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TELEVISION SERIES AS TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIUM IN THE DIGITAL AGE



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Introduzione

Why Do We Love These Damn TV Series? An Introduction to the Contemporary TV Series' Narratives: A Sociological and Mediological Perspective

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1. The Evolution of Television Narratives in the Context of Serialization of Modern Culture

TV series have become a central medium in the representation of social transformations, cultural processes, and the multiple and heterogeneous identities of contemporary society. This crucial function of TV series can only be fully understood if we analyze the evolution of the TV medium within the broader scenario of digital cultures and the mediatization of everyday life. This requires first of all the recognition of serialization as one of the essential properties of integrated systems of production, distribution and consumption of cultural products since the nineteenth century (Brancato *et al.*, 2024; Boccia Artieri & Fiorentino, 2024), although antecedents can also be traced back to ancient times: Ragone & Tarzia, 2023). Although it is important to trace a history of television seriality specifically (see Teti, 2020; Hudelet & Crémieux, 2021; Fumagalli *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b), it is equally necessary to situate this history within the genealogy of the practices of serialization of storytelling experienced, between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (such as feuilleton, pulp magazines, radio dramas, film serials, comics), which configured the social, cultural and economic assumptions of the advent of television seriality (Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019).

Television has evolved from its early days of episodic content aimed at mass audiences to a medium that now embraces complex, serialized storytelling. During the First Golden Age of television seriality (1950s and 1960s), self-contained episodic series and anthology series prevailed, in a scenario determined by the constraints of scheduling and broadcasting. As John Ellis (2000) states, we are in the era of resource scarcity, which is articulated in two different ways: in Europe, the model of public broadcasting, more or less controlled by governments and government agencies, is established, while in the United States the commercial model – already experimented with radio – is based on the pre-eminence of three national broadcasters (NBC, ABC, CBS) and a wide range of local broadcasters, in some cases brought together in syndication. TV in the age of broadcasting is a domestic medium, whose low definition is an essential feature to nurture viewers' participation. Marshall McLuhan (1964, p. 31) argues, in fact, that television is a “cool” medium, which is “high in participation or completion by audience”. Moreover, TV acts as a continuous communicative backdrop to everyday interactions and family routines. Moving from a different perspective, Raymond Williams (1975, p. 80) comes to a similar conclusion when he identifies flow as “the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a

technology and a cultural form". Flow, in fact, creates an artificial connection between discrete and different units of content (newscasts, quiz shows, movies, etc.), interspersed with commercials. Already from this summary reconstruction, the close interconnection between the aesthetic, technological and sociocultural dimensions that preside, in every era, over the production of TV series is evident. So, it is in this scenario that the first great experiences of serial storytelling on TV should be placed: some of these, such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969), represent examples of serialized storytelling capable of influencing the developments of subsequent fiction; other anthology series, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *Alfred Hitchcock presents* (1955-1962), experiment with territories of the hitherto untouched imagination; still other series impose characters capable of affecting recognizable genres, such as sitcom (*I Love Lucy*, 1951-1957), western (*Lawman*, 1958-1962), police procedural (*Dragnet*, 1951-1959), medical drama (*Dr. Kildare*, 1961-1966), and legal drama (*Perry Mason*, 1957-1966). The evolution of television seriality between the late 1960s and the 1970s is the result of the interaction of multiple factors: the openness to new cultural sensibilities that emerged in those years (with particular reference to the civil rights movements of minorities and the demands for sexual freedom and self-determination, especially of young people), technological innovation (leading to a gradual improvement of television images and telecommunication circuits), the unstable balances between the television and film industries. Although the changes may appear slow and imperceptible, there are shows in this decade that are experimenting with more sophisticated storylines; dealing with taboo or scabrous topics; reflecting the transformation of orientations, customs, and habits; and representing ongoing cultural and intergenerational conflicts. Although this is a very terse list, we can mention titles such as *Marcus Welby, M.D.* (1969-1976), *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *The Rookies* (1972-1976), *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983), *Petrocelli* (1974-1976), *Happy Days* (1974-1984).

In some ways, these series elaborate the aesthetic, cultural and media terrain for the advent of the so-called Second Golden Age of television seriality (Thompson, 1996). The fundamental elements that characterize this era of American and international TV (between about 1980 and 2010) can be summarized as follows: 1) narrative and formal experimentation: more original, sophisticated and complex programs; 2) audience segmentation and targeting; and 3) multiplication and diversification of serial productions. These phenomena are strongly interrelated and result, once again, from the intersection of cultural and social processes, technological transformations and the evolution of aesthetic forms. On the one hand, audiences demand more serial stories capable of rendering the increasing complexification of Western societies. On the other, major technological innovations, are the advent of cable and satellite technologies and the availability of devices such as the VHS video recorder and later the DVD. New cable and satellite pay TV (such as AMC, HBO, The WB, etc.) are flanking the traditional ones, bringing about a shift in the supply of TV series: they, in fact, distribute products to niche audiences, more or less extensive, who demand engaging and quality products in exchange for which they subscribe – as opposed to traditional broadcasters who, relying primarily on advertisements, favored content aimed at a mass audience, since the cost to advertisers is proportional to the share won by the broadcaster in that particular time slot. The ability to record – via VHS recorder – episodes of a series, in addition to allowing viewers to partially disengage from the rigid time scanning of programming, allows them to watch TV seriality in a new way: they can review the most intricate and ambiguous sequences, search for hidden information, and

become passionate about a character through re-viewing the episode, season, or entire series. Subsequently, the collection of a season's episodes in a DVD box set gives TV seriality the dignity of a cultural object, similarly to the book and the movie. In the late 1990s, moreover, the Web will offer viewers involved in the collective exegesis of series a protected space in which to bring together the socialization of interpretive practices (Jenkins, 2006), promoting authentic forms of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1994).

The combination of cultural processes and technological innovations creates an optimal condition for experimentation with new narrative and aesthetic forms (Hammond and Mazdon, 2005). The narrative complexity, no less than that of films and novels (Allrath *et al.*, 2005), the aesthetic quality and, above all, the authorial dimension of many Second Golden Age series contribute to the creation of the category of "quality TV" (Jankovich & Lyons, 2003; McCabe & Akass, 2007) – opening a debate that is still controversial today (Cardini, 2014; Kristensen *et al.*, 2017).

The emotional participation of audiences during this time has become more intense, both through spaces for socializing cultural taste (such as forums, chats, and web groups) and through opportunities to expand the series experience into other practices (the creation of user-generated content, dubbing of foreign series, etc.) and consumption (merchandising and expansions). Beginning in the 2000s, fandom, from a niche phenomenon, became mainstream, both because of the increased opportunities for visibility offered by the Web and because of the contribution made by narrative worlds fully integrated in the logic of transmediality (to which we will return shortly). This transforms a part of serial production into "cult TV", loved, celebrated and continuously reworked by millions of fans nationally and internationally (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004; Scaglioni, 2006; Abbott, 2010; Lavery, 2010; Cascajosa Virino, 2017). At the sociological level, the main innovation triggered by the technological, cultural and aesthetic transformations of serial TV in the Second Golden is the mutation of the social quality of the TV experience. From this point of view, the very idea of seriality is stressed (Brancato, 2011), especially because of the more intense relationship of viewers – increasingly fans – with serial narratives.

However, both the concepts of "quality TV" and "cult TV" lack analytical rigor, and it is sometimes arbitrary to ascribe a TV series to either category. Instead, the analytical category that best frames the ongoing change is that of "complex tv" (Mittell, 2015), as it makes it clear that the advent of evolved storytelling strategies is the result of refined serial storytelling choices and the participation of audiences, who have become increasingly competent in decoding, appropriating and reworking the most engaging and complex narratives. Although not all series present the same degree of narrative complexity, there is no doubt that much of (especially American) production has to deal with these processes. Complex TV series, detailed by Jason Mittell (2015), combine anthology plot (the self-contained plot of the single episode) and running plot (the plot that connects one episode to the next) in original and innovative ways, develop believable characters that evolve over the course of the narrative, and continuously interrogate audiences through narrative statements and narrative enigmas (stimulating them to wonder what will happen in the future and what happened in the characters' past). The best series adhere to extrinsic norms (which define their relatability to a genre and narrative format) and establish a pact with viewers based on intrinsic norms (i.e., that set of implicit rules that indicate how to watch

the series and how to immerse ourselves in its world)¹. The productions also involve writers, directors and actors from the film industry. As a result of these transformations, TV series gained cultural legitimacy in public opinion, criticism, and academia that they had never gained in the past.

For reasons of space, it is impossible here to recall all the groundbreaking series that came out in this three decades: nevertheless, in addition to openers such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *Miami Vice* (1984-1989), *The Simpsons* (1989 – ongoing), and *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), among the most engaging productions capable of making a lasting impact on the social imaginary we can mention *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Law & Order* (1990 – ongoing), *ER* (1994-2009), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Sex and The City* (1998-2004), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *24* (2001-2010), *Scrubs* (2001-2010), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *NCIS* (2003 – ongoing), *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), *House* (2004-2012), *Lost* (2005-2010), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).

2. From the Second Golden Age to Platform TV

The Second Golden Age sets the stage for the subsequent development of TV seriality, from the 2000s to the present. This key allows us to highlight the four elements, primarily defined in the Second Golden Age, that will further evolve toward the form of platform TV: complex storytelling and worldbuilding, transmediality, audiences and fandom, and authorship.

2.1 TV series and digitization

Before discussing this legacy, however, it is important to understand the main technological, cultural and social phenomena of digitization, understood here as a specific step in the process of mediatization of society. Although the beginnings of the wave of digitization can be placed in 1982 with the invention of the compact disc (CD), digitization fully deploys its potential for sociocultural transformation through three sub-phases: mobile-mediatization, social-mediatization, and, finally, platformization (Tirino, 2022). Following the principle established by Couldry and Hepp (2016) that mediatization proceeds “in waves”, these three sub-phases are distinguished for analytical convenience, although they are logically and chronologically interrelated. Let us briefly look at how these processes affect the social experience of TV series. The pervasive diffusion of the smartphone, equipped with wi-fi sensors and therefore potentially always connected to the Net, and the launch of very convenient Web browsing offers create the conditions for the definitive establishment of videostreaming services, already successfully launched in areas reached by fiber optics. The availability of fast and efficient connections, in fact, enables the transformation of videostreaming services into Over-the-Top Television (OTT), which allow the enjoyment of content through multiple devices connected to the Net (smart TV, PCs, tablets, smartphones). Social media – in their various configurations, from Facebook to Tik Tok – have further altered top-down and bottom-up forms of communication about TV series. In terms of the institutional dimension, both traditional broadcasters and OTTs

¹ About the rules governing the semiotic functioning of a single series see also the fascinating contribution of Vidmar Jovanović (2020).

(such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV+, Disney +, etc.) have leveraged social channels to strengthen fandom loyalty and engagement, in some cases also experimenting innovative marketing techniques. Social media entertainment becomes an integral part of the global screen industry's content offering (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). At the same time, social has granted users of different ages spaces in which to elaborate their serial passions, for example by manifesting hypotheses about later plot developments, spreading memes, GIFs, fan videos and fan fiction, creating stable emotional connections not only with the world of the TV series but also with other fans. The mediatized representation of one's passions allows fans to make visible the role of TV series in the processes of self-recognition and self-representation on social media, underscoring the ability of complex narratives to contribute to viewers' identity construction based on the intensity of their emotional adherence.

The broad proliferation of platforms, recognized both as technological tools and as environments that facilitate economic and social interactions (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), has contributed to the development of a new communicative ecosystem. Platforms function 1) on a technological level, focusing on the implementation and utilization of technologies; 2) on a social level, addressing processes of communication, relationships, and consumption; and 3) on a commercial level, as businesses generate revenue by monetizing user data through advertising (Paulussen *et al.*, 2017). Acting as intermediaries between content creators and consumers, platforms serve a vital role in today's cultural industry (Magaudda and Solaroli, 2021). The notion of a platform society helps explain how this social configuration produces socio-media mechanisms, such as surveillance and value extraction, that transform the processes of production, distribution, and consumption. Platform society highlights the inseparable link between online platforms and social structures. Platforms do not simply mirror society; they actively shape the social frameworks we inhabit (Couldry and Hepp, 2016). Platformization fosters the formation of a new social order. Platforms are underpinned by three processes: datafication, commodification, and selection (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). Firstly, they enable the conversion of social behaviors into data that can be exploited for market objectives. This is accompanied by the "commodification" of the data recorded on platforms (including circulated content and expressed preferences) and the possibility of implementing a data-driven selection process. The core component of platforms is therefore the data they gather, the management of which bolsters their social, cultural, and economic influence, aided by algorithms. Within the platform society, algorithmization leads to micro-level phenomena, such as filter bubbles. Certain features of online platforms allow the curation of content favored by users based on their previous actions – like watching a video or expressing a preference – thereby accumulating data on the users themselves. With this data, platforms make predictions to filter future content submissions (Parisier, 2011). In these bubbles, users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their interests, selected through a process of data collection and algorithmization, which is often not fully transparent. The influence of platforms is evident internally and also extends externally, as they establish a technological framework within which others operate. Data generated by others become accessible to platforms and are used in ways that align with their own economic models. Although algorithms are central to these dynamics, the selection process would initially align with users' tendencies to seek content that resonates with their interests, potentially leading to the creation of echo chambers.

So, it is within this techno-socio-cultural framework that the continuities and discontinuities between Second Golden Age television seriality and contemporary platform series should be framed.

2.2 Complex storytelling and worldbuilding

One of the most significant developments in contemporary TV series is the trend towards narrative complexity and extensive worldbuilding. Shows like *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), and *Westworld* (2016-2022), exemplify this shift, offering intricate plots that span multiple seasons and feature large, interconnected casts of characters. As Boni (2017) and Brembilla (2018) observe, worldbuilding has become a central narrative strategy, allowing for the creation of expansive universes that engage viewers beyond the immediate story. The creation of multi-layered narrative worlds must be complemented with the writing of credible characters. The affective and cognitive relationship with characters is a decisive element of worldbuilding, since the very subsistence of these fictional universes is tested through the credibility of the characters and their actions and interactions with each other. Murray Smith (1995) has fully described the steps through which viewers bond with a character: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. In addition, emotional and cognitive connection with characters over many years of viewing allows them to develop lasting intimate relationships, such that a kind of parasocial relationship is baked with them (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This kind of deep connection is also established with characters who are morally ambiguous (Tian and Hoffner, 2010; Meier and Neubaum, 2019) or even blatantly “bad” (Mittell, 2015). The affective investment in a series can be so intense and long-lasting that it represents for the most involved fans an opportunity for personal growth, as well as knowledge and pleasure: Muñoz-Velázquez and Delmar (2021) go so far as to postulate, in such cases, a form of “eudaimonic” consumption of TV series. In any case, plots, characters, and environments must be carefully crafted and, at the same time, must be original enough to meet the canons of the aesthetics of surprise, on which complex storytelling is based. Indeed, on the one hand, it is necessary for each detail to be consistent with the whole story, as fans and viewers have sufficient resources to challenge any snag in the narrative (García, 2016). On the other hand, the increasing abundance of productions, made by old and new television brands alike, requires considerable effort in experimenting with formats and narrative forms, often crossing traditional genre boundaries, in order to continue to amaze the viewer, disregarding his or her assumptions and expectations about the developments of the series they are watching (Pearson and Smith, 2015).

2.3 Transmedia

The goals and spaces of this introduction preclude summarizing, even briefly, the current debate on the forms of transmediality in the humanities and social sciences². For clarity, we limit ourselves here to a broad definition. By transmediality we mean the typical property of communicative projects (both fiction and nonfiction) whose content is distributed across multiple media platforms, by both creators and producers and fans, and within universes of meaning marked by various levels of coherence and consistency. The basic requirement for there to be transmediality is that each piece of the universe is capable of adding knowledge of various kinds. This definition has the merit of embracing in a single

² For a summary of this debate we refer to Freeman and Rampazzo Gambarato (2018) and Leonzi (2023).

framework both the forms of transmediality experimented until the 2000s (Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019, 2023a), most frequently character-oriented, and the more recent forms, most often traced to the concept of “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, 2006), based on the intensive exploitation of a franchise to maximize its ability to generate profits and, consequently, on the control about the canonicity and coherence of the expansions with reference to the entire narrative universe. It also gives an account of the dynamics of expansions of narrative universes in television seriality. They are enriched as much by top-down expansions, coordinated by the rights holders on a franchise (e.g., movies, novels, comic books, video games that expand the narrative of a TV series, official social media channels, merchandising, and so on), as by grassroots expansions, fueled by the flow of fan contributions. Both during the First Golden Age and – more prominently – during the Second Golden Age (Evans, 2011; Mittell, 2015), TV series gave rise to transmedia narrative universes. What is new in the age of platforms is the more creative and participatory role of audiences and fans (to which we will return shortly). Moreover, this very broad definition allows us to understand that transmedia expansions (“institutional” or grassroots) can serve several functions: promotional (such as trailers, teasers, interviews, etc.), orientational (such as wikis, re-caps, official and unofficial blogs, etc.), and narrative (both canonically, in the case of products approved and coordinated by producers, and non-canonically, as in the case of fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, etc. made by audiences). In the digital age, transmediality led by media conglomerates (such as Netflix or Amazon Prime Video) is an essential part of strategies to strengthen audience engagement while simultaneously enabling experimentation with new aesthetic and narrative solutions in other media. Some narrative universes have become particularly rich and substantial, encompassing both transmedia expansions in the narrow sense and various types of adaptations in other media (ascribable to the concept of intermediality) (e.g., series adapting novels or films, such as *The Queen’s Gambit*, 2020, and *My Brilliant Friend*, 2018 – ongoing). A particularly valuable theoretical tool is that of “narrative ecosystem”, formulated by Guglielmo Pescatore (2018): it allows us to analyze the consistency of narrative universes fed by both intermedial adaptations and transmedia expansions, without the need for time-consuming (and often useless) analytical disquisitions on the trans/intermedia nature and classification (sequels, remakes, reboots, prequels, etc.) of the units that compose it.

2.4 *Audiences and fandom*

The intricate configurations of transmedia narrative ecosystems are the result of multiple authors, prompting scholars to question both the role of fandom and audiences and the issue of authorship in TV series. As for the centrality of fans in contemporary TV seriality cultures, John Fiske (1992) had already emphasized the cultural vitality of fandom, identifying three types of productivity: 1) semiotic: the production of meaning, which unites fans and ordinary audiences; 2) enunciational: the production of discourses around media products “consumed” in fan communities; 3) textual: the production of cultural artifacts (stories, songs, other media objects), is the exclusive activity of fans. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) highlight the active role of audiences in interpreting and engaging with media content, a trend that has only intensified with the rise of digital fandom. Indeed, the relationship between TV series and their audiences has also been transformed in the digital era. The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 also marked a turning point for fandom. The availability of tools and spaces for the creation of digital content, the possibility of using

efficient mobile connections, and the spread of affordable performance smartphones determined the technological framework within which the policies and practices of hyperconnection in the Social Network Society developed (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Fans have thus enjoyed unprecedented opportunities for the production, dissemination and sharing of bottom-up content (fanfiction, fanvideos, tags, reviews, etc.) – so-called user-generated content (UGC). This socio-techno-cultural transformation has also profoundly altered the arrangements of fandom according to two different trajectories. On the one hand, more and more “ordinary” viewers have become fans of the cultural objects loved, effectively making fandom a mainstream phenomenon with considerable economic potential. This has also increasingly prompted media industries to seek constant negotiation in an effort to engage media users more intensively so as to expand profit opportunities. This has also increasingly prompted media industries to seek constant negotiation in an effort to engage media users more intensively so as to expand profit opportunities. As I mentioned earlier, media conglomerates (such as Disney) pursue such goals by often resorting to the creation of complex transmedia narrative universes (Tirino, 2020), consisting of texts (comics, novels, movies, TV series), media experiences (theme parks, VR and AR experiences, games), and merchandising: the Marvel Cinematic Universe and *Star Wars* franchises are emblematic examples. On the other hand, fans congregate in microgroups, virtually impermeable to the rest of a series’ audience, which are in some cases configured as toxic and conflictual environments (Arouh, 2020). Hills (2002) and Pearson (2010) discuss how fan cultures have become crucial to the success and longevity of TV series, with fans often serving as co-creators of content. Again Hills (2013a) observes that open source software, video sharing platforms (such as YouTube and Dailymotion) and communities of collective interpretation of cultural products (forums, chats, social network pages and groups) have mainly stimulated textual productivity, to the detriment of semiotic and enunciational productivity. Hills places alongside the “classical” textual productivity identified by Fiske a “mimetic” textual productivity, applied to transmedia extensions of the source text (such as action figures of a character, fansubbing, etc.). Finally, he identifies three dichotomies: 1) between content inspired by mainstream aesthetics and content inspired by grassroots cultures; 2) between UGC produced according to cultural industry codes and UGC using alternative cultural codes (in terms of copyright, formats, distribution channels, etc.); and 3) between conscious and unconscious productivity (specific to the co-creation processes in which fans are sometimes involved by industries). Compared to the past, in which they circulated in restricted circuits (associations, conventions, fanzines), fan content in the digital era has public relevance (Costello and Moore, 2007). Fans know that their content, from the moment it lands on social media, is discussed, judged, shared, and in some cases celebrated by online communities. These groups are founded through an affective self-constitution (Maffesoli, 1988), that is, on the basis of sharing a common passion. TV series – thanks to seriality and multi-seasonality – are able to build affective relationships rooted in time and extended in space: this is why for many online communities affective self-constitution is based on sharing the cult of a series. Such communities are essentially of two types: communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which carry out collective activities according to codified standards and procedures – as in the case of fansubbing (Vellar, 2011; Matielo and Espindola, 2011; Crisp, 2015; Massidda, 2015; Luczaj and Holy-Luczaj, 2017) – and communities of interpretation, mainly engaged in a choral exegesis of a cultural product (Tirino, 2023b). As Jenkins (2006) documents in his famous work on *Lost* fans, this

second type of community shows how much TV series – like few other pop culture contents – are able to stimulate *epistemophilia*, that is, or the love of research and dissemination of knowledge, especially thanks to the affective atmospheres of a collective feat. Fandom referable to a TV series, like any media fandom, has an individual basis and a social development. The basis of media fandom is always a personal, emotional, deep connection with a mediatised object of popular culture (Duffett, 2013). The intensity of this connection can go so far that fans, in some cases, link involvement in a TV series to real-life autonarratives and situations from everyday life. This phenomenon is known as reiteration discourse (Williams, 2011). In order for this passionate root to extend across time and space, the next level is provided by social participation, which reinforces personal involvement. Interaction between fans of TV series in the same community occurs in an “intermedial” dimension, as it is articulated around multiple transitions between television, social networks and other media (Nikunen, 2007). These communities exhibit extreme variability: their cultural substrate varies from group to group, according to specific series content, cultural-historical contexts, technological environments, available devices, and numerous other factors (Duffett, 2013). The advent of OTT produces two macro-transformations in fans’ experience of TV series. First, through the distribution mode of full season release (FSR), OTTs allow access to episodes of an entire season at any time, with any compatible device and from anywhere. Audiences experience the transition from the ritualized appointment (on a specific day of the week and at a specific time), typical of the First Golden Age and, to some extent, the Second Golden Age, to the full freedom of on-demand culture (when, how, and where one prefers) (Tryon, 2013): thus, the transition to “post-network TV” (Lotz, 2009, 2014) is accomplished. Second, the emergence of OTT such as Netflix has led to the binge-watching phenomenon, fundamentally altering the viewer’s relationship with narrative time (Campos Rezende & Boechat Gomide, 2017; Pilipets, 2019). This new mode of consumption emphasizes the continuous, immersive experience of storytelling, challenging traditional episodic formats and encouraging more complex, interwoven plotlines. At the same time, FSR and binge watching cause audience fragmentation and spoiler terror (Buschow *et al.*, 2014). In fact, the potential audience of any series distributed in FSR fragments into as many subgroups as there are possible viewing rhythms of the series. Precisely for this reason, each viewer will try to interact only with other viewers who share a certain viewing rhythm with him or her in order to avoid unintentionally incurring the revelation of elements referable to episodes not yet viewed (losing, thus, the surprise and wonder in front of future narrative developments). As a result, the viewer of contemporary television seriality moves through complex scenarios, maturing so many skills and competencies that one can speak of a new spectatorial (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2014) or, rather, post-spectatorial status (Tirino, 2020). The media user who is a fan of TV series not only develops skills useful in developing tactics and strategies for consumption suited to his or her personal needs (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz *et al.*, 2016; Mishustina, 2019), but also participates in the processes of production (through crowdfunding and public initiatives, for example, for the continuation of a series cancelled by a TV station), distribution (by helping to disseminate subtitles and thus expanding the geographic area in which the TV series can circulate), criticism (by processing ratings, reviews and comments on various platforms) and archiving (by saving and making available niche products). In addition, many fans also acquire high creative skills (writing, filming, audiovisual editing, digital postproduction, etc.), which are useful for producing UGC

characterized by more complex narratives and more advanced aesthetic qualities. The very concept of viewer is, therefore, clearly insufficient to describe the richness of this social actor's interactions.

2.5 *Authorship*

It was during the Second Golden Age that the issue of television authorship was addressed in depth. The construction of the authorship of a series, conceived as a public process to which producers, audiences, critics, and scholars contribute, in fact, is functional in identifying a creative figure to stand as guarantor of the aesthetic qualities and narrative effectiveness of the work. This helps to identify and distinguish quality TV from the rest of serial production (Steiner, 2015). However, authorship in contemporary television seriality is managerial in nature (Mittell, 2015; Sessegno, 2020): while conventionally the creative and, in many cases, production responsibility for a series is attributed by producers-distributors to an executive producer called the “showrunner”, the making of a TV series involves the coordination among many work streams, which cooperate on the final result (Higuera-Ruiz *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, audiences often express the need to identify a physical figure to whom they can attribute responsibility for the series they love. The need to make sure that someone is taking care of the story they have followed for years stems from anxiety in the face of the unknown and the terror that the tale will end inappropriately or disappointingly. For this reason, the role of showrunner is often given to charismatic personalities whose authority serves as a guarantee for the investors, the creatives involved, and the audiences themselves. Ryan Murphy's example is explanatory enough (Trapero Llobera, 2017; Weber and Greven, 2022). In some cases, a showrunner's signature is a valuable promotional tool, similar to what the film industry does with the signature of well-known directors (Hadas, 2020). However, the recognition and attribution of authorship of a TV series are not always simple operations. In some cases, several authors (e.g., head writer and executive producer) may vie for authorship of a series, acting in the public space as the “voice” of the series, even if they do not formally hold the role of showrunner: two examples of “disputed” authorship concern Roberto Saviano (for the TV series *Gomorra*, 2014-2021) (Tirino, 2021) and Robert Kirkman (for the TV series *The Walking Dead*) (Beil and Schmidt, 2015). Moreover, since not all authors emerge on the public scene, remaining unknown or underestimated (Hills, 2013b), the history of authorship in TV seriality can be more correctly interpreted as an alternation of recognition and anonymity (Schwaab, 2021). The construction of authorship is thus a controversial phenomenon, which affects both cultural dynamics and the legal dimension of a TV series. Legal authorship contractually establishes the responsibility of one or more physical subjects. However, the boundaries between copyright protection and freedom of expression become problematic, when it comes to recognizing the authorship of fans in the production of content, somehow marked by originality and creativity, although variously referable to elements (scenes, characters, logos, etc.) of a legally protected TV series (Sarikakis *et al.*, 2017; Małgorzata, 2018; Cuntz-Leng, 2021). The relevance of the study of authorship in contemporary TV seriality is determined by the possibility of conceiving this phenomenon as the field in which different instances (from producers, creators and audiences) clash on the basis of processes of symbolic appropriation and reappropriation of serialized narratives. In this sense, even the reduced presence of women (Strehlau, 2021), members of LGBTQIA+ communities (Sinwell, 2023), and ethnic minority subjects (Beltrán, 2016; López Rodríguez and Raya

Bravo, 2021) among showrunners represents an index of power relations within the American and, more generally, Western screen industry.

3. An entirely new cultural form: television series between screen industry, celebrity, branded engagement and fandom

In the platform society, television seriality is delineated as a capital medium: although by volume of revenue, the video game industry represents the most imposing sector among media industries (Jo and Lewis, 2024), television seriality is able to intercept and capitalize on resources, talents, and especially narratives, generated by interactions with other media (starting with cinema and literature [Piga Bruni, 2018]). Sociological analysis of TV series requires a holistic approach that considers the chain of processes linking production, distribution, and consumption (Spigel and Olsson, 2004; Bollhöfer, 2007; Lotz, 2009, 2014).

Internet distribution of television has also forced traditional broadcasters to review their content offerings and business models (Lotz, 2017; González-Neira *et al.*, 2022). For serial television, this has meant a massive transformation of industry players: traditional broadcasters have been joined by media conglomerates, OTTs, and tech players (such as Apple and Google). The definitive establishment of on-demand culture has pushed even the most conservative operators to guarantee online access to their content, with or without specific subscriptions. If cable and satellite TV had already revolutionized the scenario of TV series production and distribution, fostering the creation of narratively more complex and aesthetically more ambitious products, Internet TV has completed the process of dismantling traditional broadcasting (Lotz, 2018; Lotz *et al.*, 2018): the increase of platforms has reverberated into an explosion of production, in which narratives of every format, genre, and duration find their place. The growing phenomenon of cord-cutting (the cancellation of cable TV subscriptions, replaced by subscriptions to online services and/or the piracy), especially in the United States, testifies to the propensity of the younger generation to move away from the constraints and limitations of television to embrace entertainment systems that are fluid and adaptable to each user's personalized needs (Strangelove, 2015). Although I have highlighted the forms of continuity between Second Golden Age and platform TV, I think it is also important to point out the more innovative dynamics found in the present scenario. In the transition from broadcasting to the Web, via cable and satellite, television series are increasingly encompassed in transmedia and intermedial narrative ecosystems, which are often highly complex and layered, and above all are nodes in networks of social and cultural relations, emotional marketing practices, immersive experiences and aesthetic experiments, within exchanges in which communication, economy, society shape and influence each other (Brembilla, 2018). Platforms, therefore, fundamentally alter television markets, imposing new distribution policies and practices (Evens and Donders, 2018). The global dimension of the new players entails decisive mutations in the relationship between producers, distributors and viewers. From this perspective, although it has been repeatedly updated and adapted to the contingent needs of the period and specific contexts, the Netflix model constitutes a sufficiently explanatory object of research on how platformization affects the contemporary experience of TV series. First, the global distribution of content produces two main effects. On the one hand, local co-productions, often in agreement with national production companies, have the opportunity to reach a global market thanks to dubbing and subtitles

prepared by the platform: this is the case of series from Spain (*La casa de papel*, 2017-2021), South Korea (*Squid Game*, 2021 – ongoing), Brazil (*Três por cento*, 2016-2020), France (*Lupin*, 2021 – ongoing), Italy (*Suburra*, 2017-2020) and so on. On the other hand, this nurtures a form of cosmopolitan spectatorship that is sensitive to cultural differences and exchanges. Second, as a corollary to all this, there is the rise of mainstream cult TV series internationally, of which *Stranger Things* (2016 – ongoing) and *Wednesday* (2022 – ongoing) are among the latest examples³. The globalization of television content has also had a profound impact on narrative forms. As Lobato (2018) and Lotz (2020) discuss, streaming platforms like Netflix have facilitated the cross-pollination of narrative styles and the emergence of cultural conflicts between local and cosmopolitan identities (Gilardi *et al.*, 2018; Tahralı *et al.*, 2023). This phenomenon has sparked interest in how local cultures adapt and reinterpret global content. Moreover, the global reach of TV series has influenced other cultural domains, such as tourism – shows like *Game of Thrones* have generated significant tourism activity in their filming locations (Contu & Pau, 2022; Reijnders, 2011, 2016). This interplay between television and tourism underscores the broader economic impact of contemporary TV narratives.

However, this new geography of international distribution of TV series (Lobato, 2017, 2018, 2019; Lotz, 2020) is also governed by arbitrary mechanisms such as those of geoblocking: some content, for political reasons or for reasons of expediency, is unavailable in certain territories. In addition, the Netflix model turns the spotlight on the impact of the algorithmization of TV series supply (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey, 2016; Lotz, 2022). Recommendation algorithms, based on the individual user's previous choices, work in a way that limits accessible content, in effect creating bubbles (in a manner similar to that of social networks: see Parisier, 2011). Netflix, like other OTTs, produces a concrete mathematization of taste (Alexander, 2016), moreover by limiting the portion of the library that can be accessed, not only through geoblocking and recommendation algorithms, but also through interface affordances (Tirino and Castellano, 2021). The concept of affordance is particularly effective in interpreting both the distribution policies of OTTs and, more generally, platforms, and the fruition and interaction practices of audiences. Affordance refers to all those properties of an object (and a service), which allow some operations and manipulations and simultaneously inhibit others (Hutchby, 2001). Thus, the affordances of platform interfaces regulate the library experience in specific ways, for example by visually associating Netflix content with the aesthetics of the DVD or, later, with that of the digital content stream of social networks (Tirino, 2020). Similarly, the affordances of the devices and apparatuses, such as the set-top-box (Hesmondhalgh and Lobato, 2019), through which we relate to the TV series available on the platforms, materially condition the framework of our experience.

Platformization also draws new global scenarios about the competition among different players globally (Lobato and Lotz, 2021; Lotz, 2021; Lotz and Lobato, 2023). Streaming wars pit global entertainment giants against each other, forced to modify and adapt their financial and business strategies in a highly unstable competitive environment. Streaming wars involve global media conglomerates and regional television groups (national or

³ Among the most significant series for the Netflix model we can mention *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Narcos* (2015-2017), *The OA* (2016-2019), *The Crown* (2016-2023), *GLOW* (2017-2019), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019), *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020), *Dark* (2017-2020), *Ozark* (2017-2022), *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), *You* (2018 – ongoing), *Sex Education* (2019-2023), *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-2024), *Russian Doll* (2019 - ongoing), *The Witcher* (2019 – ongoing).

continental), which are rapidly changing strategy, vying for a market that – after a few years of consistent enlargement – has settled down: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney +, Paramount, HBO, Apple TV+, and, in Italy, SKY (NOW TV platform), Rai (Raiplay platform), and Mediaset (Infinity platform). Contemporary streaming wars have also revitalized piracy practices, as the overall cost of numerous subscriptions is unaffordable for many consumer groups. Probably the most disruptive phenomenon, however, is the overall reconfiguration of the entertainment system. As traditional TV now seems marginal, at least in the choices of the Millennials and Post-Millennials generations, the business policies of entertainment platforms are regulated on the specific properties and characteristics of streaming distribution. Ultimately, platformization – by offering operators an efficient and global distribution system – seems to complete the journey of ultimate separation between content and delivery infrastructures. Digitized TV series thus become content that can be enjoyed through multiple devices, at any time and from (almost) anywhere. This means that the competitive advantage of traditional broadcasters – the ability to have technological infrastructure and licenses, in a context of scarcity of resources – becomes totally ineffective in the age of digital abundance, in which the Net offers sufficient space to a large number of operators, also from different industries (traditional broadcasting, film, technology, etc.).

Ultimately, contemporary television seriality – when studied in its overall configuration – seems to be a new cultural form, certainly no longer based on rigid schedule programming or stream aesthetics. Although we find ourselves in a fluid technological scenario, the dynamics governing contemporary streaming wars portend a future in which TV series will be increasingly disengaged from their origins in broadcasting and the television industry and increasingly immersed in competition with other spectacular content (sports, reality shows, podcasts, live events, etc.) equally co-present on platforms. But it is not only the distribution and production dimension that identifies TV series as a cultural form sufficiently different from that assumed in the past. What, more than anything else, seems to characterize the individual and social experience of contemporary seriality is the way on-demand culture reshapes the temporal dimension of the relationship with these works (Cleto and Pasquali, 2018). If in the modern era any form of serialization establishes a ritualized connection between the audiences of a single work, based on the scheduled enjoyment of new pieces of work, on-demand culture binds our relationship with TV series more adaptively to individual needs. The ability to view a series in the empty moments of a day or, conversely, to practice binge watching makes our relationship with seriality more intimate, as the viewing experience fits more fully into the rhythms of daily life. In addition, transmedia universes allow the experience of a TV series to be greatly expanded – through practices (enjoyment of narrative expansions, commentary, interpretation, UGC production, cosplay, etc.) that transform individual passion into a shared cult, collectively and, in some cases, publicly: this also results in new configurations of temporality (Evans, 2015), for example by requiring a certain succession in the enjoyment of the pieces of a narrative ecosystem.

Whether it is when we watch an episode of a TV series on the screen of our smartphone, on the way from home to work, sitting in a bus or a subway car, or when we arrange an evening on the couch at home, in the company of a partner or friends, perfectly relaxed, to enjoy on the big screen of a smart TV a binge watching session, the relationship we establish with a series – also as a result of the temporal duration of the bonds established with the

characters – is an intimate, sensual, almost tactile one. A series can become a valuable resource for self-narrative and self-representation, whether public (online, on social media, and offline, in places such as cosplayer and fan conventions, and in daily life, for example, through the display of gadgets and merchandise), or private (for example, through the extraction of “pieces” of its world to display in one’s home or car). Moreover, the love affair can extend from the series to the other media narratives (movies, novels, comics, video games, official social channels of the series, actors and directors, etc.) that make up its narrative ecosystem.

Contemporary TV series are thus serial dramas (or docu-dramas), far from the form historically assumed in the First and Second Golden Age, multi-platform and expanded. Their consumption is integrated into the increasingly frenzied and schizophrenic rhythms (between periods of overwork and periods of unemployment) of contemporary precarized work. Platform society TV series, moreover, are increasingly environments of symbolic co-construction between producers, distributors and consumers. For this reason, they not only contribute to shaping cosmopolitan, fluid, and articulated identities, but also affect the transformations of cultures and imaginaries (as we will better see in the special issue parallel to this one).

The essays collected in this special issue aim to examine some of the processes and phenomena that characterize the contemporary television seriality system at the intersection of production, distribution and fruition processes. The special issue collected articles that are expressions of different disciplinary approaches (the sociology of cultural processes, socio-semiotics, Media Studies) and which, taken together, give a clear idea of the variability of formats, genres, production and distribution types in contemporary television seriality.

Ariela Mortara and Geraldina Roberti investigate the forms of product placement, that is, the legally permitted presence of brands within the serial narrative. Precisely because of their impact on individual lives and collective symbolic processes, TV series exert a special appeal, which can be capitalized by brands through the presence of iconic products worn by the protagonists. Fashion, in particular, is an element that contributes greatly to the signification of TV series (Mascio, 2023). The two scholars show how product placement is a crucial object for understanding the business models and forms of communication, both of the brands involved and of the TV groups themselves. Using the TV series *And Just Like That* (2021 - ongoing), a sequel to *Sex and The City*, as a case study, the paper reflects on the two types of product placement (good and bad), showing that – when convincingly integrated within the narrative dynamics of a successful TV series – brand promotion within a serial narrative fosters brand awareness (Yildirim and Aydin, 2012). Precisely because of the centrality of TV seriality in the public discourse, product placement in TV series reaffirms that, even in a mediascape punctuated by many types of advertising, the combination of storytelling/brand promotion continues to fascinate millions of viewers.

The essays by Antonella Mascio, Mario Tirino and Simona Castellano focus, from different perspectives, on the nexus between television seriality and celebrity. Mascio’s paper explores the first season of Ryan Murphy’s series *Fend* (2017-2024) as a model for analyzing the aging celebrity within contemporary TV seriality (see also Oró-Piqueras, 2014; Oró-Piqueras and Wohlmann, 2016; Jerslev, 2017; Sako and Oró-Piqueras, 2023). This series, in fact, chronicles the complex relationship between the two stars Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Mascio’s paper investigates, from a socio-cultural perspective, the set of symbolic knots that the series proposes: the ways in which elderly actresses were

marginalized by the Hollywood industry of the 1960s, according to models of beauty rigidly linked to age; the evolution of the concept of beauty and old age in contemporary society, demonstrated by the fact that the actresses playing Davis (Susan Sarandon) and Crawford (Jessica Lange) are older than the characters played; the meta-reflexive potential of television seriality, which is also configured as a space for narrating the dynamics of the screen industries. Tirino's essay analyzes the docu-series *Scugnizzi per sempre* (2023). Starting from the mediatization of sport, the essay explores the connections between the Juve Caserta basketball club's feat (winning the Scudetto in 1991), the role of aged sports heroes, and the collective memory of the city of Caserta. By interrogating the past through the affective and memorial power of the aged bodies of sports celebrities, *Scugnizzi per sempre* reaffirms the potential of a TV series to reactivate the thread of intergenerational communication in search of a shared identity and to stimulate local actors (politicians, entrepreneurs, sportsmen and women) to use the legend of Juve Caserta to invest in sports as a cultural, economic and social resource. Castellano's essay focuses on the study of platformization of TV series celebrity, using *The Mandalorian* as a case study. The presence of both real (such as Pedro Pascal) and fictional (such as Grogu, the Baby Yoda) celebrities testifies to the degree of sophistication of celebrification strategies within narrative ecosystems as vast as that of *Star Wars*. The scholar effectively shows how the series is also the result of Disney's concrete production and distribution strategies. Indeed, the media conglomerate moves on a fine balance between the need to exploit the nostalgic resonances of the franchise (with particular reference to the original trilogy) and the need to engage audiences according to the trajectories and dynamics of the platform society, thus integrating top-down and bottom-up content.

It is precisely the theme of transmediality, capable of attracting numerous others, that unites the next three articles. Lorenzo Di Paola and Manuela Di Franco examine the narrative framework established by the manga *The Rose of Versailles* to assess its effect on the perception of gender identity and the consumption of manga, comics, anime, and cartoons in Italy and France.. This article particularly explores how Riyoko Ikeda's creation crossed media frontiers, transitioning from manga to anime (*Berusaïyu no bara*, globally also known as *Lady Oscar*, 1979-1980) and beyond, and how it resonated within the Italian and French cultural landscapes, leaving a lasting impact on generations of readers and viewers. Di Paola and Di Franco valorize the issue of the regionalization of foreign series (Barra, 2009) as a process that presides over contingent forms of expansion (transmediality) and adaptation (intermediality), also influencing perceptions of gender identities and the emergence of cultural conflicts between the source context (Japan) and the target context (Italy and France). Giorgio Busi Rizzi explores the franchise that originated from Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* comic series (2004-2010), which later expanded with a film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010, directed by Edgar Wright) and the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023). The scholars analyze *Scott Pilgrim* narrative ecosystem, including several spin-offs, such as a short-lived mobile comic, a beat 'em up video game, and a card game, and the dynamics of its media expansion, including its connections to music and gaming cultures. The author also highlights the role of Netflix's policies in shaping the series' narrative so that it could converse with users with different cultures and consumption habits. Fabio Ciammella and Michele Balducci focus on another cult Netflix series, *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). Their analysis concludes with the hypothesis of the existence of a platform seriality worldbuilding, in which Netflix's

brand engagement practices, aimed at building user loyalty through intertextual links between its cult series, and users' grassroots practices, which testify to the potential symbolic uses of crucial elements of the *BoJack Horseman* series, especially in an ironic and nostalgic key, interact in fascinating forms. This reveals how narrative and distribution strategies are employed to support the Netflix-centered platform seriality worldbuilding process. Through the use of transmedia hooks, which are often shaped by users' interpretive abilities, the Netflix Serial Multiverse continues to expand.

Taken as a whole, the articles that make up this special issue give a faithful picture of the multifaceted and articulated configuration of TV seriality, in the context of the rapid and profound mediatization of cultural and social processes in the contemporary world (Lundby, 2009; Hepp, 2020; Kopecka-Piech and Bolin, 2023). By examining the evolution of television narratives, the production and distribution strategies, the role of audience engagement, and the global exchange of cultural forms, this collection of essays offers new insights into the ways in which TV series continue to shape and reflect our world. As the medium evolves, so too will the narratives it produces, challenging us to rethink the possibilities of television as a form of storytelling in the 21st century.

Warning

This special issue was conceived in parallel with a second one: if the present issue focuses primarily on the mediological infrastructures of TV seriality (i.e., the forms of interaction between the production and distribution policies of TV brands and the practices of audiences) – with a particular focus on product placement, the dynamics of celebrification and representation of celebrity, and transmediality – the second issue will focus on the power of TV series to narrate and influence the mutations of imaginaries and cultures, in often complex and conflicting forms. Within each essay the individual episode citation is given according to the formula “season number x episode number” (e.g., *Chapter Five: Dig Dug*, 02x05, for the fifth episode of the second season of *Stranger Things*). In addition, each article is accompanied by an alphabetical list (excluding definite and indefinite articles) of the TV series and films cited so that readers can quickly find the identifying elements of each audiovisual work.

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TV Series cited

3% (Netflix, 2016-2020, 4 seasons).

13 Reasons Why (2017-2020, 4 seasons).

24 (Fox, 2001-2010, 8 seasons).

Alfred Hitchcock presents (ABC, 1955-1962, 7 seasons).

And Just Like That... (HBO Max, 2021 – ongoing, 2 seasons).
Berusaiyu no bara (Lady Oscar) (Nippon Television, 1979-1980, 40 episodes).
Beverly Hills 90210 (Fox, 1990-2000, 10 seasons).
BoJack Horseman (Netflix, 2014-2020, 6 seasons).
Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013, 5 seasons).
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003, 7 seasons).
La casa de papel (Netflix, 2017-2021, 3 seasons).
The Crown (Netflix, 2016-2023, 6 seasons).
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS, 2000-2015, 15 seasons).
Dark (Netflix, 2017-2020, 3 seasons).
Dawson's Creek (The WB, 1998-2003, 6 seasons).
Dragnet (NBC, 1951-1959, 8 seasons).
Dr. Kildare (NBC, 1961-1966, 5 seasons).
ER (NBC, 1994-2009, 15 seasons).
Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-2019, 8 seasons).
GLOW (Netflix, 2017-2019, 3 seasons).
Gomorra (SKY, 2014-2021, 5 seasons).
Happy Days (ABC, 1974-1984, 11 seasons).
The Haunting of Hill House (Netflix, 2018, 1 season).
Hill Street Blues (NBC, 1981-1987, 7 seasons).
House (Fox, 2004-2012, 8 seasons).
House of Cards (Netflix, 2013-2018, 6 seasons).
I Love Lucy (CBS, 1951-1957, 6 seasons).
Lawman (ABC, 1958-1962, 4 seasons).
Law & Order (NBC, 1990 – ongoing, 23 seasons).
Lupin (Netflix, 2021 – ongoing, 3 seasons).
Mad Men (AMC, 2007-2015, 7 seasons).
The Mandalorian (Disney+, 2019 – ongoing, 3 seasons).
Marcus Welby, M.D. (ABC, 1969-1976, 7 seasons).
Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS, 1970-1977, 7 seasons).
M*A*S*H (CBS, 1972-1983, 11 seasons).
Miami Vice (NBC, 1984-1989, 5 seasons).
My Brilliant Friend (Rai/HBO, 2018 – ongoing, 3 seasons).
Narcos (Netflix, 2015-2017, 3 seasons).
NCIS (CBS, 2003 – ongoing, 21 seasons).
The OA (Netflix, 2016-2019, 2 seasons).
Orange is the New Black (Netflix, 2013-2019, 7 seasons).
Ozark (Netflix, 2017-2022, 4 seasons).
Perry Mason (CBS, 1957-1966, 9 seasons).
Petrocelli (NBC, 1974-1976, 2 seasons).
The Queen's Gambit (Netflix, 2020, 1 season).
The Rookies (ABC, 1972-1976, 4 seasons).
Russian Doll (Netflix, 2019 – ongoing, 2 seasons).
Scott Pilgrim Takes Off (Netflix, 2023 – ongoing, 1 season).
Scrubs (NBC/ABC, 2001-2010, 9 seasons).
Scugnizzi per sempre (Rai, 2023, 1 season).

A Series of Unfortunate Events (Netflix, 2017-2019, 3 seasons).
Sex and The City (HBO, 1998-2004, 6 seasons).
Sex Education (Netflix, 2019-2023, 4 seasons).
Six Feet Under (HBO, 2001-2005, 5 seasons).
Squid Game (Netflix, 2021 – ongoing, 1 season).
Stranger Things (Netflix, 2016 – ongoing, 4 seasons).
The Simpsons (Fox, 1989 – ongoing, 35 seasons).
The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007, 6 seasons).
Star Trek (NBC, 1966-1969, 3 seasons).
Suburra (Netflix, 2017-2020, 3 seasons).
The Twilight Zone (CBS, 1959-1964, 5 seasons).
Twin Peaks (ABC, 1990-1991, 2 seasons).
The Umbrella Academy (Netflix, 2019-2024, 4 seasons).
Veronica Mars (UPN/The CW, 2004-2007, 3 seasons).
You (Lifetime/Netflix, 2018 – ongoing, 4 seasons).
The Walking Dead (AMC, 2010-2022, 11 seasons).
Wednesday (Netflix, 2022 – ongoing, 1 season).
Westworld (HBO, 2016-2022, 4 seasons).
The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008, 5 seasons).
The Witcher (Netflix, 2019 – ongoing, 3 seasons).

The Role of Product Placement in Serial Storytelling⁴

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Abstract

In the last decades, TV series have increasingly become an ideal platform for product placement initiatives due to their relatively quick production process and the variety of advertising opportunities they offer through sound, visual or integrated placements (Russell, 2019). Moreover, in recent years, streaming platforms have further promoted this form of communication by creating serialized content that resonates strongly with younger audiences, who tend to favour non-traditional media (Li, 2023). The continued increase of global revenues further underscores the success of product placement, with projections anticipating a surge to \$29 billion in 2023 (Navarro, 2023). This reflects a notable increase of over 12% compared to the preceding year. In this context, the paper aims to analyse product placement in the series *And Just Like That...*, the sequel to *Sex and the City*. In particular, it will focus on two antithetical cases: the so-called “negative placement”, which occurs when the inclusion of a brand or product is linked to a narrative element detrimental to the image of the brand itself, and “positive placement”, a promotional strategy that instead enhances the appeal and visibility of the featured product within the narration.

Keyword: Literary Cities; Morocco; Spanish Literature; Orientalism.

Introduction

Product placement, i.e. the practice of deliberately inserting brands or products for promotional purposes within audiovisual narratives such as films, TV series, reality shows, music videos or video games, emerged in the United States in the 1980s as an autonomous form of brand communication⁵, although the audiovisual industry had already used similar techniques in previous decades through formulas such as exploitation and “tie-ups” (Codeluppi *et al.*, 2020). Lowrey *et al.* (2005) use the term *product integration* to refer generally

⁴The paper is the result of joint reflection and ongoing discussion among the authors. Nevertheless, Geraldina Roberti is credited with the authorship of the introduction and paragraph 3, while Ariela Mortara contributed to paragraphs 1 and 2. The conclusions were jointly written by both authors.

⁵ As Sharma and Bumb (2022, pp. 104-105) recall, “the term product placement was coined in the 1980s after the exponential increase in the sales of Reese’s Candy, which was subtly referred in the movie ‘E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial’ by Steven Spielberg”.

to the practice of incorporating a product or service into a medium on the basis of some sort of agreement; *product placement* is considered a sub-category of integration in which a product is mentioned or simply seen; finally, *product immersion* is the term for integrations in which a product or service is a part of the story⁶.

In the context of increasingly sophisticated branded entertainment strategies, corporate advertising and marketing managers have adopted new integrated communication tools to reach their target audiences more effectively. This involves combining commercial messages with increasingly spectacular entertainment content. Product placement appears to address the needs of advertisers seeking innovative ways to promote their products in competitive markets, as well as broadcasters looking for additional revenue streams⁷.

According to PQ Media (2022), the global value of product placement increased by 12.3% year-on-year to almost USD 23 billion in 2021. In this scenario, TV placement remains the main source of value at over USD 16 billion, followed by movie placement at almost USD 3 billion. In addition, according to the same source, digital platforms become the fastest growing sector with an increase of 16.3%, underlining their rising importance in the advertising market⁸.

Gupta and Lord (1998) assert that types of product placement can range from *audio only*, in which the name/logo of a brand is mentioned in dialogue without showing the product on screen, to *visual only*, in which a physical product or brand is prominently shown to the audience without any relevant message or sound in the audio track to draw attention to it, to *audio-visual*, the most effective way, which combines the previous two by showing a brand and at the same time mentioning the name or delivering a brand-related message in audio form⁹. Fundamental to the communicative effectiveness of the advertising message is the congruence of the brand's integration into the narrative. This refers to the writers' ability to make the product's presence in the scene credible and consistent with the events depicted; as Kumar writes (2017, p. 176), "[consumers] prefer it when these product placements are hard to notice or when they do not distract them from the storyline. Therefore, marketers need to bring out unique ways to grab a viewer's attention towards their product placements without causing disturbance to flow of the plot. Otherwise, the brand/product may leave a negative impression in the minds of the viewers". Under these conditions, product placement proves to be an essential marketing communication tool and strategy,¹⁰ influencing media consumers to develop positive brand attitudes and increase brand recognition, according to the logic of "people must not notice it, but they must remember it" (see Stringer, 2006).

This ability of product placement to enhance the value of a brand by making it more appealing in the eyes of the audience is also functional in providing additional purchase motivation for consumers, as it allows them to leverage the emotion and involvement

⁶ More generally, Russell and Belch (2005) define product placement as the purposeful incorporation of a brand into an entertainment vehicle.

⁷ As Gupta and Lord (1998) recall, when Reese's Pieces candies were featured in the 1982 movie *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, sales of the product increased by 65% in the three months following the film's release.

⁸ For these data, see <https://www.pqmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PQ-Medias-Global-Product-Placement-Forecast-2022-2026-Executive-Summary.pdf> [last accessed 04.08.2024].

⁹ Russell (1998), in turn, identified three types of product placement: screen, script and plot. On this topic, see also Kumar (2017).

¹⁰ In this regard, also Sharma and Bump (2022, p. 112) emphasize the importance of seamlessly integrating the product into the narrative: "with the growing importance of sophisticated technology, the task has become easier for marketers for planning the product placement right at the time of inception of the film".

generated by the narrative to increase the attractiveness of the brand, avoiding more invasive forms of advertising. In fact, according to Soba and Aydin (2013), audiences feel that products or services that are integrated into a TV shows or films have a higher value than similar products or services advertised in other forms of media. Indeed, even if it hard to determine the impact of a single communications tool on sales, especially if the company is using an integrated approach (Soba and Aydin, 2013), the recent example of the placement of Birkenstock sandals in several scenes of the film *Barbie* (2023), testifies to the tool's effectiveness.. According to the online shopping platform Lyst, the film release led to a 110% increase in searches for the Arizona Big Buckle model, worn by Weird Barbie (played by Kate McKinnon), in less than a week¹¹.

As Maccari (2016) points out, placement has long since *colonized* the various media contexts, from cinema to television or the Internet. Indeed, if initially it was mainly Hollywood movies that adopted such advertising methods, in the last twenty years television series have also been recognized as the ideal space for product placement campaigns, allowing companies to showcase their products in narrative contexts with significant emotional impact. The length of the story and the flexibility of the plot offer companies numerous opportunities to seamlessly integrate their products into the episodes' narrative. In addition, with an increasingly global audience, TV series allow brands to reach millions of viewers worldwide, giving them an international stage where showcase their products.

In such a composite scenario, the paper aims to analyse the dynamics of product placement within the television series *And Just Like That...*, produced by the US television network HBO from 2021 as a sequel to the extremely popular series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, HBO). Specifically, the article will focus on two antithetical forms of product placement, namely "positive" and "negative" placements. The term "positive placement" refers to the strategic placement of a product or brand within media content in a favourable or beneficial context with the aim of increasing brand awareness, improving brand perception and ultimately driving sales by using the power of storytelling and visual media to connect with audiences (Kumar, 2017). Instead, "negative placement" can refer to either an unfavourable effect resulting from overly prominent placement (Cowley and Barron, 2008) or instances where the product or brand is represented in a negative context (Redondo, 2012).

1. *And Just Like That...*

And Just Like That... is a television series that has captured the attention of audiences worldwide since its premiere on December 9, 2021, on the HBO Max channel. Meant to be aired as a miniseries, after the ten episodes of the first season, whose finale was released on February 3, 2022, the show has been renewed for a second season of eleven episodes, which began on June 22, 2023, and ended August 24, 2023. Additionally, a third season is in the works and is expected to premiere in 2025 (Felt, 2024).

And Just Like That... present itself as a revival and a sequel to the famous *Sex and the City*, which was produced for the pay-tv cable channel HBO, running from 1998 to 2004 for six seasons, comprising 94 episodes in total (Fritsch, 2005). The sequel show follows two not

¹¹ See <https://tg24.sky.it/spettacolo/cinema/2023/07/27/-barbie-birkenstock-> [last accessed 30.07.2024].

so much successful films: *Sex and the City*, released in May 2008, and *Sex and the City 2*, which premiered in May 2010. Taking place 11 years after the occurrences depicted in the 2010 film, the women of *Sex and the City* navigate their journey from a liberated and friendship-filled existence in their 30s to a more intricate reality of life and friendship in their 50s. Specifically, the show focuses on the lives, relationships, and experiences of three of the original four women navigating the complexities of love, friendship, and career in the setting of New York City. Indeed, the series is centred on the ever-fashionable, columnist and writer Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) now co-hosting a podcast about sex and gender roles, on pragmatical and witty Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), who transitions from her previous career as a successful lawyer involved in company law to become an advocate for social justice studying for a master's degree in human rights at Columbia University, and on the ever romantic Charlotte York-Goldenblatt (Kristin Davis), depicted as a devoted mother and wife, committed to her family but struggling with her daughter Lily exploring her gender identity. Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) does not appear as a main character; her absence is explained within the storyline as she has moved away from New York City to pursue a new chapter in her life. However, Samantha's influence and past relationships with Carrie, Miranda, and Charlotte are referenced throughout the series, shaping the characters' experiences and interactions even in her absence.

When *Sex and the City* emerged in the 1990s, it shook up numerous societal norms, particularly within the American context. It boldly celebrated and prominently depicted women's sexual desires, marking a significant departure from prevailing attitudes of the era. Romance and the unabashed portrayal of the sexual experiences of the female protagonists were the central theme (Antonucci, 2023). After thirty years, *And Just Like That...* continues to explore many of the themes and topics that were central to the original series, like relationships, sexuality (Giomi, 2005), female empowerment and friendship, but encompasses also issues as gender identity and aging. Since the main characters are facing the realities of aging, they are also on the quest for self-discovery and reinvention in a very fragile time of their live. The protagonists grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and legacy, reflecting on their past experiences and contemplating their futures.

As a sequel to *Sex and the City*, *And Just Like That...* has generated significant buzz and anticipation among fans of the original series even if the expectations were often not met. According to Berman (2022), just the first episode focused on the death of John James Preston – otherwise known as Big (Chris Noth), the husband of the central protagonist Carrie Bradshaw – is “introducing an element of tragedy that never quite meshed with the more familiar, breezier story lines”. While *Variety* reports that the show has achieved success in viewership and holds the title of HBO Max's most-streamed series ever (Guerrero, 2022), some fans have engaged in a phenomenon referred to as “hate-watching”. They continue to watch the show despite harbouring negative sentiments, potentially driven by their fondness for the original series (Tayshete, 2022). Indeed, according to most critics (Navlakha, 2023), the show's first season was quite disappointing, failing to replicate the fascination of its forerunner. Plot developments frequently felt forced, lacking the humour and the lightness of *Sex and the City* and instead inducing cringe. The three protagonists, without the presence of the most unconventional personage of Samantha, are now joined by characters of Hispanic, or African-American or even Indian origin, in what was originally a predominantly white universe: Che Diaz (Sara Ramirez) a non-binary comedian, Dr. Nya Wallace (Karen Pittman) a law professor at Columbia University, Seema Patel (Sarita

Choudhury) a New York City's real estate agents, and documentarian Lisa Todd Wexley (Nicole Ari Parker). The four new characters interact at different levels with the original three expanding the original relational network but failing to recreate the atmosphere of *Sex and the City*, most of all the new show groaned under the weight of ten years' worth of exposition. Critics are quite harsh also for the second season defined as "even more lavish and unreservedly ridiculous than its first go-around" (D'Souza, 2023), even if the show offers a deeper characterization of the new cast members and captures more closely the essence and vivacity of *Sex and the City*.

2. The positive product placement in *And Just Like That...*

As mentioned above, serial narratives within television programming provide an ideal platform for brands to engage in product placement activities. Associating a protagonist of a series with a product or brand allows advertisers to capitalize on the positive feelings that viewers develop towards the character over the course of the narrative, resulting in a highly favourable return on investment. Furthermore, product placement appears to be less susceptible to some of the drawbacks associated with traditional advertising methods, as noted by Gistri (2008). These drawbacks include viewer impatience due to the overabundance of commercials on television and the tendency for viewers to switch channels during commercial breaks.

In *And Just Like That...*, as in the original *Sex and the City* series, the brands mentioned in several episodes – from Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo shoes to Apple products and Gucci or Louis Vuitton bags – have consistently used product placement as part of their corporate communication strategy. In addition, many of these brands have chosen both series to launch special editions of their products¹².

The echo effect created around the consumer products featured in scenes from *And Just Like That...* has a positive impact on the brand awareness, often leading to significant increases in sales. For example, the orange Valentino dress worn by protagonist Carrie Bradshaw in the final episode of the first season, *Seeing the Light* (Ep. 01x10), resulted in a 194% increase in requests for long orange dresses and a staggering 1.085% increase in requests for "Valentino dresses" within just 24 hours of airing¹³.

If, as we have seen, the staging of items that are the object of desire for millions of viewers is a recurring element within the episodes of *And Just Like That...*, this presence also serves to define part of the identity of the protagonists themselves, making it explicit through the construction of their personal and recognizable style. As Gibson writes (2021, p. 2),

The central character, Carrie Bradshaw, is presented to the audience through her love of fashion and, in particular, Manolo Blahnik shoes (or as Carrie calls them in both *Sex and the City* and *And Just Like That...*, her 'lovers'). Carrie's blue wedding shoes are the narrative thread for Big's proposal, their marriage, and ultimately Big's death, where the shoes are

¹²This is evident, for example, with the Fendi Red Sequin Bag featured in the episode *The Last Supper Part One: Appetizer* (Ep. 02x10) of *And Just Like That...*

¹³ For these data, see <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/and-just-like-that-finale-fashion-valentino-dress-searches-increase-1235062613/> [last accessed 30.07.2024].

destroyed on the bathroom floor [...]. But the shoes are not merely a plot device, they are a living brand, a character in each scene. As Big himself forewarns in an earlier scene, “Those blue shoes are the whole ball game”¹⁴.

Similarly, the pink Chanel dress that Charlotte insists on buying back for her daughter Lily in the episode *The Real Deal* (Ep. 02x02) symbolically represents the romantic and traditional soul of the woman, which only at the end of the episode comes to accept the girl’s change of style (and interests).

From this perspective, we can observe how product placement in the series serves both as a tool to describe the personalities of the characters and as a presence that adds realism and authenticity to the overall setting, as in the episode *Bomb Cyclone* (Ep. 02x06), which was partly filmed in the real Apple Store on New York’s Upper East Side¹⁵. In this sense, the presence of clearly recognizable brands within the series contributes to the credibility of the narrative, as it helps to better define the socio-cultural context in which the protagonists operate¹⁶. According to Gibson (2021), such narratives always consciously and explicitly engage with the *cultural zeitgeist*, highlighting trends, brands and other cultural elements. For example, in the episode *Tragically Hip* (Ep. 01x05), Miranda, one of the protagonists, is shown sitting on a sofa surrounded by boxes clearly marked with the Amazon Prime logo; interestingly, a book found in one of these packages serves as a catalyst, prompting her to reflect on her alcohol addiction problem. This is why, as Codeluppi *et al.* (2020) also point out, product placement can be considered, in all respects, both a commercial communication and, at the same time, a tangible representation of a cultural system well contextualized in time and space.

But the use of this communication tool also allows the showrunners to exploit the symbolic value of consumer goods to highlight character growth or emotional change, as in the first episode of the second season of *And Just Like That..., Met Cute* (Ep. 02x01): the presence of an item of clothing, such as the Vivienne Westwood wedding dress worn by the protagonist for the second time¹⁷, acts as a real narrative device, allowing Carrie to demonstrate that she has begun to overcome her grief over Mister Big’s death in a tangible way. The sentence that ends the episode (“And so I repurposed my grief”) is in fact one of the turning points of the plot, as it allows the character to express her will to move on and take control of her life again, marking a concrete beginning to the second season of the series.

Finally, the integration of a product into a fictional narrative allows scriptwriters and showrunners to operate on several levels (Borello *et al.*, 2008). This ranges from the symbolic, linked to the semantic halo that surrounds certain brands, to the affective/empathetic, enabling better characterization of the personalities and facilitating audience identification, to the cultural, linked to the possibility of using the brand to represent with greater authenticity and immediacy the universe in which the protagonists

¹⁴ Ep. 01x01.

¹⁵ As Peikert (2023) recounts, this served as a form of acknowledgment of the series’ popularity, as Apple had never previously allowed a show to film scenes in its stores.

¹⁶ Commenting about the results of a survey on a sample of Italian consumers, Nelli (2009, p. 80) writes: “this study identified a segment of respondents which expressed the liking of the presence of existing brands in a movie and the belief that this presence establishes movie scene authenticity, enhances the entertaining experience, helps to finance interesting movies, aids in character development, and does not reduce the artistic value of the movie”.

¹⁷ The dress was worn by Sarah Jessica Parker’s character in the 2008 film based on the *Sex and the City* series.

of the story move. As we have seen, such a “positive” promotional strategy often proves successful it can have a beneficial impact on a specific product and its popularity, potentially leading to profitable spin-offs in terms of sales. However, after an episode of a series has aired, unforeseen events can occur that put brands in a difficult position, forcing them to face reputational crises and damage to their image. We will delve into this topic further in the next section.

3. *And Just Like That...*, he is dead!

In literature the concept of “negative product placement” encompasses various scenarios. Cowley and Barron (2008) use this expression mainly to identify the effect of the communication tool inserted in a program that is well known and liked by viewers; they conclude that “prominent placements can negatively impact brand attitudes of viewers who report high levels of program liking” (Cowley and Barron, 2008, p. 89), whereas a positive attitude towards the brand can be achieved in viewers reporting lower levels of program liking. Thus, for these researchers “negative” refers to the effects of the insertions for spectators. For Nunlee *et al.* (2012) negative product placement describes the communication activity of a company that “instead of [...] seeking to create a positive image of their products in consumers’ minds [...] seeks to have consumers disassociate from competitors’ products, by associating competitors’ products with negative role models or negative reference group members” (Nunlee *et al.*, 2012, p. 11). They link the practice of negative product placement with that of stealth marketing¹⁸ as companies involved in it prefer to operate discreetly. Finally, Redondo highlights that “at times scripts require brands to appear in negative contexts that sponsors instinctively reject for fear of having their product’s image damaged” (Redondo, 2012, p. 622). That mainly happens because the companies’ desire to place their brands in very appealing conditions (in order to elicit positive sentiments in the viewers) clashes with producers’ needs to place them in more realistic situations, coherent with the plot as probably happened with the Peloton case we are about to examine.

Indeed, as already mentioned, in the first episode of *And Just Like That...*, the husband of Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), James Preston also known as Big (Chris Noth), dies in Carrie’s arms on the floor of the bathroom, suffering from a stroke while getting in the shower after a 45-minute exercise session on a Peloton bike, coached by his favourite instructor Allegra (played by a real Peloton instructor, Jess King) (Mack, 2021). Therefore, Peloton shares dropped by 11% overnight (Gibson, 2022), although the company was already suffering a fall in their sales following the big success of the lockdown months of 2020 (Kurutz, 2021).

According to Peloton’s spokesperson, they knew the company’s stationary bike would be used in the show, allowed the presence of one of their instructors, but were not informed about the actual plot, maybe because there was not a formal product placement contract encompassing money exchange (Pisani and Graham, 2021).

The Peloton debacle presents itself as an “excellent” case of negative product placement, where a brand appears in a negative context that could damage the product and the brand

¹⁸ Roy and Chattopadhyay (2010, p. 70) argue that “stealth marketing refers to undercover, covert, or hidden marketing. Due to a low level of visibility, the target is unaware of the marketers’ actions, at least to some degree”.

image. Indeed, according to Redondo (2012), negative placements are expected to gain more attention and thought than positive placements, since they are less common, and rarity seems to make negative stimuli more potent (Fiske, 1980). Specifically, *intrinsic negative placement* refers to all those representations directly linked to the technical characteristics of the product and its attributes, casting a negative light on the quality and functionalities of the product or service that the company offers; while *extrinsic negative placement* occurs when the brand's image is diminished by social stereotypes or common prejudices. In this case, the negative content is only peripherally related to the brand, thus viewers are less motivated in processing the information and the placement might actually have a positive outcome inducing nonuser of the brand to try it (Redondo, 2012). But, since the Peloton placement is *intrinsic*, it acquires a meaningful relevance for viewers, thus strongly motivating them to carefully consider the eventual negative consequences of engaging with the product and leading them to develop a less favourable perception of the brand. Moreover, the backlash of Peloton's negative placement was particularly harsh because the brand already suffered from some reputational problems due to an accident involving one of their treadmills that led to the death of a six-year-old boy, some months prior to the debut of the show, while another incident involved a three-year-old child stuck under the same type of machine (Taylor, 2021).

In order to counteract the effects of the negative product placement, Peloton spokespersons initially accused mister Big of having led an unhealthy lifestyle leading him to the unavoidable accident, then posted on YouTube¹⁹ a commercial that was announced on Twitted with the text "And Just Like That... He's Alive" (Gibson, 2022). The ad, edited in a single night, without involving either the writers of *And Just Like That...* or HBO, features Chris Noth flirting with the Peloton instructor Jess King, discussing the possibility of a new ride because "life is too short" not to do it, while a voice-over narrates the benefits of cycling for the heart, lungs, and circulation, as well as the reduction of the risk of cardiovascular disease (Damiano, 2021). However, after a few days, Peloton revoked the commercial from its social platforms. The cancellation came after reports of allegations against Noth by two women were published in "The Hollywood Reporter"; the girls detailed incidents of sexual assault they claimed to have experienced, one in Los Angeles in 2004 and the other in New York in 2015. The women, who requested anonymity, said they came forward after learning that Noth would return to play the role of Mr. Big (Corriere del Ticino, 2021).

Commenting on the Peloton debacle, the show's director, Michael Patrick King, explained "well, we knew he was gonna have a heart attack. So, the Peloton had nothing to do with the heart attack. The Peloton is a thing [though] that people have now, right? It reflects [modern] society. I wanted something to show that Mr. Big was current"²⁰. Thus, the specific insertion of Peloton was useful to the plot in order to enhance the realism of the show (der Waldt *et al.*, 2007) and to make it more appealing to the audience even if elicited a negative reaction in viewers' mind.

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCuhM-LPLVk> [last accessed 30.07.2024].

²⁰ Excerpt from an interview with Michael Patrick (in Taylor, 2021).

Conclusions

Despite the rise of other forms of communications fostered by the overwhelming presence of social media platforms, i.e. the growth of influencer marketing, the increasing investments in product placement testify the pivotal role of this tool for brand and products. The ability to integrate products into a compelling narrative that engages and excites audiences offers a means to partially mitigate consumer disaffection towards traditional advertising. This is achieved by transferring the positive emotions evoked by the characters portrayed to the products featured.

Product placement is subtle and therefore does not distract the viewer's attention from the main content of the programme or film, thus the interweaving of product placement with entertainment programmes ensures the audience's concerted attention, leading to commercial returns.

Thanks to increasingly sophisticated communication technologies, product placement can be planned at the conception stage of a film or TV series. This allows the producer and director to seamlessly integrate the product into the storyline without disrupting the main plot.

Among the different carries, television series have become an increasingly favoured platform for product placement initiatives, thanks to their rapid production schedules and the diverse advertising opportunities they afford, including auditory, visual, and integrated placements (Russell, 2019). *And Just Like That...* makes no exception, hosting product placements for very different brands: some of them inherited from its predecessor *Sex and the City* (Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo, Fendi) some others, like Peloton, used to contextualize the show and make it more relatable to reality. However, occasionally the inclusion of a product in an episode can have unexpected consequences, even to the point of negatively impacting the brand.²¹ According to Peloton spokesperson statements, the negative placement in which the brand had incurred could be the consequence of an unclear contract between the company and the productions. After the turmoil generated by the death of Mr. Big and the attempt to regain the favour of the publics through the commercial "He's alive", Peloton has stated it is not going to file legal action, and HBO maintains that Mr. Big's death was caused by his unhealthy lifestyle and not the Peloton ride (Paul, 2022).

While numerous empirical studies in the field of product placement have concluded that it is effective in influencing media consumers to develop positive brand attitudes and increase brand awareness (see, among others, Karrh *et al.*, 2003; Brennan and Babin, 2004), the Peloton case underlines the importance of carefully considering the narrative context in which a brand is placed. This is critical to maximizing the promotional impact of its presence while minimizing the risk of backlashes.

We can conclude that *And Just Like That...* is a paradigmatic, albeit unique, case study illustrating how product placement can enliven the cultural discourse around a show, its mediation and reception, influencing both narrative and production aspects. In this sense, the centrality that a series assumes in the cultural debate can affect, positively or negatively,

²¹ As Daugherty (2005) points out, in many cases the company has limited control over how the brand is incorporated or portrayed in a story or scene.

the brands that appear in the different episodes and contribute to the identity characterisation of its protagonists.

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Frictions in Fiction. La rappresentazione dell'invecchiamento femminile nella serie televisiva *Feud: Bette e Joan*

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Abstract

The focus of the article consists in the analysis of the ways frictions and crises linked to aging are depicted in the first season (*Bette and Joan*) of the TV series *Feud* (2017-2024, FX), through the story of two cinema icons, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. On screen the aging process is narrated at a critical moment for Hollywood at a time when women after the age of forty were no longer deemed suitable or interesting for movie making. The narrative modulation recalls the set of problems connected with sexism and misogyny, quite present in the film industry of the time. In *Feud: Bette and Joan* (2017) Bette Davis and Joan Crawford are in their turn played by two other important protagonists of the cinema industry: Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange. The presence of these two great actresses further define an additional level of textual interpretations, linked to contemporaneity. The complexity of the storytelling therefore provides the audiences with the opportunity to move on, and around, several levels and frameworks, as *Feud: Bette and Joan* recalls differing time frames, making them overlap. On the one hand, an 'archival' model is being used through fragments which are remakes of past excerpts, and open up to a specific and shared historical memory for parts of the audience. On the other hand, there are different jumps which lead viewers elsewhere, closer to the present from the central focus of storytelling. In essence, reality is constantly recalled, in a form similar to docu-fiction, thus expanding the possibility for the TV series to establish ties with contemporaneity as well. A feature emerging from the analysis of *Feud: Bette and Joan* refers to the use of the Hollywood setting as the metaphor of a bigger space-world than the mere cinema industry, thus promoting a reflection on the issue of women's aging more broadly. Therefore, the sparks caused by fiction-friction give rise to discursive explosions capable of bringing new light – and new values – to aging, becoming part of the broader debate at a socio-cultural level.

Keyword: Feud; Tv Series; Ageing; Crisis; Celebrity.

Warning

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Introduzione

Feud: Bette e Joan (FX, 2017)²², ideata da Ryan Murphy, narra della rivalità tra Bette Davis e Joan Crawford, portata in primo piano durante le riprese del film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). Una rivalità che aveva radici lontane, ma che nella serie Tv viene ulteriormente accentuata per via della compartecipazione delle due attrici alla pellicola in quanto co-protagoniste, in una fase di declino della carriera per entrambe, dovuta non tanto al peggioramento delle loro capacità attoriali, quanto all'età raggiunta che le poneva, per l'epoca, in una posizione di fine carriera. Attraverso una narrazione complessa (Mittell, 2015) *Feud* richiama un insieme di problematiche presenti nell'industria cinematografica di quel periodo storico, che vanno dal sessismo alla misoginia. L'attenzione del pubblico viene però focalizzata soprattutto sulla vecchiaia, quale vero e proprio stigma per le celebrità femminili, tanto da divenire motivo di crisi e di conseguente rivalità rispetto alle attrici ventenni. Il successo ottenuto in passato e il raggiungimento di un alto grado di notorietà non erano cioè sufficienti a contrastare il valore della giovinezza portato in scena dalle loro nuove antagoniste.

Per narrare le tensioni e le rivalità legate allo stigma della vecchiaia entro relazioni femminili, in *Feud* vengono utilizzati tre periodi storici, contrapposti costantemente fra loro: gli anni Quaranta – Cinquanta, gli inizi Sessanta e i fine Settanta. Questi tre contesti temporali mettono in risalto situazioni diverse, determinando nello spettatore una riflessione fra aspetti culturali predominanti nel passato rispetto a quelli più vicini alla nostra contemporaneità.

Bette Davis e Joan Crawford vengono interpretate in *Feud* da due importanti personaggi del cinema: Susan Sarandon e Jessica Lange. La presenza di queste due grandi attrici definisce un ulteriore livello di valorizzazione del testo, legandolo alla contemporaneità e alle recenti interpretazioni della vecchiaia. L'avanzare dell'età acquisisce cioè una doppia valenza: nella serie TV appare come una fonte di crisi che determina un percorso di lotte soprattutto personali. Grazie alla presenza di Sarandon e di Lange, diviene un tema di riflessione che oltrepassa i confini dello schermo, ridefinendo lo spettro di significati legati all'epoca rappresentata, per arrivare fino alla contemporaneità. L'*ageing* crea perciò una tensione narrativa che produce confronto e complicità su più livelli: fra i personaggi rappresentati; fra le attrici fuori dallo schermo; nel rapporto fra la serie e il pubblico.

La complessità della narrazione offre dunque allo spettatore la possibilità di orientarsi fra più livelli e cornici. Dal punto di vista registico, ogni periodo viene rappresentato utilizzando espedienti diversi. Il pilot introduce un presente storico (fine anni Settanta), per il quale si fa uso del colore, che vede Olivia de Havilland (interpretata da Catherine Zeta-Jones) intervistata sulla relazione fra Bette e Joan.

²² La serie televisiva *Feud* (FX) consta di due stagioni. La prima, denominata *Bette and Joan* (uscita nel 2017), racconta la rivalità tra Bette Davis e Joan Crawford. La seconda, intitolata *Capote vs. The Swans* (2024), racconta il "tradimento" di Truman Capote, che rivelò in un suo racconto segreti scandalosi di amiche e confidenti.



Figura 1. Ep. 01x01, minuto 0:37

La narrazione principale, ancora a colori, riguarda la realizzazione del famoso film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Che fine ha fatto Baby Jane?, 1962) (primi anni Sessanta), che tratta la storia di due sorelle – a loro volta attrici – Jane e Blanche Hudson, rivali dalla prima all’ultima inquadratura.



Figura 2. Ep. 01x01, minuto 0:20

Il ritorno al passato viene invece realizzato mediante un modello “archivistico”: si tratta di frammenti in bianco e nero di film di Davis e Crawford perfettamente riprodotti utilizzando al loro posto Sarandon e Lange. Tali frammenti fungono da rimandi a pellicole che, per una parte del pubblico, toccano la propria memoria storica. Il reale simulato, in sostanza, è costantemente richiamato in forma quasi di docu-fiction, ampliando in questo modo le possibilità di connessione della serie TV anche con la contemporaneità.



Figura 3. Ep. 01x01, minuto 00:45



Figura 4. Ep. 01x01, minuto 1:02

Tenendo conto della tradizione dei Cultural Studies, dei Media Studies e della socio-semiotica, l'analisi che proponiamo nelle prossime pagine prende in considerazione la serie TV come forma testuale, dunque prodotto culturale capace di rappresentare significati e valori condivisi da uno o più gruppi sociali. Nel contesto contemporaneo la nozione di testo va compresa entro una cornice ampia che – come afferma Couldry (2000) – contempla un regime di problematicità: una delle difficoltà sta proprio nel rintracciarne il perimetro, poiché spesso l'oggetto di analisi si presenta così complesso (Mittell, 2015) da rinviare ad altri prodotti mediali, a paratesti, a creazioni tramite remix e remake che aprono a molteplici prospettive di ampliamento delle narrazioni. Naturalmente anche in *Feud* si rintracciano queste dinamiche: come abbiamo visto, le stesse rappresentazioni temporali vengono mostrate allo spettatore attraverso strategie piuttosto raffinate.

Utilizzando gli strumenti dell'analisi testuale, che fanno riferimento al contesto teorico descritto, insieme a studi recenti dedicati alle serie TV (Bernardelli, 2016; Pescator, e 2018;

Dusi e Grignaffini, 2020) *Feud* viene presentata nelle pagine che seguono sia attraverso lo studio degli schemi narrativi che propone, sia per il modo in cui i diversi temi prendono corpo in scena, dando luogo a più possibilità di interpretazione. Più che una storia, come vedremo nelle prossime pagine, *Feud: Bette and Joan* ne racconta molte, poiché contiene diversi risvolti narrativi. L'effetto è quello di produrre nello spettatore una riflessione su aspetti che interessano primariamente la questione dell'*ageing*, utilizzando Hollywood come contesto di riferimento, ma anche come metafora di uno spazio-mondo ben più ampio della sola industria cinematografica.

1. *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* O meglio, “What ever happened to youth?”

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? all'epoca fu un successo, e ricevette addirittura cinque candidature al premio Oscar. La storia, ambientata a Hollywood, narra dell'alternarsi di momenti di successo e insuccesso nel mondo dello spettacolo di due sorelle, Jane e Blanche, contemplando un periodo che va dall'infanzia all'età matura. Le vicende si concentrano sulla loro difficile relazione soprattutto nel momento in cui, ormai non più giovani, sono costrette a vivere sotto lo stesso tetto. Angherie, dispetti, soprusi che Jane compie ai danni di Blanche animano la trama, fino alla conclusione del film che presenta una sorta di rivelazione proponendo allo spettatore una possibile rilettura degli eventi.

Ma andiamo con ordine. La storia procede per salti temporali, mostrando inizialmente le due sorelle nel 1917, quando “Baby Jane”, ragazzina dal carattere capriccioso, appare come una giovane promessa dello spettacolo, molto seguita dal pubblico. Blanche, al contrario, viene presentata nelle prime immagini come una fanciulla timida e introversa che patisce la gloria della sorella. La narrazione si sposta poi nel 1935, quando le due sorelle sono diventate donne: l'una – Jane – è ormai una celebrità dimenticata, sorta di icona del passato che fatica a trovare lavoro nelle produzioni cinematografiche. L'altra – Blanche – è divenuta invece una vera e propria stella di Hollywood: nota e ricercata da più registi occupa una posizione di privilegio nel jet set del periodo. La scalata al successo di Blanche viene però bruscamente interrotta da un fatale incidente automobilistico, a causa del quale la donna perde l'uso delle gambe e si ritrova costretta sulla sedia a rotelle. La dinamica dell'incidente non è chiara e allo spettatore viene presentata una scena in cui la responsabilità dell'accaduto sembrerebbe essere di Jane, questione che verrà risolta solo negli ultimi minuti del film.

Ciò che emerge lungo tutto l'arco narrativo è una evidente conflittualità fra le due sorelle, una faida – appunto - che accompagna tutta la loro vita, dall'inizio alla fine. Jane e Blanche sembrano simboleggiare due parti avverse comprese però in uno stesso giogo. Dopo essere state investite dell'aura della celebrità (l'una nell'infanzia, l'altra nell'età adulta) solo apparentemente sembrano incarnare due destini diversi, poiché si ritrovano, nell'età matura, a vivere in una sorta di normalità, sotto lo stesso tetto, ben lontane dai fasti dei periodi precedenti.

Lo scorrere del tempo – e con esso il dissolversi della gloria – rappresenta uno dei focus principali della storia: Jane resta intrappolata nella sua immagine “baby” che inizialmente le aveva donato il successo, poi sfumato con l'età. Blanche, a sua volta, rivive i brividi della celebrità guardando alla televisione i film che aveva interpretato nel passato.

Come afferma Mindy Buchanan-King (2020), in realtà l'opera di Aldrich non si interroga tanto su cosa è successo a Baby Jane. La vera domanda che guida la narrazione sembra essere piuttosto: "What ever happened to youth?". E come risposta, afferma ancora Buchanan-King, "Baby Jane gives its audience a monster: The Aging Female. (...) the true horror of the movie is predicated on cultural anxieties of the physical and emotional loss of youth through visual manifestations of the grotesque female body" (Buchanan-King, 2020, p. 409). Si tratta di uno sguardo sulla storia che va oltre la trama proposta e che sembra, invece, chiamare in causa, attraverso riferimenti più o meno evidenti, lo stesso mondo di Hollywood e il suo sprezzante giudizio verso il passaggio degli anni, specie per le attrici donne.

Dana Heller (2022) dichiara addirittura che il successo di Baby Jane ispirerà un nuovo sottogenere chiamato *hagsploitation*, una sorta di psico-horror le cui protagoniste sono proprio le donne (attrici) di una certa età, molto adatte ad interpretare caratteri inquietanti: "a commercial vehicle for former Hollywood sex symbols facing extinction in an industry that views women over 50 with disgust and amusement" (Heller, 2022, p. 58). Secondo Heller, i film *hagsploitation* contengono le seguenti caratteristiche: (1) è presente un personaggio femminile che abbia almeno cinquanta anni; (2) il personaggio femminile agisce in modo visibilmente folle; (3) questo personaggio deve essere essenziale per la trama; (4) l'attrice che interpreta la donna pazza deve aver superato il momento del suo massimo splendore (5) il personaggio deve essere interpretato da una (ex) attrice famosa. Per Heller, dunque, il sottogenere *hagsploitation* fornisce la possibilità di poter continuare a far lavorare nell'arena cinematografica attrici donne considerate non più desiderabili, ma in grado di portare il pubblico in sala vestendo orrorifici ruoli.



Figura 5. What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?. Regia di Robert Aldrich (1962) – Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.
(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/What-Ever-Happened-to-Baby-Jane>)

Tutto ciò viene però messo in crisi dalla stessa Crawford, che evidentemente rifiuta di apparire in scena come invecchiata e imbruttita, mantenendo, al contrario, un portamento impeccabile, seppur utilizzando un corpo che nella storia non è più in grado di muovere le gambe. Questo tipo di presenza sullo schermo contribuisce a scardinare la visione cristallizzata e negativa che tradizionalmente era riservata al corpo non più giovane. Si tratta di una scelta, messa in campo da un'attrice dal carattere forte, capace di creare delle increspature negli standard di allora, provocando una iniziale rivoluzione rispetto all'*ageing*: “Crawford complicates cultural fears of the aging actress, becoming a non-normative – because she is aged – female, sexual body” (Buchanan-King, 2020, p. 409).

2. *Feud: Bette and Joan*. La storia nella storia

La serie TV *Feud: Bette and Joan* mostra sullo schermo le dinamiche che hanno accompagnato il film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, la genesi e l'evoluzione del progetto, il dietro le quinte, la sua presentazione al pubblico, la candidatura agli Oscar e gli anni successivi. In particolare la narrazione segue le dinamiche che hanno caratterizzato il complesso rapporto fra le due protagoniste, Bette Davis e Joan Crawford, insieme ad altre faticose relazioni, come quella fra la stessa Bette Davis e la figlia Barbara Sherry, o fra Robert Aldrich e Jack Warner, rispettivamente regista e produttore del film. In tutti questi casi viene spesso posto l'accento proprio sul tema dell'età e sulla conseguente problematicità della vecchiaia.

Nei dialoghi fra i personaggi, infatti, la giovinezza è spesso evocata come forma di potere da parte delle donne, un potere che nel mondo hollywoodiano dell'epoca si manifestava sia in modo concreto, attraverso proposte di contratti e partecipazioni in più film, sia in modo simbolico, per mezzo dell'esaltazione stessa di quel periodo della vita, presentando costantemente nelle pellicole protagoniste con meno di trentacinque anni. All'inizio degli anni Sessanta, per le attrici over quaranta vigeva una regola precisa: all'aumentare dell'età, in modo inversamente proporzionale corrispondeva una sottrazione costante e continua di offerte e di ruoli, fino ad arrivare alla soglia zero, al loro annullamento totale dagli schermi e dunque dal jet set.

Diverso era il caso degli uomini, dunque degli attori. Come afferma il personaggio di Nonah, la massaggiatrice di Joan Crawford (Jessica Lange), all'inizio della prima puntata della serie TV: “You know how it is. Men age, they get character. Women age, they get lost”²³.

Il tema della vecchiaia viene dunque subito introdotto e i primi minuti del pilot di *Feud: Bette and Joan* sono eloquenti al proposito. La presentazione delle protagoniste Bette e Joan, impersonate da attrici altrettanto importanti e incisive nel contesto hollywoodiano, quali Susan Sarandon e Jessica Lange, viene realizzata per mezzo della voce di Catherine Zeta-Jones che interpreta una Olivia de Havilland di circa sessanta anni. Mediante la formula dell'intervista, a lei rivolta da un sedicente documentarista di nome Adam, l'attrice Olivia/Catherine dichiara:

“There's never been a rivalry like theirs. For nearly half a century they hated each other...and we loved them for it”. [...] “At the peak of The Depression when I was

²³ Ep. 01x01, minuti 4:30 - 4:35.

first starting out, [Joan] was the woman every man wanted – and every woman wanted to be. Many think of her as the greatest star of all time. Now, my dear friend Bette...she was, quite frankly, the greatest actress Hollywood has ever known. What a career! During the war she played all the best roles, and she played them with a – I don't know how else to say this – but with a ballsy intensity that none of us, actor or actress, would have dared. You know, they only made one film together, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, but how that happened, and what happened afterwards...oh my...that's a story and a feud of Biblical proportions”.

Adam: “What was behind their feud? Why did they hate each other so much?”

Olivia: “Feuds are never about hate. Feuds are about pain. They're about pain”²⁴.

Il dolore diviene così uno dei fili conduttori della narrazione che viene realizzata mediante una specifica strategia registica basata sul dialogo fra le tre forme di temporalità a cui si accennava nell'introduzione e che producono, nello spettatore, un insieme di punti di riferimento, resi evidenti proprio grazie alle scelte cromatiche (colore o bianco e nero). Per l'intervista ad Olivia, ad esempio, viene utilizzata la tecnica del colore. Quando però ella parla della storia delle due attrici, vengono inseriti spezzoni in bianco e nero nei quali Susan Sarandon e Jessica Lange interpretano rispettivamente vecchi film di Bette Davis e Joan Crawford. L'uso del bianco e nero funziona perciò come dispositivo per mostrare una differenza temporale fra il momento dell'intervista e il periodo d'oro delle due attrici, relegato nel passato. Non solo. Questo continuo cambio di prospettiva crea una sorta di “effetto-verità”: il bianco e nero si configura come il lato documentaristico della serie, mentre il colore sembrerebbe rimandare alla parte più romanzata. L'effetto è quello di una sorta di emulazione del genere docu-fiction, basato sulla simulazione dell'uso di immagini di repertorio.



In alto, Feud, Ep. 01x02; in basso The Little Foxes (1941).

²⁴ Ep. 01x01, minuti 1:50 - 3:02.



In alto, Feud, Ep. 01x06; in basso, Strait-Jacket (1964).

Le scenografie, gli abiti, le pose contribuiscono a sottolineare i passaggi temporali, rimarcati dall'uso alternato del registro filmico e di quello pseudo-reale. Ma lo strumento che concorre maggiormente alla realizzazione di questo effetto è senz'altro il montaggio: i tre piani narrativi, legati alle tre temporalità osservate, vanno così a comporre una struttura basata su un ritmo cadenzato e costante. I frammenti delle interviste (oltre a Olivia de Havilland/Catherine Zeta-Jones, ci sono anche Joan Blondell e Geraldine Page, rispettivamente interpretate da Kathy Bates e Sarah Paulson) si distanziano però dall'andamento della storia, ponendosi a un livello "meta", poiché contengono riflessione sulla stessa.

Il tema dell'*ageing* attraversa dunque più fasi: si parla di età – e di conseguente decadimento – nelle interviste; l'età è al centro delle discussioni fra regista e produttore; l'età, infine, diviene la chiave di interpretazione delle contrapposizioni (e anche delle riconciliazioni) interne alla trama, caratterizzando i rapporti fra i personaggi. Per quanto la vecchietta venga valorizzata soprattutto in modo negativo, avere una certa età significa anche aver accumulato esperienza e sapere, come evidenzia Bette Davis (Susan Sarandon) nei momenti di conflitto con la figlia che aspira a diventare attrice. Si evidenzia perciò un ampio spettro di significati legati all'*ageing*: è espressione di perdita di freschezza e bellezza, soprattutto sul piano fisico, ma anche acquisizione di competenza, personalità e professionalità, sul piano esperienziale.

3. Gender e *ageing* in *Feud: Bette and Joan*

Portando in scena le fasi di lavorazione del film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, e utilizzando affondi sulla vita privata di Bette Davis e Joan Crawford, *Feud: Bette and Joan* racconta di fatto lo spaccato della Hollywood del tempo: offre uno sguardo sulle celebrità, sulle dinamiche di potere, sugli stereotipi di genere presenti nelle pellicole, insieme alla misoginia che caratterizzava il mondo del cinema degli anni Sessanta. La serie propone

dunque una ricostruzione della società di quel periodo, dalla quale emerge in maniera significativa la disparità di potere fra uomini e donne. In tale contesto, come abbiamo visto, la vecchiaia appare come un tema importante, addirittura discriminante. Esso viene affrontato secondo diversi aspetti, sfruttando soprattutto la rivalità tra le due attrici, esacerbata dalla stampa e dall'industria cinematografica dell'epoca, che le ha sempre dipinte come nemiche.

Nel 1962, anno di uscita di *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, Bette e Joan erano vicine ai sessanta anni. Nonostante le importanti carriere alle spalle, entrambe lottavano per trovare nuove possibilità di lavoro e ruoli significativi, affrontando la sfida di voler continuare a esercitare la loro professione in un ambiente che discriminava le donne non più giovani. L'avanzare dell'età le rendeva per questo più fragili, accentuando l'insicurezza dovuta agli effetti dell'invecchiamento sulla loro carriera.

La serie Tv *Fend: Bette and Joan* mette in evidenza proprio questo aspetto: l'età avanzata viene messa a tema e compare nei dialoghi di molte scene. Si configura inoltre come una sorta di spettro capace di contaminare tutta la narrazione, creando difficoltà tali da modificare gli atteggiamenti delle due donne, producendo in loro comportamenti che oscillano tra l'aver soggezione di registi e produttori, e i tentativi, non sempre riusciti, di sedurli. *Fend: Bette and Joan* propone dunque anche una lettura delle forme di sottomissione delle donne rispetto al dominio maschile (Bourdieu, 1998), portando in scena logiche e abitudini sedimentate nel tempo, insieme alla possibilità di messa in discussione delle stesse.

Seppure l'avanzare della vecchiaia contribuisca a produrre un clima di tensione nella vita di Bette e Joan, è anche vero che la condivisione del problema dell'età determina fra le due una forma di vicinanza e di complicità.

La vecchiaia viene perciò descritta anche come uno spazio di reciprocità e comprensione, una forma di alleanza che determina una maggiore forza in ognuna delle due donne, un'arma - in fondo - contro l'establishment che le circonda. La vecchiaia si configura in questo caso come valore positivo, come dispositivo capace di far emergere una forma di femminismo sovversivo, che punta alla revisione dei modelli di comportamento tradizionali e delle forme di agency femminile tipiche di quel periodo storico. Osservando gli atteggiamenti, i modi di fare dei diversi personaggi viene mostrato sullo schermo uno spaccato di inizi anni Sessanta, a cui vanno accostati i comportamenti delle due protagoniste, che stridono in modo evidente rispetto agli standard dell'epoca. Come è noto, l'agency corrisponde alle capacità dell'individuo di agire, determinando anche forme di resistenza alle strutture di potere (Ahearn, 1999). In questo senso i comportamenti che esprimono autonomia e differenza possono produrre variazioni rispetto ai modelli stabiliti dalla cultura. Le azioni compiute dalle singole persone determinano influsso sulle strutture sociali e politiche, e al tempo stesso sono influenzate da queste (Giddens, 1979).

Fend: Bette and Joan ci racconta queste lotte culturali proponendo allo spettatore il complicato "dietro le quinte" di un film che porta in scena per la prima volta, insieme, due celebrità le quali, a causa dell'età, sembrerebbero in declino. Tuttavia attraverso i loro comportamenti e le loro azioni, non sempre in linea con quanto previsto dalle norme sociali dell'epoca, esse sono anche in grado di mostrare la forza e le potenzialità femminili necessarie per contrastare un sistema rigidamente basato su regole definite da uomini. Joan e Bette agiscono infatti determinando conseguenze che nel lungo termine avrebbero portato effetti sul piano pubblico. Il rifiuto di accettare la fine della propria carriera decretata dalla regola ufficiosa degli *studios* che fissava i "limiti di età" per le attrici donne, segna le

prime batture della storia di *Feud: Bette and Joan* e trascina lo spettatore dentro l'inizio di una rivoluzione. L'unione delle due celebrità contro il pregiudizio dell'età produce infatti una battaglia che diviene plurale e chiama in causa l'agency delle donne come forma di resistenza, come insieme di atti che favoriscono una complicità, un accordo, inaugurando nuovi processi e nuovi modi di fare (Ahearn, 1999)²⁵. Introducendo una problematizzazione – e conseguente trasformazione – nello statuto dell'attrice, *Feud: Bette and Joan* offre una rappresentazione critica delle sfide affrontate dalle donne nel mondo del cinema negli anni Sessanta, mettendo in luce le disuguaglianze di genere e le pressioni sociali legate alla bellezza e all'età. La serie contribuisce in qualche modo a raccontare l'affermazione di una forma di femminismo basata sulle battaglie che le donne hanno dovuto affrontare per ottenere maggiore equità e riconoscimento nella società e nell'industria cinematografica²⁶. Oltre alle protagoniste, anche la presenza di Olivia de Havilland gioca un ruolo di rilievo, per via delle azioni da lei condotte a Hollywood già negli anni Quaranta. In sostanza ciò che la serie racconta appare molto vicino alla contemporaneità, come viene documentato anche dalla ricerca condotta da Amaral *et al.* (2020), dal titolo *Long-term patterns of gender imbalance in an industry without ability or level of interest differences*, realizzata mediante l'analisi di 26mila film prodotti negli Stati Uniti fra il 1910 e il 2010.

4. *Feud: Bette and Joan*. Frizioni dentro e fuori la storia

Se, come abbiamo visto, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* descrive la storia della relazione complicata fra due sorelle e attrici ormai fuoriuscite dal sistema cinematografico, *Feud: Bette and Joan* pone l'accento sul rapporto critico fra due star a fine carriera. Sullo schermo appaiono dunque due personaggi che interpretano altri due personaggi che sono in crisi per molte ragioni, tra cui la perdita della celebrità. Da spettatori osserviamo il confronto di personalità, in un incrocio di specchi che richiama in modo costante la dialettica fra stage e backstage. Al centro di questi percorsi narrativi viene posta la vita delle donne dello spettacolo: nel film, come nella serie, come nella realtà fuori dallo schermo.

Questo insieme di incastri produce una inevitabile serie di rimandi poiché, sebbene i periodi temporali a cui si fa riferimento cambino, così come i personaggi, le questioni centrali sembrano restare quasi immutate. Quanto la Hollywood dei primi anni Sessanta nella sostanza appare diversa da quella del 1917, periodo d'oro della Jane performer, o del 1935 quando Blanche è costretta ad interrompere la sua carriera? Quanto appare lontana, in termini di misoginia, sessismo e lotta all'*ageing*, dalla Hollywood attuale? Che cosa è cambiato?

Contro ogni aspettativa, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* fu un vero e proprio successo; in seguito, però, gli unici ruoli offerti alle due protagoniste furono più o meno gli stessi. La loro trasformazione da personaggi desiderabili a ripugnanti aveva avuto il sopravvento ed è così nato il sottogenere *hagsploitation*. È importante inoltre sottolineare che, seppure l'*hagsploitation* preveda lo stravolgimento dei codici della femminilità – senza produrne una reale riabilitazione – si concentra soprattutto su attrici di pelle bianca, portando in scena conflitti tra l'estetica e le convenzioni della cultura alta e bassa, del dominio e della

²⁵ Un approfondimento sul linguaggio dell'abbigliamento come forma di agency in *Feud* è contenuto in Mascio (2023).

²⁶ Ancora oggi il trattamento fra attori e attrici è abbastanza diverso. Cfr. Guo (2016).

resistenza, dell'autorità e della subordinazione (Carraghan, 2019). I film di *hagsploitation* tendono dunque a rompere i tabù, rafforzando gli stereotipi degradanti delle donne anziane, evidenziando le condizioni e le convenzioni che hanno reso questi stessi stereotipi cinematograficamente rappresentabili ed economicamente fruttuosi (Heller, 2022). In sostanza, come afferma Joan/Jessica in *Feud: Bette and Joan*, “tutto ciò che è scritto per le donne sembra rientrare in soli tre ruoli: ingenua, madri o Gorgoni”, e ad Hollywood dopo una certa età sembra-va esserci spazio solo per la terza categoria. In quale direzione procede allora *Feud*?

In un articolo dal titolo *'Hagsploitation': horror's obsession with older women returns*, apparso sul “The Guardian” il 18 gennaio 2018 per annunciare l'uscita della serie, Anne Billson si chiede se questo ritorno delle protagoniste donne nelle narrazioni horror sia davvero da celebrare, rimarcando – attraverso diversi esempi – la regola che ancora vige e cioè che dopo i cinquant'anni per le attrici è difficile trovare ruoli da interpretare.

A fronte di tutto questo *Feud: Bette and Joan* sembra voler far emergere le questioni che si concentrano su questo passaggio, tanto da titolare un episodio proprio *Hagsploitation* (Ep. 01x06). La scelta di aver inserito nel cast della serie *Feud: Bette and Joan* due protagoniste, punti di riferimento del cinema degli ultimi decenni, quali Jessica Lange e Susan Sarandon, si configura a questo proposito come un dato di fondamentale importanza. Le due, infatti, sono celebrità attive politicamente su molti fronti: la prima, fra le altre, ricopre la carica di ambasciatrice UNICEF nelle campagne di sensibilizzazione sulle conseguenze dell'HIV in Congo e in Russia. Sarandon, oltre a essere schierata apertamente con i democratici, è pacifista ed ecologista e ha sostenuto diverse battaglie, fra le quali anche quelle per i diritti civili degli omosessuali. Entrambe, cioè, evocano significati e valori che vanno ben oltre la professione di attrici: sono personaggi pubblici e carismatici, che esprimono punti di vista e posizioni politiche, con un ampio pubblico di fan che le segue da molto tempo e sul quale hanno influenza²⁷. In questo senso si distinguono dalle attrici del passato, poiché il loro modo di esprimersi, in linea con la contemporaneità, incorpora le conquiste realizzate dalle donne negli ultimi decenni (Capecchi, 2018).

Va ricordato, inoltre, che durante le riprese di *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* “Joan Crawford e Bette Davis avevano rispettivamente 58 e 54 anni. Nel 2017, Jessica Lange e Susan Sarandon ne interpretano il ruolo rispettivamente all'età di 68 e 71 anni” (Re e De Rosa, 2021, pp. 20-21). Questa scelta di utilizzare attrici più anziane, come affermamo ancora Re, ci permette di ragionare proprio sulle variazioni nei “codici socio-culturali di interpretazione dei processi di invecchiamento, soprattutto in relazione all'identità femminile e alle prassi attive nel settore dell'audiovisivo” (Re e De Rosa, 2021, p. 21). Jessica Lange nei panni di Joan Crawford, o Susan Sarandon in quelli di Bette Davis, non possono che produrre nello spettatore più accorto uno sguardo duplice o comunque multiprospettico (Mittell, 2015) che chiama in causa le possibilità che un'attrice dopo i cinquanta anni aveva a Hollywood negli anni Sessanta rispetto alle sfide – e ai successi – che un'attrice con più di settanta anni può avere oggi.

Il “nuovo” modo di concepire la terza età si inserisce in un quadro complesso che contempla una visione emancipata dell'*ageing* femminile. Ashton Applewhite, nel suo recente libro *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (2016), ribalta la rappresentazione dell'anziano come persona fragile per dare invece una connotazione fortemente positiva al

²⁷ Si pensi alla dichiarazione di Susan Sarandon rispetto alla decisione del non voto per Hilary Clinton nel 2016 e alla visibilità che i media hanno riservato a questa dichiarazione.

passare degli anni, citando la famosa curva “U” della felicità (*U-shaped in happiness*), teorizzata da Blanchflower e Oswald nel 2008, secondo cui i momenti più felici nella vita sono quelli vissuti durante l’infanzia e la vecchiaia.

Da allora, dal 1969 a oggi, lo sguardo sulla terza età è dunque cambiato, fino a dar luogo a forme di azione contro l’*ageism*, rivendicando il diritto di protestare per l’Age Pride, smettendo di perpetuare la modalità diffusa – soprattutto per le donne – del doversi dichiarare più giovani, barando sull’età (Applewhite, 2016; Ravera, 2023).

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Sudden Fear (So che mi ucciderai) (1952, David Miller)

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (Che fine ha fatto Baby Jane?) (1962, Robert Aldrich)

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**Against All Common Sense. The Mediatized Legend of Juve Caserta
between Basketball Epics, Aged Sports Celebrities, and Collective Memory
in the Docu-Series *Scugnizzi per sempre***

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Abstract

This article investigates the TV docu-series *Scugnizzi per sempre* (2023) as an example of narrative mediatization of sports. Using narrative analysis and media content analysis applied to television seriality, the article aims to focus on three essential elements:

- 1) the identification of the thematic cores that develop the celebration of the epic feat of the Juve Caserta basketball club;
- 2) the ways through which the RAI docu-series (re)connects fandom with the aged sports celebrities and the collective memory of the Scudetto victory (1991);
- 3) the analysis of storylines and sequences through which the docu-series elaborates a kind of reflexive mediatization (or meta-mediatization), recounting the role of news media and communication technologies within the series' storytelling.

Keyword: Sports celebrity; Basketball Epics; Mediatization of Sports; Sports Cultures; Collective Memory.

Warning

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1. Sports docu-series in the theoretical framework of mediatization

The media have a crucial influence on the development of sports cultures (Kennedy and Hills, 2009; Hutchins and Rowe, 2013). The theoretical concept of mediatization significantly aids in comprehending the intricate connections between media and sports cultures and practices (Tirino, 2019a). Mediatization refers to the widespread integration of media into various facets of daily life and sociocultural, economic, and political activities. Frandsen (2020, pp. 16-17) offers a valuable framework highlighting the critical aspects of the mediatization of sports. This framework: 1) emphasizes the study of reciprocal interactions between media changes and sports evolution; 2) illustrates how media induce transformations in sports organizations, occurring in “waves” (Couldry and Hepp, 2016); 3) identifies media-driven processes that can lead to long-term alterations in individual behaviors, organizational structures, and the social fabric of sports; 4) explains the significant variations in media’s impact on sports across different disciplines, different groups within the same sport, national contexts, and historical periods; 5) proposes a comprehensive analytical approach, connecting mediatization to other major processes like globalization, commercialization, and individualization, which drive notable social changes in sports. The mediatization of sports manifests in diverse ways, influenced by historical, cultural, and economic contexts (Tirino, 2022).

Due to this theoretical framework’s heuristic and epistemological strength, I find it appropriate to analyze sports-themed television series as part of the many phenomena that come together in the meta-process of the mediatization of sports.

The specific role TV seriality plays in contemporary sports storytelling can only be understood if we highlight those mediological properties that unite TV series and serialized sports events (Tirino, 2023b). Sports competitions and TV series share three fundamental attributes.

First, both follow the principle of serialization. The serial production of items and content has shaped the foundation of the modern cultural industry (Smith, 2018): from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, pulp magazines, film serials, radio dramas, and comic books paved the way for the serialization of nearly all media narratives (television, video games, technological gadgets, etc.) in the following decades (Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019b; Tirino, 2023c). Likewise, the regular national and international tournaments of numerous team sports (football, basketball, volleyball, rugby, handball, water polo, field hockey, baseball, etc.) are structured in fixed, cyclical, and repeatable fixtures. This serial aspect has promoted the integration of sports shows among the cultural content that has most rapidly influenced the collective imaginary and imagination of entire generations in the Western world (and beyond) (Wenner, 1989; 1998).

Second, with the growth of available spaces, driven first by the liberalization of telecommunications markets and then by digitization, a multitude of media operators (local, national, global) have enhanced the potential of sports content in attracting broad, interclass, intergenerational, and, in some cases, international audiences (Tirino, 2019a; Frandsen, 2020). Around the premium content (the live broadcasts of the matches), a series of supplementary content has developed: it is thus possible to distinguish a “center” (the match) and a “periphery” (the pre- and post-match programs) of each sports event (Puijk, 2000). This expansion of the sports narrative allows us to establish a second parallel between the serial television narrative and the (journalistic) narrative of sports events: I’m

talking about their transmediality. By transmediality, we mean here “the characteristic feature of those communicative projects, based on the dispersion of content units over multiple media, within universes of meaning, marked to varying degrees by expansion, coherence, and diegetic consistency” (Tirino, 2019b, p. 23). Just as TV series branch out into extensions on other media, which expand their storyworld through the narration of details, backstories, spin-offs, etc., on media such as novels, video games, movies, and comic books (think of the transmedia universe of series such as *Stranger Things*, 2016 – ongoing; Alamino-Fernández, 2020; Tirino, 2023d), similarly, sporting events are communicated to viewers through a variety of content distributed across multiple platforms and media environments, in each of which a piece of knowledge is added (commentary, analysis, discussion, UGC, etc.) (Tussey, 2018; Tirino, 2019a).

Third, the structural similarity between TV series and regular sports tournaments concerns their dramaturgical framework. As we have seen, both series and championships (especially of team disciplines) are divided into episodes/days. Each series episode is usually structured according to the dramaturgical mechanism of three acts (character introduction, struggle and conflict, and resolution) (Pisanti, 2022). In any case, the dramaturgical elements that drive any audiovisual narrative are structured according to an alternation devised by the scriptwriters between moments of *stasis* and moments of *pathos* and affective “intensity”, in which the peak of emotional tension is reached. Similarly, individual sports matches involve different moments of igniting spectators in varied forms according to the specific disciplines. For example, a basketball match consists of four quarters. If it is kept in balance, the last few minutes are marked by passages of extreme emotional tension, such as awarding free throws, calling timeouts, making three-pointers, etc. Because of these media characteristics, TV series can narrate sports phenomena with sharpness (Tirino, 2024).

A first, fundamental dichotomy allows us to distinguish documentary series from scripted series (i.e., fictional, in that they are based on original scripts). Although this dichotomy should not be understood in absolute terms, since even docu-series always follow a script that, in some way, “fictionalizes”, reconstructs and reshapes the facts being told, it does allow us to circumscribe patterns and forms of documentary seriality on sports topics (Tirino, 2023b).

Based on the themes addressed, I enucleate five main types of documentary TV series of the last decade.

1) In the first category, which can be labeled “Curiosity”, I include series devoted to the telling of (a) minor practices (i.e., *Cheer*, 2020-2022, Netflix), (b) secondary champions (i.e., *Losers*, 2019, Netflix), and (c) lower leagues of better-known sports, with a specific focus on the theme of redemption and recovery of young athletes with complicated pasts (*Last Chance U*, 2016-2020, Netflix).

2) The second category, “Backstage”, includes serial behind-the-scenes narratives of professional sports in synergy with the organizations (leagues and clubs) involved. The main reason for the interest in this type of product lies in the access to places usually precluded from the public gaze, such as locker rooms, offices, and environments of the daily life of athletes, coaches, and managers. Most of these series are dedicated to football clubs with an extensive fanbase. Arguably, the most accomplished examples of this typology are *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* (2019 - ongoing, Netflix), which reproduces in the seasonality of TV series the “storyline” of the world championships of one of the most popular disciplines globally, and *The Last Dance* (2020, Netflix), which traces the legendary last feat of the

Chicago Bulls NBA team, in which global stars such as Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan played.

3) In the third category, “Popular Passion”, we can include serial products essentially concerned with telling the story of the connection between sports, local identities, and cheering, such as *Sunderland 'Til Die* (2018-2024, Netflix), and *Basketball or Nothing* (2019, Netflix).

4) The fourth category, “Biopics”, collects TV series to celebrate a sport’s champions and legends. Variants of this typology are: a) series dedicated not to the entirety of a champion’s career, but only to a specific experience (such as *Maradona en Sinaloa*, 2019, Netflix, or *Save Our Squad with David Beckham*, 2022 - ongoing, Disney+); b) series dedicated to multiple legends of the same sport, as in the case of boxers in *The Kings* (2021, Showtime); c) series aimed at reconstructing the legendary history of a club (*Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*, 2022-2023, HBO) or a competition (*Becoming Champions*, 2018, Netflix) through the stories of champions.

5) A fifth and residual category includes TV series linked to the classic model of investigative TV journalism: examples include *The Dark Side of Sports* (2021, Netflix), *Fifa Uncovered* (2022, Netflix), and *The Fight for Football - The Super League Case* (2023, Apple TV+), which expose cases of corruption, power struggles, violations and various crimes.

Most of the documentary series of the last decade are commissioned by the video-streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which prefer single-season products structured over six to eight episodes. Rarer are multi-seasonal series (such as *Last U Chance*, *Last U Chance: Basketball*, 2021 – ongoing, Netflix; *Cheer*, and *QB1: Beyond the Lights*, 2017-2023, go90-Netflix) and miniseries structured over three to four episodes (such as *Neymar: The Perfect Chaos*, 2022, Netflix).

The docu-series *Scugnizzi per sempre*²⁸ can be traced to the third category. It chronicles the legendary rise of Italian basketball club Juve Caserta (henceforth simply JC) from the minor leagues to winning the Scudetto, the only club in southern Italy to succeed in the feat. Scripted by Sante Roperto²⁹, Vincenzo Cascone and Gianni Costantino, also the director, *Scugnizzi per sempre* is produced by Tramp Limited and RAI Documentaries and distributed by Italian public broadcaster RAI.

2. Research questions and methodology

The research questions are:

- 1) how does documentary storytelling develop the *topoi* of the sports feat?
- 2) What is the role of ageing champions? How do their presence and time-scarred bodies reconnect fandom to the collectively shared historical memory of a triumph in which city and team have totally merged?

²⁸ In the Treccani dictionary, the definition of *scugnizzo* is as follows: “masculine noun (feminine “scugnizza”) [Neapolitan term, believed to be derived from *scugnare* (to scratch, to break, derived from Latin *cuneus* (wedge)]. – Neapolitan brat, with its characteristics of a cunning and intelligent boy, lively, willing to “make do” with even poorly honest expedients; with broader signification, brat, street boy, also used outside the Neapolitan milieu” (<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/scugnizzo/> [last accessed 13.05.2024]).

²⁹ Roperto also wrote the book *Dinastia Gentile. L'uomo dell'ultimo tiro* (2016), dedicated to the basketball history of Nando and his two sons Stefano (1989) and Alessandro (1992), both basketball professional athletes.

3) As a form of narrative mediatization of sports (Tirino, 2024), does the docu-series elaborate discourses on the role of the media in the narrated events and, more generally, on the phenomenon of the informative mediatization of sport?

Various techniques can be used to analyze TV series. I will utilize two specific methods for this paper: media content analysis and narrative analysis.

Media content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) enables the identification and examination of a corpus of media objects according to specific parameters related to the research's cognitive objectives. There have been attempts to apply media content analysis specifically to TV series (Chamieh, 2016; Döring and Poeschl, 2019; Blanco-Herrero and Rodríguez-Contreras, 2019; Kaya and Ozdemir, 2020; Chapoton *et al.*, 2020). According to the cognitive objectives of this article, media content analysis will be used to isolate audiovisual sequences, which will then be included within homogeneous content classes in line with the thematic cores identified with narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis of a TV series (Allrath *et al.*, 2005; Petridis, 2020) involves two main activities: examining the plot structure to understand the sequence of events, plot twists, and character development and systematically exploring narrative arcs to investigate overarching storylines across episodes or seasons. In line with the objectives of this paper, my narrative analysis will focus on plot elements (characters, narrative turns, directorial choices, etc.) and narrative arcs essential to studying how basketball cultures are portrayed in the TV series *Scugnizzi per sempre*. The primary criterion for classifying the analyzed elements is their connection to the process of mediatization and the associated commercialization and globalization of contemporary professional basketball. This criterion helped isolate specific contents that were analyzed using Jason Mittell's (2015) concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic norms of serial narrative. Employing these two conceptual tools – intrinsic and extrinsic norms – enables a thorough examination of the narrative strategies used in the series to address the themes of this paper. This approach allowed us to identify various main sub-themes present, to varying extents, across the TV series, which were comprehensively analyzed through two rounds of viewing all episodes conducted between December 1 and 30, 2023, and between March 1 and 15, 2024.

3. Extrinsic and intrinsic norms: a media content analysis of *Scugnizzi per sempre*

Harris and Hills (1993), in a study devoted to how some news outlets had covered the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) men's basketball tournament, pointed out that journalism has chronicled the sport using essential storytelling based on the achievement of victory and the elemental contrast between the star athletes, whose excellent qualities are enhanced in the context-team by the coaches.

More recently, Karakaya and Manning (2021) have analyzed how, in the post-COVID-19 period, numerous narratives of American basketball have taken on a nostalgic mood, partly due to the success of the TV series *The Last Dance*. The nostalgic sentiment is mainly fueled by the regret of a more authoritarian, “masculine”, and less globalized game, on the one hand, and by the presence of players who tie themselves to the same team for many years, on the other hand.

The two cases cited above allow us to highlight the many ways in which, both in news media and in fictional narratives, sports (and basketball in particular) can be told. According to

Kretchmar (2017), sports and fiction share a semantic, structural, and cultural kinship. However, even nonfictional cultural products – from journalistic articles to documentaries (TV series and films) – are organized according to easily individual storytelling principles.

The narrative analysis allows us to bring out serial television storytelling's extrinsic and intrinsic norms. According to Mittell (2015, p. 167), extrinsic norms concern “the genre, creative team, network, or codes of the television medium itself”. *Scugnizzi per sempre* can be interpreted as a docu-series on sports topics, that is, an audiovisual narrative in which themes related to sports, its protagonists, and/or its audience and fandom occupy such an essential role in the narrative that they condition its very interpretation (Crosson, 2021, p. 3). An exciting element of the creative team is that the series is the brainchild of producer Attilio De Razza, a former basketball coach, and Gianni Costantino, a director, and screenwriter from Caserta who experienced the JC epic firsthand, just like screenwriters Sante Roperto (while the third screenwriter, Vincenzo Cascone, was not yet born on the day of the historic scudetto). Based on these elements, it is easy to identify a strong motivation of the creative team, linked to their origins and a passion for telling the story of basketball in all its dramaturgical and affective nuances. The docu-series, produced by Tramp Limited and RAI Documentari, consisting of six episodes of 50' each, was broadcast in the late evening on RAI 2 in August 2023 and was simultaneously released on the free video streaming platform RaiPlay (where it can still be viewed). This placement severely limited its success. However, thanks to word-of-mouth and on-demand availability on the Raiplay platform, *Scugnizzi per sempre* has experienced a fair amount of fame, becoming a small cult sports serial and marginal critical feedback. However, although small in number, reviews of the series have been generally positive and, in some cases, enthusiastic³⁰. The show is part of a copious production of documentaries dedicated to sports by Rai Documentari and made available on the open-access platform RaiPlay³¹.

The intrinsic norms of a television series teach the viewer “how to watch and what to expect from future episodes” (Mittell, 2015, p. 168). They include the form of serialization, the basic narrative structure, the aesthetic choices, the physical and psychological characteristics of the protagonist and the other characters, the linguistic peculiarities, and the settings. *Scugnizzi per sempre* presents a fascinating narrative structure. On the one hand, each episode has its leading and identifiable theme: the first episode, *Palla a due* [Tipoff], recounts the birth of the JC myth; the second, *La reggia del basket* [The palace of basketball], is dedicated to the construction of the legendary Palamaggiò, the sports hall in which JC

³⁰ See Ametrano, 2023; Carelli, 2023; Cesarano, 2023; Falanga, 2023; Grasso, 2023; Marino, 2023; Sollazzo, 2023; Valesio, 2023.

³¹ Series includes *Sports Stories* (2019-2020, 11 episodes), *Velocità. La leggenda della Motor Valley* (2024, 6 episodes); films includes *11 metri* (2011, Francesco Del Grosso), *Ragazzi di stadio, quarant'anni dopo* (2018, Daniele Segre), *Butterfly* (2019, Alessandro Cassigoli, Casey Kauffman), *This is not Cricket* (2019, Jacopo de Bertoldi), *Paolo Rossi - Un campione è un sognatore che non si arrende mai* (2019, Michela Scolari, Gianluca Fellini), *Il migliore. Marco Pantani* (2021, Paolo Santolini), *Vola, Luna Rossa* (2021, Cristian Di Mattia), *Enzo Ferrari. Il rosso e il nero* (2022, Enrico Cerasuolo), *Er gol de Turone era bono* (2022, Francesco Micciché, Lorenzo Rossi Espagnet), *Il viaggio degli eroi* (2022, Manlio Castagna), *Alberto Tomba. Vincere in salita* (2022, Tommaso De Boni), *Gilles Villeneuve, l'Aviatore* (2022, Giangiacomo De Stefano), *La bella stagione* (2022, Marco Ponti), *Due con - La storia dei fratelli Abbagnale* (2022, Gianluca De Martino, Felice V. Bagnato), *Il tempio della velocità* (2022, Tommaso Cennamo), *Azzurro Shocking - Come le donne si sono riprese il Calcio* (2022, Azzurra Di Tomassi), *Tiro libero. Basketball World Cup* (2023, Mirko Alivernini), *Dino Meneghin. Storia di una leggenda* (2023, Samuele Rossi), *sempreXsempre - Noi Italia 2023* (2023, Mario Maellaro), *Ma chi sei, Mennea?* (2023, Luca Di Bella), *Numero 3, Sara Gama* (2023, Fedora Sasso), *Nino La Rocca. Una vita sul ring* (2023, Luca Lancise, Federico Sisti), *Adesso vinco io* (2024, Herbert Simone Paragnani, Paolo Geremei), *Vincenzo Nibali: il 7° campione* (Marco Spagnoli, 2024), *Formula biancorossa* (2024, Michele Melani).

has played for more than two decades; the third episode, *Gli eterni bonsai* [The eternal bonsai trees], recounts the team's difficulty in reaching the highest levels of national basketball; the fourth, titled *Il profumo della vittoria* [The Scent of Victory], focuses on the first success, the victory of the Coppa Italia; in the fifth, *La grande scommessa* [The Big Bet], the decision to give up the most representative champion, Oscar, to change the technical-tactical set-up of the starting quintet is recounted; the sixth, *L'ultimo canestro* [The Last Basket] celebrates the resounding victory of the championship. Thus, the documentary is based on a somewhat recognizable anthology plot. On the other hand, however, the "hooks" between one episode and the next are equally prominent and underscored by narrative assertions, summarized in questions such as "Will JC succeed in challenging the domination of the Northern Italian teams?", "Will the *scugnizzi* Nando Gentile and Enzino Esposito succeed in crowning their dream?" and so on. In this way, the running plot is equally solid and engaging. The basic narrative structure of the series is based on dramatizing the sports history of the JC basketball club. As we will see more fully in this section, the essential dramaturgical conflict based on the basic narrative structure is the contrast between a small provincial reality in Southern Italy and the big basketball teams in Northern Italy. Around this core, the different storylines branch out. The aesthetic structure of the documentary is based on the juxtaposition, in itself not highly innovative, of three types of content: interviews with the protagonists (athletes, coaches, managers) and witnesses (wives, fans, journalists) of the feat; stock footage, drawn from the archives of RAI and local television networks; and fictional reconstructions. The latter turns out to be quite successful, thanks to the apt casting choice of hiring two young basketball players, Antonio Formato (as the young Gentile) and Michele Foschino (as the young Esposito). The physical and psychological characteristics of the protagonists will be analyzed in more detail in the following section. At the same time, the linguistic peculiarities of the series include the use of a technical language typical of basketball and a mix of Italian language, Neapolitan dialect, and mispronounced Italian by Brazilian (Oscar), Bulgarian (Gluškov), Slavic (Tanjević), and American (Dan Peterson) protagonists.

4. The construction of the legend of Juve Caserta through the *topoi* of the sports feat

To achieve the research objectives of this article, I will focus primarily on how the narrative structure of the series is configured to reflect the symbolic pillars of the JC epic. Right from the opening bars, the series highlights how JC's feat transcends the sporting dimension to become part of Caserta's social history and the local and national collective imaginary. In this sense, JC applies to the entire city and South by synecdoche. The connective element of this feeling of belonging is the awareness of irreverence, unscrupulousness, and courage that make JC an emergent club and the city an emerging reality without reverential fears or feelings of inferiority. The three statements that open the documentary are straightforward: "It was [...] an epic, one of a kind. Eight players from Caserta, a coach from Caserta, a young President from Caserta" (Gianfranco Maggiò, son of President Giovanni and then president himself); "[we were] a united group of youngsters who came from the street to try to achieve a dream" (Nando Gentile); "we were revolutionaries, people don't like revolutionaries" (Bogdan Tanjević, coach of the team between 1982 and 1986). The revolutionary dimension of this epic is underlined, moreover,

not only by Tanjević's explicit words, but also by the use of the rebellious song *Yes I Know My Way*, which the Neapolitan singer-songwriter Pino Daniele recorded in 1981, in the opening credits. Therefore, the first element in constructing the legend is the identity belonging that binds all the protagonists (including the foreigners) to the city of Caserta.

The second element concerns the foundation place of the Caserta epic: the small window of an anonymous bar bathroom, used as a "basket" by Nando Gentile and Enzo Esposito in a city poor in sports infrastructure. The contrast between the poverty of this founding place, from which the dream of the two *scugnizzi* starts, and the feats they will achieve in the following decades is a compelling narrative contrivance to restore the greatness of this epic.

The third building block is the descent of the *deus ex machina*, who takes the form of an outsider from faraway Brescia: the builder Giovanni Maggiò. The entrepreneur entered the company thanks to the insistence of the Piccolo brothers, who brought basketball to the city in the early 1950s and created a flourishing youth sector. Maggiò settled in Caserta for love and realized a human, entrepreneurial, and sporting path of enormous value. JC landed in the top Italian championship (A1) thanks to the courage of his choices: the hiring of the revolutionary coach of the Yugoslavian national team, Tanjević, the manager Giancarlo Sarti (a former Italian national team basketball player, who had consolidated experience in the national and international markets) and, finally, the Brazilian star Oscar Schmidt. At the same time, he developed his construction company, which grew to a thousand employees working on construction sites throughout central and southern Italy. Giovanni Maggiò is loved by the city of Caserta and admired nationwide not only for his managerial skills. Three of the testimonies collected by the authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* are enough to restore the widespread appreciation of his human qualities. Nando Gentile recounts an episode of his debut with the Italian national basketball team, which took place precisely in Caserta, when the president ran into him, opened the zip of his tracksuit shirt, and, looking at the national team uniform, was moved (Ep. 01x03). Tanjević, on the other hand, says that Maggiò had "the tenderness of a poet in human relations" (Ep. 01x03). Oscar, Gentile, and Dell'Agnello, in similar words, say that a handshake was all that was needed to enter a contract with the president because his loyalty to the pacts was unquestioned.

But Maggiò's role is incredibly decisive in building the fourth founding element of the Caserta legend: the construction of the Palamaggiò. To meet the demands of the team, which due to the regulations of the Italian Basketball Federation was forced to play all its home games in the city of Rieti, the president performed an authentic miracle: in just one hundred days, on a plot of land he owned, he managed to build an innovative sports hall (equipped with luminous scoreboards, an entrance corridor, a small gym for pre-game training, comfortable and spacious changing rooms, etc.). Giovanni Maggiò built Caserta's new sports hall with his funds thanks to an enlightened vision of the entrepreneur's social role³², like Adriano Olivetti's (Berta, 1980). The construction of the Palamaggiò has multiple meanings. As various accounts in the series attest, for the southern public, it demonstrates that, in an area accustomed to atavistic slowness in the construction of public works and transportation infrastructure, it is possible to realize projects of national excellence. For this reason, for Caserta, the Campania region, and the entire South, Maggiò's miraculous

³² Son Gianfranco's testimony in this regard is quite eloquent: "[My father told me] Young man, remember that when an enterprise like ours reaches a large size, profit should no longer be seen as an end, but as a means. We have a duty to make this profit benefit not only our family, but the whole community around us. This is the duty of the entrepreneur" (Ep. 1x02).

operation is a source of identity pride, so much so that it expresses an almost sacred respect for the facility³³. The mythical aura has accompanied this place since its construction, as Gentile and Esposito testify about the daily pilgrimages to Castelmorrone to watch the progress of work on the sports hall building site. The sports hall becomes an authentic “basketball palace”: the arena exalts the home team through the choruses and choreographies of the warm Caserta fans and intimidates many opponents, who – also due to the location in the middle of the countryside – have the feeling of entering a sort of lions’ den (this is supported by Olimpia Milano player Antonello Riva, Ep. 01x02), as happened centuries earlier to gladiators entering the nearby Roman amphitheater of Santa Maria Capua Vetere. The “Palamaggiò effect” is such that in that competitive season (1982-83), JC won promotion to A1. The Palamaggiò replaces the old facility, built in the city’s center, for the 1969 European Basketball Championships. Because of its urban location, the old sports hall was easily accessible to young people, who often began to watch JC games and admire the first local sports celebrities, such as center Mario Simeoli and point guard Antonio Di Lella.

After the mythology of the Casertan *scugnizzo*, the founding place, the *deus ex machina*, the building of the house of heroes (the Palamaggiò), the fifth element in the construction of the basketball legend is the advent of the leader: the revolutionary Bogdan “Bosha” Tanjević. The coach came from the Yugoslav national team and was immediately in tune with the environment in Caserta, which was very fond of Slavic basketball precisely because it found in its performers those characteristics (swagger, wild talent, cunning, etc.) that united them with local players. However, the coach’s revolution is mainly about imposing a work ethic and merit, resulting in devastating workouts and resetting the hierarchy. The new “vision” of basketball promoted by Tanjević allows for the promotion of many young people to the first team, one of whom – Nando Gentile, at only sixteen years old – becomes the youngest captain in the A League in any era. Enzino Esposito, in the series, confirms that the coach’s charisma is such that Tanjević trained them “not only technically, but humanly”. The commander set up the 4/5 of the quintet-base of JC: alongside local sports celebrities, playmaker Ferdinando (Nando) Gentile and point guard Vincenzo (Enzino) Esposito, inseparable since adolescence, young Italian champion Sandro Dell’Agnello in the role of power forward and Brazilian star Oscar Schmidt in the role of small forward. These are the main protagonists of the JC epic, joined by wingmen such as play guard Sergio Donadoni (more than 20 years with the club) and center Georgi Gluškov (the first player from an Eastern bloc country to compete in the American National Basketball Association). A privileged role is given to the two *scugnizzi per sempre* (forever) Nando and Enzino. Their mythmaking, in the series, is also realized through the story of the “baptism by fire”, that is, the moment when they both perceive the concrete possibility of becoming champions. For Nando, two years older, this moment coincides with the inauguration of the role of captain (at only 16 years old) and then with the first dazzling performance against Cantù, in which he towers over one of the legends of Italian basketball, Pierluigi Marzorati. For Enzino, however, that moment is realized during a phone call from JC’s youth team coach Virginio Bernardi to his father Biagio to inform him of the outcome of the tryout – which the very young player secretly listens to from another device (the fictional reconstruction of the event is particularly effective, Ep. 01x01).

³³ “We almost tiptoed in, for fear of ruining (...) the parquet. For us it was something sacred” (Enzino Esposito, Ep. 1x02).

All these elements are functional in enriching the fundamental narrative pattern that fuels the myth-building process: the underdog narrative. This narrative schema permeates many American sports narratives (especially cinematic ones: Tirino, 2023a), as it relates perfectly to the self-fulfilling possibility of the Great American Dream (Vandello *et al.*, 2016). In this case, the David vs. Goliath narrative is declined as the sporting expression of a broader opposition between a politically and economically powerful North and a poor, marginalized South that is systematically penalized by an unequal distribution of resources. JC, a club with no particular basketball tradition, young and blazing, is forced to suffer many refereeing wrongs, since – even according to journalists who have closely followed the original events, such as Francesco De Core and Alessio Gallicola – the prestige of the big clubs of the North (Olimpia Milano, Virtus Bologna, Pallacanestro Cantù, Pallacanestro Varese, and so on) affects especially at the decisive junctures of the most important matches. Evidence of this “psychological subservience” of referees to the most prestigious clubs can already be seen in the 1983-84 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup] final. Several dubious refereeing decisions stop the newly promoted Caserta team, all of which favor Virtus Bologna. The event was repeated in the first scudetto series reached by JC in 1986-87 against Olimpia Milano. Equipped with more economic resources, a very high technical rate and players of the caliber of Mike D’Antoni, Dino Meneghin, Bob McAdoo and Roberto Premier, coached by Dan Peterson, Olimpia is favored in the direct clash with “little” Caserta. However, in game 1 (out of 3) in Milan, the referees whistled a questionable foul to Oscar in the first quarter, depriving JC of its player with the most scoring talent. Even if the David vs. Goliath psychosocial mechanism is determined by ideological and cultural factors that tend to overestimate the injustices suffered by “David” groups and subjects (Jeffries *et al.*, 2012), as even Gentile himself and the head fan Giacomo Aragosa admit in the series, the belief in referees’ favoritism towards the strongest clubs in the league is increasingly strengthened in Caserta’s public opinion.

Following a pattern typical of many mythic sports stories, the narrative of the basketball legend in the series is structured according to the canons of *rise-and-fall-and-rise biography* (Bifulco and Tirino, 2018). This includes the team’s ability to overcome dramatic moments, which could jeopardize its survival in professional basketball. The first difficulty came in April 1986, while the team struggled to play for its first historic access to the finals for the Scudetto. Giovanni Maggiò was arrested for alleged irregularities in his dealings with the Banco di Napoli. As rumors began to spread about JC’s ominous future, a second “blow” arrived: both manager Sarti and coach Tanjević informed Maggiò of their intention to leave the club at the end of that season. Faced with danger, Maggiò relaunched the challenge: he duly registered the team for the championship. He decided to entrust the first team to Tanjević’s assistant coach, Franco Marcelletti from Caserta, in his first experience as head coach. At the same time, Bulgarian Georgi Gluškov, from the Phoenix Suns, was signed as a center.

Despite widespread mistrust, Marcelletti, who had recruited Gentile and Esposito for the club’s youth teams, again managed to bring them to the Scudetto finals in the 1986-87 season against Olimpia Milano, still coached by Peterson. The opposition between Milan and Caserta becomes a constitutive element of the legend, configuring itself as the “perfect rivalry” between the two cities (Keskin *et al.*, 2016). On the one hand, there is the great metropolis, the political, financial, and economic capital of Italy, whose basketball club has a well-established tradition, a high-level roster, and an internationally appreciated coach. We

are in the midst of the years of the so-called “Milano da bere”, a historical period in which the political dominance of Bettino Craxi (leader of the Italian Socialist Party and for a time Prime Minister) and the entrepreneurial rise of Silvio Berlusconi are located within an effervescent atmosphere that accompanies glamorous events, fashion shows, commercial initiatives and cultural phenomena (theater, cabaret, television, and so on). On the other hand, a provincial city on the periphery of Italy feels that it belongs to a territory (Southern Italy) systematically robbed, mocked, and forgotten. The city identifies completely with its very young team, led by a rookie local coach with no sports tradition, which becomes a formidable driver of social revenge. The ups and downs punctuate every rise and fall biography and characterize this phase of the club’s life, making its narrative particularly compelling. Although defeated by Olimpia Milano in the 1986-87 finals, Caserta is now a recognized reality of national basketball. At the end of 1987, however, a shocking event occurs: the club’s true charismatic leader, President Giovanni Maggiò, dies of fulminating leukemia. Faced with the risk of a collapse of the sports project, the union between city, team, and club becomes even more total and fideistic. The series replays an emblematic sequence: in the first game following Maggiò’s death, in a Palamaggiò packed with fans, his son Gianfranco deposits a bouquet in the seat from which the president used to follow JC games. This scene is particularly effective in restoring the palpable emotion that could be experienced in Caserta in those days, which was also evident from the other sequence, in black and white, depicting the players carrying the coffin on their shoulders on the days of the president’s funeral. The death of President Maggiò, instead of marking a fatal blow to the history of JC, united all the components even more: his son Gianfranco perceived as “sacred” the commitment to crown his father’s dream of the Scudetto, even renouncing the billions offered by Virtus Roma, acquired by the Ferruzzi industrial group, for the purchase of Dell’Agnello; Nando and Enzino, being from Caserta, felt, even more, the responsibility of bringing a trophy to their city; the team became even more united on and off the court, becoming a true second family for many athletes, thanks to an atmosphere of light-heartedness and goliardery fuelled by jokes, dinners and numerous shared moments.

The fruit of this union was the victory of the first trophy, the 1987-88 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup], which allowed Caserta to shake off the label of “eternal bonsai” and participate in the 1988-89 edition of the European Cup Winners’ Cup. In the semifinals, the team accomplished a substantial sporting feat by beating Žalgiris Kaunas, in which some Soviet basketball legends such as Arvydas Sabonis and Rimas Kurtinaitis played. On March 14, 1989, in the final in Athens, where about 3,000 Casertans (about 5 percent of the entire population of the city) arrived, JC challenged another monumental club: Real Madrid. Coached by Lolo Sainz (leading the team for the fourteenth consecutive season), the Spanish lineup could count on some of the greatest European players of the time: center Fernando Martín (the first Spanish player in the NBA), small forward José Biriukov, and especially Yugoslavian point guard Dražen Petrović (who would win European and World Championships with the national team, before becoming famous in the NBA with Portland Trailblazers and New York Jets). The two teams created a match that has remained in the annals of modern basketball. Once again, however, a missed referee call on an alleged make to Nando Gentile, right on the edge of the buzzer, deprives Caserta of the chance to clinch the win in regulation time. At the end of this legendary game, in which Petrović scored 62 points and Oscar 44, Real Madrid copped the Cup, albeit by a tiny margin (117 vs 113). This stage in the club’s history has multiple bittersweet meanings. From a narrative and

mythological point of view, it corresponds to that meeting between the hero and the Dragon (Vogler, 1992): metaphorically, the hero (the JC team) is defeated by the Dragon (Real Madrid) but conquers the magic sword (the awareness of his strength). However, even 34 years after the events, the major players (Gentile, Esposito, Dell’Agnello, Oscar) cannot help but regret that they were only a few steps away from a historic international victory and failed to achieve it.

The following “block” in constructing the JC legend through the series storytelling concerns the brutal sale to Pallacanestro Pavia of Oscar Schmidt, the most talented basketball player and one of the globally recognized JC symbols. For the implications of the link between celebrity, aging, and collective memory, I will deal with this painful page in the club’s history in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that such a decision – in mythological and narrative terms – can manifest the betrayal and separation necessary for achieving the goal so longed for.

The construction of the JC legend concludes with the tale of triumph and subsequent fall. The 1990-91 season begins with challenges to President Giancarlo Maggìo and coach Marcelletti over the sale of Oscar. Nonetheless, JC arrives in great form in the playoffs, earning the third final series for the Scudetto, once again against Olimpia Milano. Thanks to the outstanding performances of the three leaders of the group – Gentile, Esposito, Dell’Agnello – and the ability of the recruits, Americans Tellis Frank (authentic “teammate”) and Charles Shackleford (the perfect center who took Gluškov’s place), Caserta can finally face Milan in a more balanced challenge than the previous ones. Olimpia Milano is experiencing a period of renewal. The new coach is Mike D’Antoni, the team’s former playmaker. Meneghin and Premier are no longer on the roster, but many talented youngsters (including Riccardo Pittis) and the two U.S. stars Cozell McQueen and Jay Vincent. The new addition on offense is pointing guard Antonello Riva, one of the most highly regarded Italian basketball players of the time, who – after long contending with Oscar himself – would win the record for total points scored in Serie A in 2000. TV series is adept at restoring the emotional tension accompanying the final series, which is condensed in Game 5. The match shapes up as the perfect fulfillment of the epic: JC starts ahead but faces yet another blow from fate. During the game, Enzino Esposito’s knee breaks. He stays on the sidelines despite the pain to cheer on his teammates. As both Gentile and Donadoni testify in the series (Ep. 01x06), that choice will motivate his teammates. Kept in the game by Sandro Dell’Agnello’s triples (30 total points), JC is led to triumph by its young captain Nando Gentile, who takes responsibility for two “impossible” triples, thanks to which JC keeps Milan at a distance for good. JC’s triumph remains the only scudetto won by a club from Southern Italy.

The sense that the Scudetto is the condensation of at least a decade-long cycle is represented in the series both through the testimonies of the protagonists and through a refined parallel montage that connects the legend’s beginnings and its fulfillment. First, coach Marcelletti compares the victory to a kind of liberation: “I felt a feeling of extraordinary lightness. It was just like removing a boulder from our shoulders”. Even more explicit is the testimony of Sergio Donadoni from Caserta, who played about 20 seasons for his hometown team: “At that moment, my whole sporting life was condensed into the space of a minute”.

Secondly, the authors make an evocative parallel montage between the fictional reconstructions of a hug between teenage Nando and Enzino and the archival footage of

their embrace on the Assago Forum's parquet floor after the match is over. Such a sequence establishes a perfect circularity between the beginnings of the JC epic and its highest peak. Enzino himself, with a trembling voice and moist eyes, says about that moment: "Nando came into the locker room and hugged me with tears in his eyes. And those tears meant everything. Everything. From the basket by the bar toilet to the 1991 Scudetto triumph in Milan" (Ep. 01x06).

The exceptional nature of the success explains the size of the celebrations that begin directly at the Forum of Assago (whereby any means almost 5 thousand JC fans arrive), continue at the Capodichino airport, and end in a packed Palamaggiò at 4 a.m. The triumph is the pinnacle of JC's history. The following years are marked by a gradual decline, with the farewells of all the key players and the coach of the Scudetto until the 1998 bankruptcy. A new club landed in A2 in 2004-05, and the club returned to A1 in 2008-09, remaining there until 2016-17, when it failed again and was excluded from the professional leagues.

Fig. 1. The Construction of Juve Caserta Epic

#	Historical event	Mythological meanings
1	The structuring of a deep emotional bond between club and city	Identity belonging
2	A bar toilet window used as a basketball hoop by Nando and Enzino	The founding place
3	Entrepreneur Giovanni Maggiò joins the sports club	The <i>deus ex machina</i>
4	The construction of the Palamaggiò	Building the House of Heroes
5	The hiring of Yugoslavian coach Bosha Tanjevic	The revolutionary leader
6	The 1985-86 championship final (laughed), Maggiò's arrest and the farewell of Sarti and Tanjevic (fall), the 1986-87 championship final (laughed), the death of President Maggiò (fall), the 1987-88 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup] victory (laughed)	<i>Rise-and-fall-and-rise</i> biography
7	The three finals series (1985-86, 1986-87, 1990-91) against Olimpia Milano	Opposition of cultural worlds
8	The European Cup Winners' Cup final (1989) against Real Madrid	The clash against the Dragon: awareness of one's own strength
9	Oscar's transfer to Pallacanestro Pavia (summer 1990)	Betrayal "necessary" to achieve triumph
10	Winning the Scudetto (21 May 1991) and the subsequent lapse into bankruptcy in 1998	The apotheosis and the end of the winning cycle

5. Aged sports celebrities, nostalgia, and collective memory

Three sequences in the series recount the emotional, almost "mystical" connection between the club and the city on the triumph. In the first, just off the plane that brought them back to Naples after the historic victory on the court in Milan, the JC players struggle to touch down on the short journey to the bus that will take them to Caserta, overwhelmed by the irrepressible joy of the fans. In the second, hundreds of cars, arranged on all three highway lanes, escort their heroes in front and behind the bus. Finally, in the third, the day after the success, all the players and executives carry a tricolor bouquet of flowers (white, red, and green, like the Scudetto) to the grave of Giovanni Maggiò, once again accompanied by a crowd of fans and citizens of Caserta. The testimony of one fan collected in the documentary is eloquent: "The whole city around me was a jolt. Even the concrete was vibrating. The JC's championship was a volcanic eruption" (Ep. 01x06).

The driver of this powerful team-territory bond is, of course, sports celebrities (Smart, 2005; Bifulco and Tirino, 2019; Bifulco *et al.*, 2022; Tirino *et al.*, 2022; Bifulco, 2023).

In sociology, Mills (2000, pp. 71-72) provides an early conceptualization of celebrity: “Celebrities are the Names that need no further identification. The number of people who know them exceeds the number of those they know, making exact computations unnecessary. Wherever celebrities go, they are recognized [...] Whatever they do has a publicity value. Continuously, over time, they become material for media and entertainment. And when their time ends [...] and they are still alive [...], people might ask, ‘Remember him?’. That is what celebrity means.”

As a sociological category, celebrity signifies distinction and social prestige. Essentially, celebrity is achieved through attracting attention and maintaining a presence in the public sphere. The individual/mass dichotomy is notably important: celebrities occupy public space as individuals with unique characteristics, while others are seen as audience, spectators, or the public. However, celebrity is not just a status that differentiates people; it is a form of capital that can be converted into various benefits. First, celebrity can be transformed into economic capital when famous individuals endorse brands and products, as consumers trust the values and meanings they convey. Additionally, celebrity can become political capital when celebrities run for office or support political movements. Lastly, celebrity can convert into health capital when famous individuals promote healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and healthcare fundraising.

Celebrity intersects with various social spheres, such as cultural industries (television, cinema, and social networks), entrepreneurship, and, in this context, sports. Sports celebrity relies on two elements: athletic excellence and media exposure. Champions stand out due to their athletic prowess, but media narratives are crucial cultural factors. These narratives integrate celebrity culture into the contemporary social imaginary, recognizing the exceptional nature of champions’ stories and ensuring their visibility.

Nevertheless, celebrity is a result of negotiation among athletes, the public, and the media. Media facilitate a para-social relationship, offering spectators an illusory intimacy with athletes. This has intensified with social media, allowing athletes to manage their profiles directly, although many use social media managers. They interact with fans, curating aspects of their professional and private lives to align with their desired identity.

The theme of celebrity appears in the TV series in a twofold configuration.

On the one hand, in a small provincial town like Caserta, the national visibility guaranteed to athletes by their successes in basketball is a prerequisite for the emergence of local sports stardom. In particular, JC’s leaders are young, good-looking, well-built, muscular, tall boys: for this reason, soon, in addition to being acclaimed by fans for their performance on the playground, they become sex symbols. Gentile recounts a funny anecdote in this regard: often, after home games at the Palamaggiò, he would find notes on his car with the phone numbers of his female admirers. These, however, would ruin the car’s bodywork to such an extent that the player would phone the fans to insult them. The social relevance provided by media visibility also produces phenomena of emulation. Enzino Esposito recounts that, inspired by the film *Top Gun* (1986, directed by Tony Scott), he had purchased an Avirex jacket like the protagonist and that he wore this garment continuously as he strolled through the city center, dribbling with the beloved basketball he never left. In this way, that garment had become a “must-have” among Caserta kids. Of broader scope, however, is the Shackmania (Giudici, 2020) that broke out in Caserta with the arrival of American center Charles

Shackleford. His look, which seems straight out of Spike Lee's features such as *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) or *Do the Right Thing* (1989), includes a singular haircut known as a "flat top", inflatable shoes, the gaudy jumpsuits, the massive gold necklaces, gold earrings at both lobes. In the city, more and more young fans are inspired by his original style, and Esposito adopts the teammate's haircut. In the 1984-1991 period, the Palamaggiò became a center for exhibiting notoriety and status in the city and provincial scene, fueled by its proximity to local basketball celebrities. Middle- and upper-class ladies sport furs and jewelry, politicians, and business people try to grab the best seats to be close to the team and the club, and the priest Don Mario Vallarelli himself is one of the most ardent fans, as well as a spiritual guide for the athletes, managers and their families. The Palamaggiò is increasingly likened to the city's "forum", that is, the most important public space where not only identity belonging is claimed, but where social status, conflicts, and claims are staged (Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2021). But the social and spectacular relevance of the Palamaggiò was such that it also became a stage for other sports celebrities of the time who were interested in attending JC matches: this is the case, above all, of Diego Armando Maradona and other soccer players at that time hired by Napoli Calcio.

On the other hand, a second and more exciting discourse on celebrity invests their ageing. The collective memory of the JC feat – and, therefore, of an unforgettable period for the city and province of Caserta – is reactivated first and foremost by the comparison with the aged bodies of the protagonists of that epic. The ageing of a sports celebrity is a formidable activator of memory since it triggers the immediate comparison between the young, muscular, performing bodies (portrayed in the archive images) and the trudging, bloated, worn bodies that appear in the present interviews.

The feeling that moves those who experienced the JC epic during those years is nostalgia. According to Davis (1979), this feeling would emerge with abrupt changes, reversals, transitions, turbulence, political uncertainties and crises. This hypothesis is echoed by the disappointments experienced by Casertans because of the difficulties faced by city basketball over the past 15 years. Rather than speaking of ruptures, Tannock (1995) elaborates on the concept of vertical and horizontal cuts in time, which considers the processes of continuity and discontinuity: vertical cuts create interruptions, ruptures, and discontinuities; horizontal cuts bring the past into the present and future and vice versa, establishing continuity. The series activates a form of reversibility between temporal continuity/discontinuity, using the aged bodies of sports celebrities as a device for representing the past in the present.

In some cases, such re-presentation leads to an acute sense of discontinuity, which emerges from comparing the winning and glorious past and the anonymous present. This storyline pervades much of the narrative. The comparison between the athleticism of the past and the heaviness, bloat, and decadence of the present harshly invests the bodies of sports celebrities. However, two symbolic elements – the Champion and the Palace – allow us to experience a possible mending of the rips of time precisely through the means offered by audiovisual storytelling.

The first element (the Champion) concerns Oscar's story. A valid symbol of JC, among the most talented players of all time, Oscar was nicknamed "Mao Santa" [Holy Hand] because of the extraordinary accuracy of his shot, which allowed him to hold the world record for career points scored for many years. Oscar arrived in Caserta in 1982, and his impact was devastating. Journalist De Core, in the documentary, recalls that, in the presence

of the lethal effectiveness of his shots, the commentator of his first official match in Italy (in Livorno, A2) at one point exclaimed, “But that’s not possible, cut off his hands!”. Oscar’s identification with the city of Caserta is total. His role as an offensive leader on the court is complemented by that of “adopted” son for President Maggiò, who builds a relationship of family affection with him, and of “big brother” with the younger Nando and Enzino, accompanied and protected in their technical, tactical and human growth. The 1989-90 season ended with a disappointing elimination in the playoff semifinals. The dream of reaching the Scudetto still seems far away. Among the managers (including Gianfranco Maggiò himself), there is some skepticism about the actual chances of emancipating from the label of “eternal unfinished”. Maggiò recalls Sarti to the company and, with him, begins a series of talks with the coach and the most representative players on the roster. A shared need emerges to impose change: a new coach, a new center, a new tactical set-up, and so on. In the end, the club’s resounding choice is the “cut” of Oscar, endorsed by Marcelletti, who wants to focus on a quintet with an equal distribution of shots to go along with the growth of Gentile, Esposito, and Dell’Agnello, and more devoted to transition play. The way the choice is communicated to the athlete is also controversial: Oscar is in training camp with the Brazilian national team and is updated by a cold call from Sarti. The aesthetic solution chosen by the authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* is particularly effective. First, in the fictional reconstruction, Oscar eats alone at a table inside a diner while Nando and Enzino look at him with distrust and melancholy. Second, the authors focus on the evocative power of the celebrity’s aged body: his tear-smudged eyes, trembling hands, and uncertain voice restore to the viewers a repressed anger that not even a distance of 33 years has been able to bridge. “I was gone like I was nothing, and that affected me” (Ep. 01x05). However, there have been attempts over the years to recompose the rift (a tournament played between Pavia and JC, the farewell to basketball at Palamaggiò on May 8, 2003, and the award of honorary citizenship of Caserta in 2016), the wound of that forced separation from JC and the city of Caserta is still not healed, for Oscar and many JC fans. When commenting on the historic scudetto, Oscar’s words express both anger at not being able to contribute to the feat and pride in having been part of that history: “I would have done anything to win that final there... After the final was over, the first telegram Caserta received was mine... I felt part of that (...) I felt Casertan” (Ep. 01x06).

Shaw and Chase (1989) establish three conditions that would develop nostalgia: a linear sense of time, an apprehension of the failures of the present, and the availability of evidence of the past such as objects, buildings, or images.

These three conditions are indeed present in the story of the relationship between JC fans and Oscar: the linear sense of time lets one feel the distance from past glory; despair over the miserable present results further shines a spotlight on past achievements; and finally, physical symbols – such as the Palamaggiò (the Palace) – constantly call to mind the deeds of the Scudetto heroes. The medium of the recomposition between past and present – at least in the narrative form of serial storytelling – is the aged body of the sports celebrity.

Again, the visual solutions are effective in a delicate balance of montage between present and past. On May 20, 2021, the Palamaggiò, abandoned for a couple of years following another bankruptcy of the JC title-holding company, was devastated by an arson fire. In the series, the theme is introduced by a sequence in which a lone fan moves among the relics of the past (trophies, calendars, photos) ruined by the flames while whistling the most famous chorus of the JC fans: “I know / I know / I know / I’m crazy about you /you

know, you know, you know / that I live for you / it's for you, it's for you, it's for you / it's only for you / wherever you'll be, I'll be / I'll never leave you"³⁴. A quick cut and a montage connection operated through the sound of the chorus itself projects us into images of the Palamaggiò of the past, filled with fans singing the same song in an atmosphere of euphoria. If we consider the ability of objects such as trophies, photographs, blow-ups, and historical jerseys – collected in places such as sports museums – to activate the emotional and nostalgic components of collective memory (Snyder, 1991), we can better understand how much the Palamaggiò's fire was perceived as a direct attack on one of the symbols of the city. Emphasizing, in the series, Esposito declares, “It's like they set fire to the Royal Palace of Caserta, or if they knocked down the Eiffel Tower in Paris” (Ep. 01x06).

The authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* try to heal the injustice of Oscar's “missed scudetto” and the pain of the offense caused to the Palamaggiò by exploiting the potential of audiovisual storytelling. In the final sequences of the TV series, the limp, hunched, weighted, stunted bodies, in some cases (like Oscar himself) exhausted by illness, of old sports celebrities gather, together with the two coaches who were the architects of the JC epic – Tanjević and Marcelletti – right inside the “sacred” structure. It is an opportunity to mend the wounds of history, operating an attempt to weld present and past: Marcelletti tries to explain to Oscar the reasons for that excruciating choice, and the Brazilian champion and Gluškov wear the JC jersey with the tricolor (reclaiming the scudetto they had not been able to earn on the court), the Palamaggiò – albeit only for a few hours – returns to being the temple of basketball it had been for more than thirty years.

If the memory of the JC epic continued even after the farewell of its protagonists, whose subsequent exploits in other clubs were experienced by fans as an extension of that unrepeatable sporting and cultural experience³⁵, it is reactivated through audiovisual storytelling. The connection with the epic is also evidenced by the continuous urge to return. Not only Oscar but also Coach Marcelletti (2004-07), Esposito (as assistant coach and coach, 2014-15), and Sandro Dell'Agnello (as coach, 2015-17) will return to Caserta³⁶. The most significant example, however, is captain Gentile himself, who returns to Caserta as a player (2003-04), as a coach (2019-20), and as an executive (2020-24). Although the relationship with the new club, Juvecaserta 2021, ended in April 2024³⁷, the circumstance

³⁴ The choir can be heard in the video available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GywFDm40Hyk> [last accessed 13.05.2024].

³⁵ Nando Gentile won the 1995-96 Scudetto and Coppa Italia with Olimpia Milano, three Greek championships and a Euroleague with Panathinaïkos, also becoming a national team staple. Enzino Esposito, after becoming a player-symbol of Fortitudo Bologna in the two-year period (1993-95), is the first Italian (along with Davide Rusconi) ever to land in the NBA wearing the uniform of the Toronto Raptors. Oscar gets multiple national and international awards: he was honored as one of FIBA's 50 Greatest Players in 1991; he was awarded the Olympic Order in 1997; Schmidt was inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame, acknowledging his achievements in international competitions in 2010; since 2013 he has been inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame; since 2016 he has been in the Italy Basketball Hall of Fame.

³⁶ Although post-career analysis of JC sports celebrities is outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that Gentile, Esposito, and Dell'Agnello have all pursued coaching careers (only the third with decent fortunes in A2). Oscar has been a manager in Brazilian basketball, trying to create an autonomous league from the Federation for the organization of the top league, and has unsuccessfully attempted a political career. Gluškov has converted his celebrity capital back into the political arena, recently (April 9, 2024) becoming Minister of Youth and Sports in Bulgaria. Charles Shackleford's affair, on the other hand, confirms how delicate the transition from end-of-career to post-career is for an athlete's mental and physical health: after several drug arrests and various court problems, the American champion was found dead in his home on January 27, 2017, at just 50 years old.

³⁷ See Pecci, 2024. At this link is the club's official statement: <https://juvecaserta2021.it/2024/04/25/si-dividono-le-strade-tra-gentile-e-la-juvecaserta-2021/> [last accessed 13.05.2024].

that the very captain and leader of JC continued to work with the basketball players on the youth team at the time the series was filmed allows the authors to open a glimpse of hope for the future, concluding the documentary with a child scoring a few points in basketball.

6. The narrative mediatization of sports as a self-reflective process

The mediatization of sports is a complex meta-process encompassing various other processes and phenomena. It manifests in two distinct forms (Tirino, 2024). The first form is rapid mediatization, driven by news media such as newspapers, radio, TV, and online news outlets. This form primarily focuses on extreme commodification and the spectacularization of sporting events, generating continuous content loops that both precede and follow the actual matches.

The second form is narrative mediatization, a slower process powered by narrative products like films, TV series, novels, comic books, and video games. This form delves into sports' cultural and social dynamics, often with a mythologizing purpose. TV series about sports, for example, contribute to this slow mediatization by depicting heroes and events across various disciplines within genres such as comedy, drama, and teen drama.

A clarification is in order. When we speak of narrative mediatization of sports, we refer as much to fiction products as nonfiction products (as in the case examined, *Scugnizzi per sempre*). Both types of media products operate through the scripting of events, with the only difference being that in the first case (fiction products) the events narrated can be invented entirely or be inspired by actual events; in the second case (non-fiction products), the reference to actual events is the basis of the script, albeit with a certain margin of tolerance concerning the narrative invention. For this reason, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not ontological but must be framed within a variable dosage of references to reality.

When audiovisual products operating as agents of narrative mediatization of sports also address issues related to informational mediatization, we are in the presence of meta-mediatization or reflexive mediatization. Although *Scugnizzi per sempre* devotes a minority of space in the storytelling to the interdependence of media and sports, some passages are particularly interesting.

First, the series, however quickly, deals with the issue of sponsorship, which in Italian basketball assumed a dominant role from the 1970s onward. One of the most valuable concepts for investigating the phenomena associated with the mediatization of sports is that of the SMS triangle (Martelli, 2014). This theoretical tool allows us to identify a social configuration based on the balances between sports organizations (clubs, leagues, federations), media organizations (mainstream and emerging media), and economic actors (sponsors). At the center of the triangle is the public, which can play the triple social role of fans, consumers, and practitioners (Bifulco, 2019), thus being decisive in orienting the fate of the triangle. The stability of the triangle is ensured by the mutual benefits: sports organizations derive essential resources from the sale of television rights to the media organizations that win the relevant auctions; media organizations, through the signing of television subscriptions by fans and the sale of advertising space to advertisers, secure growing profits, in part because the audiences involved in major sporting events (referred to as “premium” products) can hardly be assembled with different content; brands, by

associating their products and services with entire events, and/or with sports organizations, and/or with individual athletes, gain direct economic benefits from the visibility and prestige of the entities to which they are linked. Beginning in the 2000s, at gradual rates depending on the contexts, digitization – understood as the third phase of mediatization (Tirino, 2022) – undermines the balances established in the SMS triangle, due to the dynamics of disintermediation (creating tensions both within each of the components and between the components). However, in the years since the rise of the JC, Italian basketball has become a paradigmatic example of the SMS triangle. Sponsorships have greater significance in basketball than in other sports, as clubs – in exchange for substantial sums of money – allow sponsors to name the team. In this sense, the testimony of a famous Italian sports journalist, Ivan Zazzaroni, who in *Scugnizzi per sempre* speaks of “selling out” basketball to corporations, even to the point of surrendering the “sacred” right of the club’s name (Ep. 01x01), due to the hunger for funding, appears significant. It reveals a residual bias of Italian sports culture concerning the commodification processes of contemporary sports.

Sponsorships indicate a twofold investment by companies: on the one hand, direct funding of the sports organization; on the other hand, a desire to commercially penetrate the territory in which the sponsored clubs operate, in addition to benefiting from the national visibility provided by the media. In the period (1982-1991) covered by the TV series, the JC changed four sponsors: Indesit (1982-85, home appliances); Mobilgirgi (1985-87, furniture); Snaidero (1987-89, furniture); Phonola (1989-93, home appliances). The possibility of being associated with a club not only ensures material economic benefits for brands but also allows them to enter the collective imagination, especially in the case of success. For example, the Italian champion JC will always be remembered as Phonola Caserta.

Informational mediatization synergizes with the meta-processes of commercialization and globalization (Tirino, 2019a; Frandsen, 2020). This means that the benefits of sponsorship are multiplied by the increasingly incisive role of media organizations in the economic and organizational life of clubs, leagues, and federations. In these years, the economic value of the Italian basketball industry (which decreases the distance from the football industry) increases, mainly due to the media coverage provided by RAI, which – by broadcasting an advance of the championship day every Saturday – fosters a significant expansion of the fanbase. Live television broadcasts ensure a growing widespread interest and a more substantial presence of personalities from entertainment, politics, and business, especially in the sports arenas of cities with an established basketball tradition, such as Milan and Bologna. The overall growth of the Italian basketball system results in a substantial endowment of club resources, which are also used to hire more and more foreign champions. Even in a small, though ambitious, southern Italian club like JC, players from Yugoslavia (Zoran Slavnić), Brazil (Oscar), Bulgaria (Gluškov), the U.S. (Joe Arlauckas, Mike Davis, Tom Scheffler, Frank, Shackleford), Argentina (Edgardo Parizzia, Horacio “Tato” Lopez) arrive in the 1982-1991 period. Added to this is the international visibility provided by participation in European competitions and related media coverage: in the Korać Cup, JC reached the quarterfinals four times (1983-84, 1987-88, 1989-90, 1990-91), the semifinals once (1986-87) and the finals once (1985-86, won by Virtus Roma); in the Cup Winners’ Cup, it reached the quarterfinals once (1984-85) and the finals once (1988-

89). Therefore, the growing appeal of Italian basketball results from this interconnection of meta-processes (mediatization, commercialization, and globalization).

A second core of *Scugnizzi per sempre*, which can be traced back to the mediatization of sports, relates to the role of sports journalism in the JC epic. Aesthetized newspaper headlines often appear in overlays throughout the series, summarizing and accompanying the audiovisual narrative. Recognizable in some archive footage is RAI journalist Franco Lauro (1961-2020), who has been the face of basketball on Italian television screens for many years. However, the passage dedicated to Casertan journalist Mimmo Mingione (1944-2011) arouses the most significant interest. The voice of all JC telecasts, Mingione soon became famous (first locally, then nationally), not only for the unmistakable timbre of his voice (slightly hoarse) but for the emotional transport that characterizes his storytelling. His colleague Flavio Tranquillo states, “he was able to insert the human side into what he did, and therefore, he was a precursor of everything that would come thirty to forty years later” (Ep. 01x04). Mingione anticipated the figure of the journalist-fan who would become established in Italy only in the following decades, but always choosing the tone best suited for the unique and legendary feat of the JC, the environment, and that historical moment.

A third core concern is the use of media devices for match preparation. While in current events, the use of artificial intelligence to process data and statistics in the service of match analysis is now a well-established phenomenon (Castellano, 2023; Campagnolo, 2024), the match preparation techniques of Marcelletti, nicknamed “The Professor”, may now appear to be sports media archaeology. However, the fact that Marcelletti would go as far as the newsstand that served the NATO base in Naples to buy American basketball magazines and spend hours studying Super 8 footage from the NBA is indicative of the meticulousness of the Italian coach’s study of basketball, which would become even more obsessive over the years (Ep. 01x01). Also, from a media-archaeological perspective, archive footage related to the first final reached by JC in 1986-87 shows the first applications of computer graphics in live broadcasts of sporting events in Italy (Ep. 01x03).

Finally, in the sequences of the last episode devoted to how the Scudetto final is experienced in the city of Caserta, the role of the old media (radio and television) in exploiting the liveness of media reporting (Gemini and Brilli, 2024) is extolled to build the euphoric feeling of belonging to an extra-territorial community of Caserta fans scattered throughout Italy who at the exact moment are accompanying their favorites, seeing and/or hearing their exploits through technological mediation.

7. Conclusions

This paper aims to show how the mediatization of sports is a much more complex and varied meta-process than has emerged in academic debate. In this sense, a helpful starting point is the distinction between the two “faces” of the mediatization of sports. If informational mediatization tends to produce effects in line with the meta-processes of commercialization and globalization of sport, narrative mediatization, through many media narratives, pays more attention to the social and cultural dimensions of sports phenomena.

Specifically, the sociological study of the storytelling of the TV series *Scugnizzi per sempre* first allows us to highlight the strategies for constructing the JC epic’s legendary dimension. This entails some reflections.

The TV series uses three types of audiovisual sequences (interviews, stock footage, and fictional reconstructions). This operation attests to how media products that act as agents of specific forms of narrative mediatization can use materials generated by news media for two reasons. On the one hand, RAI and local TV footage facilitate the orderly and comprehensible reconstruction of sporting events. On the other hand, like each media object, these news clips activate secondary recollection, that is, recollection not of sports events strictly but of radio and television broadcasts. However, narrative mediatization performs the function of constructing a mythological framework that - through storytelling tools, in this case serial - can restore the epic dimension of the sporting feat recounted. This dimension is more evocative the more the narrated feat has characteristics of uniqueness and unrepeatability. The mythologizing of the feat can be interpreted differently by different audiences: for audiences unaware of the history of Italian basketball, the TV series ensures awareness of an otherwise neglected sports legend; for those who directly experienced the JC Scudetto, the TV story serves as a memory activator through emotional connection; for the Caserta, Campania and southern community more broadly, *Scugnizzi per sempre* can stimulate pride and a sense of belonging.

But, beyond the effects on audiences, the choice to tell the JC legend in epicizing terms indicates how *Scugnizzi per sempre*, as an agent of narrative mediatization, creates content that can mobilize local communities through affective and cognitive storytelling.

This opens to a second reflection. One of the perspectives that this study could open is an in-depth investigation of the long-term effects that a media product can generate on collective memory and, in some cases, on public debate in the territory of the community to which it is primarily addressed. In this perspective, if *Scugnizzi per sempre* is based on the exaltation of the almost mystical link between club and city, it would be interesting to investigate whether the TV series has produced social and cultural effects through the study of social interactions in social groups, newsmedia articles (on and offline) and other materials. Such effects may range from increased awareness of the JC legend at the intergenerational level to public discussion about the prospects of local basketball. Some signs about the ability of the RAI TV series to stimulate community attention about the JC epic can already be traced³⁸.

A third set of reflections invests the issue of the sports celebrity body.

Modern professional sports have a vital commercial aspect. Athletes, clubs, leagues, and federations compete in the athletic and market spheres. Celebrity, bolstered by media visibility, translates into sponsorships, advertising, and various contracts, amplified by the global reach of stars and tournaments (e.g., Premier League and NBA). The commercialization of sports celebrity humanizes consumption (Rojek, 2001). Spectators who purchase endorsed goods or services feel connected to the star's lifestyle and values. Sports champions' celebrity appeals to companies because their lifestyle and choices become models to emulate. According to Smart (2005), consumers vicariously enjoy the athlete's exceptional qualities through shared consumption.

Moreover, sports celebrities are commodities, such as stars of media-sold shows and brands with specific economic value realized through advertising, sponsorships, and

³⁸ The premiere of the first episode of the series, at Villa Giaquinto in Caserta, on July 17, 2023, was attended by more than a thousand people, with some of the protagonists of the time in attendance (Ansa, 2023). In an interview with the newspaper "L'Arena", Coach Marcelletti recounts that he was stopped by several people in Caserta after the news of the series' broadcast spread (Perlini, 2023).

product launches. The body is crucial in this commodification process, valued for its performance, athletic prowess, and functionality. The athlete's body, adhering to contemporary beauty standards – muscular, groomed, often tattooed – becomes attractive to brands due to its erotic appeal and desirability. In essence, the celebrity body stands out for athletic excellence and represents the ideals of beauty, well-being, health, and success. The commodification of the athlete's body aligns with neoliberal ideology (Andrews and Jackson, 2011), which celebrates hedonism, individualism, and self-care as crucial identity components. Ultimately, the sports celebrity's body, as a site of desire and commodity, is crafted to have a symbolic impact on the public, serving as a model (Rojek, 2001).

Granted that such phenomena and dynamics are increasingly evident in contemporary mediatized, commercialized, and globalized professional sports, the forms of narrative mediatization of sports suggest that the aged body of a celebrity may develop other sociocultural discourses. For example, the mythologizing tone of *Scugnizzzi per sempre* is functional in its use of the aged body of celebrity as a sociocultural agent capable of reconnecting past and present, under the banner of celebrating a glorious time.

In conclusion, the sociological study of the mediatization of sports, applied in this case to a TV series, allows us to appreciate the extreme variety of processes by which the media create various types of relationships with social actors in sports (audiences, athletes, managers, and so on). Concerning the social and cultural functions of sports storytelling, media products attributable to narrative mediatization can make us reflect on the mythical dimension of sports events and their value for the collective memory and identity of territories.

On the other hand, precisely in the awareness of the heterogeneity of impacts generated by the multiple types of interconnections between sports organizations and media organizations, it is important not to overemphasize the role of narrative mediatization. As the same activity of meta-mediatization or reflexive mediatization exerted by the TV series *Scugnizzzi per sempre* demonstrates, the role of media organizations in the creation and consolidation of an SMS triangle of Italian basketball in the 1980s and 1990s reaffirms the relevance of informational mediatization in the commercialization and globalization of sport in differentiated historical and sociocultural contexts. This prompts the need for more and more studies to analyze the interdependence and conflict between informational and narrative mediatization of sports to describe the variety of disputes, interests, values, affects, and memories activated by the complex interaction between media and sports cultures.

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About the author

Mario Tirino is a researcher at the University of Salerno, where he teaches Media Communication Sport and Television and New Media. His research interests include the sociology of digital cultures (particularly about television seriality) and the sociology of sports communication and media. To these topics he has dedicated numerous scientific articles, published in collective volumes and national and international journals, and some edited books: *Sport e scienze sociali* [Sport and social sciences] (2019, with L. Bifulco, CONI Prize), *Sport, pratiche culturali e processi educativi* [Sport, cultural practices and educational processes] (2022, with M. Merico and A. Romeo), *Sport e comunicazione nell'era digitale* [Sport and communication in the digital era] (with L. Bifulco, A. Formisano and G. Panico, 2023), *L'atleta digitale* [The digital athlete] (with P. Russo and S. Castellano, 2024). He edited with Luca Bifulco an issue of the scientific journal "Im@go" on the theme of the sports hero (2018) and with Paolo Landri an issue of the scientific journal "Eracle" dedicated to the mediatization and platformization of cycling cultures (2022). He edits the scholarly series "Binge Watchers. Media, Sociology and the History of Seriality" (with M. Teti) and "L'Eternauta. Studies on comics and media" (with G. Frezza and L. Di Paola).

“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)³⁹.

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,

³⁹ 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. Celebri-fication 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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Lady Oscar's Transmedia Universe between Gender Representation and Seriality in the Digital Age⁴⁰

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Abstract

The narrative ecosystem spawned by the manga *Berusaïyu no Bara* (henceforth referred to by its English title *The Rose of Versailles*) (Riyoko Ikeda, 1972-1973) and its renowned protagonist, Lady Oscar, presents itself as a paradigmatic case study in the sphere of digital television seriality. It offers significant insights for the analysis of production and distribution, inter/transmedia dynamics, and the intercultural processes of fandom. This ecosystem stands out for its ability to permeate various media formats, thereby creating a rich transmedia universe. A prime example of its success is the 12-episode anime series, which first aired in Japan in 1979. This series delineates a path reflecting the metamorphosis of media consumption and practices in contemporary mediascape. Furthermore, *Lady Oscar* (the name given to the anime in France and Italy, where it achieved considerable success) (1979-1980, Nippon Television) assumes a pivotal role in discussions on gender representation in popular culture. The series challenges the tenets of heterosexual romanticism and traditional gender roles, with the protagonist serving as an icon of resistance against gender norms. She offers an alternative model of identity and relationships, resonating with contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. This analysis encompasses the intercultural and transnational processes, focusing on how *The Rose of Versailles* has captivated an international fandom, particularly in France and Italy. The series becomes a medium for exploring universal themes such as gender identity, social conflicts, and political dynamics, illustrating how a narrative can transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, influencing the perception and discussion of social issues in various contexts. *Lady Oscar* exemplifies how a television series can act as a crucial medium in narrating social and cultural transformations. Through its transmedia evolution, challenging gender roles, and intercultural resonance, the series provides a unique glimpse into the interaction between production, distribution, consumption, and participation in the contemporary media landscape.

Keyword: Anime; Manga, Gender Roles; Lady Oscar; Fandom.

⁴⁰ This article was conceived and edited jointly by the two authors. Nonetheless, it is possible to attribute Introduction and Conclusion to both authors, paragraphs 1-2-3 to Lorenzo Di Paola and paragraphs 4-5 to Manuela Di Franco.

Introduction

This article explores and analyzes the narrative ecosystem generated by the manga *The Rose of Versailles* to understand its impact on gender identity perception and the consumption of manga and comics, as well as anime and cartoons, in Italy and France. The adopted methodology includes a mediological and sociological analysis that takes into account the socio-cultural dynamics and the mediation processes characteristic of Japan in the 1970s, a key period for the transformation of the manga genre. In particular, it investigates how Riyoko Ikeda's work crossed media boundaries, expanding from manga to anime and beyond, and how it interacted with the Italian and French cultural context, influencing generations of readers and viewers.

The article addresses gender representations in the 1993 comics edition of *Lady Oscar*, and it reflects on the differences between the comic and the anime adaptation in Italy. It analyzes the results of a research questionnaire to explore the impact of *Lady Oscar* on the perception of gender identity and the consumption of manga and comics in Italy, with the intention of providing an empirical analysis that supports the theoretical investigation. Through this approach, the article aims to add fresh perspectives to the picture of the cultural and social influence of *Lady Oscar*, considering both the dynamics within Japan and those related to its reception and reinterpretation in Italy. By examining the narrative ecosystem of *Lady Oscar*, the article wants to approach Ikeda's work from a different angle, taking into consideration elements like nostalgia, inter-cultural exchange, and intermedial practices. In addition, a survey of the different register adopted by the Italian adaptation of *The Rose of Versailles* across different media — namely manga and anime — the article shows how translation practices and remediation processes are influenced by the target audience and the media.

1. The Japanese Revolution in Europe

Shōjo manga, in their historical and cultural evolution, represent a unique publishing phenomenon that, initially conceived for a specific demographic target (adolescent girls and young adult women), has transformed into a significant expressive space to explore, and redefine gender identities, social dynamics, and affective themes. This transformation took place in a rapidly changing media context, where manga interacted not only with their audience but also with other media and technologies.

Born at the beginning of the 20th century as editorial products aimed at adolescent girls, *shōjo manga* were initially characterized by narratives focused on passive heroines, often dealing with adversities and tragic fates, thus reflecting the limited perspectives of female agency of the time. However, with the advent of television as the dominant medium in Japan during the late 1950s and early 1960s and the subsequent saturation of the publishing market by the 1970s (Poupée, 2010), there was a significant change in production practices and themes addressed. This evolution was marked by the emergence of female artists in the 1960s, who, through participation in editorial competitions promoted by magazines, began to give a new direction to the genre, introducing elements of romantic comedy and, subsequently, more complex and articulated narratives.

In the 1970s, the so-called Year 24 Group propelled *shōjo* manga into what has been called their golden age, expanding the thematic and stylistic boundaries of the genre and addressing issues of gender, politics, and sexuality with unprecedented maturity and complexity (Shamoon, 2012). This period marked a fundamental turning point in the perception of manga as a space for artistic expression and cultural reflection, contributing to a broader recognition of the manga medium within the Japanese and international cultural landscapes.

The mediological and sociological approach to understanding *shōjo* manga requires an analysis that considers the socio-cultural dynamics and the mediation processes that characterized Japan in the 1970s. During this period, there was a significant transformation in the media and cultural scenes, which offered new expressive opportunities for manga creators, allowing them to explore previously marginalized or censored themes, such as politics and sexuality. The mangas produced by the Year 24 Group clearly show this process by actively redefining the boundaries of public discourse and participating in the emergence of new collective sensibilities. The rise of this group is inseparable from the context of profound social change of the period, marked by the influence of the 1960s counterculture and student protest movements. The thematic boldness of these manga, therefore, should not be seen simply as an isolated stylistic or narrative choice, but as part of a broader process of cultural transformation, in which manga played a leading role in reflecting on identity, gender, and power. Through the representation of political and sexual issues, these works offered individuals new languages and imaginaries to interpret and negotiate their place in society, thus contributing to a redefinition of cultural practices and social relationships.

Through the lens of media ecology (Fuller, 2005; Scolari, 2012), *shōjo* manga can be seen not only as cultural products but as active agents that participate in the constitution and negotiation of meanings, identities, and relationships within society. This perspective is particularly fruitful for the analysis of the narrative ecosystem revolving around Riyoko Ikeda's *Berusaikyū no Bara*, known in Italy as *Le rose di Versailles* and more famously for the anime *Lady Oscar*. As Marco Pellitteri (2010, p. 4) points out:

Starting from the 1960s, a large slice of this production, mostly cartoons and comics, became famous amongst American, and then eventually European, producers. In the late 1970s, because of a series of business and historical conjunctions [...] a huge quantity of Japanese animated series and then Japanese comics came to Europe, causing an important change in the mediatic structure and in the tastes of the young public. As we will see, for years Italy has been, with France, the European country with the most central part in this process.

The penetration of Japanese anime into the Italian cultural fabric starting from the mid-1970s can thus be interpreted as a phenomenon of cultural mediation – a process where cultural products are adapted and integrated into a different culture, facilitating understanding and exchange between diverse cultural backgrounds – that deeply marked the imaginary of the new generations formed in those years. This process of media globalization inaugurated an era of interconnection between the West and the East, outlining the contours of a new cultural identity influenced by narratives, aesthetics, and values from Japan. The widespread diffusion of anime through the television system constituted a turning point in the media ecosystem of the time, bringing to the fore new modes of consumption, interpretation, and identification for young Italians.

The introduction of Japanese anime contributed to reshaping the dynamics of cultural belonging and media consumption practices. The so-called “Goldrake generation” (Pellitteri, 1999; Teti, 2018) emerged as a generational group, whose socialization was significantly influenced by an exposure to these works, diverging from the cultural and educational models of previous generations (Di Paola and Busi Rizzi, 2023).

The success of anime in Italy and in France highlights the role of media as agents of cultural transformation, capable of facilitating the flow of ideas, styles, and narratives across geographical and cultural boundaries. The success of these products, made possible also by relatively low licensing and translation costs, anticipated the dynamics of content globalization that characterize the digital era, foreshadowing the spread of transmedia practices that today dominate the media landscape.

The internationalization strategy adopted by Japanese production companies, in response to the discovery of a receptive Western market, materialized in an innovative fusion of Eastern and Western narratives, historical, and mythological elements, generating a phenomenon of cultural hybridization that gave life to generation-defining anime series. This “syncretism”, evident in *Lady Oscar* but also in works like *Tiger Mask*, *Lupin III*, *Dragon Ball*, etc., reflected a process of narrative construction aimed at thematic universality, making these products relevant for a global audience and particularly appreciated by younger generations.

The appeal of these narratives lies in their ability to address the anxieties, crises, and adolescent conflicts distinctive of an era marked by the competitive individualism associated with yuppies culture. In a social context where success models and relational dynamics have been deeply influenced by market logics and competition, anime offered young viewers a repertoire of stories in which the search for identity, friendship, courage, and justice emerge as central values, thus providing emotional and cognitive responses to the challenges of growing up (Di Paola and Busi Rizzi, 2023).

The integration of these anime into a sprawling media ecosystem, which includes television, video games, comics, role-playing games, action figures, and fan culture, has amplified their cultural impact. The pervasiveness of these media, combined with the ability to generate vast networks of fans, has transformed the consumption of anime into an immersive experience, capable of offering social and behavioral models with a profound educational impact. In this context, anime transcends mere entertainment, playing a pivotal role in the emotional and social education of the first generation to grow up with diverse media platforms. Initially a revolutionary force in the 1970s, anime’s influence remained significant through the 1990s and 2000s. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the development and proliferation of different media platforms further amplified anime’s impact. The popularity of anime and manga characters and styles extended into video games, illustrating how these cultural artifacts facilitated complex processes of socialization, enriching the cultural landscape and shaping the social experiences of their audience. This has found a tangible effect in the Cool Japan cultural policies that the Japanese government developed to promote national culture and identity abroad, effectively emphasizing manga style and art across the globe to increase Japan’s attractiveness to foreigners (Tamaki, 2019).

2. The roses of international success

The Rose of Versailles, known internationally as *Lady Oscar*, embodies a cultural and media phenomenon that transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries of its native Japan. This manga, serialized in the “Margaret” magazine from May 21, 1972, to December 23, 1973, and later published in nine *tankōbon* volumes, has given rise to two spin-offs and ten additional stories, further consolidating its cultural impact through five additional *tankōbon* volumes. The work crossed media boundaries, expanding into various formats: from the stage with the Takarazuka Revue musicals since 1974, to the big screen with Jacques Demy’s film in 1979 (Duggan, 2013b), and into the television dimension with a 40-episodes anime series produced by Tokyo Movie Shinsha in the same year, under the direction of Tadao Nagahama and Osamu Dezaki.

In Italy, the introduction and success of *Lady Oscar* are closely linked to the television broadcast of the anime series, which adopted the international title derived from Demy’s film. Its first airing dates back to 1982 on the channel Italia 1. In France, the anime found its place in the programming of Antenne 2, debuting on September 8, 1986, in the *Récré A2 show*, marking another important chapter in its international spread and reinforcing its status as a transmedia and transcultural work.

Its history of dissemination, in Italy and France, reflects the complex dynamics of globalization, localization, and cultural hybridization that characterize the modern media landscape, highlighting the central role of media in facilitating intercultural dialogue and in the construction of transnational collective identities.

Ikeda’s creation is a pioneering work in the manga and anime universe, and it offered an innovative and complex representation of femininity through the figure of Oscar François de Jarjayes. The character of Oscar, raised as a man at the behest of her father, creates a narrative that challenges gender conventions, while also offering deep reflection on themes such as social justice, inequalities, love, and friendship.

The manga and anime, set in a period of significant change like that preceding the French Revolution, use the figure of Oscar to explore the tension between traditionally assigned gender roles and the multilayered reality of individual identity. This character, who navigates the conflicting expectations of male gender roles in her position as the commander of the Royal Guard and her innate femininity, offers a narrative that values gender fluidity and the search for one’s identity.

Through Oscar, the manga highlights how social constructions of gender can be questioned and redefined, anticipating contemporary discussions related to feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights. Thus, Ikeda’s work stands as a text that promotes a complex view of the individual, capable of overcoming the barriers imposed by social conventions to affirm their uniqueness and freedom.

If the success of the work endures today, it is likely due to the continuous and tireless work of fans around the world. The passion and dedication of these enthusiasts, as highlighted by Elena Romanello (2022) in *La Leggenda di Lady Oscar. Guida non ufficiale* (a 600-page book written with the love, passion, and expertise of a long-time fan), play a crucial role in keeping alive the dialogue and interest around the work, continuously feeding the corpus of materials associated with the narrative universe through fan art, fan fiction, critical analysis, and reinterpretations.

The involvement of the fandom, which transcends national borders uniting Italian fans and those from around the world, underscores the importance of fan communities in the

cultural signification process (Jenkins, 2006). These groups not only keep the focus on the original work alive, but they also expand it, integrating new content that reflects a range of interpretations and perspectives. The tragic fate of Oscar François de Jarjayes acts as a catalyst for an uninterrupted creative production that engages in the exploration of numerous “what ifs” left open by the original story, allowing the work to transcend its original context and to constantly renew itself.

The creative ecosystem generated by the *Lady Oscar* fandom embraces a variety of artistic and critical expressions, from drawings that reinvent the appearance of characters, to studies that delve into the historical context of the French Ancien régime. This polyphony of voices enriches the work with new layers of meaning and opens new spaces for discussion and appreciation.

A study conducted by French sociologist Nathalie Nadaud-Albertini (2013) shows how these fan-created narratives not only extend the narrative life of Oscar de Jarjayes but also establish a critical dialogue with the original work’s interpretation of femininity. In this dynamic, fanfictions become a digital space where Oscar’s femininity is continuously negotiated and reinterpreted.

The protagonist of *Lady Oscar* provides a rich narrative foundation for exploring the fluidities and contradictions of gender identity. However, the fanfiction community, drawing on the complexity of this character, often chooses to rework her femininity in ways more traditionally conforming to gender norms, suggesting alternative paths that bring Oscar back to identifying within a conventional femininity context.

This approach to Oscar’s character opens up an interesting dialectic between the conservation and transgression of gender norms. On the one hand, the reinterpretation of the protagonist in a more traditionally feminine light can be seen as an attempt to reconcile her identity with a predominantly binary gender system in the importing country; at the same time, her feminine side in the manga emphasizes Oscar’s transgressive way of perceiving herself and her gender: transgressive, because no matter what gender she chooses to align with, goes against the established social norms and everyone’s gender expectations.

On the other hand, the creative process itself, which questions and redefines the original work’s notion of femininity, highlights the capacity of fanfictions to act as spaces for debate and cultural resistance, where conventions can be challenged and redefined. It is also important to emphasize how fanfictions embody a form of feminism, where authors navigate the complex dynamics of power, identity, and gender. Through fanfictions, the *Lady Oscar* fandom actively participates in the construction and reinterpretation of the work’s meaning, making it a glaring example of the importance of fandoms as critical spaces for discussion and cultural negotiation.

3. “A rose will always be a rose” also watched in streaming

This tremendous emotional wave that links *Lady Oscar* to its audience has led to the anime’s return on video-on-demand streaming services; in Italy, from September 1, 2023, all episodes are available on Prime Video (while in France, it is broadcast by Apple TV+). This process uses nostalgia as a targeted marketing strategy to attract the audience, capitalizing on the collective desire to return, at least emotionally, to past periods:

The action of memory and nostalgia in relation to media products is twofold: on one hand, the content of a specific object can present (more or less directly) characteristics capable of triggering a nostalgic response. On the other hand, the media products themselves (also because of their physical supports) can become over time, regardless of their content, the objects of a memorial (nostalgic) action of remembrance and identification by their users (Busi Rizzi, 2023, p. 89, our translation).

As Pomarico (2019, p. 103) points out, we are probably facing a loss of appeal of the present. The recent revival of the anime *Lady Oscar* through streaming services can be interpreted through the concept of “archive fever” outlined by Jacques Derrida (1996). The decision to re-propose this anime (and many other media products from the recent past) exploits the audience’s nostalgia, evoking a desire to return to an era perceived as simpler or more significant, despite the temporal distances and the sociocultural evolutions that have taken place.

In this sense, “archive fever” manifests in the tension between the present and the past, where the present seems to lose some of its dynamic appeal in favour of an idealized past. *Lady Oscar*, with its complex characters and narrative infused with themes of justice, gender identity, and revolution, becomes an imaginary place to which the audience wishes to return.

However, the revival of *Lady Oscar* not only facilitates the rediscovery of this anime by first-time fans but also paves the way for new generations of viewers and new models of consumption. The concept of affordance, namely the possibilities for action offered by an environment or a device, plays a crucial role in the analysis of how *Lady Oscar* is consumed in the digital age. Streaming platforms, with their ability to offer on-demand access to a vast catalogue of content, allow users to personalize their viewing experience, choosing not only what to watch but also when and on which device. This flexibility increases the appeal of classic series, making them more accessible than traditional television programming.

The transition of *Lady Oscar* consumption from mainstream television to streaming services is part of a media and cultural transformation that concerns not only how content is distributed and consumed but also how it fosters community building and socialization among viewers. This metamorphosis highlights a fundamental change in consumption dynamics, reflecting both the technological affordances of streaming platforms (Evens *et al.*, 2024) and the social and cultural needs of modern viewers.

In the era of mainstream television, *Lady Oscar* was a fixed appointment that brought viewers together in front of the screen at specific times, creating a collective and synchronized viewing experience. This regular programming not only established a shared ritual but also facilitated the formation of fan communities bound by the shared anticipation and post-viewing discussion of new episodes.

With the transition to streaming services, the anime becomes accessible at any time, transforming consumption into a more individualized experience. Viewers have the freedom to start, pause, and resume watching according to their own timing, making content consumption more adaptable to personal needs. Despite the personalization of viewing, streaming platforms contribute to the construction of new forms of online communities, as demonstrated by features that allow shared viewing and social media hashtags that facilitate discussion and interaction among fans (Tirino, 2020).

This aspect is reinforced by the use of second screens and social media, which enrich the streaming experience. Furthermore, streaming platforms are aware of this social dimension and have developed features like Teleparty or Watch Party, which allow people to watch series virtually together and initiate online conversations about the programs they are watching. These digital tools offer spaces for socialization and sharing experiences related to *Lady Oscar*, enabling fans to explore themes, characters, and narratives together, regardless of their geographical location. The availability of the anime on streaming services also fuels nostalgia, attracting both new viewers and those who wish to relive the original experience. This sense of nostalgia not only strengthens the emotional bond with the work but also stimulates the creation of fan-made content, online discussions, and analyses, contributing to keeping the work alive over time. In short, nostalgia is not simply a yearning for the past but a bridge that connects the past to the present in complex and nuanced ways, allowing for the continuous exploration and reinterpretation of the meaning and value of our shared cultural narratives.

4. Transmasculinity and class struggle(s)

In 1970s Japan, similarly to other countries, the women's liberation movement became an active and visible presence within society, leading women to rediscuss their role and identity. It is no secret that Ikeda developed her manga, *The Rose of Versailles*, inspired by the social events of her time. Oscar expresses a form of liberation from gender stereotypes and expectations as a transmasculine character, while at the same time she explores her own identity in a fluid way – paraphrasing Butler's word, performing gender and causing trouble (Butler, 1990).

In the first issue of the manga, Oscar's gender is made very clear from her first appearance: a baby girl is born, and announced as such, and her father declares her name will be Oscar and that she will be raised as a boy to ensure his lineage. In that same first issue, however, gender identity's boundaries get blurred towards the end, when Oscar is believed to be a man by the Princess Marie Antoinette, who is attracted and fascinated by Oscar and shocked to learn that she is not a man. This kind of misunderstanding is a leitmotif of the manga, in which Oscar is regularly addressed using male and/or female pronouns and taken for a man while at the same time widely recognized as a woman. To add elements of queerness to the plot and Oscar's representation and aura, many of the heterosexual ladies at the court of Versailles express attraction towards her, conscious that she is (and identify as) a woman: "If he really a man, I would immediately pursue him" (Ikeda, 1990, vol. 25, p. 88; our translation).

While the manga plays around Oscar's ambiguous gender projection, there is no ambivalence in Oscar's own gender perception: she identifies as a woman *and a soldier*. It is this identification with her role as royal guard that adds a traditional (and exterior) masculine identity to Oscar. It is worth noting, however, that as a soldier Oscar *performs* a traditionally *masculine* role – there's no virility in the depiction of her masculine side. On the contrary, gender fluidity is more emphasized by the feminine features of Oscar's servant, closest friend, and then lover, André. As it has been previously pointed out, André's appearance increasingly diverges from the masculine standard of beauty (Anan, 2014), and it evolves

into an increasingly queer look following the evolution of his bond with Oscar. Their relationship, once it becomes sexual, highlights the androgynous features of the two, their bodies depicted in a similar way, their embrace “exud[ing] homoeroticism” (Anan, 2014, p. 49).

The same cannot be said about Oscar’s (scarce) encounters with her first love interest, the Swedish count Hans Axel von Fersen, in which her feminine features emerge and contrast with the Count’s masculine characteristics, both physical and behavioral. In an emotional backlit scene, for example, the silhouettes of Fersen and Oscar reveal the highly masculine features of the first and the highly feminine body of the latter (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 51). It is again in a scene with Fersen that Oscar shows her feminine features and beauty for the first time. In a moment of pain for her unrequited love towards Fersen, Oscar participates in a ball fully dressed as a woman, following the fashion of the time. While she is technically in an undercover mission to catch a mysterious thief, Oscar’s feelings towards Fersen are clearly the reason why she joins the French aristocracy and decides to blend in and embrace her femininity. This event is more striking if compared to the beginning of the manga, when she initially refuses to accept Marie Antoinette’s invitation to a ball in Versailles, and only gives in to fulfil her duty towards the princess (and dresses in her high uniform that enhances her androgynous figure).

Marie Antoinette and Fersen are instead representative of a stereotypical heterosexual relationship in which the woman seeks salvation and hope in the man, whose main role is that of protecting the woman he loves. In a way, the French Queen and the Swedish Count represent a highly romanticized historical version of the trope of the damsel in distress, where the couple is gender conforming and there is no space for androgyny. The differences between the heterosexual relationship represented by Marie Antoinette and Fersen and the gender fluidity of the couple André-Oscar are striking and make it for a revolutionary representation of queer relationships in *shōjo manga*. In this respect, *The Rose of Versailles* sets a precedent and an example that contributed to the transformation of the genre (Shamoon, 2007).

Romantic feelings are therefore the force that makes Oscar question her appearance. Fersen is in love with Marie Antoinette, who is always highly feminine and fully fulfils the expected female look. There is no ambivalence or androgyny in Marie Antoinette’s appearance; in fact, her beauty and feminine elegance is one of her key features. This alignment with expectations and unquestionable gender identity can also be seen as a metaphor for the class conflict developing in the background: the historically accurate facts are connected with the Japanese women’s gender liberation of the 1970s. Just like the poorest classes struggle to survive and emerge as autonomous and free individuals, women’s gender identity is also a struggle, represented metaphorically by Oscar’s ambivalent look and her inner struggles. If she has no doubts about her own gender identity and what her role in society is, emotionally Oscar often struggles to make her masculine and feminine sides coexist. In other words, Oscar identifies herself as a soldier, openly rejects feminine clothes and appearance, but suffers when it comes to expressing her feelings towards a man (Hans Axel von Fersen) and to rejecting another woman’s romantic feelings (Rosalie’s). At first, Rosalie mistakes Oscar for a man as anyone else, but unlike many of Oscar’s close friends, keeps seeing him as a man also after learning that she is a woman. Rosalie ultimately falls in love with him without ever considering Oscar’s gender as a problem. It is instead Oscar who struggles with her gender because of Rosalie’s

suffering at her incapability of reciprocating her romantic feelings. In front of the pain of unrequited love – the same that she feels towards Fersen who sees her as a soldier more than a woman – Oscar regrets not being a “real man”: “If I had been a real man...how much suffering I could have avoided” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 33, p. 52; our translation). The “real man” is therefore someone who can protect women from suffering, and protection is the key role embraced by Oscar not only as a soldier in charge of the Queen’s protection, but also in her role within society: she protects her mother, the peasants in her family’s lands, children and, more generally, the “weak”. The only exception being André, who protects her whenever he can, demonstrating how he sees her as a woman contrary to Fersen, who sees her as a strong and independent individual who does not need anyone’s protection. Oscar’s struggles with her own gender identity go hand in hand with her raising awareness of the faults of the higher classes who have taken for granted their privilege and lived without questioning their role within society. It is only halfway through the manga that we learn that Oscar had questioned her gender identity: “When I was a kid, for a long time, I thought I was a man” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 82). There is no further exploration of Oscar’s journey of self-discovery, but it is interesting to note how it is again the rejection of another woman’s love that makes Oscar regret her womanhood. Over the course of the manga, Oscar’s gender non-conformity was never questioned by other characters, and it is accepted and embraced as her own personal identity.

While men are portrayed showing their feelings, tears included, as much as women, when it comes to the representation of Oscar’s gender her depiction as a woman is visually explicit when she is in a vulnerable state, whereas her features are more androgynous and masculine when she is in action or shows feelings of anger and/or revenge. These representations follow a more traditional iconography and reinforce the stereotypical images that see women as fragile beings in need of protection. It is the coexistence of both attitudes that make Oscar a revolutionary comics character, especially for 1970s Japan (and 1990s Italy). Furthermore, the identification (and portrayal) of weaknesses with womanhood and poverty reinforces the metaphorical connection between class struggle and women’s liberation. Looking at *The Rose of Versailles* as a *bildungsroman*, the evolution of the main character (and of André) becomes an all-round psychological and moral growth encompassing gender identity and acceptance (André representing Oscar’s true love and the only man who embraces her gender nonconformity) as well as social justice and values. Oscar’s moral evolution is particularly evident in both respects: she questions her transmasculinity and is scared her gender nonconformity might push away the man she loves (Fersen) and starts doubting the righteousness of the system and class she belongs to.

Ikeda’s work undoubtedly marks an important step in addressing feminist and queer issues and anticipates contemporary discussions; it presents contradictions in the representation of homosexuality. As mentioned, and as explored by some manga scholars (Shamoon, 2012; Duggan, 2013a), queerness and homosexuality are widely recurrent themes in *Lady Oscar*. However, Ikeda also openly rejects homosexuality in a series of scenes that address the famous “Affair of the Diamond Necklace” (1784-85). During the fictional trial of Jeanne de la Motte, responsible for the theft of the necklace, the thief accuses the French Queen of revenge for the ending of their homosexual relationship (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 31, p. 69). To defend herself and show the bad character of Marie Antoinette, Jeanne publicly states that the Queen was also having a relationship with Oscar, who reacts to the accusation with anger: “A homosexual?! Me?! I’ll kill her!” (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 32, p. 70).

Oscar's shock and rejection of homosexuality is reiterated a few pages later: "How can I be a lesbian?! It makes me itchy, like an allergy" (Ikeda, 1993, vol. 33, p. 73). Such a strong negative reaction by a gender fluid character might be seen both as a homophobic comment and a rejection of labels. Given Ikeda's political activism and her other artistic work on transmasculinity, the latter appears to be the most probable explanation. There is, however, another potential explanation, rooted in Oscar's fear of never being able to experience love. First, her father rejected her femininity; then, Fersen falls in love with the highly feminine Marie Antoinette, and sees Oscar as a friend and fellow soldier. Being labelled as a lesbian, and publicly recognized as attracted to women, may have caused Fersen, and André, or any other man, never to see her as a woman. From this perspective, the open rejection of homosexuality could represent another aspect of gender non-conforming and transmasculine individuals: not being lovable, and not being seen for who they are.

5. Gender fluidity and language: *Lady Oscar's* adaptation in Italy

Oscar's gender is no secret for anyone at the court of Versailles, where she was known to be a woman. This makes for an interesting case for the study of the Italian adaptation of *Lady Oscar*, in which the use of pronouns reflects Oscar's gender fluidity.

The Italian version of the manga uses pronouns to highlight Oscar's transmasculinity, adapting in this direction the Japanese original version, in which feminine or gender-neutral pronouns are most often used by Oscar to refer to herself. In the Italian translation, in every first encounter with someone new Oscar is mistaken for a man and addressed with masculine pronouns. She herself uses masculine pronouns most of the time to refer to herself, as the majority of the people in her family do, with the only exception of her nanny⁴¹. André too uses masculine pronouns, although in his thoughts he thinks about and refers to Oscar as a woman, pronouns included, showing the same fluidity in his perception of Oscar's gender as Oscar herself. The Italian translation of the manga is therefore aligned with the journey of gender awareness of the protagonist, reflecting in the use of pronouns Oscar's fluidity. The anime, however, does not follow the same pattern, and instead shifts the gender discourse towards a more traditional and stereotyped representation. Such a difference is particularly noticeable in how Rosalie addresses Oscar. In the manga, she always uses the title "Mr." (*signor*), which was changed into *mademoiselle* ("madamigella") in the Italian version of the anime. The anime depicts Oscar as a woman, and any trace of queerness disappears, with the adoption of the third person plural polite form of addressing (*voi*) used to neutralize Oscar's gender nonconformity. It might be argued that the use of the *voi* could be a form of neutral pronoun, hence reflecting the original Japanese version, but in the early 1980s, when the anime was released in its Italian version, the debate around the use of neutral pronouns in Italian was yet to begin. It was only in 1986 that a first document on the sexist use of the Italian language was published (Sabatini, 1986), and while it would be revolutionary to see *Lady Oscar* as a pioneering translation model for Italian neutral pronouns, facts point towards the adoption of the *voi* to avoid feminine or masculine pronouns rather than to a conscious attempt at promoting a neutral language system. The generalized use of the pronoun *voi* can be thus seen as reinforcing the portrayal of Oscar's

⁴¹ The nanny, who's also André's grandmother, never sees Oscar's masculine side, always calls her mademoiselle, and suffers every time that Oscar refuses to wear feminine clothes.

fluidity. By employing non-specific pronouns, the narrative underscores the ambiguity and versatility of Oscar's identity. This linguistic choice – either conscious or simply led by a traditional use of the polite form of addressing by translators – ends up highlighting the character's ability to transcend rigid boundaries, reflecting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of identity. The deliberate ambiguity in pronoun usage allows readers to appreciate the complexity of Oscar's persona, emphasizing that identity can be multifaceted and dynamic rather than fixed and binary. Through the use of *voi*, which substitutes the informal second person singular *tu* originally used in the Italian version of the manga, Oscar loses part of her transmasculinity in the anime, and it contributes to portray her as a woman who dresses in masculine clothes, without queer elements. This leads to the change of Jeanne's storyline and to the alteration of some of the historical facts reproduced by Ikeda in the manga. Jeanne presents herself as a victim of Marie Antoinette and Oscar's thirst for power, rather than a target of Marie Antoinette's homosexual desires, a popular gossip during the reign of Louis XVI (Goodman, 2003, p. 139). It is Jeanne who summarizes Oscar's peculiar role in the court as that of a “woman dressed in man's clothes”, and although there is a hint to such a rare attire – “isn't it strange that [Marie Antoinette] has such a close relationship with a woman dressed as a man?” (Ep. 23, our translation) – ultimately Oscar is depicted as a woman looking to gain power through the favours of the Queen.

Although the Italian version of the anime does not create any confusion about Oscar's gender, the reception in Italy of the character's transmasculinity has left its mark, as shown by the success of the series. To better understand the impact of *Lady Oscar*, a survey was conducted among a sample audience of 91 people. Through 11 questions, it emerged that *The Rose of Versailles* rose to fame in Italy through the anime and was mostly watched by children aged between 6-8.

Specifically, through the questionnaires it has emerged that:

1. On average, its audience was born between 1979 and 2000, and is therefore predominantly composed of individuals from Generation Y or Millennials. Such a response is not surprising considering that 1976-1990 are the decades when Japanese anime were first broadcast on Italian television and raised a public debate on their content and impact on the children who consumed them (Pellitteri, 1999, p. 128; Teti, 2011). If we accept the notion that a generation develops its own collective identity during its formative years, and that this identity fully emerges as its members reach adulthood and begin to make independent decisions that affect both their private and public lives (Mannheim, 2019 [1928]; Merico, 2019), it is crucial to consider the profound impact that media can have on the collective imagination and the social practices of these generations. The impact of anime on the popular imagination of the generation born in the 1980s was such that a new term was coined to define Italian children and adolescents that grew up during this first wave of anime consumption: the “Goldrake generation” (Pellitteri, 1999; Teti, 2011). Anime became a fundamental element of the formative experiences for the generation that grew up with mainstream television in the 1980s and 1990s. Integrated into the television programming and consumption models of that era, anime not only provided entertainment but also created communal rituals and shared symbolic experiences. TV programs aimed at children and adolescents, featuring Japanese animation, conveyed cultural values that helped forge a sense of generational belonging, and contributed to create a shared culture that deeply resonated with their viewers.

The impact of this kind of cultural consumption marks a generational change not only for the type of medium used to consume culture (the TV), but also for the exposure and absorption of Japanese cultural models disseminated by mainstream media. This sets apart the “Goldrake generation” from their parents and creates a unifying and common identity at the core of generational shifts (Benecchi, 2005) that combined to other socio-cultural features set generations apart. If we define a generation in socio-anthropological terms, characterized by distinctive elements such as shared experiences, significant events, rituals, and myths (Tirino, 2022), it becomes essential to recognize the influential role of television programs like *Lady Oscar*. These programs not only reflect but also shape the collective consciousness and cultural identity of a generation. By weaving together historical narratives and contemporary themes, shows like *Lady Oscar* contribute to the formation of a shared cultural memory, underscoring their significance in the socio-anthropological landscape⁴². These programs enabled young people to engage with the complexities of the real world by reflecting their values and dilemmas in the narratives presented. This content and these communicative modes provided a broad spectrum of choices, allowing individuals and communities to articulate their identities and assert their decision-making autonomy. The choices related to culture, media, and identity that emerge from this context – manifested through the use of communication technologies, media habits, and symbolic consumption – underscore the significant role of media in shaping cultural practices. These practices, in turn, guide young people through the delicate transition to adulthood, acting as a bridge between personal and collective identity within the broader social fabric.

2. The historical setting, Oscar’s courage and gender ambiguity are the elements that most attracted the attention of the audience of the time. This type of response provides some insight into the taste of the audience at the time of their first consumption of *Lady Oscar*. If seen against Italian comics’ fictionalization of history, a tradition clearly shown by the unique Disney’s literary and historical parodies (Argiolas *et al.*, 2013), the fascination of the Italian audience with historical drama is not surprising. It shows, in fact, how *Lady Oscar* fit into the Italian popular imagination, and likely contributed to the initial success of the anime series. Moreover, *Lady Oscar* is set during a time of profound historical upheaval, the French Revolution, a period marked by a fervent demand for liberty, equality, and fraternity – a historical era deeply embedded in the Italian and French imaginations, thus facilitating the cultural consumption (as well as dissemination and popularity) in both Italy and France of a product rooted in that historical context. These ideals not only shaped the course of history but to this day continue to influence contemporary discussions on civil rights, social justice, and democracy. The series, by situating itself in this historical context, touches on universal themes that transcend temporal and geographical specifics, thus allowing for an exploration of ethics, power, and social change in ways that remain relevant today. *Lady Oscar* provides a vivid portrayal of the class and gender dynamics of the time, illustrating how they influenced personal interactions and individual trajectories. The protagonist, a woman who takes on a traditionally male role, challenges gender norms and reflects the tensions between personal identity and societal expectations. This gender ambiguity not only adds complexity to the character but also opens a dialogue on gender identity and women’s rights. The narrative is further enriched by a blend of historical drama and

⁴² Popular anime and manga that distinguished Italian Millennials from previous and later generations include *Lupin III*; *Candy Candy*; *Creamy Mami, the Magic Angel*; *Love Me, My Knight*; *Marmalade Boy*; *Pokémon*, and *Dragon Ball* – only to mention a few.

personal entanglements, such as love stories, betrayals, and tragedies, which ensure a strong emotional engagement of the audience. This mix is strategically effective: while the historical drama provides a broad context and a rich backdrop, the personal entanglements add immediacy and accessibility to the narrative, allowing viewers to emotionally connect with the characters and their stories.

3. The anime remained the main and only medium through which the product was consumed (83.5% of the sample), confirming how the success of *The Rose of Versailles* is linked to new forms of media consumption of a specific generation. The popularity of anime in Italy preceded the dissemination of manga and for many Millennials represented the only medium of consumption of Japanese popular culture. This found further confirmation in another question of the questionnaire asking what was the main medium used to consume *Lady Oscar*, to which the sample responded the TV. The information gathered also highlights how the consumption of *Lady Oscar* was mostly a casual form of consumption (80.2% of the sample). This data is not only consistent with the specific features of the television medium at a time where on-demand services were not available, but also with the age range of the sample. The type of medium used and the age range of the first viewing of *Lady Oscar* are consistent with changes brought to media consumption by technological advancement, and it coincides with the generational markers. Millennials who performed a casual consumption of *Lady Oscar* did predominantly using the television medium. The casual consumption of *Lady Oscar* suggests that while the tv series may have not been the focal interest of children, it still had a significant impact on its audience. Such involvement in cultural consumption reflected the nature of the tv show schedule of the time, when children could run into various programs while casually viewing tv or during pre-established broadcasting time slots. Despite the non-committal nature of this type of consumption, the impact these tv shows could have on children were profound and contributed to the formation of cultural and individual memory. Furthermore, the data reflects the general tendencies of media consumption of the generations that grew up between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This phase was characterized by an intense and significant evolution of media and technology, although television remained a key source of entertainment and information for adults and young people alike. Television was the core of domestic entertainment and engaged with children through programs created *ad hoc* for them, featuring animations and anime like *Lady Oscar*, regularly broadcast on a daily basis. Such a targeted show schedule represented an important – and often first and only – form of access to popular culture (and narrative) for children and adolescents.

4. Who watched the product as an adult used streaming platforms, mainly YouTube and Prime. The correlation between a transition from a television-based consumption to digital platforms among adult and younger audiences – that is to say among Millennials and Generation Z – mirrors the general changes in media consumption. The rise in numbers of streaming services and online platforms for cultural consumption shows a shift into a more personalized, on-demand cultural consumption. The availability of *Lady Oscar* on streaming platforms is situated at the intersection of various significant mediological and sociological factors. It exploits nostalgia as a targeted marketing strategy, evoking a desire to return to an era perceived as simpler or more meaningful. The past becomes an idealized refuge, a phenomenon amplified by digital accessibility that allows past media experiences to be re-lived at any moment. Streaming platforms alter the traditional relationship between viewers

and media content. Instead of being bound to a television schedule, users can now watch *Lady Oscar* whenever they prefer, on various devices, and can pause and resume viewing at their convenience. The ability to freely access *Lady Oscar* content allows for continuous reinterpretation of its cultural and historical significance. This process not only fuels nostalgia but also provides opportunities for broader reflections on identity, collective memory, and the ways in which popular culture is consumed and reconsidered over time.

5. For the majority of the sample, it was a one-time consumption (60.4%) followed by a re-watch of the series as an adult (24.2%). This reflects the casual viewing registered, confirming how *Lady Oscar* was part of Millennial's childhood experience of cultural consumption fuelled by the expanding television medium, and the popularity of the newly imported Japanese animation. Consistent with this form of childhood consumption, the iconography of *Lady Oscar* is not used as a means of communication on social media (e.g., memes), although it remains linked to childhood memories.

6. When asked to make a (optional) final comment, the majority of the answers given reveal that while watching the anime did not have a relevant impact on the sample's queer identity, it left a mark in different ways. First, even though there was no doubt about Oscar's gender identity (female), the ambivalence of her appearance interested the audience as children. Second, the audience remembered being attracted by Oscar's strength and determination, becoming an inspiring character for both queer and non-queer respondents; third, it helped the queer respondents better understand their gender identity's journey retrospectively. Overall, the historical setting emerges as one of the main factors that interested the audience in the first place, but in the end it was Oscar's androgyny that caught everyone's attention.

Conclusion

Lady Oscar is still being broadcast on Italian television to this day. For the generations born between the late 1970s and the early 2000s, it entered their culture via the anime adaptation watched as part of the consumption of Italian television programs aimed at children. It was, ultimately, an entertainment product that reached a wide audience and that contributed to the creation of Italian children's popular imagination. Oscar's gender nonconformity was, for generations that grew up with very few queer and/or non-binary characters, the first encounter with a gender model that could attract both boys and girls. It offered a model for any child as it portrayed a strong and determined woman who could do anything she wanted; a queer person who found its own identity and place in society without fitting into pre-established labels; a man who could show and be in touch with its emotions. The Italian translations of the Japanese revolutionary manga show the importance of the use of pronouns, and how they can be used to determine the perception of gender identity. *Lady Oscar* and its media adaptations remain a pioneering work that show how an individual's emancipation and growth can be limited by stereotypes and standardized models, and that the affirmation of one's own identity can mean the detachment from the society of origins.

The analysis of *Lady Oscar*, its adaptation and consumption, show how popular culture can go beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, holding a wide appeal in different contexts, like in France and Italy. It shows how Ikeda created and mediated universal

themes, and how the Japanese cultural industry was able to take advantage of the development of the media system and the process of globalisation to export its products. Such international success was made possible also because of generational attitudes, and specifically Gen Y's tendency to welcome new media cultures.

The advent of digital cultural products and streaming services shows how classic narratives can find new life and, consequently, relevance in an era characterised by a fragmented and personalized media consumption, offering opportunities to new generations to (re)discover and reinterpret cultural products that marked the childhood of today's adults.

Furthermore, the dynamics of nostalgia and the active participation of the fandom continue to stimulate a process of rediscovery and reinterpretation that allows the work to continuously adapt to changing media and cultural conditions.

It can be stated that *Lady Oscar* also played a significant educational and formative role, often filling gaps left by traditional educational institutions, especially regarding themes like gender identity, which were nearly absent in schools of that era. The anime introduced and addressed issues of gender and identity fluidity in ways that formal institutions often avoided or ignored. This series offered an alternative platform for exploring complex and sometimes controversial concepts, acting as an alternative and complementary educator.

Oscar herself represents a disruptive educational influence compared to the gender normative schemas promoted by formal institutions of the time. Through her character, young audiences could see a role model that not only challenged rigid gender norms but also promoted values of courage, integrity, and justice. In this sense, the series provided important lessons on resisting social conventions and asserting one's own identity, themes that rarely found space in traditional school curricula.

Lady Oscar is a key element within a highly integrated production circuit, characterized by the ability of manga and anime to establish roots in international consumption systems. These works have effectively responded to the identity needs of a generation experiencing intense social, cultural, media, and technological changes. Among these changes are the globalization of markets, the advent of computer technologies, the rise of video games, the internationalization of television broadcasts, and significant political and social transformations, such as the triumph of neoliberalism and the easing of Cold War tensions. All these phenomena have contributed to redefining national and individual identities.

In this dynamic context, anime and manga have offered new narrative models that address themes such as generational conflict, the challenge to social conventions, and the exploration of complex and multifaceted identities. These themes have provided a new and often contrasting perspective to that of previous generations, sometimes arousing concern among parents and cultural elites⁴³.

⁴³ Interestingly, concerns about the influence of manga and anime continue to persist today, despite a significant reevaluation of their cultural roles. This ongoing apprehension is illustrated by the anxieties expressed by Walter Veltroni in 2021. In his article evocatively titled "Perché i manga hanno conquistato i nostri ragazzi" ("Why Manga Has Conquered Our Youth"), Veltroni articulates late concerns regarding the impact of these media on young people.

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Great Scott! Adaptive Dynamics of the *Scott Pilgrim* Franchise from the Comics to the Netflix Series

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Abstract

This article investigates the franchise that originated from Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* comics series (2004-2010) and continued with a film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010, Edgar Wright) and the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023). *Scott Pilgrim's* narrative ecosystem unfolds across various media, displaying heterogeneous characteristics regarding production structures, forms, and content. Indeed, the franchise also features several spinoffs: a short-lived mobile comic, a beat 'em up video game, and a card game. While surveying its medial articulation, I will discuss its appeal to hypermediacy mechanisms, both interweaving references between the components of the franchise and connecting it with music and gaming cultures; and its content, examining the progressive reworking of its storyworld, its alignment with diverse genres and imaginaries, and the way its unfolding aims to adapt and resonate with varied audiences and cater to their cultural preferences and consumption patterns.

Keyword: Narrative Ecosystem; Transmedial Narratology; Hypermediacy; Imaginary; Diversity.

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Introduction

This article aims to investigate the franchise that originated from Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* comics series (2004-2010, accompanied by a short commentary titled *The Annotated Pilgrim*, 2007) and continued with a film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010), a mobile comic (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little App*, 2010), a beat 'em up video game (*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game*, 2010), a card game (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Card Game*, 2017), and the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023).

The media path taken by the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is interesting in several respects. First of all, because of its unfolding through different media objects (comics, film, video game, and the Netflix series), which entails different configurations of authorship, displaying spontaneous and unpredictable shifts that suggest reading it as a narrative ecosystem

(Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017). The complexity and heterogeneity of this path are further highlighted by the franchise's reliance on a logic of hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), which results in a continuous process of intermedial citation of forms and protocols, not only creating a network between the various media objects belonging to the franchise, but also rooting it in music and gaming cultures.

From a narrative point of view, the different installments display a continuous expansion and contraction of the storyworld, connecting to different imaginaries and genres and aiming to appeal to the tastes, representation desires, and consumption habits of diverse audiences. In particular, the Netflix series conspicuously resonates with contemporary sensibility, incorporating the multicultural politics of the franchise while problematizing and rethinking some of its assumptions regarding gaze, agency, and gender roles.

Following these double articulation (mediality, discussing its production structures and formal features; and content, examining its imaginary and ideological assumption), this article will attempt to trace the parable of the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise from its origins to its latest development. In doing so, the article aims to merge the two perspectives through which the franchise has generally been studied – the one referring to the ideological and cultural aspects (e.g., Gray and Wilkins, 2014; McKittrick, 2014; Scoville, 2014; Lizardi, 2016; Pedinotti, 2016) and the one focusing on the formal aspects of its transmedia articulation (e.g., Murray 2012; Thoss, 2014; Chambers and Skains, 2015; Fehrle, 2015; Pino, 2015; Wu, 2016; Bodner, 2019). Moreover, the article builds on, and finds its originality in, its focus on the recent Netflix series, seen not only as the franchise's latest budding, but as a crucial occasion of reinvention, deviation, and mutation, both in terms of form and content, of the original material.

I've liked you for a thousand years: Scott Pilgrim as narrative ecosystem

How does the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise work?

To answer this question, it is perhaps necessary to start with an anecdote: the name "Scott Pilgrim" was not invented by O'Malley, but originates from the title of a song written in 1998 by the Canadian indie-rock band Plumtree. The song's lyrics don't say much, mainly repeating "I've liked you for a thousand years" and "I can't wait until I see you," but the song's attitude is consistent with the slacker rock imaginary that was fashionable in the North American indie music scene of the 1990s. The same imaginary is certainly embodied by the eponymous character as he debuts in O'Malley's comic series: a twenty-something with no job and no home (crashing at the house of his "cool gay roommate" Wallace Wells), who plays bass in an indie band called Sex Bob-ombs and dates a high schooler after a traumatic breakup. However, he will soon fall in love with a mysterious delivery girl.

Indeed, this genealogy tells a lot on at least three fronts: the central generative role played by intermedial transfers, the centrality of the theme of personal and relational adulthood, and the franchise's development by spontaneous budding. In this sense, the first question to answer concerns the configuration of the galaxy of texts reunited under the *Scott Pilgrim* banner.

Three texts form the narrative core of the franchise. The first – in chronological, if not hierarchical, terms – is the comics series (2004-2010) single-authored by Bryan Lee

O'Malley⁴⁴, made up of six volumes of around 200 pages each, and published by the Portland-based independent publisher Oni Press. The series begins by showing Scott Pilgrim in a platonic relationship with high school student Knives Chau. Very soon, Scott meets and falls in love with Ramona Flowers, an American woman with a mysterious past. Having just started hanging out with her, however, Scott discovers that to date her he must defeat her Seven Evil Exes, which he will do, unfolding a series of events prompting both him and Ramona to come to terms (symbolically and literally) with their sentimental past. Each volume thus “chronicles Scott’s battle with one – or two when there are twins – of Ramona’s exes, until finally defeating the leader and founder of the Evil Exes league, the *über-villain* Gideon Graves. The volumes seamlessly flip back and forth between a perspective grounded in reality, with normal rules of physics, and the very unreal battles with the exes and travels through the otherworldly “subspace” (Lizardi, 2012, p. 2). While the original comic was in black and white, the series has since been fully republished in color (2012-2015, colored by Nathan Fairbairn, allegedly by using the film color palette as a reference), with the supplement of bonus material (sketches, notes, and outtakes from the script). Additionally, a 30-page booklet titled *The Annotated Pilgrim* was published in 2007, featuring the paratextual apparatus related to the first two volumes.

The second core text is the film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010), written by Michael Bacall and Edgar Wright, and directed by the latter. Despite not performing well at the box office, it quickly achieved cult movie status, combining Wright’s flamboyant visual style with the foregrounding of a series of hypermediacy strategies that I will discuss soon. Plot-wise, the movie unfolds along the lines of the comic, although, since it had been conceived in 2007 and was realized before the last installment of the comic came out, Bacall and Wright were unaware of how O’Malley would conclude the series. Hence, as Bodner remarks, “Scott Pilgrim is rare in the history of comic adaptations in having a source text actively created while the movie is being developed and filmed. The act of parallel creation deeply affect[ed] both texts” (2019, p. 251). Notably, the film was built around an ending that saw Scott together with Knives Chau, and that was reshot, a few months before the film was screened, to realign with the comic’s conclusion, where Scott and Ramona end up together.

The third core text is the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023), developed by Bryan Lee O’Malley and BenDavid Grabinski, realized by the animation studio Science SARU (which created the highly successful *Devilman Crybaby*, 2018) and directed by Abel Góngora. The series, which consists of eight episodes of approximately half an hour each, rewrites the story in an alternate reality in which the first Evil Ex apparently defeats Scott, and Ramona and Wallace take center stage. She will soon discover that Scott is not dead, but has disappeared, beginning a journey to find him that will reconcile her with her exes, whose fate will take a different turn; meanwhile, most of the characters will be busy filming a movie *en abyme* called *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life*, whose plot echoes the original comic and film and, we will discover, diegetically stems from a temporal paradox originated by future Scott himself.

⁴⁴ Bodner (2019, p. 261) mentions the collaboration of John Kantz for screen tone and background, and Aaron Ancheta for crowd scenes and inking assistance.



Fig. 1: The covers of Scott Pilgrim's comics series, film, and Netflix series.

Borrowing Jenkins' dichotomy of transmedia storytelling, one can consider these three texts to be more prominent and, consequently, the franchise to be unbalanced, presenting "a clearly identifiable core text[s] and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole" (Jenkins, 2011). Indeed, the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise encompasses several other medial objects – less relevant from a narrative point of view – most of which were created around the release of the final issue of the comic series and the movie⁴⁵. The first object is a 4-minute animated short (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the Animation*, 2010) focusing on Pilgrim's high school years. Produced by the Titmouse, Inc. studio, it aired on Adult Swim before being released on the studio website. The second is a beat 'em up video game (*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game*, 2010), co-developed by Ubisoft Montreal and Ubisoft Chengdu and directed by Paul Robertson. Influenced by 8-bit video games, it is a multiplayer side scroller featuring a soundtrack by the chiptune pop band Anamanaguchi, which was later reused in the Netflix series. The third is a mobile comic (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little App*, 2011), co-produced by the HarperCollins' imprint 4th Estate and Robot Media. Available for both iOS and Android, the app adapted the whole comic series for the digital environment (it was marketed on different digital comics platforms), allowing one to zoom in and out, featuring sound effects and vibrations, hidden extra artwork, and a networked comment section. Finally, a recent addition is a deck-building card game (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Card Game*, 2017), designed by Keith Baker and illustrated by Anita Osburn, produced by Oni Games and Renegade Game Studios. Players assume the roles of characters from the *Scott Pilgrim* universe, having to defeat Evil Exes and collect Power-Ups, either peacefully or by fighting their way through the game.

The difficulty in considering the whole franchise, then, stems from the fact that it encompasses both intermedial adaptations and transmedia expansions, created by a multitude of authors with their different (often distinctive) poetics, while being in more or less overt communication with O'Malley's text – I will consider the latter as the overarching

⁴⁵ I do not have enough space to discuss fandom here, although it is a constitutive part of Jenkins' understanding of transmedia storytelling (see Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019). It must nonetheless be considered that, over the years, a significant fan production has also coalesced around *Scott Pilgrim*, mostly featuring (prose) fan fiction, fan art illustrations, and the obvious cosplaying. Moreover, O'Malley has long been very active on social media, notably admitting "to constructing his text partially in response to online discourse about the comic book" (Bodner, 2019, p. 252).

creator, being the owner of the original IP. Moreover, as anticipated, several elements that make up the franchise were later grafted onto its pre-existing structure. This is particularly interesting, as

Whereas adaptations invite audiences to compare and contrast the adapted work with an original (a kind of vertical memory, as Harvey calls it), transmedia storytelling establishes a different dialogical relationship with a previous text, one that recalls some of its narrative, aesthetic, and storyworld elements – activating a type of horizontal memory (Pires de Figueiredo, 2022, p. 4).

Transmedial narratology and media studies have extensively considered the possible configurations of transmedia franchises, albeit still struggling with disciplinary divides (most notably, the different meanings attributed to the terms “transmedia” and “transmedial”: see Baroni *et al.*, 2023).

Coming from the former discipline, Jan-Noël Thon identifies three possible diegetic dynamics within narrative universes: “redundancy”, when the same storyworld elements are repeated across different media; “expansion”, when new elements are added; and “modification”, when the same storyworld is inhabited by elements that seem to be completely unrelated (Thon, 2023, p. 229).

Interestingly, while Thon does not envisage any kind of “condensation” or “reduction”, as he is not including adaptation amongst the transmedial strategies he considers, he mentions that “changes in a franchise’s authorial constellation may also result in the redefinition of (some of) the relations between its various work-specific storyworlds and occasionally [generate] rather fundamental changes of the ‘intended structure’ of its transmedial universe” (Thon, 2015, p. 33). As such, he ultimately argues for an understanding of transmedia franchises as keeping together several local, non-contradictory, medium-specific storyworlds in a global, often contradictory “storyworld compounds” that he calls “transmedia universes” (Thon, 2023, p. 228).

Simultaneously, media studies in the last 20 years have followed Jenkins’ extremely influential idea of transmedia storytelling as systems of “co-creation” where “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins, 2007), where “ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins, 2011). Tirino remarks how recent forms of transmedia storytelling are mainly focused on shrewd worldbuilding (2019, p. 26) rather than being centered on characters or authorship. A more recent perspective – and more apt to account for the texts constellation shaped by franchises such as *Scott Pilgrim* – is that of “narrative ecosystems” (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017; see also Tirino, 2019): “open systems, inhabited by stories and characters that change through time and space,” that form interconnected structures, where “sequels and prequels, reboots, spin-off, and crossovers are all in a dialogic relationship with each other” (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 170). Narrative ecosystems are “capable of shaping and adapting itself for different users, needs, and experiential strategies” (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 171): “the narrative material is alive, undergoing processes of competition, adaptation, change, modification, etc.” (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 170), ultimately aiming at homeostasis, or balance, over time.

I argue, then, that the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is an example of a narrative ecosystem made of both horizontal expansions and vertical permutations of its source material, operating principally on its storyworld and displaying a series of adaptive and inventive operations, going both towards and against medium-specific forms and discourses. In this analysis, I will focus on the three texts that constitute the franchise's narrative core(s), further examining their medial characteristics and investigating its content's somewhat modular, yet largely spontaneous and unplanned, evolutions.

***Scott Pilgrim* and the mediamorphosis: medium specificity, retro-remediation, and hypermediacy**

In order to consider the way the franchise foregrounds its mediality, I will adopt Irina Rajewsky's taxonomy⁴⁶, stemming from transmedial narratology and distinguishing three kinds of "narrow intermediality":

- (1) media combination, where intermediality is "a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation" (2005, p. 52);
- (2) medial transposition, that is, intermedial adaptations, "the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium" (2005, p. 51); and
- (3) intermedial references, namely, medial representations of emulations of a different medium (i.e., *ekphrasis*).

The *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is highly distinctive when considering its mediality, as it combines all three intermedial processes envisioned by Rajewsky: it encompasses multimodal texts, based on a constitutive "media combination"; it features several medial transpositions, moving from the comic series to the movie and from both to the Netflix series (I will discuss the implications of these passages shortly)⁴⁷; and, more evidently in the case of the comics series and the movie, it foregrounds a series of intertextual and intermedial references.

All intermedial references rest on a tension, inherent in remediation processes, between immediacy and hypermediacy, "the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 21); or, as Thoss puts it, between eradicating or foregrounding the signs of mediation (Thoss, 2014, p. 212). This may result in configurations that are more or less "mediagenic" – that is, following Marion (whose neologism mimics the idea of "photogenic"), displaying a combination where a certain content felicitously actualizes the expressive and communicative potential of a particular medium (1997)⁴⁸. From this perspective, *Scott Pilgrim* stands out for being distinctly *un-mediagenic*, relying on a complex network of hypermediacy mechanisms that I propose to distinguish between endogenous (related to other elements within the franchise)

⁴⁶ For a different model (more indebted to media studies), see Elleström (2014).

⁴⁷ If one considers the whole franchise, there are clear-cut examples of adaptations (the mobile comic) or transmedia storytelling (the animated short), but most of its peripheral components can be seen as encompassing both movement: the video and card game, notably, are *both* adaptations and transmedia nodes of the franchise, offering different entries and a diverse engagement with it.

⁴⁸ Marion's idea is a weak, less prescriptivist version of medium specificity, seeing *mediageny* as the result of a consolidated set of practices (and recurring imaginaries) enacted by a medium, rather than some inherent qualities solely depending on its affordances. For an articulate discussion of medium specificity, see Carroll (2019).

and exogenous (related to medial objects foreign to the franchise): on the one hand, the comic incorporates visual tropes typical of manga (Berninger, 2014), the film heavily remediates the language of comics (Fehrle, 2015), and the Netflix series mimics both strategies *while* also incorporating several filmic affordances; on the other, the whole franchise rests on a constitutive hypermediation of music (Pino, 2015) and video games (Wu, 2016), and the consumer cultures connected to them.

As said, the comics series foregrounds a first reference to manga. As such, it can be seen as transcultural or trans-generic rather than intermedial, but the specificities of manga are such that several scholars consider it a different medium from comics (see Hernández-Pérez, 2016). Bodner describes O'Malley's series as "a multigeneric, postmodern pastiche of media narrative and graphic traditions, the most striking of which is the incorporation of manga facial structure and overall character design into a North American comic" (2019, p. 247). Indeed, the first issue starts like many prototypical independent comics, focusing on the sentimental life of this quintessential slacker (Berninger stresses the link between this part of *Scott Pilgrim* and the tradition of Canadian comics: 2014, p. 245) – until the first Evil Ex appears and attacks Scott,

and the two are revealed to be capable of gravity-defying acts of hand-to-hand combat involving motion lines, force fields, exaggerated facial expressions, and the summoning of paranormal entities [...]. From this incident onward, the series is frequently punctuated by manga-like fight scenes, including comedic combat with robots, samurai swordsmen, and giant foes (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 57).

The manga-esque nature of the series transpires not only from its narrative tropes, but from a precise set of aesthetic coordinates – in the line, facial expressions, *emanata*, *onomatopoeia* (Wu, 2016), and so on. Moreover, "the original black-and-white editions were printed in a 5 × 7" digest form, which in the world of North American trade publishing has become commercially and semiotically synonymous with the notion of 'authentic manga'" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 58). It is worth noting, however, that, while O'Malley declared that his main inspiration was *shōnen* manga, he also stated that, at the time, the only one he was familiar with was *Ranma 1/2* by Rumiko Takahashi (Hudson, 2011); consequently, it is more apt to consider *Scott Pilgrim* as a "manga-influenced" comic (MIC), rather than an original English-language (OEL) manga (Berninger, 2014, pp. 246-247).

The second reference is established by the film towards the comics, and it is probably the most evident. The film indeed explicitly and repeatedly emulates the comics aesthetic (Thoss, 2014; Bodner, 2019) through a series of techniques: juxtaposing textual inserts, captions, *emanata*, and *onomatopoeia* to the audiovisual dispositive of the movie; incorporating several panels from the comic, although in an animated version; and replicating the comic layout through consistent use of split screens (see Bodner, 2019, pp. 254-256). Moreover, the movie foregrounds its medial heterodoxy by relying on other "unnatural editing technique[s]" (Fehrle, 2015, p. 10): worth mentioning is the accelerated pace of the dialogues and the occasional resort to *tableaux vivants*, both reflections on the spatialized time that characterizes comics' meaning-making.

The Netflix series, in turn, conspicuously references the filmic language. This is foregrounded through the systematic use of fake camera blurs, but also through the incorporation of both narrative and formal devices such as the documentary (the entire episode *Lights. Camera. Sparks?!*, Ep. 01x05). The same role has the long chain of metalepses accompanying the fight between Ramona and Roxie, which begins in the video store where

Kim Pine works but, after a shelf of DVDs falls on them, is projected into the diegetic universes of the rented films, through a chain of concatenated metalepses and genre pastiches. Also worth mentioning are the series' references to comics, not so much (or not only) by taking up the stylistic devices already adopted by the film, but by foregrounding its genetic affinity with manga/anime, both in its aesthetics and through diegetic representation – notably, by depicting one of the Evil Exes watching a (fictional, stereotypical) anime.

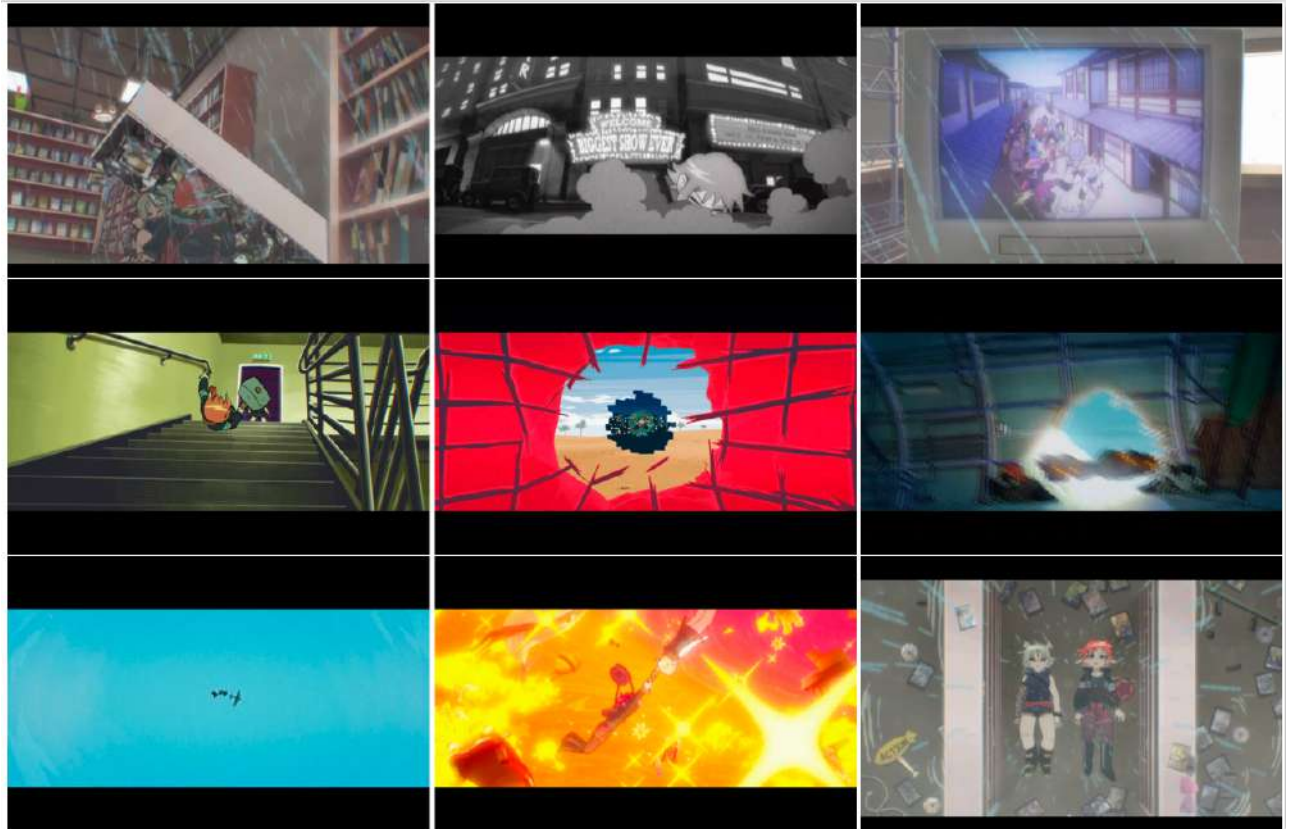


Fig. 2: *The chain of metalepses from Scott Pilgrim Takes Off (Ramona Rents a Video, Ep. 01x03) ©Netflix 2023*

At the same time, the appearance of the backdrops (and especially of the buildings) in the Netflix series is very reminiscent of the aesthetics of click-and-drag video games of the 1990s, which opens up the first, and most consistent, “exogenous” intermedial reference to video games, both as a set of formal and semiotic elements and as a culture. It is impossible to draw a complete list of the network of references that the franchise weaves with various video games, activating, as in the case of manga and anime, a relationship that is both intermedial and intercultural. The cultural coordinates to which *Scott Pilgrim* refers, indeed, almost exclusively concern Japanese products (in the series, only those marketed by Nintendo). Although some of the referenced works, such as the *Tony Hawk* series, are contemporary to the period in which the events of the franchise are set (i.e., the “Toronto of a few years ago” mentioned in the opening of the Netflix series), the vast majority have to do with the medial past of Generation Y. Throughout the franchise, *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Final Fantasy II* (1988), *River City Ransom* (1989), *Ninja Gaiden* (1989), *Sonic the Hedgehog*

(1991) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) are overtly or covertly mentioned⁴⁹. Moreover, the fight sequences are strongly reminiscent of games such as *Street Fighter* (1987) or *Tekken* (1994), both in their style and because of the use of video game tropes, such as the coins that spun at the end of each battle, or extra lives floating in the air. Finally, the aesthetics of the opening screens of each of the episodes of the Netflix series, and the names of almost all the bands in the franchise, are pastiches of as many video games.



Fig. 3: the comics series' (on four pages) and film's reference to Ninja Gaiden (on the right).

⁴⁹ For example, in Wright's film, the characters play a fictional video game called *Ninja Ninja Revolution*; in the Netflix series, the cheat code used to enter the virtual reality room is the Shoryuken input from *Street Fighter 2* (1991).



Fig. 4: Netflix series' title screens and their references⁵⁰ ©Netflix 2023.

This opens to the other main media attractor of the series, namely, music. I mentioned that the franchise is symbolically indebted to the slacker aesthetic developed through music (and film) in 1990s North America (Pino, 2015). Scoville indeed asserts that the *Scott Pilgrim* film (whose soundtrack is by Nigel Goldrich and includes original Beck songs) projects

The mythologizing of the cool Annex scene, the transformation of Toronto indie rock, as well as games and alt-comics (and even such stereotypically downtown things as veganism), into the stuff of adventure, romance, superpowers, and magic. Nearly all of the major events in both comics and film are connected in some way to this music scene (Scoville, 2014, p. 204).

The soundtrack's auratic value is confirmed by the Netflix series, which features several iconic songs from late 1990s/early 2000s indie rock, starting with the aforementioned *Scott Pilgrim* by Plumtree. The series further reflects on this pivotal role of the music medium by staging the whole *Scott Pilgrim's* comics story (once again *en abyme*) as a (fictional) musical during episode 2 *Scott 2 Pilgrim* (Ep. 01x07). Music in the series, however, also becomes a symbolic link to manga and video game culture, referencing their imaginary both visually and through the soundtrack. Concerning manga, particularly relevant is the choice as theme song of Necry Talkie's *Bloom*, a power-pop up-tempo whose lyrics (in Japanese) nostalgically

⁵⁰ https://www.reddit.com/r/ScottPilgrim/comments/17ztro7/scott_pilgrim_takes_off_title_screens_references/ [last accessed 13.05.2024].

evoke the series' imaginary. Moreover, the Netflix series interweaves explicit visual and thematic references with two Japanese works in whose plots music plays a central role: the *Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad* franchise (1998-2008, the manga by Harold Sakuishi; 2004-2005, the anime created by Madhouse studio; and 2010, the live-action film directed by Yukihiro Tsutsumi), and *FLCL*, an original video animation (OVA) series written by Yōji Enokido and directed by Kazuya Tsurumaki.

In parallel, music acts as a glue between the imaginary of the franchise and video games: the entire soundtrack of the Netflix series, performed by the American chiptune-pop group Anamanaguchi, is taken from the 2010 *Scott Pilgrim* video game, and recreates the retro sound aesthetics of 8-bit video games. Relatedly, two key moments for the film and the series are characterized by the soundtrack of *The Legend of Zelda*, defined by Edgar Wright as “like nursery rhymes to a generation” (McWhertor, 2010), and an 8-bit version of *God Only Knows*, originally by the Beach Boys. As is often the case, stylistic choices thus carry a complex symbolic value, acting as a foothold and semantic bridge to other cultural contexts, eras, and media.

***Scott Pilgrim's* precious little multiverse: imaginaries and stereotypes in the comics series and the film**

This dense intertextual and intermedial network has two implications: on the one hand, as Thoss argues while discussing the franchise's references to video games, despite mentioning “specific – and occasionally obscure – titles”, most references possess a generic quality that makes them “obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge” of the original objects (Thoss, 2014, p. 216). This dynamic is well-known within nostalgia studies – and indeed, the franchise weaves “vintage video-game and indie rock references into its very fabric, which puts *Scott Pilgrim* in dialogue with a contemporary society that is obsessed with past cultural artefacts” (Lizardi, 2012, p. 1). These references root the imaginary of the franchise in a series of habitus that are readable even by those who do not know the sources first-hand. Moreover, they symbolically foreground the theme of one's relation to their past, which is reinforced structurally by the iterated flashbacks and diegetically by the recurring theme of refusing to grow up and by the whole toxic, past-obsessed idea of conquering one's romantic history by confronting their exes (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 2-3).

While the past plays a key symbolic role, following Pedinotti, the story's other “overt thematic preoccupations include the specific flavors of narcissism, escapism, projection, emotional and sexual irresponsibility, loneliness, denial, and media-induced reality-confusion that often accompany the twenty-something phase of life,” whose central dramatic conflict concerns “struggles to become emotionally committed, responsible adults” (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 57). In this sense, Bodner notes how “the pattern of employment, housing, and general socioeconomic profile” represented by the character “creates an accurate ethnographic snapshot” of O'Malley's generation (Bodner, 2019, p. 261). Indeed, Kondo summarizes the socio-cultural coordinates of *Scott Pilgrim* as follows:

The early 2000s, a time of flip phones, dial-up internet symphonies, and the birth of MySpace profiles [...]. Amidst the Y2K transition, *Scott Pilgrim* became a magnetic force field, blending '90s grunge vibes with the neon glow of the emerging digital age.

O'Malley wove together video game aesthetics, music subcultures, and everyday life into a narrative quilt (Kondo, 2024).

In many ways, both the comics and the movie take an ambivalent stance, glamorizing this imaginary. Indeed, this lays the foundation for a story that is both a romantic comedy and a *Bildungsroman* centered on an emerging protagonist of the media imaginary of the late 1990s: a (white, hetero, cis) young boy spurred into action by romance and self-discovery. Scott personified the idea that nice, unassuming, unthreatening (both to a certain extent) men were entitled to finding success in love and life⁵¹. His journey makes him a generational emblem, reflecting cultural shifts in the portrayal of masculinity that finally allowed rooting for “nice guys” – sensitive, introspective male ideals – in opposition to the triumph of 1990s macho jocks (Rabiroff, 2023). In this respect, Wright’s film is the epitome of the indie romantic comedy of the 2000s/2010s – considering “indie” as “a cultural category characterized by a specific sensibility, style, themes, viewing practices, and, crucially, the self-aware outsider status as being ‘off-Hollywood’ that stems from a shared consensus between filmmakers and interpretive communities” (Oria, 2018, p. 149). However, the rom-com storyline is significantly hybridized with the structure, drawn from video game, that superposes to the hero’s journey the progression towards defeating the final boss.

If, from a formal point of view, the franchise still stands out for this original reuse and mix of genre tropes, at the level of imaginary and ideology both the comic series and films display several criticalities. As Lizardi points out, despite its progressive intentions “*Scott Pilgrim* does not live up to this idealized nostalgia reversal or remediation potential, and ends up reaffirming hegemonic gender roles and heteronormativity under the guise of a hip, politically correct perspective” (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 1-2). In fact, although the key symbolic nexus of the franchise has to do with the ability to grow and evolve, Scott is ultimately unable to free himself from his past (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 3-4) – a struggle shared by Ramona, whose ever-changing hair color is a sign of her temperamental nature rather than her supposed ability to shed skin and evolve (a theme that the Netflix series problematizes). From various points of view, this has to do with the very fabric of the story the franchise tells. As Lizardi notes,

[The] over-arching structure of *Scott Pilgrim* creates a gendered past in many significant ways. Scott takes on the role of the dominant male who must prove that he is ‘better’ than those boyfriends who came before him, as well as vanquish Ramona’s past to become her past, present and future. Ramona’s exes are willing to fight with Scott in a stereotypically territorial male fashion (Lizardi, 2012, p. 4).

That *Scott Pilgrim* relies more than it appears on stereotypical representations of gender roles and sexuality and replicates hegemonic logics can be seen in the extent to which secondary characters, both heterosexual and homosexual, are all functions of a system that revolves around Scott himself, and which readers perceive according to his perspective (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 7-10). Indeed, both the comics series and the film featured a non-monocultural, non-strictly heterosexual character system: one can mention Knives Chau and her friend Tasha, the Evil Exes Matthew Patel and the Katayanagi twins, Scott’s roommate Wallace Wells, Ramona’s Evil Ex Roxie Richter, and (in the comic) Scott’s ex Kim Pine. At the same time, this nominal representativity was not matched by sufficient

⁵¹ In this sense, the choice to cast Michael Cera as the movie’s protagonist stands out, him being the quintessential embodiment of non-threatening masculinity in the indie comedies of the 2000s.

narrative centrality, roundness, and agency of those characters. From this point of view, the condensation operated by the film does not allow this potential diversity to go beyond mere tokenism: notably, even O'Malley explicitly asserted regretting the film's predominantly white casting (Nakaji Monnier, 2016). Nor does it benefit the character of Ramona, who, despite Mary Elizabeth Winstead's excellent performance, is reduced to little more than a prize that Scott must conquer (Bodner, 2019, pp. 250-51) and a purely instrumental figure for Scott's growth, consistent with the trope of the manic pixie dream girl.

However, the film's issues are largely shared by the comic: Berninger remarks "the marginality of Asian characters," which particularly stands out "when one considers O'Malley's own half-Korean background" (2014, p. 250). Pedinotti more radically reads the series as a process of cultural appropriation of the manga imaginary, which "projects an image of multicultural openness while simultaneously exhibiting signs of racial antagonism in its subtexts" (2015, p. 64). According to him, against the initial presentation of "several smart-alecky, wisecracking, mostly white but sometimes not, mostly straight but sometimes gay, Canadian and American hipster kids" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 59), the comic stages instead a series of romantic subplots whose point is to marginalize Asian characters, resulting in "a hip version of the white, heteronormative couple play[ing] the role of a filtering institution in a ubiquitously manga-fied reality" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 65).

Scott Pilgrim vs the algorithm: gaze, agency, and diversity

Considering these issues, the Netflix series tries to go in two directions. On the one hand, it retains the franchise's spatiotemporal setting, as evident from the many signifiers incorporated to anchor the series in the mid to late 2000s – the Nintendo console, anime on cathode ray tube television, the *Guitar Hero* video game, Crocs shoes and so on⁵² – and begins with a first episode that seems, until the last moments, to be an almost exact copy of the film. On the other hand, by inverting a central narrative link (Scott does not defeat the first of the seven Evil Exes, but seems to perish in the fight), it gives rise to a what-if that weaves dense transtextual links with its hypotexts (comics series and film), incorporating the multicultural politics of the franchise while taking the opportunity to rethink, in light of contemporary sensibility, its more problematic issues in terms of gaze, agency, and gender, especially in relation to the idea of (monogamous) romantic relationship. This shows a true use of transmedial storyworlds as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 409).

Consistent with what seems to be a constitutive crisis in the underlying ideology of prototypical romantic comedies up to the 2020s (Oria, 2021a; 2021b), *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* completely changes tack, morphing into a kind of procedural in which Ramona, who has become the protagonist, wants to find out what happened to Scott. Throughout her investigation, she will have the opportunity to achieve closure on various relationships from her past and reflect on her tendency to run away from problems instead of facing them. At the same time, Wallace's character acquires greater salience, capitalizing on the comedic

⁵² It would be interesting in this respect to investigate the absence, amongst the many commodities, of mobile phones – an element that, along with the Internet, seems to originate a constant narrative uneasiness in contemporary fiction (see Miller, 2011).

aspects of his being the “cool gay roommate”: he ends up playing himself in the *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life* film, whose shooting occupies the central episodes of the series (and offers the opportunity to parodically distance the series from its hypotexts while mentioning them *en abyme*); he makes one of Ramona’s exes fall in love with him; and finally meets his future partner on a trip to Paris.

As noted by Phillips (2023), the series thus re-signifies many problematic assumptions from the comics and film by foregrounding their toxicity, while making room for the personal growth and redemption of several characters. It also leaves space for a less stereotypical and more nuanced queerness, if only because the greater exposure allows even the lighter secondary characters to acquire greater complexity. By constructing an alternative unfolding of events, the series hence allows for a dialogue based on double coding with the franchise’s possible worlds, while at the same time radically resignifying Scott Pilgrim as a character.

Crucial from this point of view is Scott’s evil alter egos, the embodiments of his negative sides, who had, both in the comics and the series, an ultimately absolutionary function. In the comic, Scott tried to confront Nega Scott, but finally resigned himself to merging with him, accepting the mistakes he has made and forgotten; in the film, Scott merely good-naturedly chatted with Nega Scott when the latter appeared in the finale, stating “he is just a really nice guy. We’re gonna get brunch next week. We actually have a lot in common”. In contrast, in the last two episodes of the Netflix series, one discovers that Older Scott is responsible for the different turn of events, bringing Scott into the future solely to prevent him from starting a relationship with Ramona, which would eventually be destined to end in divorce, scarring him emotionally; and that Even Older Scott is, exacerbating the same premises, a disturbed incel terrified of being hurt by feelings. However, while this makes it clear that Scott himself should be read as a negative character (or at least one unable to overcome his flaws), it remains unclear why a character as allegedly empowered and mature as Ramona would be so interested in pursuing an insignificant twenty-something with whom she has only had one date. Indeed, despite the increased emphasis on diversity, the series itself continues to revolve around its eponymous protagonist to the point of barely passing the Bechdel test.

The question then arises whether the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is not constitutively problematic on an ideological level, considering contemporary sensibility. From this point of view, the Netflix series’s alleged commitment to multiculturalism and diversity proves to be more problematic than its premise would suggest. This commitment rests on Netflix’s policies on inclusion and diversity – ostensibly a central concern of the platform, which, since 2019, has been pursuing a precise Inclusion Strategy, aiming to represent its audiences in all their diversity. This process followed a report that considered twenty-two indices of diversity and inclusion, including sexuality, disability, race, and gender (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 25; Khoo, 2023, pp. 281-82). As such, Netflix, “in its communication, presents itself as the voice of a new generation and promotes its programming as a way for young audiences to vicariously negotiate their way through the complexities of society” (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 32).

However, various scholars have pointed out several issues associated with this agenda. First of all, although sold in relation to the idea of “global citizenship”, the diversity that Netflix offers has precise socio-cultural coordinates, which bind it to the contemporary US context (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 36; Khoo, 2023, p. 282). This “dominates cultural

conversations worldwide by influencing prevailing norms and narratives about what it means to live in (multicultural) societies” (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 35). Moreover, “when cultural identities become addressed as market segments, misrepresentation inevitably ensues as corporations will tend to only promote the most marketable aspects of a culture” (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 36). This shows in strategies that privilege “visibility over representation” – the former understood as “highlighting the visual signifier of race”, the latter as “a discussion of the structural barriers that various minorities face” (Jenner 2018, p. 196). Finally, this diversity is apparent much more than it is substantive, leveraging the Recommender Algorithm (“a collective term for a series of proprietary computational tools developed by the company since the early 2000s”: Khoo, 2023, p. 282) to filter content by foregrounding more diversity than the catalog itself (Khoo, 2023, p. 283).

From this point of view, *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* turns out to be an interesting operation from the formal and thematic points of view, but only a half-won battle ideologically, due both to some ingrained criticalities in the franchise’s deeper symbolic mechanisms and to the corporate priorities behind Netflix’s identity politics.

Conclusions

The *Scott Pilgrim* franchise stages a unique combination of medial, formal and content features and tensions that deserve to be discussed in greater detail and systematically. This expanding narrative ecosystem has been able to adapt to changes in the mediascape over the twenty years the franchise has unraveled. Still, this adaptability, which has resulted in often flamboyant results from a formal point of view, suffers, when considering its content, from certain problems that seem to be indelibly inscribed in the symbolic structure underlying the franchise. Its renewed focus on representativeness eventually fails to break free from a performative diversity, which nonetheless seems to meet with favor among many.

Perhaps, then, borrowing from the Greek tragedy the idea of “fatal flaw,” the last fight that awaits the franchise is *Scott Pilgrim* vs. its *hamartia*. Whether Scott will eventually win it, only time will tell.

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Platform Seriality Worldbuilding: analisi delle narrazioni transmediali e delle pratiche partecipative nel caso *BoJack Horseman*

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Abstract

This paper, through the use of an ecological and transmedia approach, proposes an interpretation of the processes of fruition and interaction of complex seriality products generated and distributed on streaming platforms. In particular, it proposes to analyze the platformed worldbuilding process, that is, how affordances contribute decisively to the creation of a storyworld; to this end, the conceptualization of three transmedial narrative levels was carried out: diegetic, extradiegetic and hyperdiegetic. The paper proposes the animated television series *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-2019) as a case study; in particular, a descriptive analysis of individual episodes and content on social media accounts was conducted. From this it emerges how narrative and distribution strategies are activated that contribute to the Netflix-centered Platform Seriality Worldbuilding process, i.e., through the use of transmedia hooks, also generated by users' interpretive skills, the Netflix Serial Multiverse is developed.

Keyword: Transmedia; Worldbuilding; Platform; Netflix; *BoJack Horseman*.

Introduzione

Il cambiamento portato dalle piattaforme mediali alle industrie culturali e creative è ormai evidente, tanto che può essere considerato un ulteriore livello di evoluzione del sistema mediale ibrido post-convergenza (Colombo, 2018; Leonzi e Marinelli, 2022). Nel presente saggio si vogliono descrivere le pratiche comunicative, l'atteggiamento rispetto alla fruizione e i processi di condivisione legati all'intrattenimento seriale alla luce delle trasformazioni portate dalla rivoluzione delle piattaforme. Infatti, negli ultimi due decenni le serie tv complesse (Mittell, 2015) hanno acquisito una centralità fruitiva nei consumi mediali, che le hanno portate a diventare un argomento cardine per lo studio delle teorie che rimandano al transmedia, alle culture partecipative, alle piattaforme stesse. Per affrontare tali tematiche appare quanto mai necessario ricorrere a un approccio ecologico dell'attuale sistema mediale ibrido, supportato, nell'analisi, da un modello di approfondimento per l'appunto transmediale. Viene, quindi, proposta una riflessione fondata sulla logica transmediale (Leonzi, 2022), dove gli utenti diventano parte attiva nel processo di *worldbuilding*, per

indagare il processo dialogico generato tra player, autori e pubblico, che trascende la *motherhood* originale delle opere seriali e si espande anche grazie alle pratiche co-creative. In questo contesto le narrazioni che compongono lo storyworld acquisiscono dimensioni differenti anche in base alle caratteristiche delle piattaforme medialità attraverso cui vengono distribuite.

Il caso di studio approfondito per descrivere questo fenomeno è la serie Netflix *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). La serie animata è ambientata in un mondo fantastico, dove sono presenti, insieme agli esseri umani, animali antropomorfizzati; il protagonista è BoJack Horseman, un cavallo dalle fattezze umane, ex star della televisione degli anni Ottanta depresso e alcolizzato; lo stile della narrazione si fonda sulla comicità satirica, principalmente rivolta verso il mondo dello spettacolo.

Approccio ecologico e transmediale allo studio delle *platform series*

Partire da un approccio che ricorre alla media ecology significa considerare una dimensione costituita dall'habitat comunicativo come un sistema integrato di media; in un tale contesto l'innovazione tecnologica portata dal singolo medium non solo va ad aggiungersi a quelli già esistenti, attivando ulteriori livelli di complessità mediale, ma interagisce in modo diretto con tutto l'habitat mutandone le geometrie (Scolari, 2012). La logica dei media diventa la logica degli ambienti medialità dove agiscono gli attori sociali, si instaurano relazioni, si diffondono i contenuti e si sperimentano nuove esperienze di interazione, fruizione e consumo (Granata, 2015). In definitiva per media ecology si intende "l'analisi di come gli agenti sociali sviluppano relazioni di interdipendenza *con* e *in* ambienti permeati dai media" (Ciofalo e Pedroni 2022, p. 8, corsivo degli autori). Inoltre, questo approccio integra nella logica dei media il processo di mediatizzazione, anche profonda (Hepp, 2020), che realizza le trasformazioni attraverso cui i media digitali producono l'ambiente comunicativo, dentro cui confluiscono e coesistono i diversi campi sociali e culturali (Ciofalo e Pedroni, 2022).

In questo ambiente mediale complesso il transmedia offre un modello in grado di restituire una sintesi chiara dei fenomeni comunicativi che si sviluppano senza perderne la complessità descrittiva. Questo diventa possibile partendo dalla dimensione contenutistica che non si riduce al singolo elemento (film, fumetto, videogioco, serie tv, reel, meme, etc.), ma costituisce un universo narrativo che fa da collante tra le varie piattaforme medialità con cui l'utente può interagire. Gli elementi cardine che compongono il modello transmediale sono il processo di *worldbuilding* e le pratiche fruibili e partecipative degli utenti (Leonzi *et al.*, 2019).

Per *worldbuilding* si intende il processo di costruzione degli universi narrativi, che rappresenta uno degli elementi caratterizzanti dei progetti transmediali (Jenkins, 2009); nel presente saggio si vuole superare la concettualizzazione del transmedia attinente all'idea del solo producer o design di intrattenimento, ovvero legato alle strategie di produzione *top-down*, appunto ricorrendo a un modello comunicativo complesso ed ecologico (Leonzi, 2022). Il *worldbuilding*, in questo caso, rappresenta uno strumento in grado di restituire l'insieme dei processi narrativi e delle pratiche partecipative e creative applicabili ai diversi campi della comunicazione (Ciammella, 2021). Wolf (2012) definisce l'attività di creare mondi come un'azione umana, per esempio è un'attività che compiono i bambini nei loro

giochi, evidenziando in questo modo come il *worldbuilding* sia un atto innato in cui risiede una funzione evolutiva; ciò comporta un accrescimento anche personale nella formazione degli individui portando allo sviluppo di capacità cognitive, emotive e culturali. Quindi, oltre la dimensione di intrattenimento, interagire con gli storyworld comporta un atto riflessivo che non si limita al singolo testo ma consente all'utente di esplorare diverse soluzioni narrative.

Storicamente il processo di *worldbuilding* può aiutare a comprendere come cambia il rapporto tra produttori e audience nelle fasi di crescita e sviluppo dell'industria culturale, a prescindere dalla dimensione tecnologica mediale. Le espansioni narrative di franchise storici (es. Conan, James Bond, l'universo DC Comics) sono state create anche attraverso un lavoro di aggiornamento sul canone della storia; una strategia applicata è l'aggiunta di prodotti che presentavano narrazioni volte a restituire una *retro-continuity*, per esempio dopo la non morte di Sherlock Holmes nei racconti di Arthur Conan Doyle (Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019).

Il secondo elemento che costituisce l'approccio transmediale risiede nelle pratiche partecipative, che definiscono i diversi livelli di interazione e collaborazione tra gli attori sociali con le piattaforme medial, nel caso specifico del presente saggio il rapporto diretto che si instaura tra gli utenti con l'universo narrativo e con gli altri fruitori. Non necessariamente si devono attivare processi creativi, anche se le infinite possibilità di generare contenuti offerte dalle piattaforme, e anche dai tool potenziati con algoritmi di intelligenza artificiale, hanno espanso notevolmente le possibili soluzioni a disposizione degli utenti. Nell'ambiente mediale ibrido e digitale, i produttori e gli utenti possono entrare in contatto facilmente, le strategie di ascolto attivate dai player tramite i canali disponibili (in generale i social media) diventano una risorsa e un primo passo per progettare le narrazioni. In questo modo le audience acquisiscono il potere, con le dovute accortezze del caso, di interagire con il progetto transmediale: distribuendo contenuti attraverso i processi di *spreadability*, allacciando e unendo i frammenti narrativi, co-creando e/o co-narrando lo storyworld (Boccia Artieri, 2022).

Il modello transmediale descrive, quindi, un processo comunicativo che si intreccia con le infrastrutture delle piattaforme. Queste, attraverso la capacità di trasformare in dati le esperienze che fanno gli utenti e di processarli in modo sempre più raffinato, agiscono sull'ambiente mediale come attori sociali, indirizzati verso precise strategie razionali di distribuzione e di accesso ai contenuti presenti nelle loro library. Quindi, da un lato, le piattaforme indirizzano verso un tipo di esperienza, derivate in ogni caso da specifiche finalità e obiettivi di mercato; dall'altro, gli utenti esplorano e ricercano nuove forme di intrattenimento, attivando anche pratiche co-creative in spazi forniti dall'ecosistema delle piattaforme stesso – tutto questo è tenuto insieme da un collante semantico fornito dall'immaginario, che prende forma concreta appunto nello storyworld.

Come anticipato, il modello transmediale diventa una chiave di lettura per descrivere i fenomeni comunicativi e narrativi che si svolgono nei nuovi assetti medial, basati su piattaforme infrastrutturali trasversali alle attività su differenziati *multisided market* (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), che risultano, quindi, come un nuovo tassello nel mosaico dell'affermazione e nel consolidamento di un'industria culturale mediatizzata. In particolare, le loro logiche fondate sulla persistenza dei contenuti nelle library hanno contribuito a generare un'enorme memoria, anche se accessibile solo a pagamento; inoltre, la necessità di velocizzare la produzione e la distribuzione, specialmente nelle serie tv, ha ridefinito le categorie dei

generi, uno dagli aspetti principali dell'industria culturale, portando a continue ibridazioni (Colombo, 2018). Il miscelamento e l'incontro tra generi diversi, favorito anche dall'intervento e dalla maggiore auto-consapevolezza creativa dei pubblici, risponde all'effettiva possibilità di contribuire alla formazione di un genere transmediale online (Freeman e Smith, 2023).

In questo contesto mediale, la serialità complessa è diventata il prodotto culturale in grado di imporsi a livello di apprezzamento e fruizione da parte del pubblico, ma anche a livello produttivo e creativo (Barra e Guarnaccia, 2021). La serialità su piattaforma si presta a un tipo di fruizione frammentata, l'impegno di tempo e di risorse cognitive richiesto per ogni singolo episodio permette una personalizzazione del tempo di visione. L'utente può decidere di interagire con il contenuto in una visione distratta, magari attivando pratiche più o meno volute di *second screen*, oppure di immergersi nella narrazione in modo più profondo, per esempio con il *binge watching*. Inoltre, l'esperienza di fruizione sta mutando e diventando un momento di intrattenimento condiviso in tempo reale, non solo nelle opzioni di party di visione collettiva attivabile dalle piattaforme, ma anche come esperienza performativa; si pensi alla condivisione dell'istante di visione delle puntate di serie tv o spettacoli di intrattenimento da parte di *content creator*, e le relative emozioni provate, su social media come Twitch o TikTok. Il risultato è che la visione stessa e le emozioni che emergono diventano un atto performativo, un contenuto.

In tutto questo, le piattaforme di streaming, in particolare Netflix, hanno attivato strategie finalizzate alla costruzione di un universo transmediale volto alla narrazione del brand integrando i diversi universi diegetici delle serie. Un esempio sono gli *easter egg* all'interno delle narrazioni che rimandano a serie di catalogo come *Stranger Things*, *La Casa de Papel* ed *Élite* (Quercia, 2022). Si può quindi definire un processo che vede definirsi delle *platform series*, per cui la serialità complessa trova la giusta collocazione nelle modalità di fruizione delle piattaforme, grazie alla libertà di accesso offerta dalle logiche del database. Le piattaforme sono diventate custodi di immaginari racchiusi all'interno degli universi narrativi delle serie, anche e soprattutto transmediali. Il processo di *worldbuilding* però non riguarda solo le singole serie ma le narrazioni legate strategicamente alle piattaforme, che con le proprie affordances attivano nuove esperienze di consumo e, di conseguenza, anche nuove forme di creazione e distribuzione. In conclusione, in questi specifici contesti si può definire il processo di *worldbuilding* come piattaformaizzato, sia per come le narrazioni vengono adattate in base alle caratteristiche delle piattaforme (come la selezione degli algoritmi), sia per come vengono utilizzate dalle piattaforme per creare i propri storyworld.

Il *worldbuilding* piattaformaizzato: tre livelli delle narrazioni nello storyworld

Il processo di *worldbuilding* implica la creazione di uno storyworld che si differenzia dal mondo reale in misura del loro grado di subcreazione (Wolf, 2012). Tale processualità implica la ricombinazione di concetti preesistenti (come elementi naturali, leggi fisiche ma anche caratteristiche relative al piano strettamente nominale, culturale e ontologico) del *primary world*, il mondo reale, per costituire il *secondary world*, lo storyworld. Il passaggio al *secondary world* presuppone l'azione di attraversare dei portali progettati in modo tale che i fruitori accettino le regole che definiscono tale mondo, quindi attivino la sospensione dell'incredulità. La connessione tra i due mondi è spesso costruita ricorrendo a un frame

che permette al pubblico di orientarsi, alimentando un legame spazio-temporale tra mondo primario e secondario. Tale ensemble narrativo alimenta un'eccedenza di ricchezza descrittiva che costituisce una parte importante dell'esperienza del pubblico (Wolf, 2020), coltivando un immaginario e un'atmosfera narrativa fondamentali per i contributi co-creativi.

I meccanismi di stratificazione simbolica e di significato che ne derivano sono legati alle dinamiche di partecipazione basate su pratiche di creatività distribuita e trasversale agli ambienti mediali abitati dalle audience engaged. Lo storyworld è formato da un insieme di linee narrative differenti a livello temporale e spaziale, l'insieme di queste linee formano una rete – quella che Wolf definisce come *narrative fabric* – che l'utente può attraversare in modo sincronico, oltre che diacronico. Una tale modalità di fruizione e costruzione degli universi narrativi si verifica con la spinta sia delle piattaforme di streaming, sia dei social media come canali preferenziali per la generazione di espansioni e contributi *grassroots*.

È in questa cornice operativa che prende forma il *worldbuilding* piattaforma, ovvero, il tentativo di edificare una molteplicità di mondi narrativi seriali che rispondono in modo più o meno esplicito a un apparato diegetico derivante dalle strategie applicate della piattaforma produttrice e distributrice. Il media player in questione non diviene solo supporto infrastrutturale all'erogazione di serie ma “si fa” narrazione, diviene esso stesso un esteso universo narrativo che ingloba e attraversa i secondary world seriali che contiene.

Pur collocandosi nella stessa economia multilaterale e datificata che contraddistingue molte delle attuali super-piattaforme inglobanti e autoreferenziali, Netflix costituisce un modello settoriale capace di legare contenuti seriali attraverso vari espedienti, che restituiscono una continuità dialogica tra le varie narrazioni transmediali (Quercia, 2022). I vari prodotti, per quanto legati ai relativi universi narrativi, non sono strettamente separati a livello immaginativo, ma risentono di una permeabilità che permette di aprire dei varchi citazionistici tra una serie e l'altra, ma anche tra una serie e lo stesso mondo reale. Per quanto ogni trama evolva in modo indipendente dalle altre, in alcuni casi, specie considerando le serie originali della piattaforma, è evidente la possibilità di cogliere un fil rouge intertestuale che le attraversi e che restituisca la sensazione di “guardare Netflix”.

Quindi, considerando come il *platform worldbuilding* sia ormai pienamente innervato nella filiera produttiva e di co-creazione decentralizzata di Netflix, è possibile rileggere i suoi modelli di serialità, analizzandoli alla luce di tre differenti livelli di strategia narrativa e transmediale: “diegetico”, “extradiegetico”, “iperdiegetico”. In particolare, questa tripartizione è scandita dalla maggiore indipendenza raggiunta dai pubblici connessi, non più vincolati alla mera esposizione e fruizione legata alle specificità dell'interfaccia del dispositivo che orienta la visione (Ciammella *et al.*, 2019). Gli utenti, invece, possono rivendicare un'agency mediale supportata da affordance che non costituiscono solo inviti all'uso della piattaforma, ma un'occasione per usi più innovativi del servizio di streaming. In particolare, gli utenti possono diversificare radicalmente le proprie traiettorie fruttive, allenando la raccomandazione perché non converga su un unico genere prediletto, oppure impugnare i tool di rating delle serie, dentro e fuori i confini di Netflix.

Il primo livello narrativo si riferisce al piano “diegetico”, la *mothership* di partenza. Gli utenti possono esperire la densità narrativa, saggiarne i contorni e fare congetture sul proseguo degli episodi, ma si tratta di una dimensione ancora legata al media producer di partenza su cui le audience non hanno modo di interagire e operare nuove letture o cambiamenti.

Il secondo livello è quello “extradiegetico”. In questo caso, l’attenzione si sposta dal testo presente sulla piattaforma di streaming ai testi attivati anche su piattaforme secondarie per la narrazione, per esempio i social media, dove gli utenti possono instaurare un legame più *engaged* con i protagonisti della serie. Su questo versante, i fruitori sono invitati a effettuare continui passaggi e connessioni tra mondo primario e mondo secondario. Si innesca un processo finalizzato all’engagement che ramifica nuovi thread trasversali al corpo narrativo principale della serie per riportarla anche al mondo reale. Tutto ciò avvia gli utenti verso l’esplorazione della serialità complessa, concatenando lo specifico universo narrativo seriale con altri elementi che non riguardano solo il racconto in sé, ma anche, per esempio, il backstage della serie o eventuali spin-off. I fruitori hanno a disposizione un maggior margine di retroazione e interazione rispetto a ciò che viene narrato, il che implica anche le possibilità di orientare la fruizione del flusso narrativo da parte della piattaforma proprietaria.

Il terzo e ultimo livello è quello “iperdiegetico”. I collegamenti e i riferimenti che vengono attuati entro e al di fuori dei confini diegetici di una certa serie acquistano una complessità e una risonanza più ampia. Gli utenti fruitori non sono esposti solo allo storyworld principale di una serie targata Netflix, per esempio, ma, mediante una più articolata successione e talvolta sovrapposizione di *easter egg*, *trick* narrativi e *frame* metatestuali, si ritrovano immersi in un effettivo multiverso più esteso che attraversa nuove serie originali della piattaforma.

La costruzione di un mondo narrativo, quindi, incontra quella di ulteriori mondi, e tutte le citazioni e i riferimenti trovati dai pubblici (anche visionando gli altri prodotti nati dalla stessa matrice-piattaforma) alimentano un più tangibile *book transmediale* che li riporta verso un vero e proprio Netflix Serial Multiverse (NSM). Questo è un esempio di *platform seriality worldbuilding*, che diviene costruzione simultanea di più mondi narrativi afferenti a una stessa *mothership* di piattaforma.

Il caso *BoJack Horseman*

Uno dei casi più emblematici e in linea con questa tripartizione strategica alla base dell’universo seriale piattaforma di Netflix è quello di *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), serie animata rilasciata nel 2014 e scritta da Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Il *secondary world* della serie è una parodia del mondo reale, in particolare Los Angeles, dove esistono animali antropomorfizzati, le cui caratteristiche ferine diventano uno stereotipo narrativo dei personaggi (per esempio, un personaggio labrador retriever è per natura iperattivo e sempre allegro). Il protagonista BoJack Horseman è una star della televisione in decadenza, alcolizzato e depresso.

A livello diegetico, la serie descrive la rappresentazione di tematiche quali le celebrità decadute, la tossicodipendenza, la depressione, gli abusi sessuali, la morte, etc. Le avventure (o disavventure) di BoJack riescono a ritrarre in modo efficacemente metatestuale i cortocircuiti e le contraddizioni che caratterizzano la filiera produttiva e la dimensione etica e professionale dell’industria culturale e seriale contemporanea. La serie utilizza il citazionismo come strumento narrativo attivando diversi livelli di lettura, di cui il più completo richiede al lettore una notevole competenza nell’interpretare i testi.

Per esempio, un personaggio ricorrente nelle prime stagioni è Sarah Lynn, un'ex-attrice bambina del cast della sitcom fittizia *Horsin' Around* che ha rappresentato l'apice del successo di BoJack. La ragazza è divenuta in seguito un'icona pop e, raggiunta la soglia dei trent'anni, è poi decaduta abbandonandosi al consumo di stupefacenti e alimentando scandali. Una parabola biografica che ricalca in modo abbastanza lapalissiano le vicende note al grande pubblico di star come Britney Spears o Lindsey Lohan. In *Prickly-Muffin* (Ep. 01x03, 2014), in Italia distribuito come *Il ritorno di Sarah*, BoJack tenterà di portare Sarah al centro di riabilitazione "Promises", lo stesso in cui sono state sottoposte a iter terapeutico le due celebrità citate.

Un altro esempio particolarmente interessante è la battuta "He accidentally stepped on a needle and is now addicted to heroin" pronunciata sempre da Todd Chavez, coprotagonista della serie e amico di BoJack, che riporta l'attenzione sull'altrettanta nota serie di *Breaking Bad*, il cui co-protagonista Jesse Pinkman è interpretato dall'attore Aaron Paul, doppiatore di Todd.

In breve, appare evidente come lo stile del racconto attinga volutamente a un repertorio di contenuti e collegamenti che rendono particolarmente cangianti i contorni diegetici della serie di *BoJack Horseman*.

Sul piano extradiegetico, rappresentato dai social media, si alimenta la cooperazione tra i producer e designer della serie, che cercano di contribuire a ravvivare buoni livelli di *audience engagement*, e i fan più appassionati pronti a decodificare e ricomporre i frammenti diegetici. In questo modo sembra instaurarsi un rapporto di immediata interazione e scambio, che può essere riscontrato nell'account Instagram di BoJack Horseman (bojackhorseman). Qui il protagonista della serie esce dalla sua *mothership* seriale di partenza e abita i contesti mediali social: formula *caption* in prima persona per i suoi post e la sua *biography section* e condivide vari momenti della sua vita professionale e personale. In sintesi, il personaggio estende e ibrida i confini del suo *secondary world* con quelli del mondo primario, attraverso la mediazione ipertestuale dei social.

L'escamotage comunicativo di porre BoJack come celebrità/influencer fittizia permette di ottenere ulteriori effetti di realtà e di sospensione dell'incredulità che chiamano in causa i fan della serie, spingendoli ad approfondire ed esplorare non solo la serie ma anche altri storyworld e il multiverso piattaforma in costruzione di Netflix. Il *self-branding* e la pubblicizzazione del privato attivato da BoJack simula in modo abbastanza credibile le biografie d'uso di molti noti utenti di Instagram. I 332 post pubblicati nell'arco di sei anni sembrano rispettare una scansione e un piano editoriale che richiama anche i trend e gli hashtag più in voga di quegli anni (si pensi a #TBT), spesso ripresi e associati a formule sempre ironiche e caricaturali in linea con l'irriverenza del personaggio (come nel caso di #GetBoJacked). Si possono riconoscere tre tipi di contenuto (talvolta sovrapponibili negli intenti), ciascuno con un diverso margine di aderenza agli episodi della serie: *season-oriented*, *self-oriented*, *NSM-oriented*.

I post *season-oriented* fanno esplicito riferimento all'andamento narrativo della serie. In questa categoria rientra anche il materiale postato prima dell'effettivo rilascio di *BoJack Horseman* su Netflix al fine di preparare e indirizzare il pubblico verso lo storyworld animato. Ci sono ovviamente contenuti relativi all'annuncio delle nuove stagioni, frame delle puntate già rilasciate, scene inedite che anticipano elementi che verranno trasmessi nei vari episodi. Entrano a far parte di questo primo gruppo anche foto, video, caroselli di materiale

audiovisivo in cui sono spesso integrati elementi paratestuali e iconografici caratterizzati dal fatto di essere citazioni ibride, che integrano il mondo di BoJack al mondo primario.



I post *self-oriented*, invece, si focalizzano sul personaggio di BoJack Horseman e sulla sua vita privata e professionale in linea con il racconto; anche sui social, questa è esibita con una verve caricaturale e ironica, accompagnata da riferimenti diegetici legati a citazioni esterne che rafforzano la permeabilità dello storyworld della serie. BoJack, in questo frangente, mette in mostra i suoi successi (e insuccessi) personali e professionali, partnership con aziende e brand, pubblica fotografie di famiglia e ricordi del suo passato, posta selfie anche in compagnia di altre celebrità o dei suoi fan. Il fatto che BoJack si palesi nella sua quotidianità e restituisca una continuità relazionale viene garantita anche da messaggi diretti ai fan (segnati sulle note del suo iPhone, screenshottate e pubblicate), in questo caso il personaggio assume toni confidenziali e restituisce il suo lato vulnerabile. Tale apertura alimenta il legame con i fan, diventa una forma di coinvolgente immediatezza volta a spronare maggiormente l'interazione e l'attitudine all'esplorazione e alla co-costruzione del mondo narrativo.



Foto di fine riprese della serie

Infine, il terzo tipo di contenuti sono i *NSM-oriented* e rappresentano i post più interessanti ai fini dell'analisi, in particolare delle espansioni iperdiegetiche. I paratesti e l'incontro tra sfere diegetiche diverse raggiungono un livello di intertestualità e di densità citazionistica notevole, specificatamente orientata ad alimentare e attualizzare il più ampio processo di *worldbuilding* piattaforma. I contenuti veicolati risultano validi espedienti visuali con cui rafforzare simultaneamente i vari mondi seriali afferenti all'immaginario di piattaforma, quindi all'identità e alla coerenza del Netflix Serial Multiverse. In alcuni casi è possibile constatare veri e propri momenti di interazione diretta e sequenze dialogiche di BoJack con i vertici e gli operatori del servizio di streaming. I post possono essere talvolta connotati da finalità promozionale, in vista dell'uscita di una nuova stagione di una delle serie Netflix. Si attuano allora meccanismi di mixing dello stile estetico e formale della serie ospitata/citata e quella ospitante/citante, il tutto accompagnato sempre da *caption* in prima persona di BoJack che attraversa e agisce nella *reference* esplicitata nel post. Si pensi a casi come quello pubblicato il 31 agosto 2016 (Figura 3) ritraente il nome della star con lo stesso font di *Stranger Things*.



Post Stranger Things

Un altro esempio può essere rappresentato dal post del 27 novembre 2019 (Figura 4), rappresentante la copertina del film *The Irishman* (Scorsese, 2019), riprodotta con lo stile animato tipico di *BoJack Horseman*, in cui l'attore si affianca alle star del film prodotto da Netflix (Robert De Niro, Al Pacino e Joe Pesci). La *caption* riporta: “wanted to share the original poster for the irishman before i got cut for time so the movie could b a normal length wonder how long it ended up being”.



Post The Irishman

Infine, un post ancora più esemplificativo della compresenza e, per certi versi, interdipendenza tra due prodotti mediali legati dallo stesso NSM, e di espansione iperdiegetica, è quello del 26 ottobre 2019 (Figura 5) e si riferisce al lancio del film originale Netflix *El Camino: A Breaking Bad Movie* (Gilligan, 2019). In questo post si verifica una commistione di registri, tra cui l'ironico della *caption*, “id definitely let this guy have a cameo on my show idk about a talking part”, a cui è associata la foto dallo stile estetico e dal font

del film combinato con quello della serie animata. Questo restituisce una circolarità citazionistica particolarmente bilanciata; il fulcro intertestuale è garantito dall'attore Aaron Paul, interprete di Jesse Pinkman, protagonista del film e, come già evidenziato, doppiatore di Todd Chavez.



Un richiamo, invece, extradiegetico particolarmente interessante sul lato narrativo è attivato sulla piattaforma YouTube e fa riferimento al “post-BoJack Horseman”, ovvero la fine della serie viene organizzata come un evento narrativo transmediale. Tra i contenuti distribuiti dai canali ufficiali Netflix, un caso interessante è la breve video-intervista fatta dal comico e conduttore televisivo Hasan Minhaj a BoJack Horseman, pubblicata l’11 marzo 2019, un’occasione di effettivo dialogo comico-ironico tra mondo primario e mondo secondario. Un secondo caso particolarmente significativo è il video dal titolo *Come superare la fine di BoJack Horseman* (Figura 6), pubblicato il 18 febbraio 2020 sempre da Netflix Italia, in cui il tema della depressione e del lutto vengono riadattati in chiave metatestuale rispetto alla fine della serie per accompagnare i pubblici affezionati verso la conclusione.



Come superare la fine di BoJack Horseman con BoJack Horseman | Net...

78.722 visualizzazioni 4 anni fa #BoJackHorseman ... altro



Netflix Italia 1,21 Mio

Iscriviti

: Come superare la fine di Bojack Horseman con Bojack Horseman

Gli aspetti extradiegetici, che caratterizzano il processo di *platform worldbuilding* di *BoJack Horseman*, diventano dunque inneschi partecipativi rispetto alla disposizione narrativa della serie, veri e propri inviti alla pratica co-creativa.

Conclusioni

Attraverso il caso di *BoJack Horseman* possiamo comprendere l'evoluzione del processo di *worldbuilding* nelle piattaforme mediali. A livello diegetico l'immaginario composto da simboli, immagini e significati si attualizza nelle narrazioni dello *storyworld*; quindi, l'utente viene portato nel mondo secondario della serie tv entrando dal portale fornito dall'ambiente della piattaforma Netflix. In questo caso l'utente può decidere di attivare diverse pratiche di visione ma la sua azione è limitata, anche se la particolarità del prodotto richiede una buona competenza interpretativa per intercettare tutti i livelli di lettura. A livello extradiegetico vengono attivate strategie per l'*audience engagement*; nel caso specifico della serie è stata creata una narrazione parallela del personaggio BoJack su Instagram, portando l'ironia metatestuale anche nell'ambiente dei social media. L'utente, chiamato a interagire direttamente con il personaggio, potrebbe contribuire, attivando pratiche co-creative, al flusso comunicativo del secondo livello di narrazione. Infine, a livello iperdiegetico Netflix sembra creare una strategia che mira a collegare i prodotti presenti nella sua library; le citazioni e gli *easter egg* disseminati nei testi sono ormai entrati nel processo di decodifica degli utenti e questo li porta a poter essere utilizzati come dei *point of entry* all'universo narrativo della piattaforma. In sintesi, Netflix costruisce un proprio *storyworld*, il Netflix Serial Multiverse, fondato su un immaginario seriale intertestuale ed esplorabile attivamente da parte degli utenti.

In conclusione, l'evoluzione descritta nei tre livelli dello *storyworld* può essere interpretata come un processo di *platform seriality worldbuilding*. Il prodotto seriale composto dalle narrazioni generate viene condizionato dalle dinamiche imposte dalle piattaforme; in definitiva, i processi di datificazione e selezione algoritmica sono diventati una variabile primaria nella scelta, da parte dei player, nella produzione dei contenuti e

nell'organizzazione della distribuzione, anche in un'ottica transmediale. Le piattaforme, dunque, non si limitano a essere interpreti fondamentali nel contesto produttivo e distributivo dell'entertainment, ma si presentano come epicentro di un immaginario ibrido trasversale e capace di orientare le industrie creative proponendo le proprie affordance come elementi narrativi non trascurabili. In questo, gli utenti, attraverso gli ambienti dei social media, sono chiamati a interagire con gli universi narrativi, attivando anche pratiche co-creative.

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Storie, culture e immaginari. L'oratorio come agenzia educativa

Rosangela Lodigiani e Veronica Riniolo (a cura di), Il "posto" degli oratori. Una mappa delle proposte educative e ricreative per adolescenti a Milano

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Raccontare e raccontarsi, costruire mondi sociali, generare spazi culturali di costruzione identitaria: soprattutto in Italia, gli oratori si sono configurati innanzitutto come luoghi di condivisione di immaginari, culture e narrazioni, da cui spesso è scaturito un insieme di memorie collettive in grado di connettere gruppi, generazioni, individui.

Gli oratori rappresentano una preziosa agenzia formativa all'interno dello *scenario educativo policentrico* (Giovannini, 1987): essi offrono agli adolescenti spazi di crescita, inclusione e solidarietà sociale, fungono da punti di incontro e aggregazione e favoriscono l'apprendimento informale e non formale attraverso attività ricreative, culturali e sociali. Essi, inoltre, adottano un approccio educativo che si sviluppa in maniera orizzontale, promuovendo il dialogo, la pratica, la sperimentazione e l'interazione tra pari. In queste pratiche la dimensione della narrazione e dell'ascolto rivestono un ruolo fondamentale di connessione tra tutti i livelli dell'esperienza oratoriale. Questo modello riveste un'importanza fondamentale in contesti dove le istituzioni educative tradizionali vengono percepite come rigide o poco attente alle esigenze dei più giovani (Boccacin, 2022; Bignardi *et al.*, 2022).

È in tale contesto che si inserisce la ricerca presentata nel volume *Il 'posto' degli oratori: Una mappa delle proposte educative e ricreative per adolescenti a Milano*, curato da Rosangela Lodigiani e Veronica Riniolo. La ricerca, realizzata tra il 2022 e il 2023, si propone di delineare un quadro esauriente delle diverse offerte educative e ricreative destinate ai giovani milanesi, con particolare attenzione alle proposte provenienti dagli oratori. Milano, una città caratterizzata da una ricca diversità demografica e dalla presenza di profonde disparità socioeconomiche e culturali, si presta come scenario ideale per indagare le dinamiche dell'educazione e del tempo libero dei giovani.

L'obiettivo principale della ricerca è quello di mappare le diverse iniziative educative e ricreative rivolte agli adolescenti tra gli 11 e i 19 anni, promosse sia da enti pubblici che privati, profit e non, dei 12 decanati che compongono la Zona pastorale I di Milano. Parallelamente alla raccolta dei dati relativi alle varie proposte presenti sul territorio, l'indagine si concentra altresì sull'analisi dei bisogni educativi espressi direttamente dai giovani che frequentano gli oratori, nonché quelli identificati dagli esperti e dalle altre figure coinvolte nelle attività educative. Attraverso questa duplice prospettiva, il volume si propone di offrire una panoramica dettagliata delle risorse disponibili per gli adolescenti milanesi, con l'obiettivo ultimo di informare le politiche pubbliche e promuovere interventi volti a migliorare l'offerta educativa e ricreativa per questa specifica fascia di età.

Il volume si suddivide in due parti, ciascuna dedicata a un aspetto specifico della ricerca.

La prima parte, intitolata *La ricerca: bisogni e proposte educative dentro e attorno agli oratori di Milano*, si articola in quattro sezioni principali, ognuna curata da differenti autori. La sezione inaugurale, a cura di Alessio Menonna e Veronica Riniolo, offre una lettura sociodemografica dei 12 decanati della città di Milano. Attraverso un'analisi accurata, vengono esaminate le caratteristiche demografiche, le composizioni familiari, la presenza di scuole e alunni, nonché la complessa tessitura della popolazione straniera all'interno dei diversi decanati. La seconda sezione, curata da Veronica Riniolo e Fabrizio Delfini, si focalizza sulla mappatura territoriale delle offerte educative e ricreative destinate ai giovani, con particolare attenzione alla varietà presente nei diversi decanati. La terza sezione, a cura di Rosangela Lodigiani e Alessio Menonna, approfondisce il ruolo degli oratori all'interno di questo contesto in transizione, esaminando le caratteristiche degli oratori coinvolti nell'indagine, l'utenza delle loro proposte educative e ricreative, nonché il lavoro di rete e l'apertura al territorio. Infine, la quarta sezione, curata da Rosangela Lodigiani e Mattia Lamberti, si concentra sul profilo delle proposte educative e ricreative presenti negli oratori. In particolare, vengono esaminati i bisogni esplicitati in oratorio e gli impatti della pandemia su di essi. La sezione esplora l'opportunità offerta dalla pandemia per riflettere sul ruolo degli oratori, evidenziando sia gli aspetti positivi che le sfide emerse durante il periodo pandemico. Infine, si discute del concetto di "fare entrare per uscire", che rappresenta un obiettivo chiave degli oratori nel fornire un ambiente educativo e formativo che prepari i giovani a fronteggiare le difficoltà del mondo esterno.

La seconda parte del volume, intitolata *Rilanci al futuro: simposio*, si concentra su riflessioni e prospettive future circa il ruolo degli oratori all'interno della *società educante*. In questa sezione Maddalena Colombo esplora il ruolo degli oratori come agenzie di educazione non formale e il loro potenziale nell'affrontare i bisogni degli adolescenti dopo la pandemia. Successivamente, Elena Granata propone una visione degli oratori come spazi di immaginazione, cura del mondo, gratuità ed ecologia. Infine, Milena Santerini affronta il tema degli oratori come laboratori di cittadinanza in una società pluralista, esplorando la complessa dinamica dell'uguaglianza, della diversità e dell'integrazione all'interno di tali contesti. In questa parte del volume emerge con molta evidenza il ruolo delle molteplici risorse culturali attivabili nello spazio dell'oratorio, attraverso una complessa strutturazione di interazioni, mediate e non, in cui l'immaginazione e l'apertura alla possibilità diventano motori del cambiamento civico e culturale, anche attraverso la valorizzazione degli immaginari multiculturali dei frequentanti.

Dal punto di vista metodologico, il volume adotta un approccio interdisciplinare che integra diverse prospettive (demografica, urbanistica, pedagogica e sociologica), permettendo di interpretare in modo complessivo le evidenze empiriche, attingendo a vari quadri teorici e concettuali.

L'utilizzo di un approccio *mixed-method*, che combina tecniche di ricerca qualitative e quantitative, permette di ricostruire un quadro d'insieme chiaro ed esaustivo. Sono stati impiegati strumenti come l'analisi secondaria di dati statistici, questionari online, focus group con adolescenti ed educatori, interviste semi-strutturate e altre tecniche per rispondere alle domande di ricerca. Inoltre, la combinazione di metodologie qualitative e quantitative e l'approccio interdisciplinare contribuiscono a una comprensione approfondita e articolata della tematica trattata.

I risultati emersi dal lavoro di ricerca mostrano, anzitutto, la grande diversità presente all'interno dei decanati milanesi, sia dal punto di vista etnico e culturale, sia in termini di

distribuzione demografica. Questa diversità etnica e culturale, insieme alle sue implicazioni sui bisogni dei giovani e sull'ideazione di proposte mirate, costituisce un importante punto di partenza per comprendere le dinamiche educative e ricreative nella città e le sfide ad esse connesse. La mappatura, effettuata online selezionando iniziative attive nei territori dei 12 decanati e riportando la presenza di varie strutture e organizzazioni, evidenzia un'eterogeneità nella distribuzione demografica per fasce d'età all'interno dei quartieri. Alcuni di essi possono presentare una maggiore concentrazione di giovani, indicando una potenziale "domanda educativa" più pronunciata, mentre in altri contesti prevale la presenza di una popolazione anziana, con conseguenze sui bisogni sociali e sui servizi di prossimità disponibili. D'altro canto, alcune caratteristiche sono trasversali a diversi quartieri, come il processo di invecchiamento accentuato della popolazione e la contrazione delle strutture familiari. Questo fenomeno è evidenziato dalla presenza di una popolazione maggiormente concentrata nelle fasce d'età più avanzate e dalla diffusione di famiglie mononucleari, che possono influenzare i bisogni e le dinamiche sociali dei giovani presenti in tali contesti.

Alla luce delle evidenze empiriche e delle considerazioni teoriche illustrate e approfondite dagli autori, si può dichiarare che il volume contribuisce a comprendere e problematizzare le sfide educative e sociali che gli oratori milanesi (e non solo) si trovano ad affrontare. Il lavoro realizzato, inoltre, stimola nuove linee e nuovi fronti di ricerca nell'ambito degli studi sui giovani e sulle agenzie, i processi e le pratiche educative. Sarebbe interessante, ad esempio, indagare la domanda e l'offerta dei servizi pastorali anche in contesti diversi da quello metropolitano, per poterne cogliere i tratti peculiari, l'impatto delle attività realizzate sui giovani, le ambivalenze e altri aspetti rilevanti.

Un ulteriore elemento che si ritiene particolarmente interessante consiste nella possibilità che il volume offre di dedicare un'attenzione specifica alla dimensione non formale dell'educazione, molto spesso trascurata nel dibattito sociologico sui processi educativi e di socializzazione. Infatti, laddove esiste un'ampia letteratura che aiuta a identificare il campo dell'educazione formale ed esiste, in ogni caso, una condivisione dei caratteri peculiari della dimensione informale, in letteratura, il dibattito sull'educazione non formale evidenzia elementi definitivi certo più controversi e dai caratteri più sfumati. Eppure, essa non sembra potersi delineare per semplice "sottrazione" dalla prima, né può essere rappresentata con un mero riadattamento dei canoni della seconda (Crescenzo, 2023). L'educazione non formale si configura come un complesso altamente differenziato di contesti, luoghi, spazi e occasioni (Giovannini, 1987) che comprendono, entro un elenco non esaustivo, l'animazione socio-educativa (o, secondo l'espressione inglese assunta a livello internazionale, lo *youth work*), il volontariato, l'associazionismo, i centri di aggregazione e i club giovanili, gli oratori, per l'appunto, ecc. L'approccio è diretto all'inclusione, con la pretesa che anche i soggetti in condizione di disagio, minori opportunità o con trascorsi di insuccesso (scolastico e non solo), possano trovare riscatto. Nell'ambito dell'educazione non formale riveste un ruolo fondamentale anche l'attenzione alla dimensione ricreativa dell'apprendimento, che si serve di attività fondate sulla stimolazione della creatività, del coinvolgimento cognitivo e psico-fisico e della partecipazione emozionale: in questa prospettiva, gli stessi immaginari mediali e le narrazioni popolari possono fungere da campo di costruzione di pratiche di educazione non formale.

Infatti, come ha ben evidenziato Maddalena Colombo nel capitolo 5, il sistema oratoriale rappresenta un'agenzia di educazione non formale il cui contenuto educativo ha a che fare

con gli apprendimenti “esperienziali”, basati, cioè, sulla partecipazione attiva e sulla pratica riflessiva. In questo senso, apprendere le *life skills* rappresenta un progetto collettivo, un compito per le agenzie educative a ogni livello.

Inoltre, come mostrato anche dai risultati di recenti ricerche realizzate a livello europeo e internazionale (Crescenzo, 2023), coinvolgere i giovani in attività non formali contribuisce a creare spazi di crescita, di inclusione e di trasformazione sociale, promuovendo un’educazione globale che va oltre i confini delle aule scolastiche e si radica nel contesto e nelle esperienze di vita dei giovani.

Lungo questa prospettiva, si sente da più parti il bisogno di dotare il sistema di istruzione, educazione e formazione di quella flessibilità, dinamicità e capacità di rispondere rapidamente alle richieste di uno scenario economico e lavorativo sempre più mutevole. Come evidenziato a più riprese da Angela Mongelli (2006; 2021), tale necessità ha alimentato un processo di progressivo sviluppo e riconoscimento delle opportunità dell’extra-scuola o, per usare le parole dell’autrice, del *no schooling*. Difatti, in un contesto di crisi come quello che stanno attraversando le tradizionali agenzie educative, il ruolo della conoscenza, o meglio dell’esperienza conoscitiva del soggetto, è ritenuta fondamentale. In questo senso, si sottolinea la necessità di valorizzare gli apprendimenti acquisiti dai giovani nei contesti educativi non formali ed informali, in quanto capaci di dar vita ad occasioni di dialogo e di esplorazione creativa. Al tempo stesso, per intenderci, non va tralasciato o messo a margine il luogo delle istituzioni tradizionali, che, piuttosto, dovrebbero essere parte del dialogo tra i diversi attori della “comunità educante”.

A questo proposito, Merico e Scardigno (2022) richiamano i termini essenziali di ciò che significa aprirsi a un percorso di integrazione tra formale, non formale e informale, in particolare ancorandolo allo sviluppo di un lavoro di rete tra diverse agenzie che condividono un quadro di regole condivise e portano avanti una progettualità convergente verso lo sviluppo delle competenze attese dai beneficiari, nonché richieste dalle istituzioni (per il bisogno di socializzazione educativa ancorata ai principi di cittadinanza) e dal mercato del lavoro. Solo attraverso questa integrazione si potrà realizzare un cambiamento nei processi di apprendimento e aumentarne l’efficacia. Si tratta, per dirla con le parole degli autori, di perseguire un “continuum dell’educazione”, ovvero di rimarcare la necessità di doversi muovere sempre più verso una prospettiva comunicativa di ibridazione, integrazione e intersezione che può decostruire e ricomporre l’educazione, moltiplicandone e valorizzandone gli effetti di inclusione e democratizzazione (Merico e Scardigno, 2022).

Adottare una prospettiva di questa portata superando la logica tradizionale della separazione (e della gerarchizzazione) tra i tempi e gli spazi del formale e quelli del non formale e dell’informale rappresenta un obiettivo rimarcato pure in contesti diversi da quello accademico. offrendo proposte educative che dialoghino in sinergia con gli altri luoghi e campi del sapere. L’immagine dell’oratorio aperto e flessibile, che si muove in armonia con il territorio e in collaborazione con altri attori e cointesti, rappresenta una visione concreta di educazione diffusa e integrata, fondamentale per la formazione di cittadini responsabili. Stimolante risulta l’immagine dell’oratorio “a bassa soglia”, che si apre alla strada, che sa spostarsi in piazza, che sa dialogare con le istituzioni formali, che sa lavorare in rete, che sa prestare attenzione alle voci della “comunità educante”, che si muove, riprendendo le parole di Merico e Scardigno, verso un “continuum dell’educazione”.

L'invito all'apertura e alla continuità dei processi e delle pratiche educative si scontra, tuttavia, con un elemento cruciale, ovvero il rischio che questa eccessiva apertura possa "svilire" la specificità e gli obiettivi dell'attività oratoriale (o, comunque, delle singole agenzie educative). Rispondere a questa criticità significa essere in grado di bilanciare, da un lato, l'apertura e la continuità, favorendo il dialogo e la sinergia tra i diversi attori e le diverse agenzie coinvolte, dall'altro, non perdere di vista l'obiettivo ultimo della missione oratoriale, ovvero la promozione di un'educazione basata sulla prossimità e sull'espressione delle risorse umane e spirituali dei giovani attraverso un'educazione cristiana.

In conclusione, va sottolineata con forza l'importanza di rintracciare e seguire i molteplici fili che le proposte educative tessono, tenendo insieme tutte le opportunità offerte dal variegato *scenario educativo policentrico*, ivi comprese quelle connesse alle culture medialie e digitali contemporanee, ma anche essere in grado di cogliere le differenze nell'offerta e negli obiettivi specifici.

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Paolo Jedlowski, *Storie comuni. La narrazione nella vita quotidiana*

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La breve nota autobiografica con cui Paolo Jedlowski introduce il testo *Storie comuni. La narrazione nella vita quotidiana* (2022) prelude aprioristicamente alla funzione preminentemente umana e sociale della narrazione, se è vero che “la facoltà di narrare è, per quanto ne sappiamo, una costante umana”. V’è infatti un’urgenza narrativa intimamente connessa alla capacità che questa possiede di organizzare l’esperienza umana (Bruner, 1990): “Ho inteso chiarire come la nostra capacità di tradurre l’esperienza in termini narrativi non sia soltanto un gioco infantile, quanto piuttosto uno strumento di creazione di significato che domina gran parte della vita nell’ambito della cultura”. Esiste, per Jerome Bruner una capacità originaria del linguaggio, e dunque propria dell’atto stesso del narrare, di “accedere al significato”, ossia di accedere a rappresentazioni protolinguistiche del mondo mediante le quali diviene possibile per il bambino interpretare contesti o situazioni aventi natura sociale.

Nella prima parte del testo, Jedlowski s’interroga sulla narrazione e sulle sue proprietà precipue. Egli situa la narrazione nell’intermezzo tra storia e racconto, testimonianza e fabulazione. Se la prima richiama a una successione di avvenimenti e la seconda è “il discorso con cui la storia viene evocata (la forma del discorso stesso)”, a queste si aggiunge, quale (terzo) elemento di congiunzione, la trama, nella sua implicita connessione con la narrazione, con la dimensione relazionale che pone in rapporto il narratore con il suo pubblico. La trama costituisce una forma di attività interpretativa, nella misura in cui assolve a una funzione ordinatrice del racconto (nel dare forma, ordine e senso al discorso narrativo); essa risulta inoltre essere connessa a una particolare forma di “desiderio della fine”: è “il movimento che ci spinge verso il momento il cui il velo sarà tolto dagli occhi”. Purtuttavia, tale bisogno di significazione posto nella fine non coincide mai veramente con la fine del racconto, bensì deve iscriversi, secondo Jedlowski, all’interno di una dinamica intersoggettiva di riconoscimento fra il narratore e il destinatario della narrazione, sulla cui base viene a instaurarsi una vera e propria relazione sociale. Ciò contribuisce a svelare la natura autentica della narrazione, nella sua capacità di lasciar transitare i suoi racconti tra un soggetto e un altro, di agire all’interno di una relazione che essa stessa istituisce.

Nel secondo capitolo, l’autore riflette segnatamente sul rapporto tra realtà e rappresentazione nel racconto. La domanda è in che misura quest’ultimo, nonostante il carattere finzionale che gli appartiene, riproduca la realtà così com’è. In tal senso, bisogna sottolineare come la linea (dotata di una certa circolarità) che separa vita e racconto, o racconto e vita, sia segnata da confini piuttosto porosi; giacché questa dinamica circolare non si esplica soltanto mediante l’operazione con cui il racconto trae dalla vita la materia per elaborare il contenuto delle sue storie, ma anche nelle modalità con cui il racconto è in grado di operare una risignificazione del reale, mediante un arricchimento della realtà effettuale con la fantasia: “narrare significa aprire dei mondi possibili”. Jedlowski sembra fare cenno, da una parte, a quel potere “congiuntivizzante” del racconto che si traduce nella

sua funzione mimetica di cogliere la vita in azione, “non per copiarla, ma per renderne possibile una nuova lettura” (Bruner, 1990).

Possiamo ricondurre, da una prospettiva bruneriana, il senso e il valore dei “racconti congiuntivi” nella facilità con cui essi sono in grado di ingenerare un senso di familiare identificazione nel lettore, ma soprattutto nella realizzazione di un’“esperienza vicariante”, attraverso la quale possiamo accedere sia a ricostruzioni della vita reale sia a forme di immaginazione modellate culturalmente. Ciò che l’autore definisce quale imitazione creatrice secondo “un’attività che crea anche quando suggerisce di star imitando”.

Dall’altra, l’autore fa riferimento a quella straordinaria scaturigine proiettivo-identificativa dell’immagine che Edgar Morin ha elaborato nel concetto di doppio (Morin, 2016 [1956]). Nel doppio, infatti, Morin riconosce “l’immagine di sé a un tempo esatta e irradiante un’aura che lo supera – il suo mito”. Questo processo, così inteso, è frutto di uno sdoppiamento nella realtà di immagini mentali, ossia di stati soggettivi umani proiettati in immagini e forme materiali. Allo stesso modo, la narrazione possiede la capacità di “svicolare” il soggetto dalla realtà, di proiettarlo oltre sé stesso, fino a rappresentare i limiti della realtà “come margini sfilacciati, in cui il possibile, l’altrove e l’altrimenti fanno capolino continuamente” (Jedlowski, 2022, p. 56).

La narratologia, in quanto pratica quotidiana, ha per oggetto degli “atti narrativi”, ovvero nella sua gestazione quotidiana si estrinseca nella modalità del racconto; perché un atto si possa definire narrativo è necessario “che qualcuno dica ad un altro che è successo qualcosa”. Nell’atto di raccontare giungono a intersecarsi come in un intreccio complesso differenti forme di comunicazione tecnologicamente mediate, le quali si rapportano anche a dimensioni metacomunicative che connotano il grado di compresenza e reciprocità degli interlocutori, caricato di elementi simbolico-rappresentativi. Se è pertanto vero che la narrazione è “la pratica sociale in cui due o più persone mettono in comune una storia”, allora dobbiamo accoglierne il valore di “transazione sociale”, di scambio simbolico quale elemento sostantivo delle relazioni sociali. A tal proposito, Jedlowski enfatizza ancora una volta la funzione sociale della narrazione, a partire da forme di controllo: “ogni cerchia sociale è attraversata e tenuta insieme da infiniti racconti”. Nella sua funzione di controllo sociale, la narrazione possiede l’effetto di sedimentare all’interno di un gruppo o di una comunità una conoscenza comune, ovvero diviene norma ed espressione dei valori e delle norme sociali della comunità. Ciò diviene importante nella misura in cui sancisce uno specifico ambito di pertinenza della “sociologia della narrazione”. In questa accezione, assume particolare valenza il pettegolezzo, quale dispositivo sociale di narrazione (una forma di memoria sociale collettiva), nell’individuare mediante il valore testimoniale del racconto, e della sua diffusione da bocca a bocca, forme di consenso implicito nella cerchia sociale con l’ausilio della stigmatizzazione del deviante.

Tuttavia, anche Bruner attribuisce alla narrazione forme specifiche di agire sociale, ascrivendo a essa inedite funzioni di negoziazione. Di qui l’abilità della narrazione nell’individuare sia gli elementi culturalmente canonici di un racconto, sia quelli devianti, ai fini della loro successiva incorporazione. Ne consegue che ciò che potrebbe sembrare un’acquisizione di una peculiare attitudine mentale corrisponda altresì all’acquisizione di una pratica sociale. Il carattere di questa pratica è strettamente connesso a un’operazione di costruzione del significato (Bruner, 1990), mediante la proposizione e la riproposizione di una negoziazione di significati con la mediazione dell’interpretazione narrativa, e in definitiva, l’individuazione di “circostanze attenuanti”.

È importante sottolineare, seguendo le mappature tracciate da Jedlowski, come anche il carattere mediato delle narrazioni contemporanee, nei e attraverso i media, abbia una duplice funzione: da una parte nel contribuire, in diversa misura, ai processi di costruzione delle identità sociali, dall'altra nel (ri)modellare gli immaginari, liberi di espandersi mediante l'esplorazione dei mondi immaginari prodotti dai racconti. Ricollegandoci alla proposta teorica moriniana, l'immersione nel racconto equivale a proiettarsi in mondi immaginari, tessendo e ritessendo incessantemente il legame a doppio filo tra realtà e immaginazione, nella riproposizione di mitologie contemporanee totalmente "prosaicizzate". Lo "spirito del tempo" (Morin, 2017 [1962]), seppur nel carattere evolutivo e processuale delle sue espressioni culturali, segna marcatamente come tali espressioni siano atte a fotografare lo stato "presente" di una società e il dispiegamento delle sue relazioni sociali, cogliendo il mutamento sociale nell'atto di volta presente del suo svolgimento.

In conclusione, possiamo identificare il profondo nesso che esiste tra narrazione e agire sociale, soltanto considerando come per Jedlowski narrare implichi di per sé un'azione: "l'azione di chi racconta l'azione". L'atto mediante il quale si esplica il carattere sociale del racconto è una modalità di condivisione di un'esperienza di significato; una sorta di terreno pre-narrativo in cui narratore e destinatario sono già implicati sin dall'inizio, poiché essi già conoscono l'ordine simbolico delle rappresentazioni su cui si fonda il racconto da essi condiviso.

Sebbene sociologia e narrazione siano stati considerati sino ad ora antitetici in riferimento ai loro rispettivi linguaggi, possono ritrovare un terreno comune nella singolarità dei fenomeni analizzati, perché il mondo sociale è un mondo di significati mediato simbolicamente dalla singolarità degli individui che ne producono espressione.

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