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INTRODUCTION
TV Genres in the Age of Abundance: Textual Complexity, Technological Change, Audience Practices

For students and scholars in communication and media studies, the word "genre" is a great conversation starter. The concept generally points to the question of how to understand a text in relation to others, and this framework is a legacy of traditional approaches in literature found within the humanities, from the Aristotelian distinction between tragedy and comedy to the classic "universal archetypes" described by Northrop Frye[1]. In what ways is a text (a novel, a film, a tv program…) similar or different to others around it? Why does that matter? What is the value in separating texts from each other? The answers to these questions play an important role in helping understand many aspects of the production, distribution and reception of various kinds of media texts.

In this special issue of *Comunicazioni sociali* we continue that conversation by turning our attention to questions of genre to the study of television. We do so acknowledging the considerable work performed on genre within Television Studies in particular as well as within a broader range of disciplines within the humanities, from Literature to Film Studies. We also do so as a way of making sense of the continued transformation of many forms of "old media" by digital technologies. One hopes that we have now gotten past the point of saying that media forms like television "die" when digitized, but rather undergo a series of mutations and transformations, as reflected by the research within media studies on "remediation", "media convergence", and "residual media", have shown[2]. The problem with studying television in 2015 – indeed, the trouble with studying any media form – is that there is so much of it. In this issue we undertake an appreciation of TV genres as further insight into the study of media in an age not only of digital transformation but of proliferation and abundance, what John Ellis has called "the era of plenty"[3].

A central concern uniting many approaches to genre are what we might call the politics of categorization. Putting a label on something like a television show marks it as different from others, and thus starts the analyst on the road of either defining its distinctive characteristics in relation to others that may share its likeness, but be different

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[1] N. Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

[2] Cfr. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media, Cambridge*, MA: The MIT Press, 1999; H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York-London: New York University Press, 2006; A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni (eds.), *Televisione convergente*, Milan: Link Ricerca, 2010; C. Acland (ed.), *Residual Media*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

[3] J. Ellis, *Seeing Things. Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.

in some way. Here too with the labeling comes questions of authority and legitimation[4]. Who decides what is to be labeled what? Where did categories come from? Then there is the question of failed potential. What is left behind when something is categorized one way and not another? Could something be understood in a different way if we changed the categories or asked someone else to perform new forms of categorization?

As Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose note[5], genre has been at the centre of study of television as the primary form of communication for many years. A television show marked as a "soap opera" or "sitcom" produces a series of assumptions about how it will be made, what will be the terms under which it will be criticized, and how audiences will derive their expectations from the text. What has changed, Edgerton and Rose note[6], is that genres have become less of a static item – something upon which things are compared with others – but instead, in part due to the triumph of cultural studies and critical approaches to television, ideas of genre are "reconceptualized as a *process* rather than as a static category". Their book, *Thinking Outside the Box*, offered a number of novel ways to approach televisual texts taking this more process-based approach. A major effort in rethinking and reconceptualizing genre in the study of television is work by Jason Mittell, who proposes "genre" represents a cultural category more thanjust a formal one.

From this wider point of view, we could actually affirm that the theory – and the history – of the genres constitute the essential framework for any analysis of the television medium. Television Studies has based its approach to the question of genres on the well-cultivated terrain of film studies. The crucial reference points include, in particular, the works by Tom Ryall[7], Stephen Neale[8] and Rick Altman[9]: the concept of genre is extracted from the purely textual dimension and inserted into the cultural circuit linking production, text and consumption. Following this line, Mittell among others, has made a key contribution to the work on television genres[10]. Indeed, in his essay he underlines genres' vital role in the television arena: textual repertoires alone are not enough to define this function. In particular, a genre can be interpreted starting from those specific textual conventions that come into their own as much in the context of production as in that of consumption. Hence, attention needs to be drawn to both the text and the context, especially to those practices (production, distribution, promotion, publicity, consumption, fandom etc.) that define the genres' otherwise fluid and changeable boundaries in discursive terms.

To add to these questions we might ask an obvious technological question about the impact on digital technologies on the production, distribution, and exhibition of television texts. Some of these effects are by now quite obvious; the emergence of delivery platforms like Netflix and others which offer new opportunities for televisual production and consumption. The potentials and possibilities offered by cross-media

[4] M.Z. Newman, E. Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

[5] G. Edgerton, B. Rose, *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008, 7.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] T. Ryall, T. *Teachers' Study Guide, No. 2: The Gangster Film*, London: BFI, 1978.

[8] S. Neale, *Genre*, London: BFI, 1980.

[9] R. Altman, *Film/Genre*, London: BFI, 1990 (tr. it.Vita e Pensiero).

[10] J. Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory", *Cinema Journal*, 40, 3 (2001): 3-24; Id., *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2004; Id., *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York-London: New York University Press, 2015.

narratives known as "transmedia"[11], and the new mechanisms for making sense of audiences through demographic and viewing information acquired through these platforms.

It is out of this effort that we make our contribution to the study of television genre in this special issue. Here, our attention expands to thinking about genre not only in terms of programs themselves but also to the range of paratexts, such as advertisements, "television-like" series, but also to address some neglected generic forms, such as sports coverage. Still others are devoted to the issue of thinking through the differences between television and other media forms, such as film. We suggest an expansion of genre process thinking away from some of the aspects of television that have achieved the most attention, namely format programming, reality television, and towards other forms. The explosion of foreign news services is one such example. The explosion of news services such as Al-Jazeera, RT, and France 24 – all extensions, to varying degrees of government-sponsored media aimed specifically at online delivery – might be an excellent place to start, as such services mimic and tweak established "genres" of all-news network television services such as the BBC and CNN. Things like talk shows, weather broadcasts, and other forms of what Frances Bonner calls "ordinary television" might be another area to explore[12]. As Elana Levine has persuasively observed[13], soap operas are undergoing profound transformations and experimentations using different media forms.

In this issue the contributors explore television as a communicative form that can be understood as constituting a mode of communication comprised of artistic creation, audience knowledge, industrial constraints and, in many cases, commercial objectives.

Such questions are artistic in nature but they are also fundamentally questions of *communication* in the traditional sense of "making common" but also because genres serve as a means – or medium, if you will – for the communication of ideas about texts. Moreover, they are powerful mechanisms for how we make sense of different media of communication. In one case, film, Tom Gunning notes that genre serves as a "way of narrativizing and naturalizing primal fascinations present in the cinematic form itself"[14]. The different ways we may decide to take up the study of genre may be contentious. But the fact that genre retains its interest reflects our longstanding desire to understand both the structural and textual components of communicative forms. It is our hope that the contributors in this special issue, then, are able to keep that conversation going in appreciating the distinctiveness and complexities around television as a means of communication.

Therefore, when we consider TV genres in the age of abundance, first of all we have to account for the *complexity* of the ways in which contemporary television communicates, and its articulated production/distribution/consumption chain.

It is of course, first of all, a *textual complexity.* In recent years, we have faced a real explosion of studies and researches on a specificgenre considered as a model of narrative complexity[15]. It is not a surprise if more than half of the contributions you will read

[11] On "transmedia storytelling", see Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

[12] F. Bonner, *Ordinary Television*, London: Sage, 2003.

[13] E. Levine, "What the Hell Does TIIC Mean?". Online Content and the Struggle to Save the Soaps', in C. Lee Harrington, S. Ford, A. de Kosinick (eds.), *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011, 201-218.

[14] T. Gunning, "'Those Drawn with a Very Fine Camel's Hair Brush': The Origins of Film Genres", *Iris*, 19 (1995): 60.

[15] Cfr. Mittell, *Complex TV*; A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni (eds.), *Arredo di serie. I mondi possibili della serialità televisiva americana*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2009; V. Innocenti, G. Pescatore, "Dalla crossmedialità

in this special issue deal with TV series produced in the United States but distributed and consumed across the entire world. In the last thirty years, US dramas and sit-coms have gone through a deep process of change that have produced what has variously been called "quality television", "popular quality television", "complex TV" and so on[16]. The textual complexity of contemporary TV series has forced scholars to rethink questions of genre. As Paola Valentini argues in the first article of the present collection, notwithstanding a certain underestimation, sound and music in TV narrative could constitute a central factor of complexity for the different serial genres: the use of specific songs could be considered extremely relevant both from a production and a consumption point of view. The very definition of "quality TV" could also be questioned. As Paola Brembilla and Lucia Tralli clearly show, the label of "quality" has been attributed mainly to US cable productions, such as *The Soprano's*, *Mad Men* or *Breaking Bad.* But using the categories of narrative complexity, niche audiences and wide critical acclaim we could include in the definition some network, or more mainstream products, as the ones analyzed in the article (CBS' *The Good Wife*, CW's *Jane The Virgin* and Fox's *Brooklyn Nine Nine*). This consideration forces us to reexamine the very (and generic?) category of "quality TV" and to reconnect it more firmly to the wider context of institutional, technological and consumption change of American television. This is indeed the attempt of Simona Busni's article: from a more theoretical point of view, and starting from the different but in some sense analog positions of Stanley Cavell and Jason Mittell, she tries to consider genre as a key concept for an "aesthetic of serialization".

The complexity of contemporary television is often associated with the idea of *transmedia storytelling*, as a (televisual) text is no more able to "contain" the several extensions and protuberances of a wide and articulated "narrative ecosystems". Two different articles deal with the question of genre and transmedia. Still working on American TV series, and particularly on the connected CW's shows *Arrow* and *The Flash* and ABC's *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Marvel's Agent Carter*, Ana Cabral Martins illustrates how specific media conglomerates are exploiting a transmedia and successful genre as the "superhero", that typically expands itself through comics (particularly from the DC and Marvel's universes), movies, games and finally TV series. The perspective moves from United States to Europe and from series to entertainment in Axel Fiacco's analysis of "transmedia formats". If formats constitute a traditional field for Television Studies, new challenges come from the need to develop products that could be able to expand across different media and variously include the web and social media in order to address a participative audience (as in the cases of the talent shows *Rising Stars* or *The Singer Takes it All*): as Fiacco clearly demonstrates, the most successful examples of transmedia formats are the ones in which the centrality of television as medium is never forgotten.

If a genre is defined by the different practices that surround it, on the site of *reception* we cannot underestimate the relevance of both criticism and the audience. Two different articles in the issue deal with consumption cultures and the question of (cultural) circulation. Sara Martin and Roy Menarini's paper shows how a new kind of criticism

all'ecosistema narrativo. L'architettura complessa del cinema hollywoodiano contemporaneo", in F. Zecca (ed.), *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconto, pubblico*, Milan: Mimesis, 2012; G. Pescatore, V. Innocenti, "Information Architecture in Contemporary Television Series", *Journal of Information Architecture*, 4, 1-2 (2012): 57-71.

[16] See for example K. Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television*, New York-London: Harvard University Press, 2003.

– that is quite different from the traditional one oriented to film – has an important role in promoting and legitimizing certain genres (and certain authors), such as US TV series (and their "showrunner", as Joss Whedon, J.J. Abrams or Ryan Murphy). A new kind of widespread, online criticism – that we can define "TV-philia" – breaks the boundaries between grassroots, fan-based criticism and more professional (and traditional) practices and contribute to develop a particular, deep focus on serial narratives. On the other hand, Thoër et al.'s article explores the consumption practices of young viewers that mainly watch television on-line: here, again, selection and categorization of specific products is strongly related to genre definitions and expectations.

As it was recently shown[17], *promotion* is a strategic site of negotiation between media and television industry and the audience. Promos and other promotional materials contribute to cast light to both institutional strategies and textual hermeneutics within specific genres. Since Netfix and the other over-the-top have partially re-invented the distribution of film and series, they have also adopted original forms of promotion: these constitute the main focus of Federica Perego and Mattia Solida's paper.

In the last articles the attention goes to global television and to two extremely interesting genres. In illustrating the different articulation and development of *musalsalat*– series aired every year during the Ramadam period and mainly produced in Egypt, Turkey and Syria – Paolo Carelli illustrates how this particular television genre is capable to negotiate and redefine national and transnational identities across the Middle East. Looking at a global TV event as the 2015 Cricket World Cup, Damion Sturm finally analyzes the impact of technological innovation and digitization in "spectacularize" and commodify sport.

Through specific case histories, different methodological approaches and various theoretical frames, the present issue of *Comunicazioni sociali* shows quite clearly that in understanding contemporary TV textual complexity, technological (and institutional) change and audience practices the concept of genre is still useful and able to open interesting research perspectives.

[17] P. Grainge, C. Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries*, London-New York: Routledge, 2015.