

Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy¹

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Abstract

The article will reconstructs the «success story» of end-of-century italian tv fiction, within the context of cultural processes and industrial and regulatory factors that have grounded and supported it. The elements which relate the television story-telling to the italian identity, will be focused; with special reference to the powerful wave of stories which, at the millennium turn, have drawn inspiration and contents from the source of the catholic sentiment and the collective memory of italian population.

Key words: television drama, italy, catholic imagination, collective memory.

Resumo

Este artigo reconstruirá uma «história de sucesso» da ficção italiana para a TV do final do século, no contexto dos processos culturais e dos fatores industriais e de regulamentação que a consolidaram e a respaldaram. Serão abordados os elementos que relacionam a narração de histórias na TV à identidade italiana, com especial referência à onda poderosa de histórias que, na virada do milênio, buscou inspiração e conteúdo no sentimento católico e na memória coletiva da população italiana.

Palavras chave: teledrama, itália, imaginação católica, memória coletiva.

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OVER THE LAST DECADE the television fiction has turned into the central story-telling system of Italian society. In a country where reading books and newspapers is a scarcely diffused habit, and where the national cinema ceased since the Seventies to be a medium of popular entertainment, television managed to play the role of contemporary 'supernarrator'. The production of domestic drama, which in the Eighties and the early Nineties had dramatically decreased under the impact of foreign imports, has significantly increased in relatively short time; and a real explosion of huge successes has rewarded the intensive supply of homegrown fiction stories, firmly established in prime time of the main channels, where the american imports have to a lesser or greater extent disappeared.

The article will reconstructs the 'success story' of end-of-century Italian tv fiction, within the context of cultural processes and industrial and regulatory factors that have grounded and supported it. The elements which relate the television story-telling to the Italian identity, will be focused; with special reference to the powerful wave of stories which, at the millennium turn, have drawn inspiration and contents from the source of the catholic sentiment and the collective memory of Italian population.

Over the television season 1995-1996, only 130 hours of first run domestic fiction were broadcast in Italy on the six national television channels (three public, three private channels) This was the lowest amount among the five big European countries.

Ten years later, the supply of first run homegrown fiction on the terrestrial channels overcome 800 hours.

This impressive increase - one that places Italy on the fourth position in Europe after Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, and before France - is evidence and ratification of a decade of continuous growth of television drama production and supply. It is during this last decade that a industrial system of television story-telling has established itself in Italy.

In order to understand what this process of change has meant and how it has impacted on production, programming and consumption of domestic drama, we need to go back a little to the history of Italian television.

AT THE ORIGIN IT WAS *Teleromanzo*

Italian state television (RAI) was born in 1954 and for more that two decades, that is until the mid-1970s, it worked as a public service in a monopolistic system: these are the years that some nostalgically remind like a sort of *golden age* of Italian drama.

The monopolistic phase was strongly influenced by pedagogical ideologies – television was considered as an instrument of education and acculturation of the audience – and by a managerial staff trained in humanities. As far as fiction is concerned, the mix between this pedagogical project and high culture gave rise to a genre which soon became a specific and distinctly domestic field of production: the *teleromanzo* (*telenovel*, not to be confused with *telenovela*) or *sceneggiato*, a term still in use in Italy to name fiction, or television drama, in general.

The *teleromanzo* was a story constructed in few (six to ten) instalments, leading to a narrative closure. In terms of format, the *teleromanzo* was tantamount to a contemporary miniseries – even though the contemporary miniseries are a bit shorter: two up to four, rarely six parts, -. In terms of content, it was built on the “already known “: be it, as it more often happened, a literary work, or a historical event, or a biography of a lived personage. *Literary adaptation* or *costume* or *period drama*, as it was called in other countries (United Kingdom, for instance) where it equally flourished in the early days of public service television, the hugely popular *teleromanzo* became and remained for more than two decades the “national genre” of Italian television fiction.

Although in the long run the *teleromanzo* happened to undergo substantial changes – for instance, dealing more and more with contemporary family and social issues, or whatever – as a basically *short* serial it set the standard for what it is still considered “typical Italian”, and accomplished a role of cultural legitimation, providing the link between the “aristocratic” model of cinema fiction based on prototypes, and the “popular” models of the repetitive and serialized television fiction. This tradition still today enables Italy to be the first producer of miniseries (short serials) among the five largest European countries.

In this connection, it is worth stressing that up to a very short time ago a domestic production of serialized television narratives (long lasting series, daily soap, prime time serial ecc.) didn’t exist at all in Italy. This was because of two and largely related reasons: the small dimension of the Italian television industry, kind of “cottage industry”, built on a old and well rooted tradition of short running and movie-like formats, such as tv movies, few parts miniseries, four/six episodes series; *and* the fierce opposition against seriality, as a US egemonic cultural form, on the part of intellectuals and professional circles (authors, directors, actors, producers and many others).



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

The anti-seriality attitude, in turn part and parcel of the quite élitist and dismissive-of-the-popular Italian culture – as pointed out by Antonio Gramsci decades ago - proved its oppositional strength in the 80s, at the height of the great transformation of the Italian television system. As it is widely known, from mid-70s onwards the Italian *mediascape* was shaken by a deep and turbulent change: commercial networks began to appear first locally and then nationally. The most immediate effect of this transformation was an enormous increase of the television supply and a dramatic need to fill the schedules by quantity of “volume television”, that domestic production could not satisfy. Therefore, private networks gave way to heavy imports of American fiction and public television, caught in the competition, felt obliged to do the same. As a consequence, Italy became, and remained for many years, the major European importer of foreign (mainly US, Japanese and Brazilian) fiction.

It was during this stage that Italians viewers got to know, and became familiar with, new formats and genres such as the sitcom and the serial, either open or closed; they experienced for the first time, and were fascinated by the daily narratives of the north-American soaps and latin-American telenovelas, and were exposed to an unending offer of US police series.

Given the popularity earned by the serialized foreign fiction, the opportunity to start producing themselves domestic serials and long running series was taken into consideration, for the first time, by the Italian public broadcasters. But the project collided with powerful oppositions of interests and professional cultures, both inside and outside television circles. The long lasting debate raised by the project can not be examined in detail here; suffice it to say that many voices fiercely fought against an idea perceived as a surrender to “alien” modes of production and narration, as an unacceptable way to go “americanized” of our own free will. Issues of identity and otherness, national and international “ways of television”, tradition and change were intellectually and emotionally involved in this debate. Public television gave up.

The commercial channels, on their part, were scarcely sensitive to matters of original production, being satisfied with politics of imports on the one hand; on the other hand, when they started producing small quantity of fiction in the second half of the 80s they made number of series but also demonstrated to be fully aware that, in order to obtain “legitimation”, first and foremost they had to join the national tradition built on non-serialized fiction. Meaning, tv movies and above all miniseries.

As a consequence of the situation sketched above – exploitation of foreign serialized fiction, also for its economic convenience in comparison with the the more expensive domestic programmes; refusal to put in place a production system on industrial basis seen as a betrayal of national tradition – Italian television fiction entered a period of decline. Production and supply started falling down dramatically.

SCARCITY: ESCAPE FROM DRAMA

A phase of “scarcity”, to borrow John Ellis¹ conceptual categories, began. Actually the first half of the nineties was characterised by an authentic “escape from drama” by Italian broadcasters, not so much in terms of overall supply, fully catered for by north and south American programmes, but in terms of domestic contents production and offer. For economic, political and cultural reasons, the national production suffered a drastic fall, reaching an historical low of 130 hours supplied in the ‘95-‘96 season. Economic factors seriously influenced this state of affairs: public and private television crossed the threshold of the decade weighed down by huge debts, to the extent of thousands of billions. Moreover, private channels had to face up to the costs resulting from the creation of news editorial offices, required by a new law which obliged them to broadcast news programmes, and opened up a new competition front between state and commercial television. It was almost inevitable that fiction production should undergo more or less radical cuts, being the most expensive of television genres.

Secondly, and perhaps more worthy of comment, the “escape from fiction” took place, in the early nineties, during an authentic, politically *turbulent environment*, in which both state and private television were involved, though each in different ways. This turbulent environment helped to spread a climate of anxiety and instability within the broadcasting companies, making it difficult for them to plan for the future and dissuading them from investing in medium and long-term production projects and processes, which television fiction requires. State and private channels preferred to divert investments and resources into “flow” programmes, which were cheaper and more rapidly produced: news, current affairs, variety shows, talk shows, and above all reality shows, a new genre growing rapidly in the early nineties (and striking back at great impact a decade later, as we can see nowadays). In Italy, fiction was evacuated from the schedules in favour of the reality show, which where also theorized to be a “surrogate fiction”, able to satisfy almost for free the need of the audiences for stories “coming from our own backyard”.

¹ J. Ellis, *Seeing things*, Tauris, London 2000.



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

AVAILABILITY: THE SERIALISATION OF DAYTIME AND PRIME TIME FICTION

It was only in the second half of the nineties that the development of national fiction industry gradually became a relevant issue in the editorial strategies and policies of Italian televisions. Investments grew thanks to the increased revenues from advertising and the production machine started up again. It was not immediately a “takeoff”, but the fiction industry did begin to supply national channel schedules with a greater quantity of domestic contents. A phase of “availability”, to quote again John Ellis, was set in motion, leading in few years to the current “abundance”.

And then the seriality arrived, either in daytime or in prime time.

Together with (and partly as a consequence of) the advent of the multichannel environment linked to the new satellite and digital technologies, *this is undoubtedly the most remarkable transformation of the Italian television landscape in the last decade.*

The reasons for the relaunch of the Italian television industry can be attributed to four main factors:

1. A new regulatory framework. Law n° 122, formally approved in the spring of 1998 but awaited long before, established the shares of net revenues that broadcasters had to reinvest in national and European production of fiction and film: 20% of the license fee for public television, 10% of advertising for private television. Overall, a figure estimated at around 600 million Euros annually.
2. The consequences of technological innovation and pay-tv penetration. Thematic channels in the multi-channel environment were absorbing growing amounts of cinema and sport, taking them away from terrestrial channels which had to fill the voids with other sought-after genres; thus they needed to have larger quantities of fiction available.
3. The devaluation of American imports, not so much for economic reasons – it is still cheaper today to acquire than to produce – but because of the “impoverishment of the resource”. That is to say, the vanishing capacity of US products to attract mass audiences in local markets. Although still remarkable in quantity, the American fare was being gradually evacuated from prime time of Italian (and European) channels.

4. Finally, and perhaps most important, the telling evidence of “cultural proximity” which presides over television consumption and which in Italy, as elsewhere, enables the *television audiences to seek and appreciate first and foremost the recognisable and familiar worlds, narrated in domestic fiction stories*. Of course, this is not at all a new phenomenon - even at “Dallas” times domestic fiction, if available, proved more attractive than US imports - but it acquired more visibility at a time when imports were losing grounds on viewers preferences.

The impact of all this can be seen in the current schedules, now offering four domestic daily soaps, several prime time serials, plus many other long running series. More than a half of domestic supply is provided today by serialized fiction.

The turning point coincided with *A place in the sun*, the daily soap produced by Grundy for the access prime time of the third public channel, which made its debut in October 1996, and has celebrated last year its tenth anniversary. At first received with some scepticism and suspicion, *A place in the sun* (inspired by the Australian *Neighbours*) eventually managed to create a winning image for itself and soon became the trademark and indeed the pride of the channel. Set in the southern city of Naples, highly visible and enjoyable thanks to many scenes shot on location, *A place in the sun* puts in place a community of demographically and socially diversified characters living in apartments located in the same building in downtown Naples.

After *A place in the sun*, in the spring of 1999 the second Italian soap opera *Vivere* got under way, produced by Endemol for the commercial television and programmed in daytime by Canale 5 in the wake of *The Bold and Beautiful*. Other daily soaps – *The mall* (Canale 5), *Stolen hearts* (Raidue), *Downhome* (Raiuno) - came in the following years, and four are on the air in these days.

As a matter of fact, for a television industry and culture which tenaciously opposed for decades the idea of long seriality, *we are witnessing a rotation of 180 degrees*.

As far as prime time is concerned, seriality has entered this slot through the formulae of the so-called super-sitcom and super-soap. By super-sitcom I refer to *A doctor in the family* – a long-running weekly series launched in 1999 on the first public channel - a well calibrated “indigenisation” of the successful Spanish format which, staging the daily life of a family putting together three generations, has managed to capture for several seasons a large multigenerational audience, with



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

children as the driving force. The representation of a large family, welcoming and united – an image with a strong resonance in the family-centric culture still prevalent in Italy – has played an important role in rooting the series into the viewing habits *of an average of eighth to ten million viewers*.

In turn the super-soap formula was tried out with *Enchantment*, a hospital serial. Highly melodramatic in tone and style, *Enchantment* can be considered the Italian version of a telenovela. It has recently turned a daily soap. To the serialisation of prime time fiction has further contributed the police serial *The crew*, produced by Grundy for the third public channel and now in its seventh season; and more recently the successful costume dramas *Pride*, *Elisa di Rivombrosa*, and many others.

It can appear that commercial channels participate only as a marginal players in this process of serialisation of Italian domestic fiction. It is not true; apart from the two soaps already mentioned and their traditional sitcoms in daytime, the commercial channels are now used to broadcast in prime time two or three long lasting series per season (specially police series like as *Police district*, and *RIS. Imperfect crimes*).

However, the whole seriality question is far from being a neutral territory or a consensual topic in Italy today, but in one way or another or with different – and sometimes diverging - attitudes and reactions, it has ended up by being perceived as “the point of no return” on the road to industrial development. This is a change in opinions and attitudes which would have been unthinkable only a short time ago.

CONVERGENCE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

But, although the broadcasters seem to have found a kind of “holy grail” in the *seriality*, the serialisation process is not only related to, but is even functional for the revaluation of the format embodied in the “genetic patrimony” and in the tradition of domestic fiction, established since the inception of the Italian public television: the miniseries, for which both RAI and Mediaset dedicate half of their titles, with more editorial care and higher investments.

It is worth emphasizing in this connection that the new turn toward seriality does not seem to have damaged the solid foundation of the miniseries, heir to the historical *sceneggiato*, in the preferences of broadcasters, authors, and the Italian viewers themselves. The miniseries possess a unique requirement: that which the broadcasters and the marketing operators call “channel illumination”, in other words a flattering return of image, and a positive lasting aura which surrounds the network and gives it a marked identity.

The miniseries reward the high consideration that they enjoy with the broadcasters, producers, authors and actors, and increase at the same time their own prestige, proving themselves year by year the “king” of the formats of Italian fiction, that which is provided with more possibility of success.

Top ten drama 2006-2007

title	channel	format	audience	share
Papa Luciani. Il sorriso di Dio	RAIUNO	Miniserie	9.598.541	35,39%
L'Inchiesta	RAIUNO	Miniserie	7.650.299	28,55%
Giovanni Falcone	RAIUNO	Miniserie	7.597.874	28,52%
Assunta Spina	RAIUNO	Miniserie	7.576.117	29,37%
Butta la luna	RAIUNO	Miniserie	7.276.072	29,34%
Il figlio della luna	RAIUNO	Filmtv	7.215.733	27,61%
Maria Montessori	CANALE5	Miniserie	7.121.428	29,54%
Il padre delle spose	RAIUNO	Filmtv	7.026.044	26,75%
Graffio di tigre	RAIUNO	Miniserie	7.013.554	27,18%
Due imbroglioni	CANALE5	Filmtv	6.948.907	26,90%

Source: OFI

Looking at the most watched episodes of whatever season, it is quite evident the authentic hegemony of the miniseries, which confirms the strength and also the skills of a productive and narrative tradition dating back to the origins of Italian television. The largest number of the best ratings, also favoured by the historical familiarity of the domestic audience with this format, and by the similarly historical sedimentation of experience by the producers, is guaranteed by the miniseries on yearly basis. Seven out of ten most watched fiction either in 2005-2006 or in 2006-2007 are miniseries, almost all of them produced by public television and broadcast on the first national channel.

This is a peculiarity in the Italian Top 10 which cannot be seen in other countries, and reinforces the national preference for a format which is widely recognised to square the circle: i.e. to achieve the conciliation between ratings and quality, popularity and culture, requisites of which normally is complained about, or taken for granted, the total opposition.

A DECADE OF SUCCESSES

The decade 1996-2006 coincided with not only a phase of development and consolidation of the Italian television drama industry, but also an unbroken series of high levels and even astonishing peaks of audience ratings: in other words, with a harvest of rich and abundant popular successes.



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

² H. Newcomb, *La televisione, da forum a biblioteca*, Sansoni, Milano 1999, especially Chapter II.

³ Ibid, p. 38.

In Italy, within the intellectual, academic and journalistic circles, there is a widespread tendency to regard successes, and in general phenomena of widespread popularity, with a degree of superciliousness. The presumed contradiction between quantity and quality persuades people to consider large numbers (or large audiences, in the case of television) as an indication, as unassailable as it is deplorable, of the trivialisation of contents and programmes, aimed at indulging the middle-brow tastes of a mass of undemanding viewers.

To the extent that successes are an indication of the degree to which national televisual 'story-telling' can attract the broadest possible audience to watch the same story, they should (rather than being dismissed) be taken seriously. They should furthermore be assumed to be the most intense and paradigmatic expression of that which, according to the authoritative assertion of Horace Newcomb,² is the eminently 'choric' nature of television drama in the context of generalist television. In the ancient Greek theatre tradition, 'the chorus expresses the ideas and emotions of the group ... The chorus's attention is focused on the conventional responses, widely shared, that take account of socially-accepted concepts ...'³ We recognize in the metaphor of the chorus as a voice of the community or *vox populi*, concordant, tuned into a conventional and socially acceptable view of things, the television drama that we are accustomed to call 'mainstream'. It is the core of any system of popular narration, the main component of an Italian production and supply system that, in the horizon of broadcasting, proves the principal creator of the great successes and phenomena of true popularity.

We must furthermore bear in mind that the past decade has been characterised by the growing hegemony of that guiding principle of popular cultural consumption, especially in television, which is defined as 'cultural proximity' and which consists in the public's marked inclination to prefer by far the home-grown product. This intensified need for cultural proximity is an effect of, and at the same time a counterpoint to, those processes of globalisation that are widely identified as threatening to strip local and national communities of their own identifying origins. The need for cultural proximity, the *need for home*, has fuelled a demand, more pressing than in the past, for 'Italian story-telling', and has brought into being an extensive pool of viewers of television drama who are ready to flock to the siren call of what is on offer. It is this wider horizon of expectations and need for narrative fulfilment, inclined towards national story-telling, that has created (not only in Italy, for that matter) the fertile soil of the decade's large audience ratings.

Against the background of these introductory remarks, I should like in the second part of the paper to deal with the successes achieved by contemporary Italian drama, focusing on the two narrative tendencies that have revealed the greatest power of appeal and fascination among a wide range of loyal viewers: the genres of religious and of historical drama.

The 20 most popular television dramas during the period 2001-2006

Title	Season	Network	Format	Audience, (000, average)
<i>Papa Giovanni</i>	2001-2002	Raiuno	Miniseries	13180
<i>Karol Wojtyła</i>	2004-2005	Raiuno	Miniseries	12832
<i>Perlasca</i>	2001-2002	Raiuno	Miniseries	12205
<i>Giovanni Paolo II</i>	2005-2006	Raiuno	Miniseries	11329
<i>Paolo Borsellino</i>	2004-2005	Canale 5	Miniseries	10834
<i>Madre Teresa</i>	2003-2004	Raiuno	Miniseries	10600
<i>Un posto tranquillo</i>	2002-2003	Raiuno	Miniseries	10.054
<i>Il Papa buono</i>	2002-2003	Canale 5	Miniseries	9982
<i>Maria Goretti</i>	2002-2003	Raiuno	TV movie	9.896
<i>Il Maresciallo Rocca</i>	2003-2004	Raiuno	Series	9.862
<i>Il commissario Montalbano</i>	2002-2003	Raiuno	Series	9.428
<i>L'uomo che sognava con le aquile</i>	2005-2006	Raiuno	Miniseries	9252
<i>Soraya</i>	2003-2004	Raiuno	Miniseries	9234
<i>Maria José</i>	2001-2002	Raiuno	Miniseries	9160
<i>Al di là delle frontiere</i>	2003-2004	Raiuno	Miniseries	8961
<i>Cime tempestose</i>	2004-2005	Raiuno	Miniseries	8942
<i>L'uomo sbagliato</i>	2004-2005	Raiuno	Miniseries	8855
<i>Il cuore nel pozzo</i>	2004-2005	Raiuno	Miniseries	8831
<i>Gino Bartali - l'intramontabile</i>	2005-2006	Raiuno	Miniseries	8657
<i>Virginia - Monaca di Monza</i>	2004-2005	Raiuno	Miniseries	8626

Source: OFI

THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

From the year 2000, the Jubilee Year, the most successful television dramas in every season were in Italy almost systematically coinciding with tales of the 'exemplary life' of an important religious personality, who was an object of mass worship and of the canonisation process: the two *Padre Pio* dramas (1999-2000 and 2000-2001); *Papa Giovanni* (Pope John XXIII: 2001-2002); *Madre Teresa* (2003-2004); *Karol* (Pope John Paul II: 2004-2005). It must be said that the religious narrative dramas that reached the highest levels of popularity in the first seasons of the new millennium did not constitute an exceptional or totally unexpected manifestation of the close link between the supply and the consumption of the Italian religious stories: a link that is predicated upon the strong and lasting nature of Catholic sentiment. Stories



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

⁴ F. Garelli, *Il sentimento religioso in Italia*, "il Mulino", n. 5, 2003, pp. 814-822

that in one way or another draw on the religious inspiration of the national collective imagination have for years appealed to a vast public. In a market of cultural goods such as television, characterised by a structural uncertainty where despite expectations many programmes are unsure of audience results, religious drama in Italy provide the largest possible guarantee of a popular success. Actually we are not facing a new, but surely a highly intensified phenomenon.

As well as the examples cited above, the twelve titles of the Bible Project (from *Abraham* to the *Revelation of St John the Divine*) testify to this; likewise the proliferation of biographies of the last two Popes, the lives of saints (*Maria Goretti*, *St Francis*, *St Anthony of Padua*, *Rita of Cascia*) and the stories of appearances by the Virgin Mary (*Lourdes*, *Fatima*). These are all programmes whose audience ratings are more than satisfactory and sometimes remarkable.

Such an accumulation of narrative supply, correlated with the religious sentiments of the Italian public and repaid by that public with a generous and apparently inexhaustible enjoyment of the programmes, depicts an Italian scene that, at any rate in this particular respect, can be considered unique in the world. Foreign observers happen to be surprised about this, their surprise perhaps reflecting the sympathetic and culturally relativist attitude of someone who is noticing some strange instance of folklore. On the other hand it is not unusual to detect even in Italian observers and critics an attitude of barely-concealed condescension towards a typology of programmes that are attuned to religious sentiment, which is supposed to pertain to the more traditional and less secularised elements of the country.

There is no doubt that the secularisation process in present-day Italy is less advanced and more unevenly distributed in society than in other countries. But the peculiar nature of the television phenomenon under analysis cannot simply be ascribed to cultural backwardness.

As the sociologist of religion Franco Garelli⁴ has amply and persuasively pointed out in recent times, Italy is distinguished from other Catholic countries in the field of religion by the persistence of a strong and majority-held sense of belonging to the Catholic faith, seen and perceived by most Italians as a fundamental part of their collective identity as well as of their national history. This widespread feeling is relatively independent from the practice of religious ritual, observed these days only by a minority (if a substantial one) of the population; it is even independent of the observance of the sexual and family morals preached by the Church. If anything, it is precisely the pluralist way of interpreting and showing forth religious sentiments – a recurring trait of Catholic Italy and not a new one – and the

high level of tolerance on the part of the Church in the face of such diversification that creates and maintains the conditions for lasting adherence to the Catholic faith. This adherence persists not in opposition to or in spite of, but within and through, the processes of secularisation and modernisation – to which, incidentally, the Catholic religion is not (within limits) opposed or hostile.

The strength of Italian Catholicism in present-day society owes much, adds Garelli, to what he calls ‘the affective approach to the truth’: a strategy aimed at recovering and maintaining ecclesiastical authority based not so much on doctrinaire and prescriptive admonitions as on the communicative effectiveness of a religious message: a message that proves its truth in the context of charitable deeds and in a commitment to the most important matters of civil coexistence that offers constant reference points on the profound meaning of life. All this takes place in a land that is enriched more than any other by historical religious memories whose visible traces are scattered throughout the land, in numberless places of worship, art galleries, in towns and villages and in literature. A ‘Catholic imagination’ comes to life from this, populated by saints, statues, churches, cathedrals, stained glass windows, paintings and Nativity scenes; this allows symbols, icons and religious points of reference to be deeply rooted in Italians’ collective imaginary, and is in all probability related to their lasting Catholic sentiment, even if they are in large measure unaware of it.

This is almost enough to help us better to understand the phenomenon, neither eccentrically ‘folklorist’ nor attributable to the tenacity of tradition, of the success of religious television drama in Italy. And this is almost enough also to account for the escalation of a success of this kind, which has paralleled an equally intensified demand since the beginning of the new millennium. Religious figures who are loved and surrounded by immense popular devotion, like John XXIII and Padre Pio, the divine figure of Christ, a benevolent and universally admired and respected person like Mother Teresa, a holy child symbolising purity like Maria Goretti, and many others: religious dramas broadcast in the first years of the new millennium have always attracted audiences of considerable size.

In order to fully account for this, we should perhaps mention the *Zeitgeist* that permeates the start of the third millennium and, by adding the destabilising and worrying impact of the outbreak of serious conflicts in the world to the bewilderment connected to the changes of the millennium, has a considerable influence on the individual and collective awareness of the current human condition and its destiny. Even though we may not sense all this in the ordinary and largely unreflective course of our daily life, we are enveloped if not infused with an atmosphere of insecurity and danger and face much foggy uncertainty, both material and symbolic, in the future.



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

5 H. Newcomb, *TV, the most popular art*, Doubleday, New York, 1974.

There have never been more appropriate circumstances for what we might identify as a need and a demand for points of reference, solid anchorage-points and ethical sources. These prove still more convincing if they are incarnated in and ‘communicated’ by charismatic figures, whose authority and exemplary nature was acknowledged by popular sentiment. We should not therefore be surprised if television drama in precisely these circumstances has more recourse than ever – and the public allows itself to be led *en masse* – to the rich store of sense and the massive heritage of salvific and charismatic personalities of a Catholicism in which, as said above, large numbers of Italians continue to acknowledge a fundamental element of their own identity and their country. Nourished by Catholic imagination, religious television drama in turn gives these people the contemporary televisual version of the sacred ceremonies.

GOING BACK TO THE PAST

More than 30 years ago, in a book that is now regarded as the founding text on television studies, Horace Newcomb⁵ identified the three basic components of televisual aesthetics as intimacy, continuity and the sense of history. Now as then, the nexus between television and the sense of history arouses surprise and scepticism. Concerning television we have, or think that we have, our own convictions; one of these relates without doubt to the nature of the ‘medium of the present’, totally in tune with the here and now, without any memory of the past.

It cannot be denied with any evidence that the greater part of televisual content and genre, from news broadcasts to entertainment to the various types of programmes from studio to television drama itself, is primarily orientated towards the presentation and narration of the present day (sometimes live and in real time): it is the stuff of our daily experience and, furthermore, constitutes one of the main reasons for the medium’s appeal. But evidence is not infrequently blinding, in the proper sense of obscuring one’s vision; and in this case it obscures the fact that of all televisual genres, drama is the one that is most suited, equipped and also accustomed to working with the sense of history. Newcomb takes the view that television drama can be historical in different and unsuspected ways: for example, through the long duration and the evolving temporality of the serials, which unfold over a period of years and not only build up their own story but also capture and memorise social history, while the viewers’ lives run their course in parallel. Television drama can also be historical because of the evolution of the genres which is testified by the coexistence, in television schedules, of old and new programmes that constantly compare the past and the present;

or when it takes its inspiration from people who really existed, or from events that really happened. More generally, television drama is historical when it recounts stories, true or imaginary, that are set in periods of the recent or distant past.

Italian television drama was intensely and primarily historical – in this last meaning – in the first twenty years of public television, with protracted but decreasing instances of drifting in subsequent years. As has already been said, the productions of that period preferred to revisit the past through the mediation of national and European works of literature, or through biographies of great Italians or the reconstruction of events of the Risorgimento (the building of the nation in the 18th century). This was the era of the *sceneggiato*, the Italian word for TV adaptations of literature. The second half of the 1970s saw a process of ‘presentification’ of television drama, which reached its peak in the course of the last decade.

But television and televisual genres very often function in cycles, closings and resummptions, runs and re-runs. We are thus witnessing a return of the past in Italian television drama. While the new vogue for reality and quiz shows has a grip on the present, television drama goes back to working on the sense of history and on memory – including its own memory and history.

STORIES AND MEMORIES

There are strong and persistent signals that induce us to identify the distinctive feature of present-day Italian television drama in its efforts to retrieve, exploit and reconstitute the heritage of collective memory linked to personages, events, moments and experiences lived or handed down in the political, religious and cultural history of Italy.

We can perceive the continuity of these signals in their persistence from the start of the twenty-first century. We perceive the strength of this continuity in the connection between the growth of supply and the spread of consumption of television drama in the wide ‘historical’ or reminiscent sense: among the twenty most successful programmes of recent years (from the 2001-2002 to the 2005-2006 season) the top three (*Papa Giovanni, Karol Wojtyła and Perlasca*) and altogether just fifteen – proportionately, three programmes out of four – formed part of the same tendency to go over the historical routes again.

The shift of the temporal dimension of television drama stories from the present to the past – to a greater or lesser degree, but in each case clearly perceptible – is a phenomenon that has spread beyond Italy. To a different degree and, it should be understood, never such as to undermine the dominance of the present day – that is a feature of the discursive regime of all genres of television programmes (except obviously the historical

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Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

programmes sector) - the drama of all the largest European countries has been affected in the first years of the twenty-first century by a process of 'de-presentification', if not of true historicisation. From the reconstruction of daily life during the Franco era in the Spanish *costumbrista* series *Cuentame como pasò*, to the reinvigorated genre of historical and biographical *feuilletons* in French television drama, the increased production of English period drama, the unprecedented exploration of themes mythological (the Nibelungen) and political (the attempted assassination of Hitler) by German television drama: all over Europe televisual story-telling has taken to cultivating what, in the company of Paul Ricoeur, could be defined as 're-enactment of the past'⁶ in contemporary narration.

We are facing here a phenomenon that, at least in part, constitutes the expression of, and the relapse into, a more general structure of collective feelings; present-day observers and analysts (philosophers, sociologists and historians) have drawn attention to the perceptible presence and numerous traces of this sentiment. The philosopher Emmanuel Kattan refers in a particular fashion to this reviving of the past with reference to more or less distant traumatic events – the so-called 'memory of trauma' or 'wounded memory': for example, he speaks of the 'predominant place [occupied] in public space by concern with the past, in its different manifestations'⁷. 'In this end-of millennium period Europeans ... are obsessed with a new cult – the cult of memory'⁸, Zvetan Todorov anticipated, thus noting the risk of 'compulsive worrying about the past'⁹. We shall return to this point.

As we emerge from a twentieth century that, with world wars, totalitarian regimes, massacres and genocide has stored up an accumulation of wounds in the archives of the collective memory – to draw again on Ricoeur¹⁰ – our entry into the third millennium, marked almost immediately by a deadly attack on a living symbol of Western modernity, has in all probability constituted a fertile breeding-ground for 'subtle anxiety on account of the end of an era'¹¹ and for alarm at the threat to security and identity (or what is so perceived). Such sentiments can generate grave uncertainty concerning the present and how it will turn out in future; they can trigger a drive, even a compulsion, towards rediscovery and acknowledgement of the past in an attempt to find reassurance, or inspiration, or simply something to take one's mind off the pressing worries of the here and now.

Be that as it may, European television drama has taken to working on the re-enactment of the past, breaking up (without subverting it) the almost exclusive symbiosis with the present that could have been found only a few years earlier.

6 See Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare*, Il Mulino 2004, p. 16.

7 E. Kattan, *Il dovere della memoria*, Ipermedium libri, Naples 2004, p.29

8 Z. Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria*, Ipermedium libri, Naples 2001, p. 60

9 Ibid, p. 61

10 P. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, chap. III.

11 A. Cavicchia Scalamonti, *Introduzione a Z. Todorov*, quoted on p. 9

There is no place where one finds more blinding evidence of this than in Italian television. In other European countries the re-enactment of the past in all its forms, classifiable under the generalist and inclusive heading of 'historical drama', is concentrated in a limited number of titles, thus indicating a symptomatic but not extensive instance of inclination. In Italy, by contrast, historical drama is a widespread feature that in the last few seasons has embraced one-third of the titles being programmed, two out of the five titles broadcast prime time, and at least half of the ten most watched programmes of the season.

These television dramas may draw, and more and more often do, on the recent past that has its main focus on the years and crucial events of World War II and its immediate aftermath (*Perlasca*, *Beyond frontiers*, *The hart in the well*, *The war is over*); or else they go back further in time to the romantic nineteenth century (*Wandering heights*), to a romanticised eighteenth century (*Elisa from Rivombrosa*), to the seventeenth century of Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (*Virginia, the nun of Monza*), to the ancient times of the first Christian mission (*Saint John, Saint Peter*); or else they shorten the distance from the present day, setting the scene in the 1950s or the 1960s that we have barely left behind us (*The great Torino*, *Marcinelle*, *Tell me*). In each case, the disposition of so much contemporary television drama to tell stories and hand down memories that are not contemporary is dispersed in various narrative genres. Of these the most common seem today to be biography, in its religious variant (lives of saints and popes) and lay version (*Perlasca*, *Maria Josè*, *Bartali*, *Ferrari*), and adaptations or more often re-adaptations of novels (the remakes of *Small ancient world*, *Resurrection*, *Hart*, *The Betrothed*, *The small town*).

12 Cf. M. Buonanno (ed.), *Per voce sola e coro*, RAI VQPT, Rome 2002.

THE PASSING OF AN ERA

The first signs of a return to the past in Italian television drama started to manifest themselves in the television season 2000-2001.¹² Subsequent seasons were to confirm that what was being seen was an expansion and a consolidation of a tendency that was capable of lasting. Within five years or a bit more, the trend of historical television drama has produced nearly a hundred titles, variously distributed among different editorial lines and narrative genres and subgenres.

Beyond the climate of anxiety due to the passing of the era, which even in other countries – although to a lesser extent than in Italy – inclined televisual story-tellings towards times past, it is possible to identify an alliance, or at any rate a concurrence, of other conditions that probably favoured the emergence of such a marked and persistent tendency. First of all, what Edgerton calls the 'big business' of story-telling on television should be taken into account. Historical television drama, in its various



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

subgenres, has given ample proof of its popularity – as witness the numerous ‘placings’ among the most successful dramas of each season – and in an industry whose guidelines are (to some extent inevitably) mapped out by previous experiences of failure and result, success does not merely ‘prolong’ – generating continuations and repeats of the stories – but also ‘multiplies’ – promoting the production of other stories of the same type, laden with expectations of an analogous capacity to succeed.

Furthermore, even though not all historical material is equally ‘usable’ – the twentieth century, for example, is understandably the most frequently visited, while the Renaissance period is completely neglected – the past, historical and literary, sacred and secular, still constitutes an immense reserve of material from which a wealth of narrative inspiration can be drawn. Historical events, news stories, heroic and exemplary lives, literary tradition and much else offer a further two-fold advantage. They put at authors’ disposal narrative material that is rich in dramaturgical potential and allows the creation of products that benefit from the promotional value linked to the notoriety and the popularity of the original subjects (saints, popes, novels, events and historical periods). Or at any rate they benefit from the curiosity aroused by the recurrence of names, of stories that re-echo and resound in the common memory, even if only by hearsay. The past, in short, possesses the prized added value of ‘a built-in promotional resource’; and, perhaps less prized but still capable of attracting audiences, the value of the visual pleasure of costumes, furnishings and manners of times past: the ‘small pleasures’¹³ offered by the decorative details of an era.

The return to the past is still inscribed in the ‘logic of the distinction’ (in Bourdieu’s terms) between television genres in competition with each other. It is well known how the end of the 1990s saw a wave of intense and widespread popularity of so-called reality television, which is still continuing despite fluctuations. From *Big Brother* to *I’m a Celebrity – Get me Out of Here*, the new generation of reality shows are characterised by an extreme emphasis on the dimension of the present: this is expressed and testified by the access that they open up to voyeuristic scrutiny of ‘life broadcast live’ on television and to the permanent monitoring of what happens in the ‘laboratories’ in the ‘houses’, the ‘farms’, the ‘islands’. Although viewers see only sections and selected fragments of this incessant monitoring, at any rate on the terrestrial networks, the conception and enjoyment of the reality shows are inseparably linked to the idea of live filming of the daily life of our contemporaries. While the formats of entertainment intensify the grip on the immediate present, one area of television drama goes back to working on the story and the memory and causes personalities, events and stories of the past

13 That is what they are called by J. Caughie, op. cit. The appreciation of the ‘small pleasures’ of historical drama (hairstyles, dresses, the interiors of homes, lifestyles)

to resurface: it is a logic of distinction that inspires television drama to distance itself (not only in time) from a genre that in recent years has posed an alarming threat to its primacy in programming strategies and public approval.

The abundant wealth, still flourishing, of stories of the distant and not so distant past thus finds the necessary conditions for its existence in a whole series of plausible and sometimes cogent reasons. Such a widespread use of this resource, which as we have seen constitutes a specificity of contemporary Italian television drama, would require us to evoke only peripherally the risks of the excess or the misuse of memory. Authors such as Todorov and Ricoeur warn us against this risk: the ‘policy of the right memory’ that is especially important to Ricoeur¹⁴ is without doubt to be recommended also in the case of television drama, if only in the vague terms of maintaining awareness in the context of editors’ and producers’ decisions (but no-one, in all probability, possesses the recipe or dosage of the ‘right memory’).

14 P. Ricoeur, op. cit., especially Chapter 3 of Part II.

Instead it is worth devoting some consideration to the problematic question of the relationship between past and present, or to be more precise the relationship between the respective politics of representation. In this connection, it is a good moment to dismiss the enlistment, as facile as it is hasty, of the trend of returning to the past under the insignia of ‘operation nostalgia’; likewise the ill-considered assumption that by taking this path one is trying to escape or flee from the present to the past, be it recent or more distant. It can hardly be denied that the past, simply by virtue of being behind us and having existed already, broadens our reassuring vision of a stable and settled landscape that presents itself as an alternative to (but not necessarily a refuge from) to a fickle and uncertain present. Michael Pickering, in the context of an essay aimed at freeing nostalgia from the imputation of being a unilaterally anti-modernistic sentiment, acknowledges for example that ‘uncertainty and insecurity in present circumstances create fertile soil for a sentimental yearning for the past ... and the media help to cultivate this soil’¹⁵. Nor *a priori* can we rule out the risk, pointed out by Todorov, that anxiety concerning the past generates those ‘blessings of the clear conscience’¹⁶ that end up by relieving people of anxiety for the present.

15 M. Pickering and E. Keightley, op. cit. p. 925.

16 Z. Todorov, op. cit., p. 63. ‘Commemorating the past’s victims is rewarding; dealing with today’s victims is disturbing’, states the author.

Nevertheless the forms of history and popular memory tend in many ways to incorporate the present in a reactivation of the past; thus the historical dramas do not refrain from speaking of our days. They do it by treating the past in accordance with the criteria of present-day judgment, choosing personages and events that are more in tune with present-day sensibilities, staging the problems, feelings and not infrequently the language of today in the world of yesterday and, not least, entrusting the performance to actors whose faces and movements are unequivocally modern.



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

But there is no need to go into these details to uphold the statement that going back to the past in itself speaks to us of the present. Were it not otherwise, this states or suggests that the world in which we live has become (and is perceived to be) confused, complicated and indecipherable. We live in it and, with results that change and are constantly being discussed, we seek to come to terms with feelings of confusion, insecurity and disorientation concerning the future. But the past, at a backward glance, assumes the reassuring contours of protected and safe territory; since this is where we come from: we take comfort in remembering, and being reminded, that our roots lie deep in this firm ground. The twofold spirit, firm and flexible, of individual and collective identity is sometimes evoked in cultural studies through the metaphor of the tree, anchored to the ground by its roots and at the same time waving in the air thanks to its branches and leaves. It is never more necessary to trust in one's roots as when one's branches and leaves are prey to buffeting winds.

It is broadly probable that stories about the past narrated by television drama offer the antidote of renewed strong anchorage and links of continuity to the uncertainty that emerges from the 'structure of collective feelings'. If today we find it difficult to foresee the future, re-establishing the threads between past and present may serve to revive our awareness and our confidence that we are not adrift in a temporal dimension that is isolated from both past and future.

We must therefore recognise that Italian television drama is carrying out a task that is symbolically important: by way of its *tour d'horizon* of the past it brings us back to the present and allows us to perceive a present-day malaise that is in truth rather disquieting.

CONCORDANCES

Religion as a basic element of Italians' collective identity; the political and social history of the twentieth century as a melting-pot of experiences – Fascism, the post-war period, emigration – that were traumatic and at the same time remedial, in that this same identity was put to the test and in some way re-forged; all these elements form a tapestry of identity steeped in Catholicism, rent by historical vicissitudes yet capable of being mended, something that unfurls within and through the most significant successes in television drama, namely stories based on religion and stories based on memory.

What persuades us to ascribe additional relevance, and therefore interest, to this dual entity is the singular and unprecedented nature of the circumstances that at the temporal conjunction of the twentieth century and the third millennium have turned Catholic sentiment and the historical memory of the twentieth century into the two sources of inspiration that are the most widely visited by television drama and its audiences. To appeal to the components of the variegated and sometimes contradictory prism of national identity is more than just a regular practice of television drama in every country: it is an indispensable condition for arousing in viewers a sense of cultural proximity and the pleasure of recognition, this being in turn a condition of popularity. Therefore the question that really matters is not *whether* televised stories, especially the successful ones, reach out to the identity profiles of the viewers in question, but *which* identity dimension they draw, and how these dimensions change with the passage of time.

A more in-depth investigation would without doubt make us identify in the corpus at our disposal an entire repertoire of elements that bear the unmistakable mark of Italian identity – one could cite, for example, the family and Mafia crime. The Catholic sentiment and the brighter moments of Italy's recent history are not the only ones. What is unique is the fact that these elements have both emerged for the first time, with their important symbolic burden of sense-making system (religion) and of devices for connection between past and present (memory). It is significant that this should have coincided with a phase of great revival and of accreditation of domestic television drama as a central story-telling system of Italian society, at a turning-point in time (in the widest sense) that can be perceived and experienced – through the many signs of uneasiness and risk that exist in today's world – as the passing of an era from a destination that is hardly uncertain. In this context, the supply and consumption of television drama has found the greatest empathy with the 'identity' stories that have reaffirmed and testified to the depth of Catholic roots, and have recorded (or performed) how Italians went through other traumatic stages in the short tempestuous twentieth century, using the trials of history to reinforce the individual and collective strength needed to face the future.

This can be considered a unique fact, not only because of the absence of precedents but also because of the difficulty of repeating it in future seasons. The phenomena of popular culture often go in cycles: this does not mean that religious and historical television drama are on the way to extinction. But even if they are destined to be repeated, the successes of stories that narrate the lives of saints and popes, or revive the last century, will have great difficulty in future in matching the record audience figures of the successful ten-year season that has just finished.



Television drama as central story-telling system in contemporary Italy

It is highly probable that the most recent years – marking the close of an era of almost unchallenged domination by broadcasting, while narrowcasting is just starting to appear on the scene – were the last, or nearly the last, to preserve the necessary conditions that allowed Italian television drama stories to enjoy a ten-year season of great, even magnificent, successes. Let us be clear about this: there is no reason to maintain that the large and excellent television drama ratings now belong to a television world that we have lost, or are losing. The Italian market today is in an initial phase, and will stay there for some time yet, of fragmentation of the audiences who according to Denis McQuail¹⁷ correspond to the central-peripheral model. At this stage, although the multiplication of channels makes it possible to enjoy a wide range of television programmes both outside and on the edge of the mainstream, the generalist networks continue to occupy centre-stage in television and to attract a majority share of audiences.

But it cannot be denied that in a multi-channel system the largest possible audiences, who still gather round and will continue to gather round the stories that they find most appealing, will not be the same audiences as in the era of broadcasting.

It is therefore worthwhile in conclusion to point out and weigh up the special syntopies or concordances that in this decade of successes in Italian television drama have become established between the communication model of broadcasting - that is still dominant, though eroded at the edges by the advent of multi-channel narrowcasting - and the stories inspired by the Catholic faith and the memory of the twentieth century.

In these concordances the unifying spirit of broadcasting is expressed with the highest intensity. The broadcasting television, in the last phase of its egemony, offered home-grown drama, in the phase of its rebirth, the opportunity – unlikely to recur – to narrate stories of Italian identity to the largest possible national audiences.

17 D. McQuail, *Audience analysis*, Sage, London 1997, p. 137.

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