

Cultures on the Screens: Family, Identity, Gender, and Language in Television Series



EUT

edited by
Leonardo Buonomo
Piergiorgio Trevisan

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“You don’t know nothing about being me”: Ideology and Characterisation in *When They See Us*

PIERGIORGIO TREVISAN

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last 15-20 years, a growing number of academic disciplines have delved into the world of TV series, from a large variety of perspectives: Montemurro, for example, has investigated the realities these cultural products construct from a sociological point of view, focusing on the consequences on people’s behaviour and ways of making sense of the world; Orosz *et al.*, on the other hand, have analysed the psychological correlates of screen-based behaviour in order to explain the obsessive and/or positive reactions associated with series watching; narratologists like Pfister have outlined the different communicative functions of language in dramatic situations, while stylistically-inclined critics like Toolan have looked at selective, recurrent features in the style of TV shows, comparing them to more traditional narratives. As far as more linguistic-oriented perspectives are concerned, researchers have mainly studied the functions of particular phenomena like multilingualism (Bleichenbacher), accent or dialect (Bruti and Vignozzi; Minutella; Lippi-Green), movie conversation (Pavesi; Forchini, *American*), linguistic variation (Queen), dialogue (Kozloff), accessibility (Bernabé and Orero; Perego). A considerable

amount of work has been carried out, in particular, by Bednarek, who has used corpus techniques for the investigation of crucial aspects like ideology (*Fictional*), characterisation (“Nerdiness”, “Big Bang Theory”), dialogue (*Language*), and the multifunctionality of taboo words (“Multifunctionality”, “Don’t Say Crap”), to mention but a few.

By combining Critical Discourse Approaches and Corpus-Stylistics ones, the present contribution aims at joining the current, ongoing discussion on the proliferation of TV series starting from the assumption that one of today’s most urgent needs in academic education is the promotion of ‘televsual literacy’, i.e. the capacity to identify potential ideologies and/or cultural stereotypes that may manipulate viewers in a way that is contrary to their own beliefs. With this in mind, the primary aim of this paper is to analyse how various types of semiotic modes can be used to construe such crucial phenomena as ideology and characterisation. In doing so, notions from multimodality (Baldry and Thibault; O’Halloran, Tan and Marissa, “Critical”; O’Halloran *et al.*, “Multimodal”), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough; Van Dijk, *Power*, “Ideology”), stylistics (Jeffries and McIntyre; Trevisan, “Mind”, *Characterisation*) and corpus linguistics (McIntyre and Walker; McEneary; Bednarek, *Television*) will be jointly combined to attempt an initial collection of analytical tools aimed at the development of critical awareness in students and, more generally, in TV viewers as a whole.

The remaining part of the paper is organised as follows: section 2 will be devoted to the introduction and description of the case-study; section 3 will investigate the role of the paratext and of the very first moments of the narrative for the construction of viewers’ expectations; section 4 will be concerned with the ideological patterns that permeate the whole *When They See Us* show; section 5 will deal with characterisation strategies; section 6 will introduce some concluding remarks and ideas for future studies.

2. FROM “THE CENTRAL PARK JOGGER CASE” TO *WHEN THEY SEE US*

The case-study chosen for this paper is the American TV Show *When They See Us* (WTSU henceforth), a miniseries created for Netflix by the American filmmaker Ava DuVernay, which was premiered on May 31st, 2019.

The four episodes of the show narrate the events of a criminal case known as the ‘Central Park Jogger Case’, which took place in New York in 1989 and

brought to the wrongful conviction of five Black and Latino male teenagers: Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Yusef Salaam and Korey Wise. The whole story spans a quarter of a century, with each episode exploring a different moment in the protagonists' experience: in the first one, a white woman is assaulted and raped in Central Park and the show's protagonists are taken to the police station and interrogated for the simple reason that they had been spending time in the park on that same night. During this episode, it soon becomes clear that the police intend to invent a narrative aimed at accusing and convicting the teenagers, despite a clear lack of evidence: the characters are subsequently pressured into confessing to a crime they have not committed and are set up against each other. The second episode portrays their life in prison and their experience with the court hearings: all the characters are charged with rape and assault despite the evidence brought by their lawyers to show their innocence. The third episode shows the difficulties four of them experience in reconnecting with life once they are released from prison: in particular, it explores issues in socialisation and work reintegration, mainly due to the social stigma attached to the fact that they were considered ex-convicts. The fourth episode is entirely dedicated to the portrayal of a single character: Korey Wise. His personal growth in jail is explored by means of continuous flashbacks and flashforwards, until his final release.

The show received great critical acclaim, with an approval rate of 96% on Rotten Tomatoes. It received 11 Emmy Awards nominations, including the one for Outstanding Limited Series: the actor Jharrel Jerome, interpreting Korey Wise, won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Limited Series. In particular, WTSU was praised for the way in which it came to symbolise the racial injustices black and brown people may experience within the American legal system and in media coverage. As the real Yusef Salaam recently remarked:

I knew how big this series would be. And I knew how small our story had become. I say that because when we were found innocent, there was no tsunami of media that followed in the way that tsunami came out within the first few weeks when they thought we were guilty. The criminal justice system says that you're innocent until proven guilty. *But if you're black or brown, you are guilty and have to prove yourself innocent. And I think that is the difference, that two Americas that is often talked about. There are so many components that let you down* (Yousef Salam, my emphasis).

Interestingly, the series also features the then future American President Donald Trump's reaction to 'The Central Park's Jogger Case'. In episode 2, his actual words during a TV broadcast are reported: "I would like to be a well-educated black today, because I really believe they do have an actual advantage today". In that same year, Trump spent \$85000 for a full-page advertisement published in New York's four most important newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The New York Post* and *New York Newsday*). The text in the headline, written in upper-case, read "BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY. BRING BACK OUR POLICE", while in the body-copy the following words were used: "I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes". In the light of what would happen during the 2017-2021 Presidential Mandate, this type of racist language was clearly anticipating the rhetorical argumentation he would reiterate when talking about immigrants.

It is significant that just one year before the show was aired, the police violence against the Black community was condemned in a report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in which it was explicitly stated that racial disparities "permeate the criminal justice system, are widespread and represent a clear threat to the human rights of African Americans, including the rights to life, personal integrity, non-discrimination, and due process, among others" (Inter-American Commission Report).

3. THE ROLE OF PARATEXT: HOW TO BEGIN TO CONSTRUCT A FICTIONAL WORLD

As remarked by Genette and Maclean, a 'journey' across a fictional world starts from its paratextual elements: titles, images, font types, cover lay-outs, etc. all contribute to the creation of a 'border area' where new 'laws' between readers and texts are stipulated, and expectations primed. In telecinematic discourse, paratextual elements are mainly embedded in the preview image, as exemplified in *Fig.1*.

The first paratextual elements viewers encounter in WTSU are a combination of verbal text on the left hand-side and an image portraying the five main characters on the right hand-side. The verbal text is a graphologically foregrounded hypotactic clause used without a correspondent main clause: in other words, the very first linguistic element of the show is a sentence left



FIG 1: WTSU's preview image

unfinished, which is likely to open-up some room for interpretation in the viewers' minds. *Who is the referent of the pronoun 'they'? What would the main clause of this sentence be? What happens when they see us?* are all questions that may legitimately be triggered by the producers' linguistic choice. The 'logogenetic unfolding of meaning' (M.A. Halliday and C. Matthiessen, *Construing*) then continues towards the right hand-side, where the protagonists are portrayed partially overhung by the American flag, metonymically representing the Country as a whole . The entire image can thus be processed as a powerful visual metaphor projecting the idea that the black people in America are likely to be cast in the shadow by the power and the institutions controlled by the Whites. Additionally, the flag also represents an obstacle to the characters' upward vision, a fact that may open-up racial identity issues. It is also not without significance that the characters have been represented by means of an 'Offer Picture', i.e. a picture in which the represented participants are not looking towards the viewer, thus being denied the possibility of even a symbolic interaction with the world outside the frame (Kress and van Leeuwen). Thanks to the integration of verbal and visual resources, the viewers are therefore likely to infer that the missing main clause in the verbal part is to be replaced by the message conveyed by the image: possible interpretations include options like *When they see us, we cannot see them*, *When they see us, we are covered/hidden*, *When they see us, we have no right to personal identity*, etc.

At this point, the viewers' expectations regarding possible narrative scenarios have been prompted in different directions, all of them addressing situations of oppression, injustice, racial violence. Crucially, since pronouns

generally relate anaphorically to entities/people who have been mentioned earlier in the narrative, the use of ‘they’ and ‘us’ creates the impression of an ongoing situation: in other terms, it is as if the polarisation between the two groups portrayed by the show was just a further example of a well-established scenario.

The second textual ‘threshold’ viewers encounter coincides with the very first scenes of the show, which prove central to the mental formation of key narrative aspects like characters, settings, worldviews. In addition to features like lexical choices, accent, paralinguistic information,¹ all of them heavily contributing to the creation of a specific idea of a character in the viewers’ minds – other elements prove fundamental for the ‘text furnishing’ and its underlying ‘laws’ (Dolezel and Ronen): types of shots, characters’ surroundings, soundtrack and intertextual references all have the potential to *refresh* or *reinforce* viewers’ schemata regarding a particular situation (Cook). In other words, the viewers’ mental schemata previously activated by the paratext may be *reinforced* by the events occurring in the initial moments of the show or *subverted* by means of representational strategies that contradict the viewers’ expectations.

Let us observe how the plot unfolds, starting from these assumptions: in the very first shots of episode 1, Antron McCray is represented with his father while eating a hamburger and French fries and talking about football. In the following scene, Korey Wise is shown while skipping school and going to buy fried chicken. In the third scene, Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana and Yusef Salaam are portrayed sauntering round Harlem to a typical rapper-style beat. The language the different characters speak in these opening scenes is typical African American Vernacular English (AAVE henceforth), with no dialect shifts occurring: examples of this include ‘ain’t’ for negations (“Whoa, I ain’t no traitor”, “If he ain’t a Yankee, nothing to root for”, used by Antron), sentences with no verb (“You cold, Tron”, used by Antron’s father), the verb form ‘gonna’ without a preceding copula (“A’ight, we gonna see” used by Antron’s father), and in general sentence constructions that may be considered ‘non-standard’ (“How come you never hungry?”, “Everything better with you”, pronounced by Korey Wise, “Don’t let’s get there first”, pronounced by Raymond Santana) and convey a low level of education (Queen 137). This type

¹ For a detailed list of resources used for character presentation, see Trevisan (*Characterization* 54-59).

of language is combined with a soundtrack dominated by a typical rap rhythm, with pitches increasing when the characters are represented as a group.

Right from the start, then, different semiotic resources co-pattern to produce a series of characters we may refer to as ‘flat’ (Forster)²: they all seem to be constructed around the same behavioural and linguistic patterns, which include eating junk food, talking about baseball,³ using the same words and syntactic constructions. This representation of the characters’ cultural identity – especially meaningful since it occurs at the beginning of the narrative – may thus be interpreted as another possibility for filling in the missing main-clause in the show’s title: when they (the white Americans) see us (the African-Americans), trite stereotypes are likely to be applied, regardless of specific personal identities.

Crucially, the types of shots characterising this opening part seem to reinforce the ideological polarisation created by the paratext and the initial scenes. *Fig.2* and *Fig.3* capture events occurring in the first two minutes of episode 1.



FIG.2: group of black people walking towards Central Park

² Flat characters, according to Forster, are relatively uncomplicated and stereotypical, and do not change throughout the narrative. By contrast, round characters are complex and undergo development, not rarely surprising the reader.

³ Quite significantly, the shot opening the TV-Show is a baseball that one of the characters plays with.



FIG.3: group of black people spending time outside a fast-food restaurant

In both scenes, the black characters are portrayed by means of ‘high angle’ shots, i.e. a typical technique symbolically removing power away from the represented participants and conferring it to the viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen 140). These shots may therefore be interpreted as yet another possible way to formulate the missing main clause in the title: “When they see us, they do so from a higher perspective”/ “When they see us, they see a group of very similar people, not single individuals”.

Things change drastically when the white characters appear for the first time: after a jogger called Trisha Meili has been assaulted and raped in Central Park, Detective Linda Fairstein and some police officers reach the location where the rape took place to gather initial evidence. Their arrival is depicted in *Fig. 4*.

Unlike the black characters, Detective Fairstein is portrayed by means of a ‘low angle’ shot, interpersonally providing power to her (Kress and van Leeuwen 140)⁴: quite significantly, she is portrayed alone, as an *individual* and not simply as a *group member*. Moreover, all the other semiotic resources are momentarily ‘paused’ when she appears, with no soundtrack or words being recorded. One of the first questions she asks is: “Did you pick up any gays, or homeless, or anything?” another way in which the ideological polarisation

⁴ I use the term ‘interpersonally’ following Halliday’s stratification of meaning into three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, textual (*Social, Experience, Introduction*).



FIG. 4: Detective Fairstein represented for the first time

between US (the ‘righteous’ whites who could certainly not be ‘gay’ or ‘homeless’ and, therefore, definitely not potentially responsible for the assault) and THEM (all those who are not part of the US group) is created. This opposition is further reinforced by other linguistic options such as “OUR lady jogger”, or Donald Trump’s request to bring back “OUR Police”, while the black characters keep being addressed through strongly evaluative expressions that threaten their positive face (Brown and Levinson). Examples include the words “animals”, “little bastards”, “bunch of turds”.

What happens in the paratext and in the first minutes of the show is therefore crucial for positioning the viewers with respect to the upcoming narrative events. In particular, the different visual treatments of the characters, combined with variations in the language they use (AAVE always spoken by the black characters, standard English always spoken by the white characters) strongly contribute to the preliminary outline of the powerful ideological polarisation underlying the whole TV series.

4. LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY

As mentioned above, variation in language use is one of the key resources used to foreground the opposition between the two groups: the black characters

are represented almost exclusively through the use of the AAVE variety, while the white group is given the possibility to shift from more standard American English to very informal speech options which include taboo words like “bastards” or “animals”, used to prove their power while addressing the black characters. The fact that the black characters are only portrayed while using AAVE is not without significance, as it is well-known that not all African-Americans in real life necessarily speak this variety: alternative representational options could have been used but it was decided to only portray them linguistically in this way. In Halliday’s words, “where there is choice there is meaning” (*Social* 6).

The US versus THEM polarisation construed by means of language is made explicit from the initial moments of the show: during the preliminary interrogations, one of the black characters declares that on the night of the jogger’s assault he was spending time “wilding out”⁵ with his friends, an expression that both Detective Fairstein and the other police officers struggle to make sense of. Not only do they struggle with the word meaning, but they also seem to struggle with how the word is spelt: in turn, Detective Fairstein reads it as “Willing”, “Wheeling”, “Wiling out”. When she can finally identify the correct spelling, she repeatedly asks both her colleagues and the black characters what the meaning of the expression is. The same expression is also used in a newspaper headline at the beginning of episode 2, thus becoming a ‘plot device’ to move the story forward and help the white characters assemble their narrative.

More generally, the relation between language and ideology in the show can be better captured by means of quantitative methods that isolate all the words pronounced by the characters we are interested in. The remaining part of this section will thus introduce a possible application of corpus methods to identify recurrent language patterns which may prove central to the formation of ideology. The software used for the analysis is W-Matrix⁶. To start with, five different files were collected:

⁵ The expression ‘Wilding out’ is typically slang and refers to a behaviour that goes against the normal rules or standard.

⁶ W-Matrix has been created by Professor Paul Rayson at the University of Lancaster (UK). For details, see <<https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>>

1. A file containing all the words pronounced by the black characters in the four episodes
2. A file containing all the words pronounced by the police officers in the four episodes
3. A file containing all the words pronounced by the Detective Fairstein in the four episodes
4. A file containing all the words pronounced by the white characters during the interrogations
5. A file containing all the words pronounced by the black characters during the interrogations

Each of these files is a mini-corpus that can be analysed by means of tools like *Keyness* (which indicates the most frequent words in a corpus, when compared to another corpus), *Part of Speech frequency* (POS henceforth, which identifies the most frequent parts of speech in a given corpus), *Semantic categories* and *Semantic keyness* (which identify the most frequent semantic patterns in a given corpus or in comparison with another one)⁷.

To start identifying potential ideological patterns, the most frequent ‘areas of meaning’ emerging from the dialogue of the white protagonist were first identified by running a semantic keyness analysis on file 3 and file 1: since Detective Fairstein is the character who is in charge of the investigation, the meanings she produces are very indicative of the type of narrative the white people intend to create. *Fig. 5* shows the actual occurrences of the most frequent semantic area [violence] permeating her language.

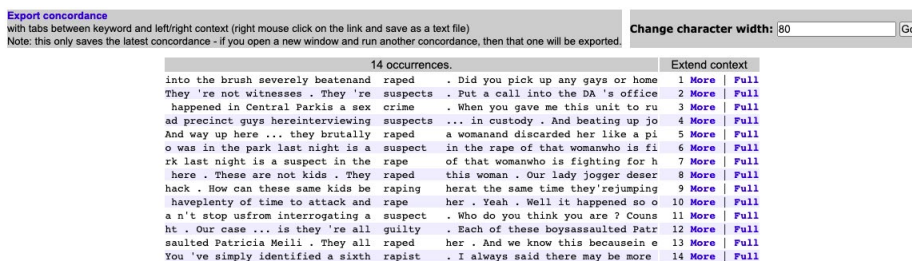


FIG. 5: Occurrences of the key meaning area in Fairstein’s language

⁷ For a detailed introduction to the use of corpus techniques for stylistic purposes, see McIntyre and Walker and Bednarek (TV Dialogue).

The most frequent words she pronounces in the whole show belong to the semantic areas of violence: in particular, the word “rape” is overused, together with its variants “rapist” and “raping”. Noticeably, other key words she uses are “guilty” and “suspects”: these lexical items are uttered from the very start, long before the trial has actually begun. This sheds light on her tendency to use prejudices towards the black teenagers, since she goes well-beyond merely suspecting their guilt but takes it for granted and in doing so she resorts to a discourse strategy analysts call *presupposition* (Fairclough; Han). In other words, she presents their guilt as a point of fact, so that all the actions reported afterwards are to be interpreted as inevitable consequences that do not need to be questioned. This strategy is corroborated by another one: the white characters very rarely use the black characters’ proper names, a fact that contributes to denying/obfuscating their identity even more. In this regard, during an interview held on the Ophra Winfrey Show, the series director Ava DuVernay remarked that “We need to know them and say their names”.

To second step in the corpus investigation was a keyness analysis using file 1 as the target corpus and file 3 as the reference corpus. By doing so, the most frequent language structures used by the black characters (as compared to Fairstein) were singled out.

... Oh man careful with that !	Oh	y'all real funny . Y'all got jok	17	More	Full
an na see Where y'all watches ?	Oh	shit . What 's that ? Tell me th	18	More	Full
They probably just wildin out .	Yo	let 's go Saturday . Saturday it	19	More	Full
go Saturday . Saturday it is .	Yo	is that Deondre coming for us ?	20	More	Full
is that Deondre coming for us ?	No	that 's Al Morris . He cool . Co	21	More	Full
id NoI know what I said Corey .	No	. " There you go taking all my f	22	More	Full
know what I said Corey . No . "	There you go	taking all my food . Yo ! Pollo	23	More	Full
ere you go taking all my food .	Yo	! Pollo ! Let 's go we 're going	24	More	Full
ght you was hungry . Come onBut	I mean	... I better look out there ...	25	More	Full
... I better look out there ...	No	Corey ! No ! Corey for realI 'll	26	More	Full
r look out there ... No Corey !	No	! Corey for realI 'll be a few m	27	More	Full
tay . I promise . Ten minutes .	All right	let 's go ! Five minutes baby .	28	More	Full
let 's go ! Five minutes baby .	Hey	yo ! Yo what do you think they '	29	More	Full
's go ! Five minutes baby . Hey	yo	! Yo what do you think they 're	30	More	Full
! Five minutes baby . Hey yo !	Yo	what do you think they 're doing	31	More	Full
minutes baby . Hey yo ! Yo what	do you think	they 're doing ? I do n't know .	32	More	Full
about that . I got that new ...	Hey	! Yo you seeing this ? Yo ! Hey	33	More	Full
that . I got that new ... Hey !	Yo	you seeing this ? Yo ! Hey man w	34	More	Full
... Hey ! Yo you seeing this ?	Yo	! Hey man watch out ! Back off !	35	More	Full
Hey ! Yo you seeing this ? Yo !	Hey	man watch out ! Back off ! Ah wh	36	More	Full
Hey man watch out ! Back off !	Ah	what have we got here ? What you	37	More	Full
's the cops ! I swear I did n't	doI	'm here for my son . He 's in th	38	More	Full
e 's in the eighth grade . I 'm	sorry	. I got ta work . I was sleeping	39	More	Full
ot ta work . I was sleeping ...	No	my son never gave me no problems	40	More	Full
.. We have translators here ...	Uh	nothing . I was n't doing anythi	41	More	Full
. I was n't doing anything ...	Um	... Uh I was out with my boy Tro	42	More	Full
s n't doing anything ... Um ...	Uh	I was out with my boy Tron . Um	43	More	Full
Uh I was out with my boy Tron .	Um	... Antron McCray . He live arou	44	More	Full
owing stuff . That was n't cool	you know	? he said some kids werecausing	45	More	Full
en he left . We left . You left	huh	? How you get mud on your pants	46	More	Full
Tron we talked about this man !	You know	better than that ! I taught you	47	More	Full
n na be downtown for ? No sir .	Yo	he stays there all the time . No	48	More	Full

FIG 6: Keyness analysis of semantic areas: Black characters compared to Fairstein

Here, a totally different picture emerges: the black characters’ most frequent words are, indeed, ‘non-words’: hesitations (“Uh”, “Um”, “Oh”), discourse markers (“you know”) and in general terms deprived of ideational meanings⁸. A possible interpretation of this result is the very limited possibilities allotted to the black characters for the production of actual linguistic content: by being statistically over-represented in their language, expressions like “Yo”, “Yeah”, “Huh” and “Hey” can be interpreted as ‘signature interjections’ (Bednarek, *Fictional* 130) for those characters, conveying the fact that white and black characters cannot express themselves equally. Indeed, characters belonging to the same group are ‘affiliated’ by their use or non-use of these types of interjections: the white ones never use them, the black ones do so at a significantly high level.

The unfair treatment experienced by the black characters is even more striking when the corpus analysis is applied to files 4 and 5, which collect all the words pronounced by the two groups during the interrogation.

Item	O1	i1	O2	i2	LL	LogRatio
1 List1 List2 Concordance G2.1-	9	1.17	0	0.00 +	5.24	2.60
2 List1 List2 Concordance A5.1+	9	1.17	0	0.00 +	5.24	2.60
3 List1 List2 Concordance M2	8	1.04	0	0.00 +	4.65	2.43
4 List1 List2 Concordance T1.1.3	7	0.91	0	0.00 +	4.07	2.24
5 List1 List2 Concordance S8+	5	0.65	0	0.00 +	2.91	1.76
6 List1 List2 Concordance B2-	5	0.65	0	0.00 +	2.91	1.76
7 List1 List2 Concordance Z99	48	6.23	10	3.85 +	2.14	0.70
8 List1 List2 Concordance M6	19	2.47	3	1.15 +	1.79	1.10
9 List1 List2 Concordance X2.1	3	0.39	0	0.00 +	1.75	1.02
10 List1 List2 Concordance W2	3	0.39	0	0.00 +	1.75	1.02
11 List1 List2 Concordance T1.1.2	3	0.39	0	0.00 +	1.75	1.02
12 List1 List2 Concordance B1	3	0.39	0	0.00 +	1.75	1.02
13 List1 List2 Concordance Z5	157	20.39	43	16.54 +	1.54	0.30
14 List1 List2 Concordance A1.1.1	18	2.34	3	1.15 +	1.51	1.02
15 List1 List2 Concordance X9.2+	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
16 List1 List2 Concordance X3.3	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
17 List1 List2 Concordance X2.5+	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
18 List1 List2 Concordance T1.1.1	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
19 List1 List2 Concordance S7.4+	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
20 List1 List2 Concordance S3.2	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
21 List1 List2 Concordance O4.6-	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
22 List1 List2 Concordance O4.1	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
23 List1 List2 Concordance L1-	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
24 List1 List2 Concordance G2.1	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43
25 List1 List2 Concordance E6-	2	0.26	0	0.00 +	1.16	0.43

FIG. 7: Keyness analysis of semantic areas during the interrogation: White compared to Black

The semantic area emerging with higher statistical frequency during the interrogations is ‘crime’. This is perfectly in line with the already-observed strategy used by Fairstein to create a ‘narrative of guilt’ well before the actual outcome of the trial. Furthermore, it is noticeable how the black characters have very few possibilities of speech compared to the white ones: as a matter of fact,

⁸ In Systemic Functional Linguistics, the expression ‘ideational meanings’ refers to ‘content meaning’, unlike the interpersonal meanings which refer to the relation among speakers, and to textual meanings which refer to the way in which the text has been organised.

the actual number of words they are allotted during the interrogations is 257, whereas the whites are granted 802. In addition to other considerations that may be formulated, this situation clashes with the viewers' typical expectations of the 'trial genre', traditionally structured into the prosecutor's short questions and the defendant's longer answers. What happens here is exactly the opposite: the ones who are asked to answer the prosecutors' questions are not actually allowed to do so properly, as they are not allocated the necessary amount of words to actually tell their version of the events. On the contrary, the members of the jury have access to a vast array of linguistic resources which guarantees the enrichment of the narrative triggered by Detective Fairstein.

Moreover, during the trial the black characters are often addressed by means of face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson) as evidenced by nouns like "liar" or by verbs like "grunt" that attribute animal properties to them. Statements like "You have been proven guilty" also contribute to damaging the black characters' face: incidentally, these sentence types are highly manipulative as they take something for granted without providing any further explanation. The decision to resort to passive constructions rather than to active ones indeed grants speakers the possibility to 'delete agency', i.e. to specify that something happened without actually needing to explain who the agent carrying out the action is. The statement "You have been proven guilty" sounds like a 'given' situation (even if the outcome of the trial has not been communicated yet) in which all the attention is focused on the "You": the agent who proved them guilty is not specified, mainly because no one could have done so at this point in the plot.

The worldview of the white characters is also very clearly conveyed by the metaphorical patterns that permeate their language: as demonstrated by several studies, metaphors are closely related to mind style, i.e. the peculiar way in which a character makes sense of the world (Semino; Semino and Steen; Semino and Swindlehurst; Trevisan, *Mind*). In WTSU, the white characters tend to use metaphors that relate to the source domain of CATASTROPHE as in "This is an epidemic we are not in control of" referred to the presumed violence perpetrated by African-Americans or Latino people in the USA. The CATASTROPHE source domain is in line with the extensive, ideologically-loaded use of 'flood metaphors' in the media to talk about immigrants documented in the main media outlets (Charteris-Black; Strom and Alcock). Detective Fairstein largely deploys metaphors related to the semantic field of violence, such as "Those bastards shot their wad into a sock, thinking we

wouldn't find it": the verb "shoot" is generally used in settings of war or more generally of violence, therefore this is again to be interpreted in the light of the Catastrophe source domain. Clearly, the use of these metaphor types adds to the already-noted linguistic strategies aimed at damaging the black characters' face and creating distance, besides further enhancing the US and THEM polarisation permeating the whole show.

6. LANGUAGE AND CHARACTERISATION

Many are the resources that can be used for the construction of a character in telecinematic environments: language, images, sounds, type of shots, etc. WTSU is particularly emblematic from this point of view, since at least two characters are construed by means of a very peculiar combination of semiotic resources: Detective Fairstein and Korey Wise. This section will therefore focus on them, devoting more space to Korey Wise, as the former has been at least partially discussed in the previous parts of this paper.

As pointed out in section 3, in her very first appearance Detective Fairstein is portrayed by means of a low-angle shot that makes her be perceived as very powerful. This choice in representation is even more significant as it strongly deviates from an intra-textual norm previously established in the general representation of characters. Other elements that contribute to her foregrounding⁹ are the soundtrack, that is suddenly paused when she appears, and her language: she uses taboo words with her colleagues from the beginning ("what the fuck was she doing here?") in addition to highly offensive expressions addressed to the African Americans who were spending time in Central Park on that same night.

Because of these choices in her representation, traits like 'arrogance', 'boldness', 'rudeness' are likely to be attributed to her by viewers from the beginning of the first episode. This impression is then reinforced in the following scenes, both through the content of her utterances and through the way in which these utterances are expressed: to start with, she is the one who initiates the 'guilt narrative' without any intention of modifying it even after her colleagues point out to her that her reconstruction of the events has many weak points. Secondly, she continues to use very offensive language when she

⁹ For the notion of 'Foregrounding', see Emmott and Alexander.

talks about the black characters, repeatedly labelling them as “animals”, “little bastards”, “fuckers”. Thirdly, she repeatedly threatens her own colleagues’ face by means of expressions like “Are you listening to yourself? You sound delusional”, “I am sick of this shit”, or by using manipulative expressions like “The whole country is watching. They are watching you” (all of them addressed to Elizabeth Lederer, the lawyer who leads the prosecution and who has difficulties in accepting Fairstein’s narrative).

Corpus investigations like those introduced in section 3 are very useful for the study of characterisation, as they can better help in identifying language patterns that are peculiar to a specific character. To collect more evidence regarding Fairstein’s character traits, after comparing her language to that of the black characters (see previous section), a similar analysis was conducted using her colleagues’ words as reference corpus. The primary reason for this type of analytical choice is that, while it may be somehow expected (though not justified) that she could exert her power by means of offensive language patterns with the black characters, when it comes to exchanges with her colleagues, power is normally balanced equally among the speakers. Therefore, the language patterns used in her exchanges with them are likely to index personal traits that are specifically hers. While it has already been observed how she tends to impose her will by threatening her equals’ face, further traits may be identified by observing the results of this second type of investigation.

22 occurrences.		Extend context
and start getting some information . We	've got a lady rapedand clinging to l	1 More Full
problematic.i This is an epidemic . We	are not in control . And we can be .	2 More Full
idemic . We are not in control . And	we can be . Call me as soon as you make	3 More Full
leading bound . Naked . And to think	we were gon na releasethese animals to f	4 More Full
t strong ... Come on guys . What did	we miss ? Let 's get an army of blue up	5 More Full
kidwho was in the park last night . We	've got suspectswe 've got kids in cu	6 More Full
it happened so obviously there was . We	still got ta tape 'em . Those are gra	7 More Full
cia Meili . They all raped her . And	we know this becausein each of these boy	8 More Full
r eyewitnessagainst each other . All	we need is for oneof these little shitst	9 More Full
ts to tie this whole thing together . We	have a sock . Those little bastards s	10 More Full
s shot their wadinto a sock thinking	we would n't find it but we found it . W	11 More Full
ck thinking we would n't find it but	we found it . Who cares ? We have it now	12 More Full
ind it but we found it . Who cares ?	We have it now . And the kicker is none	13 More Full
none of the defenseis aware yet . So	we can test it right before the trial .	14 More Full
I do if it helps a jury believewhat	we know is true . We 've still got the c	15 More Full
a jury believewhat we know is true . We	've still got the cervical DNA . Whic	16 More Full
e 's the line ? Huh ? Fucking city !	We hear something gruesome grimace and	17 More Full
ear something gruesome grimace and	we move on . Well not this time . They w	18 More Full
part fitinto the whole . That is all	we did . It 's too late for this . Like	19 More Full
tives dida brilliant investigation . We	got justice for a womanwho was violat	20 More Full
violated in the most gruesome way . We	got justice for a woman who was useda	21 More Full
like garbage . Those boys did that . We	helped make surethey got what they de	22 More Full

FIG. 8: Part of Speech Analysis: Fairstein compared to her colleagues

As the figure shows, the most significant pattern Fairstein uses is the first-person plural pronoun "we". This result is quite revealing in terms of personal traits, as it clearly indicates her habit of strategically including all her colleagues in her opinions and decisions, even when those opinions/decisions are exclusively hers. By resorting to the 'inclusive we' construction, she uses a typical strategy commonly found in political discourse: in order to influence their potential audience, politicians often employ "we" to construe a public that is supposed to share their values, ideas and feelings (Vertommen). Similarly, although it is Fairstein who constructs the narrative by repeatedly silencing whoever sees flaws in her description of the events, she uses language in a way that simulates the sharing and agreement of her ideas and behaviour among all the police officers. By doing so, she strategically allocates responsibility for her decisions to all the others, in case anything should go wrong during the trial. Additional traits like 'hypocrisy' or 'insincerity' may therefore be attributed to her.

Overall, the combination of semiotic resources distributed across the episodes contributes to the creation of an extremely obnoxious character whom viewers are likely to despise: one of the crucial consequences of this is the almost immediate feeling of empathy with the characters who populate the other group, of whom Korey Wise is the most important exponent.

Korey's importance for the plot of the show is made clear from the first moments of episode 1, when he is represented while eating and chatting with the girl he is in love with. This initial scene is crucial to the subsequent development of the character and will be repeatedly re-enacted in his mind for many years to come. In the initial scene, when some of his friends pass by and try to persuade him to join them, he is at first torn between his desire to stay with his girlfriend and the 'call of loyalty' to his pals. His decision to join them will result in 12 years of imprisonment. Quite strikingly, despite his decision to join his friends, he is not initially among the suspects: as a matter of fact, when Yusef Salam is taken into custody for questioning by the police, Korey decides to go with him to provide moral support but finds himself summarily pulled into the interrogation room and eventually accused like all the others.

During the initial interrogation, which takes place without any supervision of a parent or a guardian¹⁰, the police manipulate him by promising that he will soon be allowed to return home if he agrees to the plot of the narrative they

¹⁰ Korey Wise was sixteen at the time, therefore police was legally allowed to question him without any supervision.

are assembling. He thus becomes the unwitting participant in a downright schooling aimed at learning verbatim the version of events that the detectives have prepared: their efforts, initially, appear quite useless, since Korey is literally incapable of remembering the parts of the story he is expected to learn. On the one hand, the texts he produces are full of hesitations, false starts, repetitions, mistakes; on the other hand, he finds it very hard to stay focused, and is therefore likely to be perceived as a character with some mental impairment and social drawbacks.

Visually, the moments portraying his 'rehearsal' are characterised by high angle shots that symbolically deprive him of any agency and power. When Korey is finally able to learn the story and record it as an official confession, he finds out that instead of being released he will be charged of rape and locked in a room with the other four. It is at this point that all five characters realise they have been duped and detained by the detectives in spite of a total lack of solid evidence.

Besides marking the end of WTSU's first episode, this scene also coincides with the initial, significant changes in the characters' attitude and behaviour, powerfully symbolised by a transition in their representation: low-shots replace high ones, eye-contact with the police officers is maintained and not avoided anymore, camera focus is on single characters and not on them as part of a group. As far as their language is concerned, it gradually becomes more straightforward, with fewer hesitations and false starts: these changes, conveyed by the combination of the different semiotic resources, contribute to creating the impression of intensified agency.

Episode 4, almost entirely devoted to Korey Wise, well captures this evolution. When he is proclaimed guilty of assault and sexual abuse, he is still very frightened and somewhat paralysed in his actions. The images recording his first days in the (in)famous Rikers Island adult prison are emblematic of this agentless state¹¹: *Fig. 9* portrays his attempt to escape a fight started by his fellow prisoners during lunch; *Fig. 10* records one of the first moments of violence he actually suffers in jail, while the prison guard remains silent and inactive.

¹¹ Korey is the only one among the five who was sent to an adult prison since he was sixteen at the time. All the others were sent to a correction facility.



FIG 9: Korey represented as a victim during a fight in the prison canteen



FIG. 10: Korey experiencing violence and abuse

As far as language is concerned, at this point in the story it still features many unfinished sentences (“I was just going..”), double negations (“I don’t want no trouble”) and hesitations (“I..I..didn’t do nothing”). Interestingly, however, some initial, basic changes can be detected: these changes include, for example, the increasing use of speech acts (“Stop! Stop!”) and frequent shifts to standard English as in “What am I supposed to do? Let them do whatever they want?”; “I was hoping I could see you before now”, which didn’t occur in the previous episodes.

The scene following *Fig. 10* marks a crucial moment in Korey's trajectory from *type* to *individual*: during one of his mum's visits, he suddenly changes his body posture and moves his hands from underneath the table to its top. At the same time, he communicates his intention to leave Rikers Island for a better prison by means of sentences characterised by very high modality indexing his newly-acquired agency: "I'll make it easier. I will write up a transfer. I can get help from the library". Shortly after, he is portrayed while chit-chatting with the guard who had done nothing to interrupt the aggression shown in *Fig. 10*: when the guard asks if he is ok, he replies by saying "You tell me", followed by the guard's words "they are not fucking with you anymore". Crucially, Korey's last retort is "not today", which sounds very promising for the viewers' expectations regarding his personal development. From this moment, Korey indeed undergoes a drastic personal change that will soon turn him into a radically different version of himself, in spite of the fact that violence, physical and psychological, continues in the new prison. Korey's change in attitude encompasses radical modifications both in the way he uses language and in the way he is visually represented¹².

To investigate the changes occurring at a linguistic level, two small corpora were collected, the first one including all the words pronounced by Korey from episode 1 to this point in episode 4 (K1 henceforth), the second one containing all the remaining words he pronounces in the show (K2 henceforth). A keyness analysis was conducted using K2 as target corpus and K1 as reference corpus: this was aimed at investigating the patterns emerging with statistically significant frequency in K2's version of the character when compared to K1.

Strikingly, the word which turned out to be statistically overused in K2 is "no", i.e. - the very same word the character was not able to pronounce in episode 1 when his friends insisted on him joining them. As it turns out, many parts of ep. 4 show Korey's mind 'at work' while simulating a different outcome for the events narrated in episode 1: in all his mental projections of a different state of affairs, the word "no" is consistently central. In some ways, being now able to use it coincides with the possibility/ability to emancipate himself from the stereotypical representations previously discussed.

The keyness analysis of words was complemented by a keyness analysis of semantic domains. The areas of meaning the character overuses in his second version are those of 'negation', 'boosting' and 'speech acts'. If the 'semantics of

¹² For reasons of space, just two language patterns and two representational strategies will be briefly discussed below.

negation' is straightforwardly related to the overuse of the word "no" discussed above, 'boosting' and 'speech acts' indicate totally different linguistic phenomena: on the one hand, 'boosting' shows that the 'developed' version of the character uses linguistic strategies aimed at amplifying the content of his utterances, thus demonstrating that he now has the power to firmly assert what he believes in; on the other hand, the very high frequency of speech acts indicates that the adult Korey *does things with words* (Austin), i.e. he is more agentive.

The options selected by the producers at the visual level of representation co-pattern significantly with the strategies discussed at the verbal one. First of all, in episode 4 Korey is often portrayed as the protagonist of 'visual acts' (Queen 56), i.e. through shots in which he now *acts* upon the story-world rather than being the passive subject of acts initiated by others.



FIG. 11: 'visual act'

In *Fig. 11*, for example, he is represented while imposing his will for the first time while choosing what should be watched on TV in the common room. Before doing so, he repeatedly says "no" to his fellow prisoners who are interested in some other TV programs. Moreover, he is also repeatedly shown while he is involved in fights, but at this point in his personal development he does not escape anymore, nor does he seem at all frightened as was the case in *Fig. 9*.

Secondly, the different phases of his personal evolution are closely associated to a drastic change in shot angles. *Fig. 12* exemplifies the typical shot type portraying Korey in episode 4.



FIG. 12: Korey Wise in Episode 4

Not only is Korey now represented by means of low-angles warranting him power and self-confidence, he is also repeatedly depicted through close shots simulating intimacy with the viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen 124). In other words, the shot types selected mimic close personal distance, thus turning him into ‘one of us’, i.e. someone belonging to the viewers’ world. In addition to this, ‘demand pictures’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 116), i.e. pictures in which the represented participant’s gaze forms a vector pointing outside the frame, are now repeatedly used, thus interpersonally simulating contact between the character and the viewer, even if only at an imaginary level. Finally, shots portraying Korey in this episode are typically impregnated by an unusual amount of brightness, with all its possible connotations in terms of ‘life’, ‘knowledge’, spirituality, etc.

Overall, different semiotic resources are combined to produce a specific image of the characters in the viewers’ minds: Detective Fairstein is mainly construed linguistically both by a repeated use of taboo words and by a significant use of plural personal pronouns. The first are aimed at dramatising the content of her speech and at creating distance from the black characters. The second are aimed at distributing the responsibility for her own decisions among the whole group of her fellow white colleagues. The options at the visual level corroborate the linguistic ones and are all

aimed at representing her as a very powerful character. Korey, on the other hand, is mainly construed by a number of semiotic options that contribute to turning him into an *individual*: these include an intensive use of speech and visual acts and a massive resort to the adverb "no" as an emancipation strategy. At the visual level of representation, changes regard mainly the interpersonal metafunction: shot angles, distance, and 'demand pictures' instead of 'offer pictures'.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Educators and scholars have long argued for the need to incorporate multimodal literacy in the school curricula (Jewitt; Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen; Painter *et al.*; Unsworth, "Multiliteracies", *Curriculum*). Indeed, in today's globalised society, the demands of meaning-making practices require complex new ways of coding and decoding image-text relations: in particular, analysing and critically interpreting multimodal texts (e.g. websites, videos, online news, social media postings, posters, banners and so on) has become an indispensable skill.

This paper has hopefully demonstrated that in the contemporary 'semiotic landscape' it is essential to extend student multiliteracy skills development into a relatively new arena: televisual literacy. Since TV shows are consumed worldwide, it is legitimate to expect that they may exert a certain degree of influence both in the language and in the attitudes of millions of people across the whole globe (Bednarek, "Nerdiness"). This process is not without risks, especially in terms of manipulation. As a matter of fact, televisual products may contain 'residual ideologies' mirroring those of the most powerful groups in society: sexual behaviour, family relations, ways of speaking, types of food consumed, skin colour are only some examples of the ideologies that may be *naturalised* at the expense of the minority groups. In Gramsci's terms, popular series are often the world of the dominant ideologies, therefore they may organise "consensus around dominant ideological conceptions" (Purvis and Thornham 80).

Values and stereotypical assumptions about groups are often embodied by specific characters with whom the audience is invited to identify. Not uncommonly, these characters are often the most likable ones, a fact which makes bonding and affiliation processes much easier. Language plays a crucial

role in this process, contributing significantly to the creation of a “believable blend of individual traits with more general social types/identities” (Queen 175). Fostering a student’s capacity to analyse the effects of a character’s language is hence crucial to his/her understanding of social identities, ideologies and stereotypes.

The different sections of the present contribution are an attempt to go in that direction: specifically, each part of the paper has aimed to show how the thematisation of cultural assumptions about ‘blackness’ is obtained through the distribution and interplay of different semiotic resources. To start with, the multimodal orchestration of elements in the paratext has been analysed to show how a specific, stereotypical representation of ‘blackness’ can trigger viewers’ expectations long before the actual beginning of the series. Secondly, specific tools for analysing ideology have been introduced: in particular, quantitative methods have been applied for comparing the language produced by the dominant and the dominated group respectively. This procedure proved crucial in observing how the silencing and marginalisation of one group at the expense of the other is obtained through language. Corpus techniques have also been used to discuss the effect of recurrent language patterns for the construction of characters: for example, the specific use of the ‘inclusive we’ by Detective Fairstein sheds light on her determination to spread the responsibility of her actions among her co-workers, even when she is the only one who decides actions and strategies. Korey, on the other hand, uses language options to emancipate himself from the previous version presented of him. Visual resources, it has been argued, are consistently co-deployed to reinforce the messages produced by the verbal mode. The final aim of this paper is therefore to show how language can challenge or reinforce hegemonic ideologies without being explicit.

Future directions for students’ empowerment may include the study of how the interpersonal metafunction is realised in the language of TV series: in particular, by focusing on the sub-system of engagement in the Appraisal framework, students could learn how stance-taking towards other characters’ value positions is achieved simultaneously by the combination of monoglossic-heteroglossic space creation in language (Martin and White), together with *evoked* versus *inscribed* attitudes in images (White). This could of course shed further light on the ways in which ideology is constructed, making students even more aware of how its hidden dynamics may work at the service of the more powerful groups.

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