

From *Raccontami* to *I Medici*, From *Karol* to *Luisa Spagnoli*: Narrative Formats and Collective Memory in Italian Fiction^{*}

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This paper rethinks critically the Italian serial production of fiction, in recent years, placing it in relation to the dynamics of collective memory. The analysis starts from two Italian fiction: *Raccontami*, the history of a family returns the great changes of the 60s'; *I Medici* dedicated to the biography of the great Florentine Renaissance banker family, exemplified by similar international productions (including the Borgia) and subject to strong promotion by Rai 1. Around these two lines of address is also the analysis of some miniseries among these biopics dedicated to figures of the national imagination such as pontiffs, doctors, partisans, entrepreneurs. If the twentieth century was defined as the "century of testimony" this is also due to the massive and pervasive presence of media that are often at the center of the processes of transformation and transition of the public and cultural life of societies. Television, in particular, confirms itself as the real, symbolic and rhetorical place in which historical events unfold, to be, on some occasions, a substitute simulacrum. Fiction, as a form of popular narrative and reworking, is an intermediary and central element in the processes of building the social imagery and collective memory, responding to the need for a typical tale of every society.

Keywords: fiction, TV, history, memory, Italian television, public service, private broadcasting

Broadcasting of History

The impact of TV *re-mediation* and historic narrations has always been object of debate in media studies about folk memory. The Nineteenth Century has been defined as "the century of witness" due to the huge and pervading presence of mass media that have often been at the centre of transformation and transition processes of society's public and cultural life. Television is particularly confirmed to be a royal, symbolic and rhetorical place where historic events happen till they become, on some occasions, substitute simulacrums (Bisogno, 2008). Medial narrative seems to be the interpretative key that rearranges the present in a symbolic shape or gives the past back as stories that can be enjoyed by the audience. Fiction, intended as a popular and revision tale, stands for a central and intermediary element in the process that builds collective imagination and collective memory, feeding the need of typical storytelling of each society. The TV image, as film images (Ortoleva, 1991, p. 16), are firstly a precious source for historic research about the Nineteenth Century, as contemporary historians have recognised it to be. Compared to other mass media, the relationship between

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events and history and their TV representation has followed its own path due to its growing and pervading presence as well as its political, cultural and social significance: Dayan and Katz, among many, have highlighted the *live broadcasting of history*, looking at the TV as the place of celebration where global events happen.

In this sense, the TV image is an extraordinary means of representation and redefinition of folk memory¹, as well as an extraordinary opportunity to intensify the awareness of the past and the moments society has been founded on². The TV, just like cinema, takes on a double role as source and means of historic narration. However, the relationship between history and TV is not an easy one. If history has always been considered as a source of inspiration for TV productions, the TV provides the history with the sources of the search for a priceless value. The Nineteenth Century has been defined as the century of witness due to the high presence of mass media in the political and cultural life of postmodern society where salient moments occurs as real, symbolic or purely rhetorical. The TV as a means of witness risks to turn into a substitutive simulacrum of events. The programmes creating the TV broadcasting reach a huge audience and have a great impact on the historical context as well as on folk memory in its role of *agent of history*. However, the TV is paradoxically considered a *means of alienation of memory* and history too, due to the emphasis that it puts on the “presentification” of its topics, altering the distance between present, past and future that used to be at the heart of what we call history. Besides, today an event seems to be history in the same moment it is being broadcasted. Historical TV productions tend to *affirm* rather than *analyse* the past as if images could offer a transparent historical reality through its ephemeral authenticity.

History and Stories in Italian Fiction

History has enlivened TV schedules in different ways over the last years: from historical documentaries, that have tried innovative historical tales mainly based on images, to the most popular products of fiction (the so-called historical fiction) that have tried to feed the need of historical reconstruction and shared memory. It is possible to distinguish at least four kinds of historical programmes according to their relationship with the past: the first one includes programmes where *nothing is left to imagination and fiction*; the second regards *programmes with historical vocation* where the reconstruction is needed to provide the truest image of past and the use of *fictional elements* is related to an accurate historical context. In the third category the history is not the purpose but the means to tell another story: the past is as much important as the character (as in films about war). Finally, in films featuring period costumes, the past is needed to evocate an oneiric reality characterised by extravagant sets and costumes that contribute to make history as a simple pretext or intriguing “source”. However, despite the great ferment following this renewed interest for history, there are still many questions to answer.

Since the beginning of the 90s’, Italian fiction managed to win over the deep productive crisis and it became an essential part of the TV offerings (Prattichizzo, 2010). If it is true that it can’t be naively considered as the reflection of the social realities it represents, today it seems to provide something even more radical: it builds a place where new shapes of experiences are invented. The TV fiction introduces itself as an

¹ The collective memory was theorized by Maurice Halbwachs, whose opinions have influenced nouvelle histoire movement’s historians in the analysis of the relationship between history and memory. Cfr. M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, PUF, Paris 1968.

² cfr. A. d’Orsi, *Looking for history. Theory, method and historiography*, Paravia, Turin 1999 e M. Mustè, *The History: theory and method*, Carocci, Rome 2005.

extraordinary tale about reality contributing to the building of collective imagination. Fiction reads and interprets the social world but its reading becomes a source of inspiration for other tales and interpretations. However, what is the intimate relationship that links fiction to memory and identity? Is it possible to approve serial formulas' role of concrete memory institution? Compared to the prejudices of the past, that considered it as something artistically banal and marginal, today's TV fiction is considered as a decisive one to seize the changing of the world, nurture individual identity as well as a Country's folk memory. This memory³ is not only intended as one's own individual resurrection of the past but as a dive into someone else's past stories, where everyone can contemporarily be both protagonist and witness, on stage and backstage. The same concept of identity can no longer be defined in a static and univocal sense but it can only be intended as a process; it coincides with the ability that the individual and social groups have at being, taking the risk of the decision and being part of a challenge (De Luna, 2001, p. 110).

In this sense, serial formulas become heirs to Medieval bards, who told the brave deeds of his people from place to place. This means that the TV is no longer focused on the present but it can define itself as means of historiography. Its central position in cultural consumptions obliges us to acknowledge its vestal virgin role as well as the role of a teacher of change and new sceneries. In this sense, by making its serial nature come true, contributes to the building of the sense of society and social relationships in an historical era of disintegration, allowing "the socialization of the new". Not only does the TV record the present and make it available for future generations, but it also re-elaborates, tells and re-builds the past, making it an object of representation and link to the present need of identity. By releasing experiences, the fiction creates a stimulated universe that feeds folk memory offering a reference point for concrete hermeneutical readings of society. No other narrative system of the present or the past has ever engaged an audience of dozens of million people with stories told by the TV "super narrator"⁴.

Television Tales

In this era of erosion and fragmentation of the audience, fiction remains the most watched and appreciated genre. It is its own audience to play a more and more central and active role in the practices of reception and consumption that essentially satisfy human being's need of stories and narration. TV stories do not represent an escape from life but an exploration that has made narrative arts become the primary source of inspiration of the humanity in search for order and life meaning. Additionally, the fortune of fiction stands for its offering the spectator a chance to escape from daily life without really escaping from it and social existence. The TV audience's extraordinary predilection (Anania, 2003) for these products one more time stands for the great individual and collective needs of "dream" and "going beyond reality" through entertainment. Not only does consuming TV stories mean getting possession of possible worlds that meet the meaning of daily life but it also means getting satisfaction from the pleasing of imagination and happiness. Equally, studying fiction means investigating the interrelations in time and space through different paths and the way how media consumption contributes to "interweaving experience". The results prove fiction's capability at being a central narrative system of the present, giving order and sense to the chaotic flux of events. Because it tells about society, it

³ Cfr. M. Halbwachs, *The social cadres of memory*, Ipermedium Libri, Naples 2007 ("Memorabilia" series directed by A. Cavicchia Scalamenti) (ed. or. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Alcan, Paris 1925). Memory is socially conditioned. This means that individual memories cannot have their own consistency and cannot be called back to awareness if they do not belong to a social group's memory.

⁴ Cfr. P. Nora, *The return of the event*, in Le Goff, Nora (edited by), *Making history*, cit., p. 141.

represents many more aspects than other TV genres can represent, the fiction plays the extraordinary role of “dilator” of the huge range of social situations we have access to, even without being physically there. Narrative imagination keeps, re-elaborates, reinvents and re-writes everything, whilst keeping itself far and separate from documentaries.

Each fiction that has elements of imagination and history will aim at the belly as well as heart and head, following different mixes. Serial narration refers to “possible” world; a parallel world that has been recognised by the audience as the keeper of a past containing significant topics for our contemporaneity. Places of return that can seize and interpret the air of the time. Open and dynamic narrative schemes that reveal unexplored potentialities and evasive perspectives of perception that bring what was forgotten back to life and anticipates the unexpected, that would eventually be uncatchable in the daily routine.

TV narrative, as aware of this social function (Buonanno, 2012) is more and more capable of seizing, representing and telling the differences needed to empower identity and cultural belongings. From one side, it increases social memory and makes it accessible. From the other side, the memory is expressed through mass media that seem to be the only ones that can keep and spread the collective symbolic heritage

Four Fictions for Two Models of Historical Tale

The fictions chosen for the analysis refer to two narrative schemes: story and biopic. The former is an historical drama whereas the latter is a biographic film where the biography is reimaged for a personal who really existed.

Raccontami is the TV series broadcast from 2006 to 2008 on Rai 1 TV Channel. Through the story of a family, it tells about the great changes occurred during the 60s'. The story is structured as a big flashback told by an indefinite present. The events occurring in Ferrucci's family, made of father, mother, grandmother, aunt and three children, run in the opposite sense of the historical events of the 60s'. The protagonist is extraordinary: the TV is not a just a decorative element, but also a character that can speak through images and news; it interacts, changes and reschedules the characters' lives: the story is a huge flashback told by an indefinite present tense. All the episodes are accompanied by the narrator's voice, the littlest among the Ferrucci's, Carlo, who has now become an adult and brings his past back to the memory starting from his birth on the 3rd January 1954, when RAI started broadcasting. He then shifts to 1960, when the story really begins and Rome was getting ready to host the XVII Olympic Games.

I Medici is the TV series dedicated to the biography of a big family of bankers in Florence during the Renaissance and it takes inspiration from similar international productions (*I Borgia*, among the many), broadcast by Rai 1 in eight episodes starting from the 18th October 2016. The ingredients of its success are to be found in the cast – that features, among the many, Dustin Hoffman and Richard Madden from *Game of Thrones* – and the fascinating era (The Renaissance) that has always been famous of its commixture of art, science and power intrigues. The fiction has been objects of controversies linking to the reliability of the product: *the physical aspect of Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici* who have been played by actors with the beard even if the paintings show that they didn't have it; *the façade of the Cathedral of Florence* is showed as we see it today, but it was only completed in 1887; *the death of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici* (Dustin Hoffman) who died of natural causes and not of poisoning as told by the fiction.

Karol – Un uomo diventato Papa is the biopic telling the story of Pope Giovanni Paolo II. The Italian-Polish co-production was broadcast for the first time in Italy on Channel 5 on the 18th and 19th April

2005. The protagonist is actor Piotr Adamczyk who plays Karol Wojtyła since his childhood to his election as the Supreme Pontiff. The fiction has had a sequel called *Karol, un Papa rimasto uomo* in 2006 and broadcast on Channel 5.

Luisa Spagnoli, miniseries of two episodes broadcast on Rai 1 in 2016, is set in a textile factory in Biella, where the machines for the making of chocolate have been rebuilt to recreate the factory in Fontivegge. The shooting also features the villa of Mariella Spagnoli, Luisa's niece as well as the one and only who personally knew her. Spagnoli family has followed the shooting with great interest and creating two very important clothes for the set: Luisa's evening dress, that reminds of the image of Italian chocolate Baci Perugina's box inspired to Hayez's *The Kiss* and the angora wool cardigan that was launched by the fashion house. More than two thousand period costumes have been used for the film: all of them of great value.

It often happens that fiction stories are watched with suspicion and considered as TV's little value productions. The fiction has been for long time object of prejudice but, today, the birth and diffusion of new study approaches have led to considering serial productions as important cultural and social phenomena that also have an important place in interpretative practices through which the individual relate to the world and society. Thus, the fiction represents a resource for the identity as well as a structure that allows to keep the memory in the present and critically retrace the fiction serial production, recently broadcast on Italian channels and put in relationship with folk memory's dynamics.

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