

## “Not in the Margin Anymore”: The Transnational Turn in Contemporary TV

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For decades American—and to a lesser extent, British—television dominated global television trade. In the 1960s, for instance, they together constituted more than 90 percent of total worldwide program exchanges. However, at least since the 1990s, it has been *de rigueur* for academics to insist that, over time, commercial television outlets replace imported series with domestic ones, particularly during prime-time hours, in order to compete more effectively with other channels. Wildman and Siwek (1988) call this phenomenon “schedule replacement;” it is rooted in the “cultural discount” (Hoskins and Muris, 1988) theory of imported programming, which predicts that domestically-produced programming will be inherently more culturally relevant and popular with audiences than imported programming. Hoskins, McFayen and Finn (1997) note that cultural discounting applies less well to film trade, speculating that the “event” nature of moviegoing makes consumers less likely to demand familiar cultural fare than they do in television.

My provocation to this panel is this: with the rise of “quality television” across broadcasting, cable, and premium channels in many markets, have we have the emergence of a category of television programming that is largely immune from cultural discount? The evidence I would offer in support of this hypothesis is the increasing programming of imported quality television series into prime-time slots—slots that would have been reserved for domestic programming in an earlier era. To be clear: I think that television channels in many parts of the world have begun to program quality television in prime-time regardless of series’ status as domestic or imported; certainly, many channels would prefer to program locally-produced quality series instead of importing them, but few markets have the financial wherewithal to sustain the costs quality television production—much as with high-budget feature film. Moreover, as with films, the global marketing and near-simultaneous telecasting of high-budget quality television works to make these series appealing in some places precisely because they are global—rather than domestic—events.

Quality television is not a category limited to the U.S. or even Western powers. As Serra Tinic has noted, both the boutique production strategies and various textual practices of American quality television were adopted from public service broadcasting in Europe. Moreover, series like the Canadian *Orphan Black* and the Turkish *The Magnificent Century* maintain many of the characteristics of quality television and appear on foreign channels during prime-time. However, the effort to globally promote and near-simulcast quality television is primarily an American phenomenon. Perhaps the high-water mark in this regard is the most recent season of *24*, *Live Another Day*, which began

broadcasting in the U.S. on May 5, 2014 on Fox, and also began broadcasting within a couple of days during prime-time on channels in the UK, Ireland, Germany, France, across Southeast Asia on Sony's AXN channel, and probably a lot of other places as well.

The example of quality television trade and scheduling leads me to ask several questions about some of the main tenets of global television. First, of course, are the concepts of cultural discount and its obverse, cultural proximity. Have HDTVs, channel abundance, and digital distribution platforms altered television viewing to such an extent that these concepts no longer apply—or, apply only in limited circumstances? In other words, has television viewing become more like moviegoing—more spectacular, more concentrated, more of an event? Second, is it still accurate to equate the multiplication of centers of television production with diversity of media content? That is, does the *category* of quality television amount to a discernible *genre*? If so, what are the attributes of the genre, and how can we specify its cultural identity? Is it an American genre, a Western genre, a global genre, or something else? Finally, are we heading toward a *tiered* global television landscape, where the tastes and habits of certain audiences in certain locales are synchronized, while those of other audiences continue to fragment?