

Developing High-end Television Drama through Transnational Coproduction: A Study of *Medici: Masters of Florence*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose*

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has been composed solely by me. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where otherwise indicated by references or acknowledgements, all work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Abstract

Michele Hilmes (2014) poses a deceptively simple yet pressing question about the evolving landscape of transnational television: 'What do we mean by "coproduction" anymore?' Once defined by financial collaboration or distribution presale, transnational coproduction today increasingly involves complex creative partnerships, where national interests, audience expectations, and institutional logics must be negotiated and balanced. These are no longer merely business arrangements, but sites of tension and compromise, between public service principles and commercial imperatives, cultural specificity and global appeal, creative autonomy and market pragmatism. Public discourse often simplifies these dynamics, obscuring how coproductions are actually made and what their development processes reveal about creative and industrial practice. Hilmes's provocation prompts deeper inquiry into how transnational dramas are shaped, how these systems variously operate, and which factors – embedded within these dynamics – influence or determine the resulting media outputs, and why they matter.

While Italian television drama has a long-standing tradition – beginning in the 1950s-60s with theatre-inspired *sceneggiati* and evolving through a diverse range of miniseries spanning adventure, crime, and religious themes in the following decades – it was not until the advent of pay-TV Sky in the 2000s that the paradigm of high-end drama began to take shape. Against this backdrop, the 2010s marked a strategic turning point for RAI, which embraced transnational coproductions as a means to re-engage segments of the domestic audience and, crucially, achieve prominent positioning within the global television market.

This thesis responds by examining three RAI-driven dramas – *Medici: Masters of Florence* (2016), *My Brilliant Friend* (2018), and *The Name of the Rose* (2019) – to explore how transnational coproduction has been redefined within the Italian production system. No longer a backstage funding model, it has emerged as a visible and contested space of creative negotiation, cultural legitimacy, professional identity, and institutional transformation. Focusing on development, the study excavates the deeper layers of institutional logic and creative agency – individual and collective – within two key phases: early development, including rights acquisition, deal-making, financing, and project structuring; and screenwriting, which involves concept creation, treatment, a series bible, and the negotiation of narrative scope and creative control, particularly in relation to transnational ambitions. Based on extensive direct interviews and additional sources, the study highlights transnational coproduction as a culturally situated form whose affordances reshape roles, practices, and industry conventions. It contributes to media industries research by foregrounding cultural diversity not only in media representation, but in production practices, emphasising how diversity is enacted behind the scenes, while also challenging pre-established Anglo-American paradigms as prevailing evaluative frameworks.

To Giulio Regeni

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Table of Contents

Declaration ..... **I**

Abstract ..... **II**

Acknowledgements ..... **IV**

Table of Contents ..... **V**

Introduction **1**

Framing the Debate on Transnational Coproduction 4

The Italian Context: Scholarly Perspectives and Case Study Positioning 8

Research Methodology 14

Chapter Structure 17

Chapter 1. "Two Steps Forward and One Step Back": a History of the Long Route to the Development of "High-end" Drama in Italy, Mid-70s – Late 2000s **19**

Introduction 19

"High-end" Television Drama: Definitions and Connotations 23

Early Traces of "High-endedness": *Sandokan* the Miniseries (1976) 25

The Age of "Transition": Crisis and Stagnation from the Mid-70s to the Mid-90s 35

The Coming of Industrial Production to Italy: *Un Posto al Sole* (1996) or the Laboratory of (Long-running) Seriality 43

"The Shadow-line of Italian Drama": End of a Cycle and Need for Innovation at the Turn of the Millennium 49

Conclusion 51

Chapter 2. The 'Transnational' as Operational Concept for Understanding RAI's Coproduced High-end Drama, 2012-2019: *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose* as Transnational Media Projects **52**

Introduction 52

'Trans-' as in 'Transnational': Etymological Insights for Media Uses 53

The 'Transnational' in Media Analysis: Key Conceptualisations and Uses Relating to RAI-led Coproductions 56

The Transnational "on the Ground": Understanding, Embodying and Owning the Transnational in *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose* 59

Conclusion 68

Chapter 3. Crafting the Beginnings: Case Studies of Early and Mid-Development in Transnational TV Drama Coproduction **70**

Introduction: Contextualising Agency in Transnational Television Drama Coproduction 70

Case Study 1 – *Medici* 76

Case Study 2 – *My Brilliant Friend* 88

Case Study 3 – *The Name of The Rose* 110

Conclusion 126
Chapter 4. Forging the Narrative Core: Architectures of Adaptive Screenwriting in Transnational TV Drama Coproduction 128
Introduction 128
Case Study 1 – *Medici* 130
Case Study 2 – *My Brilliant Friend* 153
Case Study 3 – *The Name of The Rose* 172
Conclusion 194
Conclusion 196
Summary of Key Findings 196
Theoretical and Disciplinary Contributions 199
Directions for Future Research 201
Bibliography 204

Introduction

> It was a first that I believed – and hoped – would be epochal, perhaps even more so than *The Young Pope.* Just five or six years ago, the idea that a series in Neapolitan dialect could air on HBO would have been unimaginable. This moment, I thought, if successful, would reshape the landscape of serial drama – I mean, *al di là di noi* ['beyond us']. It would mean that, if it worked, Americans might begin airing series in French, German, and other non-English languages during prime time – something that had simply never happened before.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Articulated by *My Brilliant Friend* (2018) producer Lorenzo Mieli during a personal interview, this densely layered observation quickly emerged as a prism through which to interpret not only his own experience but also the broader discursive terrain of the study. This terrain is reflected in the extensive corpus of interviews that provides the empirical foundation for this research, involving industry practitioners engaged, in various capacities, in the three coproductions analysed in this study. Mieli's observation captured the formative novelty of an Italian production environment in flux, but more significantly, it reflected a collectively perceived temporal rupture, a clear "before" and "after" in the field of high-end television drama. His phrase '*al di là di noi*' (literally, 'beyond us') functions not merely as an aspirational gesture towards transcending national confines, but as a temporal marker of industrial transformation. Across the interviews, a recurring theme was that transnationality was not simply about spatial expansion but represented a lived process of rethinking and reconfiguring creative and institutional time.

This study understands this sense of the transnational as a lived process through a dual departure point. The first is Mieli's empirical intuition of temporal shift. The second is Michele Hilmes's conceptual provocation: 'What do we mean by coproduction *anymore*?' (2014, italics mine). Like Mieli's, her question foregrounds a temporal dimension, suggesting that coproduction can no longer be understood through legacy definitions, but must be reframed as a dynamic structure of negotiation, shaped by evolving cultural and institutional conditions. Hilmes's intervention calls for a critical rethinking of coproduction as a space of evolving affordances, shifting power dynamics, and emergent creative configurations, echoing what Weissmann (2024, 2025) reads through Raymond Williams as a changing structure of feeling. In this view, coproduction is not a static industrial model but a generative and reflexive form, one that demands scholarly re-engagement not only with its mechanisms but with its epistemological and affective dimensions.

Together, Mieli and Hilmes animate this thesis's reconceptualisation of transnational coproduction as an evolving structure of practice, a field marked by situated transitions in production logics, institutional reflexivity, and cultural negotiation. Transnationality is approached here not as a predefined template, but as a space of temporal redefinition, one where the industry's changing conditions are experienced, navigated, and contested in time.

This temporal frame – emerging across the interviews – functions as both an analytical lens and a shared industrial consciousness. Practitioners consistently framed the transnational not merely as a spatial expansion but as a temporal overcoming, that is, a movement away from nationally constrained production modes towards a more dialogic, outward-facing paradigm. Yet what was experienced was not simply the abandonment of an insular model, but the delayed recognition – particularly within the Italian public broadcaster RAI – of a deeper structural incapacity to respond to global developments in high-end drama, especially the rise of the multi-platform era (Dunleavy, 2017, 2020; Dunleavy and Weissmann, 2023), which reconfigured the distribution ecosystem and redefined the demands of development-intensive drama.

Transnational coproduction today no longer adheres to the rigid frameworks of the 'Europudding' television drama model, a standardised coproduction framework of the 1990s characterised by prearranged deals primarily driven by financial quotas, with the management of creativity subordinated to funding structures. It is now characterised by ongoing negotiations – of cultural specificity, creative control, and institutional structure – at every level of development. In this transformed landscape, the idea of "after" carries a dual significance. It signals, on the one hand, a self-reflexive recognition of having surpassed perceived creative and institutional boundaries, of having contributed to a venture greater than originally imagined, as is particularly true for independent producers. On the other hand, it implies legacy, that is, the conscious act of handing down one's enterprise to future industry practitioners, not only as testimony of innovation, but as a challenge to inherited constraints and as a marker of agency in context-specific conditions such as Italy's.

Mieli's quote powerfully encapsulates this sense of legacy as it relates to the coproduction of *My Brilliant Friend*. The production model co-developed with HBO – the first non-English-language series commissioned and aired by HBO – redefined the boundaries of transnational drama development and set a new benchmark for the global industry. Even when the three coproductions examined in this research, outlined below, fell short of certain objectives, they nonetheless expanded the affordances of transnational coproduction, not as standardised frameworks, but as contingent, culturally specific practices shaped by affect, dialogue, and innovation. Ultimately, the temporal dimension is not ancillary but constitutive. It informs how practitioners understand their work, reposition themselves within the industry, and imagine its future beyond nationally inherited frameworks. In these negotiations, where culturally specific logics collide, recalibrate, and reconfigure, transnationality reveals itself not as a geography, but as a temporal rethinking of creative, institutional, and professional possibility.

This thesis investigates how the development processes of three RAI-led drama series – *Medici: Masters of Florence* (2016), *My Brilliant Friend* (2018), and *The Name of the Rose* (2019) – engage with and reconfigure transnational coproduction, redefining its meaning and practice from within the Italian television system. It strictly focuses on the development phase – specifically the early structuring and screenwriting stages – as a critical yet under-explored site in scholarship. Development is understood here not as a discrete phase, but as an extended, layered, and fluid process shaped by a constellation of behaviours, dynamics, and mechanisms enacted through individual and collective agency in response to systemic regularities, all structured by the interplay of situated decision-making and institutional logics. Within what can be figuratively understood as the links of extended operational chains – functioning here as micro-sites of analysis – one can identify layered explanations, not only for the varied operational modes that emerge from project to project, but also for the varying degrees of success of the respective media outputs. That said, it should be clarified from the outset that this research is not primarily concerned with assessing the relative success of one project over another in terms of audience reception or market performance. While the reasons behind such success are indeed embedded in (and can be illuminated through) an analysis of development processes, the core objective here lies elsewhere.

This study seeks to uncover and account for those factors and conditions that, within the broader "game" of transnational coproduction, operate on two interrelated levels. On the one hand, it examines factors grounded in cultural specificity. These refer to how a given model of coproduction – typically standardised and shaped in practice through unwritten norms and conventions forged over time within historically embedded contexts elsewhere – is interpreted, enacted, and made meaningful within distinct production environments. Such environments are shaped by culturally specific logics, practices, traditions, worldviews, and value systems. On the other hand, it also brings to light additional factors or elements that may emerge as novel and previously unacknowledged determinants actively shaping the unfolding of television drama development processes.

Ultimately, this thesis asserts that transnational coproduction must be understood and analysed as a dynamic, generative mode of production, a continuous, contested *process* of negotiation and redefinition. It is a complex space where institutional agendas, creative decisions, and culturally specific forms of agency intersect and mutually reshape one another over time. This ongoing interplay expands both the meanings and practices that transnational coproduction enables, underscoring the necessity of framing it as an integrated set of processes rather than separate or discrete actions.

Bringing these insights into dialogue, this thesis is guided by the following interrelated research questions:

1) How can transnational coproduction be understood as a generative mode of high-end drama production, offering industry practitioners multiple opportunities to reimagine and refashion its meanings and practices over time?

2) How do the development processes of RAI-led transnational television drama coproductions – through initial structuring and central screenwriting – reveal the institutional logics, creative negotiations, and culturally specific agency reshaping the meaning and practice of coproduction within high-end television?
3) How can cultural diversity on the ground prompt industry practitioners to reframe transnational coproduction, enabling its standardised norms and conventions to evolve over time?

Situated at the confluence of television studies, production and media industry research, and scholarship on Italian television, this research engages with a growing and multifaceted body of work in which distinct traditions and foci increasingly intersect around the study of transnational coproduction. As its analytical scope progressively widens, the study aims to contribute to current debates on industrial, creative, and cultural discourses around contemporary high-end drama production, with a focus on development-phase processes and their role in reshaping the culturally diverse meanings and practices of transnational coproduction.

The following sections present the broader scholarly debate framing this study. The first traces the evolution of transnational television theory, moving from early spatial frameworks to more recent temporal approaches connected to transnational coproduction. The second narrows the focus to key Italian scholarly perspectives, situating the case studies within Italy's high-end drama trajectory and RAI's institutional framework.

Framing the Debate on Transnational Coproduction

As introduced earlier, Michele Hilmes offers a foundational reorientation of the transnational coproduction debate, urging its reconceptualisation as a distinct mode of producing transnational television. In her seminal article, she argues that 'transnational coproduction has become the new normal for high-end television drama', though it remains overshadowed by global reality formats (Hilmes, 2014, p.1). Drawing mainly from the Anglo-American context, Hilmes reframes coproduction beyond financial and logistical arrangements, viewing it as dynamic sites of cultural negotiation. She highlights a shift from traditional co-financing or presale models towards deeper integration of creative and institutional priorities, where national interests, audience tastes, and public-service goals must be reconciled with commercial expectations.

This expanded model calls for a reassessment of existing frameworks and poses critical questions: 'How does creativity work in various forms of coproduced narrative? How do transnational partners negotiate the conflicting demands of national specificity and global appeal? Where can international influences open up a drama productively to broader audiences [...] and where does it work

to destroy or marginalize authentic experience?' (Hilmes, 2014, p.5). Hilmes argues that addressing these questions requires moving beyond political-economic analysis to also examine texts, production practices, critical discourses, and audience uses. By framing transnational coproduction as an emerging norm rather than an exception, she lays the groundwork for scholars to explore its industrial and aesthetic implications and to critically reassess the cultural economies of global television drama.

This thesis foregrounds Hilmes's temporal reframing of coproduction, highlighting its affective, contingent and processual dimensions while building on the field's established spatial conceptualisations. Traditionally, spatial frameworks have focused on the geopolitical, institutional and regulatory geographies shaping transnational collaborations. While essential for understanding the structural conditions within which collaboration takes place, these approaches offer limited insight into the complex negotiated (and thus often seemingly inexplicable) processes through which coproduction unfolds in practice. The temporal perspective adopted here does not replace the spatial but rather extends it, enabling a deeper engagement with the rhythms of negotiation, situated creative compromises and evolving production alliances over time. To contextualise Hilmes's temporal perspective and situate the temporal lens framing this thesis within the broader field of transnational television, it is important to briefly outline how earlier scholarship conceptualised the transnational shift primarily through the spatial organisation of television.

These accounts show how geopolitical proximity, regulatory frameworks, and industrial configurations organise the cross-border circulation of television. Foundational scholars such as Chalaby (2009), Moran (2009), and Esser (2010, 2017) conceptualise transnational television through macro-level transformations linked to deregulation, European integration, the expansion of satellite and cable, and the globalisation of media markets. Chalaby identifies a decisive 'transnational shift' (2009, p. 1) in European broadcasting in the late 1990s, arguing that legislative, technological, and commercial changes reshaped television infrastructures into a four-level system – local, national, regional, and global – each requiring distinct business models (2009, p. 3). Moran similarly situates television within a 'multi-level television world' operating across several spatial tiers, from the local to the global, and highlights how these layers structure the circulation, adaptation, and regulation of formats (2009, p. 13). Esser's work on format franchising further foregrounds the industrial mechanisms through which television travels transnationally, arguing that content franchising will remain central to global schedules and drive convergence through expanding international distribution and production networks (Esser, 2010, pp. 273–275). Collectively, these contributions frame transnational television as shaped by cross-border institutional, infrastructural, and industrial arrangements that condition visibility and circulation across territories.

Taken together, this scholarship advances a predominantly spatial understanding of transnational television that moves beyond nationally bounded frameworks (Chalaby, 2009; Esser, 2010; Moran, 2009). Television is mapped as embedded within multi-scalar geographies in which the national constitutes only one layer among local, regional, and global configurations. This perspective

foregrounds how cross-border infrastructures, regulatory environments, distribution systems, and market conditions structure transnational circulation, whether through pan-European broadcasting networks (Chalaby), spatial tiers (Moran), or format markets and distribution platforms (Esser). These geographies are uneven, reflecting differentiated institutional capacities, regulatory regimes, and industrial ecologies that shape how television travels. Transnationality thus emerges not simply from cultural exchange, but from structural arrangements and industry strategies that enable or constrain cross-border connections. However, while this spatial paradigm clarifies the territorial and institutional architectures of transnational television, it is less attentive to the temporal dynamics through which collaborations, negotiations, and industrial relations unfold.

It is at this juncture that Hilmes's temporal reframing becomes critical, shifting attention from spatial structures to historical trajectories, production rhythms, and professional practices through which transnational projects are developed and sustained. Building on earlier institutional and industrial analyses, spatial approaches initially centred on relatively fixed categories of proximity and alignment; as collaboration dynamics became more fluid, they expanded to address how national boundaries are negotiated, rearticulated and reconfigured through ongoing creative and financial negotiation. While spatial perspectives remain essential for understanding the institutional contexts of transnational television, they are less responsive than temporal frameworks to the evolving, processual nature of coproduction. Accordingly, this thesis adopts a temporal lens that conceptualises transnationality in coproduction as a situated and unfolding process over time, complementing spatial accounts by foregrounding transformation, contradiction, and negotiation across development phases.

Against this background of transnational television scholarship, the debate surrounding transnationally coproduced television drama – central to this thesis – has evolved significantly over the past decade, sharpening its focus on the ecologies of high-end television drama and the increasingly intertwined dynamics of national and global production systems. A key early contribution is Trisha Dunleavy's *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* (2017), which examines how the rise of multiplatform environments and brand-driven commissioning has reshaped the formal and institutional character of long-form drama. Dunleavy (2017, p.13) defines 'complex serial drama' as a genre blending aesthetic sophistication and narrative complexity with extended storytelling, arguing that these qualities foster 'long-term brand value' in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. This perspective signals a conceptual shift: high-end drama transcends its status as a purely national broadcast product, emerging instead as a strategic convergence point between creative aesthetics and transnational distribution networks.

Building on her earlier work, Dunleavy's (2020) study of *My Brilliant Friend* offers a focused analysis of commissioning structures, identifying two primary coproduction models. Dunleavy distinguishes between two dominant coproduction models: the 'direct commissioning' model involves a single transnational network partnering with local producers, while the 'cross-platform coproduction' model, exemplified by *My Brilliant Friend*, features collaboration between a national broadcaster and a premium network. This latter model adds complexity through negotiations among diverse cultural,

editorial, and institutional priorities, reflecting both the structural evolution of coproduction and its impact on creative control and cultural representation.

The negotiation between national specificity and transnational appeal lies at the heart of this collaborative form. Cultural difference shifts from being a mere obstacle to a strategic resource mediated through editorial, financial, and aesthetic choices. Coproduction thus emerges as a space of strategic friction, where structural conditions and creative intentions intersect. This line of enquiry is further expanded in Dunleavy and Weissmann's co-authored contribution on cultural diversity (2023), which systematically analyses how high-end drama coproductions can support, contain, or dilute cultural specificity within their aesthetic and industrial logics. They argue that while transnational coproduction provides unprecedented visibility to underrepresented identities and regions, it also risks reducing cultural difference to a marketable form of cosmopolitanism. The very elements that render high-end drama globally exportable – its aesthetic refinement, narrative complexity, and brand-conscious production values – can simultaneously function as mechanisms of "soft" standardisation, curating and aestheticising cultural diversity to make it more palatable for global audiences.

This tension between global circulation and local specificity is central to Weissmann and Knox's (2020) analysis of European production cultures. They argue that what is perceived as transnational often consists of a complex negotiation of distinct national practices embedded within the logic of coproduction. This perspective calls for a shift in analytical focus, emphasising the importance of examining the specific, varied practices through which cultural meanings are constructed, rather than assuming transnationality as a uniform or predetermined framework. This orientation aligns with Weissmann's broader reflections in her recent monograph (2025), which further elevates cultural specificity as an analytical category. She argues that coproduction should be understood not only in terms of funding or regulation but as a cultural system shaped by aesthetic values, production routines, and hierarchies of taste. In her view, cultural specificity extends beyond mere national difference to encompass the unique ways in which creative ideas, professional roles, and production practices are valued and enacted, positioning it as a fundamental organising principle of production as well as a textual and representational issue. Along the same lines, Weissmann's (2023) study of European coproduction models reiterates this emphasis on cultural specificity. Although focused on the German context, the study highlights the historic variability of coproduction logics and national industries' capacity to reposition themselves within shifting global configurations. The transitions she identifies – from regional bilateralism to pan-European homogenisation and subsequently to renewed national distinction – offer a conceptual bridge linking spatial and temporal paradigms.

European scholarship by Bondebjerg et al. (2017) reinforces transnationality as both an industrial and cultural phenomenon, highlighting the challenge of preserving cultural specificity while engaging international funding and distribution. They describe transnational television as a 'project of exchange, hybridisation, and negotiation', where aesthetic and institutional practices circulate unevenly across borders. Building on this, Mikos (2019) shifts focus to the lived cultures of production and storytelling, introducing 'transnational television cultures' to capture the interplay between national

contexts and shared televisual conventions. Rather than promoting homogenisation, he argues that 'transnational storytelling does not erase cultural difference but reframes it within a shared grammar of genre, character, and pacing' (Mikos, 2019, p.41). This perspective complicates earlier spatial analyses by highlighting how genre and form actively mediate cultural specificity, framing transnationalism as much a matter of textual strategy and production culture as of policy and economics.

Together, these contributions move transnationality beyond simple cross-border collaboration towards a dynamic interplay of institutions, creativity, and culture. They reveal coproduction as embedded in cultural meaning and professional practice, not just market or funding concerns. Drawing from these contributions, the thesis adopts a temporal lens alongside spatial approaches to trace how change unfolds through contingent, processual dynamics, enabling a nuanced understanding of production as ongoing negotiation and transformation that integrates structural shifts with lived experience.

The Italian Context: Scholarly Perspectives and Case Study Positioning

While international scholarship has significantly reshaped the theorisation of transnational television and coproduction, the cultural diversity of national contexts remains analytically essential. In Italy, research has predominantly focused on Sky's transformative role in serial drama aesthetics and structures, exemplified by productions like *Romanzo Criminale – La serie* (2008-2010), *Gomorrah* (2014-2021), and *The Young Pope* (2016). In contrast, RAI Fiction's efforts, in the 2010s, to reposition itself within the high-end drama sector – especially through ambitious transnational coproductions led by the then Head of RAI Fiction Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta[1] – have received comparatively little attention. Notably under-explored are the creative and institutional innovations at RAI and the embedded production dynamics enabling this shift. This section addresses this gap by situating my three chosen case studies within Italy's high-end drama ecology and examining how RAI's strategic repositioning, framed by a renewed cultural mission, has reshaped the relationship between public service values and the logic of international coproduction.

The rise of high-end television drama in Italy – defined by the characteristics of contemporary serial drama – reflects a long but relatively recent trajectory, especially compared to established systems like the United States or pioneering Northern European contexts that developed distinctive high-end models in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Drawing on Dunleavy's concept of complex serial drama, high-end drama is framed as a television production category aligned strategically with global trends. These projects demand substantial investment from broadcasters, including public service institutions, aiming to maintain competitiveness in the multiplatform era. All the elements typically associated with complexity, quality, or premium drama are thus subsumed under the imperative of financial investment,

as Dunleavy explains:

> Crucial to the conceptual idiosyncrasies, narrative complexity and aesthetic ambition of complex serials, even though their production costs vary, have been budgets that enable the pursuit and achievement of 'high production values', a term that refers to the more expensive end (or high-end) of the investment spectrum for TV production.
>
> (Dunleavy, 2017, p.4)

RAI's role in the Italian television landscape is defined by its status as the country's public service broadcaster, operating under a concessionary model historically shaped by a mixed funding architecture that combines licence-fee revenues with regulated advertising (Monteleone, 2015; Menduni, 2002). Within this configuration, Italian public service broadcasting has been characterised by a persistent negotiation between universal access, cultural responsibility, and industrial constraint, rather than by a strict separation between public and commercial logics (Menduni, 2002). Television – and television drama in particular – has consequently been institutionally understood as a central vehicle of cultural mediation, national storytelling, and the articulation of shared historical and social imaginaries, giving fiction a legitimate and strategic place within the public service mandate (Grasso, 2011). These public service ideals constitute the institutional backdrop against which the RAI-led drama productions examined in this thesis have been developed and through which their engagement with transnational coproduction must be understood.

Within this institutional landscape, the late 2000s marked a turning point with the rise of pay-TV drama, led by Sky Italia and the production company Cattleya. This shift transformed the national television drama landscape, breaking the long-standing free-to-air dominance of the RAI-Mediaset duopoly. Italian scholarship regards this as the emergence of 'premium' television: a space aligned with international standards such as the 50-minute format, higher production values, cinematic aesthetics, and greater narrative complexity. Crucially, this period saw a reconfiguration of industrial practices, notably a strengthened emphasis on screenwriting as the central driver of narrative complexity, departing from traditional Italian drama development methods.

Two titles are widely recognised as milestones: *Romanzo criminale – La serie* and *Gomorrah*. Both adapted from existing sources, the former introduced genre hybridity and narrative boldness, while the latter expanded these ambitions, solidifying the pay-TV model as a benchmark for Italian serial production (Buonanno, 2012). Since then, Sky has become the leading force in Italian high-end scripted drama, contributing to a growing separation – both within the industry and public discourse – between

[1] Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta was Head of RAI Fiction at the time when *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose* were commissioned and produced.

mainstream television, particularly RAI, and high-end drama (Barra and Scaglioni, 2013). This fostered a perception of RAI as lagging behind other public broadcasters, such as the BBC, and commercial platforms and streaming services in producing high-end serial drama.

This perceived divide persisted until RAI, responding to domestic pressures and global industry trends, developed a new drama strategy with a strong international focus. The turning point came in 2012 with Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta's appointment as Head of RAI Fiction, marking a decisive shift in the broadcaster's direction. Committed to repositioning RAI internationally, Andreatta promoted large-scale event dramas that highlighted Italy's 'history of literature, culture, and creative talent' (Andreatta, 2019, my translation), blending national heritage and cultural specificity with the narrative demands and industrial standards of global drama through transnational coproduction. This vision produced the three dramas analysed in this thesis and led to Andreatta's 2020 appointment as Vice President for Italian Originals at Netflix. Building on these foundations and a clear restructuring strategy, the resulting drama programme was widely described by RAI executives and practitioners as an 'identity-driven' mission. It aims to restore and reshape Italian identity for both domestic and international audiences through three narratives that symbolically revisit Italy's past and present, drawing deeply on its historical, literary, and cultural heritage.

This vision aligns with Weissmann's (2025) theorisation of cultural specificity, which combines Benedict Anderson's (2006) idea of the nation as an 'imagined community' with Raymond Williams' (1977) 'structure of feeling'. Together, these theories explain how national imaginaries are affectively constructed and historically situated, with Anderson emphasising culture's role in fostering national belonging and Williams highlighting the evolving emotional coherence of cultural experience. This framework helps situate RAI's identity-driven drama strategy as a culturally specific project embodied in the three transnational dramas analysed here. From 2012, Andreatta pursued a dual strategy: domestically, to re-engage audiences drawn to the aesthetic and narrative complexity of pay-TV drama; and institutionally, to reposition RAI as a quality brand in the global television market, which she described as 'the effort to build a coherent image of quality' (Andreatta, 2019, my translation). Grounded in this identity-driven, internationally oriented approach, RAI developed three landmark dramas – *Medici: Masters of Florence*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose* – each embodying a distinct aspect of its renewed cultural mission both domestically and internationally.

Medici: Masters of Florence (hereafter referred to as *Medici*) was developed as the first season of a trilogy focused on the Florentine dynasty, followed by *Medici: The Magnificent* Parts 1 (2018) and 2 (2019), and later *Leonardo* (2021), a standalone series about Leonardo da Vinci. Coproduced by RAI, Lux Vide, and Big Light Productions (hereafter referred to as Big Light), this Renaissance cycle can be read as an act of nation branding – or even nation building – rooted in Italy's humanist tradition and Renaissance heritage (Farinacci, 2021). This interpretation is supported by interviewee Lucy Rawlinson (Assistant Script Editor, Big Light), who observed that the series carried a powerful cultural and identity-driven resonance for Italian audiences.

Following this launch of RAI's experimental phase with historical drama, *My Brilliant Friend* (2018) marked a new phase as the first adaptation of a major literary work. Based on Elena Ferrante's internationally acclaimed *Neapolitan Novels*, the series begins with the eponymous volume and spans four instalments. During the interview, Andreatta described the project as 'an even more complex leap', representing RAI's most ambitious coproduction and long-term investment nationally and internationally. The narrative, chronicling the lifelong friendship of Elena and Lila from 1950s Naples to the 2010s, foregrounds female emancipation and education, central to RAI's public service mission, as highlighted by RAI in-house producer Luigi Mariniello. This project furthered RAI's identity-driven strategy by combining the theme of women's emancipation with Ferrante's globally recognised literary voice, which had gained international acclaim prior to Italy. It is important to note that the thesis concentrates on the first seasons of both *Medici* and *My Brilliant Friend*, each conceived as multi-season arcs. From a production studies perspective, first seasons offer the richest insight into organisational change, creative decision-making, and innovation processes. This focus also aligns the temporal analysis across all three case studies, including *The Name of the Rose*, conceived as a limited series with a self-contained narrative structure.

The final case study, *The Name of the Rose* (2019), adapts Umberto Eco's internationally acclaimed 1980 novel, previously filmed by Jean-Jacques Annaud in 1986. Positioned within RAI's identity-driven strategy, this series offers a layered portrayal of Italy and Europe during the Late Middle Ages, a transitional era between medieval obscurantism and the Renaissance's dawn. Set in a Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy (1327), it symbolises a religious order that profoundly influenced European social, economic, and cultural life through the Rule of Saint Benedict, which balanced prayer, work, and study while promoting care, education, and cultural preservation. This monastic world played a key role in sparking the transformations that ended the medieval era. Central to the novel is the Church, a cornerstone of Italian identity. It explores tensions between faith and reason, spiritual and temporal authority, and ecclesiastical poverty: issues deeply embedded in Italian religious and political discourse. Language is also foregrounded as a powerful marker of identity, with the transition from Latin to the emerging vernacular (Italian in its embryonic form) vividly embodied by the character Salvatore. Finally, the series reinforces Italy's intellectual legacy through its source author, Umberto Eco, one of the country's most influential thinkers, whose work seamlessly bridged academic theory and popular discourse.

Together, these three dramas trace a coherent cultural and historical arc across three pivotal periods in Italian history: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the 20th century. This trajectory reflects an intensified articulation of cultural specificity through high-end drama and aligns with Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an 'imagined community', which Weissmann (2025, p.2) highlights as centred on 'the role of culture in creating a sense of belonging to the nation'. In doing so, these dramas fulfil RAI Fiction's dual strategic goals: re-engaging domestic audiences increasingly detached from mainstream television, especially public service broadcasting, and repositioning RAI as

a key player in the global high-end drama market.

Following the RAI-led wave of transnational drama, Italian production scholarship has increasingly recognised RAI's strategic shift (Barra and Scaglioni, 2022), often compared to Sky's earlier innovation model. Sky, benefiting from greater institutional flexibility and a commercial mandate, acted as a co-creative partner rather than a distant commissioner, fostering experimentation and risk-taking. In contrast, RAI's innovation was historically limited by a rigid, politically influenced public service framework and its conventional, static commissioning role. The rise of streaming platforms compelled broadcasters like RAI to move beyond mere commissioning, adopting a creative partnership role involving active development and content management. This repositioning required RAI to overhaul internal workflows, transform production operations, and diversify relationships with independent producers.

While this shift is acknowledged as a structural adaptation balancing global drama demands with national cultural missions, no study has yet examined its internal dynamics or deeper institutional and individual impacts. Specifically, the behavioural, organisational, and cultural negotiation processes among those involved remain underexplored, as does the embodied and affective experience of practitioners – from executives and commissioning editors to screenwriters and producers – who shaped this new generation of Italian RAI-led coproductions. This thesis addresses this gap by providing a multi-layered, culturally situated analysis of transnational coproduction through a micro-analytic, embedded approach focused on the core development processes of RAI-led dramas. The analysis is framed by two key concepts: agency, understood as the driving force of action, and cultural specificity, regarded as its ultimate purpose. It is therefore essential to briefly outline these conceptual cornerstones that underpin the examination of the development processes.

Agency refers to the situated capacity of individuals or groups to act, negotiate, and make decisions within institutional, structural, and cultural constraints. In complex settings like transnational coproduction, agency is relational and contingent, strategically enacted through culturally embedded practices that navigate power dynamics, industrial norms, and collaboration. It manifests through decision-making, resistance, adaptation, and compromise throughout the development phase. Rather than viewing agency as autonomous creative control, recent scholarship frames it as a negotiated, context-dependent capacity, continuously shaped by shifting constraints and opportunities. Foundational media industry studies link agency to authorship and industrial meaning-making, focusing on genre, legitimacy, and creative labour hierarchies. Pearson and Messenger Davies (2014), for example, show how agency in Star Trek is embedded within authorship discourse and distributed across individuals, institutions, and production environments. Such a framing challenges auteurist models and supports this study's emphasis on agency as emerging dialogically and relationally, through the negotiation of distinct production logics, strategies, and imaginaries.

The notion of 'circumscribed agency' (Havens and Lotz, 2016, as cited in Herbert, Lotz and Punathambekar, 2020) expands this view by underscoring how practitioners operate within structural

constraints and contingent possibilities. Agency here is conceived as constrained intentionality, an ongoing negotiation between what is desired, what is permitted, and what is materially feasible, expressed through practices of alignment, resistance, and adaptation within the uneven terrain of media production marked by 'messy interdependence' (Havens and Lotz, 2014, p.10).

In the context of transnational coproduction, Dunleavy and Weissmann (2023) further develop agency as a situated and negotiated force, enacted within the institutional and cultural complexities of cross-border collaboration. Rather than being anchored in singular authorship, agency unfolds through culturally diverse practices shaped by professional norms, national mandates, and culturally specific production logics. Their account foregrounds the tensions and accommodations that arise when production cultures intersect, emphasising pragmatic adjustments, intercultural collaboration, and the resolution of frictions. Here, agency is no longer merely circumscribed, but becomes processual, that is, a dynamic, evolving set of mechanisms negotiated over time.

This study draws on and extends these frameworks precisely by adopting a processual understanding of agency. It shifts the analytical focus from isolated, "discrete" actions to sequences of interdependent practices, resonating with the etymological root of the term 'process' as 'that which goes on or is carried on' and, in modern usage, as 'onward movement, progress, projection', but also 'advance, development' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). This lens enables tracing a project's development from inception to completion, revealing how transformations emerge through both systemic (institutional, structural) and incremental (individual, localised) changes. It broadens the analytical scope by recognising a diverse range of agents influencing development processes. This reflects a scholarly shift from fixed control to an evolving, processual form of intentionality shaped by structural, institutional, and cultural factors. Rooted in literature and refined by empirical findings, this dynamic view of agency highlights the complexity of transnational coproduction amid cultural diversity.

If agency constitutes the force through which practitioners and institutions negotiate and shape development processes, cultural specificity emerges as both a central site and intended outcome of such negotiations, a "horizon" towards which much of this agency is directed. In the context of transnational coproduction, cultural specificity has emerged as both a creative strategy and an institutional imperative. Moving beyond earlier paradigms of "cultural discount" or "proximity", recent scholarship has highlighted how high-end drama increasingly leverages cultural specificity as a mark of distinction in an overcrowded global market. As Weissmann (2025) observes, 'there is also an evident shift to representations of specific locales, a shift towards the micro-local', where 'locale becomes not just visible but 'conspicuous'', overtly foregrounded 'for a cosmopolitan audience who want to learn more about other places but also want to showcase that knowledge'. This visibility signals not only the aesthetic potential of local environments but also their strategic function in positioning drama within transnational circuits of cultural consumption.

Borrowing from Wang et al. (2021, as cited in Weissmann, 2025, p.2), Weissman defines cultural specificity as the way in which 'location, language, content and form demonstrate insider and

outsider perspectives and generate philosophical approaches, content and aesthetics'. Within this definition, she introduces a key distinction between 'placed' and 'place-based' specificity. Placed specificity refers to the visibility of specific locales on screen, what Weissmann calls 'location-driven visibility', in which a place is rendered conspicuous, foregrounded as a site of difference and appeal for international viewers. This form of specificity caters to a cosmopolitan audience eager to discover and showcase cultural knowledge about particular places. Place-based specificity, by contrast, moves beyond surface-level representation to signal a deeper, more embedded connection to place. It involves 'conceptual and ideological forms of belonging', where locality does not only inform the setting but the drama's narrative logic, characterisation, values, and worldview. In this sense, place-based specificity is not simply aesthetic but structural, a guiding framework for how the story is conceived and told. Rather than posing a limitation, cultural specificity in this context enables narrative richness and global appeal, particularly when it intersects with what Dunleavy (2023, cited in Weissmann 2025, p.2) defines as the 'foregrounding of local settings, stories, history, subcultures and languages'.

This analytical lens allows for a better understanding of how transnational coproductions do not necessarily dilute national distinctiveness but often draw on it in nuanced ways. In *My Brilliant Friend*, for instance, Neapolitan dialect, socio-historical context, and narrative pacing all reflect a deliberate insistence on cultural specificity, with RAI's mission closely aligned to the visibility and authenticity of Italian regional identities. Similarly, *The Name of the Rose* makes monastic codes, medieval Latin, and the philosophical legacies of European thought central to its narrative structure and thematic core. Meanwhile, *Medici* offers a dramatised but historically anchored vision of Renaissance Florence, where place operates simultaneously as setting, symbol, and site of ideological tension. In all three cases, cultural specificity is not a constraint to transnational engagement, but its very mode of articulation, a strategy that asserts distinctiveness while participating in globally intelligible storytelling forms.

Research Methodology

This empirically grounded research employs a case-study framework and interview-based methodology to offer a detailed, context-sensitive analysis of the three RAI-led projects central to this study: *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose*. The qualitative analysis draws primarily on twenty-one in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019, with one follow-up in 2021. Participants include a carefully selected group of industry professionals: executives, commissioning editors, independent producers and creative producers, RAI in-house producers, script editors, and screenwriters. Most interviewees are based in Italy, with one located in the UK to reflect Big Light's involvement, as partners of *Medici*. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Rome, except for one held in London and another conducted online.

To complement these interviews, the study incorporates primary and secondary sources such as the original literary works by Umberto Eco and Elena Ferrante and other works by the same authors, alongside publicly accessible materials including indirect interviews and trade press. This multi-source triangulation strengthens the analytical depth and rigour of the investigation into the development processes of the case studies. At the heart of the methodology lies the engagement with media industry practitioners through interviews – conceptualised as 'exclusive informants' by Bruun (2016) – which involves navigating complex power dynamics. As Bruun argues, these informants hold institutional authority and control over access and narrative framing, requiring interviews to be seen not as neutral data collection but as relational, situated interactions embedded in broader cultural, institutional, and economic contexts. This approach provides unique insights into the insider realities of media production, thereby enriching the analyses of agency, structure, and culture.

Building on this relational perspective, it is important to acknowledge the typical challenges faced in qualitative industry interviews. Despite a rich and nuanced dataset, this research also encountered self-congratulatory or rehearsed responses, 'scripted performances' as described by Caldwell (2009). Additionally, key figures linked to *The Name of the Rose* declined participation, limiting certain perspectives. These challenges underscore the complexities of negotiating access within media production environments, highlighting the need for careful, reflexive methodological engagement.

Despite these challenges, the value of rich, substantive interviews remains evident, as noted by Grainge's and Johnson's (2015) reflections on the complexities of industry research. My experience confirms that participants have offered nuanced, insightful perspectives beyond mere 'scripted performances'. This depth was partly fostered by their recognition of genuine academic interest, not only in their individual work but also in the broader structural and cultural contexts of the media industry. Such acknowledgment encouraged open, reflective dialogue, allowing candid, self-critical, and industry-wide observations that enriched the empirical material.

This understanding invites a deeper reconsideration of the concept of 'access', a theme thoughtfully examined by Johnson (2014). Building on his insights, this study shifts the perspective beyond viewing access as a simple privilege, instead emphasising the interpretative frameworks that shape the analysis of interview data. Rather than producing standardised accounts, these interviews yield rich, context-specific insights into industry complexities. The interpretative approach was shaped by interviewees' self-reflective, critically nuanced narratives, openly engaging with their strengths, limitations, and professional challenges. Interviews lacking substantive analytical value were excluded, underscoring the dataset's selective, carefully composed nature. In this regard, this study reveals that 'access' is reciprocal, as Bruun (2016) emphasises. For many participants, interviews offered rare opportunities for deep reflection on the complexities and challenges of their projects, from both broadcaster and independent producer perspectives. This mutual engagement enriches qualitative data, with interviews transcending one-way data collection to become dynamic exchanges where meaning is collaboratively negotiated. Such interactions allow informants to offer strategic self-reflections,

enhancing scholarly insight into media production cultures.

This relational approach is shaped by distinct cultural characteristics across media industries. Despite industry globalisation, discursive practices and interview methodologies widely vary across cultures, requiring sensitivity to local norms. This is especially pertinent given Johnson's (2014) observation that industry insiders already communicate through social media and trade press, channels that primarily present scripted and decontextualised narratives. Conversely, interviews unfold within embodied, spatial, temporal, and relational contexts that add communicative depth. Thus, this research challenges reducing interviews to mere "talk", emphasising their unique richness as situated communicative events, which simultaneously represents the inherent "human" structural limitation that defines them.

Against this backdrop, the distinction between mediated communication and interviews underscores the unique features of the interview setting – its physical environment, social context, and interpersonal dynamics – that shape interaction and data quality. Following Caldwell (2009), this study views interviews not merely as data collection tools but as reflexive, performative, and situated practices embedded in media industries' discourses and institutional cultures. In this context, the physical and symbolic contexts – often production offices or creative spaces – add a vital spatial dimension, deepening interpretative insight. A striking example is the interview with Lorenzo Mieli, producer of *My Brilliant Friend*, conducted at his home – what he described as his primary office – with his production company Wildside situated on the lower floor. He highlighted the blending of private and professional realms, noting: 'I strongly believe in this linguistic anomaly that our companies are called "production houses". I always work from home, a bit like publishing houses. "Production house" fits perfectly with Wildside's philosophy' (Mieli, 2019, my translation). This "extreme" case illustrates Caldwell's (2009, p.349) concept of situatedness, insisting on the importance of contextual co-presence and material embeddedness in the research encounter: 'One learns a lot when the room itself starts to speak'. That particular room spoke profoundly, embodying a spatial symbolism that reflects the producer's distinctive production philosophy, which is examined in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Linked to this, building on discussions of interview practices and reflexivity, and echoing Freeman (2016), a full understanding of media industries requires situating everyday practices within their broader temporal (historical and evolving) and structural (institutional and economic) contexts, rather than viewing them in isolation. Freeman highlights that rich interview narratives illustrate the crucial methodological role of contextualisation in linking structural forces with individual practices and bridging production and culture. This emphasis underscores media industries' embeddedness within complex social, economic, and cultural systems. Following this, the thesis adopts a temporal conception of transnationality, aligning with McDonald's (2022) view that media change unfolds unevenly across industries and geographies. Temporal sensitivity is essential for capturing the layered, evolving nature of media practices, along with the imaginations and reflections that shape them, and for understanding transformation as a gradual, uneven process. This temporal lens critically interprets the interplay of

continuity and innovation shaping contemporary media industries.

In conclusion, the methodology – centred on reciprocal, negotiated interview processes and a case-study framework – is vital for capturing the complex realities of transnational coproduction within Italian high-end television drama. Treating interviews as collaborative, situated encounters – a limitation that is also a strength – enriches analysis by highlighting the reflexivity, expertise, and agency of both researcher and participants. This relational approach moves beyond simplistic inquiry, providing a nuanced, authentic, and empirically grounded understanding of the interplay between structure, culture, and creative agency. Ultimately, it underpins the thesis's goal to illuminate evolving media production dynamics and contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourses on transnational media industries.

Chapter Structure

This thesis is organised in four chapters that together map the evolution of Italian high-end drama from its distinctive historical context, through its engagement with transnational coproduction, to an in-depth analysis of the three case studies, examined both in terms of development dynamics and screenwriting architectures.

Chapter 1 opens the thesis with a comprehensive historical overview of the forces shaping and delaying Italian high-end television drama. It examines how institutional inertia, cultural conservatism, and structural limits hindered the development of complex, internationally competitive drama within Italy's public broadcasting. The analysis focuses on two key productions – *Sandokan* (1976) and *Un Posto al Sole* (1996-present) – reflecting moments of crisis and innovation. The chapter identifies three core factors explaining Italy's production lag: an "endogenous" fragility rooted in a small-scale, artisanal industry; cultural conservatism among elites resistant to television's potential; and broadcasters' reluctance to invest in seriality, viewed as risky and threatening to tradition. The chapter highlights moments when institutional and creative actors challenged these constraints, demonstrating how in Italy the attempt to innovate high-end drama production has always emerged from significant ruptures in structural and cultural inertia, as exemplified by the case of RAI examined in this study.

Following this exploration of historical preconditions, **Chapter 2** shifts focus to the transnational as both an analytical framework and conceptual tool for understanding contemporary high-end television drama production. It examines the prefix 'trans-' as a process of radical change across multiple media industry levels. Beginning with the etymology and evolving meanings of 'transnational' in media and sociological scholarship, the chapter situates it as a key concept in global television studies. Transnationality is presented not as a fixed experience but as a contested, negotiated space shaped by 'mediated cultural encounters'. These encounters foster partnerships and networks, prompting Italian television professionals to redefine their roles and identities within new organisational

and creative paradigms. The chapter argues that transnationality is situated, multi-layered, and fluid. Ultimately, it frames transnational coproduction as both a site of tension and a laboratory for institutional and creative transformation, reshaping Italian drama through ongoing negotiation between local and global forces. After laying out the conceptual landscape of transnational coproduction, with Chapters 3 and 4, which form the core of the thesis, the analysis of the development processes related to the three case studies comes into full focus.

Chapter 3 focuses on the early development phase where the groundwork is laid for all subsequent stages of production, setting the tone for both the creative and logistical aspects of a series, and where the project moves from an idea into something tangible. Here producers secure rights (for adaptations), define deals, negotiate and build partnership arrangements and finalise the creative and financial frameworks for their projects. The chapter explores the complex dynamics of strategic agency during the initial structuring phase of the three RAI-led transnational coproductions central to this study. It explores how agency is negotiated and enacted within multi-scalar development ecologies shaped by asymmetrical partnerships, business philosophies, industrial demands, and cultural and creative imperatives. The analysis conceptualises agency as a processual, hence dynamic, context-dependent capacity distributed across interconnected networks of stakeholders, grounded in professional identity, reputational capital, and strategic adaptability. Collectively, the case studies reveal agency as multifaceted and fluid, with producers navigating institutional frameworks by integrating entrepreneurial vision, cultural mediation, and professional credibility.

Extending the focus from early development to the core of the creative process, **Chapter 4** examines the screenwriting architectures and dynamics of the three case studies. Adaptation emerges here as a nuanced site of creative and institutional negotiation, where each case study demonstrates particular structural and cultural pathways shaped by its own institutional imperatives, authorial dynamics, and adaptive challenges. The chapter demonstrates how screenwriting in transnational drama must balance global production demands with cultural specificity, requiring ongoing negotiation between efficiency and distinctiveness. It also considers the complex, culturally specific role of authorship in shaping distinct storytelling and narrative forms. By framing screenwriting as both a creative and institutional practice, the chapter highlights its role as a dynamic space for experimentation and mediation. Ultimately, it reveals how contemporary Italian high-end drama continuously reimagines and reconciles global ambitions with local identities within the evolving transnational drama landscape.

Taken together, these chapters offer a coherent narrative and analytical pathway, guiding the reader through the historical trajectory towards the complex and transformative development processes that have given rise to this wave of RAI-led transnational television dramas. With this roadmap in place, Chapter 1 opens the discussion by exploring the historical, institutional, and cultural forces that have shaped Italian drama in its early stages.

Chapter 1

"Two Steps Forward and One Step Back": a History of the Long Route to the Development of "High-end" Drama in Italy, Mid-70s – Late 2000s.

Introduction

The current era, often described as the age of "peak television[2]", is characterised by both an unprecedented volume of scripted content and a heightened competition among networks and streaming platforms for audience attention, a trend explored by Amanda Lotz (2017) in her analysis of digital-era television. This environment coincides with the rise of transnational television, as broadcasters and global streaming services increasingly prioritise high-end content to stand out in a crowded marketplace. This is a development widely addressed in Albert Moran's work (2009), which highlights the global circulation and hybridisation of drama forms as a defining feature of contemporary television culture. In Italy, it is only in recent years – beginning in 2013 with Sky's launch of the crime drama *Gomorrah* – that "high-end" drama has established itself as a core business within the national television system, igniting what can be described as a genuine boom. As Massimo Scaglioni (2021) observes, this upswing represents a significant departure from earlier decades, when Italian drama lagged behind other European contexts both in production scale and international appeal.

Yet, if one considers the broader trajectory, the history of high-end drama in Italy – more precisely, the long road leading to its development – parallels the evolution of seriality itself in the country, as mapped in a foundational account by Milly Buonanno (2012). Indeed, this trajectory is perhaps best understood not as a succession of landmark productions, but as an ongoing process marked by gradual change, institutional adaptation, and occasional breakthroughs rather than a continuous series of memorable "outputs[3]". From this perspective, reconstructing the history of Italian seriality into its social, political, and cultural contexts is essential to understanding the specific gaps and

[2] "Peak television" is widely used in media studies to describe a period marked by the unprecedented volume, diversity, and ambition of scripted content, as well as fierce competition among networks and streaming platforms for audiences and cultural relevance. The term quickly entered critical and scholarly discourse after FX CEO John Landgraf's 2015 warning about the 'oversupply' of scripted series (Littleton, 2015; Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2024).

[3] Here, by "process" I refer to the ongoing evolution of production systems, organisational practices, and creative workflows; "outputs" refers to the catalogue of internationally recognised, high-profile dramas. The Italian story, I contend, is one of process over outputs.

systemic factors that have contributed to Italy's delayed emergence as a producer of transnational high-end content.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the distinction between what Mittell (2015) terms the "cottage" and "industrial" modes of television production. The "cottage" model, rooted in traditions of theatre and auteur cinema, privileged artisanal craft and bespoke solutions, but typically hindered efficiency and innovation, especially as market pressures intensified. By contrast, the industrial mode of production, increasingly dominant in international television from the late twentieth century onward, brought systematic organisation, a clear division of labour, and the capacity for sustained, high-volume output. This transition from cottage to industrial models proved fundamental to the evolution of seriality and paved the way for contemporary high-end drama.

This chapter selectively traces the pivotal moments and underlying conditions that paved the way for the Italian industry's eventual capacity to produce what is now recognised as "high-end" drama in the contemporary era. The rationale for this chapter lies in the distinctive nature of the Italian context: unlike the steady historical evolution of high-end television drama documented in Anglo-American scholarship, Italy's experience is marked by discontinuity, absence, and belatedness. The established conceptual frameworks and definitions developed for other national contexts cannot be seamlessly applied, as Italian television lacked a sustained tradition of high-end drama prior to the contemporary boom, particularly from 2013 onward. Consequently, this historical overview focuses on selected television figures and landmark productions to examine a long and uneven process characterised by alternating periods of innovation and regression, of expansion and stagnation. Ultimately, this is a story defined by contrasts, paradoxes, and idiosyncrasies, where the emergence of high-end drama does not seamlessly result from tradition, but from a series of exceptional interventions that disrupted entrenched patterns within the industry.

The institutional configuration of Italian public service broadcasting has historically been organised around a concessionary model, whereby radio and television services are entrusted by the State to a designated operator under legally defined conditions and political oversight. As Monteleone shows, RAI's status as concessionaire situates it in a position that is neither equivalent to a government department nor reducible to a commercial broadcaster operating in a free market. Rather, the public service mandate has been articulated through a persistent balance between institutional autonomy and political supervision, exercised via parliamentary mechanisms, regulatory reforms, and periodic renegotiation of the terms of concession (Monteleone, 2020).

Following the post-war constitutional and legislative transformations, and particularly after the 1975 reform, Italian public service broadcasting was formally redefined as a domain of pluralism and public responsibility while remaining structurally embedded in the political system. Menduni emphasises that this settlement did not resolve the relationship between broadcasting and political power, but institutionalised it: public service television in Italy developed through continuous negotiation between editorial autonomy, political influence, and public accountability (Menduni, 2002). Proximity to government thus became a constitutive feature of RAI's institutional identity,

shaping its organisation and cultural mission rather than distorting an otherwise neutral system. This proximity is most concretely articulated through the Service Contract (*Contratto di Servizio*, hereafter referred to as 'Contract'), the binding agreement between the Italian State and RAI that codifies public service obligations, values, and cultural aims. The Contract functions as the primary institutional mechanism through which public service principles are translated into programming responsibilities and operational criteria. The 2010–2012 Contract reaffirms RAI's cultural, social, and educational mandate, explicitly recognising fiction and entertainment as public service genres required to demonstrate quality, innovation, and originality. Within this framework, television drama is positioned as a privileged vehicle for cultural transmission, national narration, and the circulation of shared historical and literary imaginaries. The subsequent draft Contract for 2013–2015 marks a significant evolution: while maintaining continuity with heritage-oriented principles, it expands RAI's remit to include co-productions, international circulation, European collaboration, and global visibility, reframing public service quality as both cultural value and strategic international engagement.

It is at the intersection of these contractual frameworks that Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta's strategy for high-end drama takes shape. Grounded in the earlier Contract's emphasis on culture, heritage, and fiction as core public service missions, her approach was enabled by the later draft's explicit provisions for co-production and international reach. Andreatta's objective was to showcase Italy's humanistic culture and literary tradition, an orientation reflected in the drama output analysed in this thesis, where two of the three productions – *The Name of the Rose* and *My Brilliant Friend* – adapt literary works. Despite the temporal, industrial, and aesthetic distance between the historical *sceneggiato* and the transnational dramas developed under Andreatta's leadership, both forms embody the same public service mission. As Buonanno notes, the *sceneggiato* played a central role in Italy's nation-building project, promoting cultural unification through the dissemination of shared literary culture (Buonanno, 2012). Literary adaptation thus functioned as a vehicle for humanistic transmission aligned with public service principles. Buonanno further situates the *sceneggiato* within an international context shaped by contrasting broadcasting models: the British public service tradition oriented towards education and cultural uplift, and the American commercial system driven by popular appeal (Buonanno, 2012). This contrast continues to inform Italian television decision-making, re-articulated, albeit in transformed ways, in contemporary transnational collaborations. In this sense, Andreatta's high-end drama strategy constitutes a historically situated re-articulation of RAI's public service identity, mobilising literary adaptation, cultural specificity, and co-production under new transnational conditions while remaining institutionally legible within the Contract.

While the Contract defines public service obligations normatively, their concrete enactment has been shaped by RAI's distinctive funding architecture. Unlike systems based on exclusive public financing or strict separation from commercial revenues, RAI has historically operated under a mixed model combining licence-fee income with advertising. Monteleone identifies this arrangement as a dual-track system that anchors RAI to a public service mandate while exposing it to market pressures (Monteleone, 2020). Menduni similarly argues that this configuration is not a deviation from public

service principles, but a constitutive condition of Italian broadcasting, generating enduring tensions between universality, cultural ambition, audience reach, and economic sustainability (Menduni, 2002). These tensions have profoundly shaped programming strategies and evaluative criteria, particularly in genres such as television drama, which require high investment while carrying strong cultural expectations. Within this institutional configuration, television in Italy has long been understood as a central cultural institution rather than merely a medium of information or entertainment. Grasso emphasises television's role in mediating social experience, constructing shared narratives, and organising national symbolic life (Grasso, 2000). Drama occupies a privileged position within this framework, functioning not as an ancillary genre but as one of the public service mandate's most effective instruments. Literary adaptations, historical serials, and long-form narratives have served as vehicles for cultural transmission, collective memory, and national identity. As Grasso repeatedly notes, the legitimacy of fiction within Italian public service broadcasting derives from its capacity to combine popular appeal with cultural ambition, addressing mass audiences while engaging shared cultural references (Grasso, 2000). This helps explain why questions of fidelity, prestige, and educational value have remained central to debates on Italian television drama, and why fiction has long been a key site where public service ideals are materially enacted. At the same time, the centrality of drama has exposed persistent tensions between pedagogical aspiration and popular appeal. Menduni observes that Italian public service broadcasting has historically oscillated between didactic conceptions of television and recognition of its mass-cultural power, without fully resolving this contradiction (Menduni, 2002). High audience figures could legitimate social reach while provoking concern over cultural authority or moral function. These tensions became particularly visible when narrative ambition, production scale, and popular success converged in large-scale serial productions, challenging assumptions about the appropriate balance between culture and entertainment within public service television. Such pressures emerged not only from external competition, but from the internal contradictions of a system seeking to sustain cultural leadership while operating within a mixed economic model.

In the first section, I outline the most relevant theoretical concepts and defining attributes of "high-end" drama, providing the conceptual framework for the analysis that follows. After establishing the time frame under consideration – from the mid-1970s to the late 2000s – I focus on two pivotal moments in the evolution of Italian television: the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. For each period, I focus on the production histories of two television works that proved especially significant for their respective eras: Sergio Sollima's miniseries *Sandokan* (1976) and the long-running series *Un Posto al Sole* (1996-present). These examples are not only important for their individual innovations, but also for the ways in which they illuminate the evolving conditions, opportunities, and challenges associated with seriality in Italy. By tracing their production histories, I foreground how questions of format, institutional context, and production practice have shaped the development of serial forms, and by extension, Italy's trajectory towards high-end television drama. In the second section, I examine *Sandokan* as a case study that shows how specific narrative and aesthetic choices, together

with the production's internal tensions and dynamics, anticipated many of the features now associated with "high-end" drama, albeit in an embryonic form. The third section addresses the protracted period of transition spanning from the end of RAI's monopoly in the mid-1970s through the early 1990s, a time characterised by RAI's unprecedented crisis of adaptation in the face of shifting social realities, evolving audience preferences, intensifying commercial competition, and the growing influence of American serial models. In the fourth section, I turn to the industrial production revolution inaugurated in the mid-1990s by *Un Posto al Sole*, often described as Italy's "laboratory of seriality", to highlight the pivotal changes in production practices and organisational structures that made sustained serial drama possible. Finally, I briefly outline developments at the turn of the Millennium, assessing the extent to which the transition to an industrial production mode in the late 1990s laid the groundwork for the emergence of the first contemporary forms of Italian high-end drama.

"High-end" Television Drama: Definitions and Connotations

In this section, I provide an overview of the principal definitions of "high-end" drama, with particular attention to the Anglo-American context in which this category was first theorised and produced. Anchoring the discussion within a theoretical framework that delineates the core attributes and distinguishing features of high-end drama, I trace the historical evolution of Italian television drama from the mid-1970s through to the late 2000s. This diachronic perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of the conditions that set the stage for the transformative emergence, in 2013, of a new phase in Italian drama production, marked by the arrival of high-end drama in its contemporary incarnation, epitomised by the first season of Sky's *Gomorrah*. Against this backdrop, I ask: how can we make sense of the prevailing Anglo-American and Nordic definitions of high-end drama when applied to the specificities of the Italian context?

Nelson (2007) is one of the first scholars to expressly formulate a definition of high-end television drama. Examining quality television drama between the mid-1990s and 2006, and discussing the "state of play" of television drama during a period of technological and economic change, Nelson analyses the term within debates on globalisation and quality:

> I take the primary definition of "high-end" drama from the industry to indicate big budgets and the high production values associated with them, along with a "primetime" position in the schedule of a major channel. But, as with all such definitions when placed under scrutiny, the concept is more elastic than it at first appears. […]
> The industry term "high-concept" partly informs my sense of "high-end" but, where in the UK this might be inflected toward a socialist realist drama with a social purpose or

> an adaptation of a classic novel […] with high-art connotations, in the USA it might indicate the philosophical dimensions of Star Trek.
>
> (Nelson, 2007, p.2)

What is particularly relevant in Nelson's definition for my discussion is that, although his geographical frame of reference remains fundamentally Anglo-American – reflecting the original context in which this television form emerged – he emphasises the highly "plastic" nature of what constitutes high-end drama. Nelson notes that the term acquires different connotations according to distinctive national cultural discourses. I draw on this flexibility to inform my analysis of specific works and historical periods in the Italian context throughout the following sections. Importantly, Nelson approaches the 'sense' or 'idea' of "high-end" primarily through exemplification; in doing so, his definition of "high-end" becomes intertwined with the concept of event television: 'those TV dramas […] constructed as "must-see" or appointment viewing, programmes which themselves make a claim to distinction or have such a claim made about them' (Nelson, 2007, p.2).

In a similar vein, though with a greater emphasis on theorising the concept through a series of defining features, Dunleavy (2009a) identifies

> five strategies which, although not new to 'high-end' TV drama, have been more consistently deployed in American examples since 2000. These are: inventive 'generic mixing' in concept design; the profiling of 'authorial' input; increasing 'narrative complexity'; the use of serial narration to foster a 'must-see' allure; and the pursuit of a visual quality that has further reduced aesthetic distinctions between television and cinema.
>
> (Dunleavy, 2009a)

In subsequent work, Dunleavy redefines high-end drama as 'flagship' drama, but, most notably, she foregrounds the notion that "high-end" is first and foremost characterised by 'high production values'. This core attribute, however, does not preclude the inclusion of additional elements such as 'originality', 'post-network', 'must-see allure', high-profile authorship, hybrid concepts that draw on multiple genres, 'narrative complexity', and 'enhanced visual quality' (Dunleavy, 2009b). In her latest contribution (Dunleavy, 2017), building upon this foundation, she discusses high-end long-format drama by referencing complex serials, conceptualising these as specific high-end serial forms distinguished by five interdependent strategies innovatively developed by HBO between the late 1990s and early 2000s. These strategies include: the introduction of "hyphenates" as writer-producers; 'the construction of authorship discourses around these writer-producers' (Dunleavy, 2017, p.80); increased investment to ensure higher visual and aural quality (resulting in longer production times and greater aesthetic ambition); an aspiration towards 'the extreme high-end of the production spectrum to include

cinematic scenes' (Dunleavy, 2017, p.81); and, finally, the branding of the cultural distinctiveness of original dramas. Central to Dunleavy's elaboration is the contention that the common denominator – and thus the principal marker of distinctiveness – of all forms of high-end drama is their exceptionally high per-episode production cost compared to 'ordinary television': 'within TV industries, the 'high-end' tag has provided a way to differentiate high-budget and prestige drama productions from their counterparts in the middle or low-budget areas of the investment spectrum for drama' (Dunleavy, 2017, p.81). Thus, 'high-budget' emerges as the fundamental defining element.

In the Nordic context, Novrup Redvall (2013) observes that during the 2000s, the term "high-end" was often used interchangeably with attributes associated with 'quality television' (Novrup Redvall, 2013, p.8). However, Engelstad (2016) argues that, although high-end television drama continues to fall within the broader sphere of quality television drama, it is no longer synonymous with quality serial television drama in the contemporary era, owing to the increasingly specific connotations that "high-end" has acquired, as opposed to the more loosely defined conceptualisations of quality drama. Further, in her discussion of high-end television drama in Norway, Engelstad (2016) underscores the importance of financial considerations, echoing Dunleavy's emphasis on commercial aspects: 'High-end television drama is equally – if not more – identified with drama series that carry strong commercial appeal'. Finally, Hilmes (2014, p.11) extends these definitions by addressing questions of "form" in relation to high-end drama, noting that 'coproduction has exploded to become the "new normal" in high-end drama'. Pearson (2017), meanwhile, employs the term 'premium' as an interchangeable label for high-end drama.

While high-end television drama can be defined through a variety of components – ranging from event television and aesthetics to style, auteur theory, and transnational production – these elements do not systematically feature in Italian television studies. Instead, original operational definitions have been variously translated and often used interchangeably, as reflected in formulations such as 'the so-called great TV seriality (or post-TV seriality, or high-end seriality, etc.)' (Cardini, 2016, p.4, my translation). In the following sections, I will employ these operational terms and definitions to analyse the complex trajectory that led to the emergence of high-end drama in Italy from 2013 onward. This approach enables a critical examination of how particular production histories, situated within a broader historical context, can be characterised as embryonic forms of high-end drama.

Early Traces of "High-endedness": *Sandokan* the Miniseries (1976)

It is within this institutional and cultural context that the development of Italian television drama from the 1970s onwards must be understood. Rather than constituting a prehistory to contemporary "quality television", this period reveals how public service ideals were operationalised, tested, and renegotiated through fiction. In the Italian context, these public service ideals were closely bound to RAI's

institutional mandate to combine cultural responsibility, mass accessibility, and national cohesion through television. Irrespective of the slow and uneven trajectory of Italian television drama, high-end drama, and literary adaptation in particular, has always occupied a central position within RAI's public service remit for cultural mediation, historical narration, and the dissemination of a shared humanistic and literary heritage. This enduring ideal has persistently shaped RAI's drama strategy across decades, extending into the 2010s and informing the three transnational coproductions developed under Andreatta's leadership and examined in this research. *Sandokan* must therefore be understood not simply as an industrial or aesthetic experiment, but as a concrete attempt to enact RAI's public service mission through ambitious serial drama, mobilising the highest production values available at the time in the service of culturally legitimised storytelling.

This miniseries stands as a paradigmatic case in this respect. Conceived as a high-investment adventure serial adapted from a canonical literary source, *Sandokan* combined spectacle, seriality, and international appeal with a strong claim to cultural legitimacy. The scale of the production, its popular success, and the institutional debates it generated illuminate the tensions inherent in Italian public service broadcasting: between cultural mission and mass appeal, national narration and transnational circulation, pedagogical ambition and entertainment value. As such, *Sandokan* does not represent an anomaly or deviation from public service principles, but a moment in which those principles were brought into sharp relief. That *Sandokan* continues to occupy a privileged symbolic position within RAI's cultural imaginary, and within its institutional drama strategy, is suggested by the broadcaster's decision to return to the series with a new, high-end adaptation aired nearly fifty years later, in December 2025, at the time of writing.

The broadcast of *Sandokan* on 6 January 1976 marked a watershed moment in the history of Italian television drama. While the series' extraordinary popular reception and polarised critical debate are now well documented, what remains particularly significant is the extent to which *Sandokan* anticipated key features of what would later be recognised as "high-end" drama. In this section, I argue that *Sandokan* embodies, in embryonic form, several hallmark characteristics of high-end seriality: an international co-production model, elevated production values, event-like audience appeal, prominent authorship, innovative aesthetic strategies, and a distinctive hybridity of genre. By systematically examining these elements – within the broader context of Italian television's transition from the *sceneggiato* tradition to a new era of seriality – I demonstrate how *Sandokan* not only challenged the institutional and cultural conventions of its time, but also prefigured the ambitions and complexities that would come to define Italian television drama in subsequent decades.

The miniseries, which aired in six 60-minute episodes on RAI's primary channel, was adapted from Emilio Salgari's Indian-Malaysian adventure novels and centres on the exploits of *Sandokan*, a heroic pirate who, through relentless struggle, resists British imperialism and ultimately regains control of his small kingdom – the island of Mompracem – after its invasion. The miniseries was sold to 85 countries, including the United States, and rapidly achieved immense popular success, breaking all previous audience records for drama with over 27 million viewers (Crespi, 2016, p.161). In stark

contrast, however, the press initially greeted *Sandokan* with scepticism and harsh criticism. Nevertheless, what emerges clearly is that both public opinion and the media were profoundly shaken by the "anomalous wave" this series represented within the contemporary landscape of Italian television.

In this section, I argue that within the distinctive historical trajectory of high-end drama in the Italian television landscape, *Sandokan* can be theoretically positioned at the intersection of the rise of the miniseries genre and the advent of a new era – emerging between the late 1970s and early 1980s – in which seriality increasingly became the core business of modern television systems. Various aspects of *Sandokan* relating to production, marketing, narrative, and aesthetics demonstrate that the series may be regarded as an embryonic form of what would later be recognised as "high-end" drama.

This period marked a transition away from a weak domestic seriality – characterised by "prototypes" or single titles without subsequent seasons, such as the *sceneggiato* or 'televised novel' of the 1960s, and shaped by a "cottage" mode of production – towards a context in which RAI, influenced by developments overseas, began to anticipate and respond to the need for a stronger, more industrially produced seriality (Lucherini, 2003, p.48). Within this context, *Sandokan* epitomises the drive to push the boundaries towards new productive, narrative, and aesthetic horizons. It is precisely this "tension" that sets *Sandokan* apart from other miniseries or works produced during that complex period of transition. While *Sandokan* formally belongs to the macro-genre of television films or "films in instalments", I argue that it already contains the seed of high-end seriality. Through an analysis of this pioneering production, I will show that many of the descriptors and attributes identified in the literature as hallmarks of contemporary high-end drama can already be discerned in *Sandokan* in an embryonic form. In this light, *Sandokan* may be considered the first Italian experiment with more complex forms of seriality.

To fully appreciate the distinctiveness of this case, and to understand why *Sandokan* embodies the characteristics of an embryonic form of high-end seriality, it is essential to outline the broader context in which the series emerged. This contextualisation is particularly necessary given the polarised response the work elicited among critics and cultural elites of the time, provoking intense debate and even shock within the very institutional apparatus of RAI responsible for the project. Most significantly, *Sandokan* had a profound impact in terms of audience reception, further underscoring its importance within the evolving landscape of Italian television.

Sandokan is situated within the historical context immediately preceding the 1975 broadcasting act, or "1975 reform", a legislative milestone that signalled the end of RAI's monopoly and the beginning of commercial competition in Italian television. On the one hand, RAI's monopoly began to show signs of strain in the late 1960s, as several new minor broadcasters initiated cable transmissions. On the other hand, RAI – deeply entrenched in a position of privilege, largely secured by the influence of the era's dominant political party, Christian Democracy – continued to invest heavily in production and technology. However, these investments were not accompanied by a genuine commitment to

reinvesting acquired know-how and resources.

Several factors contributed to this approach. Most notably, RAI's stability derived less from innovative management or business strategy than from political manoeuvring. The growing presence of private broadcasters was consistently underestimated until 1976, when a constitutional law finally guaranteed the right to broadcast news at the local level. Up until that point, RAI, as a monopoly, faced little competitive pressure from an emerging market. Its production strategy during this period was essentially "self-sustainable", as RAI broadcast only what it produced internally. Moreover, television as a medium was surpassing cinema and print in popularity (Richeri, p.258). Within this relatively secure and stable environment, and alongside other prominent miniseries such as *Odyssey* (1968), *Aeneid* (1971), and *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), *Sandokan* inaugurated a new production trajectory focused on co-productions. This approach allowed RAI to assert an international presence, moving beyond the traditional *sceneggiato* (televised novel) in both form and scope (Monteleone, 2014, 175; Lavina, 2015, p.113). This new production phase would reach its apex in the early 1980s with the boom of the "TV film in instalments" macro-genre, a development that will be further examined in the next section, particularly in relation to the advent of commercial television in Italy and the resulting crisis of seriality that characterised the decade.

The drive to explore new production avenues in the early 1970s reflected a changing attitude between cinema and television. This period marked the theoretical end of a long-standing ideological conflict between the two domains, a conflict whose counterproductive effects would, in reality, continue to impede the television industry's capacity to produce long-format series and, by extension, high-end dramas for decades to come. For years, a pronounced ideological divide separated the two domains: cinema, closely associated with national culture and auteur tradition, was regarded as the more prestigious and culturally legitimate art form, while television was often perceived as its "inferior" counterpart. This competition and hierarchy fostered a climate of mutual suspicion, limiting collaboration and slowing innovation within television. However, the onset of this "armistice" did not necessarily translate into a genuine commitment by RAI to invest in research and innovation, as might be expected in contemporary terms. Rather, it constituted a political compromise aimed at reaffirming an identity rooted in a limited recognition of the power of television, while simultaneously seeking to capitalise on the tradition and prestige of Italian auteur cinema. The absence of a truly forward-looking strategy is evident in the complex production history of *Sandokan*. At the same time, the modernity embodied by *Sandokan* – unlike most other miniseries of the period, which largely remained tied to the conventions of the *sceneggiato* and were often domestically oriented, limited in scope and production ambition – stands out against a cultural and institutional context that remained markedly conservative. *Sandokan* distinguishes itself through its scale of production, its international coproduction strategy, adventurous narrative, and appeal to a mass audience both in Italy and abroad. In this respect, its modernity is made even more apparent when considered alongside the more traditional, inward-looking works being produced at the time.

In this context, providing an overview of the genesis of this miniseries will help to foreground

and analyse the elements and attributes that can be arguably described as germinally "high-end". The production of the miniseries is very complex and troubled. Sergio Sollima – a key exponent of the "western" film genre, together with his friend Sergio Leone – matures the idea of making a film about Salgari's novel at the end of the 1960s. As Manzoli (2012, p.72) suggests, Sollima's aim was to create a film that would break with what he describes as the "mannerist and naïve aesthetic codes" typical of the adventure genre, seeking instead to pursue greater realism. According to Manzoli, Sollima believed that this more realistic approach would allow the production to take full advantage of the spectacular potentialities made possible by heightened realism.

During the same period, a similar interest in adapting Salgari's novel for television emerged within RAI. However, the conditions necessary to realise such a project only materialised several years later, shaped by the efforts of screenwriter Tullio Kezich and producer Goffredo Lombardo. Lombardo, representing the Italian production company Titanus, received from RAI an unprecedented commission at the time: to produce a six-episode miniseries. After a lengthy development process, the proposal was presented to Sollima, who agreed to direct the project on the condition that it be filmed in the Far East, on location, and with local actors. This agreement was reached in 1972 (Crespi, 2003, p.201). Following two years of preparation, eight months of shooting beginning in July 1974, and an extensive editing process, *Sandokan* was broadcast from 6 January to 8 February 1976. The miniseries achieved unprecedented popular success, attracting massive audiences and surpassing previous viewing records. However, this triumph in terms of public reception stood in stark contrast to the sceptical and often critical response from the press and cultural elites.

As highlighted by Di Francesco (1976), Sollima elucidates the reasons behind the longstanding clashes that arose over many years between RAI's management, producers, and directors as follows:

> Everyone stopped in front of the enormous difficulty of transposing the work of Salgari into images. There are production and narrative reasons behind this: in terms of production, such a venture could cost however much and in terms of narrative, it is very difficult to tell these stories cinematographically.
>
> (Di Francesco, 1976, my translation)

Three key elements emerge from the director's account: the challenge of literary adaptation; the question of securing a high budget and achieving high production values; and, finally, the search for a narrative line suitable for a film designed for television audiences. While the first of these elements lies beyond the scope of this chapter, the remaining two are particularly significant for analysing *Sandokan* as a "high-end" drama. I will begin with the issue of budget.

After more than a year devoted to preparing the screenplay and scouting locations, Sollima moved to the Far East in 1974. He travelled between Malaysia, Thailand, and India, spending seven months coordinating an international troupe – acting also on behalf of the German Bavaria Film and

the French ORTF – within the framework of an international coproduction model that had been established since the 1950s (Raiola, 1975, p.10; Manzoli, 2012, p.72; Crespi, 2016, p.161). At the time, the majority of RAI's dramatic output was dominated by the *sceneggiato*: domestically produced, studio-based adaptations of literary works or historical subjects, often filmed almost entirely indoors with limited budgets and technical resources. In stark contrast, *Sandokan* was conceived and realised with a scale and ambition unprecedented for Italian television drama. The production embraced on-location shooting in Asia, engaged in complex international coproduction arrangements, and mobilised substantial financial and logistical resources. These choices set it apart not only from the *sceneggiati* but also from Italian auteur films of the period. *Sandokan* thus became the first Italian television drama to be produced with a level of care and grandeur comparable to that of a major Hollywood film. This unprecedented scale of production also meant that, for the first time, the strategies and operational dynamics employed differed markedly from those traditionally used for both auteur films and the *sceneggiati*.

The episode described by Manzoli (2012, p.72) is illuminating, as it reveals how both RAI executives and Titanus producers came to appreciate the "commercial" value of Sollima's work – particularly following the test screenings – and subsequently found themselves competing to secure the maximum profit from a production that was poised to become a flagship element of RAI's programming:

> The sum invested by RAI amounted to about a billion lire, i.e. a budget far from being negligible, but Titanus, obliged by contract to deliver the product by 31st August 1975, refused to deliver copies of the film (shot in 16 mm in colour), asking RAI to allocate an additional two hundred million lire due to an increase in costs. This led to a troubled dispute with a complicated conclusion.
>
> As a matter of fact, on 23rd December, the RAI Board of Governors meets up and decides to ask a judge the forced submission of the series. This request is granted by Magistrate Michele Aiello, on 29th December 1975, in consideration of the "public service nature of the national broadcaster". In turn, RAI is obliged to pay three hundred million lire as a precautionary measure, the destination of which will be decided by the same judge subsequently.
>
> (Manzoli, 2012, p.72, my translation)

The question of *Sandokan*'s commercial value was closely intertwined with considerations of programming and scheduling. In light of the substantial financial investment involved, RAI opted to radically alter its broadcast schedule within a single week to premiere the new miniseries at a strategically advantageous time on Epiphany Day, a significant holiday in Italy. However, ongoing legal proceedings, which extended until the end of December, prevented RAI from developing a comprehensive promotional campaign. This situation elicited strong dissent from Sollima.

Overall, the production and post-production history of *Sandokan* gave rise to a debate over several features characteristic of seriality in a more modern sense, including the absence of a carefully planned promotional campaign, considerations of commercial value beyond the initial television broadcast, and questions about optimal scheduling. This debate not only persisted but intensified immediately after the first episode aired, with particular attention to audience and press reception. The press and cultural elites were divided, with some voices strongly critical of the series and others offering more favourable or nuanced assessments. Much of this debate centred on the issue of fidelity to the original literary work: a concern that reflected, in part, a broader cultural tendency within Italian criticism at the time to privilege literary and artistic authenticity over commercial or popular adaptations.

Among the varied critical responses, some film critics and writers – such as Natalia Ginzburg and Morando Morandini – raised questions that reflected wider debates about the evolving nature of television in the era of "neo-television" (Eco, 2000), particularly following the end of the broadcasting monopoly. For example, Morandini questioned the relevance of concerns about fidelity to literary sources, asking: 'What is the sense, in 1976, of asking the anguished question: will television destroy the world created by Emilio Salgari?' (Manzoli, 2012, p.74). Similarly, Ginzburg challenged the negative tone surrounding the series' popularity, writing 'why [...] one should feel intolerant and irritated if this *Sandokan* has so much resonance, if people talk about it in the street?' (Manzoli, 2012, p.74). While a detailed analysis of adaptation lies beyond the scope of this chapter, these critical interventions are illustrative of the shifting perspectives on television drama and its place within Italian cultural discourse.

While Morando Morandini – a prominent Italian film critic – and Natalia Ginzburg – a renowned writer and intellectual – are not television scholars in the contemporary sense, their responses to *Sandokan* offer valuable insight into broader debates surrounding adaptation and the cultural significance of serial television in Italy. Morandini's reflections engage with the fundamental question of adaptation within a wider discourse of cultural innovation, while Ginzburg's remarks are especially noteworthy for anticipating what might now be described as a "proto-watercooler effect", a phenomenon characteristic of contemporary high-end drama series. This effect relates to *Sandokan*'s remarkable impact not only on viewers accustomed to the traditional *sceneggiati*, but also, more broadly, on Italian society as a whole. As Manzoli observes, the "*Sandokan* phenomenon" – or what he terms the original "*Sandokan*-mania" or "Sandokanite" – rapidly spread throughout Italian society and, soon thereafter, the cultural industries (Manzoli, 2012, p.72). This phenomenon not only triggered one of the earliest and most significant cases of television merchandising and fandom (Crespi, 2016; Manzoli, 2012), but also became:

> a social phenomenon on which sociologists and intellectuals will continue to debate for a long time, seeking to explain an event as obvious as unpredictable. [...] [*Sandokan*] [...] would be the sign of a substantial change in the tastes of a popular audience. [...] It

> happened in the right place at the right time, [it] seems to be the catalyst of a series of ferments that were shaking the current media system (as well as the cultural industry as a whole) and it particularly unveils the anachronisms inherent in the television system, perceived as unsatisfactory and backward.
>
> (Manzoli, 2012, p.71, my translation)

The commercial potential identified during the production of the miniseries gave rise to a marketing strategy – approaching the scale of full-fledged branding – that proved both powerful and effective. During the broadcast period and for a considerable time afterwards, "Sandokan" became a kind of magic word, capable of transforming the fortunes of any product associated with it. This strategy encompassed a wide range of elements, including: a now-iconic soundtrack by Guido and Maurizio De Angelis, which held the number one spot in the charts due to its originality and freshness; fifteen million packs of Panini stickers; sales of two hundred and twenty thousand copies of Salgari's novels, in addition to numerous new publications dedicated specifically to the miniseries; toys inspired by the Tiger of Malaysia, targeting both children and adults; comic books; and fashion collections from 1976/1977 influenced by the series.

As Manzoli (2012) argues, the "*Sandokan* phenomenon" was rooted in an exotic imagery that resonated with the mass popular audience of the era. Beyond its evocative narrative world, the miniseries also introduced innovative elements in terms of production methods and aesthetic choices, aiming for a higher degree of narrative and formal complexity than was typical of other works in the same genre and period. According to Manzoli, its impact can be attributed above all to its exotic-erotic dimension, which constituted an "added value" within a specific cultural and historical context. Thus, Manzoli contends, the "*Sandokan* phenomenon" can only be fully understood by considering the broader context of the time: the uninspired and outdated programming schedules, and the paternalistic, pedagogical, and protective ethos that characterised RAI's monopolistic television offering.

If the *Sandokan* phenomenon is partly explained by the allure of narrative exoticism – that is, the series' vivid use of Asian locations, unfamiliar settings, and cultural motifs rarely seen in Italian television at the time – this effect arises directly from innovative production practices and unprecedented aesthetic ambition. Rather than relying solely on context, a close analysis of the miniseries itself reveals specific features that align with the characteristics of high-end drama: the extensive use of on-location shooting in Malaysia, Thailand, and India; an international cast and production team; a richly orchestrated soundtrack; and a serialized narrative structure that sustains audience engagement across multiple episodes. As Manzoli (2012) argues, it is this combination of narrative, visual, and production complexity that distinguishes *Sandokan* and marks it as a significant precursor to later developments in Italian television drama.

In presenting his work, Sollima repeatedly lamented that although the film was shot in colour to evoke a magical, fairy-tale, and spectacular atmosphere (Di Francesco, 1976, p.28), the majority of the audience would be compelled to view it in black and white. This tension between the production's

ambition and the technological reality of Italian television did not diminish the miniseries' success; rather, it contributed to the series' cultural impact. *Sandokan* was conceived and produced with the ambition and visual scale characteristic of high-end drama, yet the limitations of the existing media infrastructure meant that most viewers could only access it in an outdated and technically limited format. Paradoxically, this very gap fuelled public fascination: audiences recognised *Sandokan* as a bold and unprecedented undertaking, even if they could not fully experience its visual spectacle. The widespread awareness of these constraints may have amplified the series' status as a cultural event, drawing attention to both the forward-looking aspirations of the production and the enduring technological and institutional limitations of Italian television in this transitional era.

One of the most significant contributions of *Sandokan* was its capacity to expand the imaginative horizons of Italian television audiences. The series introduced viewers to unfamiliar settings, diverse characters, and storylines that moved beyond the traditional, domestically focused narratives prevalent in earlier television dramas. Through its exploration of travel, adventure, romance, and encounters with different beliefs, religions, races, and customs, *Sandokan* opened up new cultural perspectives for a broad audience. By presenting lifestyles and experiences previously associated mainly with social elites, the series made such ideas accessible to the mass public. The unprecedented level of public engagement and enthusiasm for *Sandokan* transformed it into a genuine social phenomenon. As Le Guern (2004, p.3) observes in relation to other widely resonant media events, when the interest of a mass audience acquires the aspect of a social phenomenon, it marks a significant shift in the cultural significance of media consumption. In this respect, the response to *Sandokan* in the mid-1970s anticipated the broad, collective fascination that would later characterise the reception of high-profile, ambitious television dramas.

With *Sandokan*, Sollima introduced significant innovations that challenged the established conventions of Italian television drama, which had long been shaped by both cultural and institutional conservatism. During the 1970s, this conservatism was manifest in RAI's reliance on the *sceneggiato* format – typically characterised by studio-based productions, adaptations of literary classics, limited narrative scope, and a didactic approach to programming. The production history of *Sandokan* itself reflects the obstacles posed by this context, from initial institutional reluctance to invest in an ambitious project to the technical limitations that affected its reception. By embracing on-location shooting, international collaboration, a more adventurous visual style, and a dynamic approach to marketing and audience engagement, Sollima's miniseries marked a decisive break with these established practices. As Sollima himself remarked, 'If I had made *Sandokan* for cinema, nobody would have talked about it'. In this respect, *Sandokan* stands as a work that – through its innovations in production, narrative, and reception – opened up new possibilities for Italian television drama and anticipated many of the features that would later be associated with high-end television.

By taking Italian television drama into new and largely untested territory – a move that attracted considerable criticism at the time – *Sandokan* contributed to the development of a more ambitious form of seriality, characterised by increased narrative and production complexity. The success of the

miniseries also reflects broader shifts within Italian society, but it is above all a product of its institutional and cultural context: a television industry still shaped by conservative traditions, limited technological innovation, and a strong attachment to established formats such as the *sceneggiato*. These factors played a significant role in delaying the emergence of long-format seriality on Italian television. As Brancato (2012, p.37, my translation) note, the *sceneggiato* – which remains the subject of widespread nostalgia – served as an aesthetic emblem of 'resistance to techno-cultural innovation and its transformational power' within the broadcasting sector. In this context, *Sandokan* stands out as an important early step towards the more complex, ambitious productions that would later come to define Italian high-end television drama.

The distinctiveness of *Sandokan* during this transitional era is evident in how the series negotiates the narrative, aesthetic, and production tensions of Italian television in the years following the 1975 reform. Rather than adhering to the prevailing cultural conservatism of the period, *Sandokan* explores new directions in visual storytelling, international production ambition, and audience engagement, thereby expanding the possibilities for long-format seriality. While Sollima's direction contributed to the series' innovative qualities, these developments emerged from a broader constellation of collaborative production efforts, institutional circumstances, and changing industrial practices. In this sense, *Sandokan*'s significance lies not simply in the vision of its director, but in the ways the text itself embodies and responds to the shifting boundaries of Italian television drama at a pivotal historical moment.

As this section has demonstrated, *Sandokan* incorporates a range of features that, even in a nascent form, point towards an aspiration for what would later be defined as high-end seriality. These include its international co-production model, elevated production values, the prominent role of authorship, and its status as a "must-see", evident in the originality of its soundtrack and visual design. The series also exhibits a notable hybridity of genre, with Sollima blending fairy-tale elements into the traditional *sceneggiato* foundations of adventure, folklore, and ideology, thereby imparting a more "cinematic" quality to the narrative. While Sollima and his collaborators pushed the boundaries of what was possible within the transitional context of the time, *Sandokan* ultimately also foreshadows the difficulties that would come to define Italian television drama in the years that followed, a period of crisis and institutional uncertainty that will be examined in the next section.

From the 1970s through the 2000s, Italian television drama continued to develop within the public-service ecosystem described above, under conditions in which RAI's cultural function was increasingly negotiated against competitive and organisational pressures (Monteleone, 2015). In the 1980s and 1990s, this tension translated into uneven trajectories of innovation and institutional strain, ranging from financial and industrial constraints on the broadcaster to a broader difficulty in achieving meaningful internationalisation of national television production, notwithstanding apparent domestic strength (Grasso, 2020; Menduni, 2002). Shaped by the contradictions epitomised by *Sandokan* – which brought into sharp relief the tension between cultural ambition, mass appeal, and institutional constraint – this long period may be understood as a phase of unresolved negotiation, in which

television drama remained a central yet structurally fragile site for the articulation of RAI's public service values, a condition examined in the following section.

The Age of "Transition": Crisis and Stagnation from the Mid-70s to the Mid-90s

The history of Italian television fiction is typically divided into three main periods, each marked by distinct production practices and technological shifts. As Silj observes:

> There are three distinct periods in the history of Italian television fiction. The first runs from 1954 to 1963, when electronically produced *teleromanzi* ('telestories') predominate; the second runs until the end of the 70s, through which transitional period occurs the progressive decline of 'telestories' and the gradual return of film stock in the production of television fiction; the third sees the definitive triumph of film.
>
> (Silj, 1988, p.187)

Silj's periodisation not only summarises the evolving technological and aesthetic landscape but also exposes the contradictions at the heart of RAI's institutional strategy, particularly its struggle to adapt to rapid change in the 1970s and 1980s. In this section, I resume the analysis from the mid-1970s: a critical juncture that witnessed the tension between the conservatism of established formats, such as the *sceneggiato* and studio-based production, and new experiments in narrative structure, visual style, and international co-production. Internally, RAI faced pressures to preserve its monopoly, institutional routines, and cultural authority, while externally, it was increasingly challenged by new technologies, emerging commercial broadcasters, and shifting audience expectations. It is precisely within this interplay of stability and transformation that *Sandokan* must be situated, embodying both the legacy of Italian television tradition and the impulses for renewal that defined this transitional era.

Spanning the late 1970s through to the mid-1990s, this section first provides a historical overview of how RAI responded to the rapid and often turbulent transformations triggered by the advent of commercial competition in the second half of the 1970s. I then turn to the protracted transition of the 1980s, analysing the various institutional, technological, and cultural factors that contributed to persistent challenges in the development of seriality. By tracing both the advances and setbacks that marked this complex trajectory, I conclude by examining the years immediately preceding the industrial production revolution of the mid-1990s. Positioning the mid-1970s as a liminal moment between two distinct eras of Italian television highlights the significance of 1975: a pivotal year that serves as the threshold for what would later be termed 'neo-television' (Eco, 2000, my translation). The new broadcasting act, widely known as the 'reform law', fundamentally redefined the institutional

landscape. A brief examination of the underlying reasons for reforming the Italian television system is crucial for understanding both the roots of the crisis in seriality and the persistent delay in Italy's adoption of an industrial production mode, that is, a systematic, large-scale approach to serial drama production analogous to those developed earlier in other European and Anglo-American markets.

To better understand these transformations, it is useful to briefly retrace the evolution of Italian television fiction and its principal genres during this period. From its origins in the 1950s, Italian television fiction evolved through a series of distinct phases, each shaped by broader institutional and cultural shifts. The earliest period, spanning from the launch of regular broadcasts in 1954 through the early 1960s, was dominated by the *sceneggiato*: a genre rooted in studio-based, self-contained adaptations of nineteenth-century European literature. These productions, often didactic in tone and conservative in form, relied heavily on theatrical conventions and the authority of classic texts to legitimise the new medium.

As the 1960s progressed, RAI experimented with new approaches, gradually incorporating filmed sequences and exploring literary sources beyond the traditional canon. Nevertheless, the *sceneggiato* remained the central pillar of Italian television drama well into the 1970s, continuing to privilege closure, a limited number of episodes, and a close adherence to the source material. The late 1970s and early 1980s marked a significant turning point. This period saw the emergence of the miniseries format, characterised by high-budget, multi-episode narratives often produced in collaboration with international partners and designed to appeal to both domestic and foreign audiences. Notable examples such as *Sandokan* and *Marco Polo* exemplified this new ambition, combining cinematic scale and production values with the serial possibilities of television. At the same time, the "film in instalments" model – where feature-length works were divided into several parts for broadcast – remained common.

However, these innovations occurred against a backdrop of increasing competition from private broadcasters, whose imported series and entertainment programmes rapidly reshaped audience expectations. RAI responded by diversifying its schedule and increasing the quantity of in-house production, yet struggled to establish a genuinely industrial model of ongoing, open-ended serial drama comparable to those emerging elsewhere, particularly in the United States. By the mid-1990s, Italian television fiction began to align more closely with international trends, adopting the industrial production practices and narrative complexity associated with what would later be recognised as "high-end" drama. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, the path to that transformation was long, uneven, and fraught with both institutional and cultural resistance.

The process of RAI's modernisation, initiated in the early 1970s, was intended to bring the Italian television system into closer alignment with the profound cultural and political changes underway in Italian society. At the heart of this project was the 1975 reform law, which sought 'to free television from direct government control and to reorganise it on a more decentralised regional basis' (Richeri, 1990, p.256, my translation). This reorganisation shifted institutional control over RAI from the government to Parliament, establishing new priorities for the public broadcaster and ostensibly

paving the way for greater pluralism. Yet the implementation of this reform coincided with a dramatic transformation in the competitive landscape, as the emergence of private networks from 1976 onwards began to challenge RAI's position of dominance. The constitutional guarantee of local broadcasting – designed to foster freedom and diversity – allowed private actors to rapidly alter the rules of the game and redefine the Italian television system.

While the broader political and economic factors behind this critical juncture are complex, my focus here is on how these institutional changes directly shaped the conditions for television programming, and specifically for the development of seriality and high-end drama. The instability and uncertainty that followed the reform, together with intensified competition from private broadcasters, encouraged RAI to prioritise short-term, cost-effective programming strategies at the expense of long-term investment in ambitious, serialised drama. These conditions discouraged the adoption of systematic, large-scale production models – characteristic of high-end seriality elsewhere – and contributed to a persistent delay in the emergence of innovative, high-value drama formats in Italy. In tracing these dynamics, I aim to clarify the ways in which institutional structure and market pressures not only challenged RAI's competitiveness, but also inhibited the development of seriality and high-end drama during this pivotal period.

RAI regular television transmissions in 1954 with a single channel. In 1961, a second channel was launched, expanding both the scope and variety of programming. This two-channel system, under direct state control, remained the framework of Italian television for over a decade. It was not until 1979 that RAI introduced a third channel, a decision shaped by the 1975 broadcasting reform and the growing pressures of political decentralisation and market competition. Each stage of this institutional evolution reflected shifting political, cultural, and technological priorities, and set the parameters for how RAI would respond to the challenges of commercialisation and serial drama production.

Three crucial factors underpin the transitional dynamics of this period. The first concerns the content of television drama production. Until the mid-1970s, Italian television relied heavily on nineteenth-century European literature as its primary source, shaping the genre known as the *sceneggiato* or televised novel. By this time, however, the once-abundant literary repertoire had become depleted, making it increasingly difficult to foster innovation within established formats. The second factor relates to the broader process of Italy's modernisation, which brought about significant shifts in public tastes and social habits. As a result, the narrative forms that had previously captivated the collective imagination began to appear outdated and less relevant to contemporary audiences. The third major factor involves the transformation of the audience itself. With the end of RAI's monopoly and the rapid proliferation of private networks, viewers gained access to a much wider and more diverse range of programming. This, in turn, raised expectations and fundamentally altered patterns of media consumption (Silj, 1988, p.188). The expansion of choice and the shift in audience preferences redefined the terms of competition, exposing RAI's increasing inability to produce drama that resonated with the evolving demands of its viewers.

Much of this incapacity can be attributed to the complacency RAI developed during its

monopoly, which inhibited the development of strategic foresight and adaptability. As the monopoly era drew to a close, this lack of perspective became increasingly apparent, particularly in the years preceding the reform. In response to the onset of commercial competition, RAI pursued a strategy that proved fundamentally misaligned with the emerging realities of the marketplace. Guided by the 1975 reform, RAI focused on expanding regional programming, culminating in the launch of the third channel in 1978. However, this approach fragmented RAI's offerings and did little to strengthen its ability to compete on a national level.

By contrast, private networks rapidly expanded both the breadth and quality of their programming, particularly in the domains of entertainment and variety shows. As Richeri observes, "the key battle [is] to take place over the quality and the quantity of entertainment programmes and television shows" (Richeri, 1990, p.261, my translation). Private broadcasters quickly established expertise and popular appeal in these areas, further consolidating their competitive advantage. Ultimately, RAI's inability to formulate a cohesive and forward-looking response to these challenges played a decisive role in its struggle to adapt to the changing landscape of Italian television drama and seriality.

Two principal strategic mistakes contributed to RAI's competitive disadvantage: first, a misjudgement in overall programming strategy, and second, a failure to develop a compelling counter-offer in terms of content. Unpacking these critical missteps helps clarify how RAI's disadvantage rapidly evolved into an unbridgeable gap. The independence granted to each of RAI's three channels in the wake of the 1975 reform, intended to reflect a new balance of political power, quickly resulted in a lack of coordination and a failure to mount a unified response to the proliferation of private competitors. This fragmented approach to scheduling resulted in a situation where the three RAI channels not only competed with private networks but also, at times, with each other. In this context, RAI faced the challenge of developing a coherent programming strategy that would leverage its public service mandate while responding to rapidly changing audience expectations. Instead, as Richeri observes, RAI 'decides to challenge private television on the very ground which [is] most favourable to the latter, namely, in the area of entertainment, quiz shows and escapist amusements, and in that of continuous increase in the number of hours broadcast each day' (Richeri, 1985, as cited in Richeri, 1990, p.261, my translation)[4]. This approach, while aiming to maintain competitiveness, did not always strengthen RAI's distinctiveness or support the development of innovative serial drama.

In responding to the exponential increase in demand for content (Lucherini, 2003, p.48), RAI navigated a complex and evolving political-institutional environment. The broadcaster was expected to adapt to the logic of a rapidly transforming media market, even as effective regulation of the television sector had yet to be fully established (Monteleone, 2014, p.179). The absence of clear regulatory frameworks facilitated the expansion of private broadcasters during this period. These developments were further shaped by the longstanding interplay between RAI and the political sphere; parliamentary arrangements often prioritised the allocation of influence within RAI (a practice known as *lottizzazione*, or "allotment") over comprehensive sectoral reform. Against this backdrop, RAI's response to increasing competition from imported programming was characterised by a defensive strategy,

reflecting the uncertainties and ambiguities of this transitional phase.

The onset of commercial competition in the late 1970s and early 1980s fundamentally reconfigured the Italian television landscape, compelling RAI to re-examine its programming strategies in the face of rapid market change. Previously, RAI's approach to seriality was defined by the *sceneggiato*. By the mid-1970s, however, the repertoire sustaining this model was increasingly exhausted, while changing public tastes, social habits, and the loss of monopoly combined to undermine its continued relevance. The arrival of commercial broadcasters such as Fininvest (later Mediaset) introduced a broad array of imported content, notably American soap operas, action series, and long-running dramas. These open-ended, audience-driven forms of seriality stood in stark contrast to RAI's more traditional programming, setting new expectations for regularity, variety, and ongoing narrative engagement.

Faced with the challenge of matching the sheer volume and dynamism of this imported programming, RAI responded by devoting significant resources to acquiring foreign series and movies, that is the most competitive genres offered by private channels. This shift inevitably reduced investment in innovative, in-house serial drama. At the same time, RAI's expansion of broadcast hours, and the launch of a third channel in 1978, demanded an increase in original production output. However, rather than pivoting to the episodic, season-based logic of serial drama that was gaining ground in the commercial sector, RAI doubled down on what Monteleone (2014, p.179, my translation) terms 'television cinema': high-budget, international coproductions designed as prestige events, marked by lavish scenic design, star-studded casts, and the involvement of prominent auteur directors. While *Sandokan* (1976) stands as an early and exceptional precursor to this model, RAI's strategy was fully realised in subsequent productions such as *Gesù di Nazareth* (1977), *Marco Polo* (1982), and *La Piovra* (beginning in 1984). These works were often co-financed internationally and conceived as multi-part films or mini-series rather than ongoing serials. As Silj notes:

> What is striking about the programmes produced by RAI is that, in spite of RAI's almost total dependence on imports for genres like serials and series, no effort has been made so far to produce them. The strategic choice of RAI [is] to concentrate on what can correctly be regarded as a national skill, namely film-making. The fact that a film is then chopped in several parts (hence the term 'films in instalments') does not essentially change its nature. […] Many of the programmes […] can be properly described as mini-series.
>
> (Silj, 1988, pp.189-190)

[4] While this approach proved problematic for RAI, it is not inherently unsuccessful; for instance, the BBC has demonstrated that public broadcasters can combine popular entertainment with a strong public service remit. In the Italian context, however, institutional and organisational factors limited RAI's effectiveness in this domain.

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>
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In prioritising 'television cinema', RAI reaffirmed its institutional authority and cultural prestige but fell short of addressing the core challenge posed by commercial competition: the need for regular, flexible, and ongoing serial drama that could sustain audience engagement in a transformed marketplace. However, by the late 1970s, the programming model that had sustained RAI's dominance was becoming increasingly outdated. As Monteleone (2014, p.179) observes, this decline occurred even as RAI remained a leading international producer of both 'television cinema" and theatrical films. In analysing the emerging need for a more industrial and flexible television production system, Ventriglia (2009, p.19) rightly suggests that attention should be paid to transformations occurring overseas. A comparative perspective helps illuminate the strategic missteps that led to a persistent lag in Italian drama production and ultimately delayed the advent of high-end television drama.

One of the key developments in the United States during this period was the emergence of the miniseries format – epitomised by *Roots* in 1977 – which, while reminiscent of the Italian *sceneggiato* in structure, was produced with the substantial budgets and production values more typical of cinema. These miniseries, along with so-called "super-soaps" like *Dallas*, were conceived as must-see television events, setting a new benchmark for audience engagement and narrative ambition. RAI was certainly attentive to these trends, as competing in this arena appeared critical to maintaining its relevance amid the rising tide of commercial competition.

Yet two factors fundamentally distinguished the Italian situation from the American experience in the late 1970s. The first concerns the relationship between cinema and television. In the United States, a strong commercial alliance between the two sectors – facilitated by growing advertising revenues – enabled a productive exchange of expertise and talent, particularly from the late 1970s onward. While the relationship was initially marked by rivalry and mutual suspicion, Hollywood gradually began to license films for television, and collaboration increased, even if significant crossover would only become routine later. In Italy, by contrast, attitudes towards television continued to be shaped by the enduring prestige of auteur cinema. Postwar Italian cinema, associated with cultural value and international acclaim, was widely regarded as the nation's primary artistic export, while television was seen as commercial, ephemeral, and artistically inferior.

This hierarchy fostered institutional conservatism, with television drama expected to conform

to established formats and literary adaptations, rather than innovating with new genres or serialized forms. As a result, RAI and the broader production sector were slow to adopt the industrial production models gaining ground elsewhere. The second key factor involves the structural response of the production sector. In the US, the success of *Dallas* prompted a reconfiguration of production practices, paving the way for open-ended, prime-time serial drama that could build long-term viewer loyalty. In Italy, however, this transformation did not occur; the production "machine" was slow to adapt, hindered by institutional inertia and the absence of a cohesive strategy. Together, these differences help explain why, despite exposure to international models and the success of prestige co-productions, Italy struggled to develop an industrial production mode capable of sustaining high-end drama, ultimately delaying its emergence until well after these forms were established elsewhere.

The clash between cinema and television in Italy is so pronounced that, even when conditions appeared favourable – such as the end of the public service monopoly in 1974 and the emergence of private networks drawing significant advertising investment – the two sectors failed to reach any meaningful agreement or coordinate responses to the changing media environment. As noted earlier, a key difference lies in the response to new production models: in the US, the arrival of *Dallas* and similar prime-time products catalysed the emergence of new professional roles – so-called "hyphenates" such as writer-producer-directors – who brought innovative approaches to television storytelling. These figures, as Ventriglia (2009, p.21) argues, embodied for the first time 'a specific, high-quality authorship proper of television', prefiguring the future role of the showrunner and laying the groundwork for the high-end drama model.

By contrast, RAI was wholly unprepared for the arrival of the "super-soap" *Dallas* in 1981, three years after its US debut. Before the series was acquired by Berlusconi's Fininvest, RAI aired just thirteen episodes in a non-sequential order – a standard practice for closed-ended series – 'without taking into account that *Dallas* represents an element of clear discontinuity with respect to that specific serial writing mode. Private televisions will not make the same mistake' (Ventriglia, 2009, p.20, my translation). This innovation gap was not merely a question of technological or industrial delay, but rather a product of diverging institutional priorities: whereas American television increasingly specialised in prime-time seriality – developing ongoing, open-ended narrative forms and new professional roles that cinema, by its very nature, did not offer – Italian television remained tethered to the prestige and conventions of auteur cinema. As a result, Italian drama was slow to embrace industrial production models and the kind of long-form, flexible storytelling that was taking hold in the US. In terms of programming, it is notable that the high-budget miniseries still produced in Italy in the early 1980s (for example, Giuliano Montaldo's *Marco Polo*, co-produced by NBC and RAI in 1982) represented the final efforts of a genre increasingly in decline. These productions, rooted in older models, struggled to compete with new international series better attuned to changing audience expectations.

In light of these converging challenges, the crisis deepened and the need for a new strategy became increasingly urgent. As Frezza notes:

> In this context, the problem of how to face competition translates into the need to adapt [RAI's] internal organization to new tasks and new strategies. The need arises to enhance in-house production capacity in both quantitative and qualitative terms.
>
> (Frezza, 2013, p.50, my translation)

This imperative forms the basis of the 1982 'Feasibility Study on the Production of Serials/Series', an internal RAI report coordinated by Massimo Fichera, who would later distinguish himself for transforming Raidue into a youth-oriented channel known for its innovative content. The report, commonly referred to as the 'Rapporto Fichera', emphasises the necessity for Italy to adopt a standardised industrial model of production. It recognises the increasing internationalisation of the television market and the importance of strengthening Italy's role as a producer, not merely a consumer. Given that drama production was becoming the core business of television systems globally, the report recommended a comprehensive modernisation of RAI's production and distribution processes. Acknowledging RAI's existing structural limitations, the study further proposed that 'the task [will be] entrusted to a new organisation, an associate company which, while in partnership with RAI, [will be] granted independent management' (Silj, 1988, p.193).

This proposal, together with a detailed report on the necessary measures to allow the development of the television industry in response to the crisis and growing challenges, came up against the persistent resistance and inertia that characterised both public and private broadcasting sectors, as well as broader institutional obstacles (Frezza, 2013, p.50, my translation). Within RAI, shifting political alliances generated reluctance to embrace structural change, while some film directors felt threatened by the increasing prominence of television, a medium that Sollima, notably, was willing to embrace as an auteur. In addition, ongoing debates about the influence of imported programming and anxieties regarding the preservation of established cultural traditions further complicated efforts to modernise production practices and develop a more competitive, industrial approach to drama. As a result, despite the clear diagnosis and recommendations of the Fichera report, RAI's capacity to respond effectively to the challenges of this period remained limited, and the structural transformation of Italian television drama continued to lag behind developments in other countries.

Thus, the Fichera report was ultimately shelved, and, as a testament to its disruptive potential, even today it remains difficult to locate a copy of the original document: arguably the most important policy proposal for the industrial transformation of Italian television production remains a "semi-clandestine" text. Paradoxically, despite having formally outlined the guidelines for modernising the industry, RAI increased its output of drama throughout the 1980s, but in the absence of any coherent or strategic direction. The decade was instead characterised by a heavy reliance on imported programming, the proliferation of telefilms, and a single truly significant domestic production: *La Piovra* (The Octopus, 1984–2001), which exported to more than 80 countries, distinguished itself through its ambitious, multi-season structure, cinematic production values, and engagement with contemporary

social and political realities, particularly organised crime. Its remarkable international success demonstrated the global appeal and narrative potential of Italian television drama, but also highlighted the industry's failure to systematically build on this achievement. Instead of sparking sustained innovation in serial production, *La Piovra* remained an isolated case, with RAI and the broader sector continuing to struggle with form innovation and international competitiveness throughout the decade. Despite this initial breakthrough, the broader landscape of Italian seriality remained weak from the 1980s into the early 1990s. Once again, the sporadic advances made were largely attributable to the vision and initiative of a handful of television figures, rather than to institutional reform or strategic investment. This is an issue addressed in the following section.

In conclusion, this section has traced how, within a brief period spanning the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, RAI found itself 'operating in new and unforeseen political, social and market conditions' (Richeri, 1990, p.259, my translation). The public broadcaster's struggle to respond coherently to shifting political balances, a changing audience, and increasingly assertive private competitors led to a stagnation of innovation in both form and industrial practice, hindering its ability to compete internationally. The next section examines the point at which investment in the development of seriality was finally undertaken in Italy, focusing on the project that came to embody this pivotal moment.

The Coming of Industrial Production to Italy: *Un Posto al Sole* (1996) or the Laboratory of (Long-running) Seriality

Recent definitions of "high-end" drama in the scholarly literature have often relied on contrastive comparisons between high-budget and low-budget productions to delineate the distinctive characteristics of contemporary high-end drama. Within this conceptual framework, the continuing soap opera is typically regarded as the paradigmatic example of low-budget television drama production (Dunleavy, 2017, p.81). Against this background, it may initially seem counterintuitive to foreground the role and significance of a soap opera in the evolution of long-format seriality in Italy, particularly when the serial in question is not what has been termed a 'super-soap': that is, 'a high-end form of soap opera' characterised by high production values, season-based structures, and weekly primetime scheduling, as exemplified by *Dallas* (Dunleavy, 2017, pp.98, 122).

Nevertheless, the production history of the case study examined in this section – the soap, or more precisely, the social-realist drama[5] *Un Posto al Sole* (1996-present) – marks a crucial turning point in establishing the structural preconditions that would ultimately enable the Italian television industry to develop high-end drama for global markets, as evidenced most strikingly by Sky's *Gomorrah* in 2013. For the Italian production system, these foundational changes signalled a transition into an era of industrial production, which became the sine qua non for the subsequent emergence of high-end drama.

In the early 1990s, amidst the political upheaval of the "Tangentopoli" corruption scandals –

which positioned media power as a central battleground in the rise of media mogul Silvio Berlusconi – investment in innovation and the development of more complex forms of seriality was not a priority. While the 'Osservatorio sulla Fiction Italiana' (the Observatory on Italian Fiction) headlined its 1993/94 report on Italian drama 'É arrivata la serialità' ('The coming of seriality', my translation), the reality was characterised by what Ventriglia (2009, p.23, my translation) aptly terms 'unexpressed potentiality'. Italian television in this period consisted largely of so-called "Italian-style series" – a legacy of the miniseries tradition – alongside the growing import of American formats such as *ER* and *The X-Files*, a trand that, despite increasing demand for drama, was accompanied by the continued insufficiency of domestically produced content.

This era coincided, on the political level, with a revolution marking the transition from the so-called "First Republic" to the "Second Republic." In parallel, the television industry was on the cusp of its own industrial production revolution. In this section, I provide an overview of the genesis of *Un Posto al Sole* (1996-present) – commonly regarded as the first true Italian serial or soap opera – focusing primarily on its production history to illustrate the structural preconditions that enabled the Italian industry to embrace, for the first time, the industrial mode of production essential to seriality.

Within a developmental trajectory marked by discontinuity, *Un Posto al Sole* emerged from the vision of a small group of RAI managers and creatives, most notably Giovanni Minoli. Minoli conceived the project to address two pressing, complementary needs within RAI and the broader Italian television system: first, to close the gap with respect to industrial serial production, and second, to respond to the pressures of globalisation in a media environment increasingly dominated by large transnational conglomerates and processes of vertical and horizontal concentration. Before analysing how Minoli succeeded in uniting these imperatives within Italian television of the mid-1990s, it is necessary to briefly introduce his professional profile and to situate the project within the context of RAI's dedicated infrastructure for innovation: the 'Format' division, where this new phase began.

Giovanni Minoli is an historical figure at RAI. A journalist, producer, and media executive, his name is associated with *Un Posto al Sole* through a trajectory of experimental programming that emerged notably during the mid-1990s, a period marked by RAI's relative stagnation and limited alignment with other European public broadcasters. In early 1995, Minoli was appointed director of 'Format', an in-house RAI production company with an independent budget and staff, and with a mission to experiment with new content forms and genres. The mandate of this division was to research, develop, produce, and broadcast – within pre-assigned slots on Raidue – high-quality formats spanning current affairs, factual entertainment, and reality programming (Fondazione Ravello, no date). Crucially, 'Format' was envisioned as a laboratory for the development of what was increasingly

[5] Here, the term refers to a tradition in television fiction that foregrounds authentic depictions of everyday life and contemporary social issues, drawing on Italian neorealism and British "kitchen-sink" drama. Unlike conventional soaps, which focus on melodrama and insular family dynamics, *Un Posto al Sole* blends the ongoing structure of the soap with a focus on real-life social problems, creating a hybrid format distinctive within Italian television (see Brancato, 2012; Nelson, 1997).

referred to as "quality television", that is, programming marked by higher production values, innovative narrative structures, creative risk-taking, and the ambition to reach both national and international audiences.

Minoli prefigured 'the new international television landscape brought about by multichannelling, new technology and narrowcasting' (Moran, 2013, p.208) and stressed the need for RAI to embrace innovation and creative renewal: 'In two years, we will be invaded by European channels, the colonisation will be worse than that of commercial television' (Rota, 1995, my translation). As Minoli argued:

> RAI has to make "a pact with creativity" again: only by opening the scheduling to experimentation and new ideas the public service can face the challenge of transforming the television system, which will have to face, in a couple of years, […] the coming of thematic channels.
>
> (Adnkronos, 1995, my translation)

Under the aegis of this research and innovation division, Minoli was able to create a range of programmes that anticipated the standardisation and globalisation of television production – developments catalysed by transnational media conglomerates, a theme to which I return in the context of *Un Posto al Sole*. 'Format' was not merely another RAI division, but an in-house laboratory and training ground for consolidating a broader project aimed at elevating the standards of Italian television. This vision originated in Minoli's earlier work, most notably with the creation in 1980 of his iconic news magazine programme *Mixer*, widely recognised for its innovative approach to interviews and considered 'the dawn of Italian formats' (Sorice, 2005, p.146, my translation).

The allocation of 'Format' programmes to pre-assigned slots on terrestrial television provided an ideal launchpad for experimentation, enabling Minoli, his team, and ultimately RAI to enhance their international standing and establish creative and financial relationships with major broadcasters and international producers, including Discovery, Beta, PBS, The History Channel (USA), Turner Original Productions, Channel Four, ZDF, NBC, Capa, and Beyond. These collaborations catalysed a number of internationally broadcast co-productions in this period, including the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Kapò*.

Minoli understands the necessity for the television system to adopt a new approach to production, observing international developments in innovative television practices. Between 1993 and 1994, he is the Director of Raidue, a channel which – since the years following the 1975 reform – had increasingly developed a reputation for innovation, especially under the leadership of Massimo Fichera. Notably, Fichera's early 1980s report on drama production (the "Rapporto Fichera") provided the first major blueprint for the industrialisation of Italian television fiction. Although only briefly referenced earlier, this report articulated a vision for systematic, large-scale drama production that would only

begin to find practical realisation more than a decade later (Brancato, 2012).

Building on the reputation earned through the programmes produced within the 'Format' division, Minoli decides to contact the Australian television production company Grundy – which would soon be acquired by media conglomerate Pearson Television in 1995 – to express his interest in their work, particularly in the domain of game shows and drama serials. The initial contact dates back to the 1980s through imports of some of Grundy's drama programmes (Macken 1989, in Moran 2013), when Minoli also recognised the global impact of the serial *Neighbours*. The interest is mutual, as Grundy finds favourable conditions for entering the Italian market in 1993.

As previously noted, following the deregulation of television by the Constitutional Court in 1973 and the subsequent 1975 reform, the ensuing climate of television libertarianism eventually gave rise to a duopoly between RAI and Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest group (later Mediaset). Grundy soon enters discussions with RAI regarding the production of a serial drama, and Minoli – having defined the objectives for RAI's "industrial revolution" during his years at 'Format' – knows what is needed: production know-how. As Cardini (2015, p.186, my translation) highlights, 'In the international scenario of television production, the Grundy model is known as one of the most industrial and efficient'. Minoli realises that, although the same globalising effects are being felt in Italy as in other media markets (increasing competition, market deregulation, etc.), the Italian industry has not adapted its practices and technologies to the standardisation processes facilitating the global flow of content elsewhere.

Therefore, while media sociologist Milly Buonanno, from her theoretical perspective, rightly emphasises the role of *Un Posto al Sole* in introducing the continuing soap opera genre to Italian audiences (Buonanno, 2009), from a production and historical perspective *Un Posto al Sole* also serves the pressing need to restructure the television system (RAI and beyond) towards a production mode that is an essential condition of contemporary television. The solution to this problem comes from the 'Very New World', as scriptwriter and producer Gino Ventriglia recalls:

> I meet Wayne Doyle, just arrived from Sydney, in the Aran-Mastrofilm offices located in Via Pasubio: only after a few days the Englishman Adam Bowen will join us. It is 15th August 1994. Such a date is engraved in my memory. I have read some episodes and "blocks" of *Neighbours* and I have realised that it is absolutely unusable because of the cultural and geographical differences imposed by the Neapolitan setting of the soap, or, as Wayne immediately underlines, "serial drama". I express my perplexities and we immediately begin to invent the characters and the story of a group of young people who goes to live in the attic of a noble palace. And then we find the title: *Un Posto al Sole*, which has been airing since 1996.
>
> (Ventriglia, 2009, p.24, my translation)

This case provides not only a compelling first-hand demonstration of the scale of innovation represented by the introduction of long-running seriality in Italy, but also highlights a critical dimension of production renewal. In acquiring the *Neighbours* format, Minoli obtained both the narrative framework and, crucially, access to the specialised training required to build new production expertise within RAI. With his deep knowledge of the Italian media landscape, Minoli recognised that a literal adaptation of the original format would be unlikely to gain acceptance within Italy's cultural, televisual, and institutional contexts. More importantly, such replication would not facilitate the industry-wide acquisition of skills fundamental to industrial modes of production. It is for these reasons that *Un Posto al Sole* can be described as an 'original format devised for RAI' (Moran, 2013), designed both to accommodate national specificities and to foster the growth of a sustainable domestic production model. According to the terms of the agreement, Grundy's contribution extended beyond narrative frameworks to encompass the provision of professional expertise, enabling RAI to oversee both the creative and organisational dimensions of production and to guarantee delivery within strict deadlines. RAI, for its part, supplied the personnel and facilities of the Naples Production Centre, with the explicit objective of gradually assimilating the organisational practices integral to the new production model (Cardini, 2015). More specifically, Grundy's package entailed the transfer of a highly efficient shooting methodology – designed to optimise time and resources – along with the introduction of a structured writing department comprising approximately twenty-five professionals, including head writers, story-liners, script editors, and external scriptwriters (Ventriglia, 2009).

This production process was, in effect, designed to recalibrate established professional roles, beginning with the screenwriter, who now assumed a central and coordinating function (Brancato, 2012, p.40, my translation). Consequently, the screenwriting department emerged as the operational nucleus of the entire project, foreshadowing the writers' rooms that would later become a defining feature of contemporary high-end drama production:

> The industrial dimension of serial writing (and of the entire production cycle) becomes an acquired legacy in the Italian television system thanks to that experience imported from Australia: the distribution of labour; the different roles and functions; the strict procedures and pace; the various stages of the scriptwriting phase; in a word, the narrative machine that produces serial drama on a daily basis. Given the particular cultural roots of our drama production, it's difficult to imagine that it would have been possible to fine-tune this machine.
>
> (Ventriglia, 2009, p.24, my translation)

This development represented a decisive departure from the earlier, more artisanal approach to television drama production in Italy, which had long been characterised by limited episodic runs, loosely organised creative teams, and a high degree of improvisation and flexibility in both writing and shooting. In contrast, the industrial model introduced standardised workflows, rigid timetables, and a

collaborative writing environment, making possible a continuous and large-scale output of serial drama. Given the specific cultural history and creative traditions of Italian television, it is hardly surprising that such a transformation required not only technical training but also a fundamental reorganisation of the entire production culture.

The process of acquiring and assimilating this new production know-how was far from straightforward, often clashing with the inability of much of the established professional culture within Italian television to fully grasp the specificities of the industrial production model, most notably, the organisation and centrality of the scriptwriting department. This difficulty was compounded by a broader lack of both technical and cultural expertise in this area. After *Sandokan*, the history of Italian serial drama is once again marked by a new "chapter", one that, as with Sollima's miniseries, emerges from a 'fracture' (Brancato, 2012, p.41, my translation) and must be understood within a discourse of industrial backwardness, too often the result of institutional incapacity to foster genuine development. In this context, *Un Posto al Sole* fills a crucial gap, providing both the acquisition of practices and the industrial expertise necessary for the sector's growth in the years that followed. Nonetheless, the path towards high-end drama following the era of *Un Posto al Sole* remains a long one, inextricably linked to enduring systemic factors.

It is hardly surprising that the launch of *Un Posto al Sole*, much like the earlier "turning point" represented by *Sandokan*, was accompanied by renewed debate within the longstanding discourse of cultural conservatism that has contributed to Italian television's industrial lag. Although arguments invoking "cultural colonisation" and, more broadly, scepticism towards long-running seriality – particularly in the form of soap opera – persisted, these did not ultimately prevent *Un Posto al Sole* from succeeding in revitalising serial drama production. On the contrary, *Un Posto al Sole* played a pivotal role in introducing into Italy the writing and production practices that have since transformed the entire drama sector.

The discipline imposed by the rigorous production structure of the soap (Cardini, 2015) – demanding not only continuous, uninterrupted output but also careful management of economic constraints – provided the Italian industry with a vital opportunity to move beyond the "cottage" production model that had prevailed until then. The soap thus became, above all, a vehicle for industrial as well as cultural transformation, enabling Italy to align more closely with other European television industries. As Lucherini (2003, p.52, my translation) observes, 'the soap is first of all a production mode, either done in a certain way or not done at all: in this case, starting from scratch has been an advantage'. In this respect, *Un Posto al Sole* served as a training ground for a generation of industry professionals who would later play key roles in the landscape of contemporary high-end drama, including directors such as Stefano Sollima and Paolo Sorrentino. Notably, while Sorrentino – now celebrated for *The Young Pope* – began his career as a screenwriter on *Un Posto al Sole*, Stefano Sollima honed his directorial skills within the serial. Sollima, who would go on to direct *Romanzo criminale* and the first two seasons of *Gomorrah* – series that signalled the emergence of Italian high-end premium

drama – has frequently underscored the formative importance of his experience on *Un Posto al Sole*: 'It looked like taking a step backwards. In hindsight, I took a hundred steps ahead. I struggled, but I felt that TV was the medium of the future. I was right' (Marmiroli, 2018, my translation).

The structural importance of *Un Posto al Sole*, therefore, lies in the way it enabled industry professionals to harness their skills and creative resources with an orientation towards innovation and renewal. As Costanzo and Morandi put it, *Un Posto al Sole* enabled practitioners 'to use creatively, and with a drive towards novelty […], their specific modes of communication' (Costanzo and Morandi, 2003, p.14, as cited in Cardini, 2015, p.181, my translation). In this way, *Un Posto al Sole* laid the groundwork for the development – nearly two decades later – of contemporary Italian prestige drama.

Once again, throughout the protracted evolution towards the production of globally relevant high-end drama – a process culminating in the rise of contemporary transnational television – both the traditional cultural establishment and segments of the institutional system have tended to dismiss or impede the forms of innovation introduced by certain television works. This resistance, evident first during the transitional period of the mid-1970s and again in the mid-1990s, often manifested through the application of evaluative criteria rooted in high-cultural aesthetics, textual analysis, and broader "cultural" perspectives focused exclusively on the "finished work". Such approaches overlook the significance of production and consumption processes as sites of transformation. As Brancato (2012, pp. 42-43, my translation) observes, 'only by accessing this new interpretative mode is it possible to understand the effects of *Un Posto al Sole* on the overall economy of Italian television' . In the next section, I will examine the legacy of *Un Posto al Sole* in shaping work culture at the turn of the millennium and explore the transition to the new phase that begins in the late 2000s.

"The Shadow-line of Italian Drama": End of a Cycle and Need for Innovation at the Turn of the Millennium

Around 1998, the success of *Un Posto al Sole* led RAI management to consider extending the production model of long-running seriality to television series. After decades of transition and resistance, RAI appeared to recognise the necessity of adapting to the rapidly changing television landscape and broader societal shifts. Nevertheless, the investments made around the turn of the millennium did not reflect a genuine strategy of innovation or product-oriented research. This is evident in the numerous, largely unsuccessful, attempts to expand daytime serial production at the end of the decade. These initiatives faltered, in large part, due to RAI management's ongoing reluctance to fully embrace industrial writing practices. While the dawn of the new millennium in the United States was marked by the so-called "HBO narrative revolution" – the product of a system whose capacity for renewal was driven by bold innovation and creative freedom – Italy's production landscape remained focused on the two-part miniseries format, with only sporadic ventures into serial television. Notable

among these was *La Squadra* (2000-2007), a police series adapted from the English format *The Bill* and produced by the same team as *Un Posto al Sole*. The experience of *La Squadra* highlighted the limitations of an industry still struggling to create the conditions necessary for its own production – and creative – renewal. In particular, the initial attempt to apply the *Un Posto al Sole* production model wholesale to a television series format demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding the aesthetic and structural distinctions between serial and series. As Frezza (2012) notes, the failure to adapt the writing department to the specific demands of the television series genre revealed persistent gaps in expertise and flexibility. This prompted the production team to embark on a process of research and experimentation, seeking to fine-tune their approach to a new form of seriality. At a broader industry level, the fruits of these years of trial and error would eventually emerge through the Italian pay-TV sector, most notably with *Romanzo Criminale* (2008) and, above all, *Gomorrah* (2013).

To conclude, the words of screenwriter Gino Ventriglia – who, as recounted earlier, was the figure who welcomed the Grundy team to discuss the conception of *Un Posto al Sole* on 15 August 1994 – are particularly apt in capturing the sense of restlessness that pervaded the industry at yet another difficult juncture in the history of Italian drama production:

> The feeling is that we have reached the end of a cycle, and the consequent question is: given the current limits of the Italian audiovisual system, will we be able to find the creative, production and management energies to start a new cycle? Is Italian seriality able to renew itself and renew its relationship with the audience?
>
> (Ventriglia, 2009, p.27, my translation)

In articulating a problematic future, Ventriglia also voices the hope that Italian drama production might move beyond the limitations of its early years – in project conception, narrative ambition, and production methods – to meet the demands for quality and complexity posed by an increasingly sophisticated audience. This feeling of unease, shared by both practitioners and viewers, stemmed from a persistent gap in the system, one that would ultimately be addressed by Sky's arrival in the market.

The 'limits' to which Ventriglia refers are symptomatic of an entire television and institutional ecosystem which, even at the advent of contemporary premium drama (2008-2009), still saw broadcasters hesitant to undertake the kinds of bold, innovative investments required by more ambitious drama production. Today, however, the scenario has evolved: new policy measures, changing relationships between networks and independent producers, a redefined role for the public broadcaster, novel business models, updated production practices, and new professional skills have all contributed to overcoming these structural barriers. This research project aims to analyse the current landscape in order to understand how and why the production of high-end drama for global audiences is becoming a core business of the Italian television system, how this development engages with wider discourses of innovation, and how it redefines the public broadcaster's mission in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a historical account of the institutional, cultural, and structural factors that contributed to the delayed emergence of a television industry capable of producing high-end drama in Italy. By focusing on two pivotal case studies – one a mid-1970s miniseries, the other a mid-1990s social-realist drama – situated within a broader historical overview, I have sought to illustrate both the persistent limits that led to the long-standing production inertia of the public broadcaster and the exceptional efforts that signalled possibilities for renewal. This period of inertia, extending through the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, stands in stark contrast to the concurrent transformation of long-format seriality in the United States, where narrative and production models underwent rapid innovation.

Three principal factors account for this lag. First, an "endogenous" fragility of the Italian cultural industry, marked by a prevailing "cottage" production philosophy that hindered the shift towards industrialisation. Second, a pervasive cultural conservatism among the national elite, particularly within the circles shaped by auteur cinema, which reinforced resistance to change. Third, a chronic reluctance among broadcasters to invest in forms of seriality that, while potentially profitable, were also perceived as inherently risky.

The contemporary period, which constitutes the primary focus of this research project, marks a decisive overcoming of these barriers and the development of high-end drama for global audiences. The story traced here – set against the backdrop of a more conventional historical narrative – is one of exceptions, ruptures, and detours, where moments of crisis catalysed new possibilities for innovation. It is a story that unfolds in the fractures generated by the clash of opposing institutional and cultural forces: a story of struggle, adaptation, and resilience. This narrative now enters a new chapter, as the rise of "high-end" drama comes to define both the current identity and the core business of the Italian television system in the global era.

Chapter 2

The 'Transnational' as Operational Concept for Understanding RAI's Coproduced High-end Drama, 2012-2019: *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose* as Transnational Media Projects

Introduction

In the era of US-originated "high-end" television drama, transnational coproductions have become a pivotal asset for broadcasters, production companies, and streaming platforms, enabling them to redefine their strategies and identities. While coproduction is increasingly recognised as the 'new normal for high-end television drama' (Hilmes, 2014, p.1), what remains under-explored in media industry research is the significance of the "transnational" in shaping high-end drama at multiple levels. Specifically, there is a lack of inquiry into how the transnational dimension influences content, industry dynamics – spanning creative work, distribution, branding, and reception – and institutional networks and partnerships. Borrowing a phrase from Johnson and Fickers (2012, p.1), 'going transnational is in', a statement that underscores the need for terminological and conceptual clarity in understanding the underlying reasons for this media trend. The concept of transnational has been applied in various ways within cultural and media analysis, often used interchangeably to address issues and processes associated with globalisation, particularly the movement of people and goods across national boundaries.

This chapter explores how and why the transnational, both as a conceptual and operational framework, pertains to the transnational media projects that form the backbone of the internationalisation strategy of the Italian public service broadcaster RAI between 2012 and 2019, following the appointment of Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta as the new Head of RAI Fiction. Three key transnational drama projects define this pivotal period for RAI: *Medici* (2016-2019), *My Brilliant Friend* (2018-2024), and *The Name of the Rose* (2019). These coproductions have facilitated a range of 'mediated cultural encounters', particularly in institutional and creative contexts, 'creating relatively stable transnational networks of production and distribution' and fostering 'encounters across borders between producers, directors, and screenwriters, leading to diverse forms of transnational narratives'

(Bondebjerg et al., 2017, p.5). Drawing on relevant literature from media studies, particularly media industry studies, the sociology of media, and broader cultural studies, this chapter examines the meanings and implications of the transnational as both an operational term and a conceptual tool, based on interview-based research into RAI's coproduced television dramas of the 2010s. The chapter seeks to address the central questions: What makes RAI's coproduced dramas "transnational" as media projects, and how does their transnational nature resonate across the industry, at various levels and from multiple perspectives?

Before delving into the chapter, it is important to clarify that my inquiry into the transnational is focused on the development phases of the selected dramas. This focus is grounded in the fact that the interview data was gathered from the development context, and the case studies are both chronologically recent and limited in terms of available data. As such, this chapter examines the transnational from the perspective of development, without extending into reception analysis, which is outside the scope of this work. In defining the scope of this chapter within the broader thesis, this premise also invites future research in two directions: firstly, exploring the transnational in terms of distribution, branding, and reception of these case studies; and secondly, investigating how the transnational, as a new mode of thinking about and producing high-end television drama for RAI and its national partners, may be relevant to other national production cultures. Some fundamental questions guide the discussion: What distinctive features define the transnational as a descriptor of high-end television drama? What are the implications and effects of these 'qualities' on the various stakeholders, dynamics, and broader aspects of the television drama industry, particularly within specific national contexts? In this regard, are these attributes universally applicable – that is, relevant and adaptable across all national contexts and dimensions of high-end television drama, including production, distribution, and reception?

To begin addressing these questions, I will first explore how etymological insights can inform the discussion of the transnational as a transformative process. I will then turn to media scholarship, outlining key conceptualisations to frame my analysis primarily within a sociology of media perspective, supported by relevant media theories on the transnational and coproduction. Finally, I will contextualise my focus on individuals within interviews, drawing on recent media industry scholarship that suggests avenues for future research. In doing so, I will argue that the transnational serves as a valuable conceptual tool, as reflected in the interviews related to the three case studies of this research.

'Trans-' as in 'Transnational': Etymological Insights for Media Uses

In their introduction to *Transatlantic Television Drama* (2019), Hills et al. examine the term 'transnational' to explore how its etymology can contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept,

arguing that its frequent misuse within the field has obscured analytical precision and therefore necessitates a more carefully grounded discussion, which they introduce as follows:

> The term "transnational" has been used to designate a wide variety of phenomena, from transnational corporations to transnational flows of people, money, ideas and media. Most uses position it in contradistinction both to the "international" and the "global" and note that it implies "going beyond" the nation and the national in some way, while still drawing on national identity for at least part of its coherence.
>
> (Hills et al., 2019, p.3)

Zooming in on the prefix 'trans-', they provide an entry point into the analysis through the *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, which highlights the core problem of defining the term 'transnational', stating that:

> […] the purpose of this entry is to capture the historical process of defining 'transnational', 'transnationalism' and other related words. It consequently advises against a preliminary definition. From their first known uses, they have evolved in an uneven and non-linear way into buzz-words that are now ubiquitous in academic and public discussion.
>
> (Iriye and Saunier, 2009, p.1047)

The permeability of the term and its semantic field are closely linked to its historical trajectory, beginning in a specific geopolitical context – post-World War I America – and extending across various fields of knowledge. It started with migration studies and has since influenced numerous interdisciplinary areas, including media studies. While the course of this journey is broad and complex, and not always directly relevant to understanding the term's significance in the context of high-end drama production, it is valuable to focus on the relationship between the original appearance of the term 'transnational' and the media analysis here.

The term 'transnational' was coined by writer Randolph Bourne and first appeared in 1916 in the magazine *The Atlantic*, within the context of a call for a more cosmopolitan vision of America, set against a historical backdrop of ethnic antagonisms across the Atlantic as a result of World War I (Hills et al., 2019). Bourne's proto-term, 'transnationality', envisioned America's role as the leader of a new 'cosmopolitan enterprise' – the construction of 'a *transnationality*, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors' – grounded on a 'cosmopolitan interchange [...] in spite of all war and national exclusiveness' (Bourne, 1916, as cited in Hills et al., 2019, italics mine). Two key points emerge from this proto-term that demonstrate its continued partial relevance to our analysis. The first is the cosmopolitan character of transnationality – the fundamental idea of

constructing a community in the broadest sense of cosmopolitanism. The sense of a transnational community of media players surrounding high-end television drama is crucial within a sociology of media approach. I will return to this point in the following section, where I will focus the conceptual discussion within media studies. The second relevant aspect of Bourne's original concept of 'transnationality' is the explicit reference to the idea of 'enterprise', which implies the co-creation of a project – a shared endeavour linked to the concept of a cosmopolitan community. The construction of such a community, united by a shared endeavour across and beyond national borders, necessitates a profound transformation across all aspects of the industry and, consequently, among all the players within that industry.

In this regard, one aspect of etymological analysis proves valuable in making sense of the transnational in relation to high-end drama in unexpected ways, offering a thread that directly leads to the conceptual framework at the core of this chapter. The etymological element in question is the prefix 'trans-', which reveals the resources and affordances of the transnational as a process. From a sociology of media perspective, the transnational process – fundamentally rooted in relational dynamics – exhibits inherent features such as transience, transformation, and transfer (unsurprisingly, all of these words share the same prefix), as evidenced by the findings of this research. This process is also characterised by intrinsic tensions between 'before and after' for both RAI and the production companies it partners with, as well as for the professional and personal lives of the individuals involved. It encompasses the transfiguration of previous identities, business practices, creative methods, and partnerships, alongside the contrasting forces between the realms of reality and imagination (and related aspirations) within the producers' minds. The perspective, therefore, is reframed, focusing on coproductions from within, rather than from an external viewpoint, as processes and relationships with their own specificities and variations (clearly identifiable within broader trends and patterns), before considering how the industry is reflected in the content. This perspective will also inform the following chapters, where interview-based research will be integrated with textual analysis.

A close yet brief examination of the prefix allows us to legitimise the concept as applied to RAI's selected coproductions, transforming the term from a mere descriptor into an inherent feature of high-end drama, as evidenced by the case studies analysed here. Building on Hilmes's argument (2012) for the inherent transnationality of broadcasting, particularly from an economic perspective, I argue that high-end drama coproduction inherently possesses a transnational character. This argument is primarily grounded in a sociological perspective but also extends its implications across the broader landscape of the industry.

Etymologically, the term 'transnational' is a compound word, formed from the prefix 'trans-' and the root 'national'. The prefix 'trans-' carries two fundamental meanings: one spatial, signifying 'across or over, […] through, to the other side of'; and the other, more temporal or moral, suggesting a limit within these spheres, meaning 'on the other side of' or 'beyond' (Oxford Latin Dictionary, 2012). As an active prefix in its spatial sense, 'trans-' denotes movement, a forward motion that implies a

radical shift from one condition to another. There is an inherent sense of novelty – and often innovation – in the original meaning of this word-forming element. It is no coincidence that terms such as 'transfigure', 'transform', or 'transfer' – all relevant to the development processes analysed in this research – carry the profound connotation of substantial change, accompanied by processes of becoming, transition, and adaptation. Such processes entail both tangible and intangible aspects of change, which are embedded in the intrinsic meanings of 'trans-'. These aspects will be examined in the analysis of how the "transnational-as-change" manifests in various ways across the case studies, providing a multifaceted picture of the transnational 'on the ground'.

The intangible aspects of the process of becoming and change, within the context of RAI's coproductions, relate to both relational dynamics – such as shared creative work and business negotiations – and more individual ones, such as the transfiguration of high-level producers' roles, which are shaped by identity-related mechanisms and the performative demands often imposed by complex negotiating circumstances. Within these "impalpable" aspects of the "transnational becoming", part of the profound meaning of 'trans-' is clearly manifested. In contrast, the more tangible and perceptible aspects of RAI-driven transnational change, as conveyed by the 'trans-' prefix, include spatial rearrangements of production spaces (which have mutual effects on the philosophy and brand identity of some of the production companies analysed here); shared creative spaces across two national borders (such as a writers' room); and, perhaps most tangibly, the endeavour to establish and share a cinematic television set at Cinecittà, underpinned by high production values, as described by the interviewee-producer.

As reflected in the interview data, both the intangible elements of transnational work – affecting individuals and companies – and the more tangible aspects, most of which relate to the new spatiality of such work, are encapsulated in the prefix 'trans-': '"trans-" means "beyond", "through", and marks a shift or change' (Armbrecht, 2013, p.12), embodying tangible and intangible forward movements.
To summarise, the cosmopolitan notion of communities across borders and countries, united by a common enterprise, coupled with the process of becoming and substantial change inherent in the prefix 'trans-', introduces another key factor underlying the concept of the transnational: the idea of exchange and its related implications in terms of relational dynamics. This leads us directly to the next section, where we will explore discussions of the transnational in media analysis.

The 'Transnational' in Media Analysis: Key Conceptualisations and Uses Relating to RAI-led Coproductions

In concluding the previous section, I highlighted the idea of exchange, along with the related concepts of flows and influences, as crucial for bridging various broader theoretical insights with the meanings

and uses of the term in media analysis. In this context, Adrien Athique (2016), in his discussion of transnational cultures in relation to transnational audiences, provides an overview of the main interpretations of 'transnationalism'. He draws on Steven Vertovec (1999, as cited in Athique, 2016), who defines it as 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states'.

Rooted in migration theory as the foundation of all transnationalism theory, this definition highlights two essential elements for conceptualising the term 'transnational' in a way that is relevant to the high-end drama industry: 'interactions' and 'across the borders'. Shifting the discourse to a broader cultural level, Athique builds on Vertovec's framework to identify the 'symptoms' of transnational cultures: 'global connectivity and a greater awareness of cultural diversity', as well as 'a sense of place and a relative perception of location […] where media mobility meets human mobility' (Athique, 2016, pp. 5-6). Technological determinism, global connectivity, and mobility are the fundamental concepts underlying global theory in the 1990s, opening avenues for research into new world orders. This period is described as the first transnational shift in media history, positioning the concept of the transnational at the core of theories of modernity and globalisation:

> the concept may actually perform double duty as part of the theoretical arsenal with which we approach the world system structures, but also as an element in a less developed enterprise, namely the analysis of the everyday networks and patterns of social relationships that emerge in and around those structures.
>
> (Portes, 1998, as cited in Vertovec, 2009)

As Portes states, the transnational lends itself to multiple applications, influencing both new world orders and everyday practices. It also indirectly underscores the importance of examining how social relationships inhabit the transnational and translate it into practices. Hills et al. (2019, p.4) further highlight the influence of socio-cultural perspectives on media analysis: 'in media studies, "transnational" has most often been used in the sociocultural sense to denote flows of influence, dispersion of media through technology, and trade in textual formats and forms'.

Adopting a sociological approach to media studies, Giselinde Kuipers (2011) examines the formation of a transnational television field, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of the 'field of cultural production'. She conceptualises this field as inherently marked by a fundamental tension between industry players (such as producers and buyers) and those responsible for legitimating these players, whether institutions or individuals. Against the backdrop of what Kuipers (2011, p.542) describes as a 'power struggle [for] recognition […], cultural consecration and legitimation', drawing on global theory, she explains cultural globalisation as the process by which national cultural fields yield power to transnational networks and institutions. This shift has resulted in increasingly expansive transnational arenas capable of "engulfing" the exchange of people, commodities, and even creativity. While this

power struggle remains relevant, the terms and conditions of this struggle have partially changed in the context of transnational television, particularly regarding commodities such as high-end drama.

Contemporary transnational coproductions demonstrate the frequent overturning of traditional cultural imperialism logics, along with their geographies and power dynamics. These have been replaced by a 'struggle over standards', where 'quality and legitimacy, at times, [supersede] moneymaking and market shares'. As Kuipers (2011, p.543) concludes, the 'tension between culture and economy increasingly plays out on the transnational level'. The criteria defining the rules of the contemporary transnational battlefield have evolved, and the three coproductions forming the evidentiary base of this research, through their development stories, clearly demonstrate that transnational arenas are constantly redefined and reshaped, as we will explore in the following chapters.

What is crucial here is understanding the new conception of the transnational in relation to power dynamics. By challenging the established notion of the 'cultural field', particularly the 'national cultural field', as the origin of a 'transnational television field', Kuipers brings a new sense of concreteness to the transnational, with significant implications for media analysis, particularly in terms of production. The transnational thus becomes more than a theoretical construct: it is a tangible arena where television drama unfolds, redefines, renegotiates, and reconfigures itself in relation to industry players and their mutual interactions, content-related criteria, institutional frameworks, and more. Ultimately, by using the term 'transnational arenas' and describing these as 'fields' for various dynamics based on reconfigured logics, Kuipers circumscribes the conceptual scope and operational sphere of the transnational, enabling us to view it not merely as an abstract concept but as an operational field.

This perspective is fundamentally important for the analysis of RAI-led coproductions in the following chapters. Kuipers will again provide a useful lens to examine how and why industry players operate on the ground, and in doing so, redefine the industry. These transnational professionals create transnational practices and quality standards, which they then diffuse into national cultural fields. As argued by Hilmes (2012), the transnational – acting as both a stimulus and aspiration, as well as a deterrent and aversion (always counterbalancing the national) – plays a significant role in the construction of the national, such that it may be considered immanent to the latter. This is particularly evident in the cultural histories of the US and the UK, where neither can be fully understood outside the framework of the continuous flow of exchanges and mutual influences between the two, with broadcasting serving as a prime example of this inherently transnational relationship. As Lobato (2019, p.41) observes in his discussion of transnational internet-distributed television: 'creatures of national government, these were transnational media from the point of view of distribution'.

It is precisely because the transnational is shaped by the national and, conversely, because the national nurtures the transnational, that we must recognise that transcending the national in media production (and in other media areas, such as reception) does not entail overcoming it. Rather, it signifies passing through it, towards transformation:

> the term "transnational" designates the crossing, not the disappearance, of national and (supposedly national) cultural boundaries. Boundaries still matter, but in transcultural research, the transnational aspect also matters and needs to be explored to uncover not only what may be shared across borders but also what may be new or may thus far have remained invisible about emerging transnational media cultures (cf. Aksoy and Robins 2008).
>
> (Esser et al. 2016, p.298)

The operational dimension of the transnational – evident within 'the tribe' of transnational professionals across borders, with their influences and mediations (Kuipers, 2012) – and, more importantly, the idea that the transnationality of high-end television does not exclusively manifest as 'in-betweenness' as the sole dimension for understanding the transnational, but also as the discovery of new media cultures, together lead us to refine the theoretical analysis. These perspectives guide us towards examining how and why RAI's selected coproductions illustrate what I would describe as 'field-based transnationality'.

The Transnational "on the Ground": Understanding, Embodying and Owning the Transnational in *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose*

This final and core section aims to demonstrate the relevance and applicability of the conceptualisations discussed in the chapter to the case studies of this research: *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose*. Through the perspectives of industry producers – Luisa Cotta Ramosino (*Medici*), Fania Petrocchi (*Medici*), Lorenzo Mieli (*My Brilliant Friend*), and Matteo Levi (*The Name of the Rose*) – I will explore how the transnational is perceived, experienced, understood, and enacted, as well as how it is discussed as metadiscourse within the field, where concepts are integrated into practices. Since this section focuses on how industry professionals and their practices incorporate and represent the transnational in the high-end drama business, I will first explain why this chapter is grounded in in-depth qualitative interviews, primarily analysed through a sociological and broadly cultural lens. Theoretical reflection on the developments within media industry studies is central to my research. In this regard, focusing on individuals and roles within the media industries has guided my approach since the outset of this project and has significantly shaped the structure of my interviews.

Drawing on media industry studies, and particularly on the growing attention to individuals and professional roles within production cultures, Herbert et al. (2020, 31, 33) argue that 'the emphasis on key individuals shapes our view of the creative side of the media industries as well', a position that, as they further contend, calls for scholars 'to move beyond descriptive case studies and connect specific

individuals and/or roles to larger questions and concerns in media industry studies writ large'. Within this broader context, applied to the high-end drama industry, key concerns include understanding the diverse roles and tasks individuals undertake within the framework of complex, multifaceted processes. It also involves exploring how individuals navigate the limitations inherent in this particular industry and beyond, as well as examining the effects of these mediations (Herbert et al., 2020).

In light of this, in the following chapters, I will examine professionals who, while undoubtedly holding executive or producer roles, have provided interview material as 'individuals' within the media industry context defined by Lotz. While they occupy mid- to high-level positions, the interview data reveal that viewing them as 'individuals' in the industry context opens valuable insights into 'the tasks and negotiation of agency available to those who produce and circulate cultural goods' (Herbert et al., 2020, p.33). There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics surrounding high-end content, where individual tasks have been reconfigured and 'established' roles transformed. In the case of high-level producers and their public personas, examining 'their trajectories within the media industries reveals their singular influence, but also maps the broader economic, political, and socio-cultural dynamics that both enable and curtail their agency' (Herbert et al., 2020, p.32), illustrating their 'circumscribed agency' (Havens and Lotz, 2014, as cited in Herbert et al., 2020, p.32).

In conceptualising the methodological value of interviews, my approach aligns closely with Grainge and Johnson's account of interview-based fieldwork with professionals from the promotional industries, which mirrors my own experience with interviewees in the high-end drama sector; as they note, interview transcripts offered far more than 'scripted performances' (Caldwell 2009a: 172), instead 'offering a viewpoint, and form of discourse, beyond that available in corporate materials and the trade press (Grainge and Johnson, 2015, p.10). Grainge and Johnson also emphasise the importance of combining interviews with textual analysis (which will similarly be part of my evidentiary base). However, drawing on their work, what is particularly relevant here is that the interviews conducted for this research also 'afforded rich insight into the practices, vocabularies, and self-theorisations of […] work, in particular the challenges and opportunities that executives at leading companies perceived as key' (Grainge and Johnson, 2015, p.10) in the 2010s.

To initiate this investigation, my entry point into the sphere of individuals and roles within the specific media industry of high-end scripted content is by examining how the interviewed professionals relate to the "transnational" understood as both the conceptual and operational framework of their work. This focus raises a series of interrelated questions that structure the analysis which follows. Was the transnational discussed during the interviews, and if so, in what terms? What kinds of reactions did it provoke, and what discussions did it generate? Was there a common thread across the various discussions regarding transnationalisation? If not, what distinguishes these contributions, and how can these differences be related to each interviewee's specific roles, tasks, and organisations (e.g., in terms of legal status – public vs. private, or independent vs. semi-independent production companies – or company philosophy, portfolio, brand identity, and positioning within the wider industry)? How do

these dynamics shape each individual's influence and bargaining power within the industry? How is agency transformed within the contemporary transnational high-end television industry, and why? To what extent can this transformation be attributed to issues of power and influence, as opposed to economic, political, or socio-cultural dynamics? Furthermore, what does 'influence' mean in the transnational industrial sphere? Finally, considering how agency reverberates across all aspects of the industry, how and why does this new form of agency impact not only development but also the circulation, promotion, and reception of content? While all of these questions, along with others, require further articulation and closer examination in the following chapters, some are addressed within this chapter, thereby bridging discussions on how the transnational has been variably incorporated into the interviews with broader issues and dynamics related to contemporary media industries.

The transnational, as a working framework based on collaborative efforts and foundational criteria, is concerned with specific aspects of the rapidly evolving television drama production culture at the global level. Recent scholarship on transnational European television drama, particularly from a sociology of media perspective, is pivotal to my analysis. This body of work argues that 'the rise of creative collaboration and co-production in Europe has resulted in many different kinds of cultural encounters on several different levels', and theorises 'mediated cultural encounters' as the key pillars of coproduction, with shared creativity as the primary practice in transnational high-end drama (Bondebjerg et al., 2018, p.5). Four categories of such cultural encounters have been identified: 'cultural policy and media policy', 'co-production', 'creative encounters', and 'reception'. In this final section, I will focus on two of these categories – 'co-production' and 'creative encounters' – as the key sites where my interviewees have encountered the transnational. Specifically, 'co-production' refers to 'institutional forms of production and distribution networks between broadcasters and other companies, often creating rather stable transnational networks of production and distribution', while 'creative encounters' are described as occurring 'across borders between producers, directors, and screenwriters, leading to different forms of transnational narratives' (Bondebjerg et al., 2018, p.5).

This theoretical approach to the analysis of transnational drama, grounded in the sociology of media and particularly from a creative industries perspective, forms the backbone of this research. The first reason for this is that the transformations brought about by transnational drama production have had a significant impact on the wider creative industries surrounding it. In the context analysed here, RAI, like most European public broadcasters, is the most important creative industry in the country. More interestingly, the broader creative engine set in motion around RAI-led coproductions deserves recognition for being, in terms of value and scope, equivalent to the other main pillars of such endeavours. I refer here to the various craftsmen – skilled professionals whose expertise contributed to the three dramas studied in this research. For instance, how would the creative imagination of Frank Spotnitz and his writers' room at Big Light have materialised without the music of composer Paolo Buonvino for *Medici*, or the work of multi-award-winning set designer Francesco Frigeri and costume designer Alessandro Lai? How cinematic would *The Name of the Rose* have been without the work of

set designer Frigeri again, and costume designer Maurizio Millenotti? Or the monumental film set built by Giancarlo Basili for *My Brilliant Friend*? While these names and their portfolios underscore the scale of the projects – particularly from a coproduction perspective, where high-profile names play an important role in the negotiation processes between transnational partners – it is the various craftsmen working alongside these names who collectively demonstrate the importance of examining the relevance of these enterprises to the creative industries of a country.

The second reason for adopting a sociology of media approach, which focuses on the idea of 'encounters' (qualified as 'mediated' and 'cultural'), is that it allows for a comprehensive examination of the different aspects of transnational drama from a relational perspective. This opens the door to more nuanced research into the specificities of coproductions and lends itself to analysis not only at the macro level, but also at the meso and micro levels. By investigating how processes have developed based on the winding complexities of relations – whether between transnational partners, intra-national ones (as might be the case with RAI and a national production company), or even within the same company – it becomes possible to understand the factors that have shaped such processes and their underlying conditions. Furthermore, this approach allows for an exploration of the deeper effects of these relationships at multiple levels: individual (for each industry professional), community (for a specific production company), and national (for the Italian television industry as a whole).

My research, informed by interview material (which will be combined with textual analysis), illustrates how the relational aspect of transnational drama production is not only inherent to the concept of the transnational but also serves as an effective research tool. The term itself carries a 'built-in' investigative key, embedded in the ideas of 'encounters' and relations as analytical lenses, enabling the collection of qualitative data that has so far been under-explored in this industry. The following chapter will explore in-depth the links between relations and processes, and then between processes and content, ultimately examining the special connection between relations and content within the specific context of RAI's high-end drama.

Against this backdrop, returning to the four main forms of 'cultural encounter' identified by Bondebjerg et al. (2018) in their transnational theory, my analysis here focuses on the key loci of the sense and idea of the transnational, as explicitly or implicitly addressed in the interviews. These will reveal which aspects of development have been most affected by the transnational mode: from creative work for RAI's producer of *Medici*, to professional identity for *Medici*'s creative director at Lux Vide; from high production values in relation to professional identity and company philosophy for 11 Marzo Productions within *The Name of the Rose*, to the metadiscourse of "transnational" as a production mode versus 'global' as embodied practice by the streaming giants of internet-distributed television. The spatial configurations of the transnational also emerge in various ways as a common thread across the interviews.

Specifically, in the case of Lux Vide, the Italian independent producers of *Medici*, the transnational dimension that emerges from the perspective of creative producer Luisa Cotta Ramosino is linked to two significant changes in their established mode of production. The first is the introduction

of a novelty factor, which represents the core of a new production approach for the company: the adoption of an American-style writers' room. The second change, a direct consequence of this shift, is that this creative process is now physically located elsewhere. As Cotta Ramosino explains in her interview:

> From the *writers' room* point of view […] Frank Spotnitz and Nicholas Meyer, authors and creators of the series, worked on the initial pitch and pilot. And Nicholas worked during the first weeks of the writers' room in London. Then he left the project and Frank remained to manage the writers room with his development manager. They also involved a story editor and a junior staff member. I visited their writers' room several times and met up with Frank, who was not always there, and more regularly with the head of development. There were also another two junior staff members as well as the writers […] *part of the development was done outside, in London, in another place* [...] *So it was important to understand how to work in this way, which was new for us*.
>
> Tinny Andreatta [Head of RAI Fiction] is a very smart woman […] So she immediately realised that this was *an opportunity to find something new, beyond RAI*. In any case, *they [RAI] immediately accepted having foreign writers*. [...] But one thing is to work with a foreigner and then we basically do everything here: translating and everything else […]
>
> But in this case, *it meant to deal with a fixed creative structure that was somewhere else. This was something to totally develop.*
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

The physical delocalisation of the core of creative work – or, more accurately, the division of work between partners with complementary tasks – is perceived as one of the fundamental aspects of the transition from the working culture behind Italian international coproductions prior to the 2010s to a transnational production culture. The development of *Medici* perfectly illustrates a key feature of this transition: in previous international coproduction models, the writers' room would not be located 'somewhere else'. Instead, each national partner would manage creativity at the national level, with all national contributions assembled in a sort of juxtaposed manner. The result of this coproduction mode is often referred to as 'Europudding'. In contrast, work coproduced in a transnational mode occupies a completely different socio-spatial dimension from the international coproduction model, such as RAI's coproductions with foreign partners aimed at foreign markets during the previous era of high-end drama.

Underlying the transnational mode of production is the concept of 'trans-ferability', literally meaning 'the ability to transfer'. It is no coincidence that this term shares the same prefix 'trans-' as the conceptual focus of this chapter. Derived from the Latin *trans-ferre*, it conveys the idea of 'bringing

something across somewhere' or 'carrying something from one place to another'. Indeed, transnational coproductions are endeavours that involve not only physical and material mobility but also cultural and more intangible "transfers". As Luisa Cotta Ramosino illustrated, these transfers encompass several key aspects: sharing creativity with a writers' room located 'somewhere else' (across national borders); incorporating "the other" – including other practices, worldviews, organisational structures, and so on – into both the individual and the company; and betting on oneself in terms of surpassing one's own limits, both as a producer and as a national broadcaster, 'an opportunity to find something that could go beyond RAI', among other forms of "transfer".

The transnational, in this context, is conceptualised 'as a potential transformative moment, a moment of a localised, everyday subject within a particular social and cultural framework meeting 'the other'' (Bondebjerg et al., 2015, p.11). It opens up an entire imaginary of possibilities beyond the everyday, which is often perceived as confined to or restricted by national cultural boundaries. This imaginary is mental, physical, and broadly cultural simultaneously: the transnational is identified with any space that transcends the self and the everyday to encounter the "other", where the "other" is understood as being both external and internal, offering the possibility of discovering a new self – such as, for example, as a producer. The encounter with "the other" and the idea of transfer is illustrated through the dynamics of shared creative work within the writers' room of *Medici*, particularly in relation to the negotiation of content (Hilmes, 2014).

RAI's executive producer, Fania Petrocchi, during the interview, highlighted the challenge of 'mediating' the treatment of historical materials related to the Renaissance, which serves as the historical backdrop of the series. Reflecting on her visits to Big Light in London (with Cotta Ramosino), where *Medici*'s writers' room was physically located, she explained the difficulty of this process in the following terms:

> Therefore, in order to *share and transfer the historical knowledge* – not the events, but rather how they were dressed, why they used that type of ink, how they ate […] etc – we had to put our personal expertise into play. And then *we tried to transfer it*, through (let's say) face-to-face meetings and notes, to *an editorial team* that was absolutely *creative , modern, transnational* (as you[6] would say), but which, on a historical level, tended, again, to fall into nineteenth-century literary models and schemes.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

On the other side of the writers' room, Lucy Rawlinson, script editor for *Medici* at Big Light, also addresses the issue of what working transnationally means and the potential effects of the transnational mode. As she explained in the interview:

> I think having lots of people involved, I think, can always be a challenge because there's different opinions, always. And I think specifically about *Medici*. This isn't our history,

> and it isn't our national public broadcaster. So, we have to be very respectful of the fact that this… you know, although we've been… Lux Vide and RAI have come to us as a sort of the 'creative engine' to script the show.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019)

While the broader creative process will be examined in the following chapters, what should be emphasised here in relation to how the transnational is perceived and communicated across different production cultures – and potentially different worldviews, as the treatment of national histories can reveal – is that the transnational mode of production is understood to be associated with specific aesthetics and narrative standards that may challenge historical accuracy. This is reflected in the approach of Fania Petrocchi, RAI's executive producer for *Medici*. The transnational, in this context, is framed in terms of creative skills and an awareness of the standards required by high-end television, rather than cultural competence on a specific topic. This highlights that the transnational remains a relatively new concept for some production cultures. Within this complex process of assimilation and resistance, it is ultimately appropriated in varying ways by different transnational partners.

Thus, coproduced content presents both challenges and opportunities, with the transnational serving as the key to both. While the transnational allows industry players to step beyond their "comfort zones", exploring new territories and engaging in self-reflection, it also presents significant challenges, such as the spatial distance between key sites of creativity located in two different countries (with the writers' room based in only one) and the difficulties in transferring dynamic processes, such as editorial meetings. The issue of editorial meetings and the exchange of notes between RAI, Lux Vide, and Big Light will be explored in greater depth in the following chapters.

For Luisa Cotta Ramosino (2019), the spatial challenges of 'having the writing somewhere else' have transformed her role, both in form and substance. As creative director, she perceives the transnational in two distinct ways, differing from RAI's producer. Firstly, the transnational takes shape within the clash between contrasting forces, making it an opportunity for innovation. The cultural tensions over content, intensified by physical distance, create a unique collaborative framework for culturally diverse content, which cannot simply be 'juxtaposed' as it was in the international coproductions of previous decades. It must be mediated and reconciled, addressing both cultural diversity and the challenges posed by physical distance. Secondly, in self-reflexive terms, Cotta Ramosino views the transnational as a transformative framework: its dynamics inevitably affect the identities of the various professionals involved.

This is also a key point raised in my interview with Lorenzo Mieli, which illustrates how differently the concept of the transnational is understood and appropriated by producers. Former CEO

[6] Here, 'you' refers to the interviewer, who had previously outlined the research focus on transnational television drama.

of Fremantle Italy, co-founder of the production company Wildside, and founder of the recent production firm The Apartment, Mieli is the producer of *My Brilliant Friend*[7]. For Mieli, the transnational manifests at two distinct levels and within two key media discourses: production cultures, on the one hand, and business and financial models, particularly as they relate to the crucial issue of intellectual property. In the context of production culture, Mieli locates the transnational in the transition between the national and its overcoming. This generative phase has the potential to push boundaries so far as to create new business models, as exemplified by *My Brilliant Friend*, the first foreign-language drama, subtitled in the original language, to be aired on American mainstream television during prime time.

Importantly, Mieli also connects his understanding of the transnational to the crucial issue of copyrights, particularly in relation to the rise of streaming giants. This perspective emerges through a contrast with how he personally experiences and engages with the global:

> I think [the partnership model of *My Brilliant Friend*] will have a short life, alas, or at least cyclically short, because what is happening at the moment is that first Netflix, then Amazon, then Apple, and now even Warner with HBO will go global doing its OTT, and Disney will go global doing its OTT… So, *the truly global model – not transnational – that is to say, "all rights forever"* means that they will tell you: 'No problem, I finance everything, because I'm in France, Italy, Spain, etc.' But there will be an attempt, which we are already seeing… there will be two types of products. One, the jewel in the crown: you have to work with Cuarón, Scorsese, etc. (clearly, I cannot tell Scorsese I'll take creative control over the product!); two, as for everything that is not flagship, which is 90% of the overall production, we will be treated as executive producers.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Thus, for Mieli, the transnational is associated with a mode of production that allows space for new business models, creating opportunities for negotiation. In contrast, the global – epitomised by the rise of internet-distributed television players, such as streaming OTTs – represents a dimension that, while still largely unknown, will have significant consequences for the industry, particularly around the issue of ownership. This shift will affect independent producers not only on a financial level but also in terms of their brand identities.

Along similar lines, the broad question of identity – understood both as the producer's identity in their role and the "identity" of coproduced content – lies at the core of Matteo Levi's understanding of the transnational in relation to his experience as the producer of *The Name of the Rose*. What can be

[7] Lorenzo Mieli is also producer of *The Young Pope* and *The New Pope*, although these are not RAI's coproduced dramas.

inferred about the transnational from interviewing him aligns with a discourse of assimilation and resistance, much like Mieli's perspective:

> I have always thought that *The Name of the Rose* should be an Italian project, *with a great international contribution*, but made in Italy. In short, that it would also contribute to the development of the Italian drama industry. And this was a cornerstone for me along this journey. If you throw yourself into a project with a pre-package which includes a great [American] director, etc., *the producer becomes of secondary importance*. In short, he nearly has no right to have its say. Therefore, *I fought a resistance battle about this*, and then I went on with the early development phase on my own.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

For Levi, the transnational takes shape as a space of business confrontation. Although his perspective becomes clearer in the chapter on shifting practices within development (Chapter 3), what stands out from his words is a mixed sense of the transnational – one that views the concept of 'mediated cultural encounter' from sociological theory as an opportunity to reinforce the national, at least on a cultural level. In the interview, Levi also emphasises the importance of selecting a European director rather than an American one, to ensure that the director could interpret the novel through a European 'eye', given that the novel is quintessentially a masterpiece of European culture. For the producer, the transnational is also reflected in his assimilation of high-end aesthetic standards and the filmmaking process that underpins cinematic effects never seen before: 'I have to say I was deeply impressed, seeing things I thought I'd never see on a film set' (Levi, 2019, my translation). Undoubtedly, despite the tensions and concerns, and the awareness of how the transnational differs from the international mode, for Levi, the transnational represents a turning point in the producer's awareness of his new role within a broader context. As he acknowledged during the interview, he himself emerged from this experience transformed, further reinforcing a common thread across the interviews: that the transnational is not only a set of specific criteria and features for coproduction, but also an operational tool for fostering innovation and change at various levels, beginning with the act of 'going beyond' the known.

Thinking transnationally, as Hilmes (2012) illustrates through the long-standing Anglo-American axis, is inherent to broadcasting, as the transnational, in this context, is:

> constituted both by the demands of the nation and the equally compelling impulse to go beyond, to provide a conduit to speak to other nations and to let other influences to stream into the national space. These two capacities operate in considerable tension. Transnational elements in the broadcasting's cultural project were (and are) resisted

and denied as often as they are acknowledged and encouraged.

(Hilmes, 2012, p.2)

'Impulse to go beyond', 'tension', 'resisted and denied [while] acknowledged and encouraged': the transnationality of broadcasting functions both as a propeller and a shock absorber, simultaneously responding to a wide range of forces. In this way, it can be viewed as the *raison d'être* of broadcasting, perhaps even the essential condition for its survival. Undeniably, this inherent feature, with its mechanism and its very physics – action and reaction – produces change: it is 'trans-formative', possessing the power to alter the form of what is subject to its influence.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the transnational as both an analytical framework and a conceptual tool for the media industries producing contemporary high-end television drama. By overturning the classical focus on the 'national' element of the term, I have instead focused on the prefix 'trans-' to begin the discussion on an underlying common thread in the interview materials: that the transnational is primarily understood, experienced, and owned as a process of radical change at various levels and across all aspects of the industry. Different theoretical perspectives have informed the analysis, particularly from media studies and, more specifically, the sociology of media. The theory of 'mediated cultural encounters' (Bondebjerg et al., 2018) has framed the topic and illuminated the data, highlighting the institutional effects of coproductions in terms of the creation of stable partnerships and networks, as well as the creative work arising from the encounters between professionals across the industry.

Furthermore, by placing individuals and roles at the heart of my data and analysis – one of the key directions of media industries studies – I have initiated a broader discussion on how and why 'thinking transnationally' (Hilmes, 2012) within RAI's coproduced drama projects has not only reconfigured the national industry as a whole but also demonstrated the 'influence of other cultures on US television' (Hilmes, 2014, p.2). Most importantly, it has transfigured the different players involved in these processes, within complex relational dynamics. This will be further explored with breadth, depth, and scope in the remainder of the thesis. Here, the case studies demonstrate that the concept of the transnational is perceived unevenly by the interviewees. For Luisa Cotta Ramosino, creative director at Lux Vide (*Medici*), and Fania Petrocchi, RAI executive producer (*Medici*), the transnational is embedded in the (re)organisation of work, which is reconfigured and 'transfigured', physically and materially represented by the writers' room. In contrast, for Lorenzo Mieli, producer of *My Brilliant Friend*, the transnational manifests elsewhere. He raises two crucial issues related to the transnationality of high-end drama. The first concerns what is arguably the most pressing issue for the entire industry: copyrights and ownership, which influence a range of other concerns, including the

future roles and identities of independent production companies. The second issue involves the tension between transnational (yet deeply nationally rooted) content – laden with universal themes and values designed to appeal to transnational audiences – and the creation of new production models. These models, albeit transnationally generated, exhibit the "negotiation pain" of resistance and assimilation to established Anglo-American business models. This perspective is also shared by Matteo Levi in relation to *The Name of the Rose*. Ultimately, transnational television reaches its most accomplished expression in the coproduction form, conceived as a site of contestation and potential resolution (Hilmes, 2014).

Chapter 3

Crafting the Beginnings: Case Studies of Early and Mid-Development in Transnational TV Drama Coproduction

Introduction: Contextualising Agency in Transnational Television Drama Coproduction

In the evolving diverse landscape of television production, agency has emerged as a critical yet contested concept, one that resists simplistic definitions and demands theoretical and contextual sensitivity, especially when applied to production forms – such as transnational coproduction – which, by their very nature, can be seen as "multipliers" of agency: production frameworks that amplify or intensify, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the theoretical and practical dimensions of agency through the interaction of actors from deeply different national production systems and with equally diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, not to mention individual subjectivities.

Rather than conceptualising agency as the fixed capacity of individual actors to make unconstrained choices, recent scholarship has advanced more nuanced accounts that emphasise its negotiated, contingent, and relational nature, as part of an ever-evolving dialectic and interplay between agency and structure. Agency, in this view, is neither entirely determined by macro-level constraints nor reducible to acts of personal will. Instead, it is understood as a relational force, exercised within and through the institutional, economic, and cultural logics that govern the media industries (Havens and Lotz, 2016).

The present and following chapter build upon a body of scholarship that reconceptualises agency not as a binary of freedom or constraint, but as a process unfolding within what has been termed 'circumscribed agency', structured yet flexible "spaces" where media professionals in their various capacities operate (Havens and Lotz, 2016). By reframing agency as "always-already" bounded – that is, inherently constrained from the outset – by the conventions, standards, norms and routines of media institutions, economic imperatives, and organisational hierarchies, this approach opens up nuanced ways of understanding decision-making processes in production environments. Media professionals involved in production are not autonomous auteurs, nor passive executors of structural dictates. They are mediators, strategists, and negotiators who operate with varying degrees of autonomy depending on the institutional setting, genre, and production culture, and crucially, within a transnational framework,

as shaped by the encounter (and its evolution) – to be understood as the actual "germ" of production – of such institutional factors and production cultures.

This conceptual shift is aligned with calls for a meso-level analysis of media work, which attends to the situated practices of industry professionals within everyday production routines (Lotz, Havens and Tinic, 2009). Thus, agency is not located in abstract ideals or, deterministically, in top-down logics, but in everyday decisions and choices, routines, and interactions that characterise professional life in the media industries. The focus moves to the lived and contextual enactment of agency, in other words how individuals interpret mandates, respond to constraints based on their culturally diverse professional and cultural backgrounds, and shape outcomes through their varied forms of participation in collaborative and hierarchical (often irreducible) systems. Lotz, Havens and Tinic stress the need to examine 'how individuals or institutions are enabled to act' (2009) and how their ability to do so is shaped by the 'symbolic, material and cultural' structures within which media production takes place. The complexity arising from the encounter of these differing structures within a transnational coproduction context is, indeed, considerable. These scholars argue that examining agency at the meso level allows one to locate media professionals' ability to manoeuvre within industrial regimes, understanding the forms of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance that occur as part of daily production life.

This perspective is further deepened in Lotz and Havens's later work (Havens and Lotz, 2016), which elaborates how the 'circumscribed agency' of media professionals operates within structured yet adaptable institutional contexts that both enable and limit creative action. Havens and Lotz's concept of 'circumscribed agency' elaborates how media professionals operate with some degree of autonomy, even as that autonomy is delimited by a range of forces, such as the cultures from which they come, the conventions of the media in which they work, and the priorities of their organisations and superiors (Havens and Lotz, 2016). This framework highlights that while industrial contexts set constraints, they also afford pockets of flexibility where creative negotiation is possible, namely spaces in which strategic and creative decisions are enacted not in absolute freedom, but within structured environments that condition what kinds of agency are possible.

The analysis that follows, through the case studies, shows how such negotiation is not only possible but also generative, giving rise to new forms of conceiving of and making coproduction, and as a result producing new media texts. As the analysis will show, *My Brilliant Friend* marks the beginning of a new television drama model for HBO, being its first foreign-language series, even mixing Italian and Neapolitan dialect. As we shall see, the case studies demonstrate the affordances of transnational coproduction as a form, within a perimeter defined by often-revised points of reference and a high degree of variability. Within this terrain, dynamics of agency play out, sometimes generative (*My Brilliant Friend*), sometimes merely experimental (*Medici*, with its use of an American-style writers' room, or *The Name of the Rose*, with the totalising involvement of the "exogenous" hyphenate John Turturro), and in the latter case, not necessarily "successful" in terms of media output. Agency,

therefore, becomes the skill of operating strategically within bounded institutional norms and conventions. This view moves beyond a binary of constraint and autonomy, stressing the complex dialectic between structure and creativity, and the interpretive labour involved in aligning industrial codes of practice and standards with culturally diverse intentions and visions.

This attention to mid-level practices finds further elaboration in scholarship that explores how agency is shaped not only by formal hierarchies but by field-specific logics and production routines. Holt and Perren's volume, for instance, advances a framework that focuses on how institutional practices – such as commissioning, budgeting, or scheduling – produce both constraints and possibilities that determine how decisions are made (Holt and Perren, 2009). Their contributors call for attention to the historically contingent arrangements that shape the cultural and economic processes through which media texts come into being. This includes consideration of how media professionals access and articulate power, how that power is distributed, and how creative outcomes are shaped by negotiations between industrial priorities and individual initiative. In particular, they argue that industrial routines, discourses of legitimation, and historical production cultures establish the parameters within which agency is intelligible and actionable. These structures do not simply restrict creativity; they frame its articulation, authorisation, and recognition.

This concern with the relational and contingent dimensions of agency is further developed by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (2009). Rather than returning to romanticised notions of the autonomous creator, here individual agency is positioned as a situated practice exercised within institutional structures. Foregrounding 'the relative power and autonomy of individual agents to express creative visions within larger institutional structures', more scholarly attention is called for to how various professionals – such as writers, executives, costume designers and so on – navigate complex industrial ecologies. Rejecting both deterministic models and auteurist exceptionalism, this contribution advocates for an empirically grounded approach that, according to Mark Banks, attends to 'the enigmas of experiential variation, personal subjectivity and human agency in everyday work contexts' (as cited in Pearson, 2010, p.8). Through this lens, agency is conceptualised not as a stable attribute, but as emergent and embedded, negotiated through daily routines and interactions that unfold within bounded environments. This orientation allows for a more precise understanding of how institutional mandates, industrial norms, and professional practices co-produce the space in which creative labour is exercised. In doing so, Holt and Perren contribute to a broader rethinking of authorship and creativity as contextually produced, collectively mediated, and dynamically situated within the lived realities of contemporary media work.

Such a rethinking of agency also compels a re-evaluation of the long-standing assumption of authorship as the privileged site of creative power. Television production, especially in its serial and collaborative forms, demands an alternative account of how creative agency is distributed. In *Star Trek and American Television* (2010), Roberta Pearson interrogates the contested role of the individual creative agent within structurally constrained production systems, highlighting the institutional

processes through which certain figures come to be recognised as "authors". She shows how authorship in television is institutionally conferred, with figures occupying positions of legitimacy not solely through their creative contributions, but through organisational alignment and industrial recognition. Drawing on Holt and Perren's framing of creative autonomy within institutional structures, Pearson resists attributing creative control to a singular source. Instead, she foregrounds the collaborative yet differentiated nature of television production, in which multiple roles – from writers and directors to costume designers and studio executives – contribute meaningfully to creative outcomes. These contributions, she argues, are shaped by a 'cultural framework' composed of background, orientation, and mindset, which interact, through alignment or tension, with institutionalised knowledge and production norms and conventions. Echoing Mark Banks, she critiques sociological approaches that reduce creativity to structural effects, calling instead for closer attention to that 'experiential variation, personal subjectivity, and human agency in everyday work contexts' (Pearson, 2010). The coalescence of these three factors is indeed crucial for understanding transnational coproduction processes, as the following analysis will demonstrate. Through her analysis of the *Star Trek* franchise, Pearson demonstrates that individual agency is not an unbounded force, but one that is structured, variable, and context-dependent, circumscribed, negotiated, and enacted through the routines and relationships that define contemporary production. She emphasises the necessity for institutions to 'provide space for these individuals' creative autonomy, thereby positioning agency not as the expression of isolated authorship, but as a negotiated function of industrial legitimacy. What counts as creative agency, she argues, is often the result of institutional recognition and the codification of decision-making within production cultures.

As the analysis shows, it is particularly interesting to observe how the reconfiguration of the "certainties" embedded in global institutional norms, conventions, and standards – brought about by the encounter between different production systems within a transnational framework – renders the negotiation of creative space by individuals highly unpredictable. At times, this dynamic succeeds, albeit temporarily and not always in structurally transformative ways, in eroding ground even where institutional constraints are well-established and entrenched within national boundaries, as is the case with the production standards and norms "imported" from the American system. This focus on "distributed" agency is further developed in Dunleavy's work, which contends that television narrative form should not be understood merely as the outcome of a romanticised notion of creative "inspiration", but as shaped by concrete institutional conditions, particularly – as demonstrated in her most recent work – within a context increasingly dominated by streaming platforms and their operational demands. In *Television Drama: Form, Agency, Innovation* (2009b), Dunleavy examines the evolving role of individual agency within the institutional and industrial dynamics of television drama. Particularly attentive to developments in the U.S., her analysis focuses on how writers and producers are enabled to innovate while operating within genre conventions and institutional frameworks, negotiating between creative aspirations and the structural limitations imposed by

networks and production companies. In foregrounding the increasing creative autonomy afforded to television writers and producers as a result of shifting industrial conditions, she positions agency as both shaped by and, crucially, responsive to institutional opportunity. Institutional opportunity is a particularly significant factor when considering the institutional conditions that define the transnational framework underpinning the three coproductions analysed in this chapter.

In *Media Industry Studies* (2020), Herbert, Lotz and Punathambekar reconceptualise agency as a relational and contingent phenomenon, shaped by the institutional, cultural, and economic contexts in which media work is embedded. Drawing on the concept of 'circumscribed agency' (Havens and Lotz, 2016), they reject individualistic or auteur-driven understandings of creative power, emphasising instead the distributed and negotiated nature of agency across production roles. As they note, 'the individual is always a part of the whole' and media professionals act within broader systems of constraint, influence, and filtration as well. Agency, in this account, is not a static capacity but a dynamic process embedded in the micro-level practices, rituals, and informal negotiations that constitute everyday media work at all levels. While final creative authorship may be formally attributed to directors or showrunners, those in subordinate roles – writers, editors, designers, to name but a few – significantly shape the range of possibilities that reach the decision-making stage. Focusing on negotiation, distribution, and institutional embeddedness, this contribution is a grounded theorisation of agency as situated practice.

As previously anticipated, these insights gain additional traction in Dunleavy's later work on *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* (Dunleavy, 2017), where she offers a nuanced theorisation of agency within contemporary high-end drama, particularly as it emerges in the production cultures of complex serial drama. Rather than treating authorship as a singular creative vision, she emphasises the interplay between individual leadership – especially that of the showrunner – and broader institutional frameworks. Creative agency is shown to be both indispensable and circumscribed: it is exercised by key figures such as creator-producers, but always within the collaborative ecologies and structural conditions set by networks. Dunleavy foregrounds the creative autonomy afforded by cable television, particularly premium channels like HBO, where reduced interference and brand-aligned risk-taking facilitated narrative and aesthetic experimentation. At the same time, she stresses the institutional power of commissioning executives, whose judgments and brand orientations shape the very possibilities (or not) for creative innovation. Ultimately, agency is framed not as a fixed attribute but as a negotiated capacity – situated within writing teams, institutional logics, and industrial opportunity – and reconfigured through shifting relationships between creative vision and collaborative production.

This perspective is reinforced in Dunleavy's subsequent analysis of coproduction and cultural specificity (2021), where she does not explicitly theorise agency, yet her analysis implicitly engages with it by examining the evolving production contexts of high-end drama. She focuses on how multiplatform environments and transnational coproduction frameworks have reshaped the conditions

under which television drama is produced, distributed, and received. While avoiding formal social theory, Dunleavy highlights the ways in which certain institutional configurations, particularly in cable and streaming, can enable greater creative autonomy for producers and writers. Her discussion suggests a form of negotiated agency, one in which creators respond to industrial demands while also pursuing narrative-aesthetic innovation and cultural specificity. In this way, agency is understood as a relational and context-dependent capacity shaped by the broader dynamics of contemporary television production. Taken together, these scholarly contributions offer a comprehensive and multidimensional theorisation of agency within media production. While early interventions sought to shift the focus away from auteurist myths, more recent scholarship has refined our understanding of agency as contingent, negotiated, structurally mediated, distributed and, crucially, relational. Havens and Lotz (2016) foreground the importance of 'circumscribed agency' within institutional logics, while Lotz, Havens, and Tinic (2009) emphasise mid-level, everyday practices as the locus of media workers' strategic interventions. Holt and Perren (2009) call for a balanced attention to individual decision-making within historically and discursively shaped production frameworks, and Pearson (2010) complicates authorship by showing how legitimacy is granted within institutional regimes, while acknowledging individuals' right to have spaces of autonomy within institutional boundaries. Herbert, Lotz, and Punathambekar (2020) extend these insights by highlighting agency as distributed and emergent across multiple professional layers. Finally, considering agency within the specific context of transnational television drama production, Dunleavy (2009b; 2017; 2021) stresses how evolving industrial contexts – particularly transnational, multiplatform, and convergent ones – reshape the spaces and constraints within which agency unfolds. What unites these perspectives is their shared rejection of binary thinking in favour of a relational approach, in which agency is always embedded, contested, and responsive to the institutional terrain. It is this evolving and relational understanding of agency that frames the case studies that follow.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to clarify that the examination of processes derived from the three case studies is focused on a specific phase within the production cycle – the broad development phase – divided into two stages: early development (Chapter 3) and the core of the development process, namely screenwriting (Chapter 4). In light of this, this chapter focuses on the processes that, within the wider production cycle of a television series, define, shape, and characterise early development. This phase plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for the entire project. It is marked by a series of interrelated activities that collectively ensure the project's feasibility and structure, both creatively and financially. At its core is the process of securing rights (for screen adaptations), where producers acquire the intellectual property (IP) required to adapt or produce the project. This typically involves optioning rights to books, screenplays, or other media and securing the legal permissions necessary to move forward with the creative work. The acquisition of these rights is not merely a transactional step but a fundamental milestone that transforms the project from an idea into a

tangible endeavour, namely the final media product that we ultimately see on screen. Following this, negotiation and deal structuring become pivotal in shaping the project's framework. During this stage, producers enter into discussions with writers, directors, talent, and other key personnel to define contractual obligations and establish financial terms. These negotiations are not only about aligning expectations but also about setting the parameters within which the project will operate, ensuring that all key stakeholders are committed to the production's vision and logistical execution. Partnership formation is another critical aspect of the early development stage. Producers actively seek collaborations and partnerships with distributors, broadcasters, networks, streaming platforms, or other co-producers, as financial backing and creative support are essential to realising the project, especially within a transnational framework defined by high production values. These partnerships serve as the primary means of securing financing, which in turn enables the production to progress to the next stages. The formation of these relationships is not merely a financial arrangement but a strategic move that ensures a collective and systemic approach to the project's success.

The analysis in this Chapter, therefore, focuses on these fundamental processes, which together constitute the critical foundation for the entire production, setting the stage for both the creative and logistical components of the project. It is now time to proceed with the analysis of the processes, grounded in the integration of the theoretical frameworks outlined in the Introduction, using a case study approach. The first case study will focus on *Medici*.

Case Study 1 – *Medici*

The 2016 television series *Medici* constitutes an eight-episode historical high-end drama that exemplifies a transnational coproduction model. The series was collaboratively produced through a partnership of prominent European and international production entities: Lux Vide, a leading Italian independent production company, acted as the primary national coproducer; Big Light, founded by American showrunner Frank Spotnitz and operating between London and Paris, served as the British partner; Wild Bunch TV, a major European independent distributor and provider of production services, was responsible for international distribution; and RAI Fiction, the drama division of Italy's public broadcaster RAI, participated as both commissioner and coproducer (IMDb, 2016; Netflix, 2016).

Medici constitutes the inaugural season in a larger transnational television project comprising three seasons, each centred on pivotal episodes from different phases of the Medici family's history. Collectively, the series explores the political, cultural, and artistic forces that shaped the Italian Renaissance, positioning the Medici dynasty as a central actor in this transformative period. The inaugural season is set in early 15th-century Florence and traces the ascent of the Medici family to political and financial prominence. The narrative foregrounds the figures of Giovanni de' Medici,

portrayed by Dustin Hoffman, and his son Cosimo de' Medici, played by Richard Madden, as they navigate the complexities of Florentine power structures, internal family tensions, and the city's emergence as a centre of artistic and commercial innovation. The cast of *Medici* features a strong lineup of international talent. Richard Madden – widely known for his role in *Game of Thrones* – features Cosimo de' Medici, a complex visionary leader navigating political and personal challenges. Dustin Hoffman stars as Giovanni de' Medici, the family patriarch whose ambitions set the foundation for the Medici dynasty. The supporting cast features Annabel Scholey as Contessina de' Bardi, Stuart Martin as Lorenzo, and Guido Caprino as Marco Bello, contributing to the overall depiction of the Medici family's story (Friedlander, 2015). *Medici* was produced with an estimated budget of approximately €24 million, underscoring its ambition to position itself as a high-end historical drama aligned with the production standards of high-end television drama. Shooting began in November 2015 and was conducted on location across Tuscany, including historically significant sites such as Florence, Montepulciano, and Pienza. The series premiered on RAI in October 2016 to strong domestic reception (Italy for Movies, 2016). The inaugural episode attracted over 7.5 million viewers and secured a 29.9% audience share, with the series sustaining high viewership throughout its broadcast, averaging nearly seven million viewers and a 27.34% share. Following its national success, the series was distributed internationally via platforms such as Netflix, enabling access to a broader global audience and reinforcing its status as a successful example of transnational television production (Roxborough & Anderson, 2016; Wagner, 2015). Taken together, its international coproduction structure, high-profile cast, substantial production budget, and use of advanced cinematic techniques position *Medici* as a landmark within the Italian television landscape: a historical drama rooted in local history yet shaped by global production values and designed to resonate with audiences worldwide. On this basis, the analysis now turns to the early development dynamics of *Medici*, drawing on interviews with two key professionals directly involved in the project: Luisa Cotta Ramosino, creative producer at Lux Vide, and Lucy Rawlinson, script editor at Big Light.

Their reflections offer a detailed perspective on the collaborative processes, challenges, and strategic decisions that shaped this transnational coproduction. Luisa Cotta Ramosino, a creative producer at Lux Vide since 2009, leads the creative development of *Medici* on the Italian side. At Big Light, Lucy Rawlinson contributes to all three seasons of the series, initially joining as assistant script editor for Season 1 before being promoted to script editor for Seasons 2 and 3. Viewed in relation to one another, their accounts illuminate the longer history of *Medici* from conception through early development, revealing a sustained effort by Lux Vide to position itself within a rapidly evolving international television landscape by adapting to new market demands and international production models while remaining anchored to its original creative vision and institutional identity; in this sense, the project exemplifies the trajectory of Lux Vide as a production company negotiating the pressures of industrial and cultural change while striving to maintain its foundational values, creative vision, and institutional ethos.

According to Cotta Ramosino (2019), *Medici* was a project deeply connected to the vision and

long-standing cultural priorities of Lux Vide's founder, Ettore Bernabei[8]. A native of Florence, Bernabei had consistently sought to promote Italian culture on a global scale, positioning it as a symbol of excellence. The series, she explains, was one that Bernabei had long aspired to produce. However, its realisation presented considerable challenges, requiring the right partners and production frameworks to support a narrative with international relevance. RAI was consistently regarded as the ideal partner, not only due to the project's thematic alignment but also because of the longstanding collaboration between the broadcaster and Lux Vide. The development process involved multiple attempts with different writers, several of which were interrupted and later resumed. Ultimately, the decision was made to produce the series in English and to develop it through international coproduction, thereby ensuring its resonance with global audiences and alignment with transnational production standards:

> *Medici* is a project that had been at the heart and interests of the founder of Lux Vide, Ettore Bernabei, for many years. Perhaps it was because he was born in Florence… he had always paid great attention to the aspect of Italian culture that could be spread around the world and presented as an excellence. This was a project he had always wanted to undertake. However, it was also a complex project because it required finding the right partners...it was necessary to decide the production mode and then find a perspective that would make the product both interesting and relevant. There have been various attempts [to initiate the project], with different screenwriters, and an initial development phase that was later abandoned and then resumed.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation)

Despite the challenges inherent in realising such an ambitious project, and RAI's initial preference for a domestically oriented drama, Lux Vide remained committed to an international vision, working towards a model that could engage both Italian and global audiences. Cotta Ramosino described the transition from an Italian project to an international one, as follows:

[8] Ettore Bernabei, founder of Lux Vide, served as the Director General of RAI from 1961 to 1974. During his tenure, he was instrumental in shaping Italian public broadcasting and fostering cultural productions that promoted Italian heritage, values, and excellence to both domestic and international audiences. This background further underscores the natural partnership between Lux Vide and RAI for a project like *Medici*.

> The partner for Lux, of course, has always been RAI… Lux has had a privileged relationship with RAI for a long time. So, from RAI's perspective, having Lux as a partner for this particular project was important. I have the feeling that, in the initial phase, RAI intended [the project] to be mainly an Italian production because it was part of our history and cultural heritage, making the project in English with international coproduction partners, wasn't initially in their plans, whereas it had always been part of Lux's perspective, because the scope of the project was such that making it solely with RAI's funding – even if significant funding – would have created substantial production limitations. And also, because we thought at it as a project worth offering to the world, which could be both a commercial gateway to become an international player [as an independent production company] and, at the same time, something that deserved to go beyond national borders, to be produced not as just an Italian production, but as a coproduction that from its very origins was conceived for the international market.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation)

Taken together, these reflections frame *Medici*'s development as a temporally unfolding process structured by a sequence of interdependent decisions rather than a single shift towards internationalisation. Phrases such as 'abandoned and then resumed', 'over time', and 'from its very origins' point to transnationality emerging through iterative negotiation under specific institutional and financial preconditions, with the eventual adoption of English-language coproduction functioning as an outcome of this extended developmental trajectory, through which the project became legible within the landscape of complex serial drama of the 2010s.

Through her reflections, Cotta Ramosino highlights two key dynamics that shaped the early trajectory of *Medici*. The first concerns Lux Vide's sustained effort to carry the project forward despite repeated setbacks in development and structural limitations. Rather than abandoning the project, the company remained committed to its ambition of promoting Italian cultural heritage on an international scale. This persistence is reflected in the multiple phases during which the project was revived and redefined, underscoring the company's long-term commitment to its founding goals. The second dynamic involves the initial hesitation within RAI to support the project as an international coproduction. At the outset, the broadcaster approached the series primarily as a national production, shaped by conventional commissioning practices and a focus on domestic audiences. This position reflected a broader reluctance to depart from established models of content development and international collaboration. Over time, however, the project underwent a gradual reframing that made it more compatible with RAI's evolving strategic vision, eventually opening the door to co-financing and cross-border production. These two dynamics gradually moved towards alignment. Through ongoing negotiation and the strategic development of the project, Lux Vide managed to shift RAI's

position, helping reorient the project towards a transnational format. This evolution not only reflects a convergence of different institutional perspectives but also illustrates how long-term commitment and adaptive negotiation can shape the structure and scale of a production in the context of a changing industry landscape. Following the reconciliation of interests between Lux Vide and RAI, culminating in the decision to pursue the project as an international coproduction, a first attempt to establish a partnership was initiated with the German distributor Beta and Michael Hirst's[9] production company (Green Pavilion Entertainment), with Hirst positioned as head writer. However, this configuration did not meet the expectations of the parties involved. Confronted with this initial setback, Lux Vide once again found itself in a position requiring resilience, continuing to pursue a viable direction for the project with renewed determination. At this juncture, a serendipitous development marked a critical turning point, prompting a strategic reorientation. Lux Vide moved from a phase of prolonged uncertainty to one of renewed momentum, responding flexibly to the new opportunity as it emerged. Cotta Ramosino described this pivotal event as a decisive moment that changed the course of the project, representing the culmination of Lux Vide's long-standing commitment:

> We started working with Beta[10] and had contacted Michael Hirst to work on *Medici*, partly because of his experience with the period genre. We worked together for a while without producing something that satisfied us, the Germans[11], and Michael Hirst [...]; so, at some point, things weren't moving forward on that front. Then, there was a contact, somewhat by chance, between Lux Vide's Head of Development, Sara Melodia, who met Frank Spotnitz in Paris during a seminar. [...] She went to meet him, told him about this project and it turned out that he had wanted to dedicate himself to period drama for a long time [...], something he had never written in his life. So, the idea of working on a project like this interested him [...]. That's how this meeting came about. From there, of course, it wasn't an overnight thing. We explored different working methods and production modes because it was about organising the work differently. But this process was also relatively quick because we then began working concretely on the project.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation)

This account foregrounds transnational coproduction as a temporally contingent process shaped by interruption, reorientation, and renewed momentum rather than linear progression. References to work that 'wasn't moving forward', to chance encounter, and to the fact that collaboration 'wasn't an overnight thing' make visible a sequence of interdependent events through which development advances under conditions of uncertainty, with strategic outcomes emerging gradually rather than by design. Lux Vide's approach to a significant early setback – namely, the failed partnership with Beta and Green Pavilion Entertainment – illustrates its continued commitment to the project and its

capacity for adaptive resilience. Rather than abandoning its original vision, the company maintained a clear strategic direction while remaining open to re-evaluating its course in response to changing circumstances, a stance that allowed development to continue without compromising the project's core objectives. This capacity to move forward without compromising the project's core objectives reflects a pragmatic and flexible production strategy: despite the disruption caused by the collapse of the initial partnership, Lux Vide did not start from scratch but instead recalibrated its approach, reallocated resources, and pursued a new collaborative direction. When a new opportunity arose through a chance connection with Frank Spotnitz, Lux Vide was well positioned to pivot and reinitiate development along a different partnership path. Importantly, this shift did not signal a departure from its founding goals, but rather an ability to adapt and move towards their realisation under new conditions.

This phase in the project also reveals Lux Vide's ability to adapt its internal coordination without losing sight of its original objectives. Despite the disruption caused by the collapse of the initial partnership, the company preserved the structural and creative integrity of the project. Rather than starting from scratch, Lux Vide recalibrated its strategy, reallocated resources, and pursued a new collaborative direction. This continuity, despite external setbacks, demonstrated an internal flexibility that enabled the project to evolve without compromising its identity or ambition. Following the establishment of the coproduction partnership, new dynamics emerged concerning Big Light's experience of the collaborative model as the UK partner. In her interview, Rawlinson (2019) reflected on the challenges of navigating creative decisions while working simultaneously with RAI, the Italian public broadcaster and main commissioner, and Netflix, as the international distribution platform. While Netflix provided access to global markets and allowed greater flexibility in content and tone, RAI's role as the primary domestic broadcaster imposed specific constraints, particularly in relation to the expectations and sensitivities of the Italian audience.

As Rawlinson notes, editorial choices, such as narrative direction or character development, often had to be assessed in terms of their perceived acceptability to Italian viewers. This dual accountability required a heightened awareness of national sensibilities, particularly when producing content intended for cultural export. At the same time, she acknowledges that when RAI's involvement receded and Netflix became the sole platform for distribution, greater creative freedom emerged. This dynamic illustrates a core tension in transnational coproduction: independent producers must continuously mediate between the conservative editorial frameworks of traditional public broadcasters and the more

[9] Michael Hirst is the English creator, screenwriter and producer behind multi-award-winning dramas *Elizabeth* (1998), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), *The Tudors* (2007-2010) and *Vikings* (2013-2020), among many others, in various capacities as creator, writer and executive producer. He is the founder of his own production company Green Pavilion Entertainment.

[10] Beta refers to German Beta Film GmbH, a licensing, distribution and production company operating across Austria, Italy, Croatia, Spain and Sweden.

[11] Here, 'the Germans' refers to distribution company Beta.

flexible, data-driven imperatives of global streaming platforms. Rawlinson's perspective illustrates this tension clearly:

> There are difficulties with making these shows for audiences in other countries. I think that everyone finds that with coproductions, but it's just having an awareness of that. And I think we always have – when we're talking about our episodes now, especially for Leonardo, which is, you know, quite at an early stage still – we now have that in the back of our minds. And we talk about – as RAI is the main broadcaster – if we think the Italian audience will like that as a road we're going down or whether we should pull back a little bit, whether they might balk at it, which is completely understandable, actually, I think, you know, there are certain things… if it was just Netflix that… I think chose and found us as now. You know, when the broadcaster sometimes leaves and Netflix is then the only platform we are making for, suddenly we're much freer with what we can do.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019)

Rawlinson's emphasis on having such considerations 'in the back of our minds' and on the shifting conditions that arise 'when the broadcaster sometimes leaves' foregrounds transnational coproduction as an ongoing temporal process of adjustment, in which creative agency is exercised through continuous negotiation across overlapping institutional mandates rather than through discrete moments of decision. This phase of the development was shaped by a complex negotiation between editorial goals and institutional expectations. As Lucy Rawlinson (2019) explained, working simultaneously with RAI and Netflix introduced a dual set of pressures: RAI, as the domestic public broadcaster and principal commissioner, prioritised cultural specificity and national audience expectations, while Netflix offered greater creative freedom but operated according to different industrial logics, shaped by global market priorities and data-driven viewer metrics. Positioned between these two frameworks, Big Light had to navigate a careful balance, adapting to the demands of both partners while maintaining coherence in the series' creative direction.

What also emerges from Rawlinson's account is the continuous nature of negotiation involved in maintaining creative coherence across institutional lines. This is not a one-time compromise, but an ongoing effort to manage expectations, defend choices, and respond to feedback from both partners. The process is often marked by emotional intensity, particularly given the high visibility of the project and the need to satisfy both domestic and international audiences. For Big Light, the challenge lay in holding together competing priorities while fostering a creative environment that allowed the series to evolve without losing its narrative or cultural grounding. This kind of negotiation unfolded not through direct confrontation, but through gradual, strategic positioning within the structures of institutional collaboration. Rather than challenging either partner outright, the creative team worked to shift expectations incrementally, adjusting scripts, proposing editorial choices, and shaping outcomes over

time. The aim was to align the project with each partner's priorities without compromising its overall creative identity. This situation underscores the editorial challenges faced by producers and writers working across national and international contexts. While the pressures from both institutions differ in nature and scope, they converge in shaping creative decisions at every level of development. As Havens and Lotz (2016) note, this context is a clear instance of 'circumscribed agency', in which the autonomy of creative professionals is shaped, and at times constrained, by the institutional structures and expectations within which they operate. The experience of Big Light thus highlights the role of independent producers as cultural intermediaries who must continuously adjust to overlapping mandates while preserving a distinctive creative vision in a transnational media landscape.

Building on the theme of partnership arrangements, a further dynamic emerges in Cotta Ramosino's account, this time concerning the shifting role of Netflix between the first and subsequent seasons of *Medici*. While Netflix initially entered as an international distributor for Season 1 – by acquiring rights after production was already underway – the platform later assumed the status of coproducer for Seasons 2 and 3. However, as Cotta Ramosino revealed, this shift in contractual status did not correspond to a substantive change in editorial engagement. Despite being formally listed as a coproducing partner and branding the series as a "Netflix Original" in the US, the platform exerted minimal influence over the creative development of the series, offering no editorial feedback or involvement in the writing process. This discrepancy between formal institutional credit and the extent of actual involvement underscores a complex and partially opaque form of participation. It challenges conventional conceptions of coproduction and prompts a more critical examination of the power asymmetries and strategic omissions that often underlie transnational coproduction arrangements. This tension between contractual visibility and editorial absence is captured in Cotta Ramosino's remarks:

> With Netflix, there was a negotiation when we were still in production because it seemed like they could come in earlier [as coproducers], but in the end, they came in later and bought the first season. However, they coproduced the second and third seasons [from the start]. And it's a strange thing because, in terms of internal development, they are listed as coproducers. In reality, we didn't receive any notes from Netflix, so we didn't collaborate at that level [on the writing]. They assess the product specifications and everything else, but it wasn't a traditional development process with them. So, they are listed as coproducers [in the credits] – and indeed, it's a Netflix original [in the US] – but I've never actually received any notes from Netflix to work with.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation)

This account foregrounds the multi-platform era as a structural precondition of contemporary transnational serial drama (see Dunleavy, 2017; 2020), in which contractual participation and

developmental agency become decoupled: the temporal sequencing of Netflix's involvement ('came in later', 'second and third seasons' and 'I've never actually received any notes') produces a form of coproduction that is highly visible at the level of credit and branding yet largely absent from the development process, underscoring how formal status does not necessarily translate into creative power. Against this backdrop, Lux Vide's collaboration with Netflix contrasts with Lorenzo Mieli's more critical stance towards HBO's involvement in *My Brilliant Friend*. While a direct comparison between HBO and Netflix must be approached with caution – given the structural and operational differences in how each platform engages with production partners – the divergent dynamics remain analytically significant. The contrast between Wildside, the production company behind *My Brilliant Friend*, and Lux Vide, responsible for *Medici*, reveals distinct strategies in negotiating power asymmetries within transnational partnerships. In the case of *My Brilliant Friend*, Lorenzo Mieli framed his relationship with HBO as an ongoing process of negotiation, marked by strategic manoeuvres – including what he terms "bluffing" – to assert his position as an independent producer. These tactics evidenced a calculated effort to retain agency within a production landscape increasingly shaped by platforms and networks wielding significant financial and structural power. Mieli's approach exemplified a strategic attempt to preserve the producer's role and creative influence amid the pressures of a globalised and intensely competitive media environment.

Conversely, Cotta Ramosino's account of Lux Vide's collaboration with Netflix suggests a more accommodating stance. While Netflix did not initially participate as a coproducer in the first season – likely as a strategy to mitigate financial and reputational risk – it later assumed the role of coproducer for the second and third seasons. Notably, this shift in contractual status did not correspond to active engagement in the development process, as Netflix remained largely absent from the creative and editorial phases typically associated with coproduction. This stands in stark contrast to HBO's involvement in *My Brilliant Friend*, where the broadcaster played a far more integrated role in shaping the project's creative trajectory. Despite its limited participation, Netflix is nonetheless credited as a coproducer, highlighting the symbolic and commercial value of platform affiliation irrespective of substantive editorial contribution.

Scholarly analyses of Netflix's role in international coproduction highlight its strategic positioning as both financially dominant and editorially restrained. Havens (2016) describes this as 'conspicuous localism', whereby Netflix balances global branding with culturally specific content. Similarly, Sundet (2017) notes the platform's transition from co-investor to primary funder, while maintaining a largely hands-off approach to creative control. This dynamic illustrates how Lux Vide neither challenged Netflix's role in the development of *Medici*, nor displayed any rigidity in its collaborative stance. The company did not reject external influence outright; instead, it sustained its creative goals while adapting to the structural and financial conditions shaped by the presence of a dominant global platform. Although Netflix was formally credited as a coproducer in the second and third seasons, its involvement in the creative development process remained limited. Lux Vide

responded with pragmatic acceptance, avoiding conflict while also relinquishing some potential influence over aspects such as branding and strategic positioning. Rather than asserting control through direct confrontation, the company advanced the project through a measured and adaptive approach, accepting compromises as part of operating within an unequal production environment.

Another important dynamic that emerges from the interviews concerns the relational dimension of transnational coproduction, with particular emphasis on the interpersonal and institutional processes that evolve over time. Specifically, Rawlinson highlighted the importance of trust, mutual understanding, and sustained communication in enabling effective collaboration between partners from different national and professional cultures. Her reflections underscore that the success of transnational coproduction depends not solely on the alignment of industrial objectives, but equally on the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and trust within the production environment. This perspective foregrounds the affective and processual dimensions of cross-cultural collaboration, suggesting that the longevity and effectiveness of a coproduction partnership often rest on the gradual construction of shared working practices and interpersonal rapport. As she explains:

> *I think it's all about relationships*. And I think as we've come this far, there's been a certain level of trust that we've gained between the two of us [the Italian side and the British side of the partnership]. *We know how each other work now and our relationships have got better*, I think, and they trust Frank [Spotnitz] implicitly. And *we have an understanding of what they like and don't like that we didn't necessarily have at the beginning*. And *I think communication is key for that*. And we all talk to each other as much as we can. And, you know, I have a good relationship with Luisa [Cotta Ramosino, Creative Director at Lux Vide], who's my sort of 'go to' person and her story editor, Riccardo, I still talk to a lot as well. So that's very important. […] I think quite early on we had an understanding that this might be the beginning of something[12].
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's emphasis on relationships that 'have got better', on trust that is 'gained', and on understandings that 'we didn't necessarily have at the beginning' foregrounds transnational coproduction as a temporally unfolding process in which collaboration is sustained through the gradual accumulation of shared working practices and growing interpersonal trust over time, a dynamic centred on time and trust within the writers' room that will be theorised in more detail in Chapter 4 (see Redvall, 2013). Seen in this light, these reflections underscore Big Light's pragmatic and

[12] In relation to the master agreement proposed by RAI that should include 4 different dramas within the same historical framework: 3 seasons of *Medici* and a final drama on Leonardo on the 500th anniversary since Leonardo's death in 1519.

anchored approach to the challenges inherent in transnational coproduction. Rather than privileging short-term control, the account points to a model of long-term engagement grounded in interpersonal continuity, sustained communication, and the pursuit of shared objectives. This orientation suggests a capacity to manage complexity through communicative consistency and professional alignment, avoiding confrontation while preserving the integrity and coherence of the project. The second quotation further illustrates this dynamic by revealing Big Light's early commitment to a broader narrative vision. As Rawlinson notes, the partnership was structured around a long-term plan for a four-part Renaissance-themed series, beginning with *Medici* and eventually extending to a project on Leonardo da Vinci. This forward-looking perspective helped to mitigate early tensions and supported continued involvement even during periods of uncertainty. By working towards a shared horizon, Big Light sustained its investment in the project, approaching challenges not as obstacles to resist, but as moments requiring adjustment and recalibration.

What stands out in Big Light's approach is its capacity to manage creative and institutional tensions without escalation. Rather than pushing back rigidly against conflicting demands, the company works through challenges gradually, turning potential points of friction into opportunities for collaboration. This ability to remain engaged, even when priorities diverge, reflects a strategic commitment to long-term partnership and shared authorship. Misalignments are not treated as breakdowns, but as moments that can be absorbed and reshaped into trust-building opportunities over contexts. This ongoing process of negotiation and continuity helps to stabilise the collaboration and reinforces the company's role within a complex and evolving production context.

The case study of *Medici* sheds light on the complex processes underpinning transnational television coproduction. Drawing on first-hand reflections from key practitioners, this section has shown how producers and production teams responded to institutional pressures, cultural negotiations, and shifting partnership dynamics through a variety of strategies. Lux Vide's sustained commitment to the project, even in the face of significant delays and setbacks, reflected a long-term orientation grounded in creative and organisational continuity. RAI's initial hesitation to embrace an international model revealed the challenges national broadcasters face when adjusting established practices to accommodate new modes of collaboration. The project also underscores the importance of individual and interpersonal negotiation. Rawlinson's reflections show how Big Light managed divergent editorial expectations from RAI and Netflix, working to align creative goals with both domestic and global considerations. In contrast, Lux Vide adopted a pragmatic approach to Netflix's evolving role, accepting the platform's position as co-producer while maintaining control over the project's creative direction. These dynamics are not shaped by overt conflict or rigid oppositions, but by gradual adjustment, relational trust, and shared investment in the project's success.

Taken together, *Medici* demonstrates that transnational coproductions are shaped as much by human relationships, long-term planning, and pragmatic decision-making as they are by formal structures and financing models. What emerges is a portrait of collaboration that depends less on confrontation and more on the capacity to adapt, negotiate, and sustain partnerships over time. As

Dunleavy (2009b) argues, television authorship is increasingly collective, negotiated, and embedded within institutional frameworks, an observation clearly borne out in the case of *Medici*, where creative leadership emerges through ongoing collaboration across national and industrial boundaries. From the perspective of agency, *Medici* further elucidates the exercise of agency in transnational coproduction by illustrating how producers operate within, and actively negotiate and shape, evolving institutional contexts. Lux Vide's sustained commitment to the project – despite considerable developmental setbacks and evolving partnerships – exemplifies, once again, what Havens and Lotz (2016) term 'circumscribed agency'. This is evidenced in the company's capacity to intervene meaningfully through strategic adaptation to externally derived structural frameworks – most notably, the reliance on a showrunner and a delocalised writers' room – combined with persistence and institutional positioning that mediate between non-domestic production logics and RAI's commissioning framework. In parallel, the project's genesis as a culturally rooted, nationally oriented drama on Renaissance history progressively evolves into a transnational product designed for both domestic and international markets, through a process of reciprocal and incremental adaptation between fundamentally distinct systems. This transformation rests on Lux Vide's ability to reconfigure the production model in real time, navigate stakeholder expectations, and recalibrate strategic alignments, initially with RAI and subsequently with Netflix. In this respect, the case reflects Dunleavy's (2009b) view of television production as a field of collective authorship, where creative control is often exercised through step-by-step institutional negotiation rather than unilateral command. Moreover, the changing involvement of Netflix – from international distributor to formal coproducer – raises important questions about the symbolic and strategic value of platform affiliation. Lux Vide's acceptance of Netflix's limited editorial input, despite its prominent branding presence, underscores a pragmatic orientation aimed at sustaining momentum and visibility, even in asymmetrical partnerships. As Dunleavy (2021) notes, such arrangements often require producers to skilfully mediate between domestic imperatives and global expectations, while navigating markedly different cultural and industrial priorities.

Big Light's role further illustrates the performative and negotiated character of agency within transnational frameworks. In line with Pearson (2010), agency in television is often asserted through the cultivation of professional trust, branding, and interpersonal credibility – all factors that come into play in the process of mutual acquaintance that accompanies the development of this project between Frank Spotnitz's Big Light and RAI. Lucy Rawlinson's reflections on the editorial process between RAI and Netflix attest to the critical role of relational labour and strategic relationship management in maintaining editorial coherence and productive collaboration across cultural boundaries. More broadly, the iterative nature of these negotiations points to the processual dimension of creative agency, where producers and writers tactically respond to institutional constraints while preserving a shared vision. The project's sustained development also exemplifies what Lotz, Havens, and Tinic (2009) frame as the interplay between institutional structures and individual practice. The creative team's ability to rearticulate the project in response to shifting opportunities – without abandoning its core vision – demonstrates a strategic mode of agency that is neither wholly autonomous nor entirely

subordinate, but emerges through adaptive, context-sensitive practice.

Overall, *Medici* offers a compelling example of negotiated agency in transnational coproduction, enacted through a multifaceted investment, involving the gradual cultivation of interpersonal relationships and mutual understanding between RAI and Big Light, the remote delegation of the project's creative core (screenwriting), and the adoption, by the Italian production system, of a profoundly reconfigured aesthetic-narrative model for period drama. Its development trajectory reveals how producers and creatives engage in incremental manoeuvres to align institutional objectives, manage stakeholder expectations, and sustain narrative and cultural specificity across platforms. The case thus reinforces the broader insight that agency in transnational coproduction is exercised less through confrontation or, vice versa, acquiescence than through strategic calibration – of partnerships, creative priorities, and institutional roles – within a structurally fluid and continuously evolving media landscape that spans multiple geographies and culturally diverse production systems. The following case study, *My Brilliant Friend*, build on these insights, examining how different structural positions and institutional affiliations afford or constrain agency within comparable contexts.

Case Study 2 – *My Brilliant Friend*

The 2018 television series *My Brilliant Friend*, adapted from Elena Ferrante's globally acclaimed quartet known as 'Neapolitan Novels', is a RAI-led coproduction among the Italian public service broadcaster, HBO, the Italian production company Wildside and TIMVision (IMDb, 2024, Vivarelli 2017b). The partnership constellation also includes the Italian production company Fandango, Mowe, and international media groups as Umedia and Fremantle as international distributor. The eight-part series is directed by Saverio Costanzo, who, alongside Elena Ferrante, Francesco Piccolo, and Laura Paolucci, forms the credited screenwriting team behind this adaptation. It should be premised from the outset that the analysis in this case study focuses exclusively on Season 1 of the complete adaptation, which spans four seasons, with each season corresponding to one of the novels in Elena Ferrante's tetralogy (Donadio, 2017). Therefore, the case study in this research focuses on the book-to-screen adaptation of the first novel in Ferrante's tetralogy, *My Brilliant Friend* (2011), which was adapted for television under the same title, *My Brilliant Friend* (2018).

Set in 1950s Naples, the series follows the intricate and evolving friendship between Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo, the latter known as Lila. The narrative spans from their childhood in the working-class Rione Luzzatti ('rione' meaning 'neighbourhood') to the divergent paths they take in adulthood. Praised for its immersive depiction of post-war Naples, *My Brilliant Friend* captures the city's complex social, political, and economic landscape with remarkable authenticity. The high production values are evident in the meticulous set designs that reflect the historical accuracy of the era

(Italy for Movies, 2019b). The narrative traces the evolving friendship between Elena and Lila, spanning several decades and exploring the complex interplay between personal and socio-political factors in their lives. It foregrounds the issue of female empowerment, highlighting the desperate, violent yet fiercely determined struggle that permeates their experiences. To do so, it delves into the broader social issues that shape their identities, including gender roles, family dynamics, and the shifting socio-political landscape of post-war Italy, in the particularly challenging context of suburban Naples. Both in Season 1, which is the focus of this analysis, and across the entire four-season series, the unfolding events reveal the diverging life trajectories of the two protagonists. Lila's fiery independence stands in contrast to Elena's intellectual ambitions, creating a compelling and nuanced exploration of female friendship, identity, and power. This narrative offers a profound investigation into the complexities of these intertwined themes, providing an insightful, vivid portrayal of the challenges and tensions that define their lifelong relationship.

The reception of *My Brilliant Friend* has been overwhelmingly positive, with particular praise directed towards its strong adherence to Ferrante's original narrative and the emotional depth translated to the screen. Critics have commended the series for its evocative storytelling, as well as its ability to capture the nuanced inner worlds of the characters (Nicholson, 2018). Overall, the adaptation has been celebrated for its fidelity to the source material, while simultaneously making it accessible to a global audience (Fienberg, 2018). In terms of viewership, *My Brilliant Friend* performed strongly, attracting a significant audience internationally, particularly following its world premiere on HBO on November 18, 2018 (average of 1 million viewers), and its subsequent debut in Italy on RAI (approximately 7 million viewers, with 29% share) and the TIMVision media platform on November 27, 2018. It subsequently aired across Europe, including in the UK on Sky. As highlighted by Variety, the show's success was not only evident in its viewership figures but also in its capacity to elevate Italian television content on the global stage. This positioned *My Brilliant Friend* – alongside *Medici* and *The Name of the Rose* – at the heart of RAI's internationalisation strategy for high-end drama, contributing to the broader wave of RAI-led high-end dramas explored in the case studies of this research (Vivarelli, 2018). The release of *My Brilliant Friend* has significantly enriched Ferrante studies within the humanities. Scholars have explored the adaptation's fidelity to the source text and its narrative authenticity (Heltzel and Verzella, 2023; Gambaro, 2021), while also situating it within broader debates on gendered trauma and the universal relevance of Ferrante's themes (De Rogatis, 2022). These contributions largely align with traditional adaptation and transmedia frameworks. Conversely, media and production scholarship on the series remains limited. Notable exceptions include the work of Dunleavy (2020) and Dunleavy and Weissmann (2024), who examine *My Brilliant Friend* within the wider transformation of global television industries through transnational coproduction. Their analyses highlight the integration of cultural specificity, creative negotiation, and industrial logic, illustrating how partnerships between institutions like HBO and RAI can successfully bridge local authenticity and international appeal. With its international coproduction structure, high production values, and critically acclaimed screenplay, *My Brilliant Friend* exemplifies the potential of high-end drama that resonates

on both a local and global scale (Thorp, 2024). Dunleavy (2020) in particular underscores how the series negotiates tensions between artistic control and institutional demands, arguing that cultural specificity is not only expressed narratively but embedded within production structures themselves. Building on earlier work (Dunleavy, 2017) focused on distribution models and narrative form, her later analyses shift attention to the collaborative production process. Together with Weissmann, she emphasises the need for granular, case-based analysis of coproduction practices, which unfold through fragile, incremental negotiations rather than linear processes.

Taken together, this highly focused scholarship contributes to the understanding of the transformative power of transnational coproduction as an industrial phenomenon, illustrating how global television has been reshaped by increasingly complex, multifaceted, and even unlikely partnerships. It offers valuable insights into the intricate interplay of culture, economics, and creative innovation in the contemporary television landscape. This section analyses *My Brilliant Friend* by focusing on the early dynamics of its transnational coproduction, particularly the development phase in which producers secure rights, negotiate agreements, and establish creative and financial frameworks. This investigation draws primarily on an interview with Lorenzo Mieli, producer of the series and co-founder and partner of the Rome-based production company Wildside. At the time of the interview (2019), Lorenzo Mieli also held the position of CEO at Fremantle Media Italia, a production company primarily focused on entertainment programming and long-running serial formats. As of 2025, Lorenzo Mieli serves as co-founder and executive of Our Films, a Rome-based production and film financing company established in early 2024 in partnership with fellow producer Mario Gianani. Season 1 of *My Brilliant Friend* thus marks a pivotal moment in Mieli's career and offers a valuable lens through which to explore how transnational coproduction can drive institutional and industrial transformation within a national context.

In his interview, Lorenzo Mieli reflected on the origins of the project, taking us back to a time when Fandango, led by Domenico Procacci and Laura Paolucci, had already shown interest in acquiring the rights to Ferrante's famed tetralogy, before it sparked the global phenomenon known as "Ferrante Fever". At this stage, Mieli was not directly involved with the project, but his perspective began to shift dramatically in 2016, after reading the books. Initially, he harboured doubts about whether the story – centred on female emancipation, set in Naples with a rich historical Italian backdrop – could truly align with his production company's vision, Wildside. Yet, something about the first novel struck him deeply, and as the "Ferrante Fever" grew, particularly in the United States where it first took hold, Mieli's approach to the project evolved. It is during this surge of excitement around Ferrante's work that Mieli approached Procacci with an idea that would ultimately reshape the entire trajectory of the project. Rather than sticking to the initial plan of adapting the four books into a mini-series – a more traditional format, and one that felt somewhat outdated – Mieli proposed a bolder vision to his fellow Rome-based producer: to transform it into a broader, more internationally oriented series, designed with global appeal in mind. This idea marked the birth of a vision that would not only capture the

essence of Ferrante's work but also position the series on the world stage, as recounted by the producer in the following excerpt:

> I told him: 'Look, I want to be part of this project. What do I bring to the table? The fact that I've worked extensively with international companies on TV series, and specifically recently with HBO on *The Young Pope* by Sorrentino. I think that, given that this is *an extremely Italian project* (unlike *The Young Pope*, which was directed by an Italian but had an international cast), considering what's happening with Ferrante and seriality, we could try to make it bigger. First, by turning it into a series – with one season for each book – and then by making it an international project *from the start*, that is: not producing it for RAI and then selling it, but coproducing with one or more foreign partners, alongside HBO.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mieli's account frames transnational coproduction as a temporally situated strategic intervention rather than a purely spatial expansion, grounded in prior experience and anticipatory judgment about serial form. Phrases such as 'considering what's happening with Ferrante and seriality' and 'making it an international project from the start' point to a sequence of interdependent decisions through which the project's development was reoriented in advance, establishing the preconditions for its later configuration as a high-end, transnational series. In the unfolding narrative of *My Brilliant Friend*'s journey, this strategic reorientation was underpinned by Mieli's prior involvement with international productions, notably his collaboration with HBO on *The Young Pope*, which proved pivotal. This experience became crucial in shaping his approach to the project. Initially, Procacci took time to reflect on Mieli's proposal, but ultimately, he recognised the value of Mieli's international experience and agreed to move forward. This marked the moment when Wildside, under Mieli's leadership, steps into the project.

To understand how this transnational coproduction took shape, particular attention should be given to the initial strategic move: Mieli's approach to Fandango. His trajectory – from his proposal to take responsibility for securing the rights to managing contractual negotiations and defining the financial structure – marked a critical phase in the project's early development. Mieli's coproduction strategy reflected both pragmatic reasoning and ethical intent. He proposed a fair distribution of profits between Wildside and Fandango, with Wildside assuming the role of lead and executive producer. This arrangement acknowledged Fandango's initial efforts in approaching Ferrante's publisher and signalled Mieli's vision of equal partnership. The project thus began as a collaborative effort grounded in mutual trust and a shared commitment to ensuring its success. By including Fandango in the profit-sharing structure while relieving the company of financial risk, Mieli consolidated an early alliance on the Italian side, one that was significant both politically and creatively. Fandango, originally a film production company and later active in distribution and publishing, was widely respected for its auteur-

driven identity and strong cinematic profile.

Lorenzo Mieli's early intervention in *My Brilliant Friend* reflected a calculated strategic move to stabilise a financially precarious project and assert leadership over its development. Mieli recognised that the transnational coproduction model opened up a wide array of possibilities, expanding the scope for creative agency within the evolving role of the producer. It is in this spirit that he intervened when the television adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, initially conceived by veteran producer Domenico Procacci of Fandango, faced significant financial obstacles. Rather than allowing these challenges to halt the project, Mieli transformed them into an opportunity for collaboration. Recognising the creative and industrial value of collaboration, Mieli proposed a profit-sharing model that also ensured creative inclusion, particularly by incorporating Laura Paolucci into the core writing team (an award-winning screenwriter and long-standing collaborator of Fandango). This decision not only preserved the project's continuity but also reinforced Mieli's ethical commitment to Italian creative partners, solidified Wildside's role as lead producer, and laid the groundwork for a transnational coproduction framework that balances industrial credibility with creative authorship.

Following this initial strategic move – through which Mieli transformed Fandango's financial limitations into a structured and actionable production plan – the next step involved advancing a bold and innovative proposal to HBO. With a clearly defined vision for the adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, he proposed that the series be produced entirely in Italian, or more precisely, in the original linguistic register of the novel, alternating between Neapolitan dialect and standard Italian, with English subtitles for the US market. What made this proposal particularly ambitious is that it would become the first foreign-language series, and the first in a non-standard dialect, ever to premiere on HBO. Mieli explained that this linguistic originality was conceived not merely as a stylistic choice, but as the foundation for a new kind of format within the network's broader programming strategy[13].

Faced with this proposal, the recently appointed President of Programming at HBO, Casey Bloys, did not respond favourably, at least not immediately. The impact was too abrupt, too disruptive. Mieli's proposal to Casey Bloys marked the beginning of a prolonged and complex negotiation process between HBO and Mieli. This process vividly illustrates how collaboration is shaped not only by institutional negotiations but also by the deep-seated identities, histories, and operational cultures of the agents involved. As Dunleavy (2017) notes in her broader analysis of multiplatform-era production dynamics, such processes must ultimately be understood through the specificities of individual cases and agents. It is only by examining micro- and meso-level interactions and interdependencies that the structural transformations engendered by transnational coproduction as a production form can be critically identified and theorised.

To fully grasp the depth and complexity of HBO's initial and significant pushback against Lorenzo Mieli's vision, the reader must be guided through a kind of 'flashback'. The development

[13] Later HBO series – such as the Hebrew-Arabic Israeli drama *Our Boys* (2019) and the Spanish-language comedy *Los Espookys* (2019-2022) – would follow this model, but *My Brilliant Friend* was the first to establish it (Roxborough, 2018).

history of *My Brilliant Friend* is, in many respects, embedded in a 'time capsule', intricately linked to a prior coproduction between HBO and Wildside: the television series *The Young Pope*, created by Academy Award-winning director Paolo Sorrentino. A particularly interesting point about how *My Brilliant Friend* initiated is provided by Mieli's response when asked, during the interview, 'Who went to HBO?' to which he replies: 'I did. I believe the answer is *The Young Pope*. *The Young Pope* has a special history. It was *The Young Pope* that helped me establish a solid relationship of trust with HBO' (Mieli, 2019, my translation). This statement encapsulates an essential feature of transnational coproduction as a process with porous boundaries, sometimes even resembling a sort of continuum (from *The Young Pope* to *My Brilliant Friend*), but characterised by prolonged negotiation, recalibration, and the careful alignment of divergent interests, values, and production logics. Let us take a closer look at how *The Young Pope* serves as a catalyst for *My Brilliant Friend*.

The coproduction of *The Young Pope* (2016) between Mieli's Wildside and HBO marked the first coproduction with a non-English-speaking production company following *Rome*. Lorenzo Mieli unhesitatingly ascribed the mutual trust built between HBO and his company Wildside to the coproduction effort represented by *The Young Pope*, created by Paolo Sorrentino shortly after winning an Academy Award for *La Grande Bellezza*. The project, underpinned by an original and high-quality screenplay, attracted HBO's interest due to the participation of Jude Law and Paolo Sorrentino. Furthermore, the proposal required limited investment from the network, restricted to the American market, making the project relatively low-risk. The project also benefitted from a strong European coproduction network, with collaboration from Sky and Canal+, which allowed Mieli to negotiate a limited investment from HBO. The combination of prestige and moderate risk convinced the network to invest.

The release of *The Young Pope* coincided with a period of significant executive restructuring at HBO, driven by strategic recalibrations in response to internal failures. The network had recently suffered the failure of *Vinyl* (2016), a costly and poorly received series (Porch, 2016), while Netflix was increasingly positioning as a powerful competitor. In 2016, a major leadership overhaul saw Casey Bloys, whose professional background is rooted in Los Angeles and comedy programming, replace Michael Lombardo as President of Programming (Birnbaum, 2016, Littleton, 2016, WBD, 2024, Low, 2020). This shift signalled a move away from the author-driven, New York-centred drama culture championed by Lombardo and Michael Ellenberg, HBO's former Head of Drama. Lorenzo Mieli identified this transition as indicative of diverging creative visions: one favouring commercially oriented entertainment (Bloys) and the other privileging narrative depth and auteurship (Lombardo and Ellenberg). The shift ultimately unsettled HBO's coproduction relationships, introducing new challenges for partners such as Wildside. This is precisely the case for Lorenzo Mieli, who coproduced *The Young Pope* under a different executive management team and subsequently had to engage with a newly appointed one. In May 2016, following Bloys' appointment and prior to the world premiere of *The Young Pope* at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival in September 2016, HBO's President of

Programming summoned Mieli to convey the following message:

> When I showed him *The Young Pope* in August 2016, he told me, 'I don't even think we're going to air it, I don't understand what you've made; we have an agreement, so we'll pay you and it'll be business as usual'. So, we left [Casey Bloys' office], we went to Venice[14], and there it went very well. HBO didn't promote *The Young Pope*.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation)

Mieli's account illustrates how transnational coproduction is shaped by shifting institutional temporalities, in which previously established trust can be destabilised by executive turnover, revealing how creative alignment depends on evolving organisational conditions rather than fixed contractual assurances. It is against this unsettled institutional backdrop that the project entered a critical phase of public exposure. On the one hand, the screening of the first two episodes at the Venice Film Festival garnered critical acclaim. On the other hand, the American trade press raised questions about how the series would be received in Italy (with the television debut scheduled for October 2016), and, more importantly, in the American territory, among the many other territories where the series had been sold. Events unfolded rapidly, and following the series' official Italian premiere in October 2016, an unexpected development occurred, one that ultimately reshaped and reconciled the tensions between HBO and Wildside. This turning point emerged not from within the formal structures of industrial control, but rather through a phenomenon that originated and gained traction online, outside the direct oversight of the production agents. In the words of Lorenzo Mieli:

> But then a 'miracle' happened because at that time, the phrase 'Young Pope' became a top trend on Twitter as a meme, and the Americans started mocking it: it became a phenomenon. I don't know why, but it made them laugh a lot. Not being Americans, Paolo [Sorrentino] and I looked at each other and wondered why. It became something that seemed a little grotesque, surreal, a bit 'cheap'. I don't know. So, for a month, social media went wild over *The Young Pope* – they were making memes, mocking it, creating parodies of how *The Young Pope* would look – it became a huge attention grabber. HBO was stunned, but it was still perceived as negative attention, so they were concerned. Then the first episode aired, and it broke records in viewership, despite HBO having promoted it very little or not at all.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation)

[14] In September 2016, the first two episodes of *The Young Pope* world premiered at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival, out of competition (Anderson, 2016).

This episode foregrounds how transnational trajectories can be redirected by outcomes emerging outside formal production control, as the temporally sequenced circulation of the series – from festival screening to online memification and eventual broadcast – reconfigured HBO's perception of risk and value. This reconfiguration unfolded rapidly in the autumn of 2016, when the series began to circulate online in the United States in ways that neither the producers nor the broadcaster had anticipated. What occurred in the autumn of 2016 is that the online sphere in the United States generated a myriad of memes about the series, quite unexpectedly for two key reasons. Firstly, at that point, the series had only premiered on the Italian television and had been distributed to other countries, but had not yet been released in the United States. Furthermore, HBO, having lost confidence in the project – which it no longer intended to broadcast – had, in the meantime, decided against launching an extensive promotional campaign. As a result, the subsequent memification appeared even more inexplicable. And so it happened, as explained by Mieli, that HBO found itself perplexed in the face of the nature of the buzz generated by the memification surrounding *The Young Pope*. On the one hand, it was an important signal of attention and interest generated around the theme of the series. On the other hand, given that much of the buzz consisted of parodies and mockery, there was also a certain degree of concern and uncertainty regarding how the series would be received if aired in the US. Ultimately, it was predictable that, with the production completed and in light of the substantial investment ('$45 million, making it Italy's most expensive TV production ever' at the time; Anderson, 2016b), *The Young Pope* would be broadcast in the United States. Its reception proved unexpectedly positive: the premiere was successful, and the series maintained strong performance levels, particularly given the highly unconventional and controversial narrative style of director Paolo Sorrentino.

HBO's trajectory in this case highlights a broader pattern in the global high-end drama industry: the realisation of a project is always the result of sustained negotiation, strategic positioning, and careful alignment of interests. In this instance, Casey Bloys' initial hesitation – stemming from concerns about the project's perceived risk – was met by Wildside's decision to move forward with the planned world premiere of the first two episodes at the Venice International Film Festival. This was followed by the domestic launch in Italy, a wave of meme-driven online circulation in the United States, and finally the American broadcast. Meanwhile, the Italian-American Francesca Orsi assumed the role of co-Head of Drama at HBO, and, in the wake of the phenomenal success of the "Ferrante Fever", both HBO President Richard Plepler and President of Programming Casey Bloys were persuaded to proceed with the project. This decision was set to mark a paradigm shift for HBO, both in its approach to content adaptation and, from an industrial perspective, in its strategy for engaging in coproductions.

The development trajectory of *My Brilliant Friend* is deeply entangled with the legacy of *The Young Pope* and is best understood through what Bondebjerg et al. (2017) define as the 'track record principle', namely, the idea that trust, built over previous collaborations, becomes an essential enabler

for complex and high-risk transnational coproductions. Yet it is precisely through this tension that the track record principle became decisive. Mieli's strategic response – to maintain the European launch of *The Young Pope*, premiering it at the Venice International Film Festival and proceeding with Italian and international releases – demonstrated both confidence in the work and resilience in the face of institutional hesitation. When the series garnered critical success and audience traction, HBO reassessed its stance, eventually airing the series in January 2017.

This moment of institutional recalibration restored trust and paved the way for *My Brilliant Friend*, which benefitted directly from the creative and industrial credibility accrued by Wildside. In summary, the coproduction of *My Brilliant Friend* exemplifies what Hilmes (2014) describes as the fluidity of the term 'coproduction' itself – a form shaped by continuous negotiation, mutual adjustment, and the struggle to balance cultural specificity with global resonance. Rooted in a legacy of trust, *My Brilliant Friend* does not emerge as a standalone project but as the outcome of an extended, trust-based negotiation, shaped by institutional memory, strategic calibration, and the enduring industrial currency of the producer's track record.

It is within this broader narrative of resilience – culminating in January 2017 with the US release of *The Young Pope* on HBO – that the genesis of *My Brilliant Friend* must be situated. As previously noted, capturing the complexity and non-linearity of such industrial processes requires guiding the reader through a series of temporal flashbacks and flashforwards. Having traced this extended flashback detailing the genesis of *My Brilliant Friend*, the analysis now returns to the narrative juncture previously suspended: the moment when Lorenzo Mieli, having already proposed an adaptation in Italian and Neapolitan dialect and encountered a degree of initial, albeit not absolute, hesitation from Casey Bloys, recognised the need to construct a financial arrangement that would be both equitable and compelling for HBO. This strategic move was shaped by the network's prior financial difficulties with RAI during the high-cost international coproduction of *Rome* (2005-2007), produced in collaboration with the BBC. As Dunleavy (2017, p.3) observes, complex serial drama fundamentally relies on 'budgets that enable the pursuit and achievement of high production values'. In this respect, the ambitious adaptation of a television drama that integrates both studio-based and on-location shooting – most notably through the construction of an open-air set replicating an entire neighbourhood (the 'Rione Luttazzi') and the deployment of cinematic techniques – demands considerable financial investment. The engagement of a full complement of film-industry professionals, including directors, cinematographers, costume designers, lighting specialists, and casting directors, further underscores the scale and resource intensity of such a production. While Dunleavy (2020) observes that 'its combination of Italian and American investors has helped facilitate *My Brilliant Friend* as an aesthetically and narratively sophisticated period drama', the financial framework assembled by Lorenzo Mieli was more intricate. It was shaped not only by his entrepreneurial trajectory but also by a previous success. Specifically, Mieli structures the funding model according to the principle of track record: if a similar configuration proved effective for *The Young Pope*, it could serve as a replicable model. The rationale underlying this financing strategy laid

in the extensive network of collaborators and institutional relationships that the Italian producer had cultivated over time.

In parallel with his career as a producer, in 2010 Lorenzo Mieli was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Fremantle Italia, the Italian branch of the British production and distribution company Fremantle (formerly FremantleMedia), part of the RTL Group. The relationship between Mieli and Fremantle had been both long-standing and strategically fruitful. It enabled him – first with *The Young Pope*, and later with *My Brilliant Friend* – to rely on such a consolidated distributor to pre-sell the first season of *My Brilliant Friend* to two major television players: Canal+ for the French market **(**Keslassy, 2018) and Sky Atlantic for the United Kingdom **(**Hazelton, 2018). While the series would later have been licensed to various European broadcasters and eventually distributed in over 150 countries worldwide, Fremantle's role in securing substantial financial backing from Canal+ and Sky Atlantic was pivotal. This support significantly altered the production landscape. Although HBO's investment was undoubtedly substantial – despite the fact that, as Dunleavy notes, the budget for Season 1 was never officially confirmed – the presence of a robust international distributor contributed to a broader, more diversified coproduction structure. Rather than reflecting a dual-axis financing model between Italy and the United States, the project evolved into a distributed financial constellation. Mieli characterised this coproduction network as follows:

> So, the geometry of the project looks like this. Wildside is the lead producer – they hold the rights and manage executive production, so they're the ones who handled the contracts. Wildside then shares 50% of everything with Fandango. So those two are the core producers.
>
> Then you've got the funders – who are also credited as coproducers, mainly for contractual and crediting purposes – and those are HBO, RAI, and TIMVision. HBO and RAI are the two main broadcasters, while TIMVision, even though it's technically an OTT platform, plays the role of a broadcaster here. So, those three are the broadcasters who financially backed the project.
>
> Wildside also brought in Umedia for post-production, and they're listed as a coproducer too because they tapped into the Belgian tax credit system – essentially contributing part of the financing that way.
>
> In terms of additional funding, they secured support from Creative Europe Media and from the Campania region through its Film Commission. And finally, Fremantle International – the distribution arm of Fremantle – took on international sales and helped close the budget by contributing a minimum guarantee.
>
> (Lorenzo Mieli, 2019, my translation)

Mieli's description of the project's 'geometry' frames transnational coproduction as a spatial

constellation of distributed partners produced through temporal sequencing, as financing, distribution, and institutional participation are layered progressively rather than fixed from the outset. The ordered progression of roles he outlines – from lead producers, to broadcasters, to post-production partners, public funds, and finally international sales – points to a sequence of interdependent arrangements through which risk is negotiated and redistributed over time, securing the project's viability.

At the level of production practice, the coproduction structure of *My Brilliant Friend* reflected what Lorenzo Mieli called a complex 'geometry' of partnership, balancing financial input and institutional roles across multiple players. In addition to RAI and HBO, the Italian streaming platform TIMVision functioned as a third principal financier and de facto broadcaster, with the domestic release strategically synchronised across both RAI and TIMVision. International post-production was entrusted to Belgium-based Umedia, which contributed financing through Belgian tax incentives, while additional support came from Creative Europe MEDIA funding and Italian regional Film Commissions. Fremantle's orchestration of international pre-sales to major broadcasters in France and the UK further reinforced the project's financial structure, contributing decisively to the closure of the production budget. This diversified coproduction model distributed risk across multiple partners, contrasting sharply with earlier, more centralised models like *Rome* (2005-2007), where HBO, BBC, and RAI bore unsustainably large financial burdens, ultimately contributing to the series' early termination (Cyrino, 2008).

By contrast, the *My Brilliant Friend* model offered a more sustainable and scalable configuration. It mitigated risk, decentralised creative control, and reassured global partners like HBO by avoiding the dominance of any single national entity. As with *The Young Pope*, HBO's role remained strategically limited to US distribution, reinforcing this recalibrated and internationally balanced production paradigm. It is precisely on these premises – namely, the construction of a financial model that avoided the excessive burden and risk that characterised earlier ventures such as *Rome* – that HBO ultimately decided to join the project and renew its collaboration with both Wildside and RAI. In this context, the financial arrangement itself emerged as a key instrument of resilience for the independent producer, functioning as a mechanism to reduce investor exposure while maintaining creative ambition.

The case of *My Brilliant Friend* illustrates how institutional frameworks of evaluation – particularly those concerning quality, risk, brand identity, and creative control – critically shape the trajectories of transnational coproduction. At HBO, such frameworks are not merely procedural; they serve as the principal mechanisms by which the network asserts its cultural authority and editorial coherence. In the context of high-end drama, this is particularly salient, as HBO attempts to reconcile its established identity with evolving global production dynamics (Hilmes, 2014). The commissioning of *My Brilliant Friend* marked a strategic inflection point: the network's first decision to produce a drama series in a foreign language, rather than adapting it into English. Francesca Orsi, co-head of drama at HBO, captured the significance of this shift when she affirmed, 'There are so many international shows we've seen in recent years where I thought, 'This is so riveting, why don't we just do this instead of adapting it into English?'' (Roxborough, 2018, italics mine). This rhetorical question

expressed not only a growing curiosity towards non-Anglophone narratives, but also a bold departure from a long-standing adaptation model that implicitly privileges English-language production.

At the heart of this strategic turn lies the question of language, no longer a barrier to be overcome, but a cultural resource to be valued. As Ferrante (2018) powerfully states:

> When I say that I'm Italian because I write in Italian, I mean that I'm fully Italian – but Italian in the only way that I'm willing to attribute to myself a nationality. I don't like the other ways; they frighten me, especially when they become nationalism, chauvinism, imperialism and reprehensibly use language to wall themselves in, either by cultivating a purity as pointless as it is impossible, or by imposing language through overwhelming economic power and weapons. It has happened, it happens, it will happen, and it's an evil that tends to cancel out differences and therefore impoverishes us all. *I prefer linguistic nationality as a point of departure for dialogue, an effort to cross over the limit, to look beyond the border – beyond all borders*.
>
> (Ferrante, 2018, italics mine)

Ferrante's formulation positions language as a cultural and relational precondition of transnational exchange, reframing linguistic specificity – one of the most salient expressions of cultural specificity – not as an obstacle to circulation, but as a generative starting point for dialogue. Her insistence on language as a means to 'look beyond the border – beyond all borders' articulates a conception of the transnational that is fully aligned with the argument advanced in this thesis: one that moves beyond the national frame not by negating it, but by profoundly and intimately incorporating it, in this instance through linguistic expression. It is on this basis that the unprecedented decision to produce and air *My Brilliant Friend* in Italian and Neapolitan, as HBO's first non-English-language drama, can be understood as a culturally grounded act of transnational production. Within this conceptual framing, Ferrante's statement resonates profoundly with HBO's editorial decision: it positions linguistic specificity as a foundation for cultural dialogue rather than exclusion, aligning language with values of openness, diversity, and mutual recognition. In this sense, *My Brilliant Friend* became not only a television adaptation but a symbolic act of transnational encounter.

The series also exemplifies what Newman and Levine (2012) have called the "cinematisation" of television, a strategy through which networks like HBO seek to elevate their content by drawing on the prestige of cinematic form. Director Saverio Costanzo adopted a stylistic register heavily indebted to Italian neorealism, while producer Lorenzo Mieli articulated his role in terms of a national cinematic legacy:

> […] the idea that a 100% Italian product would be placed in HBO's 'core' slot […] this was incredibly exciting for me, and Saverio Costanzo's decision to draw stylistically from Neorealism while simultaneously reconstructing Naples with absolute fidelity…

> those immense studios we built in Caserta, in short...*I had never done anything like that. It felt like making a kind of cinema* that perhaps was made in the late 60s-70s: large-scale film productions (at that time, of course, not television)...a mix of global influences...for me, that experience was even bigger than *The Young Pope*. *I felt so much excitement, but also fear*, because on the other side, if it fails, we risk losing a very significant opportunity, and so it was a huge risk.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mieli's juxtaposition of 'excitement' and 'fear', together with his emphasis on placing a '100% Italian product' within HBO's 'core' slot, foregrounds transnational coproduction as a temporally situated process of institutional risk-taking, in which moments of uncertainty and exposure are made visible through affective language, and national cinematic specificity is strategically amplified to recalibrate value, scale, and legitimacy within an increasingly complex global television ecosystem. It is precisely through this configuration that *My Brilliant Friend* can be understood not only as a formal innovation, but also as a strategic experiment in narrative transnationalism, exemplifying what Lotz (2014, 2017) describes as HBO's transition from a channel defined by aesthetics to one defined by institutional and strategic identity. Here, quality television is less about individual authorship than about the capacity of institutional ecosystems to absorb and legitimise cultural difference through sustained collaboration. As Mittell (2015) and Mayer (2011) argue, such forms of quality television are made possible not only by visionary leadership but by the labour, negotiation, and adaptive expertise of all partners involved. Ultimately, this project reveals how high-end drama coproductions evolve not merely through creative ingenuity, but through institutional flexibility, strategic alignment, and a shared willingness to reimagine the parameters of authorship, adaptation, and cultural legitimacy within a global media landscape.

Building on the development dynamics underpinning *My Brilliant Friend*, Lorenzo Mieli's interview narrative returns to a critical issue within high-end drama production: the degree of agency available to independent producers working within complex transnational frameworks. As *My Brilliant Friend* emerges from the creative and institutional groundwork laid during the earlier collaboration, Mieli reflects on the constraints and opportunities that come with navigating between powerful global partners and national production priorities. In this context, the concept of 'circumscribed agency' as defined by Havens and Lotz (2016) becomes particularly relevant. It captures how producers operate within structures that simultaneously enable and constrain their decision-making – structures shaped by economic dependencies, institutional hierarchies, and cultural negotiations.

Mieli's self-reflexive account of the independent producer's role[15], set within the global context of high-end drama coproduction, offers a profound and insightful reflection on the specificity of this role, which extends far beyond its business dimension. Rather, it should be understood as the first link in a complex creative chain, one that historically characterises the Italian production system and has its

origins in film production. Mieli described the porous and nuanced role of the Italian producer in high-end drama series in the following terms:

> If you go to America, there is *little attention paid to the producer* [of indie productions], very little. There is attention in the market, of course. But there is less attention to the identifying brand of a certain type of product with a specific production. In Italy, both film producers and now high-end drama producers – from this new wave, there are two or three of us – we actually find ourselves being *somewhat like publishers, meaning we almost have editorial lines*.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mieli's analogy between the independent producer and a 'publisher' foregrounds agency as a relational and historically situated practice rather than an abstract capacity for control. By invoking the notion of an 'editorial line', his account frames transnational coproduction as a process in which agency is exercised over time through the cumulative articulation of values, thematic orientations, and stylistic commitments, operating within, rather than outside, the structural constraints of global production ecosystems. Building on this understanding, the interview further clarifies how such an editorial line functions in practice for an Italian producer engaged in high-end drama production. Rather than a purely managerial device, it operates as a guiding framework akin to those developed by large media organisations – such as public service broadcasters, streaming platforms, or print publishers – structuring decisions about content development and positioning. Mieli emphasises that, in order to stand out and assert a position in the global landscape of high-end drama coproduction, it is essential to define and sustain a consistent set of ideological, thematic, or stylistic commitments. Grounded in specific values and perspectives, these commitments direct a production company's approach to content selection, framing, and presentation, ultimately shaping its positioning within both national and global industries.

During the discussion of the successful partnership model established for *My Brilliant Friend*, Mieli extends his reflection to the future role of the independent producer. This firm stance, within a self-reflective narrative rich in insights on the future of roles and agency in the global high-end drama production landscape, stems from an intellectually honest reflection on the creative autonomy an independent producer can exercise when imagining, negotiating, and structuring successful partnership

[15] The term independent producer is used here to refer to the producers directly interviewed, such as those from 13 Marzo (*The Name of the Rose*) and Lux Vide (*Medici*), even though most major drama-focused companies – including Lorenzo Mieli's Wildside – have sold majority shares to large foreign groups since 2017. While Wildside, founded by Lorenzo Mieli and acquired by Fremantle in 2015, is no longer independent in legal terms, producers retain editorial autonomy. Thus, the label remains valid for the purposes of this research.

models. In relation to *My Brilliant Friend*, Mieli emphasised that the project represented an exception rather than a standard. As he compellingly argued:

> This model – imagining a two-way dialogue between HBO and RAI – on the one hand, *it was financially enough for us*, and adding a third partner would have been complicated…*This model is borrowed from cinema, meaning having a producer who brings broadcasters into a project*. In the past [in cinema], it could have been film distribution in two or three countries, and you had control, the creative lead of the project, yet knowing that the ones paying wanted to have their say. But this model allows you to maintain creative lead. Mainly because, in fact, you're selling a license for the rights for a certain period to these partners, and then you still have the rest of the world to sell and distribute to. It's the model of *The Young Pope*, it's the model of Ferrante [*My Brilliant Friend*]. I believe it will have a short life, alas, or at least a cyclical one.
>
> (Lorenzo Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mieli's reflection frames transnational coproduction as a historically contingent configuration rather than a stable or scalable model, explicitly situating producer-led arrangements within a temporal horizon marked by cyclicality and impending transformation. His emphasis on the model's likely 'short life' underscores how agency in high-end drama production is conditioned by shifting industrial preconditions, in which control, licensing structures, and territorial rights are progressively reconfigured under multiplatform pressures. This perspective is echoed in Mieli's own retrospective account of the business model developed for *My Brilliant Friend*, which, by drawing explicitly on a cinematic tradition in which producers occupied a central coordinating role, appears, in hindsight, to be approaching the limits of its historical viability.

As Dunleavy (2020) theorises, two dominant models have emerged in the multiplatform era: 'direct commissioning', where global streamers like Netflix fully control local productions aimed at international audiences (e.g., Netflix originals like *Dark*, *The Rain* and *Home for Christmas*), and 'cross-platform coproduction', which involves collaboration between national broadcasters and international networks (e.g., *My Brilliant Friend*, *Babylon Berlin*, *Anne with an E*, and *His Dark Materials*). While the former bypasses national specificity, the latter negotiates it, balancing public service goals with commercial imperatives (Hilmes, 2014). Both models, Dunleavy argues, enable culturally specific, non-English-language dramas to circulate globally, blending local authenticity with international reach.

By converging Mieli's insights from his experience with the theoretical reflections of Dunleavy, two interesting considerations emerge. The first concerns the model that Dunleavy attributes to *My Brilliant Friend*, which she defines as a 'cross-platform coproduction' (Dunleavy, 2020, p.346). While

the collaboration can be broadly framed as occurring between two distinct 'platforms' – namely, a traditional public broadcaster (RAI) and a premium cable network (HBO) – characterising this transnational coproduction primarily in terms of its two principal financiers risks a reductive interpretation that overlooks the complexity of its industrial, editorial, and cultural dynamics. Not only does this perspective neglect the real dynamics and key agents who have driven the development from the outset – thereby diminishing the producer's role both within industry discourse and in media scholarly analysis – but also overlooks the underlying reasons and dynamics that contribute to the rebalancing of power within the partnership (which is authentically transnational in nature). This rebalancing, in turn, significantly impacts the creative management of the project.

The second consideration emerging from Dunleavy's delineation of two transnational coproduction approaches pertains to the first model, termed 'direct commissioning'. In this approach, a commissioning network, typically a streaming platform such as Netflix, holds full control over the development, without requiring the involvement of national broadcasters. This model directly aligns with the concern raised by Mieli regarding the projected diminishing of the producer's role. In the words of Mieli:

> What's happening right now [early 2019] is that, first Netflix, then Amazon, now Apple, and even Warner with HBO are going global with their own OTT platforms, and Disney will also be going global with theirs. So *the really 'global' model – not 'transnational' like in this case – but meaning 'all rights forever'* will mean that these platforms will say: 'No problem, I'll finance everything because I'm in France, Italy, Spain, etc.'. But there will be an attempt, which we're already seeing…there will be two types of products: first, the flagship ones, meaning we'll need to work with Cuaron, Scorsese, etc. (it's clear I can't say to Scorsese: 'I will control the editorial side of the product'); and second, for everything that's not a flagship, which is 90% of the production, *we will be treated as executive producers*.
>
> (Lorenzo Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

This passage marks an illustrative moment within the research encounter itself, in which Mieli explicitly situates his account in relation to broader discourses of transnational television by contrasting what he terms a 'truly global' model with the transnational configuration examined in this thesis. His reflexive use of categories such as 'all rights forever', alongside the differentiation between 'flagship' projects and the remaining '90%' of production, demonstrates how industry practitioners actively theorise contemporary production regimes, articulating their own position within, and against, emerging global paradigms. Mieli's distinction between the 'global' and the 'transnational' is anchored in the contractual horizon signalled by 'all rights forever', which marks a structural shift from territorially bounded licensing to perpetual platform ownership and constitutes a significant rupture with earlier understandings of spatial transnationalism. The bifurcation he draws – where

producers are ‘treated as executive producers’ outside the narrow category of ‘flagship’ projects – makes explicit how agency is redistributed under direct commissioning, increasingly displaced from local production actors and reconfigured according to status, scale, and platform control. Read in this way, Mieli’s account frames the erosion of producer agency not as a sudden outcome but as the result of a sequence of interdependent events, beginning with the structural precondition of platform-led consolidation in the multiplatform era, crystallised in the logic of ‘all rights forever’, and unfolding through successive reallocations of rights, control, and creative authority over time.

As defined by Dunleavy, the ‘direct commissioning’ approach constitutes a fundamental challenge to the role of the independent producer, a point that Mieli articulates with particular clarity and precision. In doing so, he offers a comparative analytical reflection between the ‘transnational’ model implemented in *My Brilliant Friend* and the ‘truly global’ model, encapsulated by the phrase ‘all rights forever’, within whichthe battle over rights is central. In this part of the interview, Mieli describes what he understands as an inevitable path unfolding due to the overwhelming power of streaming platforms. This power is embedded in what is described as a ‘truly global’ model, distinct from a transnational framework, and is understood to signal the progressive erosion, and eventual dissolution, of the independent producer’s agency, effectively relegating this historically central figure to the role of a mere executive producer. Mieli thus articulates an account that, on the one hand, underscores the distinctiveness of the Italian independent producer, while on the other, foregrounds the desire to “harmonise with” the role of the showrunner. Although this role is intrinsic to the American production system, Mieli perceives it as the closest counterpart to his own, which he defines through a hybrid fusion of business acumen and creativity, blending skills and knowledge. In this context, he conceives his role as simultaneously representative of and adaptable to this intersection of worlds, where business and creative logics converge without erasing his professional identity. This reflection culminates in a self-reflexive articulation of his role, structured as a compelling discursive crescendo through which Mieli renders his position with notable clarity:

> [At that point, we producers] will have every interest in just doing executive production. We would only earn from executive production, which means much less. They [the platforms] will say, ‘No, but look, I’ll compensate you for what you lose in rights sales, etc.’. Maybe economically we’ll earn a little more from the executive production, but *we’ll lose intellectual property forever, worldwide. There’s no compensation that can make up for that*.
>
> In Italy, the model we follow, which ultimately stems from the great international cinema, is one where the producer and director, or producer-writer-director, are the showrunners. *We don’t have showrunners here. I consider myself a kind of showrunner in some ways*, because I’m not someone who organises the sets. I’m the one who has the ideas, develops them, proposes them, and keeps them alive with the talents I attract around these projects or who have brought me these projects. I defend them and act as

> a shield between those who pay and air the project and those who create it and shoot. I act as a mediator. The moment they tell you, '*I'm doing a total buy-out, you do what I tell you*' the negotiating power is minimal. That's a certainty.
>
> (Lorenzo Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

The decisive hinge in Mieli's account is the moment of 'total buy-out', where the shift in rights ownership compresses negotiation and renders 'negotiating power…minimal', which he explicitly frames as 'a certainty'. By describing himself as a 'shield' and 'mediator' between those who 'pay and air' and those who 'create and shoot', he locates the producer's agency in relational labour exercised across the chain of production, an interdependent sequence that is structurally weakened when control is absorbed upstream by streaming platforms. This articulation clarifies how, in the context of global streaming, producer agency is progressively displaced from ownership and negotiation towards a more precarious role of mediation, a shift that carries particular weight in production systems such as Italy's, where intellectual property has historically underpinned creative authority. Against this backdrop, he explores how the Italian producer's role, traditionally tied to cinema, can evolve within a transnational framework. *My Brilliant Friend*, he argued, exemplifies this evolution: though not shaped by an American-style showrunner, the series is a transnational achievement in which the producer becomes a creative anchor, conceiving, developing, mediating, and defending the work.

Mieli integrates culturally embedded practices of Italian filmmaking with responsibilities commonly associated with the global showrunner, thereby embodying a hybridised professional figure adept at negotiating the intersection of national production traditions and transnational industrial expectations. Through a vivid metaphor associated with the definition of a "production house", Mieli delineates the distinctive traits and corporate philosophy of Wildside, which is entirely centred on authorship. He envisions both the present and a future in which his signature as a producer will be associated with the authors who choose to work with him. As Mieli compellingly articulated:

> We [Wildside] for true, real attitude, what we've tried to become and have started being from the beginning is a *production company of authors*: Paolo Sorrentino, [Saverio] Costanzo, [Elena] Ferrante, now with [Luca] Guadagnino we're doing a series for HBO, etc. But there are not just Italian authors: we'll do a series with Pablo Larrain[16]. The idea is to be very Italian. We did the series based on [Niccoló] Ammaniti's book (a huge success in France). In short, we aim to be a production company of authors, where the brand is more Sorrentino than *The Young Pope*, more Ferrante than *My Brilliant Friend*, more Costanzo, more Guadagnino than the series we'll make with him, more [Marco] Bellocchio (now we're doing a series with him)[17]. [The idea is to] become a place…I strongly believe in this linguistic anomaly that our companies are called 'production houses'. I always work from home, a bit like publishing houses.

> *'Production house' fits perfectly with Wildside's philosophy*, meaning a place where in one room you have Guadagnino, in another one Sorrentino, in another one Bellocchio developing projects. In one *room* there's Costanzo, in another one Ferrante (who, of course, is not there because she doesn't show up, but ideally, there's even a room for her), in one there's Ammaniti, in another Paolo Giordano, etc. In short, this is a bit what *My Brilliant Friend* demonstrates. Because then [the authors] will come to us. Let me give you a silly example: Antonio Scurati, who wrote the book *M* on Mussolini, when he saw *My Brilliant Friend*, immediately called and said, 'I want to give you the rights'. This is something that never happens. Usually, an author puts the rights up for sale, and then there's a bidding war among producers. [...] 'I want you to develop the Mussolini series based on my book'.[18] *It's a bit what I hope will happen: that authors come to us*.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mieli's metaphor of the 'production house' – explicitly compared to 'publishing houses' – frames transnational production capacity as an infrastructural precondition: a 'place' articulated through multiple 'rooms', where authorial development is sustained internally rather than delegated to external commissioning systems characteristic of other production traditions. The causal sequence he outlines – '*My Brilliant Friend* demonstrates' this, and 'then [the authors] will come to us' – connects this spatial imaginary to a projected outcome in which sustained internal development consolidates reputational authority and facilitates privileged access to future intellectual properties, a dynamic crystallised in the illustrative episode he recounts when an author 'immediately called' to entrust adaptation rights. On this basis, Mieli frames his production philosophy as a creative *manifesto* grounded in authorial control, where the producer serves not only as a facilitator but as the custodian of a shared artistic vision.

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[16] Reference here is to feature film *Maria* (2024) about the last days of iconic opera singer Maria Callas by Chilean multi-award-winning filmmaker Pablo Larraín Matte and starring Angelina Jolie in the lead role (Vlessing, 2024).

[17] Reference is to the television Series *Portobello* by Italian film director and screenwriter Marco Bellocchio (Vivarelli, 2024).

[18] Reference is to Sky eight-part drama series *M. Son of The Century* (2025) based on the award-winning international bestselling novel by Antonio Scurati (*M. Son of the Century*, 2018), and chronicling the rise of fascism in Italy (Ritman, 2022). The series was directed by British filmmaker Joe Wright, while Stefano Bises and Davide Serino adapted the script. The series was produced by Sky Studios, Lorenzo Mieli and French Pathé. Mieli did not produce the series under Wildside (the company behind *My Brilliant Friend*, which he left after *My Brilliant Friend*), but under a new production company called The Apartment Pictures, which he founded in December 2019, and which is controlled by Fremantle. At the time of writing this research, both Mieli and Gianani (co-founder of Wildside) have exited their Fremantle-owned companies – The Apartment and Wildside, respectively – to found a new company called Our Films, launched in early 2024 and controlled by production powerhouse Mediawan (Keslassy, 2024).

His concept of Wildside as a 'production house' inhabited by authors underlines this ethos. To protect this model – exemplified by *My Brilliant Friend* – Mieli outlined a strategy centred on strong internal development and financial independence. For him, maintaining creative authority within transnational partnerships requires early risk-taking and economic readiness; without this, the producer's voice risks being sidelined at key development stages. It is within this delicate phase of negotiation and structuring that the producer's long-term position is either secured or undermined. Hence, Mieli uses the vocabulary of gambling to describe the nature of negotiations between an independent producer and large networks or streaming platforms:

> *To curb the overpowering influence of OTTs* in the present and the future, it's clear that if I develop a series with my money, I develop the script, I choose the director, I choose the cast, then I can go to everyone and say: 'who wants it? I already have a well-defined product'. But if I go with two pages, a vague idea, and I don't have the money to write the series, then Netflix will pay for the scripts, and they can tell me whatever they want about the scripts. So, you need financial power behind it. We [Wildside] develop everything internally. For example, about the series by Guadagnino: I haven't even closed the contract with them [HBO] yet, and we're shooting in May[19]. I'll keep them in the loop, because I've already given them all the scripts. If you like it [the production], it's already there. Clearly, we are in conversation. But developments [meaning 'development processes'] are these giant baskets that networks have, where they give everyone a chip to take the rights from the start, and then later, we see what happens. To be competitive, for me, *you must start with a solid structure and say: 'I'll do it anyway'. You kind of bluff*, because you risk a lot of capital, but on the other hand, you're very strong creatively and productively.
>
> The other thing I hope for – and it's unfortunate that all these OTTs are American – is that for the first time in history, we will find 100% of the world's audiovisual production being American in the coming years. *The real missing link and the impossibility of this happening is the existence of a major European OTT that can compete* with these [Americans], but I don't see any sufficiently strong financial players on the horizon who could sustain a competition […] All of this, in the medium-to-long term, will be serious.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

[19] Here Mieli refers to May 2019, considering that the time the interviewee is speaking is January 2019.

The contrast Mieli draws between approaching platforms with 'a well-defined product' and arriving with 'two pages, a vague idea' makes the precondition explicit: whoever funds scripts and development can 'tell me whatever they want about the scripts'. His characterisation of platform development slates as 'giant baskets', in which networks buy in with 'a chip', alongside the verbs 'bluff' and 'risk a lot of capital', frames agency as a temporally anticipatory strategy, secured upstream through early internal development and progressively exposed to escalating asymmetry in the 'medium-to-long term', which he warns 'will be serious'. Taken together, these reflections show how, under conditions of structural asymmetry, producer agency is not a fixed position but a continuously negotiated stance, sustained through pre-emptive investment, calculated risk-taking, and the capacity to retain leverage at the earliest stages of development. His approach exemplifies the tactical expertise required to operate in an uneven industry landscape, one in which institutional leverage is systematically skewed in favour of larger players. In this sense, and in line with Havens and Lotz's (2016) account, independent producer agency does not emerge as a stable position, but as a condition that must be continually negotiated – through early risk-taking, long-term strategic vision, and positional manoeuvring – if creative authority is to remain a meaningful and defensible stake in transnational drama production. It is from within this negotiated space that moments of innovation acquire their broader significance. Within the framework of transnational coproduction involving Italy, Mieli locates such innovation in the capacity of producers to generate outcomes that exceed the immediate project and gesture towards lasting industrial and cultural transformation, as he articulates in the following excerpt:

> It was a first time, one that I thought and hoped would be epoch-making, almost more so than *The Young Pope*. Five or six years ago, the idea that a series in Neapolitan could be on HBO was unthinkable. *This first time, I thought, if it succeeds, it will truly change the TV drama landscape*, in the sense that…*beyond us*…because then it would mean that, if it works, the Americans could start airing French, German, and other European series in prime time. That had never happened before.
>
> (Mieli, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

This passage constitutes a culminating moment in Mieli's self-reflexive account, in which transnational coproduction is articulated not merely as an industrial configuration but as a practice carrying broader historical implications for television drama. His repeated emphasis on 'a first time', 'unthinkable', and 'epoch-making' marks a heightened reflexive awareness of acting at a turning point within the television drama landscape. The affective register through which he frames this moment – anticipating both success and its capacity to contribute to changing the TV drama landscape 'beyond' everyone and everything (see Introduction for an analysis of the emblematic phrase 'beyond us') – signals how transnationality here emerges as an outcome of prolonged negotiation and strategic risk-

taking, realised through the maximal assertion of cultural specificity, here most decisively through language. This legacy is thus the result of prolonged and complex negotiations among diverse production partners. While the transnational coproduction model can lead to significant achievements through these multifaceted interactions, it must also be acknowledged that when independent producers are unable to assert their vision with sufficient clarity or intensity, the resulting production – both as a process and as a media output – often mirrors that diminished influence. Outcomes are shaped proportionally by the level of strategic engagement, assertiveness, and sustained input applied during the ongoing phases of negotiation, exchange, and adjustment that coproduction between asymmetrical partners requires.

To conclude, the case of *My Brilliant Friend* offers a rich and multifaceted illustration of how agency is exercised within the complex institutional, cultural, and industrial ecosystem of a transnational coproduction. It involves the quintessential premium American cable network, HBO, alongside a robust Italian production base consolidated around the project, as well as additional European partners. Drawing on Dunleavy's (2009b) understanding of the television producer as a key intermediary operating across intersecting layers of creative vision, industrial strategy, and editorial negotiation, this case illustrates how individual agency is shaped – and variously circumscribed, based on the production ecology of each case – by broader structural dynamics. Producer Lorenzo Mieli's approach resonates with Lotz, Havens, and Tinic's (2009) observation that media industries are constituted by ongoing struggles between institutional forces and individual practices, as he navigates shifting leadership at HBO, recalibrates editorial alignments with RAI, and tactically defends the cultural specificity of the project. Through this project, Mieli reconfigures his role as a producer, partially transcending the traditional national functions typically associated with the Italian production model, assuming functions that somehow resemble those of the American showrunner, albeit without the formal overarching authority typically associated with that position in its original industrial context.

This transfusion and coalescence of competences – what may be interpreted as a form of role experimentation enabled by the affordances of transnational coproduction – illustrates what Dunleavy (2021) describes as the producer's need to negotiate creative control by balancing the demands of both domestic and international partners, while managing the contrasting institutional logics and cultural expectations that emerge across multiple platforms. In this case, one need only consider the mediating role Mieli played between multiple stakeholders in the partnership, notably between two broadcasters as structurally and culturally distinct as HBO and RAI. In other words, Dunleavy invites reflection on transnationality as it applies to the reconfiguration of production roles – an affordance of the transnational coproduction framework that may be understood as a form of hybridisation of production functions in the multiplatform era, where agency is frequently negotiated across divergent cultural and industrial contexts, and even individual roles are rearticulated along increasingly fluid boundaries of professional competence. Throughout the development process, Mieli exercises Havens and Lotz's 'circumscribed agency' (2016), embodied in his ability to influence outcomes is neither wholly

autonomous nor entirely determined, but instead emerges through a combination of strategic, incremental decision-making, institutional positioning, and the mobilisation of reputational capital.

As Pearson (2010) reminds us, such agency is also performative, in other words, it is asserted through various acts of branding, authorship, and creative alignment that signal trustworthiness and credibility (hence legitimacy) within industry networks. Mieli's decision to align with Elena Ferrante's authorial voice from the outset, his commitment to linguistic authenticity, and his resilience in defending the project through moments of institutional doubt, all reflect this layered, performative mode of agency. Ultimately, *My Brilliant Friend* exemplifies how agency in transnational coproduction is enacted not in isolation but within evolving processes of negotiation, friction, and cultural brokerage. The project's success, both critically and industrially, demonstrates how producers can navigate asymmetrical conditions to "co-author" narratives – precisely as reconfigured producers in a transnational mode – that maintain cultural specificity and depth while achieving global reach. In this way, the case underscores the significance of individual strategic agency in shaping the shifting geographies and narrative-aesthetic configurations of contemporary high-end television drama, particularly as facilitated by the transnational coproduction model. This is further illuminated by the case of *The Name of the Rose*, the third and final case study, to which the analysis now turns, examining the dynamics that shaped the project during its early development and their broader implications for the exercise of agency in transnational coproduction.

Case Study 3 – *The Name of The Rose*

The 2019 television adaptation of *The Name of the Rose* is an eight-part historical drama miniseries based on Umberto Eco's internationally acclaimed eponymous 1980 novel. Created and directed by Giacomo Battiato for RAI, the series unfolds in the 14th century and centres on the figure of William of Baskerville, played by John Turturro, a Franciscan friar who investigates a series of mysterious deaths at a secluded abbey, unravelling a plot steeped in theological, political, and philosophical intrigue (IMDb, 2019).

The miniseries is a coproduction between Italian companies 11 Marzo Film and Palomar, with international distribution handled by the Tele München Group. It marked a significant collaboration between Italian and international production teams, exemplifying a model of transnational partnership that prioritised both global appeal and cultural specificity. As Niola (2024) observes, the project reflects a strategic convergence of industrial resources and creative visions aimed at positioning Italian historical drama within the global high-end television market. As commissioning broadcaster, RAI assumed a central role in maintaining creative oversight and safeguarding the adaptation's European identity, understood here as the constellation of cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic values that inform Umberto Eco's original novel. These values, profoundly anchored in the intellectual heritage of

European humanism, medieval scholasticism, and political-theological critique, do not only constitute the thematic core of the narrative, but also its epistemological and historiographical orientation.

Directed by Giacomo Battiato, a seasoned filmmaker with extensive international experience, the series reflects his scholarly approach and attention to historical detail. Battiato also contributed to the screenplay, which underwent multiple revisions to balance faithfulness to Eco's novel with the demands of serialised storytelling. Not only did John Turturro take the leading role as William of Baskerville, but he also played a significant role in shaping the adaptation through his creative contributions. The cast featured notable actors such as Rupert Everett as Bernard Gui, Michael Emerson as Jorge of Burgos, and Damian Hardung as Adso of Melk, alongside a talented ensemble of European and American performers. Shooting took place starting in January 2018, primarily at the historic Cinecittà Studios in Rome and other Italian locations. The production showcased meticulous set designs, recreating the abbey and its labyrinthine library with remarkable detail. Advanced technical equipment was employed, including state-of-the-art lighting and staging techniques, to create an atmospheric depiction of medieval Europe (Cinecittá, 2019, Italy for Movies, 2019a).

With a budget exceeding €26 million (Vivarelli, 2017a), the series soon became one of the most ambitious projects in the Italian television of that period, as well as being one of the three flagship coproductions in RAI's new season, aiming to compete with globally recognised high-end productions. The series aired across various platforms internationally, with its debut on RAI in March 2019. It later reached audiences in Germany, France, and the United States through networks such as Tele München and Sundance TV. The premiere episodes in Italy attracted a 27% share of the audience, demonstrating the strong anticipation and viewership for the adaptation. While the reception varied across markets, the series succeeded in reigniting interest in Eco's novel, while contributing to positioning Italian book-to-screen adaptations in the global landscape of high-end television drama (APA, 2019). In what follows, I will provide a comprehensive analysis of the development processes behind the television adaptation of *The Name of the Rose*. This analysis explores the complexities and intricacies of the project's development stage, primarily drawing on the interview account of Matteo Levi, independent producer of the series.

Matteo Levi's career as a producer began in 1981 by founding the production company Tangram Film and taking on the role of executive producer for many internationally focused television and film productions. In 2003, he founded the production company 11 Marzo Film – of which he is President and Managing Director – with the aim of producing socially engaged television series intended for prime time on Rai and Mediaset. In 2018, he embarked on the television adaptation *The Name of the Rose*, based on Umberto Eco's novel. Interviewed directly by the author of this research in 2019, Matteo Levi began his account of the project's genesis by recalling the initial difficulties encountered in securing the rights to *The Name of the Rose*. The first obstacle, he explained, came from the powerful publishing house behind Eco, Bompiani, which did not initially embrace the possibility of a serial adaptation, instead informing the producer that it would need time to consider the proposal. In the words of Levi:

> I immediately got in touch with Bompiani, who held the rights to the book, but, just as quickly, I received a negative response. They told me: 'we do have plans for this book... we've received other proposals, other calls from very important international groups […] We want to take the time to figure out which direction to go in a few years'. This was also because they got thirty-year protection rights following the release of the film *The Name of the Rose*. So, for about a year, nothing more happened.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's account foregrounds transnational coproduction as a temporally conditioned process rather than an immediate expansion across borders. Phrases such as 'for about a year, nothing more happened' and the reference to 'thirty-year protection rights' locate the project within a sequence of deferred decisions, revealing how historically sedimented contractual frameworks operate as structural preconditions that must be negotiated over time before any transnational configuration can even begin to emerge. These dynamics exemplify the tensions that emerge when historically entrenched institutions – such as legacy publishing houses – are confronted with transformative pressures from rapidly evolving sectors, such as the global media industry. The publishing house Bompiani's refusal to yield control over the intellectual property, despite growing international interest, reveals a form of cultural and strategic rigidity. This protective stance, rooted in the long-standing contractual terms and symbolic authority associated with the novel, reflects a desire to safeguard editorial autonomy and institutional identity in the face of external demands. However, such inflexibility also risks foreclosing opportunities for innovation and international visibility. Furthermore, the environmental pressures at play here – namely, the increasing interest from international producers and distributors – heightened the tension between the publisher's resistance to change – namely, the willingness to relinquish the rights to the book – and the competing forces coming from the global high-end television drama arena that exerted external pressures on the producer, in order to join the project in some capacity. Levi's perseverance through the effort of securing the book's rights shows the producer's understanding of how his stance fundamentally enabled change processes: in other words, he soon perceived that the external pressures from global industry actors had given impetus to his effort, thus counteracting Bompiani's inertia.

Levi further elaborated on the origins of the project by reflecting on his reaction to the difficulties posed by Bompiani's initial refusal to release the rights to *The Name of the Rose*. Faced with Bompiani's inflexible stance, Levi demonstrated resilience and adaptability in responding to the protective mechanism surrounding the book's rights. Despite the challenges posed by the publisher's position, Levi maintained his identity and steadfast belief that he could carve out a place for himself among the numerous producers competing for the book's rights, even from his position of "disadvantage" compared to larger, more powerful international companies. Through this resilient process, Levi highlighted the pivotal role of Mario Andreose – Bompiani editor-in-chief and long-time

collaborator of Eco – who, by mediating between the producer and Eco, enabled Levi to implement a successful strategy to secure the writer's trust:

> I got in touch with Mario Andreose, who was Bompiani editor-in-chief and also one of Umberto Eco's closest friends. I started talking with him until I had an idea (an absolutely simple idea, but as often happens, the simplest ideas are the winning ones) which was the following: *letting Umberto Eco know that I was committed to doing everything I could to ensure that this project remained under a strong Italian editorial control, which it would be produced in Italy, and it would be led by RAI*.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Levi's strategy reframes spatial anchoring as a precondition for transnational development rather than its opposite. His insistence on 'strong Italian editorial control', on the project being 'produced in Italy' and 'led by RAI' demonstrates how the assertion of national institutional leadership functions here as an enabling condition within a sequential negotiation process, securing trust and legitimacy before any expansion beyond the national framework could be contemplated. On this basis, Andreose's mediation enabled a first interaction between Levi and Eco, opening a channel through which the project could be reframed in terms that resonated with the author's institutional and cultural commitments. Levi raised with Eco the possibility of adapting his novel into a serial form, explicitly assuring him that, in the event of an agreement, the project would be creatively led by RAI. Given Eco's early career within RAI and his well-known sense of attachment to the Italian public broadcaster, this condition functioned as a decisive prerequisite for the project's positive development[20]. Nonetheless, as a distinguished semiotician, Eco left behind a series of "traces" – a handful of interviews, very few publicly available notes addressed to RAI's Head of Drama Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta, and other fragments – which, when carefully interpreted, shed light on his engagement with the project. While limited in number, these traces offer a glimpse into the conditions under which his participation was considered. In particular, they reveal the importance he placed on RAI's involvement as a non-negotiable condition for his support of the adaptation. Although Eco initially expressed reservations regarding the transformation of his novel into a television series, the assurance of RAI's creative leadership appeared to ease his concerns and created the conditions for a more constructive engagement with the project. Levi concluded his account of the genesis of the show

[20] At this point, it is necessary to provide a preliminary clarification regarding the limited – yet significant – availability of materials and data that document Eco's involvement in the project. This limitation is ascribable to a few factors. The first is undoubtedly the novelist's premature passing in February 2016, which made it impossible to ascertain whether, and in what capacity, Eco might have actively participated in the project. Secondly, as will be further explored in Chapter 4 – which focuses on screenwriting (and where both Eco and Ferrante will be central to the analysis) – the scarcity of evidence also stems from the reluctance of several key professionals involved in the project to speak about it in detail. This hesitance may be linked to the increasing difficulties encountered during the screenwriting phase, which will be examined in Chapter 4.

by describing the crucial moments of gaining Umberto Eco's support and securing the rights to adapt *The Name of the Rose*:

> [This] quickly convinced Eco, because he always had a great love for RAI, both because he somehow started his career there, and also because he had a great respect and affection for the Italian public service broadcaster. In this respect, I was strongly supported by Tinny Andreatta [RAI's Head of Drama at the time], to whom I had mentioned the project. So, once Andreatta had also spoken about the project with Gubitosi, Rai's director general at the time, we organised a meeting: Andreose, Andreatta, and I. It was a very warm meeting in which we practically convinced Andreose and, consequently, Eco […] We went on a quick negotiation, followed by the contractual phase to option the book. When I signed that contract, which was also a contract with Umberto Eco, it was one of the most emotional days of my life. I signed the contract with Eco in 2014, and then we aired the show in 2019.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's account frames the acquisition of Eco's support as the culmination of a temporally extended sequence of interdependent negotiations, in which institutional alignment functioned as a decisive precondition. References to the 'meeting', the 'contractual phase', and the five-year interval between signing in 2014 and airing in 2019 bring into focus transnational coproduction as a process unfolding over time, while the affective intensity of 'one of the most emotional days of my life' marks the moment in which these accumulated negotiations finally coalesced into a concrete outcome.

With this phase concluded, Levi went on to recount how acquiring the rights to *The Name of the Rose* immediately generated significant international interest, attracting major production and distribution groups increasingly eager to collaborate:

> As soon as it became known that I had acquired the rights to this book, I started receiving phone calls from major production and distribution groups from all over the world, both European and non-European groups […] Some major distributors, including American ones, approached us. But, more importantly, among these groups, there were also those that initially aimed to lead the project by optioning the rights. In some cases, they requested to immediately bring on board additional screenwriters, potentially French or Spanish, alongside Porporati[21].
>
> In other cases, proposals would suggest German directors for this [project], and in many instances, the idea was to set up a co-production in such a way that a participant country's share into the coproduction would then oblige us to spend the same share in that European country.

(Levi, 2019, my translation)

This moment marks a rapid spatial expansion of the project's transnational horizon, activated immediately 'as soon as it became known' that the rights had been secured. Levi's references to interest from 'all over the world', including 'European and non-European' and 'American' groups, illustrate how transnational coproduction emerges here as an outcome of accumulated negotiations, reconfiguring the project into a spatially distributed constellation of potential partners. At the same time, proposals organised around territorially bound spending obligations – spectral remnants of the old Europudding model – make visible the tensions produced by this expansion, as they collide with a production environment in which power has been recalibrated and control is no longer anchored to territorial expenditure but to strategic positioning within a rebalanced transnational field.

Following this contractual closure, Levi was approached by numerous producers and distributors from around the world. Some of these producers had previously sought to acquire the rights from Bompiani, a venture in which Levi ultimately succeeded, as outlined earlier. In this context, some international groups emerged, demonstrating such strong interest in the project that they were even willing to join the partnership as "followers" rather than lead producers. Nevertheless, these potential partners – predominantly American companies – proposed to enter the project under terms that primarily favoured their own interests. Specifically, these proposals included "comprehensive packages" encompassing key development and production elements such as screenwriters, director, cast, and other creative craftspeople. Levi perceived these suggestions as top-down impositions that risked significantly undermining the narrative core of the project. Some of these interested parties even proposed joining the project by acquiring financial quotas that would result in a proportional allocation and management of artistic and creative decisions. In effect, Levi was presented with a return to the outdated 'Euro-pudding' television drama model – a standard coproduction framework of the 1990s – which transnational coproduction aims to transcend, particularly in terms of balancing power and creativity between partners.

Levi remained resolute in his rejection of these terms and proposals. As external pressures intensified, his stance became even more determined, evolving in the process as he navigated the complexities of this negotiation. In response to mounting demands, he reaffirmed his vision with heightened resolve, insisting that creative leadership remain firmly rooted in the Italian production context and under RAI's editorial guidance, in line with prior agreements and, significantly, in fidelity to Umberto Eco's legacy. This position was not merely strategic; it was ethically grounded in a producer's sense of custodial responsibility over the cultural and intellectual integrity of the source material.

[21] Andrea Porporati was the first screenwriter to be directly chosen by Eco for the treatment.

In so doing, Levi articulates a model of transnational collaboration that resists cultural dilution, envisioning a coproduction framework that preserves the authenticity of the narrative while embedding it within a broader European value system. His stance exemplifies a form of principled agency, whereby professional autonomy is exercised not only in defence of national creative control but also in service of safeguarding the epistemic and aesthetic continuity of the original work. The proposals Levi received from international production and distribution partners revealed rigid dynamics, rooted in practices and production models that clashed with his principles and objectives. Some took the form of dominant conventions – such as the imposition of a specific writing model and team – that Levi perceived as particularly intrusive, as explained here:

> Nowadays, there are big American agencies that offer you a full package [...]; they provide the screenwriter who works on Porporati's version, the director, the lead actor, which are the fundamental elements. Based on this, they also find you a budget. And then you will definitely have the executive production in Italy, and all that stuff.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's description of the 'full package' arrangement brings into view a structural precondition of television drama coproduction in which development, particularly within the American sphere, is front-loaded and spatially outsourced, compressing creative decision-making into pre-arranged configurations that leave little room for temporal negotiation or locally situated agency. If the 'full package' model exemplifies an entrenched form of structural rigidity associated with particular production cultures, other proposals Levi encountered pointed instead to a coproduction era believed to have been definitively surpassed, namely the Euro-pudding model, as previously noted. Levi's rejection of these proposals was articulated in terms that highlighted firm principles and a personal sense of responsibility, which he described as follows:

> I must say […] I wasn't convinced because I felt it would be very dangerous to start working together on a screenplay [...], and moreover, it conflicted with what I had somewhat taken as a personal commitment. I have always thought that *The Name of the Rose* should become an Italian project, with substantial international contribution, but *made in Italy*. In short, I believed it should also serve the development of the Italian TV drama industry. This was, for me, somewhat of a guiding principle of this journey.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

This formulation articulates transnational coproduction as a spatially ordered configuration rather than a homogenising one, with Levi's insistence on being 'made in Italy' while allowing for 'substantial international contribution' delineating a hierarchy of roles grounded in territorial leadership rather than mere participation. The phrase 'guiding principle of this journey', articulated in explicitly ethical

terms, further situates Levi's position within a temporally unfolding process, in which transnational coproduction is shaped by prior commitments that operate as normative preconditions guiding subsequent decisions. Taken together, these excerpts reveal how Levi's position within the development of *The Name of the Rose* is structured by two inseparable dynamics. Firstly, they expose the vulnerability of the independent producer's role within transnational systems that tend to reduce local actors to executive functions through pre-packaged development models. Secondly, they articulate a principled commitment, on the part of the independent producer, to Italian-led authorship as both a spatial and cultural anchor, particularly salient given the status of *The Name of the Rose* as a globally recognised Italian literary work embedded in European cultural and intellectual traditions, sustained over time through deliberate resistance to externally imposed production logics. It is at the intersection of these dynamics that Levi locates his self-described 'battle of resistance', a formulation that captures both the structural pressures he confronts and the circumscribed agency through which he seeks to contest them. Levi's concern regarding the marginalisation of the independent producer resonates closely with Lorenzo Mieli's reflections in *My Brilliant Friend*, where analogous pressures emerge in relation to platform-led development models, together pointing to a broader reconfiguration of producer agency across contemporary transnational drama. This 'battle of resistance' thus acquires its full analytical weight as the moment in Levi's reflective narrative where accumulated industrial, economic, and cultural pressures crystallise into deliberate opposition. The following excerpt gives concrete form to this stance, as Levi explicitly articulates the economic, creative, and cultural stakes involved in resisting pre-packaged international arrangements that, in his view, progressively marginalise the independent producer and erode editorial autonomy:

> But this [a pre-packaged deal] meant that, after I had the satisfaction of signing a contract with Umberto Eco, it truly meant letting go of everything. I would have had much less difficulty and probably would have made much more money because I had received some very important offers. However, it's clear that if you put yourself in the hands of an American director – which, by the way, I thought was wrong because *The Name of the Rose* represents, in my opinion, the essence of European culture and *I'm not sure how an American director could truly understand it in its real essence and depth* – I mean, I have experience in coproductions, but if you put yourself in the hands of a pre-arranged package that includes a big director, etc., the producer becomes entirely secondary and essentially has no say whatsoever. And so, on this, *I fought a battle of resistance, and then I continued to develop all the initial parts on my own*. I never asked for a coproduction contract with RAI; I took my book rights, continued the development phase for quite a while, investing a lot of money to remain autonomous and free in my decisions.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Levi's repeated use of active verbs – 'fought', 'continued', 'investing' – frames transnational coproduction as a sequence of interdependent actions in which autonomy is not assumed but progressively secured through temporal endurance, financial exposure, and sustained development outside formal coproduction structures. The expression 'battle of resistance' thus marks an outcome of accumulated pressure, crystallising the moment in which structural constraints, economic risk, and cultural conviction converge into a decisive stance against production logics perceived as prevailing within the contemporary global industry. In this sense, Levi's 'battle of resistance' can be understood as an instance of circumscribed agency (Havens and Lotz, 2014): a form of producer agency exercised within, rather than outside, constraining financial, institutional, and industrial frameworks. Crucially, this agency is not oriented primarily towards control, but towards custodianship. Levi's actions demonstrate how influence is exercised through the sustained defence of a specific cultural vision – most notably the insistence on Italian-led authorship and production – within complex transnational partnerships. His conduct throughout the development process illustrates a calibrated balancing of compromise and conviction, in which negotiation does not dilute cultural specificity but is mobilised to protect it. By positioning himself as a "custodian" rather than a mere intermediary, Levi anchors transnational coproduction in a clearly articulated national and cultural responsibility, ensuring that the project's Italian identity remains structurally central rather than symbolically residual. By contrast, *My Brilliant Friend* offers a different configuration of producer agency. While Lorenzo Mieli likewise operated within a high-stakes production environment, the scale of Wildside and its established embeddedness within the global television industry – most notably through *The Young Pope* – significantly differentiated his position from Levi's, shaping each producer's respective margin of manoeuvre. These structural distinctions are examined in greater detail in the section dedicated to *My Brilliant Friend*.

Turning back to Levi's case, one may ask how this sustained effort was operationalised in everyday practice as the project progressed through the complexities of transnational coproduction. Following sustained pressure from American companies and production groups during the initial phase of partnership negotiations, Levi redirected his strategy towards the Franco-German distributor Wild Bunch, a pan-European company with a specialised focus on high-end television drama.

During the initial meeting with Wild Bunch at Levi's 11 Marzo headquarters in Rome, the Italian producer informed the Franco-German distributors of his pre-emptive decision regarding the director and that rested on Giacomo Battiato's name. A renowned and award-winning director with extensive experience in film, television, and opera (including an Emmy nomination), Battiato brought a personal connection to both Italy and France, being 'accustomed to working on large-scale international productions, often with mixed crews across various locations' (Levi, 2019, my translation). For Levi, the choice of Giacomo Battiato was non-negotiable, as he observed in this quote:

> [Giacomo Battiato] is a man who has the right intelligence and qualities, and he is a

> friend, a very respectable and honest person, with whom I knew I would somehow manage to stay within budget. [Because] anyway, it was very risky for my company to do such an international blockbuster, it was a leap forward, and Battiato somehow gave me a kind of guarantee.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's emphasis on the project being 'very risky', a 'leap forward', and on Battiato as a 'guarantee' positions the choice of director as a structural precondition within transnational coproduction. In line with the centrality of directorial authorship in the Italian cinematic tradition, this decision establishes an early and stable creative vision, intended to endure across the project's development and to orient subsequent collaborations towards clearly anticipated outcomes. On this basis, given the director's established reputation and the esteem in which he was held by Wild Bunch, an agreement was reached between the producer and the distributors, thereby reinforcing the producer's agency. This accord may be seen as an early manifestation of the broader resilience process, as reflected in Levi's own words: 'Having the international distributor agree with this choice, this increased my ability to control the project' (Levi, 2019, my translation).

For Levi, this pivotal moment marked a significant milestone in his trajectory as a small, independent Italian producer, reinforcing his confidence in asserting control over the development process. Concurrently, RAI – serving as the project's guarantor from the outset, alongside Levi as lead producer – initiated the early phases of what would evolve into a complex and multi-layered writing process.

As the project progressed, however, the situation began to evolve in unexpected ways, ushering in a period of intensified challenges. Levi gradually realised that Wild Bunch, the distributor, was facing significant budgetary difficulties. Consequently, the likelihood grew that the distribution agreement, which was yet to be finalised, would not come to fruition, a prediction that, as events unfolded, proved accurate. Time slipped away, and the script, which was already encountering its own set of challenges due to the involvement of multiple screenwriters (as will be examined in Chapter 4), struggled to progress smoothly. One of the critical obstacles at this juncture was the casting of the lead role, specifically the actor to portray William of Baskerville. Amid this complicated phase, which stretched over a couple of years, Levi was guided by the expertise of business lawyer Guendalina Ponti, a seasoned professional with strong connections in the Hollywood industry. Ponti, recognising the importance of securing the right talent, suggested John Turturro for the role and took on the role of intermediary between the Hollywood actor and the producer. Reflecting on this crucial interaction, Levi recounted that:

> He [Turturro] expressed interest in the project. We gave him the script to read, and he shared his concerns, after which he began collaborating with Giacomo Battiato to make further revisions to the script. By that point, from a production perspective, we had secured the backing of Rai, the script was in a fairly advanced stage, Turturro had been

> confirmed as the lead actor, and Battiato was set as the director.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's account frames this moment as a decisive point within a temporally sequenced process, in which a series of interdependent elements – RAI's backing, an advanced script, the confirmed director, and the attachment of an internationally recognised lead actor – finally converged. The phrasing 'by that point' and the cumulative listing of conditions signal how transnational coproduction here advances through the gradual alignment of preconditions that stabilise the project and enable it to move forward after a prolonged phase of uncertainty.

As the project entered its next phase, this fragile alignment was re-tested. In 2017, while the broader production team experienced a series of departures, it also welcomed new contributors who would prove pivotal to the project's development. During the Spring of that year, Levi came to the crucial realisation that managing such an ambitious project on his own, with his small company '11 Marzo', consisting of just two employees, was no longer feasible. Confronted with this challenge, he turned to a fellow producer, Carlo Degli Esposti, founder and Head of the larger and well-established production company Palomar. Palomar is renowned for acquiring the rights to the highly successful television drama *Inspector Montalbano* (1999), which became a global phenomenon in the 2010s. As a result, Palomar established itself as one of Italy's leading production companies, alongside Cattleya – the production house behind *Romanzo Criminale*, *Gomorrah* and *Suburra* – and Lorenzo Mieli's Wildside. The decision to involve Palomar marked a turning point for Levi, as it enabled him to realise his vision of forming a fully Italian partnership that would retain creative control over the project. Not only did this collaboration with Palomar strengthen the production's foundation but also brought critical expertise and resources to the table, with a financial investment and a team of skilled professionals dedicated to identifying reliable international partners, particularly in Europe. Indeed, the results quickly manifested, with one of them, in particular, proving to be decisive in triggering fundamental dynamics aimed at elevating the project to a transnational enterprise. Palomar's involvement was notably reflected in the appointment of an Italian executive producer, Patrizia Massa, and in their substantial support during the casting process, which became one of the central elements of the project's development. As Levi recalled:

> Carlo [Degli Esposti] also made artistic contributions, in the sense that he suggested John Conroy, a cinematographer who is in Variety's top ten, and who did an extraordinary job with the photography. They [Palomar] had just co-produced the film about Oscar Wilde with Rupert Everett, so Rupert Everett wrote to us saying he wanted to play the role of the antagonist [Bernardo] Gui at all costs.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation)

Levi's emphasis on how Palomar's entry rapidly activated concrete developments – through the

attachment of a cinematographer, the attraction of internationally recognised talent, and the consolidation of an Italian executive structure – positions this moment as a temporal turning point in which national partnership operates as a precondition for transnational expansion. The sequencing implied by 'had just co-produced' and 'wrote to us' highlights how accumulated industrial credibility and prior collaborations enabled the project's spatial reach to extend outwards, while remaining anchored in Italian-led creative control.

Yet this acceleration did not resolve all uncertainties. Amid this sequence of events, Turturro – who had become involved through the mediation of business lawyer Guendalina Ponti – read the initial drafts of the script but had not yet formally committed to the lead role. This uncertainty generated significant concern for producer Levi, who was left with an unconfirmed lead and no signed contract in place. Nevertheless, Turturro began contributing informally to the casting process, notably by recommending Michael Emerson for the role of the Abbot. By October 2017, despite significant progress, Levi found himself navigating a particularly complex phase of the project. Although Turturro was on board, his participation had not yet been formalised, and the script was at a critical juncture, with the screenplay approaching what was described as a 'final state' by the producer. However, as will be examined in Chapter 4, Levi's notion of a 'finalised' script corresponded in fact to one of many versions that would alternate throughout what stands out, among the three case studies, as the most arduous screenwriting process. Chapter 4 will explore the dynamics and challenges that characterised this turbulent trajectory in the development of *The Name of the Rose* screenplay.

What concerned Levi most at this stage was the fact that an international distributor had yet to be secured. Faced with these challenges, Levi chose to adopt a strategy rooted in resilience, navigating the project incrementally with a focus on perseverance. Given the project's allocated budget of €26 million (Vivarelli, 2017a), his approach was, above all, one of survival and persistence. Just days before the start of the most significant audiovisual market event – the Global Content Market MIPCOM, held from October 16 to 19 that year – Levi provided a brief update on the project's progress to *Variety*. This update included crucial information, including: Turturro's confirmed participation in the lead role of the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville (although the official signature was still missing); Rupert Everett cast as the inquisitor Bernardo Gui; and Giacomo Battiato as director. Additionally, *Variety* reported that filming would begin three months later, in January 2018, and, most importantly from a strategic perspective, that negotiations with international distributors Wild Bunch were well advanced, though the deal remained 'not closed yet' (Vivarelli, 2017a).

This development triggered a natural sequence of events in the market, with several international distributors expressing interest in joining the project, including Lionsgate, Beta, and Canal+. In response, Levi opted to initiate negotiations with a trusted and long-standing partner, Tele München Group, led by Herbert Kloiber Jr. The negotiation process was swift, and within three months, an agreement was successfully reached, resolving all outstanding issues. Despite RAI's role as guarantor, the contract remained unsigned, a final hurdle that persisted. The deal with Tele München

Group, however, proved instrumental in securing much-needed bank financing, resolving the financial complications due to earlier distributors Wild Bunch. As December 2017 approached, after a long period of hesitation, Turturro finally signed the contract. This moment marked a crucial turning point, a final 'sprint' in securing the necessary logistical and financial arrangements before production could commence:

> Turturro came to sign the contract. He made us sweat a lot. He came to sign it in December even though we hadn't had any guarantees since October that he would sign it (he said: 'Ah, I want to do this revision with Battiato' [...]). And at the same time, [the set's] construction began at Cinecittà, all the commitments with the other actors were in motion (we did part of the casting in London, part in Rome). And so, *the production side was put together* until, in January, we started shooting with the plan of twenty weeks (we ended up doing twenty-four, but they were absolutely necessary). *I must say, I was very impressed*: I saw things that I never thought I would see on a set.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Levi's account renders this phase as the culmination of a densely interdependent sequence of events, in which contractual delay, set construction, casting across multiple locations, and financing arrangements unfold in parallel rather than linearly. Temporal markers such as 'at the same time', 'until January', and the shift from a planned 'twenty weeks' to an extended 'twenty-four' foreground how transnational coproduction here materialises through compressed timing and coordinated escalation, producing a decisive outcome only once multiple institutional, logistical, and creative preconditions are synchronised.

It is precisely through this compressed and high-pressure convergence that Levi's interview assumes its self-reflexive tone, articulating a narrative marked by reflection and determination, illuminating how a producer can come to recognise, and strategically enact, his capacity to navigate change under adverse conditions through a process of self-reflexive understanding. The difficulties encountered throughout the project were not only obstacles to overcome, but also moments that allowed Levi to reaffirm his role and responsibility as an independent producer. This process became a means of defining and asserting his professional "space" – both its limits and its possibilities – within the broader framework of transnational production. It also allowed him to clarify the values that guide his work, particularly the convergence of professional judgment, ethical responsibility, and strategic adaptability.

In a deeply introspective narrative, akin to that of fellow producer Lorenzo Mieli (*My Brilliant Friend*) – both in emotional intensity and unfiltered candour – Levi's interview highlights the dynamic, evolving, and porous role of the independent producer in transnational coproduction efforts. This can

be understood as one of the key affordances of transnational coproduction as a form: the creation of a space of possibilities for the independent producer, one that must be continuously defended, but also redefined, reconfigured and firmly enacted through their agency. In line with Havens and Lotz (2016), certain contexts – such as those shaped by transnational coproduction – are characterised by conditions of 'circumscribed agency', wherein producers operate within structural constraints yet continue to negotiate creative and strategic influence, enabled in part by the inherent flexibility of the transnational coproduction form. In Levi's account, this space must be continuously defended, redefined, adjusted and adapted, not only through formal negotiation with external partners but through a sustained effort to maintain coherence between personal values and professional action in a complex and competitive production environment.

Levi's role increasingly extended into the creative domain, a space he actively sought to safeguard given its high stakes: the management and control of creative decision-making. Yet this domain had been progressively 'eroded', particularly in ways that diminished the agency of independent producers. While Levi consistently resisted particular exogenous production practices – especially those associated with the American industry and presented as rigid or non-negotiable – he also recognised that sustained resistance would eventually have to yield to a workable resolution. His reflections suggest that persistent opposition to external pressures must ultimately lead to a workable outcome shaped through negotiation and sustained effort. In the case of *The Name of the Rose*, this balance was ultimately realised through the completion of the project itself, as powerfully captured in Levi's own words:

> I have produced coproductions worth 5, 6, or even 7 million Euros, but it's quite different to have a production worth more than 25 million Euros with a cinematographer [John Conroy]…what can I say…there were three rotating crews, three hundred people on set for lighting, fifteen cranes, in short, there was a lighting setup with technical equipment I didn't even know existed, which *the Americans know by heart and have always used…* if a ray of sunlight came out, a caterpillar would arrive to lift a panel to cover the sun… *things that we aren't used to seeing in Italy. So, this aspect impressed me a lot and it moved me deeply*. Then there was this massive construction [reference to the entire set] […] we were very keen on having this done at Cinecittà, which was in a phase of revitalisation of the public management.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

This passage materialises transnational coproduction as a balanced configuration of differentiated practices rather than a hierarchical redistribution of power. Levi's detailed attention to technical apparatuses – 'three rotating crews', 'three hundred people on set', 'fifteen cranes', and lighting

systems ‘we aren’t used to seeing in Italy’ – does not signal displacement or dominance, but a moment of experiential recognition in which distinct industrial traditions are brought into coordinated relation. His repeated expressions of being ‘impressed’ and ‘deeply moved’ register an affective awareness that transnationality here operates through the careful integration of complementary knowledges, skills, and working cultures, each retaining specificity while contributing to a shared production environment. The insistence on realising this scale of production at Cinecittà further anchors this process within a controlled and Italian-led framework, ensuring that international technical expertise is incorporated without overriding local creative authority. What emerges is not a loss of agency, but the tangible outcome of a negotiated equilibrium in which no single tradition prevails, and each partner maintains a recognisable stake in the project. Levi’s account, rich in evocative imagery, underscores the sustained, multifaceted nature of his effort to shape *The Name of the Rose* according to a distinctive vision. As discussed earlier, his experience affirms the centrality of transnational coproduction not only as an industrial arrangement but as a site for professional self-definition and legitimacy. Rejecting the reduction of his role to that of a merely executive producer – an outcome often enforced by dominant commercial logics – Levi asserted alternative cultural and ethical values: his commitment to Umberto Eco, the symbolic weight of the novel as a cornerstone of European cultural heritage, the moral imperative to preserve creative control in Italy, and the pursuit of equitable international partnerships.

A further driving force behind Levi’s endeavour was his aspiration to contribute meaningfully to Italy’s high-end television drama ecosystem, particularly through a revitalised use of Cinecittà, emblematic of the nation’s cinematic legacy. The ‘massive construction’ he describes – referring to the set for *The Name of the Rose* – becomes a powerful metaphor for the scale and complexity of the transnational production process. Not only does it symbolise the physical realisation of the series, but also the material manifestation of Levi’s five-year journey, during which he actively redefined his role amid a dense network of negotiations, pressures, and structural constraints. Levi’s experience thus challenged the efforts of more powerful industry actors to marginalise independent producers within coproduction frameworks. Rather than yielding, he progressively moved from a reactive stance to a more strategic position, shaping the project according to his own terms. His capacity to resist structural marginalisation and reconfigure the negotiation space exemplifies the notion of ‘circumscribed agency’ (Havens and Lotz, 2014), a dynamic in which producers, despite operating within systemic constraints, are nonetheless able to exert meaningful influence over both creative and strategic outcomes. This form of agency becomes particularly evident in Levi’s reflections on the full-scale production phase.

Observing the technical sophistication and collaborative ethos on set – often shaped by the involvement of American partners – he did not respond with antagonism, but with admiration. What initially appeared to threaten his autonomy came to embody, through his evolving perspective, the potential of carefully negotiated transnational collaboration, namely, echoing Hilmes (2014), the combination and reconciliation of divergent interests and objectives, as well as, crucially, the alignment of distinct worldviews and value systems. The set, in his view, emerged as a site of convergence, where

different industrial cultures and creative logics were reconciled through a shared sense of purpose and commitment. In this light, Levi's case speaks directly to Hilmes's foundational question: 'What do we mean by coproduction anymore?' (Hilmes, 2014). Not only does his account offer a situated response, but also a framework for rethinking transnational coproduction as a fully lived, incrementally negotiated practice.

Overall, the case of *The Name of the Rose* illustrates the complexity of exercising agency within transnational coproduction, highlighting how an independent producer can negotiate creative influence to a certain extent, despite strong structural constraints, all the more significant because they are exogenous, as they stem from pressures and forces originating in the American system. Matteo Levi's persistent effort across the early development process exemplifies what Havens and Lotz (2016) term 'circumscribed agency', in other words a form of agency always enacted within specific industrial, financial, and institutional boundaries, yet capable of asserting creative and strategic direction.

From the outset, Levi's ability to mobilise personal relationships, institutional allegiances, and ethical commitments to secure the rights to Eco's novel shows how individual agency operates relationally and progressively within a dense ecology of actors and structures (Havens, Lotz and Tinic, 2009). His strategic alignment with RAI and reliance on shared cultural capital with figures such as Andreose and Eco demonstrate how agency is often enacted through negotiation with consolidated institutions – whether these are foreign media companies, other types of institutions such as a traditional publishing house, or even individual agents in their own right, such as a writer – echoing Dunleavy's (2009b) view of producers as navigating diverse, layered institutional terrains. Levi's refusal to accept American pre-packaged proposals or surrender editorial control can be read as a sustained effort to uphold a form of integrity (Holt and Perren, 2009), namely his right to maintain coherence with the project's national and narrative-aesthetic ambition. His resistance to external pressures, while not total, affirms that producers can reconfigure transnational partnerships in ways that preserve creative vision and a certain, yet crucial, degree of local agency.

At the same time, Levi's gradual engagement with European distributors as Tele München and Italian coproducers as Palomar reveals the strategic flexibility often required in transnational coproduction frameworks. Rather than depicting agency as absolute autonomy, Levi's narrative foregrounds its contingent, negotiated nature. His case underscores that agency in transnational coproduction is not static but processual, hence dynamic and ongoing, emerging through decisions, refusals, alignments, adjustments and adaptations shaped by the encounter and negotiation of culturally diverse structural conditions. The set at Cinecittà (Rome), as described by Levi, becomes both a material and symbolic manifestation of this negotiated agency: a hybrid space where national identity, industrial ambition, and international collaboration converge, embodying the producer's idea and sense of what a transnational coproduction should be.

In conclusion, *The Name of the Rose* illustrates that agency within transnational coproduction is neither wholly constrained nor entirely autonomous, but rather operates as a negotiated capacity enacted through multifaceted interactions and contestations, where various forms of resistance converge

in the pursuit of a common production goal. As Pearson (2010) notes, such agency is often contingent, emerging through the interplay between institutional structures and the individual's ability to find spaces of autonomy and assert creative influence within them. Agency is constrained, but also enacted and redefined in motion, through the persistent labour of producers who operate within – but do not fully yield to, as Levi shows – the logics of global media industries (Herbert, Lotz and Punathambekar, 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the dynamics of agency within the early development phase of three RAI-led transnationally coproduced television dramas – *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose*. Drawing on producers' interview accounts and a detailed reconstruction of each case, this study has shed light on the ways in which creative and strategic agency is exercised within complex, multi-scalar production ecologies shaped by asymmetrical partnerships, national policy frameworks, industrial logics and expectations, and ongoing cultural negotiations. By foregrounding producers as key mediators within transnational frameworks, this chapter has demonstrated that agency is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated capacity, activated variably across different contexts and stages of the development phase. Agency, in this sense, emerges as 'circumscribed' (Havens and Lotz, 2016), relational, progressive, and frequently performative (Pearson, 2010). It is distributed across a network of stakeholders, but is also deeply embedded in professional identities, reputational capital, and the capacity to navigate structural tensions with strategic flexibility.

Firstly, *Medici* illustrated how agency can also be collective and institutional, as in the case of Lux Vide, which reoriented its coproduction model over time, adapting to the demands of both RAI and international partners such as Netflix and Big Light. The case underscored the relevance of relational labour, mutual adaptation, and strategic flexibility in managing creative authorship across culturally distinct production systems. It further showed how sustained commitment, incremental negotiation, and the navigation of editorial expectations across different industrial contexts can enable independent producers to assert meaningful influence, even within structurally asymmetrical environments.

Secondly, *My Brilliant Friend* offered a more pronounced instance of transnational negotiation, where Lorenzo Mieli's role demonstrates a reconfiguration of the producer's function within a hybrid model that blends elements of Italian production culture with features typical of global showrunning. This reconfiguration also points to a gradual form of role hybridisation, as Mieli increasingly operated across editorial, organisational, and reputational dimensions that transcend traditional national production roles. The case revealed the performative dimension of agency – asserted through branding, trust-building, and alignment with authorial legitimacy – and emphasised the producer's pivotal role in safeguarding the cultural specificity of a project within a highly demanding, often perceived as oppressive, global market.

Finally, the analysis of *The Name of the Rose* underscored the importance of persistence, personal relationships, and affective capital in overcoming institutional inertia and legacy constraints. Here, Matteo Levi's tactical engagement with Bompiani and Eco illustrates how agency can be incrementally enacted through resilience and symbolic alignment with national broadcasters and authors, particularly when seeking to mediate between domestic traditions and international expectations.

Taken together, these case studies demonstrate that agency in transnational coproduction is a variable and multi-dimensional phenomenon, operating at the intersection of structural constraints and strategic interventions, and, crucially, enabling multiple spaces of autonomy that, echoing Mark Banks as cited in Pearson (2010, p.8) reflect 'the enigmas of experiential variation, personal subjectivity and human agency in everyday work contexts'. Rather than affirming a singular model of transnational agency, the chapter foregrounds its contextual articulation: producers respond to, and shape, institutional frameworks through a combination of entrepreneurial vision, cultural mediation, and professional credibility. In doing so, not only do they contribute to the realisation of specific projects, but also to the evolving contours of transnational television production as a broader field of practice and research, encompassing multiple dynamics and processes, as is the case with transnational coproduction. It is for this reason that, after analysing the early development phase within each of the three case studies, the next chapter focuses on the core of development and creativity – the screenwriting phase – and it is to that which we now turn.

Chapter 4

Forging the Narrative Core: Architectures of Adaptive Screenwriting in Transnational TV Drama Coproduction

Introduction

This chapter examines the screenwriting processes underpinning the three transnational coproductions – *Medici* (2016), *My Brilliant Friend* (2018), and *The Name of the Rose* (2019) – with a particular focus on how adaptation theory can illuminate the creative dynamics at play. Though heterogeneous in form, origin, and development, all three case studies are rooted in adaptation: *Medici* draws on historical material, while *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Name of the Rose* are based on pre-existing literary texts. Each case is approached through distinct foci and specific sites of inquiry, reflecting the different challenges and configurations that shaped their respective screenwriting processes.

Medici highlights the unprecedented use and relocation of a writers' room, and the negotiation of culturally specific historical content from abroad, within a development framework stretched across Rome and London. As the first Italian-driven coproduction to adopt an American-style writers' room, it crystallises a distinctive site of negotiation, marked by cross-cultural strain and spatial asymmetry between Italian and Anglo-American production cultures. *My Brilliant Friend* centres on a fortified screenwriting architecture – a protective "stronghold" – anchored by the presence of Elena Ferrante, designed to safeguard the novel's narrative and linguistic integrity while adapting it to the serial logic of television. It exemplifies a reconfigured notion of fidelity that reconciles respect for the source with the pragmatic demands of serial storytelling, a position Ferrante herself explicitly embraced. The series' distinctive value lies in this carefully negotiated balance between literary and televisual priorities, enabled by a tightly coordinated and resilient screenwriting structure. By contrast, *The Name of the Rose* foregrounds the disruptive agency of the source text itself, revealing how the novel's narrative complexity and philosophical density exerted pressure on the adaptation process, even without Eco's direct involvement. The case demonstrates how the nature of the source text can act as an active agent within development, recalibrating screenwriting dynamics and repositioning creative roles according to distinctive logics and constraints that transcend culturally specific paradigms and embody the very sense of the transnational. Taken together, these case studies show how adaptation functions not only as a creative and interpretive act but as a site of structural negotiation. They reveal how adaptation, particularly in transnational television, is shaped by competing authorial, institutional, and cultural

logics, and how screenwriting operates as the space in which these forces are mediated, contested, or provisionally reconciled.

Recent adaptation scholarship – particularly that of Cardwell, Hutcheon, and Hogg – departs from fidelity-oriented models, emphasising the autonomy of adaptations as works in their own right. Rather than derivative echoes of their sources, adaptations are here understood as interpretive reconfigurations shaped by the constraints and affordances of the screen. Cardwell's emphasis on 'medium specificity' (2002, 2018) stresses television's distinct narrative strategies, rhythms, and expectations. This is particularly pertinent for *The Name of the Rose*, whose semiotically dense literary source posed unique challenges to televisual adaptation. The screenwriting process thus became a site of negotiation between the symbolic complexity of the novel and the demands of episodic coherence, character development, and accessibility. Even posthumously, Eco's views on adaptation – notably his conception of intersemiotic translation – continued to shape the screenwriting process. His understanding of adaptation as meaning transfigured across sign systems (Eco, 1979) aligns with Hutcheon's model of adaptation as intersemiotic transposition (2006, p.16).

In *Medici*, the adaptive challenge took a different form. Although not based on a literary source, the series drew on historical material that functioned as a culturally charged source "text". Here, script development – led by a UK-based writers' room modelled on American industry practices – evolved into a delicate negotiation between Italian producers and British screenwriters, under the creative direction of an American showrunner. The goal was not simply narrative clarity, but the rendering of a foundational chapter of Italian identity and cultural heritage – the Renaissance – in a form compelling to international audiences. What emerges is a sharp illustration of the tensions involved in adapting culturally saturated material within a transnational framework marked by spatial dislocation and institutional asymmetry. Beyond the interpretive challenge of historical transposition, the process had to reconcile divergent operational logics across fragmented geographies, revealing the institutional and epistemic fault lines that adaptation must navigate.

Finally, *My Brilliant Friend*, while based on a contemporary literary source, advances a fidelity that goes beyond the text to encompass tone and emotional depth. Ferrante's prose is deeply interiorised, characterised by a highly subjective narrative perspective that intimately explores the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. Adapting this novelistic subjectivity for the screen required a careful negotiation between preserving this introspective voice and translating it into visual storytelling techniques. The collaborative, "concentric" structure of the screenwriting team – involving two principal writers, the director-screenwriter, and Ferrante herself, all as credited screenwriters – enabled continuity with the source voice while accommodating televisual form. This represented a deliberate act of transformation, which Ferrante supported from the outset, standing in marked contrast to Eco's more resistant stance. Echoing Hogg's dichotomy – between 'serving the source' and 'making the source serve' (2021, p.118) – this chapter shows that *The Name of the Rose* exemplifies the former, while *My Brilliant Friend* adopts the latter, that is, a more assertive model of adaptation, transnationally framed and shaped by televisual imperatives.

Across all three case studies, screenwriting emerges not merely as the core of the development phase, but also as a central arena in which adaptation is both discursively negotiated and materially embodied. It is the crucible where the tensions between source material, industrial expectations, authorial vision, and cultural specificity converge with greatest intensity. Following Hutcheon (2006, p.4), adaptation is best understood as an act of 'repetition with variation', where screenwriting is not a derivative function, but the primary nexus of creative agency and a site of layered, interpretive labour at the heart of the adaptive imagination and enterprise. Let us now delve into these case studies to excavate the creative strata and uncover the intricate folds where multiple layers of agency intersect, collide, negotiate, and ultimately coalesce, generating particularly revealing dynamics within a transnational framework. This chapter begins with the case study of *Medici*.

Case Study 1 – *Medici*

This section examines creativity and screenwriting in the development of *Medici*, drawing on interviews with Fania Petrocchi, Luisa Cotta Ramosino, and Lucy Rawlinson. Petrocchi, RAI's in-house producer, oversaw *Medici* and its subsequent two seasons, as well as the fourth and final chapter of the Renaissance cycle, *Leonardo*. Cotta Ramosino, a creative producer at Lux Vide since 2009, managed the creative development of the series on the Italian side. Rawlinson, based at Big Light, contributed across all three seasons, initially as assistant script editor on Season 1 (*Medici*, the season analysed in this thesis) before becoming script editor for Seasons 2 and 3.

The creative development of *Medici* offers a compelling example of cross-fertilisation in transnational television production. At the core of this process was the introduction of an American-style writers' room into the Italian production landscape, marking a significant departure from more traditional European models of screenwriting. This transition was spearheaded by Frank Spotnitz, whose reputation as the creator of *The X-Files* and experience within the Hollywood studio system lent the experiment both credibility and momentum. As Lucy Rawlinson recounts, Spotnitz was 'pioneering' this model in Europe, and this novelty became a key point of attraction for the Italian partners:

> It was what *Frank* [Spotnitz] *was kind of pioneering over here*. So, I think that's what the Italian partners were quite looking for. *It's that kind of gravitas that Frank has in the industry and the fact that he's doing it here, not in America*. You know, it was just that kind of slotting together. […] There were writers' rooms that were happening, perhaps. But actually, I don't think they were quite as sort of authentic to the American style, as what we were doing and the very model of us and, you know, Lux Vide being open to that meant that we could do it! Because you know, it's not cheap to run a writers' room. Writers are paid at a daily rate. And, you know, there's subsistence. And it's just

> extra costs that you wouldn't have normally if you were doing a sort of conventional British show.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's account articulates the writers' room not simply as a creative technique but as a spatial precondition of transnational coproduction, explicitly translating an American development model 'over here' and reconfiguring the institutional geography of high-end television writing in a European context. The adoption of the writers' room model thus entailed not only logistical adaptation but a substantive redefinition of authorship within a transnational framework. In this configuration, Spotnitz's role as showrunner – still relatively uncommon in European practice – introduced a centralised form of creative leadership that reorganised the development process around a single authorial axis, reshaping both the distribution of creative authority and the temporal coordination of collaborative writing. As Fania Petrocchi observes:

> *With this new model, writing is essentially outsourced*… the entire development *process is entrusted to a showrunner*, as is done in the United States. This showrunner is somewhat atypical, as he comes from the Hollywood studio system: Frank Spotnitz, the creator of *The X-Files*, who, due to his own creative evolution, has settled in Europe.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Petrocchi's emphasis on writing being 'outsourced' and on the 'entire development process' being 'entrusted to a showrunner' marks a structural precondition of this coproduction model: transnational collaboration is enabled by a deliberate centralisation of authority at the development stage. At the same time, the description of Spotnitz as both 'from the Hollywood studio system' and having 'settled in Europe' locates this arrangement within a spatially and temporally inflected trajectory, where transnationality is mediated through a professional relocation and creative 'evolution' rather than arising as an automatic outcome of partnership. Spotnitz's background – most notably his authorship of *The X-Files* (1993–2002) and his subsequent relocation to Europe – thus becomes operational within the *Medici* project as a form of translational expertise, enabling him to function as a connective figure between American studio-based development practices and emerging European models of serial production. This influence materialises in his approach to storytelling, most notably through the introduction of a murder mystery as a narrative engine that structures the serial form while sustaining narrative momentum across episodes. The Italian partners – RAI and Lux Vide – acknowledged the value of this narrative innovation, not only as a creative device but also as a strategic means of engaging global audiences beyond RAI's traditional scope. Furthermore, Spotnitz's authorship was not merely operational but conceptually foundational. His initial pitch, as recalled by Luisa Cotta Ramosino, introduced two elements that remained pivotal across all seasons: a formal organising device, the murder mystery, and a thematic anchor centred on the social and cultural transformation

driven by the rise of the banking class. Together, these dual strands enabled the project to balance serial engagement with historical depth and resonance, a structuring logic that, as Cotta Ramosino explains, was established at the very outset of development:

> When presenting us with the first pitch, *he combined two aspects that, in my opinion, remained throughout to the final season*: on the one hand, a technical aspect, namely the idea of *incorporating a murder mystery*, which provided a narrative structure, created a drive for the characters […] On the other hand, a thematic aspect, that is the *emergence of the middle class and the role of bankers as a driving force for change*, providing opportunities to people who would not have otherwise had them […] *Tinny Andreatta immediately understood that this was an opportunity to create something that could go beyond RAI's usual scope*, and they promptly accepted the involvement of foreign writers.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Rawlinson, likewise, affirms the centrality of Spotnitz's vision and the structural logic underpinning it:

> *Lux Vide and RAI came to us as a sort of the 'creative engine' to script the show*. And Frank is, in his level of experience, as, you know, the perfect person to come up with ideas and a way "in" […] He created a story and an engine that went all the way through with the murder mystery. And that's something that can only really happen with, you know, the creative process and having a writers' room and things like that.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's emphasis on a shared 'creative engine […] that went all the way through' frames screenwriting not as a discrete phase of development, but as a temporally sustained process extending across the series. Her insistence that such continuity 'can only really happen' through the writers' room positions this collaborative structure as a deliberate structural precondition – actively sought by the Italian commissioners – through which spatially distributed creative labour is stabilised over time. In this configuration, and within a context that proved unexpectedly challenging for both the Italian and UK partners, the writers' room functioned as the primary site in which distinct writing traditions were brought into sustained negotiation. Moments of friction and tension became constitutive of this process, testing the conditions of collaboration and enabling the gradual consolidation of a shared narrative ground. It is through this ongoing exchange, rather than through unilateral authorial control, that a coherent narrative architecture ultimately emerged. Taken together, the preceding accounts point to a deliberate strategy of hybridisation: the fusion of Anglo-American narrative structures with Italian historical content, coordinated through a transnational writers' room. Rather than adopting foreign practices wholesale, the project reconfigured them through a co-creative process that balanced

global storytelling models with local cultural textures.

As the interviews show, Frank Spotnitz's initiative was perceived by the Italian partners as both innovative and desirable, blending Hollywood's narrative discipline with the flexibility to adapt to a European context. The financial and logistical commitment – evident in Rawlinson's reference to writer fees and related costs – underscores Lux Vide's willingness to experiment with a format still uncommon in European drama. This openness reflects what Bondebjerg et al. (2018) define as 'mediated cultural encounters', where creative practices circulate across borders and reshape local production ecologies. The writers' room became not a transplant of US norms but a space of negotiated hybridity, what Hilmes (2012) identifies as a key feature of transnational broadcasting. Spotnitz's dual positioning – Hollywood-trained but working in Europe – enabled him to act as a conduit for adaptation. Petrocchi's note that development was 'entrusted to a showrunner' signals both a move towards US models and a shift in Italian creative authority. Rawlinson's portrayal of Spotnitz as the 'creative engine' further underscores his central role in structuring the narrative, particularly through the use of a murder mystery device. Furthermore, Spotnitz's contributions extended beyond structure. As Cotta Ramosino explained, his initial pitch introduced not only a formal device but also a thematic focus on the rise of the middle class and the historical role of banking, elements embraced by RAI, which saw the format as a way to broaden audience appeal. These dynamics exemplify what Havens and Lotz (2016) term 'circumscribed agency': creative authorship within institutionally bounded yet adaptable frameworks. Spotnitz's leadership was exercised through negotiation, with structural and thematic choices co-produced alongside Italian collaborators. The convergence of creative control, institutional adaptation, and cultural alignment illustrates how transnational television operates as a collaborative and context-sensitive practice, shaped by institutional roles and negotiated expectations.

In this context, the writing process of *Medici* unfolded within an organisational structure that marked a clear departure from conventional Italian screenwriting models. At the heart of this innovation was the writers' room, introduced by Frank Spotnitz and adapted from American television practices. This collaborative setting redefined the creative workflow and redistributed responsibilities among the three principal partners: Big Light, Lux Vide, and RAI. From the outset, RAI's producer Fania Petrocchi described the process as a systematic technique of idea generation and narrative coordination, orchestrated by Spotnitz in his role as showrunner and supported by two script editors. The writers' team, composed primarily of young British writers, developed an initial outline, which was then refined through multiple exchanges between the editorial teams of Lux Vide and RAI. Petrocchi explains how this collaborative feedback loop progressively shaped the scripts through several rounds of development:

> *The showrunner assumed the role of coordinating the writing process and managing the writers' team*, which consisted primarily of young British writers. This approach established *what I consider a technique* […] *referred to as the 'writers' room'*. I recall there were two script editors coordinating the process, alongside periodic

> interventions by Frank Spotnitz […] At that point, *once a short outline of the series had been drafted, the Italian partners* – specifically Lux Vide's editorial team – *became involved*, and simultaneously RAI's editorial team also entered the process. Through direct exchanges, editorial notes, conference calls, and so on, the draft was refined […]. We become actively involved once the series bible has emerged from this process. At that point, we restructured the distribution of events and narrative material, *placing a strong emphasis on the psychology of the characters*. Once our notes were received, they were incorporated into the draft […] and ultimately, we worked on the final version of the scripts.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Petrocchi's technical enumeration of 'drafts', 'editorial notes', and 'conference calls', together with the repeated temporal markers 'once' and 'at that point', foregrounds how collaborative writing was pragmatically organised at a distance through a routinised sequence linking a UK-based writers' room to the Italian partners. Within this testing ground of a spatially distributed workflow, the writers' room is framed as a commissioned coordinating 'technique', against which RAI's emphasis on character development emerges as a parallel and increasingly articulated creative priority, one shared with *The Name of the Rose*, as will be discussed in depth in the dedicated section. Seen in these terms, Petrocchi's account underscores a layered, dialogic structure that integrated the initial Anglo-American creative impulse with Italian editorial revision, producing a hybrid workflow adapted to the demands of transnational co-creation.

Luisa Cotta Ramosino elaborated further on this structure, highlighting the daily functioning of the writers' room. Big Light's Head of Development and junior script editors were its constant presence, while Spotnitz participated intermittently. In this setting, Lux Vide became the mediator between Big Light and RAI, translating editorial feedback and managing the compromise between differing institutional expectations:

> They [Big Light] had a script editor and an assistant script editor. When I visited their writers' room on several occasions, Frank wasn't always there; the Head of Development was more consistently present, along with the two junior editors and the screenwriters. *Our workflow involved receiving material from them and producing notes based on it*. […] This created *a somewhat unusual mediation process*, as we debated RAI's notes – which we then relayed back to them – alongside our own […]. *The creative structure was located elsewhere, which required some adjustment, even for RAI*. They are typically used to work directly with authors. However, in this case, they showed trust by delegating this part of the work to us. […] For the most part, *we were the ones mediating this process*.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Cotta Ramosino's repeated references to material 'located elsewhere', to 'receiving material', 'producing notes', and 'relaying [RAI's notes] back' foreground how the spatial displacement of the writers' room translated into a sequential mediation process, unfolding through daily exchanges rather than direct authorial interaction. The emphasis on RAI 'delegating this part of the work' and 'show[ing] trust' situates this arrangement as a conditioned outcome of the earlier outsourced writing model, in which institutional roles, authority, and proximity were reorganised along the collaborative chain, with Lux Vide assuming a newly central intermediary position, an institutional shift for RAI, which had traditionally maintained direct relationships with authors and now reconfigured trust and authority through delegation.

From the perspective of Big Light, Lucy Rawlinson offers insight into the everyday dynamics of the writers' room. She recalls its formal establishment in January 2015 for the first season, involving a blend of experienced and emerging writers, including figures such as Alex von Tunzelmann[22] and Michael Hirst. Rawlinson reflects on the collaborative fluidity enabled by this environment, which allowed the team to collectively discuss and break down episodes, a process that scaled up slightly in the second season:

> We then started the writers' room in January 2015 for the first series […] That was with Alex von Tunzelmann – which is great because she's a historian as well – and Michael Hirst. And then our other writers… We had already been working with a couple of them… like Francesca Gardiner and Sophie Petzal […] For an eight-episode, huge series like *Medici*, a historical serialised co-production, it just meant we could come together to discuss ideas and together break down the episodes. This created a certain fluidity within the room, driven by the collaborative nature of the process. […]
> [The number of people in the writers' room] normally depends on how many episodes the creators are writing. So, I think for [*Medici*], the writers' room wasn't actually that large – probably about six of us. For [*Medici Season 2*] it was a bit bigger, as we also had [two additional writers], which was a great help.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019)

Rawlinson's references to the writers' room being 'started…in January 2015', to the team's ability to 'come together to discuss ideas', and to its expansion as it became 'a bit bigger' in the second season position the writers' room as a temporally staged and scalable precondition, whose composition and size evolved in sequence in response to the demands of serial development. The emphasis on

[22] Alex von Tunzelmann is a British historian, screenwriter and author.

‘breaking down the episodes’ and on the ‘fluidity within the room’ situates the writers’ room as the initial site of concentrated creative labour, prior to subsequent phases of Italian–UK coordination. Taken together, the interviews with Petrocchi, Cotta Ramosino, and Rawlinson provide a detailed account of how the writers’ room functioned within the transnational framework of *Medici*, showing how creative labour emerged through layered processes of negotiation and mediation. Petrocchi outlines a sequential model, where initial ideation – led by Frank Spotnitz and a predominantly young British team – preceded the involvement of Italian partners. The writers’ room served as a mechanism for organising ideas, coordinated by script editors and shaped by Spotnitz’s interventions. RAI and Lux Vide joined the process only after a preliminary outline had been developed, contributing structural and psychological refinements across multiple drafts: a priority for RAI, for which character psychology remains central to narrative development. Once again, this workflow reflects ‘circumscribed agency’, that is, the capacity of institutional actors to exert meaningful creative influence despite operating within structural constraints.

Cotta Ramosino’s account further reveals the asymmetry of this arrangement. Lux Vide mediated RAI’s editorial feedback, which was consolidated internally before being passed on to the writers. This bifurcated process – where direct communication was absent – transformed editorial input into a form of institutional translation. RAI’s acceptance of this model, she suggests, reflected a degree of trust and an adaptation to displaced creative authority. Rawlinson’s view from within the writers’ room highlights its collaborative and fluid nature, involving experienced voices like Michael Hirst and newer talent like Sophie Petzal. Despite Spotnitz’s intermittent presence, his conceptual leadership remained pivotal. In line with the focus by Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009) on meso-level creative dynamics, the account by Rawlinson foregrounds the microstructures of authorship, shaped by professional hierarchies, collaborative processes, and institutional frameworks. Together, these perspectives show how the writers’ room, though inspired by US practice, was reshaped by the spatial and institutional conditions of European co-production. It became a site of mediated negotiation, where creative agency was distributed across national, editorial, and professional lines. Rather than a direct transfer of format, *Medici* illustrates how transnational coproduction redefines authorship through alignment, translation, and institutional trust.

The collaboration between Big Light and RAI, mediated through Lux Vide, introduced a complex interplay of creative autonomy and institutional oversight in the coproduction of *Medici*. Central to this dynamic was the integration of RAI’s editorial ethos as a public service broadcaster within a production model shaped by international co-creation. In this context, RAI producer Fania Petrocchi characterises her role in the writers’ room as largely observational, noting that active mediation was primarily undertaken by Lux Vide’s Luisa Cotta Ramosino. This distinction reflected RAI’s longstanding editorial tradition, which, as Petrocchi noted, had to be communicated to showrunner Frank Spotnitz, whose expectations were shaped by Anglo-American industry norms. She underscores that such control was not simply procedural but deeply tied to RAI’s identity as a national

broadcaster entrusted with safeguarding cultural representation:

> *I was in the writers' room at Big Light in London together with Luisa [Cotta Ramosino], but more as an observer*. [...] *We had to explain* this tradition to Frank Spotnitz (who came here several times to talk with Tinny Andreatta and Francesco Nardella[23]) to make him understand that *we've always worked in international co-productions*, [...] *maintaining quite a strong control over the product*; [...] as a public service broadcaster, we couldn't have done it any other way.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

This moment crystallises the apex of the challenges introduced by physically distant creative collaboration. Petrocchi's positioning of herself 'more as an observer' in the writers' room 'at Big Light in London' foregrounds the spatial dimension of transnational collaboration, as creative authority is exercised across physical distance rather than through direct, co-present authorship. The need to 'explain this tradition' and to 'maintain quite a strong control over the product' situates this moment within a sequence of interdependent events, in which RAI's historically grounded editorial role in international coproductions persists as a precondition that must be articulated and negotiated across spatial separation. From this perspective, Petrocchi's emphasis on RAI's historical responsibility and the importance of editorial oversight reflects a broader philosophical and institutional distinction. The Italian model is grounded not only in creative concerns, but also in a commitment to public accountability and cultural stewardship. Within this framework, the collaboration with Big Light became a space of negotiation, where differing production logics and institutional mandates had to be carefully aligned. For Big Light, this required a sensitive and respectful approach. In her interview, Lucy Rawlinson reflects on the challenges posed by working across national and institutional boundaries, recognising the need to account for historical and cultural ownership in telling a story rooted in Italian heritage:

> I think having lots of people involved, I think, can always be a challenge because that's different opinions, always. And I think specifically to *Medici*. *This isn't our history, and it isn't our national public broadcaster*. So, we have to be very respectful of the fact that this […]
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's emphasis on 'lots of people involved' and on *Medici* being 'not our history' and 'not our national public broadcaster' highlights the cultural and institutional dimension of transnational collaboration, in which creative work must increasingly incorporate cultural specificity as a non-negotiable aspect of creativity under conditions of more symmetrical cultural ownership. This marks a

[23] At the time of the interview, Francesco Nardella was Deputy Head of RAI Fiction.

clear departure from earlier phases of European coproduction – such as the so-called "Europudding" era – when cultural specificity was more readily negotiable, and often expendable, in the name of financial arrangements and more asymmetrical power relations between partners. In this respect, the attention to cultural specificity extended beyond content to encompass a broader sense of responsibility on Big Light's part in working with a public service broadcaster. Accordingly, Rawlinson contrasts the sense of permanence and legacy associated with public broadcasting to the more transient logic of commercial television, noting the long-term cultural value of working with institutions such as RAI:

> It's nice to work with sort of more […], you know, traditional, I'd say, platforms. You feel like you're creating something that will last, that will have a legacy rather than… I mean, there are some incredible TV shows, but there's just so much, isn't there, so much to consume. And people may only watch things once and then not think about it again. I've done that before. Their shows… that you're watching: 'Oh, it was great'. And then: that's it! They didn't leave a mark in your life or on a place or anything like that. So, I think *that's the difference for creating something for a public broadcast […] it feels like we've created something that has a legacy*, I think.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

By contrasting projects that 'leave a mark' with content that is rapidly consumed and forgotten, Rawlinson situates collaboration with RAI within an outcome-oriented logic embedded in Big Light's production philosophy, in which public service broadcasting functions as a cultural precondition for long-term value rather than short-term circulation. In this sense, collaboration with national broadcasters is reaffirmed not only as a cultural commitment but also as a strategic guarantee of enduring brand value. Navigating this collaboration, however, required a structured process of mediation and communication. Within the established workflow, Lux Vide acted as an intermediary, attending meetings at RAI and consolidating institutional feedback before passing it on to Big Light. As Rawlinson describes:

> *We don't meet with RAI* […] mostly it's Luisa [Cotta Ramosino] and Sara [Melodia][24] and perhaps Luca [Bernabei][25] who go to RAI, have their big meeting. And *then they'll work something up into a sort of a combined notes document and then feedback to us*. So… *it worked very well actually*.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's description of not meeting RAI directly, of notes being consolidated in a 'combined notes document' and of feedback being relayed back to Big Light highlights a sequential and mediated

workflow, in which spatial separation is meticulously managed through an ordered chain of institutional intermediaries – most notably RAI's in-house producer Petrocchi and Lux Vide's creative producer Cotta Ramosino – thereby underscoring the intrinsically processual nature of transnational collaboration as a dense sequence of interdependent events. This layered communication network points to a carefully structured system of editorial collaboration, organised through successive stages of mediation. Petrocchi offers further detail on how this process functioned, clarifying that RAI's editorial intervention occurred later in the development chain, through written notes that primarily addressed structural coherence and narrative clarity:

> *The writers' room operated freely*, and it continues to do so for Leonardo. *Our involvement comes later, through written notes*. These notes serve not only to (at times) redistribute narrative material – since there can often be an overcrowding of content stemming from characters being derived from actions – but also to simplify and reorganise events and narrative material across the episodes. *This intervention primarily concerns the form and structure of the story*.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Petrocchi's distinction between the writers' room operating 'freely' and RAI's later intervention 'through written notes' situates editorial oversight as a temporally deferred mechanism, in which institutional priorities are exercised at a specific stage in the development sequence rather than through continuous co-presence. This arrangement highlights the ongoing difficulty for partners such as RAI in recalibrating creative control across the full writing process. In this workflow, the autonomy of the writers' room was balanced by a late-stage editorial process focused on narrative discipline and coherence, particularly crucial in a public service context. Rather than involving all stakeholders in direct collaboration, the structure enabled creative freedom early on, with editorial oversight introduced later to uphold RAI's priorities. This mediated feedback system underscores both the institutional complexity of the partnership and the adaptability required in transnational production. As Petrocchi and Rawlinson recount, the relationship between RAI and Big Light was shaped by an ongoing process of institutional and cultural negotiation. Petrocchi underscores RAI's editorial tradition and its responsibility to safeguard national history, casting its oversight not merely as procedural but as a form of symbolic authority. Her self-described role as an 'observer' within the writers' room is another example of 'circumscribed agency': a mode of influence that operates within defined institutional limits while still shaping creative outcomes. Building on this, Rawlinson, representing Big Light, openly acknowledges the asymmetry of roles and the inherent sensitivities in

[24] At the time of the interview, Sara Melodia was Head of Drama at Lux Vide.

[25] Luca Bernabei is Lux Vide's CEO.

portraying a history that does not belong to them: 'this isn't our history, and it isn't our national public broadcaster'. Her comment exemplifies a 'mediated cultural encounter', that is a process in which editorial authority and cultural responsibility are not merely shared but actively negotiated across institutional and national boundaries. This dynamic required both creative sensitivity and structural attentiveness to the asymmetries embedded in transnational collaboration. Rawlinson also contrasts public broadcasting's cultural investment with the fleeting logics of streaming platforms. For her, creating something 'that has a legacy' distinguishes public service media as a custodian of cultural memory. Narrative coordination followed this layered model. Big Light did not interface directly with RAI; instead, Lux Vide mediated feedback, which RAI supplied later via written notes. These helped 'simplify and reorganise' narrative elements. This structure reflects the meso-level of production described by Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009), illustrating how authorship in transnational television is negotiated through institutional mediation, formalised communication, and sustained trust. The development of *Medici* brought together distinct professional traditions and working methods, with the Italian team playing a pivotal role in shaping the series' visual identity and logistical

Fania Petrocchi underscores the extent to which the Italian side of the partnership retained control over key artistic and craft-based dimensions of the series, encompassing production design, costumes, and the material construction of authentic settings:

> From a production standpoint, *we nonetheless retained artistic control over many aspects of the show's craft and visual construction, namely costumes, set design, and shooting in real locations.*
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Within the transnational division of labour, production design constituted a spatially anchored precondition through which Italian partners exercised creative authority over the material and location-specific dimensions of production. This allocation of control ensured cultural specificity through the material organisation of production, anchoring creative decision-making in place despite the spatial dispersal of other development phases, most notably writing. This artistic autonomy extended beyond design decisions into the concrete realities of production logistics. Luisa Cotta Ramosino further elaborated on how the Italian team's embedded working practices and operational logic contrasted with the expectations and workflows of Big Light, noting:

> As a production company, Lux Vide [...] brings the ability to never think solely about what works in the script, but to always keep in mind the practical aspects of realising it. [...] We knew from the start that *we intended to shoot on real locations in Tuscany, and not in a backlot*. [...] We couldn't shoot using the American episode-by-episode system. Instead, we had to create shooting-blocks as we normally do for Italian TV

> series. [...] In the first year[26], *it was very difficult to reach an understanding on the delivery and production schedule*: 'okay, first we'll do this, then that… no, because we need to start with all the scripts in place'[27] [...] We can't keep going back and forth between locations as this would be too expensive. [...] This was complicated for them [...] because the *writers' room system is designed to produce one episode at a time* [...] whereas *we* [*Italians*] *have it in our DNA*.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Cotta Ramosino's account reveals an Italian production workflow organised around clearly articulated preconditions, most notably the organisation of production into 'shooting blocks', with the requirement that 'all the scripts [be] in place' operating as a prerequisite for location-based shooting. Her references to 'shooting on real locations in Tuscany' and to the impossibility of 'going back and forth between locations' make visible a tightly interdependent relationship between script completion, scheduling, and spatial logistics. The difficulty she describes in 'reach[ing] an understanding on the delivery and production schedule' with Big Light thus points to a structural misalignment between two distinct production logics. On the one hand, the Anglo-American writers' room system is oriented towards sequential, episode-by-episode development, in which scripts remain open to revision during shooting in response to logistical, locational, or creative contingencies. On the other hand, the Italian model of serial drama production is grounded in the stabilisation of a locked-down script as an essential condition for coordination within a location-driven workflow, where narrative fixity functions as a prerequisite for managing costs, time, and the coordinated use of locations within a television drama production culture traditionally anchored in location shooting. Taken together, her remarks encapsulate the tension between an Italian production logic grounded in early script stabilisation and location-based pragmatism, and a US–UK writers' room model oriented towards iterative development. This divergence was further complicated by the broader framework of transnational coproduction, which introduced both opportunities and constraints. Petrocchi acknowledged that adapting to this model meant accepting a redistribution of editorial influence, especially during the writing phase: 'Creative control during the writing phase – and this is a paradox – was less from our [RAI's] point of view. However, this has allowed us to take these products worldwide' (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation). This paradox reflects a strategic trade-off in which editorial oversight was loosened to facilitate international circulation, aligning creative compromise with the broader ambition of global reach. Lucy Rawlinson echoed the awareness of these challenges from the British side. She pointed to the constant balancing act of respecting cultural contexts and audience sensibilities when working with a national broadcaster such as RAI:

[26] Referring to the production of Season 1, *Medici*.

[27] The line voices Big Light Productions' willingness to start shooting once the screenplay was locked.

> *There are difficulties with making these shows for audiences in other countries*. [...] When we're talking about our episodes now, especially for *Leonardo*, [...] *we now have that in the back of our minds*. [...] And we talk about, as RAI is the main broadcaster, what the Italian audience […] will like that as a road we're going down or whether we should pull back a little bit, whether they might balk at it, which is completely understandable. [...] When the broadcaster sometimes leaves and Netflix is then the only platform they are making for, suddenly they're much freer with what they can do.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

The need to keep the Italian audience 'in the back of [their] minds' and to repeatedly assess whether a narrative direction is one '[they]'re going down' or should instead be curtailed positions this collaboration as shaped by institutional preconditions tied to RAI's status as commissioning public service broadcaster. Rawlinson's contrast with situations in which 'Netflix is then the only platform' situates these editorial checks within a temporal sequence of interdependent decisions whose outcome, while limiting creative latitude, is framed by her as an investment in cultural legitimacy and legacy-building rather than unrestricted freedom. Seen through this lens, the collaboration between Big Light, Lux Vide, and RAI involved more than workflow coordination; it required negotiating national production cultures, artistic priorities, and institutional values. Italian partners contributed a historically informed and logistically grounded approach, while Big Light brought an iterative and flexible model shaped by Anglo-American writers' room practice.

The interviews reveal that transnational coproduction operates as a negotiated space of industrial difference. Lux Vide brought a distinct production culture, rooted in practices such as location shooting and block scheduling, common in Italian television but unfamiliar to the episodic structure of Anglo-American productions. As Cotta Ramosino explained, filming on location in Tuscany demanded greater script synchronisation early in the process. This misalignment initially caused friction around scheduling and delivery. Such tensions reveal the extent to which national production routines, when integrated into a collaborative framework, must be rearticulated through processes of negotiation and mutual adaptation. As Lotz (2014) notes, creative processes in television are shaped by institutional frameworks that govern both content and participation. Here, one system prioritised iterative development; the other emphasised efficiency under logistical constraints. From RAI's perspective, these negotiations encompassed questions of editorial control. As Petrocchi noted, RAI's influence during development was deliberately limited to enable the creation of a project with global appeal. This strategic compromise exemplifies 'circumscribed agency', whereby institutional influence is maintained not through direct control but through negotiated and context-specific forms of intervention within bounded production frameworks. Rawlinson's comments also show how adaptation occurred over time. The British team gradually internalised RAI's editorial culture and adjusted accordingly. This reflects the concept of 'mediated cultural encounter', where transnational

collaboration exposes and reconfigures national differences through mutual adaptation. Ultimately, *Medici* exemplifies transnational television's hybrid operational model. Creative coordination did not rely on uniformity but on managing structural asymmetries – through compromise, translation, and institutional trust – where shared authorship and logistical feasibility emerged through the integration of divergent production practices.

This hybridisation became especially pronounced in the series' development as a period drama, which brought into focus the differing approaches and cultural priorities of the Italian and Anglo-American partners. The series' ambition to narrate a critical moment in Italian history – the rise of the middle class and the transformative role of bankers in early modern society – demanded not only historical depth but also narrative accessibility. From the Italian side, this ambition was inseparable from a broader cultural and intellectual project. As Luisa Cotta Ramosino explained, the show sought to represent the historical transition into modernity, marked by a new spirituality and social mobility:

> Identifying [as a key theme of the series] the *emergence of the middle class* – where bankers, whom we are used to viewing negatively, instead represented a force for change by creating opportunities – was something historically significant for Lux Vide. […] This *marks the dawn of the modern era*, a time when spirituality and religiosity are confronted with challenges that compel individuals to make decisions and take ownership of them. […] For us, *this was also a way to portray a form of* '*modern*' *religiosity*.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Cotta Ramosino's framing of the emergence of the middle class as 'historically significant' and as marking 'the dawn of the modern era' positions historical interpretation as a precondition shaping narrative development, rather than as a constraint applied retrospectively. This orientation did not translate into a rigid adherence to chronological or factual precision; instead, it reflected a commitment to capturing the emotional and cultural truths of the period. For the Italian team, conveying the spirit, values, and inner dynamics of Renaissance society, its ethos and emotional cadence, took precedence over strict historical exactitude, as Cotta Ramosino further explained:

> *We were* […] *committed to staying as close to history as possible, not necessarily in event details, but in capturing the essence and emotional truth*. I feel *the American approach tends to modernise the story, often seeking contemporary parallels*. For example, when Frank [Spotnitz] talked to us about Jacopo Pazzi[28], it was clear he had Trump in mind. *As Italians, we aim to make the narrative feel modern while also emphasising that this is a different world*, fascinating because of its difference. […] They [the Americans] care more about precision: 'Oh no, but this is exactly how it happened…' Sure, but you can't tell it that way! […] The rhythm of human emotions

> is different from historical time. […] So, *the mediation was: conveying the passage of time while creating a compelling and engaging story*.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Speaking from the UK side of the partnership, Lucy Rawlinson acknowledged the challenge of making Italian history resonate with a global audience, shaping a narrative that retained its cultural specificity while remaining broadly engaging. At the same time, she emphasised the importance of avoiding the risk of transforming the series into a dry, documentary-style account. Her remarks highlight the delicate balancing act between historical complexity and narrative accessibility that defined the creative process:

> *I find it challenging to read up on the history in terms of the politics and social politics as well*. It is very specific. Florence had a very specific sort of history at that time. […] To get that feel in our series *without making it feel like a documentary*, but still provide a full understanding of the world, you need time. And that's been the lovely thing about having three seasons of *Medici* – we've been able to show how things have changed. […] It's the modern relevance that's important in creating historical drama. Frank will always say: why do I care? Why am I watching? […] *It's making sure people care about the characters*, even when they do quite strange things – whether because of history or because we want them to – and ensuring people enjoy watching the show.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's emphasis on history being 'very specific', on the need to avoid a 'documentary' tone, and on taking 'time' to show 'how things have changed' situates transnational development as a temporally extended process, in which narrative accessibility emerges through serial accumulation rather than immediate exposition. Her repeated insistence on making audiences 'care about the characters' frames emotional engagement as a desired outcome of this process, through which cultural specificity is rendered legible to a global audience without being diluted. Rawlinson's appreciation for her Italian partners' deep historical awareness came through most clearly when she reflected on her main takeaway from the collaboration. Her response highlighted not only a heightened understanding of the cultural richness the Italian team brought to the project, but also a recognition of how strongly national identity and historical pride informed their editorial vision. In her words:

[28] Jacopo Pazzi (1423-1478) was a member of the influential Pazzi family, a wealthy and prominent Florentine banking dynasty. He was a key figure in the *Pazzi Conspiracy* (1478) against the Medici, which aimed to overthrow their rule in Florence.

> I think that *the biggest one I've learnt or taken from this whole process is the passion they* [the Italian partners] *have for their identity and history*. It's phenomenal. And if we can harness that, as in Britain, not necessarily to celebrate the past, but to acknowledge it and be proud of the public figures who've lived before. […] It's everything in terms of the places and the identity of a place, who it's linked to, and just having more awareness of that, which we perhaps didn't anticipate at the start. But now we really understand it's very important.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's characterisation of Italian partners' 'passion […] for their identity and history', together with her emphasis on 'places' and 'the identity of a place', and the admission that this significance was 'not anticipated at the start', positions national historical consciousness as an emergent precondition of the collaboration, one that became legible only through the unfolding of the process itself. The shift she marks – from initial unawareness to recognising that this dimension was 'very important' for the Italian partners – situates transnational development as a temporal sequence of cumulative, sedimented learning and recalibration, through which cultural specificity progressively reshapes creative priorities, associated outcomes, and, crucially, collaborative relationships between partners, extending beyond the immediate project. This shared creative process moved beyond the treatment of historical content to encompass the narrative form itself. Fania Petrocchi described how the collaboration fostered a meaningful exchange of expertise, particularly in the areas of storytelling structure and character development, highlighting how each side brought distinct narrative sensibilities to the shaping of the series, which she describes as follows:

> My challenge was this: to contribute not only formal narrative competence[1] but also a broader set of competencies. This included the structural elements of storytelling […] and the cultural and historical depth needed for a project like *Medici*. In this regard, Frank Spotnitz and the Anglo-Saxon tradition have nothing to learn from anyone, as they are already masters of this form of storytelling. […] Our expertise in narrative form *required us to reorganise the material to give prominence to the characters in addition to the actions that define them*. […] The collaboration involved an almost equal exchange, as we shared a comparable level of formal narrative competence. *The real challenge lay in leveraging our broader cultural competence*. […] *This is our history*. The historical and cultural knowledge that an average Italian possesses about the Renaissance is deeply embedded in our lived experience. *[…] We had to bring forward and convey our historical expertise*, not about events, but details such as how

[1] In the original Italian interview, Petrocchi uses the expression 'esperienza di linguaggio' (literally, 'language expertise'), employing 'language' figuratively in the industry-specific sense of shared narrative form, structure, and storytelling conventions.

> people dressed, why they used a particular type of ink, how they ate. […] All of this knowledge had to be transferred […] *to a creative editorial team that was undoubtedly strong in storytelling terms but, from a historical perspective, tended to fall back into nineteenth-century literary models*.
>
> (Petrocchi,2019, my translation, italics mine)

Petrocchi's emphasis on having to 'reorganise the material to give prominence to the characters', together with her distinction between a shared formal narrative competence across the Italian and UK creative teams (understood here as narrative "grammar" and storytelling conventions) and unevenly distributed 'historical and cultural knowledge' situates narrative form and structure as a key site of interdependence within the transnational screenwriting process. The need to 'transfer' historically embedded knowledge – described as 'deeply embedded in our [Italian] lived experience' – positions cultural and historical competence as a precondition that had to be actively mobilised and sequenced across collaboration, shaping how character development emerged as a hard-won outcome of sustained reflexive exchange rather than as an initial given. In this sense, the passage marks the most acute manifestation, in this case study, of how cultural specificity operates as the central challenge of screenwriting within a transnational framework, and of the concerted effort required on the Italian side of such partnerships – here and later, most fully in *The Name of the Rose* – to assert character development as a creative priority rooted in Italian screen storytelling traditions across culturally diverse writing teams. As recalled by Rawlinson, the implications of this tension became more concrete during the development of *Medici: The Magnificent* (Season 2, 2018), which, while not examined here as a case study, nonetheless offers a further illustration, also echoed later in *The Name of the Rose*, of a recurring and consequential divergence between the Italian and Anglo-American creative teams around two distinct screenwriting priorities: character-centred development on the one hand, and event-driven plotting on the other. Faced with an abundance of historical material but lacking a cohesive emotional throughline, the writers' room began to realise that the episodes, as originally conceived, lacked sufficient character depth. This prompted a process of reflection and structural revision, revealing the underlying tension between the Anglo-American preference for historical event-driven plotting and the Italian insistence on psychological coherence and character-driven arcs. As Rawlinson reflects on this phase:

> *But as we started the writers' room and were dividing the experiences of his life up into episodes* […] *it was trickier* because we didn't have that kind of throughline of the first series with the murder mystery. So, it was Lorenzo driving the story and his important character arc. […] We were relying quite heavily on moments in history […] and it just wasn't working, really. […] *There wasn't enough character* […] in the story. So, *we had big discussions and went back over those episodes, rebroke them, and had to recreate them*. […] That definitely came from the Italians saying to us that it wasn't

quite working at the time. *There was a bit too much plot, not enough character*.

(Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

In tracing how the writers' room initially attempted to manage the dense historical lifespan of the central character (*Medici: the Magnificent*) by segmenting his life experience into episodic units – only to confront the absence of a sustaining 'throughline' – Rawlinson situates this phase as a critical temporal juncture in the writing process, marked by retrospective reassessment and structural revision. The subsequent decision to restructure the episode breakdown ('rebroke them') and to 'recreate' episodes of a recurring and consequential divergence within the Italian and Anglo-American creative teams between two distinct screenwriting priorities prompted by the recognition that there was 'too much plot, not enough character' and explicitly attributed to Italian intervention – casts character development as a hard-won outcome of interdependent negotiation over time rather than as an initial organising principle. Following this moment of structural reassessment, both sides recognised the need for recalibration, albeit from different positions and with different concerns. The Italian editorial team, led by Petrocchi, prioritised the restoration of psychological coherence to the characters, which they felt had been overshadowed by excessive plot complexity. By contrast, the Anglo-American writers' room struggled with the scale and specificity of the historical material, finding it difficult to adapt and sustain within episodic drama. This tension between character-driven and event-driven storytelling thus reflected not contingent creative clashes, but deeper cultural divergences rooted in distinct narrative epistemologies and practices.

Petrocchi observed that the Italian emphasis on character development – prioritising interiority and psychological plausibility – reflected a humanistic tradition in which the individual occupies the core of narrative construction. In contrast, the Anglo-American model often inferred character through plot progression, consistent with an empiricist orientation that privileges observable behaviour and narrative momentum. These divergent storytelling logics, each embedded in distinct institutional and industrial frameworks, required ongoing negotiation throughout the development process to achieve a balance between dramatic effectiveness and cultural authenticity. These tensions recur across the interviews, with Petrocchi's remarks clarifying that Italian input extended beyond questions of narrative form or structure to encompass a historically grounded understanding of Renaissance Italy, one that shaped both character construction and story development. This divergence became particularly consequential in Season 2, where Rawlinson recalls that early episode drafts were judged unsatisfactory by the Italian team due to an overemphasis within the writers' room on historical events, at the expense of sustained character development.

This contrast in narrative construction provides a clear illustration of how 'circumscribed agency' operates across distinct storytelling paradigms, in which institutional and cultural frameworks do not only shape what stories are told, but how character and plot are negotiated, whether through the Italian emphasis on psychological interiority or the Anglo-American preference for plot-driven structure. Crucially, this was not a case of one model prevailing over the other, but rather a concrete

enactment of transnational collaboration. Instead, through a genuinely transnational spirit and effort, both sides recalibrated their approaches through sustained, and at times intense, dialogue and exchange, as well as through forms of physical mobility, such as Petrocchi's travel to London alongside Cotta Ramosino, undertaken to secure mutual understanding and a workable outcome with Big Light. The writers' room – operating conventionally until the commissioner broke into the process and, quite literally, the room – thus functioned as a bounded yet porous space of creative negotiation, in which different narrative logics, institutional norms, and professional expectations were shared, articulated, and translated rather than imposed or assimilated. The resulting form was not a seamless synthesis, but the outcome of iterative co-creation, grounded in mutual recognition and shaped by the structural challenges of transnational coproduction.

This collaborative dynamic did not simply resolve creative tensions but actively redefined how narrative decisions were shaped and when editorial authority was exercised. Within this evolving framework of negotiated agency, the choice of writing model played a pivotal role in structuring both process and outcome. The writing model adopted in *Medici* was a central element in shaping both the creative process and the final form of the series. For Fania Petrocchi, one of the key advantages of this model was its capacity to align the script with international standards, particularly by shifting creative control to a later stage of development. As she explained:

> In essence, this model shifts creative control to a later phase for us [RAI]. […] It allows for the *universalisation of the writing process, meaning that we ultimately achieved a script very close to the Anglo-American models* […] There is undoubtedly *an alignment with international standards*, both in terms of narrative language – resulting in screenplays with concise, non-literary dialogues and characters whose psychology is enacted rather than explained […] – and in terms of visual language. Constructing stories and characters through action naturally requires more dynamic direction and camera movements, representing a clear step forward in cinematic storytelling.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Petrocchi's emphasis on creative control being 'shift[ed]…to a later phase' together with her reference to the 'universalisation of the writing process' and to scripts 'very close to the Anglo-American models' situates the writing model itself as a temporal precondition shaping how authority and decision-making are distributed across development. The alignment with 'international standards' – evidenced through 'concise, non-literary dialogues', enacted character psychology, and more dynamic visual construction – frames this delayed intervention on the part of the commissioning broadcaster, RAI, as a processual outcome of transnational collaboration, in which convergence emerges through sequencing rather than through initial standardisation, further testifying to how the transnational mode of coproduction differentiates itself from earlier forms of television drama collaboration.

Echoing this, Luisa Cotta Ramosino explained how the writers' room architecture itself operated as a temporal sequencing device, with national competences entering the process at different moments. Her account is particularly revealing because the Italian contribution is framed not as a constant co-presence, but as a staged intervention designed to perform cultural mediation at a specific point in the development chain, with the aim of enriching the scripts through targeted intervention:

> Paradoxically, we brought Italian writers into the writers' room only later, not from the outset. […] *The contribution of an Italian writer in the writers' room provides the kind of mediation* I mentioned earlier, which, in my opinion, is significant and can be helpful. Big Light were very pleased to have Francesco Arlanch join the writers' room for a few days.
>
> (Cotta Ramosino, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Cotta Ramosino's emphasis on 'only later' and 'for a few days' makes explicit the temporal design of this transnational workflow, in which cultural mediation is treated as a conditioned intervention rather than an initial premise, one link of a chain being constructed in progress through a negotiated process. The writing model being negotiated here functions as a precondition that structures both when national expertise from outside the writers' room can influence the scripts and how that influence is channelled towards particular outcomes. From the British side, Lucy Rawlinson characterised the writers' room as a collaborative environment whose effectiveness depended on calibrating different cultural backgrounds and levels of professional experience. Her remarks locate diversity not simply as an ethical commitment, but as a pragmatic precondition for managing the complexity of serial development:

> We try and be as diverse as we possibly can, because that's very important to us. […] We've always tried to have at least one or two newer emerging talent. […] *We need experienced talent as well, because these shows are tricky*. […] It's very useful to have people in the room […] to make people feel looked after, and not doing a bad job.
>
> (Rawlinson, 2019, italics mine)

Rawlinson's emphasis on assembling a writers' room that combined emerging and more experienced voices positions team composition as an upstream structuring condition for the entire development sequence, shaped through a tense process of negotiation with RAI and subsequently internalised by Big Light as acquired organisational knowledge. In this sense, transnational screenwriting emerges as a spatially and organisationally distributed process whose outcomes remain contingent upon the initial configuration of expertise and support within the room. Fania Petrocchi clarified, however, that the benefits of this model were accompanied by specific risks that only became visible once the process

was underway, particularly when historically dense material was filtered through screenwriters whose cultural reference points, according to RAI, did not align with an in-depth understanding of Renaissance culture. Crucially, the friction she identified was not positioned as a rejection of the writers' room per se, but rather as a problem of historical competence that came to drive later structural adjustments within the development process, as she recalled:

> *We did not so much clash with the modern narrative form itself* but rather with a lack of capability within the writing team, something that was later adjusted for Seasons 2 and 3 by bringing in a slightly older group of writers. […] *The original team struggled to grasp the historical depth of the project*. […] This does not mean being stilted or overly formal, but rather having a proper understanding of the material being told, which requires a historical perspective.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

The temporal markers 'later adjusted' and the reference to Seasons 2 and 3 position this as a sequence of interdependent events, in which early constraints in cultural literacy generate downstream staffing changes as corrective mechanisms along the way. Petrocchi's account therefore illuminates transnational screenwriting collaboration as a processual endeavour: a development trajectory in which outcomes are shaped through gradual recalibration rather than assumed from the outset on the basis of default practices or entrenched routines. This process of gradual recalibration becomes more tangible when Petrocchi specifies the nature of the cultural gap that necessitated such adjustments. She elaborated on the difficulties faced by writers unfamiliar with the historical significance of key fifteenth-century Italian innovations – from banking and bookkeeping to classical aesthetics – which, in her account, fundamentally shaped how Renaissance Italy should be narrated on screen:

> In narrating the 15th century, the challenge lies in *the cultural gap*: if a 25-year-old writer with an Anglo-American educational background approaches the material, *they cannot have the historical perspective required to grasp what the 15th century truly represented in Italy*. The 15th century saw the invention of modern banking as we know it, the development of double-entry bookkeeping, the introduction of linear perspective in painting, and the revival of classical architecture through imitations, fakes, and excavations. If a writer lacks an understanding of these fundamental innovations, they can only draw from their own cultural references. Throughout all seasons, including those focused on Lorenzo, *we faced the enormous task of stripping away the 19th-century patina from the narrative*. *For Anglo-American culture, the past is often filtered through Victorian or Dickensian narrative models, but these frameworks are entirely unsuited to characters from a vastly different cultural period*. This is not merely about historical accuracy – something RAI prioritises highly, given the need to

> provide the correct portrayals of figures like Cosimo de' Medici and Lorenzo the Magnificent, who are studied in schools – but about something deeper. *It is about faithfully capturing the spirit of a cultural era without imposing anachronistic models of thought and behaviour on its characters*.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

By mapping the 'cultural gap' onto writers' 'Anglo-American educational background' and their reliance on inherited 'Victorian or Dickensian narrative models', Petrocchi's account positions historical embeddedness as a structural precondition of transnational screenwriting at a distance. The repeated reference to this difficulty 'throughout all seasons' situates cultural specificity not as a one-off issue, but as a temporally extended challenge unfolding across the development process. At the same time, the need to 'strip away the 19th-century patina from the narrative' makes visible how spatially displaced authorship generates interdependent corrective interventions, through which historically inappropriate narrative templates are progressively identified and recalibrated in order to shape viable story outcomes.

Petrocchi offered a particularly revealing example to illustrate how profoundly the moral codes embedded in the Renaissance value system diverged from contemporary narrative expectations, and how this divergence posed concrete challenges within the writers' room. Reflecting on the risk of anachronism when historically distant ethical frameworks are filtered through modern narrative conventions, she explained:

> *We cannot impose Victorian and Protestant ethics on characters for whom acts like revenge through murder were considered a legitimate form of justice*. […] This illustrates the cultural codes of the 15th century, which require a deep historical understanding to portray authentically. […] This is precisely why, for *Lorenzo*[2]*, we agreed with Frank Spotnitz to slightly increase the age of the writing team. I must say that this adjustment improved the outcome*, as it brought greater historical awareness and sensitivity to the creative process.
>
> (Petrocchi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

By invoking the impossibility of 'impos[ing] Victorian and Protestant ethics' and explicitly identifying the 'cultural codes of the 15th century' as requiring 'deep historical understanding', Petrocchi positions cultural specificity as a non-negotiable precondition of transnational screenwriting. The phrase 'this is precisely why' marks epistemic misalignment as the causal driver of a subsequent organisational intervention, framing the decision to 'increase the age of the writing team' as a sequenced corrective response within the development process. The claim that 'this adjustment

[2] 'Lorenzo' here refers to Season 2, *Medici: The Magnificent* (2018).

improved the outcome' situates cultural mediation not as an abstract principle, but as an outcome-oriented intervention through which transnational collaboration recalibrates itself in order to safeguard historically grounded characterisation.

These excerpts from the interview with Petrocchi highlight both the advantages and limitations of the writing model adopted in *Medici*, particularly in relation to cultural translation and historical representation. Petrocchi acknowledged the strengths of the Anglo-American model – especially its alignment with international norms of concise, visually dynamic storytelling – but also noted that its implementation delayed RAI's editorial input. This situation exemplifies circumscribed agency, whereby meaningful intervention is exercised within, and limited by, bounded institutional frameworks. Beyond procedural concerns, however, Petrocchi articulated a deeper epistemological problem, rooted in the initial writing team's limited historical literacy and the consequent risk of anachronistic narrative formations drawn from Victorian or Dickensian traditions. Her insistence on defending the cultural specificity of Renaissance Italy resonates with what Holt and Perren (2009) term the preservation of 'cultural integrity', namely the safeguarding the internal coherence, historical consciousness, and aesthetic conventions of the source culture within transnational production environments. The mid-process inclusion of more historically attuned Italian writers – described by both Petrocchi and Cotta Ramosino – functioned as a recalibration of creative control, reinforcing the epistemic and cultural depth of the storytelling. Petrocchi further explained that the Italian emphasis on constructing characters from within – privileging interiority and psychological plausibility – draws from a humanistic narrative tradition that places the individual at the centre of storytelling. In contrast, the Anglo-American model tends to develop characters through plot-driven momentum, consistent with a more empiricist framework that privileges externalised behaviour and action. These divergent creative logics, institutionalised in different industrial systems, had to be carefully negotiated to arrive at a final product capable of balancing dramatic impact with cultural authenticity. In this context, the Italian team's determination to preserve emotional nuance and historical depth exemplifies what Dunleavy and Weissmann (2024) define as 'cultural specificity': the embedding of a television drama within the historical, aesthetic, and affective coordinates of its originating context. Cultural specificity, in this sense, is not reducible to local colour or national symbolism; rather, it operates as a structuring principle that shapes narrative conventions, character psychology, and the drama's worldview, enabling transnational coproductions to respect the originating culture while remaining legible to global audiences. From the British side, Rawlinson underlined the structural value of a diverse writers' room. Her reflections align with the view that 'mediated cultural encounters' (Bondebjerg et al., 2017) play a productive role in shaping collaborative creativity. For Rawlinson, diversity of experience and cultural standpoint not only enriched the creative process, but also provided a stabilising mechanism for navigating the complexity of serialised historical drama.

To conclude, the development of *Medici* offers a nuanced case of transnational collaboration, in which creative authorship emerged through ongoing negotiation across cultural, institutional, and professional boundaries. The writers' room became a site of hybridisation, where Anglo-American and

Italian storytelling paradigms intersected and adapted to one another. Structural asymmetries – whether in narrative focus, editorial timing, or workflow – were not eliminated but managed through mediating institutions such as Lux Vide and through iterative feedback processes. What emerged was a form of 'circumscribed agency', in which creative decisions were made within flexible but bounded frameworks. Italian partners such as RAI and Lux Vide exercised selective editorial authority, safeguarding historical authenticity and cultural depth, while Big Light contributed internationally recognisable narrative structures. Taken together, *Medici* can be read as an instance of a 'mediated cultural encounter', in which convergence operates through dialogue rather than homogenisation. This dynamic was particularly evident in the negotiation between character-driven and plot-driven approaches, reflecting broader storytelling logics (Lotz, 2014). The adjustments made during Season 2 further demonstrate that creative authorship in transnational contexts is distributed and negotiated, shaped by institutional mandates, cultural expectations, and industrial norms. In this sense, the translation of both content and practice became essential to the series' creative and operational success.

We now turn to the case study of *My Brilliant Friend*, which offers a contrasting configuration to *Medici*. While *Medici* illustrates how Anglo-American creative models – particularly the writers' room and showrunner framework – were introduced into an Italian coproduction context, *My Brilliant Friend* foregrounds a model in which Italian narrative traditions and production structures played a central role from the outset, operating as a structural precondition. In this context, as the analysis will show, screenwriting becomes a crucial site for negotiating creative priorities and, more fundamentally, for asserting cultural legitimacy and identity, as well as the authority of a distinct storytelling tradition and production culture, through a carefully articulated screenwriting architecture and related practices.

Case Study 2 – *My Brilliant Friend*

From a screenwriting perspective, *My Brilliant Friend* stands out not necessarily for the success of the final product, but for the distinctive architecture of its scriptwriting framework, one developed within a broader system designed to define, manage, regulate, and safeguard creative authorship. This section unpacks a deliberately constructed creative and scriptwriting model, meticulously crafted around the adaptation of Elena Ferrante's novel. In this case, development can be understood as a unified and indivisible process where early conceptualisation is inextricably intertwined with the core phase of scriptwriting.

Drawing on interviews and primary materials, the analysis focuses on five key figures whose insights illuminate this framework: writer Francesco Piccolo, director and co-writer Saverio Costanzo, author Elena Ferrante, RAI in-house producer Luigi Mariniello, and the then Head of RAI Fiction Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta. The model they enacted draws inspiration from both the legacy of Italian cinema and a strategic ambition to consolidate Italy's high-end drama industry, bringing together all

segments of the production chain around a shared creative vision and cultural mission.

At the heart of this model lies a striking feature: the writing team structured itself as a kind of "stronghold", an internally coordinated system designed to manage and protect creative authorship. Figuratively, this structure can be envisioned as a system of concentric rings, within which a distributed network of creative agents operated in synchrony. To articulate the logic of this organisation, a cellular metaphor proves especially generative: the writing architecture can be likened to the structure of a biological cell, composed of four concentric layers, each performing distinct yet interrelated functions. At the very centre of this cell lies the "nucleolus", a compact, self-contained unit within the nucleus, whose biological function is to produce ribosomes, the molecular machinery for protein synthesis. Metaphorically, it serves as a specialised workshop where the fundamental tools for the cell's operation are generated.

In the writing model of *My Brilliant Friend*, the "nucleolus" corresponds to the operational core: the professional screenwriters directly responsible for crafting the screenplay line by line and producing the final script, namely Francesco Piccolo and Laura Paolucci. Piccolo, a multi-award-winning author, screenwriter, and academic in screenwriting education, holds a distinctive position at the intersection of Italian literature and screenwriting, being one of the few figures to bridge the two domains with such prolific output. Paolucci[29], a respected screenwriter and producer at Fandango (coproducers of the series), occupies a dual role as both creative force and industrial stakeholder, linking artistic and organisational functions within the production process. The two form a long-standing writing partnership, having co-authored numerous screenplays, with Paolucci also adapting several of Piccolo's literary works, further deepening their professional synergy. This duo constituted a consolidated and highly autonomous nucleus, the central locus of creative authorship within the screenwriting "cell". Much like the biological nucleolus, which operates as the cell's factory for generating ribosomes – the tools essential to protein synthesis and cellular repair – this writing duo functioned as the narrative workshop where the core components of the script were forged. Once various creative inputs (from the director, Ferrante, independent producers, RAI, and HBO) were received and selectively assimilated or filtered, Piccolo and Paolucci worked to integrate them into a structured narrative system. They were not merely co-authors responding to guidance; rather, they acted as the architects of the scriptwriting machinery, translating a constellation of conceptual contributions into a coherent and operational screenplay.

Encircling this inner duo was a second layer of authorship and coordination, forming the scriptwriting nucleus proper. In biological terms, the cell's nucleus contains the nucleoplasm – a substance that sustains the nucleolus – and is encased by the nuclear envelope, which regulates the exchange of signals between the nucleus and the rest of the cell. In *My Brilliant Friend*, this next level integrated another central figure, whose dual creative function sustained and interfaced with the core:

[29] Laura Paolucci is an award-nominated screenwriter and producer known for her work in auteur cinema and literary adaptations, with credits including *Gomorrah* (2014-2021) and adaptations of Elena Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults* (2023).

director and co-writer Saverio Costanzo. Costanzo's role was doubly articulated. Firstly, he functioned as the nucleoplasm, maintaining and nurturing the internal environment that allowed the writing core to operate with cohesion. Secondly, he embodied the nuclear envelope, the interface through which communication and feedback between the writing nucleus and the broader production system were mediated. As such, Costanzo acted as a regulatory filter, channelling and calibrating the creative inputs from external actors (including Ferrante, producers, and institutional partners), and ensuring alignment between the inner writing process and the wider artistic and industrial ecosystem. His presence guaranteed both permeability and protection: enabling necessary exchanges while safeguarding the coherence and integrity of the narrative core.

In a biological cell, beyond the nucleus lies the "endoplasmic reticulum", a production and regulation hub responsible for facilitating synthesis and ensuring functional continuity. In the cellular metaphor, this corresponds to a fourth central figure: Elena Ferrante, author of the source novels. Although external to the operational nucleus, Ferrante remained closely connected to it, primarily through the director. This functional proximity enabled a selective and sustained exchange: Ferrante offered narrative input and feedback, which Costanzo mediated, ensuring alignment with the inner writing core. Much like the biochemical dialogue between the endoplasmic reticulum and the nucleus in a biological cell, this interaction supported the project's narrative consistency and creative cohesion. While remaining external to the operational mechanics of scriptwriting, Ferrante played a regulatory and generative role, actively contributing to the refinement of the screenplay. This inward-to-outward configuration established a structured sphere of influence over the development of the adaptation. It was within this "fortified ring" that the screenplay was conceived, iterated, and aligned with the overall creative vision, before being presented to the broadcaster and additional contributors (to be discussed shortly). As the innermost tier of creative control, this inner circle safeguarded narrative fidelity and coherence, functioning as the core locus of authorship and justifying its formal attribution of screenwriting credit.

Expanding further outwards, we reach the "cytoplasm", a complex and dynamic space populated by "organelles", each with a specialised function. In this outer layer, we find the institutional and industrial stakeholders who, though external to the act of writing, played a fundamental role in shaping the creative ecosystem. At the heart of this layer was the commissioning broadcaster, RAI. While RAI remained outside the artistic authorship of the screenplay, it played a central role in defining the industrial and editorial framework within which the adaptation unfolded. The first tier of this outer structure included RAI's in-house producers[30], particularly Luigi Mariniello, who was appointed as the broadcaster's dedicated producer and acted as a liaison throughout the development phase. At a higher institutional level, editorial executives such as Francesco Nardella (former Deputy Director of RAI Fiction) and Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta (former Head of RAI Fiction) offered strategic oversight and were instrumental in initiating the transnational partnership with HBO.

Equally significant were the two independent producers: Domenico Procacci (Fandango) and

Lorenzo Mieli (Wildside). Their proximity to both the creative nucleus and international partners positioned them as hybrid agents, contributing to creative development and strategic alignment. Even though they did not partake directly in the act of writing, their influence shaped the conditions under which the script was conceived and refined. Much like organelles within a cell, each of these figures performed distinct roles – operational, editorial, or strategic – but it was their coordination that proved vital. Their collaborative functioning enabled a seamless interface between the creative nucleus and the institutional-industrial apparatus that surrounded it. As such, this cytoplasmic layer ensured that the screenwriting cell of *My Brilliant Friend* remained responsive, resilient, and capable of managing the demands of an ambitious transnational adaptation.

Finally, enclosing the entire structure is the "cell membrane", that is, the boundary separating the internal system from its external environment. It regulates selective exchanges, ensures internal cohesion, and facilitates communication through specialised receptors. In My Brilliant Friend, this boundary corresponds to the interface through which the writing and production architecture engaged with external cultural, institutional, and industrial forces. Like a cell membrane, it maintained internal coherence while allowing for necessary adaptation. The Italian side of the partnership – including the independent producers, director, screenwriters, Ferrante, RAI's in-house team, the commissioning editor, and the Head of Drama – collectively functioned as this membrane. More than a protective shield, this configuration played an active role in steering the adaptation's development. Rooted in the original vision of the lead producers and reinforced by RAI's institutional framework, it enabled cohesive creative progress and ensured fidelity to the adaptation's cultural and narrative foundations, while mediating the demands of transnational coproduction.

In this context, the group comprising all the actors involved on the Italian side of the partnership formed a structure that functioned as an interface between two distinct environments. These environments must be understood within the framework of a renewed coproduction paradigm: the transnational model. A model that, as highlighted in the academic scholarship which has significantly informed this research, redefines creative collaboration across national and institutional boundaries: 'transnational coproduction in the current era includes […] also involves a creative partnership in which national interests must be *combined and reconciled*' (Hilmes, 2014, p.12, italics mine).

These two "environments" delineated distinct spheres of influence whose reconciliation lay at the heart of the development phase. On the one hand – within the "cell" structure – stood the collective of actors engaged in the creative process, as it was initially conceived, shared, expanded, redefined, and implemented by a broad cross-section of Italy's television, film, and literary industries. This included independent producers, the full institutional apparatus of RAI, directors, screenwriters, and, notably, the original author of the novels being adapted, Elena Ferrante, whose international literary recognition had originated outside Italy, particularly in the United States, but who nonetheless

[30] RAI producers are in-house professionals responsible for overseeing a commissioned serial's full life cycle, ensuring compliance with editorial policy and alignment with the agreed production concept.

occupied a central position within this Italian configuration. On the other hand – outside the "cell" – stood HBO. Although not formally embedded in the creative core, HBO played an active and direct role in the development process and was perceived as an external partner towards whom the Italian side felt the need to present a unified front. This nuance required clarification to avoid misinterpretation. As the interviews consistently revealed, while the collaboration with HBO was not without its challenges, the relationship was described as fundamentally constructive, marked by an open, reciprocal, and cooperative exchange of notes and editorial feedback.

Nevertheless, at the very heart of the creative process, a structural duality persisted. On the one hand stood the creative leadership, rooted in a shared national interest and collective vision; on the other, a broader transnational interlocutor whose engagement had to be carefully navigated. Leadership was anchored in RAI's role as commissioning broadcaster, but extended horizontally across all Italian stakeholders – each contributing, within their respective roles, to the articulation of the project's artistic direction. For RAI, the adaptation of Ferrante's novels aligned with a dual strategic framework: the renewal of the domestic audience – across generational, educational, and socio-economic lines – and the international repositioning of Italian drama. As RAI Fiction's former Head Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta stated in interview:

> *Over the past few years, we've worked on developing major international productions, all grounded in Italian history, literature, culture, and talent*. There are two main strands, as you know: on the one hand, large historical or literary productions like *Medici* or *The Name of the Rose*, which, because they're set in a distant period of our history, more easily allow for the use of English – a lingua franca – thus facilitating broader exportability. On the other hand, and this was an even more complex leap, the real breakthrough was *My Brilliant Friend*, which, probably thanks to Ferrante's success in the United States, enabled what has been our boldest coproduction to date […].*I built the editorial line. Essentially, I had a vision*. This particular project was intended for RAI1, which is a kind of aircraft carrier, a massive ship that moves slowly. This meant that we first had to exhaust the cycle of previously produced content. In other words, *the perception of change and innovation took time to materialise* […].*There was talk of censorship*[31] at RAI. What I can say is that building a broader image of quality is a complex task. For instance, the campaign for *My Brilliant Friend* began in Venice[32] in September 2018 and continued through to November. For three months, I worked on crafting the product's public image, which ultimately contributed to its great success, drawing in segments of the audience who normally don't watch mainstream television. The viewing numbers for *My Brilliant Friend* were also the result of successfully turning it into a media event, attracting viewers who might otherwise choose different viewing platforms. So, yes, RAI's overall public image is strongly influenced by politics, but that doesn't always reflect

the actual quality of its programming.

(Andreatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

What is articulated here is a temporally extended configuration of coproduction grounded in preconditions, in which internationalisation and editorial renewal are explicitly anchored in 'Italian history, literature, culture, and talent' within a broadcaster described as 'a massive ship that moves slowly', whose 'perception of change and innovation took time to materialise'. The repeated emphasis on duration, sequencing, and effort – alongside references to 'censorship', political influence, and the sustained labour of image construction – renders visible a struggle against time in which, despite the alignment of cultural and institutional preconditions, reputational legacies intermittently resurface, demonstrating how attempts to reconfigure audience reception through transnational coproduction remain exposed to institutional memory even when the anticipated outcome ultimately holds. In this sense, Andreatta's characterisation of My Brilliant Friend as the cornerstone of RAI's editorial renewal situates the project as a concrete instance in which cultural input became the organising principle through which creative control, collaboration, and international positioning were recalibrated. Within this framework, My Brilliant Friend was conceived by Andreatta as the central project through which this broader editorial and cultural strategy was to be realised. In line with Dunleavy and Weissmann's (2024) argument for a careful calibration between local authenticity and global appeal – ensuring that cultural diversity remains a central concern in the development of high-end international television drama – cultural specificity must be embedded not only in the narrative but also in the development mechanisms themselves. It is primarily within the creative sphere that such embeddedness facilitates meaningful communication, reciprocal exchange, and collaborative coordination across national and institutional boundaries.

The interview conducted with Francesco Piccolo, head writer of the series, provides a crucial internal perspective on the creative architecture underpinning the "screenwriting cell", offering direct access to the concentrically organised structure that governed the writing process. He identifies two fundamental pillars around which the screenplay work was articulated: on the one hand, the autonomy of the writing process in the strict sense; on the other, the central coordinating role of director Saverio Costanzo. His highly narrativised reflection, marked by deliberate semantic choices, renders visible the distributed and layered logic of creative collaboration previously outlined through the biological analogy. The following excerpt provides a vivid verbal rendering of the first of these two key elements: creative autonomy. Offered from the privileged vantage point of someone positioned at the innermost core of the process – the nucleolus of the cell, the "factory" where the screenplay's

[31] The reference here is to a rape scene that was omitted from the version edited by RAI for primetime broadcast on RAI1.

[32] The reference here is to the world premiere of the first two episodes at the 75th Venice International Film Festival on 1 September 2018 (RAI, 2018).

operational machinery is assembled from its most essential components – Piccolo's testimony underscores the crucial role that autonomy played. As one would expect from a multi-award-winning writer, his words powerfully and precisely articulate the value of creative independence, firmly embedding it within the concentric geometry that defined the entire screenwriting process of *My Brilliant Friend*. Piccolo offers this insight:

> From the very beginning, the work was structured – both from the perspective of screenwriting and production – in two very clear ways. First and foremost, *we were given a great deal of autonomy*. I, Saverio [Costanzo], Laura [Paolucci], and, of course, in communication with Ferrante, worked in a very independent way, particularly throughout the development of the various episodes and, more broadly, in how we structured each book: we wrote three seasons, and they're now filming the third. We operated with considerable freedom, *receiving feedback essentially each time we reached a new phase*.
>
> At the start, we would submit an outline of each episode, or sometimes just describe it: often Saverio would do this. Then we moved quickly into full scriptwriting. As we drafted the different versions, we would get feedback from the Italian producers, HBO, RAI, and *from the people around us who were working closely with us* – [Domenico] Procacci and [Lorenzo] Mieli, the two independent producers – and we would rework things accordingly, always after discussing them with Ferrante. Even our responses to the notes were developed in consultation with her. *So, there was a very tight-knit writing core: the three of us, plus Ferrante. Then, we would open up to external input*. I must say, it was a remarkably smooth process in terms of creative choices. We worked hard, but always with the full support of the production teams, HBO, and RAI. They were consistently positive, offering constructive suggestions throughout.
>
> (Piccolo, 2021, my translation, italics mine)

In this detailed narrative account, Piccolo's use of the term "core" provides a precise verbalisation of the spatial logic underpinning the screenwriting process, aligning with the concentric organisation previously outlined through the biological cell metaphor. The formulation 'there was a very tight-knit writing core: the three of us, plus Ferrante. [T]hen, we would open up to external input' delineates an inner creative space whose autonomy is established from the outset, and whose opening to external interlocutors is explicitly staged rather than continuous. This inner core functions both as a precondition for the adaptation and as a structuring prism within a sequence of interdependent events. External feedback – from Italian producers, HBO, RAI, and independent producers – is received at defined moments ('each time we reached a new phase'), following the progression from outlines to scripts and subsequent revisions, indicating that inputs are temporally ordered through the nucleus of

the writing team rather than dispersed across it. The internal environment, composed of 'the three of us' working in close collaboration with Costanzo and in dialogue with Ferrante, is described as a deliberately protected and insulated space. Such insulation is not framed as exclusionary, but as a spatial condition preserving coherence and creative freedom across the temporal unfolding of the process, thereby enabling external interventions to be absorbed without displacing the conceptual and artistic integrity of the adaptation.

Within this metaphorical "cell factory" – what the earlier biological analogy identified as the nucleolus – Piccolo and Paolucci crafted and assembled the essential components of the screenplay. Yet this duo did not operate in isolation. Their work was inextricably linked to the third member of the core team: director Saverio Costanzo, who fulfilled a dual role. Not only did he shape, structure, and construct the screenplay (paralleling the function of the nucleoplasm) but he also acted as a conduit between the nucleus and the surrounding creative environment (akin to the nuclear envelope mediating between nucleus and cytoplasm). Together, this trio constituted an autonomous and interdependent entity. To this inner group, Elena Ferrante must also be added, not as an external figure, but rather as an extension of the nucleus itself. Ferrante shared the "dwelling" occupied by the other three, each contributing distinct functions and perspectives towards a common goal: the writing of the screenplay. It is for this reason that all four – Piccolo, Paolucci, Costanzo, and Ferrante – are officially credited as screenwriters, jointly inhabiting what may be understood as the innermost environment of the creative process. The external environment, as defined and narrativised by Francesco Piccolo – 'then, we would open up to external input' – functioned as a space of dialogue: a point of interaction where internal processes met external forces for the exchange, discussion, and negotiation of ideas and creative suggestions. Given the closed nature of the writing core – composed of the four credited screenwriters – Piccolo's account reveals a creative process that radiated outwards from a central point. This process was structured in concentric circles, each sharing a common centre but differing in radius, forming a layered pattern anchored by a fixed core. Moving outwards from the nucleus of credited screenwriters, Piccolo identifies the next concentric layer: the independent producers Domenico Procacci and Lorenzo Mieli. Referring to the various sources of feedback received during the writing phase, he describes this proximate ring as 'the people around us who were working closely with us, [Domenico] Procacci and [Lorenzo] Mieli, the two independent producers'.

In this context, the complexity of Lorenzo Mieli's role – previously explored through the lens of 'circumscribed agency' (Havens and Lotz, 2016) – becomes especially salient. As the global television landscape increasingly limits the autonomy of independent producers, often reducing them to executive intermediaries, Mieli asserted a form of creative agency that resisted this trend. His negotiation with HBO over the non-negotiable mixed use of Italian-Neapolitan dialect marked a decisive intervention that anchored the project's cultural and artistic leadership within the Italian production sphere. In doing so, he not only safeguarded the local specificity of *My Brilliant Friend* but also reasserted the producer's strategic role in shaping creative vision.

Taken together, the principle of creative autonomy is inseparable from the very structure – or

operational configuration – of the screenwriting process, which in turn reflects and embodies that principle. What emerges as particularly compelling is the extent to which a process defined by a tightly enclosed and protected internal sphere – almost cocoon-like in nature – surrounded by concentric circles of external agents, each exerting a progressively broader radius of influence, has enabled a writing model marked by fluidity and acceleration. This concentric structure, both deliberately designed and functionally layered, facilitated a workflow which, as Piccolo notes, often bypassed traditional intermediate stages such as the subject outline or treatment. Instead, the process advanced swiftly from a loosely defined narrative scaffold to full screenplay drafting, illustrating a unique convergence of autonomy, structural clarity, and procedural efficiency.

The second pillar of the screenwriting process identified by Francesco Piccolo is the figure of the director. Piccolo articulates this cornerstone of the authorship model within a broader reflection on the distinctiveness of Italian serial storytelling. According to him, Italian serial drama, both in artistic vision and tonal quality, resembles a long film more than a television series structured according to Anglo-American paradigms. This, he argues, constitutes the distinctive hallmark of Italian seriality and the signature contribution that the Italian tradition can bring to the global high-end drama industry. What is particularly noteworthy is Piccolo's attribution to the director (Saverio Costanzo) of the role of 'protagonist', thereby transferring a key element of fictional narrative into the industrial reality of production, an interpretive move that likely comes naturally to a professional novelist. He underscores the director's centrality as the true nucleus of the entire process – echoing the biological cell analogy – not merely as a bridge between screenwriting and executive production, but as a protagonist in his own right, deeply embedded in the narrative he helps construct. This formulation encapsulates the depth and complexity of authorship as it is embedded within both the screenwriting and the broader creative development process. This is a perspective that Piccolo captures with striking clarity in the following passage:

> And the other key link between the screenplay and production was the director, because the director was… Well, *we had a very auteur-driven structure*, much more like a film than a TV series. It was as if we were writing one long film in which *the director was, in a way, the protagonist*, unlike what often happens in TV series, at least in international series. I actually think that in Italian series this happens quite frequently, and *I believe it's also our* [Italian] *hallmark of quality storytelling: having a director and a directorial tone that allows the series* [to be viewed] *exactly like a film*. So, once the scripts were completed, the director then became the point of contact with executive production, as we moved into prep and eventually onto the set. That, of course, is the classic model. In television, it's more common to see a sort of continuous back-and-forth between writing and production. In our case, I must say, we worked… I don't know whether this system is universally effective, but it worked.
>
> (Piccolo, 2021, my translation, italics mine)

What is articulated here is a spatial-conceptual reconfiguration of authorship in which the director occupies a structurally central position within the creative process, functioning as the nucleus through which the transition from screenwriting to production is organised. Piccolo's repeated emphasis on a 'film-like' structure, the director as 'protagonist' and the clearly demarcated passage from completed scripts to 'prep and eventually onto the set' delineates a sequence of interdependent phases in which creative authority is consolidated before production begins, thereby diverging from the possibility of continuous back-and-forth more commonly associated with Anglo-American serial models. In this respect, Piccolo's emphasis on the director's central role in the creative development of *My Brilliant Friend* is hardly surprising, given that it was Elena Ferrante herself who originally set the adaptation on an authorial path by selecting Saverio Costanzo as director and positioning him as its primary creative agent, indeed, its 'protagonist'. To fully grasp this emphasis on authorship and the rationale behind Ferrante's choice, it is necessary to reconstruct the relationship between the two, situating Costanzo's appointment within the broader authorial configuration of the adaptation. Tracing this relationship chronologically allows for a clearer understanding of how Ferrante positioned herself within the project and how her role, instrumental to the screenwriting process, was shaped by a deliberate need to maintain distance from her own novel. The account begins with the moment when Saverio Costanzo and Elena Ferrante first came into contact. In an interview for the Haifa Film Festival in October 2020 (Haifa Film Festival, 2020) director Saverio Costanzo reflected on his evolving relationship with Elena Ferrante, which began as that of a devoted reader. Costanzo first encountered Ferrante's work in 2007, when he read *The Lost Daughter*. Inspired by the novel, he approached Ferrante's publisher Edizioni E/O to option the book's rights. Ferrante responded with a generous offer: she would grant him the rights for six months, provided he could develop a script within that time. However, at the end of the allotted period, Costanzo wrote to Ferrante expressing his gratitude but explaining that he had struggled to adapt the novel, particularly due to the complex use of flashbacks, which he felt ill-equipped to handle at the time. This early interaction marked the beginning of a long relationship between the director and the author. By 2010, Costanzo had gained recognition for his adaptation of *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, a novel that deals with time jumps, hence, similar in structure to *My Brilliant Friend* and the entire Neapolitan Novels quartet. The success of this adaptation demonstrated Costanzo's capability to navigate the challenges of adapting complex literary narratives involving time and memory, elements that resonate throughout Ferrante's oeuvre.

In a noteworthy turn of events, it was Ferrante who reached out to Costanzo many years later. Through her publisher, she suggested him as the ideal director for the television adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, for a very specific reason, which the director articulated in the following terms:

> I asked her, actually, the same question: *why a man?* And she was like, '*Because this is the tension I need*' […] and she says, 'You have a very feminine outlook, but also very masculine, you know, so I need someone who has to build a kind of tension'.

(Haifa Film Festival, 2020, italics mine)

Ferrante's response, as recalled by Costanzo, introduces a foundational condition for the project's authorial configuration, grounding the choice of director in the need to 'build a kind of tension' between 'feminine' and 'masculine' perspectives. Framed in these terms, Costanzo's appointment functions not simply as an individual endorsement, but as a structural decision through which a central thematic dynamic of Ferrante's work is embedded in the adaptation process from its inception. Overall, Costanzo's trajectory in relation to Ferrante's work evolved from distant admiration and unsuccessful attempts at adaptation to a sustained collaborative, with both eventually credited as screenwriters, despite neither having been a screenwriter by profession. His acute sensitivity to the thematic undercurrents of Ferrante's writing – particularly the interplay of time, memory, and gender – ultimately positioned him as the ideal director for *My Brilliant Friend*. Ferrante herself confirmed this choice, citing her wish for a director capable of staging the tension between masculine and feminine perspectives, a thematic axis central to the series. This very tension defines Ferrante's authorial stance, both within her fiction and in her broader public positioning. The conflict she asked Costanzo to represent on screen mirrors the one she sought to inhabit through her participation in the screenwriting process. It is therefore essential to examine the contours of Ferrante's role, one marked by a paradoxical dynamic of presence and absence. While maintaining a concealed public identity, she engages in sustained acts of self-disclosure through alternative forms of writing. These interventions not only construct her authorial persona for her readers but, in light of the adaptation's transmedia reach, reposition her for an expanding audience. Most notably, Ferrante reflected on her screenwriting experience through a series of editorial essays published in *The Guardian*, offering a rare public insight into her role in the adaptation. These columns were later compiled into *Incidental Inventions*, a collection of essays published between January 2018 and January 2019.

Ferrante's (2018) *Incidental Inventions* offers an intimate exploration of her thoughts, desires, failures, and self-reflections, framed through fragmented narratives. These essays, born out of the tension between the editor's prompts and Ferrante's personal urgency to write, form a collage of her inner world, piecing together moments of her life without presenting a linear story. At its core, the book focuses on Ferrante's ongoing process of 'self-invention', whereby her identity (a presence hidden behind her public persona) is presented through fragmented glimpses on different topics, intentionally curated to offer a selective version of herself. Among these essays, three are particularly relevant for examining Ferrante's screenwriting experience, as they reflect on her relationship with the themes that also serve as their respective titles: *Works of Art*, *Creative Freedom*, and, most significantly, *The Book and the Film*. Taken in this sequence, the three texts guide the reader towards an increasingly nuanced understanding of how the author positions herself in relation to other artistic media, and more specifically, to the medium of television and cinema. In *Works of Art* (7 July 2018), Ferrante explores her relationship with artworks, focusing in particular on screen-based art forms, which she views as the outcome of collective creative labour. As she writes:

> In the course of my life, I have had intense *emotional relationships with the screen versions of many actors and actresses*, on both the big and small screen. […] When I love Daniel Day-Lewis, I love the novelists from whose books his films are adapted, the screenwriters who have composed the dialogue, and the film directors, the directors of photography, the lighting and sound technicians, the set designers, the acting coaches – in other words, *all those who have helped to make his real body* – with its mimetic ability, its gait, way of gesticulating, its photogenic quality – *into a body particularly suited to becoming a movie or television icon*. […] In other words, he is a marvellous product of the imagination, a phantom moulded with words and images and technical equipment and professional skill.
>
> (Ferrante, 2018, italics mine)

Ferrante's reflection situates screen-based works within a spatially distributed configuration of creative labour, in which the actor's body operates as the point of condensation for a multiplicity of written, visual, and technical contributions. By foregrounding the accumulation of 'words and images and technical equipment and professional skill' her account frames the collective dimension not as a later addition to authorship, but as a constitutive precondition of screen production, articulated through a sequence in which heterogeneous forms of creative input are progressively assembled into a single visible outcome. In the essay titled *Creative Freedom* (6 October 2018), Ferrante engages for the first time with the discourse surrounding the adaptation of literature to screen, specifically in reference to Maggie Gyllenhaal's adaptation of her novel *The Lost Daughter*. In doing so, she anticipates the initial difficulty of relinquishing control over her work, while simultaneously recognising the inherent tension in curbing the creative freedom of a woman, particularly in an industry where such autonomy is still hard-won. But it is the essay *The Book and the Film* – published on 10 November 2018 – that more than any other constitutes a self-reflexive account of what the screenwriting process entails, seen from the unique perspective of someone who is simultaneously positioned both inside and outside the core "nucleus" formed by the trio of writers and director. It is hardly coincidental that this piece appeared in *The Guardian* just eight days before the world premiere of *My Brilliant Friend* on HBO (18 November 2018), particularly when considered as part of Ferrante's broader effort to narrate – or indeed construct – herself not only for her readers, but also for her emerging viewership. Likewise, it is not difficult to see how a short, introspective piece in one of the UK's major newspapers might serve as a strategic invitation for the reader to become a viewer. In this introspective account, Ferrante reflects on the adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, offering a candid portrayal of her practical engagement with screenwriting from a liminal position between author and credited screenwriter. From this interstitial space, she narrates a complex, evolving, and ultimately cathartic involvement in the script:

> *I speak as an inexperienced screenwriter*. When I write a book, and someone decides to make it into a movie, I'm glad. Then? *Then the work begins. My first impression is traumatic*, as the literary cover is torn off my novel by the screenwriters. It's a terrible moment: I worked on that text for years, and now everything seems to become impoverished: places, events, characters. A city square minutely described is *reduced in the screenplay* to the simple common noun: square. An event to which I devoted many pages shrinks, becomes a stage direction. Characters become names, actions are abridged, as are lines of dialogue. Stripped down, the novel suddenly appears to the writer to be a trick of literary words, a fraud, and she is slightly ashamed. *The story, in this summary form, is banal*.
>
> (Ferrante, 2018, italics mine)

Ferrante's description foregrounds the initial outcome of entering the screenwriting process as one of dislocation and loss, articulated through a language of 'trauma' 'impoverishment' and radical reduction. At the same time, these terms mark the opening phase of a processual sequence in which the adaptation of the novel generates a parallel and internal transformation, an adaptation she herself undergoes through the practice of screenwriting, conditioning all subsequent engagement with the work. Ferrante gives voice to this internal transformation in a self-reflexive passage that traces her gradual emotional and imaginative adjustment to the logic and demands of screenwriting:

> *Then, little by little, one gets used to writing for the screen*; *it's a functional type of writin*g, preparing the leap from the novel to the new work: the film. I calm down: my book is still fine; it contains what I had to write and was able to; it's sitting on the table, completely self-sufficient. *But the film isn't there yet: it wants to be, and relies on cinematic writing*, whose job is to identify the film's requirements and satisfy them. *The perimeter is drawn by my book, but inside that perimeter, everything is rearranged*, reimagined based on the show – the real objective. Only at this point is the imagination kindled.
>
> (Ferrante, 2018, italics mine)

Ferrante's reframing of screenwriting as a 'functional type of writing' operates as a precondition for her gradual emotional and cognitive resettlement within the adaptation process. By distinguishing between the novel as 'completely self-sufficient' and the film as a work that 'isn't there yet', her account marks a transitional phase in which recognising the distinct function and requirements of screenwriting enables the accommodation of loss, rearrangement, and re-imagination as necessary conditions rather than threats. Everything must thus be recalibrated and restructured within the defined perimeter set by the novel. At a certain point, this adaptation within the adaptation becomes both heuristic and cathartic, allowing Ferrante to engage in an introspective analysis of her own literary

practice. In articulating the internal tension between the role of screenwriter and that of novelist, Ferrante, in just a few lines, encapsulates the core meaning of screenwriting, both quantitatively, by pointing to the endless redrafting required by a script, and qualitatively, by identifying materialisation and concreteness as the defining traits of writing for the screen:

> I can see very clearly what, while I was writing the book, was either overexplained or confused. *I feel the need for scenes that in my story would have been superfluous. I write dialogue that the tone of my text wouldn't tolerate. I often seem to be collaborating on "remaking" my novel, with writing that I would never have used. And when it all seems in order* – the story and the dialogues flow; we've honed, eliminated – the work seems finished.
>
> *Yet this is just the beginning*, a preliminary goal for writing that, on the one hand, reduces the book to its skeleton, and on the other still displays the features of every written word: ambiguity, openness to multiple representations. *In the film or television version, everything, absolutely everything, will have to have a precise aspect*: the streets, the church, the tunnel, the houses, the rooms, a classroom, the desks. And everyone, absolutely everyone, will have to have a particular body.
>
> (Ferrante, 2018, italics mine)

Ferrante's account here crystallises the outcome of the screenwriting process as one of materialisation, in which narrative ambiguity gives way to spatial and corporeal determination. The insistence on 'precise aspect', 'streets', 'rooms' and 'particular body' marks the endpoint of a temporal trajectory in which writing is progressively oriented towards concreteness, visibility, and spatial fixity as defining conditions of screen production. When examined through the lens of agency, *Incidental Inventions* extends beyond personal reflection to engage with broader cultural and media discourses surrounding authorship and adaptation. Through these essays, Ferrante actively and materially positions herself – always at a measured distance, under her disguised persona, yet operationally present as a credited screenwriter – within the screenwriting process of *My Brilliant Friend*, participating through concrete practices of exchange, commentary, and approval, and articulating both a personal necessity and an artistic strategy, namely the need to confront her work from a different vantage point while relinquishing direct control over its screen realisation. In doing so, and in order to fulfil this need, she aligns herself with the director's artistic vision and the writers' narrative scaffolding, while negotiating the specific constraints and technical demands of a medium structurally distinct from literary production.

While Ferrante's reflections – as narrativised in *Incidental Inventions* – illuminate her individual positioning within the adaptation process, a fuller account of the screenwriting dynamics requires attention to the institutional framework that enabled and structured this configuration, namely RAI in its role as commissioning broadcaster. From this perspective, the creative process behind *My*

Brilliant Friend is further clarified through the interview with Luigi Mariniello, an in-house producer at RAI who, together with Sara Polese, oversaw the project from its inception. Mariniello was involved from the earliest stage, when Domenico Procacci first presented the idea of a domestic miniseries to RAI (see Chapter 3), and accompanied the project through its subsequent development, including its transformation into a transnational coproduction under the leadership of Lorenzo Mieli at Wildside. In a self-reflexive account of public service storytelling, Luigi Mariniello articulates the responsibilities of a RAI in-house producer as those of 'being there' across the entire life cycle of a project. From this position, he situates *My Brilliant Friend* within the broader strategic vision articulated by Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta following her appointment as Head of RAI Fiction. Among the key editorial directives she issued to the team of RAI producers, Mariniello recalls a mandate to identify and develop narratives addressing the condition of women in contemporary Italy. It is against this backdrop that he contextualises both the origins and the editorial orientation of *My Brilliant Friend*, as he explains:

> *Since we're a public service broadcaster, we couldn't ignore the deeper meaning of the book. Behind the story of two teenage girls and their friendship, there was actually the very prompt we had been given*: it was about telling the *story of women* at the end of the '50s and throughout the '60s, at least in the first part of the narrative. And more than that, *it was about a country in transformation*, coming out of World War II and heading into the economic boom of the '60s. So, being RAI and being public service, a story like that was something we could only welcome with real enthusiasm.
>
> (Mariniello, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mariniello's account foregrounds the institutional precondition whereby, as a public service broadcaster, RAI 'couldn't ignore the deeper meaning of the book', thus framing the adaptation from the outset as a remit-led project grounded in public value rather than purely commercial logics. In his formulation, what lies 'behind' the story of two girls is a clearly articulated editorial orientation introduced under Andreatta's leadership: the narration of women's experience, inseparable from the account of 'a country in transformation' emerging from the post-war years and moving into the economic boom, and, crucially, carried forward across decades. For RAI, *My Brilliant Friend* was therefore a story about women through a narrative of national history, or vice versa, in which historical continuity is not merely backdrop but is interwoven with, and embodied in, the intersecting life trajectories of two girls bound by a friendship that unfolds from youth to adulthood and into old age. It is this dual alignment – female experience and emancipation, together with national identity and historical continuity from the post-war years through to the early 2000s – that enabled RAI to recognise the project as a powerful embodiment of its public service remit and as an instrument for implementing Andreatta's editorial strategy, shaping its early institutional endorsement of the adaptation. *My Brilliant Friend* was immediately perceived as the epitome of this dual mission, a

recognition that helps explain why, when Domenico Procacci, producer at Fandango, first brought the project to RAI in 2013, it was met with enthusiasm, even before the "Ferrante Fever" phenomenon had taken hold in the United States. Beyond situating the project within RAI's strategic and institutional framework, Mariniello also offers a detailed account of the operational dynamics through which the screenwriting process of *My Brilliant Friend* was organised. During development, the RAI team worked in close coordination with the core creative group, which included the two independent producers (Wildside and Fandango), HBO, and Elena Ferrante, who read all materials remotely due to her concealed identity. Despite this mediated form of participation, collaboration was substantial, as Mariniello recounts:

> *During the development phase, we worked a lot with them* [Piccolo, Paolucci e Costanzo] and with Elena Ferrante, who read everything from home. But there was definitely an exchange. We held meetings where *we really got to know each other*. We also got positive feedback, especially from the Americans. It was a real team effort: we kept meeting here [at RAI] with the writing team and the producers, and we always kept in touch via email. *There was a huge amount of written feedback.* RAI would read the material and send in notes, HBO would send in theirs, and so would Elena Ferrante. Then we'd all come together with the different sets of notes and work out what changes to make to the scripts.
>
> (Mariniello, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mariniello's account frames the screenwriting process as a temporally extended sequence of interdependent practices, in which repeated meetings, sustained written exchanges, and iterative feedback functioned not merely as mechanisms of coordination but as preconditions for creative alignment. His emphasis on the fact that collaborators 'really got to know each other' points to the centrality of mutual knowledge within transnational screenwriting, where mediated collaboration requires the gradual calibration of roles, expectations, and scopes of intervention in order to sustain more symmetrical forms of creative exchange. On this basis, Mariniello's description of partners meeting 'many times because it was all about setting things up' – including decisions about episode structure and the redistribution of narrative material across instalments – highlights how the core screenwriting process itself operated as a foundational moment in which narrative architecture was stabilised through a dense collaborative exchange involving both creative coordination and mutual interpersonal adjustment. In this sense, the screenwriting process itself emerges as the locus in which mediated collaboration enables cultural specificity to be negotiated and consolidated through successive iterations of the script, ahead of subsequent phases of production. Mariniello outlines how the process began with initial discussions between RAI and HBO, led by Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta, while, in parallel, he and the wider creative team liaised with HBO executive producer Jennifer Schuur, who made several visits to Italy during the script development phase.

Through these exchanges, the partners worked jointly on treatments and outlines, progressively shaping the narrative as the collaboration deepened. As Mariniello recalls:

> *The early meetings with HBO were handled by Tinny, who spoke directly with their team*. *In Italy, we worked with Jennifer Schuur*, the HBO producer who came over here at least a couple of times, mostly during the script development phase. *We worked through the whole process of story treatments and outlines*, as I mentioned. Our first meeting included the screenwriters Francesco Piccolo and Laura Paolucci, [Saverio] Costanzo, [Lorenzo] Mieli, [Domenico] Procacci, Tinny [Andreatta], Sara [Polese], and me. *That's where it all started*… and from the beginning, there was *great synergy* and a strong sense of collaboration.
>
> (Mariniello, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mariniello's account foregrounds the early sequencing of what Havens and Lotz (2016) conceptualise as 'distributed agency', enacted through forms of 'collaborative authorship' (Caldwell, 2008) within the coproduction process, and locates its emergence in a concrete moment of collective encounter. The emphasis on the first meeting – bringing together broadcasters, producers, writers, and the director – highlights how transnational screenwriting was premised on early co-presence, mutual recognition, and relational alignment among partners. The reference to repeated visits, shared work on treatments and outlines, and the immediate perception of 'synergy' points to the establishment of collaborative conditions that enabled creative authority to be distributed and negotiated from the outset, rather than imposed hierarchically through entrenched industry conventions and asymmetrical power relations. In this sense, the quote illustrates how agency in transnational coproduction is not pre-allocated or fixed, but emerges through an initial sequence of coordinated encounters that, through processes of negotiation and exchange, eventually stabilise roles, relationships, and narrative direction.

Mariniello's reflections also illuminate another crucial dimension of the RAI–HBO partnership: the negotiation of narrative orientation. While this process ultimately proved broadly constructive, it nonetheless constituted a key site of tension within the creative collaboration between the Italian and American sides, rooted in differing narrative sensibilities and storytelling traditions. This tension comes most clearly into focus in Mariniello's extended reflection on the negotiation surrounding the role of crime within the adaptation. His account offers a particularly lucid illustration of how cultural specificity – anchored in the original novel's focus on women's emancipation against the backdrop of Italy's post-war social and historical transformations, and aligned with the public service remit of the commissioning broadcaster – was actively defended within the screenwriting process, not through the rejection of external input, but through calibrated negotiation aimed at preserving the narrative's core orientation. The following passage encapsulates this dynamic in full:

> Let me give you a clear example. *My Brilliant Friend* is indeed the story of two friends set in a real working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Naples, a place that truly existed and still exists today. In the background, there are these criminal families competing for control of the area. On the one hand, there are the Carracci, represented by Don Achille, the ogre-like villain of the early episodes; on the other, there are the Solara family, who are loan sharks, somewhat less powerful because Don Achille is the boss. Nevertheless, throughout the first season, there is an underlying presence of these two families' control of the neighbourhood.
>
> *In the book, this aspect remains very subdued, very marginal*, except when it directly concerns criminal dynamics. The Americans, drawing on a popular storytelling tradition (I'm thinking of The Godfather), initially asked us, in the early stages, to open up this narrative strand much more – *they wanted more emphasis on neighbourhood control*. To some extent we did that, and I must say that Elena Ferrante was very generous in this respect, because she introduced narrative mechanisms that were not present in the book.
>
> On the other hand, *we tried to make it clear that this was not the heart of the story*. *We agreed up to a certain point*, because at times it was also functional to the narrative, so why not? But we also made it clear that going beyond that would have shifted the focus: that is not the story we are telling. It worked, because otherwise it could easily have turned into a crime story, and that is not what this story is. Yes, you need to tell some of that, but at the same time *you are telling a story about the fact that you cannot emancipate yourself from deep poverty or from a life of crime unless you have the necessary tools, education being the key. That is the heart of My Brilliant Friend*.
>
> (Mariniello, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Mariniello's account delineates with exceptional clarity how cultural specificity – and, inseparably, the cultural legitimacy of a distinct storytelling tradition – functioned as a governing precondition within the transnational screenwriting process. The negotiation he describes unfolds as a sequence of interdependent decisions in which external genre expectations, themselves embedded in long-standing socio-cultural stereotyping – most notably the association of Italian narratives with mafia-centred representations – were selectively accommodated on the basis of narrative functionality, without displacing the project's core orientation. His repeated distinction between what could be included 'up to a certain point' and what would have 'shifted the focus' foregrounds agency not as the capacity to impose, but as the capacity to delimit as much as to integrate, within a calibrated interplay of creative and institutional power relations. Crucially, the outcome of this negotiation is framed not in terms of compromise driven by established asymmetries of creative power, but as one of narrative stabilisation: crime remains present, yet clearly confined to the role of contextual pressure, while the story's centre

of gravity is preserved in the depiction of female friendship, social mobility, and education as the condition of emancipation. In this sense, the quote exemplifies how transnational screenwriting operates as a temporally extended process in which creative priorities and cultural legitimacy are defended through sustained dialogue, institutional commitment, and calibrated adjustment, ensuring both the maintenance of the project's thematic integrity and the realisation of the source material's dramatic potential within complex serial form across institutional and national boundaries.

This emblematic statement foregrounds how creative agency within transnational coproduction is not reducible to questions of authorship alone, but is exercised through the processual maintenance of narrative frameworks amid competing creative logics. Mariniello's account illustrates circumscribed agency on the ground of creative practice, specifically as a mode of constrained yet strategic influence enacted by professionals operating within institutional boundaries, while incrementally pushing those limits in order to redraw them. HBO's narrative proposals, Ferrante's openness to accommodating selective narrative adjustments, and RAI's sustained commitment to the project's cultural core together reveal a dynamic interplay of creative decision-making unfolding within a transnational development context. As Lotz (2014) observes, such environments require a continuous balancing act between industrial negotiation and narrative translation. In the case of *My Brilliant Friend*, the Italian side's defence of a gendered and socio-cultural narrative against pressures to amplify crime elements exemplifies this form of boundary work, rendering agency visible not as absolute authorial control, but as negotiated and sustained power exercised within relational and institutional frameworks.

To conclude, this section has explored the multilayered dynamics that shaped the screenwriting process of *My Brilliant Friend*, highlighting how creative agency was distributed across a tightly structured yet collaborative framework. From the protected core of the writing team to the extended network of institutional stakeholders, the process was characterised by a careful balance between individual vision and collective negotiation. Testimonies from key figures such as Francesco Piccolo and Luigi Mariniello revealed how national production cultures, transnational expectations, and the singular authorial presence of Elena Ferrante coalesced to form a unique creative model, one that blurred the boundaries between literature, television, and personal authorship. Through the interplay of aesthetic alignment, cultural translation, and institutional strategy, *My Brilliant Friend* emerged not only as a successful adaptation but also as a case study in negotiated authorship and mediated agency.

In the following section, we turn to a third and last case study: *The Name of the Rose*. While *My Brilliant Friend* was shaped by a stable and collaborative development process led by Italian institutions, *The Name of the Rose* reveals a more fragmented development history, marked by multiple shifts in creative leadership, institutional tensions, and competing priorities, all of which became especially visible during the screenwriting stage.

Case Study 3 – *The Name of The Rose*

The screenwriting process behind *The Name of the Rose* differs significantly from the other two case studies in both complexity and the challenges encountered from its inception. This complexity stems from the cryptic evolution of the project, which unfolded as a layered intertextual and intermedial dialogue with Umberto Eco, both as novelist and semiotician. Launched in 2015, the process unfolded in two phases. The first, before Eco's death in February 2016, involved his direct collaboration with Andrea Porporati. The second, longer phase followed Eco's passing and saw several changes in screenwriting leadership. Within this, a "pre-Turturro" period transitioned into one where John Turturro and director Giacomo Battiato restructured the screenplay. Official credits from Italian co-producers Palomar list the story concept under Porporati and the screenplay under Battiato, Porporati, Turturro, and Nigel Williams (Palomar Online, 2021). However, these credits obscure the process: according to Turturro's remarks and Michele Zatta's testimony, the final script was largely redefined by Battiato and Turturro after Porporati and Williams exited.

Fidelity to the source text was a core concern from the outset, closely tied to Eco's involvement and, earlier, to producer Matteo Levi's commitments to Eco and publisher Bompiani during the negotiation phase. The most vocal advocate of an almost absolute fidelity to the novel was producer Matteo Levi:

> We had Umberto Eco, and *we wanted to stay faithful to the book, as he had requested*. He gave us the opportunity to expand the subplot of the Dulcinians, offering us a significant chance. This was a great gesture of trust on his part.
>
> (Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Levi's insistence on 'staying faithful to the book' explicitly framed as a request originating from Eco himself, positions fidelity not as an aesthetic preference but as a precondition structuring the adaptation process from its earliest negotiation phase. The reference to Eco's 'gesture of trust' and to the authorised expansion of the Dulcinian subplot further situates fidelity within a sequence of interdependent decisions, in which authorial consent was initially intended to enable specific narrative developments while simultaneously delimiting the scope of permissible transformation. This commitment, rooted in an agreement with Eco, extended to RAI, whose participation was a precondition for the author's approval. Within RAI, however, perspectives diverged over adaptation strategy. Key figures – including the then Head of RAI Fiction Eleonora (Tinny) Andreatta, the then Deputy Head Francesco Nardella, commissioning editor Michele Zatta, and in-house producer Marta Aceto – played direct roles in the process, with Zatta providing the most detailed account of the project's inherent tensions.

In his interview, Zatta outlines the early development stage, emphasising the screenwriting

process and its difficulties, including the high, and largely unintended, turnover of writers. This instability led to fragmented authorship, as writers joined, left, or were dismissed. The result was a disrupted writing trajectory shaped by clashing visions and conflicts between executives and the creative team. Given this complexity, reconstructing the sequence of events is crucial. The first screenwriter engaged was Andrea Porporati, a writer-director who developed the series concept, treatment, and an initial screenplay draft. According to Zatta, Porporati's first draft was '*too philological*, too closely tied to the book, and therefore […] not sufficiently functional for serial storytelling' (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine). This pointed critique – articulated through the term 'philological' – connotes excessive adherence to the original text at the expense of televisual effectiveness. The draft struggled to translate the novel's elements into a serialised format, particularly in terms of pacing, visual construction, and episodic architecture, resulting in scenes that resembled transcriptions rather than television episodes. It ultimately lacked the adaptability required for screen language. Zatta contextualises this approach by linking Porporati's appointment – made on Eco's recommendation – to a strategic assertion of authorial control:

> Keep in mind that back then [2014] *Umberto Eco* was still alive and maintained very strong control over the editorial content. He was the one who suggested Andrea Porporati, a writer he knew and trusted. But he also *set some clear boundaries for the work*.
>
> (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Zatta's account positions Eco's continued presence and 'very strong control' as a formative precondition of the adaptation process, shaping not only the selection of Porporati but also the permissible scope of screenwriting intervention. This early configuration established a sequence of interdependent constraints in which fidelity operated as an organising principle, but one that would soon collide with the functional demands of serial storytelling. Within this constrained framework, however, producer Matteo Levi (see previous chapter) confirms that some subplots were successfully negotiated and expanded:

> Even though the book was very long and expansive, with a lot of material in it, there were still things that were only briefly mentioned […] – *basically more secondary elements in the novel – which we realised could actually be useful to us*. [These elements] *allowed us to introduce new characters*, expand the use of exterior locations, and reach the necessary running time. So we made a choice which was clearly shared by Umberto Eco – in fact he was really enthusiastic about it – to significantly expand one of the subplots from the novel: the whole storyline involving *the Dulcinians*, the heretical sect. In the book they're only briefly mentioned, but in our version, they've become a central part of the story.

(Levi, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Levi's description of the Dulcinian subplot reveals how fidelity was not monolithic but negotiated through selective expansion, enabled by authorial consent and framed as functional necessity. Here, Eco's authorial endorsement marks a moment in which pre-existing constraints were temporarily recalibrated, allowing character development while leaving the broader adaptation logic intact.

Each such 'concession' was thus framed as the outcome of successful negotiation, yet it did not dissolve the broader structural challenges of adaptation, a point underscored by a shared awareness within RAI of the technical limits imposed by the requirements of serial form, as Zatta observes:

> *Now, anyone who knows the book is well aware that it's not written in a way that naturally lends itself to a TV series*. It's a fantastic book for a film, like the one that was in fact made years ago, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Sean Connery as William. The book is actually quite brilliant, but it contains a lot of what we might call "cultural digressions". And if we break down the plot, it's essentially a mystery that unfolds within a fairly limited time frame.
>
> So if we want *to adapt this story into a serial narrative*, we need to approach it from a completely different angle. That means recognising that what needs to come to the forefront are *the characters, not the plot*, so the whole approach to story development has to shift accordingly. *With Porporati, and partly due to the level of control Eco was exercising, this was possible up to a certain point, but no further*.
>
> (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Zatta's reflection crystallises the outcome of this sequence: despite isolated expansions, the combined weight of philological fidelity and authorial control ultimately limited the adaptation's capacity to reorient itself fully towards a character-driven serial form. What emerges is a process in which early preconditions continued to shape later stages, constraining the range of viable narrative solutions. These constraints are further elucidated by the structural challenges inherent in adapting the novel's symbolic complexity. The approach advanced by Eco and Porporati, which prioritised strict textual fidelity and scholarly precision, restricted the screenplay's ability to adapt fluidly to the demands of television storytelling. This philological method, focused on preserving exactness, limited the creative flexibility required for effective adaptation. As Zatta emphasises, character development had to take precedence over a plot too intricate to translate effectively into screenwriting.

The development of *The Name of the Rose* reveals not merely the difficulty of adapting a semiotically dense literary work, but a fundamental misalignment of storytelling priorities. Italian television drama traditions have historically privileged character, moral interiority, and relational depth, while US television storytelling has foregrounded plot organisation, causal progression, and narrative momentum. In this case, however, these priorities were inverted: actors committed to

safeguarding Eco's cultural and symbolic integrity gravitated towards plot-centred fidelity and philological exactitude, while commissioning logic articulated within Italian television culture insisted on character development as a functional requirement for serial legibility. This inversion cannot be explained through institutional imperatives or source complexity alone, but points to the transnational redistribution of creative responsibility that reshapes how adaptation priorities are negotiated in practice. On this basis, to make sense of the tensions that emerged during the development of *The Name of the Rose*, the adaptive process must be read against the storytelling traditions that shaped the expectations and evaluative criteria of the agents involved. What emerged, therefore, was not merely a practical struggle with a semiotically dense source text, but a sustained collision of competing narrative logics – embedded in different national storytelling traditions – unfolding within a transnational coproduction framework. Within Italian television drama, these logics have historically been organised around the primacy of character. Italian drama privileges protagonists as the principal locus through which themes, values, and ethical tensions are articulated across serial time, with character functioning as 'the primary vehicle of a story's themes, meanings, and value orientations' (Buonanno, 2013, p. 32, my translation). Audience engagement is likewise rooted in protagonists' capacity to communicate 'shared feelings, emotions, and values' (Buonanno, 2013, p. 44, my translation), positioning characters as emotional and ethical anchors enabling identification across social and cultural contexts. In this sense, television fiction becomes a space where moral interiority is made narratively productive, as protagonists are expected to 'embody the fears and hopes, the dreams and anxieties, of the contemporary human condition' (Buonanno, 2013, p. 44, my translation). This character-centred orientation also shapes how Italian fiction imagines circulation beyond its immediate cultural context: rather than relying on abstract universals, transnational accessibility is framed through character construction, with protagonists needing to appear 'familiar and appealing' to audiences both local and global (Buonanno, 2013, p. 33, my translation).

If Italian television drama has historically privileged character as the primary carrier of meaning and engagement, US television-writing traditions have been organised around a markedly different narrative logic, one centred on plot architecture, causal clarity, and dramaturgical efficiency. Across classical broadcast forms and contemporary serial drama, US television storytelling has been governed by a model of narrative unity in which events are tightly linked through cause-and-effect chains that generate momentum and intelligibility. As Thompson describes, narrative coherence depends on a 'unified narrative' in which each effect becomes the cause of the next, sustaining forward propulsion rather than extended exploration of character interiority (2003, p. 20). This orientation is operationalised at the level of scene construction, where dramaturgical efficiency functions as a core writing discipline. Scenes are conceived as modular causal units, entered late and exited early, with narrative elements required to be 'motivated' by their contribution to causal progression (Thompson, 2003, p. 21). Devices such as deferred causality, or the 'dangling cause' further sustain momentum by orienting viewer expectation beyond the immediate scene. Within this framework, characters are primarily configured as agents of causality, defined through stable traits

that ensure narrative intelligibility rather than as autonomous sites of ethical or psychological complexity (Thompson, 2003, p. 22). These dramaturgical priorities are reinforced by the industrial conditions of US television production. Professional writing discourses and training practices consistently invoke classical narrative models, often drawing on Aristotle, to legitimise unity, motivation, and structured progression, while strict temporal constraints intensify the demand for narrative economy (Thompson, 2003, pp. 37–39). Plot-centred efficiency thus operates not merely as an aesthetic preference, but as an institutionalised norm embedded in production routines. In contemporary US television, these priorities are not displaced but scaled up within long-form serial narration. Narrative complexity redistributes causal logic across extended temporal horizons, expanding scene- and episode-level efficiency into season-long architectures structured through multiple story arcs, deferred resolutions, and serial enigmas (Mittell, 2015, pp. 17–29). Viewer engagement is sustained through what Mittell terms an 'operational aesthetic', in which pleasure derives from tracking how narrative mechanisms function over time (2015, p. 34). Characters remain central within this system, but primarily as stabilising anchors within complex plot architectures rather than as primary sites of moral interiority.

It is against this comparative baseline that the adaptive tensions surrounding *The Name of the Rose* become analytically legible. What emerges is not merely the difficulty of adapting a semiotically dense literary work, but a deeper misalignment of storytelling priorities. While Italian television traditions have historically emphasised character-centred development and moral interiority, and US traditions have foregrounded plot organisation and causal efficiency, these orientations were inverted in practice. Actors most invested in safeguarding the cultural and symbolic integrity of Eco's novel gravitated towards plot-centred fidelity and philological exactitude, while commissioning voices within Italian television culture insisted on character development as a functional requirement for serial legibility. This inversion cannot be explained by national tradition alone, nor reduced to source-text complexity, but instead points to how transnational coproduction frameworks redistribute creative responsibility and actively reconfigure adaptation priorities in practice.

Read in this light, the challenges posed by the semiotic density of Eco's novel cannot be understood in isolation from the industrial and organisational conditions of its television adaptation. Adaptation here emerges not merely as textual transposition, but as a process shaped by production logics, professional hierarchies, and collaborative negotiation within television as an industry. As Christopher Hogg argues, television adaptation takes place 'within the medium and industry of television itself' and is invariably conditioned by institutional contexts and production practices (Hogg, 2017, pp. 4–5). In the case of *The Name of the Rose*, this perspective is particularly salient, given its development within a transnational coproduction framework in which multiple commissioning cultures and expectations of serial form intersected. Central to Hogg's framework is the understanding of adaptation as a process of mediation among invested parties, aimed at accommodating diverse creative and institutional interests (Hogg, 2017, p. 60). While such negotiation characterises television production more broadly, it becomes structurally intensified in

transnational coproduction, where creative authority is dispersed across broadcasters, producers, and cultural intermediaries operating with divergent assumptions about narrative effectiveness. Rather than privileging singular authorship, adaptation relies on the management of multiple forms of authorial contribution and the creation of spaces for individual agency across roles (Hogg, 2017, pp. 240–241). Read through this lens, the tension observed in *The Name of the Rose* between plot-centred fidelity and character-centred serial legibility emerges as the outcome of redistributed and negotiated agency, producing an inversion of expected storytelling priorities. Hogg's redefinition of fidelity further clarifies why this inversion cannot be explained through national semiotic traditions alone. Distancing contemporary television adaptation from source-centred elitism, he reconceptualises fidelity as a relational and institutional strategy designed to cultivate shared creative commitment and manage symbolic and economic risk (Hogg, 2017, p. 61). In a transnational setting, fidelity thus functions not as cultural inheritance but as a mechanism through which authority and legitimacy are negotiated. From this perspective, the prominence of philological exactitude in *The Name of the Rose* reflects the structural pressures of coproduction, where established storytelling priorities are not simply combined but actively reconfigured through transnational negotiation.

This logic of negotiated authority provides the context for the project's subsequent development, in which the same tension between character-centred serial legibility and plot-centred textual reverence re-emerged under a newly configured writing arrangement. A decisive turning point came in February 2016, with Eco's death and the greater freedom subsequently granted by his heirs, which opened the possibility of pursuing a broader vision for the project. Porporati's collaboration ended, and RAI and producer Levi brought on Nigel Williams, an Emmy-nominated writer known for Elizabeth I (2005). This transition was accompanied by an explicit strategic intention to place greater emphasis on character development, particularly through a renewed focus on one of the novel's central thematic concerns: the Church's spiritual poverty and the tension between its material wealth and its moral and spiritual challenges. Yet, as Zatta explains, this intention was once again undermined by a reversion to a plot-driven narrative structure, resulting in the marginalisation of character interiority and ethical depth. Zatta attributes this outcome to Williams' difficulty in fully engaging with the thematic dimension at stake, noting that the resulting screenplay prioritised plot mechanics over what he describes as the 'movements of the soul', a phrase that encapsulates the interiority and character-centred orientation long associated with Italian television storytelling. This assessment is articulated explicitly in the following terms:

> Nigel Williams […] wasn't quite able to grasp the spirit we wanted to bring to the series. Since it also deals with a very topical and widely debated issue within the Church – the poverty of the Church – from his perspective, his background, I would say, his personal history, he just wasn't able to integrate that dimension into the narrative. So *the result leaned more towards plot mechanics and less* […] *towards the "movements of the soul". But when you're developing characters, the inner life, the*

> *soul of those characters is absolutely essential*.
>
> (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Zatta's assessment positions this difficulty as a problem of narrative orientation rather than individual competence, foregrounding a precondition of serial adaptation that remained unmet. His contrast between 'plot mechanics' and the 'movements of the soul' signals a misalignment between a plot-centred writing logic and a character-centred conception of serial storytelling, in which interiority functions as the primary vehicle of meaning over time. The quote thus exemplifies how pre-existing storytelling priorities shaped the development process from the outset, constraining the project's capacity to translate thematic and ethical complexity into a serial form. It is therefore no coincidence that, in discussing the contrast between what would later become the final, intensely "hyper-philological" screenplay – so strongly shaped by Turturro – and the character-oriented narrative framework he had originally advocated, Zatta dwells on the repeated attempts made by the commissioning side to recentre the storytelling around character development. One such strategy involved constructing a father–son relationship between William and Adso, a storyline explicitly designed to bring the characters' interiority to the foreground, but one that was ultimately significantly curtailed by Turturro's intervention, as Zatta explains:

> I would have liked *The Name of the Rose* to be a bit "warmer", to be honest, because for me, *my guiding lights when I develop a series are always two: the intrinsic truth of the story and the warmth of the characters*. And here, let's say, in terms of warmth… By "warmth of the characters" I mean characters who stage a kind of *"fatal flow"*: a necessity, a need, a problem, a fear that is deeply human, widely shared, and immediately recognisable to the audience. Characters who have to overcome a major trauma, a major problem – *characters who carry a heavy existential burden – are characters with whom the audience immediately connects*.
>
> (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Here, Zatta articulates character interiority as a functional precondition for serial narration, rather than as an aesthetic preference. His definition of 'warmth' in terms of necessity, fear, and trauma explicitly frames character development as the mechanism through which narrative meaning becomes recognisable and sustainable over time. Read within the broader sequence of the project's development, the quote clarifies how commissioning interventions sought to recalibrate the adaptation towards serial legibility, even as these efforts were progressively delimited by competing authorial and philological priorities. This orientation stands in opposition to storytelling strategies driven by plot escalation 'at all costs'. Indeed, as already noted earlier in this case study, Zatta argued from the outset that Eco's novel did not naturally lend itself to serial television adaptation and that, consequently, priority had to be

accorded to character development rather than plot, requiring a fundamentally different approach to story development. As the negotiated trajectory of the project demonstrates, however, this orientation was repeatedly undermined over time. This tension between an articulated commitment to character-centred development and the recurrent reassertion of plot-driven narrative logic is further corroborated by the account of RAI in-house producer Marta Aceto. Reflecting on the project's development, Aceto similarly identifies a persistent difficulty in translating Eco's thematic and philosophical density into a serial form capable of sustaining character interiority over time. Her remarks reinforce Zatta's "diagnosis": despite an explicit awareness of the need for character-led storytelling, successive iterations of the screenplay remained constrained by a philological orientation and a reliance on plot mechanisms. It is from this position that Aceto reflects critically on Nigel Williams' narrative interventions:

> This [William's contribution] affected our approach to maintain *a philological respect for the story*, [...] *and also the cultural history*. For us, representing William of Baskerville as a learned former inquisitor [...] meant adhering to a cultural code, which could allow for certain liberties but only up to a point. At one stage, in an attempt to craft a highly engaging and accessible story, Nigel Williams transformed the former inquisitor [...] into the tutor of a new female character who is the daughter of a former Dulcinian[33]. [...] Williams took some creative liberties, to the extent that, as one might say, there were blunders – though perhaps that term is a bit strong – but for us, they represented betrayals of the story […] *We felt we couldn't push things that far* [...] also because *our relationship with Eco's novel was more important than anything else*.
>
> (Aceto, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Aceto's account foregrounds a further precondition shaping the adaptation process, namely a philological posture that frames Eco's novel as a culturally saturated artefact requiring custodial care rather than free narrative reconfiguration. Her emphasis on 'cultural codes' and on the limits of permissible 'creative liberties' situates adaptation within a sequence of negotiated constraints, initially framed by Eco's involvement but persistently shaping later stages of development. The objection to Williams' narrative deviations is thus articulated not as resistance to innovation per se, but as a defence of the project's symbolic and intellectual coherence. Read within the broader trajectory of the project, Aceto's remarks confirm how this custodial orientation functioned as a structuring condition of the screenwriting process, repeatedly delimiting the scope of character-centred serial development. The outcome, as with Zatta's account, is a process in which the recognised necessity of interiority-

[33] The Dulcinians were a radical religious sect active in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, emerging from the Apostolic Brethren. They rejected the institutional Church's wealth and authority, advocating communal ownership, voluntary poverty, and a return to the ideals of early Christianity. Their doctrines were condemned as heretical, leading to intense persecution and eventual suppression by the Catholic Church.

driven storytelling for televisual legibility remained subordinated to a plot-centred fidelity rooted in different storytelling conventions.

Aceto's emphasis on philological respect resonates with what Hutcheon (2006) identifies as the 'myth of fidelity', whereby adapters risk being positioned as custodians rather than creative agents. Yet, taken alongside the broader interview material, fidelity in *The Name of the Rose* emerges not as an end in itself but as a necessary yet insufficient condition for serial adaptation. As Hogg (2021) argues, contemporary adaptation increasingly operates in a context where the 'object' of adaptation is plural, unstable, and shaped by institutional and production dynamics rather than by the literary source alone. Fidelity thus functions as a threshold requirement, beyond which further decisions must be made about how a text's intellectual and cultural architecture can be rendered legible and sustainable within long-form television narration. This shift aligns with Cardwell's account of how fidelity has been historically reconfigured in television adaptation. While early adaptations privileged faithfulness to the novel's wording, later practice increasingly understands fidelity as respect for the source's 'spirit' rather than its literal form (Cardwell, 2007). Fidelity persists as a legitimising posture, but one that tolerates substantial transformation so long as tone, cultural texture, and symbolic coherence remain perceptible within serial form. Read in this light, Aceto's position reflects an institutional dilemma rather than a contradiction: the project must demonstrate respect for a culturally saturated literary artefact while simultaneously making that artefact function as television. Hogg's industry-oriented framework clarifies why these pressures intensify under transnational conditions. Adaptation, he argues, takes place within the medium and industry of television itself, operating as a practice of mediation among multiple invested parties (Hogg, 2021). Fidelity is thus neither singular nor obsolete, but one term within a broader ecology of institutional, collaborative, and practical demands. His distinction between 'serving the source' and 'making the source serve' captures the core tension at stake in *The Name of the Rose*: reverential custodianship collides with the requirement that the material be reshaped to meet the functional demands of serial storytelling.

At this point, screenwriter selection becomes a decisive mechanism for managing this tension. When reframed from a production perspective, Straubhaar's concept of cultural proximity – defined as the tendency for audiences to engage more readily with cultural products that reflect familiar cultural content and styles (1991, p. 26) – can be understood as an anticipatory practice embedded in writing and development. Proximity here refers not to reception but to writers' capacity to recognise, select, and shape culturally meaningful elements in advance, rendering it a necessary but insufficient condition for adaptation. Van Heuckelom's production-side analysis (2024) further refines this understanding by demonstrating that cultural proximity operates as a form of situated attunement rather than comprehensive knowledge. Writers draw on partial familiarity and circulating imaginaries, which may enable cultural legibility but also expose the limits of proximity when deeper historical or epistemic grounding is absent. Proximity may orient creative choices, but it does not guarantee narrative depth or sustainability. It is precisely this gap that Redvall's work on screenwriting as a

knowledge-based professional practice helps to clarify. Redvall foregrounds research competence, time, and institutional trust as the conditions under which creative authority is delegated within television production cultures. Extended development and research phases are not optional but structurally necessary for sustaining long-form serial narration, while creative autonomy emerges as a conditional privilege grounded in demonstrated competence and responsibility (Redvall, 2013). Within the broader landscape of transnational drama, this evaluative logic is structurally embedded. As Lotz (2021) and Dunleavy and Weissmann (2023) argue, creative authority has increasingly shifted from individual authors to commissioning and institutional frameworks, where screenwriter selection functions as a strategic mechanism for negotiating cultural integrity, narrative legitimacy, and international intelligibility. In this context, fidelity, familiarity, and institutional authorship intersect not as fixed principles but as dynamically recalibrated criteria within transnational production. The impasses that mark the development of *The Name of the Rose* thus appear not as anomalies, but as the outcome of a consistent industrial logic governing creative authority in contemporary transnational television drama.

Against this institutional and transnational backdrop, Marta Aceto's dual reading of Nigel Williams's contribution highlights how cultural and creative clashes can serve as productive sites of negotiation within transnational dynamics. While critical of what she terms Williams's narrative 'excesses', Aceto also acknowledges the opportunity they presented: by challenging philological fidelity, Williams's unconventional approach prompted the team to reassess the adaptation's narrative direction and expand its structural boundaries:

> *The strength of Williams lay, on the one hand, in his willingness to push against Eco's narrative code*, a move that proved useful to us. Compared to Porporati's version, he introduced the theme of heresies more explicitly, which we had already intended to develop and reinforce. We had recognised the narrative potential of this theme within the serial adaptation, as it allowed us to break out of the claustrophobic structure found even in Jean-Jacques Annaud's film where, in a 100-minute feature, you can afford to stay within the abbey. *But we needed fuel; we had to energise the subplots, bring in female characters* […]. What he forced us to do was actually very stimulating, that is, to push beyond an initial version that was too respectful of the source, and move in a direction that, *while not as free or uninhibited as Nigel's*, was nonetheless able to benefit from some of the insights he had introduced.
>
> (Aceto, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Aceto frames Williams's contribution as both enabling and insufficient within the development sequence. While his willingness to push beyond excessive reverence for the source helped RAI recognise the need for narrative expansion, she also identifies a persistent shortfall in character development, explicitly described as the necessary 'fuel' for serial narration. The outcome was not a

rejection of boundary-pushing, but its recalibration: Williams's excessive creative freedom was curtailed in favour of a more controlled, character-centred configuration capable of sustaining long-form serial development.

It is in the wake of this recalibration that John Turturro joined the production as actor, screenwriter, and executive producer. His involvement exemplifies the Hollywood "hyphenate" model, in which stars expand their creative influence by taking on multiple roles, thereby reshaping their authorship and artistic identity (McDonald, 2012). While Battiato's draft had satisfied the production, Turturro's decision to reshape his own character reoriented the adaptation towards a more philological approach. As Zatta remarks:

> *Turturro*'s touch was rather glacial, in the sense that he *adhered more closely to Eco's original vision than perhaps even Eco himself would have*. So, while *in our early drafts* we had introduced some narrative digressions – particularly in *developing a father-son dynamic between William and Adso* – the version we reworked with Turturro significantly scaled back that element, bringing the script back into a more classical vein, originally charted by Eco.
>
> (Zatta, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Zatta locates Turturro's intervention at the final stage of a sequence of interdependent development decisions, in which earlier efforts by RAI to reorient the adaptation towards character interiority were reversed. Under Turturro's influence, the removal of the William–Adso father–son dynamic – originally introduced to foreground emotional development and relational depth – marked a return to a plot-centred, philologically "classical" configuration. This outcome restored narrative coherence but conflicted with RAI's precondition of character-driven serial legibility.

The concentration of agency in Turturro's multifaceted role – as lead actor, screenwriter, and executive producer – shaped a narrative with a distinctly philological orientation, as noted by Zatta and Aceto. Examining his agency across these domains reveals how adaptations can become overdetermined by the source material, reframing Eco's early influence and exposing the added complexity of transnational coproduction when adapting a literary work. Turturro's trajectory exemplifies how agency concentrated across artistic, creative, and industrial roles can paradoxically diminish cohesion. Initially cast as the lead, he expanded his role to co-screenwriter and executive producer, championing a "hyper-philological" approach that incorporated verbatim excerpts from Eco's novel. While supported by Aceto, this strategy was met with resistance by Zatta, who saw it as incompatible with the project's televisual logic. John Turturro's "hyphenate" reputation as both a "director's actor" and an "actor's director" aligns with auteur-oriented production cultures and shaped the adaptation's creative trajectory. Yet while his consolidated authority enhanced his influence, it also exposed the limits of individual agency within a collaborative and transnational coproduction

framework.

Turturro's career has been defined by his engagement with hyphenated roles – actor, writer, and director – beginning with his directorial debut *Mac* (1992), inspired by his father. Subsequent projects such as *Illuminata* (1998), *Romance & Cigarettes* (2005), and *The Jesus Rolls* (2019) continued this trajectory, underscoring his interest in creative control and narrative reworking. His involvement with literary adaptation further anticipates *The Name of the Rose*. In *La Tregua* (*The Truce*, 1997), adapted from Primo Levi's memoir, he prepared extensively, describing the role as transformative and reflective of a "European sensibility", a tone that would resurface in *The Name of the Rose*: '*The Truce* is one of the best things I've ever done. It was a breakthrough for me as an actor. […] Well, *it's a European screenplay, a European writer* […] *There is a different sensibility*' (Turturro, 2007, italics mine). Turturro's adaptation interests extend to his roles in *The Color of Money* (1986) and his admiration for Elena Ferrante, whose work he discovered via *Troubling Love*, later reading the *Neapolitan Novels*: 'I always look for Italian writers' (Begley, 2016). This consistent engagement with Italian cinema and literature positions Turturro as an interpretive artist, bridging cultures through performance, authorship, and adaptation. Turturro's entry into *The Name of the Rose* was shaped by a gradual shift from initial detachment to active creative investment, a trajectory consistent with his broader practice as a hyphenate and his long-standing engagement with Italian literary culture. When first approached by producer Matteo Levi through legal intermediary Guendalina Ponti (see Chapter 3), Turturro had neither read Eco's novel nor seen Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1986 film. What Levi initially perceived as hesitation instead marked a period of exploratory engagement, during which Turturro examined early drafts and progressively redefined his role from performer to creative partner. His eventual commitment crystallised around a clear precondition: that the adaptation restore and foreground Eco's authorial voice. As he explains:

> I read the book and I loved it. I started writing to [director] Giacomo [Battiato] to say, 'Why isn't there more Eco, this is eight hours, you don't have to reduce it' […] I said, '*if you put more of Eco in, then I'm interested*'. […] *I could always tell when it was Eco's words and when it wasn't, so we reverted to Eco's words whenever we could*.
>
> (Clarke, 2018, italics mine)

Once engaged, Turturro's involvement extended well beyond performance, evolving into an intensive and sustained screenwriting practice carried out alongside Battiato. He describes this phase as an iterative process of investigation, mirroring the narrative logic of the series itself: 'We always worked at weekends, *always worked on the script* to see what we could improve. *It became kind of an investigation* as [the characters] were doing their investigation[…]. It was exhausting but very stimulating' (Clarke, 2018, italics mine). In a later interview for Sundance TV, Turturro situates this labour within a broader interpretive commitment to Eco's intellectual project. Reflecting on William of Baskerville as both character and conceptual vehicle, he foregrounds Eco's semiotic density,

philosophical ambition, and enduring relevance, articulating a rationale for a strongly philological approach to adaptation:

> He's [William of Baskerville] not a monk, he's a friar, a person who is interested in science and interested in the world and how things work. And, you know, as we know about Eco that he was a Professor of Semiotics, so *there's always a meaning behind the meaning, behind the meaning, behind the meaning*. *So he touches on all these modern topics…Eco does…through William and the plot and the other characters*, too, who are quite erudite… all the characters are. I think it may even be more relevant now than it was when the book came out. I mean, he talks about women, talks about religion, talks about heretics, outcasts, how people split. He talks about lust, he talks about lust, he talks about, you know, how you can figure one thing out, but then it means something else. *There's just a lot of beautiful philosophy in the book, which you can't do into our movie*. *And so I really pushed hard to bring Eco back into his own story and Giacomo Battiato agreed with me* […]
>
> He talks about modern politics, about how people are afraid to teach people who are illiterate too much. And if you do, that can scare them. So *there's so many wise, I mean, great, great speeches that we have*. And I also was interested in bringing an understanding of the Franciscan order, which a lot of people don't really understand, including myself. *I had to read a lot of books* on it, and I really was hoping that all the characters would be rich because in the book, it's really rich. And to our movie it's hard. You have to kind of make the characters more maybe grotesque over…so…But *I've been working on it for about a year. I've been working on the script with Giacomo, and that has never stopped*.
>
> (Sundance TV, 2019, italics mine)

Read within the project's development sequence, Turturro's account marks a decisive reconfiguration of creative agency. Acting as both performer and co-writer, he pursued, together with Battiato, a rigorously philological strategy that actively reincorporated Eco's original writing into the screenplay, positioning the author as a silent co-screenwriter. This orientation functioned as a governing precondition for the later stages of development, privileging textual fidelity and philosophical density over character-centred serial expansion. The sustained, iterative rewriting Turturro describes situates this approach within a temporally extended process in which fidelity was continuously enacted rather than merely declared. The outcome, however, was a stabilisation of plot and intellectual architecture that constrained the interpersonal dynamics and character interiority identified by RAI as essential to serial legibility.

Turturro also highlights the enduring relevance of Eco's ideas, especially his writings on medieval aesthetics and satire. He frames *The Name of the Rose* as a work whose relevance lies in

Eco's critique of power, censorship, and the suppression of knowledge. By foregrounding humour and satire as subversive forces, he draws explicit parallels between medieval repression – book burnings, silenced women, controlled knowledge – and contemporary forms of cultural and intellectual erasure. His engagement extended beyond the novel to Eco's wider corpus, with the aim of rendering these concerns legible within a modern serial form despite the historical setting. This emphasis, however, exposes a tension within transnational coproduction. As Zatta later acknowledges, *The Name of the Rose* relied heavily on Eco's cultural authority without sufficiently articulating why the story should resonate today. The resulting friction reflects a broader transnational divide within creativity: pressures to contemporise historical material for global circulation coexist uneasily with commitments to preserving symbolic and intellectual density.

Turturro's reflections bring this ambivalence into focus at the level of individual creative process, shaped by an explicit recognition of early missteps – particularly the lack of a coherent narrative orientation – balanced by a determination to re-centre the script around Eco's original work. This tension is crystallised in the following emblematic, self-reflexive account of the adaptation's final outcome:

> You know, *a project like this you can work on for years. There's never enough time, enough money*. It could be ten hours long. We could have used more pre-production time just to work on, to make sure *the script* was all, just, you know, perfectly ready because everyone needs that information. And *since we changed it*, that affects the design, that affects everything. […] you know he was a philosopher, Eco, you know, I mean he was an essayist […] It's really cool. I mean, I say, *almost everything*…I would say eighty per cent of what I say…*is Eco*…or ninety per cent. There's a few things we've taken some liberties to explain, Saint Francis, but from books about Saint Francis, just so people will know […] I mean, I have whole speeches about lust…*It's the book, I mean, it's edited down, but it's still*… [Turturro opens his arms wide to indicate the size and abundance of potential material to be treated within book] you know, if you can do that in an entertaining way, that's the idea, not in a didactic way. And that's hard to do because *you can't muscle it. And when we tried to, it didn't work, you have to find the light of…discovery. And that's…so it's very close to Eco.*
>
> (Sundance TV, 2019, italics mine)

Here, Turturro articulates a mode of adaptation grounded in the deliberate tracing of Eco's presence across the screenplay. His insistence that 'almost everything…is Eco' and that the series remains 'the book…edited down' foregrounds a transfer logic in which the screenplay is conceived not as a transformation of the source, but as its careful condensation. This approach is framed as a necessary precondition for adaptation: the desired outcome – 'very close to Eco' – can only be reached through a prolonged investigative process, which Turturro metaphorically describes as the search for the 'light

of discovery'. This formulation reveals how fidelity operates here less as an abstract principle than as a processual orientation, shaping development decisions over time. Faced with a source he regards as resistant to tonal distortion, Turturro, together with Giacomo Battiato, rejects an overtly entertainment-driven strategy in favour of emulating the novel's investigative tone. The emphasis on inquiry as both method and narrative sensibility positions Eco's semiotic logic as the organising framework for the adaptation, even as this logic constrains the screenplay's capacity for serial reconfiguration.

Read through adaptation theory, this strategy aligns with what has been described as tonal fidelity: an allegiance not to plot replication, but to the affective and philosophical tenor of the source (Hutcheon, 2006; Leitch, 2007). Yet Turturro's remarks also expose the limits of this stance in a serial context. By pursuing closeness through near-verbatim incorporation and sustained reverence, the adaptation approaches a threshold where investigation risks becoming enclosure, and fidelity, while securing intellectual legitimacy, restricts the flexibility required for long-form television narration. In this sense, the quote crystallises how a strongly individual creative trajectory, grounded in prolonged immersion in the source, can both enable and delimit adaptation outcomes within a transnational production process. Turturro's dual role as screenwriter and actor positions him as an embodied authorial surrogate, enabling a distinctive form of performative authorship in which his interpretive choices mirror the investigative logic of William of Baskerville, the character he portrays. This convergence between authorship and characterisation produces a reflexive embodiment, where adaptation becomes an epistemological act, echoing the novel's own hermeneutic concerns. In inhabiting Eco's narrative from within, Turturro fuses performance and authorship into a singular interpretive gesture. This approach aligns with Sarah Cardwell's (2002) account of authorship in television adaptation as an aesthetic and interpretive function rather than a matter of fidelity. For Cardwell, tone, mood, and formal coherence mediate the relationship with the source text. This embodied interpretation preserves the novel's investigative and philosophical core through tone rather than replication. This strategy aligns with what Thomas Leitch (2007) calls 'fidelity to spirit rather than letter', where allegiance to the source is expressed via genre logic or thematic resonance. Turturro's position also reflects John Caughie's (2000) notion of distributed authorship, typical of television, where meaning emerges through collaborative contributions across creative roles. His fusion of performance and authorship thus functions both as narrative strategy and epistemological alignment, framing the adaptation as a dialogic reinterpretation. Yet this fusion was not without its challenges. Turturro describes the creative process as disorienting, marked by the complexity of Eco's ideas:

> I think *we got lost a lot into Eco*. Sometimes we don't know where the hell we are. And that has happened frequently. But sometimes we figured out that *we don't understand it*. And that's been, like, our weekends, you know, figuring out *the labyrinth* for example, and what really works and not. So it's been a daily adventure.
>
> (Sundance TV, 2019, italics mine)

Rather than describing a finished outcome, Turturro's account exposes adaptation as an immersive and destabilising process. The repeated experience of 'getting lost' does not merely characterise the labour of writing but establishes a direct transfer between Eco's novel and the conditions of its adaptation: the labyrinth is no longer only a narrative symbol but becomes a structuring principle of the screenwriting process itself. In this sense, the semiotic density of the source text actively shapes creative practice, as the writers' investigative labour mirrors the novel's logic of cryptic signs, deferred meanings, and interpretive uncertainty. Adaptation here operates not as linear transformation but as a temporally extended passage through the source's semiotic architecture, with Eco's intellectual world functioning as both material and method, a dynamic that finds its most explicit formal articulation in the series' visual rendering of the labyrinth, where the parallel between media text and media practice becomes fully legible. Viewed through a media industries lens attentive to the interplay between individual agency and industrial constraints, the screenwriting process of *The Name of the Rose* illustrates the layered dynamics of adaptation within a transnational coproduction framework. The case reveals a complex form of authorial agency unfolding across successive iterations of the script. The final configuration – co-written by director Giacomo Battiato and actor John Turturro – reflects the inherent difficulty of adapting a philosophically dense novel into serial television. Eco's former student and scholar Claudio Paolucci (2018, p.141) underscores that *The Name of the Rose* is a novel that 'has much to do with semiotics' and is rich in intertextuality, linguistic play, and symbolic layering. This density resists straightforward "translation" across media. Consequently, adaptation in such contexts must negotiate not only industrial and collaborative constraints but also the semiotic complexity of the source text, which, as an active agent, can enable or constrain narrative strategies.

John Turturro's dual role exemplifies a form of hybrid authorship in which performance and writing converge as interpretive acts. His approach mirrors William of Baskerville's hermeneutic method while engaging deeply with Eco's epistemological concerns, transforming the adaptation into a site of reflexive authorship. Rather than merely embodying a role, Turturro inhabits the text's investigative logic, fusing performance and screenwriting into a unified process of interpretation. If William is 'the embodiment of semiotics' and 'a personification of Eco himself' (Paolucci, 2018), then Turturro's creative immersion enacts a similar epistemic inquiry. His own words – 'you have to find the light of discovery […] so it's very close to Eco' (Sundance TV, 2019) – affirm this alignment. Through it, the boundary between actor, adapter, and author collapses: interpretation becomes co-authorship.

At the same time, this interpretive depth operates as a constraint. The novel's structural density, reverently preserved, resists the functional demands of serial adaptation. Turturro's agency thus appears paradoxical, simultaneously enabled and delimited by his fidelity to Eco. Rather than adapting the novel as flexible source material, he approaches it as an intellectual legacy to honour.

This tension reflects two contrasting modes of creative agency in adaptation: authorial veneration and embodied authorship. The former privileges fidelity and ethical responsibility; the latter involves inhabiting the source's epistemology through interpretive performance. When the actor is also screenwriter, these modes converge, collapsing creation and enactment into a singular authorial presence. In *The Name of the Rose*, this convergence centres on Turturro and director Giacomo Battiato – neither of whom is primarily a screenwriter – whose leadership followed a complicated early development stage marked by fragmented writing. The resulting adaptation privileges fidelity as an intense, even disorienting commitment. Turturro's remark, 'we've got lost a lot into Eco' (Sundance TV, 2019), captures this fusion of reverence and immersion. Ultimately, what is adapted is not only narrative but Eco's philosophical ethos itself, a shift that transforms the adaptation into an act of intellectual embodiment.

At this juncture, as the screenwriting complexities come into sharper focus, Turturro's confession of having 'got lost into Eco' warrants closer examination. His sense of disorientation – voiced repeatedly in interviews – raises key questions: what does it mean to become lost in Eco's thought, and where do the roots of this creative impasse lie? To answer this, one must return to the project's inception, specifically the early negotiations between Eco and producer Matteo Levi. From the outset, Eco brought more than thematic insight; he introduced the full force of his semiotic imagination. His contribution, though temporally limited, proved decisive and transformative, embedding within the adaptation two of the most defining elements of his theoretical framework.

First is Eco's conception of authorship as a semiotically grounded process of narrative world-building, an image-driven logic privileging the visual design of meaning. Second is his theory of translation, particularly his understanding of adaptation as an intersemiotic shift across sign systems, such as from novel to screen. These two pillars shaped both Eco's early scepticism and his philological engagement during initial development. More importantly, they reframed the adaptation not simply as a narrative enterprise, but as a semiotic negotiation, conditioned as much by the ontological density of the source as by the industrial demands of transnational coproduction. As previously discussed, this complexity activates culturally divergent logics within the writing process, visible in Spotnitz's and Turturro's shared emphasis on making the adaptation culturally resonant and politically relevant. Given the weight of Eco's integrated contribution to the serial adaptation, the next step is to examine the twin components of his framework in more detail, beginning with his creative method: a theory of authorship grounded in visual logic and semiotic design. Umberto Eco's writing method is defined by the integration of semiotic rigour, visual imagination, and exhaustive research, resulting in the construction of materially and visually immersive narrative worlds. This preparatory phase is not merely a precursor but a generative force that actively shapes the writing process. It includes the spatial mapping of settings, visual sketching, and the deliberate configuration of narrative conditions. Before any plot structure emerges, Eco undertakes what he calls 'the furnishing that precedes writing' (Capuano, 2020, my translation): an extensive phase in which he sketches characters' faces, draws architectural layouts, and constructs the physical environments of the story. As his publisher Mario

Andreose observed, Eco's early preparatory sketches for *The Name of the Rose* , dated to 1976-77, serve as visual documents that map out 'the identity and physiognomy of the main protagonists', a method Eco himself described as necessary 'to know what words to put in their mouths' (Capuano, 2020, my translation). Eco consistently stressed the primacy of this phase in interviews and documentaries. In a documentary directed by Franco-American filmmaker Teri Wehn Damisch, he located the pleasure of writing in the immersive solitude of research: 'The greatest pleasure lies in the preparation for writing […] the moment of research, of discovery, of secret pleasure […] when no one knows what you are doing' (Eco, 2012). This emphasis on the pleasures of research is inseparable from Eco's belief that narrative does not originate with plot, but with a striking visual intuition, what he calls a generative image capable of setting the entire novel in motion. As he reflects in an interview to Tonny Vorm: 'I realised that to write a novel meant to start from an image. In *The Name of the Rose* it was the image of a monk being poisoned while reading a book. […] you start from a poignant image. I mean [that's] me' (Eco, 2015). From this initial image, Eco would proceed to construct the architecture of a storyworld. As he explains, this process would require an almost obsessive attention to spatial and visual coherence:

> *I had first of all to create a world: I have a lot of drawings* in which, for *The Name of the Rose*, I designed all the faces of the monks, which they were not so useful, because I changed them, but I needed to have points of reference. For the labyrinth of the library, I designed, I don't know, fifty, sixty labyrinths, studying all the existing labyrinths. […] *I had to know how my characters could move*. […] *Place for me is very important, to visit places* […] *which is part of the research* […] I have to know the number of steps in a staircase in order to make my character climb up.
>
> (Eco, 2015, italics mine)

Here, Eco frames space as a constitutive precondition of narrative construction rather than a representational afterthought. His emphasis on drawing, mapping, and measuring reveals writing as a process of spatial verification, in which narrative possibility is enabled and constrained by the prior construction of a coherent world. Statements such as 'I had to know how my characters could move' explicitly position space as an operative condition shaping character action and narrative plausibility. Read in processual terms, Eco's claim that 'writing doesn't mean [just writing] […] it's starting a research' casts authorship as an extended sequence of exploratory operations in which spatial design precedes narrative development. This helps explain why, in adaptation, *The Name of the Rose* repeatedly resists serial reconfiguration: the source text arrives already organised as a tightly pre-structured semiotic space, shaping the temporal unfolding of the adaptation as much as its narrative content. This approach is inseparable from Eco's broader semiotic philosophy, which views the novel not as a medium for authorial expression but as a constructed world to be assembled, tested, and explored. Writing becomes an epistemic act, where meaning arises through the reader's engagement

with a system purposefully designed for interpretive play. As Eco (2015) observes: ‘a book, not only a novel, is like a child: it [takes] two years to grow it up, to follow it’. Even in recalling the genesis of *The Name of the Rose* , Eco frames its origin as the convergence of impulse and structure. When asked by a friend to write a short crime story, he responded that his version would be ‘five hundred pages long, set in the Middle Ages, in a monastery’. What followed was not romantic inspiration but the immediate act of ‘writing the names of monks’, and soon after, ‘making little drawings’. This approach rejects the myth of spontaneous, romantic genius. As Eco states, ‘It is not the author who writes the novel. The author posits some starting points’ (Eco, 2015). These initial fragments – sketches, images, and conceptual cues – form the visual and material scaffolding from which the fictional world emerges. These secondary sources illuminate the rationale behind Umberto Eco’s insistence on shaping the television adaptation of *The Name of the Rose* according to rigorously defined parameters – an approach that RAI Commissioning Editor Michele Zatta would later describe as excessively ‘philological’. Yet, rather than signalling a reductive or sovereign notion of authorship rooted in textual authority, Eco’s early involvement – particularly his endorsement of Andrea Porporati as screenwriter – reflects a more nuanced conception of creative control. Eco’s interviews, writings, and intellectual legacy – the semiotic “cues” left by a master theorist – suggest that, as a novelist, he simultaneously inhabited two additional creative roles rooted in screen-based storytelling: those of set designer and screenwriter. As a set designer, Eco constructed his fictional worlds through meticulous visual planning and empirical research. His preparatory sketches, architectural renderings, and spatial mappings were not supplementary artefacts but integral to a method grounded in semiotic precision. These visual frameworks enabled internally consistent and epistemically coherent narrative spaces, inviting the reader into worlds that feel both materially grounded and intellectually navigable.

Viewed through the lens of television storytelling theory, Eco’s world-building aligns closely with Jason Mittell’s concept of narrative complexity. Mittell (2015, p.34) asserts that a storyworld must ‘function as a consistent environment that can support ongoing narration’, adhering to internal rules that regulate spatial logic, character movement, and narrative plausibility. Eco’s empirical approach – his architectural mappings and visual scaffolding – embodies this principle, reinforcing the narrative’s structural integrity. In this light, Eco also assumes the role of screenwriter, crafting scene-driven prose rich in precise description, dialogue, and dramaturgical intent. While the novel is densely symbolic and interwoven with Latinisms, historical references, and philosophical allusions, it also functions on a highly accessible level as a detective narrative. At this layer, Eco deploys vivid sensory detail – smell, sound, and texture – not only to delineate characters and environments, but to construct a deeply immersive atmosphere. These textual features make the fictional world particularly conductive to visual adaptation, bridging the gap between literary complexity and televisual translation.

This operational dimension of Eco’s writing resonates with Elena Ferrante’s (2018) notion of screenwriting as ‘functional writing’, a form that serves narrative construction beyond literary expression. Within the intricate architecture of *The Name of the Rose*, Eco similarly embeds dramaturgical engines: passages that are not merely expressive, but operationally driven. This aligns

with what screenwriter and novelist Francesco Piccolo (one of the two lead screenwriters of *My Brilliant Friend*) described in a public lecture as follows:

> This profession [*screenwriting*], in my view, is particularly interesting because it can be defined as *the writing of concreteness*. And the writing of concreteness – that is, *writing scenes* – is the most concrete kind of writing there is.
>
> (Piccolo, 2019, my translation, italics mine)

Read alongside Eco's narrative practice, Piccolo's definition of screenwriting as a 'writing of concreteness' – specifically as the practice of 'writing scenes' – clarifies how *The Name of the Rose* already operates according to a logic of functional writing. Concreteness here does not denote stylistic simplicity, but the systematic construction of actions, spaces, and movements capable of material realisation on screen. Eco's prose is organised around spatial causality, character movement, and visual legibility, establishing a crucial precondition for adaptation. The novel arrives already structured as a system of concrete narrative operations, which both enables and constrains subsequent screenwriting decisions. In this sense, the 'writing of concreteness' functions not as an adaptive outcome, but as a structuring condition shaping the transnational development process. Eco's densely layered prose thus operates as writing for action, space, and performance, revealing narrative as fundamentally architectural: a designed structure intended to sustain meaning through spatial and procedural coherence.

This architectural logic extends to Eco's reconceptualisation of authorship. Rather than an originating or sovereign voice, the author emerges as a textual function embedded within a semiotic system that anticipates an ideal reader and guides interpretation through internal cues. As Doležel (1980), citing Eco (1979), observes, 'the term "author", being "a mere metaphor for textual strategy", is discarded', and replaced by a model of authorship immanent to the narrative's construction. Eco's writing process – grounded in sketches, maps, and empirical research – reinforces this model. Fiction emerges from visual and spatial design rather than plot-first narration, and writing becomes a form of epistemic inquiry. Within this framework, Eco's early involvement in the adaptation reflects less an assertion of personal authority than a defence of the novel's internal semiotic logic. His resistance to external interference sought to preserve the procedural coherence of a narrative architecture already oriented towards screen-based realisation. This orientation towards authorship as an immanent procedural logic is also explicitly articulated in Eco's retrospective discourse on the adaptation process, most clearly in the interview titled *I Was Always Narrating* (Eco, 2015), where his performative ambivalence – gesturing at the screenplay's bulk with irony – underscores a deeper recognition: authorial control does not lie in the adaptation, but in the structural logic of the original text. The irony peaks in his quip, addressed to the interviewer:

> Before you arrived, I was reading a treatment that the Italian television want to make:

> ten episodes out of *The Name of the Rose*. You cannot escape it. No, you try to escape but your publisher says: 'No, please do it'.
>
> (Eco, 2015)

In this remark, Eco's ironic reference to a 'treatment' and his insistence that 'you cannot escape it' situate adaptation within a sequence of externally driven pressures rather than an authorially initiated process. The quip foregrounds adaptation as an imposed outcome emerging from institutional, economic, and temporal constraints – publisher expectations, industrial momentum, and serial expansion – rather than from narrative necessity.

At the same time, Eco's performative distancing signals that authorial control does not reside in managing the adaptation itself, but in the prior organisation of the source text. The remark thus frames serialisation as a contingent event in the transnational development process, one that unfolds downstream from a narrative architecture whose coherence has already been secured elsewhere. Eco's scepticism about translating *The Name of the Rose* into serial form is grounded in his semiotic theory of translation, a second core element of his authorial stance. His engagement with translation unfolds on three levels: as a translated author, a translator, and a theorist of translation (Wardle, 2015, p.8). The most sustained articulation appears in *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (Eco, 2003), where he distinguishes between interlinguistic translation ('translation proper') and intersemiotic translation, the shift from verbal to non-verbal sign systems, such as from novel to film:

> Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is when we have 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal systems', for example, when a novel is 'translated' into a film, or a fairy tale into a ballet.
>
> (Eco, 2003)

Eco's distinction between intersemiotic 'transmutation' and translation proper redefines adaptation as a process predicated on material transformation rather than semantic equivalence. By describing adaptation as an 'interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal systems', Eco foregrounds a shift in expression matter – language into image, discourse into performance – that irreversibly alters meaning-making conditions. Within this framework, adaptation cannot be understood as reversible or equivalent transfer, but as intervention. This theoretical position establishes a critical precondition for Eco's scepticism towards serial adaptation: screen development is not a continuation of the novel's semiotic logic, but a procedural reconfiguration that exposes the text to external agencies, temporal extension, and material constraint. Adaptation thus emerges as manipulation, an act whose outcomes depend on how far successive screenwriters reshape, rather than preserve, the novel's internal architecture.

Unlike interlinguistic translation, which operates within a shared semiotic continuum (e.g., sound), intersemiotic translation entails a shift in expression matter – such as language to image or

music to gesture – thus altering meaning-making conditions and eliminating reversibility or semantic equivalence. As Eco (2003) notes, translating *Hamlet* into Italian modifies its form and substance but stays within the same medium, whereas rendering a scene as a painting changes the material substrate entirely. This distinction grounds Eco's refusal to consider adaptations as translations. While they may enhance understanding, he frames them as 'understanding through manipulation' rather than translation. His resistance does not dismiss adaptation, but asserts the specificity and irreducibility of sign systems. Eco's first explicit account of screen adaptation defines it as manipulation, an act that transforms and intervenes. Adaptation becomes a 'shedding of skin', wherein the adaptor's agency materially reshapes the original. In *The Name of the Rose*, this raises key questions about how successive screenwriters altered the novel and whether these changes compromised its integrity.

In *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*, Eco (2003) critiques adaptation's tendency to fix meaning and reduce interpretive openness. Using *The Portrait of a Lady* (1997) as an example, he argues that casting Nicole Kidman as Isabel Archer imposes a visual identity, curbing the novel's imaginative freedom. For Eco, this is symptomatic of adaptation: literature allows ambiguity, while visual media enforce specificity. The shift from verbal to visual restricts interpretive range, as viewers are compelled to accept predefined representations: 'the director has made the choice for me, and as a spectator I am less free than as a reader' (Eco, 2023). Adaptation thus entails not just formal change, but a reconfiguration of meaning. Visual codes replace textual porosity; suggestion becomes assertion. While Eco concedes that intersemiotic translation can be valuable, he insists it be recognised as interpretive imposition, not fidelity. As Eco (2023) observes, visual storytelling both fixes representation and overloads the viewer's imaginative field, a paradox that restricts interpretive freedom while saturating meaning: 'adaptations say too much'. As Eco (2023, italics mine) concludes: '*In the passage* from one continuum to another *we are forced to render explicit*, and thus to emphasise, certain aspects of the content that a translation would have left indeterminate'.

Eco's early agency in the adaptation process rests on two interrelated dimensions at the intersection of authorship and semiotics. First is the visual genesis of his creative method: drawing functioned as the initial act of world-building – what he termed the 'furnishing' of the story – aligning his practice with that of a production designer or screenwriter. This materially embedded mode of scene construction resists delegation within the collaborative logic of serial television. Second is his theory of translation, in which adaptation is conceived not as expansion but as constraint: the passage from novel to screen narrows meaning and curbs the interpretive openness sustained by literature. Eco therefore viewed the serialisation of *The Name of the Rose* not as enhancement, but as a loss of semantic plurality. In this configuration, agency emerges less from direct intervention than from the novel's embedded semiotic architecture and theoretical framing.

Situated between textual fidelity and televisual logic, the adaptation unfolds as a negotiation between media systems rather than a linear transfer, aligning with Cardwell's (2002) account of adaptation as medium-specific reconstitution, Hutcheon's (2013) definition of interpretive appropriation, and Hogg's (2022) emphasis on industrial and collaborative constraint. From this lens,

The Name of the Rose is not simplification but a semiotically distinct construct shaped by collective authorship. Furthermore, Boozer (2008) underscores that adaptation authorship is always mediated by the target medium's constraints, a dynamic reflected in the project's fragmented writing process. Eco's (2003) own notion of adaptation as a semiotic 'moult' reinforces this notion, and his discomfort reflects an acute awareness that the novel's complexity resists transposition. As Cardwell (2002) notes, adaptation to television entails 'a full aesthetic and material reconstitution', made more difficult by Eco's embedded textual design, which is difficult, if not impossible, to model. Ultimately, the adaptation is best understood not as betrayal but as a response to the structural and epistemic distance between media. Within this space of transmutation – where authorship, agency, and semiotics intersect – *The Name of the Rose* becomes an act of productive divergence.

In conclusion, *The Name of the Rose* exposes the tensions that arise when transnational coproduction confronts a source text resistant to transformation. The adaptation unfolded as a space of structural negotiation, forcing creative agents to choose between philological fidelity to Eco's text and a more selective, character-driven logic aligned with serial television. RAI's international commissioning editor, Michele Zatta, championed the latter through thematic reorientation aimed at contemporary relevance and global reach, while Eco's semiotic architecture exerted a strong gravitational pull – particularly on Nigel Williams and John Turturro – rendering alignment with television's narrative logic persistently fraught. Crucially, this case demonstrates that, within transnational coproduction of adaptation from an existing source, the most complex negotiation may occur not between institutional partners, but between the production system and the text itself. Divergent storytelling models, thematic priorities, and interpretive sensibilities fractured development, revealing how narrative content can actively shape a project's transnational trajectory. In this light, one of Eco's final contributions lies in demonstrating that a source text may exert a form of "inanimate agency": as a semiotically dense and philosophically charged structure, *The Name of the Rose* catalysed multiple interpretive strategies and constrained development in ways that rendered the project structurally transnational (irrespective of the series' eventual success) by persistently challenging and, at times, overturning conventions embedded in specific national production cultures, thereby affirming its status as a genuinely transnational enterprise.

Conclusion

Taken together, the screenwriting processes explored in *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose* reveal the manifold ways in which adaptation becomes a crucible for negotiating the transnational. Each case study demonstrates a structurally and culturally distinct approach to script development, shaped by its own constellation of institutional priorities, authorial configurations, and adaptive imperatives.

Medici exemplifies a model of transnational screenwriting defined by spatial dislocation and industrial hybridisation. Its Anglo-American writers' room, relocated to London yet tasked with narrativising the Italian Renaissance, embodied a tension between operational efficiency and cultural rootedness. The screenwriting process – spearheaded by Big Light and concurrently supervised by Italian producers and the commissioning broadcaster RAI – emerged as a charged site of cultural negotiation, where historical representation, narrative coherence, and cultural interpretation were continuously mediated across both spatial and epistemic divides. What ultimately materialised was a cross-border screenwriting architecture structured by asymmetry: the authorial voice was geographically and culturally dislocated from the source context, demanding continuous negotiation between divergent storytelling traditions, audience expectations, and, above all, historical sensibilities inflected by the charged memory of distinct national legacies.

My Brilliant Friend, by contrast, reflects a fortified and cohesive screenwriting model, one built around the gravitational presence of the author, Elena Ferrante. The process was not decentralised but concentrically structured, with Ferrante's voice embedded in every stage of development. Here, fidelity was neither passive reverence nor literalist mimicry, but a mode of textual and tonal attunement, enabled by a highly controlled writing environment, seamlessly integrated within the broader production. The screenwriting team functioned as a defensive architecture, designed to uphold the affective and linguistic specificity of the novel, while transforming them into serial form. In doing so, the adaptation asserted a form of cultural agency markedly different from *Medici*: it did not outsource creative authorship, but rather internalised the source author within the screenwriting architecture, thereby reinforcing a composite and layered authorial front, unified by shared interests and cultural backgrounds, within a transnational logic.

Finally, *The Name of the Rose* offers a case in which the adaptation is recalibrated not around authorial voice, but around the disruptive agency of the source text. Eco's novel, dense with semiotic and philosophical layers, acted as a quasi-autonomous force within the screenwriting process, resisting linear narrative, complicating adaptation strategies, and exposing the limits of conventional televisual transposition. Unlike the collaborative stability of *My Brilliant Friend* or the structured asymmetry of *Medici*, *The Name of the Rose* reflects a process marked by volatility, fragmentation, and creative uncertainty. The text itself functioned as a site of friction, compelling its adapters to engage in interpretive labour that foregrounded epistemic negotiation as much as narrative construction.

Bringing these threads together, these screenwriting processes not only illustrate how adaptation operates within transnational television, but actively enact it. Through their divergences in structure, authorship, and adaptive logic – and the distinct dynamics they instantiate – they reveal the transnational not as an externally imposed framework, but as an internally generated condition, continuously negotiated and materially expressed through the architecture of screenwriting. Viewed collectively, these case studies chart a composite map of screenwriting practice as a site of negotiation, plurality, and experimentation, each contributing, in its own way, to making sense of and giving shape to the complex undertaking of transnational coproduction.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the development processes of RAI-led transnational television drama coproductions, focusing on how agency and cultural specificity are negotiated within complex, multi-layered, and culturally diverse collaborative frameworks. Through three detailed case studies – *Medici*, *My Brilliant Friend*, and *The Name of the Rose* – which represent a specific commissioning wave in the 2010s as part of RAI's renewed high-end drama strategy, it has excavated and illuminated the granular dynamics by which institutional, creative, and broader cultural forces converge to shape high-end drama in the Italian context and beyond. In doing so, it has positioned development not as a preparatory step in the background of production, but as a decisive arena where the conditions for authorship, collaboration, and cultural representation are constructed, actively redefined, and reconfigured within the transnational framework.

By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, this thesis offers a new understanding of transnational coproduction as a site of both creative opportunity and structural negotiation, an evolving form whose meanings, to borrow Hilmes's question, must be continually reassessed, and whose ambitions, echoing Mieli's phrase *al di là di noi* ('beyond us'), reach beyond the contingencies of individual projects.

Summary of Key Findings

This section addresses the three research questions as they were originally formulated in the Introduction:

1. How can transnational coproduction be understood as a generative mode of high-end drama production, offering industry practitioners multiple opportunities to reimagine and refashion its meanings and practices over time?
2. How do the development processes of RAI-led transnational television drama coproductions – through initial structuring and central screenwriting – reveal the institutional logics, creative negotiations, and culturally specific agency reshaping the meaning and practice of coproduction within high-end television?
3. How can cultural diversity on the ground prompt industry practitioners to reframe transnational coproduction, enabling its standardised norms and conventions to evolve over time?

Together, these questions distil the core concerns that have guided the research: conceptualising transnational coproduction as a generative mode of production; examining the institutional, creative, and cultural mechanisms that operate during development; and demonstrating how the lived realities of

cultural diversity "on the ground" can prompt the evolution of norms and conventions that once appeared standardised and fixed.

The following discussion crystallises the main insights of the study, reflecting on what has been learned through the research and directly addressing the research questions as originally posed in the Introduction and restated here. In doing so, it brings together the empirical and theoretical strands of the thesis to demonstrate how the findings advance understanding of transnational television drama coproduction.

A primary contribution of this thesis is to reconceptualise, frame, and study transnational coproduction as a *process*, a dynamic and evolving site of negotiation rather than a static silo. Transnational coproduction should not be understood as a rigid template, but as a fluid and evolving practice shaped by the interplay of institutional imperatives, creative agency, and cultural specificity, producing outcomes that both reproduce and reinterpret established industry conventions while reconfiguring them through culturally specific lenses that respond to shifting market demands, institutional priorities, and creative visions. In this process, not only are meanings redefined and practices reconfigured, but the boundaries of professional roles also become more porous. By foregrounding development as the decisive arena where these forces converge, the thesis advances an understanding of transnational coproduction as a temporally situated mode of production that continually reshapes its norms and practices on the ground of cultural diversity at play.

Evidence from the three case studies shows how practitioners negotiate these institutional, creative, and cultural dimensions through iterative processes that extend beyond individual projects. Such negotiations are embedded within broader temporal horizons and imaginations – how practitioners make sense of the industry, their work, and their roles – shaped by prior collaborations, institutional memory, and individual and collective long-term strategic objectives. In this light, transnational coproduction emerges as a generative form, layering and sedimenting negotiations across projects and establishing evolving standards and practices over time.

The analysis demonstrates how such cumulative experience fosters both continuity and change: continuity in the persistence of certain business philosophies, working methods, alliances, and editorial approaches; and change in the gradual redefinition of creative authorship, narrative structures, and culturally specific strategies. This temporal perspective reveals transnational coproduction not merely as a project-bound arrangement – one tied to the success of the textual outcome – but, from a media industry and production perspective, as a generative framework whose meanings and operational logics are continually reimagined, redesigned, and refashioned through sustained engagement, to be then reintroduced into the industry as new possibilities and forms of transnational coproduction. Framing transnational coproduction as a temporally evolving practice, with norms and conventions that change gradually through repeated, situated acts of negotiation in development, foregrounds development as a fertile site of meaning-making and an engine of transformation. Far from being a preparatory,

"backstage" step before actual production, development stands as constitutive of creative identity, institutional learning, and industrial change.

In the early development phase, these negotiations revolve around rights acquisition, partnership formation, and the architecture of deals. Throughout this process, producers operate simultaneously as cultural mediators and strategic brokers, balancing the commissioning broadcaster's objectives with the creative and market imperatives of international partners. Securing the participation of global players is not merely a contractual achievement but a decisive creative inflection point. Decisions about financing, territorial rights, and governance structures – and, within all this, the assertion of legitimacy and positioning – prefigure a redefined distribution of creativity, its control, and its management. In this sense, early development functions as an engine of transformation, reshaping power relations while enabling the protection of culturally specific elements. The outcome is enhanced negotiating power and greater capacity to protect and integrate culturally specific elements. This phase reveals how RAI's commissioning wave of the 2010s became an arena in which the conceptual foundations of each project – its authorship model, its approach to culturally specific representation, and its industrial positioning – were actively constructed.

The screenwriting phase adds a second, equally decisive layer to this process. Here, adaptation – serving as the scaffolding that underpins all three projects, two drawn from existing sources and one from historical material – emerges as a multifaceted practice shaped by transnational collaboration. From the three case studies, adaptation crucially emerges as an industrial and collaborative practice, with each project articulating this dialogic and relational character in distinct ways.

Medici emerges as a "structural" adaptation, namely a form that exposed, in its very material operations, the affordances and constraints of transnational coproduction. Here, screenwriting was not simply a matter of distributed authorship but of a physically dislocated apparatus: a process literally stretched between geographies, requiring Italian practitioners to recalibrate their work within an exogenous organisational model structurally alien to their own production system. This displacement, at once constraining and generative, provided a concrete instantiation of what a transnational working environment may materially entail, that is, not an abstract negotiation of creative voices, but a tangible reconfiguration of where and how creative labour unfolds. The challenge was amplified by the subject matter itself: the Renaissance, a period central to Italy's cultural heritage, which rendered the structural adaptation of practices both more demanding and more revealing of how material conditions shape creative possibility.

My Brilliant Friend epitomises what I describe as a "sovereign" adaptation, that is, adaptation understood as the capacity to determine conditions and situations, articulated as an act of industrial and cultural self-assertion and self-legitimation. Its "sovereignty" is realised through an innovative screenwriting architecture conceived as a fortified stronghold, materially composed of the constellation of Italian partners spanning the development chain, aligned around the project and forming a united front against potential external pressures. In so doing, the adaptation foregrounds Italy's cultural

identity – its value system, heritage, and, in particular, its cinematic tradition – while demonstrating that, within a transnational coproduction framework, adaptation can function as a declaration of cultural self-affirmation and creative autonomy, a gesture of self-enunciation and positioning that set a benchmark for Italian high-end drama internationally.

Finally, *The Name of the Rose* emerges as what I term an "embedded-agency" adaptation, that is, a form in which the semiotic richness and philosophical density of Umberto Eco's novel operate not merely as source material but as an active force, both structuring and destructuring the development process: structuring by asserting its built-in narrative direction, thematic emphasis, and overall texture, and destructuring by unsettling entrenched cultural-specific storytelling traditions. In doing so, it reframes the possibilities and constraints of transnational coproduction by introducing the source text itself as a distinctly transnational element, one capable of blurring boundaries, unsettling and reshuffling pre-established creative approaches, prompting striking reversals in expected practice, and demonstrating how development, and screenwriting in particular, within a transnational framework, can become a dynamic space of exchange and reimagination.

Read together, these case studies show how transnational coproduction enables different enactments of adaptation as mediated authorship and industrial negotiation. Ultimately, transnational drama coproduction emerges as a dynamic, culturally embedded, and temporally evolving field of practice, a process whose elements and mechanisms are best conceived as links in extended chains, rooted in historical trajectories yet projecting concretely into future possibilities. Practitioners negotiate institutional, creative, and cultural dimensions in ways that both recast and reinforce production norms. Cultural diversity acts as a central driver of this evolution, fuelling innovations in industrial authorship, the management of creativity, adaptation strategies, and, as a consequence, even production models. These transformations, though uneven and contingent – as is invariably the case with experimentation – nonetheless accumulate to redefine the future directions of the form, positioning transnational coproduction as a key laboratory for the ongoing reconfiguration of culturally diverse high-end drama production.

Theoretical and Disciplinary Contributions

This research positions itself within the converging domains of transnational television studies, media industry research, and Italian production scholarship. It addresses an underexplored area of existing scholarship by engaging with the lived realities of media work through a granular focus on the development phase, a stage too often treated as peripheral rather than constitutive of cultural and industrial transformation. In doing so, not only does it align with but also extends the trajectory set by key contributions to transnational television and media industry research, advancing the analysis of the

multifaceted ways in which creative authorship, institutional power, and cultural identity are negotiated in transnational contexts. By foregrounding development as a fertile site of meaning- and practice-making and by situating Italian RAI-led transnational coproductions within these debates, the study contributes both an original empirical corpus and a theoretical reframing of adaptation, agency, and cultural specificity in coproduction.

Building on existing work, this research directs analytical attention to development as the nexus of sustained multi-layered negotiating processes. The present study positions development as the central site of inquiry and bridge for the researcher to bring into dialogue different realms and discourses, and crucially a space where economic imperatives and creative visions are reconciled, contested, and redefined. This approach draws from and advances Hilmes's reconceptualisation of transnational coproduction as a process that is as much temporal as it is spatial, showing that norms and conventions are not simply applied but evolve through constantly emerging collaborative encounters.

It also contributes to refining and expanding the concept of agency in media industry studies. By evidencing the interplay between 'circumscribed' and processual agency, it provides a more nuanced account of how practitioners operate within and against institutional constraints, shaped also by culturally diverse factors. In *Medici*, the capacity to act within established commissioning structures and the public broadcaster's ethos and mission was coupled with the iterative adaptation of the writers' room model. In *My Brilliant Friend*, agency was exercised through sustained collective advocacy for cultural specificity and integrity across every stage of development, anticipating and countering potential pressures at the creative level. Finally, in *The Name of the Rose*, processual agency was evident in the adaptive choices required by the source text's semiotic and philosophical density, asserting itself as an active agent in the process, and by the project's hybrid authorship arrangements. The latter constitutes a conceptual expansion of agency beyond practitioners, extending agency to the text itself, understood here as carrying an embedded agency that actively influenced the trajectory of the screen adaptation.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes to debates on how to access and analyse the processes of media work that often remain hidden, naturalised, or treated as secondary. Through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews and other sources, it reconstructs the iterative decision-making of the development phase, offering a model for capturing the interplay between individual agency, institutional frameworks, and cultural specificity. In the case of adaptations from existing sources, the triangulation of direct interview material with industry insiders, secondary sources, and, most importantly, novelists' primary sources proves particularly productive. It enables the researcher to probe deeply into the reasons behind the novelists' direct involvement (never incidental) and to understand how these diverse rationales can themselves shape and orient the course of the adaptations.

Conceptually, integrating agency, cultural specificity, and 'development-as-meaning-making' has been central to this thesis. The multiformity of agency elucidates the multiple, and at times unexpected, ways in which practitioners navigate constraints and opportunities. Cultural specificity

reveals the diverse creative and symbolic stakes of negotiation at both the individual and collective levels, reaching beyond surface-level expectations or established conventions. Finally, development-as-meaning-making highlights the formative role of this phase, not only in shaping production outcomes but, crucially, in generating new possibilities and forms of transnational coproduction.

The reflexive lesson for the study is that granular, mid-level practices – writers' room dynamics, editorial mediations and architectures, adaptive compromises, and so on – are not operational minutiae but the very sites where the evolving norms and conventions of transnational coproduction are rearticulated, learned, and transmitted. This approach yields rich empirical insights while also demonstrating the value of situating production analysis within longitudinal trajectories, allowing for the identification of shifts as they materialise over time through lived processes.

Theoretically, the study's integration of temporal perspectives into the analysis of transnationality refines existing conceptual frameworks. By tracing how precedents set in one project shape the negotiation strategies and institutional arrangements of subsequent projects, and how practitioners' imaginations project forward the construction of new potential scenarios – not only for themselves but for the industry of which they see themselves as part – the thesis demonstrates that transnational coproduction is a path-dependent process in which the legacy of earlier collaborations actively conditions future possibilities, and in which imagination and self-reflexivity work upon those possibilities to create ever new realities. Taken together, these contributions position development as a privileged epistemic site, a venue in which meanings, practices, and professional identities are (re)configured and (re)articulated, and where the temporalities of the transnational are negotiated and sedimented.

Directions for Future Research

This thesis has demonstrated the value of approaching development as a decisive and fertile, temporally layered site of meaning- and practice-making, where agency and cultural specificity are continually negotiated. At the same time, it opens pathways for further inquiry along both theoretical and empirical lines.

A first direction concerns the ongoing redefinition of transnationality. Far from being a fixed category, the transnational emerges as a fluid, contested, and evolving condition that requires frameworks capable of adapting to shifting cultural, industrial, and geographical contexts. Building on culturally diverse empirical data will allow scholars to refine conceptualisations of the transnational as a temporal and relational construct, capturing how precedents, practices, and imaginaries move across projects and reshape industrial norms. This reconceptualisation may be better understood by framing transnationality as an emergent property of a complex system, namely coproduction in a global scenario.

As such, it cannot be exhaustively defined or analysed through its individual components alone, for it arises from the dynamic interaction of those elements within the complex whole. Pursuing this line of inquiry across a broader range of production cultures – beyond the Italian and RAI-led cases analysed here – would foreground cultural diversity as a driving force in redefining the meanings and practices of transnational coproduction. Comparative studies across public service broadcasters, global streamers, and independent producers could further refine our understanding of how transnationality is differently configured, ensuring that its theorisation remains dynamic and responsive to diverse creative and institutional realities.

Equally important, and deeply interwoven with this, is the need to extend the analysis of transnational coproduction as a generative form. By this I mean a mode of production that does more than bring discrete projects to life: it engenders new practices and models, reconfigures professional norms and conventions, and generates repertoires of collaboration that carry forward into subsequent endeavours. Generativity here refers to the capacity of development processes to create industrial practices and collaborative templates that transcend any single project. The development phase is crucial in this regard, functioning as an "excavation site" of transnational coproduction, where negotiation, authorship, and adaptation crystallise into precedents that shape future projects. Borrowing from organisational studies and political science, process-tracing approaches – namely, qualitative methods designed to reconstruct sequences of decisions and negotiations – could provide valuable analytical leverage in capturing how this generativity unfolds across time and projects.

Finally, the methodological lessons of this thesis highlight the importance of approaching development as a lived and negotiated process, one that demands engagement with multiple sources. Future research should prioritise triangulation, combining interviews with practitioners, production documentation, and, where relevant, writers' primary materials (books, essays, letters, drafts, notebooks) in the case of literary adaptations. Such triangulation is particularly productive in uncovering the rationales that guide adaptation choices, even when the writers of the original works being adapted are absent, elusive, or writing under a disguised persona, as with those involved in the case studies, namely Umberto Eco and Elena Ferrante.

Taken together, these directions would deepen theoretical and empirical insights into transnational television, consolidating development as a central field of inquiry and clarifying how culturally diverse innovation is generated, negotiated, and sedimented through complex collaborative encounters.

In closing, the thesis turns back to where it began. Two initial anchors, one empirical and one theoretical, framed this thesis: Lorenzo Mieli's sense of an epochal "before and after", in relation to this new wave of RAI-led high-end drama production, encapsulated in the phrase *al di là di noi* ('beyond us'), and Michele Hilmes's thought-provoking question in relation to transnational television: 'What do

we mean by coproduction anymore?' (2014). The evidence gathered in this thesis allows a circular return to both.

The case studies suggest that practitioners experience the transnational not only as spatial extension but as temporal reframing, that is, a lived shift in how development, and therefore production, is reimagined and re-enacted to make sense of coproduction from a culturally diverse perspective. In so doing, they advance new understandings and lived experiences of this production mode. In answering Hilmes's question, this thesis proposes that coproduction today is best understood not as a fixed deal type but as a generative, processual mode of production, a set of negotiated dynamics through which institutions and creators repeatedly test, retool, and sediment new conventions and, potentially, new standards. In this sense, Mieli's *al di là di noi* resonates, retrospectively, as the practitioners' felt register of that processual change, that is, the recognition that, when cultural specificity is protected and negotiated rather than flattened, the horizon of Italian high-end drama's "beyondness" – its capacity to reach beyond established limits – genuinely widens.

In drawing together the threads of this investigation, the analysis has shown that development is neither a mechanical preparatory stage nor a merely functional pathway to production, but a decisive arena where institutional logics, creative negotiations, and cultural specificities converge. Across the three case studies, the processes observed reveal transnational coproduction not as a static arrangement but as an evolving, contested, and productive form, one that enables practitioners to probe, adapt, and at times reinvent and rewrite the conventions and norms that orient and structure transnational coproduction. Seen through the granular dynamics of development, these encounters suggest that transnational coproduction is a generative mode of practice, one that challenges creative and institutional actors to measure themselves against inherited norms, push beyond perceived limits, and leave legacies of experimentation and innovation. In this continual process, the meanings and practices of transnational coproduction are not simply applied but reimagined, reconfigured, and carried forward, expanding the possibilities of the form itself.

If the initial anchors served to launch this investigation, its closing reflections reaffirm them with greater clarity: transnational coproduction, approached through the lens of development, emerges as a dynamic and generative mode in which the interplay of cultural diversity and collaborative experimentation continually reshapes both practice and imagination. In this sense, Mieli's 'beyond us' resonates not only as a horizon for Italian drama, but as a call to view transnational coproduction as an open-ended process, continually redefining what high-end television drama can be on the global stage.

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