

Why Do Viewers Find TV Mobster... Prof. Dana Renga Has a Theory

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SPEAKERS

Dana Renga, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, David Staley, Eva Dale

E Eva Dale 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

D David Staley 00:32
Dana Renga is an Associate Professor of Italian and Chair of the Department of French and Italian at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She is an Affiliate Faculty in the Film Studies program, the Department of Comparative Studies, and the Department of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, and she serves as Vice President of the American Association for Italian Studies. She has published over 30 articles and book chapters on Italian cinema and television, Italian popular culture, and modern and contemporary Italian poetry and literature, and has a number of books as well that we're going to be talking about here. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Renga.

D Dana Renga 01:08
Thank you very much.

D David Staley 01:09
So your most recent book is titled, "Watching Sympathetic Perpetrators on Italian Television: Gomorrah and Beyond" - what a title that is. Tell us tell us about this book.

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Dana Renga 01:21

This book came out just last month, and it really engages with all sorts of really, really popular Italian television programs. I've been watching TV since I was a young kid, I started watching soap operas with my grandmother when I was seven, and I would run home off the bus and run to her, just always about 20 minutes late for the beginning of "General Hospital". And I was just fascinated by serial television and just watching lives evolve. We would sit there and talk about Luke and Laura and eat cookies and it was the highlight of my day, really. So, I'm an avid television viewer, so in a sense, I've been kind of preparing to write a book on TV since, I don't know, about 41 years now, which is kind of funny. I've always watched TV for fun, and I love kind of quality TV, you know, shows on HBO and on Netflix and things like that. And I was working previously more on cinema because cinema is serious, and you're supposed to work on serious things, and my first book was on cinema, all the while watching all of these television shows and becoming increasingly fascinated with how, in Italy, organized crime, the Mafia is like a real thing. It's all over the place, you open up the newspaper, you know, look at an Italian newspaper, or even the BBC or even the New York Times and you read things on a regular basis about Mafia hits, arrests, assassinations, drug deals, heists, etc., it's just a total ongoing thing. At the same time, the production of TV shows and films that glamorize criminality is increasing. And so, this is really exciting to me, because I'm interested in how this phenomenon that's really like part and parcel of Italian culture is represented on screen, when the perpetrators are depicted in highly sympathetic terms. And also they're very beautiful. So...

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David Staley 03:04

Beautiful?

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Dana Renga 03:05

They're very good looking.

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David Staley 03:06

Physically, handsome?

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Dana Renga 03:07

Physically handsome, conventionally attractive. What I noticed, and this is kind of the main thrust of the book, which is fairly simple that, you know, I've watched "The Sopranos" and, you know, "Breaking Bad", and "House of Cards". And if you think of those perpetrators, right, they're kind of ordinary looking, you know, they're not these really hot, good looking guys, you know, they don't star conventionally attractive actors. In Italy, that's not the case at all. They're all incredibly good looking, which creates a lot of tensions and fascinations given that shows, unlike in the U.S., and I'll say a little bit about that in a moment, are based on actual events and historical figures. In the U.S., with very few exceptions, everything's invented.

D David Staley 03:48
What are some of these shows, some of these Italian shows, and just give us a synopsis or a flavor?

D Dana Renga 03:53
Well, I taught one of them this morning.

D David Staley 03:55
Oh, okay.

D Dana Renga 03:56
In my Mafia movies class, which we can talk about later, and it's called "Gomorra". This series, it's in the title of the book because it's the most watched Italian series, it's exported to 190 countries. So 190 countries have bought show rights, there's 206 sovereign states, so that's like pretty good odds for viewing. It's showing in the U.S. on Netflix, streaming on Netflix seasons one and two, it premiered on the Sundance Channel here. It's about the Camorra.

D David Staley 04:22
The Camorra are...?

D Dana Renga 04:23
There's four main mafias in Italy, five if you count the Roman Mafia, that's kind of up for debate. But the Camorra is the Mafia of Naples and Campania, so it's the Mafia, South of Rome. Everyone kind of knows about one of the Mafias the most, which is the Mafia of Sicily, Cosa Nostra, which means "our thing", and that was the Mafia that was first exported to the United States with the growth of the lemon business, and we can talk about that later if we want, it's kind of interesting. But so, people kind of associate the Mafia with Sicily. This is the Mafia that's been really quiet for a long time and is now totally in this spotlight, media-wise and everything. The Camorra is a super interesting mafia because most... when people think about the mafia you think of hierarchy, right? There's a boss on top and there's an underboss and then there'll be a, you know, the consigliere, the advisor...

D David Staley 05:13
"The Godfather".

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Dana Renga 05:14

"The Godfather", everyone has that idea, like, Don Vito's on top and there's all these people and it's a struggle for power, the structure's a triangle. The Camorra is totally different. It has a horizontal structure, which means that everyone's at war with each other. There is no boss of bosses, there is no Don Corleone or Michael Corleone. There is all of these clans, there's tons of clans that are warring with each other at all times, and it means that there is a lot of opportunity for people to switch sides. That's why, especially in Naples in the late 2000s, 2006 to 2010, there were just murders and assassinations on the front pages all the time. The Camorra is one of the most internationally lucrative Mafias, and it kind of came into the media spotlight with the publication of a book called "Gomorra" by someone named Roberto Saviano. Roberto Saviano infiltrated the Mafia and kind of pretended that he was a Camorra soldier and got their trust, and he kind of lived with them and did a lot of illegal activity with them. But what he was really doing was he was a journalist, and he then wrote this exposé, which was an international best-seller, it's been translated into tons of languages, and it's called "Gomorra". And of course, the biblical reference to Sodom and Gomorra, the city that's, you know, doomed to die and should die because of everything that's happened there is obviously front and center. So, that book came out in 2006 and in 2008, just two years later, a film came out called "Gomorra" by an Italian director, Matteo Garrone. The film and the book are very dark, they show a bleak picture, especially the film. I just taught the film last week, the students don't like it very much, even though it's the most taught Italian film outside of Italy. I did a survey, it's taught the most because it's just very interesting. It shows just, everyone's trapped, everyone dies young, it's somber, there's no positive figures, there's no way out, there's no glamorization. Then, in 2014, "Gomorra" the series came out, and that just broke the mold in terms of Italian perpetrator - what I'm calling Italian perpetrator quality television. Italy, Italian television had been working for a while, since 2008 in creating criminal series with focus on the anti-heroes. But when "Gomorra" came out, contemporary focus, very wonderful Italian and some non-Italian soundtrack, high production values, content that was both local and global - everyone loves crime stories, right? So, the Mafia has an international appeal, but it's also a very local, focal to Italy problem. It immediately went kind of haywire in terms of viewership. So, "Gomorra" is now in its fourth season, season four premiered a week ago on Sky Atlantic today, and I haven't been able to watch it, since I haven't figured any legal means to do so yet. But, it is just a phenomenon and people describe it as such, the "Gomorra" phenomenon, because of its immense popularity and its ability to incredibly humanize people who do horrible things, horrible, horrible things.

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David Staley 08:22

And that's distinct, say, from the movie, that television depiction is different from the movie depiction?

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Dana Renga 08:27

Exactly. The television depiction is much more in line with what HBO has been doing since "The Sopranos", or even earlier, since "Oz". So "The Sopranos" premiered in 1999, "Oz", the prison drama, in 1997, right? And they kind of created the idea of creating a perpetrator who's very sympathetic, and that audiences are kind of aligned with people with these villainous, hideous men, people who do horrible things. The whole idea is, how do you, like, divide this in your

mind? You invite someone regularly into your home on the small screen and you watch them on a weekly basis, scheduled visits, right? Before Netflix it was on Sunday nights, HBO, whatever, nine o'clock or something like that; you do that willingly. But what happens if Tony Soprano shows up at your door, your actual real life Tony Soprano, you're gonna call the police, lock yourself in. So what's happening, what's the mental kind of disparity there between the real life and the fictional? So what do you think explains the appeal of these kinds of characters, these - as you describe them, these hideous characters? These hideous characters. Well, in my recent book, "Watching Sympathetic Perpetrators", I created what I'm calling a "sympathetic perpetrator identikit".

D David Staley 09:36
Okay.

D Dana Renga 09:38
There's various kinds of... and I borrow a lot of this from people who've written on American seriality, mainly, so there's a bunch of people who I cite in my book, who I'm indebted to their scholarship. But I found out a lot of the particularities about, you know, what happens in Italian TV, a lot of which is imported from shows like "Mad Men" and "The Sopranos", "The Wire", "Breaking Bad", and all of these things, but they all seem to follow a certain model. One is insider knowledge, so viewers get to know them well, you get to see them at home with their friends, on their own, at work, right? They're not just bad guys killing people. Dexter, for example, that's a very good example of something like that. Another thing that's very regular is they feel remorse when they've done something bad, so usually bad guys feel badly about doing something bad, right? The worst bad guys don't, but all these bad guys do. So you see them crying, back in the day, men would shed maybe one tear if zero, but these guys are crying nonstop, they can't stop crying. They do something horrible and they feel remorse about it, almost immediately, frequently. And that really helps viewers in the process of re-aligning; so, the word alignment is frequently used in talking about identification with TV and film characters, because identification is weird. You're not actually identifying with that person or else you're like, too in their head, but alignment is more like, you take their side, you kind of root for them, right? So that idea of remorse, feeling guilty, feeling badly, makes you go, oh my god, they're so horrible, they just killed someone - but they didn't want to, they had to, right? Along those lines, frequently, almost all the time, there's childhood trauma, something that happened in their past that kind of, usually they were totally victim to but it made them who they are. And it frequently it's like, that's who they are, they can't help it.

D David Staley 11:24
It, like, absolves them, of their...?

D Dana Renga 11:25
It absolves them. I don't want to give away any spoilers, but Tony Soprano, for example, right? What happened with his father, what he witnessed with his father that had to do with his awareness of his father being in the Mafia and his awareness of his father having a sexual

awareness of his father being in the mafia and his awareness of his father having a sexual relationship with his mother, caused his panic attacks, things like that. Like with Dexter, his father was a serial killer, and he witnessed this horrible thing at a young age. And these guys, it's frequently, parents are absent, the father is always to blame in these Italian products, the father has done something horrible. There's all sorts of other things in this identikit that creates sympathy, however.

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David Staley 12:00

Well and, I take it that part of that identity kid is that they're attractive, that they're physically attractive. Is that part of the way in which they establish alignment with an audience?

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Dana Renga 12:08

It's an interesting question, I grappled with that a lot in the book. So people find Tony Soprano, right, all sorts of characters find Tony Soprano incredibly attractive, in that women are wanting to sleep with him all the time. Is it the power, is it the money, is it whatever, you know, but there's women throwing themselves at him. And I think the attractiveness in the Italian model has a lot to do with casting. And that's my new project, we can talk about that later, but a lot of the casting of these anti-heroes in "Gomorra" and a bunch of other shows is done by this one casting director, a woman named Laura Muccino, who has this amazing eye for casting, and she's trying to cast quote, unquote, "authentic faces". But I find it interesting that most of the people she does cast end up being very good looking, right? That might have to do with the star system in Italy, you know, which actors are, you know, are available to play these roles. But, I think definitely their physical allure aids in that kind of idea of glamorization. I also think it aids in the glamorization, and whether that's the intent of the show runners - so, the show runner is someone like David Chase in "The Sopranos" or Stefano Sollima with "Gomorra", it's the person who's in charge of all the series, because series has frequently have multiple directors. So the show runners, I think, are probably aware that their products are going to cause a lot of contention, protest in the local population. So, one way to make their shows popular is casting someone really good looking doing bad things, right? Because that's an immediate recipe for a lot of media attention. So that phenomenon, the casting of attractive people as horrible characters - is that strictly Italian or is that something that we see in other cultures? If you think of the Nordic noirs like "The Bridge" and all of those things, they aren't particularly good-looking.

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David Staley 13:38

"The Bridge", that was... Danish?

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Dana Renga 13:58

Danish, so there's been multiple "bridges", that's a bridge between two countries, so there's the Danish co-production and then there was the French, U.K. co-production and then the American, Mexican co-production, where the body is found halfway between the country, you know, one half of the body and each side. But those investigators, the male investigators are certainly not good looking, they're like kind of middle-aged, middle life crisis pudgy, you

know, et cetera. There are some French actors who are more good looking, for sure, but in the American case - and you have to take vampires out of it because vampires are always good looking, except for Nosferatu or something like that, but vampires just... and people have written books on this, it's hysterical, but vampires are generally really good looking. So take out vampires, and in the American case, you have good looking anti-heroes in choral dramas, like something like "Game of Thrones", where there's tons of different stories, and even... the only exception would be "Mad Men", Jon Hamm is very good looking, but, he's one of the main American exception. But, Italy is exceptionally exceptional for, just, that real focus, it's hard to find anyone not really good-looking starring in these shows.

J Janet Box-Steffensmeier 15:04

I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for the Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of the Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at artsandsciences.osu.edu.

D David Staley 15:29

So, I think you've gestured toward this, but I'll ask anyway - so the representation of the Mafia on Italian television, what's the relationship between the representation on TV and the actuality when people are sort of reading in newspapers? I assume there's a clash there, but maybe there isn't?

D Dana Renga 15:46

Yeah, that's a great question. So there's this other really popular series that you can watch on Netflix, season two just dropped last... in February, called "Suburra". And "Suburra" is kind of a ripoff of "Gomorra" in many ways, it borrows a lot from "Gomorra", and "Suburra" is about the Roman Mafia, called Mafia Capitale, the "Mafia of the capital", of Rome. It's not super contemporary, but set in 2008, the series, and it engages on purpose with a lot of real stuff that was happening in 2008. And what Netflix did, I found this fascinating, is they played off that in their marketing of the series. They made up a game that said, "'Suburra' or Reality", and they'd give you like a snippet of, you know, there was a priest who was found hanging under a bridge, did this happen, or it was it in Suburra, and you have to play and guess and, and then the characters would give you a score, and they tell you, you were good or bad, and you didn't know. So... and this is new, self-consciously drew attention to how much the series was inspired by historical fact. There's tons of scholarship on this, and there's a lot of debate about how, I mean, I take a lot of caution around, you know, how realistic the representation is, but something like "Gomorra", in the series, for example, you know, it's filmed on location, a lot of people in the Camorra, they're called "Camorristi", were cast as actual actors. And so, during season one, for example, a drug pusher was arrested who had a role in "Gomorra". So, he was an actual Camorrista and he was arrested, and this happens frequently. Another guy was in jail, he was in episode nine, and he was arrested for being involved in a train station knifing, and he was the main character in episode nine of season one. So, there's that real interesting interplay between actors who play soldiers, mafiosi, who are actual criminals in real life.

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David Staley 17:41

Why your interest in the Mafia or in these in these characters, what drew you hear?

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Dana Renga 17:46

That's a good question. So in 2008, I am not a football fan, I shouldn't say this very loudly, but there is a reason why I was watching the Super Bowl, and it's for the commercials, I love Super Bowl commercials. It was my second year... no, it was my first year at Ohio State, because the Super Bowl is in January, so I started in 2007. And I was at a bar in German Village watching the Super Bowl, and the commercials came on, and I perked up as always. And there was an Audi commercial, and it was a spoof of the famous horse head scene from "The Godfather". And it was an almost - I don't know if you've seen it, it was an almost identical spoof. It had the same music, it had the same camera angles, it had the same, like, approaching Jack Woltz' house, entering the window, and that kind of Psycho-like way in the beginning of "Psycho", and then spying and then, you know, the gilded bedroom with everything so. And then he pulls back the covers, and what does he find? He doesn't find the poor cartoon horse head, he finds the grille of an old car, a classic car. I think it says, luxury has been put on notice or something like that, as the new Audi drives off. And I was so struck by that, because I thought, wow, the Mafia is so part of American culture and mythology that you don't even need the blood anymore, it's just ingrained, right? You know, it's just there. And so that next day, I sat down and I wrote a proposal to write an edited volume called "Mafia Movies: A Reader", and I contacted about 40 film studies people working in the U.S., U.K. and Italy and ask them to contribute chapters, because nothing existed that kind of critically assessed Italy's and America's Mafia. So, that was what originally drew me, you know, how's the Mafia understood in Italy, how is it understood in the U.S., and then what kinds of films are made about the Mafia based on what place it has in each culture?

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David Staley 19:33

And you've written other books on depictions of the Mafia, I believe?

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Dana Renga 19:36

Yeah, the reader is going to be out in its second edition, which I'm super excited about, in about two months, I just submitted my proofs this morning, actually, and it has all sorts of great new material. And then, my first book that I wrote was in 2013, called "Unfinished Business: Screening the Italian Mafia in the New Millennium", and that looked specifically at Italian movies made after 2000 that focused on women. And so, I looked at ten films that had women as protagonists, either as perpetrators or as victims or around the Mafia. And what I found, which led me to this new project, the TV project, was that unlike men, women don't get the good deal. They're killed off, sexual violence is incredibly common, there are clips from the narrative; even if they're focal, and if they have active roles in the Mafia, because in some Mafias, women can actually have quite active roles, their narrative doesn't have an arc, it just kind of ends. Frequently, violence against them, even if it's based on a historical figure, is invented. So...

D David Staley 20:36
Really?

D Dana Renga 20:36

In real life, there's this woman... this is one of the most fascinating stories to me, there's an anti-Mafia martyr named Placido Rizzotto, who was killed in 1948 in the town of Corleone, you know - "The Godfather" town. Indeed, in the same year that Michael Corleone was hiding out, after he did the double murder and had to hide out in Sicily. So you have two views of Corleone, one is glamorized with, you know, Apollonia, and the wedding and the nice music. But then, what really is going on when Placido is there is that it's just mayhem and horribleness and murder and dark. So, his girlfriend, Leah, who in real life was his girlfriend, but in the film, they create this really, really graphic, brutal rape. And when I teach this film, it's really complicated for undergrads, and I explain where this is where it is, and they don't have to watch it, we discuss it at length in graduate courses. But, I found it really interesting that this rape was invented, right, when it never really happened in real life. And it's just a way to kind of, I think, further punish or demonize women involved around the Mafia. It's a pattern that I saw in so many films, where men are redeemed at the end, women have no sort of space or no sort of kind of sense of closure or redemptive arc.

D David Staley 20:49
Of course.

D Dana Renga 20:50

So you began this interview by saying you've been watching television, with some glee, since you were seven years old, and you obviously like watching television. But, watching television as a fan, versus as a scholar, these are different processes. What's the difference between the kind of watching or viewing that you do as a scholar versus pleasure watching? That's a great question. I'm going to take it back a little bit to film and then I'll transition to television. So when I teach large general education classes here at Ohio State, every autumn I teach an Italian cinema class, it's called "Sex in Politics" We do a lot of auteur stuff, we also do - Auteur, so the classics of Italian cinema, like Fellini and Antonioni and De Sica and Rossellini. So, generally, white men who direct lots of films that create an idea of a national cinema. And so, we also do queer coming of age films and more recent immigration cinema. And that course, generally, and the Mafia movies course, which now I have about 207 students in it, the other one has about 200 students, and mostly enrolled students outside of the College of Arts and Sciences, tons of Engineering students and tons of Business students who are taking it for a GE general education course. And they're kind of interested in film, but they haven't really studied film as a medium, it's their one visual and performing arts GE and, and there's some skepticism at first about how do I watch film, what's the vocabulary, what do I do? And I was a Math major at UCLA, so.

D David Staley 22:25
Auteur...? Oh, interesting.

D Dana Renga 23:16
Yeah, so I was a Math major for two and a half years, and then I transitioned to Italian Studies because I loved it so much. And the math was great, but it really... everyone was kind of unhappy, and I just found my passion and my love in Italian. So what I do in the first day or two of these courses, we do these scene analyses, and I say, I was a Math major, and what I loved about film, and why I ended up doing a dissertation, and then PhD on cinema was that cinema, visual projects, you know, they're kind of like formulas. So if you're an Engineering major, or a Business major, and you're doing all of this complex problem solving, and you're looking for, you know, different kinds of patterns, or whatever, just think of film as any sort of other texts you'd use in one of your classes for your major, and then kind of watch and look for stuff. I look for stuff that's weird, stuff that seems out of place, stuff that might - why is that there, why did I see that again, well that's a really weird transition, why is there a cut there and a dissolve there, kind of thing. And so I found gradually, in my own kind of educational upbringing, when I was transitioning from a Math major to someone who really did film, that all the skills I learned about, kind of, problems and dealing with these complex problems really worked with film because I just looked for patterns. And it could be irregular patterns, or regular patterns or repetitions or something that didn't stand out. And taking that and broadening it out from one text to many texts to a corpus to, you know, and then bringing in other considerations outside of the text I found was a really cool system for studying something. And I think the same thing is true for TV, maybe even more so because I'm a binge watcher. So, if you binge watch something, or want to watch something for fun, and then I'm opening up my computer and writing down notes because I want to work on this product later, right? So, the problem is sometimes it spoils the fun.

D David Staley 25:01
I was going to say, can you watch TV for fun anymore?

D Dana Renga 25:04
Yeah, I watch everything. So I watch, even like Grey's Anatomy. And I watched that for fun and I don't look for patterns.

D David Staley 25:10
How do you turn that off, how do you... how does the scholar sort of disengage like that?

D Dana Renga 25:15
Part of that has to do with, I mean, the shows that really fascinate me are these kind of more

quality television programs like the ones I've been talking about. At the same time, in my book, I wrote about this - there's four different television networks or viewing platforms in Italy, and one of them does not really follow the same pattern as what I was talking about before, but does star a really good-looking perpetrator, is this five season television series called "Honor and Respect", "L'onore e il Rispetto". And it's really not very good, but I had to watch it. And it's five seasons, and in Italy episodes lasts like 180 minutes, so it takes a really long time to watch this thing. And I was bored out of my mind, and I was kind of watching it at the gym or on my phone, and then I realized it was a soap opera. And when I realized it was a soap opera, I became fascinated by it, because it reminded me of my grandma and all of those years of watching soap operas with her. And then, I was able to find the patterns that soap operas kind of play into; the long term expectation, the idea of no closure, women waiting, all these other things. And so, even though I didn't think I had to turn it off then because I was so bored with it, something clicked and I immediately became engaged, and I was so fascinated with watching the show. So, I don't know, maybe it's not possible to turn it off, which is fine.

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David Staley 25:26

Tell us what's next for your research.

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Dana Renga 25:53

More TV. Some of you listening might have seen a new HBO program that just came out in December called "My Brilliant Friend", and "My Brilliant Friend" is HBO's first ever show that's shot in subtitles. So, of course they have like Latinx programs that are specific for a certain market, but "My Brilliant Friend", they took this huge risk. It's about 1950s Naples and female friendship. I was obsessed with "My Brilliant Friend" when it came out, and I realized that one of the reasons why I was so fascinated by it is it's based on these novels by this uber, uber popular author named Elena Ferrante, who is a pseudonym because we don't really know who Ferrante is. Her novels have been translated internationally, has a huge fan base, and there's this question about, you know, wanting to make these actors look as quote unquote, "realistic as possible". And to me, when I saw the series, they looked exactly like I had imagined them to, and it brought up this question of casting again, and casting is not written about at all really, there aren't really any scholarly monographs about casting, which I find fascinating. There's a few, like two or three that I found; most are like how-to like if you're an actor, how do you learn or if you're a casting director, how do you pick the right...but, the casting is such a crucial part of the whole cinematic process, but it's an off screen experience, like the face of the face of the actor is just like out of view. And so, I'm going to write a larger project on casting, not just in Italy, I want to think towards U.S. productions as well, starting with "My Brilliant Friend". And, especially thinking about the question of... I think my book's going to be called "Authentic Stardom". How is stardom kind of created and produced off screen? So, not really looking at the products themselves, but all the stuff that is involved in creating the products, starting with casting.


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David Staley 28:23

Dana Renga. Thank you.

 Dana Renga 28:25

Thank you very much. It was wonderful talking with you.

 Eva Dale 28:27

Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.