Where in the World Is *Orphan Black*? Change and Continuity in Global TV Production and Distribution

Serra Tinic

University of Alberta
Serra.tinic [AT] ualberta.ca

Abstract:

The proliferation of digital windows, specialty channels, and fragmented audiences compels global media industry scholars to reassess the increasingly complex cultural negotiations that underpin new forms of transnational financing, production, and distribution for television dramas. The emphasis here is on the underexamined issues of branding both national and genre channels and issues of distribution, which are all important strategies in transnational television flows. The essay uses as a case study the Canadian television series *Orphan Black*, and its acquisition by BBC America, to illustrate how national and channel branding expectations of distributors are facilitating new forms of transnational television production partnerships.

Keywords: Distribution, Television, Globalization, Canada, United Kingdom, Nationalism

The proliferation of digital windows, specialty channels, and fragmented audiences compels global media scholars to reassess the increasingly complex cultural negotiations that underpin new forms of transnational financing and the distribution of television dramas. Despite two decades of scholarship that has insightfully questioned the stability of the nation as the primary arbiter of a unified sense of cultural identity (or singular site of cultural production), the literature tends to remain somewhat polarized into homogenization and hybridity perspectives on global media texts. Under the former, we see the standardization of cultural expression with global media conglomeration, global formats, and international joint ventures (IJVs) that target transnational audience markets. Hybridity theories, conversely, highlight the ways that global narratives are adapted or reconstructed such that they speak to local cultures and industry assumptions about domestic audience categorizations. Consequently, this essay moves beyond these dichotomies to examine the contradictions and disjunctures that characterize contemporary global television production partnerships through a brief case study of the Canadian series *Orphan Black* (2013–), produced for the specialty channels Space (Canada) and BBC America. The production and distribution contexts of this series exemplify the changes in a transnational environment of evolving post-network structures, increased competition for content, and a renewed emphasis on national as well as channel branding. The success of the
series illustrates the necessity of sustained attention to the policies and funding structures that continue to enable producers in small-market countries to develop programs that speak to the specificities of the cultural geographies of space and place.

Since the early days of broadcasting, Canada and other countries with perceivably small audience-advertising markets (relative to population size) have sought to foster and protect a space for national television production through domestic content regulations and the establishment of public service broadcasting systems, as well as preferential labor and production-location tax credits. Government intervention in the cultural sphere was seen as integral to the maintenance of what is referred to as “shelf space” for domestic storytelling, given Hollywood’s dominance in the global mediascape. These measures were further seen as a means to address concerns over “market failure”: namely, that without regulatory oversight, commercial broadcasting networks would have little incentive to invest in locally specific programming that might translate into a “cultural discount” in global sales and distribution agreements. However, today’s new media environment of expanded channel capacity and multiplatform delivery systems has revitalized debates about the continued relevance and legitimacy of public investment in the transition from the high, or classic, network era to an age of digital spectrum surplus. Georgina Born astutely describes such arguments as “projection” or “abstractions and future-oriented discourses” that are strategically invoked in favor of deregulation, particularly by large media conglomerates and neoliberal governments, in ways that elide the persistence of conventional industry practices and constraints in a digital, multiplatform world. Similarly, two consecutive research task forces on the future of Canadian cultural production (the Juneau Report, 1996, and the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 2003) both cautioned against liberal pluralist visions of a new millennium with free-flowing domestic production premised on the exponential growth of windows for televisual content. Indeed, both task force reports concluded that divestment of funding, tax credits, and content regulations would merely negate any incentives for the country’s largest media corporations to support the independent production sector as they would, instead, focus on generating greater profit margins through less expensive international content acquisitions, especially from American networks and cable channels. The circuitous route from production to distribution of the series Orphan Black appears to confirm the prognostications of both task force committees.

Creating and Selling Orphan Black

Orphan Black is a science fiction dystopia in which the lead actor, Tatiana Maslany, plays several characters of various nationalities who eventually meet and discover that they are clones being hunted by both their creators and religious groups opposed to genetic experimentation. The premise explicitly invokes both Orwell’s 1984 and Huxley’s Brave New World as all of the clones were “born” in 1984 and the scientist who developed them is named Aldous Leekie (while a central train depot is called Huxley Station). The series was conceived and created by Graeme Manson and John Fawcett (who would continue as head writer and director, respectively) through the independent production company Temple Street Productions during a residency with the Prime Time TV Program at the Canadian Film Centre (CFC) in Toronto. The CFC was established in 1988 by filmmaker Norman Jewison and has since grown to be a significant national training and mentoring program for all facets of television and film development from writing to financing and developing domestic and international distribution strategies. Manson, Fawcett, and the production executives at Toronto’s Temple Street were no strangers to the North American television market as all partners had proven successes in Canada-US IJVs as
well as programs produced independently in each country (The Secret Circle 2011-12, Flashpoint 2008-12, Lost Girl 2010-, and Being Erica 2009-11, to name but a few).

Despite the track records of the creative team and the initial positive responses to the premise of the series, Orphan Black was destined to face the customary challenges of most Canadian productions: piecemeal financing and risk-averse network executives.\textsuperscript{4} Unable to secure a commitment from any Canadian broadcaster or cable channel (including Space), Temple Street decided to pursue distribution deals in the United States. It was only after BBC America, in search of original programming, agreed to an acquisition agreement that Orphan Black was able to find its way home. Once BBC Worldwide (the commercial arm of the British public service broadcaster) guaranteed financing and international distribution, Space’s parent company Bell Media moved quickly to purchase the series.\textsuperscript{5} Orphan Black eventually debuted in March 2013 with 513,000 viewers, making it the highest-rated original series premiere for Space.\textsuperscript{6} Its simultaneous launch on BBC America garnered 680,000 viewers.\textsuperscript{7} The series rapidly grew audience ratings in both countries after being widely praised by American television critics and fans’ word of mouth across social media sites. Consequently, despite the fact that Space had originally passed on the project, Bell Media’s vice president of specialty channels proudly announced: “This joint-Canadian production demonstrates our commitment to produce original, world-class content in Canada while simultaneously showcasing our amazing homegrown talent.”\textsuperscript{8} The fact that Orphan Black also helped the specialty channel fulfill its mandated Canadian content (CanCon) requirements remained unstated.

In this regard, Orphan Black’s current global success needs to be understood within the larger cultural and financial contexts of the contemporary transnational production ecology. Perhaps ironically, Canada’s comparative advantage in the global television arena lies in the domestic content regulations and concomitant public production funding that have acted as an integral component of growing the media industries in a small-market nation. In brief, Canadian producers are attractive to IJV partners due to the tax credits and financial grants that they bring to project development. With over fifty official coproduction treaties, Canada has become the world leader in IJVs. This has not been without opportunity costs on a cultural level. Until recently, Canadian producers and their coproduction partners tended to erase culturally specific markers and follow the grammar of American network formulas and genres. These type of generic or “industry” productions were commonly seen as the hallmarks of the culturally homogenizing impact of capital interests in the quest to access one of the most restrictive television import markets: American broadcast networks and basic cable channels.

Orphan Black presents a departure from this model to the extent that, while not made overly specific, there is no erasure of its cultural spatiality or domestic reference points. Nevertheless, some American television critics “read” the series as a British story set in the United States.\textsuperscript{9} Although Orphan Black is not “British,” despite being acquired by BBC America, the fact that it may be perceived as such aligns with BBC Worldwide’s current objective to build the BBC brand globally through investing in and developing coproductions with culturally proximate industry partners.\textsuperscript{10} Canadian producers have long been seen as favorable international coproduction partners due to the perception that they are cultural intermediaries who are conversant with the American television industry yet bring a slightly “European sensibility” to their projects.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, Orphan Black fulfilled the channel’s goal to purchase content that would complement and expand its genre-based brand recognition in the US market beyond the landmark Doctor Who.
This very brief sketch of the industrial context of *Orphan Black* should not be seen as primarily a coming-of-age story for Canadian television. Given the historic structural constraints of domestic drama production, Canadian production companies merely had a head start in developing global strategies that other nations are now adopting as well. In fact, prior to the establishment of BBC Worldwide in 1996, Canada did not even have an official coproduction treaty with the United Kingdom despite their Commonwealth ties. By 2001, the United Kingdom had become the country’s largest production partner and contributed to 57 percent of Canada’s treaty coproductions. While financial concerns are paramount, shared industrial histories of public service broadcasting have also led to affinities in storytelling styles that have enabled Canadian and UK producers to negotiate cultural specificity in ways that are not always possible with every transnational partner.\(^\text{12}\) *Orphan Black* is instructive to the extent that it illustrates the necessity of avoiding both generalized depictions of cultural homogenization and optimistic “projection” discourses in mapping the complexities of transnational television financing and distribution.

Case studies of specific international joint ventures allow us to see continuity amid change in global television production. New platforms and specialty channels have increased opportunities for producers in small-market nations to sell their programs globally. Yet concomitant audience fragmentation and ever-increasing production budgets have resulted in intensified competition for content in an era that simultaneously requires unique brand differentiation and nuanced cultural negotiations between transnational creative partners. At the same time, differential power structures between national television markets persist—namely, the enduring importance of access to the American audience market on the part of Anglo-production communities.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, the popularity of *Orphan Black* in the United States facilitated BBC Worldwide and Bell Media’s ability to further monetize the series, in a seemingly reverse flow, through sales to their respective national broadcast networks (BBC Three and CTV, Canada’s largest private broadcaster) several months after the series had completed its first season in Canada and the United States.

Consequently, the example of *Orphan Black* compels those of us working within global media industries research to reconceptualize our analyses of international coproductions to include nuanced studies of television distribution and, in particular, branding. The series is not a treaty coproduction (it is completely written and produced in Toronto), nor does it fall under the very productive category that Michele Hilmes identifies as transnational coproduction, where “national interests must be combined and reconciled.”\(^\text{14}\) The questions of distribution, acquisition, and branding are both old and new again in transnational television studies as we ponder the future and where the contradictions of both national specificity and structural histories of “broadcasting” are now significant selling points for select TV series globally.

---

\(^\text{1}\) Serra Tinic is Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on critical television studies and media globalization. She is the author of *On Location: Canada’s Television Industry in a Global Market* (University of Toronto Press). Her work has been published in a range of scholarly anthologies and journals, including *Television and New Media, The Journal of Communication, Social Epistemology, Velvet Light Trap, Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture, and Communication, Culture, and Critique*. 
Where in the World is Orphan Black?
– Tinic


4 The production house would eventually patch together financing through several provincial and national programs including the Cogeco Program Development Fund, the Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit program, the Ontario Media Development Corporation Film and Television Tax Credit, and the Rogers Cable Network.


13 Both Temple Street Productions and BBC Worldwide acknowledge the imperative to maintain production offices within the United States for access to industry partners and to pursue the most lucrative production and distribution agreements. Competition from large-budget series such as Game of Thrones and Mad Men are cited as setting a new threshold for evolving financial partnerships via specialty channel distribution windows. Jordan Twiss, “Best of the Year: Temple Street,” Playback, December 13, 2012; BBC Worldwide, “Annual Review 2012/13—Market Context.”


Bibliography


Dillon, Mark “Space: Boldly Going Where No Channel Had Gone Before.” *Playback* (fall 2012).


