

ITALIAN SCREEN STUDIES, PRESENT AND FUTURE

## RETHINKING ITALIAN TELEVISION STUDIES

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The field of television studies has undergone significant changes in recent years because of technological innovations that have dramatically altered the very concept of television reception. The shift from ‘broadcasting’, through the introduction of niche targeting, to ‘narrowcasting’ has quickly led, thanks to the multiplication of platforms through which television has now become available, to the era of ‘me-casting’.<sup>1</sup> As viewers increasingly turn to Digital Video Recorders and online platforms (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime), replacing their TV set with a laptop, a tablet, a game console, or a mobile phone, television schedules have virtually become obsolete structures imposed on viewers who have learned to bypass them through the flexibility offered by new forms of media consumption. Once merely considered a ‘flow’ (as Raymond Williams’ famously noted)<sup>2</sup> as television’s continuous output existed without and in absence of the viewer, television has now become a virtual ‘quilt’ whose programming blocks can be extracted and time-shifted indefinitely, so as to be enjoyed by viewers at their own leisure, on a number of varied viewing platforms.

Such an epochal shift in broadcasting and consumption should indeed be mirrored by a shift in the reconception of the very methods of television studies, which once identified in the ‘flow’ a core element against which all analyses of television were to be structured, foregrounding the centrality of institutional discourse and conditions of production in all viable critical readings. The era of ‘me-casting’ has shifted the critic’s attention from the producer to the product, from the time of broadcasting to that of consumption, from the flow to the actual programme. One of the most indirect consequences of this shift, in the academic field of television studies, has been a gradual widening of the objects of analysis, which were once almost always strictly limited to the broadcasting practices of the country in which the analyst resided. The sole exception to this rule was, of course, US television because of its unique global distribution. In the days of ‘me-casting’, however, television studies finds no methodological resistance in the analysis of programmes and broadcasting practices *ex-loco* and adopts textual approaches akin to those common in film studies. Although rigorous analyses of television programmes will always need to take into proper consideration questions of production and institutional discourse, the increased broadcasting of so-called ‘quality television’ paired with the diverse modes of its reception justifies critical approaches long associated with film studies. The work of showrunners such as Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Newsroom*), Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*, *True Blood*), David Chase (*Northern Exposure*, *The Sopranos*), or Shonda Rhimes

(*Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, *Scandal*) thus becomes the legitimate object of an auteuristic approach once reserved for the likes of Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, or Altman.<sup>3</sup> Entire seasons or individual episodes of quality television series such as *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, or *Game of Thrones* inspire critical readings informed by psychoanalysis, semiotics, philosophy, or narratology.<sup>4</sup>

In the specific field of Italian screen studies, once traditionally encompassing almost exclusively scholarship on film and printed media, scholars have begun to approach Italian television along similar lines to those once limited to Anglophone television.<sup>5</sup> In the specific case of Italian broadcasters, the recent influx of quality television from the US and UK has significantly raised the stakes for local productions, spearheaded by increasing investments in television productions by Sky Italia, the sole equivalent to US premium television. Miniseries such as *Romanzo criminale — La serie* (Sky, 2008–2010), *Faccia d'angelo* (Sky, 2012), or the more recent Italian adaptation of *In Treatment* (Sky, 2013) have attracted considerable critical attention, and their international appeal is witnessed by the inclusion, in their DVD box-sets, of English subtitles. At the same time, the recent boom of the European TV *noir*, originated mostly in Scandinavian productions such as *Forbrydelsen*, *Bron*, *Borgen*, and *Wallander*, has 'de-provincialized' and brought new interest in Italian detective series such as *Il Commissario Montalbano* (Raiuno, 1999– ), *Nebbie e delitti* (Raidue, 2005–2009), *Don Matteo* (Raiuno, 2000– ), and *Il commissario Nardone* (Raiuno, 2012– ), which have redefined their characteristic traits along questions of genre which in turn connect them to their most illustrious antecedent, *La piovra* (Raiuno, 1984–2003). Recently made available on DVD on the English-speaking market, these series lend themselves to comparative analyses along questions of genre, thus granting new relevance to the Italian national drama produced by the two largest networks: RAI (public) and Mediaset (private). Anglophone approaches to Italian cultural studies once limited their analysis of Italian television mostly at the institutional level, paying particular attention to the role played by opposing political forces in its daily practices: the Christian Democrat hegemony of the early days, the division of managerial oversight of individual public channels among Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Communists in the late 1970s and 1980s, the consequences of the advent of private networks, and questions around the later entry of media-mogul Silvio Berlusconi into politics.<sup>6</sup> Italian drama production, hardly exported until the beginning of the new century with the sole of exception of the ten instalments of *La piovra*, was completely neglected in these studies.

Quality television is a term often associated with drama productions of the last two decades: in Italy we think of *La meglio gioventù* (Raiuno, 2003), the first production meant for television yet clearly imbued with cinematic qualities. And while many scholars have analysed Marco Tullio Giordana's miniseries, they have rarely done so within the context of television studies. Many of the series and miniseries that have followed in Giordana's 'quality' footsteps have shown remarkable ties with cinema: *Boris* (Sky, 2007–2010) ended its three-year run with a critically acclaimed film; *Romanzo criminale — La serie* shared with its cinematic antecedent the iconic figure of Michele Placido, who directed the film and served as consultant in the series; *In Treatment* is directed by Saverio Costanzo, one of the most prominent voices in Italian cinema, and boasts a stellar cast of stars such as Sergio Castellitto, Barbara Boboulova, Valeria Golino, and Licia Maglietta.

These television shows have attracted significant critical attention, and will most likely serve as pivotal catalysts in shaping a new direction for Italian television studies.

The limit of television studies, whether applied to Anglophone or Italian broadcasting practices, is its innate obsession with ‘the present’: possibly a consequence of the methodological consideration of television as flow, the attention of television critics worldwide has focused mostly on current practices and programmes, preferring synchrony over diachrony. In our time of technological advancement, however, the greater access to digitized archives of broadcasting, whether on DVD or online, calls for a rethinking of the possible venues of research for our field, widening significantly its scope and its relevance. The recent release of most serial drama broadcast in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s calls for the rediscovery of what should indeed be considered as the ‘golden age’ of Italian television, a time when the question of quality was not defined by the cinematic aspects of television, but by its debt to the theatre, which greatly contributed to these early productions.<sup>7</sup> The digitized media archives of Rai, freely accessible to all scholars in different Rai offices in Italy, allow us to retrace the very flow in which these programmes were originally inscribed, as well as the institutional discourse in which they were embedded.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Patrick Parsons, ‘The Evolution of the Cables-Satellite Distribution System’, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47.1 (2011), 1–16.
- <sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1974).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Considering David Chase: Essays on The Rockford Files, Northern Exposure, and The Sopranos*, ed. by Thomas Fahy (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2008) or, in the same series, *Considering Alan Ball: Essays on Sexuality, Death and America in the Television and Film Writings*, ed. by Thomas Fahy (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Lost and Philosophy: The Island has its Reasons*, ed. by Sharon M. Kaye (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); *Reading Lost*, ed. by Roberta Pearson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO*, ed. by David Lavery (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, ed. by Henry Jacoby and William Irwin (New York: Wiley, 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> Michela Ardizzoni, *North/South, East/West: Mapping Italianness on Television* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007); Sergio Rigoletto, ‘Country Cousins: Europeanness, Sexuality and Locality in Contemporary Italian Television’, *Modern Italy*, 17.4 (2012), 479–91; Giancarlo Lombardi, ‘Days of Italian Lives: Charting the Contemporary Soapscape on Italian Public Television’, *The Italianist*, 28 (2009), 227–48.
- <sup>6</sup> See essays by Peppino Ortoleva, Elena Dagrada, and Stephen Gundle in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs and David Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> In 2008, Fratelli Fabbri Editore, a publishing house specialized in encyclopaedias sold in weekly instalments, began the weekly release of RAI serial drama from the 1960s and 1970s that was previously unavailable on DVD. Following the success of this limited release, most of these *sceneggiati* were reissued by RaiTrade and became available for purchase online and over the counter.

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