

# ***Fidelity as Interseriality: The Challenges of Adapting the Québécois TV Series *Les Invincibles* for Broadcast in France***

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**ABSTRACT** This article takes a closer look at the processes of transcultural adaptation by focusing on the French-Canadian television series *Les Invincibles* (Radio-Canada, 2005), which was adapted for the French-German cultural channel ARTE in 2010. Based on recent developments in adaptation studies, the authors discuss the question of fidelity as interseriality on two adaptation levels: production process and the diegetic world. Their interest lies in how this example of a multi-faceted, hybrid format impacts upon representations of identities and cultural specificities when it comes to its transcultural adaptation. In-depth, semi-structured, and qualitative interviews with producers and screenwriters are discussed within a content analysis of the episodes as well as a semiotic reflection on aesthetics and narrative aspects.

**KEYWORDS** *Transcultural adaptation; Format; Television series; Interseriality*

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article propose une étude des processus d'adaptation transculturelle en se fondant sur l'analyse de la série québécoise *Les Invincibles* (Radio Canada, 2005), adaptée pour la chaîne franco-allemande ARTE en 2010. À l'appui des travaux récents dans les domaines des adaptation studies, nous discutons la question de la fidélité en tant qu'intersérialité sur deux niveaux d'adaptation: le processus de production ainsi que l'univers diégetique. Notre analyse porte sur les multiples facettes d'un format hybride et ses répercussions sur les représentations des identités et spécificités culturelles au moment de son adaptation transculturelle. Des entretiens semi-directifs et qualitatifs approfondis avec les producteurs et scénaristes sont confrontés à une analyse de contenu des épisodes ainsi qu'à une réflexion sémiotique sur les aspects esthétiques et narratifs.

**MOTS CLÉS** *Adaptation transculturelle; Format; Série télévisée; Intersérialité*

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## Introduction

Written and directed by François Létourneau and Jean-François Rivard, and broadcast from 2005 to 2009 (Radio-Canada), *Les Invincibles* follows the adventures of four main protagonists wrestling with turning 30. The television series, navigating between situation comedy and drama, opens with a pact signed by close friends Steve, Pierre-Antoine, Carlos, and Rémi (respectively Vince, FX, Hassan, and Mano in the European version). They decide to break up simultaneously with their current girlfriends. This decision introduces a new and apparently free life for all of them; but of course the first complications appear immediately with the implicit and explicit clauses of the pact. Rémi, the musician, cannot split up with his girlfriend because she breaks up with him a few minutes before the beginning of the pact. Steve, the sexual addict, announces his decision to Kathleen in a hospital where her grandmother is passing away. Carlos, dominated by his partner Lynne, remains silent and does not split up with her while pretending the contrary to his friends. Only Pierre-Antoine, the initiator of the project, seems to overcome all obstacles in the beginning of the show. But this new freedom will not last as their ex-girlfriends seek revenge. With plot points ranging from relationship problems to existential questions, the series is based on a “typical Québécois hybrid format” (Huet & Rao, 2012): traditional fictional narrative threads are interwoven with comic strips. Carlos transfers their situation to the virtual world by secretly drawing non-animated comics retelling the pact in a more liberated way. Fake documentary (“mockumentary”) interviews are also introduced. Most of the time sitting on a sofa or chair and talking to an invisible interviewer, the four friends depict the story from a meta-perspective, as if they were explaining their pact scientifically. Witnessing the popularity of the concept and the success of the Québécois show, the production company MakingProd, based in Paris, wished to make a French version. It was then the French-German channel ARTE decided to produce it: *Les Invincibles* was given a second lease on life in 2010 on French and German screens.

Some scholars have already undertaken an exhaustive analysis of *Les Invincibles*, mainly in regard to aesthetics, semiotics, and intertextuality (Binette, 2013; Boisvert, 2013). The reflective comparison of Huet and Rao (2012) between the original and its adaptation entails an analytical perspective of narrative and cultural aspects as well as the juridical contexts of production and reception in correlation with Québécois series in general. However, by mostly referring to press interviews with the producers/screenwriters and to Barrette’s (2008a) exchanges with Québécois producers and screenwriters, Huet and Rao did not meet the team themselves in order to confront them directly regarding their comparative analysis of the two shows. As a consequence, their analysis remains too isolated from the initial adaptation and creative process.

This article aims to fill this gap by re-engaging with the initial production process of the adaptation and by foregrounding the players of the adaptation and those of the original. Current interrogations and concepts of adaptation studies are the backbone of the content and semiotic analysis as well as of the interviews conducted with the producers and screenwriters of both versions. The article is divided into four sections. It first asks what makes *Les Invincibles* special in contrast to other transcultural adaptations or remakes. It then explores the necessary methodological and theoretical ap-

proaches required to analyze the new version of the show and its adaptation process. Further, after having introduced the notion of *interseriality*, the article reflects on questions to do with the format and likewise the content of *Les Invincibles*. Central to the examination are the power relations during the production period and their influence on narrative and aesthetic choices for the adaptation.

### ***Les Invincibles*: A very special transcultural adaptation**

As Moine (2007) states, the notions of adaptation and remake are often randomly employed, not only in the common vocabulary but also in scholarly works. The remake is initially a cinematographic Hollywood term referring to “the fabrication of a film on the basis of a film” (Moine, 2007, p. 6), and the term *adaptation* takes its meaning from other sources, such as the novel or the theatre play. Consequently, the fabrication of a TV series based on a TV series should then be labelled a remake. However, the designation is not as simple as it seems, because it is difficult to differentiate these terms, as they meet theoretical, practical, but also historical and cultural complexities. This article uses the term *adaptation* for mainly two reasons. During the interviews with the producers and screenwriters of the two versions, they did not mention the word “remake” at all. They used either the word “adaptation” or “transcultural adaptation.” This usage agrees then with what Gemzøe names a “transatlantic remake as cultural adaptation” (2013, p. 283). Even if both terms, remake and adaptation, are not the same, they overlap when it comes to reflecting on “the circulation of ideas, pictures and words” (Moine, 2007, p. 7).

Scholarly works on transcultural remakes and adaptations of TV formats (including TV series) and their circulation are well established (Bataille & Hatchuel, 2012; Beeden & De Bruin, 2010; Bourdon, 2012; Chalaby, 2012, 2015, 2016; Esser, 2016; Ferrari, 2010; Holdsworth, 2011; Moran, 2009a; Navarro, 2012). Also, during the past few years, Scandinavian TV series or films and their adaptations are the epicentre of research for many scholars who work on international format-travel (Gemzøe, 2013; Hochscherf & Philipsen, 2016; Perkins & Verevis, 2015; Waade, Nielsen, & Jensen, 2016). The Québécois TV series *Les Invincibles* seems to be part of this transportability of TV formats, referring to “a show that can generate a distinctive narrative and is licensed outside its country of origin in order to be adapted to local audiences” (Chalaby, 2012, p. 296). But even if *Les Invincibles* participates in this transnational and global phenomenon of shared TV formats (Chalaby, 2015; Moran, 2009b), its status is special.

First, *Les Invincibles* was not conceived as a product to travel, as Joanne Forgues (producer, Casablanca Productions) expressed during the interview. Second, the French-German channel ARTE is adding a complexity to the adaptation process, as the viewers are either living in France or Germany or in French- or German-speaking countries, watching the same show at the same time. It is interesting to see here that the Paris-based video production company Making Prod did not invite German producers to work with them on the project: only a synchronized version was broadcast in Germany, under the title *Die Vier* (*The Four*). This translation is probably related to two well-known elements of German pop culture—the Fantastic Four (a German hip-hop band) and *The Fantastic Adventures of 4 Friends* (a German audio drama of the 1960s)—but we could not verify this.

In the case of ARTE, the transcultural adaptation should ideally include two different cultures, the German and the French one, and even go further, as ARTE sees itself as a European channel. This is what makes this transcultural adaptation special: it is conceived for a channel that addresses two different or even more cultures and not only one country or language community. But as Huet and Rao (2012) state, the TV series keeps mainly a French touch, and even more than a touch. It is quite regional or locally oriented. This joins what Esser (2016) calls cultural essentialism; meaning that the nationalization of content and the national perception does not reflect cultural diversity within a country, consequently making the idea of a national audience questionable. The following analysis will therefore show how culture is articulated within the adaptation process by referring to Hepp's idea of *cultural articulation* (2009), taking into consideration the "national" and likewise the "universal" and "local" frame of cultural meanings of diversity. This consists of identifying the crossroads between the environment surrounding the production and directorial teams in conjunction with the audiovisual universe created in the two series. To achieve this, a double methodological and theoretical approach has been employed.

### **A methodological and theoretical approach to interseriality**

As highlighted by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2003), analysis of a television program should take into account the three entities of which it is made up, namely, the various stages between development, production/product, and reception. This article includes these three entities; however, research was not conducted on the concrete interpretation or reception of the show by journalists or a panel or focus groups of spectators. In this case, *reception* is understood as an anticipation of the imagined viewers by the screenwriters, the producers, and the channel ARTE. Concerning the conceptual and methodological framework in adaptation studies, the research integrated new transdisciplinary directions being undertaken in this field. Gjelsvik, Bruhn, and Hanssen (2013) name five analytical and theoretical clusters that currently dominate in adaptation studies: fidelity (similarity and difference), the opening to other media forms, the multi-level approach in contrast to one-to-one adaptations, the idea of a dialogical process in between the original and the adaptation, and finally the reflection on larger theoretical frameworks, as such intermediality.

With these different directions in mind, this analysis focuses mainly on the question of fidelity, the dialogical process, and intermediality. The French adaptation bears numerous audiovisual traces of the Québécois original, without distorting its appearance: "An adaption is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is [it] paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise" (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, p. 176). In the case of *Les Invincibles*, the interplay of intertextuality and intericonicity (Arrivé, 2015; Guillemette & Hébert, 2009; Samoyault, 2001) is significant. The combination of both, termed *interseriality* here, is the very special diegetic and aesthetic transposition from one screenplay to another within the same televisual genre.

There is no intention here to arbitrarily create a neologism. However, *interseriality* is not only about intertextual and intericonic relations between two versions;

it is also a question of what could be named triple fidelity. First, the exchanges of producers, screenwriters, and directors (dialogical form during the production process) in between the two versions precede the final product. Second, there is the structural and genre-specific dialogue: a television series is mainly characterized by different layers of seriality (Benassi, 1998; Engell, 2011; Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014); the seasons and episodes change the structural character of adaptations in contrast to other media forms. Third, the signs that are finally produced within this adaptation process reflect the serial and structural character as well as the production process. Considering these levels of fidelity, it becomes easier to consider the series production process and the final product, by thinking about both together, theoretically and methodologically.

The French version of *Les Invincibles* is therefore not simply an arbitrary “copy and paste” of the original, but an interserial product that relies on the articulation of the named fidelities. The adaptation can then be seen as an original re-creation bearing fidelity in form of resemblance and similarity, in the Peircean sense of those terms. In the case of *Les Invincibles*, the iconic resemblance with the original is both verbal and visual. It is this resemblance that forms the basis from which the latter version begins to create its own universe *via* the interserial interplay. In this sense, adaptation occurs in diagrammatic form: “A Diagram is a representamen which is predominantly an icon of relations and is aided to be so by conventions. ... It should be carried out upon a perfectly consistent system of representation, one founded upon a simple and easily intelligible basic idea” (Peirce, 1903). Two different diagrammatic forms are fundamental to the two versions of the series, the diagram as resemblance and the metaphor functioning as similarity. The first is found within the original creation: the passage from action shots to comic-book scenes. The diagrammatic aspect here arises from the relationship between the comic book and the filmed scene: do the animated scenes in *Les Invincibles* show clear links with the personal experiences of the characters, or is the opposite true? This initial diagrammatic form, active at the very heart of the original creation, is testament to the hybrid characteristics mentioned earlier.

Concerning the French version, diagrammatic connections are formed from the entire range of signs produced, which carry with them imprints of those signs present in the original—a sort of previous experience, which is where the notion of metaphor takes on its full meaning. Containing elements of a diagram according to Peirce, a metaphor includes a degree of extra conventionality. The metaphor, however, does not operate *via* relations of resemblance but relations of similarity (Thibaud, 1994). In other words, resemblance comes down to a form of automatism, and is immediate. Similarity, meanwhile, requires actions of distinction, comparison, and evaluation. Metaphors, therefore, create images by “positing two distinct worlds in a dynamic/diagrammatic connection while highlighting the traits that they have, or would have, in common” (Verhaegen, 1994, p. 27). This corresponds directly to what Gjelsvik, Brugn, and Hanssen (2013, pp. 4–5) currently name “fidelity” in adaptation studies; both similarity and difference.

To articulate this first level of fidelity with the others, five in-depth, semi-structured, and qualitative interviews with individuals involved in the production and sto-

ryboarding were conducted, in order to provide a better understanding of the interserial dialogue in between the two versions. We met the French team from Making Prod between February and May 2014: Stéphane Drouet, the producer, and then the screenwriter and director Alexandre Castagnetti. On May 21, 2014, the interviews with the Québécois team were realized in Montréal: Joanne Forgues (producer, Casablanca Productions); François Létourneau (co-producer, series creator, and actor); and Jean-François Rivard (series creator and director). A series of questions was designed to allow the interviewees to freely express their opinions while ensuring that the answers obtained were relevant to the creative and the adaptation processes. The questions put to the French team from Making Prod reflect the various challenges of adaptation as outlined by Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013): formal entity or product, process of creation, and process of reception. Particular attention was paid to aspects such as immigration, gender, labour and cultural diversity, with a view to providing an improved appreciation of certain screenwriting and production choices according to the content and semiotic analysis that was conducted for this research. The five interviews, each lasting more than one hour, highlight new aspects within the transcultural adaptation, leading to a better understanding of the production and creative process and likewise the diegetic universe that emerges as a final product. Examining a complete transcript of these interviews allows forming a direct link between systematic content analysis and the semiotic of the first season of each series (realized before the interviews) and the issues of *transcultural adaptation* and format constraints. Each sequence was categorized and its duration measured by using a time code, then classified by its particular characteristics: style (classic narrative, interview/mockumentary scenes, and comics), geography/place (the setting and decor), and the characters featured in the scene. Depending on the context of the scene, other factors were also taken into account: camera angles or shooting techniques, and visual and verbal deictic elements referring to the cultural universe (such as typically French or Québécois expressions, music, popular culture, food, etc.). The results of the study are presented in the following interlinked sections: Formal mechanisms of adaptation; Format: Between constraint and creation, Adaptation: Between resemblance and similarity; and Fidelity and "Frenchification": Transcultural and interserial adaptation.

### **Formal mechanisms of adaptation**

The story of *Les Invincibles*' arrival in France begins with something of a light bulb moment: Stéphane Drouet and Matthieu Viala, the two young producers behind Making Prod, discovered the series created by François Létourneau and Jean-François Rivard and, as Drouet states, "fell in love" with it. He also explained in the interview that the project was exactly what their young company was looking for: a story of solid friendship between 30-year-old men built around an innovative narrative concept. Viala and Drouet immediately set about obtaining the rights to the show; they contacted the Québécois team, who accepted. The adaptation of *Les Invincibles* was now up and running. Making Prod took the idea to the main French TV channels and submitted some initial material. The Franco-German channel ARTE was, unexpectedly, the most responsive: the broadcaster was excited about the series and asked for a project outline and adaptation schedule. The producers contacted authors and directors and organ-

ized a casting session to rewrite the script for the TV series. Drouet would head up the small group of screenwriters, orchestrating the development of the show's plot and structure, aiming to provide what he termed a genuine "transcultural adaptation," corresponding to the expectations of the particular broadcaster involved.

This brief account of the interactions behind the creation of the French version of *Les Invincibles* reveals the emergence of what Becker refers to as an "art world." The author defines this concept as follows: "An artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people ... The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world" (Becker, 1982, p. 1). The collaborative ecosystem at work in the project of *Les Invincibles* illustrates that each person or group brings something to the table that will affect the adaptation—from the producer (acting as both concept discoverer and promoter) to the screenwriters, those contributing to the finished product, and the viewing public being targeted.

In this study it was not aimed to offer a systematic breakdown of the creative or adaptive processes used in TV production generally, but rather to analyze the particular form that this process has taken in the case of *Les Invincibles*. It is therefore important to determine the role of each of the parties involved and to envisage, where possible, the process of adapting the television series in its entirety. In this regard, Becker highlights the fact that the notion of an *art world* takes on a specific meaning when applied to "culture industries." The concept concerns audiences, which are difficult to gauge, since "No one knows with any assurance what conventions the mass audience appreciates and accepts, what class or professional artistic cultural understandings might inform their choices" (p. 123). As such, the role of the producer takes on special importance in the type of *art world* in which *Les Invincibles* operates. The producer acts as a necessary interface between the broadcaster (ARTE), the screenwriters, and the directors: "The system affects the art work through the interaction between the managers of the culture industries and the artists" (p. 126). Drouet himself expressed this interdependence clearly:

They [ARTE] asked questions about how we were going to be able to modify everything, then they also suggested some writers/directors who could work on the project. I had already met, auditioned and cast some of my own. So I went back and did a sort of 'writer's casting' with two or three writers who would pitch me suggestions and ways of adapting certain elements of the original series for the French context, and working from there I chose the authors who I thought could make it work. Then we went back to the channel executives to show them what we'd come up with, and they were convinced. Then we set about developing the first season.

The producer acts like an orchestra conductor for the group of screenwriters; he or she is also the decision-maker, anticipating the expectations of both broadcaster and potential viewers. Drouet himself recognizes that he also assumed the role of "writing director," occasionally modifying content and often giving the final say in discussions involving the script. This pivotal role became all the more important given that the script for the French version was written by a four-person team (consisting of Alexandre

Castagnetti, Bertrand Marzec, Brigitte Bemol, and Julien Simonet), which required a particular type of organization and division of labour. The screenwriters all knew each other and had already worked together; they devoted themselves to the task of writing together in order to preserve the authentic character of the original series, as Castagnetti has stressed. The draft scripts would circulate around the *art world*, being read, reread, and collectively modified, with producer and broadcaster freely able to oversee proceedings. Through this progression a “sort of back-and-forth is established between the texts, much like the drafts of a law that is being passed around a group of assemblymen, going from one group of readers to the other, being successively examined, corrected, amended and written over” (Chalvon-Demersay & Pasquier, 1993, pp. 105–106). The development of *Les Invincibles* is rooted in this type of process, benefiting from both a cooperative framework between the various people involved in the creative process and a permanent circulation of the text for the adaptation. In effect, the nature of the adaptation makes *Les Invincibles* part of a twofold *art world*: that of the original Québécois version and that of the French reinterpretation. For this reason, the Québécois team was consulted and asked to give their input on writing processes. As Drouet explains:

We brought the Québécois directors and writers to France ... to talk a little bit about the adaptation process right at the beginning. We did that to make sure they didn't see any harm in our modifications, and to reassure them that their original series was being respected. ... When they left after those two days, they were reassured; they trusted us 100 percent and they gave us total creative freedom.

A highly trusting relationship should therefore be established between the various parties involved in a twofold art world. Indeed, Joanne Forgues, director of Productions Casablanca, emphasizes how carefully her company went about choosing a French production company with which to entrust the rights to the show, aiming not only to avoid “distorting” the original creation, but also to preserve the creative spirit behind its conception:

I was looking at three big companies and Making Prod. ... I spoke with Stéphane ...; he came to Montreal and I told him I was going to trust him, and give him the rights to the show ... because I didn't want to control the texts, and neither did François or Jean-François, but we also didn't want our project to be distorted. Because we didn't want the project to be distorted, we wanted someone who really 'got' the concept, and who wasn't just going to take it and spin it into something new as fast as they could.

Evidently, the handover was not a case of simply giving the French production team *carte blanche* by selling the format and abandoning the content. Forgues' comments confirm that the original series was collectively developed, bearing its own artistic characteristics; as such, the reinterpreted version would have to correspond at some point to the vision of the original authors. Later on, she cancelled a lucrative contract with a large American production agency that was hoping to adapt the series for the FOX network; in her words, they “completely distorted the project.” Any company

aiming to adapt audiovisual material, it seems, must walk a perilous tightrope between respecting the original intentions of the authors and giving their creation a new lease on life, resulting in a new product. Pressure notwithstanding, Castagnetti and Drouet are satisfied with their result, feeling they managed to deliver a series that is “their own” and that reflects the personalities of the various contributors involved, as well as the ARTE audience itself. The producer recognizes that this was possible for *Les Invincibles* precisely because of the interweaving, peaceful co-existence of the two *art worlds* in question: “They weren’t at all interventionist when it came to the work we did on season 1, either as producers or directors. We really had a lot of freedom to make it a French production.” This freedom of creation is a sort of invisible contract of fidelity during the production process, as Forgues told us. The closer examination of the interactions between parties involved in the adaptation of the series contradicts our commonly held assumptions about the transposition of audiovisual formats, enabling us to envisage the object of our study as something that has been re-created, which is also due to the fact the role of a showrunner is not really applicable in France; the broadcast system does not function as in the United States, for example.

### **Format: Between constraint and creation**

It may seem contradictory to associate the idea of format with that of creativity; the audiovisual format is widely associated with a notion of standardized programming, resulting in the mechanical transposition of original ideas. However, in agreement with Bourdon (2012) and Chambat-Houillon (2009), the televisual format goes hand in hand with the creative dimension of recasting the “narrative arcs,” as Castagnetti puts it; and this recasting can only result from genuine innovation during the development process: “Contrary to popular belief, format and creation are not diametrically opposed. Format is no longer a constraint that shackles creativity in TV” (Chambat-Houillon, 2009, p. 245). This is why a content analysis of the two versions of *Les Invincibles*, while demonstrating that the adaptation has retained the form of the original series, also shows that the French version amounts to a creative reinterpretation of the original concept, and consequently that “the format registers the allographic aspects of the show from which it becomes possible to introduce variation” (p. 246).

As referenced in the introduction, the narrative construction of the series revolves around an entanglement of plot points, each one depicted using varying narrative styles: action shots, mockumentary-style interviews, and comic strips. The Québécois format for the show is broken down as follows: 83 percent of scenes are action shots, while 7.9 percent are mockumentary-style interview shots, and 2.7 percent are comic-book depictions of the characters. The French remake was composed of 81.8 percent action shots, roughly 7 percent interview scenes, and 5.6 percent comic-book scenes. At first glance, the breakdowns seem to be fairly similar between the two shows. That said, the French screenwriters were also faced with the challenge of reducing the series run from 12 to 8 episodes, and therefore had to tighten the narrative framework in order to ensure the viewers would still be able to follow the individual plot points. As such, the increased presence of comic-book scenes in the French adaptation may be viewed as a strategic screenwriting choice, aiming to avoid a profusion of narrative ellipses in the surrounding action shots. However, Castagnetti stressed that it was not

simply a case of condensing the action, but creating a fully symbolic narrative and reinforcing the plots involving the superheroes (the avatars of the four main characters).

The screenwriters also chose to highlight a third level of interpretation in their production: the meta-narrative. Carlos' imaginary world takes on a new dimension in the French adaptation and is set apart from the more allusive comic panels featured in the original series (Huet & Rao, 2012). The character interview scenes are also longer in the French version of *Les Invincibles*. The French screenwriters chose to exploit the hybrid elements of the original show. This results in the viewers getting a better idea of the characters. The latter are more fully expressed by carrying over from the original version the paradoxes that motivate their respective arcs. In addition, certain scenes were created from scratch for the French version, such as Hassan's moving house and the bike race. As Drouet remarked: "There were scenes that we invented ourselves. In our series we had to restructure certain episodes and therefore recreate the narrative tension ... in order to keep the plot momentum going."

This means that the French writing team reinterpreted the hybrid potentialities of the original show and that the condensation of the plot led to what was really a re-appropriation of the initial format. In addition, Castagnetti explained that in order to "achieve a coherent fidelity of adaptation," the screenwriters committed to an "overhaul of the narrative framework." The Québécois version was dissected as the team sought to establish a chronology for the adventures affecting each character: on the one hand, that consists in reintegrating the largest possible portion of the overall narrative, and on the other hand, in offering viewers a reworked and coherent new product. Working to enhance the hybrid nature of the show, while also introducing new plot twists, constitutes forms of creative activity within the framework of adapting a project to a television format, and is evidence of producing a television series that suits both French- or German-speaking viewers and the broadcaster ARTE itself. Moran (2009b) calls this "a necessary accommodation between format and local culture" (p. 121).

The issues encountered in the *art world* of *Les Invincibles* also led us to consider the role of the broadcaster in the adaptation process. Indeed, to the same extent as a writer or producer, the broadcaster represents an integral part of the collaborative ecosystem at work behind the transposition of a series. Becker posits that "artists produce what the system can and will carry" (1982, p. 129), an observation that is all the more pertinent in the context of the culture industries under discussion here. Consequently, it suits the producer and also the screenwriters to make their work correspond to the brand image of the TV channel they are working for. This is exactly what happened to Making Prod. Drouet told us that they "contacted all French broadcasters with different project arguments suiting the respective channel." In this case the idea of the brand image is valid as "artworks always bear the marks of the system which distributes them, but vary in how that happens" (Becker, 1982, p. 94). The trick, then, is to balance the program between the editorial line maintained by the ARTE network and the screen adaptation choices being proposed by the writers, in order to hit the right note with the channel's viewers.

First off, ARTE is a French-German channel with a cultural vocation. Arthouse and experimental films, as well as documentaries and telefilms, occupy the prime

spots in the channel's programming schedule. The *Les Invincibles* project matched the channel's objective of diversifying its audience, giving it a younger image and attracting city-dwelling viewers and twentysomethings. Likewise, a diversification in the types of programming was being offered, as the channel moves away from traditionally preferred formats toward newer television series. The series' proven success in Québec, as well as the type of viewer it brought to the Radio-Canada channel, were both points of interest for ARTE, as Forgues (Casablanca Productions, Québec) explained:

It's certainly true that it brought them a younger demographic; it was also a significant demographic because our viewers are 55 percent men, which is extremely rare—the only more masculine thing on TV is sport. They were very happy to have a drama series with a more masculine slant; it brought a younger audience that was perfect for advertising—the 25 to 45 market is a key demographic for them. Studies also showed that our audience tended to be made up of well-educated individuals.

*Les Invincibles* represented one of ARTE's first true forays into the world of TV series; however, it should be noted that the *docu-soap* had already been one of the hallmarks of the French-German channel since the late 1990s. Ferjoux (2013) remarks that documentaries, and the *docu-soap* in particular, play an active role in setting ARTE's programming apart. A hybrid format combining serial narration with a documentary tone, the concept of the *mockumentary* immediately calls to mind the concept behind *Les Invincibles*, and in this light the favourable reception for Making Prod's adaptation proposal makes perfect sense. In tandem with this editorial decision, the producers and screenwriters set about anchoring their series within the contextual universe of their target audience, as Chambat-Houillon explains: "Because the format is not the only thing that defines a show, the finished product possess other characteristics, and it is these that form the basis of the localized appropriation carried out by the executive producer to suit a given channel" (2009, p. 247). As such, certain adaptation options for *Les Invincibles* were chosen to correspond with the image of the ARTE network, adding another level of fidelity between the channel and the producer. Of course, the choice of location Strasbourg was not arbitrary. The historic headquarters of the French-German channel, the city occupies a position as a European crossroads and home of the European Parliament (which incidentally serves as a place of employment for the character of Vince—Steve in the Québécois version). By the same token, the decision to also include a character from an immigrant background seems to have been an obvious choice. Instead of keeping the Spanish origins of Carlos, the French team attributes Turkish origins to Hassan. This is a clear nod to the significant Turkish population in Germany (first- and mainly second-generation), which would of course be familiar to a portion of ARTE viewers. Drouet explains this decision:

We know there's a large Turkish population in Germany, which is why we also included other characters in that milieu; there's also Meike, FX's girlfriend, who's originally from Germany. There was definitely a desire to register with that audience ... With little touches like that we were trying to bring their world closer to ours.

These observations are evidence not only of the efforts made by the producers and screenwriters to adapt the original format of the series, but also of their desire to integrate into the overall milieu of the ARTE channel and strike a chord with its target audience. Elsewhere, the writers' deliberate choice to give greater importance to the characters' mockumentary interview scenes demonstrates the willingness to blend in with the channel's existing style of programming, thereby making *Les Invincibles* a genuine first-generation transcultural adaptation. This choice also demonstrates the possibilities for original creation within the confines of a pre-existing audiovisual format and underpins the idea that dramas and comedies are sensitive material to adapt, needing new approaches to structure and format points (Chalaby, 2016). Nevertheless, the question of fidelity remains an important issue for the French and the Québécois team, despite the differences between both versions. Difference can therefore be understood as participating in fidelity in a form of similarity. In other words, the borders of a creative adaptation are located in this play of similarity and difference.

### **Fidelity and “Frenchification”: Transcultural and interserial adaptation**

Castagnetti, screenwriter and director of the French version, states clearly that the “Québécois version has not been emptied of meaning, but rather deconstructed like a building made from Lego.” The same pieces are then used to assemble a new version, which often remains faithful to the original or reinvents aspects of it, adding elements that make sense, usually, to potential French and German viewers. The adaptation does not in any way distort the original, nor does it drain the life force from it; rather, it establishes a new system of signs within a new media culture while maintaining connections with the signs that preceded them. As previously mentioned, diagrammatic and metaphorical characteristics already existed in the Québécois version of the show, in the form of similarities and resemblances between character action and the animated comic-book scenes. In this sense, when focusing on the question of fidelity among forms and content as result of the fidelity in the production and writing process, the notion of *interseriality* mentioned above becomes relevant and gives way to what the French producers and directors have termed the “Frenchification” of their screenplay, bringing to mind Barthes' idea of “italianité” (1964) but also Moran's idea of the original as a “flexible template or empty mould awaiting particular social inflexion and accent in other television territories to appeal to home audiences in that place” (2009a, p. 151).

The geographical choices form the basis of this specific type of what Drouet calls “Frenchification”: that of Alsace, a region of France, whose capital Strasbourg becomes the nerve centre of the series. The title sequence portraying the Alsatian backdrop highlights this focus, but likewise the universal appeal of the series, which is not solely focused on four young men but is also about friendship and family. The universal nature of the series was also mentioned by Rivard in during the interview: “a story that touches everyone by the universal human traits of the characters.” This affirmation was confirmed by Castagnetti, who told us: “We wanted to maintain and reinforce the story's broader universal appeal.” The term “Frenchification” is oddly chosen by Drouet, since the particular semiotic foundation of his version of the show is based

around referential nods and clichés linked to Alsace itself; the Strasbourg setting shows regional particularities ranging from everyday objects to local cuisine, which do not represent France in its entirety, but particularity. In contrast to Drouet, Castagnetti did not use the term “Frenchify.” As he recalled, it was more a case of imagining the viewers at whom the screenplay was aimed. He mentioned the French, but highlighted the adaptation’s European and Western characteristics: “Paris wasn’t an option; it’s too dense ... We needed a ‘neutral’ setting, one that was less imbued with pre-set ideas and associations. We thought about the South of France at first, but that area is also too familiar. Strasbourg also worked out well for the link with ARTE.” Strasbourg did work out well, but according to the producer of the Québécois version, this choice seemed to have been made out of obligation to the ARTE channel as well as for other economic reasons, an element not mentioned by Making Prod.

Unlike the French version, which highlights its regional specificities, the original series did not focus on local cultural indicators such as poutine, the feast of Saint-Jean-Baptiste, regional or traditional clothing, or the popularity of maple syrup. When these kinds of tropes did appear, they were generally not emphasized in the narrative. The original series tackles rather other types of cultural intertextual references and influences, such as films or music. Both Létourneau and Rivard mentioned Woody Allen’s *Husbands and Wives* as one major influence on their screenplay by naming the film as being “one of their favourites.” Likewise, Rivard evoked in detail the musical influences and his choices to integrate them into the plot: “The music that was important to me and also to choose Kim Bingham, who used to play in a group I loved, based in Québec ...” The French version keeps Kim Bingham’s music for some parts. However, viewers of the adaptation encounter a compendium of regional and much more stereotypical symbols: the clothing of the waitress in the Strasbourg tavern, sauerkraut and German-style sausages, Alsatian desserts, the cuckoo, Vince’s colleague’s German accent, pretzels and beer, and the Coq au Riesling dish. This very local or regional adaptation stands in contrast to what Moran calls “national persistence” (2009b, p. 122).

What is largely French or partly French in *Les Invincibles* is difficult to determine. Not to forget, as Moran also states, that “in an era of increasingly larger movements of populations across the globe, it is impossible to designate a kind of majority television viewership of native origin and ancestry” (2009b, p. 122). So finally, the “Frenchification” is more an attempt to condense national French and some German traits, regionalism, and specific immigration cultures within a topic that is overall “universal.” As a balance, the language of the main characters is spoken without the Alsatian accent and remains standard French. The language used in the Québécois version includes *blonde* (girlfriend), *char* (car), *câlisse* and *tabarnak* (fuck, fucker); in the French version you can hear *va te faire foutre* (go fuck yourself), *putain* (fuck), *meuf* and *gonzesse* (chick, woman), and *abruti de parisien* (goddamn Parisian). Of course, there are evident differences in language between the two versions, but these automatically make sense within the cultural universe in which the show is being broadcast, firstly emphasized by the fact that it is difficult for French productions to broadcast Québec language in its original, a fact confirmed by Drouet in the interview. Still, the “imagined South” of Italy, a pattern of Italy as a nation in adapted U.S. televisual drama (Ferrari, 2010, p. 296), could mean here

something as an “imagined North”: not to represent France in its whole, but the very heterogeneous region of an Alsace that underpins the difficult historical encounters between Germany and France. This kind of domestication of a televisual format leads finally to the densification of “regional stereotypes” that might “engage viewers while repulsing them at the same time” (p. 238) and this despite the universal character of the plot.

In a less stereotypical way, other elements of the content have been rethought, such as the characters’ jobs, including a certain vision on labour: in the Québécois version, Carlos works on the line at a chicken factory; in the French version, Hassan is employed at a company that recycles used nappies of old people. Drouet highlights the common ecological thread here, specifically recalling:

Yeah, that aspect of the Québécois version didn’t suit us as much; there was a surrealist aspect to the workplace setting, and we felt we needed to Frenchify that using ecology as an intermediary, hence why they’re recycling nappies. The world of that workplace seemed very far removed from everyday life.

Castagnetti does not recall the ecological aspect during the adaptation process. Rather, he highlights the fact that chicken production seemed more pertinent to the North American context and less so to the French, which is in a certain sense strange as chicken is also part of French cuisine, but maybe not in the mass production imagination. For Castagnetti, the notion of “being tender around old people” was a significant feature of the series, foreshadowing the future lives of the characters and producers. Chicken was thereby replaced with nappies, but the transposition went even further. This pertains not only to the surrealist characteristics of the scene in which Carlos frees a chicken in the Québécois version, but also the desire to “go behind the scenes” of unbridled capitalism, which is something also understood by European audiences. Metaphorically speaking, Carlos also frees himself from the “hen” that is Lyne.

The idea of standing up against the exploitation of chickens and excessive production practices is present in this scene and may not have been necessary to be “Frenchified,” but the French production of the show goes further: Cathy (Lynne in the Québécois version) is transformed into a care nurse. When looking after a wheelchair-bound senior citizen, Hassan reacts vividly and “frees” the man by bringing him outside the house; for Castagnetti this scene is a clear indication of the idea of “rites of passage,” as it pertains to the anticipated sorrow of nostalgia felt for a future that is still to come. The issue of twentysomethings turning 30, and the perception of their generation as “M’eh” “X,” “unstable” or “disenchanted,” certainly plays a role in the adaptation (Huet & Rao, 2012). However, those involved in the production of the two versions do not overplay this aspect when the generational question is put to them. Drouet and Castagnetti for the French version, and Létourneau and Rivard for the original series, all talked to us about the importance of friendship and family, as well as rites of passage that relate not only to the protagonists, but also to their own life experiences at the time of writing or during the adaptation process. *Les Invincibles* therefore carries, unsurprisingly, traces of autobiographical influence from the authors and adapters. This aspect underlines what Forgues told us: the idea is not to distort this originality but to maintain a fidelity that is not only based on the content and aesthetics:

“I told Stéphane that we want really someone who believes in the project and who does not use it as being one project of eight others by then adapting fast and without any consideration of fidelity.” Consequently, the vision of the profession is shared here as being part of the fidelity both reclaim.

Still, all these elements do not lead necessarily to a complete satisfaction in the end and the universal character of the show does not change this: Rivard (2008), for example, was disappointed with one element: “I did not like how they transformed the character of Carlos’ girlfriend Lyne. Cathy is too hysterical in the French version and at some point attributes her a pejorative feature.” This bitter note might be related to the fact that Québécois and French women do not have the same trajectory of feminist movements (Revillard, 2008). This was not mentioned in the interviews, but by asking Castagnetti why the scenes with sexual character were less explicit in the French version and the style of the represented families quite different to the Québécois version, he answered: “Well, it is tradition, when you think of a French family it’s often ‘bourgeois’ and Catholic, like no sex before the wedding, et cetera. I was a bit conservative maybe.” The question of gender relations in the series could be the topic of a single article, but what is interesting here is the imagination and image that Castagnetti has of his own culture. He admits in a certain sense a fidelity to a self-imposed stereotype. What can be added here is that the French version cast women who were much more “bombastic” than the Québécois version. Létourneau told us that they preferred a casting for the Québécois series that reflected a sort of “normality” and fewer exaggerated external signs of sophistication.

### Perspectives

Discussing and comparing the interviews with content and semiotic analysis of each series provided a deeper understanding of the constraints that arise in both production and creation. This was considered while extricating the diegetic aspect of the television series. The interserial play between format and creativity are not opposing forces, but confront and interact with one another. Thinking interserially helps consequently to tackle the question of fidelity from two points of view: the production and creative side and likewise the content side. The *Les Invincibles* series raises “universal” questions about friendship and family, including certain elements of nostalgia and the portrayal of rites of passage. The role of these aspects owes much to the “communicative and nostalgic power of the television series” (Wentz & Niemeyer, 2014), which has the ability to show, say, and manufacture the kind of nostalgia that the French and Québécois producers and screenwriters have alluded to. In both production teams, shared autobiographical elements played an important role in the conception of the screenplay and its adaptation. In this sense, the idea of a format that authorizes creativity within a certain imposed framework is reinforced. In addition, the hybrid character within one singular TV series is not only a question of aesthetic style: here, the televisual medium is modifying and reinventing its own codes of existence and those of other narrative and visual universes. As outlined by Barrette (2008b), the artisanal work and the creative freedom of the creators and directors in Québec might be one of the reasons behind the exportability of Québécois television series and likewise maybe the less constrained question of authorship. Rivard and Létourneau (at least in the inter-

views) did not talk about “my” creation, but “our” creation, by also including Forgues. This shows a cooperative and independent authorship that can lead to a successful series. As such, it is *via* the medium of the televised series that television can ideally create its own metamorphoses (Beil, Engell, Schröter, Schwaab, & Wentz, 2012): metamorphoses which, for the most part, are yet to be discovered.

## Interviews

Alexandre Castagnetti, screenwriter and director, *Making Prod*

Stéphane Drouet, producer, *Making Prod*

Joanne Forgues, producer, Casablanca Productions, *Les Invincibles*

François Létourneau, co-producer, series creator, and actor, *Les Invincibles*

Jean-François Rivard, series creator and director, *Les Invincibles*

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