

## NARRATING THE PAST TO (RE)BUILD THE PRESENT OF METROPOLIS: MIAMI AND NEW YORK

Sheyla Moroni  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali  
Università di Firenze  
[sheyla.moroni@unifi.it](mailto:sheyla.moroni@unifi.it)

The analysis of the tax and communication system implemented in the last fifteen years by some administrations of the East coast of the USA (in particular New York and Miami) revealed the centrality of detaxation in favor of products that foresee the targeted use of some urban spaces as sets of TV series (including period dramas). This attempt seems to be in contrast with the natural Californian attractiveness towards TV-film productions (which represent the second industry of the Country), but it is also an investment to mitigate the fear perceived after the 2001 terrorist attacks and, in case of Florida, the fear that - once the "Cuban hazard" is eliminated - the Hispanic community would turn into a criminal and socially exclusion problem. Nonetheless, Florida has blocked this policy as urged by the Koch brothers, just a few months prior to presidential elections and hand-over of the country to the GOP. Therefore, this phase shows a strong contrast not only between globalized metropolises projected towards a transnational model (that was allowing them - before Trump - to govern themselves by referring to other megacities and not to the nationality of their citizens - such to be defined and named "sanctuary cities" - reserving the faculty not to indicate the names of illegal immigrants to authorities) and the declining idea of soft power, in American version (clearly in recession in 2013).

Starting from Serge Noiret's input according to whom "nowadays, making public history does not only mean to teach or diffuse a certain type of history concretely applied to the problems debated [...] in the public arena, aspiring to reach a wide audience [but] it also means making history in direct contact with the evolution of mentality and sense of common belonging of different communities that co-habit within the national territory and worldwide, and promote the study of their identities"<sup>1</sup>, I try to link the plots of the three analyzed period dramas to the history of the cities where they are filmed and to political (therefore also cultural and social) evolutions that are distinguishing the larger network of globalized and transnational megacities (with their own aspirations and policies), comparing them (mostly in the USA) to national-state cities.

### 1) Cities to re-build

Why is it possible to talk about re-building the analyzed metropolises? Because the audiovisual production is useful not only to "rebuild" their past, but also to: 1) implement the metropolitan economy after September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and mainly started immediately after the 2007/2008 financial crisis, which became an economic crisis; 2) reclaim part of the social-urban fabric thanks to targeted contributions and by giving visibility to those city areas (in this case) mostly in need and sometimes to 3) re-think and rebuild a history characterized by the inclusion (also through violence) of certain communities that are permanently settled on the territory (also as elite).

The analyzed plots (*Boardwalk Empire*, *The Knick* and *Magic City*) can be seen overall as the (elitist, politicized and "losing") reconstruction of the American history read through non-wasp communities (Cubans, Italians, Irish, Jews and Afro-Americans) that settled (through illegal economy and use of violence but also thanks to their skills and ambitions) in US urban societies. It is not by chance indeed that the reconstructions cover particularly "fluent" periods of the American history: early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prohibition years and the period immediately after the victory of the Cuban revolution; years in which the mainstream totters (or seems to totter, therefore it becomes implicitly stronger) and during which the "newcomers" settle on the territory.

The productions taken in consideration are period dramas because they show the intention to shape an idea of the past, more than any other media, and are selected according to the highest price and impact on the metropolises where they were filmed: these productions are *The Knick* and *Boardwalk Empire* for New York City and *Magic City* for Miami (Beach).

The production years of the analyzed seasons (3 for BE and the only 2 for the others) range between 2010-2015; during this five-year period, the detaxation benefited by productions reached record highs, especially with regards to New York: for BE, the millions of dollars refunded to subjects related to filming can be quantified in 19 and 16 TK.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Noiret, "Public History" e "Storia Pubblica" nella Rete, in "Ricerche Storiche", 39, 2-3, 2009, p. 275.

The productions in object (premiers broadcasted by HBO, Cinemax and Starz) were realized and anyhow significantly benefited of the policies implemented by the Mayors of New York during that period: above all Michael Bloomberg (2002-2013, independent), whose policies were brought forward by De Blasio's (Democrat, in office since 2014) stern choices, further aiming at narrating minorities and in Miami, Tomas Pedro Regalado's policies (Republican, in office since 2009). The choices made by the governors of the two States in office during the afore-cited five-year period - the governors of New York (David Paterson and above all Andrew Cuomo, in office since 2011), and Florida governor (above all Republican Rick Scott, in office since 2011) – had a significant impact. In particular, Bloomberg created the brand/initiative "Made in NY" aimed not only to detax, but also to provide necessary infrastructures and services for productions, within a business that reached 130,000 workers. In order to be detaxed, productions had to be 75% filmed in NYC, however in reality, the program was also foreseeing a specific degree to get a job as assistant producers; in 2011, Bloomberg eliminated the incentive program which was re-instated later on by Cuomo while De Blasio, who presented himself as "anti Bloomberg", took only this proposal from his colleague's activity, especially prompting to hire unemployed youngsters in the TV series and audiovisual sector. In particular, the Brooklyn's College of Cinema was promoted as follows: "As the first public film school in New York, Feirstein is dedicated to diversity, inclusion and the cultivation of new and emerging voices in cinema". It is not by chance that this cultural approach is underscored, also born in contrast with Californian video-film production academies; indeed the latter embody an opposite philosophy compared to New York philosophy: away from the city (parts of districts are rebuilt in NY to host them), private, extremely pricy, and strictly related to Hollywood studios (which remain a separate industry).

According to BCG's report, New York City is one of only three cities in the world with a filming community large enough to enable a production to be made without needing any roles to be brought in from other locations, including cast, crew members, and the creative team. Additionally, a rich real-life history, iconic locations, diverse storytellers and top talent are among the reasons productions choose to film in New York City. State Senator Martin Golden states: "New York has always been central to stories on the big screen, but many times New York City was recreated on a set, because it was too expensive to film here. We changed that and now we see camera crews and actors filming New York scenes right here on the streets of the Big Apple on a regular basis."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the "city-state"-like or actual "sanctuary cities" idea is proposed as centre of an independent cultural and employment policy: President Donald J. Trump harshly objected them. The President elected in November 2016, despite coming from NY, strongly criticizes the entertainment industry.

However, changes to the policies concerning immaterial and cultural productions (also in respect to the meaning analyzed herein) were not introduced after the election of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States: indeed, it is not by chance that Luis Castro, former HBO, has become Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment of New York in 2015, and also the choice made in 2016 regarding detaxing in Florida during the primary Presidential elections appears to be equally blatant. In that occasion, Richard Lynn Scott, governor of the South-East State, supported Trump, allowing Florida (the only State with New Jersey) not to offer any longer incentives to the entertainment industry, while New York city offers: 30%, plus 10% for below-the-line wages in select upstate counties for productions over \$500,000 with a minimum spend of \$0, sign of a fluent political situation in line with State policies that have ambiguous outlooks with regards to the federal government.

Indeed, after the election of the new President, former host for broadcaster NBC (in particular at the time when the so called Muslim-bans were introduced), De Blasio further politicized his choice, detaching from Scott who instead declared to fully agree on the objected policy of the new chief-in-commander (even if characterized by some actual islamophobia traits).

## 2) The period dramas, the narration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and narration sources.

This paper is not intended to analyze the consistent scientific literature explaining how fictions can be compared to novels/ good literature that shapes the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream; this document aims at reminding that, not by chance, the "actual" directors of the three analyzed period dramas are amongst the most famous directors worldwide: Steven Soderbergh, Martin Scorsese (who is also the producer) and Mitch Glazer (not as famous but equally renowned at professional level).

The plot of these fictions often focuses on the self-made man and his relation with success in different historical periods and fluency in dealing with illegal and/or immoral aspects of social mobility that often recalls (directly or indirectly) the experience (while filming the fictions) of the relation with immigrants, who are disadvantaged by definition.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/721-15/mayor-de-blasio-increased-growth-new-york-city-s-entertainment-industry-brings-8-7>

All three products are not intended to be simply nostalgic tales, but aim at producing and diffusing the cultural myth of the USA through “rebel projects”.

Above all, these fictions are produced by/ and produce "local" history: *Boardwalk Empire*, *The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City* is the best seller volume of Nelson Johnson (a lawyer, judge and author) who, as fond protagonist, tells about the recent past of his city, which is also the background of the entire TV series; while *The Knick* was created by Dr. Stanley Burns, founder and CEO of The Burns Archive, who served as the on-set medical adviser on the series, and worked closely with production and the actors to make the hospital scenes realistic and authentic to the period. The Burns Archive is the world's largest private collection of early medical photography and historic photographs, housing over one million photographs. While it primarily contains images related to medical practices, it is also famous for photographs depicting 'the darker side of life'. “The wardrobe, the scenery, and the dialect – all around well done and extremely well-researched [...] to understand the authenticity apparent in this show”<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the Burns Archive has contributed images, as well as consulting and advisory services to various feature films, including: *The Others*, *Gangs of New York*, etc.... *The Knick*, in turn, stirred the production of scientific and specific, more complex literatures, while *Magic City* is strongly based on large photo archives of interiors and fashion referring to historical periods, and dedicated to Miami history.

### 3) Brooklyn and Miami Beach.

Thanks to these period dramas, “Boardwalk Empire Filming Locations” tour is offered in Atlantic City (New Jersey) and also a Boardwalk Empire Tour in New York; the first offers a tour of the "actual" places filmed in the TV series while the second offers a tour of the sets in Manhattan, Queens (particularly interesting because it includes the “Poppenhusen Institute” which collects grants for its causes) and Staten Island where some scenes were filmed; nonetheless, the New York "district" with audience fond of *The Knick* (which natural set is thought to be in Manhattan) and most BETour is Brooklyn.

There is obviously a tour to visit Downtown Miami, especially “aimed” at detaching from the city of *Miami Vice*, *Scarface* etc... meaning the ‘80s audiovisual productions (that shaped American fantasies on this city) and that attempts to exalt the historic dimension of the city’s architecture even if *Magic City*, in this case, did not play a key role because in view of the expectations, the series was accused not to have sufficiently "exploited" the city (for budget reasons?), not to have particularly boosted the economy of Miami "film tourism", and also because it is no longer filmed since 2013 (year in which the detaxing policies concerning sets in Florida were amended).

Nonetheless, according to some commentators, *Magic City* had an impact in selling the image of Miami: indeed, the attempt to remodel the metropolis like “Gateway to Latin America and the Caribbean” was introduced with this series and would have been “successful” only if continued, because the city is still suffering from the image conceived during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and exploited for a long time also by the fiction industry, very difficult to overturn. In this respect, critics on the series are all focused on the synergy with memory policies (a “nostalgic operation”) shared with the administration.

Miami Beach, 1959: It was a time of mobsters and the mambo, Cuban exiles and the CIA, Sinatra and sun-soaked glamour. This is the world captured in the new Starz series *Magic City*, the latest addition to TV’s postwar nostalgia wave. Premiering this week, *Magic City* centers on hotel visionary Ike Evans (Jeffrey Dean Morgan of *Grey’s Anatomy* fame) and his silent partner, notorious mobster Ben “The Butcher” Diamond (Danny Huston), who run the fictional Miramar Playa hotel during a politically tense period of social—and architectural—change that forever reshaped the Miami landscape. Much of the show’s action takes place in the hotel [...]<sup>4</sup>.

It is indeed the last statement that paradoxically infers that it was MC to "bet" the most on a "coated effect", linked to citizens' emotions, “which is not surprising when you learn that the father of *Magic City*'s screenwriter Mitch Glazer, an electrical engineer, designed the lighting for both those hotels. It is also similar to the Deauville, where Mitch Glazer worked as a cabana boy while growing up in Miami”<sup>5</sup>.

### 4) Is Florida “in line” with the Koch brothers and New York...?

The relation between these cities and film sets seems not to have been successful due to different reasons: Brooklyn choices seem to have negatively affected some politicians/ governors with many objections from citizens/ electors of other districts, while Miami Beach was the first to experience the discontent of various stakeholders when the Koch brothers, major GOP's financiers, clearly decided to do lobbying on the State of Florida in order for the latter to cut all incentives through the *Americans for Prosperity Foundation*. The Koch brothers’ ultra-conservative lobbying group helped the institution of the Tea Party in 2009 as political movement and sponsored actions against Medicare,

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.boweryboogie.com/2014/08/first-look-knick-takes-authentic-approach-toward-turn-century-life/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/starz-magic-city-article>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1832045/faq>

Medicaid and the idea of climatic change. “Data compiled by the Florida Secretary of State’s office shows that over the past three election cycles, Koch Industries has made the maximum allowable campaign contributions to more than 50 members of the Florida House who opposed the incentives, while Americans for Prosperity actively campaigned against those who support tax credits”<sup>6</sup>.

This battle shows how the sets linked to (all) TV series are involved in the fight related to the vision of future US policies; also linked to employment, industrial development of cities (typical or not) and the educational system; indeed, in the latter field, it is important to notice that Florida has introduced school courses to follow New York footsteps immediately after 2013, declaring that “We’re educating them [i.e. assistant producers] with our tax-payer money and they’re graduating and fleeing to California and Georgia”, which anyhow, inconsistently, do not deviate from an opposite view.

The public opinion is also underlying the debate between States and lobbies, which was already divided much earlier than the end of the second mandate of Barack Obama “The only thing that puzzles me is why there are so many liberals who favor tax breaks for the film industry but are against tax breaks for the myriad other industries that get them (for example; textiles, biotech, and of course “big oil”)”.

In August 2016, Michael Thom, a professor at the USC published a study titled *Lights, Camera and No Action?* that found that state incentives programs aimed at luring productions away from California and New York had “little to no sustained impact on employment or wage growth” in their states. His study found that since 1997, the film and TV industry has received more than \$10 billion in state tax subsidies<sup>7</sup>.

“The incentives are a bad investment,” Thom wrote on USC’s website. “States pour millions of tax dollars into a program that offers little return. On average, the only benefits were short-term wage gains, mostly to people who already work in the industry. Job growth was almost non-existent. Market share and industry output didn’t budge”.

We remember that in 2007, Charles Koch published a book called *The Science of Success*, explaining how the system works, which is clearly and harshly against the models expressed by the American liberal-pop culture, even in the choice of the company's headquarters, which was intentionally kept in Wichita, Kansas, away from Silicon Valley and any other US metropolis. Despite the above, and like Trump, David Koch is the richest New York citizen and in 2012, he financed Republican campaigns with 400 million dollars, to prevent Barack Obama’s re-election and put pressure on Miami which was the first to break away from “sanctuary cities” regarding immigration, also rejecting Obama’s foreign policies concerning Cuba.

In December 2016, one of the great Section 181 lobbyist (Film Federal Tax Incentive) stated: “It was one of the greatest jobs acts we had,” but despite this “enthusiasm”<sup>8</sup>, Trump’s administration did not extend the law.

The entire debate is an important step in defining the importance of the State (at federal, state and citizen level) as stakeholder-promoter of some industries and markets. And while Florida bets that no incentives will be re-introduced for the cultural industry, Mayor De Blasio promises instead to focus New York fiches on “diversities” represented by an increasingly important entertainment business.

## REFERENCES

- J. J. Bagelman, *Sanctuary City. A Suspended State*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016.  
 G. Cobb, *Greenpoint Brooklyn's forgotten past*, North Brooklyn Neighborhood History, New York, 2015.  
 A. M. Damico; S. Quay, *21st-century tv dramas : exploring the new golden age*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, California, 2016.  
 D. Hassler-Forest; P. Niklas (Ed.), *The Politics of Adaptation. Media Convergence and Ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015.  
 N. Johnson, *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City*, Plexus Publishing, Medford, NJ, 2002.  
 C. H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> D. Robb, *How The Power-Broker Koch Brothers Are Killing The Florida Film Business*, October 21, 2016 in <http://deadline.com/2016/10/koch-brothers-florida-film-industry-tax-incentives-lobbying-1201838246/> and K. O’Connell, *Florida Yells "CUT" on Film Tax Incentives*, in [http://msworldlaw.com/lawyer/2016/07/13/Entertainment-Law/Florida-Yells-CUT-on-Film-Tax-Incentives\\_b125725.htm](http://msworldlaw.com/lawyer/2016/07/13/Entertainment-Law/Florida-Yells-CUT-on-Film-Tax-Incentives_b125725.htm). Cfr. D. Ferrante, *Burt Reynolds blames Gov. Rick Scott for Florida's dying film industry*, in <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2017/03/10/burt-reynolds-blames-gov-rick-scott-for-floridas-dying-film-industry>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://pressroom.usc.edu/lights-camera-and-no-action-how-state-film-subsidies-fail/>

<sup>8</sup> D. Robb, *Quiet Death For Federal Tax Incentive Designed To Stem Runaway Production*, December 30, 2016 in <http://deadline.com/2016/12/runaway-production-federal-tax-incentive-dead-1201877065/>

- M. Panter (sous la direc.), *Imagination et histoire : enjeux contemporains*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2014.
- M. Parks, *Miami, the Magic City*, Community Media, Miami, 2008.
- S. Peacock, J. Jacobs (Ed.), *Television Aesthetics and Style*, Bloomsbury, London-New York, 2013.
- The Boston Consulting Group, *The Media and Entertainment Industry in NYC: Trends and Recommendations for the Future*, Media and Entertainment in New York, New York, 2015.
- M. Thom, *Lights, Camera, but No Action? Tax and Economic Development Lessons From State Motion Picture Incentive Programs*, in “*American Review of Public Administration*”, Online before print June 5, 2016.
- M. Wolff, *Television is the New Television. The Unexpected Triumph of the Old Media in the Digital Age*, Penguin-Portfolio, London-New York, 2015.