as we will later elaborate.

To date, most academic work about definitions of television 'quality' has focused on Anglo-American television drama series (e.g., Thompson, 1996; Newman and Levine, 2011; Mittell, 2014). Due to cultural globalization and the emergence of a global television market (Bielby and Harrington, 2008), the American-based discourse of 'quality' television has spread around the world (Kuipers, 2011), reaching both Israel (Author 1, 2015) and Belgium (Dhoest, 2014).

With the growing importance of non-Western centers of television production, global television flows of goods and discourses can no longer be easily captured by a center-periphery model, with a 'one-way flow' from the United States to the rest of the world (Kuipers, 2011, p. 543). It is therefore timely that we offer a different perspective by analyzing the legitimation discourse of television drama in two markets outside of the United States – one in Western Europe, one in the Middle East.

3. Flanders and Israel: Comparable Case Studies

While our analysis of quality discourses as constructed within the field of television production already constitutes an addition to the existing literature, our further contribution is to add a different cultural perspective. Given the extensive writing about Anglo-American quality drama (Mittell, 2014; Newman & Levine, 2011), we would like to explore how quality discourses operate in other TV markets. We will focus on Flanders and Israel, partly for pragmatic reasons, as this is where we live and work and these are the television markets we are most familiar with, both as viewers and as researchers – but also because Israel and Flanders are non-Anglophone countries, allowing us to study the ‘quality’ drama genre in smaller TV markets outside the main Western Anglo-American market. Both countries are regarded as Western, however, despite Israel’s geographical location in the Middle East (Lemish, 2003). Our analysis therefore remains within the Western cultural sphere, and our conclusions should not be extended beyond it. Moreover, both countries are well within the Anglo-American sphere of influence in terms of drama imports (Bielby and Harrington, 2008), which suggests that English-language ‘quality’ series and the discourses about them are available to creators and critics in those countries.

Culturally speaking, there are important differences between Israel and Flanders. The national boundaries of both are questioned in different ways. Flanders is part of the Belgian nation-state, which is divided into three regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north, French-speaking Wallonia in the south, and bilingual Brussels in the center. This leads to ongoing political and cultural controversy and incessant calls for increased regional autonomy (Deprez & Vos, 1998). This internal conflict remains peaceful, however. Israel faces much deeper rifts, with a minority of

Palestinian citizens excluded almost entirely from mainstream Israeli culture and politics, an ongoing conflict with the Palestinians outside of Israel's formal borders, and an Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (Ehrlich, 2013).

Despite these clear differences, both countries are similar in a number of respects, justifying their comparison. First, both countries have similar-sized television markets. Israel has a population of approximately 8.1 million, 75% of them Jewish Hebrew-speakers and 21% Palestinian Arab-speakers with Israeli citizenship (Israeli Statistics Center, 2013). Due to the Jewish hegemony in Israeli society and politics, Israeli television broadcasts mainly in Hebrew, a language which is spoken practically nowhere else in the world. Moreover, Israel's regional market is quite limited due to Israel's conflict with its Arab neighbors (Sopher, 2011). Nevertheless, in recent years the Israeli television market has become a global television format exporter, exporting, in particular, game shows, reality, and drama formats to central Europe and the United States (Author 1, 2011). Flanders (the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) similarly constitutes a small television market, quite distinct from its Francophone Belgian counterpart, but with some connections to the television market in the Netherlands (Dhoest, 2014). Despite a population of only 6.2 million, Flanders has a rich media landscape, including twelve television channels.

Second, drama is a key genre in both television markets. During its monopoly period (from 1953 until 1989), Flanders' public service broadcaster used television drama as a key genre in order to educate and cultivate its audience. With the liberalization of the Flemish television market, a more audience- and entertainment-oriented policy was adopted. As a consequence, drama became an even more prominent genre, with Flemish viewers showing a particular preference for local dramas that portrayed everyday life in Flanders in ways they could find recognizable (Dhoest, 2007). The main players in the production and programming

of television fiction (including drama, soaps and sitcoms) in Flanders are the first public channel, Eén [One], which is the market leader with circa 30.54% ratings in 2013, followed by the commercial channel vtm (Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij), with 17.2% ratings (VRT 2014).

As for Israel, the country's first public channel, Channel One, was also its sole television channel for over two decades, from its establishment in 1968 to the emergence of multi-channel television in the early 1990s. The latter development was again part of neo-liberal privatization processes (Liebes, 2003), which culminated in the launching of Israel's first commercial television channel, Channel 2. This soon became the country's top-rated channel by a wide margin, with average ratings around 35%-40% (Walla, 2013). Like their Flemish counterparts, Israeli television viewers showed an immediate preference for domestic television content in the local language. To meet the demands of the young television market and its audience, Channel 2 and the younger commercial broadcaster, Channel 10, began to produce Hebrew content in large quantities. However, these productions were mainly soap operas, game shows, and talk shows, all low-prestige, cheap-to-produce genres. Channel One, which due to political and economic constraints was never a major producer of dramatic content (Sopher, 2011), gradually became a non-player in the emerging Israeli television market (Bar Gur, 2011).

Third, in both countries the issue of 'quality' is of central importance in debates on television. In Flanders, public broadcaster VRT is regulated via five-year government contracts, which, in keeping with the longstanding approach to Flemish public television as an agent of national values and cultural elevation, stipulate that VRT must produce 'quality' programs, defined in terms of social relevance and impact, technical quality, etc. (VRT, 2011). In Israel, in order to prevent the newly born commercial channels from flooding the TV screen with low-cost, high-rating,

“low quality” programs, legislation distinguished between “high-end television genres”, including drama series, and “low-end” forms. The new legislation required private commercial television channels to produce and air at least 150 hours of “high-end” television content annually, among it 'quality' drama (Bargur, 2011; Author 1, 2011). This content was defined in terms of ‘production value’, measured by the time and money invested in one hour of television production. Eventually, the emergence of commercial (if still publicly regulated) television in Israel allowed the creation of a relatively significant volume of dramatic production pre-labeled as of 'quality' (Author 1, 2011).

4. Methodology

To study the construction of ‘quality television’ and the concomitant ‘sorting struggles’ as they take place in the field of television production in Flanders and Israel, we use a comparative approach inspired by Bourdieusian field analysis (Purhonen and Wright, 2013). According to Savage and Silva (2013), field analysis requires different sorts of strategy to assess the relationships between different elements of a field (*ibid.*, p. 114). For our analysis, we decided to focus on two groups of agents in the field of television production: creators and critics. We chose these two groups because, according to Bourdieu (1993) and others (Scardaville, 2009; Harrington et al., 2015), both are major players in any cultural field and take significant part in consecrating cultural artifacts into a canon of ‘quality’ works of artistic value.

Our data are a subset of the data collected for two separate larger projects which explored artistic legitimation in Israel (Author 1, 2015) and in Flanders (Dhoest, 2014). For each country, we selected a comparable sample of three series acclaimed by the press and by industry awards as being of ‘quality.’ We do not

consider this small sample as representative of the diversity of drama produced in each setting, but we do believe that the discourses around them are representative of the debates around 'quality television' in both countries. For Israel, we selected *The Bourgeois* (2000-2004), *Love Hurts* (2004) and *Arab Labor* (2007-2013). These series were chosen based on a survey of 430 reviews and articles about television series in Israel published between 1998 and 2012. Furthermore, all three series were declared as groundbreaking works of television and won Israeli television awards. As to themes and settings, *Ha-Burganim* ("The Bourgeois") features a group of friends living in the city of Tel Aviv, *Ahava Ze Koev* ("Love Hurts") revolves around a socially mismatched young couple, and *Avoda Aravit* ("Arab Labor") tells the story of a Palestinian-Israeli citizen and his family.

For Flanders, we selected *The Tour* (2011), *Divine Monster* (2010-2013), and *Old Belgium* (2009-2010). These series were chosen based on a survey of all TV drama reviews for the Fall 2010–Spring 2011 season, where the three selected series were the only ones labeled as 'quality' or 'prestige' series. *De Ronde* ("The Tour") is a tragicomic series charting the experiences of a broad group of characters on the day of the "Ronde van Vlaanderen" (Tour of Flanders), the major Flemish cycling event, *Het Goddelijke Monster* ("The Divine Monster") interweaves the tragic experiences of a wealthy Flemish family with recent Belgian history, and *Oud België* ("Old Belgium,") recounts the demise of a popular variety theater in Antwerp.

These shows were broadcast by commercial Israeli broadcasters Channel 2 and Channel 10, which are the main creators of television dramas in Israel, and the public Flemish channel Eén, which is the main player in the Flemish television field. Though the former are private and the latter is public, the series we study occupy a similar position in their respective television markets, widely recognized as 'quality television.' Moreover, all were produced under similar quality regulations: Israel's

commercial channels are subject to the quotas and definitions of ‘high-end’ production stipulated by law, while the Flemish public channels Eén is subject to the ‘quality’ stipulations set by its government contracts.

To analyze the critical discourse on these series, we collected sixty one articles and reviews from a broad selection of newspapers. In Israel, we used the print and online versions of *Ha’aretz*, Israel’s most prominent highbrow newspaper (Kama, 2005), and *Yedioth Aharonot*, one of Israel’s most popular daily newspapers. Both newspapers display a similar discourse (Author 1, 2015) and hold consecration powers in the field of television production in Israel (Author 1, 2011). For Flanders, we used Mediargus, a database containing all Flemish newspapers, subjecting to deeper analysis only those reviews containing statements regarding ‘quality’.

As for the creators, we selected key people involved in the production process of both television fields – writers, producers, directors, and actors – using a purposive sampling method (Bryman, 2004). Our selection also followed the insights of creative industries scholars who view the creation of products in those fields as a result of joint work by different agents (Hirsh, 2000; Murphy and Eshner, 2008).¹ These creators’ voices and conceptions of quality are important, as all of them are major position holders within the fields of Israeli and Flemish television production and, as such, have participated in these fields’ sorting struggles (Bourdieu, 1993). All in all we conducted 15 interviews which were held face to face and lasted between an hour and a half and three hours. We also used one newspaper interview with an Israeli creator as a secondary source.

¹ For *The Tour*, director Jan Eelen was interviewed, as were assistant director Eddy Stevesyns and actor Bruno Vanden Broecke. For *Divine Monsters*, screenwriter Rik D’hiet, producer Gunter Schmid, and composer Steve Willaert were interviewed. For *Old Belgium*, director Indra Siera, actor-writer Stany Crets, and production designer Johan Van Essche consented to interviews. Finally, Eén drama manager Stef Wouters was interviewed. For *The Bourgeois*, director Eytan Tzur was interviewed. For *Love Hurts*, screenwriter and main creator Dana Modan was interviewed, as well as director Ram Nahari. For *Arab Labor*, lead actor Norman Issa and first-season director Roni Ninio were interviewed.

Our current analysis builds upon our prior work (Author 1, 2015; Dhoest, 2014) by focusing on themes previously cited as contributing towards the 'quality' of television series. We analyzed the interviews and the reviews in the same way, using qualitative content analysis to identify the core categories and main concerns of the players in both fields.

In line with methodological literature (e.g. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Bryman, 2004) we began our analysis with a process of 'open coding' that consisted of reading the texts line by line, categorizing the data based on our conceptual perspective, and naming the categories according to the detected themes. In the second phase of our analysis we mapped our categories, identified the links between them, and revised them where necessary, for example by combining them into new categories. In the third phase of the analysis we brought our final categories into greater focus by describing and explaining each in concrete detail (Shkedi, 2006).

In what follows, we first discuss the discourses of critics and creators separately, in each case comparing Israel and Flanders in order to identify common themes across both countries. Doing that, we also highlight, throughout the text, the similarities between critics and creators in both countries. We then zoom in on differences between Israel and Flanders. In this way, we aim to pay equal attention to the two comparative perspectives guiding our analysis—that between the two countries, and that between creators and critics.

5. 'Quality' Television in Israel and Flanders

5.1 The Critics' Discourse

Though Bourdieu sets television firmly apart from the artistic field, one consistent finding across our countries is that critics explicitly or implicitly refer to art and artistic criteria in discussing and assessing television quality. Thus, Flemish

critics regularly describe the analyzed series as art. For instance, a review of *The Tour* in the Flemish newspaper *De Morgen* enthuses: “The first episode of Jan Eelens’ *magnum opus* more than fulfilled the high expectations; and if it is right that true art discloses its secrets gradually, then we can only be dealing with a masterpiece here” (Hanot, 2011). “What [series creator] Jan Eelen does in *The Tour* is daring and unique,” writes another reviewer of *The Tour* in *De Standaard* (De Foer, 2011).

To support their designation of *The Tour* as a work of “true art,” these reviews emphasize certain qualities such as *innovation* (“daring and unique”) and *complexity* (“discloses its secrets gradually”), which according to Bourdieu (1990a) cannot be expected to characterize works adhering to the capitalist logic of production. Instead, these characteristics adhere to the autonomous logic of production which, according to the modern autonomy-of-art ideology, are features of works of art (Regev, 1994). Moreover, the critics’ reference to the work’s so-called “complexity” echoes the Anglo-American academic discourse on ‘quality,’ for example Mittells’ (2014) claim that quality television series feature narrative complexity.

Similar perspectives are expressed by Israeli critics, for instance, in this review of the acclaimed series *The Bourgeois* published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*: “There is *innovation* here—the intent is *purely artistic*, and the *stylistic vision* stems from a *creativity and truth* which are *not intended to increase ratings*” (Alper, 2001; our emphasis). *Innovation* is again stressed here as a prerequisite of ‘quality’ and ‘art.’ And since the creators’ “intent” is “true”, it is also “purely artistic,” as opposed to the more lowly kind of television that is “intended to increase ratings,” in keeping with capitalist logic (Bourdieu, 1990a). In other words, for the majority of reviews sampled for this research, a television series must be crowned as a work of art for it to become worthy of the ‘quality’ title.

The same attributes—complexity and difficulty—highlighted in the above reviews are also emphasized by Bourdieu as marks of art. According to Bourdieu (1984, 1990b), artistic work is presumed to be more complex and more difficult to understand than other cultural artifacts. This sort of distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural content—between complex, intellectually demanding works intended for a select elite and lowly content intended for the masses—is a way for those occupying the habitus of the cultural elite to distinguish themselves (ibid.). Falling under the former category, ‘quality’ television series have thus come to function as differentiating social mechanisms in the struggle over social positions in the field of television and the field of culture as a whole.

Another aspect of what Bourdieu defines as artistic ‘quality’ is *aesthetic innovation* (Regev, 1994). This aspect is again evident in the discourse of Israeli and Flemish television critics. In Israel, for example, *The Bourgeois* is hailed in the press for its innovative use of a “Polaroid-like technique of shooting and styling” (Alper, 2000). The emphasis on aesthetic innovation seems to be even greater in Flanders. For instance, the focus on “purely aesthetic” values is strongly evident in reviews of the Flemish series *Old Belgium*, which is praised largely for its style and less for its content. The series, one reviewer writes, “is exceptional in its jumpy editing, extreme close-ups, and actors occasionally talking to the camera” (Werbrouck, 2010). These quotes again echo Anglo-American discourses on ‘quality television’ which also emphasize aesthetic innovation as a feature of ‘quality’ (Thompson, 1997, Mittell, 2014).

Another component of the autonomy-of-art ideology is that of ‘*the genius creator*’ (Heinich, 1996). According to Bourdieu (1990a), ‘genius creators’ are creators labeled as ‘autonomous’ who despise the rules of the capitalist market and create out of their own free spirit (Heinich, 1996). Moreover, according to the Kantian ideas that

stand at the root of the autonomy-of-art ideology (ibid.), the ‘genius creator’ is one capable of enacting *new* rules of art and aesthetics. These ideas are strongly evident in both Flemish and Israeli television reviews. The discourse of Flemish reviewers and journalists underscores the eccentric and unique qualities of the creators, embracing the myth of the ‘genius creator’ of works regarded as art. Hence, Jan Eelen, the creator of “De Ronde,” is described as “a prodigy” (De Foer, 2010), while other reviews stress his “unique” voice and work (De Foer, 2011). Moreover, the Flemish reviewers generally credit a specific ‘auteur’ with the creation of the series in question. For example, Flemish writer-director Eelen is presented as the one and only ‘auteur’ of *De Ronde*, while novelist Tom Lanoye assumes this position for *Het Goddelijke Monster*, a serial based on his ‘Monster Trilogy’ of novels. Eelen and Lanoye are the creators most often interviewed in pieces on their respective series, and in reviews of *Het Goddelijke Monster* Lanoye’s name is featured more prominently than those of the (lesser-known) director Hans Herbots and screenwriter Rik D’hiet.

The same tendency is evident in commentary on the Israeli series. In an article on *The Bourgeois* published in the daily Yediot Aharonot, the following is written about the series’ director-creator Eitan Tzur: “Tzur is a *rare* animal in danger of extinction. He is a quality director-creator, who does what he does for the sake of *pure art*. He is not interested in cheap entertainment. This is rare in the field of television—a director who has his own personal signature, who is skeptical, doubtful, and very *heavy and serious*... Tzur is a *fighter* as much as he is a creator” (Shaked, 2003). Here, Tzur is not only praised as a unique and expressive creator in accordance with the myth of the ‘genius creator.’ It is also evident that the reviewer differentiates between Tzur’s work, defined as a work of art, and other works of ‘cheap’ television, which presumably adheres to the rules of the capitalist market.

Furthermore, Tzur's 'authorship,' his personal signature, is regarded as "heavy," as difficult to digest and to understand. It seems that the reviewer uses the myth of the 'genius creator' to explain, again, that 'quality' television drama is intended for a niche elite audience capable of understanding this kind of work. Furthermore, by identifying the series' 'complexity,' the reviewer is positioning himself as part of that elite and as owner of its particular habitus.

Clearly, critics in the field – both in Flanders and in Israel – have internalized this myth of the 'genius creator' in a way that makes it a meaningful criterion of canonization. This discourse which singles out an 'auteur' is also prominent in the Anglo-American discourse of 'quality television' (Levine & Newman, 2011; Mittell, 2014). Here, again, we can detect the globalized flow of the 'television quality' discourse from the United States to other television markets such as those of Israel and Flanders.

5.2 The Creators' Discourse

Juxtaposing these critical voices with the creators', what emerges is not so much a sorting struggle as a joint canonization process. Like the critics (who often quote them), both in Flanders and in Israel creators readily stress the artistic aspects of particular television series. For instance, the producer of Flemish series *The Divine Monster* states: "I have a sense that this series is timeless... It is something that sticks to you. And of course one needs a little *intellect*, one cannot just lie down on the couch and let it come to you. You have to keep on *thinking*" (Schmid, 2011; our emphases). This interviewee, like many others both in Flanders and in Israel, echoes the stress on complexity and difficulty as qualities of 'art' which were identified in critical discourses. Again, this very much conforms to Bourdieu's vision on art as a mode of distinction. Furthermore, by highlighting the intellectual qualities one needs

to have in order to enjoy 'quality' television, these creators, like the critics, echo the Anglo-American discourse of 'quality' television (Mittell, 2014).

Similarly, the critics' focus on aesthetic innovation was also present in the creators' discourse. Our interviews indicate that for some creators, the bid for 'quality' can be a self-conscious and intentional goal. For instance, Flemish writer Rik D'hiet reports that during pre-production meetings it was agreed that *The Divine Monster* "had to be different, using new narrative techniques and innovative content. It was also our deliberate aim to sometimes breach realism by means of special effects, shifts in tone, and other alienating techniques." It is significant that in D'hiet's account the series' 'quality' was pre-contemplated in a pre-production meeting. It seems that in aspiring to create a series with "new narrative techniques and innovative content," the producers used some of the properties of what Mittell (2014) calls "complex television." Bourdieu would say that such pre-contemplation adhered to rules outside of the field of "pure aesthetics" (Bourdieu, 1995), while "barbarously" trying to create a cultural product that would be received as aesthetically superior (Bourdieu, 1990b, pp. 77-78).

It seems that having internalized the autonomy-of-art ideology into their habitus (ibid.), the creators, much like the critics, are cleverly using its components, alongside the Anglo-American discourse of 'quality television' (e.g. Mittell, 2014), in order to attract an elite audience and create a canon of culturally legitimate television dramas. The producers of the dramas in question presumably believe that this kind of audience is similar to television critics in expecting aesthetic innovation (Mittell, 2014). As one of the Israeli creators interviewed acknowledged: "I am creating television for the elite, for me, for my friends and for the television critics." This quote highlights the rather conscious way in which various agents of the elite work in order to exclude others from their status group. For this particular creator, the

members of the elite include the creators and the critics as joint agents of stratification.

Further echoing the discourse of the critics, the trope of the 'genius creator' was also prominent in the interviews with creators. For instance, in Flanders *Old Belgium* director Indra Siera distinguishes between "quality" and "conventional" television drama primarily in terms of the contribution of individual creators: "The measure of quality is when a director, actor, or some other individual has taken [the work] into his hands and given it an exceptionally strong identity, whether through strong acting or by making the work visually sumptuous, fresh, clear and surprising, all as a function of the story" (Siera, 2011). Siera goes on to express his idea of the individual creator: "I love enlightened despotism... Fuck off of my set, follow my vision, or don't follow it at all..." For Siera, 'quality' television is thus the product of an individual who meets the criteria of the 'genius creator' myth—a highly unique human being who expresses his uniqueness in his art (Heinich, 1996). Moreover, in his own language, he stereotypically demonstrates the style of the eccentric, idiosyncratic artist (ibid.).

In Israel Dana Modan, creator of *Love Hurts*, similarly gives expression to the myth of the 'genius creator' as involving a divine element, in terms that strongly echo the aforementioned Kantian view of artistic autonomy: "For me, creativity is *something divine* that flows through you... As I've grown more focused in my writing, I've connected to my *subconscious*, where the *divine* and most beautiful part of my writing lies..."

So far, our analysis has highlighted the similarities between the discourses of creators and those of critics in both countries. These discourses gravitate around the notion of television as 'art'. However, in the interviews we also identified an

alternative discourse on quality television drama, stressing its technical, practical and commercial aspects. This discourse was more salient among creators than among critics, possibly due to the fact that creative workers in the field of television are aware of their dependency on money and technology (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010).

A first trope in this more practical discourse is the importance of *ratings*. For example, Flemish director Indra Siera (*Old Belgium*) notes: “As a director... I work in a mass medium, and I work with tax money, [so] I’m not going to make an art movie... I am not going to drive people away like other series do...” (Siera, 2011). Ratings seem to be highly important for Siera, and he expresses concern with the number of people who are going to watch his show. This is the same Siera who earlier in the interview said that people have to “follow his vision”; here, however, he addresses with contempt an ‘art movie’ – the kind of movie that film scholars often view as the product of an auteur’s singular vision (Mittell, 2014) – as something no one would want to watch. The blending of autonomous and capitalist values and the importance of both are thus a major theme in Siera's interview.

In Israel, in an interview for the financial magazine *Globes*, Saeed Kashua, creator of *Arab Labor*, also emphasizes the importance of money and ratings in Israel’s television industry. He is described as “constantly preoccupied with the series’ ratings”; in a semi-ironic tone that only hints at the built-in tension between television creators and their employers, he tells the interviewer that his tip for television “tycoons” is to “create only what brings in ratings, very high ratings” (Askal, 2013). As David Hesmondhalgh (2002) puts it, television creators are workers in a capitalist-industrial environment. This is not to say that they cannot create works of ‘quality’ that are socially recognized as ‘art’ (2006). They do, however, work in an unstable capitalist setting which has great impact on their work and way of thinking

(Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). In other words, high ratings and 'making money' are definite concerns for them.

For Norman Issa, the leading actor of *Arab Labor* and a highly acclaimed theater creator in Israel, it is precisely the show's high ratings that give it its political power and thus also its 'quality'. In our interview, he states: "Only when you have [high] ratings can you reach people and introduce radical and subversive political ideas into the work in a way that will affect people subconsciously and make a difference" (Issa, 2014). In this case, the tension between commerce and art is resolved (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), with both contributing to the making of a meaningful cultural product. For Issa, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, being politically subversive is a sign of 'quality,' in keeping with Bourdieu's predictions (Regev, 1994), while television ratings are practically needed for making a political change.

Beside ratings, *budgets* emerged as another practical concern in creators' discourses in both countries. In Flanders, *Old Belgium* production designer Johan Van Essche lists the elements needed to make a 'quality' drama series: "When more money is spent, more time is taken, and more talent is invested, you can get more 'quality.' It is simply a matter of the script being better, the acting being better, the direction being better" (Van Essche, 2011). For Van Essche, higher budgets allow greater investment in talent. In this view, money is the practical engine behind good television work and artistic talent. Echoing this, in Israel Ram Nahari, director of *Love Hurts*, expresses similar practical concerns: "Trying to be objective, I will have to say that my parameter for 'quality' in a television drama series is what the legislator calls 'production value' – the amount of time and money spent on scriptwriting, rehearsals, and the visual and technical aspects" (Nahari, 2010).

For David Hesmondhalgh (2006), this sort of mixed discourse illustrates the degree to which the capitalist and the artistic discourses conflict less sharply than

Bourdieu had argued. Nevertheless, for the early Bourdieu (1990b), the ambiguity emphasized in our analysis and the mixture between a 'pure' aesthetic discourse and a more practical, 'vulgar' capitalist discourse (ibid, p. 97) is a result of the way practitioners of what he calls the "sphere of the legitimizable, to which television also belongs" (ibid, p. 95-97), try to establish their work as a fully legitimized field of cultural production.

To Bourdieu, cultural works in the "sphere of the legitimizable" are not consecrated as legitimate art; rather, this sphere is controlled by competing authorities of legitimation—some autonomous, some heteronomous (ibid.). However, some "virtuosos" of the "sphere of the legitimizable," as Bourdieu calls them, manage to juxtapose a vague artistic discourse with a more "technical" and practical language. According to Bourdieu (1990b), they do so because, due to the capitalist technology they are using, they cannot provide a precise and discursively "pure" concept of their activity (Chamboredon, 1990, p. 132).

In recent decades, however, there has been much academic writing about 'quality television' (e.g., Feuer et al., 1984; Thompson, 1997; Nelson, 2006; Newman and Levine, 2011; Mittell, 2014). Academic legitimization is a key factor in the "sphere of legitimacy," the sphere of already-canonized works of art (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 96). It is therefore our suggestion that the field of television production, especially its so-called 'quality' products, is in the process of moving to the "sphere of legitimacy" (ibid.), in much the same way that the field of Hollywood film production had done so (Baumann, 2001). This legitimization project is largely the work of academics from the United States and Britain (Newman and Levine, 2011), but our analysis suggests that it is also resonating in the process of position-taking (Bourdieu, 1993) in the smaller, more peripheral fields of television production in Israel and Flanders.

6. But Not All Is the Same: Differences Between 'Quality' Discourses in Israel and Flanders

So far, our analysis has identified and discussed the many similarities between the discourses on quality television across the different cultural contexts of Flanders and Israel. Though the series in question may be perceived as strongly rooted in national culture, the criteria used to assess them turned out to be very similar. There is one striking exception, however, which seems to be strongly linked to differences in national context and to the way these differences affect the construction of institutionalized social concepts such as 'quality television' criteria. This difference is reflected in the reference to *social and political subversion* by critics in both countries. Social and political subversion is also widely regarded as an indication of 'quality,' and therefore of art, according to the autonomous logic which is supposed to characterize art (Bourdieu, 1990a). For this reason, it seems, television reviewers tend to view subversive content in television series as a mark of 'quality.' There are, however, some notable differences between prevalent Flemish and Israeli attitudes.

In Flanders, references to sociopolitical subversion are rare. In the reviews we analyzed, only one case stands out. Comparing *The Divine Monster* with *The Tour*, a reviewer for Flemish newspaper De Standaard claims that both series are "trying to sketch out a fresco of Flanders, albeit in very different ways: whereas writer-director Jan Eelen (*The Tour*) has put together a fine mosaic of people we see and hear every day in the street, the Flanders of Lanoye (*The Divine Monster*) is a pocket of corruption and ruin populated by hysterical creatures" (Deckmyn & De Kock, 2011). The emphasis here is not only on authenticity, which is a mark of modern artistic quality (Regev, 1994), but also on the series' subversive sociopolitical stance. Staunch

sociopolitical criticism is stressed here as contributing towards the series' quality. The sympathetic reviewer invokes the social critique shown in the series as another way to highlight the series' quality.

In Israel, such references to the sociopolitical importance of drama are much more common. For instance, a review of the Israeli series *Arab Labor*, published in *Ha'aretz* in 2010, declares the series to be innovative thanks to its politically subversive stance concerning Israel's Zionist hegemony and its effect on the country's Palestinian citizens: "The *most courageous step* taken by the series is its perspective. It introduces us to the house of [Palestinian-Israeli citizen] Amjad and shows us Zionist society through his eyes. This world is a mirror image, one completely opposed to what we [Israeli Jews] have been raised on. *To the camera, the Star of David [the Israeli flag] hoisted in the schoolyard looks like a disturbance*" (Sharir, 2010). For the reviewer, the series' innovativeness and most effective content have to do with its "courageous" political content. The two other Israeli series examined here, *The Bourgeois* and *Love Hurts*, are also hailed for their critique of various sociopolitical ills: capitalism, socio-ethnic gaps between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, male chauvinism, Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, etc. (Author 1, 2011).

According to our analysis, the view of political critique as a sign of quality is much more prominent among Israeli television reviewers than among their Flemish counterparts, who seem to highlight more "universal" social themes at the expense of direct political engagement. In a review of the much-praised Flemish series *Old Belgium*, for example, one reviewer writes: "This is a drama about our own land as we like to see it: rooted in Flemish soil, *but also universal in its themes*" (De Foer, 2010). According to the review, quality content in Flemish television dramas apparently involves "universal" themes concerning human nature, the relationship between the individual and society, and so on. Israeli reviewers, by contrast, seem to be much

more heavily affected by the ongoing violent conflict between Palestinians and Jews and the way this conflict is reflected in all other social tensions involving gender, religion, class and ethnicity (Ehrlich, 2013). This socio-political context may be the reason that Israeli television critics seem to lay greater emphasis on the immediate political content of the television series they review.

In other words, the different socio-political contexts of both fields result in differences in the criteria of 'quality television'. This finding highlights one of our main arguments in this paper, which is that quality criteria are not objective but socially constructed.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

We can now begin to answer our first question: What are the properties of 'quality television' as constructed by television creators and critics in Flanders and in Israel? The 'quality' television drama series in both countries exhibits a mix of two social discourses: an artistic-autonomous and a capitalist-heteronomous discourse of legitimation. In other words, in both countries, the field of 'quality' television features both an autonomous discourse that in Bourdieu's terms imitates the legitimate sphere of 'highbrow' cultural production—painting, literature, etc. (ibid.)—and a heteronomous capitalist discourse characteristic of the field of power (Bourdieu, 1993).

Prior studies have shown how American soap operas attained mostly economic legitimacy (Scardaville, 2009), though partial aesthetic-artistic legitimacy was bestowed on certain soaps by agents in the field of television production in the United States. This aesthetic discourse did not gain dominance, however, because of the simultaneous rise of the soap opera's economic and aesthetic status. Because cultural works with aesthetic qualities are supposed to be autonomous of economic

intentions, this simultaneity may have hurt the genre's attempts at achieving aesthetic legitimacy (ibid., p. 379).

In our study we showed how 'quality' television drama series gain their status by relying on both types of legitimacy. Still, the artistic-aesthetic type of legitimacy is more evident in the discourses of both critics and creators in both countries. This results in an inner polarization of the field of television production which differentiates between a 'mass' end of production, consisting for example of soap operas and 'reality' television, and a more 'restricted' end of television production aiming towards an elite audience, in which cultural capital is somewhat more important than economic capital.

Nevertheless, our findings support Hesmondhalgh's (2006) view that definitions of artistic quality and commercialism in the field of television production evince less tension than has been suggested by Bourdieu. It appears that a complex definition of a 'quality' television has emerged in both fields, one that is a hybrid of artistic and capitalist ideologies. Under this definition, a 'quality' television drama series must to some extent be commercial, yet remain the innovative, sometimes subversive, authentic, and therefore autonomous work of a 'genius creator' who is also a craftsman.

In addition, we have detected more similarities than differences among actors within this field. Perhaps most strikingly, the 'sorting struggle' over quality has turned out to be not much of a struggle at all, with both parties, creators and critics, presenting a very similar discourse of 'quality television' as (a kind of) 'art' and stressing similar elements such as complexity, artistic innovation and the contribution of 'genius creators.' The creators' discourse did exhibit more 'practical' arguments regarding ratings and funding, though these, too, supported the process of legitimization.

Our second question was: How do the Flemish and Israeli discourses on quality compare to each other and to Anglo-American academic discourses? As indicated throughout our account, we observed strong similarities in the arguments and criteria used to judge the quality of television series in Flanders and Israel. This does not imply, however, that local cultural context does not matter in these discourses. Its importance was especially noticeable in the greater emphasis placed on social and political subversion in Israel, which reflected not only the greater emphasis on concrete socio-political concerns in the Israeli drama we studied, but also the more tense and violent socio-political circumstances of Israeli society.

As for the relation between the Israeli and Flemish discourses on quality television, on the one hand, and Anglo-American academic discourses, on the other, our analysis showed great similarities. This is rather unsurprising, as the creators and critics in both Israel and Flanders are mostly part of what is called the 'new middle class' – a class typically composed of high-status, globally oriented workers engaged in social distinction (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; Regev, 2013). This global class has acquired an omnivore taste, which includes products of the popular cultural industries (Peterson and Kern, 1996) and which has come to characterize academics as well (Ortner, 2010).

Furthermore, as our analysis has highlighted, the legitimization work done by both critics and creators in Israel and in Flanders seems to be a joint project rather than a struggle. The creators and critics nourish each other, while both are writing for a designated elite audience with globalized Western-orientated omnivore tastes.

Our initial attempt to shed light on two non-Anglophone television markets and their quality discourse leaves us with many directions for further studies. First, while our focus on two different non-Anglo-American contexts presents an addition to the academic field, we have to be careful in generalizing from our findings. The

discourses on 'quality television' in Israel and Flanders turn out to be rather similar, but this does not imply that they remain so across the Western world, let alone worldwide. Further studies exploring global flows and contra-flows vis-à-vis local discourses of 'quality' television are thus needed. Second, the apparently joint work of legitimization done by critics and creators in the field of television should also be further investigated. Third, our account of quality discourses in both contexts is by necessity sketchy: a more detailed analysis of additional reviews and interviews on further serials would undoubtedly lead to a finer-grained picture. Fourth, it is important to further investigate the role of audiences as television consumers and the evaluative work done by them (Mittell, 2014).

To conclude, as scholars coming from Israel and Flanders, we are also aware that our historization of television 'quality' is highly affected by our own preferences and our Western academic schooling. Taking all this into account, however, we hope to have shown how the discursive production of 'quality television,' viewed as a cultural field in the Bourdieusian sense, operates rather similarly across our two different socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, we also hope to have demonstrated the value of comparative analysis for identifying persistent national and cultural differences in a globalizing cultural and television landscape. Finally, we strongly believe that our combined analysis of the discourses of critics and creators opens an important avenue for future research aiming to better understand television as a field of cultural production.

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