

# Bridging Worlds: Producing and Imagining the Transnational through TV Narratives

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## ABSTRACT

Globalization has transformed economic, political and social structures, but it also reshaped our perceptions of the world. These transformations influenced media narrative not only as products of big multinational corporates, but also, as stories. This paper, motivated by the success of the Nordic Noir police drama, *Bron/Broen* and its adaptation by the US. channel Fox, explores how transnationalism permeates TV narratives generating new narrative worlds. Moreover, the work goes a step further examining how these narratives reimagine the transnational lifestyle and how this contributes to their success internationally. What happens when TV stories cross borders? And in what ways does transnationalism become an internal element of these narrative mobilities? But also, how is transnationalism narrative-generated, too?

## KEYWORDS

Transnationalism, Imagination, TV Narrative, Nordic Noir, *Bron/Broen*, *the Bridge*.

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 22 December 2016

Accepted: 21 June 2017

Published: 04 August 2017

<https://dx.doi.org/10.7559/citarj.v9i2.243>

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the economic, social and cultural transformations often labelled as globalization caused a significant impact on media. This impact did not only include the formation of global media corporations but also the introduction of new digital technologies and the emergence of new habits in the consumption of media products (transmedia, online streaming, smart technologies etc.). It also affected narrative construction in media and the way TV narratives travel among different audiences. My paper will focus on the narrative construction of a popular TV series [1], the Danish/Swedish police drama *Bron/Broen* (*Rosenfeldt*, 2011) and its adaptation in the USA as *The Bridge* [2] (*Stiehm*, 2013).

My work will explore one aspect of globalization, transnationalism, and how the latter contributed to the success of the series in question. I will argue that transnationalism, by becoming the main framework of TV production, contributed to the circulation of this TV series. Moreover, embedding elements of transnationalism in the storylines, characters and locations, the series became more relevant to global audiences and their everyday experiences. This paper will explore the connection between narrative construction and transnationalism and to what extent they influence each other.

## 2 | TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES AND NARRATIVES OF THE TRANSNATIONAL

Since the 1990s, the concept of transnationalism was launched as a framework to examine human, cultural and economic capital movement beyond nation-states and their bounded borders. Basch, Schiller-Glick & Szanton-Blanc (1994), in one of the first definitions of transnationalism, argued that the concept included “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 8). The crossing of geographic, cultural and political borders contributed to the development of these relations. Moreover, transnational relations extended beyond immigrant communities to different sorts of flows (human, capital, symbolic) which were not necessarily shaped by state involvement (formation from above), but they could emerge due to individual desires, activities and agencies (formation from below) (Vertovec, 1999). Furthermore, transnationalism often described a new “type of consciousness” (Vertovec, 1999, pp. 4-6) which was characterised as less bounded and more interconnected to multiple localities and cultures.

As the study of transnationalism became popular, a central issue was the cross-fertilisation of this field of study (Vertovec, 1999) with other subject areas such as network, migration and diaspora theories, global or urban studies. As a result, transnationalism turned into an open category of analysis which tried to capture the interlinkages between different scales of action and experiences. In the field of media and TV studies, transnationalism instigated an interest in the flows of capital and ownership rights, i.e. “media concentration” (Christensen, 2013, p. 2402), as well as of images, ideas and symbols beyond national territories and cultures (“media export” Christensen, 2013, p. 2402). Since its inception, television’s role was closely attached to the formation of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991). TV, for decades the most popular medium of home entertainment, played a significant role in the consumption of national cultures through daily practices. TV narratives managed to produce belongingness in living rooms, during breakfast or before bedtime. Routines like watching one’s favourite programme turned viewers into insiders to a “common sociality” (Herzfeld, 2004, p. 3). Moreover, this was accomplished not as an outcome of state ideologies and its traditional apparatuses like education, church or the army.

Instead, it was generated through the process of naturalising a way of life, which marked a shared national experience, producing an everyday “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995).

Transnational media, though, formed a space where the above shared sociality seemed to stretch beyond national borders and communities. Which were the conditions that help the formation of this transnational sociality? Regional and cultural proximities, according to Straubhaar (2007), could produce the necessary conditions for transnational media flows. Linguistic, cultural and historical heritage can create a fertile ground for joint ventures in terms of TV production and it could also contribute to the success of a TV series within a region; both are confirmed in the case of the Nordic series. *Bron/Broen* is a quintessential transnational production. It is a Nordic and European co-production (Danish Broadcasting (DR), Swedish TV (STV) and the German ZDF channel). The culture of collaboration between the different Scandinavian states was initiated by the foundation of the Nordic Film and TV Fund in the 1990s (for a detailed discussion see Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2015, pp. 98-114). As Bondebjerg (2016) argued, “[n]ational media enter into collaboration with partners and regions with which they have an affinity beyond just commercial and economic interests and benefits” (p. 5). As a result, economic motivation was combined with cultural affinity in the Nordic case. Moreover, this co-production was encouraged by the EU media policies, which since the 1980s fostered transnational collaboration. This collaboration was recognized as salient for the formation of a European identity (De Vinck, 2011; Bondebjerg and Redvall, 2015).

In the context of the Nordic series, transnationalism was not only applied in the production’s economic partnership (co-producers) but also in its organisation. Transnational and transborder mobility (between the states of Denmark and Sweden and the cities of Copenhagen and *Malmö*) took place at a regular basis among different types of professionals involved in the series’ production (writers, actors, directors, photographers, editors, technicians). This mobility further enhanced the experience of transnationalism in the phase of script development and pre-production. This augmented experience of transnationalism that the writers and other members of the crew lived may have contributed to the realistic

and persuasive depiction of the mediated transnationalism included in the TV narrative.

By contrast, FOX is a paradigmatic case of a global media conglomeration of affiliated channels, TV stations, networks, cable TV and production companies all over the world (Kimmel, 2004). Thus, from its inception, a transnational circuit of media products and global audiences are almost embedded in Fox's structure and productions. FOX bought the rights of the Nordic *Bridge* from a British production company, the Shine, which had already produced the *Tunnel* (British/French adaptation of the original Nordic series, completed in two seasons in 2013 and in 2016, see Turnbull, 2015). This was an example of transnational format trade [3]. Circulation of TV formats became a frequent practice in media markets in the last decades (Jensen, 2003). However, while media markets like the UK, France or the US are still considered major TV programme and format suppliers on a global scale, they remain quite strict in accepting foreign language TV products. Penetrating these markets is not an easy thing to do. *The Bridge* crossed regional borders due to the formation of global media flows. FX International produced the series in house for the US. As a result, from the moment that FOX bought the rights for the adaptation of the Nordic series, transnationalism became part of the narrative and did not really play any role in the pre-production, apart for scouting for locations.

To sum up, this part introduced the idea of transnationalism and examined how this idea was encountered in the context of the two series' productions. In the Nordic case, transnationalism was not only part of the economic alliance of different production companies, but it became part of the organisation and communication of the production team. In the US. case, transnationalism facilitated format circulation and trade between different production companies. In the following part, the paper will explore how different perceptions of transnationalism in relation to audience expectations and power relations in the media world led to differences in the narrative construction.

### 3 | TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVE

Arjun Appadurai launched the term *mediascapes* in order to postulate the economic interconnectedness of media conglomerations with narrative. In his words, "series of elements (characters, plots, textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined

lives" (Appadurai, 2006, p. 591) travel through borders and among different audiences. Appadurai postulated (2006) the interwoven relations between production (economy), their construction (narrative) and imagination. Until this point, the paper examined transnationalism as part of the conditions that allowed the production of the series in the Nordic region and the US. This section will discuss the construction of the narrative and how this construction imagined transnationalism.

Assessing the global success of many Nordic series in the last decades, like *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, etc., Bondebjerg suggested (2016) that their stories included many "transnational elements and conflicts" (p. 5). However, as he underlined, these elements were not ingrained in the narrative in order to produce an international hit, "but because the national reality in any European country, when it comes to crime, involves global issues" (Bondebjerg, 2016, p. 5). The embeddedness of these elements in the story of the Nordic *Bridge* contributed to its international success. These elements included issues such as social justice and corruption, the function of the political system or EU institutions, security, difficult family relations, youth problems, digital threats, urban lifestyle. These issues did not belong anymore to a national repertoire of social and political anxieties but they were part of a global political agenda and public dialogue shared among different societies and nations. Nordic societies, though, were often identified as a paradise of social and gendered equality, welfare state and democracy. The reversal of these stereotypes in the narratives of various Nordic series intrigued international audiences contributing to the series' marketability on a global scale. This success was boosted by the quality of the series' production: their big budgets, renowned professionals (actors, directors, photographers), impeccable cinematography (impressive locations, desolate autumn and winter landscapes with dim light, edgy editing, a solid directing and good choices in casting) (Redvall, 2013).

*The Bridge* (Season 1) focused, in both the Nordic and US versions, on the investigation of two murders by two detectives of different nationalities: in the Nordic original, the two detectives were a Swedish female detective, Saga Noren, and a Danish male detective, Martin Rohde. The actors playing the two characters belonged to the corresponding nationality, a result of the transnational and transborder casting

of the series. In the American series the leading characters were Sonya Cross (USA) and Marco Ruiz (Mexico). The actor playing Marco's character was of a Mexican origin but he was based in the US. The choice showed a more limited transnationalism in the production of the series. How did transnationalism affect the narrative structure of the series? Elements of a transnational way of life were embedded in the storylines, characters and the representation of space in the series. For example, there was an increased number of interwoven stories concerning crossing of boundaries (physical and symbolic); characters were attached to various localities and cultures; images of spaces that bore the mark of a transnational way of life (physical border landmarks e.g. the bridge that unites Denmark and Sweden, customs at the border of US/Mexico. etc.) became dominant in the series. The following discussion will unpack how these transnational elements permeate the narrative of both series.

### 3.1 STORYLINES

*The Bridge* did not avoid the classical linear narrative where strong causality linked the past with the present and future. *The Bridge's* narrative was developed through a four-line structure (A: B: C: D). Each letter corresponded to a storyline. Each one of these lines ran in parallel, but they did not necessarily have the same prominence in the narrative or the same length in each episode. For example, A was the most significant line, B was less significant, and so on. Some secondary storylines, for example: C and D, were often used to develop aspects of characters or recurrent themes (Colonna, 2010; Douglas, 2011).

In the case of *The Bridge*, the four storylines were constructed as it is described below:

- A-line referred to the main crime investigation. Two mutilated torsos were found in the middle of *The Bridge*. Each part of the torso belonged to a different state and class (one part belonged to a politician from Sweden, in the Nordic version, and from the US in the American one, and the other part belonged to a prostitute from Denmark and Mexico in the corresponding versions).
- B-line referred to social inequality and marginalisation. The main character of this line was a social worker who helped victims of social exclusion. For example, the Nordic version focused on the case of an abused wife, whereas the US

series stressed female sexual exploitation by local corrupt police officers who were involved in transnational crimes (trafficking, drugs etc.) in the border town of Juarez.

- C-line addressed the issue of social inequality from above. It explored how a privileged elite found shortcuts in the social and global system in order to have its way. For example, the Nordic *Bridge* showed how the wife of a rich investor in Denmark found a donor for her husband's heart transplant, despite his doctor's reservations. The American case showed how a US rancher made a deal with a female Mexican trafficker, when he faced the impact of the economic crisis. When he died, the deal was continued by his wife.
- D-line developed the personal relations of the two leading characters, Saga/Martin and Sonya/Marco: the storyline followed their in-between professional relation which gradually became a friendship but also the relations of each of the two characters with their partners and family.
- In both series, there was also an E pseudo-line. This line introduced an inciting incident to the first minutes of each episode. At first, this incident seemed unrelated to the other four storylines. However, after the middle of each episode, the investigation of the two detectives revealed that there was a connection between the inciting incident and the main crime investigation.

In detail, for both series, in season 1, storyline A remained identical following the investigation of the two mutilated bodies. Nevertheless, this storyline was completed in ten episodes in the Nordic *Bridge*, whereas the American *Bridge* had three extra episodes, which prepared the ground for season 2. B and C lines for the Nordic *Bridge* tackled the issue of the welfare state and its failures (social exclusion and class privileges). As it was stressed, B followed the character of Stefan, a social worker and activist who tried to fix social injustices. On the other hand, C addressed the same issue, that of injustice, by putting forward the exploitation of the system by the upper class, which resulted in the perpetuation of social inequalities. Storyline C was developed around Charlotte, the trophy-wife of a rich businessman and investor, who needed a heart transplant. To succeed in this, Charlotte used shortcuts.

In Fox's *Bridge*, storylines B and C differed. There was a neat shift to human trafficking. The latter is a

major socio-political issue in the borderland area of the US/Mexico. The main character of B, a social worker, Steven Linder, and that of C, a Texan ranch owner's wife, Charlotte, were both involved in trafficking. Steven secretly helped Mexican women to get into the US in order to avoid sexual exploitation and male violence, whereas Charlotte allowed a tunnel created by her husband to continue to function as an illegal pathway for immigrants from Mexico to the US. As a result, the two series share the same narrative form, but they changed the content in order to adapt it better to their target audiences (more regional for the Nordic series, more international for FOX).

The shift of emphasis from social justice to trafficking underlined Sue Turnbull's argument (2015 p. 97) that transnational circuit of TV formats led to varied translations of what was understood as local, national or global. Social justice guaranteed by a welfare state was the trademark of the Nordic socialist state, but it had nothing to do with the American neo-liberal politics and federal system. As a result, it constituted a national or regional issue but it did not belong to the repertoire of global issues that could easily circulate and become understood among varied audiences. Instead, the theme of trafficking was closer to the US/Mexican reality, but it also addressed global concerns regarding immigration. As a narrative element, the welfare theme could attract regional audience due to cultural familiarity. However, for international audiences the same narrative element appealed instead to foreign perceptions about the North and its successes. Social justice, welfare and social equality were brand names for the Nordic region. But when *The Bridge* was relocated to the US, the same branding could not travel in the US adaptation. That is why it was replaced by an uncontested global issue, migration, which made sense both for US spectators and international audiences.

Another salient feature of the storylines was the consistent links between the public/ collective spheres and the domestic /individual ones. The main crime investigation turned in the end into a story of loss, betrayal and personal revenge regarding Martin/Marco's past. The socio-political failures of the system became a story of family rupture. Stefan/Steven hid a traumatic past of family abuse and in both series Charlotte found out that her husband cheated on her. Turning the social into

personal, the public into domestic increased emotional attachment in spite of the cultural difference. The interconnection of social reality with the emotional life of the series' characters increased audiences' empathy. This contributed further to the transnational mobility of the narrative, as it contained more potential for transnational appeal, since it dealt with recognizable, political or social issues. Storylines – in spite of the differences - embedded transnationalism by developing the themes of border crossing, social and cultural boundaries and transnational crime networks. These themes made it easier, for different reasons, for diverse audiences to become attached to the series' multiple stories. These themes were also connected to transnationalism and how it was understood. The Nordic series fascinated audiences by challenging stereotypes of the North whereas the US case emphasized more global issues like trafficking, drug smuggling, etc. The development of characters was also connected to transnationalism.

### 3.2 CHARACTERS

Leading characters in both versions of *The Bridge* played a significant role in the success of the series. The *X-Files* introduced a new take in the coupling of contrasting - in character and gender – detectives, which had always a significant present in the genre of noir, by exploring darker aspects of human identity and challenging gender stereotypes. In the last decades, there was a shift towards strong female detectives. Nicci Gerrard (2014), analyzing the success of female characters in crime TV series in the last years (*The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *The Fall*, etc.) underlined that, “[f]ictional detectives are often loners, but being women makes them doubly alone”. Saga and Martin challenged perceptions of male/female emotional stereotypes. Martin's chaotic personal life is a mess. He himself seems unable to control his libidinal instincts. On the contrary, the social "autism"[4] of Saga made her aloof, confused about social etiquette and human nature (Hughes, 2012, pp. 41-43). Saga's confusion became the dominant POV in the series. By breaking gender expectations and roles, Saga remained difficult to read and thus captivating as a character. Nevertheless, her relation to Martin had many subtle moments of humour stemming from the cultural similarities/differences, for example linguistic similarities and differences in the pronunciation.

In the American *Bridge* Sonya revealed more about her emotional pain. Her character disclosed a lot of her background: her sister's murder, her relationship with Dobbs, her sister's killer, her alcoholic mother. We got to know Sonya more than Saga in season 1. Sonya attracted, even unintentionally, male and female protection (Marco's, Hank's, her boss, the police female secretary). This need was strengthened by the fragility that Diane Kruger, who played Sonya, seemed to exude. On the contrary, Saga was more distant with social affinities. At the same time, the Mexican character of Marco was much more passionate and extroverted than Martin, as one would expect from a "Mexican man". Although Martin's unrestrained sexuality contradicts perceptions of the Nordic temperament, whereas in Marco's case stereotypes were confirmed. Saga and Martin's relation allowed for humorous overtones deriving from Saga's social detachment and national stereotypes. Sonya and Marco did not have the same chance due to the relocation to the US/Mexico borders and its political inequalities. Space played an important role in both series, as it will be discussed below.

The success of the characters of the series was connected to transnationalism as a form of consciousness which went beyond bounded localities and cultures. The characters of *The Bridge* crossed physical and symbolic borders. They moved between states and cities; between societies, languages and cultures, trying to understand each other in order to solve their cases. These characteristics made them more attractive to global audiences who came from different backgrounds and faced a gradually increasing transnational reality in their everyday life, like their favorite characters did in the series.

### 3.3 SPACE

"Much of the time, classic film noir takes place in Los Angeles — but it's always in the city, always a detective looking for clues to unravel the mystery of whodunit" (Abrams, 2007, p. 7). Noir as a genre was interwoven with the rise of the European city at first (German expressionism), and then with the development of the American urban centres. The breaking up of the traditional communities, international migrations, industrialisation as well as the economic crisis of the mid-war period and the sharpening of social inequalities contributed to the formation of the classic film noir. As a result, the inclusion of cityscapes, the urban landscape, in the

narrative became a central element of the genre. Examining the role of place in crime fiction, Kjetil Sandvik and Anne Maarit Waade (2008) argued that, "[f]ictional crime stories do not unfold in fantastic worlds (...): they may take place in the past or in the future, but they always carry a contract of realism (...)" (p. 2). In the genre of noir, most of this reality took place in cities.

The shots from the cities of Copenhagen and Malmö (for example, the little Mermaid, the Turning Torso, the Scandinavian architectural minimalism as well as marginal spaces such as shelters for the homeless, drug addicts' parks or working-class blocks of flats, impersonal malls) did not only anchor viewers in the corresponding part of the bridge. The melancholy of the North, icy and dim light, emblematic architecture, grey landscapes, contributed also to the branding of the region (Waade, 2013). The numerous shots of urban landscapes, although they did not have a narrative function, produced a surplus of urban realism, which intrigued the imagination of audiences with images of the North, but also generated familiarity among global audiences. Within this framework, the excess of urban images in the Nordic TV series increased the narrative's realism and enhanced the imagined familiarity of audiences. As Sandvik and Waade argued (2008, p. 11), an enhanced mediated realism of place always referred to original places, multiplying the emotional affect and the identification of audiences with their favourite series.

Both series included real locations, intensifying their audiences' emotional attachment with the stories' worlds. However, they had different strategies of representation, the Nordic version was more focused on urban landscapes whereas the US series included more scenes from the borderland. In the US/Mexico borderland sand and heat are the dominant elements of the landscape. This characteristic in the series enhanced by the orange and yellow lights of the cinematography created a sense of a world in flames. The US/Mexico border covers approximately 3,000 km from California to Texas and a high degree of transborder mobility each year. But it is also highly registered in the cinematic memory, from El Zorro westerns to contemporary road movies (Brégent-Heald, 2015). This cinematic archive of images regarding the mediation of borderland challenged its depiction in the US *Bridge*. For example, many fans debated about the reality of the locations, which

in the series corresponded to the Mexican part of the border. However, what was captured in a realistic way in the American version was the transfigurations of the border through the theme of trafficking. The border was there, even when it became invisible. The world of the tunnels and passages of traffickers was extensively screened in the series, confirming American and international audiences' perceptions and fears about migration. In a sense, this visible/invisible mediatisation of the border strongly materialised the darker sides of transnationalism in the narrative world of the American *Bridge*.

Embedding transnational elements into the narrative structure (storyline, characters, narrative space) contributed to the mobility of the series from a small TV market to a bigger one like the USA, as it increased the familiarity of global audiences with both series' narrative worlds. Following the narrative strategies that the creative teams followed showed different approaches to transnationalism as part of the narrative as well as the production process. Nevertheless, the success of the two series did not mean that audiences did not stand critical to the fictionalisation of transnationalism. In many online fora, fans from both series challenged the limits of the transnational collaboration of the two detectives and its representation as an easy transborder mobility that can be adapted in every context. For example, one of the fans wondered about the absence of political commentary in the US version, which hid the tensions between the US and Mexican authorities. Another one pointed out that transnational collaboration should be represented less through spatial borders like a bridge, but through the negotiation of social and cultural boundaries [5]. This remark was revealing of how transnationalism concerns more the everyday experience of boundaries than state borders. Moreover, these comments produced an interesting contradiction between fictionalised transnational politics and the lived experience of transnationalism, where political and economic hierarchies could forbid the crossing of boundaries and borders in the real world. Further research within these online communities could help us understand the relation between real and fictionalised politics.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

The examination of transnationalism in relation to TV narrative helped us understand how different media traditions and systems of production, although they take place in the all-encompassing framework of

globalisation, could differ. For the US version of *The Bridge*, transnationalism became the space upon which the format of the Nordic series traveled. Media flows, as they were contextualised in the EU context, which motivated transnational collaboration, allowed TV successes from the North to become known and travel to the other side of the Atlantic. Then, the American *Bridge* turned transnationalism into a narrative element by addressing international/global themes such as trafficking and borderlines. By contrast, for the Nordic *Bridge* transnationalism was part of its core production plan. Furthermore, it integrated transnational social and political storylines (social justice, corruption). This worked successfully in a double way. It pleased regional audiences, but it also appealed to global audiences through regional branding. However, fans of both series expressed reservations whether the series' depiction of transnationalism could be contextualised with no limits (political or cultural). As a result, mediated transnationalism produced a critical reflection on the phenomenon among the transnational par excellence: the online communities of TV fans.

Kathleen Newman (2009, p. 10), in her account of the concept of the transnational in film studies, tried to explore the interrelations between power and scale in intersection with film. She underlined that transnationalism was more apt to challenge the inequalities of centre and periphery as it produced a space in-between. The transatlantic passage of *The Bridge* was such an example. In order to explore this passage, the paper focused on the way transnationalism in the formation of mediascapes that connected the two sides of the Atlantic: the conditions of production (economy) and the construction of the narrative (storylines, characters and space). This exploration showed how much transnationalism was embedded in both aspects of mediascapes in an interwoven way. The transnational co-production of the series contributed to transatlantic circulation of the format. At the same time, the narrative imagined the world in a transnational way where boundaries were both physical and symbolic, visible and bounded but also invisible and unbounded. However, the examination of the two-series revealed different perceptions of what transnationalism was or what it included or how it concerned different audiences and productions' planning. Furthermore, this exploration postulated how mediated and fictionalised transnational politics could bridge different audiences, even when critical reflection regarding the meaning and limits of transnationalism is developed.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The paper is based on my research in the framework of my studies at the School of Film Studies, Faculty of Fine Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. I am indebted to my supervisor Panagiotis Iossifelis Associate Professor. I would like to thank Kostas

Kefalas, Assistant Professor for his comments on the first presentation of this paper.

## ENDNOTES

[1] My research considered the two first seasons of both series. It included both qualitative (content analysis, storylines, plot structure, character analysis) and quantitative analysis (duration of storylines, introduction points for stories and characters). I considered cinematographic and editing characteristics provided that they were related to the narrative. I also examined fans' pages to get a grasp of what the reception of the two series was. Nevertheless, this aspect of the research did not go into a more detailed audience analysis.

[2] Hereafter, I am going to use the English title.

[3] TV format, as Moran and Malborn underlined (2006, 23-26), is a multiple entity, including script format, sound, title, the Bible, paper format etc.

[4] Asperger syndrome was suggested as the cause for Saga's inability to connect with people, although it was never explicitly mentioned in the series.

[5] For a variety of comments visit <http://www.avclub.com/review/the-bridges-source-material-hits-hulu-201019>

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