

SERIAL CONTRADICTIONS. THE ITALIAN DEBATE ON TV SERIES

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade the academic debate on television seriality has become lively and often quite animated, in the US as well as in Italy. The traditional hierarchic relation between cinema and television is clearly represented by the form of the most recent tv drama, whose boundaries are more and more difficult to locate.

The main questions at stake seem to be the so-called “cinematic television” (Mills, 2013; Jaramillo, 2013), the um-

brella definition of “quality tv” (McCabe and Akass, 2007) and its relation with the broadest concept of “complex tv” (Mittell, 2009, 2015).

The essay will take into consideration these oxymorons, which are deeply rooted in the Italian tv series debate, with the aim of considering both their risks and their opportunities.

A great variety of texts are grouped under the “tv series” label, but they are very different as far as content, production values and audience reactions are concerned. The academic discourse, however, only recently has tried to identify the differences between longstanding mainstream shows (such as, for instance, *Grey’s Anatomy* or *CSI*) and some more recent, and supposedly “cinematic” series like *True Detective* or *Fargo*. Together with the analysis of the oxymoric nature of recent television seriality, the essay will explore the need to historicising what is proving to be one of the most dense and fruitful domains of recent television studies.

Until the beginning of the new century, tv drama was far from being a noteworthy topic in the Italian media studies. Film studies and narratology have long ignored television serial forms, and television studies have been traditionally interested in analyzing other genres, such as the news, which were considered more serious (Buonanno, 2012; Abruzzese, 1995). In slightly more than a decade, the mediascape has radically changed. Today, tv drama is a central interest not only for scholars, but also for those audiences which were traditionally distant from television. Not knowing what *House of Cards* (2013-) or *True Detective* (2014-) or *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) are about would mean being cut off from the majority of social conversations and from a lively academic multidisciplinary debate.

Why and how, then, has tv drama become a cutting-edge topic in Italy? The present interest in serial tv narratives seems to enlighten some interesting contradictions, which traditionally characterize both Italian media studies and, more specifically, the social discourse about television. In parallel with the favour of the Italian media scholarship towards the new “quality” tv series, it seems that television’s traditional bad reputation has not completely disappeared.

In the last decade, television has undergone a revolution in technology, language and audiences, which is clearly symbolized by the new tv drama. Jason Mittell’s definition of “complex tv” clearly describes its new features and can be applied to the outlooks of tv drama in the 2000, such as *Breaking Bad*, *True Detective*, *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones* (2011-), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), or *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015): “

To call something complex is to highlight its sophistication and nuance, suggesting that it presents a vision of the world that avoids being reductive or artificially simplistic, but that grows richer through sustained engagement and consideration. It suggests that the consumer of complexity needs to engage fully and attentively, and such engagement will yield an experience distinct from more casual or partial attention. (...) Thus while complexity need not be seen as an evaluative criterion, it can certainly serve as one that helps shine a light on how serial television can reach aesthetic achievements (Mittell, 2013: 46-47).

According to some Italian observers, however, this label could not be extended to successful mainstream tv series such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-), or *CSI* (2000-), for instance:

their narrative structure, the director’s and authorship’s signature, the standing of actors cannot be compared with *True Detective* features, for example, which is often considered as the benchmark of “quality” seriality (Fumarola, 2014; Demaria, 2014).

One of the contradictions in the Italian debate on tv series, then, seems to be the unclear definition of “quality tv drama”: are mainstream series such as *Grey’s Anatomy* comparable with *Fargo* (2014-)? And, if that is the case, is quality tv necessarily related to the idea of “cinematic values”? (Mills, 2013). The uncertainty in drawing a specific list of “quality” titles is the first marker of how the field of tv drama has today become richer in suggestions but at the same time quite elusive, at the centre of the social-media discourse but difficult to be analyzed in a clearer theoretical framework.

In the following pages I will try to focus on some contradictions which emerge from the Italian recent studies on tv series, and which more or less overtly show a tendency to downgrade the “tv” element from the debate. Such contradictions emerge also in other international contexts (Mittell, 2015), but in the Italian media studies they appear particularly polarized around the opposition between cinema and tv studies.

“COMPLEX TV DRAMA IS NOT TELEVISION”

In the last five years the international debate about the so-called ‘cinematic tv’ (Mittell, 2009, 2013; Mill, 2013; Jaramillo, 2013) has involved also the Italian academia. One of the most relevant topics in this discussion is whether television dramas can be considered as a homogeneous group of texts or not. Even at a non-specialist glance one can clearly see the huge gap between the serials from the early 1990s (or even the 1970s telefilms) and the shows that from the beginning of 21st century, can be termed “tv series” (Buonanno, 2012).

Audiences, too, are different in attitude, tastes and behavior. The excitement expressed by *Grey’s Anatomy*’s lovers, although quite high, does not in any way match the *hype* surrounding the airing of the second season of *True Detective*, which in turn is quite different from the quiet pleasures expressed by the audience of a new episode of *CSI*. Can all these shows be labeled as “complex tv”? They differ in terms of narrative structure, number of episodes and seasons, acting performances, relevance of directing, dialogue density, audience’s quantification and demographics, relevance on social

media - just to mention only some of the many possible areas of comparison.

In his sharp analysis of *Lost* (2004-2010) and of *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* (2002-2008), Mittell (2009, 2013) proposes to finally overcome the traditional opposition between television studies and film studies, where the former are accustomed not to express any personal evaluation and the latter, on the contrary, are allowed to base their analyses on taste and aesthetic pleasure. In this perspective, Mittell's definition of "complex tv" underlines the need to overcome as well the narrow label of "quality tv" under which some tv dramas are traditionally grouped (McCabe and Akass, 2007):

I do not believe that complex tv is a synonym of quality television, as the latter is a troubling term that shines more light on the assumptions of the speaker than the programs it labels, while the former is an analytic term that doesn't necessarily imply value judgement. Complexity and value are not mutually guaranteed (Mittell, 2013: 46).

In the Italian debate, it would be quite useful to adopt the concept of complex tv and to apply it more strictly to tv series. "Complex tv drama" could be applied to identify the new forms of seriality which spread their textual structure on a long time span, and extend their narratives over the limits of film, whose peculiar dimension is *the season* instead of the single episode (Bandirali and Terrone, 2013).

Traditional television seriality is based on the repetition of conventionally short and clearly-defined narrative units (installment and/or episode), which are regularly scheduled on a weekly basis, while in complex tv dramas repetition mechanisms refer to an extended narrative unit, the season, composed by at least 12-13 episodes. Far from the weekly schedule of traditional tv programming, the narrative model of the season exploits the new and flexible modes of consumption offered by the idiosyncratic time frame of the web: from the "serial instantaneity" provided by Netflix or Hulu, to the practice of *binge watching* (Poniewozik, 2012; Roberts, 2015), which consists in a viewing marathon of many episodes at a time, or maybe of the whole season in a weekend or in a few days.

The narrative potential of complex tv drama is expressed in the season, which broadens its boundaries in both vertical and horizontal lines (Thompson, 2003) and enormously extends the universes of meaning compressed into the limited time-frame of the movie, and adds the strength of the

image to the large-scale narrative of the novel (Bandirali and Terrone, 2012).

"Complex tv drama" means that a series is a television show, *and also* a movie, *and also* a novel, but it bypasses the narrative closure of the movie, the time extension of the novel, and the traditional television division in repeatable units (episodes). Some recent Italian studies on tv seriality have already considered and discussed this concept, with the aim of overcoming the traditional oppositions in media studies in order to open up to the more flexible concept of "medial environment" (Boccia Artieri, 2004; Abruzzese, 2015) and of "narrative ecosystem" (Pescatore and Innocenti, 2013).

"COMPLEX TV (DRAMA) IS NOT WATCHED ON TV"

Since the mid-1990s, the traditional notion of mainstream television audience has been questioned by new practices brought about by the web and social networks, by the possibility of sharing content, commenting on them and freely stating one's opinion, together with the radical change in the socio-demographic profiles. Social networks have created a generation of "experts", bringing to light new concepts to be considered: besides the idea of "sharing", deeply affecting media agendas and priorities, also the practices of online fandom have proved to be a grass-root phenomenon that radically influences the contents and relevance of television and media products (Jenkins, 2006; Scaglioni, 2006). Sharing information, anecdotes, and opinions on one's own favourite series is gratifying, and being "the first" in reviewing an episode, in discovering a new series or in downloading a new season is even more pleasurable, giving birth to the so-called spoiling activity (Jenkins, 2006b).

As far as complex tv is concerned, its fruition practices are both complementary and contradictory. On the one hand, as said before, the narrative division in seasons is strictly linked to the practice of binge watching, which usually promotes an individual (if not narcissistic) viewing experience. On the other hand, the multi-screen viewing on different devices (computer, television, tablet, smartphone) takes place in a non linear time dimension, where the individual viewing experience is shared in the collective commentaries and discussions which take place in the virtual time and space of social media. The outcome is a viewing and sharing experience which is quite different not only from the features of mainstream fandom (Scaglioni, 2006), but also from its earlier digital ex-

pressions, as those engendered by *Lost*, which can be considered the ancestor of complex tv drama (Pearson, 2009), which expressed themselves mostly in blogs and forums.

“COMPLEX TV DRAMA IS QUALITY TELEVISION”

The quality issue has been one of the main focuses in television studies, also in the Italian debate. It is maybe the topic which has been most thoroughly explored by interdisciplinary analyses in the early 1990s, being the focus of a high number of studies which triggered quite a heated debate (Sartori, 1993; Lasagni and Richeri, 1996; Colombo, 1993).

The definition of quality television developed in Italian media studies, however, was unclear, mostly due to the persistence of a strong cultural bias against television and of the opposition between high-brow and low-brow. The early Italian scholars of television seriality stressed the fierce criticism of academia towards this genre, which was considered too popular and low-brow in comparison with the news, the only qualitative television content which was worth studying and analyzing (Abruzzese, 1984; Buonanno, 1994; Casetti, 1988).

In the same years, though, the first wave of “quality” US serials came to question the assumptions of such a negative attitude: *Twin Peaks (1990-1991)*, *E.R. (1994-2009)*, *X-Files (1993-2002)*, reached Italian broadcast television schedules, scoring huge audience success. From the mid-1990s, also some Italian serial productions began to get very good audience results, for example *Il Maresciallo Rocca (1996-2005)* or *Il commissario Montalbano (1999-2013)*, which partly changed the negative attitude of academia about serial television.

In the same years the topic of television quality became an issue in the US academia as well (Thompson, 1996). This debate is still quite alive and controversial, centered on the concepts of complexity and of evaluation as useful criteria to be applied also in television studies, in order to overcome the traditional hierarchical opposition between cinema and television.

The differences between the American and the Italian (and European) cultural attitude on this topic is clearly expressed by Mittell:

‘Quality television’ is a more commonly use phrase in Europe, referencing upscale fictional programs in the press and academic discourse, while it is used far less frequently in the United States, even

though much of what is labeled ‘quality’ is American television. Most American media scholars regard the emphasis on quality with skepticism and even have outright hostility toward regarding television as an aesthetic object” (Mittell, 2015: 210).

Today, quality tv is still an issue in contemporary Italian debate on tv series, which is still polarized in the opposition between television and cinema: the more a tv series is similar to cinema, the more it is considered ad an example of “quality television”, but often without a clearer definition of what “quality” means. In order to overcome this useless and maybe anti-historical categorization, also in the Italian seriality studies it would be useful to take into consideration the discussion of “cinematic television” coming from US television studies (Mills, 2013; Jaramillo, 2013). As Mills points out

it’s clear that the term ‘cinematic’ is associated with hierarchical ideas of quality, and is perceived to be a compliment when appropriated for television... This means that television style only seems to become of interest when it is seen to draw on the conventions of another medium which, in more broad terms, has far more cultural legitimacy... Its use [of the term ‘cinematic’] in television studies is never innocent (Mills 2013: 64-5).

Even though the debate on quality television is still alive in the US either, American scholars have traditionally paid attention to “production values” broadly (Cardwell, 2007: 26), and to the economic and technological context where tv drama developed, influencing its aesthetic dimension. The industrial nature of television and of media in general is taken into account also by the debate on complex tv drama, thus broadening the horizon of the discussion and somehow blurring and downsizing the comparison with cinematic values.

While in Italy the studies on media production (and on television seriality production in particular) are quite a few (Scaglioni and Barra, 2014; Barra et al. 2016; Menduni and Catolfi, 2009; Cardini, 2004), in the United States the studies on complex television and also on the aesthetics of television often take into account (Mittell, 2009, 2015; Pearson, 2009; Mills, 2013) both the role of economic investments in the development of television seriality, without penalising it with respect to cinema (Hesmondhalgh, 2008), and the role of digitalization, which has deeply changed not only audience practices, but also shooting and editing techniques, thus enabling

television to reach a “cinematic” technical quality (Nelson, 2007: 43). Technical improvements have played a major role in convincing cinema professionals (actors, directors, screenwriters) to take part to new complex tv drama shows: in the pre-digital Hollywood era, they would have barely accepted to be involved in television productions.

In Italy, on the contrary, from the beginning of television studies the industrial nature of television has been neglected, and in part still is, and the economic value of seriality has long been ignored (Abruzzese, 1984; Cardini, 2004), while on the other hand a solid scholarship has flourished on the aesthetics of film. As a consequence, cinema and television continue to be considered as two opposite media, where the first one is somehow “better” than the second one. Such a persistent attitude is mirrored in the often animated debate about the features of complex tv drama.

NEW DEFINITIONS (AND NEW CONTRADICTIONS): THE TELE-CINEPHILE

As we have tried to underline so far, complex tv drama is the combination of several elements: the turning to the narrative unit of the season expands the storytelling potential of the film along new and creative dimensions of time and space; technological changes allow a prolific exchange process between production routines and creative professions from cinema to television and the other way around; the growth of social media enables the new generations of viewers-fans to show their skills and creativity by discussing the complexity of dense narrative structures, multi-screen fruition and binge-watching practices. Given these elements, it is possible to retrace in the Italian debate on tv series a peculiar characteristic which summarizes many of the contradictions highlighted so far, and which can be termed “tele-cinephilia” (Cardini, 2014).

This concept is an adaptation to the Italian context of the seminal “telephilia” definition by John Caughie, that is “an awkward neologism which is itself a provocation” (Caughie, 2006: 6). Caughie answers to the question: “Is television drama the last refuge of people who don’t really like television?” (ibidem) by discussing the term “cinephilia” with reference mainly to the work of Elsaesser (2005) and trying to apply the same idea to the “love for television”. In Caughie’s argumentation, cinephilia can be defined as the idealized love for cinema itself, together with memory and nostalgia, that generates an attachment which “drives a deep emotional engagement with

the critical object which is also a love object” (Caughie, 2006: 9). Would it be possible a similar attitude towards television? In Caughie’s analysis, the dignity of television compared to cinema is evident, and it comes from its capability to “ask of us a kind of intellectuality, a degree of intelligent detachment from the shock and discontinuity of ‘the flow’” (ivi., 15). For our analysis, it is quite interesting to observe that Caughie’s “television” is not strictly referred to tv drama, but to the broader concept of “good television”. Telephilia, in Caughie’s words, describes the love for those peculiar aspects of television language which “ask for our perceptual intelligence... and... may offer an exteriority to be appraised rather than an interiority in which to lose ourselves” (ibidem).

In Caughie’s argumentation, the non-hierarchical relationship between cinema and television is quite clear, and it mirrors the point of view of a large part of the academic international debate. As a consequence, within this conceptualization it is possible to distinguish between a “cinephile” and a “telephile” attitude.

In the Italian academic debate, on the contrary, such a neat and non-hierarchical distinction between cinema and television is still difficult to achieve. For this reason, it can be more appropriate to speak of “tele-cinephilia” while referring to the Italian attitude towards complex tv drama, where the specificity of television values is quite often downgraded in comparison with the “cinematic” features which give relevance to some tv series in comparison with others.

As a consequence, Italian tele-cinephiles can be portrayed as cinema lovers, who consider complex tv dramas mainly as a form of expanded cinema. They do not watch traditional television, nor do they love mainstream movies: they are closely linked to high-brow culture and art as opposed to low culture and “commercial” media. Social networks are useful for tele-cinephiles to try out (and show) their cinema expertise in commenting episodes. For tele-cinephiles, *True Detective*, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, *Fargo* maybe cannot be strictly considered as movies, but certainly they are not television shows. They are particularly active in blogs and social networks, where they are proud to state their “addiction” to tv series. A rapid glance to the titles of some of the most popular Italian blogs can clearly show what can be defined as a “tele-cinephile attitude”: www.serial.minds, www.amoreperleserietv.com (“love for tv series”), maniaciseriali.blogspot.it (“serial addicted”), www.seriangolo.it (“the serial corner for quality tv series”), just to mention only a few.

As tele-cinephiles often implicitly state in their reviews (or social network comments), watching a tv show is not the

same immersive experience as watching a movie: as a consequence, in their opinion, complex tv dramas are more like cinema than television. For the same reason, tele-cinephiles love binge-watching (Poniewicz, 2012). Compulsiveness is another quite common feature in tele-cinephiles, together with “nerdiness” (Nugent, 2011), that in this context means showing hyper-specialized knowledge and skills, even about secondary aspects of seriality; being the first ones to get new information about narrative and technical aspects of the shows, previews, gossip; to be recognized as experts in their social media communities.

In the above-mentioned international debate on complex tv drama and telephilia (Caughie, 2006), one recent key-point is whether binge-watching can influence the comprehension of storylines, or whether this practice can affect the pleasure of watching serialized tv (Jurgensen, 2012). Also on this topic, a further analysis of Italian practices should be useful in order to better understand these peculiar aspects of “tele-cinephilia”.

SOME CONCLUSIVE SUGGESTIONS (AND WARNINGS): IN THE FIELD OF TV DRAMA STUDIES, IS ITALY AT RISK OF REMAINING “A PROVINCE OF THE EMPIRE”?

I have attempted here to pinpoint some of the major contradictions in the Italian debate on tv series, and tried to sketch the outlook of a peculiar attitude towards its fruition, which can be termed “tele-cinephilia”.

In the Italian scenario of tv seriality studies, some risky and therefore interesting issues seem to emerge.

The first issue, as it has been argued before, is *the predominance of film studies categories in the analysis of television drama*. Instead of exploring the recent changes in the mediascape, in order to focus on the characteristics of the new forms of cinema and television storytelling, the Italian debate risks to underestimate the complexity of the new tv drama by applying to its analysis mainly the critical, aesthetic and theoretical categories of film studies, ideologically downsizing – if not totally ignoring – its television components. This peculiar attitude is clearly observable not only in the academic debate or in common discourse, but also in everyday practices of television scheduling. For instance, before the opening of a dedicated channel (Sky Atlantic, opened in 2014), tv “quality” drama was scheduled by Sky Cinema, a

channel almost exclusively dedicated to movies. In line with this attitude, the marketing and programming strategies of the new channel Sky Atlantic, moreover, are quite similar to those traditionally used for the promotion of movies: previews for journalists, premieres at film festivals, awarding ceremonies in classic cinema style.

Another example of Italian “tele-cinephiliac” attitude is the deep change in the structure of the historic dictionary of Italian movies “il Morandini”. In its 2014 edition it changed its title into *Dizionario dei film e delle serie televisive (Dictionary of films and television series)* including 250 reviews of tv dramas, a genre which was never before taken into account by its authors.

Also the recent hype on the annual ceremony of the Emmy Awards is an example of tele-cinephilia. Until a few years ago the Emmys were considered nothing more than “second-rate Academy Awards”, just because they dealt with television shows. Nowadays, thanks to the inclusion of tv dramas in their scheduling, they have become a must-watch event even for cinema lovers, which involve increasingly larger audiences who comment on social networks and blogs.

The second issue is related to the critical attitude towards domestic seriality. It would be worth analyzing with more attention the *ongoing comparison between Italian and US television seriality*. Every time a new American tv drama is released, the usual volley of complaints is inevitably heard coming from several fronts (academics, professionals, journalists, and the mainstream discourse) according to which “producing *Breaking Bad* (or *True Detective*, or *Fargo*, etc.) would always be impossible in Italy”. If this attitude is explainable when referred to fans, the same cannot be said if it comes from scholars (or professionals), who should be well aware that such comparisons are unjustified.

Moreover, it seems that the success of many mainstream domestic productions is not worth being studied by tele-cinephiles. For instance, prime time series produced by broadcasters Mediaset and Rai can turn to be more easily the focus of ironic comments than of serious analyses capable of explaining their huge audiences. Even though these shows can be quite different in style, production values and technical aspects from complex tv drama (Cardini, 2004; Buonanno, 2002; Grasso, 2007; Innocenti and Pescatore 2009), they are nevertheless a cultural benchmark which cannot be ignored in order to understand most of the Italian scholars’ attitude towards domestic seriality.

An important step in this direction is the analysis of the more recent tv series produced by Sky (Scaglioni and Barra,

2014), which highlights the productive and narrative reasons of their success. *Gomorra – La serie* (2014-) is a clear example of this new trend, but it would be important to study also the reasons of failures (like for instance *1992 [2015]*, the series on the recent scandals in Italian politics, which was hailed by critics but not appreciated by the audience).

Moreover, some recent Italian series such as *Braccialetti rossi* (Raiuno, 2014-), *Tutti pazzi per amore* (Raiuno, 2008-2012), or *Tutto può succedere* (Raiuno, 2015-) could be considered with no doubts as complex tv series. They have reported a huge success both from audiences and critics; two of them stem from a careful and difficult process of adaptation from a foreign format (*Braccialetti Rossi* is adapted from the Spanish format *Polseres vermelles [2012-]*, aired by TV3, while *Tutto può succedere* is adapted from the US series *Parenthood [2010-2015]*, produced and aired by NBC); and all of them are produced and aired by the mainstream broadcaster Raiuno, which is used to more traditional forms of tv fiction.

To sum up, the analysis of complex tv drama in Italy should stay clear from the risk of further drifting into another useless opposition, according to which Italian top tv seriality should be only the one produced and broadcast by pay tv, a “niche” product close to cinema and not also, and with full rights, some of the new series produced and broadcast by traditional mainstream television.

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