

1992 / 1993. A story of political celebrity degradation through a fiction framework*

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Milan early Nineties. The city became famous in media news thanks to the "Mani Pulite" investigation, led by a pool of magistrates and attorneys who became quite well known at the time; in Italy this will mark the passage from the first to the second Republic. Alongside the legal issues that shook public opinion, the media-land social practices of the degradation of a political body emerged with force: the public questioning of an entire system mostly focusing on some well-knowns names, tied to the major political parties from that historic period.

The 1992 and 1993 TV series (Italy, 2015 - 2017, Wildside, in collaboration with Sky and LA7) focus on the events that emerged from those investigations and which led to the scandal called *Tangentopoli*. 1992 and 1993 reveal the story of the degradation of political celebrities, against the background of the degradation of the city of Milan, a symbol of the Made in Italy success of the 1980s.

Our analysis explores the way in which degradation and delegitimization processes are told in the series. Our lines of analysis concern the following questions: what are the narrative strategies that underline the shift from positive to negative celebrity, not only for individuals, but for an entire political and economic system? How was the social value of political celebrity transformed during *Tangentopoli*? How much did the media system participate in this narration? Is it possible to find a sense of nostalgia during the degradation process? Is it possible to speak of real "ceremonies of degradation"?

Keywords: Political Fiction, Italy, 1992-1993, Celebrity, Delegitimization

In recent years the political tv drama has had its large share in television programming: from mainly fictional products like *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-), to stories drawing inspiration from specific figures of the political realm, like *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), down to narratives highlighting significant events of the political life of a country, like 1992 and 1993 (Italy, 2015 – 2017). Often these fictions focus on political celebrities while they move within the corridors of power and in their private lives. These are tv series representing a fictionalised version of the political culture (Tryon, 2016) thus contributing to define - at least in part - the typical regimen and the boundaries of that universe.

As for the series 1992 and 1993, for example, real-life events, referred to in the plot, are elements of an intertextual process which becomes visible through the documents of the time. Clips from newsreels, excerpts from newspapers, fragments of television shows appear on screen precisely to provide an enhanced reality effect.

* Articolo proposto il 02/11/2018. Articolo accettato il 04/12/2018

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Viewers are therefore not only presented with a quality product to enjoy; through it, and interspersed with a plethora of events, a portion of Italy's political history is depicted where of course, as stated in the opening credits, "the role of characters, societies, organisations, news publications, political parties, tv programs, public administrations, and in general public and private subjects, all from real life, have been re-elaborated and fictionalized."¹ An effective melodramatic narrative is then adopted to "bring to the surface issues of social and political justice" (Tryon 2018, p.26), staging the downfall of important personalities, real political celebrities from that specific time. Precisely for their being set in the past, *1992* and *1993* enable us to see how the construction and deconstruction of politicians' notoriety was established, starting from the way the media had covered it.

1992 and 1993

Italy, early Nineties. The country became famous in global media news thanks to the "Mani Pulite" ('Clean Hands') investigation, led by a pool of magistrates and attorneys who became very well known at the time; in Italy this will mark the passage from the first to the so-called second Republic. Alongside the legal issues that shook public opinion, the media land social practices of the degradation of a political body emerged with force: the public questioning of an entire system mostly focusing on some well-knowns names (Bettino Craxi, or Arnaldo Forlani, for instance), tied to the major political parties of that period. The *1992* and *1993* TV series (Italy, 2015 - 2017, Wildside, in collaboration with Sky and LA7) focus on the events that emerged from those investigations.

Between 1992 and 1994, in effect, the daily updating of inquests, linked mostly to the importance of the defendants' names, was front-page news in national newspapers, together with in-depth investigative reports aired on radio and television. The scandal emerging from these enquiries was called *Tangentopoli* (TN, from *tangente*, kickback, and *poli*, from Greek *polis*, city); it unveiled a series of connections between entrepreneurs, politicians and financiers all linked together by deals, shady businesses, bribes, and specifically kickbacks, or *tangenti*. The State was literally shaken to its foundations, with dramatic consequences especially at political level: the traditional political parties collapsed (the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties), leaving their place to new political groups (Lega Nord – Northern League – at first, and Forza Italia, Berlusconi's party, later).

The ways politics was played out at the time, as described by the series and linked to that specific historical context, seem already quite detached from today's. During the first Republic, in effect, political parties were positioned according to a clear subdivision into three parts, right/left wing and centre. And the status of politicians, their language, discursive tone, their ways of doing politics exhibited in public characterise them, making them easily recognisable to citizens, as belonging to a social group identified with precise symbols. Their media visibility outlined the specificity of their role while marking their distance from ordinary citizens. Politicians dressed in a certain way, moved in accordance

with established canons, adopted a television oratory based on conversational norms that entailed a mutual recognition with journalists, and respect for their specific roles.

Quite differently from today's, television was then the prevalent medium followed by audiences, while the Internet was still unknown and social media did not exist at all. The boundaries between public and private were much more defined, as well as the distance between the political class and citizens. At the same time however, as the fiction has shown rather well, the spectacularisation of politics which the media had somewhat established, was then in full swing, by imposing the use of codes and rules of mass communication to those same politicians (Boni, 2002).

The public image of the political leader still remained well separated from his private sphere and was displayed mainly to convey the values of honorability, honesty, credibility and trust to citizens, the same values that came to be questioned in the period of the inquests linked to Mani Pulite.

At the time, therefore, the desecration process of political celebrities followed courses mostly determined by the work of traditional media, considered by public opinion as the overseers of what was happening, as shown by the narrative of 1992 and 1993.

The series finds then its inspiration from real-life events, resulting at times in a short-circuit between the frame of reality and that of fiction, by using video clips broadcast in the newsreels of the time, as well as by showing the headlines of contemporary newspapers. This mechanism is quite useful to better understand how the narration develops around the degradation of well-know people, real-life political celebrities.

In the TV series, the story goes through some fundamental stages of the early 90s, giving an image of society and the habits of the time. The main character, Leonardo Notte, is an advertising man. This kind of profession emerged in Italy around the second half of the 80s. He embodies the young social climber that moves (or wants to move) from commercial marketing to political marketing. The mixing of discourses between trade, industry and politics is the novelty of that historical period, whose emblem is undoubtedly Silvio Berlusconi, present on several occasions in the TV series. The grafting of the reality effect in the fictional narrative takes place through a series of elements easily recognizable by the viewer and linked in particular to the world of the media: from the pages of newspapers and news of the news, up to the most popular programs of the moment, from "Non è la RAI" to the "Maurizio Costanzo Show". These fragments take on the role of *witnesses* to the events that took place in the past. Therefore they involve the spectator towards the double level fictional / real on which the events of 1992 - 1993 are based.

About the (political) celebrity definition

We know that celebrity is the consequence of the 'attribution' of qualities to a particular individual through the mass media (Rojek, 2001: 10). This attribution coincides however with an effect of notoriety precisely linked to the media's ability to widespread images of important people by reason of their skills - as in the case of politicians - by rapidly making

them famous and therefore familiar to the citizens' audience. For David Giles (2000), fame is a 'process', a consequence of the way individuals are treated by the media. In a political setting, celebrity is a feature that in many instances stands for an entire class of people, and not 'a property of specific individuals. Rather, it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented' (Turner et al., 2000: 11). Politicians, as well as television stars, pop stars and the latest evictee from the *reality shows*, all seem to be integrated into the same 'publicity regimes and fame making apparatus' (Langer, 1999: 53).

Political celebrities, as modern celebrities, are a product of media representation: understanding that demands close attention to the representational repertoires and patterns employed in this discursive regime. Just consider contemporary leaders like Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump or Kim Jong-un. The media's narrative has always favoured the rise of leaders, and especially television has given a much higher visibility, besides upgrading (or downgrading) people appearing on screen, in view of its presence everywhere and its massive viewing by audiences. John Langer (1981), proposed such a distinction: film created stars, while television created personalities. Political leaders certainly belong to this definition (or vision).

During Mani Pulite, television, the press and radio became powerful tools both for the dissemination of news linked to Tangentopoli, and their participation in the demystification of the involved celebrities. The leaders of the different parties, already known to the general public, were political celebrities with a well-established standing. Their style envisaged a communicative dimension, one relational and the other cognitive (Campus 2016). The communicative ability of the politician has in fact always been one of the factors specifically impacting on consensus building, therefore notoriety.

If taking Weber's analysis into account, we may consider political celebrities as a status group (Kurzman et al. 2007). Four aspects of celebrity fit the general outlines of Weber's analysis: the formation of a high-status group (..); the usurpation of "honor"; (...) the monopolization of economic niches (niche of fame); and the pursuit of legal privilege" (Kurzman et al. 2007, p.354). Aspects which we can easily attribute to the members of the political class described in 1993. The series indeed tells the life stories of several politicians both in their public and private sphere. It also compares the differences between long-standing politicians and new-comers, quite green on the job of party members. One of these fictional characters is Pietro Bosco, a recruit of the then fledgling party of Lega Nord (North League). When following Bosco's narrative course we can trace a series of relevant developments starting from a turnaround in clothes (from the sports uniform to the suit and tie), to the choice of the type of house to live in, the habits to adopt in public, the ways of acting and speaking, which slowly bring him closer to the style of the other members of parliament from the Lega.

From a narrative point of view, Pietro is born as a character linked to a lower class milieu, quite far from the luxury of the "Milano da bere" ("drinking Milan")² in the 1980s. One evening, in the street he steps in to defend an old man and his wife assaulted by a couple of thugs. The man is Gianni Bortolotto a (fictitious) leader of the then fledgling Lega Nord. Out of gratitude Bortolotto backs and succeeds in making Bosco a candidate for the

Lega in the coming election. From then on the life of the character, Pietro, changes drastically: from a financially difficult situation and an ordinary life away from the limelight, he slowly comes to don the look and accoutrement of the politician.

Becoming part of a group would mean embodying a specific status, being part of a social hierarchy defined by “a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor” (Kurzman et al. 2007, p.348). In terms of success, honour, reputation and charisma contribute to a rise in popularity for the politician, in a narrative arc quite similar to that of celebrities (Gabler 2001): the (extraordinary) abilities of the subject are in fact highlighted in order to turn him into a public character, famous at national or international level.

Honour seems to be closely linked to reputation of politicians found in the fiction and drawn from reality. It is one of the elements on which the narration in *1993* focuses the most. The notion of honour, indeed, is peculiar to this status. Politicians appear as a high-status group, which shows a “‘purely conventional’ situation of differentiated styles of life – that is status inequality based on social conventions – by gaining state acknowledgment and enforcement of ‘legal privilege’” (Kurzman et al. 2007, p.349).

Again through Weber, for the study of political celebrity, making also reference to the concept of “charisma”, and its underlying power is important as well. By “charisma” Weber (1974) indicates a group of qualities pertaining to an object or a person that - within a given system of social or cultural reference are considered “extraordinary”, namely capable of transcending the common horizons of everyday experience. (Tuccari 1991). It should be underlined that Weber also conceived political activity as an “extraordinary” dimension of action, and accessible only to those possessing the disposition to “lead”, in complete analogy with the double - extraordinary and aristocratic nature – of charisma. Therefore, the charisma pertaining to political representatives is considered a needed quality for that profession: the “extraordinary” task of politicians consists in bringing about the values they have devoted their professional lives to. Charisma then represents a force capable of producing and supporting a specific social and power-based relationship. Honour, reputation and charisma thus become categories embedded in the politician’s role, and in the whole political class, features which in *1992* and *1993* were disrupted by the scandal of widespread corruption - the so-called *tangenti*.

In the TV series political characters are well known to television audiences as they were the representatives of major parties at the time, and at first take up the role of charismatic leaders, to be later utterly despoiled of it. We witness then a celebration of degradation coming to pass through the Mani Pulite investigation. From this point of view the tv series shows quite significantly the “status degradation ceremony” (Garfinkel 1956) becoming the main focus of narration. The layout on which such ceremony is based see in fact the building of a binary model, where truth and false, good and evil engender separate identity-based regimes, undergoing the same programme of communication strategies aiming at praising the positive features of one side and downplaying those of the other side.

If on one hand the issue of kickbacks - *tangenti* - shifting the attention from the political actions of the representatives of the then major parties, to their corrupted and dishonest behaviour, comes to define a new horizon of interpretation denting - or rather demolishing

- the charismatic and honourability standing of these politicians, on the other hand a new group embodies the positive values of justice and honesty linked to the events: the Magistrates/District Attorneys.

Degradation Effects

On screen the character guiding viewers through the different stages of the story is the (fictional) adman, Leonardo Notte (Night, in English). With him we discover the suicide of the Socialist member Sergio Moroni and the entrepreneurs Gabriele Cagliari and Raul Gardini. Notte represents a sort of gaze – totally subjective – cast on the events. He asks the viewers to follow him in retracing the different stages in a chronological order, which, twenty years later, is necessary in order to put back together the specific circumstances and - in some cases - to understand their effects.

Raul Gardini, still quite present in collective memory precisely for his suicide (that someone called instead a homicide) becomes the character taken as a symbol of this context. The fourth episode of *1993* delves briefly on him: the character is depicted from the time when he learns from the newspaper that he will be arrested soon, to when he kills himself.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. From *1993*, Episode 4, minutes 52.00 – 53.00. Raul Gardini reads his name in newspapers and shoots himself

These narrative fragments highlight the psychological state of the guilty and dishonoured character, as if in the attempt to show audiences a point of view concerning the degradation produced by media news. We witness then the showing of an another point of view. The responsibilities of the defendants are placed side by side those of investigative journalism.

Suicide is depicted as an action activating a double order of consequences: on the one hand, it triggers a mechanism of imitation among the individual defendants, as facts have unfortunately shown. On the other hand, for some groups of citizens, it is interpreted as the result of the pressure that media have exercised on some specific people, based on articles and reportages focusing on the scandal and desecration.

The degradation of celebrity - the TV series actually tells us - leads to states of evident despair, with outcomes that at times could not be controlled. In those years there were many suicides which are narrated in *1993*. Precisely in these scenes the use of video clips from the newscasts and the images depicting the headlines of many newspapers of the time, as well as news footage, produce a significant effect of degradation of the character, thus determining a strong connection between reality and fiction.

Suicide comes into play at the time of utter degradation of individual characters. The denunciation of illicit behaviours, emphasized by the media and at the time enjoying a strong backing by public opinion, inevitably brought about the demise of politicians under investigation; they even became more famous, or infamous, and their widespread delegitimization turned into a generalized public contempt. Politicians saw their notoriety grow, but negatively: they lost credibility and people's trust. Suicide then becomes the point of arrival of a pathway based on the loss of the positive qualities linked to the acquisition of status and its subsequent celebrity, together with the acquisition of the negative traits of the corrupted politician and entrepreneur, such as dishonour and unreliability. The status of the victim should be added to all of this, which makes us think about other possible interpretation of the events.

The degradation process also affects invented characters. Mr Mainaghi, for example, father of Bibi, who is one of the central characters of the narrative, is taken up in the first episodes as an important and authoritative man, owner of a real estate and economic empire. Throughout the story, through the interweaving of other narrative lines that tend to give more complex features to the character, a more private part is also shown, less recited in public occasions, in which Mr. Mainaghi appears decidedly more tense. The narrative strategies in question are based on an increasingly evident tension between the public and private sides of the character. The use of more relaxed atmospheres and lighter colors is placed in opposition to gloomy settings, obtained mainly through the use of dark environments. This antithesis, this sort of resistance between public façade and private shelter (Goffman 1959) is resolved for Mainaghi in a strong inner conflict that appears on the scene as the narration of a growing tension, whose climax ends in suicide. The moral desecration of the fictional character follows (or anticipates) the dynamics concerning the real one, showing a psychological path that is displayed through suffering.

Degradation of Celebrity

In 1993 the degradation process is told by using two specific frames: on the one hand the use of media is evident. Headlines and original newspapers articles, together with real footage from tv broadcasts appear constantly in the fiction. Reporters and journalists, in real life and well known to the public, appear in all the episodes of the series.

The other frame refers to the trials which are present in the speeches and lines of magistrates, politicians and police, and when appearing on screen they are replaced by real footage, with the real protagonists in a specific scene.

What is being stressed is that what was at stake then, did not solely pertain to a legal perspective, but also and mostly to a moral aspect, as it focused on identity, images and public reputations” (Giglioli, 1997, p.9). And in reality, as in fiction, “it is as moral subjects, more than legal subjects, that the leaders appearing before the court have been disqualified and de facto expelled from political life” (ibidem), and would soon be completely forgotten, losing their celebrity status for good.

The asymmetry of status between the accuser (the investigating magistrates quite present in 1993) and the accused (presumably corrupt politicians) becomes a necessary element of the series in order to produce a game of degradation, mimicking what had really happened. The moments of this progression correspond to very precise points: the notice of investigation sent to the accused - and great attention paid to it by the media -, the arrest warrant, the jail experience and - to the extreme - suicide, for some. From the point of view of celebrity, the effect of degradation is that of destroying the positive aura that celebrity does confer, to be replaced by a negative shadow capable of contaminating even the past of the people involved. It should be added that the degradation process finds its correspondence in a similar and opposite process: that of celebration mostly touching the magistrates in 1993. The rising of the Magistrates, and their celebration, particularly the figures of Antonio Di Pietro and Gherardo Colombo, corresponded to the parallel demise of politicians.



Figure 5. From “Famiglia Cristiana”, 17.02.2017. Archive photo.



Figure 6. From 1993

All this is easily found in the series, starting from the first episode of 1993 with the famous throwing of coins against Bettino Craxi (then head of the Socialist Party) which took place in the evening of 30 April, outside the hotel Raphael where he used to stay

when in Rome. This is one of the topical moments of political degradation linked to Mani Pulite, together with fragments of processes, banners praising Di Pietro raised in football arenas, spontaneous demonstrations, which were all typical components of the spirit of the time, down to the utter distrust in politics and politicians. In the tv series the desecration is performed mostly through the use of the two frames described above, which comprise the narrative architecture of public outrage. On the screen the social identity of people involved in the scandal is thus thoroughly transformed. We, as spectators, thus witness a double trial/process: the de-celebration of those initially appearing as respectable characters, with a shared feeling of honourability, and their subsequent re-identification through a change of status depriving them of their publicly redefined political role.

Biographical note

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Notes

¹ Opening credits, 1992 and 1993.

² "It's a common expression used to describe the excess of the Milanese 80s. (...) Easy money, constant partying, and one out of two people in the street was a foreigner. It was a very superficial atmosphere, but it was vibrant." https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yv3m55/drinking-milan-v15n4