

French series and diversity: an improvement yet to confirm

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Overview: the consumption of fiction series by the French public comes with two phenomena linked to the influence of images that needs to be reinforced: the strengthening of the importance of female actors in the latest popular fictions and the timid advance of ethnic diversity on screen.

Series are among the most popular TV programmes. In 2019, the two highest audience ratings for France 3 were for the airing of *Capitaine Marleau* (8,600,000 viewers, corresponding to a 33.6% of audience share on April 9, 2019 and 8,100,000, corresponding to a 30.1% of audience share on October 22, 2019). On TF1, the series *Le Bazar de la Charité* was the channel's 3rd best audience the French team's matches at the Women's Football World Cup and the entertainment programme *Le Monde des Enfoirés* with 8,200,000 (32% of audience share) on 18 November. These two French series, as well as *Julie Lescaut* (TF1, 1992-2014), *Joséphine Ange Gardien* (TF1, 1997-) or *Plus Belle la Vie* (France 3, 2004-) reached ratings close to those of American TV series such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (TF1, 2003-2013), *Grey's Anatomy* (TF1, 2006-) or *The Mentalist* (TF1, 2010-2015).

Since the early 2000s, watching series have crossed age and social boundaries,¹ a phenomenon that has only increased since then. As sociological studies underline, series are now adopted even in higher social circles, which, because of their status, originally kept

them at a distance. They have now occupied the place that was traditionally held by novels and then by cinema.² The consumption of TV series profits from the coexistence of TV channels (terrestrial, cable...) and the presence of streaming platforms (Amazon, Netflix, Apple TV, Disney Plus...). Therefore, in 2017, almost 70% of 15-24-year-olds, 60% of 25-34-year-olds, 57% of 35-49-year-olds and 50% of 50-64-year-olds watched series in digital version.³ The analysis of the supply in France shows that the consumption of fiction series by the French public is accompanied by two phenomena linked to the influence of images.



¹ O. Donnat, *Les pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère numérique*, enquête DEPS, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, 2008.

² H. Glevarec, *La sériephillie. Sociologie d'un attachement culturel*, Ellipses, 2012.

³ Statista Research Department, *Part des consommateurs de séries TV en ligne en France 2017, selon l'âge*, 27 août 2019.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTRESSES IN THE MOST POPULAR FICTIONS

First of all, it is worth noticing the very high popularity of series built or carried by female main characters. From Julie Lescaut (TF1, 1992-2014) to Bazar de la Charité (TF1, 2019), as well as Capitaine Marleau (France 3, 2015-), women are often the main protagonists of popular fiction series.⁴ Formerly limited to the role of subordinates or companions, they now occupy complex and multidimensional roles in fictions that range from crime dramas to comedy-dramas or social series. Historically, female heroines have often been found in series considered low risk by the industry, relegated either to short formats (sitcoms)⁵ or to reassuring roles, integrated into a republican order (the policewoman, the officer, the investigator), with classic, non-authoritarian and empathetic gender performances.⁶ Today, they remain officers but no longer apologize for affirming themselves (Capitaine Marleau) and they are given expensive formats such as the historical series ("Le Bazar de la Charité"), a sign of a confident investment by the industry.



Although they may be well-known, already established in the cinema or in previous fiction series, they can also encourage the rise of actresses. Originally centred on the predominantly white heterosexual woman, these shows (Dix pour cent, Plus Belle la Vie, Profilage, Le Bureau des Légendes) now focus on a plural gendered representation, linking different sexualities, professions or ethnicities together. Although still inferior to men's representation on the screen, it is therefore becoming more and more in tune with French society.



A SLIGHT PROGRESS OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON SCREEN

Originally limited to mainly racialised roles (Capitaine Justin N'Guma in Julie Lescaut), actors from diverse backgrounds are slowly beginning to get access to more varied roles. Three popular series launched in 2020 illustrate the relatively good progress made in terms of access to leading roles for actors of diverse backgrounds.

⁴ G. Sellier et P. Beylot (dir.), Les séries policières, L'Harmattan, 2004 et SELLIER Geneviève, « Les séries policières françaises : de nouveaux rapports hommes/femmes ? », Médiamorphoses, 2007.

⁵ J. Fiske, Television Culture, Routledge Classics, 2010.

⁶ HONG-MERCIER Seok-Kyeong, « Les femmes flics et les relations familiales dans les séries télévisées françaises » dans G. Sellier et P. Beylot (dir.), Les Séries policières, L'Harmattan, 2005.

The series Validé (Canal Plus, 2020), with over 20 million downloads on the MyCanal platform, depicts the rap industry and debunks a number of clichés about the suburbs, its youth and this musical genre. Inspired by the eponymous film, the series Il a déjà tes yeux (France 2, 2020) with a predominantly black cast (Lucien Jean Baptiste, Aïssa Maïga, Manda Touré) enables the French public to follow the adventures of the Aloka family and thereby to consider societal themes such as ethno-racial mixing and adoption.

More recently, the series Narvalo created in September 2020 by Matthieu Longatte on Canal+ gives an uncommon vision of the suburbs, appearing as a normal everyday space without any particular stigma, thanks to a diverse group of actors from different backgrounds.

These three examples remain however the exception: only 11% of fictional characters are perceived by viewers as 'non-white' if France Ô channel is excluded (Baromètre de la diversité du CSA, 2019). Yet, French fiction series, in increasing the number of characters from diverse backgrounds appearing on screen, contributes largely to the broadening of this representation and proves its success with (TV) viewers.

"PROGRESS IN FRENCH FICTION SHOULD BE HIGHLIGHTED IN ORDER TO FURTHER ENCOURAGE IT."

Both of these trends highlight the progress that has been made. They mark the contemporary evolution of series production and are in line with a consumer request made more visible by social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). In addition to the fact that the public can now watch fiction depicting a more realistic range of diversity in French society, series allow (TV) viewers to build up an attachment and understanding that are central to social cohesion.



⁷ France Ô : a French channel dedicated to cultural diversity and overseas.

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