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Taboo Topics in Limited Series Offered by Internet-Distributed Television

Abstract

The broader structural and organisational changes associated with the global expansion of Internet-distributed television have changed the ways in which we perceive the qualitative level and socio-cultural significance of television dramas. Individual transformations can be perceived in connection with the hybridisation of genres, the thematic variability of individual works, the number of episodes and their average length, or relevant considerations about the need to better understand TV dramas as products that are qualitatively equal to ambitious film production and in many respects even overshadow it. A currently resonating area of interest are mini-series/ limited series, which target audiences often prefer over other types of episodic works with a significant number of seasons and instalments, emphasising their high-end quality and refined production value. The popularity of this type of content results from engaging and complex narrative structures, which often include explicit depiction of taboo topics, such as stories and plotlines related to death (or old

age and/or dying), sexual behaviour, various deviations, extreme violence or self-harm. The presentation of these publicly suppressed topics in limited series is the focus of our interest. The main goal of the study is to reflect on the current popularity of television mini-series in the environment of Internet-distributed television, taking into account the taboo topics that are portrayed in them. We achieve this goal on the basis of theoretical reflection on the issue, analysis of the thematic specifics of selected television works and subsequent synthesis of acquired knowledge.

Key words

Internet-Distributed Television.
Limited Series. Mini-Serial.
Narrative. Serial. Taboo.

Introduction

One of the primary tasks of the media is to reflect various social and cultural phenomena as accurately as possible. The more technologically advanced the given medium is, the more authentic the presented media content seems to be and the more audiences prefer it. Television has evolved technologically as well, even though the inevitable shift in television production and distribution was not as immediately obvious as in case of, for example, journalism¹. A few decades ago, it was generally presumed that the Internet would shift our attention towards emerging types of media threatening to replace newspapers, television and maybe even films. However, journalism was affected much sooner. Lotz explains that “it took nearly a decade longer for the technology of Internet distribution to affect television and film”, because video files are much larger than print (text-based) media typical for ‘traditional’ journalism. One way or another, all these expectations were misguided; the Internet has enabled innovative (multiplatform) journalistic production, along with new ways of watching television and films instead of replacing them. The most watched items on YouTube were music videos and

television clips. Before creating original content, the Internet-distributed television *Netflix* expanded its subscriber base by offering TV shows produced and previously broadcast by ‘linear’ television networks², popularising them globally. Internet-distributed television (IDTV), which is one of the most obvious results of this broader transformation within the media industry, merges television dramas, documentaries, films, multimedia and other types of media production, offering vast libraries to choose from. However, increased consumption of television content has resulted in establishment of binge-watching as a preferred viewing pattern and the technological advancements related to IDTV have made television content more spectacular and ‘cinematic’. As we believe, the rising popularity of mini-series (or limited series) partly results from these circumstances.

However, the popularity of mini-series amongst today’s television audiences does not lie only in their presumed quality and innovativeness, but also in the viewer’s ability to consume the whole narrative in a relatively short period of time. The aforementioned short-form television dramas typically offer dynamic narrative structures, crossing genre boundaries and addressing topics which make us feel uncomfortable

and are hard to talk about. The phenomenon of “taboo” has always been an inherent part of human society and it is thus only natural that media production, while reflecting our collective mentality, individual lifestyles and volatile identities, needs to acknowledge taboo topics and portray them in an acceptable and intriguing manner. The cultural development of society leads to deep changes in the general understanding and acceptance of certain social problems, which also changes the range of taboo topics and the ways we perceive them. Nevertheless, there are still countless taboo topics in today’s society, and many of them have been depicted in television dramas. For example, we may mention issues of sex and (homo) sexuality, physical or psychological violence, death and old age, xenophobia and racism, etc. The present study is interested in the ways in which socially ‘concealed’ topics are portrayed and discussed in popular mini-series produced and distributed by various IDTV providers. Lotz underlines the fact that the video accessed via services such as *Netflix*, *Hulu*, *Amazon Prime Video*, *HBO Max*, *Disney+*, *Apple TV+* and many other providers is, in its nature, adapted to multiplatform distribution. Technically speaking, IDTV may be understood as a specific type of video-on-demand (VOD). Nevertheless, IDTV services are rarely perceived as video-on-demand, since VOD is traditionally associated with industrial practices and conventions of cable TV

¹ See: GREGUŠ, L., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: News Values in Slovak Television News. In *Communication Today*, 2016, Vol. 7., No. 2, pp. 78-89; HUDÍKOVÁ, Z., PRAVDOVÁ, H., BLAHÚT, D.: Post-Lockdown Metamorphoses of Television Culture. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 88-99.

² LOTZ, A.: *Media Disrupted: Surviving Pirates, Cannibals, and Streaming Wars*. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2021, p. 11.

(and with VCR, DVD and Blu-Ray technologies as well). Specific types of VOD, namely SVOD (subscription video-on-demand), AVOD (advertising-supported video-on-demand) and TVOD (transaction video-on-demand, more commonly known as pay-per-view) fail to explain how globally available IDTV services truly work, as some of these platforms or their cheaper subscription plans may include advertising (AVOD) and others tend to offer particular shows, programmes or films not included in subscription, charging additional access fees (TVOD). OTT (over-the-top television), another term for Internet-distributed television, emerged in 2005, but was uncommon until 2010³. It is necessary to point out that this expression, here referring to cord-cutting and wireless communication, also means “extreme”, “too demanding”, “excessive”, and thus bears multiple negative connotations. Thus, “Internet-distributed television” seems to be the only neutral and general term defining the phenomenon in question.

The aim of the study is to explore the theoretical framework of the given problem, i.e., to define the concepts of “mini-serial” (or “limited series”) and “taboo”. We work

with the assumption that mini-series are, given their narrative complexity, target audiences and formal structure, able to portray a wide range of taboo topics. The third chapter of the study offers a series of small-scale case studies focused on selected mini-series and their thematic and discursive particularities. The purpose of doing so is to explain the current representations of taboo topics within the mentioned type of media production.

1 The Mini-Serial and Its Rise to Global Popularity

Today, mini-series obviously attract the attention of the audience, which also means that their production advances both qualitatively and quantitatively and is thus capable of fulfilling the economic intentions and artistic ambitions of their creators. The general definition of this short-form television drama is based on our general understanding of “serials”. According to Douglas, a serial is any drama whose story continues throughout several episodes. The main characters develop over time⁴. This kind of (in our case audio-visual) work is released and/or broadcast during a certain time interval and consists of episodes⁵. The main characters

do not change too often, and there are relatively few of them (compared to, for example, films). In contrast, the supporting characters do change and their purpose is to differentiate a certain plotline from the previous ones, despite the fact that the essence of the whole narrative remains unchanged⁶. Kaminsky and Mahan claim that mini-series are serialised television dramas divided into episodes and present continuous storytelling. This genre is also considered suitable for adapting literary works, and the authorship component is a very important part of its production⁷. The problem of distinguishing between mini-series and other kinds of serialised television drama is addressed by Dunleavy. In terms of British television, short-form dramas, which are (and have been) able to successfully challenge established conceptual, generic and narrative conventions, are called “mini-series”. They have been the key format for individually authored British TV dramas since the 1980s. Being a high-end form, the mini-serial can be distinguished by “its paucity of episodes and historic confinement to one season”. However, American producers tend to label this form “the mini-series” instead⁸. This terminological

3 LOTZ, A.: *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*. Ann Arbor, MI : Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2017. [online]. [2023-02-11]. Available at: <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpu-b9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>>.

4 DOUGLAS, P.: *Writing the TV Drama Series: How to Succeed as Professional Writer in TV*. California : Studio City, Michael Wiese Productions, 2014, p. 16.

5 MRLIAN, R. et al.: *Encyklopédia dramatického umení Slovenska 2*. Bratislava : Veda, 1990, p. 308.

6 ECO, U.: *Meze interpretace*. Prague : Karolinum, 2005, p. 96.

7 KAMINSKY, S. M., MAHAN, J. H.: *American Television Genres*. Chicago : Nelson-Hall, 1985, p. 35.

8 DUNLEAVY, T.: *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2018, p. 73.

chaos is further complicated by the fact that The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, the non-profit organisation which represents the advancement of the television industry in the United States and presents the Primetime Emmy Awards, probably the most prestigious television awards in the world, basically does not differentiate between limited series, mini-series/mini-series and anthologies: “*Limited Series is defined as a program with two (2) or more episodes with a total running time of at least 150 program minutes that tells a complete, non-recurring story. The story arc must be completely resolved within its season, with no on-going storyline and/or main characters in subsequent seasons*”⁹. According to Davies, it is no surprise that “mini-series” or “limited series” (the preferred term in the U.S.) have gained their current popularity specifically in this highly competitive age of digital streaming; our attention spans are ever-shorter, and self-contained narratives – whether 3 or 12 episodes long – are often seen as better options “when compared with hasty one-offs or eight-series fantasy epics, which might end in disappointment”¹⁰. The

9 Primetime Emmy Awards: Rules & Procedures 2022 – 2023. [online]. [2023-02-11]. Available at: <<https://www.emmys.com/sites/default/files/Downloads/2023-rules-procedures-v2a.pdf?bust=230228>>.

10 DAVIES, H. J.: *Less! Less! Less!: How the Miniseries Took over TV*. [online]. [2023-02-11]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/02/less-less-less-how-the-miniseries-took-over-tv>>.

fact that The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences does not separate limited series from anthologies actually makes sense, because some of the most successful mini-series have later become serials (for example, the first season of *Big Little Lies*, 2017, produced by HBO and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, originally designed as a mini-serial, but later expanded by a second season based on its immense success and critical acclaim) or anthologies – we may mention *True Detective* (since 2014, created by Nic Pizzolatto, HBO, the first season directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga) where the individual seasons are linked by the main idea that being a detective and solving the worst crimes is a job which destroys families, damages relationships and endangers one’s mental health. Davies explains: “*The miniseries, then, perhaps cynically, could be seen as the ultimate win/win for broadcasters; if a show is a hit, it can be extended without any prior commitment, while, if it fails, there are no further decisions to be taken*”¹¹. Bataille points out that prestige television dramas have explored the anthology format quite successfully; each season tells a different story unfolding around a new set of characters. Being conceived as very long films, all distinctive seasons of

11 DAVIES, H. J.: *Less! Less! Less!: How the Miniseries Took over TV*. [online]. [2023-02-11]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/02/less-less-less-how-the-miniseries-took-over-tv>>.

these television shows usually acknowledge their own narrative hybridity based on combining cinematic visuals and serialised storytelling¹². In other words, there might always be enough creative space to change mini-series into serials or anthologies, but only when their audiences are interested enough.

Each mini-serial presents a complete, autonomous, dramatized story containing a plot that is usually resolved at the end of the storyline¹³. This plot usually needs more time and space than a feature film is able to deliver, but the storyline still does not need to be spread over multiple seasons¹⁴. Despite the predetermined (and thus limited) number of episodes the mini-serial contains, the average demand for this type of television has been steadily increasing since 2018. In January 2018, the average demand for mini-series was only about half in comparison with long-form serials. However, in 2020, the average demand targeting mini-series was slightly higher than in case of ‘regular’ serials consisting of multiple seasons. While these figures only suggest that the popularity of the mini-serial allows

12 BATAILLE, S.: *Fargo (FX, 2014-) and Cinema: Just Like in the Movie?* In HUDELET, A., CRÉMIEUX, A. (eds.): *Exploring Seriality on Screen: Audiovisual Narratives in Film and Television*. Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2021, pp. 159, 172-173.

13 *Mini-Series Definition*. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/mini-series>>.

14 *The Black List. Television Format & Style Standards*. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <https://blcklst.com/help/tv_script_standards.pdf>.

the format to compete against long-form television dramas, this increase in relative popularity is actually significant, showing how much attention these limited series have gained in recent years, along with fans and mainstream acceptance¹⁵. Currently, the mini-serial can be considered as one of the most important types of products offered by Internet-distributed television. There is a clear difference between producing 'regular' serials and mini-serials. However, both serials and mini-serials share some characteristics as well. According to Tušer, the introduction should be designed to familiarise the recipient with the key topic, main conflict and establishment of essential characters. Subsequently, there should be an escalation of the plot. Thus, the conflict influencing the fate of the characters is intensified and complemented by secondary, supplementary plotlines. The tension slowly rises and during the climax, the fate of the characters is fulfilled. In addition, we can often see a hint of a plot twist here; later the pace of the story begins to slow down, as a consequence of what happened in the previous phases of the serialised narrative. In the season finale, the story (or its important part) is gradually finalised. The end of the narrative consists of the last moment, the conclusion and a thought stimulus, which indicates the possible

future development of the work in question¹⁶. In case of serials, this future development lies in creating the next episodes and seasons following the progressing narrative. In contrast, mini-serials (if they are successful enough) might expand the original – already finalised – story, e.g., in terms of an anthology presenting different characters, environments and conflicts, but the same idea and message. Mini-serials utilise narrative complexity, understood by Mittell as a poetic and structural organisation of a televised story which “*redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*”, often merging episodic and serial forms and thus rejecting the need for plot closure present in each episode following conventional episodic form known from police and medical TV shows. Narrative complexity thus represents a number of ongoing television stories regardless of the TV dramas' genre determination. Mini-serials work with cumulative narratives that build and unveil over time, expanding individual plotlines and personal fates to make the drama more appealing, rich in conflict and driven by complex, attractive and diverse characters¹⁷. Creeber explains, however, that since television drama has become more complex, the increased serialisation makes it quite difficult

to clearly distinguish between the series, serial and mini-serial/mini-series. The storylines within a serial are usually carried over from one instalment (episode) to another, which is why serials are also referred to as “cumulative narratives” or “arch shows”. The finite serial (i.e., mini-series or mini-serial) has been linked with less formulaic television drama. Having an inbuilt narrative arch, this type of story offers its characters and storylines more room to change, evolve and develop. This has given the genre “*a reputation for frequently producing innovative, challenging and hugely popular drama*”. Television dramas with a limited number of episodes also tend to “*encourage intense audience involvement through the use of multi-narrative cumulative storylines*” by utilising conventional cliff-hangers. They are occasionally promoted around the name of a single creator, “*delivering the prestige of authorship seldom attributed to the series or soap opera*”. The finite serial form works especially well in terms of adapting classic literary masterpieces, allowing the genre to acquire both large audiences and critical acclaim. It is also successful in terms of dramatizing large historical narratives. All types of mini-serials seem to be able to present complex issues and provide stylistic innovation which the series or continual serials cannot due to their

15 Exploring Opportunities for Miniseries. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://www.parrotanalytics.com/insights/miniseries-opportunities/>>.

16 TUŠER, A.: *Praktikum mediálnej tvorby*. Bratislava : Eurokódex, 2010, p. 250.

17 MITTELL, J.: *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York, London : New York University Press, 2015, p. 18.

nature and long-form structure¹⁸. The position of *auteur*-director seems to be the most prestigious one here, which is obvious in the case of Sally Wainwright and her creative achievements related to the long-form British crime drama *Happy Valley* (2014 – 2023, BBC) and her most recent television project, *Gentleman Jack* (2019 – 2022, HBO), originally designed as a mini-serial, but then expanded by a second season. Wainwright's success is even more impressive given the fact that very few female creatives have assumed the role of *auteur*-director.

2 Taboo Topics in Terms of Consuming Television Drama

The problem of understanding the term “taboo” is quite extensive and needs to be studied continuously, in the context of heterogeneous cultural communities. In the early 20th century, taboo became an important field of study in terms of various scientific disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, and later media and communication studies. The term usually refers to something forbidden or sacred. It is a system of magical, religious prohibitions to perform certain activities, the violation of which is followed by a certain type of punishment¹⁹. It is also associated with persons,

places, objects or situations that are carriers or sources of some mysterious features; at the same time, these features are dangerous or forbidden²⁰. Crystal argues that taboo subjects are those people avoid in polite society because they are either considered harmful, or embarrassing, or offensive. This category also includes blasphemy, obscene acts or vulgar words²¹. Taboo is usually seen as an unspoken social custom or a certain emotional aversion that individuals try to avoid. This term includes all activities and ideological attitudes that are widely rejected in a certain social space²². Luurs further explains this problem: “*Contemporarily, taboos function to control our communicative behaviours by defining appropriate, allowed, and polite topics of conversation. We establish those rules at the micro, meso, and macro levels and leverage those rules across the various systems in which we partake*”.

Though they are not explicitly taboo, we tend to associate stigmatised topics with difficult conversations and unspeakable words²³. However, the mentioned phenomenon is understood differently within individual cultures, and therefore what is acceptable for one society is marked as something unimaginable in another. In contrast, many taboo phenomena can be considered universal since they occur in almost all cultural frameworks (e.g., murder, incest, cannibalism, open displays of sexual behaviour, etc.).

There is, however, a difference between understanding what is forbidden and repulsive and communicating about it. As noted by Krajewski and Schröder, subjects such as sexual abuse or incest need to “*remain action taboos but not communication taboos*”. In fact, social conventions related to avoiding communication about these topics may even enhance the possibilities for them to take place and/or remain undetected and therefore unpunished. That is why it is important to explore taboo topics via television dramas, as “*it may actually help facilitate communication about taboo topics in real life*”. Media audiences certainly tend to discuss stories and conflicts seen on television just like real events. However, TV dramas are, in most cases, mere fiction, which makes it somewhat

18 See also: CREEBER, G.: *The Mini-Series*. In CREEBER, G. (ed.): *The Television Genre Book*. London : British Film Institute, 2001, pp. 35-38.

19 *Ilustrovaná encyklopedie A-Ž*. Prague : Encyklopedický dům, 1995, p. 255.

20 FREUD, S.: *Totem a tabu; Vtip a jeho vztah k nevědomí: Teoretická část*. Prague : Práh, 1991, p. 24.

21 CRYSTAL, D.: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 45; Remark by the authors: Bednarek notes that when scholarly literature addresses swear words used on television, these are often labelled as “profanity”, “bad language”, “expletives”, “curse/cuss words” or even “taboo words”, which makes it harder to understand what the term “taboo” means in relation to television dramas. In any case, studying taboo language (swear words) used in contemporary television dramas significantly differs from reflecting on the ways taboo topics are portrayed in them. Source: BEDNAREK, M.: *The Multifunctionality of Swear/Taboo Words in Television Series*. In MACKENZIE, J. L., ALBA-JUEZ, L. (eds.): *Emotion in Discourse*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, p. 30.

22 *Taboo Meaning: Here's What It Means and How to Use It*. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <https://thewordcounter.com/taboo-meaning-heres-what-it-means-and-how-to-use-it/>.

23 LUURS, G.: Preface. In LUURS, G. (ed.): *Handbook of Research on Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics*. Hershey, PA : IGI Global, 2022, p. XX.

'safer' to symbolically experience and encounter taboo topics present in these stories²⁴. This symbolic experience is rather unpleasant, but might be cautionary or educational instead.

There are numerous items (objects, situations, expressions, actions, etc.) that are perceived as taboo. These include abortion (a deliberate termination of pregnancy); addiction (being addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, etc.); adultery (especially in terms of marriage); bestiality (sexual intercourse involving a human being and an animal); cannibalism (a person consuming other person's flesh or their body parts); incest (a sexual relationship between close relatives, this 'closeness' being interpreted variously in different cultures); infanticide (murdering an infant); murder (taking someone else's life violently and intentionally); paedophilia (being sexually interested in minors); necrophilia (sexual intercourse with human remains); polygamy (having more than one spouse at the same time); pornography (production and consumption of explicit content portraying people engaging in various sexual activities); racism (intolerance and hatred targeting people with different complexion, skin colour); sexism (hostile behaviour targeting people of different gender/sex, seeing them

as inferior in diverse contexts); slavery (treating people like goods and products; imprisoning them with intent to forcing them to work without any salary); prostitution/soliciting (having sexual intercourse in exchange for money or other kinds of valuable items); many other publicly stigmatised, religious or cultural topics – masturbation, homosexuality, etc.)²⁵. Nevertheless, the media often explicitly represent taboo topics, and Paľa even sees them as means of overcoming taboo²⁶, since taboo topics have become sources of inspiration in terms of creating heterogenous media content, in our case mini-series. Krajewski and Schröder claim that the degree of directness plays an important role in terms of discussing taboo topics via media communication; they might be addressed openly (explicit taboo), suggested (implicit taboo), or completely avoided (avoided taboo). In general, most attention (and often controversy as well) is usually assured by choosing taboo topics deliberately and communicating them straightforwardly²⁷. Tipton claims that in terms of television, the most problematic taboo topics include using condoms, exposed male

genitals (and referring to their size), masturbation, gender reassignment surgery and homosexuality²⁸. Bignell follows a similar line of thought, stating that some highly disturbing and/or inappropriate topics remain prohibited in the television depictions of human sexuality – the representation of erect penises and the representation of sexual behaviour involving children. The latter taboo is unquestionable, since any portrayals of children as objects of sexual desire for adults would be seen as repulsive by audiences and would and should be subject to criminal prosecution. In contrast, however, "the eroticised, youthful body has become a commodity for the attraction of youth audiences, and also a source of titillation for the older viewer". In other words, many television stories that depict sexual behaviour and intimacy represent either teenagers or young adults in a quite explicit manner²⁹. We may mention the prestige television drama *Euphoria* (since 2019, created by Sam Levinson, HBO) which portrays personal struggles, mental problems and conflicts involving teenagers, young adults and their parents, including addictions, sexual violence, pornography, homosexuality, transgender persons, etc.

The following part of the study

25 GORMANDY WHITE, M.: *Examples of Taboos in Societies around the World*. [online]. [2023-03-07]. Available at: <<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-taboo.html>>.

26 PAĽA, G.: *Masmediálna komunikácia – skriptá*. Prešov : University of Prešov, 2010, pp. 60-61.

27 KRAJEWSKI, S., SCHRÖDER, H.: Silence and Taboo. In ANTOS, G., VENTOLA, E., WEBER, T. (eds.): *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. Berlin : Walter de Gruyter, 2008, p. 608.

28 TIPTON, N. G.: American Television: Talk Shows. In SUMMERS, C. J. (ed.): *The Queer Encyclopedia of Film and Television*. San Francisco : Cleis Press, 2005, p. 26.

29 BIGNELL, J.: *An Introduction to Television Studies*. 2nd Edition. Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2008, pp. 253-254.

24 KRAJEWSKI, S., SCHRÖDER, H.: Silence and Taboo. In ANTOS, G., VENTOLA, E., WEBER, T. (eds.): *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. Berlin : Walter de Gruyter, 2008, p. 610.

focuses its attention on the current (and successful) mini-series and their ability to represent various taboo topics apparently interesting to and/or sought by the audiences of IDTV. Taking a closer look at some of these television dramas, our ambition is to clarify the presence and nature of the 'taboo phenomenon' in this type of audio-visual content.

3 Mini-Series Portraying Taboo Topics

Regarding taboo topics in contemporary mini-series, one of the most frequently reflected (and thus most obvious) would be homosexuality and other kinds of sexual behaviour falling outside the heterosexual mainstream or the gender binary. Hart claims: "(...) like other kinds of subject matter that have at one time or another been culturally regarded as controversial or taboo, regular exposure to a range of boundary-pushing televisual representations of queerness in its various forms can result in this historically sensitive subject matter becoming easier for audience members to encounter, accept, and no longer feel threatened by"³⁰. Thus, it is presumed that portraying queerness on the small(er) screen might lead to its wider acceptance, especially when specific mini-

series acquire critical acclaim and are able to attract the audience's attention. We may mention *Queer as Folk* (1999 – 2000, Channel 4), a popular, daring and cleverly written British drama portraying explicit sexual encounters which involve a teenaged boy (Charlie Hunnam) and a much older, experienced man (Aidan Gillen). However, one of the most remarkable limited series portraying homosexuality is *Angels in America* (2003, directed by Mike Nichols, HBO). Tipton sees this critically acclaimed television drama as a significant achievement in representing sexual minorities, acknowledging the fact that it "featured an all-star cast including Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, and Al Pacino"³¹. *Angels in America* is a complex story that represents a variety of topics – Reagan era politics, the spreading AIDS epidemic, and a rapidly changing social and political climate. In contrast, the previously mentioned British version of *Queer as Folk* has been criticised precisely for not addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Johnson acknowledges that "television narratives have a long way in terms of talking about sex". Even though television audiences are often confronted with images of strangers having casual sex or explicit (predominantly female) nudity in general, dramatized portrayals of HIV and protected

sexual intercourse (i.e., condoms) remain to be afeard and taboo. In other words: "Regardless of how realistic a show is, or how similar a viewer is to the character one fact remains, talking about the prevention of HIV and STDs is perceived as a taboo topic"³². Nevertheless, *Angels in America* can be seen as a welcome exception,³³ along with the British mini-serial *It's a Sin* depicting the lives of a group of gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United Kingdom. It is relevant to note that Olly Alexander, the actor portraying one of the main characters, is also the lead singer of the band *Years & Years* that released a cover of the song *It's a Sin*, originally performed by the *Pet Shop Boys*, in order to promote the mini-serial.

Another taboo topic addressed quite often is young women facing adversity, sexual, psychological and physical abuse or their own insecurities and mental problems. For example, HBO delivers a complex portrait of a female detective named Mare Sheehan (Kate Winslet) in *Mare of Easttown* (2021, directed by Craig Zobel, HBO). While helping local people with somewhat mundane trouble and later solving serious cases

30 HART, K.-P. R.: Introduction. In HART, K.-P. R. (ed.): *Queer TV in the 21st Century: Essays on Broadcasting from Taboo to Acceptance*. Jefferson : McFarland & Company, 2019, p. 6.

31 TIPTON, N. G.: American Television: Drama. In SUMMERS, C. J. (ed.): *The Queer Encyclopedia of Film and Television*. San Francisco : Cleis Press, 2005, p. 9.

32 JOHNSON, M. A.: *HIV on TV: Popular Culture's Epidemic*. Lanham : Lexington Books, 2018, p. 139.

33 Remark by the authors: We may also mention the TV movie *Normal Heart* (2014, directed by Ryan Murphy, HBO) which, however, is not a mini-serial. A rather stylised, spectacular representation of the same topic is also present in the limited series *Halston* (2021, Netflix) which portrays the legendary fashion designer's life, career and personal struggles.

such as murder and disappearance (abduction), Mare's story uncovers her complicated personal relationships and traumas. The narrative involves a non-stylised portrait of this scruffy middle-aged mother, grandmother, daughter and divorcee. Her seemingly strong personality (associated with her occupation) is confronted with sadness and inner suffering; she lives with her stubborn, aging mother (Jean Smart), taking care of her adolescent lesbian daughter (Angourie Rice) and half-orphaned, mentally disadvantaged grandson³⁴. Combining another taboo topic related to female characters with images of physical and mental abuse, *Sharp Objects* (2018, directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, HBO) introduces a nervous, frantic young journalist Camille Preaker (Amy Adams). Returning to her home town, Camille aims to write reports on unsolved disappearances/ murders of local teenaged girls. As she re-joins this tight-knit Southern 'aristocratic' community, the main character experiences once again her traumatic memories, starting to binge-drink and harm herself like she used to years before. Camille's fears, anxieties and flashbacks are, quite literally, 'written' (carved) all over her skin, which is obvious when she tentatively establishes an intimate relationship with detective

Richard Willis (Chris Messina). However, the story is dominated by women; the unpredictable, often drunk Camille, her passively aggressive, deviant mother (Patricia Clarkson) and naïve, childish sister (Eliza Scanlen).

Unbelievable (2019, Netflix) offers explicit manifestations of sexist and sexually violent behaviour towards women based on real events. Eighteen-year-old Marie (Kaitlyn Dever) reports to the police that an unknown man broke into her room one night and raped her. However, the sexist attitudes of the detectives initially dealing with Marie's case result in the protagonist's serious doubts about what truly happened, worsening her mental health and trauma. The topic of sexual violence targeting women is merged with the peripheral theme of secondary victimisation and male characters refusing to acknowledge the crime's existence; the only ones who trust Marie's testimony are female detectives Karen Duvall (Merritt Wever) and Grace Rasmussen (Toni Collette).

A similar message is present in BBC/HBO's project *I May Destroy You* (2020, directed by Sam Miller, Michaela Coel) that addresses the uneasy question of sexual consent and the ways it is discussed in contemporary society. The characters thus represent various pitfalls of today's casual dating and intimate relationships, e.g., our apparent inability to understand the difference between sexual liberation and exploitation of women. The main character of Arabella (Michaela Coel), a former Twitter influencer,

is portrayed as an epitome of the Millennial generation experiencing sexual violence, something she used to think would never happen to her. Portraying the consequences of an abusive relationship, the mini-serial *Maid* (2021, Netflix) focuses on a variety of taboo topics, including a young mother's struggle to provide for her child while working as a cleaner and living in a shelter along with other abused women. Alex (Margaret Qualley) thus represents discourse better known from British social dramas, facing absurd bureaucracy and indifferent authorities, her own problematic family unable to help and repeated attacks initiated by her ex-partner. Another taboo topic we would like to mention is depicting serial killers and other types of criminals (and their despicable crimes), especially stories and characters represented in an attractive, rather likeable manner. According to Robinson, our perverse familiarity with serial killers has increased exponentially since 9/11, i.e., the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11th September 2001. Prior to 9/11, serial killers were presented by film and television as cultural boogymen, "representing societal fears and anxieties". Replaced by the foreign terrorist as the primary source of fear in the U.S., the (audio-visually portrayed) serial killer has started to serve as a nostalgic representation of 'All-American' identity; most televised serial killers are "white, male, charming, physically fit, heterosexual, and coming from a Judeo-Christian background". Becoming morally flawed

34 Remark by the authors: The boy's father (Mare's late son) was mentally ill and committed suicide. His partner, the child's birth mother, is addicted to drugs and mentally unstable as well, thus incompetent to take care of her son.

protagonists instead of villainous antagonists, serial killers might still be viewed as personifications of misogyny and evil, but they also represent the same cultural worldview and religious identity as mainstream television audiences instead of foreign Otherness³⁵. Such TV narratives are currently quite popular. This applies to *Netflix's* hit mini-serial *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022, created by Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan). Jeffrey Dahmer is globally known as a convicted and executed sexual deviant, the killer who murdered 17 young men (most of them were African-American, which implies traits of racism as well). The limited series explicitly portrays Dahmer's homosexuality, along with a number of his deviations, including necrophilia and cannibalism. However, the drama also acknowledges Dahmer's pathological childhood and upbringing (autopsies of animals as a way of spending leisure time with his father, his mentally ill mother, alcoholism running in the family, etc.). This leads to a paradoxical phenomenon – many viewers, women included, may try to 'understand', seeing the main character (usually played by an attractive, charismatic actor) as a victim, a product of a dysfunctional family background. The drama thus

successfully follows other serialised television stories depicting serial killers such as *Dexter* (2006 – 2013, *Showtime*), *Hannibal* (2013 – 2015, *NBC*) or *The Fall* (2013 – 2016, *BBC*). A similar concept is present in the drama *Escape at Dannemora* (2018, directed by Ben Stiller, *Showtime*) that is based on true events. The story depicts two convicted murderers (Benicio del Toro and Paul Dano) as they manipulate a married woman nicknamed 'Tilly' working in the prison facility (Patricia Arquette). Appealing to Tilly's naivety and peculiar sexual appetite, the prisoners convince her to help them escape, which ruins her marriage and life. This might qualify as a manifestation of hybristophilia, a deviation based on expressing sexual interest towards persons who commit crimes.

Multiple critically acclaimed mini-series present people being falsely accused of serious crimes. It is necessary to mention *The Night Of* (2016, *HBO*), a fictitious story of Nasir 'Naz' Khan (Riz Ahmed), a naïve Pakistani-American college student accused of murdering a young woman he spent a night with. The narrative involves prejudice regarding Naz's descent and family, as well as horrible depictions of a young prisoner being raped by an inmate and then committing suicide. The drama also involves Naz's defence lawyer, John Stone (John Torturro), a skilled cynic suffering from eczema that affects his feet, making him wear sandals instead of shoes. When proven innocent, the main character, now a drug addict, returns to his family, having no

future.

Another variation of merging racism and false accusations is portrayed in *When They See Us* (2019, directed by Ava DuVernay, *Netflix*). The limited series focuses on tragic true events related to the rape and assault of a white woman, exploring the lives of five black or Latino boys who were accused of these crimes and convicted despite lack of evidence and reasonable doubt, mostly on the basis of their skin colour and the authorities' effort to solve this closely watched case at any cost. The story includes their struggle to prove they are innocent and images of some of them spending most of their prison time in isolation cells or facing repeated racist assaults by fellow inmates and prison guards.

Taboo topics included in the short-form TV drama necessarily involve teenagers and young adults exploring their sexuality, intimacy and serious issues associated with coming-of-age, some of them in a rather subtle manner, others quite

35 ROBINSON, B. A. B.: Introduction: From Shadows to Our Living Rooms. In ROBINSON, B. A. B., DAIGLE, C. (eds.): *Serial Killers in Contemporary Television: Familiar Monsters in Post-9/11 Culture*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-3.

explicitly³⁶. Presenting an intimate relationship involving an intelligent, yet shy and awkward girl Marianne (Daisy Edgar-Jones) and a popular, skilled athlete and student Connell (Paul Mescal), *Normal People* (2020, BBC) focuses on two young people with different social standing. While Marianne's widowed mother is first depicted as dismissive and cold, the viewer later finds out this family's problems can be traced back to the girl's deceased father, a domestic abuser. It is obvious that Marianne's brother is abusive as well. In contrast, Connell's mother is single, poor and works for Marianne's mother as a house cleaner. The story tells a lot about how young adults see and (mis)understand each other, struggling to articulate their feelings and facing social pressures and own anxieties.

A more explicit, even controversial approach to these topics is obvious in the case of *We Are Who We Are* (2020, directed by Luca

Guadagnino, HBO). The narrative offers a portrayal of a happily married lesbian couple (played by Chloë Sevigny and Alice Braga). These women are affiliated with the U.S. military and stationed in Italy. The story primarily follows the couple's adolescent son, Fraser (Jack Dylan Grazer) and his friend Caitlin or rather 'Harper' (Jordan Kristine Seamón) who seems to be a self-confident and outspoken girl; however, she is struggling with her gender identity. Merging Italian culture and American values, the narrative reacts to the meaning of true friendship, show what first love feels like and underlines the importance of establishing one's identity.

Conclusion

Today's television dramas, specifically audio-visual products provided by Internet-distributed television, are fully adapted to the needs of the mainstream viewer. Their producers seem to prefer themes, plots or ideas that clearly resonate in the hypermodern social and cultural environment. Gray and Lotz emphasise that studying television (including serialised TV dramas) always means examining "the operation of identity, power, authority, meaning, community, politics, education, play, and countless other issues", television itself being "an important prism through which these issues are

shared"³⁷. In other words, popular mini-series necessarily reflect and represent everyday reality. In terms of short-form TV drama, taboo topics seem to be addressed quite often. The given phenomenon includes a wide spectrum of 'forbidden', cruel or controversial activities and ideas which, despite their general social rejection, are literally preferred and sought by television audiences interested in IDTV.

According to Henderson, the question of what audiences take away from their viewing experience (e.g., an opportunity to explore meanings and memories) is inherently associated with television fiction's influence on our understanding of traditionally taboo topics. On the other hand, audiences are never isolated from wider social and cultural contexts; the ways we perceive televised taboo topics are inevitably confronted with what we have already known, seen and experienced³⁸. The mini-serial (or limited series) seems to be quite successful in terms of portraying taboo topics, often achieving both critical acclaim and global popularity. Bignell and Woods explain: "The shorter run of these high-end serials – six to ten episodes – enables high budgets and production values". These television

36 Remark by the authors: Long-form television dramas have explored these topics as well. We may mention *13 Reasons Why* (2017 – 2020, Netflix), a TV drama following the story of a teen-aged girl named Hannah (Catherine Langford) who committed suicide and had recorded 13 cassette tapes explaining why she did so prior to killing herself. Mentioning various peers who had affected Hannah's life and their deteriorating mental health, the tapes offer a ruthless depiction of an American high school plagued by bullying, sexual abuse, hatred and gun violence. Even more explicit and complex variations of similar taboo topics are present in *Euphoria* (since 2019, HBO), a drama centred on a young drug addict named Rue (Zendaya) who is surrounded by a plethora of confusing events and people with pathological character traits (a young, abusive football player not hesitating to blackmail a schoolmate to protect his own deviant father who sexually violates and exploits underaged people; a teenaged girl earning money as a webcam prostitute; a transgender person seeking casual sex; an awkward and violent, yet strangely sensitive young drug dealer, etc.).

37 GRAY, J., LOTZ, A.: *Television Studies*. Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA : Polity Press, 2012, p. 22.

38 HENDERSON, L.: *Social Issues in Television Fiction*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 178.

dramas are typically 'authored' serials which are well-known for their creative ambitions and sophisticated storytelling. Moreover, "the prestige status and shorter commitment to a project (compared to the three to seven years required for a multi-season series)" attracts high profile actresses and actors, along with critically acclaimed creative personalities³⁹. This means that complex characters needed to personalise and thoroughly explore taboo topics are often played by elite actresses and actors (for example, Meryl Streep, Toni Collette, Kate Winslet, Amy Adams, Al Pacino, Benicio del Toro, Paul Dano) who do not see these shorter commitments as endeavours that may complicate their careers in Hollywood. The same seems to be true regarding writers/directors (Mike Nichols, the late Jean-Marc Vallée, Ryan Murphy, Ava DuVernay or Sally Wainwright). According to Dunleavy, these serial stories are conflict-riven, portraying morally and psychologically complex primary characters. Their content is more explicit than is possible for American broadcast dramas which are economically reliant on advertising revenues⁴⁰. This also means that most of them aim to engage the attention of mature, more demanding and economically

active, sometimes *niche* audiences. Bignell and Woods claim that high-end television dramas bear "a distinct visual style and sophisticated, beautiful, carefully considered compositions". Labelling a television drama as 'cinematic' and 'a ten-hour movie' (which is frequently used by creators moving over from the film industry) legitimises the drama as a work of art, but also fails to recognise that such a project cannot be separated from television, as it is still subject to serialisation⁴¹. According to Lynch, the production of high-value serial drama relies both on creativity intrinsic to the process and attracting the attention of target viewers based on their previous choices (or rather data acquired by algorithms). Many of the contemporary television dramas offered by IDTV providers excel at representing today's world, traumas, desires and volatile belief systems, which necessarily leads to depictions of taboo or controversial topics⁴². These include receptive, explicit and comprehensive portrayals of queerness, but also the consequences of leading reckless sex lives such as terminal illnesses and sexually transmitted diseases. Some of the most prominent taboo topics in today's limited series are inherently associated with female

characters and their struggles – such as a pragmatic middle-aged woman who is much more intelligent and efficient than her fellow (male) policemen, a young girl facing mockery and irony while doing everything in her power to prove that she was raped, a young mother working as a house cleaner and building her future after she leaves her abusive partner, or teenaged girls and boys facing adversity while striving to define and establish their identities. Topics such as sexual violence, self-harm, suicide and mental and/or physical abuse are depicted quite often and explicitly. These stories merge the given topics with various expressions of racism, sexism and gun violence. Their ability to 'mirror' the complex realities of hypermodern society is therefore quite extraordinary.

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39 BIGNELL, J., WOODS, F.: *An Introduction to Television Studies*. 4th Edition. Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2023, pp. 75-77.

40 DUNLEAVY, T.: *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2018, pp. 2, 5.

41 BIGNELL, J., WOODS, F.: *An Introduction to Television Studies*. 4th Edition. Abingdon, New York : Routledge, 2023, p. 291.

42 See: LYNCH, J.: *Between Habit and Thought in New TV Serial Drama: Serial Connections*. New York : Routledge, 2021.

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