

# Injecting Actuality in TV Fiction: The Financial Crisis in Greek TV Comedy Series

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the use of actuality inside Greek TV series as a key element creating a common and familiar ground to be shared with the spectator. Focusing on Greek TV series, our analysis builds on the idea that media contents (and, thus, TV fiction) are not a simple mirror reflection of society but symbols and, more precisely, symptoms. Within such a context, the question that we propose to examine in this paper is the following: What is Greek TV series' promise of actuality a symptom of, if not a simple analogical representation of the 'real', factual situation Greek society is experiencing? By applying a semiopragmatic analysis, this paper argues that the injection of actuality in TV series functions as a strong engagement strategy for the fictive narrative universe that is created inside the series.*

## KEYWORDS

actuality effect  
Greek TV series  
reality in fiction  
symptom  
truthfulness

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the use of actuality events inside TV fiction. Focusing on actuality markers inside TV series, i.e. on referential elements linking the universe of fiction with the 'real' world of the spectator, does not mean that we intercept the fictive narration of the real as the simple equivalent of a framing mechanism. Our semiopragmatic analysis of the state of reality injected in several Greek TV series considers the latter as media objects and is built in contradiction to considerations of media productions as plain 'reflections of society'. More specifically, aware of the multiple layers and statuses of truth in television fiction, we propose to focus here on a specific mechanism, i.e. the multiple ways of intrusion of reality in TV fiction by centralizing the Greek case and the referential context of the Greek crisis.

The paper is structured as follows: considering that TV fiction does not refer to reality in the same terms and modalities as factual television does, a passage into the theory of genres is necessary in order to expose the theoretical premises upon which our work is based. The same applies for the notion of *symptom*, central in the work of the French media theorist François Jost and at the core of our own hypothesis and prism of interpreting television programs. The use of the terms *truthfulness*, *reality* and *realism*, as well as the term *actuality effect*, are also explained in regard to our analysis, followed by the methodological choices made. The main body of the analysis is then developed, proceeding to a typology of three main functions of actuality inside TV fiction:

- a) the expression of an ironic view on media discourses through fiction, as metacommentary not on reality but on media representations of reality;
- b) the use of actuality as a pretext for the fictive universe; and
- c) actuality as an element of credibility of the fictive convention proposed by the series.

In conclusion, we argue that the injection of actuality inside TV fiction can be apprehended as a symptom of a reflexive trend in television discourse that serves the communicational strategies of media productions towards the audiences. The latter could be thought of as an apparent paradox in regard to the promise of an intrusion of reality inside fiction, in the sense that the Greek financial crisis is not necessarily recalled as a destabilizing referential context; instead, it is implemented in a metonymic way, that is as an element that carries the promise of authenticity of the narrated universe without endorsing, though, the responsibility of proving its link.

## THEORETICAL PREMISES

### *A Shortcut to the Theory of Genres*

The notion of *genre* goes back to the theory of literature and to the Aristotelian poetics, and is central to the understanding of *texts*, of media productions, and of television programs. The cognitive frame inside which a television program is placed, as well as the hypothesis and interpretations that are formulated by the (TV) viewer depend largely on its *genre*; the latter is assigned by the TV channel but is also an element of appreciation and negotiation by the spectator. Literary theorists notice that in the world of adults serious reading errors referenced in literary texts, as well as many incorrect judgments and evaluations, are attributed to misunderstanding the text's genre (Scholes 1986: 79). Hirsch (1967) insists that the prism inside which we read a text is decisive. This relationship of a text to a genre, or to use Genette's words "the relation of a text to its archi-text" that he calls *architextualité* is fundamental since the *architext is omnipresent* (2004 [1991]: 81), providing a background frame in which the text unfolds and becomes understood. Therefore, the perception of the category in which a text is embedded is a major component of the understanding of this text, providing that this perception will not change.

Following this tradition, TV genres respond to permanent negotiation processes. The term itself covers a wide range of uses and is at the crossroads of different rationales and functions, such as informing and orienting viewers on the program, proposing interpretations. We can also add financial and advertising functions of the genre within which a program is inscribed (Jost 1999; 2010a). TV genre is a tool which permits the TV channel to characterize a program in relation also to its other programs and to delimit a reception context for the spectator. For Jost, TV genres can be categorized according to three worlds, which play, in a way, the role of *archigenre* or, in peircian terms, that of *interpretant*.<sup>1</sup> Every genre is based on the promise of a relation to a world whose mode or degree of existence conditions the adhesion or the participation of the receiver. These three worlds are *the*

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<sup>1</sup> In his 'triadic' theory of signs Charles Sanders Peirce (1978; 1991) explains how the *sign* (*representamen*) is linked to an *object* which leads to one or more *interpretants*. The variability of the *interpretant* depends both to a referential context and to a context of expression (context of enunciation) of the sign. The *interpretant* is a dynamic element that makes the passage from a purely semantic perspective to a pragmatic one possible, since the interpretation process is unlimited, as a constantly ongoing act between objects, signs and interpretants (Klinkenberg 1996: 313-315). It is the pragmatic dimension of the communication process that gives emphasis on the origins of signs and their context of expression (enunciation), as well as on their effects on and potential uses by the receivers (cf. Eco, 1988 [1973]: 41).

*authenticating world (for real), the world of fiction (fake) and the ludic world (for 'fun')* (Jost 2001b: 18-22). Going beyond the idea of hybrid or mixed genres, that are not, in any case, defined once and for all, the registration of a TV genre (i.e. series, reality show, talent show, comedy, docu-drama, etc.) in these three worlds can change, depending on the positioning we adopt. Within this context, TV genres are not stable-in-time categories and they can modify their intrinsic rules, if we consider that genres are not only defined by *textual* parameters, but also historically and culturally, as *cultural categories* (Mittell 2000 and 2004). From a communicational point of view, "an *oeuvre* is never a simple *text* but first an act of interhuman communication" (Lits 2008: 47). Following these epistemological thoughts, the negotiation of genres is undertaken both from the point of view of the production or of the TV channel and from that of the viewer. As Annette Hill suggests, "[v]iewers are alchemists, transforming factual genres from audiovisual documentation into cultural and social experience" (2007: 84). The generic reconstruction of programs from the point of view of the viewer goes beyond factual genres and concerns fiction as well.

The theoretical background related to the notion of genre and that of TV genre provides a useful frame inside which we develop our analysis of the injection of actuality inside television fictional narratives. This 'actuality effect' is not to be perceived/understood in the same way, nor with the same codes that apply to the representation of the social world as it would perhaps be in factual genres. In other words, the inscription of a program in a generic category, in our case that of comic TV series, allows us to think about the different states that actuality is 'attired' as *symptoms*, leading to different *interpretants* for the television programs and their fictional universe.

### ***The Use of Symptoms in Television Communication***

In his heuristic parable of Mr. Sigma, Umberto Eco (1988 [1973]: 11-19) explains the function of signs in our everyday life. For instance, physiological symptoms as stomach ache or certain spots on the skin lead to a diagnosis of an illness. These indexes, these signs,<sup>2</sup> among others, do not maintain an analogical relation of similarity with the object or the situation they are pointing to; in other words, they

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to medical semiology, evident in the history of semiotics. We would like to briefly remind that if the symptom is the form in which an illness appears, the 'phenomenal real', as Barthes suggests following Foucault's explanation of the symptom in *Naissance de la Clinique*, is to be deciphered. The sign, therefore, would be the symptom transformed through language within a description process (medical language, oral speech, audiovisual language, etc.). In that way, we move from the 'phenomenal' to the 'semantic' (Barthes 1985: 273-276).

do not *look like* them. Also, as signs, they can have different *interpretants*, different meanings depending on who is receiving them and in which context.

The notion of symptom is central in the work of the French semiotician and media theorist François Jost who gives back to semiology, or *semeiology*, the sense that it has in medicine, i.e. the study of symptoms. The symptom is, thus, defined as follows:

Unlike the reflection, the symptom is not a transparent sign whose meaning would appear at first glance. Nor does it necessarily resemble the object whose image it returns or distorts. Rather than an *icon*, it is an *index*<sup>3</sup> that keeps the trace of its object without necessarily resembling it: a headache does not look like its cause, but refers to it. The symptom is also more than a sign: it is a sign of a crisis or, at least, of a pathological functioning of the body. To consider [TV] programs as symptoms means therefore both to consider them as signs of an object that they do not manifest explicitly but by a latent meaning, and to consider to what extent they say something of a state of society, of politics or viewers, this ‘something’ being in some cases a dysfunction, discomfort or the dark part of ourselves (Jost 2011b: 150).

Drawing from the above framework and focusing on Greek TV series, our question is grounded on the idea that media contents (and, thus, TV fiction) are symbols, more precisely *symptoms*, and not a simple mirror reflection of society. The inadequacy of the mirror metaphor in order to understand the communicational dimension of television programs builds on the fundamental work of Jost (2007; 2009; 2011a; 2011b; among other works). Within such a context, the question that we propose to examine in this paper is the following: What is Greek TV series’ promise of *actuality* a symptom of, if not a simple analogical representation of the ‘real’, factual situation Greek society is experiencing?

### ***Truthfulness as a Cross Thread in TV Discourse***

The above question poses the problem of an issue so vague, so open to various perceptions and interpretations as that of the question of truth, or more precisely, that of the question of *truthfulness*, linked in the present study with reality or *actuality*, in the sense of something (a fact or a condition) really existing outside the narrative world of fiction. This theme traverses television discourse and television programs no less than a cross thread, whatever the type of the program, its format, genre or tone of expression may be. The way in which Greek TV series are immersed in our personal truth and in the real world that surrounds us is the main question of

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<sup>3</sup> Following the peircian categorization of signs in indexes, icons, and symbols.

this paper, in regard to the blurring of borders between truth/fiction/imaginary (cf. Iser 1993), since, between the dichotomy reality/fiction there is a third element, that of the 'imaginary'. The latter allows us to think in broader terms about how something can *exist* without being an *actual* event. The narration (fictional and non-fictional), the storytelling, allows precisely the *imaginary* to penetrate the dialectic, giving meaning to the relation between reality and fiction and violating, at the same time, their borders, making them porous.

In his work *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), Bernard Williams distinguishes two major components – virtues – of truth, accuracy and sincerity. Since our quest is not an ontological one (the notion of truth as a philosophical object, i.e. 'what is truth?' or 'what is the *nature* of truth?') but a communicational and a cultural one, our point of departure is to consider truth aspirations inside TV fiction as communicational objects, inscribed in the rationale of the communicational strategies of media productions.

Considering television fiction as a *paraphrase* (Esquenazi 2002; 2009; 2017) of the social world rather than as a mirror leads us to question how the general demand for 'truth', 'truthfulness', 'veracity', 'sincerity', 'authenticity' in every form of public discourse (from politics and news to reality TV, entertainment, YouTube productions, and so on) becomes an argument of consolidation of TV series, seeking *the 'truth' of fiction*, an element which is to be reconstructed by the receiver (Esquenazi 2009). For Esquenazi, the notion of paraphrase makes clear why the term 'reflexion' is inappropriate to explain a fictive universe and its relation to social realities:

[A] fiction does not reflect the real [...] Fiction makes the real disappear before making it reappear again disguised [...] [Fiction] tells it [the real] again but differently, which is the exact definition of a paraphrase; except that fictive paraphrase is not reduced to the transformation of words but to that of a universe (or a portion of a universe) (Esquenazi 2017: 214).

In regard to the above, how does television fiction shape conceptual worlds (and propose narratives) that are considered to be truthful and authentic in relation to the 'real world'? The process by which television shapes reality is based on the acceptance of the pragmatic tradition of communication [cf. Watzlawick 1976]. According to this tradition, communication and reality are linked through strong connections. For Jost "reality is a kind of horizon, always present, whose status is changeable: from referent or necessary object to the interpretation process, it slips to the status of model or index for fiction and to that of necessary ingredient for games" (2010: 21).

### *From Reality to Realism*

The fictional transformation of reality into signs in literature is described by Käte Hamburger (1986 [1977]: 197) as follows:

[T]he apparent reality that is built in different fictional genres [...] has the mode of existence of the symbol, precisely because it is apparent, non-reality. The reality, as for it, is but does not mean. Only the non-real has the power to transform the real into signification, meaning.

Roland Barthes explains the *reality effect* as an expression of realism in modernity, pointing out the fact that details that are supposed denoting directly the real are, in fact, signifying it. This would be the *referential illusion*, a situation in which elements of the 'real' do not denote (represent) the real but refer to the category of 'real', i.e. to a sense of reality inside texts that gives way to a state of verisimilitude of the fictive universe. According to Barthes, by this procedure, the traditional notion of 'representation' is put in doubt in the texts of the era of modernity (Barthes 1968). From a different epistemological departure, Mepham reaches a similar conclusion when he refers to a "post-modern nightmare – a world overwhelmed by the endless flow of simulacra to such an extent that the distinction between fantasy and reality no longer has any purchase" (1991: 27).

If realism is a concept we use in order to signify a likely figuration of reality<sup>4</sup> (Gefen 2002: 229), or the relation between representation and a physical and external social reality (Grodal 2002: 68), or if we consider it as a degree of accuracy of the fictional representation (Esquenazi 2017: 215), we do not lose sight that realism is not the only fictional modality that refers to the 'real' (Ibid.: 216, 222). To be more precise, cognitive realism ('perceptual' for Hill 2007: 115) or historical realism in regard with referential accuracy, as traces to be detected in a fictive universe are not the only path leading to the sentiment of *truth of the fiction*. The element of an *emotional realism* as a subjective "experience of reality" (Ang 1985: 44-45), points out the fact that the relation of audiences with television is not only visual but affective. As Lull notices, "people never just 'watch' television [...] more than anything else, audiences 'feel' television and other popular media, often quite deeply" (Lull 2002: 170). Or, as Grodal (2002: 70) suggests, "[i]n order to understand the experience of the real in media representation we must look into the basic mechanisms that constitute our *experience* of what is real".

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<sup>4</sup> We do not occult the movement of realism in literature or in painting during the 19<sup>th</sup> century although it is not possible here to develop this parameter into our analysis.

Therefore, realism is not to be apprehended as a synonym of reality nor of actuality. Instead, we consider actuality as a sign (representum) used inside fiction in order to lead the viewer to an *actuality effect* (interpretant) that reinforces the sentiment of realism of the fictive situation. Actuality injections inside TV fiction bring the promise of a realistic narrative universe, close, familiar to the viewers' experience; a universe that *matters to them*.

### ***The Actuality Effect***

Within this context, this paper examines the injection of *actuality* inside recent Greek TV series as a key element creating a common and familiar ground to be shared with the spectator. By doing so, it is the notion of *actuality* in non-factual TV genres, such as TV fiction, that is questioned. Actuality is a notion related to *truthfulness* and *realism*, major components linked to the promises of factual TV genres (Hill 2007; 2018). However, how can we interpret actuality markers inside fictional narrations that have no obligation to present an *actual* state of the world (as is the case with informational genres, for instance)? It is in this question that this paper tries to shed light on by considering the function of the *actuality effect* inside several Greek TV series.

In this category of truth in television fiction that we examine, we use the term 'actuality' in the sense of a referential element linking the universe of fiction with the 'real' world of the spectator. As it has been argued, TV fiction can be measured by its degree of 'accessibility', i.e. the cognitive operation undertaken by the spectator of rapidly entering the imaginary world of fiction. Jost mentions a double way of accessing TV fiction: through actuality and through universality, subject to a psychological identification with human conditions and behaviours such as love, fear, jealousy, etc., that can be familiar to the spectator despite spatio-temporal distance (Jost 2001a: 154-156). The former, i.e. the 'actuality effect' (a term initially used by Chateau 1983 and adapted by Jost 2001a) that brings a realistic element into the narrative world of the series can rely on various degrees of *mimesis* of the places and characters really existing or plunge into a situation of the real world or of our everyday lives. This mechanism that we could associate with a – more or less – familiar topological or chronological *anchorage* (*ancrage*)<sup>5</sup> relies on the use of audiovisual and/or linguistic markers inside complex representation systems, such

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<sup>5</sup> The term '*ancrage*' (*anchorage*) has been employed by Roland Barthes in his *Rhétorique de l'Image* in order to explain the two major functions of the text in relation to the image (*ancrage-relais*). The function of *ancrage* of several linguistic messages is to stop the fluctuation of meaning of the (polysemic) image.

as fictional narration, that helps situating the place (*lieu*) or condition inside which a fictional universe unfolds, providing an additional layer of realism.<sup>6</sup>

## METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

Studying specifically television fiction poses the question of the television program as a media object which is placed into a specific context of expression (*contexte d'énonciation*) and one of reference. As François Jost (2011b: 152) explains, “[u]nlike the text in general, which can be studied for itself, without taking into consideration any contextual *ancrage*, the media object only makes sense in and through communication”. The same applies to the object of study ‘Greek Television Fiction’, since the ‘text’ as well as the ‘paratext’<sup>7</sup> form both a system of elements the specificities of which need to be taken into consideration. This endeavor implies a different methodology from an audiovisual analysis of a film, for example (Jost 2010a; 2011b). A TV series is characterized by a periodicity of programming (a specific day, before and after another program), a seriality (which can take different forms whether we watch the broadcast or we binge-watch, for instance) and is inscribed in the logic or brand of a TV channel.<sup>8</sup>

Entering and analyzing the world of fiction is accomplished by several ‘entrances’, such as the genre (drama, comedy, adventure, sitcom, soap opera, historical series, etc.), the format (mini-series, serials, series, etc.), the characters (main, secondary characters etc.). Also, at a semantic level, an important factor that needs to be taken into account methodologically is the analysis of the narration, and that of its different levels, i.e. the plot (the different plot levels and the way they ‘tie’ together in a narrative universe, that is, the sequence of events within a story). Television series as media objects are also characterized by periodicity and programming, that

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<sup>6</sup> The examples of the latter are endless in TV fiction worldwide. In order to illustrate this function of *anchorage*, we could refer to some examples regarding the Greek case. Such a reality marker is, for instance, the city plans opening the episodes in the TV series *Oi Vasiliades/The Kings* (2012-2013, MEGA), an adaptation of the Argentine series *Los Roldán*, (2004-2005, Telefe); or the description as “stories unfolding in the city center” provided on the website of ALPHA TV for the series with the highly intertextual title *Yperoxa Plasmata/Magnificent Creatures* (2007-2008, ALPHA) (Available at: <https://www.alphatv.gr/show/yperoxa-plasmata/aboutuperoha-plasmata/>, last access 19 December 2019).

<sup>7</sup> On the notion of *paratext* in literature see the work of Gérard Genette (1982; 1987). On the role of paratext on TV programs see the fundamental work of François Jost (2009; 2010a; 2011b; among many others).

<sup>8</sup> In the case of programming films on television it is then interesting to examine how they are embedded in the programming of the channel.

are to be perceived as paratextual, though constitutive elements of the analysis. In contrast, for example, to film, a television series subscribes to a particular context of enunciation, that of the TV channel and programming (a particular *temporality*). Both are combined with the rest of the content and the programs of the TV channel, as well as with the daily reality of viewers outside the screen. In this way and through the above stages of analysis, it is always attempted to understand the kind of relationship that television series have with the social and cultural environment. Therefore, the object 'television series' is understood in combination, depending on where we put emphasis on. Entering the world of television fiction through genre, theme, system of fictional characters and so on, has repercussions in the type of analysis one operates on the series.

For the purposes of this paper and in order to specify *why* (i.e. what is the function of actuality in the fictive universe) and in *what way* (i.e. in what forms or narrative schemes) the injection of actuality is implemented in the narrative world of Greek TV series, we focus and analyze various fragments of reality inserts as they manifest in the scenario: news images embedded in the story, actuality references in the narration, situations and characters inspired by the 'external' actuality, etc., both in verbal and audiovisual mode.

### *Corpus Perimeter*

Our epistemological orientation determines our methodological choices; indeed, in this paper we do not opt for a specific corpus analysis, nor an analysis of a *subgenre* of TV fiction, nor a purely comparative approach in time or diachronic perspective. Instead, the subject of our study (the question of truthfulness in Greek TV series linked with a state of *actuality*) suggests a research field that allows different approaches, more than a strict delimited corpus of study. In that context, our reference and analysis of specific Greek TV series will focus on one of the criteria of the different assertions of 'truth' within Greek TV fiction; that of the reference on *actuality*. By doing so, we do not lose sight of a larger trend which can be traced into various TV programs in television and in media discourse in general, that of speaking 'in the name of the truth', including the recourse to an *emotional realism*, though not as an exclusive way of reaching the *inner truth* proposed by fiction, as we have tried to point out in previous works (Vovou 2010).

Not referring to a specific or exhaustive corpus does not mean that our choices are made in an entirely aleatory way. In this paper, the examples of the TV series are selected through two filters: a) their generic affiliation to the comic series and b) their thematic affiliation to the Greek financial crisis. This methodological choice allows us a certain economy to the profit of a coherent analysis of the *actuality effect*

in a more restricted area of study. The two filters used – genre and theme – presented in this paper allow us to operate on homogeneous categories of programs following more or less the same rules. Within the genre of television fiction for instance, drama or crime fiction are not necessarily following the narratives codes of comedy. And respectively, the assemblage of different social realities, such as climate change or immigration, mobilizes different specters of social representation that need to be addressed, going beyond the purposes of this work.

### **WHAT IS THE PROMISE OF ACTUALITY IN GREEK TV SERIES THE SYMPTOM OF?**

If *the state of reality is changeable* or, if reality is like a kind of *background* for the media *form/shape* that appears each time,<sup>9</sup> the referential context of the Greek crisis as an example of reality injection inside the fiction is to be found in several TV series. In what terms though? In the following sections we examine three ways in which the *actuality effect* is manifested in Greek TV series, giving space to different functions of the status of reality of the financial crisis inside TV fiction. These modalities are: a) the ironic distance with the socioeconomic reality the series is referring to, b) the use of actuality as a pretext for the diegetic word of fiction, and c) the injection of actuality as a key element giving credible substance to the characters and the situation on which the scenario will be based.

#### ***The Status of Reality to the Test of the Comic Genre: Irony as an Interpretative Inquiry***

Our first category of the intrusion of actuality in the fictive universe focuses on the series *Piso sto Spiti/Back Home* (2011-2013, MEGA)<sup>10</sup> and questions, precisely, the affiliation to the comic genre as a prism through which the series can be understood.

In the work of Aitaki (2018), the series *Piso sto Spiti* is taken as an emblematic example of the way in which popular culture and, more specifically, Greek television fiction shapes and makes sense of the crisis as a discursive object. Building on Entman's (1993) concept of framing, Aitaki meticulously explains the way in which,

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<sup>9</sup> Here we are expanding and extrapolating Fritz Perls' Gestalt theory in psychotherapy whose main principle is that humans are to be considered as a whole entity (the word 'gestalt' meaning 'whole'). Within that context, an emerging situation or problem are best viewed as part of a whole, taking into consideration the relation between form/font.

<sup>10</sup> The story of *Piso sto Spiti* unfolds around the Akindynos family, formed by the married couple of Katerina and Ilias, their grown-up children, and their grandchildren who are forced to return to their parents' house due to financial problems linked with the Greek crisis.

by portraying the Greek crisis as a domestic problem, *Piso sto Spiti* contributes to the discursive construction of the crisis as a problem the causes of which are to be found in cultural traits, thus leaving little room for a more holistic understanding of the problem with its economic and political parameters” (2018: 52).

Thus, the latter series “repeats and normalizes, rather than challenges, dominant (at the time) views of the crisis as a culturally infused problem” (Ibid.). The role of the television series as a framing mechanism of the Greek financial crisis is, therefore, underlined.

Following our theoretical premises that television productions need to be understood as media objects within both a referential and an expressive context, the latter understanding of the – garish, in this case – intrusion of actuality in the fictional narrative universe needs to be examined in light of the TV genre in which the program appears to be affiliated – in this case, comedy. *Piso sto Spiti* is a comic TV series; this ludic/comic mode of expression also functions as a framing mechanism, that of the comic convention. The comic series’ genre functions here as a precaution; besides the promise of laughter and entertainment, the series seems to be absolving the negative stereotypes about Greeks at the time (this operation is not contradictory to a certain normalization) or, more accurately, *laughing at accusations*. For the series does so through the ludic register while avoiding to endorse full responsibility of the depicted proposition. The final (if such a thing exists) judgment on the Greek temperament and culture is left to the spectator to decide. This playful mode can also be discerned and somehow compacted in the wordplay regarding the surname of the family, ‘Akindynos’. The literal meaning of the word in Greek is ‘harmless’, ‘not dangerous’. Among many attributes (physical, social, psychological, function inside the narration, etc.) of a fictional character, the name is an important indicator of his consistency, giving birth and at the same time orienting to a certain mode of reception of the character (Lits 2008: 138). In our case, the parodic surname ‘Akindynos’ is to be understood in a double sense: one literal/declarative (‘Greeks are not dangerous’) and one ironic (‘Are they, really, dangerous?’). Again, it is up to the spectator to choose the meaning that suits them best (although not once and for all). In that case, *Piso sto Spiti* can also be understood as a metacommentary not of the Greek financial crisis but of the dominant, at the time, media and political discourse on the cultural features of the Greeks that were regarded as responsible of the crisis. By imitating in a ludic and parodic way the life and days of a Greek family throughout the socioeconomical context of the financial crisis, the TV series has a relation of similarity with a

'serious' model<sup>11</sup> of representing the real world (i.e. stereotypes of Greek cultural features held responsible for the crises). The comic effect is coming from the exaggeration of this *serious model* of representing the real world. And that is different from a direct relation of similarity (*analogon*) with the 'real world'. On the contrary, and in a pragmatic frame of analysis, here, the series counts on the existence of a discursive community that makes possible the ironic effect – not only of the fictive heroes' surname but of the whole *diegesis*.<sup>12</sup> Analyzing the relation between comedy and reality from a similar prism, Savorelli refers to a *cubed reality* existing in TV comedy, as an additional layer of discursive reality – *squared reality*<sup>13</sup> – describing the ability of television to “look not only at the world but also at the world *as represented* by some other form of televisual expression” (Savorelli 2010: 183, 194-195).

As Schaeffer (1999) explains, fiction is not only imitative in the platonic sense of a simulacrum. The imitation of the real world is also to be understood in an Aristotelian sense of creating a model of reality. Therefore, if in the case of some television series the truth of the fiction relies on the use of elements that refer to the 'real' world outside of it, we argue that this use is not to be apprehended in a direct causal mode of intelligibility (that of a type 'media representations of the Greek crisis') that could be perhaps implemented in an informational media *genre*. For, in our case, the *transparency cum opacity* of the sign is to be discerned in the playful and constant oscillation between distance/proximity created by the – comic – *genre* of the program. Therefore, the ironic dimension of the series is to be understood, as we argue, as a playful game of reflections that questions, puts in doubt,<sup>14</sup> to the same level at least (if not more) that it normalizes the mainstream discourses on 'Greek cultural features as responsible for the economic crisis'. In this case, the comic genre itself functions as an interpretative frame, *reframing* the referential frame of the financial crisis.

### ***Actuality as Pretext***

In the TV series *I Genia ton 592 Evro/The Generation of 592 Euros* (2010-2011, MEGA) the reference to the Greek financial crisis could not be more direct. Indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2002) insists on the fact that most of the times “fiction does not imitate reality but our modes of representation of reality”.

<sup>12</sup> As Pierre Schoentjes points out “it is not the use of irony that creates communities; but the discursive communities that make possible the irony” (2001: 297).

<sup>13</sup> Savorelli refers to the collected volume edited by James Friedman (2002) questioning the representation mechanism of the real in television discourses.

<sup>14</sup> In fictive literature, Pierre Schoentjes (2002: 320) argues that irony solicit interpretation by confronting the reader to contradictive significations.

the series' title<sup>15</sup> refers directly to the minimum salary wage instituted by Greek government during the years of crisis for young people from 18 to 24 years old. The series belongs to the comic fiction *subgenre* and announces itself as an explicit *promise*<sup>16</sup> (through its title, presentation by MEGA Channel, and opening episode as we will see) to follow the life of six young people during the economic crisis in Greece.

The intension of an inscription of the series to a 'real' reality is more than evident in the opening episode.<sup>17</sup> In the first scene of the very first episode we are immersed in what could be understood as a bureau inside a television channel (that of MEGA Channel). A producer (played by well-known actor Spiros Papadopoulos) is briefing an employee on a new project regarding the production of a documentary on the 'generation of 592 euros'. The assignment of the employee is to follow constantly a group of friends, six young people chosen by the production, in order to realize this documentary project on their lives. The six young people/characters of the series are presented through a television screen inside the office, both by the producer and by scenes that contextualize their role inside the fiction. In that way, the series begins to unfold its scenario by introducing us to the six main characters and their relations to each other.

However, even if the series seems to borrow from the narrative mode of documentary or that of *cinema vérité*, it winks, at the same time, at the spectator from the very beginning, communicating that this is in fact a *genre travestissement*, a playful disguise or a *pastiche* of one genre into another. For, from scene one,<sup>18</sup> it is evident to the spectator that this will be a comic television fiction. How? The man assigning the project and representing the channel is directly identified as an actor playing a fictive role. The same, also, applies for the six characters of the series,

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<sup>15</sup> According to the fansite [retrodb.gr](http://retrodb.gr), the original title of the series before its broadcasting was *The Generation of 700 Euros*; due to a downward revision of the minimum salary the series title followed the actuality of the 'austerity measures' and was renamed *The Generation of 592 Euros* (Available at: [https://www.retrodb.gr/wiki/index.php/Η\\_γενιά\\_των\\_592€](https://www.retrodb.gr/wiki/index.php/Η_γενιά_των_592€) last access 19 December 2019).

<sup>16</sup> On the notion of *promise* see Jost 1997 and 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_vaerlh\\_9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_vaerlh_9w), last access 19 December 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Even before the experience of watching the first episode, since paratextual elements such as trailers, information provided by the channel and in the press precede and shape our *horizon of expectations* (cf. Jauss, 1978) of a television program.

actors playing a fictive role.<sup>19</sup> So the question would be ‘why’? Why bother using this trick while in the same time telling us that this is a trick? Because, even if we know that this is fiction, the invocation to the documentary genre reinforces the promise of *authenticity* regarding the representation of the situation of young people during the Greek crisis context. Therefore, the inscription of the series in the *actuality* of the spectators who are invited to watch the show, and, potentially, to feel concerned of it and even identify themselves to any of the fictional elements (characters/situations), is reinforced. In this case, the regime of truth in *I Genia ton 592 Evro* draws from the socioeconomical context and uses it as a situational convention upon which the narrative universe is constructed.



**Fig. 1:** *The opening scene of I Genia ton 592 Evro on a large poster of the series To Nisi*

Having argued that the series uses a main actuality event as a point of departure from which the scenario will unfold from the first episode on, if we go back to the opening of the series and the very first scene we can ask again: ‘what do we really see in the opening of the first episode?’ The very first sequence opens with a big poster announcing the main TV series of MEGA Channel for the season in question (2010-2011) *To Nisi/The Island*,<sup>20</sup> clearly indicating the day and time of

<sup>19</sup> We invite the reader to see in the distinction made by Käte Hamburger (1986) between real subjects of speech and fictitious subjects of speech in literature.

<sup>20</sup> *To Nisi*, was one of the most expensive Greek television productions, broadcasted on Mega Channel at the time, that received dithyrambic critiques and attracted a large audience; the

broadcasting of the series; in addition to that, Cretan music is played by a cassette in the office, as a sound reference to the universe of the latter series (Fig. 1).

Taking into account the fact that *To Nisi* was the main television production of MEGA Channel during the same season, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that – in an additional level of *semiosis* – the ultimate truth of television is television itself. Adopting a reflexive and tautological attitude, by promoting its programs, the ultimate reality – the ultimate *actuality* – is that of the TV channel. To give just an example, this intertextual yet promotional technique – amply employed in television discourse – is also present in the very last episode of *I Genia ton 592 Evro* when the character of Miri makes an allusive reference to the series *To Nisi*; he talks about a dream he had the previous night in which he was in holidays at Spinaloga, the little island where lepers from Crete and the rest of Greece were quarantined, central in the story of the TV series *To Nisi*.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, several intertextual elements are pointing out a strong reflexive attitude of television. For example, the series ends with the comment of the man who had originally thought of the project (which appears only in the first and last episodes) that this will never be broadcasted but that he could use the group of friends in something else, asking if they know how to cook. This character's line is, in fact, a metacommentary on the programming of numerous cooking shows that have deluged television over the past years. The same applies to other audiovisual mechanisms we can discern in the series. One could mention, for example, the mechanism of 'confession' using the *eye to eye address* in this series, which refers to the status of telling the truth in factual television *genres* that promise to show us a 'real' state of the world (such as news, for instance, or reporting) and to institute a regime of *sincerity* (Chambat-Houillon 2016);<sup>22</sup> or as constitutive element of reality television that has also amply developed in modern

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series was based on the homonymous best-selling novel of Victoria Hislop. The series tells the story of the village of Plaka in Crete and the little island of Spinaloga across it; the latter was a leper settlement from 1903 to 1957. For more information on the series see for example here <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1708523/> (accessed on 11 November 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSHqORpbfX8>, last access 11 November 2019.

<sup>22</sup> As Chambat-Houillon argues, sincerity refers less to a concern of finding the truth than to the commitment to be truthful. In that sense, the credibility of an enunciator is not evaluated according to his capacity to produce a truthful speech, but according to the estimation of his intention to speak the truth; and that intention belongs to the domain of sincerity (Chambat-Houillon 2016).

TV fiction (see for example TV series such as the first season of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, HBO) or *Singles* for Greek television (2004-2008, MEGA)).<sup>23</sup>

In short, taking into account the evolution of the story in *I Genia ton 592 Evro*, we argue that the element of actuality of the Greek crisis, is, in fact in this case, a pretext for unfolding a scenario that does not focus on the former but mainly on human relations borrowing from the format of *sitcom*. To put it otherwise, here, the reference background of the financial crisis is a *pretext* for the *text*. And in an additional layer of perception, the *text* itself (*I Genia ton 592 Evro*) is punctually used as a *pretext* for another text (*To Nisi*), bringing out the fact that the latent context of reference of television is always itself, always self-referential/reflexive. This is why it is important to combine *textual* and *paratextual* elements of the television programs in order to analyze television productions both as contents and as communicational strategies.

This intertextual yet reflexive trend is not only promoted by television discourse from the point of view of the production; it is also acknowledged by the spectators. Some of the comments on YouTube where the episodes can be watched are quite telling.<sup>24</sup> In fact, spectators notice that characters, situations, scenes and lines are borrowed from other TV series like *The Bing Bang Theory* (2007-2019, CBS) and *Friends* (1994-2004, NBC). If we turn punctually here our focus to reception elements, it is to shed light on the communicational procedure that characterizes television mediation. A TV program can make a promise of referring to reality elements. The latter promise though, in a pragmatic context of communication (which takes into consideration the eventual meanings or uses), is, or is not, acknowledged as such by the viewers. As it can be understood by the comments cited below, the relation of the series to the reality of the financial crisis is not an issue.<sup>25</sup> Viewers seem to skip the *pretext* and go directly to the various layers of the text.

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<sup>23</sup> Even if this rupture element -the eye to eye address- can be found in fiction in the past as well; a genealogy though of this mode of address goes beyond the purposes of the present analysis.

<sup>24</sup> YouTube is here a paratextual element of the text, just as the TV channel (MEGA) on which the series was originally programmed. The same applies to the comments of the viewers that one can find on the platform, providing insights, and clues of how -in what mode- to watch the series.

<sup>25</sup> Although a more organized reception study of the series would permit to draw general conclusions.

Some of the viewers' comments are quite eloquent in regard to this aspect:<sup>26</sup>

"They have stolen lines, themes and characters from American series BUT the series is very good and achieves its purpose of laughing. Good lines, very good interpretations, nice directing and despite the stolen it has some original elements!!!"

"Basically it must be a little bit stolen huh?"

"Sheldon from big bang, Rachel, Ross, Phoebe and Joey from friends, Fez from that 70s show... in a collage *à la grecque*"

"As a TV viewer of both series I have to say that they took some elements even whole scenes from the big bang theory"

In a slightly different register, the comic series *Me ta Pantelonia Kato/With Pants Down* (2013-2014, MEGA), which is an adaptation of the Spanish TV series *Con el Culo al Aire* (2012-2014, Antena 3), that also uses the crisis as a reference background, makes the crisis its fundamental condition for the scenario to be developed. The story takes place inside a camping site, where many people and families move permanently because of financial problems due to the crisis. Using once again an actuality reference as a canvas, the series displaces the fictive reconstruction of a society miniature to a different *lieu*, i.e. the camping site. The camping site, functions as a narrative convention of the cohabitation just as other space markers have been used in various (not only Greek) TV series. Such examples can be found in the TV series *I Polikatoikia/The Apartment Building* (2008-2011, MEGA), also an adaptation of the Spanish series *Aqui no Hay Quien Viva/There is No One Living Here* (2003-2006, Antena 3); recently restyled into *Tha gini tis polikatikias* (2019-, SKAI), that could be translated as 'See what will happen in the apartment building'. The Greek TV spectator also remembers among the series of Yannis Dalianides, *To Retiré/The Penthouse* (1990-1992, MEGA) followed by the series *Oi Mikromesaioi/Those from the Small-Middle Class* (1992-1993, MEGA), both placing the narration in specific places: the apartment, the bureau, etc.<sup>27</sup> As we can observe, the multiple layers of intertextuality and of citation inside television fiction "do not oppose frontally reflexivity and reference to the real world" (Chambat-Houillon 2010: 122).

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<sup>26</sup> Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_vaeRlh\\_9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_vaeRlh_9w), last access 11 November 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Through a different approach focusing on the recycling of narrative, character and situational patterns in the work of the director Yannis Dalianides, see also Kassaveti (2018).

### *Actuality as Credibility*

Having argued that the series uses a main actuality situation as a *canvas* on which the scenario unfolds but not as a *sine qua non* condition of the existence of the series (as it would be for instance for *Piso sto Spiti*), we can discern similar trends in other Greek comic TV series that use the reference background of the Greek financial crisis. Following that trend, a variant would be the injection of actuality as a trigger of the plot. We discern the latter, for instance, in the series *To Kato Partali* (2014-2015, MEGA) – Kato Partali being the name of a fictive village in which the story takes place) indexed as a *noir comedy*.<sup>28</sup> In this case, the financial crisis offers an argument of consolidation of the credibility of the characters and that of the situation narrated in the fiction by providing a contextual frame directly withdrawn from an emblematic media image of the Greek financial crisis, i.e. the well-known moment of the announcement in front of the cameras of the prime minister at the time (April 23, 2010), George Papandreou, from the little island of Kastelorizo, that Greece applied for the activation of the ‘support mechanism’ of the EU and the recourse of the IMF.



**Fig. 2:** *Scenes of fun on the island of Mykonos*

<sup>28</sup> *To Kato Partali* relates the story of a Greek ‘golden boy’ that gets fired due the financial crisis and lands in a small Greek village where his girlfriend is coming from. His sister Vivian who discovered that her husband not only cheated on her but is arrested because of debts is following them, despite her expensive tastes and former luxurious way of life. As we discover, Kato Partali is a ‘peculiar’ village, providing the fond of this noir comedy.



**Fig. 3:** *Scenes of fun on the island of Mykonos in which the series characters are appearing*

In fact, the first episode of *To Kato Partali*<sup>29</sup> opens with a flash back on the popular island of Mykonos, symbol of a kind of frivolity and luxury (Figures 2 and 3), since it is a highly quoted holiday destination for many local and international celebrities. The main characters of the series are taking their luxurious holidays there when the intrusion of actuality appears not only in the form of dialogues, verbal allusions to a 'real' referential background or even that of a fictive narrative situation inside the plot, but also via the use and the reframing of well-known news images.

In Fig. 4 we see the protagonist Konstantinos (the 'golden boy' who is about to get fired) and his sister's husband Stefanos hearing a noise (we can hear from very far away the voice of the Prime Minister George Papandreou). The following dialogue takes place:

*Konstantinos:* "What is that we hear? [*Going near Stefanos*] Do you hear something?"

*Stefanos:* "Not from here; it is coming from somewhere else".

*Konstantinos:* "It comes from Kastelorizo" [*the well-known images of Georges Papandreou follow on the next scene, Fig. 5*].

<sup>29</sup> Broadcasted on February 3, 2014. Available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1m8pd3>, last access 11 November 2019.



**Fig. 4:** *Konstantinos and Stefanos hearing from afar Papandreou's speech from Kastelorizo*



**Fig. 5:** *George Papandreou's speech from Kastelorizo*

Mixing media images of different origins and modes of enunciation (news and fiction for instance) is a common procedure that we can find in contemporary media

and popular culture, creating a universe that makes sense for the audience.<sup>30</sup> This familiarity with the playful shift of regimes of enunciation inside fiction which calls for the complicity of a wink,<sup>31</sup> is extrapolating us momentarily from the fictive universe in order to deeper immerse us back in again. The vivid intrusion of a (past) referential background both represented fictionally (scenes of fun in Mykonos) and by the recourse to news images (the famous speech from Kastelorizo) serves the economy of the narration in a highly elliptic way: in a few minutes the fictive universe of the series makes sense for the viewer. In fact, this amalgam of images explains and gives credit, *authenticates* a key element of the story based on the constitutive contrast of the characters put inside the improbable situation of city people living in a small village. Once again, the *actuality effect* here does not concern a depiction, neither a sense making, of the Greek crisis *via* fiction but, instead, pounces from that reference to the ‘real world’ in order to build in a convincing way the fundamental dichotomy ‘former wealthy city people vs paysans’, upon which the narrative thread will be developed.

## ACTUALITY AS AN AUTHENTICATION ELEMENT OF THE FICTIVE UNIVERSE

In his text ‘True life, real lives’, Didier Fassin distinguishes *reality* and *truth* in the following terms:

I use the two words – reality and truth – not as equivalents but as concepts in profound and permanent tension: the real being that which exists or has happened and the true being that which has to be regained from deception or convention. Reality is horizontal, existing on the surface of fact. Truth is vertical, discovered in the depths of inquiry (2014: 41).

And continues by reminding us the fact that “...more than reproducing the real, fiction aspires to unveil profound truths about the state of the world” (Ibid.: 52).

To summarize, whether it is to present an ironic *metacommentary* on dominant media discourses on reality, in a kind of displaced framing mechanism through the comic *genre* (see the case of *Piso sto Spiti*), to use reality as a *pretext* for creating a fictive universe (*I Genia ton 592 Evro*, *Me ta Pantelonia Kato*) or to use the material of reality situations in order to give credibility, *materiality*, to characters and

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<sup>30</sup> We can see this trend, for instance, in the innumerable productions of YouTubers and as a central issue of media literacy.

<sup>31</sup> Lipovetsky and Serroy (2007:131-147) use the term ‘image-distance’ in order to explain the mechanisms by which an apparent distancing is integrated into films *via* the use of allusion, irony, citation and humoristic associations.

situations (*To Kato Partali*), it seems that reality is slipping away, one way or the other. For the *injection* of actuality in TV series is, rather than the intention of a *reflective tendency* that we can find in informational media discourse for instance (Pleios 2011: 196-210), what the literal meaning of the word ‘injection’ announces: a kind of ‘booster’, a communication tool, increasing the affective engagement<sup>32</sup> towards characters and situations in order to immerse the fictive narrative universe of the series.

Consequently, this kind of semiopragmatic analysis of the fine liaisons between the real, *actually* existing situations and events, on one hand, and the various fictive universes, on the other, is built in contradiction with an analogical perception of media and television discourses which is most of the time veiling the *non transparency of signs* (in our case that of media texts). In other words, by studying fictional *texts* (i.e. TV series) as communicational objects, this work is keeping its distances from analyzing media productions as the ‘reflection of society’, a posture that is not going beyond the obvious. In that sense, the *truth of fiction*, the sentiment of authenticity of the fictive – even probable in some cases – universe proposed by TV series, is not necessarily to be searched in its relation to reality elements. As we have tried to point out in our analysis, media culture itself is a major component of the *experienced* real shared with the audiences; and that finding leaves the question of truthfulness of TV fiction wide open, in a *to be continued* mode, or, one could say, as a promising act.

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<sup>32</sup> On the notion and the different levels of ‘engagement’ in cinematic fiction see, for example, Smith (1995); on emotional engagement in TV fiction see, for example, the collective volume of Garcia (2016). For the complexity of the poetics of contemporary TV narratives see Mittell (2015).

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