

RESEARCHING TELEVISION SERIAL NARRATIVES IN ITALY: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In the essay the authors would like to review the main Italian studies that have focused on the television series, including both studies that have dealt with national production, and those which have looked to foreign markets and its serial products. In the multiplicity of disciplinary approaches, the authors will focus on studies related to the language and narrative of serial products. The essay is divided into three large blocks which cover three specific periods (the eighties, the nineties and the block from two thousand to present). Each of the three sections will try to give an account of the extent of Italian studies on Italian products, on foreign products and on more theoretical studies, which focus on innovative formulas of the story. At the end of the survey, it is possible to observe positive and thorough input regarding the status of studies on the subject. From the eighties to present, in

fact, the studies have not only increased in number, but they have spread out over different fields and divided themselves between the analysis of the national scene and the analysis of international scene.

KEYWORDS

Television serial narratives; narrative ecosystems; Italian television studies; television criticism; European television.

¹ The essay was conceived and developed by the authors in close collaboration. However, as regards the draft of single sections, Marta Martina wrote the paragraphs "The Eighties", "The Twenty-First Century and Today", "Conclusion"; Attilio Palmieri "The Nineties", "From the Television Series to the Narrative Ecosystem", "Role of Criticism". "Introduction" was written jointly.

FIRST LEVEL HEADINGS

In this essay we would like to review the main Italian studies² that have focused on the television series, including both studies that have dealt with national production, and those which have looked to foreign markets and its serial products, particularly the Anglo-Americans.

In our country, studying television means dealing with a diversity of approaches (defined by different methods and points of view) that have tended to follow six paths:

1. Television as a mass medium, capable of reflecting, emphasizing and in some cases promoting dominant ideologies. It is one of the original ways to gain insight into the understanding of television, as well as being one of the most enduring traditions of academic approach due to the interdisciplinarity that characterizes it (Ortoleva 2009; Menduni 2002b).
2. The peculiar role of the public service and its dialectic with commercial television. In 1976, the judgment delivered by the constitutional court in favor of the liberalization of radio and television frequencies led to an increase in competition between public and commercial television; a competition particularly evident in the consequent production and importation of serial entertainment for both sectors (Grasso and Scaglioni 2003).
3. The development of technology has always constituted one of the most important strands of research, from the invention of the medium to the synergy and competition with new media. The television has been increasingly at the center of analyses that have tied technological aspects to the redefinition of the national and international economic balance and to the change in the media scenario after digitalization (Scaglioni 2011; Menduni 2008).
4. Analysis of Italian and international television audiences related to the tradition of audience studies in film and television (Anania 1997; Livolsi 2005). Television consumption has undergone radical changes due to the changing nature of technology that has made contemporary television viewers something entirely different from those of the past.

5. The differences between broadcast, commercial, thematic and satellite television and their effects on the production of the series.
6. Analysis of the narrative and aesthetic specificity of the television series.

In this multiplicity of disciplinary approaches, in which emerges the difficulty of talking about television in a comprehensive manner, we will focus on studies related to the last two points. In fact, points five and six are those in which the language and narrative of serial products are put at the center of the investigation and therefore they identify the studies most pertinent to the objective of this essay. For the sake of clarity we have decided to divide our essay into three large blocks which cover three specific periods. In this way, respecting a chronological order, we can have an overview of the studies as clear as possible. Nevertheless, these three periods have their specific characterizations: in the eighties we have denoted the departure of the Italian studies on the television series, in the nineties the period in which some lines of research are imposed on others and different approaches have seen a systematization and the block from two thousand to present characterized by a proliferation of studies and their specificities. Each of the three sections will try to give an account of the extent of Italian studies on Italian products, on foreign products and on more theoretical studies, which focus on innovative formulas of the story.

01 THE EIGHTIES

The studies on intertextuality and hypertextuality in literature have led, in the field of film studies, to an overriding of the concept of the closed narrative, and more generally, to a major challenging of the concept of uniqueness. In light of these changes, in the film studies field, adaptation, remake, and the sequel have been understood as practices that characterize the period. These new studies have paved the way for a series of analyses that have subsequently proved to be enlightening in the understanding of the function of the television series. In 1984 some Italian scholars questioned the concepts of repetition and seriality in an attempt to bring order to the vastness of the serial productions that in those years began to populate the Italian schedules. Given this crucial and radical change within the schedules, the questions that scholars were posing, acquire a substantial weight. In particular, *Ai confini della serialità* (lit.trans. *The*

² Note to the reader. To ensure legibility, citations from texts are always translated into English by the authors. The original quote is reported in the footnotes. When necessary, a literal translation has been made for the Italian titles of books and television programs.

Edge of Seriality) by Alberto Abruzzese (1984) and *La serialità nel cinema e nella televisione* (lit. trans. *Seriality in Film and Television*) by Angelo D'Alessandro (1984), which pose as pioneering and fundamental works. Among these initial texts, it is also important to point out *L'immagine al plurale* (lit. trans. *The Image in the Plural*). The text edited by Francesco Casetti in 1984 can be attributed to the origins of the theoretical path. One of the most important points brought into focus by this collection of essays is the basic distinction between seriality and repetition. The term repetition signifies the return to or re-use of elements already known and in particular with a "new occurrence that combines recall and originality" (1984a: 9);³ now, the term seriality proposes a sequence of textual objects organized in order to form a "list" which allows the emergence of a homogeneous group. Casetti adds a third element: expansion. The expansion of the elements that compose the serial forms is, according to Casetti, the element that distinguishes the seriality. This element depends on both the continuous procrastination of the ending and the atrophy of the recurring elements, given their need to occupy the maximum space possible.

Within the book edited by Casetti, we can also refer to the essay 'I replicanti' (lit.trans. 'Replicants') by Omar Calabrese and the essay 'Tipologia della ripetizione' (lit.trans. 'Types of Repetition') by Umberto Eco, which will be resumed in 'L'innovazione nel seriale' (lit.trans. 'The Innovation of the Serial'). Calabrese's essay focuses on the illustration of the aesthetics of repetition. Assuming that the uniqueness of a work of art, an idea largely overcome by the creative and productive practices of contemporary culture, Calabrese aims to demonstrate through the tools of linguistics and semiotics, the existence of an aesthetic based on "organized differentiation, love to polycentricity, the pace as aesthetic behavior" (1984: 79).⁴

Eco's essay presents rather a taxonomy of the complex relationships between original, copying, replication, repetition within the narrative or creative production in the broadest sense, leading to an outlining of different types of serial forms: recovery (ripresa), tracing (ricalco), series, saga and intertextual dialogism. Looking at the cinematic, television and literature production, Eco builds a useful case series to reflect on repetition and seriality, a typology of relationships and possible links between serial texts. The features highlighted

by these essays make evident a number of elements that correspond perfectly to narrative models of the television series and the structures of production, distribution and promotion that these products put in place.

If the studies described above helped shape the theoretical framework on the notion of seriality – at the same time – it is necessary to highlight the significant contribution of a series of studies conducted by Rai-Radiotelevisione Italiana, the Italian public service. This series of studies, which were subsequently named Verifica Qualitativa Programmi Trasmessi - VQPT (Qualitative Testing on Transmitted Programs) at the end of the seventies focus mainly on information and political discussion. In 1984, Casetti was the curator of *Un'altra volta ancora. Strategie di comunicazione e forme del sapere nel telefilm americano in Italia* (lit. trans. *One more time. Communication Strategies and Forms of Knowledge in the American TV Shows in Italy*), which is dedicated to the American serial market. Four years later, Alessandro Silj was the curator of the book *A Est di Dallas, Telefilm USA e europei a confronto* (lit. trans. *East of Dallas, USA and Europe TV Shows*).

It is only from the Nineties that the editorial series VQPT, began to focus, as we shall see, on the Italian and European television fiction in a systematic way. By the end of this decade it was therefore possible to note the peculiarity of the Italian publishing scene. On the one hand the studies proceeded along a more analytical and speculative line (working on the systematization of the concept of seriality), on the other hand, an important part of publications were concerned with the observation and analysis of the television offer. Only in the twenty-first century, have these binaries that proceeded separated, begun to overlap.

02 THE NINETIES

In the nineties, it is relevant to recite the activities of the Permanent Observatory⁵ on Italian Television Fiction. In particular, in 1991, Milly Buonanno with *Il reale è immaginario*.

3 'Nuova occorrenza che mescola richiamo e originalità'.

4 'Differenziazione organizzata, l'amore per il policentrismo, il ritmo come comportamento estetico' (Calabrese 1984: 79).

5 Created in 1986 by sociologists Giovanni Bechelloni and Milly Buonanno, Permanent Observatory is a center of sociological studies that conducts research, analysis, consulting and training in the field of media communications, with attention to the Italian and European television industry. The research centre employs proven systems for monitoring the quantity and quality of the production and consumption of television, and publishes continuous and ad hoc reports that target the decision making, professional environments, scholars and the media public <http://www.campo-ofi.it/chi_siamo/chisiamo.php>.

La fiction italiana. L'Italia nella fiction (lit. trans. The Real is Imaginary. Italian Fiction. Fiction in Italy) presents the results of a research started in 1988. From the 80s, the success of American serial, a key element in the affirmation of private broadcasters in Italy, contributed to a lively debate on what was then called 'telefilm'.

In the early nineties the Permanent Observatory highlighted some positive and negative aspects that still represent the preferred areas of investigation for Italian studies. In 1991, from the point of view of production, it became clear that among the variety of programmes and information, fiction was one of the most appreciated genres by the television audience and was the only one able to be sold to foreign markets, establishing a national independence in production (Buonanno 1991: 14). Therefore during those years, fiction became the field on which the huge battle, or rather imbalance, between import and export was played out in favor of the latter (14). The importance of the Observatory was also to analyze not only the production of serial narrative in Italy, but above all to relate these products to changes in economic, financial and infrastructure.

These studies pose both as a reflection of the panorama of production, but also as a projection of possible lines to be developed. For example, at the beginning of the nineties, it was perceived that the serial narrative might be the testing ground for Italian television. With it you could increase production capacity and inaugurate network strategies and affirmation. In addition to the comprehensive overview of national productions, the Observatory, in its first report, provided an up-to-date review of the studies on serial storytelling. These reports also serve to highlight the 'bardic' characteristic of television. Moreover in 1991, since serial narratives began to be perceived as the most impressive narrative corpus of our day, it was imperative that the centrality of television drama as storyteller be stressed. The Observatory also seeks to work on the disruption of prejudice with respect to the concept of a formula tied to the serial narrative which in those years was deeply rooted in Italy (Buonanno 1991). Relying on a series of studies by international figures such as Horace Newcomb (1974), John Fiske (1987), Robert Clyde Allen (1992), it is possible to see how the fiction provides valuable material for understanding the culture and the society of which it is an expression.

Milly Buonanno continued the path of analysis on Italian seriality with the volume of 1994, *Il bardo sonnacchioso* (lit. trans. *The Sluggish Bard*), dedicated to the 1992-1993 television season, the Observatory's fifth year of research. It is

possible now to understand that the most lasting results of the Permanent Observatory are those of creating a systematic historical background of the Italian television drama which can be drawn on for study and research, or for purposes connected with the professional practices of producers and programmers. In the five years between 1988-93, for the first time in production policies and programming the fiction was recognized as having a strategic role thanks to the presence of serial production of private television stations that redefine profiles and positions of traditional networks.

As regard contents, the Observatory was concerned with both drawing up tabs of the programmes aired, and producing insights into genres or themes that emerge as dominant (eg. family comedy and police drama in 1992-93 report). The first five years of investigation were already sufficient enough to draw up the results of the Observatory; for example, as regards the year 1992-1993, there was a certain weariness of inspiration and a lack of brilliance and in the following years, a drastic reduction of the investments in the field since in the hierarchy of forms of expression was considered the most irrelevant. The nineties also saw the release of two essential books for broader history of television in the nation. From 1991-1992 Aldo Grasso and Franco Monteleone, with their texts on the history of television, subsequently updated year after year, started to cover the evolution of Italian television certifying the growing importance of television series from a historical perspective.

During that period, the television series began to be studied in other disciplines. The 1994 publication, *Le passioni nel serial Tv. Beautiful, Twin Peaks, L'ispettore Derrick* (lit. trans. *Passions in TV serial. Beautiful, Twin Peaks and Derrick Inspector*) by Pier Luigi Basso, Omar Calabrese, Francesco Marsciani, and Orsola Mattoli is dedicated to investigating, from a semiotic perspective, the thematic and passionate dimension.

As for the Italian studies on international television serial productions, the year 1997 is of great importance, as the first Italian report on the production of original television drama in Europe was published, based on a monitoring and analysis of all original programmes of television drama, produced and broadcast in first-run from the public and private television companies of the five largest European countries: Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy. The 1997 Eurofiction Report is the first volume and follows the structure of the reports of the Observatory. In addition to the comparative analysis of the data relative to the five national television systems, in which Italian production is systemati-

cally compared with other European countries, the Eurofiction Report is also a stimulating read on genres and formats used, on industrial and commercial, political and cultural strategies. Through the comparison with international television systems and their production, the importance of thinking about the impact of serial fiction on the proliferation of channels and the consequent increasing complexity of the television offer emerged. This analysis began to impose the need for increased investment in original productions in order to achieve national serial products that could compete with those coming from the United States. In the 1997 publication, *Analisi della televisione* (lit. trans. *Analyses of Television*), Francesco Casetti and Federico Di Chio investigate the complexity of television outlining the need to delineate the object of study in three major themes: production, supply and consumption. Under production falls the whole analysis of the technological aspects related to the study of the properties of the signal (emission techniques, coverage, utilization of bands and frequencies, types of support, production equipment, post-production); aspects of economic enterprise (organization of the television, logical, commercial and financial, production routines); of cultural and social aspects of production (types of channels and networks operating in the area, established communication systems); aspects of political institutions (political control over the media, different editorial lines). In terms of what television has to offer, different dimensions are outlined: programmes, programming, scheduling, TV flow, TV market. And finally in the category of consumption, the two scholars focus on the analysis of audience data, demographics of audience, practices of vision, processes of understanding and appreciation of programmes.

The final part of this study is dedicated to the identification of some objects endowed with their own stability and autonomy 'linguistic and communicative creations [...] [that] obey strict rules of composition' (209),⁶ thus highlighting the need to focus more on the elements that characterize them than on the content of the programmes. In this way, it is possible to highlight the architecture and the functioning, the discursive drive of the text and the strategies that unfold in these types of programmes. The authors identify a first change of perspective that attempts to rewrite the limitations of content analysis: if the latter tended to operate on units isolated from one another, it is clear that television texts mobilize much more complex configurations 'build true own

worlds that tend to amalgamate the various suggestions offered and cover the whole of reality presented' (211).⁷ The nineties are also the years in which the television series began to be the subject of specific case studies. In 1996, Franco La Polla dedicated several essays and books devoted to *Star Trek* both the classic series (1966-1969) that *Next Generation* (1986-1994). In particular, *Foto di gruppo con astronave* (lit. trans. *Group Photo with Spaceship*) (1996), the edited volume *Star Trek. Il cielo è il limite* (lit. trans. *Star Trek. The Sky is the Limit*) (1998) and *Star Trek al cinema* (lit. trans. *Star Trek in Cinema*) (1999). The only Italian scholar to have worked in a systematic way with *Star Trek*, highlighting its important transmedial potential and how it helped to bring science fiction into its adulthood.

To draw some conclusions we can say that during the decade of the nineties the studies on Italian television serial narratives have seen the rise of essays intended to systematize the analysis of domestic and international serial productions, in particular thanks to the Observatory TV. At the same time in this decade, there is also the emergence, in the field of academic studies, of some of the first monographs concerning the television series, such as Franco La Polla's studies.

03 THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND TODAY

After having gone through the years in which the texts were founding and pioneering and years before systematization, we are now entering a period in which academic writing on the television series is on the increase. In continuity with the previous paragraphs, the contributions examined in this section will be presented in chronological order while trying to bring out the mutual affinity of the studies (and it is therefore possible to present the various contributions in an essentially chronological order.) In this climate where the concept of seriality in its breadth, enjoys widespread attention it seems important to mention another course of study that, while addressing the issue in a slightly tangential way, sheds light on some crucial features that will accompany the seriality up to the present day. We refer to the studies on the origins of serial films (Dall'Asta, 2009) which have revealed some of the dynamics of production, distribution and creativity (tie-in, cliffhanger, etc.) that similarly recur in the television series.

6 'Realizzazioni linguistiche e comunicative [...] [che] obbediscono a precise regole di competizione' (Casetti and Di Chio 1997: 206).

7 'Costruiscono veri e propri mondi che tendono ad amalgamare le diverse indicazioni offerte e a coprire l'intera realtà presentata' (Casetti and Di Chio 1997: 211).

In *Trame spezzate. Archeologia del film seriale* (lit. trans. *Broken Plots. Archaeology of the Serial Film*) the connection between the sense of precariousness, which is the aesthetic character of the cliffhanger, and the concrete experience of workers in the film serial forced to ensure still very high productivity levels, is highlighted. In this same volume also highlighted is the way in which, in the cultural industry, the link between seriality and continuity emerges as a structural feature of the system, providing the most appropriate tools to optimize the performance of the intellectual workforce. From an analysis of the serial film of the second decade of the twentieth century emerges an already developed set of techniques that guarantees a rhythm of regular production, rendering the serial format a reservoir of standard formulas that reduce the variability of the process to a minimum.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the narrative complexity of serial worlds has become the main theoretical subject on which most academic studies focus. Serial television has become the real expression of our time where a great amount of apparently unreadable meanings collide with each other (Grasso 2007: 25). Scholars' interest in the TV series has been in continuous growth due to the sophistication of the *mise en scene*, elaborate promotional structure, increasing narrative complexity and a more intense audience participation. For example, in *Ai confini della realtà. Cinquant'anni di telefilm americani*, (lit. trans. *The Twilight Zone. Fifty years of American TV series*) Diego Del Pozzo (2001) using a typical approach of cultural studies in which creative texts are connected to the society and its imaginary, devotes an analysis to the U.S. TV series. From *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964; 1985-1989) to *X-Files* (1993-2002), the products are analyzed in light of changes in society, taking into account that the imagined world of the great television tale is articulated in a highly branched and polyhedral way.

During the beginning of the twenty-first century, seriality was analyzed as a combination of *horizontalità* (the development of the recurring plots and story arcs) and *verticalità* (the construction of the drama within the single episode) (Thompson 2003). This structure is presented as an alternative to the traditional narrative format which provides in its text several hints to the viewer whose task is to collect and follow them episode after episode. This new approach implies the attempt to interpret the serial television language not as a series of cause-effect links, but as a world construction, not as a matter of *meaning* but one of *functioning*. Major attention is given to the study of genres in relation to TV seriality. On this matter, it is particularly important to mention

Giorgio Grignaffini's (2004) book, *I generi televisivi* (lit. trans. *Television Genres*), which deepens our understanding of the relationship between the narrative genre and the different serialization formats. The work of Grignaffini highlights the way in which the combination of genres, the flexibility of their features, composes one of the most important characteristics of the contemporary TV series.

In 2004 *La lunga serialità televisiva. Origini e modelli* (Long Running TV Serials. Origins and Models) was released. In the first part of the book, the author Daniela Cardini, reconstructs the beginnings of seriality and identifies American radio seriality as the real progenitor of the television serial form. In the second part the author approaches the notion of seriality starting from its definition and highlights a great amount of cultural prejudices. The third part is concerned with the development of long seriality in Italy. Starting from the description of the TV series from the origins (paleotelevisione) to new television (neotelevisione) it focuses on the changes that the Italian television system has gone through over the course of the nineties and which have led to the development of the long-running series, after decades of resistance. Daniela Cardini's contribution also reconstructs the debate on seriality, which had affected Italy in the seventies and the eighties. She focuses, for example, on some feasibility studies commissioned by Rai, the outcome being in favor of seriality production and the establishment of production studios (unfortunately, this innovative idea has not seen the light for both ideological resistance and low industrial capacity). In addition to the analysis of three Italian case studies *Un posto al sole*, *Vivere, Centovetrine*, Cardini sheds some light on the scheduling strategy of the foreign TV series. Thanks to the analysis of *E.R.* (1994-2009), *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000) and *Friends* (1994-2004), Cardini demonstrates how different types of scheduling can influence the success of a TV series.⁸ The work of Cardini aims to depict the progressive openness towards the long-running series and the clash with the resistance of the Italian television system and its inability to accept the mechanisms of industrial production, ie, long running times, long running series, the need to consolidate

8 On the same topic, the monographic issue of *Comunicazioni Sociali* journal 'Moving at Different Speeds. The Commercialization of Television Systems in Europe and their Consequences', edited by Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, presents an essay 'Dallas, Italia. Cronaca di un successo (non troppo) annunciato' (lit. trans. 'Dallas, Italy. A success (not so much) Expected') by Davide Bassi (2013, 1, 90-100), that focuses on the analysis of the scheduling of *Dallas*, both on Rai and Canale 5 and demonstrates how an understanding of the U.S. programming strategies, have turned a failure into a success.

the audience in a progressive and constant way and the slow construction of successful actors and characters initially unknown. In the same year another book was published on different types and formats of the TV series. *Le logiche della televisione* (lit. trans. *The Logic of Television*) edited by Gianfranco Bettetini, Paolo Braga, Armando Fumagalli offers in-depth analysis dedicated both to short seriality and long running seriality.

In the panorama of the critic's journal, *Segnocinema* is considered one of the first journals to have shown interest in serial language in a systematic way. Volume 138 (2006) gave birth to the *Segno Serie TV* column. The aim of the column was to elaborate a method of analysis and an evaluation of the most important contemporary TV series. The special issue entitled 'Mondi a puntate' (lit. trans. 'Episodic Worlds'), edited by Luca Bandirali and Enrico Terrone, covers production between 1999 and 2006. In that period the two scholars identified the birth of specific aesthetics and the original narrative structure and for this reason they argue that it is necessary to adapt the traditional analytic instruments to these new types of narratives. In 2006, as the *Segnocinema* special issue pointed out, 'There is a resounding absence of a continuative and methodic analysis for TV series'(12).⁹ The special issue was divided into five essays, starting from the Paola Valentini one that is based on the relationship between TV series and genres and the strong cinematic influence (2006:13-16). In 'Le serie tv e l'esperienza del transito' (lit. trans. 'TV Series and the Transit Experience'), the author, Attilio Coco, underlines a primary theoretical point: the narrative world shows its essence during its progressive changes. From this perspective, the TV series places less importance on the traditional role of the author who controls the whole narrative world (24-26). In the Bandirali and Terrone essay, 'La Forma del Mondo' (lit. trans. 'The Shape of the World'), it is argued that the style of the TV series is more innovative than both past TV series and the average quality of contemporary cinema. To gain a better understanding of why the TV series reached this specific outcome, scholars have drawn on the relationship between TV series productive investments and their innovative elements (27-30). Among the other academic journals it is important to mention the sense of timing of *Cinergie*, in particular the eighth issue (September 2004), which started to focus on the TV series thanks to a special section dedicated to film and television called 'Speciale TV Files', where the column

TV Files was launched. This column was active until 2009, at which point it was integrated into a new, bigger section called *Art&MediaFiles* (issue 19, 2010) composed of theoretical researches and case studies in different disciplines. The attention surrounding the TV series is also addressed through the particular approach of the concept of cult television.

In 2006, Massimo Scaglioni in *TV di culto. La serialità televisiva americana e il suo fandom* (lit. trans. *Cult TV. The US TV Series and its Fandom*) worked mainly on the American context and went to the roots of the phenomena of cult, with the objective of explaining the various forms of fandom production. The starting premise is the description of a television scene in continuous expansion: starting from the tripartite division of the age of television (scarcity, availability and abundance), the volume focuses on the contemporary age, indicating the narrative complexity and the ecosystem structure as the most important reason for the cult phenomenon. Mainly dealing with the US context, where fandom studies are consolidated for several decades, (Matt Hills 2003), the book seeks to answer several basic questions: who generates the cults? Are they generated by a top-down or bottom-up dynamic? The answers contemplate both theories: the cult is derived from both particular design modes of serial products, and the adoption of different types of enjoyment and sharing. The work of Scaglioni is divided into two distinct parts; the first has a more historical and theoretical approach, while the second presents the results of an empirical research on fandom. Fandom is analyzed within the broader discipline of audience studies, and first investigated as a phenomenon capable of generating money, i.e. to create the specific markets that lie between the mainstream and niches then as a phenomenon linked to individual and collective needs that binds the viewer to the object of cult. The second part of the work, as mentioned above, is characterized by an empirical study conducted with ethnographic tools on a community of Italian fandom dedicated to *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and its spin-off *Angel* (1999-2004). *Buffy* is also the focus of several other studies, one being *Buffy The Vampire Slayer. Legalizzare la cacciatrice* (lit. trans. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer. Legitimize the Hunter*) edited by Barbara Maio (2007). In particular, the essay 'L'apocalisse come Weltschmerz. Le radici culturali di *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*' (lit. trans. 'Apocalypse as Weltschmerz. Cultural Roots of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*') by Franco La Polla, a study on the cultural roots of *Buffy* and the concept of apocalypse in American culture. La Polla identifies in *Buffy* the elements of camp, popular culture and postmodernists (highlighting how *Buffy* can exceed post-

9 "Permane clamorosa l'assenza di una riflessione continuativa, articolata e sistematica" (Bandirali and Terrone 2006: 12).

modernism itself) and shows how the series contains books, movies and television references and tributes, both past and contemporary.

Among the other academic journals, *Link – Idee per la televisione* published by RTI, deserves a mention. The project was born in 1999 and became available to public from 2002. The year 2007 marked the primacy of the presence of the TV series in Italian and European TV scheduling. Among the essays, there were some dedicated to the market of format and interviews with members of the television industry about the practices of Italian acquisition of foreign products or the selective processes that a script needs to undergo in order to become a TV series: the pilot the screenings, from production to programming. The following number, *Link 5*, published in the same year was focused on the transformation of audience behavior after digitization. *Link 5* questions how new platforms affect ratings and what the editorial strategies outlined by the broadcaster in order to retain old and new audiences are. It is also focused on the increasing importance of shared viewing and the disappearance of the public in favor of audiences. In 2008, the book *Mondi Seriali. Percorsi semiotici nella fiction* (lit. trans. *Serial Worlds. Semiotic Paths in Fiction*) edited by Maria Pia Pozzato and Giorgio Grignaffini was published for the *Link* series. The essays originated from interventions made at the conference entitled *Semiotica e Fiction* held in San Marino in 2007. The starting concept is that semiotics should be actively focused on the television drama, because it could be a fertile ground for the scholars of the area. At the same time there is also the need to pay attention to these types of texts because of their wide international circulation, the increasing complexity of their formats and the social importance of this type of product. In the book the same approach for each chapter is used: each question is addressed with the help of one or more case studies, mainly US TV series. The main questions considered are on the evolution of genre and format, the cases of narrative originality, the relationship between TV series and national history, and finally the problems related to reception, investigating the reasons for the cult as well as the reasons for TV flops.

Regarding the systematization of the language, forms and genres of television series, in 2008 the volume *Le nuove forme della serialità televisiva. Storia, linguaggio e temi* (lit.trans. *New forms of Seriality. History, Language and Themes*) by Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore was published. In this publication the differences between series and serial are addressed, as well as the new form of serialized TV series and an attempt to overcome the reductive definition of 'television', a word not

used in the English-speaking world, but only in Italy with slightly derogatory connotations towards television series. In this volume a historical reconstruction is carried out that passes through the golden age of the sixties, the second golden age of the eighties, and reaches as far as the contemporary age with its medial and television system reconstructions. The book underlines the characteristics of each aesthetic narrative relating them to the respective production types and places importance on the economic modes of production and marketing related to TV series and their uses, as well as the systematization of the concept of High Concept TV series which cannot be analyzed without considering the different economic aspects of the media franchise. The book is divided into two distinct parts: in the first part the systematization of the concept of seriality from its origins up to the systematization of the mechanisms of the television series of the first half of the twenty-first century is explored; the second part consists of an anthology of essays that reflect on the discourse of seriality from its roots, in order to provide a mixed picture about the theoretical contributions on the subject.

Another scholarly journal that provides an essential contribution to the discourse on seriality, is *Comunicazioni Sociali* published by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano. The first issue of 2009 entitled 'Arredo di serie. I mondi possibili della serialità televisiva americana' (lit. trans. 'Furnished TV series. Possible Worlds in American Serial Narratives'), begins to concentrate on the specific ability to build worlds that are, with the new serial productions, amplified. Starting with Umberto Eco who, in *The limits of Interpretation* (1990) begins to explore the idea that the narrative is finding new ways to furnish its possible world. This definition of the narrative as a 'possible world' and cult like 'furnished world', refers to environments populated not only by the main characters but filled with figures in the background, with accessories animate and inanimate, and with minor but essential details which render the story plausible and engaging. In the same issue, a reflection on media convergence phenomenon that transforms the textuality of the series, making it extended among television, internet, video games and movies is also made.

The issues at play in the special issue of *Comunicazioni Sociali* are those which speak to us of contemporary seriality highlighting how its world-building activities have changed. In all the essays there is, on the one hand, the reference to the variegated universe of industrial television production, made by the creators, producers, writers and directors, but also - in a highly convergent context - screenwriters, game

developers, mediators of various kinds (adapters, translators etc.). And on the other hand, the equally kaleidoscopic ground of consumption, in which the figures of the casual spectator and that of the fan, avid collector of any item of serial franchise, mingle their faces. The various essays try to detect the way in which industry strategies and tactics of consumption of the audience are found in the text, such as in the fluctuating and unstable boundaries of extended text (which also includes secondary texts made by the production, such as mobisodes and webisodes, and tertiary texts produced by the fan). In the essay entitled 'Variazioni di mondo' (lit. trans. 'World variation'), Massimo Scaglioni analyses a particular mode of world building that is evident in all contemporary television series (from *Buffy* to *Lost*). A further two essays analyze how the 'possible world' of a series can be adapted and translated in cultural contexts different from those of origin. 'Restaurare i mondi seriali' (lit. trans. 'Restoring Serial Worlds') by Cecilia Penati explores the practice of reversioning, ie the creation from scratch of a product of fiction from a format produced in another cultural context (*Yo soy Betty, la fea/Ugly Betty*¹⁰). Meanwhile, in 'Lost in Translation, e oltre' (lit. trans. 'Lost in Translation and Beyond') Luca Barra takes into account the problem of the adaptation of an extended product (which is spread over other media and texts), for a different cultural context. So, how can a "furnished world", consisting of at least primary and secondary textuality, be translated for another audience? If the extended world of the series undergoes transformations and, for the most part, reductions, it's up to the viewer/fan to fill in the void. The last part of the journal contains one essay that address more directly the relationship between extended possible worlds, and the media on which this extension takes place. In the final paper 'Questioni di canone' (lit. trans. 'Matters of Canon'), Matteo Tarantino and Simone Tosoni illustrate how the relationship between the worlds of a series and those created by video games relating to the television franchise have changed. In particular, the authors focus on the definition of canon in relation to the expanded narrative universes. Furthermore Il testo espanso (lit. trans. The Expanded Text) by Stefania Carini, published the same year, focuses on the spatial and temporal extension of the television series. Through the analysis of products such as *Lost* (2004-2010) and *24* (2001-2010), Carini questions further the strategies which involve producers and audience. In particular, she highlights the close links between primary, secondary and tertiary textuality.

10 *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999-2001); *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010).

In 2010, Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni edited the volume *Televisione convergente. La TV oltre il piccolo schermo* (lit. trans. *Convergent Television. TV Beyond the Small Screen*) published in the Link Research Series. Right from the title it is clear that the two scholars will question the relationship between television, once considered the mass medium par excellence, and convergence culture, as theorized by Henry Jenkins (2006). Extension, access and brand are identified as the keywords for interpreting the phenomenon of convergence, and therefore the main questions are: What are the dynamics that characterize the convergent television? What results can we expect?

Though it is not the only driver of change, technology is identified as one of the major causes of the new TV assets, particularly because of the growing relationship between TV and the Web, and because of the overhaul which began with the digitization of the television signal. The multiplication of access to television also implicates the broadcasting station, which must evolve to take advantage of the opportunities of new platforms and new audiences. Another mutation is also that of text television, more and more detached from the concept of 'closed work' in favor of 'brand',¹¹ constituted by a text matrix but also by many extensions able to position themselves in a more or less spatial and temporal independent way. The reticular dimension of the text expands even more if we take into account not only the top/down extensions but also the extensions produced by users that in many cases become to all effects part of the narrative universe of the TV series.

This volume was the result of a research (between 2009 and 2010) made by Ce.RTA - Center for Research on Television and Audiovisual at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano. Founded in 2008, the Ce.RTA. is led by Aldo Grasso and conducts research on issues related to the evolution of the media system with particular attention to the television series. The main lines of research are technological convergence, economic and institutional; the evolution of consumer habits; textual and linguistic features of various products; the reading of the schedules and the interaction between television and the web. Among the many scientific publications of the research center is the column which reports on the television series and can be found within the quarterly journal of film studies *Bianco e Nero*. As regards the work aimed at investigating the US scenario - and in particular

11 In *Romanzo Criminale. Transmedia and Beyond* (2013) Marta Boni focused on the issue where the TV series is addressed as 'a galaxy of texts and performances which contribute to the transformation of an Italian narrative into a complex world or an epic work' (p. 7).

pay TV - the volume edited by Barbara Maio entitled HBO. Televisione, Autorialità, Estetica (lit. trans. HBO. Television, Authorship, Aesthetics) (2011) should not go without mention. The same author went on to edit the book Cult TV in 2013. Alongside the publications, and also curated by Barbara Maio, Osservatorio TV, an independent research project which publishes a free e-book each year in which TV series produced in the previous 2-3 years are analyzed, should also be noted. Drawing on a more philosophical perspective is, *Filosofia delle serie tv. Dalla scena del crimine al trono di spade* (lit. trans. Philosophy of the TV series. From the Crime Scene to Game of Thrones) by Luca Bandirali and Enrico Terrone, published in 2012. In the first part of the book, TV series are considered as objects worthy of a philosophical treatment. The fundamental thesis that the authors carried out is that the television series represents a synthesis of the two major contemporary narrative forms that have dominated previous centuries: the epic form of the novel and the dramatic form of plays and cinema. The most interesting television series – the authors are concerned with *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *24* (2001-2010), *Game of Thrones* (2011-), among others – are able to construct relevant philosophical discourses that help us to gain an in-depth understanding of the forms of our existence in the world in which we live. Also interesting is the attention that the authors give to the spoiler phenomenon and subsequent spoiler policies, linking them to the way in which the TV series is viewed by the community of fans. Several areas of study are dealt with, starting with the name “TV series” which suggests a very tight bond with the TV medium whereas in reality it is no longer so important due to the de-institutionalization of TV viewing.

Another focus is the comparison between television seriality and cinematographic seriality: if in the latter we have episodes that form a series, in the case of the television series we have a continuous narrative that is divided into episodes. Cinema and television series are often analysed together like, for example, in the book *L'illusione difficile: Cinema e serie TV nell'età della disillusione* (lit. trans. The Difficult Illusion: Cinema and TV series in the Age of Disillusionment) by Federico Di Chio (2013) which, following the evolution of the illusion in classic American cinema up to the contemporary TV series, analyses textual strategies and the forms of enjoyment that characterize them. In the form of provocation, Daniela Cardini in *Serial tv. Come la televisione ha sconfitto il cinema* (lit. trans. Serial TV. How Television Has Defeated Cinema) (2013) analyses the TV series as a text rich in intertextual references, comparable with movies for content and modes

of expression, and whose strength lies, among other things, in its ability to create group identity (evident in online activity) and to propose completely new ways of viewing unlinked to the traditions of the television medium.

3.1 From the Television Series to the Narrative Ecosystem

The studies that we have reported so far have moved forward the theoretical and critical discourse on television serial production. Some have highlighted fundamental connections with specific structures in American television and others have focused on alternative forms of consumption. Since 2005, the Italian debate has become more complex taking into account all the different aspects of the production of seriality, involving most of the Italian research centers. The increasing complexification of serial television production tends to make obsolete even the most precise definition of the serialized series. Guglielmo Pescatore and Veronica Innocenti focus, for example, on the transition from the concept of series to that of narrative ecosystem (2013: 57-72).

Since 2009 the University of Bologna has undertaken a fruitful path of research on contemporary mediality, viewed from different perspectives and with a marked interdisciplinarity, which finds its greatest fulfillment in the Media Mutations conferences.¹²

The contemporary TV series is no longer simple textual objects, but the result of an ecosystemic design, where the model is designed in advance as an evolutionary system with a high degree of density between the various components. For this reason, from the idea of text we arrive at the narrative ecosystem.

The narrative, which no longer has a single center of irradiation, tends to develop along different paths. The traditional tools of narrative analysis (semiotics, narratology), which once would have considered the story as something oriented and with a clear direction, even if complex and labyrinthine, are no longer sufficient enough to give an account for all the complex shapes of the television serial narrative. Watching a television series is now a distributed experience, which creates a new kind of participation and stimulates further consumption. Narrative ecosystems are non-procedural systems.

12 The event editions have grown in their international dimension and their ability to attract major Italian and foreign media scholars. The first two editions were concerned respectively with contemporary cinema and its relationship with the web (edition of 2009) and the definition of the concept of popular in old and new media (2010 edition).

tems (Pescatore and Innocenti 2013: 68), meaning that they are not determined by a syntagmatic sequence of functions, but are determined by declarative elements that describe the environment, characters and relationships, making the narrative material a universe traversable by viewers, and where the experience can be reconfigured. The episodes are therefore textual objects that allow us to relate and connect to the narrative universe. The configuration of the fictional universe is a process of negotiation between the mode of use (enjoyment, experience and production) and the project (media delivery and marketing) and the proliferation of non-linear marks a point of rupture in the narrative “consensual” and a universe as an ecosystem is driven simultaneously by the industry and users (65).

In the context of media ecology, it is about giving an organic vision: The ecosystem perspective imposes a point of view that goes beyond the concept of *media specific* and considers the abiotic dimension as an integral part of the development of the biotic dimension.¹³

On the basis of these research advancements, 2011 and 2012 were highly relevant editions of the above-mentioned conference, in which, for the first time, the objective was to explore these forms of extended narrative. Ecosystem narratives became the privileged focus of the event, described as lasting worlds, persistent and sharable as places inhabitable and full of manipulable objects, which are investigated for both their structure and function. These two editions found their natural continuation in the volume edited by Claudio Bioni and Veronica Innocenti (2013), which is a collection of the interventions.

In 2013, Media Mutations 5 was dedicated to Ephemeral Media. Time, Persistence and Transience Screen in Contemporary Culture (organized by Sara Pesce, Paul Grainge and Roberta Pearson). On that occasion and on the basis of previous editions, the nature and behavior of all the textual forms that make up ecosystem narratives, but which are not part of the matrix text, were questioned. The paratext especially, in all its forms and in relation to the main text to which it refers, proved to have a decisive influence [publication forthcoming].

The sixth edition of the conference, in 2014, entitled Modes of Production and Narrative Forms in the Contemporary TV Series (organized by Paul Noto, Veronica

Innocenti, Leora Hadas and Luca Barra), drew attention specifically to extended narrative in television, looking at systematic studies on the seriality. In particular, the perspective examined was the relationship between the modes of production and the different aesthetic-narrative characteristics of the products. With regard to the latter, both national and international forms of serial production were analyzed, taking into consideration the development of new technologies and their impact on serial products and their distribution (e.g. the advent of *over-the-top* channels and *straight-to-series* production), the relationship between the viewer and serial products and the role of video games in the design and sale of the vast narratives.

3.2 Role of Criticism

We have noticed that, with regard to the television series, academic studies have only in recent years started to pose specific questions regarding serial products. Studies belonging to the field of criticism, on the other hand, have acquired and are still acquiring a special dimension. For this reason, the last part of this paper will attempt to give an account of the vitality that surrounds the studies on the television series, also taking into consideration non-academic spaces, such as those of the online criticism. Currently, there are no printed journals focused primarily on the criticism of the television series, whether it is national or international, nor are there official spaces on the web. Not always the absence of an institutional coverage leads to a total vacuum, indeed, what occurs in Italy exactly reflects the ecosystemic and participatory nature of the contemporary television serial. The absence of a real critique on the television series has been filled by some blogs that, starting from the boundless passion of the fans, were able to offer unprecedented, great value. Now, the two sites that stand out for completeness, quality and competence of the reviews produced are Serialmente and Seriangolo, whose birth have a common origin: mourning. In the case of Serialmente, the founders of the site started from the series finale of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, presented the site as a place of mourning where the need for discursive discussion on serial products was so urgent that the it had to be created. A few years later, the same thing happened with Seriangolo: this time it was the turn of the series finale of *Lost* to act as a trigger for the birth of the site. In both cases, these are amateur writers, among whom there are people who study and work in the world of film and television, as well as others who write only for pleasure.

13 ‘Ecosystems have a biotic and abiotic component. The biotic component is the narrative form, a living subject that underlies the processes of competition, adaptation, change and modification, while the abiotic component is provided by the media context in which the series is placed’ (Pescatore and Innocenti 2013: 68).

The most innovative feature of these websites are the reviews of television series episode by episode following the original calendars of each country.¹⁴ Regarding the American TV series, the reviews are published a few days after the date of the original transmission and consequently much earlier (with rare exceptions) than the Italian one. This habit, encouraged by some fansubbing sites that offer the subtitles of the series aired in a very short time, has the benefit of introducing the viewer to a vision of the series in its original language, as well as allowing them to be aware of the airing and the scheduling of their favorite show. Despite the fact that almost all the authors of these blogs are amateurs, their knowledge of the world of the television series has given rise over time to indepth sections and thematic monographs which can be read alongside the reviews of individual episodes on the site.

04 CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this survey, it is possible to observe positive and thorough input regarding the status of studies on the subject. From the eighties to present, in fact, the studies have not only increased in number, but they have spread out over different fields and divided themselves between the analysis of the national scene and the analysis of international scene. In the eighties, the studies had a pioneering nature, especially given the novelty of the subject, and were addressed by scholars from different disciplines. The nineties were the years of systematization and affirmation of the first research centers on television series. The last fifteen years, in addition to being the years in which structured searches are produced (facing the economic point of view, the point of view of the text and consumption), are the years in which different paradigms depending on the skills of the individual research centers have been proposed.

Given the speed of technological change involving television and new media, new research perspectives have opened up and must necessarily focus on social TV and the interaction between vision and sharing on social networks, piracy and the new forms of distribution, the increasing reduction of the windows of distribution time and finally the customization of the act of viewing as a result of mobile and on-demand devices.

14 However from autumn 2014 Serialmente changed its editorial line abandoning weekly reviews in favor of critical insights on the TV series.

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