

Televisuality on a Global Scale: Netflix's Local-Language Strategy

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Abstract

This article focuses on Netflix’s local-language strategy, the context leading up to it, and the extent to which transnationality, in this particular case, becomes televisual in John Caldwell’s sense. I argue that Netflix has developed a different business model for transnational TV formats through this strategy. For that, I use the Netflix original and exclusive series *Criminal* (Field Smith & Kay, 2019–present-a-d) as a case study and show that its production context triggers a specific visual response due to Netflix’s economic and legal obligations in Europe. Building on the “transnational TV format trading system” approach of Jean K. Chalaby, this case study highlights how the affordances of multi-country video-on-demand providers like Netflix allow for the successful international franchising strategy in linear television to be conducted internally and simultaneously. Specifically, it shows that fictional TV series no longer need to be developed for a national broadcaster before reaching international markets because multi-country video-on-demand providers do not require various national intermediaries to distribute and stream TV series in different markets. The adaptation process can also be bypassed entirely if the decision to localize a programme into multiple versions is made before production starts. As a result, companies like Netflix can produce several local variations of TV content without running into as many barriers as national broadcasters. From there, I further argue using Mareike Jenner’s “grammar of transnationalism” that the impact of production and distribution processes on the visual treatment of *Criminal* leads to style excess at the interface level and stylistic scarcity at the aesthetic level.

Keywords

aesthetics; media globalization; Netflix; televisuality; transnational television; TV formats; TV production

1. Introduction

The transformations of Netflix over the years—from American DVD distributor by mail to global media behemoth offering a variety of audiovisual works on its video-on-demand (VOD) service—and the numerous changes the company brought upon cultural industries in the US and abroad are well documented in and outside academia. It has been established since 2007 that its usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to offer its VOD service across the world changed the distribution of audiovisual content and its consumption by viewers in many ways (see Chalaby, 2023; Jenner, 2018; Lotz, 2017; McDonald & Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Typical examples include the popularization of “binge-watching” as a common television viewing practice, same-day global release on Netflix’s interface for its original and exclusive programmes, on-demand access to a content catalogue for a monthly subscription, and the introduction of personalized recommendations based on machine-learning algorithms.

Whilst Netflix’s use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology has been discussed in seminal works on platform and transnational television studies regarding the development of a new business model, algorithmic culture, television consumption and so on (e.g., Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017), few have addressed its consequences on processes of production–distribution and format adaptation as well as the power exercised by Netflix over these processes on several levels ranging from local to global. Yet, this is especially important in the context of transnational television considering that the company produces and releases programmes across the globe. The implication here is that the way Netflix operates aggravates existing asymmetrical power dynamics in television industries in and outside the US. In turn, this affects other dimensions of the company, such as the form and aesthetic of its original and exclusive content. This article will thus make the case for the development of Netflix’s dominant position within transnational television from a production standpoint through a specific content strategy. Then, it will address its consequences on a cultural level through the aesthetic analysis of one of its exclusive and original programmes.

First, I will argue that Netflix developed a business model for transnational TV formats through a content strategy called “local-language” to serve its globally oriented interests and its position in transnational television industries. For that, I will use Chalaby’s concept of “transnational TV format trading system” (Chalaby, 2015, p. 462) to demonstrate that Netflix managed to surpass dominant players in the transnational television industry by gaining more control over the “global TV format commodity chain” via a specific “input-output structure” (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461). To illustrate that concretely, I will use *Criminal* (Field Smith & Kay, 2019–present-a–d) as a case study. Described by Netflix as “a police procedural with a unique premise” (Netflix, 2018), the original and exclusive programme takes place entirely within the confines of a police interview suite and comprises 12 stories set in four countries: the UK, France, Germany, and Spain. Each country initially bears three episodes in one of their official languages, with no narrative link between them—i.e., you do not need to watch the UK episodes first to watch the French episodes and so on. A year later, Netflix released four more episodes of the UK variation only. However, this article will only focus on *Criminal*’s initial pre-production and release in 2019.

What makes this case relevant is its exemplification of how Netflix can scale the process between production and distribution to an ambiguous transnational level. Namely, despite their varied settings, all variations of *Criminal* were co-produced by a single production company from the UK called Idiotlamp Productions. The company’s two founders—George Kay and Jim Field Smith—also served as showrunners for

the entirety of the programme. Interestingly, every episode was shot back-to-back on the same, identical set in Netflix's production hub in Spain (Pickard, 2019) and most of the Spanish staff and crew members worked on more than one national set of episodes if not all of them. Exceptions to this were episode-based positions—e.g., assistant nurse—or the following key roles, which were filled by people from the episodes' country of origin: writers, directors, co-executive producers, actors, casting directors, and chief editors. In short, *Criminal* is an English coproduction commissioned by an American company for global release, filmed in Spain with a majority Spanish crew, but with key creative roles filled by local talents from France, England, Spain, and Germany, in local languages. Differently put, *Criminal's* transnational ambiguity comes from maintaining local linguistic and creative distinctions while being presented as a visually unified production. Therefore, the aim of sections 2–5 is to contextualize how Netflix was able to produce this type of TV format through the business model of its local-language strategy in conjunction with its usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology.

Second, I will argue that Netflix's local-language strategy impacts the visual treatment of its original and exclusive programmes as well as their presentation on Netflix's interface. Specifically, I will assert that Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats fuels a presentational crisis that encourages some programmes under the local-language strategy to appear on the interface as clearly defined local content while remaining culturally ambiguous visually. Still using *Criminal* as a case study, I will show that the programme's (pre-)production segment under the local-language strategy triggers a specific visual response leading to style excess at the interface level and style scarcity at the aesthetic level. At the interface level, I will focus on how transnationality becomes televisual in John Caldwell's sense due to the wide array of options offered by Netflix to find the programme on its interface. As for *Criminal's* visual treatment, I will use Jenner's (2018) "grammar of transnationalism" to analyze how the programme remains culturally ambiguous and why that is important to Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats for its local-language strategy to work efficiently.

2. The Circulation of TV Formats

This section will use Chalaby's (2015, p. 462) "transnational TV format trading system" to explain why a change in the TV format business model is needed to account for the possibility of a company like Netflix to produce a format transnationally and to circulate it internationally. Indeed, a case like *Criminal* might seem somehow normal nowadays, but it was not possible only a few years ago. This is because TV formats are usually produced and licensed for adaptation on a one-to-one basis in terms of product and market—i.e., a TV format is usually made and adapted for broadcast on a regional or national basis, at least initially. This main model of TV format licensing stems from the gradual globalization of television structures brought upon by waves of television deregulation across the globe originating from the US in the second half of the 1980s and the subsequent proliferation of national and transnational channels at the end of the 1990s. According to Chalaby, these events are what caused "the number of formats in circulation [to grow] exponentially, as did the number of countries they travelled to, and the number of companies distributing and producing them" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461). In other words, the globalization of television led to the systemization of the TV format business model. For this reason, Chalaby refers to it as a "trading system" instead. He defines it as follows:

A trading system can be defined as a *singular transnational space that brings together interdependent economic agents, institutions, places, networks and commodities*. At its core lies a *commodity chain* that

determines economic agents' positions and strategies, organizes networks of production and distribution and shapes trade flows within that space. (Chalaby, 2015, p. 461)

In short, the commodity chain acts as the (re)organizing structure of the system. Here, the TV format licensing model uses a specific "input-output structure" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 462) of the commodity chain—i.e., the link connecting production and distribution processes. Generally, the input-output structure can include various economic agents such as format owners, distribution companies, production companies, and broadcasters. Furthermore, the number of steps and economic agents change depending on the chosen model. In the case of the TV format licensing model, the structure can be deployed in two ways. Both include the sale of a TV format's international rights (license) by a format owner (A) to a distribution company (B), which then either sells the license to a production company (C) that will produce the format locally for a broadcaster (D) to later acquire, or sells the license directly to a broadcaster (C) that will produce the format in-house and broadcast it (C). Here, the letters are suggested by Chalaby and used to identify the economic agents involved in the four steps of the input-output structure—i.e., origination, distribution, production, and acquisition (Chalaby, 2015, p. 463).

This structure of the TV format licensing model can also be replicated to multiple markets if a licence is sold to foreign production companies or broadcasters, for instance. Chalaby theorized the replication of the structure to other markets for format adaptation as the "local-global-local route" (Chalaby, 2012, p. 31), which can be summarized as the process of identifying the global potential in a local TV format and then localizing it for a different territory through the process of adaptation. This route also extends to later variations of the TV format licensing model that account for different power distributions within the input-output structure of the commodity chain, such as the "international production model" (Chalaby, 2015, p. 463). Here, the structure can be deployed in different ways depending on the control achieved by an economic agent in the structure of the chain. For example, format owners who acquire production facilities and produce their own content locally and internationally (A) become more present in the input-output structure of the chain: origination (A) → distribution (A) → production (A) → acquisition (B) (Chalaby, 2015, p. 464). Another example is when broadcasters and media conglomerates consolidate into "super-groups" in the hope of achieving complete vertical integration of the commodity chain through an A/A/A/A input-output structure—e.g., by acquiring production companies and facilities, gaining majority stakes in production houses, or signing joint venture agreements with local companies across various territories (Chalaby, 2012, pp. 24–25). However, it is important to note that this latter form of the "international production model" is mostly an exception; only a few broadcasters and media conglomerates managed to extend their reach to other markets and when they did, the extent of their reach was limited to "the few countries where they own a TV channel" (Chalaby, 2015, pp. 463–464). What the "international production model" reveals then is that scaling the vertical integration of the "global TV format commodity chain" beyond the home market is difficult due to the last step of the input-output structure, which requires the acquisition of a TV channel in every market an economic agent wishes to expand in. Consequently, "super-groups" can only extend their reach to other markets by replicating the one-to-one connection of the "local-global-local route" between a programme and a market across every territory. This is why TV format licensing for adaptation implies a process that first benefits from a format's success and "know-how" in an original market.

One question, then, is what happens to the "local-global-local route" and the input-output structure of the "global TV format commodity chain" when a VOD service like Netflix uses internet infrastructure and streaming

technology instead of cable or broadcast systems to extend its stay beyond a national level by circulating audiovisual content across the globe. To provide some answers, I will now look into the connection between Netflix's business model for transnational TV formats and its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to analyze how it allows the company to achieve vertical integration of the input-output structure and efficiently scale it beyond a national level.

3. Transnational TV Formats (Netflix's Version)

First, it is important to note that Netflix also adapts some of its own original and exclusive programmes through the local-language strategy. This is mostly done with its unscripted formats, such as *Love Is Blind* (Claesson et al., 2024–present [Sweden]; Cagliolo, Helman, & Solmesky, 2024–present [Mexico]; Cagliolo, Quiroga, et al., 2024–present [Argentina]; Coelen et al., 2020–present [US]; Ghosn, 2024–present [Habibi]; Goto, 2022 [Japan]; Karim et al., 2024–present [UK]; Paes, 2021–present [Brazil]). Netflix's only scripted format adaptations to date are *La Casa de Papel* (Pina et al., 2017–2021) from Spain, which spun off a Korean adaptation called *Money Heist: Korea–Joint Economic Area* (Pina, 2022–present), and *Elite* (Montero et al., 2018–2024), also from Spain, which spun off an Indian adaptation called *Class* (Ahluwalia, 2023–present). Yet, the company's adaptation process differs from Chalaby's "local-global-local route" because it is done with the intention and goal of reaching "global viewing"—i.e., attracting viewers on a global scale at once (Netflix, 2016). In other words, a format adaptation under the local-language strategy is not made to only target its home market through a one-to-one connection since Netflix's VOD service is available across the world. Consequently, Netflix needs to value the economic benefits of a multinational or global success more than success on a national scale only. Let us see how that is in more detail.

Netflix started pursuing global expansion strategies in 2016 as revenues from international markets were steadily paced to outgrow US revenues and did so in 2017 (Insider Intelligence, 2016; Netflix Investors, 2017, pp. 1–2). One of the main strategies was to streamline the entire content operations under one global TV unit and a single programming strategy called "local-language" (Low, 2020). Specifically, the local-language strategy entails the production or adaptation of original and exclusive programmes in and outside the US, in English and non-English languages, in the hope of achieving "global viewing." To help pursue this strategy on a global scale, Netflix uses a business model called the "cost-plus model," which covers all production costs of a TV programme upfront in addition to giving a 20% to 30% profit fee in exchange for owning "all or most of the rights to distribute the show, domestically and internationally" (Adalian & Fernandez, 2016) as well as "most merchandising rights" (Castillo, 2018) in perpetuity or "at least a period of 10 to 15 years" (Lotz, 2021, p. 201). In other words, the local-language strategy acts as a tool for Netflix to expand its operations globally by setting terms and conditions that allow it to retain as much power and control as possible over its intellectual property internationally.

The main cause behind Netflix's need for multinational or global success comes from its need to secure large investments from its shareholders. Indeed, the company tends to invest heavier sums of money into its original and exclusive productions than most of its competitors (Ryan & Littleton, 2017). However, large production budgets come with strings attached as the company needs to prove to its shareholders that they can lead to economic profitability and a return on investment. For that, Netflix uses metrics to measure the efficiency of its original and exclusive content across every market. Examples include the cost of a programme per viewing hour (Netflix Investors, 2012, p. 8), the number of views per title in its first 91 days

on Netflix (Netflix Investors, 2023, p. 4), the number of new subscriptions generated by the release of a programme, audience retention (Urban et al., 2016), and the number of “households that watch 90% of a film or season of a series” (“completers”; Netflix, 2019). Differently put, Netflix needs its original and exclusive content to reach a certain degree of multinational success to continue investing large sums into its local-language strategy and growing its business. Therefore, the decision-making process of Netflix in terms of greenlighting, producing, and adapting original and exclusive programmes—or even buying international licensing rights—under the local-language strategy is always informed by the company’s needs for content to reach economic profitability through a multinational or global success under the “cost-plus model.”

What this means regarding the connection between a programme and a market for Netflix is that it is not one-to-one, but always many-to-many—i.e., a programme is intended for many audiences around the world from the start and it is available on Netflix’s interface across every market on the same day. Consequently, the input-output structure of a programme under this strategy and the route for content adaptation necessarily differ; other structures and routes are thus needed to account for the need for success beyond the home market. To make this claim more concrete, I will first show how the many-to-many connection of Netflix’s local-language original and exclusive programmes reveals that concrete processes can be implemented in their input-output structure to maximize revenues and the potential for “global viewing.” As previously stated, I will be using *Criminal* as a case study.

4. *Criminal*’s Input-Output Structure

To understand the effects of Netflix’s many-to-many connection between a programme and a market on the input-output structure of its local-language original and exclusive programmes, I adapted Chalaby’s TV format business model to Netflix’s local-language strategy and *Criminal* specifically.

To quickly preface this, it is important to mention that Netflix first achieved vertical integration through an A/A/A/A structure after it started fully producing its own original and exclusive programmes back in 2013. From this point on, the company became the sole or main economic agent in each step of the input-output structure. More precisely, the acquisition of a format’s rights allowed Netflix to skip the distribution step and directly produce or co-produce a format in-house with a local production company before releasing it on its own online interface. In this sense, the input-output structure of the chain seems relatively equivalent to the structure of the “super-groups” under the “international production model.” What differs, however, is the scalability of the first and last steps of the structure beyond a local or national level and its consequences on the production step. Indeed, the correlation between the upfront acquisition of a format’s global rights through the “cost-plus model” and the company’s need to achieve multinational or worldwide success by releasing programmes globally using internet infrastructure and streaming technology means that the first and last step of the input-output structure operate on a global scale (x). This leads to the structure Ax/A/A/Ax, in which both a format’s origination and its release are done with the objective of reaching “global viewing.”

This change in the input-output structure is notable because it impacts the production step of the structure drastically. Indeed, because Netflix acquires a format’s global rights upfront and is free to release it at its convenience across the world, it is also at liberty and incentivized to produce adaptations or variations of said format in different markets in the timeline and manner of its choosing. In the case of *Criminal*, four national variations were co-produced by Netflix and Idiotlamp Productions. I use the term variation here because as

I mentioned in Section 1, all of *Criminal* was shot in the same period, at the same place, and by approximately the same team. Differently put, no adaptation process took place as the format was developed with these four variations in mind (Pickard, 2019); none of them stemmed from the prior success and “know-how” of another in a former market. Consequently, the many-to-many connection between a programme and a market means that the production step can be scaled to a multinational level (y), if desired, without undergoing an adaptation process. In the case of *Criminal*, this leads the input-output structure of $A_x/A/A_y/A_x$ (see Figure 1).

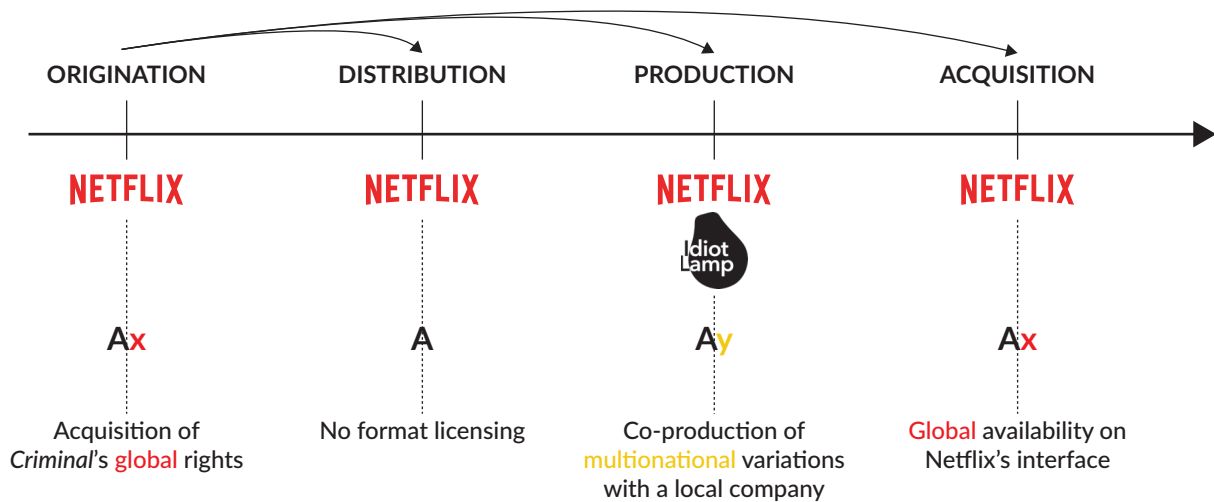


Figure 1. *Criminal's* input-output structure.

Therefore, the possibility for Netflix to scale the first and last step of the input-output structure of its local-language original and exclusive programmes marks a fundamental change in the ways that television is made as it allows for the adaptation process to be bypassed entirely in favour of multinational variations production.

Moreover, because the production step can be scaled to produce a variety of national formats in-house, this change in the input-output structure of the “global TV format commodity chain” has consequences on the route leading to format adaptations. Indeed, the production of format variations means that Chalaby’s route for format adaptation—the “local-global-local route”—does not apply to cases like *Criminal*. Specifically, the replication of the input-output structure to different markets is not needed to produce and release multinational versions of a format since Netflix can produce them in-house and release them globally through its online interface. Furthermore, Netflix’s control and power over an input-output structure such as *Criminal's* means that the number of cultural intermediaries in the entire process has been greatly reduced. As mentioned, only one company is handling the production of *Criminal's* four national variations whereas four local companies would have been involved in the “local-global-local route” due to the route’s one-to-one connection between a programme and a market. Therefore, I contend that Netflix’s use of a different input-output structure through its many-to-many connection not only problematizes the production context of its local-language original and exclusive content but also the status of the image on a cultural level. To demonstrate how that is, I will show that a different route exists for formats like *Criminal* that feature processes of national variations instead of adaptations. Then, I will explain the impact of the local-language strategy on the image of *Criminal* through its representation on the interface and through the aesthetic of the programme itself.

5. *Criminal's* Route for TV Format Variations

In cases like *Criminal*, where Netflix (co)produces multiple variations of the same format in-house around the same time, I claim that the company is using a different route than the one presented by Chalaby for format adaptation. I refer to it for the time being as a “global-locals-global route.” Based on the local-language strategy, its associated business model and Netflix’s usage of internet infrastructure and streaming technology to make original and exclusive programmes appealing and accessible to global audiences through its many-to-many connection, this route implies that Netflix can: algorithmically assess the global potential of a format in terms of audience reach and market penetration; acquire a format’s global rights; (co)produce multiple variations of a format within the same timeframe, and make them globally accessible at once (see Figure 2).

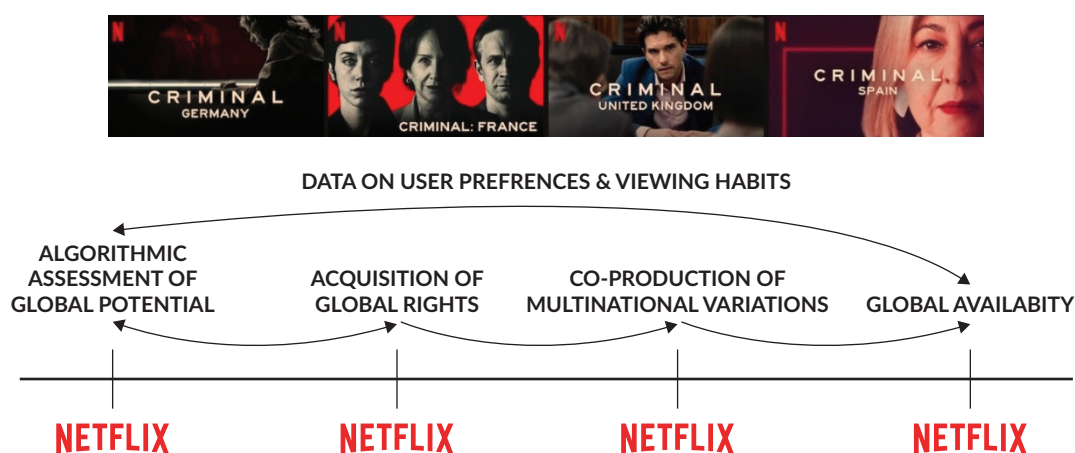


Figure 2. *Criminal's* use of the “global-locals-global route.”

Indeed, Netflix’s reliance on internet infrastructure and streaming technology allows the company to acquire an enormous and precise data set regarding the preferences and viewing habits of its members on its interface (see Adalian, 2018; Dye et al., 2020). For instance, Netflix can know whether a member watched a series in full or not, how long it took to complete it, or at which episode they stopped watching. When cross-referencing data points, Netflix can then estimate whether a title is or could be successful across multiple markets or not, whether some genres perform better than others, etc. The conclusions that the company draws from connecting these data points can then inform whether to (re)invest in the production of a series or not, which is helpful for Netflix from an economic standpoint. From a cultural standpoint, however, these economic conclusions can also influence what kind of “local” content Netflix should make, what form it should take, and how it should look. For example, Netflix can choose to mainly license content or produce original and exclusive titles in markets that are economically advantageous to it—i.e., markets that have infrastructure in place to make audiovisual content, offer tax breaks and other financial benefits, have not reached saturation, have content with a good track record in terms of multinational or global appeal and success, etc.—such as South Korea (Wan, 2023). Simultaneously, however, this means that markets that are economically detrimental to Netflix, like Denmark, can be discarded or disadvantaged in terms of cultural representation and financial investment even though Netflix operates in and financially benefits from them (see Whittock, 2023).

Netflix’s high level of economic and cultural power stems from an asymmetry between its scope of operations and the scope of regulations aimed at VOD service providers. Indeed, whereas services like

Netflix operate at near-global capacity, the scope of regulations aimed at them is limited to a national or supranational level and varies between countries. While some countries may place or apply policies to regulate these companies for a variety of reasons—e.g., levelling the playing field between VOD service providers and traditional broadcasters, acting out of concern for the safety of minors, etc.—others may choose to do so to a lesser degree or not at all in order to attract these companies and benefit from large investments in audiovisual industries. For instance, the EU modified its existing audiovisual policies in 2018 to include “multi-country VOD providers” like Netflix (Council of the European Union, 2020, pp. 10–16). Principally, the EU added a 30% quota of European works and the possibility for member states to tax these companies if they target audiences within their jurisdiction, notwithstanding where their headquarters are located. The main idea was for these global players to participate actively in the production and circulation of European works by either producing original European content, licensing it on their interface, and/or financially participating in national audiovisual funds. However, because the tax is optional and the content quota does not specify that all member states need to be included, companies like Netflix are in a strategic position to make crucial cultural decisions as they can pick and choose how and where to fulfil the content quota. Specifically, they can favour member states that align with their commercial imperatives.

Keeping that in mind, we might start looking at Netflix’s decision to produce *Criminal*’s four national variations in only one member state differently. Namely, the choice of Spain as a European production hub is not as random as it might first look. Indeed, the country offers tax incentives to national and international productions, which makes it an attractive destination in Europe (see Green, 2019). Spain is also a strategic location because the country depends on the economic support of “global streamers”—Netflix specifically—to sustain its audiovisual industries (see Green, 2019; Rey, 2020). For this reason, Spain’s financial obligations to domestic and targeting VOD service providers are flexible. More precisely, all VOD service providers are at liberty to choose between direct investments (original production or licensing) and/or levies. Thus, Netflix is free to choose how to invest in the country. In other words, Spain’s mandatory financial obligations align with Netflix’s commercial interests. Furthermore, producing several variations of a TV format is a strategic way for Netflix to adhere to current and emergent regulations and content quotas. With *Criminal*, the co-production of one multinational programme resulted in the release of four series as they all appear as separate titles divided by country on Netflix’s interface—i.e., *Criminal: United Kingdom*, *Criminal: France*, *Criminal: Spain*, and *Criminal: Germany*. The only way to reunite all variations is to look for them under the title “*Criminal* collection” on the search bar (see Figure 3), or to select one variation and scroll down to find the others under “*Criminal* collection.”

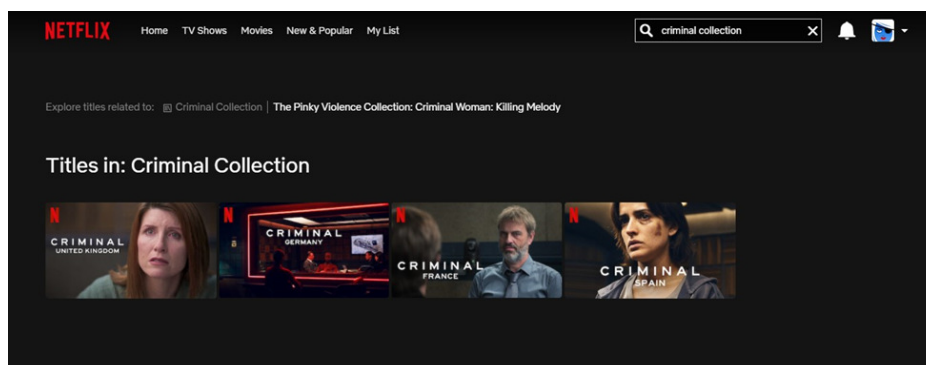


Figure 3. Screenshot of “*Criminal* collection” keyword search results on the author’s Netflix profile on July 21, 2021.

Differently put, Netflix released *Criminal* as four programmes even though it was produced as one. The company does not provide any official reason for this decision. However, dividing *Criminal* into four titles after production fulfils the quota of European works more productively. Additionally, offering each national variation separately or partially combined through Netflix's numerous recommendation categories allows the company to target and reach a broader viewer pool and thus increase its chances of achieving "global viewing."

To summarize, Netflix's efforts in developing global expansion strategies since 2016 like the local-language strategy led to significant changes in the processes linking a programme's production and its release. Its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology allowed it to scale multiple steps of the input-output structure beyond a local or national level and ascertain its control and power over the "global TV format commodity chain" at the same time. The result is the possibility for a single company to (co)produce and release as many national variations or adaptations of a TV format as it wishes with limited intervention from national cultural instances. Now that we understand the impact of the local-language strategy on a production level, let us see how this strategy can affect the image of its programmes by looking at *Criminal* at the interface and aesthetic level through the lens of Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality and Jenner's (2018) "grammar of transnationalism."

6. The Impact of the Local-Language Strategy on the Image of *Criminal*

The most striking visual element of *Criminal* is that it uses the same set depicting the same interior and exterior for every episode. Whilst reusing sets across TV shows is a known industry strategy to save costs, the set of *Criminal* is stripped of any visual elements that could suggest where the action is located even though it is supposed to take place in four different countries. Moreover, each variation follows the same narrative structure and was filmed according to a similar spatial "grammar" (Kerjean, 2019; Pickard, 2019). In other words, every variation of *Criminal* looks the same (see Figure 4 for an example).

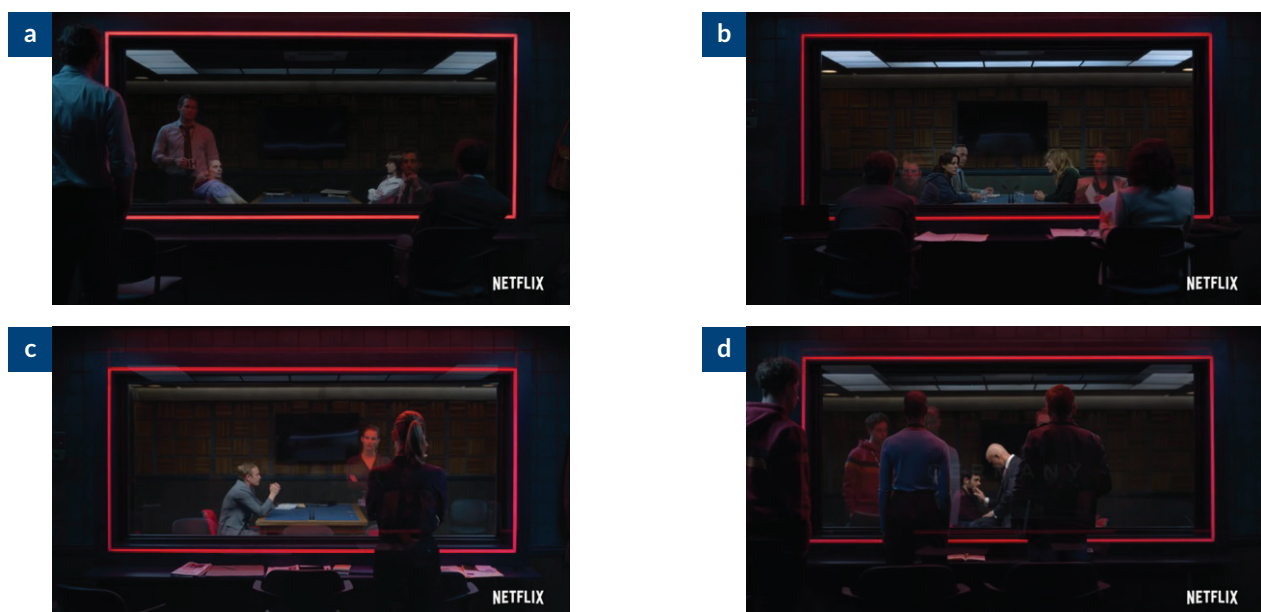


Figure 4. Screenshot of *Criminal: United Kingdom* (a), *Criminal: Spain* (b), *Criminal: France* (c), and *Criminal: Germany* (d).

At first sight, Netflix’s television style seems contradictory to Caldwell’s (1995) concept of televisuality—i.e., that contemporary television programmes have a distinctive televisual aesthetic represented by stylistic excess (or style as a performance)—since there are no identifiable style markers to differentiate each variation and no distinct look. The question then is whether the changes brought upon by Netflix’s local-language strategy on processes of production–distribution and format adaptation are affecting the style of its content and, to a larger degree, the way contemporary television programmes made by “multi-country VOD service providers” look. My hypothesis is that VOD service providers using a many-to-many connection need to perform style, but in a way that is consumer-friendly beyond a specific location. With Netflix, style needs to help its programmes cross borders to maximize the potential for “global viewing.” In other words, Netflix’s televisual style must be transnationally appealing. In the case of *Criminal*, I argue that televisuality takes place at the interface level instead of the aesthetic level of a programme.

At the interface level, Netflix is continuously performing style to cross borders by making TV formats like *Criminal* appear to audiences transnationally. As I previously mentioned, the four variations of *Criminal* can appear together—as a collection or not—but only for audiences that actively search for it. They can also appear separately in many changing personalized recommendation categories that are based on variables like location and genre for discovery purposes according to a user’s viewing habits and preferences (see Figure 5).

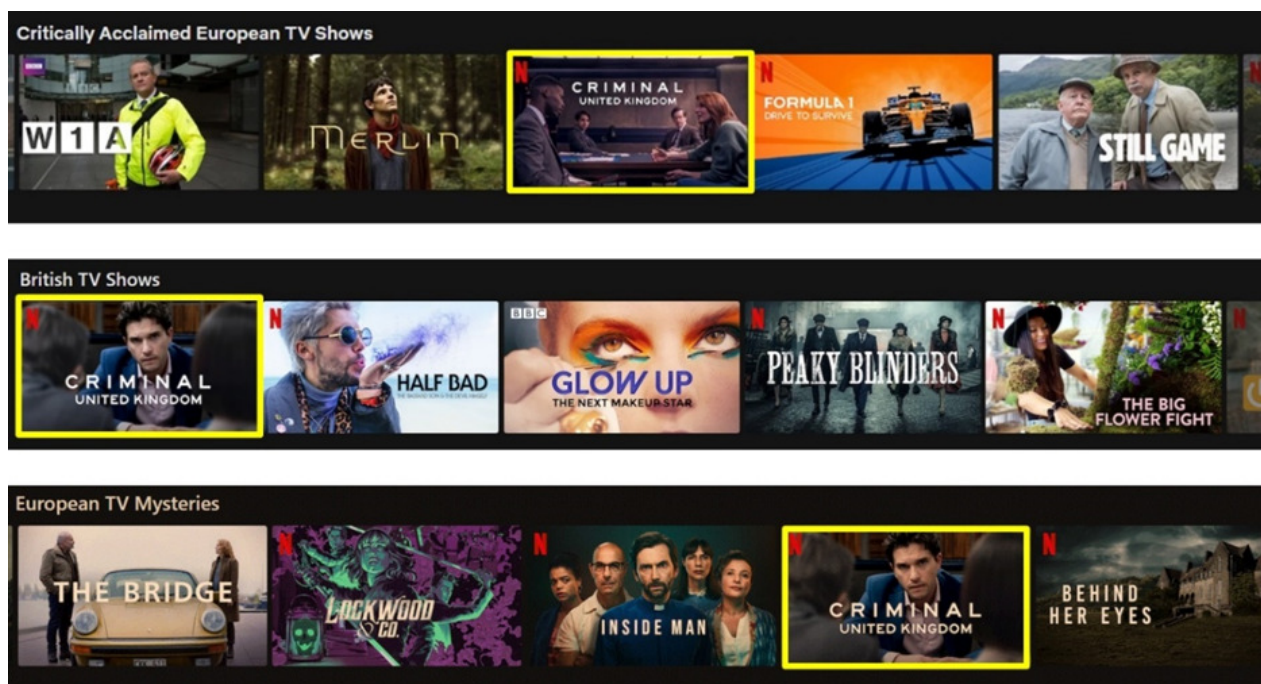


Figure 5. Screenshot of *Criminal: United Kingdom* in different recommendation categories from the author’s Netflix profile on June 1, 2021.

The artwork of every title on Netflix’s interface is also determined in this way and changes in time, as the company uses the same data to generate what it calls “personalized visuals” (Chandrashekar et al., 2017; see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Examples of “personalized visuals.” Source: Adapted from Chandrashekar et al. (2017).

The continual articulation of programmes like *Criminal* on every member’s Netflix profile is due to perpetual testing and updates made by Netflix to optimize personalization features and the potential for “global viewing” (see Chandrashekar et al., 2017; Krishnan, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Urban et al., 2016). Differently put, each variation of *Criminal* is more or less nationally articulated on Netflix’s interface depending on targeted elements that will push a viewer to watch the series in a given session. Therefore, Netflix constantly reinvents formats like *Criminal* on a presentational level by performing style on its interface transnationally and to an excess, which helps its content cross borders and reach as many viewers as possible.

At the aesthetic level, Netflix also performs style transnationally, but not necessarily to an excess. In cases like *Criminal*, the company takes the opposite approach, which is to opt for style scarcity as depicted by the programme’s use of the same set for each national variation. Regarding how this approach can also be a way to transnationally perform style, Jenner came up with a theory specifically for Netflix’s original and exclusive productions that can help explain that. She calls this theory the “grammar of transnationalism” and she defines it as “specific textual features that make texts viable in a reciprocal relationship across borders” (Jenner, 2018, p. 220). Specifically, Jenner (2018, p. 220) contends that “the importance of exports for the economy of television means that the transnational appeal needs to be coded into the text” from the outset, and that this happens through these textual features. In other words, Netflix’s many-to-many connection encourages the proliferation of specific visual and narrative elements in its original and exclusive content. Jenner notes five elements that form Netflix’s “grammar of transnationalism” itself (Jenner, 2018, pp. 227–231):

1. Genres associated with the notion of “quality TV” or serious subject matters;
2. A decentralized and postmodern version of history;
3. Broad visual appeal through aesthetics;
4. Representation of Western liberal values and humanism;
5. Multilingualism in dubbing and subtitles options, and within the content.

To be clear, these elements do not all need to be present within one programme to present a transnational appeal. In the case of *Criminal*, all these textual features are present to different degrees. While I cannot go through all of them in detail in this article, here are some observations on the matter.

The choice to set each version of *Criminal* in the same undisclosed location and to film the programme similarly participate in “strategic efforts to internationalize (or deculturize) narrative content to enhance portability across cultural borders” according to Bielby and Harrington (2008, p. 89). Indeed, *Criminal*’s showrunners deliberately decided to avoid cultural elements that could distinguish each variation from the others, such as the way police stations operate and look in each country. As George Kay explained: “To labour on the differences between them [the four countries] was not something we wanted to do for any dramatic reason. So it all became quite a universal story” (as cited in Pickard, 2019). As Jim Field Smith added: “On a visual level, we wanted to create our own space. We tried not to get too bogged down in what a police station in Germany would look like” (as cited in Pickard, 2019). Specifically, the visual deculturization of *Criminal* participates in performing style transnationally by shifting the focus of the programme solely on its genre. For example, historical events mentioned in *Criminal* like the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris or the fall of the Berlin Wall are not situated or used to deepen viewers’ understanding of sociopolitical issues—you don’t need to know about these events or see where they took place to follow the story as a viewer. Instead, they act as plot points or background information in service of the crime genre and function as puzzle pieces to answer the premise posed by each episode—i.e., whether the person brought in for questioning is guilty of the accused crime or not. In other words, the crime genre is more transnationally appealing; therefore, it trumps local specificities on an aesthetic and narrative level.

All of this is not to say that there are no local elements in *Criminal* or that they are never useful for Netflix in its globalization strategies. After all, the programme is shot in multiple local languages and features actors, writers, and directors from each country. Rather, I use this case to demonstrate one of many strategies that Netflix can play in terms of style to cross borders and achieve “global viewing.” With *Criminal*, I showed that Netflix can perform style in opposite ways to reach the same objectives. I first established that the company uses style excess at the interface level by releasing the programme as four national variations and displaying them with many “personalized visuals” through several personalized recommendation categories. Then, I explained that Netflix uses style scarcity at the aesthetic level through Jenner’s “grammar of transnationalism” to focus on elements that are appealing to audiences across the world.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate the consequences of Netflix’s local-language strategy on processes of production–distribution and TV format adaptation and, in turn, on the stylistic treatment of its original and exclusive programmes. I first established that the company was able to gain power and control over

its input-output structure and scale most steps beyond a local or national level through its use of internet infrastructure and streaming technology as well as its “cost-plus” business model. Then, I specified how this led to the introduction of a connection going from many-to-many and a new route for TV format variations. Finally, I analyzed the impact of Netflix’s local-language strategy on the status of its content’s image by showing that the company performs style in a transnationally appealing way to maximize “global viewing.” In the case of *Criminal*, the result was an excess of style at the interface level and stylistic scarcity at the aesthetic level.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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