

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



EUT

edited by
Leonardo Buonomo
Piergiorgio Trevisan

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Contents

- IX Introduction
LEONARDO BUONOMO
PIERGIORGIO TREVISAN
- 1 From Russia with _____: Disguise, Performance, and Family Dynamics in *The Americans*
LEONARDO BUONOMO
- 17 *The Affair*: Authorship and Melodrama in Complex TV
VINCENZO MAGGITTI
- 39 The English Influence on Dubbed TV Series: The Case of *Modern Family*
VINCENZA MINUTELLA
- 69 “Just the facts, ma’am”: Class, Masculinity and Family Representations in Jack Webb’s *Dragnet*
ANTONIO DI VILIO
- 91 “You don’t know nothing about being me”: Ideology and Characterisation in *When They See Us*
PIERGIORGIO TREVISAN
- 121 Index
- 131 Contributors

Introduction

LEONARDO BUONOMO
PIERGIORGIO TREVISAN

Even though the study of television fiction emerged as a relevant field of study in the 1970s (Stedman; Newcomb; Adler and Cater), it is especially in the last three decades that attention has increasingly focused on TV series as a sophisticated form of expression and a fertile ground for research into the cultural dynamics that govern the representation of cultural identity, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and the use of language (Jones; Miller; Creeber; Hammond and Mazdon; Mittell; Bianculli). There can be little doubt that this surge in critical interest came in response to the new generation of series, such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, that broke new ground from the 1990s onwards in terms of aesthetics, production values, narrative complexity, and subject matter. With the advent of cable and, more recently, streaming services and other alternatives to traditional network channels, not only have TV series been freed, at least in part, from the shackles of censorship, but they have also provided creators and show runners with a flexible vehicle which encompasses different formats and communication strategies. This has resulted in a rich, enormously varied offering of television products which often partake of, and straddle across, different genres: drama, comedy, fantasy, reality television, etc. It is

increasingly rare to find television dramas that do not incorporate elements of comedy and soap opera, or comedies that don't occasionally swerve into drama.

Like the great serial literature of the nineteenth century which they often draw upon or evoke, TV series simultaneously entertain and hold up a mirror to society, providing invaluable insight into political and social issues, re-examining history, inviting reflections on gender and generational issues, and delving deep into the human condition. Often characterized by a high degree of intertextuality, TV series mix high and low – classic literature, drama, and movies, with pop culture (songs, comics, etc.) – thus speaking a hybrid language which transcends national borders. TV series have been for some time a truly global phenomenon. While English-language (especially American) productions continue to dominate the international market, the menu of streaming services such as *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime* has become increasingly diverse, introducing large audiences all over the world to series written in languages other than English (as demonstrated by the astounding global success of the South Korean series *Squid Game*).

At the same time, however, much can be understood about specific countries and cultural contexts, by studying the evolution of their television offerings. One could mention, for example, the educational “mission” which was at the basis of several literary adaptations produced for European public broadcasting companies such as the BBC and RAI, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, or the idealized, suburban domestic comedies that dominated American small screens during the Eisenhower era.

Over the last three decades, the study of TV series has also attracted the interest of linguists from different traditions: as a consequence, aspects like “multimodal characterization” (Toolan; Bednarek 2010), “genre and performance” (Paltridge, Thomas, and Liu), “mind style” (Montoro) and “ideology” (Bednarek 2011), to quote but a few, have been widely investigated starting from the language patterns characterizing characters' dialogues.

Indeed, while TV shows are rarely *about* language (in fact, few media products ever are), language itself always plays a crucial role in sustaining the general settings, the internal consistency of the characters and the unfolding of both the broad and the narrow narrative arcs (*Queen 2*). This potential of language can be ascribed primarily to what linguists

call ‘variation’, i.e. alternative ways of using grammar, of pronouncing sounds, of structuring conversations, and of selecting particular words over others. In gender representation, for example, stereotypical roles are heavily dependent on the different way in which language is used by different characters: specific patterns may be used only by females, while others may be exclusively employed by male figures. This, of course, can result in an extreme polarisation of gender roles, which then may become ‘naturalised’ and ‘common sense’ for viewers. It goes without saying that the stereotypical representation of different ethnicities is construed by using language variation in analogous ways.

In the last 10-15 years, linguistic studies of TV shows have also benefited from so-called ‘corpus methods’, i.e. computer programs that make it possible to collect and analyse millions of words at the same time (e.g. all the words pronounced by a specific characters over all the seasons of a show, for example), thus allowing researchers to quantitatively identify recurrent linguistic patterns that are indicative of particular aspects. The use of corpus techniques could also prove crucial for the creation of learning materials aimed at the development of ‘televisual literacy’ both for University and for Secondary school students.

The present collection originates from a research project, financed by the Department of Humanities of the University of Trieste, whose findings were first shared and debated with scholars from other Italian academic institutions, as well as students and the general public, in the course of a two-day conference held at the “Stazione Rogers” in Trieste, on 15-16 October, 2021. It presents, in amply revised and expanded form, papers which were first presented in that venue and which are representative of a variety of approaches to the study of TV series. The opening essay, by Leonardo Buonomo, places the highly acclaimed American drama series *The Americans* (2013-2018), created by Joe Wiseberg (a former CIA agent), in the context of the representation of family dynamics, a staple of American mass entertainment since the very beginnings of television programming. The essay argues that under the guise of a fact-based spy thriller, involving two Russian agents who pose as a typically American middle-class married couple with children during the Reagan era, *The Americans* offers an insightful and probing look into suburban American mores, consumerism, gender relations, parental responsibility, and generational conflict.

Questions of gender and marital conflict are also center stage in *The Affair* (2014-2019), created by Hagai Levi and Sarah Treem, which Vincenzo Maggitti in his essay sees as part of the glorious tradition of melodrama. Fully representative of the recent generation of television drama, characterized by high-quality production values, carefully honed writing, visually ambitious directing, and impeccable casting, *The Affair* exemplifies what has been appropriately called “complex TV”. Focusing on the series’ pilot, Maggitti shows how the tropes and traits that identify *The Affair* as melodrama are firmly established from the very outset of the story, thus setting the tone for what follows in the overall narrative arc of the series.

The focus on gender, family, and class representations continues in the next essay of this volume, by Antonio Di Vilio, which takes as its case study an apparently unlikely candidate, namely the police procedural *Dragnet* (1951-1959), created by Jack Webb. Tracing its origins from radio to television, and highlighting its connections with the Hollywood noir tradition in film, Di Vilio’s essay uncovers and analyses *Dragnet*’s political, social and gender ideology, with particular attention to its treatment and depiction of American masculinity.

In his paper, Piergiorgio Trevisan uses a range of linguistic and multimodal approaches to show how the *Us versus Them* polarisation between the White and the Black population is construed in the American TV show *When They See Us* (2019). Starting from the contribution of linguistic and visual choices at the level of paratext, Trevisan then moves to analysing how the representation of the black characters heavily relies on trite stereotypes about food, sport and music. A key role in this polarisation is played by language variation, which also explains why the white characters struggle to make sense of some colloquial expressions used by the black group, ultimately misunderstanding their meaning.

Vincenza Minutella’s paper starts from the assumption that American TV series dubbed into Italian can exert a great cultural and linguistic impact on young audiences, who often mimic the way their favourite TV characters behave and speak. Ultimately, this can produce changes in the way Italian is spoken by Italian themselves. In order to collect evidence of this phenomenon, Minutella analyses a corpus of television dialogue consisting of 10 episodes from the world-renowned TV series *Modern Family* (2009-2020). By comparing the original version in English and

the correspondent dubbed one in Italian, she takes into consideration a number of Anglicism that are generally associated with *dubbese*, i.e. the specific language variety of dubbing.

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From Russia with _____:
Disguise, Performance, and Family Dynamics
in *The Americans*

LEONARDO BUONOMO

Television portrayals of domestic interiors, marriage, parent-children and sibling relations, constitute, as William Douglas has aptly put it, “a public history of the family” (12). In the case of American television, that history is nearly as old as the medium itself, for representations of the family, whether in the form of sketches, comedy, or drama, were prominent from the very beginning. Even though the American television landscape, and with it the way television shows are watched, has changed enormously over the years, the family continues to be a major source of inspiration for show creators, as witnessed, for example, by the success of such currently running series as *Ozark* and *Succession*.¹ The use of the continuing narrative line of the soap opera which, since gaining prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, has become a staple of quality drama series, has proved particularly suited to the representation of family dynamics. As Glen Creeber has noted, “the ‘soap opera’ conventions that typify such narratives may actually offer a more complex means by which the intricacies and personal ambiguity of contemporary life... can be dramatized

¹ In addition, one could argue that for all its fantasy trappings, the phenomenally popular series *Game of Thrones* is, at its core, an exploration of family relations.

for a more self-knowing and self-reflexive audience” (3). This essay intends to highlight the ways in which, even within the long and varied history of television families, the drama series *The Americans* stands out. It contends that this series offers a valuable insight into the ongoing debate on what is still regarded as the basic unit of society, as well as into gender relations and the intersection of private and public spheres.

Created by Joe Weisberg, former CIA agent turned novelist (*An Ordinary Spy*, 2007) and showrunner, *The Americans* is a drama series which ran on the American FX cable channel for six seasons, from 2013 to 2018. Although it never garnered massive ratings, it gradually earned the devotion of loyal viewers both in the United States and internationally and won considerable acclaim from critics and the television industry. Remarkably, *The Americans* was twice the recipient (in 2014 and 2018) of the prestigious Peabody Award, which traditionally singles out television shows for the excellence of their writing. Set in the 1980s, *The Americans* revolves around two Soviet KGB agents who, after years of exceptionally rigorous training, have acquired the ability to pass as Americans. When we meet them in the first season, set in 1981, they have been living in the United States for fifteen years under the names of Philip and Elizabeth Jennings. Their meticulously constructed public image is that of an attractive, happily married middle-class couple running a travel agency and living in a comfortable house in Falls Church, Virginia (a suburb of Washington D.C.) with their children Paige (age 13) and Henry (age 9). What their neighbours, acquaintances, employees and, crucially, their own children, don't know is that Elizabeth and Philip (whose real names are Nadezhda and Mikhail) lead a double life as spies for the Soviet Union, as part of which they routinely have recourse to deception, disguise, blackmail, seduction, violence, and murder. While it might appear far-fetched, the premise of the series – Philip and Elizabeth's perfect impersonation of a typical American couple – is actually based, at least in part, on real-life events. In 2010 several Russian “sleeper agents” were arrested in the United States and later exchanged for American citizens detained in Russia.² What, at the time, made the story sensational was the realization that the spies had been living in the United

² The case was widely covered by the American media. The title of Manny Fernandez and Fernanda Santos' piece in the *New York Times* on June 29, 2010 – “Couples Accused as Spies Were the Suburbs Personified” – perfectly captures the disbelief that many Americans experienced when the news broke.

States for decades, successfully passing as Americans. Some of them were married and had children, born in the United States, who were unaware of their parents' real identities. However, given the status of US-Russian relations in 2010, several years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the discovery of the spy cell was not perceived by American public opinion as an existential threat. This is one of the main reasons why Joe Weisberg, while taking inspiration from the spy scandal of 2010 for *The Americans*, decided to set the series in the early eighties when, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, there was a heightening of Cold War tension. A master communicator, Reagan famously configured the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in stark moral terms, calling the communist superpower "the empire of evil".³ Undoubtedly, in *The Americans* the plan set in motion by the KGB under the name of "Directorate S" does sound diabolically clever. So much so, that even within the FBI there is initially a certain degree of scepticism. FBI agent Chris Amador seems to voice widespread incredulity when he scoffingly assesses the potentially explosive information about invisible Soviet agents in the United States: "Super-secret spies living next door. They look like us, they speak better English than we do. According to Timoshev [a KGB defector], they're not allowed to say a single word in Russian once they get here. I mean, come on, someone's been reading too many spy novels" (Season 1, pilot).

There is no doubt that in the volatile, fiercely contentious context of the 1980s the stakes for Elizabeth and Philip, and by extension for those they serve and those they seek to undermine, are vastly higher than for their real-life counterparts in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The period in which Weisberg's fictional spies operate includes such major crises as the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the tenure of four leaders of the Soviet Union in a relatively short span of time: Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Kostantin Chernenko, and Mikhail Gorbachev. Astutely, Weisberg locates his narrative of ultra-sophisticated secrecy and dissimulation in a climate of exacerbated suspicion and menace in

³ President Reagan delivered what came to be known as the "Empire of Evil speech" on March 8, 1983, during a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. Interestingly, in an effort to appeal to his religious-minded audience, Reagan denounced the attack that, in his view, secularism was waging against parental control over children by promoting unsupervised access to contraception. It is also worth noticing that, by labelling the Soviet Union as "evil", Reagan was resuming a rhetorical strategy he had first deployed in the 1950s (Rowland and Jones 445-47).

the United States which echoes the so-called red scare of the 1950s. By telling the story of Soviet spies who are indistinguishable from ordinary Americans, Weisberg and his collaborators evoke the paranoia-charged atmosphere of that era, when the fear of ideological infiltration and contamination fuelled the idea that the enemy might be lurking near you, under the guise of your next-door neighbour or your colleague at work. Indeed, given its premise, *The Americans* brilliantly captures the fear of being surrounded by enemies who are all the more insidious because they don't look or sound like enemies at all – a fear that in the 1950s had found expression in such science-fiction movies as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958).⁴ While presumably affecting the entire planet, the alien threat in those movies was particularly frightening to American audiences because it seemed to target middle America, and specifically the type of suburban family life which, in the 1950s, was insistently presented as the very essence of the American way of life. In *The Americans*, not only has the alien infiltration successfully taken place, but the seemingly perfect suburban home has become simultaneously the base of and cover for the operations of a mission that aims at destabilizing American society from within.

In addition to evoking the ideological and cultural landscape of the 1950s, *The Americans* invites comparison to previous television portrayals of families. For example, given their unusual identity status, the Jennings may be said to bear some resemblance to the eccentric, sometimes outlandish families of 1960s sitcoms such as *Bewitched*, *The Addams Family*, and *The Munsters*. The expression of a reaction against the bland conformity of Eisenhower America, the characters portrayed in those series were suburban American families through and through, but with a twist (magical powers, a macabre appearance and/or an unorthodox lifestyle, etc.).⁵ Similarly, the Jennings are simultaneously typically American (given the perfection of their role playing) and atypical, indeed secretly anti-American. Because of its psychologically insightful

⁴ The same premise – aliens impersonating humans – is at the basis of the popular NBC sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun*, which ran from 1996 to 2001. Interestingly, the aliens in this case pose as an American family as a means for observing the behavior of human beings. Once again, suburban America is an object of interest for extraterrestrial forces, but the intent is benign, and the treatment of the situation is comedic.

⁵ As Lynn Spigel has argued, these programs “poked fun at narrative conventions of the sit-com form and engaged viewers in a popular dialogue through which they might reconsider social ideals” (214).

portrayal of marriage, gender and generational conflicts, *The Americans* may also be regarded as a successor to the socially-conscious programming that emerged in the 1970s with such ground-breaking series as the sitcom *All in the Family*, the drama series *Family*, and the reality/documentary series *An American Family*, and continued in the 1980s with *Thirtysomething*.

What makes *The Americans* unique in the contemporary American television landscape – filled though it is of high-quality dramas featuring problematic families – is that it not only offers a multi-faceted representation of family dynamics, but enacts and dissects that very representation for us. At its centre are secret foreign agents whose mission, and indeed their survival, relies on their performance as American spouses and parents. While their secret activities depend heavily on the use of appearance-altering disguise (makeup, wigs, clothes and eyewear), the most demanding roles they play are those of Philip and Elizabeth Jennings, husband and wife, working partners and loving parents of two children born and raised in the United States. What we see are two highly accomplished actors (Keri Russell as Elizabeth and Matthew Rhys as Philip) playing characters who, like Method-acting performers, fully inhabit their pretend identities to the point of achieving perfect mimicry. As a result, the series invites us to observe closely, and reflect upon, the challenges that the Jennings face in trying to make their marriage work and do a good job as parents. As Masha Gessen has noted, when we first meet the Jennings, they are in a crucial moment of transition and by the end of the season they “become the roles they’ve been playing”, a process which includes adopting “a psychotherapy-infused, stylistically American way of conducting a relationship”.

As part of its multi-layered approach to the representation of the family, *The Americans* is a television series which alludes to, and makes narrative use of, television itself as a major provider of cultural and ideological messages as well as a staple of shared domesticity (in the pre-internet, pre-mobile phone era). It does so, intriguingly, through the casting of Richard Thomas in the key role of FBI agent Frank Gaad, head of the agency’s special unit entrusted with the task of finding and neutralizing Soviet illegals operating in the United States. For American viewers who grew up in the 1970s and, thanks to countless reruns, even for younger members of the audience, Richard Thomas will always be identified with his role as John Boy, the eldest son of *The Waltons* (1972-81), the drama series which revolved around a large family in rural depression-era Virginia. Celebrated or parodied, depending on one’s point of

view, as the quintessential (white) American family, *The Waltons* undoubtedly struck a nerve when it originally aired and soon became part of the American collective imagination. Nowhere was this more evident than when, during the presidential campaign of 1992, the then president George H. W. Bush famously exhorted American families to be “a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons” (qtd. in Douglas 12). Thus, the casting of Richard Thomas as a defender of American institutions and values inevitably carries strong cultural and ideological associations. It is almost as if John Boy, virtually inseparable from the actor who played him, the “perfect” son of the “perfect” American family, had been chosen to hunt the fake American family (the Jennings) who poses a grave threat to the macrofamily of the United States.

It is a measure of what critic David Bianculli has referred to as *The Americans*' awareness “of television history”, that an entire episode (Season 4, episode 9) revolves around the much anticipated and controversial telecast of ABC's 1983 TV movie *The Day After*, which imagined the devastating consequences of nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union as experienced by the “heartland” community of Lawrence, Kansas (444-45). Not only does the episode, written by Joe Weisberg and Tracey Scott Wilson, focus and reflect on a television show as a collective shared experience, reverberating in millions of American living rooms, but it does so, specifically, on a cultural product that made the horror of nuclear catastrophe *literally* familiar. *The Day After* made the unimaginable imaginable and frightening precisely because it presented it through the lens of a typical middle-class family as they prepared to celebrate the wedding of their eldest daughter.

On more than one occasion, Joe Weisberg and his co-creator Joel Fields have stated that the Cold War backdrop of *The Americans* and the dangerous, secret activities of its protagonists are essentially a narrative device to examine the inner workings of a family and, in particular, the fraught relationship between husband and wife. As Joel Fields, interviewed by June Thomas, put it, *The Americans* is “at its core a marriage story” (“A Conversation”). Indeed, one way to describe the series would be by borrowing the title of one of the most celebrated TV dramas of all time, namely Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). In *The Americans*, “International relations”, Joe Weisberg has pointed out to journalist Katie Arnold-Ratliff, function as “just an allegory for the human relations” (“Spy vs. Spy”). While Weisberg's unique expertise as a former CIA agent has certainly infused the series with an air of credibility and competence, he has significantly drawn attention to his fascination with

the private sphere of his ex-colleagues. Significantly, he revealed that the “most interesting thing” he observed during his time at the CIA “was the family life of agents who served abroad with kids and spouses” (“Spy vs. Spy”). Ultimately, in *The Americans* the real suspense lies in the durability of the marriage between its protagonists. Speaking about the series in 2013, when he himself could not anticipate how long it would last and what would happen to its characters, Weisberg stated: “Espionage adds drama and raises the stakes, but the thing people are going to care about is this couple and whether or not they make it. We already know how the Cold War ends. Nobody knows how this marriage will end” (“Spy vs. Spy”).

However unusual and grounded in a specific historical, political, and cultural context, the story of Philip and Elizabeth speaks to viewers all over the world because it intersects and examines questions of gender and forms of relationship that are widely relatable and continue to be pressing objects of debate. For example, through dialogues and occasional flashbacks we learn that the training the two agents underwent was often viciously brutal, including as it did a heavy dose of psychological and physical violence, intended to desensitize them to the violence they themselves would be called upon to perpetrate as part of their missions. In order to become Philip and Elizabeth, they learned to use their bodies not only as lethal weapons, thanks to the mastering of various combat techniques, but also as instruments of seduction. Learning to have sex with strangers and dissimulate pleasure was a key component of their training and indeed we see them making abundant use of that skill in numerous plot lines across the overall narrative arc of the series. Trauma was inevitably part of the process. In a horrifying flashback, we see young Nadezhda being raped by her instructor and superior who, years later, having been kidnapped by her and Mikhail/Philip for defecting to the United States, confesses that raping young women trainees was considered one of the perks of his position of authority. Significantly, it is Philip who ends up killing the defector, not only because his presence in his household puts his family at risk but, also, importantly, to avenge the crime he had committed against the woman who is now his wife. Although dictated by security reasons, this is, in essence, an honour killing.

Flashbacks also show us the training Philip went through as a young man in the Soviet Union. In particular, a rapid montage shows us the different sexual partners, of all ages and shapes, female and male, who were allotted to him as part of his instruction. As Emily Nussbaum has justly observed, in

“those flashbacks, as he slept with strangers, his experience wasn’t portrayed as a sexy fantasy, either, but as a form of institutional abuse”. Significantly, Nussbaum makes this point with reference to one of the most disturbing plot lines of the series, in which Philip is called upon to seduce Kimberly, an underage girl who has a complicated relationship with her frequently absent father. Although by then we have seen Philip commit horrible acts of violence and murder several people, this operation comes across as one of the most shocking he has been ordered to conduct. This is due, in large part, to the excellent performances of Julia Garner, who admirably conveys Kimberly’s teen-age vulnerability and, especially, Matthew Rhys, who makes Philip’s discomfort and self-disgust transpire even through the genial façade he has adopted for the occasion.

The long-ranging effects of the abuse Elizabeth and Philip suffered and which, in turn, they inflict on others, inevitably spill over into their marriage and their relationship with their children. This becomes painfully apparent when Elizabeth gains the confidence of Martha Hanson – a secretary in Frank Gaad’s office – whom Philip, under the name of Clark, has seduced and subsequently married, thus becoming to all intents and purposes a bigamist. Posing as Clark’s sister, Elizabeth becomes the recipient of very intimate details about Clark and Martha’s married life and is surprised to learn that, as Clark, Philip adopts a very aggressive and domineering demeanour when they have sex. Simultaneously bemused and intrigued, one day she asks Philip to treat her as Clark treats Martha. But when Philip, after overcoming his initial resistance, complies, there is nothing remotely titillating about what takes place between them. To experience or rather, given her past, to *re-experience* victimization, is horrifying to Elizabeth. Similarly, Philip is aghast at his own conduct which has brought into the supposedly safe space of his home the toxic hyper-masculinity he has been taught to adopt as part of his operations. Although in different ways and to different degrees, both Elizabeth and Philip feel violated.

Inevitably, aspects of the attitude and behaviour Philip and Elizabeth adopt when carrying out their secret operations seep into their family life. This is apparent when Paige, as part of becoming an adult and asserting her own identity, challenges their parental authority. Alarmed by her involvement with a local church and, especially, her close relationship with the pastor and his wife, Philip and Elizabeth do not hesitate to threaten her verbally and resort to coercive measures to reclaim their hold on her. Tension between

Paige and her parents escalates when, in Season 3, she confronts them about their secrecy and extracts from them a partial confession about their true identities (crucially, they continue to lie to her about the murders they have committed in their line of work). What the series portrays is, in a sense, an extreme, heightened form of what countless families experience, namely the potential unravelling of stability because of teenage rebelliousness. The stakes may be exceptionally high in the Jennings household, but the situation is very familiar. In the words of Joel Fields: “Sometimes, when you’re struggling in your marriage or with your kid, it feels like life or death. For Philip and Elizabeth, it often is” (“Spy vs. Spy”).

Similarly, the planning and training that went into the construction of Philip and Elizabeth as a credible American couple bears a considerable resemblance to a form of relationship which in several cultures is still widely practiced, namely arranged marriages. As is often the case with that type of union, Philip and Elizabeth were brought together by their elders and had very limited say in the process. Although we do learn that, before being introduced to Philip, Elizabeth had rejected the first partner that the KGB had selected for her, the fact remains that she was expected to play the role of wife, have sex and procreate children with a man she had never known before, in a foreign country. The Jennings needed to have children in part because it made their cover as an average married couple more convincing but, more importantly, because in the KGB’s long-term strategy, their children, as authentic American citizens, might become in the future formidable infiltrators (in politics and/or intelligence). Interestingly, this emphasis on procreation as the essential outcome of marriage, also aligns the Jennings’ union to a religious marriage – something of a paradox, since the Jennings are convinced atheists.

The morphing of the KGB arranged marriage into a “genuine” relationship, a marriage of love, albeit never free from conflict (as is the case in most marriages), undoubtedly constitutes one of the most interesting plot lines of *The Americans*. At the end of the first season the Jennings separate, temporarily, after Elizabeth discovers that Philip, while engaged in a covert operation, slept with an old flame. Although both Elizabeth and Philip have multiple sex partners as part of their assignments, Elizabeth regards what Philip did in this case as something entirely different, a real, deeply hurtful betrayal. Similarly, in the same season, Philip keenly resents Elizabeth’s close connection with Gregory, a black activist she had recruited, because he senses that they have strong feelings for each other. Unlike Philip, however, Elizabeth keeps those feelings

in check and, as we see in Episode 3, ultimately rejects Gregory's advances. Philip's jealousy of Gregory, however, does not fade even after Gregory dies in the line of duty. If anything, it intensifies because he witnesses first-hand the depth of Elizabeth's grief. Indeed, the memory of Gregory may be said to haunt the Jennings' marriage, because it is deeply interwoven with the largest bone of contention between Philip and Elizabeth, namely the different degrees of their commitment to their mission and their different attitudes towards American society. While Elizabeth is totally dedicated to her role as a "soldier" for the Soviet Union and is unwavering in her belief in the superiority of the Communist regime over American capitalism, Philip over the years has grown fond of the American lifestyle and, especially, of American popular culture. Elizabeth never loses sight of the fact that her image as a comfortable middle-class American wife and mother is a façade designed to make her a powerful asset for the KGB. She simply accepts the fact that, for the greater good, she needs to conform to a bourgeois lifestyle and appear to enjoy the advantages that in the United States are the prerogative of the economically prosperous section of society. When she can speak openly, however, she does not hesitate to paint Americans with a broad brush as weak, mentally comparing the comparatively uneventful life of the people with whom she interacts with the terrible hardships she and her mother had faced in Russia, after Elizabeth's father had abandoned the family. By contrast, Philip is clearly susceptible to the siren call of American consumerism. For example, in the second season he cannot hide the sheer delight he feels in buying a new car and showing it off, especially to his son Henry, in a typical scene of male bonding over ownership and hedonism. But it is especially in his unmistakable fondness for American popular culture (music, movies, junk food) that Philip's real feelings toward "the enemy" find expression. Tellingly, he is at his most delighted when he has the opportunity to sport that quintessential piece of American footwear – cowboy boots – and join a group of patrons in a bar engaged in line dancing. Much to Elizabeth's disbelief and horror, Philip even contemplates defecting to the United States, which would make it possible for him and Elizabeth to become the American couple they have been impersonating so convincingly. As he puts it: "We *are* Philip and Elizabeth Jennings. We have been for a long time. ... [We can] Get relocated. And just be happy. Take the good life". When she berates him for even considering betraying their country, he replies "Our family comes first" (Season 1, pilot). The ideological rift between the Jennings widens to its utmost when Elizabeth, in compliance with her

superior's wishes, and despite Philip's strong objections, throws herself into the effort of recruiting and training her own daughter Paige.

As René Dietrich has noted, *The Americans* differs from other acclaimed drama series such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, in its handling of gender roles. Whereas in those series, it is the male antihero who finds fulfilment in the second life he leads outside the home (and outside the law) – a life of danger, power, excitement, and violence – in *The Americans* it is the female protagonist who is fully devoted to her other, unofficial pursuit (211). Where I partially disagree with Dietrich, is when she contends that the “subversive potential of this reversal is somewhat contained, though, as the characters are Russian spies and therefore do not represent the American norm in any way” (212). It seems to me that the Jennings *do* represent the American norm, in the sense that their perfect recreation of an American married couple in the early eighties even includes the new role and agency that American women had achieved as a result of the pressure exercised by the militant feminism of the 1970s. As we learn through dialogues and flashbacks, Philip and Elizabeth arrived in the United States in the 1960s and lived as Americans through the seventies (a period that saw, among other things, greater access to contraception and the legalization of abortion). In other words, they refined their new American identity, their identity as a married couple, in a phase of profound transformation for American society, especially as regards gender roles. Indeed, it is possible to read Elizabeth's total identification with her mission (her “career”) as a metaphor for growing female empowerment in America. Significantly, the same tendency seems to be at play in the younger generation, because it is Paige, not Henry, who feels the need to commit to a cause, first by engaging in the socially conscious work of her progressive church and later, after she has discovered the real identity of her parents, as a trainee KGB agent.

Since its clever title sequence, in which the iconography of the United States alternates with that of the Soviet Union in a fast-paced montage, *The Americans* invites a comparative approach which reveals more similarities than differences between the two systems and ideologies. In the first season, the tensions that threaten to unravel the Jennings' pseudo-American marriage are mirrored by the lack of meaningful communication between their next-door neighbours, Stan and Sandra Beeman. In the end, however, it is the “imitation” marriage that survives, while its authentic counterpart collapses. As it happens, Stan is an FBI agent who is part of the very unit entrusted with

the task of hunting down Russian spies posing as Americans. Ironically, when he moves with his family to their new suburban house in Falls Church, it is Philip and Elizabeth who welcome them, perfectly mimicking the traditional American gesture of bringing baked goods to one's new neighbours. In both marriages one of the spouses (respectively, Elizabeth and Stan) places country above family and this inevitably causes friction within their households. Just as the Jennings use sex as a lever to approach, and get information from, Americans who work in strategically important fields, so does Stan, when he conducts an affair with Nina Krilova, who works in the Soviet Embassy in Washington D.C. And like the Jennings, Stan has recourse to blackmail and murder in the exercise of his work. We also get a glimpse of family life in the Soviet Union, among the upper echelons of power, when the series follows Oleg Burov as he moves back into his parents' home in Moscow after serving as head of a KGB intelligence operation in Washington D.C. The son of the Soviet Minister of Transportation, he is constantly trying to prove himself to his father, especially after the death of his brother – a captain in the Soviet army – in Afghanistan. The dialogue is in Russian, but what transpires with painful clarity is the same difficulty in establishing meaningful communication that cripples the conversation between Stan Beeman and his estranged son, or between the Jennings and Paige.

As the overall narrative arc of *The Americans* implies, there are additional parallels that can be traced between other, larger family-like structures portrayed in the series, namely the antagonistic organizations of the FBI and the KGB, and, at the macro level, the countries of the United States and the Soviet Union. At the outset, both countries resemble traditional patriarchal families presided over by (supposedly) strong, elderly, authoritative male figures: Reagan and Brezhnev. In terms of organization, strategies, and methods, the FBI and the KGB are practically mirror images of each other. However, Weisberg and his co-writers suggest that while both organizations are largely male-dominated and sexist, it is in the KGB that women have more opportunities to hold positions of power and crucial responsibility. Cases in point are, for example, Tatiana Vyazemtseva, who works in the Soviet Embassy, and Claudia, the agent who, initially, has a very contentious relationship with Elizabeth and Philip as their “handler” and conveyor of instructions from the KGB. By contrast, within the FBI unit in which Stan Beeman works, women are relegated to the traditional role of secretaries. And perhaps work-related frustration does play a part in making Martha Hanson

particularly susceptible to Philip's advances. In addition to being strongly attracted to him, she eagerly responds to his appeal for help, since he initially convinces her that he is conducting a secret operation to uncover malpractice within the FBI. In more ways than one, he makes her feel valued.

Central to the world of *The Americans*, secrecy "opens a space of exception from the rule of law, an exception that can breed violence, corruption and oppression" (Horn 106). In recent years, critics such as Jason Landrum and René Dietrich have argued that secrecy offers the male antiheroes of quality tv dramas (such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and, to some extent, *Mad Men*) an outlet for transgression, a sphere of action wherein there is no moral and legal constraint on their agency, assertiveness, and libido. While they try, ostensibly, to protect their transparent life as husbands and fathers by keeping it separate from their illicit activities, it is in their secret life, away from the demands and obligations of domesticity, that they find real fulfilment. I would add that the type of masculinity these series portray is a sort of updated, extreme version of the trope of the American man in flight from normative relationships, marriage and fatherhood that Leslie Fiedler famously described as informing classic American literature in his 1948 ground-breaking essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!". *The Americans*, however, differs significantly from this model. First of all, as we have seen, in this case marriage, parenthood, domesticity are themselves part of the secret sphere. They are not what they seem. Secondly, in *The Americans* the "double", parallel life of the protagonists offers both of them, regardless of their gender, the opportunity to break the law, have multiple sexual partners, and freely engage in deception and violence. In addition, in the later part of the series, it is Philip who retreats into the public, transparent world of home and work (his "official" work at the travel agency). Tellingly, the tipping points that nudge him in that direction are both related to his identity and role as father. First there is the excruciatingly uncomfortable closeness in age between Kimberly (the young woman he seduces), and his own daughter Paige. Then, there is the shocking realization that his children, starting with Paige, have been part of the KGB's long-term recruitment strategy all along. Seeing his wife train Paige brings home to him, more vividly than ever before, the irreconcilable contradiction between his duty toward his family and his (real) country. Significantly, in the last season Philip goes back into action, behind his wife's back, to thwart a plan – set in motion by a faction within the KGB – to undermine and possibly eliminate Gorbachev. In effect, Philip joins in the effort to save another father,

namely the new, young father of the Soviet Union who promises to inaugurate a new era of openness and reform.

Ultimately, however, Philip cannot save his own family. The two worlds he and Elizabeth have inhabited for decades finally collide when their real identities are discovered by the FBI. Forced to escape precipitously – their only chance is to cross the border into Canada – Philip and Elizabeth make the lacerating decision of leaving Henry behind, because Henry is completely oblivious of the fact of who they really are. To all intents and purposes, they lose him to the United States, the only country Henry has ever known, the larger family in which he has been raised and formed. In the end, Philip and Elizabeth, on the verge of resuming their identities as Mikhail and Nadezhda, lose Paige too, when she gets off the train at the last stop before the border. It remains an open question, while her parents watch her helplessly as the train moves away, whether her act means that she has chosen her brother over her parents, or the United States over the Soviet Union, or has merely asserted her independence as an adult. What can be stated with relative certainty is that even in this thrilling, suspense-laden finale, *The Americans* presents us with an intensely relatable and finely perceived family rite of passage. Under the semblance of a Cold War spy story (the series' own disguise), *The Americans* leaves us with the poignant representation of that inevitable moment when parents and children go their separate ways and children, upon embarking on their new lives as adults, become, to some extent, strangers to those who have raised them.

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