

# ***Trailblazer or a One-off? Rita and the New Approach to Representing Teachers in Contemporary Audio-Visual Narratives***

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## Abstract

*The paper attempts to analyse the international success of the Danish televisual series Rita (TV2 Denmark - Netflix, 2012–2020). It places the production in a wider cultural and historical context and treats it as an exemplification of, what the author deems, a recent shift in representations of teachers in visual media narratives. The author's argumentation is premised on three principal assumptions. First, Rita demonstrates that after the genre's decline at the turn of the twentieth century, the school-centred audio-visual narratives are back in favour. The trend is connected to the growth of the post-network television and the so-called over-the-top services (OTT). Second, the substantial part of Rita's wide appeal is related to the show's innovative application of the conventions known from the earlier Scandinavian productions and themes from serials about "difficult women". This particularly concerns the show's adept exploration of the resilient and anti-heroic female lead character. Third, Rita is regarded as an early indication of the shift in the ways school life and teachers are represented in the media today. The author stipulates that the show may augur the emergence of many similar complex televisual images of teachers in the near future.*

*Keywords: representation, woman, teacher, school, audio-visual series, image*

## Streszczenie

**Prekursor czy jednorazowy przebój? Serial *Rita* i nowe podejście do przedstawiania nauczycieli we współczesnych narracjach audiowizualnych**

*Artykuł jest próbą analizy międzynarodowego sukcesu duńskiego serialu telewizyjnego Rita (TV2 Denmark - Netflix, 2012–2020). Autorka lokuje serial w szerszym kontekście kulturowym i historycznym i traktuje go jako egemplifikację zmiany w sposobach reprezentacji nauczycieli we współczesnych narracjach. Argumentacja autorki opiera się na trzech zasadniczych założeniach. Po pierwsze, Rita pokazuje, że po spadku popularności gatunku na przełomie XIX i XX wieku do łask wracają narracje audiowizualne skoncentrowane na szkole. Trend ten związany jest z rozwojem telewizji "post-internetowej" i platform Over the Top (OTT). Po drugie, atrakcyjność Rity wiąże się z nowatorskim zastosowaniem przez producentów serialu*

konwencji znanych z wcześniejszych produkcji skandynawskich oraz motywów znanych z seriali o „trudnych kobietach”. Dotyczy to zwłaszcza umiejętnej eksploracji prężnej i antybohaterskiej protagonistki serialu. Po trzecie, *Rita* może być uważana za wczesną oznakę zmiany sposobu przedstawiania w mediach życia szkoły i nauczycieli. Autorka sugeruje, że serial *Rita* może zapowiadać pojawienie się w niedalekiej przyszłości wielu podobnych, wymykających się stereotypom medialnych obrazów nauczycieli.

Słowa kluczowe: reprezentacja, kobieta, nauczyciel, szkoła, serial audio-wizualny, wizerunek

## 1. Introduction

In this article I want to offer a critical examination of the acclaimed Danish televisual series *Rita* (2012–2020). Although the show deals with an ostensibly parochial subject matter, the vicissitudes of a school teacher living in provincial Denmark, it has managed to attract considerable global audience and widespread critical praise. In my paper, I approach *Rita* as an exemplification of an ongoing shift in the representation of teachers in the recent narratives about school. My argumentation is driven by three principal assumptions. First, *Rita* demonstrates that after the genre’s decline at the turn of the twentieth century, the school-centred narratives are back in favour. I see this trend as directly connected with the growth of the so-called post-network television and the OTT (over-the-top) services, that is the expansion of the Internet video streaming platforms, such as Netflix, HBO GO or Amazon Prime. Second, I believe that the substantial part of *Rita*’s wide appeal is related to the show’s innovative application of the conventions known from the earlier Scandinavian televisual productions and themes from serials about the so-called “difficult women”. This particularly concerns the show’s adept exploration of the resilient and anti-heroic female lead character. Finally, I regard *Rita* as an early indication of the shift in the ways school life and teachers are represented in the media today. I presume that the show may augur the emergence of many more similar complex televisual images of teachers. My objective in this paper is also to present *Rita* in a broader media and cultural context.

## 2. About the show

*Rita* is a televisual series which premiered on the Danish public service channel TV2<sup>1</sup> on 09 February 2012 and ran into five consecutive seasons (IMDb 2019). The final episode was broadcast on 20 July 2020. The show’s principal cast includes Mille Dinesen (as Rita), Lise

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<sup>1</sup> TV 2 is distinguished as probably the only public service channel in the world that requires subscription (Nielsen 2016: 37).

Baastруп (Hjørdis), Nikolaj Groth (Jeppe) and Carsten Bjørnlund (Rasmus). In terms of a general idea and script, *Rita* is a creation of a Danish scriptwriter and producer Christian Torpe, for whom the show became a springboard to international recognition. In 2012, thanks to *Rita* he won nominations for the International Producer of the Year and the European Producer of the Year at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Monte Carlo Television Festival (IMDb 2012).

Thus far, *Rita* inspired three different remakes as well as one spin-off. In 2015, the Dutch national broadcaster NPO1 launched their own version of *Rita* renamed to *Tessa*. Similar step was taken by the French network TF 1, where their local version was named *Sam* (2016 –). While the Dutch production ended only after a single season, the French adaptation has spanned into five seasons and is still running at the time of writing of this article (IMDb 2016).

*Rita* also commanded the attention of producers from the United States. However, the American path towards a local adaptation proved much more complicated. A pilot episode for the American *Rita*, starring Anna Gunn, was filmed as early as 2013, but it was not continued as a series. In 2019, the Showtime cable network commissioned another pilot for a remake, with the titular part offered this time to Lena Headey. At the time of writing this article, the American version of *Rita* directed by Lisa Cholodenko is still marked as “in post-production” on the IMDb website and no specific date of release is given (‘Rita’ 2019). In 2015, *Rita* inspired a spin-off entitled *Hjørdis*. It was launched in 2015 and aired for one season.<sup>2</sup> The true watershed for *Ritas*’ broader international fame came in 2015, when Netflix made the show available on its platform. Later, Netflix participated in the production of the three subsequent seasons until the conclusion of the show in 2020.

### 3. *Rita* as a “difficult woman”

Undoubtedly, there are many reasons why a series about a teacher from a provincial Danish school gained such wide popularity around the world. Certainly, one of the important ones is that the show, in an original and creative manner, inscribes itself into a wider global media trend of narratives about “difficult women”. In 2013, an American journalist, Brett Martin, published an acclaimed book *Difficult Men: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. It was a behind the scenes account of what Martin described as the new breed of popular and innovative American television shows which reinvigorated the format of a television series

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<sup>2</sup> The spin-off takes place in the same school as *Rita* (season 1–3), focusing on the attempts of her colleague Hjørdis (Lise Baastруп) to organize a school play. Mille Dinesen did not appear in the series.

and lifted it to the new creative heights. Series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008), *Deadwood* (2004–2006), *Mad Men* (2007–2015) or *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), although relied on different settings and themes, shared at least two major features. They were developed by charismatic male creators/showrunners and their plots revolved around complex, anti-heroic male protagonists. As Martin described the new phenomenon on American TV in his own words, “not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely about [original emphasis] manhood – in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat” (Martin 2013: 13).

A few years later, somehow in direct response to the “difficult men” phenomenon, the corresponding “difficult women” shows emerged on various American distribution platforms. As Svenja Hohenstein and Katharina Thalmann rightly notice, strong and controversial female protagonists appeared on television screens much earlier, but only recently they have gained prominence and formal recognition. Thus, “critics and scholars have, for a long time, turned a blind eye to the complex female characters who typified or even anticipated the changes in television” (Hohenstein, Thalmann 2019: 115). However, with the advent of shows such as *Weeds* (2005–2012), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), *Homeland* (2011–2020) or *Big Little Lies* (2017–), the phenomenon of “difficult women” vis-à-vis “difficult men” has become too big to ignore. In Derya Özkan and Deborah Hardt’s words, thanks to the rise of the new distribution platforms such as Netflix, we have a proliferation of shows with strong, anti-heroic female protagonists who “are portrayed as masters of their own density”, and who “exercise control over their bodies and sexuality” (Özkan, Hardt 2020: 166). Isabel C. Pinedo, the author of a recent monograph on the subject, *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics of Complex Women in Serial Narratives*, explains that the new wave of shows:

center on female characters that are complex, multi-dimensional, and who possess the female gaze, the narrative center with whom the audience is aligned. We see events unfold from their perspective, their actions drive the narrative, and they take up a substantial amount of screen time. The story deals with candor about women’s experiences and looking is organized around female empowerment. She is not a spectacle. This content deliberately serves and targets a female audience.

(Pinedo 2021: 1)

A few pages later in the same study, Pinedo extends that characteristics by providing a comprehensive definition of a new type of protagonist recurring in those shows:

The difficult woman who is not a straight out antihero transgresses the norms of femininity unapologetically and systematically. She is abrasive, aggressive, ambitious, often defined by work more than motherhood, at times unlikable. The figure of the difficult woman took root in the subsoil of a changing industry, one that first developed the male antihero.

(Pinedo 2021: 4)

Although Pinedo does not discuss or even mention the Danish show in her book, the above descriptions perfectly fit the characterisation of Rita and its titular protagonist. Undoubtedly, Rita is one of the many “difficult women” populating screens all over the world. At the same time, however, Rita brings distinct and uncommon elements to the formula. The show introduces the new kind of protagonist into a very familiar setting, namely that of a school. Thus, we get a very refreshing perspective on the character of a teacher against the contemporary school setting.

#### **4. In the wake of Nordic Noir**

Another source of *Rita*'s worldwide resonance is the connections that the show makes with Nordic Noir, the popular genre of contemporary video narrative. Obviously, *Rita* is not an instance of Nordic Noir. However, it shares several elements and themes that made the latter distinct and popular. The very term Nordic Noir has roots in the Scandinavian crime novels, also known as “Scandi crime”, that in turn grew out of the local fascination with the American hardboiled detective novel and the British clue-puzzle (Stougaard–Nielsen 2016). The most representative authors within that tradition include Henning Mankell, Leif G.W. Persson, Stieg Larsson, Arnaldur Indriðason or Camilla Läckberg (Engelstad 2018: 24–25; Hansen, Waade 2017: 1). In the mid-1990s, the spectacular international fame those novelists gained has opened the way for even greater success of their works' audio-visual adaptations (Hansen, Waade 2017: 1). Titles such as *Wallander* (2005–2013) and *Millennium* (2009–2010) quickly paved way for other, this time original series from Northern Europe such as *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (2007–2012) or *Bron/The Bridge* (2011–2018). They consolidated the position of Nordic Noir as a separate genre with broad international recognition and substantial economic potential (Hansen, Waade 2017: 2).

The first obvious feature of the genre is the geographic location. The shows are set in the austere landscapes of northern Europe with dark skies and rainy or snowy weather. Nordic Noir is also distinguished by the characteristic thematic elements. The plots usually “examine institutional corruption, all marshalled by a cast of slightly dysfunctional protagonists” (Berger 2016: 149). Audio-visual Nordic Noir has had a lasting influence on contemporary production.

It has popularised a revised, darker and gloomier aesthetic of popular television crime series and pushed the crime shows from a mostly episodic structure to a serial plot structure (Hansen 2020: 123). The feature that most explicitly connects Nordic Noir with *Rita* is the approach to gender issues and the presence of strong female characters. Nordic Noir serials are often built around outstanding, larger-than-life female protagonists with distinct anti-heroic dimensions. Usually, they struggle not only with the cunning and resourceful antagonists, but also their own problems, like addiction or various mental conditions. They combine professional brilliance with flawed personalities and propensity to blunder. Probably the most iconic characters include Birgitte Nyborg Christensen (Sidse Babett Knudsen) from *Borgen* (2010–2014), Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) from *The Killing* (2007–2012) or Saga Norén (Sofia Helin) from *The Bridge* (2011–2018). Those protagonists are staunchly independent, sexually liberated and ready to engage in risky ventures when pursuing professional goals.

*Rita* borrows several elements from the formula of the Scandinavian police procedural and applies it to portray an original story about school life. The titular Rita, like *Borgen*'s Birgitte Nyborg Christensen or *The Bridge*'s Saga Norén, is a captivating non-conformist and rebel. At the same time, she is a compelling professional, outstanding teacher, who does not balk at risky choices and controversial decisions. A good illustration of Rita's approach to work is her declaration that she became a teacher in order to protect children from their parents. Much of the comedy as well as drama in the show is derived from the application of that formula to specific situations in school and private life. Rita, like characters in the Nordic Noir stories, does not shy away from dangerous or transgressive behaviour. For instance, she conducts a clandestine affair with the school principal or slaps one of the parents when he behaves in a contemptuous and insolent way towards her. She also stages various provocations or resorts to sabotage when the goal is to benefit the school. She is also a flawed character, a genuine anti-heroine and a "difficult woman". Many of her decisions bring unexpected and negative outcomes. She is no stranger to minor embarrassments or even major disasters. As one of the reviewers put it, Rita can be both inspiring and irritating, and her moral compass has difficulty pointing in the right direction. It is most clearly visible in the far-from-perfect relations with her children (Piesowicz 2017). For instance, she is often quick to notice even minor problems or dysfunctions of her pupils, but at the same time for years she fails to recognise and even acknowledge the autism of her own daughter Molly (Sara Hjort Ditlevsen). When her son Jeppe (Nikolaj Goth) outs himself as gay, Rita's major concern becomes whether he is active or passive in sex. Ostensibly, out of concern for his health and wellbeing.

Similarly to the entire Nordic Noir genre, the series has also benefitted from the fascination with Northern European cultures in the Anglophone world and beyond. At the same time, putting *Rita* vis-à-vis a typical Nordic Noir series, we can also notice several significant diversions. Most importantly, *Rita* shuns the more gruesome, “noir” dimension of the genre. It does not include any macabre motifs, there is no murder or torture in the series at any point. If the themes of death and mourning are presented, they concern everyday experience and are adjusted to the purpose of the realistic portrayal of school life.

It seems that the contemporary global viewers, driven by such cultural phenomena as “Scandimania” or the embrace of Danish *hygge* (Kolff 2017) are more inclined to invest their time in the narratives set in Northern Europe and which embody progressive ideals associated with Northern European countries. However, we should also perceive *Rita* through the prism of the resurgent popularity of narratives concerning school life, and teachers’ lives in particular.

## 5. Refreshing school narrative

Teachers have always been an attractive material for the media and the entertainment industry. Similarly to police officers, medical workers (including doctors and nurses), journalists or lawyers, teachers have been among the favoured professional groups represented in the audio-visual narratives, especially in relation to female characters (Elasmar, Hasegawa, Brain 1999: 28; Signorielli, Kahlenberg 2001: 28; Glascock 2001: 663; González-de-Garay, Marcos-Ramos, Portillo-Delgado 2020: 416, 420). The interest in teachers has not waned in recent years. We can directly link the popularity of teacher protagonists and school settings to the rise of the new content delivery technologies. The streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, Apple TV or Netflix, have been instrumental in the revival of the school film genre. While the young people today watch less television, they are increasingly drawn to streaming platforms (Brown 2017; Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Howard 2013: 126). The patterns of consumption offered by those services seem much more attuned to the tastes, habits and expectations of young, especially the so-called digital natives (Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua, Lazkano-Arrillaga, Eguskiza-Sesumaga 2018: 62–63). This in turn influences the programming choices of the media platforms. For the young and adolescent audience, school is a familiar and easily relatable environment. Therefore, people from those groups eagerly consume shows which are set in schools and feature students and teachers.

Another key feature brought about by the streaming platforms is the greater leeway and flexibility with which they operate. Compared to traditional television stations, the streaming

platforms are constrained with fewer regulations and legal restrictions. Moreover, despite some similarities, they often rely on different business models. Streaming services seem unrivalled in offering content to diverse niche audiences. The traditional complaint directed at the pan-national, generalist television networks is that they must inevitably pander to the lowest common denominator. This practically discourages formal experimentation and engagement with controversial topics (Özkan, Hardt 2020: 167). Progress in technology allowed for the development of the so-called narrowcasting, that is, the system of minority channels and small cable and satellite networks available on subscription (Buonanno 2008: 25). However, this is still far away from the providers such as Netflix or Amazon Prime in terms of cost and flexibility (D'Arma, Raats, Steemers 2021). Hence, streaming platforms can disseminate stories with riskier themes concerning school and adolescent life.

Obviously, popular narratives about teenage problems set in schools which involve such subjects as sexuality, substance abuse or violence, were not invented by Netflix. The history of what is now usually referred to as “teenage film” or “high-school drama” goes back to the early 1980s and is usually identified with the films of John Hughes. Between 1984 and 1987 Hughes directed six enormously popular movies: *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), and practically created a new genre. It enjoyed great popularity for the next two decades and prepared ground for other seminal titles such as *Heathers* (1988), *Clueless* (1995) or *Mean Girls* (2004). Although rarely cast as protagonists, teachers in those films usually played important roles. At the same time, however, they are rarely represented in a sympathetic, multidimensional manner. Typically, they are either sadistic bullies who take advantage of their privileged social position or easily manipulated, narrow-minded bores, targets of various jokes and pranks (Shary, McInnes 2005: 79).

With the advent of the new millennium, high school film fell into decline (Fedorov et al. 2019). It was not only a result of a mere exhaustion of the genre, although that was also a factor. The change in patterns of production played its part as well. The cinematic production became dominated by blockbusters with special effects and high-concept plots. In this model movies were only elements in a wider commercial environment that also involved merchandise (toys, clothes etc.), other media (video-games, TV spinoffs) or attractions like theme parks or live shows. High-school dramas hardly fitted into this model. Simultaneously, as mentioned above, the conventions of television did not allow for the more explicit treatment of the taboo subjects that made those films attractive to the adolescent audience. Therefore, with the rise of the



streaming services and their large young and adolescent audience, film schools or school shows gained a new platform to thrive.

Expectedly, the new school-themed productions could not just revert to recycling the old patterns but have eagerly embraced changing mores and expectations. While the school films made at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century usually highlighted psychological intrigue, violence, heterosexual affairs and substance abuse, the new series have offered a much wider gamut of potentially controversial and thus attractive themes. The new productions have included gay and transgender characters as well as such problems as mental illness, eating disorders and even suicide. Titles such as *13 Reasons Why* (2017), *Elite* (2018-2020), *Sex Education* (2019–2020), *Quicksand* (2019), *Euphoria* (2019–2020) or *The Mess You Leave Behind* (2020) are just a handful of recent popular shows set in schools (at least partially) and featuring students and their teachers.

Even with the abundance of shows revolving around school life available today, *Rita* clearly stands out. First, it is targeted at the more mature audience rather than adolescents. Also, in contrast to most of the audio-visual, *Rita* prioritises the teacher, not student perspective. Apart from Rita herself, most of the key characters in the show – with the notable exclusion of Rita's children – are teachers. Other significant teacher characters include Hjørdis (Lise Baastrup), Rasmus (Carsten Bjørnlund) and Helle (Ellen Hillingsø). They are all multi-dimensional figures, endowed with distinct personalities and idiosyncratic traits. By contrast, in most other popular school shows available on Netflix, like *Elite*, *Sex Education* or *13 Reasons Why*, the teachers are often sadistic tyrants or boring and detached educators resembling individuals from John Hughes' comedies. *Rita* unambiguously breaks away from the template. She is neither a bore nor a heroic saviour and clearly breaks away from a heroic teacher model created by other iconic fictional teachers like Richard Dadier from *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), John Keating from *Dead Poets Society* (1990) or Lou Anne Johnson from *Dangerous Minds* (1995). Although the presentation of the teachers in *Rita* may sometimes veer towards caricature and exaggeration, they are treated with sympathy and benevolence. She seems to display a far greater level of efficacy as a character and individual. However, like many of her heroic predecessors, she also gets punished for her non-standard approach. In the fourth season of the series Rita gets expelled from the school and establishes her own small independently-run institution.

Despite her emblematic non-conformity, Rita eschews many of the exaggerated or romanticised representations often found in Anglophone narratives about schools. Usually in American and British depictions of school life we either encounter elite institutions (expensive private schools like in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), or *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012)) or run-down,

inner-city schools, plagued by delinquency and( blatant lack of discipline (vide *Blackboard Jungle* or *Dangerous Minds*). Rita is definitely not a generic teacher and her school is far from an outlying educational environment. Rita's school is not exceptional in any way. On the contrary, it struggles with many familiar problems. Most typical of them are various interventions from the local authorities, and the reality of budgetary austerity, staff shortages and cuts to the extracurricular educational initiatives.

*Rita*'s other distinct feature is the show's unorthodox engagement with controversial topics presented in the context of education. *Rita* introduces many risky themes such as adolescent sex, violence, abortion, teenage pregnancy and mental illness. This is congruent with the approach of many popular Anglophone series. Yet, also here certain diversions can be noted. For instance, one of the most frequent motifs explored in films as well as televisual narratives are sexual relationships between teachers and students. Other favourite themes include the students' consumption of illicit substances, sexual violence and bullying. We will also find all those themes addressed in *Rita*. But the series does it from a less sensationalist angle while simultaneously adding a distinctly local Scandinavian flavour. As an American reviewer, Maureen Thomas, explains it, "one of my fascinations with the show is it's un-Americanness, the peek into Danish culture, especially as it relates to women's issues, sexuality, and education" (Thomas 2015). Particularly striking for Thomas is the show's approach to sexuality. When comparing *Rita* to the similar productions she knows from the United States, Thomas observes:

There are far less boundaries about what teachers can and cannot discuss with their students, which is probably a reflection of the more relaxed Danish outlook on sexuality than here in the US. Rita counsels a pregnant student, and becomes involved in the homelife of a boy with a bipolar mother. Another character, Hjørdis (Lise Baastrup), an inexperienced, but well-meaning teacher [...] strips nude in the girls' locker room to encourage body acceptance. I can only imagine what would happen in America if that occurred! Yet, in the context of the show, it is endearing, not creepy, again, most likely that Danish thing!

(Thomas 2015)

Because of its focus on the mature adult rather than teenage experience *Rita* ostensibly avoids titillation or caricatural exaggeration of so many adolescent comedies from Hollywood (with the most iconic, *American Pie* series of films). In *Rita* we can also find frequent references to the characters' sexual life, substance abuse or violence, but also topics that Anglophone productions tend to avoid, including abortion – which as Pris Blossom observes is "completely

normalised, even encouraged at times” (Blossom 2016) – xenophobia, mental illness or immigrant experience.

With its nonconformist, “difficult woman” protagonist, *Rita* strays from the typical representations of teachers on screen. Obviously, contemporary Anglophone televisual narratives also feature charismatic and awe-inspiring teachers but much more commonly they are university professors. Presumably, their social status seems to be higher and more appealing. Their roles are not limited to teaching. They are often researchers with outstanding expertise that can be practically applied beyond the campus. By contrast, *Rita* is a primary school teacher who is professionally fulfilled and her job is revealed as complex and intriguing. Moreover, various problems of the school and the students are also depicted as demanding high levels of expertise and skill.

*Rita*’s unique status is highlighted not only by the manner she approaches various challenges and personal conflicts at school, but also in the way she dresses. She emphatically values comfort over appearance. Instead of a typical teacher uniform, she wears jeans, flannel shirts, leather jackets and cowboy boots – all the emblematic markers of rebelliousness and independence. At the same time, she is not devoid of sexuality and sexual attractiveness. She is neither a temptress and seducer nor a sexless creature consumed entirely by her social mission. Even the opening credits exacerbate such an image. *Rita* is not only shown smoking cigarettes (often in itself a marker of a rogue teacher), but she is doing it in the school toilet while mischievously correcting spelling mistakes students made in their writings on the walls. However, *Rita* is not a slacker and bears very little resemblance to the notorious Elizabeth Halsey (Cameron Diaz) from Jake Kasdan’s comedy *Bad Teacher* (2011). Despite her transgressions (sometimes openly flaunting or breaking official rules), *Rita* is presented as competent and clever. Her contrarian and rebellious side is juxtaposed with her considerable pedagogical competence and charisma. She is guided by her progressive attitudes, and on numerous occasions she does not shy away from confrontation, especially if it involves standing up to the various vestiges of patriarchal culture. As it is often the case in “difficult woman” or Nordic Noir narratives, her temperament and clear moral judgement frequently lead her to trouble. *Rita* is not free from errors or instances of poor judgement. However, her anti-heroism makes her more attractive and intriguing to viewers.

## 6. Conclusions

*Rita* occupies an exceptional place in the increasingly popular genre of the twenty-first-century portrayals of teachers. While sharing the genre's emphasis on spectacular progressiveness and moral ambiguity, it supports many values and ideas normally linked with education. The show's most visible aspect is that it focuses on the teacher rather than the student. Furthermore, it manages to combine serious problems with elements of comedy and even grotesque. The titular protagonist is often constructed as a comedic antiheroine, a cultural figure not nearly as conventionalized as that of the antihero.

*Rita* is a living proof of the continuing appeal of the Scandinavian productions. The series has managed to reignite the teacher-centric film genre. It constitutes an original instance that revamps and modernises the heroic-teacher paradigm found in many classic Anglophone productions. The wide international success of the series on the Netflix platform gives hope for establishing a new, fresh paradigm in representing teachers today. It seems that we can expect similar attempts as the streaming platforms offer the possibility of development for the school environment as an attractive setting for contemporary narratives.

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