

## Serialization and parasitic voices: the case of *Desperate Housewives*

The development of a serial relies on repetitions and variations based on a formula. In terms of reception, audiences identify elements belonging to a serial based on their affinities with the formula.

*Desperate Housewives* was created by Marc Cherry in 2004 and aired on ABC until 2012. It tells the story of four women living in the fictional suburb of Wisteria Lane after the suicide of their friend, Mary Alice Young. The latter lingers over Wisteria Lane after her death and provides the voiceover narration for almost every episode. The series gave birth to official and non-official extensions including several books, a board game and a videogame. After the success of the first season on ABC, a competing network, Bravo, launched in 2006 *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. This reality show became a franchise that has since been declined in different American cities and in other countries. The *Real Housewives* franchise is studied as an example of rip-off of the *Desperate Housewives* formula: a narrator guides the viewers through the lives of a small group of women living in an economically privileged environment where reputation is key.

My approach of serialization thus encompasses the ABC series as well as some official and unofficial extensions of the *Housewives* universe in the United States and their adaptations in France. This paper is based on a sample of sequences from the series, some examples of extensions on other media and promotional productions, and on interviews with dubbing actresses. A media studies approach combining the analysis of the conditions of production and of the contents of the series and their extensions underlines the economic and cultural dimensions that make the serialization process more complex.

One of the key elements of the *Housewives* formula is the voice of the narrator. In the fictional suburbs of Fairview or in the gated-communities of Orange County, the voice is a guiding thread for the viewers who are introduced to the private and intimate spheres of the characters' lives. It is central in the serialization of the narrative in that it weaves links between the seasons, the episodes and between the narrative arcs. The voice is also part of a branding strategy. The promotion of the ABC soap throws light on Brenda Strong's voice as the voice of the show. This allows official and parasitic extensions of the *Housewives* universe to rely on this voice to take advantage of the aura of the original TV show. Finally, the case study of the French dubbed version of the ABC series and of the French adaptation of the *Real Housewives* franchise shows that voice is key to the adaptation of the formula for a foreign audience. For instance, Françoise Cadol, who dubbed Mary Alice Young, was also the narrator of *Les Vraies Housewives*, the French version of the *Real Housewives* franchise, and she often is hired as voiceover for TV commercials advertising, among other products, laundry detergent, thus reminding us of the origin of the soap as a genre.

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