

SAINTS, COPS AND CAMORRISTI. EDITORIAL POLICIES AND PRODUCTION MODELS OF ITALIAN TV FICTION

LUCA BARRA, MASSIMO SCAGLIONI

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Italian TV fiction production is the result of both a long historical tradition and a complex broadcasting scenario. In recent years, three different models clearly emerged, following the divergent goals and needs of public service broadcaster Rai, commercial television Mediaset and pay-TV operator Sky Italia: respectively, with a pedagogical approach resulting in hagiographic miniseries, socially committed fiction and relevant comedies; with procedural and legal dramas following the US commercial models and romance-filled prime time soaps; and with a cable-oriented tension towards anti-heroes, high-budget productions and

“quality television”. The paper reconstructs the main traits of each model, focusing on their main titles and most emblematic genres, as well as on the national production companies that helped the broadcasters in defining and establishing peculiar “fiction styles” and editorial policies.

KEYWORDS

Italian television; TV series; television fiction; television production; media industries.

INTRODUCTION

The umbrella term *fiction* took root in Italy and the rest of Europe in a crucial phase in television's development across the Old Continent. As Jérôme Bourdon (2011) observed, it was in the 1980s, the decade of deregulation and the systematic arrival of the commercial networks that "besieged" public-service broadcasting (Barra and Scaglioni, 2013), that "fiction" became professionals' and scholars' broad label for a genre that would become increasingly important for the small screen. Indeed, it replaced the earlier narrative-production experiences that drew on first theatrical then cinematic traditions and typified the public-service broadcasting monopoly era. In Italy, these were the halcyon days of TV miniseries or serials (Grasso and Scaglioni, 2003).

But this was a change in more than just name. Initially – essentially during the 1980s and early 1990s – European television was "invaded" by ready-made fiction products mainly from North America, with some South American *telenovelas* and Japanese animations. Later, audiovisual production industries developed throughout Europe to meet the growing demand for narrative-fiction products, as much from the public-service broadcasters as from their private and commercial counterparts.

As for Italy, the domestic TV fiction production sector evolved over nearly two decades into a segment of increasing importance for the national economy and culture. From 1996, and more vigorously from the late 1990s through the 2000s to the present day, Italian fiction became an essential genre, and not only on generalist television (Buonanno, 2010; 2012b). As in other European countries, Italy's incentives for producing TV fiction sprang from EU policies (such as the 1989 "TV without borders" directive) and national initiatives. In particular, in 1998, the Italian parliament passed an important act (Law no. 122) earmarking 10% of the networks' broadcasting time and advertising revenues and 20% of the licence-fee proceeds for independent productions. The effects were immediate. Investment from the public-service broadcaster – the Rai – and its private competitor – Mediaset – in new Italian fiction grew strongly; by the turn of the millennium, annual programming time reached 650 hours, up more than 360 in four years (Buonanno, 2010). This was not just a nominal change; but it was about more than a quantitative increase in output, too. Rather, it established a new model that gave TV fiction a prominent position on the national television scene. Indeed, in the nearly twenty years since 1996, Italian-made TV fiction has grown in importance from several perspectives.

First, of all the content types, fiction is among the most prestigious (including in a purely "national" sense) in the main generalist networks' schedules, especially for the two market leaders, Raiuno (public) and Canale 5 (commercial). Both for the number of prime-time evenings dedicated to this genre (over 200 a year, on average) and for ratings (Geca Italia, 2005-2012), TV fiction content is strategic for the schedule and is essential for attracting large, broad audiences and hence significant advertising investment. Although the revenue from home-produced TV fiction has dwindled in recent years because of the recession, it still stands at an estimated €500 million a year (Barca and Marzulli, 2008).

Second, fiction has been an important spur for change and growth in Italy's audiovisual production sector. At the end of the 1990s, few independent production companies yet worked for television, but during the 2000s they gradually became more numerous and varied. Indeed, a roster of "major" production houses (the 8 most active companies – Freemantle, Endemol, Taodue, Publispei, Lux Vide, Albatross Film, Ares Film and Cattleya) was complemented by numerous "minor" players whose product has nevertheless sometimes had a significant economic and, above all, cultural impact. One such is Palomar, which has been producing the Raiuno ratings-toppers *Il commissario Montalbano* [*Inspector Montalbano*] and *Braccialetti rossi* [*Red Band Society*], since 1999 and 2013, respectively.

Third, from the perspective of genres and languages, too, the domestically produced fiction scene has progressively become more diverse and fertile. While, for cultural reasons, Italy has no established tradition of making serials, especially long ones, the TV fiction of the last twenty years has undoubtedly been an arena for innovation and experimentation. Although miniseries (normally two-partners) or short series (often termed "*serie all'italiana*" or Italian series, in four to eight episodes) are a traditionally fundamental strand, long series have gradually gained ground, in various forms: first as "Italian soaps" (e.g. *Un posto al sole* [*A Place in the Sun*], *Vivere* [*Living*] and *Centovetrine* [*A Hundred Windows*]); then as US-inspired "serialised series" over several seasons, with interweaving running plots and anthology plots, especially in the crime and police genre, from *Distretto di polizia* [*Police District*] to *Squadra antimafia* [*Anti-Mafia Squad*]; or in the domestic adaptations of long formats (mainly comedies, from *Un medico in famiglia* [*Doctor in the Family*] to *I Cesaroni* [*The Cesaronis*], both localised versions of Spanish scripted formats).

The current TV fiction scene, then, is particularly complex and varied. Since 2009, the recession that has affected all

production sectors – including, therefore, audiovisual production – has blighted growth in this segment for five years now (Barca and Zambardino, 2012). Nevertheless, TV fiction remains one of the most important areas for Italy's cultural industry for economic and socio-cultural reasons (thanks to the genre's enduring popularity, as the healthy viewing figures confirm) and for the languages of TV (with an ample range of genres, formats and aesthetics). In this broad and complex scenario, at least three major models have emerged; albeit with some overlaps, they still remain fairly well differentiated.

The first model regarded the TV fiction made for the public-service broadcaster, the Rai, the sector's major commissioner. The public broadcaster sets its own editorial line, in an attempt to enact its mandate while addressing its difficulties as a player that must reconcile this mission with the need to stay competitive in the advertising-revenue marketplace. A second model arose with the editorial policy developed by Italy's main commercial broadcaster, Mediaset, especially from the early 2000s, primarily to maximise ratings and advertising revenue. The picture has become more complicated with the emergence of a third model, a part-alternative to the first two, when the pay broadcaster Sky Italia began producing fiction in 2008. Its "trial and error" approach was driven by different needs of its own that shaped another editorial policy, largely concerned not with ratings and advertising revenues but with using fiction production to create visible and "newsworthy" events. The aim was to augment the value of its pay offering as perceived by both existing subscribers (around 4.5 million families) and potential ones (*prospects*). Each of these three models embraces a different mix both of specific genres and formats and of various "premier" production companies that best seems to serve that model or editorial policy's purpose. This article aims to delineate the fundamental characteristics of these models, detailing both their strongest and most emblematic genres and the main Italian production companies' more or less established "styles".

HAGIOGRAPHY, SOCIAL COMMITMENT, AND COMEDY. THE RAI EDITORIAL POLICY

The national public-broadcasting service is the most important and most traditional entity in the fiction production sector. The most important, because it invests the most money in fiction – €180 million in 2011 (Barca and Zambardino, 2012) – and dedicates the most evenings to the genre. And the most

traditional, because the Rai's is still the editorial policy most closely anchored to the established, recognisable forms of fiction, regarding not only formats (with a substantial selection of two-part miniseries, the least "serial" type of fiction) but also genres (with an emphasis on celebratory biopics, social commitment, and comedy) and audience (still generally with the highest proportion of adult and older viewers). "Hagiography", "social drama" and comedy therefore remain the genre strands most typical of the Rai fiction production model.

Domestically made miniseries have found their natural form, and to a certain extent their destiny, in the "hagiography", which has been a pillar of the Rai model. Etymologically, it denotes the "writings on the lives of saints", and in some cases, that is exactly what is aired, sometimes even accelerating the process of beatification and sanctification in real life, as with the 2005 biopic *Giovanni Paolo II [John Paul II]*. But also, and more generally, it involves telling the story of an exemplary figure, whatever their profession or art may have been. A nation traditionally made of "saints, heroes, poets and explorers" unavoidably tends to cherish and celebrate its leading exponents and to unite around the deeds of those who have shone the brightest; even foreigners may feature, too. Hagiography, sometimes with a historical or religious bent, is largely typified by the style of a production house that works primarily, if not exclusively, for the public-service broadcaster: Lux Vide, established in 1992 by the historic figure of early Rai director general Ettore Bernabei. Lux Vide productions enact and renew the old public-service broadcasting mission – centred on the "educational" imperative – in a new context characterised first by competition from commercial TV only, then by the explosion of the multichannel offering. The miniseries events telling the story of the greatest personalities in 20th-century history – from *Papa Giovanni [Pope John XXIII]* (2002) to *Madre Teresa [Mother Teresa]* (2003), *Padre Pio [Father Pio]* (2000) to *Giovanni Paolo II* (2005), and *Enrico Mattei* (2009) to *Coco Chanel* (2008) – aim to construct a pantheon of figures who lived exemplary lives with robust values, narrated with the hagiographic linearity of an illustrated book. In historical-religious cycles, too, (first of all, *Bibbia [The Bible]*, 1993-2002) the production house's style maintains an artless schoolmasterliness that sacrifices complexity for accessibility. Indeed, an edifying tone, unadventurous plot structures, and a certain ethical Manichaeism that sharply separates good from evil are the defining characteristics of a model that perfectly fits a specific offering (Raiuno prime time) and audience (popular family, aka "grandparents and grandkids").

The Rai model is sustained not only by the historical and religious content but also by a second pillar of challenging drama, modern-history fiction, and social drama. Because of its remarkable popularity, “socially committed” drama is a central element – perhaps the most mainstream one – in the national output. Reading between the lines, we discern a trait peculiar to Italian culture, a decidedly unique view informed both by distant traditions, e.g. from America, and by experiences closer to home, e.g. in Europe. “Challenging” fiction (these labels always oversimplify to some extent) is the hub of a firmly established virtuous circle running from production to the audience – happily for the public-service broadcaster, which can attract large audiences while justifying its cultural mission. The social-drama genre has a celebrated forebear in a cycle produced by the Rai between 1984 and 2001, *La Piovra* [*The Octopus*], ten miniseries recounting the tentacle-like expansion of mafia and organised crime and a tenacious police chief’s struggle against it. *La Piovra* represents, on one hand, the national response from the public-service broadcaster to the wave of imported series that invaded the networks after the commercial TV networks’ arrival and, on the other, a genuine “media event” drawing peak audiences as large as 17 million viewers and 60% share (Buonanno, 2012). From *La Piovra* onwards, Raiuno in particular has kept renewing and refreshing its challenging social-drama strand, often through miniseries, from the story of Giovanni Falcone, a judge martyred by the mafia (*Giovanni Falcone. L’uomo che sfidò Cosa Nostra* [*The Man who Stood up to the Mafia*], 2006) to that of lawyer Giorgio Ambrosoli, murdered because he knew uncomfortable truths about the links between politics and organised crime (*Qualunque cosa succeda* [*Whatever Happens*], 2014). Television uses social drama to unravel the story of the nation. Italy is a country in somewhat strenuous pursuit of a shared narrative, one that can fill the voids – and the dark corners – of an identity that is permanently a work in progress and continually called into question. It is the country of the mafias but also of the “reluctant heroes”, martyred simply because they refuse to compromise over values and duties. It is the country of terrorism but also of people who sacrifice themselves for the democratic rule of law. Social drama’s popularity reflects the incessant need to find a shared story to represent the nation, in the absence of a solid shared past. It is a genre engaged in a piecemeal struggle to construct a national epic. Normally enjoying great ratings success, social drama is often a “media event” for an “imaginary community” to recognise itself in. This is the main reason that it often becomes the test bed for various production companies, a terrain criss-crossed by

rather different styles, including commercial TV (as with *Paolo Borsellino* by Taodue for Mediaset, 2004).

A third pillar of the public-service TV fiction model is comedy, a vessel with various subgenres and formats. As a subplot to crime or detective stories in an idealised Italian provincial setting barely affected by crime (which is always punished, moreover), the light element becomes central to the narrative within the popular strand of family comedy. Typical examples include the five seasons of the miniseries *Il maresciallo Rocca* [*Sergeant Rocca*] (1996-2005), the nine long seasons of *Don Matteo* [*Father Matthew*] (2000-present) and the more recent *Che Dio ci aiuti* [*God Help Us*] (2011-present), the last two being Lux Vide productions. Family comedies have a long tradition in both film and television (Barra and Penati, 2011), animated by grafted-on scripted formats from abroad and by a more contemporary approach. The production company Publispei is the main specialist in this genre, principally with the Italian adaptation of the Spanish format *Médico de familia*. Indeed, *Un medico in famiglia* (1998-present) is one of the longest-running and most popular long series made for public-service television, having run to nine seasons spanning the entire period of “rebirth” in Italian fiction. Publispei specialises in this strand of comedy – it also makes *I Cesaroni* for Mediaset. It tried to “freshen up” the formula by offering an original hybrid with the musical genre in the three seasons of *Tutti pazzi per amore* [*Love Drives Us All Nuts*] (2008-2012), a story laced with continual irony and with musical numbers based on old domestic and international pop hits (Barra, 2010). Its writers (Ivan Cotroneo and Monica Rametta, with Stefano Bises) have followed up with other projects: the dramatic canvases of *Una grande famiglia* [*One Big Family*] (2012-present) and *Un’altra vita* [*Another Life*] (2014).

Finally, besides the three pillars of the Rai’s fiction model – hagiography, social drama, and comedy, especially of the family variety – mention surely must be made of a genre that is different in many ways, even though public-service television started it off. The first move towards the long-series format, until then foreign to Italian cultural tradition, came in the mid 1990s with the Grundy (now FremantleMedia) production of the first national soap opera, *Un posto al sole* (1996-present). It was made as a daily early-evening fixture for Raitre in over 4,000 25-minute episodes. After that came *Vivere* and *Centovetrine*, produced for commercial TV, and *Agrodolce* [*Bittersweet*], made for the Rai again. Italian soaps can boast an identity of their own, despite having borrowed elements from British, Australian and North-American programmes. From the original US soap model, they have inherited the

format, the daytime schedule slot, and the rigidly industrial production machinery; from British experiences, the propensity to everyday realism and settings and the discussion of social issues, aspects that lend cultural legitimacy to a genre considered “lowbrow” and “trivial” (Grasso and Scaglioni, 2003; Cardini, 2004; Barra, 2014).

AMERICA AND “STRAPAESE”. THE MEDIASET EDITORIAL POLICY

Whereas the public-service broadcasting editorial policy was rooted in a tradition as long as the story of Italian television itself, the commercial networks began to produce original fiction only later. From the late 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, in a now-stable television sector, the imported American TV series and the much-trawled cinema library were complemented by domestic series, sitcoms and soaps. In any case, among the private networks, only Mediaset had the financial means for those kinds of new production. They aired mostly in prime time on the flagship network, Canale 5, except for a few soaps and sitcoms in the same network’s daytime schedules and for a handful of cautious experiments, often still with sitcoms, on Italia 1, the group network targeted at younger audiences.

On one hand, especially in the beginning, Mediaset’s fiction output aped the public-service broadcasting genres and languages and followed the model of the Rai’s miniseries and family comedies, in direct competition with them. A typical case was *Il Papa buono* [*The Good-Hearted Pope*] (2003), aired a few short months after Raiuno’s *Papa Giovanni* (2002). On the other, the commercial editorial policy gradually developed its own identity, often making Mediaset programmes into an alternative capable both of broadening Italian productions’ appeal to reach a larger, more varied audience and of engaging in a dialogue (through a commercial filter) with the experiences involving the most advanced American network and European series. Mediaset’s original fiction productions comprised elements that were to some extent contradictory, often closely linked to a single production house and its “style”, and that combined to form a picture that was rich, composite and – above all – extremely recognisable for Italian television audiences.

An early thread, one that runs through Mediaset programming, is the American-style action cop show in many episodes across multiple seasons (and, sometimes, spin-offs). It is modelled on the US network crime series, especially the

typical CBS kind, with an Italianised format (of not 60 but 90 minutes’ duration, or as two episodes paired together) and at least sometimes with a few lighter storylines to vary the dramatic register. Taodue – the production house founded by Pietro Valsecchi in 1991 and taken over by Mediaset in 2007 in a vertical-integration process – has developed an original, distinctive style and refined it over the years. It has various hallmarks: stories of criminals and uniformed heroes, of mafia clans and law-enforcers, in exhaustive variations on the theme of the struggle against evil, told with clear references to the film and television action genre; a pacy, spectacular story structure that holds the audience’s attention and negotiates the inevitable advertisement breaks unscathed; and a powerful narrative tension that develops in parallel with emotional engagement. *Distretto di polizia* (2000-2011) is a long-running ensemble police show, where each episode’s cases interweave with a dramatic horizontal narrative line, often concerning organised crime, and with lighter storylines where the police station becomes a workplace family reflecting the relationships and problems of everyday and police life (Buonanno, 2012: 97-98). *RIS. Delitti imperfetti* [*RIS. Imperfect Crimes*] (2005-2009) and its spin-off *RIS Roma* [*RIS Rome*] (2010-2012) adapt the concept of an international franchise such as *CSI* to an Italian setting. They tell, respectively, of the happenings in the Carabinieri scenes-of-crime departments in Parma and the capital. *Squadra antimafia. Palermo oggi* [*Anti-Mafia Squad. Palermo Today*] (2009-present) portrays the battle between the institutions and the mafia, transforming it into a clash between two female authority figures – a deputy chief of police and a clan member (Scaglioni, 2010, 2012). *Il capo dei capi* [*The Boss of the Bosses*] (2007) and *Il clan dei camorristi* [*The Camorra Clan*] (2013) adopt a shorter format, focusing on the power dynamics within the mafia and the Camorra, respectively, turning historical events surrounding such figures as Totò Riina or the Casalesi clan into an action story where the state is nonetheless always there and triumphs in the end. Through these shows, a new take on the police genre becomes the key to a language that can introduce innovations major and minor (such as the dual female leads, or a cast of virtually unknown actors) into the generalist and mainstream audience arena. Little by little, the family flavour and hearty sentiment typical of Italian public-service-broadcasting fiction are allowing room for a rawer worldview, for pure, unleavened action, for the criminal viewpoint, for teamwork, and for a crisp, precise style. The attempt to re-present a very “American” set of genres on Italian commercial TV, which was a complete success with the police and crime shows, has also

prompted experiments of more limited compass by the same production house, Taodue: the local adaptation of the teen drama in *I liceali* [*The High-schoolers*] (2008-2011), the comedy on a forced clash of cultures in *Benvenuti a tavola. Nord contro Sud* [*Welcome to Dinner. North vs South*] (2012-2013, in collaboration with Wildside), and *Il tredicesimo apostolo* [*The Thirteenth Apostle*] (2012-present), the supernatural fantasy with a religious backdrop. Although they did introduce new features into the national drama panorama, they were more conventional and less successful. Indeed, they have not (yet) managed to broaden Italian television's spectrum of regular genres, partly because Italian audiences are unaccustomed to more focused stories, and partly because of certain production constraints.

Canale 5, like the public-service broadcaster, has adopted the miniseries format, often in two episodes, for one-shot stories that hit the spot and create an event. However, compared to the Rai's educational-hagiographic tendency, Mediaset adopts an original perspective of "social drama with added spectacle". Biographies of remarkable people, stories that unite a national audience into an "imagined community", and even (the few) adaptations of literary classics are chosen according to dual criteria of pop success and action content. Once again, Taodue has also responded best to this editorial line from the commercial networks. It has been successful not only with subjects of a more classically religious stamp – e.g. *Francesco* [*Francis*] (2001), *Karol. Un uomo diventato papa* [*Karol. A Man who Became Pope*] (2005) and *Karol. Un papa rimasto uomo* [*Karol. A Pope, Still a Man*] (2006) – but also when interpreting events from the nation's civil history, some recent, as with *Paolo Borsellino* (2004), *Nassirya* [*Nasiriyah. Lest we forget*] (2007) and *Aldo Moro. Il presidente* [*Aldo Moro. The President*] (2008). Add to that the hit series re-examining true crimes or anti-mafia struggles: *Ultimo* (1998, with numerous sequels), *Uno Bianca* [*The White Fiat Uno Terrorist Group*] (2001), *Il sequestro Soffiantini* [*The Soffiantini Kidnap*] (2002) and *Il delitto di via Poma* [*The Crime on Via Poma*] (2011). The hero is always a loner, and good usually wins out, but the commercial miniseries leave room for extra nuances, often breaking away from the genre's traditional tenets and customary formulas to make the story spectacular.

Alongside the American model and the action genre, another cornerstone of Mediaset's editorial policy for fiction, one that in a sense radically contrasts with Taodue's productions, is what may be called a "fotoromanzo filmato" [photo story on film], the emblem of a mega-popular mass taste infused (more or less consciously) with camp and kitsch

elements. These shows give the easy-reader tradition a melodramatic make-over, presenting "strapaeese" parochialism in its "original purity" while harking back to the post-war years and the 1950s and 1960s. The production company that has made this national-popular fiction its signature style, a distinctive and exclusive trait, is Ares Film, essentially a partnership between screenwriter Teodosio Losito and producer-director Alberto Tarallo. *Il bello delle donne* [*The Ladies' Hairdresser*] (2001-2003), a women's story that was part melodrama, part comedy, set in the present day started a new genre in its own right, including shows such as *L'onore e il rispetto* [*Honour and Respect*] (2006-present), *Il peccato e la vergogna* [*Sin and Shame*] (2010-present), *Pupetta. Il coraggio e la passione* [*Pupetta. Courage and Passion*] (2013) and *Furore. Il vento della speranza* [*Fury. The Wind of Hope*] (2014). The stories' bold, theatrical tone, the making of actors such as Gabriel Garko and Manuela Arcuri into big fetish stars, and the warm, textured cinematography have reinvented the melodrama in a contemporary style that adds a cult-like dimension to their "lowbrow" popular perspective.

Between the two extremes of American-style action à la Taodue and Ares's popular melodrama, the prime-time fiction on Canale 5 typically belongs to two other major strands, once again partly dependent on the individual production houses' particularities. One strand is family comedy. It can attract an inter-generational audience through a multi-strand storyline featuring characters in various age groups, hybridising genres to piece together a genre-world that blends different types of humour, teen and adult storylines, and even some murder or mystery elements (Barra and Penati, 2011). Mediaset's biggest hit from this perspective is *I Cesaroni* (2006-2014), produced by Publispei, the company that made *Un medico in famiglia* for the Rai. *I Cesaroni* also adapts the format of a Spanish drama (in this case, *Los Serrano*); it follows the story of a family resulting from the union of two others, where teenage romance, misunderstandings and Rome-flavoured popular humour are the order of the day (Penati, 2010). Another frequently used editorial line comprises sentimental drama featuring stories of love and passion in prime-time soaps, often in period costume, mainly for female audiences. Examples include *Elisa di Rivombrosa* (2003-2005), a smash-hit costume drama that ran to several seasons, and the low-budget experimental production *Non smettere di sognare* [*Don't Stop Dreaming*] (2009-2011), a tentative attempt to use the industrial soap-opera machine first for a TV film and then for an entire season. The sentimental side has become a fertile specialist area for the Endemol Italia production company, part of an international

group controlled by Mediaset from 2007 to 2012, and now independent again. Shows such as *Le tre rose di Eva* [*Eva's Three Roses*] (2012-present) are hybrids heavily based on romantic stories with some thriller components, in soap form.

Indeed, the soap opera, this time the afternoon variety, is the arena for another long-term collaboration between Mediaset and Endemol that has spawned two shows – *Vivere* (1999-2008) and *Centovetrine* (2001-2015) – that occupied Canale 5's early-afternoon schedule for years (and to some extent still do), alongside soaps from America, such as *Beautiful* (*The Bold and the Beautiful*, 1987-present) and Spain, with *Il segreto* (*The Secret/El secreto de Puente Viejo*, 2011-present). Unlike *Un posto al sole* and its British-inspired social stamp, Mediaset's afternoon soaps offer a world of sentiment and intrigue, electing to depict great northern cities and aspiration lifestyles (Cardini, 2004). Based on industrial-type routines aimed at optimising time and resources and on the use of various ad hoc production centres, e.g. at San Giusto Canavese (Barra, 2014), the production model transforms daytime soap into “current”, everyday, always vivid dramas.

Mediaset's fiction offering is completed with some situation comedies, although this output has been almost abandoned in recent years. On one hand, Italy had a strong tradition of home-grown sitcoms dating back to the late 1980s, most resoundingly typified by *Casa Vianello* [*At the Vianellos*] (1988-2007). Shot entirely in the studio on a low budget, using “easy” humour based on repetitive, rather thin plotlines and topics, these shows were often little more than a narrative vehicle for major Italian comedians (such as the couple Raimondo Vianello and Sandra Mondaini, or Gino Bramieri) or for Mediaset presenters' acting debuts (such as Gerry Scotti's, as just one example). On the other, various sketch shows based on international formats, such as *Camera Café* (2003-2012) and *Love Bugs* (2004-2007), were produced during the 2000s in house or with the aid of production companies such as Magnolia. While Italian sitcoms found a home in the Sunday schedules on Canale 5, sketch shows often aired on Italia 1, although budget cuts at these networks have brought those productions to a halt.

Italian sitcoms, family comedy, spectacular miniseries, daytime and evening sentimental drama, American-style action shows, and mega-popular melodrama for the masses all helped commercial fiction to distinguish itself from its public-service-broadcasting counterpart in both genre and tone. It went on to establish a contrasting yet complementary model while enriching the original mainstream fiction offering for Italian audiences.

BAD GUYS.

THE SKY EDITORIAL POLICY

On the Italian fiction scene, alongside the public-service broadcaster and its main commercial competitor, both with decades of production experience, a third way has opened up in recent years, with the original fiction produced by satellite pay-TV operator Sky Italia, broadcast exclusively as premium subscriber content (Scaglioni and Barra, 2013). Sky's editorial policy (or at least its aim) embraces a principle of quality TV, modelled on similar European experiences and on American cable series. On one hand, the production output is smaller than the generalist networks', with a limited number of titles. On the other, for that very reason, Sky fiction programmes are meticulously produced not only in their conception, scripting, filming and editing but also in how they are promoted and scheduled, to maximise the return on investment.

The pay-TV original productions are explicitly and inherently different from the generalist networks' offerings in their style and subject matter: they represent an alternative “in terms of languages, styles, themes and target audiences” (Carelli, 2014: 431) to the genres, narrative *topoi*, and linguistic stereotypes adopted by much Rai and Mediaset fiction. Its distinctive editorial characteristics are various: the representation of evil in its violence and, in a sense, banality, depicted without mediation or counterbalancing; the emergence of the anti-hero as a main character (with ensuing controversy); attention to narrative construction and visual detail typical of quality television aimed not at mainstream audiences but a (real or presumed) élite; an ironic, detached or otherwise different take; a crude, realistic language that can express or represent tones and content out of bounds to TV made “for everyone”. The stylistic differences reflect an original production model, still a work in progress, that, as in the American one, gives control of the entire project to a showrunner (or the head writer and director together). This arrangement is based on the strong relationship forged between broadcaster and production company, and seeks, moreover, to transform fiction programmes into fully fledged brands, using creative and operational levers from image building to promotion (Scaglioni and Barra, 2014).

Sky's first fiction experiments were actually led by Fox Italia, working with the production company Wilder (now Wildside), which was founded by Lorenzo Mieli and Mario Gianani. The biggest hit of this period was *Boris* (2007-2010), a unique and heavily metatextual cult sitcom located on the film set of a “classic” generalist Italian fiction, satirising

its stereotypes, tics, habits and general sloppiness (Pezzini, 2008; Innocenti, 2013). The Fox–Wilder collaboration continued with fiction programmes in very different genres: an anthological series / docu-fiction hybrid in *Donne assassine* [*Women Who Kill*] (2008), the serialised adaptation of a film comedy in *Non pensarci* [*Don't Think About It*] (2009), and a crime miniseries based on a true story in *Il mostro di Firenze* [*The Monster of Florence*] (2009).

Initially in parallel, and from 2010 exclusively, Sky produced original series itself for its channels (Sky Cinema, then Sky Atlantic), exploring different paths before settling on a fairly clear model. While Fox confined itself to a few forays into what anyway was niche terrain, Sky built its alternative to the generalist offering by taking the most popular genres and “reinventing” them to emphasise its different approach. Hence its output of miniseries, often biographical, dealing with deviant themes and characters, a world away from the generalists’ saints and civic heroes, from satanism in *Nel nome del male* [*In the Name of Evil*] (2009) to biopics of a porn star in *Moana* (2009) and a criminal in *Faccia d'angelo* [*Angel Face*] (2012). Meanwhile, the longest-format (often the most ambitious) series shook up the commercial channels’ action genre, recasting it from the “bad guys” perspective or at least blurring the distinction between good and evil. An early example was *Quo vadis, baby. La serie* [*Quo vadis, baby. The series*] (2008), adapted from Gabriele Salvatores’s film of the same name and produced by Colorado Film, a *noir* set in an ethereal Bologna.

This approach was echoed in the productions for Sky Italia by Cattleya, a company set up by Riccardo Tozzi. They set the style and the template for several “art-house” TV series solidly underpinned by a literary and cinema hit that they liberally reinvented; they brought evil to the screen, giving it a mythical air; and they pushing back the boundaries of what could be depicted and watched. The two seasons of *Romanzo criminale* [*Crime Novel*] (2008–2010) reconstruct the doings of the Banda della Magliana criminal organisation in a dramatic and sinister light, with an ensemble narration where the actors playing Dandi, Freddo and Libanese are virtual debutants (D’Aloia, 2010; Pisoni, 2011; Galvagno, 2013). And the more recent *Gomorra* [*Gomorrah*] (2014–present) even cuts out all guardians of legality from the story, in a no-holds-barred close encounter with the Camorra underworld that turns its hierarchies, rites and recurrent language into legend in a reading akin to US cable-network productions (which partly explains why the show has proved a hit export in many foreign countries – uniquely among Italian productions).

Completing the Sky fiction scene are the Wildside productions, which explore alternative genres other than action and re-present them as quality TV. The annual Christmas comedies and, above all, the ironic mystery *I delitti del BarLume* [*The Bar Lume Crimes*] (2013–present) are a not-always-successful attempt to apply the “Sky template” to lighter themes. The Italian edition of *In Treatment* (2013–present) faithfully reproduces the format and many storylines from the Israeli original and its American reprise, adapting some characters and casting some very famous Italian actors. Finally, the new reading of recent Italian history in *1992* (2015) adopts the tone of a political and social review.

All told, it is “a whole new kind of fiction” (Scaglioni and Barra, 2013): although limited in number and still a work in progress, Sky original productions have opened up a “third way” in Italian serial drama, contrary in some ways and complementary in others to Rai and Mediaset, positively affecting not only the entire national industry but also the quality and variety offered to viewers.

CONCLUSIONS. NOT JUST TV

The fiction production (and broadcasting) scenario on Italian television therefore evinces three major models or strands (sometimes seen as practical policies, sometimes as ideal guidelines or intentions) informed by distinct editorial lines, precise positioning relative to competitors, and different creative and economic objectives. First, the public-service broadcaster, Rai, seeks to build as inclusive an offering as possible for the general public, without neglecting the dimension of educating and “shaping the citizenry” through its stories. Second, the Mediaset commercial networks’ products follow a broader principle of undiluted, sometimes even shameless, entertainment, following the example of the American networks or Italian mega-popular mass tastes. Third, Sky’s pay offering aspires to make more sophisticated, complex (in a word, premium) fiction to differentiate itself radically from the mainstream and to justify the subscription cost to its viewers.

These three models must not, however, be considered stable and set in stone. On one hand, indeed, as we have tried to outline, the evolution in fiction production (and in Italian television in the round) fuels a constant reappraisal and refinement of editorial policy. On the other, the strategies adopted by one network are mirrored, “overturned” or opposed on the other channels: the three models continually overlap,

mix and cross over, and innovations in one are reprised in the others, or at least cause knock-on effects. The picture also becomes even more fluid with the presence on the fiction scene of two linked but to some extent independent groups: besides the broadcasters, the production companies operate within the market, reshaping their editorial and commercial strategies, often working for all three players and thus within all three models. The presence of competing and fully formed production styles thus does not preclude – and could even stimulate – a broad variety of hybrid ideas or innovations.

On the fringes of the three models, finally, digital media and the web offer scope for new forms of (para)television fiction production and original languages, partly as newer professional skills develop and budgets inevitably shrink. In recent years, numerous shows (and as many “viral phenomena”) have flourished online, especially in satirical and comic genres, albeit with constant reference to the languages of television. As web series become fragments inserted in TV programmes or give centre stage to personalities and stars who then conquer other media, various experiments in “planned cross-fertilisation” between TV and the web may prove more interesting, where the production companies and creative people from traditional fiction look to shorter formats and original narrative structures. *Una mamma imperfetta* [*An Imperfect Mum*] (2013-present) is a partnership between the daily newspaper *Corriere della sera* and the second Rai network, which has broadcast the various episodes; *Una grande famiglia. Vent'anni prima* [*One Big Family. Twenty Years Before*] (2013) is the prequel of the Rai drama of the same name, devised specially for the web; and *Il candidato* [*The Candidate*] (2014-present) is a comedy sketch lasting just a few minutes during political talk show *Ballarò*. But there is still a long way to go.

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- Che Dio ci aiuti* (2011-present)
- Coco Chanel* (2008)
- Distretto di polizia* (2000-2011)
- Don Matteo* (2000-present)
- Donne assassine* (2008)
- Elisa di Rivombrosa* (2003-2005)
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- I delitti del BarLume* (2013-present)
- I liceali* (2008-2011)
- Il bello delle donne* (2001-2003)
- Il candidato* (2014-present)
- Il capo dei capi* (2007)
- Il clan dei camorristi* (2013)
- Il commissario Montalbano* (1999-present)
- Il delitto di via Poma* (2011)
- Il maresciallo Rocca* (1996-2005),
- Il mostro di Firenze* (2009)
- Il Papa buono* (2003)
- Il peccato e la vergogna* (2010-present)
- Il sequestro Soffiantini* (2002)
- Il tredicesimo apostolo* (2012-present)
- In Treatment* (2013-present)
- Karol. Un papa rimasto uomo* (2006)
- Karol. Un uomo diventato papa* (2005)
- L'onore e il rispetto* (2006-present)
- La Bibbia* (1993-2002)
- La Piovra* (1984-2001)
- Le tre rose di Eva* (2012-present)
- Love Bugs* (2004-2007)
- Madre Teresa* (2003)
- Moana* (2009)
- Nassiryia* (2007)
- Nel nome del male* (2009)
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1992 (2015)

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Aldo Moro. Il presidente (2008)

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Padre Pio (2000)
Paolo Borsellino (2004)
Papa Giovanni (2002)
Pupetta. Il coraggio e la passione (2013)
Qualunque cosa succeda (2014)
Quo vadis, baby. La serie (2008)
RIS Roma (2010-2012)
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Romanzo criminale (2008-2010)
Squadra antimafia. Palermo oggi (2009-present)
Tutti pazzi per amore (2008-2012)
Ultimo (1998)
Un medico in famiglia (1998-present)
Un posto al sole (1996-present)
Un'altra vita (2014)
Una grande famiglia (2012-present)
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Una mamma imperfetta (2013-present)
Uno Bianca (2001)
Vivere (1999-2008)