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The Bureau and the Realism of Spy Fiction

Pauline Blistène

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of realism in relationship to contemporary serial fiction. Drawing on *The Bureau* (Canal+, 2015–2020), it argues that spy TV series are “realistic” not because they correspond to reality but because of their impact on reality. It begins by giving an overview of the many ways in which “realism,” in the ordinary sense of a resemblance with reality, served as the working framework for *The Bureau*’s team. It then identifies three distinct types of realisms in the series. The first is a “fictional realism,” namely the ability of *The Bureau* to conform to the aesthetic and narrative conventions of realistic fictions. The second type of realism, which I qualify as “ordinary,” refers to the possibilities offered by the show’s aesthetics and the enmeshment of *The Bureau* with viewers’ ordinary experience. The third type of “performative realism” refers to the series’ impact on shared representations and reality. By providing a common language about the secret activities of the state, *The Bureau* has gone from being a framed version of reality to being one of the defining frameworks through which state secrecy is experienced both individually and collectively, by insiders and the public at large.

Keywords: [TV series](#); [fiction](#); [secrecy](#); [secret intelligence](#); [espionage](#); [democracy](#); [The Bureau](#)

Introduction

Contemporary media culture can hardly be reduced to a single paradigm, but the “pseudo-factual” regime, in the form of a hybridization between factual and imaginative elements, constitutes one of the privileged configurations of contemporary fiction.⁽¹⁾ The question is not new, but it is particularly acute when it comes to the genre of espionage. Whether in their

ability to fit into a certain state of the world, or to refer to reality through internal criteria or contextual elements, spy fictions^[5] are especially prone to an enmeshment of imagination and references to the world since the appearance of the genre at the beginning of the twentieth century.^[6] This indeterminacy, the fact that espionage fictions constantly play on both sides – that of factuality and fictionality – gives them an equivocal epistemic and ontological status. They are assigned all sorts of vices or virtues in the field of knowledge, and they exist *in* and have effects *on* the empirical world, despite their fictional nature.

This ambivalence of spy fiction has already been noted by scholars, who have all underlined the importance of cultural artefacts in structuring collective representations of secret intelligence.^[6] The main reason they give to account for this power of fiction on opinion is the lack of information regarding actual intelligence activities, a shortage that is somehow naturally offset by the extraordinary amount of spy fiction available to the public. While some researchers have anchored their analyses in the preservation of a border between the realm of facts and the realm of fiction – a border that does not exclude, in some cases, a certain porosity between fact and fiction^[6] – others have proposed to emancipate themselves from such a frontier under the influence of postmodernism, seeing in this emancipation the promise of an intellectual and ideological deliverance.^[6]

The aim of this article is to propose an alternative to these approaches, by connecting the problem of spy fiction to contemporary philosophical debates regarding realism,^[7] theories of fiction and TV series studies. The realism of spy fiction that I defend here is based on the capacity of spy fictions to fix shared representations instead of offering a possible conformity of spy fiction to true statements or empirical reality.^[8] Such a conception moves away from the common considerations of realism, where only the correspondence with reality or presumably true (or perceived as true) statements matter, to replace them with an approach that puts individual and collective agency back at the heart of the analysis. If fictional artefacts are often seen as a framed version of reality, an idea that incidentally founds the necessity to analyse them in order to reveal the different messages they convey, cultural artefacts are also the framework through which we experience reality, both individually and collectively.

This is even truer of television series,^[9] given the large place they occupy in viewers' lives, along with the space they take in today's ordinary conversations and public debates.^[10] Over

the past twenty years, there has been a growing interest in the question of the serial format, in connection with the so-called “Golden Age” of television series, and the rise of the American TV channel HBO.^[11] While some scholars include TV series in the long history of serialized fictions, seeing them as the twenty-first century’s version of newspaper or magazine serials,^[12] others have emphasized their specificity, from both a narrative point of view and in terms of their modes of production or consumption.^[13] Recent studies have addressed practices of consumption of TV series in connection with a larger reflection on “popular culture.”^[14] In addition, a number of empirical studies have looked at TV series within the broader context of New Media studies:^[15] this includes analysing viewing modalities in connection with the digital revolution, and studying audiences and how spectators understand subtext and paratext of TV series.^[16] In France, highly engaging studies have tackled the question of attachment, often based on logics of fandom.^[17] A few publications have also examined the particular modes of production and writing of TV dramas in France and in the Anglo-American world,^[18] but this remains an understudied question when compared to sociological reception studies.

Drawing on the vast and already well-established field of television studies, in addition to ongoing debates in philosophy and philosophy of film, this article proposes a redefinition of “realism” anchored in an understanding of the serial medium. Specifically, it argues that spy TV series are “realistic” not because they correspond to reality but because of their impact on reality. Yet contrary to previous attempts to rethink the power of spy fiction,^[19] this re-conceptualization of fictional realism does not decree the blurring of the boundary between the realm of fact and fiction: on the contrary, it reaffirms its importance, as a hypothesis for the production and reception of fictional works.^[20] Defending this “realism” of spy fiction – in the sense of its impact on social and political reality – does not amount to saying that fictional objects merge with reality. It is, however, a way of rethinking spy fiction in its relation to the world;^[21] as a place for the elaboration of meaning that is dynamic and fully integrated into the social and political space, which nevertheless retains its own ontology. This perspective highlights the open and sometimes problematic character of interpreting fictional works, while retaining the possibility of a critical examination of the moral and political questions that underlie such fictions.

To support this claim, I will rely on the French TV series *The Bureau* (Canal+, 2015–2020), one of the most popular spy series in France and abroad. Beyond its unique mode of

production for the French context²³¹ and its high quality – both narratively and aesthetically, the ever-growing interest in the series also stems from the official support of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE), the French intelligence external service, to the project. For the first time in the history of France, an intelligence service that is hitherto known for its great opacity agreed to support the showrunner Éric Rochant and his team in their quest for “realism,” a term that comes up throughout all stages of production. This unusual collaboration,²³² which has been skillfully put forward by *The Bureau*’s team and the DGSE, foreshadows an authenticity of the fictional discourse never achieved before, yet poses the question of being confronted to a propaganda operation.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section gives an overview of the “realistic intention” of *The Bureau*, specifically the ways in which realism, in the ordinary sense of a certain correspondence or resemblance with the *real* world, served as the working framework throughout the production of the series, which also influenced its reception by the public and the critics. The second section evaluates the different ways in which the series holds up to the promise of “fictional realism,” by demonstrating a certain attention to details, or the importance of causation. The third section highlights the ways in which the serial aesthetics *is* a principle of *The Bureau*’s “ordinary realism,” thanks to the serial-episode principle and the enmeshment of the series within viewers’ ordinary experience. The final section explores this alternative understanding of realism that I call “performative,” by looking at *The Bureau*’s impact on shared representations of secret intelligence and contemporary security environment.

1 The “realistic intention” of *The Bureau*: From production to reception

The Bureau is a French spy TV series centred on a fictitious clandestine service of the DGSE called “The Bureau of Legends” (BoL). The first season begins with the return of former clandestine officer named Malotru (Mathieu Kassovitz) to France, after six years working undercover in Syria. His exceptional abilities make him the perfect trainer for a brilliant new recruit Phenomène (Sara Giraudeau), whose perilous mission is to infiltrate Iran’s nuclear program. Yet, Malotru’s difficulties in readapting to normal life increasingly appear as he is

progressively forced into a logic of betrayal to save the love of his life, a history professor who is about to play a decisive role in Syria's future, Nadia El Mansour (Zineb Triki).

Malotru's unfinished love story is certainly the driving narrative arc of *The Bureau*'s five seasons. If this narrative choice is not driven by a will to explore the springs of amorous feelings, it nonetheless allows for a complex depiction of complementary yet sometimes-conflicting elements: on the one hand, the slow descent into hell of a tormented hero, who is forced to betray the service he once so brilliantly embodied; on the other hand, the hunting game that this betrayal triggers once it is discovered by his former employer, who seems always caught between the loyalty for their own and the need to protect France's national interest and security. This classic cat-and-mouse game is set against the backdrop of the contemporary international scene: the Syrian conflict (seasons 1–3), the Iranian nuclear program (seasons 1 and 2), Jihadist terrorism and the so-called Islamic State (seasons 1–3), Russia's power politics (seasons 1–5), cyberwarfare (seasons 4 and 5). Thus, the tragic destiny of Malotru constantly intertwines with the main trends of contemporary security events, to the point that *The Bureau* is often considered a geopolitical drama.

This ability of the series to depict with great subtlety the complexity of the contemporary security environment is certainly one of the many reasons explaining the show's success both in France and abroad. When the first season came out in 2015, *Le Monde*'s critic Pierre S risier underlined the quality and great novelty of a spy TV show that offered "a different and credible tone,"^[24] whereas in *Lib ration* Cl lia Cohen emphasized the exceptional performance of Malotru's interpreter, Mathieu Kassovitz.^[25] In 2016, *Le Figaro* simply described the series as the best TV series ever made in France^[26] and the *New York Times* ranked the series second in their 2020 best international shows list. Season 5 slightly disappointed fans, especially the two last episodes whose writing and directing were, in a surprising move, left to filmmaker Jacques Audiard, *The Bureau* remains undoubtedly one of the most viewed, commented and appreciated French TV series throughout the world. The website *Allocin * rates the five seasons of *The Bureau* 4.4/5 on the basis of 6767 users' vote, and *IMDb* credits the series with an overall score of 8.7/10 based on 8110 users' vote. At the time of writing, *The Bureau* is distributed in over 110 countries^[27] and discussions have started in the USA, Korea and the United Kingdom for possible remakes.^[28]

Another important reason for this domestic and international success is the willingness of the *real* DGSE to collaborate with *The Bureau*'s team, a collaboration that has been cleverly put forward every time a new season comes out. For the first time the French external intelligence service, hitherto known for its great opacity and very little if no public relations,^[29] agreed to open its doors to the entertainment industry thus offering what I call a “spectacle of *pseudo*-transparency,”^[30] by organising meetings between intelligence professionals and screenwriters, in addition to several visits to the real premises of the DGSE for actors and other members of the series' team so that they might soak up the spirit of the place. According to a famous anecdote, the production designer of the series managed to reproduce the different rooms that were shown to him during his visit almost identically thanks to his photographic memory.^[31] If such a change in the DGSE's attitude certainly signals a clear desire to modify its public image, sometimes giving rise to the fear of a propagandist offensive, it also raises the prospect – rightly or wrongly – of an authenticity never achieved before.

This search for authenticity is arguably what drove the showrunner Éric Rochant to reach out to the DGSE. And it is also why the intelligence service responded favourably to his request, assuming that Rochant, a director known for his great interest in the topic and his serious treatment of it, would allow them to restore their public image. Rochant's previous movies, in particular *Les Patriotes* (1994), which is still greatly appreciated internally, suggest a certain understanding of secret intelligence, as well as a clear intention of the director to move away the usual artifices *à la* James Bond. When asked about his understanding of the international success of the show, Rochant explained in *Variety*:

From what I hear, anyway, I think international audiences respond to a credible realism within a genre – in this case, espionage – that often veers towards more fantastical depictions. It breaks with convention, and when I read positive notices, that's what I find people respond to: They are fascinated by the realism and the process. We have taken a mysterious and intriguing world and opened it up in a realistic way. I think that's what makes the series a success. Now, is that replicable? I don't know. You'd need another mysterious and intriguing milieu, and you'd need to explore it in a similar way.^[32]

The quest for a “credible realism,” in the ordinary sense of a certain correspondence with what is usually called “reality,” certainly defines the working framework of *The Bureau*’s team. In addition to researching every aspect of the story they wanted to tell, thanks to meetings with scholars and specialists, writers also explained that they constantly thought about what would happen *in real life*. As the chief screenwriter Camille de Castelnaud explained:

It wouldn’t be realistic if there weren’t any romantic relationships at work because in real life, in a firm like that, there are stories – even if not with everyone and not all the time.^[31]

Beyond this quest for realism in the writing of the series, *The Bureau* may be considered an aesthetic attempt to almost duplicate the visual reality of the DGSE. On top of the already-mentioned talent of the set director,^[32] this search for resemblance manifests itself through the use of the DGSE’s *real* logo,^[33] with several scenes shot inside and outside its *real* premises in Paris. This willingness to refer to real events and locations, both narratively and aesthetically, materializes itself vividly in a troubling scene that closes season 2. While Malotru is off on a mission to Syria, spectators, and members of the BoL discover together, via a video broadcasted on a TV channel within the fictional DGSE’s premises, that he was taken hostage by the Islamic State: the sinister scene in which the French spy appears on his knees dressed in an orange jumpsuit, surrounded by two hooded men in black, reciting an unfortunately predictable text, is recognizable at first glance.

Given the fact that this “realistic intention” constitutes the working framework of *The Bureau*’s team, an ambition that is regularly recalled in the different interviews given by the showrunner and the screenwriters, it is not surprising to see this search of the real in the reel manifesting itself in the way the series is received by audiences and critics. Since the release of *The Bureau*, there have been countless press articles relying on specialists or former intelligence professionals offering to debunk the myths that are conveyed in this series.^[34] Notwithstanding the rare polemics, mainly online, concerning the few breaches to this realistic ambition of the series (a false title of *Le Figaro* which does not correspond exactly to the *real* layout of the French newspaper, a Moroccan teapot used by alleged Bedouins in the Egyptian desert), the reputation of the series remains largely intact, both domestically and internationally.

This intransigence of the public as to the way the *real world* is duly rendered on screens, which expresses itself even more acutely because of the rhetoric of authenticity that surrounds the series, suggests an increasing awareness as to how these fictions impact upon our shared social and political reality. While these polemics are understandable, especially as to how cultural diversity should be duly represented on screen in order to avoid perpetuating offensive or even orientalist clichés,^[97] this constant evaluation of the series' realism poses the risk of trapping the public and critics in an endless comparison between fiction and reality, a comparison that would remain difficult to carry out as the world of intelligence remains, for a large part, entrenched behind the border of secrecy. In addition, this approach may overshadow the many ways in which the notion of "realism" can be understood in contemporary serial fiction. This is what we are going to see in the following sections.

2 The "fictional realism" of *The Bureau*

In her classic study of Wittgenstein, Cora Diamond begins by evoking the non-philosophical uses of the term "realism."^[98] Unsurprisingly, most of her examples refer to the realm of fiction, so much so that she ends up drawing a portrait of what is expected of a realistic novel, and more generally, a realistic fiction:

We also speak of realism in connection with novels and stories; and here again we often have in mind kinds of attention to reality: to detail and particularity. ... We expect in a realistic novel something you might call a phenomenalism of characters: it is built up of observed detail, and in a sense, there is nothing to it over and above what we are shown. That is evidently an oversimplification. To make less of one, I should have to say something about how what is said about a character, when it goes beyond what we have been shown, may be tied to what is actually there in the story.^[99]

According to Diamond, a work of fiction is said to be realistic if it first demonstrates an attention to details and particularities. This explains, in turn, the recurrence of certain themes and writing styles in realistic novels, such as ordinary lives, the abandonment of stylization or the recurring use of description. And she continues:

A further characteristic of realistic fiction, which is relevant in the same sort of way, is that certain things do not happen in it. People do not go backward in time, pots do not talk, elves

do not do chores while shoemakers sleep, and holy men do not walk unaided over the surface of lakes or oceans. We all know that if God sells wine in an English village, we do not call the story realistic; and if the devil turns up in a realistic novel, it is within what we can take to be some extraordinary experience of one of the characters, say in a dream or in delirium. Magic, myth, fantasy, superstition: in different ways are terms used in making contrast with realism.^[40]

In addition, a realistic fiction is characterized by the absence of certain elements that are usually associated with the realm of fantasy or magic. This absence explains the presence of a certain typology of characters, namely ordinary men and women, at the expense of superheroes or magicians. However, supernatural elements are not entirely driven out of realistic fictions: they can make a brief appearance in spaces that are dedicated to and identified as such: dreams or fiction, if a protagonist devotes herself or himself to the reading of a sci-fi novel.

Finally, Diamond describes the last defining feature of realistic fictions as follows:

Similarly, in a novel; it is unrealistic if the plot proceeds by a series of improbable events, incredible coincidences, and the like; rather, in a realistic story, events develop out of each other, characters respond to circumstances and so on: there is operative of conception of how things work in our lives, what leads to what, what sorts of things do in actual fact determine how events proceed. It is connected with this that a novel in which vice is defeated and virtue flourishes in the end is often felt as unrealistic: that is not how things are determined. The duke does not reveal himself, and the king's messenger does not come riding up.^[41]

In the words of Diamond, realistic novels demonstrate the significance of causation. This means, on the one hand, that realistic fictions are characterized by an internal coherence to the story: causes lead to probable consequences that are themselves embedded in the way the story is told. On the other hand, a realistic fiction shows an attention to what can be called an ordinary probability, namely how things usually happen *in the real world*.

This significance of causation for realistic literature resonates with Jacques Rancière's study of the different forms and meanings of literary realism.^[42] According to Rancière, the truly revolutionary dimension of nineteenth century literary realism comes from its ability to completely reverse the logic of the fictional rationality that had prevailed since Aristotle.

While literature had always favoured what he calls a “supplement or an excess of rationality” in order to reveal how the unexpected happens,^[45] writers such as Stendhal, Balzac or Maupassant refocused their writings on the random succession of things, or what is also called ordinary experiences.^[46] This change facilitated the option “to open a door to the world that gave birth to it,” which is, in this case, on the ordinary world – Rancière’s words^[45] – and to show the numerous ordinary people who form this world and had remained invisible until then.

Interestingly enough, this preeminence of both the rational and the ordinary – in the sense of the everyday rather than the social sensitivity Rancière describes – are also among the central characteristics of the spy genre, whose appearance closely followed that of the social novel at the beginning of the twentieth century.^[46] In his book *Mysteries and conspiracies*, Luc Boltanski argues that detective and spy novels tend to depict an even more banal reality than that of the social novel in order to make the rupture of the ordinary, which is at the heart of detective and spy stories, and its corollaries that are suspicion and investigation, even more salient.^[47] As Boltanski explains, detective and spy novels – at least in their original form – all convey the image of a duplicitous reality, where an apparent and surface reality is progressively replaced by a *much more real reality*, which is hidden, disturbing, woven with crimes, enigmas, conspiracies and plots. In doing so, spy novels and movies – films having largely replaced novels for Boltanski in this function – not only signals the anxiety of a certain fragility of the “ordinary” reality, which seems always potentially threatened by an extraordinary double. But it also encourages readers and viewers to question the “reality of the reality,” an anxiety that is expressed in various ways in the social and political reality of the time.

The strength of Boltanski’s proposal comes from his ability to place discursive phenomena, and particularly “popular culture” artefacts, at the heart of the social and political reality of the time.^[48] According to Boltanski, fiction does not only mirror a certain state of mind or *Zeitgeist*, but it also largely influences the way readers and viewers perceive their shared political reality. Thus, by staging the capacity of state agents to guarantee not only the security, but a certain stability of the social and political reality, spy fiction participates in the very construction of state’s power (*l’État*). What is true for literary creation and for cinema, should also be true for contemporary TV series. Let us see whether *The Bureau* goes beyond

the sole realistic intention and really holds the promise of fictional realism described in this initial threefold definition: an attention to particularities; things that do not happen; the significance of causation and the rational.

2.1 Particularities and characters

First, *The Bureau* does demonstrate a real attention to details and particularities. By focusing on lunches in the canteen, coffee breaks, love intrigues between colleagues, birthday or retirement parties, the series successfully moves away from the artificiality and stylization of spy fictions *à la* James Bond and reveals what could be called the fictional everyday lives of French intelligence officers.^[49] The exhibition of all details of the alleged daily office life sometimes borders on the familiar, as for example with Sisteron's (Jonathan Zaccarì) compulsive eating habits or during a famous exchange between Jonas Maury (Artus) and Céline Delorme (Pauline Etienne) in season 3, regarding the use of office washrooms and bowel movement. This distinction and sometimes combination of the (almost) ordinary life at the office, which gives some ordinary texture to the milieu described by the series and contrasts with the extraordinary dimension of their occupation, is further reinforced by the systematic opposition between two very distinct spaces: on the one hand, the closed-door environment of the DGSE on Boulevard Mortier in Paris, whose austerity is reminiscent – with the exception of all the security protocols that regulate in-house life – of any French public administration; and, on the other, the outside world, where future operations are being prepared and conducted, as spies' life *outside* their work environment is rarely depicted in the series, with the exception of some rare family dinners or a few scenes in the Parisian metro.

This realistic aesthetics is further seen in the typology of the main characters. Neither physically advantageous, nor dressed in flamboyant or ostentatious accessories: in *The Bureau*, French intelligence officers look like any other civil servants, seemingly harmless, who pass unnoticed in their cheap suits. This ordinary aesthetic is recalled several times during the multiple conversations concerning Henri Duflot's (Jean-Pierre Darroussin) surprising ties, conversations that have no kind of narrative importance, except to signify the apparent normality of office life,^[50] a normality that should not mislead the viewers as to (French) intelligence officers' exceptional skills.

Note that *The Bureau*'s casting reinforces this realistic aesthetic of the series. Indeed, most of *The Bureau*'s actors are also known for having starred in hard-hitting social dramas, such as *La ville est tranquille* (Jean-Pierre Darroussin), *Petit Paysan* (Sara Giraudeau) or *Jusqu'à la garde* (Léa Drucker), without forgetting the famous hit directed by Mathieu Kassovitz in 1995, *La Haine*, which takes an uncompromising look at the cycle of violence between the French police and young people in the Parisian suburbs.^[51]

2.2 Absence of mythical elements

Second, the series is devoid of elements generally associated with the supernatural or science fiction. No magical powers, no phantasmagorical technology: if the BoL's agents are what they are, it is above all thanks to their skills and hard work. This apparent normality of protagonists seems all the more important as it contributes to the normalization and heroization of intelligence professionals. Besides, as already noted, depicting people who appear to be just like everyone else allows the series to break away from the James Bond or Jason Bourne aesthetic, inherited from hard-boiled fiction or technothrillers. It also locates *The Bureau* within the long tradition of "realistic" British spy fiction and, at the same time, allows the series to renew it: after John le Carré's or Len Deighton's novels, where spies seem to have lost the meaning of their action, Malotru, Duflot or Marie-Jeanne Duthilleul offer more positive alternatives.

Thus, in order to be associated with a research project in Tehran that would allow her to enter into Iran without hindrance, Phénomène/Marina Loiseau (Sara Giraudeau), a former Polytechnique student – one of the most selective French *Grande école* – manages to be recruited for an internship at the highly selective Institut de Physique du Globe of Paris, all while learning to speak Persian perfectly. And when she asks her mentor Guillaume Debailly (Mathieu Kassovitz) about the efforts he had to make before leaving for his mission to Syria, he explains: "I had to pass the French agrég' exam to be sure of being accepted at the French high school in Damascus, and I had to learn Arabic in a year."^[52] These extraordinary skills of Phenomenon and Malotru, well hidden behind completely banal faces that never let anything show, can be seen throughout the series as they travel through the most dangerous parts of the world. One can also think of César/Pacemaker (Stefan Crépon), a baby-faced computer genius from the DGSE's Technical Department who dresses in a hoodie and baggy pants,

successfully foiling several Russian cyberattacks and managing to infiltrate the Russian cyber-command after posing as a fake French defector.

Even if they don't have super-powers, as the long hours spent training and hardening themselves before leaving on a mission suggest, the BoL's clandestine operatives are still exceptional individuals able to assume multiple fictitious identities often for several years. One is not born an intelligence officer but becomes one. Moreover, the few elements that could be considered supernatural are well confined to spaces that are acceptable for a realistic fiction, such as the dream space as evoked by Diamond. Thus, the character of Henri Duflot, who died in an operation in Syria at the end of season 3, returns to "haunt" the dreams of Marie-Jeanne Duthilleul (S4E4), or reappears in the form of flashbacks for events preceding his death. Not to mention Malotru's last supper (S5E10), in the conclusion to the series conceived by Jacques Audiard, which proposes a mystical interpretation of the end of Malotru's quest, explicitly at odds – both narratively and aesthetically – with the more realistic ensemble conceived by the series' showrunner Éric Rochant.

2.3 Significance of causation

Third, the series attests to the importance attached to causation. In addition to avoiding incredible twists and turns, *The Bureau* not only demonstrates an internal coherence to the story, but it also presents events – the way things happen – in a plausible way. Take the example of Sisteron (Jonathan Zaccari), who has a foot amputated by an Islamic State's leader after a failed operation on the Iraqi-Syrian border. While the absence of post-traumatic stress on his return to Paris might seem surprising in view of the experience he has just lived, Sisteron remains nonetheless crippled for the rest of the series. Wearing a prosthesis will even become an important part of his everyday life. Likewise, if one may be surprised by the way Phenomenon (Sara Giraudeau) manages to escape from her Iranian jailers at the end of season 2 (and an assassination attempt in season 3), the fact that she develops a number of anxiety disorders on her return to Paris, disorders that she tries to hide from her employer and, at the same time, to herself, adds to the credible causality of the series. Thus, her apprehension before going back to the field, which manifests itself in a panic attack in the airport toilets before boarding for Moscow, signals this willingness to depict things in a plausible way. The vulnerability of the characters becomes a function of the credibility of the series because it

allows for the depiction of men and women who are certainly very talented, but who remain human and therefore fallible nonetheless: a vulnerability that allows a greater attachment to characters, and certainly helps audiences forgive their sometimes-immoral actions.

A first examination of *The Bureau* demonstrates a certain conformity of the series to the fictional realism described by Diamond, Rancière and Boltanski. However, some precisions are now necessary as to the nature of the serial medium.

3 The “ordinary realism” of the serial medium

Notwithstanding the precision in the way the series is written and directed, the ability of *The Bureau* to depict the ordinary life of the world of secret intelligence also comes from the exploitation of the possibilities offered by the serial medium, and especially two of its characteristics: TV series’ *photographic* nature (something they share with photo and cinema), and their serial-episode principle or *seriality*.

3.1 Photographic realism

Let us first begin by recalling something that may seem obvious but has its importance here: TV series are first and foremost a photographic medium, which means that they allow viewers to *see* what is placed in front of the camera and what then appears on the screen. This understanding of photographic realism builds on Stanley Cavell’s characterization of the ontology of films, for whom cinema allows spectators to experience reality by *seeing* the world on a screen.^[51] It also takes into account Sandra Laugier’s and Martin Shuster’s^[52] engaging writings on the importance of TV series for our individual and collective ordinary experience by allowing viewers to *see* a fictional world they become familiar with and get attached to, episode after episode. And while this fictional world becomes intrinsically part of viewers’ ordinary experience, they nonetheless never mistake it for *the real world*.

Following such an understanding of realism – a realism that can be described as “ordinary”^[53] – one could argue that *The Bureau* allows viewers to *see* the world of secret intelligence on a screen, to experience and re-experience it, without mistaking it for their “reality.” This is not to say that the series does not have any influence over the way the public perceives secret

intelligence: as already underlined, spy fiction often allows to compensate for the lack of information on secret activities of the state. But this means, in this context, that the photographic realism of the serial medium is a function of the ordinary realism of *The Bureau*.

3.2 Serial realism

Second, the *longue durée* of the serial narration allows writers to build a multifaceted and extremely rich fictional world by lingering on details that have very little – if any – narrative interest. In *The Bureau* this idea takes shape for instance in the numerous scenes about work comfort (and especially Sisteron's), or the eternal return of Henri Dufлот's tie. This approach makes it also possible to specify the moral texture of each of the characters who inhabit the fictional world that is presented to us. While Sisteron appears to be, at first glance, the stereotypical grumpy Frenchman who cares more about his little comfort than his mission – an idea later contradicted by his determination when it comes to going into the field – Dufлот, in contrast, is the ultra-dedicated and reassuring father figure, who takes care of his team, to the point of sacrificing his life for one of his own (season 3).

In addition, the serial-episode principle permits in-depth description of routines or practices, something that other forms of representational arts do not necessarily allow.¹⁶⁰ In *The Bureau*, such routine is for instance well-shown through the constant use of badges and security clearances, which suggests not only the extreme compartmentalization of space within the DGSE, but also the extreme partition of knowledge that is essential to any intelligence services.¹⁶¹ This internal partition is further reinforced by the seemingly technical vocabulary used by professionals, which may appear at first a bit opaque for outsiders, but eventually becomes a second nature. In *The Bureau*, this narrative thread of the disoriented newcomer is staged strongly through the entry of Dr. Balmès, a psychologist recruited externally to offer support to clandestine operatives, into the service (season 1, episode 2). Several close-ups on different parts of her body – her hands, which we see storing her phone in a locker at the entrance to the DGSE, her torso and arms, which are screened with a metal detector – indicate both the rigor and the intrusive nature of the security measures to which each new entrant must conform. Clearly disoriented, she is then welcomed at the security gate by Rim (Émilie

Chesnais), Henri Duflot's secretary, who escorts her to the BoL and initiates her to some of the uses of the house:

How was security?

Fine. I feel naked without my phone and tablet.

You can't get in with a computer or a phone. Do you know why?

No.

Remote activation can transform them into a microphone.

I see.

You get used to being naked, you'll see.

The ignorance and inexperience of Dr. Balmès (Léa Drucker) are reminiscent of that of any outsider who, for the first time, crosses the border of secrecy and enters this closed universe. Several close-ups that embrace Dr. Balmès's gaze, suggest her astonishment when confronted with this new universe: signs indicating the location of "crisis room 1" or prohibiting access to certain spaces without the appropriate badge, offices with indecipherable code names (DN/SWR-02), limited circulation (the elevator they use is strictly reserved for members of the BoL) etc. By opposition, the ease of Rim (Émilie Chesnais), her facility to move in this labyrinthine space, suggests her belonging to the world of "insiders." A last exchange between the two women allows the series to insist on the distance which separates the characters, while specifying the strangeness of the everyday life in the BoL a little more:

Every night, you might destroy your documents in the shredder. Or store them in this closet safe protected by a code. Your desk and trash must be empty. Maintenance and cleaners aren't allowed in. You clean your own office. All the numbers are there. Door, closet, telephone.

Ok.

One last thing. Don't say a word to anyone. No one's to question you. If someone asks, then they don't know what you know. They aren't on a need-to-know basis. That's what we say. "It's all on a need-to-know basis."

Like a professional confidentiality.

No, like classified information.

While she seems confused by all the codes, practices and customs when she first arrives at the BoL, Dr. Balmès slowly gets used to her new work environment, where mistrust structure any human interaction.

This gradual acquisition of expertise is not limited to some characters of the series, but it also fundamentally engages viewers. Laugier underlines TV series' ability to reconnect spectators with their moral and political experience through an enmeshment of the series and viewers' ordinary lives;^[68] the back-and-forth presence of a series into one's life explains this impression of getting accustomed with a certain *milieu*, as the series unfolds sometimes for several years. Dr. Balmès can be seen as something more than a simple narrative thread allowing writers to didactically expose the specificities of secret intelligence: she *is* the spectator-outsider, when confronted with the strangeness of *The Bureau*'s universe for the first time.

This pedagogical ambition is also clearly displayed at the very beginning of the series, during a rare scene (season 1, episode 1) in which Malotru has dinner with his daughter Prune after returning from his mission in Syria. By opening this scene on a wide shot through a half-open door, the spectator is initially put in the position of the unwanted guest – if not voyeur – of this exchange where Prune interrogates her father about his job:

Is your mission over?

Yes.

What was it?

I still can't tell you.

Did you kill people over there?

You really think I'll tell you? I can't tell you what I do, but I can say I killed people?

Did you free hostages?

No.

I didn't free hostages.

Did you find chemical weapons?

No.

Did you set up wiretaps?

No.

I won't know then?

No.

Seemingly insignificant, this dialogue is nevertheless essential to understand the ambition of the series. To each question asked by Prune, an interrogation that evokes the usual fantasies about her father's job and conveyed by popular spy fiction, the latter answers her in the negative. Like Prune, the viewer is gradually invited to exchange his old beliefs about the world of intelligence for a much more toned-down view:

My mission was to make contacts. Meet people in a certain environment, observe them, get to know them, and see if they had information that could be useful. If that was the case, I had to convince them to give it to us.

Did you blackmail them?

No, that doesn't work.

It's people who want to help France or advance their cause. My only task was to find relevant people.

You had to make friends.

Acquaintances, let's say.

That's why you left for 6 years. To make acquaintances.

You prefer I kill people?

Yeah. No, I don't know. But that's cool... You left to make friends.

I left because it's my job.

Yeah ... Well, now I know.

Like Prune, the viewer is taken into confidence about Malotru's mission, an idea reinforced by the alternating close-ups on the faces of the two protagonists. If Prune seems genuinely happy to see her father finally opening up to her, as her illuminated face and non-stop questions suggest, she nevertheless seems disappointed by the insignificant nature of the activities he describes. Here, the pedagogical ambition of the series becomes clear. The series does not aim to "fool" the viewer by describing a James Bond-like world. On the contrary, *The Bureau* seeks an education-initiation of the spectator, who, by familiarizing himself with an atmosphere, a certain daily life, will consider it in a more correct way.

Furthermore, building on Stanley Cavell's defence of the importance of films for one's experience,⁶⁹¹ a TV series can be compared to a companion or a friendly acquaintance: it comes and goes into our life and accompanies us over the years, as the plot unfolds and evolves, as we unfold and evolve. The (more or less) assiduous frequentation of fictional characters through the viewing of TV series thus explains the gradual attachment or detestation one can feel for them, an attachment that resembles Mark Granovetter's description of "weak ties."⁶⁹² One can think, for instance, of *The Bureau's* main character, Malotru, whose ambivalent attitude and everlasting strangeness (in particular, one should say, to himself), shows nonetheless a real humanity, which allows for a certain attachment despite his constant treason. This is all the truer since Malotru's actions are determined by the love – seemingly infinite – that he bears to Nadia. The difficulties he encounters with his daughter Prune, who resents his repeated absences, as this dinner scene suggests, also make him a more endearing man than he could be at first sight.

The various effects of this assiduous frequentation of serial characters can further be seen in the feeling of disappointment resulting from Phénomène's successive failures in the field, or conversely the sense of admiration that may come from the revelation of Dr. Balmès' true identity. At the end of the first season, the viewer discovers that she is *in fact* a CIA mole informing the Americans since her very first day. From the slightly dull newcomer with square manners, she immediately translates into a master of disguise whose ability to go unnoticed calls for admiration. A final interesting example of this relationship between seriality and attachment to characters is to be found in Marie-Jeanne Duthilleul (Florence-Loiret Caille). While at the beginning of the series she is, because of her sometimes-abrupt manners and mousy temperament, a not-particularly likeable secondary character, nonetheless, she progressively becomes one of the most beloved characters of the series and a central figure of *The Bureau's* fictional world, who embodies determination and loyalty at all costs. Only serial aesthetics permits that.

4 The “performative realism” of *The Bureau*

As noted above, realism – in the non-philosophical sense of a certain resemblance or correspondence with reality – is certainly what *The Bureau* seems to achieve. Beyond its sole capacity to refer to real world events, the series appears to faithfully render a certain atmosphere of secret intelligence that is, first and foremost, a bureaucracy in which secrecy and mistrust structure any human interaction. Besides, the willingness of the DGSE to collaborate with the showrunner Éric Rochant, an unprecedented move in the history of French intelligence, also suggests a certain authenticity of the series. However, a closer look at the series reveals the striking invisibility of one of the DGSE's *real* main activity: the production of certified information (“intelligence”) to inform political, diplomatic or military decisions.^[61] With the exception of a few sequences in seasons 3 and 4, during which Artus (Jonas Maury) incarnates an analyst who is obsessively searching for information, or when Sisteron (Jonathan Zaccai) collects an enormous quantity of documents that once belonged to the Islamic State in season 3, the different stages of the “intelligence cycle,” the multiple-step process that is hypothetically followed by any intelligence agencies to turn raw data into valuable information for decision-makers, are not made visible in the series.^[62]

Moreover, the “Bureau of Legends” is particularly isolated in the French bureaucratic and strategic environment. While it has very little contact with the rest of the DGSE, supposedly due to the highly sensitive nature of its mission and the strict compartmentalization it requires, it is also not integrated into the French intelligence community and almost never exchanges with other services in France (with the notable exception of a timid appearance of the DGSI in season 2). This isolation at the national level is, however, compensated by numerous and puzzling links with foreign intelligence services (American, Syrian, Russian), at the risk of making the BoL their privileged point of contact, if not the point of origin of tensions between intelligence services. A closer look at the series reveals that the attic of BoL, this closed cup of French intelligence whose autonomy and room for maneuver never cease to astonish, is busier solving crises it has itself generated than protecting French interests.

Thus, more than a *mimetic* resemblance with the *real* DGSE, or a certain correspondence with its day-to-day activities, *The Bureau*’s realism lies above all in its impact on social and political reality. By providing powerful visual and linguistic referents, which have had a great impact on ordinary conversations but also on decision-makers, the series has become an essential component of the contemporary political and security environment.¹⁶³ Specifically, *The Bureau* makes visible two secret intelligence structuring elements: on the one hand, the “anarchy” or perpetual state of war between sovereign states, which structures the international stage despite an apparent state of peace;¹⁶⁴ on the other hand, the ambivalence of democratic regimes, whose foreign policy and security is based on a derogatory principle to the rule of law, a sort of persistence of *raison d’État*,¹⁶⁵ which is embodied in the clandestine action of the BoL. Consequently, more than the acquisition of a detailed knowledge about intelligence, *The Bureau*’s pedagogical dimension resides, above all, in its capacity to reveal and to co-construct following Boltanski¹⁶⁶ the principle behind secret intelligence: the permanence of a certain political violence that is expressed and resolved by a need for a secret dimension of the state, in spite of the transparency and publicity principles that Western democracies have themselves erected.

Furthermore, this figuration of the state’s secret activities arrived precisely when the role of French intelligence services was hotly debated in the public arena. The multiple upheavals of France’s security environment, in particular the wave of terrorist attacks that started with the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in January 2015, along with the numerous reforms of the French

intelligence community that preceded and followed such attacks, had made secret intelligence one of the mostly debated issues in the public sphere. First a critical success, *The Bureau* gradually became an extraordinary social and political phenomenon, due to an increased demand for information regarding France's intelligence services. After five publicly acclaimed seasons, it is not an exaggeration to say that *The Bureau* has been an essential part of any discussion (public or private) on the matter of secret intelligence, by providing a common language for both insiders and outsiders of the secret world. As French journalist Jean Guisnel underlines in his recent book on the DGSE:

No one, including its management or those at the top of the state apparatus, speaks today about the DGSE without referring to the television series. A senior executive of the service explains as follows: 'The day it first happened to me was during a meeting at the Élysée Palace in which someone asked me: 'Is it really like that, in your service?' I told myself that it was won, that our contacts were conquered and finally interested in us.'^[67]

Leaving aside this institutional battle for recognition that is captured in the quote, the advertising banner that appears on the cover of Guisnel's book "Inside the real *Bureau of legends*" serves as another reminder of the series importance in ordinary language, as well as in any press or research articles that deals, first and foremost, with the authentic DGSE.

The performativity^[68] of the series thus stems from its ability to fix a certain use of language that largely impacted the democratic conversation surrounding intelligence activities.^[69] By providing a common language to talk about the secret activities of the state, a language that makes this conversation about secret intelligence possible, *The Bureau* has "framed" – in the words of Erving Goffman –^[70] the individual and collective experience of state secrecy in a democracy like France.

This power of the series can first be explained by the asymmetry of information that characterizes the world of secret intelligence. As Timothy Melley and others have already pointed out, the enormous amount of fiction that takes the secret world as its topic often compensates for the lack of information that characterizes the national security state.^[71] And within this prolix fictional world, where more or less grotesque representations cohabit, *The Bureau*'s alleged authenticity imposes itself as a radically distinct reference.^[72]

This “realism” of the series – in the new sense of its impact on shared representations and reality – also takes its source in *The Bureau*’s contextualization in the contemporary security and political events. As previously underlined, the five seasons released so far have dealt with the most sensitive issues of the contemporary international scene: Iran’s nuclear program, jihadist terrorism, cyberwarfare, Russia’s power politics... Therefore, all the “documentary versions”⁽⁷³⁾ of these *real* issues uphold, both narratively and visually, the fictional struggle of French intelligence officers against those threats. These solid reference points also allow the series to sometimes leave *real* events off-camera, without losing any of its force or meaning. Whereas the different terrorist attacks that occurred in France since 2015 are neither depicted in *The Bureau* nor even mentioned by its characters, viewers nonetheless understand the urgency and the sensitivity of their mission precisely because of what happened *in the real world*. Likewise, it is the documentary versions of the Syrian conflict, to which the viewer had previous access in the media, that support the vision of Jonas Maury (Artus) making his way through a difficult and perilous path in a devastated Syria (season 4). Finally, the tensions that arise from Putin’s Russia, particularly in its cyber side, support the visualization of the confrontation between the Technical Directorate’s hackers and Russian hackers (season 4), not to mention the cats-and-mouse game between French and Russian spies, which we know to be true *in reality* (season 5).

In an almost paradoxical reversal, it is the reality of the world *as viewers individually and collectively know it* that makes the fictional experience possible. By inscribing the series in a certain context, an “ordinary” world that we all experience on a daily basis, *The Bureau* becomes, in turn, a supplement to the documentary versions already available to the public via other means. This does not mean that viewers risk to confuse the fictional – what they see in the series – with the reality – the real DGSE. It is not because one thinks of Malotru’s character when passing by the DGSE headquarters that one spontaneously believes that he works there. In short, *The Bureau* retains its own ontology. Yet, by offering an additional point of view on our shared individual and collective reality, and in particular on the behind-the-scenes workings of democratic regimes, *The Bureau* paints a more complex picture of democracies in all their problematic and ambivalent aspects. From a framed version of reality, *The Bureau* has become one of the frameworks through which questions of state secrecy and strategic intelligence are experienced in France individually and

collectively.^[74] This power of *The Bureau* over reality makes it all the more urgent to clarify the politics and the ethics exemplified in the series, inasmuch as it may participate in the normalization, or even the trivialization, of the hidden side of government.^[75]

5 Conclusion

Drawing on the case of *The Bureau*, one of the most popular spy TV series, this article has shown that the problem of “realism” for contemporary media culture is more complex than it first appears. Moving away from the traditional understanding of realism as the sole correspondence with reality, three different realisms stand out from our examination of *The Bureau*, which all proceed from one another. The first one is what we call a “fictional realism”: simply put the way the series conforms to the aesthetic and narrative conventions of a realistic fiction. Drawing on Diamond’s and Rancière’s writings on the matter, *The Bureau* lives up to the promise of fictional realism, as demonstrated by the attention to details, the absence of mythical elements and the importance of causality.

Second, the ability of *The Bureau* to conform to fictional realism also comes from two of the medium’s specificities: TV series’ *photographic* nature and their *seriality*. If *The Bureau* allows viewers to experience and re-experience the world of secret intelligence, it is thanks to the specificities of the serial medium that allows them to *see*, episode after episode, specific routines or practices, and to get attached to entities that *a priori* do not exist, namely fictional characters. Seriality also explains the gradual acquisition of expertise regarding a fictional world that may appear at first rather opaque. And because it proceeds from the enmeshment of the series with viewers’ experience, this second type of realism can be qualified as “ordinary.”

Finally, *The Bureau* demonstrates what I call a “performative realism,” namely the many ways in which the series has impacted shared representations of secret intelligence. By providing a common language about the secret activities of the state, the series has gone from being a framed version of reality to being one of the frameworks through which questions of state secrecy and strategic intelligence are experienced in France individually and collectively. This does not mean that viewers confuse the fictional – what they see in the series – with the reality of the true DGSE. But this power of the series over our shared reality

makes it all the more urgent to clarify the moral and political issues exemplified in the series, inasmuch as they participate in the normalization, or even the trivialization, of the hidden side of government.

If *The Bureau* is probably one of the most striking examples of this “performative realism” of spy TV series, it is certainly not the only one. Just think of the many ways in which the series *24* or *Homeland* have made a dramatic entrance in the real world, whether in ordinary conversations or public debates, concerning, for example, the use of torture, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the racist stereotypes sometimes conveyed by popular culture. In the same way, Israeli series such as *Fauda* or *Our Boys* have not left reality unscathed by reactivating, each in their own way, the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From a framed vision of reality, with all the ethical or political problems this implies, spy TV series have become one of the privileged frameworks for this appropriation of the secret world and all the clandestine operations carried out in our name. It is time to take the full measure of this upheaval, by considering them no longer as mere mirrors of reality, or objects of philosophical experimentation somewhat “above ground,” but to appreciate their relationship to the political and social world that we all inhabit.

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