

## INTRODUCTION

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In the past few years television serial narratives have gone through some relentless changes in their structure, as well as in the way they are perceived and “used” or “re-used” by the audiences. This new wave of serial production has been quite well analyzed by scholars from different countries. Therefore, several books and essays have been published that focus on different aspects of serial productions, from the narrative construction to the audience reception. Nevertheless, the main focus of these studies seems to always be on US productions. This issue of *Cinéma & Cie* aims to draw more attention to European TV series.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors deserve the focus of this issue dedicated to serialized audiovisual content produced in Europe. First, TV serial narratives have become one of the most successful among trans-nationally distributed media products, benefiting both producers and distributors. Second, these cultural products appeal to a wide range of consumers, are a common factor across European markets (otherwise differing in many significant aspects) and are designed to be enjoyed through different devices (from conventional broadcast television to the Internet). These factors make audiovisual serialized formats suitable for investigating potential transformations/trends and the construction of the cultural imagery of media convergence in Europe. The digital production, distribution and consumption of contemporary TV series allow a continuous reshaping of content. This modularity, flexibility and fast-paced adaptation offer the opportunity for serialized content to engage in direct interchange with user communities and thus to better suit European communities’ needs and values. Thus, working on European TV series also means to take into consideration a wide and diversified landscape. In every EU country TV serial production is structured according to different industrial, technological and cultural models, leading to the affirmation of certain genres and formats. From this perspective, we think it might be useful to spend a few words on the Italian situation, where the serial production starts simultaneously to that of the public TV system.<sup>2</sup>

The first serials produced by RAI and called *sceneggiati*, mainly based on novels and literary works, date back to 1954. For a long time the “serie all’italiana” (Italian style series) has been characterized by the limited number of episodes lasting 90 minutes each and by a multistrand narrative structure. Scholars often talked about a “weak” serial model, mainly based on the already existing familiarity of the audience with the plots: biopic, products inspired by true stories and literary adaptations.<sup>3</sup> The very same definition of “serie all’italiana” was coined expressly to mark the discontinuity toward other serial formats.

The golden age of the Italian “sceneggiato” lasted until the beginning of the 1980s, when the

changes that followed the 1970s deregulation opened up the market to commercial broadcasters.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1980s scholars and audiences started talking about “telefilm” in order to refer to all those serial products, mainly coming from the US, that had just invaded the programming, especially on commercial broadcast TV.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, the production of TV serial dramas is indicated in Italy as “fiction”. Since the mid-90s, with the resumption of national production, Italian TV serial narratives adopted a specific production system, such as soap operas, through the production of soap-like programmes such as *Un posto al sole* (1996-) and *Centovetrine* (2001-). Moreover, we have been witnessing a significant increase in those programmes that present a multi-seasonal continuity (such as *Distretto di polizia*, 2000-2012; *La squadra*, 2000-2007; *RIS – Delitti imperfetti*, 2001-2009; *Tutti pazzi per amore*, 2008-), as it often happens with American TV serial productions. The opening toward longer forms of serialization is undoubtedly mediated by the knowledge of American, European and Extra-European serial formats. It is not by chance that many Italian productions are in fact adaptations of original foreign formats, as it happens for instance with *Un medico in famiglia* (1998-) and *I Cesaroni* (2006-), based respectively on the Spanish formats *Un Médico de familia* (1995-1999) and *Los Serrano* (2003-2008); with *Love Bugs* (2004-2007), Italian adaptation of the Canadian format *Un gars, une fille* (1997-2003) and of its eponymous French version (1999-2003); but also with *La squadra*, based on the British *The Bill* (1984-2010) as well as with *Un posto al sole*, adapting to Naples the Australian format *Neighbours* (1985-). The most recent case is *In treatment* (2013-), inspired by the American production (2008-2010), which in turn based on the Israeli show *BeTipul* (2005-2008).

How does Italian TV serial production fit into a TV environment more and more characterized by technological, institutional and cultural convergence processes?<sup>6</sup> It is evident that serial narratives have become more flexible than they were in the past, overflowing the usual time and space boundaries and spreading on several channels through complex production and promotional mechanisms able to generate strong involvement and participation of the viewers. When compared to the more traditional TV programming and shows, contemporary serial production is evidently marked by an open narrative structure, by its easy replicability, immediate remixability and permanent extendibility on other media.<sup>7</sup> These features define the transmedia nature of contemporary TV serial production and allow the viewer to keep an active role in the process of construction and development of the narrative universe, fragmenting and diversifying the viewer experience in different formats and on different channels.<sup>8</sup>

As far as the formats are concerned, we are seeing the birth of new serial narrative models, originated by a matrix product designed for TV fruition. In fact, it is now very common to produce a variety of ancillary products that are originated by the diegetic fictional universe of the TV show. For instance, the viral promotional videos teasing the viewers curiosity that circulate through the videosharing platforms or the *mobisodes* and *webisodes*, designed to condense and summarize contents already offered on TV or to explore narrative patterns not already discovered by the TV weekly show.<sup>9</sup> In Italy, the traditional low serialized narrative formats representing the majority of the production of the broadcasters haven’t allowed yet the full development and exploitation of these mechanisms. Nevertheless, some efforts have been done both by broadcasters and pay TV. For example, RAI worked on the use of the Web and of its potential effect in the involvement of the viewers for the series *Tutti pazzi per amore* (season 1, 2008-2009), using for the first time some ironic viral videos that insert the series protagonists in classical film environments. On a

dedicated YouTube channel viewers could find the horror, western and sci-fi versions of the series trailers. Although very interesting and new, this formula has not been used in the following years. The reasons behind this choice must be found, among others, in the average target audience of this kind of production. Analyzing the good performance of the recent series *Volare*, it is evident that, although it had a good success on the commercial 25-54 year-old target (3.739.000 viewers), the core audience is composed by an older group of people, mainly over 65 (4.363.000 viewers) and the group 55-64 (2.219.000).<sup>10</sup>

This attitude toward the use of new media and digital technologies to support TV serial narratives is not much different if we take a look to the production of the Italian privately owned main broadcaster Mediaset. Nevertheless, as far as this broadcaster is concerned, it is possible to observe a certain interest toward the production of merchandising, able to extend the experience of vision and fruition on other channels. An example might be that of *I Cesaroni*, series from which books, music CDs, stickers, board games and much more have been originated. Still, we are not facing a transmedia storytelling project yet. Apparently, among Italian broadcasters the only one who has been working on transmedia storytelling projects is Sky that back in 2008 with the series *Quo vadis, baby?* had started this trend with a product which, originally a novel, had been adapted into a movie and found many ways of becoming transmedial, through the use of social networks (through the Facebook profiles of the series characters) or the offer of games for mobile phones. This trend continued for other Sky productions, and in particular for *Romanzo Criminale – La serie* (2008-2010, born from the same path: novel-movie-TV series) through viral videos posted on YouTube as part of the series marketing campaign. Sky production of TV serial narratives is still short in number, nevertheless the broadcaster seems to be interested in carrying on this trend through some ongoing projects, such as *Gomorra* and *Diabolik* that in some cases easily fit the transmedia storytelling design (we are thinking for instance of *Diabolik*, announced for 2014, but already present on the Web through a short trailer).

Nowadays it is possible to affirm that the investment on transmedia narrative projects by national broadcasters is still very limited. The main reason behind this trend is the average age of the target audience of the Italian series. Mediaset, Rai and Sky mainly produce prime time serial dramas and do not have productions specifically aimed to teen-agers or to target audiences highly familiarized with web and digital media. Other reasons might reside in the contraction of the broadcaster investments on this kind of production that happened after the economic crisis between 2008 and 2011. Moreover, there is a scarce policy of diversification of the sources of income, since nowadays they are limited to the DVD release, without very inadequate exploitation of the web and mobile platforms.

Still, Italian fiction confirmed itself in the past few months as the leading item in the broadcaster programming.<sup>11</sup> Italian production is in fact able to catalyze a remarkable percentage of viewers and to confirm itself as one of the most appreciated show format on national programming. For this reason, despite the high production costs, the relevant transformations undergone in the media market offer many new opportunities for this kind of emerging products. In particular, though still facing a difficulty in the serial production export, the transmedia investment might guarantee new formats and new audiences, also beyond the national borders, and together with the exploitation of new release markets might also allow for the compensation of high production costs. Moreover, investing on transmedia projects might provide the chance to take significant advantage of serial

production, using the narrative elements on different platforms and addressing them to different audiences. From the same concept many products and projects can sprout, exploiting all their potential.

As such, we believe it is very fruitful to focus this issue of the journal on European TV series, considering national specificities as an element of richness within the complex and multifaceted frame of transnational production and circulation. One of the main reasons that prompted us was to see how research and studies on European TV dramas and TV series production circulate outside the context of national studies. As a matter of fact, a big part of these researches does not go beyond the national boundaries for several reasons, such as the linguistic problem and because some of the productions, which are relevant and significant within a national context, are not sold and known abroad. Therefore, a second issue we decided to investigate is that of the circulation of European TV dramas within the EU, as well as outside of the EU. Moreover, we found particularly interesting the investigation of the domestic and American characteristics of EU TV dramas (in terms of formats, genres...) together with the peculiarities of the European modes of production.

These and other relevant issues have been acknowledged and interpreted by the contributors of this issue, who worked on some of these trajectories, intertwining for instance the analysis of specific genres (crime, neo-noir, historical) with the international circulation of these productions. This is what has been done by Bernard Papin and Gunhild Agger, whose articles are focused respectively on the French production *Nicholas Le Floch* (2008-) and on Danish *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012) in order to analyse, in the first case, the reasons behind the international success of a product deeply rooted in French history and culture and strongly connoted by its “frenchness”. In the second case, the main focus is on the combination of the genre elements (noir and mainly Nordic noir) and its effect on the three seasons of the series. Paola Valentini worked instead on the national, productive and representative specificities, analyzing Italian detective and crime series, strongly tied to the traditional genre called *giallo*.

Another issue that has been addressed by the contributors is the relationship between European and American quality TV. This is the main focus of the article by Stéfany Boisvert, who applied the concept of quality television to British production, underlining the evolution of the concept of quality and raising questions about the future of TV production in the UK. Lucia Tralli’s article is also concerned with British quality TV, focusing on the online activity of *Downton Abbey*’s fans. Not surprisingly, TV serial narratives are among the TV formats that are considered more engaging by the audiences who are involved in a rich and intense participatory activity, commonly labeled as *fan fiction*, that is composed by several different practices. Mapping a wide range of activities including fansites, Tumblr, live-tweet, fanfictions and fanvideos, Tralli focuses on the traits of *Downton Abbey* that seem to be more appreciated by the fans and to which they dedicate more time and attention.

Finally, the last three contributions are dedicated to the analysis of national production, with the aim of overcoming that closure that often leads the research on TV serial narratives to be confined within national borders. The cases of Poland, Turkey and Spain are analyzed with a rich amount of details and data by Sylwia Szostak, Cem Pekman and Selim Tüzün, Patricia Diego and María del Mar Grandío, providing the reader with useful tools in order to approach the specific national production environment.

In Szostak’s analysis of Polish serial production of the 2000s, it is extremely relevant to keep

in mind the relationship with American production, that invaded the scheduling of Polish broadcasters after 1989, and which today represents the primary model for local production both from an aesthetic and narrative point of view. Also Turkey has a relation of dependence with the US, since in Turkey commercial TV market gained a certain solidness only in the 1990s, beginning a prosperous production activity ever since. This activity also found another incentive in the 2000s thanks to the exporting of productions that reached a wide range of countries, from Eastern Europe to Middle East. A contrary movement is instead identified by Diego and del Mar Grandío in the history of Spanish serial production, always strongly linked to the procedure of the adaptation from theatre or literature, which in recent years seems to favor the foreign (from US, Latin America and Europe) series formats replica.

Of course many topics and questions remain open, but we hope that the issue you are about to read may provide interesting and stimulating starting points for research and study into European TV series.

This introduction, written by Veronica Innocenti, has been conceived and discussed by both co-curators.

- 1 In order to deepen the analysis we list here some useful, but of course not complete, bibliographical references in chronological order. See, among others: Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens, Katalin Lustyic (eds.), *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, Routledge, London 2012; Andreas Fickers, Catherine Johnson (eds.), *Transnational Television History. A Comparative Approach*, Routledge, New York 2012; Barbara Selznick, *Global Television: Coproducing Culture*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2008; Jonathan Bignell, Andreas Fickers (eds.), *A European Television History*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA)-Oxford 2008; Mary Kelly, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Denis McQuail (eds.), *The Media in Europe. The Euromedia Handbook*, Sage, London 2004; Jérôme Bourdon, "Shakespeare, Dallas et le commissaire: une histoire de la fiction télévisée en Europe," in *Les Temps des Médias*, no. 2, 2004, pp. 176-197; Els De Bens, Hedwig de Smael, "The Inflow of American Television Fiction on European Broadcasting Channels Revisited," in *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2001, pp. 51-76; Milly Buonanno (ed.), *Eurofiction 1998. Secondo Rapporto sulla fiction televisiva in Europa*, RAI-ERI, Roma 1998; Milly Buonanno (ed.), *Imaginary Dreamscapes. Television Fiction in Europe. First Report of the Eurofiction Project*, ULP/John Libbey, Luton 1997; Liebes Tamar, Livingstone Sonia, "European Soap Operas: The Diversification of a Genre," in *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1998, pp. 147-180; Jean-Pierre Jézéquel (ed.), *La Production de fiction en Europe*, La Documentation française-INA, Paris 1993; Preben Sepstrup, *Transnationalisation of Television in Western Europe*, John Libbey, London 1990; Alessandro Silj, *East of Dallas. The European Challenge to American TV*, British Film Institute, London 1988.
- 2 The official beginning of the TV broadcasting in Italy is 3 January 1954.
- 3 See Milly Buonanno, *Leggere la fiction. Narrami o diva rivisitata*, Liguori, Napoli 1996, and Id., *Le formule del racconto televisivo. La sovversione del tempo nelle narrative seriali*, Sansoni, Milano 2002.
- 4 On the history of Italian television see: Franco Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Costume, società e politica*, 6° ed., Marsilio, Venezia 2009; Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, Nuova ed. aggiornata, Garzanti, Milano 2004; Francesca Anania, *Breve storia della radio e della televisione italiana*, Carocci, Roma 2004; Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni, *Che cos'è la televisione. Il piccolo schermo fra cultura e società. I generi, l'industria, il pubblico*, Garzanti, Milano 2005; Aldo Grasso, *La TV italiana dalle origini*, Garzanti, Milano 1998.
- 5 Seminal works on this topic are: Francesco Casetti (ed.), *L'immagine al plurale. Serialità e ripetizione nel cinema e nella televisione*, Marsilio, Venezia 1984, and Id. (a cura di), *Un'altra volta ancora. Strategie di comunicazione e forme di sapere nel telefilm americano in Italia*, ERI/Edizioni Rai, Torino

1984. More recent works are: Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, *Le nuove forme della serialità televisiva. Storia, linguaggio e temi*, Archetipolibri, Bologna 2008; Daniela Cardini, *La lunga serialità televisiva. Origini e modelli*, Carocci, Roma 2004.
- 6 On convergence the main reference is to Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York 2006. See, also, Richard Collins, *Media and Identity in Contemporary Europe: Consequences of Global Convergence*, Intellect, Bristol-Portland (OR) 2002; Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni (eds.), *Televisione convergente. La tv oltre il piccolo schermo*, LINK-RTI, Milano 2010; Massimo Scaglioni, Anna Sfondini (eds.), *MultiTv. L'esperienza televisiva nell'età della convergenza*, Carocci, Roma 2008.
  - 7 See Lev Manovich, *Software Culture*, Olivares, Milano 2010.
  - 8 See Veronica Innocenti, Guglielmo Pescatore, "Information Architecture in Contemporary Television Series," in *Journal of Information Architecture*, journalofia.org, forthcoming 2013.
  - 9 Veronica Innocenti, "This is Snack Culture And Boy, is it Tasty (not to Mention Addictive). La migrazione delle forme seriali dalla televisione al Web," in *Close Up*, no. 22, 2007, pp. 39-47.
  - 10 Source of these data is Auditel, the Italian society that collects and publishes Italian television ratings.
  - 11 Here are some data on the productions that in 2013 gained more than 20% share. On 18 and 19 February 2013 the two-episode drama *Volare – La grande storia di Domenico Modugno* (Rai1) attracted more than 11 million viewers. Very good performance also for *Un medico in famiglia* (Rai1) that attracted 7.393.000 viewers (24,90%) on 3 February 2013. On 8 January 2013 the Mediaset fiction *Ultimo. L'occhio del falco* (Canale 5) was seen by 7.048.000 viewers (24,56%). Sources of these data is Auditel, ASCA.