

IMITATION, BORROWING, RECYCLING. AMERICAN MODELS AND POLISH DOMESTIC DRAMA

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Abstract

The history of post-1989 Polish serialized fiction falls into two periods. The first, from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, was characterized by heavy American imports. The second, from the mid-2000s up to 2012, is characterized by the gradual disappearance of American productions from the prime time schedules of Polish terrestrial broadcasters, as they turned to domestic products. Despite an increasing self-sufficiency in generating original television fiction content and the erosion of the hegemony of American imports on Poland's TV screens, American programming still plays an important role in shaping Poland's television industry and the fiction programming it produces. This article explores the impact of American programming on the Polish television market in terms of genres of domestic fiction, their narrative conventions and aesthetic qualities. American television, however, is not just mechanically transplanted, as Polish producers adjust foreign ideas to local structures of feeling. The genres that Polish broadcasters produce, as well as the narrative strategies and aesthetic canons of the domestic shows, become a site of negotiation between the American influence and the domestic Polish televisual culture. This article not only explores the myriad ways in which Poland's television professionals borrow iconic elements of American television culture and its programming ideas, but it also illuminates how those foreign elements are transformed into the Polish context.

Imitation is the sincerest form of television.

Fred Allen

In 2009, one of Poland's internet sites devoted to TV shows created a playful slideshow, which demonstrates how Polish TV series borrow heavily from foreign productions.¹ This is illustrated by 16 examples, each accompanied with a short description, where American TV series are contrasted with their supposed Polish equivalents. According to the site, American shows such as *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002), *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) and *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006) each inspired a Polish copycat show. This playful game of associations points to the similarities between Polish and American shows. I invoke it here as it reveals

an important characteristic of the Polish television sector and a recent trend in the construction of televisual imagery in Poland: namely the heavy borrowing of foreign, particularly American, ideas and television formulas.

In the pre-1989 era, the influence of foreign television on the Polish television market was limited, though this changed in the post-Soviet period. Since the 1990s, Poland's TV market has been involved in international audiovisual exchanges – including the importation of foreign, mainly American programming – and thus part of the highly interconnected global television industry. As a result of this internationalisation, the Polish television market opened up to not only foreign programming but to foreign influences as well. After a decade-long reliance on American imports throughout the 1990s, television fiction programming in Poland is increasingly produced for the Polish market by Poland's own television industry. This is revealed by comparison of data from the broadcast schedules of sample weeks between 1998 and 2011 (figs. 1-3).

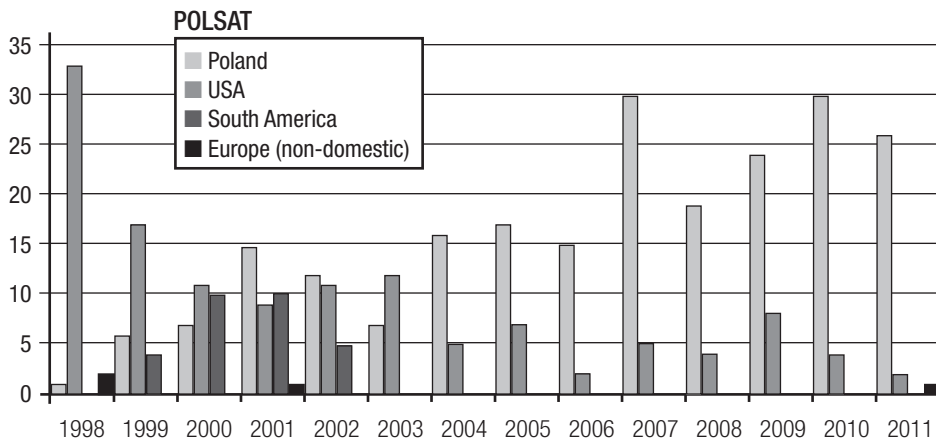


Fig. 1 – Number of fiction series episodes by origin on Polsat, sample weeks 1998-2011, 4pm-11pm (*Tele Tydzień*, 1998-2011)

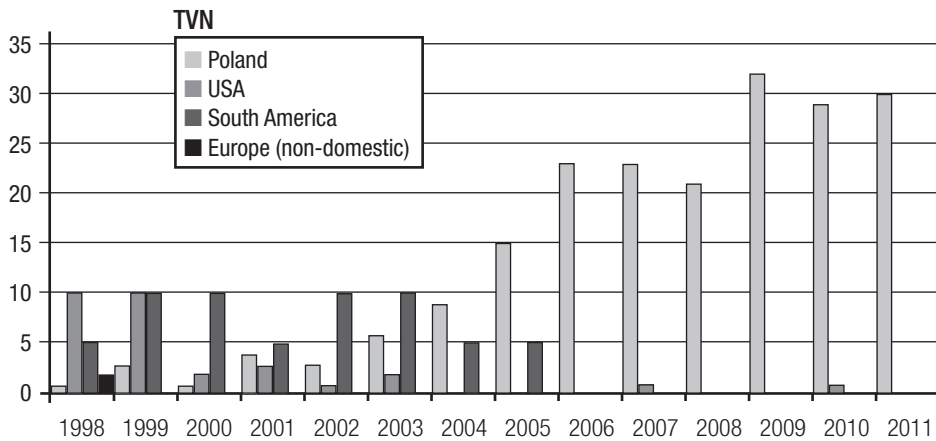


Fig. 2 – Number of fiction series episodes by origin on TVN, sample weeks 1998-2011, 4pm-11pm (*Tele Tydzień*, 1998-2011)

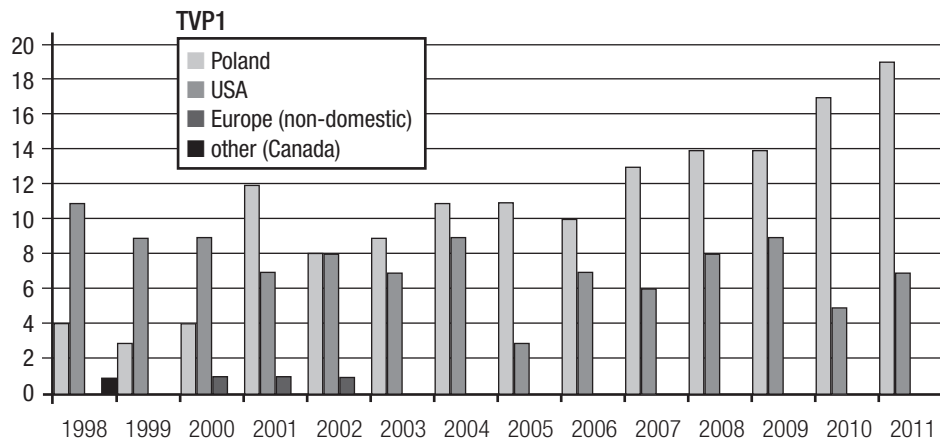


Fig. 3 – Number of fiction series episodes by origin on TVP, sample weeks 1998-2011, 4pm-11pm (*Tele Tydzień*, 1998-2011)

For Poland's three terrestrial free-to-air broadcasters – public service one TVP1 and its two commercial counterparts, TVN and Polsat, the 2011 sample week from the September schedule, representing high season for television in Poland, demonstrates an overwhelming dominance of local fiction over American product. TVP1 significantly increased its domestic fiction output from 4 episodes of domestic fiction in the sample week of 1998 to 19 in 2011. A similar shift occurred in both of Poland's commercial terrestrial broadcasters. In the sample broadcast week of 2011, out of 29 serialized scripted episodes broadcasted by Polsat, as many as 26 were of domestic origin, and only two were American imports. A similar trend is pronounced on TVN, Poland's second commercial broadcaster, whose entire scripted fiction output in the 2011 sample week (30 episodes) was of domestic origin.

Poland's broadcasters are not unique in their move from importation towards domestic production: it is a successive stage of development and business strategy for the growth of a channel. In their early years, channels turn to importation as there was insufficient domestic production, but in time they generate new audiences and profits enabling them to produce in-house. The case of Poland's commercial broadcasters supports observations by Jeanette Steemers, made with Western Europe in mind, that "American imports have often been important for the introduction of commercial television, but as markets mature and produce more domestic content, American programming is not always necessary to continue the commercial model."²² It remains true for Poland also, as elsewhere in Europe, that as the broadcasting market matures, it will rely less on imports and more on domestic product.

Poland in this instance reflects the same trends that occurred in Western European countries in late 1990s. This trend holds for all imports, including American fiction series, which "although still plentiful increasingly occupy a more marginalised position in the schedule."²³ Steemers continues that "US series are now often restricted to daytime or late-night slots on the main free-to-air channels in Germany, Spain, France and Italy."²⁴ Similarly in Poland, American fiction series have not completely disappeared from the broadcast schedules of Poland's terrestrial broadcasters. American shows continue to be imported but they are migrating to daytime or late-night slots

and from the Polish high season in the autumn and spring months to less competitive winter and summer periods.

The move towards domestic programming and the decline of imported programming is usually associated with the position that local content has greater resonance with local audiences. Joseph D. Straubhaar claims that local viewers prefer domestic programming over imported fare because they prefer narratives that incorporate familiar elements, and thus choose “their own cultural products when they can.”⁵ Cultural proximity theory assumes “a preference, first, for local, provincial, or national material when available.”⁶ Bogdan Czaja, Deputy Programming director at TVN, recognizes the importance of cultural proximity:

This is how markets work, not only here but elsewhere as well – local content always works better. Viewers prefer shows featuring characters that speak Polish and deal with problems and issues they can relate to. The general truth is that people want to watch Polish series more than the imported content.⁷

This preference of the Polish audience for local content and the market’s ability to cater to the local viewers’ taste could lead us to believe that TV fiction on Polish TV screens gradually becomes exclusively *Polish*. Tapio Varis reminds us however that “the real social and political impact of imported programs may be greater than might be inferred from the volume of imported material.”⁸ Despite the maturation of the production capacity and an increasing self-sufficiency in generating original TV fiction content, it would be naive to speak of Poland’s TV market as being culturally self-sufficient. Foreign programming still plays an important role in shaping Poland’s industry and the fiction programming it produces. But now this impact is pronounced in ways other than the presence of imported content, namely licensed formatting and emulation.

When Polish terrestrial broadcasters began producing domestic fiction programming in the late 1990s and the 2000s they had little experience of producing varied fiction programming. Narrative formulas characteristic for serialized storytelling and associated production modes were completely alien to Polish commercial broadcasters as those only began functioning in the 1990s (Polsat in 1992 and TVN in 1997). It was difficult to find inspiration within national boundaries as TVP (the former state broadcaster, after 1989 transformed into the public service broadcaster) had little experience with series production either, as during its pre-1989 history television fiction was not a priority. In the first instance, Polish broadcasters turned to international scripted formats as those supported the development of the domestic market and helped to boost domestic production. However, fiction formats were attractive to Polish broadcasters for a variety of reasons other than merely being a fast track to local content or a hit show. Formats helped Polish broadcasters introduce new types of fiction programming, and thus learn how to be innovative and eventually create their own local programming content.

This was the case with TVN’s treatment of the telenovela genre. In the late 1990s, the broadcaster was importing South American productions, such as *Esmeralda* (Televisa, 1997), *Rosalinda* (Canal de las Estrellas, 1999), *Ricos y famosos* (Canal 9, 1997-1998), *Por tu amor* (Canal de las Estrellas, 1999), *La intrusa* (Televisa, 2001), *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (RCN TV, 1999-2001) and many others. The network abandoned the telenovela importation in the mid-2000s and decided to produce telenovelas domestically. In order to minimise the risk involved in producing a new genre, TVN decided to go with programming ideas that had proved successful in different markets. And

so TVN commissioned local adaptations of the Columbian series *Yo soy Betty, la fea* in 2008 and 2009, the Argentinean production *Sos mi vida* (Canal 13, 2006-2007) in 2010 and the Venezuelan *Juana la virgen* (RCTV, 2002) in 2011. After these three telenovela adaptations, the time came for TVN's first original production in 2012: *Julia*, which can be considered a crowning achievement after a long period of training, during which the broadcaster learned through adapting the production mode of this particular genre.

Format adaptation was also a way to deal with particular weaknesses that local broadcasters struggled with, which is demonstrated by the numerous sitcom adaptations that have been made in Poland. Sitcoms were first introduced to the Polish mediascape in the 1990s when Polish broadcasters began to rely heavily on this programming type, importing shows such as *Caroline in the City* (NBC, 1995-1999), *Married with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997), *Wings* (NBC, 1990-1997), *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-1999), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-1996) and many others. The reliance on American sitcoms declined towards the end of 1990s, as was the case with American programming more generally. Almost immediately, American sitcoms began to be replaced by those of domestic origin. Polish broadcasters, however, have not succeeded in producing commercially viable original sitcoms, and therefore sitcom adaptation became a long-term solution to fill a programming gap caused by the broadcaster's failure at sourcing original concepts. In 2005 TVN produced a Polish adaptation of the American format *The Nanny*. A year later TVN adapted *Grace Under Fire* (ABC, 1993-1998) and most recently *Everybody Loves Raymond* in 2011. In this instance, scripted formats helped to substitute imported programming with domestic fare that would continue the aesthetic strategies of the imports, marginalizing especially American content in the primetime slots. However, adapting foreign scripted formats is both a difficult and an expensive venture; this has caused Poland's broadcasters to turn towards sourcing more programmes domestically. The Executive Producer in TV Drama and Feature Film Production Department at TVN Dorota Chamczyk explains:

After our experiences with formatting we now know that adapting can be such hard work, involving so many profound changes to the script that sometimes it does not really make sense to be paying for a format. That is why we started investing more time and effort into our own originally scripted drama.⁹

This shift toward domestic original production does not mean that foreign television has ceased to impact on Polish television production. Currently, this reliance on international fiction television is not evident through the number of imported series but rather through the impact of foreign television on originally scripted Polish drama. Licensed formatting, where the owners of ideas are acknowledged and the copyright respected, is not the only way in which a network or producer can borrow and recycle programming ideas. In addition to a number of internationally successful formats, which are bought and adapted legally, television executives can appropriate programme ideas without acknowledging their origins or paying royalties. Media critics have argued that this copycat phenomenon, which includes borrowing and modifying other cultural texts to augment local production, is common in the media industries. In fact, Albert Moran claims that "copying and customizing program production knowledge has been ongoing, widespread and persistent over the past 80 years."¹⁰ Michael Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung and Albert Moran similarly claim that "the reality of today's international mediascape is that television con-

cepts and ideas are swiftly copied, modified and exploited by stations desperate to put together successful programs to keep ratings elevated.”¹¹ Jeremy Tunstall and David Machin argue that in seeking inspiration “other countries tend to look towards the USA where they see both more channels and also more production.”¹²

The inter-European programme trade is weak as the European countries rely heavily on their own programming and American imports, Therefore, it is especially American programming that has had considerable impact and power in the audio-visual industry in Europe.¹³ Today, copying and borrowing are practices that are endemic and even essential to the TV industry in Poland, where American television has become a major source of inspiration for the local television professionals. However, the informal copying practices have derived from the structural conditions of the Polish television industry rather than from any individual misconduct. Interviews with a variety of TV professionals reveal that practices of emulation are not isolated instances but an essential part of work in the Polish TV industry. The television screenwriter Karol Klementewicz understands that the recycling of ideas is an inherent part of the creative industries:

*Everything has already been written in the Bible, and then Shakespeare repeated it. So if you were to write stories that do not resemble anything that had come before it, you would soon realise that you cannot write anything because, when you come to think of it, everything has already been thought of. I think that copying is a natural part of the industry and creative work more generally. Writing my own scripts, I feel that I am inspired by programmes I have watched. This is exactly one of the reasons why I watch so many TV shows – to be able to benefit from it in my own work. I personally think that if something is good, there is no shame in being inspired by it.*¹⁴

As a direct result of the creation of the commercial sector in the late 1990s, the competition for viewers became crucial to securing the existence of commercial broadcasters and equally important for the partially advertising-funded public broadcaster TVP. As the private sector matured during the 2000s, the three main terrestrial broadcasters (the public TVP and its two commercial competitors – TVN and Polsat) began competing not only with each other, but increasingly also with the newly established thematic cable and satellite channels: AXN, FOX, Universal Channel and others. The cable and satellite sector, including American TV fiction-oriented channels, has been gradually directing the Polish audience away from the terrestrial broadcasters. In 2007 the combined share of the pay TV channels accounted for 20% of the audience share among adults aged 16-49 and the percentage has been increasing ever since: to 24% in 2008, 29% in 2009 and 32% in 2010. In 2010, out of 38 million Poles who had access to television services, 26.6 million had access to pay-TV offerings.¹⁵ As the Polish industry plunged into this heightened competition for ratings, the domestic soap operas produced by TVP since the 1990s and into the 2000s continued to be extremely successful and able to generate impressive ratings.

Klan (TVP1, 1997-), the longest running Polish soap opera, averaged 7.3 million total viewers in 2000. Despite a declining viewership, the show still managed to attract a weekly average of 3.1 million viewers in 2011.¹⁶ *Plebania* (TVP1, 2000-2012), another long-running domestic soap, demonstrated a similar tendency of declining viewership from 5.3 million in 2000 to a still remarkable 2.9 million in 2011. Finally, *M jak Miłość* (TVP2, 2000-), Poland’s most well-known soap opera, went from 4 million viewers in 2000 to 7.5 million in 2011.¹⁷ The viewership for

domestic soaps is very impressive, especially when we consider that – in Poland’s TV market – generating an audience of 3 million viewers constitutes a considerable success.

Polish soaps tend to fare better with ratings than other fiction series in Poland and have carved out a loyal audience, but what this type of programming fails to do is to attract the commercial audiences – the advertiser-coveted adult 16-49 demographic. Domestic soaps produced by the public service broadcaster TVP attract mainly female audiences above the age of 50, from rural areas of Poland and urban areas whose population is below 100,000 residents.¹⁸ Recently, the commercial terrestrial broadcasters – Polsat and TVN – have begun to appeal to an audience segment that is both unsatisfied with TVP’s fiction programming and attractive to advertisers, by providing a different viewing experience to that supplied by the studio-based soap operas produced by the public service broadcaster TVP. TVN’s Programming Deputy-Director Bogdan Czaja explains that:

Local drama allows us to attract an audience that is otherwise difficult to reach. Reaching that audience is a very difficult task [...]. When we make a TV series for the type of audience that we want to reach [16-49 demographics], we need to compete with those really well-made American shows. For those people the point of reference is not domestic soaps, because soaps do not exist for them: when soaps are broadcast they are at work and even if they are not they would not want to watch that type of show anyway. That type of audience has to have content that can endure comparisons with shows like Friends for example, The Sopranos or Desperate Housewives. Those people know those American shows, they like them and they think “now give me a domestic drama, I am willing to watch it but make sure it is better or at least as good as the American shows I know.” Competing with American shows is not an easy thing to do.¹⁹

The commercial terrestrial broadcasters, in order to reach the commercial viewers, and prevent the audience from tuning to cable channels, began to emulate American exports by producing more American-style drama. The Polish industry needed an efficient recipe for ratings success and American television programmes and their genres were considered to be excellent models for the production of more competitive programmes.

This article describes the manner in which American television practices are creatively appropriated, thus demonstrating a mode through which American programmes play an important developmental role in the construction of the Polish TV market. The following sections account for the influence of American programming on original Polish prime time drama and investigate the myriad ways in which Poland’s TV professionals emulate iconic attributes of American television, such as aesthetically ambitious *mise-en-scène* and the cultivation of style, as well as American programming ideas, such as genres and storytelling modes. Yet this article examines not only the impact of American texts but also the role of Polish practitioners in negotiating this influence. Building on interviews with the creators of two original Polish prime time dramas, *Lekarze* (2012-) and *Prawo Agaty* (2012-), produced by the commercial broadcaster TVN, this article explores how Polish television practitioners take the elements of American television culture and rework them to fit the local context. This article thus uncovers the strategies of dynamic change operating within the Polish television industry as manifested through the practice of appropriation of attributes of American television.

American textual models and original Polish drama

Ien Ang claims that the American influence on TV markets nearly everywhere is pronounced as the dissemination of a set of specialised practices, which in television “takes the form of a continuous rehashing of relatively constant formats and genres (e.g. the cop show, the sitcom, the soap opera).”²⁰ Ang’s observation fits the Polish broadcasting context, where American genres have an increasing impact on the kind of domestic prime time drama produced in Poland. A good example of the generic impact of American television is *Prawo Agaty* (English title: *True Law*) – the first Polish legal procedural drama that premiered on TVN in March 2012 (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – TVN’s legal prime time drama *Prawo Agaty*. Courtesy of TVN

The series focuses on Agata Przybysz, a successful lawyer, who suddenly loses her prestigious job. As the titular character is forced to abandon her old habits, the series depicts how Agata tries to build her life and career from scratch, while struggling with various legal cases. Bogumil Lipski, the show’s producer, describes the preparation for producing Poland’s first legal procedural drama:

In working on this project we took other legal dramas as a point of reference, as a point of departure. I first did field research; I looked at the shows our competitors were making. Then I looked at the shows of the genre. I watched several of those. I wanted to rely on Ally McBeal the least actually, to avoid obvious comparisons. I watched The Good Wife because it was the most recent legal drama. I also watched Harry’s Law, and Drop Dead Diva. I watched a couple of episodes of Boston Legal, and classic American movies that centre around legal issues, such as Erin Brockovich, for example. All those shows inspired me and helped me to spot what is important for a legal drama. But it’s not that I methodologically analysed every episode of American drama I watched. Watching it just helped me negotiate my own ideas through watching different things.²¹

This account highlights how watching American programming can support local producers in the creation of domestic programming. This approach is not an isolated case. In September 2012, the commercial broadcaster TVN premiered its most recent original prime time drama *Lekarze*

(English title: *Medics*) – and thus expanded its programming repertoire with yet another new genre; in this instance the first Polish originally scripted medical drama.²² The show focuses on Alicja Szymańska, a young and ambitious surgeon, who joins the medical staff of a fictional hospital, Copernicus, in Toruń, northeast of Poland. Dorota Chamczyk – the show’s executive producer – prepared for the task of producing a new genre in a similar way:

We had different ideas about how to approach that project. One of them was actually to buy the format of Grey’s Anatomy. But neither the public broadcaster nor we [TVN] managed to buy that expensive format. It is a great show, I would love to have writers that could produce such a great script and create a Polish Grey’s Anatomy. Once we decided to produce an original medical drama, instead of adapting a format, I first monitored what type of drama our competitors were producing. Then I have watched all the medical drama out there. Particularly, the American shows such as E.R, Grey’s Anatomy, House M.D., Private Practice, and Nurse Jackie. But I also watched some British ones, but there are not as many British medical dramas as American ones. I watched them but it was not what I was after. I feel that my biggest inspiration was Grey’s Anatomy. I told the people involved in the project, writers included, to watch Grey’s Anatomy as a type of homework. My intention was never to copy and imitate the show, but it was a huge inspiration certainly.²³

These examples support the argument that the Polish industry produces fiction programming whose existence is indebted to the generic impact of American prime time dramas. American genres inform the understanding of Polish TV professionals, who learn the new cultural language through watching American television. Gradually Polish producers are able to develop their own versions of textual models from the American television culture. Polish producers thus become active agents in the on-going process of strengthening the existing repertoire of Polish broadcasters with new genres, which are modeled on the American genre traditions (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 – TVN’s medical prime time drama *Lekarze*. Courtesy of TVN/Piotr Litwic

The influence of American programmes on Polish original TV production is not constructed through a straightforward homogenisation, in which cultural difference and diversity are eradicated.

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ed. Polish TV professionals recognise that directly copying American elements into Polish reality would not work. Chamczyk observes that what works in an American show would not necessarily work in a Polish one:

If we were to make a Polish The Bold and the Beautiful without changing the context, this series would surely fail. Polish viewers are willing to accept certain programmes as foreign imports made in the English language, shows like The Bold and The Beautiful, but also more sophisticated American drama. But if you were to copy those directly one to one in the Polish language set in small town Poland, those would not work. You need to introduce profound changes to foreign programming ideas and adapt to the Polish context for them to work.²⁴

This account highlights the importance of the local Polish context in transplanting American television elements. The recognition that American TV forms and ideas need to be indigenized and made to fit the local context determines the degree to which Polish TV professionals can rely on American programming ideas. Despite the fact that Polish practitioners look up to American prime time drama and its genres, American programmes are not imitated, simply because such a direct imitation would not work in the Polish context. Polish practitioners carefully check what aspects of American genres, and American programmes more generally, are workable in the Polish context. This approach is pronounced in the account of Kaja Krawczyk – the head writer for *Prawo Agaty*:

We all, writers and viewers alike, when we think of court cases we think of the American legal cases, which we got to know through watching American legal dramas and films. When I started writing the script for Prawo Agaty, I realised that what I thought happens in court is what can happen only in American courts. In Poland, the lawyers cannot approach the judge or move around the courtroom, there is no jury, legal cases in Poland drag over long periods of time. So at the beginning I felt a bit hopeless, asking myself “how will I ever write that show?” And then we made the decision to allow ourselves the creative freedom to break some of the basic rules that govern the Polish courtroom. One of the biggest obstacles was the issue of legal language, which in Poland is quite elaborate and complicated. So we knew that we would also need to simplify the language our characters spoke in the courtroom so as not to bore the viewers. In Poland you cannot say “objection,” like in America, but a longer more elaborate legal phrase. There is even a gossip that law students in Poland have watched too many American legal shows and tend to say “objection” which is frowned upon by the professors as this is not the correct legal terminology. There is an anecdote connected with this. I think while shooting the second episode of season 1, Leszek who plays the main lead was tired of repeating the same long Polish phrase over and over and he just burst out “objection,” which was not in the script. The scene did make the cut though. So we faced a lot of practical obstacles connected with what we could and could not do in writing the show and we had to try really hard to make the show work.²⁵

Krawczyk’s statement stresses the fact that the differences between the Polish and American legal systems created unforeseen difficulties for the writer, who initially expected to write scenes similar to those that she knew from the American shows she had watched. Only after beginning the writing process did she realise that that many events she envisioned could only take place in an

American courtroom. Lipski – the show’s producer – encountered similar obstacles and thus was convinced of the necessity to localise the American genre of legal procedural to the Polish context:

I knew that we would not be able to tell interesting courts stories simply because law and legal proceedings in Poland are very boring, complicated, but more importantly extend over long periods of time. From the beginning, I knew that I would not be able to present the real court cases. I had to simplify the court stories and tell them less literally, putting emphasis on something else. I decided to concentrate on the drama aspect, emotionally resonant dilemmas of interesting people caught up in compelling situations. The American genre of legal drama had to be modified slightly to match the Polish context. For a legal drama to succeed in Poland it has to put more emphasis on the character development and their emotions, rather than the actual legal proceedings. In America they can produce legal dramas the way they do because they have a different legal system.²⁶

Because of the disparities between the Polish and American legal realities, the impact of *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-) on the Polish “incarnation” is smaller than one might expect from the accounts quoted earlier. The influence of the American show is in fact limited to the camera work and the structure of the show rather than character or plot imitation. Lipski reports:

Despite my watching of The Good Wife, you are not going to find any direct references to this show in Prawo Agaty. We used The Good Wife to see how they write their legal cases into the episodes. But not what type of cases they are but rather how they are told. The biggest lesson I took from The Good Wife was how the legal cases were shot. Not who said what but rather how it was filmed. I also noticed while watching The Good Wife, what is important in those legal cases. Sometimes it is the small gestures the characters make. So it was attention to those little details and shooting them well that captured my attention.²⁷

But even emulating the cinematography proved to be a difficult task. Lipski recalls many practical problems he encountered when he began shooting the first episode of his original legal drama *Prawo Agaty* in a similar manner to the blocking patterns from *The Good Wife*:

Americans have a different layout of their court rooms – only two sides: the judge and the witness sitting beside him, and the defendant and prosecutor on the other, sometimes three if you want to include the jury. The layout of Polish court is different. While shooting the first episode we realised that it simply takes too much time for us to shoot similarly to the way they do in The Good Wife, because we have to position the camera on four different sides. In Poland the defender and the prosecutor are sitting opposite one another, the judge in the middle and the witness opposing him – forming a square. In order to capture the exchanges and the interactions between the characters we had to position the camera in four different spots. It was taking us too much time to shoot like that. So we knew that we had to modify that and simplify the exchanges between the characters. This was very challenging. Americans have to do it from only two perspectives, sometimes three. This was a big lesson for me, as I did not realise that while watching The Good Wife.²⁸

The above accounts demonstrate that the local Polish context can in some instances render direct imitation impossible. However, cultural congruity is not the only factor determining the extent

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and character of Polish TV's emulation of its American source material. Polish television professionals that I have interviewed report that another factor determining the limits of innovation in domestic fiction production is the Polish audience's preference for a particular type of storytelling. Chamczyk believes that the problem associated with writing innovative TV drama scripts has to do with the fact that:

Polish viewers are used to telenovela narration symptomatic of Polish daily soaps produced in the 1990s, which forces us to be very cautious when creating our drama. We have to adjust the parameters of narration to what the Polish audience is used to. I think that we should try to challenge that a bit but we need to build acceptance for experimentation over time. The bottom-line is that our programming experiments should not be revolutionary but rather evolutionary. It should be a gradual process of preparing the Polish viewers for a new type of programme in their own language and context.²⁹

According to Chamczyk, Polish viewers are not ready for too much experimentation in televisual forms and structures of domestic drama and would not accept some American televisual storytelling characteristics. Years of exposure to domestic series such as *Klan* – the longest running Polish soap opera, *Plebania*, *M jak Miłość* and many other Polish programmes that are mixtures of soap opera and telenovela narrative models, have made the Polish audience accustomed to a particular, explicit way of storytelling. Particularly where the extended long-running series allow a lot of space for story development and detailed and elaborate dialogue. Polish producers and TV executives, while seeking to produce new genres, have to adjust the parameters of narration to match local sentiments. Krawczyk explains:

The pilot of Prawo Agaty was particularly difficult for us. I think we created fifteen different versions before we got it right. It was difficult because in 45 minutes we had to introduce the main character, and pretty much her whole life story. We made the pilot this way because we had to think of the local viewers. In an American series you would not have a pilot episode with such an elaborate exposition and you would probably start with what we made as episode two. In an American series you would start with a legal case episode and you would communicate the background information from the character's life story through some signals and the viewer would accumulate information throughout the season. But the Polish viewer would not accept that. This had an impact on the way the show was scheduled: the first two episodes premiered back-to-back as a double bill.³⁰

Krawczyk's statement testifies to the importance of local tastes, which may define the extent to which Polish producers can use American storytelling models. With the Polish viewer in mind, the creators introduced extensive background information from Agata's life story in the pilot episode, more than one would find in a pilot of an American legal drama, before they could go on to telling law based stories of an episodic nature. The local sentiments had an impact throughout season 1. The viewer preference for telenovela storytelling made it challenging for the creators of *Prawo Agaty* to create the type of narration symptomatic of a legal drama, where plots of a legal nature are interwoven with those relating to the main character's personal life. Due to the nature of such stories, the personal and emotional plots cannot be developed in such detail as they usually are in an extended narrative universe of a soap opera or telenovela. Writing a show with limited personal

plots and striking the right balance between the legal and personal plots was quite difficult for the writers, as Kaja Krawczyk points out “mostly because this is something that the Polish viewer is not used to.” Krawczyk elaborates on that notion:

When you watch American drama the writing craft is based on showing character relations in a simplified but not reductive way, by showing only the turning points and moments. In Poland it is about showing every moment. The viewer is therefore not used to simplified depictions of relationships. We as the writers of Prawo Agaty need to show only the essence of the drama aspect, because we do not have room to develop it in such detail. But this makes the writing process interesting and challenging for me – that we do not make characters repeat the same information over and over again.³¹

Despite the awareness that viewers in Poland might expect a more detailed and elaborate depiction of the characters’ emotional universe, the creators of *Prawo Agaty* decided to develop the show’s narrative in a manner resembling the American storytelling model characteristic for a legal drama, namely the one that combines the self-enclosed episodic structure of different legal cases with personal plotlines that extend over the whole season. Following this narrative structure meant moving away from the domestic tradition of telenovela story writing with extended serialised characterisation and inclusion of excessive detail not directly relevant for the story development.

Robin Nelson calls the blending of the episodic and the serial a flexi-narrative.³² This mode of storytelling rewards dedicated viewers by introducing larger arcs of narrative progression but also allows sporadic or new viewers to enjoy the standalone episodes. Jason Mittell believes “this model of television storytelling is distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception.”³³ Recent original Polish TV series, such as *Prawo Agaty* and *Lekarze*, share the formal attributes of this storytelling mode of contemporary American television, where the episodic cases, legal and medical respectively, are complemented with the overarching plots of character accumulation. Lipski reports:

I wanted Prawo Agaty to have a procedural structure, with new story in each episode. So my basic pre-occupation was how to combine the episodic, case-based structure with the narrative drama arc. And this is what will make people tune in, the drama arc. I do not think the case structure would be enough for viewers to tune in. So it is a hard job to combine the both narrative structures. There is certainly an art to it.³⁴

But *Prawo Agaty* and *Lekarze* are not isolated cases. Bogdan Czaja, TVN’s Deputy Programming Director, recognizes the increasing importance of the blending of the episodic and the serial in Poland’s television market more generally:

For a mainstream broadcaster the type of fiction that seems to work best is the type that involves episodic form with a narrative arc, but not too serialised. The types of shows that do not seem to work too well are the ones that require continual watching. People’s habits differ, there definitely is a part of audience who are avid viewers but the majority are rather casual ones. So if the show is too demanding and requires watching episode by episode, it does not work. We lose viewers like that. Someone will miss

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*an episode or two and if they cannot follow on a casual basis we will lose the audience. So it is best to have a show that, even if it has the continuity across episodes is not too demanding. This is the best recipe for a show nowadays.*³⁵

These accounts suggest that a new paradigm of television storytelling is emerging in Poland, with a reconceptualisation of the boundary between episodic and serial forms. New norms of storytelling practice emerge in Poland as Polish practitioners borrow the proven storytelling resources of American television's craft tradition.

As we have seen, American contributions do not erode the importance of the local context in Polish televisual culture. Instead, Polish producers negotiate and rework foreign elements to meet local expectations. Even though local Polish storytellers and producers turn to American cultural products, they always carefully conduct the inevitable modifications so that their programmes resonate with the Polish audience, and thus are more likely to succeed. Therefore the impact of American programmes and their genres on Polish original drama is not pronounced through imitation of particular stories, characters or plotlines – simply because those have to be modified and adjusted to the local context. Thus more often than not, the reliance on American programmes is pronounced in the practices of borrowing and reworking, as we have seen is the case with American genre traditions, rather than resulting in straightforward imitation.

US Television as a model for visual aesthetics

Exposure to American televisual product has not only influenced the structural language of Polish television culture, namely the generic and storytelling standards, but has also raised awareness of the importance of the visual aesthetics in TV production. Lipski sees the influence of American drama and its standards on his work in ways other than only generic imitation:

*I think that the point is not really about making Polish drama, Polish stories, similar to those from American shows. I think it has more to do with how those American shows are made and to aim for that type of quality.*³⁶

In a similar vein, Chamczyk points out that the American product raised expectations when it comes to the visual quality of television drama:

*The American shows that we all have watched made us hope for more. The cinema quality of the American productions, particularly those cable ones is very high. The Polish viewer no longer wants to watch the cheaper, rough-looking programmes but they expect a better quality viewing experience, one associated with American productions.*³⁷

American product that dominated the Polish schedules in the 1990s introduced Polish viewers to TV programming of a certain aesthetic quality. As a result, judgments about style and quality among Polish viewers and television professionals alike have increasingly been formed by comparisons to American product, which, as John T. Caldwell argues, emphasises high production

values and the cultivation of style.³⁸ The dramatic growth of the Polish television market and production sector now allows Polish producers to engage with, and respond to, viewers' expectations by producing original Polish drama that emulates American visual style and its production value. American programming thus provides a model for not only generic conventions but also for visual style as well. What Polish producers learned from American programming is that producing top quality TV drama relies on attention to detail, careful planning and the distinctive use of visual resources; and not just characterisation, dramatic logic and thematic complexity. The visual quality of Polish drama productions now means aesthetically ambitious programming, where different aspects of *mise-en-scène*, such as costume, décor, and properties are prioritised, as well as their organisation and interplay.³⁹ Lipski provides a detailed account of the significance of *mise-en-scène*, and its potential for expression, during pre-production and shooting of *Prawo Agaty*:

In a story you are telling in a TV show, everything matters: costumes, props, set design, shots, acting, screenplay. All those have to work well together because if any of those does not, it weakens the show. It was extremely important for me to make all those elements click. It requires a lot of effort to make everything flow nicely together. Making a TV show is a group effort so you have to manage different groups of people and co-ordinate. Every detail matters and so attention to detail is crucial. It makes a huge difference how the main character's flat looks. Everything in this flat should be congruent with who the character is. The Americans know about that, they pay attention to detail and this is what makes their shows special, this is what sets them apart. Take Desperate Housewives for example. If you watch the show, you can recognise where a given scene is taking place even if there are no characters present. The level of detail in each character's house allows you to know exactly who this house belongs to. Every detail is an important part of the show and how it matters. In Poland you do not yet really pay attention to those little things. So it is a matter of aesthetics. I was very sensitive to those visual matters and I wanted to make my creative team aware of all those aesthetic issues as well. First, you have to make things pretty but this is only the first step. Then you need to make sure it matters and means something, contributes to the story. So when you have three characters you need to personalise their workspace, make their houses, workspaces, match the characters and their personalities.⁴⁰

Chamczyk provides a very similar account of what in her opinion constitutes quality in terms of visual aesthetics when talking about the production of *Lekarze* and gives a sense of how *mise-en-scène*, in her opinion, contributes to the visual style:

I personally divide shows between the sloppy ones and those that are made scrupulously. And I only want to make shows that are made in a way that is very thorough and meticulous. It is the combination of factors such as set design, photography, lighting but also editing. You cannot see quality as a single factor. The quality has to be built on many different levels, from the script, the cast, creative teams, and the technical aspects. I know that everything matters and I try to pay attention to every single detail as even the smallest element can send signals to the viewer. You can either make use of that opportunity to communicate with the viewer through aesthetic elements or waste it. This is something I work on with our designers and the creative team. It matters where a character lives, what his or her apartment looks like. How their mother looks, whether she cooks home-made Polish dumplings or they eat out. Elements like that have to be included on the level of the script, which I always monitor and then I also try to be

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the person who sees it through on all levels of pre- and post-production as well. Only then does the show become a complete entity. A TV show is not a shipment of nails, but a work of art. Maybe TV art with a small "a" but still art.⁴¹

Lipski and Chamczyk's accounts make it possible to believe that Polish TV drama is increasingly seen as a carefully planned product which is becoming increasingly uniform as a result of the growing emphasis on consistency and attention to detail. Polish producers stress the importance of the mediation of narrative by specific audio-visual forms and elements. This emphasis on semiotically rich production design and the foregrounding of the individual elements of what you can see on the small screen, as well as the way that those are organised, have become the markers of quality. This understanding of visual quality in Poland is a result of the influence of American programming, whose visual aesthetics became the new standard in TV series production.

The visual aspect of television production and the quality of what can be seen on the small screen is not only dependent on consistency, attention to detail and *mise-en-scène*. The issues of aesthetics and style are inevitably linked to technology. In order to deliver high production value to television and to produce images that have the organic look and feel of film, TVN recently switched from using the HD Betacam cameras for the Polish domestically produced show *Lekarze* to the state-of-the-art Arri Alexa digital camera, which is gradually becoming the standard in the American television industry. A small sample of American television productions that have chosen to use the Alexa camera system include the following: the HBO television productions *True Blood* (2008-), *Girls* (2012-), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-); Fox's *House M.D.* (2004-2012) and *Bones* (2005-); ABC's *Castle* (2009-), *Pan Am* (2011) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-); NBC's *Grimm* (2011-), *Community* (2009-); CBS's *Person of Interest* (2011-); The CW's *Ringer* (2011-) and *Supernatural* (2005-); and Showtime's *Californication* (2007-) and *Homeland* (2011-); among many others.⁴² TVN chose to work on the equipment that is becoming standard in the American industry to emulate the quality of image of contemporary high caliber American television productions. Chamczyk states that the switch to the new Arri Alexa camera was made to improve the visual quality of Polish TV drama:

We now work on Arri Alexa cameras, the type of cameras with which the Americans are shooting their TV shows. We no longer use HD Betacam. So we have gone one step further. Why? We did it because we knew that we were making a show, the majority of which will be shot indoors. The set design, the lighting and the shooting equipment can all make a difference. I wanted the experience to be made as realistic as possible. I wanted the hospital we built in our studios to look as real as possible. The quality therefore is very much related to the quality of image.⁴³

US series have affected Polish television drama in relation to visual aesthetics on a number of levels: from the emphasis on aesthetically ambitious *mise-en-scène* and stylistic coherence to technical upgrades. By working on the equipment that is gradually becoming the standard in the American television industry, TVN has taken another step towards emulating the visual aesthetics of American programming. TVN is so far the only broadcaster using this equipment and *Lekarze* the first Polish production shot using the Alexa.

Conclusion

The instances highlighted in this article identify the vital ways in which American television production practices have contributed to the development of domestic serialised production in Poland. The impact of US drama on local Polish TV culture is visible through the assimilation of American genres, narrative formulae, as well as in the matters of visual style and aesthetics. As a result, some Polish programmes now have content, style, form and cultural cache previously associated only with American imports. What needs to be emphasised, and it is an important point, is that this practice of borrowing and recycling is producing television fiction programmes that have become significant commercial successes for their broadcasters, as both *Lekarze* and *Prawo Agaty* have managed to attract audiences as well as advertisers. Each episode of season one of TVN's prime time medical drama, broadcast between 3 September and 26 November 2012, attracted on average a little above 3 million viewers, giving TVN 23.10% audience share in the 9.30 pm slot among 4+ demographics and more importantly almost 24% share among the 16-49 demographics, making TVN the most popular channel in the late prime time Monday slot. *Lekarze* in fact improved the viewership for the broadcaster in its slot compared with the corresponding period of 2011, when the viewing numbers were lower by nearly 800 000. Additionally, the series managed to attract advertisers, earning 29.3 million zlotych for the TVN network.⁴⁴ Similarly, each episode of season one of *Prawo Agaty*, broadcast between 4 March 2012 through to 3 June 2012 on Sunday nights at 9 pm, gave TVN a second place in the given slot.⁴⁵ Season two brought the network 26 million zlotych from advertising.⁴⁶ Given the success of these shows, both have been renewed for successive seasons. At the time of writing, season 3 of both *Lekarze* and *Prawo Agaty* were in production.⁴⁷

The emulation of particular aspects of American fiction television is not a one-way process of cultural imposition on the *indigenous* Polish culture. Polish producers do not just mechanically transplant American television as the local cultural context is critical in dictating which elements of American television programming should be emulated. While Polish broadcasters refer to American television programmes, they always carefully conduct an inevitable modification to attune their material to the local context. This is certainly visible in the attitudes of Polish industry professionals, who speak of cultural obstacles in recycling American genres and programming ideas. Therefore, the cultural translation of American elements and practices are attractive concoctions of local production context and American templates blended with a unique Polish flavor.

This however opens up a complex question: does a distinctly *Polish* television industry actually exist? The discussion of originally scripted shows of Polish broadcasters and their production context in this article make it possible to believe that, even in the case of originally scripted Polish shows, the boundary between the *foreign* and the *indigenous* is to some extent blurred – as even the shows produced locally, that do not rely on international scripted formats, borrow heavily from American shows. The notion of the local is therefore complicated by the fact that global influences are actively transformed into domestic contexts and disguised as local. Poland's domestic fiction, as discussed in this chapter, supports Ien Ang's observation that "the global and the local should not be conceived as two distinct, separate and opposing realities, but as complexly articulated, mutually constitutive."⁴⁸

This article contextualises Polish TV shows as culturally hybrid forms in which the global and

the local are inextricably intertwined. This leads to the emergence of aesthetics which are labeled and experienced as Polish, but are in fact indebted to American forms, genres and practices. Therefore the character of the local, Polish TV culture and its textual output is not fixed and autonomous. On the contrary, Polish TV drama is interdependent and interconnected: shaped by the domestication of imported cultural goods and audiovisual elements and responsive to international influences. This capacity of Polish television practitioners to successfully localise the American influences questions the basic dichotomies of global-local and imported-domestic, which traditionally anchor the debate on television flows.

Knowledge transfer between academia and media industries is still relatively rare, particularly in the Polish context. Considering the difficulties in accessing first-hand accounts from those working in the media industries, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dorota Chamczyk, Bogdan Czaja, Kaja Krawczyk, Bogumił Lipski and Karol Klementewicz for their time, cooperation and willingness in contributing their knowledge to this article and my academic project more broadly.

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