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"So many traps to set": subversion and subversiveness in *Profit*[1]

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Profit, created by David Greenwalt and John McNamara, produced by Stephen J. Cannell and starring Adrian Pasdar as Jim Profit, was first aired on Fox Broadcasting Company in April 1996 and axed after just four episodes[2] (out of the eight originally filmed and scheduled). Probably one of the most controversial and category-defying television serials ever, it portrays Jim Profit, a ruthless and ambitious junior executive, whose hidden agenda is progressively unveiled as he climbs the corporate ladder of the multinational conglomerate Gracen & Gracen (G&G).

While throwing into sharp relief the shadowy recesses of corporate America, the series also distorts the dominant ideological and aesthetic patterns of traditional television series, as it develops a subversive discourse on American society. *Profit* mirrors the complex cultural currents and counter currents that run through American society, provocatively depicting such aspects as the workplace, family values and sexuality. *Profit* is probably one of the most tantalizing and riveting dramas in television's recent history, not only on account of the themes it discusses, but because of its reversal of traditional televisual codes, which contributes to the viewer's entrapment in a complex and elaborate narrative structure.

This paper will, therefore, discuss the narratological implications of the show's Chinese box narrative pattern, highlighting the way in which it subverts the traditional textual structures of television series. I will then examine the camera's discourse which, in conveying an impression of fragmentation, imparts a puzzle-like

dimension to the narrative overall. Finally, I shall study how characterization reveals and subverts mainstream ideological and sociological stereotypes.

I. The Chinese box narrative pattern

The show's narrative arcs are subtly intricate and intertwined; they function like a Rube Goldberg mousetrap,[3] as John McNamara remarks:

> These [arcs] were all carefully plotted out, and then when you changed one little thing in episode 1 [...] it affected five things in episode 3, 6 and 7.[4]

Consequently, the narrative's complex *modus operandi* resembles that of the domino effect which greatly contributes to hooking the reader-viewers[5] by concentrating their attention not so much on what happens, but on how it happens. One of the major features of this extremely complex narrative pattern is the Chinese-box structure, i.e. stories within stories, providing the reader-viewer with a multilayered text, creating textual heterarchy, disrupting the reader-viewer's linear reading, and establishing a multiple diegesis pattern. The different settings of the show—Profit's flat and the G&G headquarters—seem to reduplicate the Chinese-box structure. The Chinese-box-like construction of Jim Profit's posh apartment conveys the impression that the rooms have the ability to replicate themselves in ever-diminishing versions, in which each receptacle contains a smaller one: the flat contains the sitting room which contains the secret room which, in turn, contains the cardboard box in which the reader-viewers are astonished to see a naked Jim Profit curled up in a foetal position at night. In fact, Profit's secret lair is the luxurious version of the Gracen & Gracen cardboard box he grew up in (as an abused child), while looking at television through the hole cut out of the side of the box.[6]

This opening onto the world may well be symbolized by the aquarium which also functions as a kind of a window through which we can see Jim Profit's living room and which awakens the curiosity of the muckraker reporter Ms Kelly Hunt, in the penultimate episode of the series, "Security". This is clearly illustrated in the segment in which Jim and Kelly kiss in his living room. The camera films the scene from the secret lair and through the aquarium. Then, as the camera moves back slowly, it progressively uncovers the G&G box Jim sleeps in at night, thus emphasizing the Chinese-box structure of the apartment.

This *mise en abyme* effect induced by the setting is also emphasized by the scenes in which Jim Profit is seen sitting in the nude, in the hidden lair, behind his computer. During these scenes, the reader-viewers find themselves immersed in a virtual reconstruction of the fictional world of the show, on Jim's computer screen. As the camera moves into the virtual world of Gracen & Gracen's virtual premises,

the double glass doors swing open and the camera moves towards a virtual office. As the door opens, one is greeted by the avatar of the character whose office the reader-viewer and Profit have entered. The camera then moves on towards the virtual desk located in the office and, as Jim clicks on the desk, a virtual set of drawers appears. Profit then clicks on the drawer containing the information he wishes to retrieve.

As the narrative unwinds we clearly notice how the main framework, provided by the headquarters of G&G, is also structured like a Chinese box. Economist and statistician David Lane quotes Herbert Simon's definition of hierarchy in the corporate world. Simon's definition insists on the complexity of such structures, using the Chinese-box metaphor to describe them:

> In application to the architecture of complex systems, "hierarchy" simply means a set of Chinese boxes of a particular kind. A set of Chinese boxes usually consists of a box enclosing a second box, which, in turn, encloses a third [...]. The Chinese boxes called "hierarchies" are a variant of that pattern. Opening any given box in a hierarchy discloses not just one new box within, but a whole small set of boxes; and opening any one of these component boxes discloses a new set in turn.[7]

In the pilot, at the end of the first board meeting, a wall panel in the board room slides open onto another office, in which Japanese executives are waiting for a meeting with Chaz Gracen. In the episode "Healing", the offices of the executive staff clearly mirror this Chinese-box structure: the reader-viewer can see all the offices separated by glass walls, doors opening and closing, and characters entering or leaving this space, in a perfect illustration of Linda Aronson's argument that the setting must allow for "new stories to 'walk in the door'".[8] The Chinese-box structure is also made obvious in the pilot. The open-space office where the lower-ranked personnel work contains cubicle after cubicle which all communicate and can be reached through a labyrinthine corridor.

The Chinese-box pattern also informs the main narrative framework, which contains a number of stories, linking the characters' pasts with the present. When, for instance, a character decides to probe into another character's past, his or her own past and private space will open up in turn. Let us examine the way in which two of the main characters, Jim Profit and Joanne Meltzer, interact during the series.

When Joanne Meltzer and Jack Walters delve into Jim's mysterious past in the pilot and in the episode "Hero", they discover the existence of his incestuous and promiscuous (step) mother, Bobby Stokowski. This, in turn, leads them to find out that Jim had his father committed to a hospital under a false identity, the reasons for which emerge as they uncover the secret of Jim's abused childhood. While they are investigating Jim's origins, Jim is busy setting up a master plan which will eventually send Jack behind bars and allow him to invade Jack's privacy and befriend his wife. Jim also makes it clear to Joanne that he is aware that she, too, has a repressed and hidden past:

> Jim: Why, I remind you of someone? Your sister? You know I hear she's doing really well at the [mental] institution. They're gonna let her out soon. You must have mixed feelings after what she did to you. Joanne, one thing we have to remember is to forgive. You can't run from your past. And you can't run from yourself.

Their confrontation reaches a climax during the fourth episode, "Healing", when Jim blackmails Joanne's psychiatrist Dr Grant, having found out that the latter sleeps

with his female patients. Using Dr Grant, Jim enters Joanne's mind while she is under hypnosis:

> Dr Grant: You're seven years old, Joanne. It's June 23rd. You're playing in the backyard, remember!

During this scene, the reader-viewer learns that Joanne discovered her father hanging in the basement of their house at the age of seven. After a while; Dr Grant, who fears Joanne may suffer a total collapse, reluctantly lets Jim Profit take control and continue questioning her:

> Jim: So you take her [Joanne's doll] downstairs into the basement where the soda pop is kept. Because it's cool and dark. Isn't it nice down there?
> [...]
> Joanne: I hear a noise.
> Jim: What kind of noise?
> Joanne: Like hiha, hiha, like a rocking chair.
> Jim: So you move towards this noise. And what do you see?
> Joanne: My daddy, he's ...
> Jim: Look at your daddy, Joanne, what's he doing?
> [Joanne looks puzzled]
> Joanne: He's hanging from a rope, that's wrapped around a pipe, that's making that noise. His head's all... bent. Ohhhhh, ohhh. Ohh daddy.
> [She starts crying, looks horrified, and takes Jim's hand.]

The psychoanalytical dimension of this segment is enhanced by the way in which Joanne proceeds through her repressed thoughts, moving from the backyard down into the dark basement of her house where she sees her father hanging. During this almost spectatorial process, through which Joanne unlocks the door of her hidden past, the Chinese-box *motif* re-surfaces again.

The authors, John McNamara and David Greenwalt, actually parody the *motif* in the episode entitled "Chinese Box". At its close, we see Dr Jeremy Batewell being abducted by the workers of Wong Industries and tied to a chair which is placed in a wooden box. The box is then closed and picked up by a fork-lift truck that places it

into a ship container. This container is, in turn, going to be lifted onto a ship presumably bound for China, which is obviously to be viewed here as the larger Chinese-box container.

II. The reversal of traditional televisual codes

At the beginning of each episode, during the recap, "[p]reviously on *Profit*", Jim Profit speaks directly through the camera to the audience, breaking the fourth wall and disrupting the boundary between the viewer-reader's world and the world of fiction. This device had been used with great effectiveness in the English mini-series *House of Cards*, starring Ian Richardson and first broadcasted in November 1990 on BBC television. The main character, scheming Chief Whip Francis Urquhart, also known as F.U., regularly looks straight into the camera in a direct address to the viewers. There is, in both shows, an obvious reference to William Shakespeare's arch-villain *Richard III*. Richard regularly addresses himself to the audience in asides and soliloquies, keeping them apprised of his Machiavellian plots. While this use of direct address, combined with the voice-over technique, is a narrative ploy, its main purpose was to create a form of highly disturbing intimacy between the audience and the villain.[9]

Although intensely involving, Urquhart's address has a theatrical resonance to it and keeps the audience at a "moral" distance, conveying the impression that the reader-viewer acts as the character's conscience. This is made clear after F.U. murders a main character, and tells the reader-viewer "you know that is over", while arguing that the murder was necessary. As opposed to this, Profit breaks the fourth

wall in a far more insidious way, as "he lets [the viewer] in".[10] This induces a greater degree of personal involvement for the reader-viewer. Profit wants "to put [the viewers] in his point of view",[11] plunging them into a moral quandary as they glimpse at the nature of evil which is innate in all human beings. Consequently, Profit may well be viewed as the viewer's depraved double, as Profit himself notes in "Security", "[w]e all seek that other, a soul mate. The shadow-self within which we can merge seamlessly".

The fact that viewers project themselves into characters in a television series is not, in itself, new. The Belgian media theoretician, Jean-Marie Piemme, cogently argues, in his study on the ideological aspect of television, *La Propagande inavouée* (1975), that it is almost impossible to watch a television series without a certain degree of personal involvement:

> To watch a serial is much more than seeing it: it is also involving oneself in it, letting oneself be held in suspense sharing the feelings of the characters, discussing their psychological motivations and their conduct, deciding whether they are right or wrong, in other words living "their world".[12]

This aspect is corroborated by John Fiske, who claims that "[t]elevision viewing is more interactive than [...] cinema spectating". [13] Television is, according to him, characterized by a far more open text than the closed narratives that are characteristic of films.

What is, therefore, subversive in *Profit* is not so much its enhancement of illusion by reducing the distance between the reader-viewer and the character so that the reader-viewer may eventually "imagine the characters as 'real people'";[14] its subversiveness lies in the way in which it *erases* the distance between the reader-viewer and the main character, Jim Profit. Although the reader-viewers are well aware of the fictitious nature of the protagonist, they are unavoidably attracted by Jim Profit's darkness which brings them to reflect upon themselves, in an almost psychoanalytical way, as Jim explores the recesses of his own dark side. As Adrian Pasdar notes, "[h]e was a mirror to people's worst inclinations".[15]

The disruption of the reader-viewer's "spectatorial privelege"[16] is clearly delineated when the camera moves down onto Jim Profit, then moves close up onto him in a segment of "Healing". The camera puts the viewers into the position of the fictional character, denying them superiority and suggesting they have lost their omniscient perspective.

This effect is driven home by Profit's voice-over: "We've definitely underestimated Pete". The pronoun "we" is used to include the viewer into the fictional realm of the character, whereas the use of the pronoun "you" by F. U., in *House of Cards,* deliberately creates a distance between the fictional character and the reader-viewers.[17]

This disruption between the fictional realm and the real world is enhanced by a recurrent mirror *motif*. In the opening scene of the second episode, "Hero", while Jim is getting dressed, he addresses the reader-viewers while looking directly at them in the mirror. This specular image creates an optical interference with the reader-viewer's world, breaking the fourth wall once more and disrupting again the diegetic space. The mirror may be viewed here as the metaphorization of the Other's gaze[18] which, as Michel Thévoz notes, corresponds to the reversal of the subject and his mirror image,[19] thus inducing a sense of confusion between the fictional character and the reader-viewer, trapping the latter into the narrative, as the boundaries of the diegetic world intersect with the "real" world. This is only one of a number of mirror

scenes that question and threaten the representation of the self by disorientating the reader-viewer.[20]

Indeed, on a number of occasions, Jim Profit is filmed as an onlooker. In "Healing", he is seen peering into the psychiatrist's practice as he is standing at the window located in the flat opposite.

As the camera slowly moves back, we can distinguish the window frame of the flat in which Profit is standing as well as the window to Dr Grant's practice. The camera creates a sense of perspective as it moves back while using a slight high angle shot, conveying the impression that Profit wields control over the characters of Joanne and Dr Grant, like a puppeteer.

But, it is probably in the final episode, "Forgiveness", that this device is the most relevant. At the beginning of the episode, Jim is filmed outside Pete Gracen's house peering through the window. The importance of this scene lies in its metaphorical dimension as Jim is still viewed, at the beginning of the episode, as an outsider to the Gracen family. In the closing scene, we are inside Chaz Gracen's house where a party is on and Chaz is proposing a toast:

> Chaz: Excuse me, excuse me everyone, excuse me. I have a toast to make, well actually three. Everyone has a drink? To the family, to the company, and to Jim, who helped us keep together.

Chaz has clearly accepted Jim as a member of the Gracen family. This acceptance is conveyed by the camera's following Jim into Chaz's library, where he is filmed contemplating a portrait supposedly of Charles Gracen, the founder of Gracen & Gracen and father of Chaz. The camera then fades to the exterior of Chaz's house and, as it moves away from the house, we can see on the front column at the entrance gate of the property a "Gracen" plate, clearly indicating that Jim is now part of the Gracen family. Profit's final voice-over thus echoes Chaz's words:

> Jim: When the smoke clears and you get down to it, only three things matter, your faith, your fortitude and your family.

This segment clearly gives a sense of circularity not only to the final episode but to the entire series itself, as Jim Profit has become, at last, part of the "family company".

Another trick of the camera is to focus on details to convey a puzzle-like dimension to the narrative since each highlighted object plays a part in defining the characters' personalities. Jean Baudrillard insists, in *The System of Objects* (1968), on the importance of surroundings in our modern societies: "The entire modern environment is [...] transposed onto the level of a sign system",[21] emphasizing the importance of objects as material signifiers that provide clues for character reading: "Man is thus bound to the objects around him by the same visceral intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, that binds him to the organs of his own body". [22] I would, therefore, like to consider a few examples which contribute to helping the reader-viewer's deciphering of the main characters.

Let us backtrack and return to the aquarium. As I have previously suggested, we might view the aquarium as the equivalent of the opening in the cardboard box Profit grew up in. But it can also be viewed as a metaphor of Jim Profit's seclusion from the surrounding world.

When underlining the paradoxical nature of glass, Jean Baudrillard noted:

> Glass facilitates faster communication between inside and outside, yet at the same time it sets up an invisible but material caesura which prevents such communication from becoming a real opening onto the world.[23]

Another illustration of this desire to avoid contact with the world is underscored by the fact that Jim Profit always wears gloves when outdoors. This not only enables him to leave no fingerprints behind, but also prevents him from catching germs. As Adrian Pasdar notes, "you need a buffering between you and the world you're dealing with",[24] a remark which highlights Profit's desire to keep the outer world at bay.

The authors also add a cultural and literary dimension to the show by focusing on *books*. In the very opening sequence of the pilot, the camera focuses on one of the walls in the living room, which is entirely devoted to a bookshelf.

The camera holds, for a beat, a number of these books: Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* which may be seen as rather ironical if we consider the economic environment in which our hero evolves. There is also a book entitled *Microeconomics*, and a work copy of *Eat Healthy, Live Young*, as well as the sixth volume of Winston S. Churchill's *History of the Second World War, Triumph and Tragedy*. The presence of books in this type of series is rather unusual, but they clearly indicate Profit's bookish knowledge, indicating that besides being a ruthless and clever businessman, he is also a well read character, which was obviously not the case of someone like J.R. Ewing. The more recent television series seem to have incorporated this cultural element in their narrative structure. The main character of *CSI*, Gil Grissom, is regularly heard quoting Shakespeare and other authors such as Henry James. As for *Criminal Minds*, it ends with a literary quotation summing up the moral message of the episode.

Because the television set played an essential role in Jim Profit's upbringing, it is turned into one of the paradigmatic objects of the show. Television practically has the same effect on Profit as kryptonite on Superman. This subtextual reference may be explained by the fact that both authors worked on *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. During the series, there are at least three occurrences when Profit has a phobic reaction to television. In the pilot, as Jim and Bobby enter her bedroom, Bobby goes to switch on the TV. While Jim is asking her how she found him after all those years, he seems very ill at ease as he tries to keep his eyes off the TV screen. Bobby notices and quips:

> Oh yeah, you never did like TV much, did you? Of course who can blame you after what happened and all. If you don't like it turn it off, it won't bite ya.

Bobby's words clearly underline the almost physical effect television has on Profit. Another instance of his discomfort occurs later on in the same episode, while he is waiting for a lift in the hall of G&G. The TV set behind him is blaring, and we can see him getting tense and jittery as he repeatedly presses the lift button to escape the sound. This is one of the very rare scenes when we see him losing his composure. His aversion to TV is even more obvious when he enters Bobby's suite at the Castle Mar Hotel in the episode "Sykes". Bobby is in bed watching television, and Jim, who was about to enter her bedroom, suddenly stops, steps back slightly and remains on the threshold, seemingly puzzled by the TV. Even when using it as a means of trapping Ms Kelly Hunt in "Security", the way in which he shows his portable TV to her clearly illustrates his unease with the object as such:

> Jim Profit: Do you like TV?
> [He pulls a portable TV from his pocket]
> Kelly Hunt: What?
> Jim Profit: TV. Television**.** Me personally, I don't. But I do agree there are times when it can be awfully educational. Ah! There we go. A command performance just for you!

Furthermore, each time Jim is confronted with TV, there is a quiz show on.[25] According to John McNamara, *Profit* is mainly "a show about TV itself".[26] The television *motif* can therefore be seen as an oblique reference, not only to the pervasiveness of television culture, but also as a form of criticism of TV quiz and game shows that have a very low cultural status. Both producers insist on the fact that they designed *Profit* for the "literate viewer".[27] Thus, *Profit* may well be viewed as a comment on television's limitations, as John McNamara notes: "Both David and I were a little unimpressed by what was going on, on television".[28] Profit's aversion for television could be read as a rejection of contemporary television or of what

television has become. Having been brought up and bred by television as a child, Jim Profit, now an adult, may well be seen as the authors' desire to bring television into a new age in which the viewer would not be merely a passive viewer but a more active one.

However, television may also be a means of reflecting Bobby's character. John Fiske has convincingly pointed out how money and sex are adroitly mingled in game shows or quiz shows:

> Quiz shows, like advertising, are undoubtedly part of commodity capitalism, and use many of the similar cultural strategies. For instance, glamorous models are used to display the prizes and thus associate commodities with sexuality, thereby linking buying with sexual desire and satisfaction. Linking the domain of sexuality with that of economics is commonplace in our society.[29]

Thus, the television cue serves as a "metonymic pointer"[30] that reflects Bobby's character. She is clearly portrayed as someone who is attracted to money and sex. Overall, then, the way the camera focuses on certain objects contributes to the complexity of the show's narrative structure, as the reader-viewer has to read the symbolic subtext so as to tease out the threads of its complex web.

III. The subversion of mainstream ideological stereotypes

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, TV series came to portray more psychologically complex characters, as opposed to the one-dimensional ones of the 1970s and the 1980s. As Lichter and Rothman note:

> The prevalence of ambiguous double-edged characters in the current prime-time schedule represents a distinct departure from the more clear-cut portrayals that we found in earlier seasons.[31]

The characters of Jim Profit and his (step) mother Bobby Stokowski are perfect illustrations of the various forms of the show's subversiveness. The characters manipulate a number of sociological stereotypes to entrap, not only the reader-viewer, but the other characters. Pete Gracen, for instance, uses his supposed

drinking problem as a ploy to take control of G&G and take over his brother's job as C.E.O. It is of interest to point out that when Jim Profit is trapped by other characters, the reader-viewer is trapped simultaneously. Thus, the reader-viewer is once more deprived of his omniscient position.

The eponymous character owes his name to the notions of profit and loss, which clearly links him to the world of corporate finance. But it is also a reference to Mel Profitt, the character played by Kevin Spacey in the second arc of *Wiseguy* (1987-1990), a psychopath who entertained an incestuous relationship with his sister. Jim Profit's traumatic upbringing was based on a true story described by Robert K. Ressler in his non-fiction book on serial killers and psychopaths, *Whoever Fights Monsters* (1992):

> The abuse that the children endured was both physical and mental. Society has understood somewhat that physical abuse is a precursor to violence, but the emotional component may be as important. One woman propped her infant son in a cardboard box in front of the television set, and left for work; later, she'd put him in a playpen, toss in some food, and let the TV set be the baby-sitter until she came home again.[32]

To think of Profit as a psychopath is, I believe, debatable. Profit is mainly "an environmentalist"[33] in a hostile corporate world; he only "kills" when absolutely necessary and, while doing so, he shows no particular sign of pleasure.

According to the authors, the box was an essential element of the plot[34] as it gives indications as to the complexity of Jim Profit's psychological profile and his motivations. As character Jack Walters remarks in the following dialogue:

> Joanne: So Profit didn't choose G&G by coincidence.
>
> Jack: No, just to survive that upbringing. He had to create this fantasy family. What did he see on TV? What did he hear his father talking about? What was on the box? G&G, a family company.

The fact that Profit "was ignored"[35] and denied the most basic of nurturing during his childhood explains why he has turned into a sociopath, yet one not

completely devoid of human feelings, as the scene following his father's murder attests. As he looks back on his father, who lies dead in his wheelchair, he feels a tear in his eye and looks at it with great astonishment. David Greenwalt points to the fact that, in this segment, Profit sees himself as both human and not human, which explains why he "will always be outside of society and mores".[36]

While the series pictures the harshness of the business world, it does not, however, formulate any deep-rooted criticism against capitalism.[37] In fact, contrary to the usual way in which the corporate world is portrayed on television, John McNamara insists that the series' "views of corporations was not a negative one".[38] The authors of *Profit* thus subvert the way Hollywood (*Wall Street*...) and television (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*...) traditionally picture the sordid world of big business in which cutthroat deals and Machiavellian manoeuvres take place, and in which businessmen are portrayed as bad guys: as Lichter and Rothman note, "television merely reflect[ed] a long-standing antipathy toward business by all forms of popular art".[39] *Profit*, conversely, conveys a rather realistic picture of the corporate world: for Jim Profit, "understanding the basic nature of business" means "adapt, or pay the price".

Another subversive aspect of the show lies in Profit's sexual life. Although in the world of *Profit* "sex is the means to power [...] and control",[40] one has to keep in mind the American social and cultural context in which "puritanical shame [is] attached to sexuality".[41] Although the presence of sex has become pervasive on television nowadays, it was not quite the case in 1996. Profit's incestuous relation with his (step) mother who, in the original script, was to be his mother,[42] was the reason CBS rejected the show. But this eventually turned out to be the most stunning aspect of the series. Moreover, sexuality is depicted in an extremely graphic manner, which is reinforced by the bawdiness of the dialogues:

> Bobby: You know, ever since you were a little kid, there's this real snooty sound you got in your voice which made me just want to grab a belt, yank your breeches down, and beat your ass to hamburger. So what do you say?
> [She grabs his belt off his pants]
> [Episode "Healing"]

Bobby: [...] Hey, you got time for a quickie?
[Jim looks at his watch]
Jim: Mmmh.
[He tries to go, she holds him by his tie.]
Bobby: Somebody's gonna get a spanking. Nice and hard.
[Episode "Cupid"]

In fact, the scene in the pilot when they kiss in Jim's office shocked the audience so much, that, within the half hour, the Nielsen ratings showed a fall from approximately 8 million viewers to about 5 million, corroborating Lichter and Rothman's remark: "Audience response doesn't create new shows, it only kills existing ones".[43] American viewers were not quite ready for such material, despite the critical acclaim the series received.

The taboo of incest had been alluded to, though obliquely, in *House of Cards*. As Francis Urquhart and Mattie Storin are having an affair, she calls him daddy ("I want to call you daddy")[44]. Fiction and reality collide at times: Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was recently involved in a sex scandal with a young woman named Noemi Letizia who claims to "call him Daddy".[45]

Jim Profit's affair with Kelly Hunt in "Security" reveals another aspect of Profit's sexuality which verges on sadomasochism and fetishism.[46] After having had sex in the lift at Gracen & Gracen's, Jim is later seen sitting behind his desk with her pantyhose in his hand, smelling it before putting it away in his drawer. This actual scene was partly censored as Jim is not actually seen smelling Kelly's pantyhose. The authors shot this scene so as to distract the *Standards and Practices*'s attention from other subversive elements of the show.[47] As John McNamara notes, "[t]he intent was to cut that scene so as to keep the sex scene in the elevator". The authors were thus not only snaring the audience in lurid fascination but also outwitting the censors in the editing of each episode.[48]

Bobby Stokowski, Jim Profit's "stepmonster" (as she is called in "Security"), embodies the traditional stereotypes of the white Southerner: as soon as she speaks, her Southern drawl immediately identifies her. She epitomizes all the aspects of the deviant Southerner, as a former prostitute, a drug addict, and a person of questionable morality. Lewis M. Killian notes, in his compelling sociological study on the Southerners, that: "There was a widespread belief that the moral standards of the southern migrants were equally low".[49]

Bobby is promiscuous, to say the least, as she is seen sleeping with a different man in approximately every episode, while also sleeping regularly with her (step) son. Incest is another of the negative stereotypes that characterizes the white Southerner:

> Another type of behaviour sometimes attributed to the white southern minority was still regarded as typical in 1956, according to James Maxwell. This is incest. In his article in The Reporter Maxwell quoted a police officer who said: "Incest is another matter which a lot of mountaineers see differently than we do. They usually come from small, isolated communities where there's a considerable amount of in breeding anyway, and they can't see why it's any business of the police what they do with their sex life[50].

In addition to all this, Bobby is having an affair with both Chaz Gracen and his wife, Constance. Bobby's lesbian relation with Constance Gracen obviously posed a

problem to the censors. Both authors underline TV's discomfort with the question of female homosexuality: it had, until then, mainly focused on the male aspect of homosexuality.[51] Thus, *Profit* was, once more, ahead of its time, as the question of female homosexuality seemed, at the time, to remain a taboo on television.

In the penultimate episode, both women are seen in bed, presumably after sex, barely touching and not kissing. As a matter of fact, they are never seen kissing[52] and, when they are about to kiss, Bobby always finds some excuse not to. The way both characters are filmed when they are about to kiss is interesting. Usually, the back of one partner's head blocks the reader-viewer from seeing the actual kiss. This technique was regularly used to prevent the viewers from seeing a same-sex kiss. The authors emphasize the fact that they deliberately chose "the angle-of-choice used for homosexual kisses".[53] Moreover, the shots were filmed very slowly so as to facilitate fade outs and cuts if ever the censors wanted the scene cut. However, the accumulation of these shots, Bobby's frequent excuses and the way in which the camera cuts away from the two characters seem to attract the reader-viewer's attention, as if the authors wanted to unveil the ideological codes they had to comply with.

Same-sex kisses were later given full screen visibility in *Ally McBeal*, when Ling Woo and Ally go on a date and kiss during the third season of the show. The kiss was shot in profile, locked lips clearly visible, and was described by Chisun Lee in *The Village Voice* as a "same-sex lip-lock".[54] Meanwhile, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* also broached the theme of lesbianism. And with Showtime's recent series *The L Word*, the topic seems, at last, to have entered mainstream culture.

To conclude, the intricacy of the narrative pattern and the way in which the producers subverted standard televisual codes, combined with the subversiveness of the themes disrupting societal norms, clearly contributed to the show's great originality.[55] Producer Stephen J. Cannell claims that "[t]here was nothing like it on television"[56] and, perhaps because it was ahead of its time, it was a commercial failure. Although *Profit* paved the way for a new type of television series, the average viewer was certainly not ready for the show's "*wry wit*"[57] and its subversiveness. As

Lisa Zane notes, "It credited the audience with a lot of intelligence".[58] In fact, the authors and the producer had perhaps expected *too much* of it. Hence, like Shakespeare's arch-villain, *Profit* was:

> Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before [its] time
> Into this breathing world scarce half made up –
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark[ed] at [it].
>
> *Richard III*, Act I, scene 1, 19-23

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Filmography

House of Cards Trilogy (*House of Cards*, 1990; *To Play the King*, 1993; *The Final Cut*, 1995), written by Michael Dobbs, screenplay by Andrew Davies, directors Paul Seed and Mike Vardy, producer Ken Riddington, BBC Warner, 2003.

Profit (1995), written by David Greenwalt and John McNamara, produced by Stephen J. Cannell, New World International, Free Dolphin Entertainment, Paramount Pictures, 2005.

NOTES

[1] I am grateful to my friends Aurée and Laurent who introduced me to *Profit*. I would also like to thank Sarah Hatchuel and Monica Michlin for their help and remarks which were extremely useful. The term "subversion" is to be understood as the way in which the authors

of *Profit* overthrew the formulaic narrative structure of television series. As for the term "subversiveness", it describes the way in which the authors distorted a number of traditional themes (the business world, family...) and sociological stereotypes, highlighting the contradictions which are inherent to American society.

[2] The four last episodes were never aired in the U.S. The unaired episodes were shown for the first time on the Trio cable network in 2002. "Pilot" (parts 1 and 2), "Hero", "Sykes", "Healing", "Cupid", "Chinese Box", "Security" and "Forgiveness".

[3] See David Greenwalt in *Greed Kills,* Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2005. This documentary contains interviews of the authors, actors and producer of *Profit*.

[4] John McNamara in *Greed Kills*.

[5] Television being a popular medium, it requires what Umberto Eco calls an "open" text, which is the reason why I opted for the term "reader-viewer". "Un texte, tel qu'il apparaît dans sa surface (ou manifestation) linguistique, représente une chaîne d'artifices expressifs qui doivent être actualisés par le destinataire", Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. Le rôle du lecteur*, p. 61.

[6] He was brought up by his abusive father in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in a cardboard box which bore the G&G logo. Jim spent his days watching television through the hole cut out of the side of the box while his father would throw him food.

[7] David Lane, p. 84.

[8] Linda Aronson, p. 3. See also David Greenwalt: "There's a lot of people coming in and out of doors" in *Greed Kills*.

[9] This started to be used in the 1980s notably in *Magnum P.I.* (1980-1988), in which the characters of Thomas Magnum and Jonathan Higgins would often "break the fourth wall" by "locking eyes" with the audience. Since *Profit*, the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) has used the same device, as the young hero Malcolm regularly addresses the viewer during the show. See Umberto Eco, *La Guerre du faux*, notably the chapter entitled "TV : la transparence perdue", p. 196-220: "Le cas de celui qui regarde la caméra est bien différent. En regardant le spectateur droit dans les yeux, celui-ci le prévient, implicitement, qu'il y a quelque chose de 'vrai' dans le rapport qui s'instaure entre eux, indépendamment du fait qu'il donne des informations ou qu'il ne raconte qu'une histoire fictive. On dit au spectateur: 'Je ne suis pas un personnage imaginaire, je suis vraiment là et c'est à vous vraiment que je parle.'" (p. 202).

[10] John McNamara.

[11] David Greenwalt.

[12] English translation in Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas. Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 28. "Regarder un Feuilleton, c'est bien plus que le voir : c'est encore s'y impliquer, se laisser prendre au suspens, partager les sentiments des personnages, discuter de leurs motivations psychologiques et de leurs conduites, leur donner tort ou raison, en un mot vivre leur 'monde'", Jean-Marie Piemme, *La Propagande inavouée*, p. 114.

[13] John Fiske, p. 147.

[14] Ien Ang, p. 30.

[15] Adrian Pasdar in *Greed Kills*.

[16] John Fiske, p. 25.

[17] *House of Cards*, "To Play the King" (1993), episode 2.

[18] "métaphorisation du regard de l'Autre" in Michel Thévoz, p. 18.

[19] "correspond au renversement du sujet et de son reflet spéculaire", *ibid.*, p. 18.

[20] See Marc Vernet, chapter 2 "Regard à la camera". See also Sabine Melchior-Bonnet: in her comprehensive study, S. Melchior-Bonnet notes that the mirror creates a fictional otherness ("altérité fictive", p. 249).

[21] Jean Baudrillard, p. 40.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[24] Adrian Pasdar in *Greed Kills*.
[25] For instance, the show *Caesar's Challenge* is on in the pilot.
[26] Quoted by Kinney Littlefield.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] John McNamara in *Greed Kills*.
[29] John Fiske, p. 272.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
[31] S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter and Stanley Rothman, p. 71.
[32] Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shachtman, Chapter 4 "Childhoods of Violence", p. 84.
[33] John McNamara.
[34] "The box is such an important image in the show", David Greenwalt.
[35] John McNamara.
[36] David Greenwalt.
[37] "I think corporations are good. I think capitalism is great", David Greenwalt, *Greed Kills*.
[38] John McNamara.
[39] S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter and Stanley Rothman, p. 212-213.
[40] David Greenwalt, *Special Profit*, produced by Canal Jimmy and Alain Carrazé, 1999.
[41] John McNamara, *ibid*.
[42] "[She] was his mother, not his stepmother", John McNamara.
[43] S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter and Stanley Rothman, p. 36.
[44] *House of Cards*, episode 3.
[45] Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times*.
[46] This could also be said of his sexual relationship with his (step) mother.
[47] In the United States, *Standards and Practices* is the name given to the department at a television network which is responsible for the moral, ethical, and legal implications of the programs that the network airs.
[48] Adrian Pasdar notes: "That was fantastic, because they focused all their energy and attention on that one part of the episode, so we were able to slip a couple of other things through the cracks", in *Greed Kills*.
[49] Lewis M. Killian, p. 107. See also John Fiske: the reader-viewer "would read the exaggerated southern accent as sexual playfulness", p. 92.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 108.
[51] In *Dynasty*, Alexis and Carrington's son was portrayed as psychologically imbalanced; as for *Love, Sidney* (NBC-1981), it was the first series built around a homosexual hero.
[52] Both women kiss very briefly in "Security".
[53] Larry Gross, p. 93. See in particular chapter 5: "Television Takes Over", p. 81-93.
[54] Chisun Lee.
[55] As Martin Winckler remarks in *Les miroirs de la vie. Histoire des séries américaines*, *Profit* belongs to one of those "œuvres 'inclassables", p.19.
[56] Stephen J. Cannell in *Greed Kills*.
[57] Ginia Bellafante.
[58] Lisa Zane in *Greed Kills*.