ADAPTATION OF STAND-UP PERSONA TO THE NARRATIVES OF SITCOM AND DRAMEDY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the results of the adaptation of Louis C.K.'s stand-up persona to the narrative and genre conditions of the sitcom and the television dramedy. The research belongs to the field of television studies and applies narrative analysis (with a focus on characters) to the TV shows Lucky Louie (2006) and Louie (2010–). The first section of the essay offers an analysis of Louis C.K.'s stand-up performances in order to identify the subject matter of his comedy and the traits of his comic persona. This analysis makes it possible to define the influence of his television projects on the transformation of the original comic character. Unlike the sitcom, dramedy favors genre and narrative experiments and features an ambiguous yet relatable protagonist. This character provides a wider range of opportunities to reinforce the original message about everyday life conveyed in Louis C.K.'s stand-up comedy.

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Lucky Louie (2006) and *Louie* (2010–) are the television projects created by Louis C.K., one of the most popular contemporary stand-up comedians in the United States (and around the world) today. These two TV shows have met with very different fates: *Lucky Louie* was cancelled by HBO after its first season and did not receive a positive reaction from critics, while *Louie* soon became a "critically acclaimed comedy series" (http://www.fxnetworks.com/shows/louie/about), receiving many prestigious awards (Emmy, Golden Globe, etc.), and has so far run for five seasons. In both TV shows, Louis C.K. plays the title character who to a certain extent bears a resemblance to the persona that the comedian presents in his stand-up acts.

This study compares characters in two different comedy forms: stand-up and television comedy. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that "for the stand-up, self is text to a much greater degree than for a dramatic comedian" (Marc, 1989: 18). The comic persona functions as a "medium" of communication with the live audience, and "provides a context for the material" (Double. 2013: 53). Louis C.K. uses his stand-up character to expose issues that hinder communication, such as ignorance, self-obsession, intolerance and lack of empathy. Hence, the comedian's stand-up can be treated as social commentary. When Louis C.K. makes his transition from the live stage to the screen, his TV characters move away from the stand-up persona as a result of the influence of the television format. In terms of narrative characteristics, *Lucky Louie* matches the definition of the "traditional sitcom".[1] Its narrative combines "a dependence on repetition and an avoidance of narrative closure" (Neale & Krutnik, 1990: 6). In every episode, characters face a problem that threatens to transform the initial order of things, but the end of the story always restores that order. In accordance with the narrative, sitcom characters are also required to maintain a consistent, stable personality and are not expected to experience any meaningful changes.

Following the classification of narratives established in television studies, I refer to *Lucky Louie* as an example of a "series" because "each episode is [...] self-contained" (Bednarek, 2010: 12). In the case of *Louie*, the events unfold in a more complex and heterogeneous way. Though most of the episodes allow us to consider *Louie* as a "series" as well, there are plotlines that often break away from the initial order. The events of these plotlines develop over several episodes in a narrative mode of a "serial", where "the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus" (Kozloff, 1992: 70). *Louie*'s experimentation with the form is noted by Jason Mittell,[2] who describes it as an example of "narrative complexity", "a new model of storytelling [that] has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms" (Mittell, 2015: 17) over the past two decades. Narratively complex shows are not required to fit into formal genre conventions. This often places them "across a range of genres" (Mittell, 2015: 18).

Perhaps the best way to begin describing *Louie* is to distinguish it from the traditional sitcom, because the show differs from the norm in terms of setting, aesthetics and narrative. Mittell calls *Louie* a "much more unconventionally authentic sitcom" (2015: 109) as opposed to a sitcom that follows the formal conventions. Trisha Dunleavy sees the difference between traditional and more recent forms of sitcoms in the approach to visuality: "a single-camera film approach allows sitcoms to deviate from the natural aesthetic of studio production and, with that, from the theatrical performance styles that have characterized multi-camera sitcoms" (2009: 189). So according to her classification *Louie* could be identified as a "single-camera sitcom" because it is indeed shot by a single camera on location. However, I prefer to apply the term "dramedy" to this series to highlight its hybrid nature. The term first appeared in the 1980s to identify an example of "genre fusion": "add one genre to another, allowing the associated assumptions to interplay" (Mittell, 2004: 155). In the case of dramedy, "the weaving together of comic and dramatic elements" creates "a highly complex text" (Lancioni, 2006: 131).[3] This article analyzes the character that functions within the complex text of *Louie*. The narrative complexity and the mix of drama and comedy result in a protagonist with an ambiguous personality: over the course of five seasons he exhibits contradictory social behaviors.

I agree with the popular opinion "that television programming in the postmodern era is marked by such genre hybridity that the notion of pure generic forms is outdated" (Mittell, 2004: xii). Neither *Lucky Louie* nor *Louie* can be considered representative of a pure "sitcom". However, the use of "genre"

1 "There are three aspects to this definition. The first examines sitcom's setting, which is focused on recurring places and characters; the second outlines sitcom's aesthetics, and notes the artificiality of the sitcom text; the third looks at narrative, with reference to the repetitive nature of sitcom stories" (Mills 2009: 28).

2 "It is rare for a program to violate [...] serialized characters and world building, such that it becomes noteworthy when *Louie* plays with the form by having the same actress play Louie's date in one episode and his mother in another episode's flashback..." (Mittell, 2015: 22).

3 Another term applied to this hybrid genre is "comedy drama" (Mills, 2009: 31; Neale, 2015: 4).

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understood as a dynamic "cultural category" (Mittell, 2004: xi) can still be beneficial for the research of a television product as it helps us to understand relevant cultural trends and shifts in society's modes of reception. A product of "genre mixing" makes "conventions and assumptions [...] more visible and therefore accessible" for the researcher (Mittell 2004: 157)., The analysis of complex genre hybrids like dramedy appears to be a productive direction for studies of television genres to take.

Another element that adds complexity to *Louie* is the quasi-autobiographical connection between the main character and Louis C.K. as his creator and the actor who plays him. Mills points out that "the notion of someone playing themselves is quite common in comedy, and comedy remains the only mode within which this is a possibility" (Mills, 2010: 193). But while in the scenes that elicit laughter the protagonist of *Louie* seems close to his comic persona, in dramatic scenes the character appears in a new light: vulnerable and conflicted, demanding a new type of reaction from the audience.

As can be seen, the analysis of the comic in this article is influenced by certain key notions of Relief Theory, according to which humor is required "in order to deal with the restrictions placed upon everyday behavior" (Mills, 2009: 92), and Henri Bergson's concept of humor as an indicator of automatism ("what is essentially laughable is what is done automatically", Bergson, 1911: 146). Since "a direct contact with people [... is] a defining aspect of stand-up comedy" (Marc, 1989: 32), the first section of the article explores the comedian's communication with the audience, in addition to his verbal jokes and physical gags. In so doing, the section considers the social aspect of joking first theoretically described by Mary Douglas. Television "texts" are analyzed in their complexity as they are "made up of many comic moments, alongside a whole host of other narrative and aesthetic factors" (Mills, 2009: 92).

This article explores the results of the adaptation of the specific stand-up persona to the contexts of different types of television comedy. Because of the narrative and genre differences between the shows *Lucky Louie* and *Louie*, their main characters appear dissimilar. Both shows seem connected to Louis C.K.'s stand-up material as they touch upon similar themes and, in the case of *Louie*, include scenes of his stand-up performances in the episodes' structure. In the first section of the essay I analyze Louis C.K.'s stand-up specials professionally recorded for TV and paid distribution from the official website (https://www.louisck.net/) to identify the subject matter of his comedy and the traits of his comic persona. This then allows me to define the influence of two television projects by the same author on the transformation of his original comic character. I apply narrative analysis (with a focus on characters) to his two TV projects in the second and third sections. My aim is to demonstrate that the format of dramedy, due to its hybrid nature, provides a wide range of opportunities to reinforce the critical message about the modern person and his/her everyday life.

THE STAND-UP PERSONA OF LOUIS C.K.

Many stand-up performers create characters that differ radically from themselves in such aspects as speech, clothing style or social origin. Louis C.K. belongs to the group of comedians who appear to the audience to be similar to their "real" identities, "eschewing the luxury of a clear cut distinction between art and life" (Marc in Double, 2013: 69). Louis C.K.'s onstage dress always looks emphatically casual: jeans and a navy blue or black T-shirt. In this way he intends to blur the line between himself off-stage and his stand-up character and to reduce elements of the show that may distract the spectators from his words.

Louis C.K. constantly emphasizes various details of his private life in his act, which also contributes to the impression of authenticity. Oliver Double sees "C. K.'s strength as a performer" in "his honesty": "the brilliance of what he does is that he is mercilessly honest in the way he comically analyses his own life" (2013: 88-89). Louis C.K. describes his sexual and biological activities, his physical shape, health problems, anxieties about fatherhood (he has two daughters), romantic relationships and traumatic childhood experiences. It might seem that the comedian hides nothing from the audience, as in many stories he presents himself in a very negative light by revealing blameworthy thoughts and actions.[4]

Besides topics that have to do directly with his personal experience, Louis C.K. uses a little "observational comedy" about everyday life, as well as expressing his thoughts on national traumas or social and cultural issues. Such issues include: the colonization of the indigenous peoples and the history of slavery in the United States, discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation, violence against children, environmental issues, unemployment, the self-obsession of

4 For example, in the stand-up special "Shameless" (2007) he tells of his habit of scanning people in the line at the bank and commenting on them in a mean way in his mind.

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the privileged class, and the inability of modern people to empathize with each other. In this respect Louis C.K. could be called a satirist or a "sick comedian": the kind that "insists on exploring the sick aspects of society in an [...] articulate way" (Marc, 1989: 70).

To make his reflections on private and social issues funny, Louis C.K. often uses physical gags that can be considered to belong to "satiric forms of parody" (Hutcheon 1985: 44). According to Linda Hutcheon, satire uses the "textual differentiation" and "critical distancing" offered by parody to "make a negative statement" about its object (1985: 43-44). Oliver Double introduces a separate term for this type of physical gag: the "instant character" (2013: 199). In Louis C.K.'s acts, the instant character is most frequently himself as a participant in the events that he's describing. In these cases, the line between the narrator and the instant character is not obvious to the audience. The comedian's family members and randomly met strangers become "victims" of his impersonations as well. He creates their comic portraits as he describes a certain situation and uses mimicry to attempt to reproduce the social behaviors that he finds annoying. Such behaviors include uncontrolled aggression, overindulging children, indifference to other people's interests, manifestation of extreme masculinity, the unreflecting use of certain words, etc. As he often chooses himself as the embodiment of the behavior being criticized, self-irony can be considered the key "ingredient" of his comic style. In one of his interviews, Louis C.K. comments on his satirical approach: "I wanted to do material about how selfish Americans can be and how self-centered and unfair they can be. And the only way I could really make that work is to say it about myself first" (Marsh, 2010).

"The most extraordinary use of instant character is when comedians act out painful, traumatic or terrifying experiences" (Double, 2013: 204). When C.K. demonstrates an excessively emotional reaction to a minor inconvenience he "deviates from established emotional patterns" (Zijderveld, 1968: 302) and enters the realm of the grotesque. "The grotesque object [...] simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observer" (Steig in Palmer, 1994: 157). For instance, in the stand-up special "Chewed Up" (2008) Louis C.K. remarks that because he lives in the country, he sees a lot of wild deer around. They annoy him so much that he confesses: "I don't have a gun, but if I did, I would shoot a baby deer in the mouth and feel nothing". He goes on to add that he would even be willing to get infected with a deadly virus solely to pass it to a deer and cause its death. This "plan" seems both extremely irrational and cruel. In this and similar scenes the comedian demonstrates how anger and other fixed ideas turn reasonable instincts into unhealthy obsessions. What often follows these grotesque scenes is the comedian's regret for acting so aggressively or his laughter about the violent intentions revealed to the audience. Thus, the apparent seriousness of his previous antisocial statements comes to nothing. Even without such "corrections", such hyperbolic comic representations of emotions seem to be a satire on a modern person's incapability of being tolerant and sympathetic to others. The exaggeration totally exposes the irrationality of aggression as a reaction to everyday irritants.

Comments on the unreflecting use of certain words constitute another important element of C.K.'s stand-up performances. In many cases these reflections are devoted to taboo terms or offensive expressions: for example, the comedian notes that nobody seems bothered by the phrase "white trash" which often designates the social group of uneducated poor "white" Americans (Louis C.K., 2005). He also draws attention how the use of the euphemism "N-word" by the official media frees them from the moral responsibility for pronouncing the taboo word and at the same time puts this responsibility on the consumer (viewer, reader) of this "cypher", who automatically decodes it mentally and is thus forced to break the taboo (Louis C.K., 2008). Some words are clearly marked by society as offensive but many, like "Jew" are not usually recognized as insulting. Yet this word can not be completely released from negative connotations unless it appears, for example, in the President's speech (Louis C.K., 2010). By illustrating the problematic status of particular words, Louis C.K. reveals the conventional nature of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable by society and the fragility of established boundaries.

During stand-up performances "the comedian must always keep a grip on things and stay in control" of the audience, which "can and do influence events" (Ritchie, 2012: 164). Louis C.K. tends to suppress the attempts of individual spectators to interfere in his act or interrupt him even unintentionally (by answering a mobile phone call, for example). At the same time the comedian attentively observes the audience's reactions to the jokes and always responds to exclamations of astonishment and shock. "Stand-up is a dialogue: it requires the active participation of its audience, and therefore the comedian has a responsibility to orchestrate and manage those responses" (Quirk, 2015: 11). In this communication process, Louis C.K. usually tries to test the limits of spectators' tolerance.

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He often performs "the oldest, most basic role of the comedian, [which is the] role of negative exemplar" (Mintz, 1985: 75): using taboo words to describe family members and other characters in his stories, invoking the rhetoric of racists and homophobes, and offering unnecessarily cruel decisions for problems. Nevertheless, he manages to keep the audience from directly protesting and to obtain their permission to continue in the form of laughter. According to Mary Douglas, permission for the joke is equally important as the act of it being identified as a joke in a social situation (1999 [1968]: 152). However, Jerry Palmer offers a modification to this principle, stating that someone but not necessarily everyone must allow that the joke has been pronounced (1994: 169). So a comedian's aim becomes to convince at least a part of the audience to express agreement.

"All jokes, and much humour, are dependent upon performance skills" (Palmer, 1994: 161), and so it is important to analyze the tools used by Louis C.K. to gain an audience's permission. Every time spectators get indignant at his words he either apologizes for them or takes them back. Sometimes after a shocking joke, C.K. abruptly changes the subject as if openly trying to "escape responsibility". This usually elicits laughter from the audience but at times the comedian has to wait till the "booing" is over to proceed. In some cases, he intensifies his interaction with spectators by succeeding to get their approval to break a taboo. For example, in the stand-up special "Oh My God" (2013), C.K. says that his decisions are always influenced by ideals, on the one hand, and realistic modifications to them, on the other hand. He calls this principle "of course..., but maybe...". To demonstrate to the audience how it works he says that, of course, all the conditions must be created to guarantee the safety of children allergic to nuts, but maybe their death as a result of nut consumption should be perceived as a natural consequence. The spectators laugh, i.e. recognize and permit the joke. After that Louis C.K. tries to draw another example: "Of course, slavery is horrible..." The public does not let him continue. The comedian responds by reminding how they approved his previous joke about the death of children with allergies. So he believes that the audience should share with him the responsibility for the second joke. They find the argument fair and applaud. C.K. proceeds with the interrupted joke. The shared experience of violating taboos within which the comedian and the audience become equals produces what Douglas calls "a sense of freedom from form" (1999 [1968]: 151): the "norm" reveals its constructed nature and the relativity of its observance. The will to obey the rules overpowers the wish to laugh when a certain type of rhetoric is officially marked as unacceptable. However, less widespread but equally antisocial statements might get round the mechanism of "inner censorship".

Thus, in his stand-up Louis C.K. alternates grotesque gestures and antisocial rhetoric with criticism of irrational, unethical actions. The examples of reprehensible behavior are presented as the results of both violations of social norms and their observance without thinking. If a person does not try to understand values and ideals they become commonplace and clichés. Another important problem that the comedian emphasizes is the lack of empathy towards the "other", the excessive unsociability and self-involvement of certain people, social classes and nations. The more isolated a person is the fewer opportunities he/she has to adapt to social life.

LUCKY LOUIE: FROM STAND-UP PERSONA TO SITCOM CHARACTER

The first TV series created by Louis C.K. matches many of the criteria of the traditional sitcom. *Lucky Louie* (2006) was filmed in a television studio, shot by several static cameras; the scenes of the show were performed in front of a live audience and their reactions were added in the series as the background sound ("the laugh track").

Another characteristic of the sitcom – narrative permanency – is present in *Lucky Louie* as well. For instance, the modest life conditions of the main characters (Louie, Kim and their daughter), their occupations (mechanic and nurse), the dominant role of the wife in the spouses' relationship and their limited circle of contacts never change throughout all the twelve aired episodes. The events of every episode follow the same scheme: the characters are confronted with an unpleasant situation, often caused by their own actions; they employ productive and counterproductive measures to resolve it and then by the end of the episode the encountered problem becomes partly or completely eliminated. Though sometimes the rising action of an episode seems capable of altering the plot of the whole series, its potential is never realized.

The narrative of *Lucky Louie* often focuses on the immaturity and irresponsibility of its protagonist, Louie. In the final scene of every short story he comes to realize the negative consequences of his behavior. But as a sitcom character he "entirely forget[s] the 'lessons' in which episodes engage [him]" (Dunleavy, 2009: 174). For example, in episode "Drinking" (1.09) Louie neglects his parental responsibilities

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to watch a football match with friends; he regrets this subsequently, but in the next episode ("Confession" 1.10) he feels too tired to look after his daughter one afternoon and foists her onto his neighbor. Such "obligatory incorrigibility" (Langford in Dunleavy, 2009: 175) is characteristic not only of Louie himself but also of his relationship with his wife, Kim. They seem always to be under the threat of falling apart but at the same time are "insured" against a total breakdown by the sitcom format, as it "embodies narrative's tendency [to] go backwards" (Bortzmeyer, 2014: 5).

However, while the narrative circularity and the fixed setting of *Lucky Louie* might signal its status as a traditional sitcom, the aesthetics of the show represents a deviation from the genre. One of the key characteristics of the sitcom is its open artificiality: "Contrary to most other televisual genres, sitcom does not want to either cause belief or show to believe in its own story. Rather, it reveals its nature of fiction" (Savorelli, 2010: 32). Conversely, *Lucky Louie* often represents what could possibly be the everyday reality of a blue-collar worker. Unlike most of the *domesticoms* ("domestic sitcoms") that aired on network channels, HBO's *Lucky Louie* was not limited by restrictions on offensive language, nudity or the demonstration of drug consumption. Almost all the characters regularly use obscene words and expressions in their speech; sex scenes between Louie and his wife Kim are shot with a naturalistic approach; and characters are often seen smoking marijuana.

As Brett Mills suggests, "sitcom is a genre defined by its association with the comic" (2009: 5) and "it must never stray too far from humour for too long" (2009: 7). In the case of *Lucky Louie*, stories constantly emphasize sad aspects of the characters' lives: for example, in the pilot episode Louie and Kim find themselves with empty pockets after paying the monthly bills. Besides their financial troubles, the characters are subjected to violence and they break the law. In several episodes ("Discipline" 1.07, "Get Out" 1.08) they are shown imposing strict disciplinary measures on their children. Limited resources and the crises in Louie and Kim's relationship remain the never-changing elements in the narrative and are embodied by the show's most frequent setting: the kitchen with a table and three chairs (the characters do not have a living room). It is mentioned a few times that Louie and Kim rent the flat so it seems to be a place they are forced to inhabit due to their economic circumstances, rather than a "physically spacious yet spiritually warm home" (Marc, 1989: 26). Thus, the content of the episodes appears to be in conflict with the conventions of the genre. The upsetting reality and the antisocial behavior of the characters are likely to be read by the cable channel's audience as a "shocking violation of normative taboos" (Marc, 1989: 24), which is a frequent ingredient of stand-up comedy.

Before comparing Louis C.K.'s stand-up persona to his sitcom character, I would first like to draw attention to the genetic and formal similarities of the two genres of comedic performance. The formation of the sitcom on American television in the 1940s-1950s and the development of stand-up comedy in the US were both influenced by the culture of vaudeville (Dunleavy, 2009: 188). This may explain why an active live audience has been a necessary component of both stand-up and the traditional sitcom. However, while a sitcom can work successfully with recorded laughter instead of a live audience, a stand-up act cannot really exist without a group of listeners present (Double, 2013: 98). This distinction clearly demonstrates the key difference between the audience function in each case. In a sitcom, performers and spectators are contained in "parallel worlds": the former are not supposed to pay attention to the audience's reactions and the latter cannot interfere in the scenes. Furthermore, "the creators and performers of sitcoms are structurally separated from immediate human reactions to their work" (Marc, 1989: 28). They evaluate the effectiveness of their material based on ratings and media reaction, while the voice of a live audience serves merely as an additional sound effect. Its aim may be to impose "'canned' definitions of situations" (Zijderveld, 1968: 295) on viewers, to make them recognize something as a joke. Conversely, in stand-up the comedian creates a performance in collaboration with his/her spectators. Though a performer defines and controls the extent of audience involvement, their responses to the material directly influence the unfolding of the comic monologue and the actions of the comedian.

The transition to the context of sitcom eliminates Louis C.K.'s ability to communicate with his audience during the performance. He thus finds himself confined inside his comedic material. Many of his stand-up jokes are transformed either into plot situations or into lines spoken by the character he's playing. In his stand-up act, Louis C.K. shares his witty observations with the audience; in the sitcom, he tells them to other characters. It is also worth noting that the comedian's sitcom character is far less inclined to demonstrate antisocial behavior than his stand-up persona. Tolerance and disapproval of violence are among his good qualities. Despite the fact that in many episodes Louie acts in a reprehensible way (e.g. making his daughter sit in a closet ("Discipline" 1.07); using an offensive word to address his wife ("Flowers for Kim"

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1.06), etc.), he always realizes his mistakes in the end and is shown to be repentant.

Unlike Louie himself, his friends in the sitcom often express the kinds of perspectives that Louis C.K. makes fun of in his stand-up. Mike advises Louie to use violence in disciplining his daughter, and drives his car when drunk; Rich is openly homophobic and misogynistic, neglects personal hygiene. Yet none of these two characters ever try to analyze their words and deeds. The same character in a sitcom cannot exhibit opposing qualities: tolerance and homophobia, respect for his wife and hatred toward women, etc. Therefore, a sitcom can only provide foils to a character to add to the variety instead of interchanging the kind of contrasting discourses possible in stand-up. Though the other male characters contrast with Louie, he is united with them by their shared social class of "blue collar" workers, interests (food, sex, watching sport on TV) and language, particularly the casual use of offensive expressions. As a result, their interactions appear as a substitution for the monologues of Louis C.K.'s stand-up character.

Another peculiarity of *Lucky Louie* is that in most situations it is the title character's wife who is more likely to win audience approval. Thus, the role of the protagonist that the viewers can relate to is divided into two: a strong and active protagonist (Kim) and a weak protagonist who prefers talking to acting (Louie). The "voice" of Louis C.K.'s character is not the most authoritative in the series, as his passivity strips his words of their performative nature and seems to be a tactic to avoid taking serious action.

Lucky Louie can be considered an experimental example of a sitcom in view of its tendency towards realism and its representation of social issues. Nevertheless, "the genre's remarkable rigidity" (Mills, 2009: 43) prevented the show's creators from introducing major changes to the scheme of a sitcom character. *Lucky Louie*'s protagonist provides a much narrower frame for Louis C.K. to present himself before the spectators. Moreover, many topics from his stand-up material, such as the economic state of the country, the analysis of taboo words, the self-indulgence of the privileged class, issues associated with childhood and relations with parents, etc., do not find a place in the dialogue of the sitcom's characters. Thus, though the sitcom format introduced Louis C.K.'s comedic material to a wider audience, it distanced him from them at the same time. This happened because his transition to the sitcom format eliminated direct contact between Louis C.K. and the spectators, demanded a contraction of themes and resulted in the performer losing his completeness as a persona.

LOUIE: A TELEVISION CHARACTER WITH A TOUCH OF STAND-UP

As was previously mentioned, the narrative of *Louie* is complex and heterogeneous. In the first and the second seasons it follows the format of a "series": the events of one episode do not develop in the following episodes. There are a number of constant features, like characters and themes (fatherhood, the romantic relationship, the profession of a stand-up comedian, etc.), but most episodes consist of two or three separate stories, so that the narrative is fragmented not merely into episodes but into smaller parts thereof. Starting from season No. 2, more episodes are devoted to a single independent story. The third season features eight single-story episodes plus two longer stories ("Daddy's Girlfriend" and "Late Show"), which unfold over two (3.04-3.05) and three episodes (3.10-3.12), respectively. Thus, a "serial" narrative is introduced through the episodic unfolding of the events. The fourth season expands this pattern, as there are only three single-story episodes, while the other eleven form part of three mini-series: "Elevator"(4.04 – 4.09), "Pamela" (4.10, 4.13, 4.14), and "In the Woods" (4.11, 4.12). However, the narrative fragmentation remains, because these stories are self-contained and unconnected to each other. The narrative of *Louie* is an example of how "narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration — not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance" (Mittell, 2015: 18).

"Narrative special effects" (Mittell, 2006: 35) in the form of unexplained narrative transitions and intentional missing plot links are another peculiarity of *Louie*. For example, though the character of Louie's brother is present in a few episodes of the first season, he is completely absent from seasons 2 and 3, and then reappears in the fourth and the fifth seasons. While in the episodes that take place in the present Louie is shown having a brother and three sisters, these characters are always missing in all flashbacks of his childhood. Louie's mother is present in both "time dimensions"; however, her attitude to her son is radically different in each, as in the past she is always represented as a compassionate and caring parent, whereas in the present she acts in an egoistic and hard-hearted way toward her children. Though such elements do not considerably transform the narrative of the dramedy, they demonstrate wide ranges of possibilities within which the events occur. In addition, they establish the priority of a separate short story over the coherency of character representations, i.e. one plot requires a "good mother" and an-

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other one needs to include a "bad parent". In this way, *Louie* challenges the episodic format not only by "implanting" the opposite type of narrative ("serial") but also by making some of the recurring characters "unstable".

As noted above, I prefer to define *Louie* as a dramedy because it is a hybrid series that combines comedy and drama.[5] "[Genre] fusion can occur at a variety of levels" (Mittell, 2004: 155); in *Louie* these are mostly levels of separate scenes and episodes. "Serious" dialogues are often followed by funny moments, which relieve the viewer of the sentimental/tragic impression. Dramatic plots in *Louie* usually take turns with comedic ones, but it is especially interesting to watch the switch from drama to comedy within one scene. It can be considered a "parody" in the sense of "a form of inter-art discourse" (Hutcheon, 1985: 3), a reflection on the form exercised through imitation. For instance, in "Bummer/Blueberries" (2.02) on his way to a date with a stranger Louie witnesses a horrible death: a stranger rushes to the street and his head is knocked off as a result of a collision with a moving car. Louie's shocked state surprises his date when he gets to her. In response to her questions he shares his thoughts on modern people's egocentrism. The woman enthusiastically agrees with his opinion, saying that she feels the same way. She passionately kisses Louie. The camera moves around them in a suggestion of vertigo to film their kiss. This visual detail, along with the music of the scene, evokes the clichés of romantic comedies and melodramas. Then Louie tells the woman about the tragedy that he has seen before they met. She becomes indignant at the fact that after such an experience he was still able to come on a date, and she storms off. The music immediately changes to the piece normally used in the comedic scenes of Louie's failures. Louie automatically turns from the lover and "profound thinker" into the loser unable to win women's sympathy despite all his "tricks". Such transformations of dramatic scenes into comedic ones upset audience expectations of being fed another re-creation of a mass culture formula and force the actor to adapt flexibly to changing contexts.

In the case of the multi-episode stories mentioned earlier, drama prevails over comedy. The events are united by a common problem which is solved over the course of several episodes. These inserted mini-series are always constructed according to formulas borrowed from popular cinema: in three stories ("Liz", "Elevator" and "Pamela") it is melodrama; the plot of "Late Show" matches the description of the "narrative of test" (Bortzmeyer, 2014: 7)[6]. "In the Woods" is evocative of a "coming-of-age" movie, another cinema genre. Sometimes the formula is reproduced with intentional deviations; nevertheless, these self-contained multi-episode stories seem to have more in common formats of film than of a modern drama series in terms of narrative and temporality. Whereas the storytelling in drama series is never fully resolved (Bortzmeyer, 2014: 4-5), these plots always have a clearly defined ending. They are divided into several episodes only because of the formal rules for how the series is broadcast.

Louie broadly employs "cinematic values" like "feature-style cinematography" and "deep space" (Caldwell, 1995: 12). This results in an obvious contrast between the visual aspects of *Louie* and *Lucky Louie*. The latter supports the point of view that "sitcom may have resisted televisuality" (Caldwell, 1995: 18), the "stylistic exhibitionism" that has become characteristic of American television since the 1980s (Caldwell, 1995: 4-5). The cinematic televisuality gives *Louie* "the realist look of drama", which "positions the viewer as an observer of everyday behavior" (Mills, 2009: 127-128) and allows the creators to insert elements taken from different movie genres. However, despite the stylistic and narrative borrowings from film drama, *Louie* can be still regarded as a collection of separate stories (of differing duration), in which the recurring character regularly finds himself in situations that have a comic/tragicomic conclusion. Thus, *Louie* is located between two poles: popular cinema and situation comedy.

The structure of a self-contained Louie episode includes inserted short stand-up performances. For the most part they are not connected with the plotlines of the episode, although in some cases there is a thematic unity. For example, in the episode "God" (1.11) the common theme is religion. In the stand-up fragments, the performing comedian can often be identified both as Louis C.K. and as his character Louie, because they share the same occupation and stage persona. However, it is clear that the performer is Louie when these scenes are presented as the character's everyday activity or when they influence subsequent events in the episode. When the performer's actions in stand-up scenes are influenced by a stressful situation that preceded the stand-up performance, it is not the jokes that grab the viewers' attention. The question here is whether Louie can overcome the problem and find a connection with the audience. In such cases viewers adopt the perspective of the comedian as the camera is di-

5 On IMDB it is also associated with both genres (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1492966/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt).

6 Example: "Rocky" (1976).

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rected toward the spectators of the live comedy show more than the performer.

In comparison with the character in *Lucky Louie,* the protagonist of *Louie* has more biographical similarities with Louis C.K.: in addition to being stand-up comedians, both are divorced and have two daughters. Moreover, the plots of several episodes reference events from Louis C.K.'s life that would be known to much of the audience. For example, in the episode "Ikea/Piano Lessons" (3.07), Louie's reconciliation with his old friend, stand-up comedian Mark Maron, may remind viewers of Louis C.K.'s interview with Mark Maron on his podcast "WTF with Marc Maron" in 2010, which represented the resumption of their friendship. In this way, the fictional character alludes to issues in the life of the person who portrays him. Although "[a comedian] can move between acting and being – and keep the same name" (Mills, 2010: 200), the character in the series is never called "Louis"; even on the sign-boards at comedy clubs his name is always spelled "Louie C.K." in the dramedy. This dividing line may seem thin, but it does stress that the similarity between the performer and the character is only partial and that there are important differences. For instance, at no point in the five seasons of the show does Louie enjoy major success in his career as a comedian. In the series he is often referred to as "a comics' comic", suggesting that his audience is largely limited to other comedians. The character often meets colleagues (famous comics playing themselves in the series) whom he considers more well-known and successful than he is, when in fact Louis C.K. (as opposed to Louie) is definitely on their level.

Following the pattern of the serial narrative with its constant deferment of a final resolution, the identity of its protagonist also transforms over the course of the series and constantly reveals new personal qualities that contradict one another. On the one hand, Louie's behavior can often be described as automatic. He uses clichéd expressions when he expresses feelings of love or offers life advice. By behaving and speaking without reflecting, the character engages in psychological violence toward others, trying to impose his own ideas of what is right on them. On the other hand, Louie is also shown overcoming the automatism of his reactions to others through self-irony and displays of empathy. He clearly identifies empathy as a key to socialization and tries to teach his kids to sympathize with other people's feelings.

In addition to his communication difficulties, Louie fails to achieve many of his goals, such as buying a new house, getting himself in shape, being appreciated by his children, or winning the attention of attractive women. His failures are generally due either to his lack of self-confidence and idleness or simply to bad luck. Many of Louie's friends consider him a loser. At the same time, the character's confidence in his professional life compensates for his weakness in the other aspects of life. His job thus enables him to transform his everyday troubles and stresses into objects of amusement. Louie's attitude to his job is based on firm principles that keep him from compromising on questions concerning material, authorship and his performative style. Yet in his personal life he usually tries to consider the interests of others. Openness to the new and to the "other" enriches the character and makes him less socially awkward.

Compared with straight stand-up performances, *Louie* gives the audience the chance to observe a stand-up comedian on and off the stage, thereby providing a better understanding of his material. The aim to test spectators' tolerance is a distinctive feature of Louis C.K.'s stand-up and is present in the dramedy as well. First of all, it is evident in the content of the stand-up insertions, which are identical to the previously analyzed stand-up specials in terms of themes and performative techniques. Another strategy to elicit a reaction from viewers is the representation of Louie's negative behavior: he offends a member of the comedy club audience who interrupts him ("Heckler/Cop Movie" 1.06), disrespects his mother ("Double Date/Mom" 1.07), and imposes his opinions on others. Unlike the stand-up performances, the dramedy also often aims to elicit compassion for the protagonist. Technically this is done through close-ups and by positioning the viewer in the place of Louie's interlocutor in scenes with dialogue. While in the stage performances the comedian controls the situation all the time, in the dramedy Louis C.K.'s character frequently becomes the victim of other people's actions and is shown being able to feel confident only in a limited number of locations: his house, comedy clubs and cafés.

Unlike the sitcom *Lucky Louie*, all the events in the dramedy unfold around the title character. His attitude toward his own life is fraught with worries about death, health, loneliness, and professional failure, and treated as a priority over his interactions with others. In this case, there is no need to assign the author's "voice" to several characters because the protagonist combines positive and negative qualities and is able to develop. He oversteps the limits of his own way of thinking and of the spatial limits of his everyday life. He appears to be "broader" than both the stand-up and the sitcom character, as he is not obliged to be constantly funny due to the hybrid co-existence of drama and comedy in the complex narrative of *Louie*.

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CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed how comedian Louis C.K.'s stand-up persona, which embodies his critical reflection on social and cultural issues, has been adapted to different television contexts. *Lucky Louie* and *Louie* are connected not only by virtue of having the same creator and star, but also by the fact that both shows deviate from the genre requirements of traditional stand-up. *Lucky Louie* uses a realistic approach and provides no "comfort" either "literally" or "figuratively" (Marc, 1989: 26). However, it still follows the conventions of narrative and setting of a traditional sitcom. As a result, the character lacks the capacity for self-reflection and functions as a barrier between the comedian Louis C.K. and the audience.

Conversely, *Louie* appears to be a more effective television format for Louis C.K. to express his ideas about the everyday experience of a modern person thanks to the hybrid nature of the series. A viewer of this dramedy observes the alternation between short and longer stories, daily situations and life-changing events, dramatic and comedic scenes. These experiments with narrative, with the density of events and genre elements in the dramedy correspond to the complexity and ambiguity of an everyday experience where the sublime and the banal, the sad and the funny, are always intertwined.

"A comedy is [...] marked [...] by its concern with the representation of 'everyday life'" (Neale & Krutnik, 1990: 11), and thus even though the protagonist of *Louie* is usually shown to be immature, physically weak, and struggling to resist hedonistic temptations, by demonstrating empathy and self-irony he can still teach viewers a lot about socialization. The character of *Louie* can be considered a relevant commentary about life in today's society, embodied in a fictional personality.

This research demonstrates that dramedy offers a wide range of opportunities to incorporate external elements (such as those of stand-up comedy) into a television text and mix them with characteristics taken from various other formats of drama and comedy. Dramedy's openness to different genre and storytelling experiments can produce an ambiguous yet relatable protagonist who is able to reflect the everyday experience of a modern person.

Dramedy (or "comedy drama") remains relatively unexplored in television studies (Neale, 2015: 4). Its relationship with sitcom should be reconsidered, as although both genres "employ recurring characters in regular settings" (Mills, 2009: 31), their narratives may differ considerably in terms of complexity and comprehensibility. Moreover, the functioning of dramedy as a hybrid genre should be studied more, as it can help us define the current state of the genre system on television and understand the cultural processes behind the prevalence of dramedies among modern comedy series.

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