

## “In a galaxy (no longer) far, far away”: *The Mandalorian* between Platformization and Processes of Celebrification

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### Abstract

The paper's main aim is to analyse the television series *The Mandalorian*, placed within the transmedia narrative ecosystem (Pescatore, 2018) of *Star Wars*, to reflect on several particularly urgent issues concerning the contemporary mediascape and, more generally, the digital society we live in. Distributed by Disney+ in Italy in March 2020 (2019 in the USA), the series covered by the paper allows us to advance multiple considerations. First, it will enable us to reflect on complex television (Mittell, 2017) and how this has changed regarding renewed spectatorship (Tirino, 2020). Secondly, it allows us to reflect on new modes of consumption, production, and distribution related to the rise of SVOD services and OTT Television (Re, 2017b) and, in this case, the existence of a (proprietary) platform of the Walt Disney Company group. *The Mandalorian* also allows us to focus on the evolution of transmedia storytelling (within the *Star Wars* universe or, more generally, within the mediascape in which we live). A further aspect concerns the concept of celebrity: the production's choice fell on the actor Pedro Pascal to play the Mandalorian; the actor participated in the promotional events linked to the release of the series, but for almost the entire duration of the first season and the second one a helmet and armour cover him. After contextualising the television series, the paper intends to highlight the abovementioned aspects.

**Keyword:** TV Series; Platformization; Celebrity; Fandom; Transmedia Storytelling.

### 1. Introduction. TV seriality and platformization

We can count *The Mandalorian* (2019 - ongoing) among recent years' most successful TV series. It is a science fiction TV series conceived by John Favreau from a subject by George Lucas, set within the *Star Wars* universe (Jenkins, 2017; Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018; Bertetti, 2022). Distributed by Disney+ in 2019 in the first countries where the streaming service was available and in Italy by March 2020 (during the lockdown dictated by the Covid-19 emergency), *The Mandalorian* is the first live-action series in the *Star Wars* media franchise – even if several previous animated series dedicated to specific events, such as *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-2020, Cartoon Network-Netflix-Disney+), have been released in past years – and it is a product designed to launch Disney's proprietary streaming platform, Disney+ (Lucasfilm is a part of Disney Company).

Structurally, the series has three seasons (with a fourth in the works), each consisting of eight episodes, numbered in continuity and referred to as “chapters” (ranging from *Chapter*

1: *The Mandalorian*, Ep. 01x01, to *Chapter 24: The Return*, Ep. 03x08). Each chapter has a short title that allows an understanding of the main narrative element around each episode.

The TV series tells the adventures of bounty hunter Din Djarin and the various characters accompanying him. It is organised in self-contained episodes (with a vertical plot, the so-called “anthology plot”). However, each season has a horizontal plot (the so-called “running plot”) that runs through the different chapters. This series can, therefore, be called a “serialised series” for these reasons (Innocenti & Pescatore, 2008; Teti, 2020). The release of the episodes of the series in question took place weekly, thus not following the trend of other streaming platforms, such as Netflix, to release the series in one go, leading to new modes of viewing (Tirino, 2020), such as binge-watching.

The paper aims to reason around some critical junctures of the mediascape and contemporary spectatorship (Tirino, 2020) that the series lets emerge.

Starting from an analysis of this TV series, we can reflect on platformization (Poell *et al.*, 2022) concerning the production, distribution, and consumption of complex television seriality (Mittell, 2015; Re, 2017b). This case study allows us to reflect on transmedia storytelling, which increasingly includes within it (collective) grassroots narratives, primarily through social media (Castellano, 2020), and on phenomena of celebrity rewritten in the context of platformization (Castellano, 2022) and processes of celebrification (Rojek, 2001) involving characters that are not necessarily real but fictional.

Proceeding in levels, we can point out how, within a model outlined primarily by Netflix (Lobato, 2019; Tirino, 2020), the production rhythms of media companies have increased significantly to offer viewer-consumers a wide range of audiovisual products and the ability to tap into the platforms’ libraries by juggling within an assortment of categories, divided by product type, by genres, by suggestions defined by recommendation algorithms, but also by following priorities dictated by the platforms themselves (e.g., “most watched in Italy this week”), emphasising in this way the incidence of a non-neutral interface (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Gillespie, 2017) in consumption and spectator experience. Despite many productions, this does not exclude the fact that many of the products reflect high-quality standards that distinguished quality television in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s (Thompson, 1996; 2007) and that also run through contemporary television seriality in some respects. A role within the process that sees several serial audiovisual products taking shape is played by the so-called “streaming wars” (Neira, 2020; Scolari, 2022) within a more general “platforms war” (Tirino and Castellano, 2021), and in a context in which all the media companies have aimed to differentiate themselves from competitors (Di Chiara, 2017), focused themselves on audiences, user data, and rights to audiovisual products to be acquired. In this scenario, Disney has tried to mark its difference by trying, on the one hand, to approach new audiences and, on the other hand, by aiming to strengthen its brand (Neira, 2020; Scolari, 2022) (and the other acquired companies) by focusing on exclusive programming, based for the most part on in-house productions. Although also in the case of Disney, there has been a significant increase in the production pace of *ex novo* and in-house TV series, this has not excluded the birth of qualitatively appreciable products and experimentation with production techniques such as *stagecraft*, that is a technique that redefines the concept of background chroma and translates it into virtual background chroma, which goes from being part of the physical CGI set environment to being part of

the CGI image itself rendered in real-time, creating on-set virtual worlds that can react to camera movements” (Martínez-Cano, 2021, p. 501)<sup>39</sup>.

The creation of *The Mandalorian* follows this technique. The production of *The Mandalorian* was only the first, and it was followed by different other products, focusing on other characters (*Obi-Wan Kenobi*, 2022; *Andor*, 2022 – ongoing; *Ahsoka*, 2023 – ongoing), reflecting the desire first and foremost to provide spectators with insights into events contextualised in *Star Wars* but not duly dissected in previous canonical products (e.g. films or animated TV series), but also the willingness on the part of the media franchise to develop its stories serially, with a more dilated storytelling time frame (Mittell, 2015).

## 2. *The Mandalorian*: an ‘innovative’ TV series between past, present and future

Although *The Mandalorian* promises to be a series with innovative traits and although it is perfectly cast in the *platform society* (van Dijck *et al.*, 2019), at least for marking Disney’s debut (with Disney+) in the world of streaming platforms and for the technologies employed, in its reference to the primary genre and its relationship to the *Star Wars* fictional universe it presents some elements that seem to turn its gaze to the past, particularly to the original trilogy, with a marked reference to the Western. The past, however, is not the only time category the series focuses on, as there are several references to current issues in the public debate. The further (narrative and transmedia) expansions to which the series opens may represent, instead, a glimpse into the temporal category of the future (of the media franchise and beyond).

*The look to the past.* Corroborating the hypothesis of a call to the past is the choice to provide this TV series with a strongly Western-oriented imprint, recalling traditional seriality (Dusi and Grignaffini, 2020), naturally in a mixture with science fiction, inscribing itself in the category of space-western (Gutiérrez Delgado, 2022), referring back to the more typical setting of the *original trilogy* and to a mixture of genres that also characterises contemporary seriality instead. The Western emerges from the settings, often desert, and precise imagery forged from Spaghetti Westerns (e.g., Ep. 01x02 and the figure of the “sheriff”), including the soundtrack. As Freeman and Smith (2023) point out in an article, Lucasfilm cleverly created a bridge between the first trilogy and *The Mandalorian* series – probably also because of the narrative arc within which this serial audiovisual product is placed – through what scholars refer to as “genre intertexts” and “genre linking”. According to the authors, the Western could create a link with the “core” of the media franchise, namely the *original trilogy*.

*The Mandalorian in the present and contemporary society.* Although they are not the subject of in-depth study here, the series offers food for thought about issues that are particularly significant in our contemporary society, emphasising the innovative features of such a fictional product. First, it is possible to reflect on the ethical dilemma that grips Din Djarin (Ebner, 2023) and the choices he makes, completely changing his perspective and approach towards Grogu and the Mandalorian Creed in the first season and veering towards an “ethics of care” (Ebner, 2023; Belluomini, 2022), albeit in the face of an initially “fundamentalist” attitude (even if in the third season he fights against the label of apostate,

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<sup>39</sup> Translated by me from Spanish.

to follow “the way” again). It is also possible to reflect on Din Djarin’s role as Grogu’s “tutor” and, more specifically, on parenthood (Quinn, 2020).

*‘Back to the Future’: the series in the transmedia Star Wars universe.* As mentioned above, *The Mandalorian* is a TV series drawn from the *Star Wars* universe and, within the narrative-timeline arc envisioned by George Lucas, it is possible to place it a few years after the events narrated by *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* and about twenty-five years before *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Such placement helps define the role of this TV series within a larger transmedia narrative universe or a narrative ecosystem (Pescatore, 2018) composed of official and grassroots (fan-generated) products (Bertetti, 2022). *The Mandalorian* expands narrative elements that are only hinted at in other franchise products and does so innovatively since it uses television seriality for the first time in live action. It raises consideration of the direction the *Star Wars* storyworld is taking (Nardi and Sweet, 2020), i.e., increasingly oriented toward a serial production that aims to provide spectators with an additional (unseen) glimpse into the entire fictional world, delving into characters (as spin-off or midquel, e.g., *The Mandalorian*), events (as prequels, e.g., *Andor*), and narrative-temporal arcs (as interquel, e.g., *Obi-Wan Kenobi*). The series itself expands through additional products found on Disney+, such as several trailers, prologues of the seasons, an animated short film by Studio Ghibli focused on Grogu (*Zen - Grogu and Dust Bunnies*), a docu-series focusing on production and direction, with technical commentary on the making of the TV series, the composition of the soundtrack, the set material, etc. These elements represent guiding paratexts (Mittell, 2015) for fans.

The narrative interweaving with other Lucasfilm serial products distributed by Disney+ should also be noted, confirming the intersectionality between products. It is the case with *The Book of Boba Fett*: with the presence of the Mandalorian and Grogu in some episodes, the series is more than a spin-off on the character Boba Fett; it even poses as a crossover of *The Mandalorian*. A further indication in this sense comes from the end credits: in this case, rather than before an example of transmedia storytelling and transmediality of the narrative universe, we could advance the hypothesis that we can face the transmediality of the seriality: the end credits of *The Mandalorian* outline a kind of storyboard, showing drawings of the primary sequences of the episodes, thus underlining the inextricable relationship that exists between cinema and comics (Frezza, 2018). Each piece, as we can see, represents a small world that expands the (narrative) world (Boni, 2017). A peculiar narrative expansion concerns *The Mandalorian*-themed merchandising and the figure of Grogu, who has become a “real” celebrity (of the Net and beyond), also an example of transmedia entertainment (Riva and Boato, 2022). This element marks a further step towards defining a direction within which *Star Wars*, especially Disney, and the platforms could move.

### 3. Celebrification processes between concealment and imagination

For an examination of *The Mandalorian*, an in-depth look at the celebrity category is particularly interesting. The series boasts the presence of several actors known to the public, among whom one can count Pedro Pascal (Din Djarin, the Mandalorian), who for almost the entire narrative arc covering the three seasons remains with his face covered, showing himself only on three occasions (in the first season and the second season). As mentioned

above, particularly interesting is also the case of Grogu, aka “Baby Yoda”, who, although a fictional character, has seen his figure go through a process of celebrification, starting from the series and production (with the release of the market of different kinds of toys, action figures, collaborations with companies in other product sectors, etc.) and primarily through the grassroots expansions by fans. Going back to the literature on the subject and wanting to identify some categories, we could argue that we are faced with two different types of celebrity (Polesana, 2023): Pedro Pascal could fall into the category of “attributed” celebrity, i.e. “celebrity produced or staged by the entertainment industry (i.e. public image created to serve specific interests” (Polesana, 2023, p. 74); Grogu, on the other hand, could fall into the category of “celebrity of a subculture”, i.e. “media personalities who are famous only to their fan base” ((Polesana, 2023, p. 74). Although the level of celebrity may be tied to the fandom of the TV series, the media and market resonance have instead reached global levels.

### *3.1 For a definition of celebrity (in the era of platformization)*

Before examining the two cases, defining celebrity and contextualisation within a platformization involving actors and star system personalities may be essential.

Following Rojek’s (2001) studies on celebrity, this category in contemporary society can be constituted with “the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere” (Rojek, 2001, p. 10). For a celebrity to exist, such attributions must be recognised by someone (consumers-spectators), for there to be media resonance (Bifulco, 2023) and for the involvement of professionals who take care of their public image, defined by Rojek as “cultural intermediators”, but also the management of “a private self and a public self” (Rojek, 2001, p. 10) and the perpetuation of this recognizability over time. Although compared to the past, the boundary between celebrity and audience/fandom, which serves for the acquisition of celebrity status (Rojek, 2001), is perceived as less pronounced due to media transformations and the management of celebrity through the media, intimacy remains at a distance (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Thus, specific considerations of mass consumption are still relevant. Some of Morin’s considerations from his 1957 work, *Le star*, taken up also in *L’Esprit du temps* (1962), fit correctly into such a scenario. Even if some principles of the category of the divo/star are changed, others are rewritten in contemporary times, in a whirlwind of technological, media and socio-cultural innovations, together with changes in the status of audiences (Castellano, 2022). Already in the transition from classic to modern cinema, the sociologist had pointed out elasticity of the concept of age and beauty (Morin, 1961), emphasising how there are no ideal age ranges attributable to the star, just as “beauties are no longer always ideal and even an interesting homeliness is permitted to impose its particular charm [...] Nearer, more intimate, the star is almost at the disposition of her adorers” (Morin, 1961, p. 23), concepts that are well suited to the category of contemporary celebrity. Another significant element is the extension of the category of the star to multiple fields and sectors (Morin, 2017) and, therefore, no longer the exclusive preserve of cinema. The sociological category of celebrity changes, enriching itself with new attributes and at the same time losing others in the contemporary media ecosystem and within a framework such as the one generated by streaming platforms and SVOD (subscription video on demand) services, among which Disney+ can be counted, and more generally within a context rewritten by a film and television production, distribution and consumption system that has radically changed in

the last decade. Since the birth of modern cinema (Frezza, 2021) and the advent of the first television broadcasts, some of the regulating principles of the star system – linked to the attribution of divine qualities to the actors and performers of Hollywood cinema (Codeluppi, 2017) – have fallen away: it is clear how a system such as the current one contributes to overturning the conception of celebrity, enjoying new connotations (Castellano, 2022) and fitting more generally within a renewed spectator paradigm (Tirino, 2020) and broader changes that have characterised the cultural industry and the film and seriality industry (Frezza, 2021).

As pointed out at the outset, the contemporary television system has seen an increase in the supply of services and platforms but also and above all serial products (Barra and Guarnaccia, 2021), either intended for a global market or designed for national and territorial markets (Lobato, 2019), in addition to an increasingly fragmented consumption (Barra and Guarnaccia, 2021) by audiences. Inevitably, a quantitative big production entails recognizability and notoriety for many actors, mainly if they perform in TV series capable of gaining prominence. As some studies have pointed out, “within the contemporary scenario, the pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years” (Andò *et al.*, 2018, p. 6). Compared to a more cadenced production at a slower pace, a production such as the current one, together with the possibilities offered by social media such as Instagram (Castellano, 2020) and with increasing affinity and overlap with the concept of influencer, allows celebrities to flourish and celebrity status to grow, even outside the national context and in larger markets. The identification of the fandom with the celebrity and the relationship between the fandom and the celebrity also deserves reflection. This relationship has changed due to socio-cultural changes, which have materialised hand in hand with changes that have affected the mediascape. Social media changed celebrity-fan interaction (Wheeler, 2014). For the celebrity, these media allow communication as close and direct as possible, “more intimate, open, reciprocal, and frequent” (Chung and Cho, 2017, p. 481), as well as encouraging autonomy in choice of times and ways to express oneself (O’Brien, 2014); at the same time, they allow fans to be updated on the events related to the celebrity in a different way than in the past. The relationship with the celebrity continues to be based on a certain distance but, as already highlighted by Morin in 1957, with the necessary differences compared to the present, these figures no longer have that divinity and sublime aura because “they are no longer inaccessible [...] they have established a cult in which admiration supplants veneration. They are less unapproachable, but more moving. Less sublime, but all the more lovable” (Morin, 1961, p. 32). Morin had grasped the possibility that the points of contact between the star and the spectators-consumers could increase, encouraged by the multiple channels available, through which the cult of such figures is stimulated (Morin, 1961). Social media and the images that celebrities publish on social media represent a further point of contact, which provides a different possibility of learning details and information regarding the private lives of these figures, but also of knowing their style of communication in more depth. Thus, the fan implements a different identification level than in the past. Not only do spectators vicariously enjoy the luxury and comfort displayed by celebrities through the images published on social media, but they consume the figure differently. Furthermore, through social media, “fascination behaviours typical of digital celebrity culture are activated and trigger algorithmic dynamics” (D’Aloia and Pedroni, 2021, p. 88) and not just algorithmic ones that amplify engagement and “socio-media” success of the contents.

After a definition regarding the celebrity and the changes that have affected this sociological category within more general socio-cultural and media changes, it is possible to proceed with the exemplification of the two identified figures, Pedro Pascal and Grogu.

### 3.2 *The hiding of the celebrity and the increase in desire*

Pedro Pascal's celebrity status has consolidated over the years between film productions and, above all, serial productions (*Game of Thrones*, where he plays Prince Oberyn Martell; *Narcos*, where he plays Javier F. Peña; *The Last of Us*, where he plays Joel Miller). He is an actor who is already familiar with the mechanisms of television series and the consolidation of celebrity capital in the platform society. The presence within *The Mandalorian* has allowed it to extend its notoriety to different types of audiences (multiple generations of Star Wars fans, different target consumer-spectators). The peculiarity in this specific case lies in hiding his image (and face) under the Mandalorian's armour, under the helmet. In a digital society in which the construction of the celebrity also depends on what is shown and revealed through images, in a process of uninterrupted showcase of the self (Codeluppi, 2015), through a constant presence, especially within social media, in the case in question the celebrity is almost removed from the spectator's gaze: it is possible to recognise the voice and physical movements – but within the perimeter of the character portrayed – but it is not possible to see him. It may be one of *The Mandalorian's* biggest challenges. What is hidden is the face of the actor, but also the face of the character. During the narration, the production tries to find new expressive mechanisms that replace the expressiveness of the face and the different kinds of tensions that the face shows. The face is where all expressions settle, but it is also the repository of the character's identity and the actor who plays it (Spisso, 2016). From the first episodes of the first season, the spectators of *The Mandalorian* are faced with the hidden face of the character, and Pedro Pascal's fans do not see their favourite. This concealment may have increased fans' suspense, *hype*, curiosity, desire, and anticipation. The first season of the TV show plays and lingers on this aspect, keeping high the public's desire to finally see which character is hidden behind the mask and, in the case of Pedro Pascal's fandom, to finally see the actor, precisely because it is the face that tells us so much about a character and a person. From the first episodes, knowing that they were faced with the presence of Pedro Pascal, spectators could long for the moment in which the helmet, accidentally or intentionally, fell, leaving the actor glimpsed. As anticipated, *The Mandalorian* series works strategically in this sense because, on the one hand, it keeps the hype high; on the other hand, it finds alternatives to the face, making the helmet almost a substitute face that reflects and shows identity and emotions.

### 3.3 *'Baby Yoda': A celebrity born (also) thanks to the fandom*

The process of celebrification and construction of Grogu's celebrity is quite different. As mentioned, it is a celebrity born from this TV series within the frame of the commodification of the celebrity. "Celebrities humanise the process of commodity consumption. [...] Celebrities are commodities in the sense that consumers desire to possess them" (Rojek, 2001, p. 16). Grogu's birth as a celebrity fits perfectly into this context. Fans are faced with an imaginary character, highly humanised, on the one hand, and made into a commodity, on the other, within a broader transmedia architecture, which includes the production of *The Mandalorian*-themed merchandise, making the experience for fans immersive, starting from what Disney has always aimed to do (Freeman, 2017). The

marketing strategies developed for the release of *The Mandalorian* were oriented towards nostalgia (Kutlu, 2021), but also and above all the fandom, which began to nickname this character “Baby Yoda”, played a significant role in these processes, despite not being Yoda, due to the strong resemblance to the character of the first two film trilogies and the lack of further details regarding the identity of the mysterious “child”, as is underlined several times during the episodes. Added to this is the production of memes, created from some sequences of the series, which concerned the most disparate topics and social categories (Kutlu, 2021) and which contributed to increasing its popularity and celebrity within social media environments, with resonance also in other media environments or other product categories. Fan communities dedicated to this character have proliferated within social media, especially using the nickname “Baby Yoda”. The fandom has exalted the character’s “cuteness”, naivety, generosity, and courage in some situations within the show.

#### 4. Conclusions: A closer galaxy

As we have demonstrated in this contribution, *The Mandalorian* TV series represents an exciting case study for reflecting on some issues concerning platformization, with the entry into the world of TV series of giant cinema production animation like Disney (and *Star Wars*). In live action, the serialisation of the *Star Wars* narrative universe has allowed the expansion of events or characters not explored in depth by other media products. A narrative expansion that includes top-down and bottom-up content seems typical of contemporary television seriality (Re, 2017a) and fits perfectly within the scenarios opened by participatory culture.

This TV series, designed for the debut of the proprietary streaming platform Disney+, also allows us to put forward hypotheses on the future of the media company’s entertainment, increasingly familiar with the logic of transmedia storytelling, while also looking, perhaps in a nostalgic way, at previous products, such as the *original trilogy*. *The Mandalorian* also represents a starting point to reflect on the platformization of the celebrity who necessarily sees their celebrity capital adapted to a different type of narrative compared to that of the cinematic, paced over time, with a distinct possibility of bringing the fandom closer. Furthermore, *The Mandalorian* allow us to reflect on the birth of celebrities (even imaginary ones) who arise from serial products and with the contribution of fandom and grassroots cultures in Net environments. As the title of this contribution suggests, this TV series – and with it also the other live-action serial products of the *Star Wars* universe – could represent the attempt by the company to take a further step towards the contemporary spectator and to bring them closer, understanding their needs and requirements (especially media consumption).

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