



In Conversation with Walter Presents

COLLECTION:
WATCHING THE
TRANSNATIONAL
DETECTIVES

ARTICLES –
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The video-on-demand service Walter Presents launched in the UK on 3 January 2016, as part of Channel 4's All 4 online platform. The service was founded by Walter Iuzzolino, Jo McGrath, and Jason Thorp and specialises in bringing subtitled international drama and comedy to British audiences. Iuzzolino acts as frontman and curator of the service and explains that series are selected because they are “big shiny hits in their native country”, offer “the finest writing, directing and acting that each country has to offer”, and are “award-winning or already critically acclaimed”. In November 2018, at the “Watching the Transnational Detectives: Showcasing Identity and Internationalism on British Television” conference at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, Walter Iuzzolino and Jo McGrath sat down with Dr Helena Chadderton and Dr Rachel Haworth from the University of Hull and talked about their experiences of establishing Walter Presents. This article relates that conversation.

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Q: How did you conceive of Walter Presents?

A: The dream was to create a channel, where viewers would go to Channel 97, for example, and find Walter Presents. It would be available constantly, a 24/7 feast of foreign drama. This was something new in the old-fashioned days of linear viewing and terrestrial broadcasting. What we wanted to provide was something like *telenovelas* all day long. That was our dream. Of course, we realised that that wasn't going to happen, so we set about trying to get Walter Presents off the ground in a different way. We pitched to Sky and ITV, who both loved the concept and felt it addressed a gap in the market. This was when BBC4 was bringing in dramas like *The Killing* and Channel 4 was showing *The Return*. French and Scandi dramas were popular but we were looking for something else. We had conversations with different department heads about formats that travel, and suggested drama. "No", came the answer. "Never seen foreign drama. There's no market, outside of French and Scandi series". But we stuck with drama. Drama is exciting. There's an excitement to viewing cultural crime dramas, for example, that you can't see elsewhere. Viewing quality drama is exciting, too. And we knew there was a wealth of content like that out there.

Q: How do you go about sourcing your content?

A: Our number-one concern is that we source stuff that is good enough. And we found plenty of it because we were the only ones looking! There was no competition. We are also extremely grateful to the distributors, who took a risk on us. They agreed to give us their shows if our platform got off the ground. We were saying for two years that we would launch but we couldn't get going. Channel 4 changed everything. They jumped at what we were offering straight away. As a channel, they are culturally very progressive; they look forward and like opportunities to be disruptive, in a way. Everything happened very quickly: it took one week to sort out terms and conditions and only two weeks after our first meeting, we had a deal. We would be a channel without a terrestrial channel, if that makes sense. We would be a bespoke unit online, and would need online traffic to drive viewers to consume our shows on All 4. Of course, now, Walter Presents has actually shifted perceptions of All 4. We will make people wait for the next release and they do. Last year (2017), was the first time that more people came to All 4 to watch new shows than to catch up on programmes previously broadcast on Channel 4. Viewers clearly want quality drama and we have fantastic content that doesn't cost a fortune.

Q: Let's talk about foreign drama in general in the UK. Why do you think there has traditionally been a lack of foreign language television in the UK?

A: There's no need for people in the UK to speak another language because the world speaks English. So there's less of a perceptible need to speak other languages. We have lots of television and literature, so we can consume what we have. And what we have is lots of choice already. But the world today is much more integrated, more global even. There's interest in global food and fashion, for example. What we want today is the best of everything, and at the click of a button. And what we're seeing are cultural trends converging now, as people get interested in the international. This is why we avoid "foreign language" as a way of describing our drama and instead prefer "international". Foreignness is off-putting, or at least that's what people

said in feedback to us. It might well be seen as a marker for quality but it was putting people off. Let us share an anecdote with you: we went to California to pitch to some big executives at a well-known American company that shall remain nameless! And our dilemma was, do we pitch what we do as offering “foreign language drama” or “international drama”? We knew the word “foreign” was off-putting so for our pitch, we decided it would be best to go with “international”. We explained the concept, provided a list of French, Belgian, and Israeli titles, then shared a mood reel with clips that focused on big emotions (because, after all, when we’re in love, we all speak the same language!). The reel showcased scenes from around the world and really appealed to the executives. “Great, fab”, they said, “and it’s all in English, right?” Of course, it wasn’t all in English and so we lost the business. When we pitch to journalists now, we often talk about television as the new novel. There’s a lot of kudos in talking about the next big Polish television show, for example, and subtitles are seen as a marker for quality. For Korean and Japanese programming, it’s totally different. We’re still thinking about how to introduce this kind of programme further down the line. For the moment, we think we’d struggle to find an audience here and now for Asian shows.

Q: How do you plan Walter Presents launches for programmes?

A: We hold a première on Channel 4, which is all about publicity. It’s about getting the audience hooked, and then we move directly to the digital channel. We’ve never been snobbish about this as our platform. We aren’t providing art films, and we’re not an independent cinema. That’s not what we want to do. We don’t want to reinforce those stereotypes of foreign drama as being obscure and intellectual. The shows we provide are shiny, glossy, entertaining shows. They’d be on BBC1 here if they were made in the UK! Our programmes are definitely mainstream and great examples of TV for fans. Yes, they’re conceived, made, and produced abroad, but that just means that you get to see how they do cop shows. Take a police thriller from France, for example: when you watch, you see what’s similar to the types of programmes we get in the UK.

Q: What principles do you use to inform your selection of programmes?

A: It’s about providing a good mix. Some fast-paced, glossy shows that keep you watching and are ideal for binge-watching. Others, like crime procedurals, for example, will appeal to a more conservative audience who want to tune in week by week. We’re trying to offer a range in our catalogue. But what is fundamental is that there is no snobbery involved in the selection. If we went just for rare programmes that felt like works of art, we’d feel like we’d failed because that sort of programming is already available. Our aim is to bring good quality entertainment from around the world to mainstream audiences. This was why we did think about partnering with Sky as a way of reaching that kind of audience, but the platform would have required that advertisements be shown during the shows. This was the risk of going with Channel 4: there was to be no revenue from advertising during programmes, so if people hadn’t streamed our shows, we would have had to close. But the fact that the programmes are free-to-view is part of the appeal. It gives our service a democratic nature. The launch of *Deutschland 83* is a good example of what we do: that show appealed to everyone and proved to be an international tipping point, culturally. It’s interesting because that show didn’t do so well in Germany (*Deutschland 86* did better). But it appealed to our audiences.

Really, we’re aiming to break down the dichotomy of high and popular in terms of television viewing. There’s this idea that either you revel in watching crap or you enjoy opera, and television programming makes you travel between these two points on the spectrum. Our idea was to park right in the middle of the spectrum. Take *Tatort*, for example. Our choosing to include that show in our offer was really important. The programme is very specifically German, and there are many sociocultural specificities involved. Its selection was an implicit cultural act on our part. We wanted to show the real culture that sits between the highbrow and the lowbrow.

Q: What was the thinking behind the inclusion of *Heartless*, the series with the vampire lesbians?

A: We wanted to attract a younger audience! And it’s a wonderful piece of television. What we found with our other shows was that young people don’t take to crime shows, so we started looking at short-form shows in other genres. We wanted to buy more of this type of thing but we needed to establish a slot to be able to play this type of programming. We felt *Heartless*

was one of the best ways to draw people in. Once we'd got the audience, we could target other shows with similar promise. So our aim was to promote and market the programme to the younger audience. And our strongest marketing tool is in fact the television we provide. We get up to a million viewers, so people know we're there. But young people don't watch television. So what might be the best way to draw them in? With a lesbian vampire show!

Q: Who is your typical viewer?

A: Our audience demographic research shows that we have an equal male/female split across viewers. As you might have predicted, our typical viewer is aged 55 plus. *Heartless* was an exception there, as we attracted 16 to 34-year-olds, which was a rare draw for us. In general, we attract an older audience. Our viewers also tend to be upmarket but less metropolitan than you might think. When we were thinking about how to broaden our audience, we were looking for a show to use as our breakout show, which would also help us to diversify our schedule. So we chose *Deutschland 83* because it's for a younger audience, it's cool. We didn't want something that relied on the tropes of Scandi drama. *Deutschland 83* is disruptive and the younger audience liked it because it was sexy and cool. We also like *The Swingers*, which is basically *Fatal Attraction* in suburbia. It's fun, a bit of a romp. The show's original title was *New Neighbours* (*Nieuwe buren*) but we renamed it *The Swingers* because that title rated better with viewers. The show captured audiences because of the stereotypes of Dutch culture that are on show, which of course get played up in the series.

Q: What do you see as your role at Walter Presents?

A: We're curators of the brand. Our job is to ensure that the offer is varied and broad enough to attract audiences. The service is designed to be broad enough to attract everyone and not be a high cultural outlet. We're meant to be mainstream. Our shows are meant to be fun to watch. Take *Locked Up*, for example: that Spanish show has changed the market. The press was making lazy comparisons between it and *Orange Is the New Black* and at first, we wanted to kick against that. But then, we decided to use the comparisons. What the show offers is a wonderful, brilliant, cliff-hanger ending which makes you want to watch more. That show helps break through those perceptions of snobbery that surround foreign television because you just gobble it up. That meant we could market the show as a boxset for audiences because they loved it.

Q: How do you actually choose which shows to include on the platform?

A: We deal with the language problem by watching shows that are already subtitled. But we choose by looking at the images and we actually ignore the language. Yet by watching shows that are already subtitled, we are insisting that all distributors that are selling their programmes must have the first episode already subtitled. We then watch that episode, and read the script in English.

Q: How are you different to other platforms that are out there?

A: Netflix is definitely encroaching on what we do, which does make life harder! But platforms like Netflix and Amazon, they are like the supermarket in that they offer just the staples. Walter Presents is like an upmarket deli offering upmarket cheese and exquisite balsamic vinegar. Our emphasis is quality over quantity. And the question that is our guiding principle when choosing a show is: will you, the audience, watch it? The thing to remember is that Walter Presents is a badge of brand quality that is associated with good TV. We are well-established. We know we have great stuff to watch and that there is more great stuff out there. Walter Presents wants the shows that no one else wants. We want to find new things. Netflix and Amazon tend to commission, too, using the classic US model meaning that they own the programmes that get made. But the problem is the poor quality of the dramas that get produced. Even though both platforms have large chequebooks, and are able to assign millions of dollars to making shows, there's no filter for quality, which is what we have. Everyone needs an editor. At Walter Presents, we edit ourselves. And Channel 4 edit us, too. There are lots of layers to our process. The other thing to remember is that money doesn't always equal distinctiveness. What we need is for people to say that what is being produced isn't good, like what might happen in a gallery. You

need this type of discernment to build a collection. But the other thing to remember is that the filters in the US are different, and they have a different conceptualisation of quality. Shows get made but they don't get watched, which is soul-destroying for the producer.

Q: What is your approach to subtitling?

A: When you're subtitling mainstream material, you have to have consistency. So it was important that we developed a house style for Walter Presents. This helps us to ensure the quality of our subtitles, because when the shows arrive with us, the quality of the subtitles provided can vary! You have to remember that the human eye can only take in a certain number of characters so you can't literally translate everything. The job of our subtitles is to capture the essence of what's going on on screen, to preserve the entertainment that the show provides. Yes, as a viewer, you need to read quickly, but the subtitles aren't just about reading. They should also help you to think that you speak the language that's being spoken on screen, because you need to be able to enjoy the costume and the performance that you're watching. It is TV after all.

Q: What can you tell us about your business model?

A: We work with a model of licence contracts, which does have its advantages. To secure a licence, the show must be seen as excellent in its home territory and must have completed its first run. In-country, we partner with the broadcaster. Channel 4 then acts as a kind of mother ship. We secure the rights for broadcast in the UK for three years, with a distribution pattern of putting one episode per week online, and offering a one-month-long première through Channel 4. And the content is then downloadable. This is a model that we want to replicate elsewhere but we need a broadcaster as a partner to reach viewers. For example, PBS is going to be our partner in the US.

Q: Where do you source your programmes from?

A: We haven't as yet sourced a lot from Africa. That's because not a lot of material has come across our desks but we do have some scripts to consider. It seems that Africa isn't producing a lot of drama at the moment. For content from China, we have to be aware of what constitutes successful in that market. For a show to be a success in China, it will have had a run of 100 episodes. China doesn't tend to have short runs of series, which consist of something like 10–13 episodes. It's the same for shows from Turkey. We have to find something that is manageable for UK audiences. There's also the question of how to package Chinese content. We have got options from Latin America to consider. And Korea is another option.

Q: Would you consider sourcing film, as well as television programmes?

A: We might look to move into film, too, because it's not that radically different but we would have to think about strategy in that area. Television is all about storytelling, which is what appeals, but if a film is structurally like a television show, then it's a possibility for us. Quality would be the key factor, though. We must be able to champion what we source.

Q: How will you compete in the future?

A: As far as acquisitions are concerned, we will compete when we need to. And passion is key, too. It was definitely important for us in securing *Deutschland 83*. The thing to remember is that Walter Presents is like a crazy, eclectic shop. We don't want to look at offering packages. As we grow globally, we want to be able to push for the ability to show our content in other countries as well. And there's no hard and fast rule for what we want to do next.

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