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# DESECRATING CELEBRITY

Italian Cases in Cinema, Tv Series, Music and Socia Media

A CURA DI  
ROMANA ANDO'  
LAURA GEMINI  
ANTONELLA MASCI  
FRANCESCA PASQUALI  
SARA PESCE

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# Indice

## **Desecrating Celebrity.**

**Italian Cases in Cinema, TV Series, Music and Social Media.....3**

*Romana Andò, Laura Gemini, Antonella Mascio, Francesca Pasquali, Sara Pesce*

## **Saggi**

**1992/1993. A story of political celebrity degradation through a fiction framework....10**

*Antonella Mascio*

**'Il Caso Tortora': Assuming the Celebrity's Guilt.....20**

*Silvia Vacirca*

**Scandal as Medium of the Celebritization Process: Exploring the 'Mina as Mother' Image in the Context of Post-War Italian Culture .....29**

*Rachel Haworth*

**The Pope-celebrity and the role of cinema.....42**

*Isabella Pezzini, Bianca Terracciano*

**The Strange Case of Pope Francis: Between Populism, Celebrity and Divinity.....56**

*Anna Maria Lorusso*

**Where is the sacred in online celebrity? Praise, loath and physical interaction with Italian webstars.....64**

*Stefano Brilli*

**The revenge of Asia Argento: Desecrating celebrity as a means of celebrity culture.....80**

*Romana Andò*

## **Percorsi di ricerca**

**Sbarchi mediatici. Pratiche di consumo mediale e rappresentazioni socio-narrative del fenomeno migratorio..... 95**

*Guido Di Fraia, Elisabetta Risi*

## **Desecrating Celebrity. Italian Cases in Cinema, TV Series, Music and Social Media**

Romana Andò  
Sapienza Università di Roma

Laura Gemini  
Università degli Studi di Urbino

Antonella Mascio  
Università di Bologna

Francesca Pasquali  
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

Sara Pesce  
Università di Bologna

The theme of “celebrity”, its cultural origins, its social meaning and media propagation, and its effects on the audience, has interested scholars of various disciplines for a long time. Just recently, however, an academic research area called “Celebrity Studies” has been established, with a consolidated tradition mostly in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

Early theorists of celebrity, especially in the United States, focused their sociological analysis on what they recognized as a shift in the system of reputation (Klapp 1949, Mills 1956, Boorstin 1961), from one rooted in honor and merit, to one in which media exposure becomes the primary source of visibility and fame. However, not all the founding texts of the field share the suspicious and somewhat moralistic attitude towards the celebrity of this strand of studies.

Two key books from Europe - Edgar Morin’s *Les Stars* (1957) and Richard Dyer’s *Stars* (1979) - laid the foundations of star studies as a legitimate branch of film scholarship and opened up the question of the meaning that celebrities have for their fans and for the cultural systems in which they are embedded. Morin’s pioneering work was especially interested in the particular place between the sacred and the profane that stars occupied, and in their role of “modern myths” of the cultural industry. Dyer’s book explored stars as social signs able to incorporate and disseminate specific values, views, and beliefs, underlining the polysemy and the multiplicity of meanings that they can embody.

In more recent audiences and media studies, the interest in celebrity culture has been further developed. According to Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2010), the topic is already present in the 1980s in classic studies addressing the role played by TV and media consumption in people's everyday life. However, it is in the 1990s and 2000s that celebrity culture gradually has acquired increasing importance in audience studies, booming with fandom studies (cf. among other Hills, 2002) and with the diffusion of reality shows and factual TV shows (Hill, 2005). Among others, three areas of study have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s: 1) "performing audiences" (Abercrombie, Longhurst, 1998) and fan production (Jenkins, 1992) in their relationship with the objects (including celebrities) they "adore" (Lewis, 1992); 2) the relationship between media and material consumption practices of the audience and the (self-) commodification of celebrities (Cashmore, 2006; Rojek, 2012); 3) the relationship between ordinary people and celebrity culture. From a double standpoint, that is, understanding how and why ordinary people have gained such a prominent position in contemporary media and how this has reshaped celebrity culture towards a "trivialization" of celebrities, pushing them to represent themselves in ordinary settings and to participate in what Turner (2010) has called the "demotic turn" in media and popular culture.

These different research strands have large overlaps as it became evident with social media where online celebrities and "micro-celebrities" (Marwick, 2014) call our attention on the very same topics establishing a research agenda focused on: 1) the relationship between daily life/self-presentation/content curation; 2) self-commodification and self-branding; 3) the relationship of online celebrities with followers and their "participatory" practices.

The Italian contribution to this extensive area of investigation started to appear in the second half of the last century. From *L'élite senza potere* by Francesco Alberoni (1963) to some essays by Umberto Eco, like *Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno* (1961) or *Il mito di Superman* (1964), the themes of stardom and celebrity have been at the core of many of the reflections on media productions, focusing primarily on cinematic phenomena (we may remember Guido Aristarco (ed.) *Il mito dell'attore. Come l'industria della star produce il sex symbol*, 1983). In recent years, however, a group of scholars from various Italian Universities has started to conceive an Italian research field capable of defining or re-defining Celebrity and mapping the thematic differences that this topic calls into question in the new millennium.

An assessment of the developing arena of celebrity studies in Italy, a reflection on the hermeneutic tools and procedures that characterize this field and on the possibility of activating a dialogue with international scholars started in November 2015 with a conference entitled *Celebrities. Fashion, Branding, Performance in the era of Social Media*, organized at University of Bologna, Department of the Arts. The conference gathered scholars of cinema and popular culture, scholars of acting and performance, like those from the CRAD - the research center on acting and stardom based in the University of Turin -, and observers of most recent phenomena that bind celebrities and fashion. From that moment on, this group of scholars has expanded, including a variety of different

disciplines: cinema and television studies, media studies, pop culture, audience studies and fashion studies, music and performance studies, communication, sociology. The group's agenda is therefore to further develop the interdisciplinary approach that is essential to operate in the field of Celebrity Culture.

In 2016 a full-fledged research group took shape, under the name of INC (Italian Research Network in Celebrity Culture), bringing together scholars from the Universities of Bologna, Turin, Florence, Rome-La Sapienza, Bergamo, Urbino, Milan (IULM) creating partnerships with research centres such as CRAD, and CFC. INC's fundamental purpose is that of promulgating the study in the culture of celebrity in Italy and circulating the existing research products related to the topic, while maintaining a strong focus on analytical methodologies.

Currently, the group operates along two different lines: planning conferences or round tables and publishing new editorial products of Celebrity Studies that create a dialogue between Italian and international scholars. The need to find an Italian network derives from the acknowledgement that academic research on celebrity occupies a marginal territory in our country and is instead frequently incorporated into other thematic or disciplinary frameworks that tend to re-semanticize it. Little attention is attributed to Celebrity Culture as a specific and independent approach. Consistently with the INC's agenda, a series of occasions of exchange and study followed the 2015 conference. In Rimini, a few events were organized at the Department of Life Quality Sciences (University of Bologna), investigating the relationship between celebrity culture and fashion:

- a Special Lecture with Pamela Church-Gibson entitled *Celebrities, Fashion Studies, Media* (November 2015);
- a day conference linked to the Media Mutation Convention, which deals with the themes of the *Media Mutations Serial fashion. Celebrity*, (2016);
- the *Celebrity* section of "ZoneModa Conference – Sizing" (2017).

Another day was organized at the Department of Arts of the University of Bologna:

- *Celebrities and Cultural Industries. Film, Fashion, Music, Advertising* (2016).

At the University of Bergamo, a two-day international symposium was dedicated to David Bowie, unquestionable global celebrity:

- *Iconic 01. Bowie. Still / Life / Image* (2017).

Finally, in 2018, the "4th Celebrity Studies Journal Conference", entitled *Desecrating Celebrity*, was organized at the La Sapienza University of Rome, underlining the interest of the international academic community towards Italian studies.

The most recent outcome of this study of celebrity-culture in the realm of audio-visual production and consumption can be found in various publications by the members of the group, especially on journals like *Comunicazioni sociali*, *Bianco e Nero*, *La valle dell'Eden*, *Zone Moda Journal*, *Film Fashion and Consumption*. Below here are listed only the volumes entirely dedicated to the topic:

- Volume 5, Number 1 of the *Film, Fashion and Consumption Journal*, (August 2016), edited by Marta Martina, Antonella Mascio, Sara Pesce. The Volume is dedicated to the relationship between Fashion Studies and Celebrity Cultures in Italy;

- A “Celebrity Culture and Media Mutation” section of the collective volume *Fashion, Culture and Society. Notebooks 2016*, Bruno Mondadori / Pearson, Milan, 2016, (edited by Roy Menarini);
- Volume 7 of the magazine *ZoneModa Journal*, entitled "Fashion and Celebrity Culture" (edited by Sara Pesce and Pamela Church-Gibson, 2007).

As we stated before, in Italy scholars in media and audience studies – as we definitely are – have traditionally addressed these issues while not publicly defining their research and debate as celebrity studies, also for this field is still observed with both curiosity and snobbery, watched from afar, dismissed or not completely understood and appropriated. In this way, the aim of our network is to distress the academy, provoking an original debate on celebrity culture in Italy, and at the same time to make closer and more effective our common interest in these issues. The opportunity came when some of us participated in the Celebrity Studies Journal Conference in Amsterdam in 2016 and accepted the challenge to host the 2018 edition<sup>1</sup>. For our network this was an effective starting-point for an open examination of what celebrity studies is doing now from an international perspective and to construct an agenda for substantive change in the academy awareness, in Italy and abroad.

Within the contemporary scenario, the pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years: the connective media are progressively involving in both the celebrification (Gamson 1994; Turner 2006) and celebritisation (Driessen 2013) process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. In particular, as we know, ordinary people who gain visibility and fame are legitimated as celebrity in the mediatized performative society. This process can be seen as an economically-driven artifice facilitated by media institutions that produce and promote celebrities and put them into a position of very public intimacy by covering their private lives or turning their private lives into stories and commodities to consume. As a matter of fact, in contemporary society, widespread digital circulation of content on media and social media enlarges the audience and increases people’s engagement towards celebrities: the media provide the audience with a complex and intensified representation, where the person’s status dynamics are constantly negotiated and evaluated by the people and the audience, who definitely are witnesses of such processes, through their participation and everyday interactions.

What is new in the contemporary media system is that this intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person's social position. In contemporary society, this kind of ritual is generally managed through media representations, which are progressively changing and expanding in the new media ecosystem. As a matter of fact, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past.

For this reason, in order to define the main theme of the 2018 conference, Sapienza’s scholars, as members of the Scientific Committee, started to address the idea of ‘celebrity

desecration' as a complementary perspective to the 'celebrity authentication' theme, verified in 2016 in Amsterdam. As we perfectly know, traditionally, across cultures, degradation is the opposite and – in a certain way - the complement to accreditation ceremonies, which are two social practices that involve a community's shared values and specific social roles (Garfinkel, 1956). However, what is the meaning (and the social values) of desecration in the contemporary accelerated mediascape? Do media need degradation rituals more than in the past to create a celebrity? Could we consider the desecrating process as a new way (even strategy) to reach endorsement and authentication? What is the cost of success if this opportunity comes at the price of being publicly humiliated – or seen as *losers* – by the audiences? In other words, can celebrification be a form of abjection, and vice versa?

The aim of the conference was to investigate both how celebrities manage their status in the contemporary fluid mediascape, what set of communicative practices are involved in both celebrification and desecration processes and what happens when celebrities lose their own status. Far from being linear, this relationship between desecration and celebrification in the new media ecosystem does require a deep analysis.

This special issue of Mediascapes Journal reflects on the conference theme focusing on Italian celebrities as they were addressed during the parallel sessions. Then, we invited scholars who presented insightful perspectives on very controversial and well-known Italian case studies, to carry on the discussion. The result is a composed and rich scenario, that deals with the issue from multiple perspectives, underlining how the degradation and desecration processes represent today, as indeed in the past, the counterpart of the celebrification within the contemporary mediascape.

In the article entitled *1992/1993. A story of political celebrity degradation through a fiction framework*, Antonella Mascio analyses the Italian TV series dedicated to the political Italian scandal called Tangentopoli and explores the way in which degradation and delegitimization processes are told in the series. More specifically the article focuses on the different narrative strategies that allow to observe, on the one hand, the political celebrity degradation both for the individuals and for the social system and, on the other hand, the symbolical processes of degradation seen as “ceremonies of degradation”.

Another controversial Italian case of degradation of the celebrity is the central issue of the Silvia Vacirca's *Il caso Tortora: assuming the celebrity's guilt*. The article analyses this impressive example of spectacular justice – concerning the famous anchorman Enzo Tortora arrested for mafia crimes in 1983 – by underlying the role played by media in the construction of a “guilty narrative” and the possible presence of pre-conditions that could have favoured the destruction of Tortora's public persona.

Starting from an opposite case to the previous one, the article *Scandal as Medium of the Celebritization Process: Exploring the 'Mina as Mother' Image in the Context of Post-War Italian Culture* by Rachel Haworth takes Mina's celebrity as a case study to examine the legacies of scandal within the celebritization process. After presenting an overview of the nature and significance of Mina's celebrity – since Mina was

and is one of Italy's most popular and best-loved pop singers – the article examines the press coverage of the 1963 scandal, as a way of determining how Mina's motherhood was constructed and perceived as scandalous by 1960s Italian society and then observes how this scandal shaped and continues to inform the meanings of Mina as celebrity and star. The article thus tracks the impact of scandal on the creation, circulation, and significance of celebrity in contemporary society.

The Isabella Pezzini and Bianca Terracciano's article *The Pope-celebrity and the role of cinema* focuses on the analysis of some movies and/or sequences of films considered effective examples of the celebrification of certain religious figures. From movies like *Roma* and *La dolce vita* by Federico Fellini, to *Habemus Papam* by Nanni Moretti and the series *The Young Pope* by Paolo Sorrentino, the article sheds an interesting light on the processes of sacralization and desacralization of the religious figure, namely the Pope, and the role played by the fictional imaginary.

From a different perspective, but from a similar interest for the celebrification of the religious figures, the article by Anna Maria Lorusso is dedicated to *The Strange Case of Pope Francis: Between Populism, Celebrity and Divinity*. In order to understand in which way Pope Francis may be considered a celebrity, the article analyses some features of Pope Francis' discourses and practices to observe the strange mix between divine sacredness and earthly humanity.

A further look on the relationship between sacred celebrity and degradation can be found in the paper *Where is the sacred in online celebrity? Praise, loath and physical interaction with Italian webstars* by Stefano Brilli. The article analyses the transformations of the fan-celebrity interaction by examining how the online proximity between young internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical settings. Through a multi-sited ethnographic observation in pre-staged encounters, such as meet-and-greets, book signing events and club parties, the research examines what kind of social distance is ritually enacted in such occasions and how the typical profane/sacred code of media rituals is redefined in the "desecrated" environment of online celebrity.

Finally, the Romana Andò's article *The revenge of Asia: Desecrating celebrity as a means of celebrity culture* presents the very controversial Asia Argento's case. Starting from the facts related to her involvement in two sex scandals (the first with the producer Harvey Weinstein and the second with the young actor Jimmy Bennet) the case is seen as an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This conference is part of a long-term project, managed by *Celebrity Studies Journal published by Routledge* and a Scientific Committee (Susan Holmes, University of West Anglia; Neil Ewan, University of Winchester, Hannah Hamad, University of East Anglia, Sean Redmond, Deakin University). The first conference 'Celebrity Studies now', took place in 2012 (December 12-14th) at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. The second edition 'Approaching celebrity', took place in 2014 (19-21 June), at Royal Holloway University of London. The third edition 'Authenticating Celebrity', was held in 2016 (June 28th-30th), at University of Amsterdam. The fourth edition 'Desecrating Celebrity' was host by Sapienza University of Rome in 2018 (June 26-28).The scientific committee members were: Romana Andò (Chair), James Bennett, Hannah Hamad, Neil Ewan, Gaston Franssen, Andrea Minuz, Sean Redmond, Alessandro Saggiaro. <https://celebritystudiesconference.com/cfp-2/>

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

Antonella Mascio\*\*  
Università di Bologna

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.

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\*\* Email: antonella.mascio@unibo.it

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."<sup>1</sup> 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")<sup>2</sup> 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

Antonella Mascio è Ricercatrice in Sociologia dei Processi Culturali e Comunicativi (Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali, Università di Bologna). Da diversi anni si occupa di relazioni sociali online, con particolare attenzione alle forme comunitarie e di audience studies nella cornice della cultura convergente. In particolare i suoi ultimi studi sono focalizzati sulle connessioni tra internet, tv drama e moda. Tra le sue recenti pubblicazioni: *Film, Fashion & Consumption* (curato con S. Pesce e M. Martina), vol.5, Issue 1 (Intellect, 2016), "Fashion Convergence" (con J. Tsuchiya) *ZMJ* (Pendragon, 2015), *Fashion Games. Moda gioco e virtualità* (FrancoAngeli, Milano 2012), *Virtuali Comunità* (Guerini e Associati, Roma 2008), *Visioni di moda* (FrancoAngeli, Milano 2008).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Opening credits, 1992 and 1993.

<sup>2</sup> "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](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yv3m55/drinking-milan-v15n4)

## 'Il Caso Tortora': Assuming the Celebrity's Guilt\*

Silvia Vacirca\*\*

Sapienza Università di Roma

On Friday, June 17th 1983, the face of Portobello, Enzo Tortora, is put under arrest for drug trafficking and mafia crimes. With these words, on Tg2, that day, Italy followed the tv images displaying the famous anchorman being arrested. The role played by media, which circulated not verified news and espoused almost unanimously the 'guilt hypothesis', in the shaping of court cases and public perception of the facts was relevant. 'Il caso Tortora' was an impressive example of spectacular justice. In the light of the scholar Steven Connor's words, that "It is the destiny and function of the celebrity to be exposed to scandal and absurdity and to bear its mark forever" (Connor, 2005, p. 4), this paper intends to focus on the media construction of the 'guilty narrative', in order to underline the possible presence of pre-conditions that could have favoured the destruction of his public persona and the ways through which his 'presumption of guilt' could be linked to his status as TV celebrity.

**Keywords:** Enzo Tortora, celebrity culture, Italy, guilt, media trial

On June 17<sup>th</sup> 1983, Enzo Tortora, an Italian journalist and TV presenter that reached 'celebrity' status thanks to the TV show *Portobello*, was arrested and charged with membership of the camorra and with drug-trafficking. The next day the news was on every national newspaper's first page, while the audiovisual images of his arrest were broadcasted over and over again. Just over two years later, in September 1985, he was found guilty and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, while in 1986 the Court of Appeal and then the Court of Cassation proclaimed his innocence. He will die of lung cancer on May 18<sup>th</sup> 1988.

In this paper I will try to argue how the 'Tortora Case' is an example of ritual desecration closely connected with the meaning of being a famous announcer in Italy between the 70s and the 80s. In Italy, a highly successful TV presenter had to negotiate TV fame with the institutional standards imposed by the public service (Rai) and that moral and cultural entity which was the 'telefamiglia'. For this reason, before entering into close analysis of the 'Tortora case' we need to address some of the issues related to TV fame and its place in the celebrity studies landscape. Canonical conceptions of television fame put an emphasis on how the medium's rhetoric of familiarity and intimacy, and the domestic context of its reception, mitigate against the paradoxical and enigmatic construction of the film star, instead creating the 'personality effect' (Ellis, 1982; Langer, 1997). Television

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\*\* Email: [silvia.vacirca@gmail.com](mailto:silvia.vacirca@gmail.com)

fosters a close identification between persona and role, so being 'oneself' is unlikely to be considered a skill on TV. The perceived specificities of television celebrity, as Christine Becker also observes, have functioned simultaneously to 'denigrate the stature' of television fame (Becker, 2005, p. 9), even though we will see how Enzo Tortora was named a 'divo della televisione' in current media discourses. It is important to recognise that the foundational conceptual paradigms for celebrity studies emerged from within film studies and constructed television fame as a 'lack'; television can *magically* confer fame upon anyone, "without the requisite association with work" (Marshall, 1997, p. 9). But if we consider celebrity a discursive *mode of representation* (Bonner, Marshall, Turner, 2000, p. 11) in the 'Tortora case' we need to consider how the apparently 'innate' qualities of television fame actually emerged from the RAI's efforts to negotiate the popular appeal of television personalities in relation to the institutional parameters of public service. There is also moral discourse to consider here in so far as, as Ettore Bernabei explained to *Sette* periodical in 1980 (Sabelli Fioretti, 1980; <http://interviste.sabellifioretti.it/?p=500>):

La televisione non è come il cinema. La televisione è sempre accesa, viene vista in pantofole, a casa. La gente non la percepisce come qualcosa di finto, di inventato. È come se si continuasse il discorso fatto nell'altra stanza con la moglie, la suocera, il figlio, il padre.

According to the major newspaper narrative following his arrest, Enzo Tortora's on-screen self was not so much exposed as finally *revealed* as 'inauthentic' by Italian judiciary power. The groundlessness and the virality of accusations demonstrate the primacy placed on 'authenticity' in the construction of a successful on-screen televisual image. It suggests that Enzo Tortora was already suspected of being 'inauthentic'. A fact that would be confirmed by his reluctance to break the boundaries between on screen/off screen personae, his willingness to hide his private self from the media and not accepting to conform to the public service TV announcer's role and media demands.

## Before the arrest

After having won a Rai contest, Enzo Tortora worked for the so-called 'radiosquadre' and travelled the peninsula to broadcast from the deep province's Italian medieval town squares. Tortora offers himself both as journalist and showman to his radio audiences. He remembered: "Quei quattro o cinque anni in giro per l'Italia mi diedero la possibilità di verificare l'importanza della radio. Ancor oggi sono convinto che il lavoro in televisione non può prescindere da un tirocinio radiofonico" (Tortora, 1988, p. 25):

In 1954, Tortora is called to co-host, with Lidia Pasqualini, *Campanile d'oro*, a six month long music regional contest which airs on Wednesdays on Rete2. It is his television debut. Rai tv chooses to broadcast *Campanile d'oro* on TV. Tortora stresses the TV non-subjugated 'domesticity' (p. 29-30):

Ma il mattino dopo, passeggiando per Milano, mi accorsi di una caratteristica particolare del mezzo

televisivo, che è quella di renderti personaggio pubblico. E difatti incontrati un signore che disse: 'Ehi, questo qui non è quello di ieri sera?' rivolgendosi a un amico. Da allora il 'Questo qui non è quello di ieri sera?' me lo sono sentito dire tante volte.

In 1956, in the talent show *Primo applauso*, he plays the valet of “maggiorata” Silvana Pampanini. Good looking, loose tongued, secure, he pierces the screen and replaces the stiff Silvana Pampanini as the official announcer, together with the model and actress Rossella Como. After his first appearances he already starts to receive letters from admirers, interviews and portraits on newspapers and periodicals. In 1957 his notoriety is confirmed by *Telematch* (Italian adaptation of the game invented by the French Pierre Bellammare and Igor Barrère), which Tortora co-hosted with Silvio Noto. In 1959, the year he divorced from his first wife Pasqualina Reillo, he declared to journalist Vito Nieri (Nieri, 1959, p. 17):

Mi sento al centro dell'attenzione di tutti. Vogliono sapere che cosa c'è dietro il mio sorriso. In teatro il pubblico cerca di scoprire il mio dramma e i radioascoltatori aspettano di notare qualcosa nella mia voce che faccia loro capire se soffro o sono felice. Io non ho la forza di piangere durante una conferenza stampa, non sono capace di fare della satira sulle mie disavventure coniugali.

In 1965, when he was fired because of an unwelcomed imitation of Alighiero Noschese performed at the evening show *Telefortuna*, he will admit his 'vulnus'. He is too normal (Pezzuto, p. 27):

Non mi piace frequentare cinema troppo affollati, non ho mai stazionato a Via Veneto, abito in una casa normale [...]. Dovrei fare il divo per amministrare il mio “successo”? Grazie no. Non sono un divo e non ho mai posato a divo. Non ho né ho mai avuto yacht e automobili lunghe come pomeriggi d'estate, non mi faccio proteggere dalla Celere, non ricevo migliaia di lettere e nessuna donna mi ha mai scritto “Fuggiamo insieme” oppure 'T'amo follemente'.

In this declaration Tortora points to the specificities of the 'star' persona: inaccessibility, glamour prosthesis, visibility management. In Susan Murray's work on 1950s American television the performers she discusses – Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason – do not conform to the regime of stardom as set out in film studies (Murray, 2005, p. 129-30):

Within the context of the discourses that constructed television's aesthetic, television viewers were encouraged to believe that they could actually locate the true personality of a television performer somewhere within his or her performance. Because television was said to produce intimacy, immediacy, and spontaneity, it also generated authentic identities.

Between the fifties and the sixties Enzo Tortora possessed a crossmedial public persona: he played in “Carosello”, interpreted the count Loris Ipanoff in the fotoromanzo *Fedora* published in Grand Hotel, played in “Il campanile d'oro” directed by Giorgio Simonelli (1955) and “Italia Piccola” directed by Mario Soldati (1957), became publicist for *Il Musichiere* and *La Domenica del Corriere* where he wrote the column *Il processo alla TV*.

## The parrot doesn't speak

But the show that will skyrocket Enzo Tortora into Italian TV celebdom is *Portobello*. *Portobello* begun at 9:45 pm on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1977 directed by Gian Maria Tabarelli. The first ten episodes register an overwhelming success: from five millions on the first night to sixteen of the following (Pezzuto, p. 130-1). According to Vittorio Pezzuto, “Portobello si afferma come il presepe vivente di un'Italia genuina, solidale, ricca di talenti e fantasia” (p. 131). For the first time to the audiences is given the spectacle of ordinary people. The success is so strong that on the *Grand Hotel* cover, in 1978, the title is: *All'ultimo sprint Enzo batte Mike*. Portobello had started to dictate the newspapers' agenda.

When Enzo Tortora was arrested, he was one of some eight hundred people seized in what the press called the “maxi blitz” against Raffaele Cutolo's Nuova Camorra Organizzata. Its struggle with other groups for the control of these activities reached a bloody climax after the 1980 earthquake which brought rich pickings for the camorra in the shape of public funds. The operation against the NCO was designed to stem this wave of crime and violence. However, it was mounted on the evidence supplied by camorristi 'ideologically' dissociating themselves from Cutolo's organization. They became known as the *pentiti*, a term first used of terrorists who took advantage of the law offering leniency in return for information on former colleagues. In Tortora's case almost all the evidence was provided by *pentiti*. Giovanni Pandico claimed that Cutolo had told him that Tortora was an 'honorary member' of the camorra with responsibilities for cocaine distribution in the entertainment world and for getting money across the Swiss border. Others testified that they had seen Tortora receiving drugs.

Tortora's arrest proves that “non è vero che in questo paese non cambia nulla, non è vero che le leggi o sono sbagliate o se sono giuste non vengono applicate, non è vero che esistono gli intoccabili” (p. 161). At the centre of the investigation there are the words of the *superpentiti* Giovanni Pandico and Pasquale Barra. Regarding Pasquale Barra, on *La notte* Massimo Esposti affirms: “Gli inquirenti lo hanno definito un vero cervello elettronico, una banca dati precisa, senza tentennamenti. Durante gli interrogatori ha citato alla perfezione luoghi, dati, personaggi senza mai sbagliare”. Paolo Bonaiuti on *Il giorno* echoes him: “Barra diceva qualcosa? Subito si controllava, nei minimi dettagli. Ma non c'è stato verso di coglierlo in errore” (p. 163). On *La Stampa* it is possible to read the words of the Procuratore Capo della Repubblica di Napoli Francesco Cedrangolo: “Non abbiamo l'abitudine di emettere ordini di cattura senza motivo. Tutte le informazioni raccolte sono state sottoposte in questi mesi a controlli accurati” (1983, p. 2). Those newspapers fabricated a powerful veracity machine which certificated the truth and trustworthiness of pentiti's words. In fact, media had pronounced their sentence. The *sostituti procuratori* Lucio Di Pietro e Felice di Persia, that had ordered the maxi-blitz, were described as zealous machines on *Il Giorno*, *il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Giornale* and *Il Tempo*. Di Pietro and Di Persia declared to *L'Unità*: “Non potevamo avere occhi di riguardo, la notorietà non significa impunità per nessuno” (p. 165). The fact that Enzo Tortora – the 'deamicisiano' -

is beyond suspicion, only reinforces that logic.

*Pentiti* whispered an audiovisual landscape based on popular mythologies. Their words were *confessions*, not words to be confirmed. In the end, evidence offered to corroborate such testimonies proved to be either without substance or inconsequential. The charges against Tortora were, nonetheless, upheld throughout the stages of the judicial inquiry preceding the trial. Tortora himself, as a consequence, spent until January 1984 in the Regina Coeli prison in Rome, and was then transferred to Bergamo, before being put under house-arrest on health grounds in January 1985. Indeed, the charges against Tortora were seen as justified by the magistrates in the light of each new 'revelation' coming from his accusers; and these accusations were instantly turned into major news stories. The case for the prosecution dominated the headlines for the first year of Tortora's arrest.

The many articles and books dedicated to the 'Tortora Case' stress a break in Enzo Tortora's life. For example, the book on which the TV series *Il Caso Enzo Tortora* is based, written by the journalist Vittorio Pezzuto, is titled *Applausi e Sputi*. The before and after public images of Enzo Tortora and their meanings are so distant and the accuses were so unbelievable that a magical transformation seemed to have occurred.

Enzo Tortora had never talked about his private life to magazines. Quite on the contrary, he acted as an active subject - rather than the object of media gossip - as a freelance journalist, often writing against RAI and the Italian cultural backwardness. According to this point of view, the trial offered a priceless opportunity to fabricate Tortora's private self, turning newspapers into *rotocalchi*. The story, in fact, provides a bitter example of a news-event that came to mirror a society's preoccupations, fantasies, and contradictions.

There are two components that I think need to be taken into account in interpreting the 'Tortora Desecration Case'. The first one had been addressed by Enzo Tortora himself on the newspaper *La Repubblica* on September 24<sup>th</sup> 1985, where he calls himself a TV celebrity. TV celebrities are usually judged for their personalities, we expect them to be authentic, ordinary, to penetrate our homes without affectation. Enzo Tortora had a problem precisely with that required 'authenticity'. After the arrest, his colleagues and close friends, like for instance the TV presenter Piero Angela, described him as a workaholic who did not lived the showbiz lifestyle. He was some kind of alien, living the showbusiness with a very bourgeois attitude. He did not enjoy watching TV and he read lots of literature. When, in 1969, he expressed some controversial ideas against the RAI monopoly, the public service fired him. He was a TV celebrity who refused to conform to the social norms attached to TV celebrity status: frivolity, ordinariness, authenticity.

The second component is the role played by the national media before the magistrates came into play. In 1983 the only way to gain informations about the NCO trial was through press and RAI newscasts. The very notion of the 'Tortora Case' points to the process whereby the trial of the camorra became increasingly overshadowed by that of one famous individual.

It is important to stress the fact that since the very first moment the body of Tortora was the object of manipulation in order to offer to the media a precise image of guilt. Enzo Tortora used to dress with the typical bourgeois suit, often striped, complete with a vest.

On TV he appeared very put together, with all those layers covering the body. It was 4 am when he was brought from Hotel Plaza, a luxury hotel in Rome to via In Selci, the site of Carabinieri operations centre but it was 11 am when they took him to Regina Coeli prison. They were waiting for the media. Everything was staged. The car fifty meters away from the Operations Centre door in order to allow the media to photograph and shoot him. So, for the very first time Enzo Tortora appears on TV with his off screen private clothes. A casual look made by a blu shirt open at the neck, blue jeans, an untidy beard, and a blue sporty jacket - which has been sold at auction for 880.000 lire by the Radical Party. His naked self, sick and unkept, was being offered to the audiences. That was the evidence. National media like *Epoca* will make a spectacle of his body imprisoned and sick.

In the first hours from his arrest many in the media will dedicate themselves to the analysis of the personal and public image of the 'divo of Portobello'. Mario Collacciani writes (p. 171):

L'eroe televisivo Enzo Tortora rivela una calma addirittura sospetta al momento dell'arresto. Le labbra mosse con flemma, i muscoli del collo e della faccia tirati e la voce compassata sembrano voler ricordare e riprodurre a tutti i costi il personaggio del piccolo schermo, amato dalle massaie. Alla mia richiesta di un pensiero da rivolgere a tutti coloro che lo conoscono, [...] Enzo Tortora non ha avuto esitazioni: 'Dovete credermi. E voi colleghi giornalisti italiani dovrete seguire con molta, molta attenzione tutta la vicenda'. Una frase del genere, un attimo prima di entrare nella macchina che punta su Regina Coeli si può prestare a più di una interpretazione. Molto meglio seguire le prime sensazioni, quelle istintive, ma non per questo meno valide. (...) Può forse aver voluto dimostrare di sentirsi sicuro e di avere le spalle ben protette?

Wladimiro Greco underlines his theatricality: "Dosando con grande mestiere indignazione e sbigottimento ha retto bene la parte della vittima innocente" (p. 171). Costanzo Costantini is suspicious about his reluctance to offer his private life to public media (p. 172):

Desta qualche sospetto quando fa di tutto per nascondere la sua vita privata. (...) I moralisti e i moralizzatori sono sempre da salutare con favore, specialmente in tempi come quelli che viviamo, ma a condizione che non bistrattino con l'azione i loro principi, che conducano una vita irreprensibile.

Before the arrest he had come to be completely identified with his *Portobello* persona, and, in particular, with his role as announcer. *Portobello* went off the air with Tortora's arrest, prompting an article in the *Corriere della Sera* entitled *La gente orfana di "Portobello"*. *Portobello* was a very innovative show, designed to maximize audience involvement and participation via selling and buying things, phone-ins, letters from viewers, and the live audience itself. It was a show which celebrated the old fashioned values of provincial Italy.

However, while protagonists of theatre and cinema enjoy a measure of 'artistic licence', the RAI television announcer represents social standards of decency and good taste. This responsibility attached to fame was all the greater in Tortora's case because of the high moral tone of *Portobello*. Ironically, Enzo Tortora did fall victim to his own show, suffering, in real life, from a version of the distorted fascination of viewer for presenter depicted in films like "Play Misty For Me" (Clint Eastwood, 1971). It seems that the admiration of a viewer for Tortora turned into undying hatred when his contribution of embroidered table-

mats to a *Portobello* auction went missing. Tortora's name became an object of hatred for the viewer and his close associates, who, like himself, were *pentiti* who had belonged to the camorra. The presenter's own personalization of his relationship with his audience rebounded with terrible consequences.

But those consequences became terrible only because the accusations were considered instant truth by the media, with few exceptions. This element of aversion emerges in many articles from different intellectuals, signaling an ambiguity at the heart of the public image of Tortora. An ambiguity which Enzo Tortora addresses in his autobiography *Il racconto della mia vita*, when he writes (Tortora, p. 10):

Ecco, qui ci sono gli elementi che formano un po' le contraddizioni della mia vita. Forse da mio padre ho preso quel coraggio che mi è servito a buttarmi nel mondo dello spettacolo, mentre da mia madre il gusto della privacy tipicamente ligure.

He was accused of being *unpleasant*. At RAI they called him *professorino* (tiny professor) and “primo della classe” (first of the class) (p. 63). In fact, many accused him of *deamicismo*, meaning a certain literary sentimentalism that tends to represent Italians as a supportive, benevolent family. Enzo Tortora affect was being unmasked as affectation, with him turned into the man with a thousand faces. Many wrote against his conjunctives, his northern accent, his cultivated self and verbal sophistication. The narrative the media fabricated was one where behind his too-good-to-be-true public image there must have been a criminal. But, as the publisher and intellectual Giulio Bollati has written in his book *L'Italiano*: “It is hard not to see guilt in a picture arranged to recognize it” (Bollati, 1981, p. 164). The reversal of his image from jaunty announcer to lost soul is sudden. As Lietta Tornabuoni suggests (Tornabuoni, 1983, p. 1):

Prima ancora che una celebrità è una persona di casa, un parente: la stupefatta incapacità di pensarlo colpevole è magari anche il rifiuto di riconoscersi ingannati e presi in giro, oltre che da tanti, pure da Enzo Tortora, perfino da Portobello.

With the 'Tortora case', it seems that the very integrity of the televisual, national family represented by 'mamma Rai' was being put at risk. That would explain the virulence of the media trial strictly intertwined with the judicial one.

## Biographical note

Silvia Vacirca is a PhD candidate in 'History of Europe' at Sapienza University in Rome. Her current research is focused on representations of Italian fashion and femininity during World War II. She writes for L'Officiel Italia, Hunter Fashion Magazine, Rivista Studio, Lettera43 and other publications.

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## Scandal as Medium of the Celebritization Process: Exploring the 'Mina as Mother' Image in the Context of Post-War Italian Culture\*

Rachel Haworth\*\*  
University of Hull

Mina is one of Italy's most popular and best-loved pop singers. She rose to fame in the late 1950s and was particularly dominant from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Yet she remains popular even today, despite retiring from television appearances and live performances in 1974 and 1978 respectively. Whilst Mina's celebrity status in Italy is predicated first and foremost on her status as a popular music star, her celebrification has involved different mediums, including live and recorded music, television (as performer and programme host), and films. In 1963, one specific medium was to irrevocably shape Mina's celebrity status for the rest of her career: that of personal scandal. This was the year in which Mina announced her relationship with married actor Corrado Pani and gave birth to a son outside of wedlock (shocking behaviour in the context of 1960s' Italy where divorce and abortion were still illegal). Indeed, the scandalous nature of this behaviour is demonstrated by RAI's decision to ban the singer from their network in 1963. It was then public demand for Mina that forced RAI to rescind their decision. This article takes Mina's celebrity as a case study to examine the legacies of scandal within the celebritization process. Her celebrity is such that she is well-placed to shed light on the nature of Italian culture in the post-war period and to highlight the dominant values and ideals at work within Italian society from the 1960s to the present. After presenting an overview of the nature and significance of Mina's celebrity, the article examines press coverage of the 1963 scandal, as a way of determining how Mina's motherhood was constructed and perceived as scandalous by 1960s' Italian society. The article then traces the ways in which this scandal shaped and continues to inform the meanings of Mina as celebrity and star in post-war Italy. It focuses specifically on the ways in which the idea of 'Mina as mother', scandalous and otherwise, circulates as one of the features of Mina's contemporary star image. The article thus tracks the impact of scandal on the creation, circulation, and significance of celebrity in contemporary society. It argues that, in this case, scandal becomes one of the texts, or 'mediums' through which celebrity and star status is produced and which interacts with other mediums to generate the meanings of Mina's star persona.

**Keywords:** Mina; scandal; celebritization; motherhood; star image

Mina is a prolific Italian popular music star whose rise to fame occurred at the end of the 1950s and who remains hugely popular in Italy today. At the time of writing, her latest album, *Maeba*, was released in March 2018 and immediately charted in the number one spot in the Italian album charts. She was particularly successful from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s thanks to her continued participation in RAI's Saturday night variety television shows of those years. Indeed, her rise to national fame had always been mediated through the small screen and by the time she took on her first recurrent role on television,

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\*\* Email: r.haworth@hull.ac.uk

becoming in 1961 the host and leading star of the first series of *Studio Uno*, Mina had already been labelled by the press as the “diva nazionale” (Guerrini, 1961, p. 12) of the moment.

Because of this status, Mina constitutes a valuable case study through which to explore post-1945 Italian culture. Indeed, celebrities and stars can shed light on the culture and society from which they originate: Gundle (2008) has argued that Italian cinema stars offer “a significant way of ‘reading’ Italian society and culture” (p. 262). In other words, Italian stars can be seen to transcend their origins and come to reveal something about Italy and “function as a cultural symbol and conduit for ideas about gender, values and national identity” (p. 263). As a result of the celebrity- and star-making process to which they are subjected, Italian stars, and Mina as popular music diva in this case, are seen to embody a specific set of meanings and connotations which reveal something about the systems of cultural value, and the broader, established ideologies and ways of behaving that are at work in Italian society. Understanding ‘the many meanings of Mina’, which have changed and evolved during her career, is a way to develop our understanding of Italian cultural change in the post-war period.

But Mina is also exemplary of the way in which celebrities, stars and icons<sup>1</sup> are all constructed by different media, and the resultant polyvalent status of the star becomes the site for negotiation between local and global identities, values, ideologies, and ways of behaving. This is because whilst Mina is first and foremost a popular music star, during different phases of her career, she has also been a film star and a television personality. She has advertised different successful Italian brands on television, and she has been a magazine writer and agony aunt. Her star persona and subsequent iconic status, then, is the product of her work in many different areas and then of the promotional materials and commentaries that are produced in response to her work. Dyer (1998) explains that “a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films, and criticism and commentaries” (p. 60). But in the case of Mina, the range of media texts that make up her iconic status goes beyond the area of popular music, because she is a star across different media. Meyers (2009) explains that “The celebrity [...] is an intertextual sign informed by multiple sources in multiple ways” (p. 892) but in the case of Mina, I would argue that we need to think about the star as an intermedial sign informed by multiple ‘mediums’ in multiple ways. It is therefore necessary to expand our approach to reading this type of the star, by taking into consideration both the impact of the intrinsic nature of the popular music star (who is a singer, video star, live performer, fixed in time on album covers and recordings, for example) on the star image, but also the way in which all the media that the star is involved in, interact to produce the star image.

Mina is thus a perfect case study through which to analyse both the celebrification and celebritization process. Driessens (2012) argues that a differentiation needs to be made how we use these two terms. Celebrification, he explains, is “the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities” (p. 643), whilst celebritization then refers to “the meta-process involving changes in the nature of celebrity (or its democratization), and its social and cultural embedding (through its diversification and migration)” (p. 653). Celebritization “occurs not at the individual, but at the social

fields level” (p. 643) and “should be conceived as a product of mediatization, personalization and commodification” (p. 653). It is also important to remember that the process indicates a “shift of emphasis from achievement-based fame to media-driven renown” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 7). This suggests that there is a need to pay close attention to the role and influence of the media in the context of celebrities and, in particular, to the broader impact on society. Celebrityization, Driessens (2012) ultimately suggests, “enables us to think more profoundly about celebrity’s influence without having to cast this immediately in terms of linear effects. Instead [it allows for an] analysis of how celebrity moulds the cultures we live in or the fields people are active in and what its consequences are, for instance in terms of power relations, expectations, identity formation and self-presentation (online as well)” (p. 653). It is in this particular context that the usefulness of Mina becomes clear: the intermedial nature of her celebrity status and star persona allows for an in-depth investigation into how different significances of the celebrity are produced by different ‘texts’ and ‘mediums’, how these meanings continue to circulate and be renegotiated and redefined during a celebrity career through an introduction of and interaction with new ‘texts’ and ‘mediums’, and how ultimately, these meanings influence and impact the broader cultural and social contexts with which the celebrity comes into contact.

To illustrate this, let us focus on what Mina signified in 1961, when the press sought to label her as Italy’s ‘diva nazionale’, with no further explanation of what this meant or how Mina had attained this status. By 1961, Mina had achieved national fame through appearances on popular television shows, including *Lascia o raddoppia* and *Canzonissima* during 1959, and in six *Musicarelli* movies, and through chart success, with three number one singles (‘Tintarella di luna/Mai’ (1959), ‘Il cielo in una stanza/La notte’ (1960), and ‘Moliendo café/Chi sarà (1961)). Following a failed attempt to win the Sanremo Festival in 1961, despite being labelled by the press as the favourite, Mina’s status as national star was cemented through her being cast as the host of *Studio Uno*, the popular Saturday night variety television show, from October to January 1962. Her star image on the show appeared to be that of demure and respectable starlet (Haworth, 2015, p. 33). Yet it was also informed by her success prior to this moment as *urlatrice* and modern singer. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Italian media had presented her as “the lively, modern young woman from Cremona, who lived a celebrity lifestyle with fast cars, cigarettes, and late nights out dancing” (Haworth, 2017, p. 247). The newspapers and *rotocalchi* were also keen to cover her many different love interests. It can be argued that “even if her star image had softened by the time of her television appearances on *Studio Uno*, as she embraced more obviously in her performances the traditional *canzone italiana* genre, she was still known to Italian audiences as ‘Mina: cantante modernissima’” (Haworth, 2017, pp. 247–8). These different aspects of Mina’s early career then reveal the various texts at work in the celebrification process here, which are then embedded in a social and cultural context which meant that Mina migrated across genres and texts and her star status underlines the importance of media-renown that is associated with celebrityization. Such a turn then begins to reveal something of the modernisation of Italian culture taking place in

this period, and, specifically, the cultural forms and cultures from which Italian society was drawing inspiration for this change.

A new 'text', or 'medium' would enter the celebrification process in 1963 in the form of a personal scandal: in January of that year, Mina shockingly announced she was expecting a baby with the already married Corrado Pani. Writing about media scandals, Lull and Hinerman (1997) argue that "the scandal functions simultaneously as a moral anchor in a sea of conventionality, and as a vigorous challenge to mainstream social values conditioned by the substantial forces of ideological and cultural hegemony" (p. 2). In this light, Mina's pregnancy out of wedlock can be seen as scandalous because of the challenge it posed to the dominant social values at work in Italian culture at that time: we need to remember that in Italy in this period, divorce and abortion were still illegal, and the Christian Democrat government that had been in power since 1948 still sought to promote traditional, domestic roles for Italian women as wives and mothers (see Morris, 2006, pp. 3–4). The pregnancy thus functioned to draw attention to and simultaneously challenge and reinforce the social conventions and dominant morality at work in Italy at the time. As a result of the scandalous nature of the situation, the story received much coverage in the press during 1963: articles were published that recounted Pani's attempts to annul his marriage, Mina's preparation for motherhood, and, in April 1963, the birth of baby Massimiliano and the impact this event had on Mina in particular.

This article takes this scandal as its focus, and tracks the ways in which this event shaped and continues to inform the meanings of Mina as star in post-war Italy. After presenting an overview of the ways in which the 1963 scandal was reported in the press and the resultant significance this episode had for Mina's star persona, the article concentrates on the ways in which the idea of 'Mina as mother', scandalous and otherwise, circulates as one of the features of Mina's contemporary star image. The aim therefore is to track the impact of scandal on the creation, circulation, and significance of Mina's celebrity and star status in contemporary Italian society.

### **A scandalous affair: Mina, Corrado Pani, and the birth of Massimiliano, 1963**

Given the status of Mina as 'diva nazionale', and Pani's fame as an actor of stage and screen, it is perhaps unsurprising that the news that they were expecting a baby received much media attention in 1963. The story featured consistently throughout that year in the Italian newspapers and *rotocalchi* (see Haworth, 2017). This article takes as its case study the coverage of the national newspaper *La Stampa*, to illustrate the broader nature of the scandal in the context of Italy of the 1960s. This newspaper had a national readership and an independent, centrist stance in this period under the leadership of editor, Giulio De Benedetti. Specifically, *La Stampa* was arguably representative of the mainstream in Italian culture during the 1960s and became popular largely thanks to Benedetti's strategy of giving a voice to readers through the introduction of a column to which readers could send letters and the editor would then reply. The newspaper constitutes a useful case

study for the analysis of Mina's personal scandal precisely because of its stance and desired interaction with readers: stories would arguably be selected because of their public interest, and presented in such a way to highlight mainstream values and ideals, and promote them to readers.

*La Stampa* breaks the news of the pregnancy on 10 January 1963. After what the newspaper refers to as 'repeated denials', the headline informs us that "Mina attende un figlio dall'attore Corrado Pani" (p. 4). The photograph that accompanies the story shows Mina "nella tipica espressione aggressiva che l'ha resa popolare" (p. 4) but the article itself focuses not on Mina's aggressive defence of her actions, but rather on her declarations of love for Pani and the unborn baby. This demonstrates a subtle shift in the way Mina is portrayed by the media: she had previously earned a reputation for being aggressive, due to her brash personality and forthright demeanour. Her nickname of 'la tigre di Cremona' illustrates this. But the newspaper here suggests that with motherhood, comes a change in behaviour that can be seen to be only fitting with Mina's changing circumstances. The suggestion that becoming a mother will require Mina to become more obviously loving and thus less aggressive is coupled with the idea that although in the past, Mina's various romantic relationships were 'intricate', or complicated, her declaration that "lotterò per sposare l'uomo che amo" (p. 4) can be read as her seeking to embrace the societal norms of motherhood and marriage seen as fitting for women in 1960s' Italy. Indeed, in an article published in the evening edition of the newspaper on the same day, the label 'tigre' is redefined, so that it now fits this new Mina who will fight tooth and nail for the man she loves and for her unborn child. It is also important to note that although the newspaper acknowledges that the announcement will naturally scandalise some readers, it is also at pains to point out that Pani's marriage was doomed from the start (it recounts how the couple were involved in a car crash immediately after their wedding), suggesting that love is the most important factor in this story and that it can conquer, and perhaps even forgive, all as well ("Mina è fuggita," 1963, p. 9).

There is, then, an element of recuperation at work here, the result of which is to realign Mina once again with the social conventions and values at work in Italy in this period. This approach to Mina and the scandal is present also in an opinion article published on 11 January 1963. Here, the journalist Gaetano Tumati (1963) demonstrates how this story of Mina's maternity will have initially come as a shock to her fans: she is, he argues, the woman they would least expect to settle down, given that fact that "era lei, Mina, che annodava e slegava a piacimento i vincoli amichevoli o sentimentali, passando di fiore in fiore come un'ape regina" (p. 3). He again underscores the sudden change in her behaviour and vocabulary, but goes on to point out that "eppure, a ben pensarci, la nevrastenica modernità di Mina non è una moneta così sicuramente autentica come poteva apparire a prima vista" (p. 3). He argues that "anche quando sbarrava gli occhi, anche quando si elettrizzava, il suo volto non mostrava mai quelle linee tormentate, quelle stigmate affascinanti e vagamente perverse che contraddistinguono i prototipi femminili dell'umanità d'oggi" (p. 3). These role models, he says, include the actresses Sophia Loren, Annie Girardot and Jeanne Moreau. As far as Mina is concerned, Tumati (1963) claims, "per quanto sbarri pupille, il suo viso da precoce matrona mantiene sempre una

regolarità ottocentesca, che ricorda i ritratti delle nostre nonne” (p. 3). His conclusion is that Mina will in fact look very much at home next to a crib.

There is here a careful criticism and subsequent reworking of Mina’s celebrity status: her status as rule breaker, a woman who scorns social conventions, is carefully undone through the suggestion that all that has gone before was inauthentic. The journalist encourages us to look closely at Mina, so as to identify her true self – which, he argues, embodies maternalism and old-fashioned, traditional, family values (through the resemblance to a grandmother). The shock and scandal elements of the story are played down here through the focus on motherhood, which, it would appear, we should all have been expecting as ultimately this is what suits Mina. The potential challenge to societal conventions and gender norms that Mina can be seen to embody in the early 1960s is thus nullified somewhat, as her celebrity status is reworked to begin to embrace motherhood and to simultaneously cast off ideas of her as a challenger of social conventions. She can be ‘saved’ by motherhood, a transformation which allows for her recuperation back into Italian society.

Thus when the newspaper reports in March 1963 that Pani’s wife, Renata Monteduro, has denounced Pani and Mina for ‘concupinaggio’, an offence that carries a two year prison sentence should the two be found guilty, it is unsurprising that the picture portrayed of Mina is not that of a woman fighting ‘tooth and nail’ to protect her relationship but rather that of a shocked, dejected woman who is visibly shaken by the news and cannot understand why Monteduro should seek this course of action. Mina’s focus remains her baby, as she is quoted by the journalists as repeating “proprio mentre sto per avere il bambino...” (“Mina è stata sconvolta,” 1963, p. 5). These words also appear in the headlines of follow-up articles published in March, repeatedly provoking our sympathy for the singer and what we now see as her plight.

The reader’s sympathies then remain firmly with Mina as coverage continues, with the newspaper reporting during April how the pregnancy has affected her health and how she is finally taken to a clinic in Milan during April as a precaution. Her baby boy, Massimiliano, is born 18 April. An article then appears on the occasion of the baby’s baptism on 25 April: the accompanying photograph shows a content Mina, relaxed and apparently well-suited to motherhood (“Battezzato in clinica,” 1963, p. 10). However, we are still encouraged to feel sympathy for her as we learn about the distress she feels at not being able to breastfeed her baby (as a mother should, is the implication of the article).

Following the birth of Massimiliano, the stories that feature for the rest of 1963 in *La Stampa* recount the court proceedings between Pani and Monteduro, as Pani fights the accusation of *concupinaggio*. Mina is never present in court and indeed, as the story unfolds during September and October, there is a suggestion of distance between Pani and Mina that was not present in the stories earlier in the year. An article published on 29 September recounts how Pani and his wife broke down in tears in court and embraced one another; we then learn that Mina’s relationship with Pani is not what it was a few months ago and that when she found out what had happened in court, she too began to cry and asked journalists to leave her in peace (“Corrado Pani offre 30 milioni,” 1963, p. 17). Indeed, we are constantly reminded in articles of this period that Mina is not present in

court, and the photographs used to illustrate these stories nearly always show Mina, Pani and Monteduro in separate shots, or else show Pani and his wife together, with Mina in a separate photograph. It is as if, now that Mina's image has been recreated as that of tender, loving mother, she must be distanced from the sordid story of the affair. There is also the suggestion of a breakdown in the relationship between Mina and Pani (which was in fact inaccurate at this point) through the alleged reconciliation between Pani and Monteduro. This consolidates the idea that by the end of 1963, Mina has been recuperated and can now be seen to have embraced Italian social norms and traditions; she is thus presented as being distanced from any behaviours or relationships that would constitute a challenge to convention. The re-moulding process is complete, and Mina can now be seen to occupy a socially acceptable role within Italian culture: that of mother. It is this idea of Mina that takes hold in the public imaginary during 1963 and becomes an important signifier of the singer in this period.

## Mina as mother

This image of 'Mina as mother', and thus of Mina as fulfilling a traditional gender role and abiding by the status quo, then returns throughout the 1960s and indeed remains a fundamental part of Mina's star persona. This is clear in the magazine articles and features which appeared during the 1960s that showcased Massimiliano's childhood and explained Mina's commitment to her son and to her role as mother, which, we are told, is her priority above all else.

For example, in an article in *Bella* from March 1964 entitled 'Mina nuova maniera', we discover that Mina now has a new sense of her responsibilities, both at work and at home. The journalist Tino Robert comments on the changes that are now evident in Mina and explains:

Ecco, la sua ossessione è questa: di essere ingrassata. In effetti si nota un cambiamento fisico, ma non tale da preoccupare. Si è fatta più donna, più florida. Il suo vero cambiamento è forse soprattutto psicologico, interiore. "Prima non ero una cantante, ero soltanto una ragazza di buona famiglia borghese che cantava per divertirsi. Adesso mi considero una professionista che ha degli impegni da assolvere nel miglior modo possibile. Insomma prendo sul serio il mio lavoro" (Robert, 1964).

The reader has to make the connection between the changes to Mina's physical appearance and her recent pregnancy but it is interesting to note that these appear to be positive changes. She has demonstrably embraced her role as mother, seen in the fact that she is now "più donna" and "più florida", meaning that the reader can identify the physical results of Mina embracing her socially acceptable role as mother.

But she has also started to take her work seriously now, following the birth of her son. The article quotes Mina's record label manager, Ansoldi, who explains of Mina "ti sei resa conto di avere delle responsabilità" (Robert, 1964). This is then the opportunity for Mina to talk about her son, "con una sincerità e una commozione toccanti" (Robert, 1964). Her change in attitude is clear to those around her, and, encouraged by the journalist, we too

feel moved by Mina's emotions towards her son. Indeed, following his birth, Mina is no longer 'la tigre' we are told; rather, "si potrebbe definirla una dolce gazzella, adesso, un placido elegante cigno da laghetto" (Robert, 1964). It is important to note that these ongoing reminders of how Mina has apparently changed for the better as a result of becoming a mother then become part of her new star image: 'Mina as mother' is tranquil, sweet, and placid, meanings that are in direct opposition to those associated with her star persona at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s.

These changes have had additional consequences for Mina's star image though, as a four part interview published in *Tuttamusica TV* in October 1964 demonstrates. Again, Mina recounts how the birth of Massimiliano changed her life and how her son is the best thing that has happened to her. But in addition to demonstrably embracing her role as mother, she explains how becoming a mother has brought her closer to the public:

Massimiliano nacque il 18 aprile del '63 a Milano. È il giorno che ho segnato come il più bello della mia vita. Quando mi fecero vedere Massimiliano i miei occhi si riempirono di lacrime, era bellissimo, era come lo avevo sognato.

Fu anche in quell'occasione che mi resi conto come la gente non sia cattiva. Ricevetti poche lettere di insulti, di rampogna. Ricevetti invece migliaia e migliaia di auguri. Ricevetti fiori, coprifasce, abitini per il bambino, da ogni parte d'Italia, da gente che non avevo mai visto, ma che mi conosceva per avermi sentito alla radio, alla televisione o per aver visto le mie fotografie sui giornali. Quei regali e quelle lettere le ho conservate tutti. È stato il più bel premio che abbia avuto, il più grande successo.

Quando tornai a farmi vedere in pubblico mi accorsi di essere ancora amata. La gente mi sorrideva, mi si stringeva attorno, mi chiedeva di Massimiliano. È stato tutto questo a ridarmi il coraggio di ricominciare da zero. Ora posso dire di essere felice, ho riconquistato il mio pubblico, ho una casa mia, ho Corrado e ho il più bel bambino del mondo. (Berlendis, 1964)

Here, we are reminded of the scandal by means of Mina's belief that "la gente non sia cattiva" and through the reference to the very few letters "di insulti, di rampogna" that she received following the announcement of her pregnancy. She is aware of the scandalous nature of her situation but is able to turn this scandal on its head by virtue of explaining what she has found the public's reaction to be, which suggests they do not perceive her situation to be as scandalous as might be expected. Rather, they choose to support the singer in her maternity and send best wishes, flowers, and baby clothes to show their support. The narration of the public's positive attitude to her personalises Mina's story in a way that makes the scandal part of her celebrity status, which has 'migrated', as Driessens (2012) would have it (p. 644), to now include the role of mother. The story she tells here can be seen as part of the celebrization process at work, as Mina's account involves aspects of privatization (allowing the public intimate details about her private life) and emotionalization (allowing the public first hand access to her feelings about her family and about her fans); both of these aspects are fundamental moulding forces in celebrization (Driessens, 2012, pp. 644–5). But in this way, the 1963 scandal thus becomes an integral part of what Mina now stands for as a star, and arguably becomes one of the 'texts' through which her star image is created, again also contributing to our understanding of the celebrification process to which she has been subjected.

In particular, though, the private and emotional responses to the scandal become a fundamental part of its reworking that the 'Mina as mother' image represents. For example, in an article published in *Epoca* in October 1966, the journalist Guido Gerosa places Mina under the spotlight and, through an interview, tries to get to know Mina, the person behind, 'Mina', the star persona. She is, according to Gerosa (1966), "colei che, con Sophia Loren, incarna il tipo della 'diva' italiana del dopoguerra". The reference to this status reminds the reader of Mina's place in Italian culture, which she has arguably regained following the 1963 scandal, if indeed she ever really lost this status for the Italian public in the first place. Gerosa then shows how Mina remains attached to Italy, outlining how she does not like to travel or tour, suggesting a reciprocated affection that repays the status her fans ascribe her (Gerosa, 1966). There is, however, an additional important aspect to this attachment that supports the 'Mina as mother' image. Gerosa seeks to understand the extent to which Mina prioritises staying in Italy and the article recounts their exchange on the subject:

è vero che ha rifiutato un contratto per cantare un mese a Las Vegas, a cinque milioni per sera, e l'ha fatto per non staccarsi dal bambino? Oh Dio, forse non erano cinque milioni per sera, ma un mucchio di quattrini erano, questo sì. Ci ho rinunciato per stare con mio figlio, e anche per stare in Italia. E' un paese troppo bello, il più bello del mondo, lo dice una che il mondo l'ha girato tutto. Siamo così viziati... Io, quando mi trovo all'estero, mi ammazzo a fare dieci cose al giorno pur di tornare a casa in fretta. E se solo sento, per strada, accennare una canzone napoletana, mi vengono le lacrime agli occhi e prenoto un posto sul primo aereo per l'Italia (Gerosa, 1966)

Mina's desire to stay close to her son and to stay close to her country of birth are conflated here, building an important sense of attachment to both family and nation. The 'Mina as mother' image, then, takes on a new aspect here, as the feelings and emotions Mina has for her son are transferred to the nation. Her role of mother is then opened up further: she is now not only responsible for Massimiliano's welfare and wellbeing, but also has a role to play in that of the nation too. Such a representation of Mina reinforces her position as 'diva nazionale' whilst also redefining it to now include an aspect of caring and parental responsibility.

This caring element is reinforced when Gerosa narrates what happens during the interview when he asks directly about Massimiliano:

"Lei dice che non ha bisogno di nessuno, ma non è vero. C'è qualcuno, mi hanno detto, per cui stravede: il suo bambino, Massimiliano." Finora la conversazione si è svolta in clima rarefatto, appunto da film di Fellini. Quei muri decorati di stemmi, quell'abito candido che fa somigliare Mina a un'apparizione di Giulietta degli spiriti, il trucco profondo agli occhi, il suo scivolare lento nella stanza dall'alto di "un metro e settantotto a piedi scalzi". Ma adesso che parla del figlio, una luce diversa le accende lo sguardo: torna ad essere la ragazza di Cremona che aveva paura di presentarsi sul palcoscenico una sera di dicembre di otto anni fa, la Mina che, già ricca di trionfi, invitata al circo, si rifiutò di salire in groppa a un elefante perché le facevano paura gli "animali grossi". (Gerosa, 1966)

The visible change in Mina's demeanour that the conversation about Massimiliano elicits results in a reintroduction into her star image of the original authenticity she used to

represent. Prior to the mention of her son, the interview has had an inauthentic, unreal air, as seen in the likening of the environment and conversation to those found in a Fellini film. Yet when Mina begins to speak of her son, her face lights up and the reader once again sees her as a frightened young girl who has much to learn and much to lose. This revelation of authentic feelings, that echo a pre-existing version of Mina's star image, functions to bring the audience closer to Mina. Meyers (2009) explains that

tabloid and entertainment magazines, fan-authored and official Web sites devoted to celebrities, and any other forum where celebrity lifestyles are the main topic of concern [...] bring the celebrity close to the audience by making her life not so far removed from the audience's own. In other words, the illusion of intimacy strips away the mask of the public performance through the revelation of personal and private details about the celebrity as an average person that resonate with the audience's own experiences. (p. 893)

In the context of the Gerosa article, the presentation of the private details of Mina's lifestyle and, in particular, her experience of raising and caring for her son, help to construct her as an average person whose experiences are similar to those of ordinary Italians. The 'Mina as mother' image introduces an aspect of accessibility to Mina's star persona, making her not so far removed from her audience.

## **Mina and Massimiliano today**

This accessibility then developed during Mina's career and took a new form during from the 1980s onwards. Following Mina's retirement from public appearances, concerts, and television performances at the end of the 1970s, any contact her audience has with her has been and is fully mediated through her recording company, the record industry, and the media. The role of PDU, Mina's recording company, is of particular interest in the context of this article: this is because, although PDU was founded by Mina and her father in 1967, it has for the past thirty years been managed by Mina's son, Massimiliano Pani. His presence serves as a constant reminder of the scandalous events of 1963 and the idea of Mina as mother today. But Massimiliano is also now responsible for delivering Mina to her public and for shaping her contemporary star image through a narrative proposed solely by the record company. As Mina's son, he has the authority to speak about her and to offer a legitimate narrative of Mina's career, in order to continue to celebrate the star and reify her status.

This is clear from a recent episode of *Che tempo che fa* that aired on January 14 2018: Massimiliano Pani appeared on the programme to speak about the newly released *Tutte le migliori* album, a collection of greatest hits and duets from Mina and Adriano Celentano, which was released on December 1 2017. After a short introduction to his career, the questions Massimiliano answers are about Mina's album, the production process for her songs, Mina's artistic choices on the album, his childhood growing up with Mina, and Mina's everyday routine today: the focus always remains Mina. Massimiliano presents certain pieces of information about her personality, her artistic decisions, and her approach to music in general, ensuring that Mina's star image here is shaped appropriately. For

example, when questioned about his description of her as “la più grande donna che io abbia mai conosciuto”, which the host, Fabio Fazio, sees as a wonderful compliment to offer, Massimiliano responds “guarda, [...] sicuramente è una persona che ha un punto di vista delle cose formidabile. A volte dice una cosa e ci penso e dico ‘perfetto, perché non ci ho pensato io?’ perché è proprio avanti” (Biondani). Mina here is presented as continuously and consistently modern, forward-thinking, and ahead of her time, in all that she does. We the audience might think of her musical career in this context, but her personal life and family choices were arguably equally modern and against the status quo. Mina’s absence from the screens is mediated through her son – and through his presentation of her and his guidance on how we should interpret her behaviour. As a trusted family member, Massimiliano can speak on Mina’s behalf, and the images of the two of them together as mother and son that are projected on large screens in the television studio and thus constitute the backdrop to the conversation, remind us of his status. When we then view a ‘Mina montage’ in homage to the great singer, we also see Massimiliano’s live reactions to seeing his mother on screen. The way in which he smiles and nods approvingly of what he sees prompts us to respond in a similar (and thus legitimate) way to the star.

Massimiliano ‘speaks’ for his mother also on the occasion of the release of the 2018 studio album *Maeba*. In an article from *Il Tempo*, for example, published on 22 April 2018, “Massimiliano Pani racconta la madre” (“Mina superstar”, 2018, p. 21). Again, because he is a member of her family, he has the authority to represent Mina to the public: the story he presents is consistent and depicts Mina as “l’artista più moderna che ci sia in Italia” (p. 21). According to Massimiliano, Mina is courageous (as always), hardworking, professional, committed to her art, open to new developments and possibilities, and able to speak to new generations and audiences. She remains unique in her ability to produce a song that goes straight to the heart and elicits an emotional response from her listener. There is no mention here of the 1963 scandal; and whilst its legacy remains in the presence of Massimiliano’s narrative voice and the use of a photograph of Mina and Massimiliano together, all scandalous connotations of the idea of ‘Mina as mother’ have now been removed. Yet the idea of her as modern and courageous takes on new meanings when we bear in mind the scandal of the past: it is as if modernity, courage, and an implicit challenge to tradition and the status quo have always been part of Mina’s star image. The legacy of the scandal then reminds us of the very core of this image, of Mina’s broader significance as modern and anti-traditionalist, and of the ways in which she can be seen to challenge established ideals and values within post-war Italian culture.

It is the circulation of the medium of scandal as one of the ‘texts’ or, rather, ‘mediums’ which constitutes Mina’s star image and its resultant significance, which allows for the negotiation and renewal of Mina’s meaning as a celebrity and star in the Italian context. The coming together of such texts to produce celebrity status is of course indicative of the celebrification process, “by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities” (Driessens, 2012, p. 643). But the generation of meaning through the coming together of these texts also sheds light on the process of celebritization, which “points to

certain changes in the nature of celebrity and its societal and cultural embedding” (Driessens, 2012, p. 644). The case of Mina and the 1963 scandal illustrates specifically the anxiety of Italian society about gender norms and ideals in this period, specifically towards young women, given that “the role of the family and identification of women primarily with it remained strong in this period” (Willson, 2010, p. 129). Specifically, the turn towards modernisation within Italian culture of the 1960s brought with it anxieties regarding possible increases in sexual relationships outside of marriage and unmarried young mothers. Mina’s celebrity status drew additional attention to her motherhood and the coverage in the press demonstrates how the dominant values for women were re-exerted and the scandalous nature of Mina’s behaviour recuperated, through the promulgation of the traditional, socially-acceptable ‘Mina as mother’ image. This is the image that Mina herself proposes in her narration of her relationship with her son during the 1960s. She appears to have internalised the societal expectations for a mother as required by Italian culture. Yet the fact remains that Mina was a modern, unmarried mother, and this aspect of modernity continues to be present within her star image and inform her significance to a certain extent, but is always contested then by the presence of the traditional, particularly in the contemporary context. The meanings that Italian audiences attach to Mina are informed by the cultural and social significance of the Italian context within she appears, and by the changes and continuities of post-war Italian society. The legacy of the 1963 scandal continues to circulate within Mina’s star image but is reworked to such an extent that the image of ‘Mina as mother’ now points to the necessity within Italian culture to embrace and adhere to convention. The notion of ‘the unconventional mother’ still exists within Mina’s star image, but has been largely erased by the Italian cultural necessity to recuperate Mina as a traditional, ‘good’ mother, thus reaffirming the positive trope of motherhood within Italian culture.

### Biographical note

Dr Rachel Haworth is Senior Lecturer in Italian at the University of Hull (UK). Her research interests lie broadly within the area of Italian popular culture, and, specifically, in popular music. She is interested in questions of gender, performance, stardom, legitimation and value within Italian popular music. She has published on the *canzone d'autore* and its relationship to the *chanson française*, on French and Italian singer-songwriters on stage, and on the singer Mina.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the case of Mina, these are all terms that can be used to characterise her level of fame at various points in her career. In this article, I have tended to use star in order to indicate a certain longevity for Mina’s career by that point, and to draw a distinction between a type of fame that is associated with an industry and with notions of a constructed star ‘persona’ and a more personal, private aspect of fame that is then connoted here by the term ‘celebrity’. I also use ‘celebrity’ to mean, more generally, ‘a famous person’.

## The Pope-celebrity and the role of cinema \*

Isabella Pezzini\*\*

Sapienza Università di Roma

Bianca Terracciano\*\*\*

Sapienza Università di Roma, Università degli studi della Tuscia

Cinema, in particular the *auteur* one, often offers a dense and sometimes visionary reflection on the processes of constitution and medial recognition of celebrities, some religious figures included, helping us to understand the depth of these phenomena also in relation to the different moments of history and of media development. The essay proposes a first exploration of this vast topic focusing on the analysis, conducted with semiotic instruments, of two texts considered prime examples in this sense, linked through the theme of the relation between worldliness and religion, as well by the direct connection of inspiration between the two directors. We refer to the historical sequence "The Princess Domitilla" from *Roma* (1972) by Federico Fellini and to the television series *The Young Pope* by Paolo Sorrentino (2016). In the first one, the link between sacralization and desecration is widely and provocatively explored, through the hyper-Baroque imaginary of an Ecclesiastical fashion show occurred in the heart of the Roman "Black nobility". Fellini already in the *Dolce Vita* (1960) staged the role of the media – especially the gutter press and the beginnings of television – in the construction of mass "fanaticism" phenomena, both worldly and religious. In the TV series created and directed by Paolo Sorrentino, *The Young Pope*, on the other hand, the question of the Pope as celebrity is explicitly addressed and theorized at different levels, starting with the choice of the lead actor, Jude Law, who emphasizes this theme.

**Keywords:** semiotics, sacred, profane, fashion, consumption

## Religious celebrities between sacralization and desecration: catwalk of the absurd and improbable psychotherapies

According to *Cambridge Dictionary* "desecrate" means "to damage or show no respect towards something holy or very much respected", whereas the *Merriam-Webster* reports these two definitions "1: to violate the sanctity of: PROFANE [...]; 2: to treat disrespectfully, irreverently, or outrageously".

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\*\* Email: biancaterracciano85@gmail.com

\*\*\* Email: isabella.pezzini@uniroma1.it

So “desacrating” something or someone implies a status or a preliminary process of “sacralizing”: for example, in the field of mass communications, it is exactly the phenomena called “divism”, that is the accurate semiotic construction, realized by apparatus of cultural industry, that consists of particular aura and charisma, built around actors and personalities of the star system, made through mundane interventions on both their bodies and images, vastly imitated thanks to social networks. To establish an essential reference, in a very extensive bibliography, we should start by considering some famous books like Edgar Morin’s *The spirit of the time* (1962) and *The Stars* (1957), or their contemporary *Mythologies* (1957) analyzed by Roland Barthes, of which there is the one dedicated to the dematerialized face of Greta Garbo, or, entering in the religious sphere, to the head of Abbé Pierre, so much negligently coiffed to reveal an accurate production of meaning, the “signs of charity” rather than charity itself.

On the basis of Barthes and Morin studies celebrities can be placed in a sort of limbo, between sacred and profane – an “affordable” sacred –, and also halfway between real and imaginary: it’s because they are at the same time unattainable ideal beings, but imitable too. We can affirm that their binary nature is analogous – without prejudice to the proportions – to God who makes himself a man in the Christian religion: celebrities are equal to the deities for the aura of perfection imposed by their public role, while in their private life they are simple humans among humans. The process of deification starts from media, that make celebrities mythological beings, although they enter in their private sphere to generate identification mechanisms, promoting their credibility, an element that also explains the success of their social networks verified profiles, which represent the official window on their daily life, as confirmed even by Pope Francis himself.

The celebrities, therefore, have a dual nature, they are both attractors of projection-identification, and role models of culture and life, and their acting as energetic condensers of mass culture generates many myths of self-realization in public and in private which gather around them, that also make their lifestyle based on seduction, love, well-being an example to follow.

Therefore celebrities represent and conciliate three universes:

- The imaginary
- The information,
- The field of advice, exhortations, norms

What do the “famous” religious share – like a Pope or a saint can be – with the stars? The fact of belonging to a middle ground, above the common mortals but still in their midst, being by definition the dispensers of behavior and cultural models. In contemporary media they also share very similar dynamics of media presence, of interaction with the public, of participation in major events, crowds and so on, as well as the recent book on Pope Francis communication edited by Annamaria Lorusso and Paolo Peverini (2017) represents.

What are their differences? Compared to the secular celebrities that are always “too human”, the saints are characterized by a strongly oriented earthly and spiritual path that

leads them to transcend the human, from which they come, fully entering and participating in the regime of the sacred “true”: privacy, solemnity and sometimes even the mystery surrounding them help to wrap celebrities in a halo of respectful distance from ordinary mortals. The biographical parable of the saint, as the institution of a sacred legend, is counted among the *simple forms* – that is basic – of narration identified by André Jolles (1930), and to which the nowadays biographies and media hagiographies are still held.

Vice versa, how does cinema “desacralize” the religious sphere? The discourse would be long and complex, but in this paper we focus on two prime examples, two texts about “desecration”, staged through comedy, irony, paradox, at most a bit of satire, in the common sense spirit well resumed in the definitions cited at the very beginning of this paper.

Shown below the texts chosen for our research:

- *Roma* (1972) by Federico Fellini (with special reference to the ecclesiastical fashion show)
- *The Young Pope* (2016) by Paolo Sorrentino.

It is not a matter of proposing an in-depth analysis of the work of the two directors and of the considerable bibliography about them, but of focusing attention on the aspects – in our opinion unpublished – that we have identified as pertinent in this context. The methodological background adopted is of a sociosemiotic type, therefore focused on the organization of the levels of construction of the textual meaning, with particular attention to the figurative dimension. It is a way of reading where it is given prominence to how the sensible is inscribed in the discourse (see Bertrand 2000, p. 21) starting from the social dimension of the text, considered a “formal device through which the meaning, articulating itself, manifests, circulates in society and in culture” (Marrone 2018, trans. mine).

All of these filmic texts and particularly some of their sequences, rely on the imagination and on the cinematic translation of some Vatican backgrounds, trying to tear apart its ritual and formal veil. They are as well linked to each other by a series of intertextual references as demonstrate the explicit ancestry claimed by Paolo Sorrentino regarding Fellini, or they share some themes that indirectly concern or even contradict the celebrity of Pope Francis, like, for example, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI that led him to the papal throne, or his “aversion” towards protocols and rituals, his sobriety and distance from every detail from the “Father of princes and kings” designation.

As for Fellini's *Roma*, we have to focus on the episode “The Princess Domitilla”, which culminates with the famous catwalk of ecclesiastical fashion. The sequence reconstructs with nostalgic accents by its protagonists the familiarity, now lost, between the so-called black nobility and the Roman clergy, and if we consider that the film was shot in 1972, perhaps we can identify a direct reference to the abolition of the Pontifical Court, decreed by Paul VI in 1968, in which certainly took place anachronistic rituals and attires similar to those shown by Fellini, as their rhetorical exaggeration. In particular it seems that the references are to the apparatus of Pope Pius XII, a pontiff who symbolized the

conservative ideas of the Roman aristocracy, whose icon is however recognizable in the final apotheosis of the sequence.



Fig. 1. The Fellini's Pope and Pius XII in comparison.

This complex sequence mocks the spectacular and profane background of rituals, the exhibition of luxury and treasures and the consequent excitement through which the Church of Rome and its representatives often celebrate their saints, revealing the night and secret dimension of vanity linked to the temporal power, to the political alliances and to the potentates of the Roman nobility.

The procession/catwalk is a moment in which Fellini lets his imagination run freely, where the entertainment aspect, in a dreamlike atmosphere underlined by music, is almost superior to that of satirical overthrow. Very interested in the ecclesiastical rite, Fellini writes, for example: "I like the choreography of the Catholic Church [...] its grandiose mortuary apparatus. The merits of the Church are those of any other creation of thought tending to protect us from the ravenous magma of the unconscious..." (Bondanella 1992, p. 215, trans. mine).

The fashion show begins with the cleaning and the preparations of the huge room in which the event will take place. Among them, there is the setting up of several paintings, removed from the walls to be dusted, all large portraits of red dressed cardinals, whose attitudes and expressions can not fail to recall the disturbing variations on the portrait of Innocent X by Velasquez realized by Francis Bacon.

The semantic base on which Fellini works is provided, among other things, by the isotopies that unite the <procession> and the <fashion show>. In fact, they are both events of a spectacular nature endowed with an internal narrativity, which responds to a progression: the series of surprising manifestations grows gradually, increasing expectation, surprise and wonder until reaching a peak with an exceptional event that

triggers pathos. Usually the fashion shows climax with very elaborated wedding dresses, the true triumph of the designer who at that point is called on the catwalk to be applauded and acclaimed. In Fellini's *Roma*, however, the audience falls into swoon and in mystic ecstasy at the manifestation of an old pope set in a baroque machine like a relic, but effective. The ecclesiastical fashion show is divided into three parts. The first has a highly ludic character: for the initial figures – the nuns, the novices, the country priests – dominates the funny, comic aspect: the dress is functional until the paradox due to its improbable details, like the fan-wings on the nuns' hats, or the cuts for comfortably riding the bicycle in the garments of the country curates, emphasizing on one side the details of the common religious clothes, on the other the usual ways and gestures of their wearers.

In the central part of the show the bodies disappear: only the dresses are paraded, in the most luxurious versions: the symbolic dimension of the canonicals prevails on the body that has become accessory and secondary. Here is shown a dress that is the emblem of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that imposes itself, which could wear any body, not vice versa – the dress, unlike the popular saying, does make the monk. In the third part, certainly phantasmagoric and grotesque, the dead walk down the catwalk in ever more sumptuous and complex clothes, real machines and baroque triumphs, and therefore we can consider them as saints: clothes for relics, for transportable saints and miraculous apparitions, for bodies beyond the opposition between life and death. Fellini had dedicated meticulous drawings and instructions to Danilo Donati: "Remember: a cardinal like a pinball machine, a cardinal like a cuttlefish bone, a cardinal (invisible?) made by bright lights" (trans. mine from Lo Vetro 2015).



Fig. 2 – Iconic clothes from the clerical fashion show.

Here Fellini has had – perhaps without even imagining it – a fantastic insight into the *medial body* whose traits would have increasingly contaminated the religious one,

especially that of the Pope, a phenomenon progressively accelerated with the papacy of John Paul II, which we refer to the careful reading by Federico Boni (2002). As is known, at the beginning of his pontificate, the good looks of John Paul II has made him known as “bionic body, ATHLETE of GOD”, transformed progressively into the representation of the “suffering servant of God”. In particular this transformation had its cruel peak in the inauguration of the Great Jubilee of 2000, in which he was forced into a cloak, miter and cope with bright colors and fabrics (silk and lurex) suitable for television shooting. A Pope who became a dummy, a sacred object, before death and sanctification.

The satire then extends from the mundanity of the church to the mimicry by the outside world, as indeed suggests a joke pronounced during Fellini's fashion show by some of the public: “It is the world that must look to the Church and not the Church that must look at the world”. With his imagination Fellini anticipates and also senses a radical development of the fashion meaning of our time. If the world of the old and disgraced ecclesiastical nobility represented into the film falls in ecstasy for its past glories and for its rituals of luxury and death, in the current "worldly world", not otherwise, one falls into swoon for the designers, the top models and the other deified characters of the fashion star system. The relationship between the sacred and luxury, which we perceive as a seductive mixture of sacred and profane, in the film is considered evident, as well as the link between the search for transgression and the simple inspiration to the religious symbolism, and today the now common identification of the objects of fashion as objects of cult (Violi, Cosenza 2008).

### **Objects of common use, of fashion and of consumption as signs of celebrity and signs of sanctity**

We could define the last filmic text of our corpus – *The Young Pope*, a 10-episode drama series, created and directed by Paolo Sorrentino – as a direct derivation of the previous paragraph, both because of the visible citations, and the paradoxical vein that runs through the whole story, focused on a Pope to be considered as the perfect crisis between desacralization and sacredness, precisely because of his peculiar relationship with celebrity, of which we are going to examine the characterizing trait of the two sides of this medal divided between the sacred and the profane, in other words some signs of celebrity and sanctity that play an important role in the significant relationships that determine the transmission of the television series deep meaning and the identity construction of its protagonist.

Lenny Belardo, also known as Pius XIII, is a 47 years old young Pope, and he likes to wear Havaianas, Louboutin and Armani sunglasses, as seen on him in combination with a huge white cape with gold filigree and clasp, during the meeting with the Italian prime minister interpreted by Stefano Accorsi ("Episode 6"). Havaianas is the most famous brand of rubber flip flops, made in Brazil, inspired by Japanese Zori, and become the global footwear for leisure, while Christian Louboutin is a French shoes designer, known for his signature red sole. Despite being flip-flops, Havaianas is undoubtedly a significant brand

of social status, like the luxury labels as Louboutin, because as the latter covers the feet and footsteps of celebrities on red carpets, the first does the same work on sidewalks, pools and beaches, as evidenced by the celebrity section of the Havaianas USA Website.

Pius XIII wears Havaianas exactly as the celebrities do, during free time, whilst red sole shoes by Louboutin, specially made for Jude Law, have been chosen to be in antithesis with the barefoot Franciscan monks, developing the opposition between rich and (fake) poor. Another reason to commission the red leather shoes resides in the color that, as the costume designer Poggioli said in various interviews, figurativizes the blood of Christ.<sup>1</sup> So flip-flops and red soles represent a figurative qualification of a form of life, a modality of stereotyped presence, which aim to organize the figures of clothing with respect to certain narrative programs. The outfit details are surely traits of celebrity characterization, as the preference for the Coke Zero Cherry, a fizzy drink that suits an adolescent top model like Kaia Gerber or Lily-Rose Depp.

Even in the real world we can also witness the creolization of ecclesiastical fashion with that of the laity, just like in the case of the Met Gala 2018 marking the grand opening of the exhibition *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 10-October 8, 2018). I refer to Rihanna's papal outfit by Maison Margiela, enriched with luxurious and precious baroque embroideries, which makes her a true feminine declination of Belardo, where nothing was missing, neither the tiara nor the Louboutin shoes, so that seen on the Met Ball red carpet, along with the other attendees, it seemed a contemporary replica of Fellini's catwalk.



Fig. 3 Belardo wears Armani sunglasses and Havaianas flip-flops; Rihanna at the Met Gala 2018.

Reconnecting to the analysis of the Ecclesiastical fashion show staged in *Roma*, if we consider the latest models that walk down on Fellini's catwalk of the absurd – sequence also showed during the Met Costume Institute's exhibition – we notice that they are

characterized by impressive volumes, and heavy materials not easily wearable – although they are defined with the adjective “light” by the presenter – so much to walk the catwalk virtually empty, as entities with a life of their own, fantasmatic. Now it is intuitive to make a parallel with *The Young Pope*'s meta-drama about Pope Paul VI's triregnum, a very precious tiara, symbol of the abdication of temporal power, due to which Pius XIII postpones continuously the first address to cardinals, waiting for its restitution, because it is no longer in Rome, but at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. The real issue at stake it is not the tiara, but the restoration of papacy temporal power, one of the cornerstones of Lenny's strategy, totally figurativized in an accessory, in a sort of hat, which also serves to highlight the subordination of the American church to the European one.

If a past Pope had taken off his hat as a sign of respect for secular power, standing aside as regards the government of men, the present Pope puts on the headpiece, the supreme baroque object, transforming a simple gesture into a signic and expressive event (see Fabbri 1991). So we have to consider the triregnum a prosthesis of power and a trope of the physiognomic device like the one of Fellini's dazzling clericality, but this time declined in a traditional way. Fellini's sparkle is due to the grafting of the aesthetics of the new consumption and the devilry of modern technology, while Lenny, preferring the darkness of the veiled, of secrecy, of mystery, wants to dazzle with the light reflected by the insignia of power, restoring the threefold power of the Pope figuratively represented by the three superimposed diadems: *Father of princes and kings*, *Rector of the world*, *Vicar of Christ on Earth*.

As a further confirmation of what has been said so far, it is worth recalling the name of the Pope who inspired Fellini for the final acme of the catwalk, that is Pius XII, whom we easily link to Lenny, that is to say Pius XIII. It is probably one of the tributes to his teachers disseminated by the director Paolo Sorrentino, but it is also a reference to the ideal predecessor for the first part of the pontificate of Lenny, devoted to the rigid observation of traditions and to the obscurantism.



Fig. 4 – Triregnums in comparison: Pius XIII and Paul VI.

In the end the question of the triregnum resolves in favor of Lenny, and the arrival of the precious baroque object requires an appropriate outfit and a careful dressing ritual, so that Paolo Sorrentino celebrates this topical moment with an elliptical editing, *remedying* the typical style of romantic comedies, during which the protagonist intends to choose the perfect dress for a great event, a topical moment always highlighted by a pathemic and at the same time energetic soundtrack, and, in fact, in *The Young Pope* we can hear the LMFAO's "Sexy and I Know It" song ("Episode 5"). In this occasion, as in the more solemn others, the Pope's outfit is composed of overlapping layers, constituting a complex system aimed at underlining the complete lack of functionality of his clothes: a Pope must not work physically, he must not walk or run, must meditate and emanate spirituality. His body is treated in the same way as a statue, as an object of worship, so much that it is transported on a gestation chair, another point in common with the Fellini's catwalk. So the iconoclast Lenny refuses to expose his image because he knows that as Pope only his corporeity suffices, but on the other hand he does not want to support this model based on the indiscriminate acceptance of his holiness, but he intends to build the foundations to be venerated, even if in a debatable way.

The triregnum marks Lenny's passions, becoming the privileged trope to express his value and his way of relating to others, necessary for the rite of passage of the address to the cardinals, fundamental event of the Pope's coronation, rite of passage to celebrity. The triregnum on one side desecrates and degrades the efforts of the predecessors of Pius XIII, that is the refusal to exercise power over the issues of men, but on the other it makes up for the interference of the grotesque in Catholic worship with the return to tradition, sweeping away every shade of populism and carnivalism. Pius XIII does not want to please, he has no will to seduce believers, and therefore rejects media voyeurism, using the past to disavow the present. Belardo refuses to be seen and consumed through

merchandising with his effigy, rebelling against the dominance of market dynamics on the religious sphere, proposing himself as a contemporary iconoclast.

The celebrity of Lenny derives from his role as Pope, of which he denies the canonical practices: being a pontiff does not necessarily means to show off, and therefore he chooses to cover himself with the veil of secrecy, positioning himself halfway between the two complementary categories of veridiction, namely *being* and *non-seeming*, where the complex term is the *secret*.

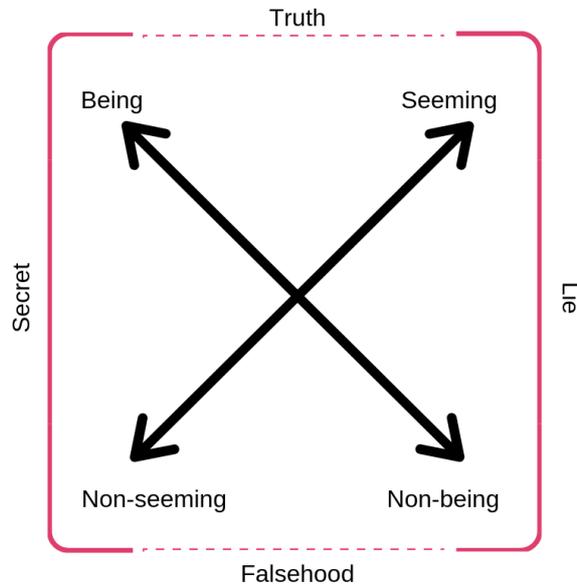


Fig. 5 – Veridiction square

The topic of the secret is the main reason of iconoclasm because Belardo does not want to lend his image simply because he does not have one, therefore he can not be evaluated economically, he is not worth 45 euros as the Vietri plate proposed as merchandising, he is not Jesus Christ, and so he does not deserve icons ("Episode 2"). Hence the absolute veto to propagate photographs of the pope, a choice that is opposed with one of the contemporaneity fundamental axioms: in a visual and social network based society if you cannot see a thing, it does not exist. But it's not always like that, and Lenny knows it so well that he's always been training to become an invisible Pope, going along the road traced by J.D. Salinger, Stanley Kubrick, Banksy, Daft Punk, Mina (celebrities of various fields listed by Lenny himself). These are people who hide to avoid the persecution of the crowd, to work in peace and amplify the notoriety through the curiosity of the public kept alive by the press. If already a Pope has a status unattainable by ordinary mortals, an invisible one is practically similar to God: we can not see both, but they are in this world, we can feel their influences.

The inaccessible is more desirable than the attainable, of what is reachable, and Lenny, who repeatedly alternates his little faith in God with a reverential fear, chooses to compare himself with the exponents of culture and entertainment, probably because they are more

affordable, and their celebrity processes are at their peak, so they can be good examples to follow.

In fact, by bringing the church back to traditional rigor, Lenny would like to wipe out fanaticism and replace it with a real love, the one he's been looking for since he was a child, as an orphan abandoned by his parents. True devotion is the sum of action and emotion, which must be felt by the believers because they share with the Pope and the catholic religion certain values, not because they are seduced by alluring populist discourses.

Belardo is well aware of the aesthetics of the spectacularization of major events: for his first non-appearance in public, he decides to appear at the window late, like the rock stars who get on stage behind time ("Episode 2"). The lights are so low that from below the audience only sees a black silhouette, an alienating and disturbing element that triggers deviant behaviors like the laser pointed at the Pope during the homily, typical of football matches and concerts.

Lenny Belardo is not just a young pope, but he behaves and looks like a Hollywood actor because of his beauty, often opposed by grotesque, almost Fellinian faces, as in the case of the false saint Tonino Pettola, the celebrity of the people. He truly has, like John Paul II, a bionic body, he is an athlete of God, as we can see thanks to his workouts, performed in a cashmere tracksuit by Italian underwear brand La Perla. *The Young Pope* grants us an all access pass to witness the most recondite Pope's daily life, given the lack of public outings, and we come to accompany him even in the shower, where the frames of his naked body contribute to desecrate his sacredness, showing him as a man among men. Belardo is human, too human at times, especially when he performs a series of obsessive-compulsive rituals to ensure correspondence of earthly and heavenly order, and also drags God with him, since during a speech with the confessor Don Tommaso humanizes him saying that he lives in a duplex with a swimming pool, near the Ursa Major, *remedying* the astrological houses in the form of homes ("Episode 5").

The first nine months of Pius XIII pontificate, narrated in the first six episodes, corresponding to the pregnancy of Ester – the wife of the Swiss guard whom he redeems and miracles –, can be defined as the fulfillment of the *celebrification* (see Couldry 2004; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004) process because the ordinary Lenny is transformed in one of the most potent men of the world.

During this period we also witness a degradation of the figure of the Pope, which loses relevance in both the temporal and secular, coming to be almost rejected by the believers, an element that is evident from frequent references to the decline of tourist visits to the Vatican and the languishing of its budget. We would never have thought of the existence of meetings with the head of marketing of the Holy See aimed at raising the fate of Pope image and it is from here, from something that apparently seems a mere strategy of promotion, that starts Lenny's *celebritization* (see Boykoff, Curtis & Goodman 2009; Driessens 2013), which goes hand in hand with the explication of his signs of holiness. In the last 4 episodes *celebritization* is shown as a meta-process of a positive change that falls back in a powerful way on clerical and social equilibriums, investing Lenny with a

sacral aura that becomes mediatizable and commodifiable, just in time to save the Holy See finances, finally establishing Pius XIII as an unveiled celebrity.

To conclude, we must return to the square of veridiction and recall the insertion of objects belonging to fashion and therefore to earthly pleasures, because of which the sacredness of Lenny is first rendered a lie. At this point we can state that in *The Young Pope* religious celebrity desecrates itself through two types of isotopies: one euphoric of appearance, of luxury, of pleasure – like cigarettes, typical vice of ecclesiastics –, the other one dysphoric due to caducity and mortality. The secret masks the lie, but, due to the process of celebritization, lies and secrets are put on the same level to be enslaved to the only thing that matters, the truth, the only great beauty of life, the way to go to reach the immortality counteracting the transience of what is condemned to destroy itself.

## Conclusion

The papal figures, analyzed through the sequences of their staging, show different “desecration” forms of the solemnity of their religiousness, interpreted as excluding and useful to the strengthening of a mythology based on the creation of an unbridgeable distance from the common man. We can ask ourselves if we can establish similarities with a series of behaviors of the actual Pope, that is Pope Francis, whose new style of communication at all levels is highlighted unanimously. Certainly this Pope never falls into the profane in his path of holiness, indeed, letting his human dimension emerge helps him to explicitly assume the role of leader. Above all, aware of the dynamics of celebrity, he does not disdain the need for contact, even medial, required by his “followers”. His medial body, though overexposed, recovers a dimension of “normality”, far from any spectacular excess: his body is a body between bodies, which weaves relationships and does not arise as an icon to be worshiped. Conversely, the Popes of the fictional world are focused on the unsaid, on the secret, on how much a figure that embodies the perfect crisis of the sacred and the profane could experience in its most intimate and private sphere, in its hidden thoughts, especially in a society founded on continuous temptations. Both Pius are characterized by semantic marks of *dogmatism*, *hieraticness* and *ritual traditionalism* (Pozzato 2017), denying *human sympathy* and *meekness*, main prerogatives of Francis. Lenny Belardo would only need his beautiful face to please, but he does not show it, depriving the believers of such aesthetic satisfaction because he knows his skills at “strategically managing the media” (Pozzato 2017, trans. mine), so much to be called “diabolic” by the Prime Minister interpreted by Accorsi. Francis, unlike his colleagues in the filmic universe, has repeatedly refused to wear luxurious clothes, jewels and red shoes, all canonical figuration of clerical power, making even the simple purchase of a pair of glasses – strictly modest – a means of affirming his truthful *being*, far from the dimension of the *seeming*. As Maria Pia Pozzato (2017) points out, Francis, with his black and ill shaped shoes, his hopping gait, baldness and corpulence, embodies the comic figure of the *august* analyzed by Paul Bouissac (1979-1982, as cited in Pozzato 2017), while Lenny is the perfect transposition of his opposite, the *white-face clown*, well dressed and

"mannered", way too culturalized. Pope Francis is accessible because he is natural in his spontaneous being – at least apparently – he denies any type of construction of his image, preferring the "non-bearing" (Pozzato 2017) of a *body-meaning* (see Landowski 2004, trans. mine), which causes meaning effects, determines a feeling, to the detriment of the hypercodification of a *body-sign*, where the dress *is* the monk. The affirmation of sacredness occurs through desecration, it lies in the veridical simplicity of everyday life, and this probably applies to any type of celebrity.

## Biographical note

Isabella Pezzini, full professor in Philosophy and Languages Theory at the Department of Communication and Social Research (CORIS), at Roma Sapienza' University, Italy. Teacher of "Semiotics of Fashions" in Fashion and Costumes Sciences Course. Member of the PhD Program in Communication, Social Sciences, Marketing of Roma Sapienza' University. On the board of *Versus. Quaderni di Studi Semiotici*, and many others, nazionale and internationals. Main research areas: semiotic theory, text semiotics, semiotics of culture. Her research into examines contemporary forms of expression, imaginary and spaces of consumerism, fashion, museums, urban creativity, and strategies in efficacy. Recent publications include: *Semiotica dei nuovi musei*; Roma, Laterza, 2011, *Introduzione a Roland Barthes*, Roma, Laterza, 2014; (co-ed. with V. Del Marco) *Nella rete di Google*, Milano, Angeli, 2017.

Bianca Terracciano is research fellow at Sapienza University of Roma and adjunct professor of "Digital Cultures and Social Media" at the University of Tuscia (Viterbo). She writes for *Doppiozero*, with which she published in 2016 the ebook *Mitologie dell'intimo*. Her latest book is *Social Moda. Nel segno di influenze, pratiche e discorsi* (Franco Angeli 2017).

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> [www.wwd.com/eye/lifestyle/the-young-pope-costume-designer-talks-jude-laws-red-shoes-armani-10754451/](http://www.wwd.com/eye/lifestyle/the-young-pope-costume-designer-talks-jude-laws-red-shoes-armani-10754451/)

## The Strange Case of Pope Francis: Between Populism, Celebrity and Divinity\*

Anna Maria Lorusso\*\*  
Università di Bologna

Which is the relationship between populism and celebrity? And in which sense Pope Francis can be considered a celebrity? Through a brief analysis of some features of Pope Francis' discourses and practices, the paper aims at focusing the specificity that populism can assume in the religious discourse and the strange mix that we can find in this Pope between divine sacredness and earthly humanity.

**Keywords:** Populism; Celebrity; Semiotics; Media

My contribution will propose some reflections on the relationship between celebrity, popularity and populism, with particular reference to that 'special' celebrity - Pope Francis. As we will see, from a semiotic perspective, identity can only be a matter of meaning effects, and the effects of meaning are shaped in a public sphere where verbal discourses, media texts, public behaviours are all combined and thrown back into a mediascape where the sacred, politics and entertainment seem to overlap.

### Celebrity: a topic for semiotics

The category of celebrity from the semiotic point of view represents a field of great interest.

In its internal logic (independently, therefore, from the medium in which it is shaped – TV, internet, cinema – and from the field in which it is given: cinema, music, politics, religion) it involves at least with two large dimensions of semiotics:

- i. The narrative dimension
- ii. The regimes of visibility

As regards the narrative dimension, semiotics has long focussed on the discursive procedures of actorialization. Actors are not actually given, but identities shaped by many dimensions built through the social discourses. First of all, we have a dimension that regards the syntax of action (what is the role of a given actor... Subject, helper, opponent?), one regarding their capacities in terms of power, knowledge, will and duty (known in linguistics and semiotics as 'modalities'), a dimension that has to do with their

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\*\* Email: [annamaria.lorusso@unibo.it](mailto:annamaria.lorusso@unibo.it)

figurative features (age, aspect, look etc...), a dimension that has to do with their 'voice' and the way they use it (how does the subject handle their turns to speak? Are they 'autonomous' or do they have to be authorized to speak? Do they express self-confidence or hesitation? and so on). It is impossible to sum up such a complex semiotic narrative theory as Algirdas Greimas here (see Greimas 1970 and 1983), but I aim to simply provide an idea of how people become 'actors' and how the social identity of someone, their agency, their recognizability is an *effect* of many components, which are built through social discourses. In semiotics the category of meaning-effect is crucial; identity is a meaning-effect.

As for the regimes of visibility, I make reference here to the theory by Eric Landowski (1989 and 1997), which invites us to reflect on the different social effects deriving from two basic attitudes: wanting to be seen and wanting to not be seen, wanting to be visible, on the 'public stage', and wanting to hide in one's own private life, in one's own intimacy. Landowski in particular suggests to not overlap the public vs private pairing with that of collective vs individual, and this suggestion is particularly relevant for my argument. Perhaps the private life of a pop star is also, in a way, collective, shared and lived at a collective level. We will see in the case of Pope Francis (as in the case of many celebrities) that there are number of aspects of his private everyday life that become public, and the point lies precisely in the difficult equilibrium between maintaining a private space and sharing with everyone else.

Landowski also reminds us that in order to be really popular, to be truly recognized as subjects that embody the feeling of a community, it is not enough to make known, to make visible, some aspects of himself. To become truly popular instead requires the creation of a co-presence of individuality and people, coordinating a coincidence between the time lived by the subject and that experienced by 'the others' (people, audience, etc). One of the features of a 'popular' actor is that they must be visible, but maybe one of the features of an 'icon' (a particularly special category) is that they must also be unattainable, they must have something secret and special that lies in a very complex dimension between visibility and invisibility, staging plan and a backstage plan (as Erwin Goffman has already focused on).

## Celebrity and Populism

I make these observations simply to highlight how the problem of popularity, celebrity, iconicity is ripe for consideration from a semiotic perspective,<sup>1</sup> as this approach has a number of specific tools with which to study the effect of celebrity and popularity built by social discourses.

Let us now consider why we should investigate the link between celebrity-popularity-populism.

The celebrity-popularity relationship is quite obvious. There is no celebrity without a dimension of public protagonism.

However, in times of a strong presence of populist phenomena, it is natural to reflect on the link between celebrity-populism too (popularity and populism are, of course, not the same). At the basis of celebrity and populism, beyond the obvious popularity, are a number of shared features:

- a *strong personalization*: a populist leader is not only someone who guides a party. They are someone who has a special *aura*, a sort of special power (a hero, like in movies or comic strips) for embodying people's desires and expectations, and at the same being able to answer and satisfy them. For this reason, in populism there is not just personalization but a real cult of personality. And the same goes for celebrity: a celebrity is both unique and everyone. Their uniqueness, their extraordinary personality lies in interpreting everyone else.

- (the illusion of) a *direct relationship with people*: a populist leader, just like a celebrity, does not need intermediaries in order to speak to the people. Their speech is direct, clear, effective. In an epoch where 'disintermediation' seems a key word, populist leaders and celebrities embody this overcoming of intermediate levels - they *touch* people.

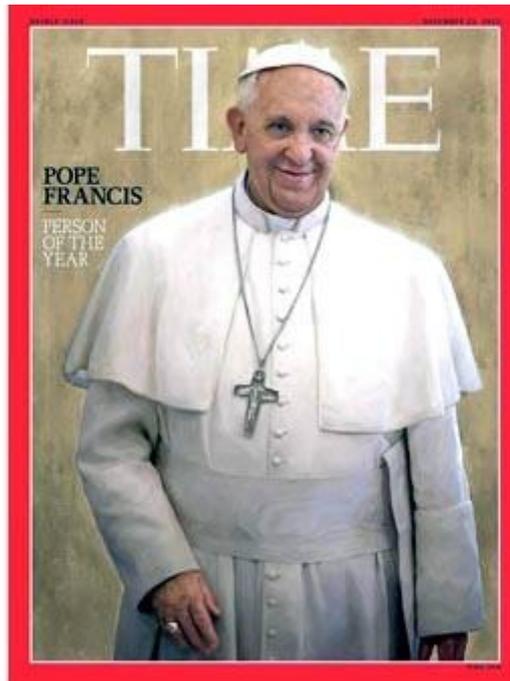
- (consequent) *direct communication*: the populist leader and the celebrity both know how to speak to people; they know their language, their questions, their competences. They manage *pop communication* because they are able to put themselves in the people's shoes. They speak pop because they are pop.

Therefore, we understand that a *populist* leader is not just a popular leader; they have something more. They have a form of protagonism that is that of a celebrity (and perhaps the opposite is also true: a celebrity uses populist codes, they are not simply popular): a star, between divinity and immediacy.

## The Strange Case of Pope Francis

But let us now look at the case of Pope Francis, who responds to all the features I have just mentioned.

There is no doubt that Pope Francis has attained a great level of protagonism. Following the crisis in credibility for Benedict XVI, he has brought the image of the pope under the spotlight. Let us consider the cover of Time magazine, here below.



He has not only reached significant popularity in terms of visibility (as someone very well known throughout the world); he has become a sort of *narrative hero*. What do I mean by that? I mean that he is the core of many narrations, many narrative situations and frames: he is Francis like the saint, with his well-known story: the poverty, the renunciation of material goods, his capacity to speak to every living being, animals included. He is Argentinian, so from the South of the world, the country of Italian immigration, the country of Military dictatorship. He is transgressive, he does not always comply with the protocol dictated by his role. He is unpredictable, we can expect a call from him at any time. He seems to feed stories, if not legends, and not so much 'Vatican stories' (which could be of interest only to a few), but everyday stories, stories which are eloquent and entertaining for everyone.

As for the second feature (direct relationship celebrity-people with the consequent very special management of the regime of visibility), we could say that this Pope is a real exception with respect to other Popes but, more generally, when it comes to any other 'political' leader (Presidents, political 'stars' and so on). We know things about this Pope that we have never known about other leaders: where he buys shoes, where he buy his glasses. Pope Francis is not over-exposed (we do not have the impression to know everything about him). It is not a quantitative matter, but he is very able to let us know some marginal aspects of his everyday life, giving us the feeling we are part of his ordinary life; that we are, at least in some respects, similar to him. He seems like a human among humans.

Finally, as for the third aspect – the direct language – we can underline how Pope Francis' speech is always modeled on everyday language, and has been since the famous 'Good evening' with which he opened his first appearance after election to the papal throne. Also his well-known telephone calls follow this pattern. He is not a Pope who keeps himself within the space (the cultural world) of the Vatican, but a Pope who knows how to make direct contact with ordinary people, about ordinary problems. Last but not least, we cannot forget the use of social media: a Pope who is on Twitter is of course a Pope who would like to use the communicative codes of his contemporaries, and in particular, young people.<sup>2</sup>

If with these traits we find in Pope Francis the very important features of a popular (and maybe populist)<sup>3</sup> leader and global celebrity, we do have to say, however, that he is obviously a celebrity of a particular kind, and a populist *sui generis*. He is extra-ordinary by definition (he is a Pope, therefore divine, for those who believe), and it is his earthly dimension that is the strangest. He manages to be an exceptional person but also a subject with which ordinary people can identify.

A first specificity of Pope Francis lies precisely in this: in the transformation of a celebrity by definition into a 'normal' person. In most cases we have a 'normal' person who becomes 'celebrity'. In the case of Pope Francis however we have a 'divine' person (if not celebrity, undoubtedly extraordinary by definition) who becomes normal.

In the frame of this inversion, Pope Francis handles his relationship with the 'people' in a very personal way through his speeches, – the people listening to his speeches, the people which can be not attending the event where he is speaking but who are nonetheless also the addressees of the Pope's speech.

The word 'people' is very present in the speeches of Pope Francis and this, in my opinion, lies at the core of the dialectic 'exception (of celebrity) / normality (of the people)'.

First of all, I would like here to highlight three different meanings of "people" to which Pope Francis continually resorts.

1. On the one hand, 'people' is the whole to which everyone, including the Pope, belongs. It is people as a *people of God*. It is therefore a category that is almost supra-historical, a level to which they elevate themselves, devoid of concrete and social determinations. I quote here from the discourse in Casa Santa Marta, on May 15th 2014 but there are many other cases:

The Christian can not live isolated from the People of God or even worse out of it: the Christian is a person who lives in the People of God because he is the son of this people, just as Jesus cannot be understood on his own but contextualized in the People of God, of which he himself is a son.<sup>4</sup>

But I could mention a recent stance taken by Pope Francis on immigration (this is not explicitly said, but – given the timing – this is the implicit topic), entitled "Letter from His Holiness to the People of God".

2. On the other hand, Pope Francis also uses 'people' meaning *people as a nation*. In the speech of Pope Francis at the American Congress, for example, this was very evident. The people therefore here is treated as political entity:

"Our own responsibility as members of Congress, is to enable this country, by your legislative activity, to grow as a nation. You are the face of its people, their representatives."

"Legislative activity is always based on care for the people."

"Today I would like not only to address you, but, through you, the entire people of the United States."

"I wish to speak with all of you, and I would like to do so through the historical memory of your people."

3. Finally, and this is the thing that is perhaps most important for me, we find people as ordinary, concrete people: *plebs*, we would say in Latin (not *populous* or *demos* – entities tied to the political dimension – nor *ethnos*, as category linked to race, roots etc).<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis enacts in various ways contact with and immersion in people; he often breaks the codes and walks, for example, among the people. This kind of people is an entity into which to mix, *to lower himself to*.

Bergoglio enters the space of the people, establishes a contact, physical or mediated, with people: neutralizes the borders, legitimizing the people's way of life. For example (one of the cases that amazed me most), he made a call on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016 during a very popular TV programme – "Una mattina", a typical morning entertainment programme for housewives – to participate in and celebrate its 30th anniversary. But of what interest can a TV program like that be to a Pope if not for sharing the lives of people, ordinary people, in order to be close to them?

If the people in the first meaning (people as people of God) is an ideal entity, the people in the second case is an historical-political entity, and in the third case, people is the pure world of "normality", of daily life.

So we have a 'strange' celebrity in the case of Francis, who acquires more strength and exceptionality the more he mixes himself with the people, and who by "normalizing" himself becomes more and more extraordinary.

At the basis of all this, we find a systematic overturning. The exceptionality of Bergoglio is a reversal of the typical codes of the status of the actor-Pope (while for another person it may be normal to buy glasses, for him it is not).

But the exceptionality of Bergoglio is also his narrative coherence, which makes him a kind of 'dense' icon, which does not provide exceptions but works on the mechanism of redundancy. The theological people (meaning 1) gives weight to the people-plebs (meaning 3), using theology to justify unexpected behaviors (such as calling in to a TV program), and legitimates a political discourse (in sense 2) about immigration, for example, building a continuity between minister of God-political minister-everyday model.

There is, in Pope Francis, a continuous short circuit between word and action, or between representation level and action. Jurij Lotman (perhaps the most relevant theorist

of the semiotic study of culture) made a very interesting reflections on behaviours from a semiotic point of view, selecting the case of a kind of 'dandy' group of Russian culture: the Decembrists (see Lotman 1984). He said that the Decembrists turned the directionality of the word-action relationship. not from actions to discourses (normally first we act, and then we talk about our actions), but from discourses to actions (first words are declaimed, then we adapt our action plan to words). This inversion is, according to Lotman, typical of the dandy, and typical of people looking in some way for celebrity.

Bergoglio does not choose to properly invert the directionality word-action but suspends it in a circularity, so that his words always seem to refer to his actions and *viceversa*: his actions (typical of people-plebs, meaning 3) always refer to the words of God (people in the meaning 1).

Bergoglio 'uses' the three meanings of 'people', thus shaping a model of life and discourse that neutralizes the separations inside/outside (private sphere/public sphere), high/low, theology/everyday life, word/action.

This is perfectly aligned with what the semiologist Landowski wrote about regimes of visibility (and which I have already mentioned here). In fact, Landowski reminds us that to be truly popular, to be truly recognized as subjects that embody the feeling of a community, implies not only to make known private aspects of oneself. Rather, it is about creating a co-presence of individuality and people, coordinating a coincidence between the leader and the collectivity. The 'popular' subject must be both a singular person and an impersonal symbol, in a 'mystical' union (the reference to the religious is proper to Landowski), which is actually very unusual and which is rarely achieved. It requires remaining authoritative and being ordinary; embodying the extraordinary and being ordinary. Whoever realizes it is defined by Landowski as a 'mediator hero', not because he mediates between different interests (he is not a diplomat!), but because he becomes an intermediary with regards to another plan(e?) of reality, a 'beyond': he refers to a plan(e?) that goes beyond his own person (Landowski 1997, p. 27).

This is, in my opinion, the power and the specificity of Pope Francis. He seems always mindful of the distinction between popularity as fame and popularity as communion (see Landowski (1997, chapter 7-IV). He is a great leader, he is populist in many aspects. He is popular as a celebrity, but he has managed to shape his celebrity not as mere notoriety: his is a "mystical populism" – a form of identification in which the divine and the earthly dimensions are superimposed.

### **Biographical note**

Anna Maria Lorusso is Associate professor in the Department of Philosophy and Communication of Bologna University, where she teaches "Semiotics of Culture" and "Analysis of Media Communication". Since 2017 she is President of the Italian Association of Semiotics. She is in the board of several international journals: she is vice-director of the semiotic journal *VS-Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici* and in the editorial board of the international journals *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques*, *Comunicación y medios*, *De signis*.

Among her last publications: *Postverità* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2018), *Il racconto di Francesco. La comunicazione del Papa nell'era della connessione globale* (a cura di, con P.Peverini, Roma, Luiss, 2018), *Cultural Semiotics* (London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On this, see also Spaziante 2016.

<sup>2</sup> On the language and the immediacy of Pope Francis, see Lorusso-Peverini eds. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See Zanatta 2016.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.papafrancesco.net/la-nostra-identita-cristiana-e-appartenenza-a-un-popolo-alla-chiesa/> (read on October 25<sup>th</sup>)

<sup>5</sup> On these aspects of populism, see Diamanti-Lazar 2018 and Müller, J.W. 2017.

## Where is the sacred in online celebrity? Praise, loath and physical interaction with Italian webstars \*

Stefano Brilli\*\*  
Università Iuav di Venezia

This paper aims to investigate how the online proximity between internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical settings, through a multi-sited ethnography that explores fan-star interaction in offline events where Italian webstars participate. Events where fans meet celebrities are among the most relevant media rituals (Couldry, 2003) where the celebrity status is reproduced, particularly through the definition of specific rules of interaction that mark the exceptionality of the famous person. However, in the social media landscape, the interaction with celebrities – especially with internet born stars – shifts from being relegated to rarity or para-sociality, to be a more frequent possibility of multisocial interaction (Hills, 2015). This increased potential for interaction doesn't necessarily correspond to an undermining of the symbolic distance between audiences and highly visible people. In the case of Italian webstars, for example, such passage from scarcity to abundance of presence have produced two very different scenarios: on the one hand we have social media stars that cultivate a deep intimacy with their fans, and are therefore requested to perform friendship, closeness and equality; on the other hand we find “trash stars”, people famous because they are ridiculed or ironically praised by networked publics, who are demanded to perform a stylized “memetic” version of themselves. By examining twelve occasions where Italian webstars participate in parties, book signing events and meet-and-greet events, this study will try to show 1) the existence of two distinct types of proximity with social media celebrities: one that is “fast”, bounded to the event and interested in preserving the idol's exceptionality, and one that is “extended”, repeated in time and aimed at an emotional and physical intimacy, 2) how this encounters can be regarded as instances of the “bio-economic sacred” (Mellor & Shilling, 2014), which is affectively stronger in extended proximity but formally more present in fast proximity.

**Keywords:** Internet celebrity; Media rituals; Fan/celebrity encounter; sacred; Italian celebrities

### Introduction: a new fan/celebrity proxemics?

Between April and May 2017, a new fad spread in the world of Italian young social media celebrities: male webstars<sup>1</sup> kissing their teen and pre-teen fans on the lips.<sup>2</sup> Such acts immediately aroused widespread indignation among commentators of the Italian YouTube-sphere,<sup>3</sup> as well as attempts by some rising youtubers to replicate the controversial but attention-grabbing behaviour. What spurred the “older” youtubers' outrage was not just the fact that very young fans were involved, and (allegedly) randomly met, but also the opportunistic effort of these webstars to publish videos and photos of such acts on their

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\*\* Email: stefano.brilli@uniurb.it

profiles, as a strategy to allure their audiences by promising the not-so-rare possibility of a personal - even sensual - contact with them.

Stars kissing fans as part of their performing routines is not of course a new phenomenon, especially if we look at pop and rock music stardoms. Many pop stars like Madonna, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry and Demi Lovato, among others, incorporated a “kissing a fan on stage” moment in their concerts.

In these cases, however, the exceptionality of such behaviours is orchestrated within the festive, excessive and exclusive frame of the performance or of the television appearance. When it comes to the Italian webstars case, such acts take place in apparently regular and mundane situations, in city streets, malls and squares, without an explicit moratorium bounded by the party situation or by the televisual arena.

Here we witness not just another step towards ordinariness in the communicative register of the stars, but what looks like a redefinition of fan-celebrity interaction rituals.

Certainly, these few cases are not necessarily representative of a general global trend within celebrity culture and need to be localized both at the level of the increasingly fluid and decentred system of representation of celebrity (Giles, 2018) and within the proxemics rules specific of the Italian culture.

Nevertheless, they suggest the existence of a code of the fan-celebrity interaction, where the physical contact with the stars is less and less similar to the exceptional encounter with the sacred icon and becomes a regular part of a work on the audience that includes physical, affective, and to certain extends, erotic labour.

If, as Chris Rojek (2004) stated, social distance, not just visibility, is the necessary condition of celebrity, should we abandon the use of this category in such cases or should we abandon the previous one as a necessary condition? Where is the sacred to desecrate when the difference between star and fans becomes more quantitative than categorical?

This paper tries to attempt an answer to the question “what remains of the sacred in online celebrity?”, by investigating how the online proximity between internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical-offline settings, especially in events where Italian webstars participate, like meet and greets, book signing events and club appearances.

Through a multi-sited ethnographic observation, the research examined what kind of social distance is staged in these events, trying to answer a second, more theoretical set of questions: “what kind of ritual is produced in these contexts?” and “which distinctions command the symbolic action of the fan-webstar encounter?”.

## **Celebrity and the sacred**

To employ the category of the “sacred” in relation to the study of celebrity is certainly an operation that asks for some preliminary clarifications. That of the sacred is notoriously a slippery concept, whose definition does not meet unanimous consensus and provokes

frequent misunderstandings, especially when it comes to its relation to religious phenomena.

Much sociological work rooted in the Durkheimian tradition, especially within cultural sociology (Alexander 2005), has aptly worked to dispel the misleading overlap between “the sacred” and “the religious”. By framing sacrality as “a particular form of cultural signification in which symbols, objects, sentiments and practices are experienced as expressions of a normative, absolute reality” (Lynch, 2012, p.15), this approach has underlined the culturally constructed and historically contingent nature of the sacred, and therefore its persistence within secularized societies. The sacred, according to Mellor and Shilling (2014), manifests even in consumer culture – in what they define as a “bio economic modality” – as a “proliferation of re-enchantment options available to individuals and groups within a broad, socially differentiated market” (Mellor & Shilling, p.35).

Both the para-religious semantics and the reference to the sacred – and their confusion thereafter – have been a recurring theme in commentaries on stars (Burr 2013; Lawrence, 2009) and within the field celebrity studies. Such use can be traced since the pioneering remarks of Barthes (1957) on the “divinity” of Greta Garbo’s Face and Morin’s (1957) on the “modern pantheon” of Hollywood stars; in the numerous parallels traced between religious and secular idols worship (Braudy, 1986; Laderman, 2010; Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, & McCutcheon, 2002; Rojek, 2004; Ward, 2011);<sup>4</sup> in resorting to concept like iconicity and charisma in relation to celebrities social meaning (Alexander 2010, Lofton 2011, Hackley & Hackley 2016); but also in Couldry’s (2003) post-durkheimian approach to media ritual, where the categorical distinction between the sacred and the profane is used to read the legitimization of media power through the naturalized distinctions between ordinary and media world.

However, since the first works on the topic, and most notably in Morin’s *Les Stars* (1957), the relationship between celebrity and sacred is often framed in a peculiar paradox: on the one hand, stars are seen as forms of *immanent sacred*; they, so to speak, follow the typically modern passage from a transcendent sacred that creates heteronomy, to a interiorized sacred the creates autonomy (Seligman, Weller, Puett, Simon, 2008). On the other hand, the same analysis, tend to trace a trajectory towards the mundanization of stars, as if the very process of celebrification, putting the person in place of the myth, is destined to expose its arbitrariness and therefore to dispel it.

Celebrity thus seems to work in the manner of pharmakon for the sacred: it makes it persist against secularization, but on the condition of making it vulnerable to its disappearance.

On this scenario, internet and social media have been seen as accelerating factors on the development of the de-sacralization of celebrity, and mainly along three trajectories: *proximization*, *vilification* and *networked-commodification*.

Under the category of proximization lie all those processes that foster an incremental symmetry between fan and stars. Such trends concern both processes that were in place before the expansion of social media – like the democratization of celebrity (Driessens, 2015) and the increasing use in the celebrities’ communicative registers of traits of ordinariness, genuineness and mediocrity (Turner, 2010) – and processes galvanised

mostly by the multiplication of interaction possibilities afforded by digital media. Such dynamics attracted the attention of an increasing scholarship in recent years that tried to overcome “para-sociality” (Giles, 2000; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956) as a totalizing category of the fan-celebrity relationship, advancing concepts like “multisocial-interaction” (Hills, 2015) and “perceived interconnectedness” (Abidin, 2015). While some studies question the fact that social media are really enabling a more symmetrical communication between fans and celebrities (Kehrberg, 2015; Rihl & Wegener, 2017; Stever & Lawson, 2013), others have emphasized the existence and the significance of this interaction (Bennett, 2014; Giles, 2018).

The vilification trajectory concerns the growing influence that affects of aversion, derision and disgust have in the construction of fame in digital environments. This can be traced in the way social media afford to coordinate and make visible the work of anti-fandoms (Harman & Jones, 2013), but also in the emergence of anti-celebrities whose fame stems primarily from mockery (Gamson, 2011), like in the case of Italian trash stars (Brilli, 2016; Brilli 2017).

The trajectory of participatory commodification regards those developments that allow a possible coexistence between an explicit commercial strategy by the internet celebrity and its capacity to be perceived as authentic by its following, insofar as fans welcome and feel responsible for the person’s success and economic gain. For young fans of influencers and social media celebrities, authenticity and commodification aren’t necessarily opposed in a strict sacred/proface kind of polarity (Andò, 2016; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017), due to the networked reflexivity (Boccia Artieri, 2012) regarding the fame acquisition dynamics (Cocker & Cronin, 2017) and the normalization of self-entrepreneurialism and visibility labour discourses within the influencer industry (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017).

The question that persist, however, is whether these trajectories constitute factors that undermine the social distance with- and the special status of internet celebrities, or ways to reproduce them through the illusion of a qualitative difference becoming a quantitative one.

## **Fans-celebrities encounters: media rituals and beyond**

Fan-celebrities encounters represent special sites to test the transformations of established semantics and proxemics that structure celebrity culture. These are occasions where norms and codes of interaction that regulate the contact between the ordinary and the celebrity world are ritually performed (Couldry, 2003) and therefore made partially visible.

A notable body of work in this field focuses on aggressive and pathological behaviour towards public figures (Meloy, Hoffmann & Sheridan, 2008), or on the “situational impropriety” produced in unstaged individual encounter with a celebrity (Ferris & Harris, 2010). Pre-staged public appearances, however, like meets-and-greets and autographs

signing events, also provides a valuable and more practicable setting to observe fan-celebrity interaction rituals. As Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland & Boross (2014) state “meet-and-greets are ritualized meetings in which the contradictions between celebrities and ‘normal people’ are staged and temporarily bridged by the application of an established protocol” (Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland & Boross, 2014, p. 153). As every liminal space or situation, the existence of such “temporary bridges” raises the question of the relationship between the ritualized behaviour, that keeps the liminal space in place, and the status of the symbolic boundaries on which the situation is build. Is the ritualized act of traversing those boundaries an anti-structural force that expose their arbitrariness or, instead, a way to recognize and reify their existence?

While Nick Couldry’s study of media rituals tends to frame such occasion as performative reproduction of the categorical separation between media people and ordinary people (Couldry, 2003), other studies have highlighted a more multifaceted set of meanings involved in these cultural performances. In their study of meets-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato, Reijnders et al. (2014) emphasized how, alongside the confirmation of the star-status, such occasions also work for the fans to establish themselves as a fan community and to experience a deep emotional – almost thaumaturgical – connection with their idol that help them facing personal sickness, losses and traumas.

Looking at the Italian context, the last 4 years have seen an exponential growth of organized meetings with webstars, both in quantity and in types. It is fair to say that the physical setting has become one among the crucial spaces where these celebrities exercise their cross-platform influence (Abidin, 2018). In this sense, not only is internet celebrity becoming less platform-bounded that it used to be (such in the YouTube-youtuber relationship); it is also the notion of a fame specific to the online world that is declining, in favor of a close interaction between online and offline celebrity performances.

When dealing with Italian webstars, we can distinguish six groups of fan-star event, which can be positioned along a continuum that goes from the *praxis* side to the *poiesis* side, that is from events where the webstar’s action is centred on its being-there, to events where the webstar’s action revolves around the production of a detached performance or content.

*Meet-and-greets* are among the most typical and diffused fan-celebrity encounters and also the closest to the *praxis* side, since the webstar’s presence is the sole centre of the event. Moving towards the *poiesis* side there are the occasions where limited groups of fans take part to the webstar everyday activity, like in the case of Lasabrigamer doing gymnastics with a group of young fans. Around the middle of the continuum there is the guesing in clubs and parties, which usually comprise a certain degree of entertaining routine. Closer to the *poiesis* side there are the book signing events, since in such occasion the work (allegedly) produced by the webstar is made visible in book-form. At highest level of *poiesis* there are those cases where the webstar perform an offline translation of its online contents, like vloggers doing stand-up routines and gamers live playing in front a fan-audience in theatres.<sup>5</sup> Between the two poles we find a new emerging form of webstars-centred events; these usually take place in concert venues,

where the webstars are called to play the role of entertainers, doing sketch comedy, challenges and singing songs, even if these are not their main specialities. *Webstar Mania*,<sup>6</sup> *Doubletap Tour*,<sup>7</sup> *Beautiful Festival*<sup>8</sup> and *Made in Internet*<sup>9</sup> are among the most successful ones. One of the unique features of these events is the fact that they are constructed as “webstars festivals” that gather multiple young idols on stage. Moreover, they are aimed at providing both entertainment for the young fans and reassurance for parents that accompany them. As we read in the description of *Made in Internet*:

Made in Internet, the only show dedicated to fans of webstars, is a unique and unrepeatably show with challenges and live performances, which will see on the stage the most beloved group of gamers with the backing soundtrack of DJ Klaus. A truly unforgettable experience for fans, where *the distance imposed by screens will be eliminated*.<sup>10</sup>

Since its presentation, events like *Made in Internet* clearly manifest a paradoxical relationship with the symbolic boundary between fans and celebrities: on the one hand they are advertised as occasions where a more symmetrical interaction with fans can take place; on the other hand, however, they sanction an “A-list” of internet celebrities, by using the trope of the concert as a suggestion of the proximity between the webstars on stage and more mature media arenas.

## Method

The observations here presented are part of an ongoing research project that employs multi-sited ethnography to examine how fan encounters with young Italian internet celebrities take place in both physical and online settings (Pink et al., 2016). The study considers such encounters through the framework of a digitally-mediated liveness (Gemini, 2016), where the event resides not just in the ephemeral *hic et nunc*, but in the interconnection between direct experience and multiple fragments documentation.

Since no previous studies on fan-celebrities staged encounters (Ferris & Harris, 2010; Raphael & Lam, 2018; Reijnders et al., 2014; Reijnders & Xu, 2018; Wagemakers & Dhaenens, 2015) have examined meetings with internet celebrities and none have been conducted in the Italian context, this research follows an exploratory aim.

More specifically the study combines participant observation at the events,<sup>11</sup> interviews with young fans, their parents, the events hosts and organisers, and analysis of online contents produced in relation to the events, during the anticipation phase (promotional material, teaser videos), throughout the event (photos and real time streamings) and after the event (vlogs and reports).

Here, however, I will concentrate on the data gathered through the participant observation, focusing on the spatial arrangement of the encounters, on how the interaction with the star is managed and on the sequence of actions that take place on stage and within the audience.

In order to take into account how different version of internet celebrity might influence the style of interaction, and therefore the kinds of ritualized action observable, I examined the two more distinguishable type of Italian internet celebrities that participate in offline encounters: canonical webstars and trash stars.

By canonical webstar I mean young Italian youtubers, instagrammers and tiktokers, admired by a core fan base of pre-teens and teens with an age ranging between 8 and 16, that establish a relationship of intimacy and mediated friendship with their followers, and that are supported by professional talent agencies.

“Trash star”, instead, is the name acquired in the Italian social media environment by those internet personalities who become famous because they are ridiculed or ironically revered online (Brilli, 2016; Brilli 2017), but that nonetheless have been able to reach the status of being paid to participate in offline events.

Overall, I attended 12 events, 7 with canonical webstars and 5 with trash stars,<sup>12</sup> as detailed in the following table.

Table 1 - Details of the events analysed through participant observation

Event	Date and venue	Type of celebrity	Type of event
Bello Figo	February 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2015, <i>Miami Club</i> , Monsano (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Andrea Diprè	April 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2015, <i>Sui Club</i> , Ancona (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Andrea Alongi	December 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2016, <i>Mamamia</i> , Senigallia (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Marco Morrone	June 28 <sup>th</sup> , 2017, <i>L'Ombelico</i> , Latina (LT)	Trash star	Club party
Bello Figo	September 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2017, <i>Mu</i> , Parma (PR)	Trash star	Club party
Luciano Spinelli	June 10 <sup>th</sup> 2017, <i>Mondadori Megastore</i> , Bologna (BO)	Webstar	Book signing event
Sabrigamer	July 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2017, <i>Polo Est 3.0</i> , Igea Marina (RN)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Martina Francia	May 20 <sup>th</sup> , 2018, <i>Ipersimply</i> , Senigallia (AN)	Webstar	Book signing event
Kessy & Mely	June 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2018, <i>CC Auchan</i> , Ancona (AN)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Made in Internet (Mates and Favij)	April 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2018, <i>Estragon Club</i> , Bologna (BO)	Webstar	Spectacle/performance
Me Contro Te	June 16 <sup>th</sup> , 2018, <i>Piazza Andrea Costa</i> , Cesenatico (FC)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Doubletap Tour Final	September 23 <sup>rd</sup> , <i>Fabrique</i> , Milano (MI)	Webstar	Spectacle/performance

For practical reasons most of the events were chosen by opportunity sampling among those that took place in the Centre-North of Italy (where I live). Nonetheless the sample includes many of the most famous Italian webstars, as well as two of the biggest events of this kind organized in Italy (*Made in Internet* and *Doubletap Tour Final*).

## Encountering the webstar: performing availability, intimacy and mediocrity

In the analysed events, as far as the spatial structure is concerned, we note that the places designated to host the encounters are mainly commercial stores and squares. Most of the time the arrangement of the stage doesn't impose a strict frontality to fans; they can move around the temporary stage – and sometimes even look at the backstage, leave the space and return to it, engage with the other fans and with their parents. The events are not insulated from mundane reality; people going shopping or conducting other everyday activities usually pass nearby and mesh with the audience.

Obviously, the security and the bounding of the audience is still carefully curated, with bouncers, crush barriers and personnel for the emergencies. However, as one of the security personnel admitted, “these are very quiet events, very easy to handle, without crazy exalted actions to date, since girls and boys are already disciplined by the parents' gaze”.

The design of the encounters reflects on many levels the value of availability and reciprocity set forth by the webstars.

First, meets-and-greets and book signing are usually free events, where everybody – even adults – can participate to cheer the webstar. The custom of having to buy the book or other merchandising to access the area, which was the norm in the first phase of webstars meet-and-greets, it is now steadily decreasing. Sometimes the star is not even in an elevated position on a stage, but at a very close distance with the audience. When a stage is involved, we always find many attempts through which it is profaned and made unexceptional by letting casual fans and parents getting on it and interact with the host.

When some exclusivity is performed, it often appears to be a very “inclusive exclusivity”. In one event, the one with the TikToker Martina Francia, she recorded a special musically on her profile with one among the audience; the chosen one was one was not the first, but the last girl arrived.

This Christological inversion reflects the golden rule of the meet & greet: the webstars cannot leave until every present fan has been cheered, may the audience be made of 50 people or 2000.

The temporal sequence of the events is generally standardized. First, the event is introduced by electropop music played by a DJ or from a track-list, preparing the joyful atmosphere several minutes before the arrival of the star. Then is the turn of the presenter that starts to heat the audience about half an hour before the beginning. The emotional climax is reached when the webstar appears, usually walking into his area by the same route that the fans will traverse. Next there is some brief entertaining routine between the host and the webstar, usually performed casually and without any planned script.

In events like the *Made in Internet* the performance part is the central one; but even if carefully designed and supported rich lighting, videos and music, such performances maintain an informal and amateurish allure, to the point the many parents are surprised by lack of any attempt to mask the mediocrity of the performers.

Later starts the sequence of meet and greets and photo making. Here is where the actual interaction happens and where the proxemic code of the relation can be observed.

The performed closeness and bodily intimacy of these contacts is constant among all the webstars events. The star, passionately embrace the fan, kiss her on the cheek, ask her how she is doing, signs her body and cheerfully accept the gifts, in a routine that has to be replicated hundreds, if not thousands of times, within a single event.

This closeness aims to work both ways; the most valuable goal lies not just in passively receiving the star touch, but in accessing a reciprocal dimension where the star recognize and acknowledge the fan. Sometimes this is an actual possibility fostered by the previous online interaction, especially through Instagram stories, directs and streams. But mostly it becomes part of a performed sense of surprise that follows another rule that clearly emerges in the encounters: the webstar always have to show himself as a needing subject. Lasabrigamer, for example, came up with an ingenious way to mediate between performing neediness and the risk of misguided fan behaviours, like buying expensive gifts to the star: she asks fans to bring her very unremarkable objects like toilet paper rolls or toothpaste tubes.

The more the stars are in an early stage of their rise to fame and more they have to work on the stage physically. If the average time of the encounter for the most famous webstars is between 20 and 30 seconds for each fan, with the new one, especially with the webstars that came out of TikTok, the routine can extends up to four minutes. Among the observed cases, that of Kessy and Mely (who are recognized mostly as tiktokers) is the most elaborate one. The encounter includes the usual embrace, an Instagram story that is uploaded on their profile, the book signing, another embrace, the official photo and a musically performed together on the fan profile. It is not just the star the leave a trace on the fan, but also the other way around.

Here the parents' perspective is particularly telling. A common observation they make is that, they don't really understand the phenomenon or why their kids follow people that from their point of view, do next to nothing. But at the same time, they are not concerned since they see these personalities as clean and safe models. Apart from the sheer boredom that they experience, they don't regret accompanying them, it is an occasion to be assured of the non-threatening character of the phenomenon, and for their daughters and sons to meet their idols halfway on a common ground, without what they see as the "magnifying effect of the screen". As one of them stated:

To me these are occasions where they can witness that they are nothing special. I like *how clumsy and awkward they appear on stage*, because in this way they can *question their idols*. In fact, in my experience, after I bring her to event like this, the passion with that particular character kind of *fade*. But then there is another one immediately after. (R., 48, Made in internet, Bologna)

Overall, these features show a certain homogeneity between the encounters. This also due to the role of promotion agencies in producing a shared standard that facilitates the selling of these events. Since the publicity phase, such occasions are presented as ways to decrease the social distance with the star. On the one hand, several aspects like the extended physical contact with fans, the confusion between the ordinary and the extraordinary space and the performed reciprocity, are all features that seems to weaken

such distance. On the other hand, however, these also the first occasions where very young digital stars are introduced through the ritual framing of the fan-star encounter, making them occupy (and negotiate) the subject-position of the traditional celebrity.

### **Meeting the trash stars: the return of the aura (by ironic means)**

The encounters with the trash stars show a different proxemic order from the intimate interactional style observed with the webstars. In the last decade, the label “trash star” has come to identify those people who become famous because ridiculed or ironically praised by networked publics. They constitute a peculiar kind of internet celebrities, considered halfway between freaks to be observed and commiserated, fools to be mocked and humiliated, and icons to be revered and glorified. For these characters paid offline appearances are the primary way to monetize their controversial fame. In live events and club parties the trash star enables the group to act out a sort of ironic fanaticism. In such occasions people are free to collegially indulge in a kind of wild collective effervescence around the ridiculous idol, since the shared awareness of the foolishness of such worship functions as an agent of disinhibition. As one interviewee at one of the analyzed events states:

First row, screaming, all of us singing and dancing, but none of us really knew what we were doing. It was all improvised in order to play the role of the real fan. I'm not sure I ever jumped and screamed so much at a real concert. (L., 22, Bello Figo concert, Parma)

Their farcical otherworldliness is used to infuse with exceptionality events like shop openings, parties and club venues. Just from this fact, we notice a first fundamental difference with the other events, as the presence of the trash star is instrumental to a process of emplacement (Smith, 1987) where is the space that is invested with a particular value. The encounter with the trash star may represent the apex of the event, but the party situation proceeds autonomously after that moment. In webstars meet-and-greets, instead, there is no event outside the encounter with the star. The trash star works like the ceremonial sacred object that keeps the ritual going, fostering the autonomy of the collective effervescence. The webstar, instead, works more like a devotional object that monopolizes the group attention and affectivity.

Secondly, the way trash stars are presented actively conceal the person behind the “meme”. The presenters don't entertain any dialogue with them that may reveal any detail of their feelings and daily lives. They instead prepare the ground by recalling those gestures and catchphrases through which the audience knows that specific trash star. The encounter, in this sense, amplifies instead of reducing the distance, as the trash star is requested to reproduce a stylized version of himself and to replicate the memetic traits that made him famous.

Thirdly, in these public exposures, the trash star usually remains in an elevated position in respect to the audience. Then the meeting and the photo taking does not happen in front of the audience but takes place at a side of the stage. This contact is carried out quickly, it lasts just the time of the photo recording of the encounter.

The contact between the two worlds is in this case much more controlled, ritualized and, in a way, dangerous; if prolonged, this contact risks to dissolve the ridiculous idol by showing the person that carries it.

Trash stars play the role of temporary fixed points around which the group can synchronize. This totemic power is not in contradiction with their distance from the star ideal, or with the marginal interest that audiences claim to devote them. Is precisely because of their explicit marginality that they can be treated as safe objects of worship. The obvious undesirability of their emulation makes it possible for them to accumulate attention without being envied. Thusly trash stars show a peculiar kind of “inverted charisma”, since the group coordination around them is not predicated on consent on their special quality, but on an agreement on the triviality of the situation.

While the young webstars’ fans want to adhere as much as possible to their world, the participants in these encounters have to be sure that the world of trash does not spill into the ordinary world. While the webstars’ events are presented and performed as occasions to erase the distance “imposed” by the screen, in the encounter with the trash stars the sacred/profane boundary is reinforced, made more visible and unsurmountable.

## Conclusion

This paper tried to examine to what extent forms of the sacred may persist in the desecrated environment on online celebrity. By examining pre-staged physical encounters with Italian internet celebrities, the study wanted to examine the meanings performed in these media rituals and to test the current transformation of the categorical distinction between ordinary people and celebrities.

The intense emotions showed in the fan-star encounters may be understood as occurrences of what Mellor and Shilling call a “bio-economic sacred”, that is a modality of the sacred evident in modern societies in which “anything, including worldly phenomena, can be ‘set apart’ from and emotionally responded to as ‘special’ in relation to mundane life (Mellor & Shilling 2014, p. 22). There is, however, a peculiar chiasm between webstars, trash stars and the bio-economic sacred. The analysis showed the existence of two distinct types of contact with social media celebrities: one that is “extended,” repeated in time and aimed at an emotional and physical intimacy (with canonical webstars), and one that is “fast,” bounded to the event and interested in preserving the idol’s exceptionality (mostly observable with trash stars).

Hence, if the bio-economic sacred manifest its emotional surplus more in the contact with the youth webstars, it is in the ritually controlled contact with the trash stars that we

can witness a survival of the formal characters of the sacred, like the logic of emplacement, the distance with sacred object and separation between worlds.

Here we see how irony and reflexivity don't necessarily work as forces that undermine the sacred. Instead, the ridicule frame facilitates the acceptance of ritualized action and the producing of a subjunctive universe, by communicating the suspension of the criteria of sincerity demanded by the modern cult of the self (Seligman et al., 2008).

The second point to make concerns the redefinition of the traditional relationship between fame and the labour on the star presence. The corporal, sensual, even thaumaturgical contact with fans does not necessarily acquire importance only after a critical concentration of celebrity capital. In the case of webstars it becomes a physical work with a "therapeutical" quality that has to be performed since the very early stages of the rise to fame.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the question of whether these events reinforce or tends to blur the symbolic boundaries between fan and celebrities, requires further analysis. Observed traits such as the emotional proximity, physical fatigue and availability, ostentatious averageness and fan-star reciprocity, and the brief duration of fandom span, are all elements that frame these events as occasions dedicated to the facilitate the crossing between worlds: a crossing between the ordinary and celebrity, between online and offline, but also a crossing from childhood to adolescence, from taste as heteronomy to taste as autonomy and from phantasy idols to the seductive allure of personified idols.

The interpretation of this crossing is however uncertain. On the one hand it is possible that these encounters function on the long-term as a de-mythization force, as events that normalize fame to a point of unexceptionality, preparing the ground for a future in which visibility and social distance are less and less associated.

On the other hand, another interpretation is possible: that they function as rehearsal for the more long-lasting fandoms of adolescence, rehearsal in which they interiorize the habitus of the proper fan, incorporating gestures, affects, literacies and subject positions that will fully express in the teenage years.

## Biographical note

He is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Università IUAV di Venezia. He received his PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Urbino in 2016, with a thesis that investigated the relationship between celebrity and ridicule in digital culture. He also collaborates with the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies (DISCUI) of the University of Urbino in research projects on communities on social media, contemporary theatre audiences, audience development and festival audiences. His research interests revolve around the study of digital media, social networks and performative practices.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although English sounding, the term “webstar” represents mostly an Italian way to refer to internet celebrities and, in particular, to those young stars that acquired fame through *cross-platform influence* (Abidin 2018) and whose main audience is composed of pre-teen and teen social media users (mostly YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat).

<sup>2</sup> For example: Di Martino, S. [Samuele di Martino]. (2018) *HO LIMONATO CON UNA FAN - Sfida BACIO o SCHIAFFO Feat. Nick*. From: <https://youtu.be/vJKsXt8Wnxc>

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<sup>3</sup> The youtuber Riccardo Dose has been among the most vocal critics of the phenomenon, for example in the video *LO SQUALLORE DI CHI BACIA LE BAMBINE DI 10 ANNI!* (“the baseness of those who kisses ten years old girls”, my translation): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyThJ\\_fGVsY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyThJ_fGVsY)

<sup>4</sup> The para-religious parallelism, and in particular the suggested resemblance between religious and celebrity worship, has also been object of widespread criticism from multiple field, like religion studies (Doss, 1999), cultural studies (Frow, 1998) and fan studies (Hills, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> For example: Alessandrini, M. [CiccioGamer89]. (2018). *CiccioGamer89 Live Show, un Gamer a Teatro*. From: [https://youtu.be/jl\\_ZoQoU8LE](https://youtu.be/jl_ZoQoU8LE)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/webstarsmania/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://doubletap.live/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.beautifulfestival.it/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/madeininternetofficial/>

<sup>10</sup> From: <https://www.fabriquemilano.it/live/made-in-internet/>. My translation, my emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Even if all the events were open to everybody and most of them didn't required a pass or admission fee, the presence of the researcher was always notified to the event's organizers before it took place. During the event I wore a self-made badge with my name and my academic affiliation. Before any on site interview or informal talk I always stated my identity, the aim of the research and the fact that the conversation was recorded for research purposes. I audio-recorded the events where a presenter was involved. I also took several photos and videos of the events that were used solely as research material and that therefore were never showed to or shared with anybody.

<sup>12</sup> While the participant observation in events with webstars took place in the last 18 months (since May 2017), I attended trash stars' events since the beginning of 2015, as a part of a research that focused specifically on social media and ironic/derogatory fame.

## The revenge of Asia Argento: Desecrating celebrity as a means of celebrity culture \*

Romana Andò\*\*

Sapienza Università di Roma

The pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years, thanks to the connective media that are progressively involving in both the celebrification and celebritisation process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. What is new in the contemporary media system is that is that the intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person’s social position. Moreover, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past. The aim of this article is to reflect on this phenomenon, starting from the analysis of the very controversial Asia Argento’s case. To briefly summarize the events, Argento was recently involved in two different sexual scandals: in the one involving Harvey Weinstein, she was among the first actresses to speak out about powerful producer’s sexual assaults, playing the roles of both victim and heroine, even if she was also criticised and strongly condemned by public opinion. In the one involving Jimmy Bennett, who said she sexually assaulted him when he was 17, she played the role of oppressor.

Within a few months (less than one year) the media and the general public attacked Argento, while putting her in the very center of public debate, celebrated and exploited her renewed visibility and success (to be clear, she was forgotten for a while as a celebrity), and then dumped her again (celebrating her as a victim, in the end). Asia Argento’s story is an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity. Beyond the opportunities for gossip provided by the media’s presentation of this series of events, this ongoing and hasty relationship between celebrification and desecration requires an in-depth analysis.

**Keywords:** celebrification, degradation rituals, scandal, reputation, media, morality

On October 18, 2018, at the end of the X Factor episode “Home Visit,” Sky confirmed that Asia Argento had been replaced as a judge of the talent show, starting from the next live episode. The intentionally neutral announcement by host Alessandro Cattelan came at the apparent end of a narrative that began approximately one year ago, in which actress Asia Argento, daughter of the famous horror movie director Dario Argento, has been cast by the media in the roles of heroine, whore, penitent, and victim — not necessarily in this order — in a schizophrenic way. As a matter of fact, this trial ended with an apparently clear-cut verdict issued by the Italian mainstream media, which for months has fueled a carousel of

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\*\* Email: [romana.ando@uniroma1.it](mailto:romana.ando@uniroma1.it)

opinions and emotions, packed with audiences who are sometimes accomplices, sometimes antagonists, and always noisy.

To briefly summarise the events, Asia Argento was among the first actresses to speak out about powerful producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults, the revelation of which led to the well-known #MeToo campaign. In contrast to the solidarity that Weinstein's victims received elsewhere and to the credibility attributed to Argento in other countries<sup>1</sup>, in Italy Argento herself was immediately the victim of a terrifying online ritual of degradation that — not surprisingly — was very often initiated by women. As Andrea Hajek pointed out, “the criticism was often accompanied by verbal insult and scorn, ranging from reprimands for not having rejected Weinstein's sexual advances, to condemnations of her continued collaboration with the producer in subsequent years, during which she suffered further abuse” (2018, p.139). Conservative newspaper *Libero* published an op-ed by Renato Farina with the headline: “First they give it away, then they whine and pretend to repent”.<sup>2</sup> While Argento was giving an interview about the assault accusations, journalist Mario Adinolfi tweeted that the actress was attempting to “justify high-society prostitution”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in Italy the echoes of this rebellion against sexual violence have taken a peculiarly nationalist and chauvinist turn, and “only very few voices have dared to question the gendered relations of power that make this form of sexual abuse both possible and widespread” (Zambelli, Mainardi, Hajek, 2018). This very controversial matter involves both the sexist male perspective and, one might say, the failure of feminism in Italy, as underlined by Guia Soncini in *The New York Times*<sup>4</sup> who vividly stigmatized how Italian feminists view themselves as a gendered and generational separate community..

Other critics approached the situation from a different perspective; many interpreted and condemned Argento's decision to speak out about sexual assault as an opportunistic way of advancing her career. Her delayed accusations against Weinstein were thus seen as an attempt to gain media attention for herself. As a matter of fact, in the same period Argento was hired by the TV network Sky to be on the jury of *X Factor* 2018. However, no one has remarked on the media's exploitation of Argento's growing visibility and her convertibility into economical resources.

What happened after these events was a complete reversal of the scenario. In August 2018, after the unexpected death of her partner, the famous chef Anthony Bourdain, Asia Argento settled a complaint filed against her by a young actor and musician, Jimmy Bennett, who said she sexually assaulted him when he was 17. Instantaneously, Argento went from being one of the most prominent activists of the #MeToo movement to an alleged rapist who traumatised Bennett, affected his mental health and damaged his career. Moreover, as newspapers reported, Asia Argento paid Bennett \$380,000 in order to avoid a public denunciation, which appeared to confirm her guilt. Consequently, Asia Argento was dumped by the #MeToo movement and fired from *The X Factor*, as reported above.

Beyond the opportunities for gossip provided by the media's presentation of this series of events, what is most relevant about this story is that within a few months (less than one year) the media and the general public attacked Argento, while putting her in the very center of public debate, celebrated and exploited her renewed visibility and success (to be

clear, she was forgotten for a while as a celebrity), and then dumped her again (celebrating her as a victim, in the end). Far from being linear, this ongoing and hasty relationship between celebrification and desecration requires an in-depth analysis. Asia Argento's story is an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity.

## Celebrity as a process

Asia Argento's case is an effective demonstration of the idea that celebrity is a process rather than a static position, and it provides us with additional dynamic perspectives on celebrity culture that we need to address here. First of all, celebrity culture is the result of a twofold process — “celebritisation” (Boykoff and Goodman, 2009) and “celebrification” (Gamson, 1994; Turner, 2006) — connected to a mediascape that is defined both by traditional mass media and, nowadays, by the internet. It is worth underlining that these two processes take place on both a social and cultural level (celebritisation) and an individual level (celebrification) (Driessens, 2013a). More specifically, “celebrification” refers to the process that transforms ordinary people or public figures into celebrities, while “celebritisation” has to be interpreted as a meta-process, as the democratisation of celebrity.

The second point here is that these two processes have experienced extraordinary growth in the age of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008), in which the balance between the media industry and the audience is redefined as both a top-down, corporate-driven process and a bottom-up, consumer-driven process. As a matter of fact, the pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years, thanks to the connective media (Van Dijck, 2013) that are progressively involving in both the celebrification and celebritisation process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. In particular, ordinary people who gain visibility and fame are legitimated as celebrities in the mediatised performative society; equally importantly, the size and diversity of social media networks offer a widespread, active and participatory audience with which to engage. In contemporary society, the pervasive digital circulation of content through traditional and social media enlarges the audience and increases people's engagement with celebrities. The media constantly manage a complex and intensified representation, where the person's status dynamics are constantly negotiated and evaluated by the audience, who witness such processes through their participation and everyday interactions. As Dyer states, celebrity becomes an area of negotiation between media, audiences and celebrity itself rather than merely a media production (Giles, 2000) to be consumed, worshipped, and adored, imposed by media industries through a top-down process of distribution. To a certain extent, celebrity can be conceptualised as a meaningful step in the complex and dynamic

consumer experience of audiences, who actively build their everyday identity, choosing their favourite celebrities on the media shelves.

The ideas of negotiation and consumer experience evoke a dynamic view of celebrity, in which mainstream media and social media platforms inhabited by audiences cohabit and cooperate in defining our social symbolic imagery, which is mostly made up of celebrities. This leads to the third point of this reflection: the growth of visibility and increase of speed in producing celebrities is not only a matter of media marketing, but above all a social and cultural process. While the politics of producing celebrity may be conjunctural and contingent, nobody denies that celebrification and celebritisation have the power to generate “real-life” consequences, and that celebrity also has to be analysed as a cultural formation with a social function. Celebrity is not only a category of media text, nor is it merely a genre of media discourse. Celebrities are constituted discursively (Turner, Bonner, Marshall, 2000, p. 11), are implicated in the construction of audience cultures, and are central figures in many of the dominant discourses about identity, gender and sexuality. As Turner (2010) points out, celebrity culture is one of the areas through which we can trace the new role for the media: as the generator or author of social identities.

Mapping the cultural functions of celebrities (and stars) may help us to understand how they articulate ideas about identity, personhood and individualism in contemporary society and how the audience may affect these areas. Moreover, as Couldry (2002) argues, being visible in the media means to be at the very center of the world and to have the opportunity of ordering the world itself. In this sense, we may read the media as the social arena where celebrities constantly emerge through public and semi-private (but always visible and detectable) performances which are recognised and validated by audiences as an expression of both celebrity status and consistency with social norms.

What’s more, within the new mediascape, celebrities can further be seen as a process in that they function as a set of circulated strategies and practices (boyd and Marwick, 2011) that are publicly built, represented and negotiated. In other words, “celebrities” are performances and social practices that involve a community’s shared values and specific social roles.

However, due to the aforementioned technological and cultural turn, nowadays the media rituals related to the celebrity as a process are not only enhanced in terms of the number of people involved, but also hastened in comparison to the past. As Driessen (2013b, pp. 11–12) points out,

this sheds light on the demographics of celebrity culture: because of visibility’s contradictory forces, namely the need for renewal as well as the scarce public’s attention, there is only a small core of celebrities with longstanding careers and international allure, next to a mass of temporary and disposable “celetoids” (Rojek 2001) and celebrities (Brighenti 2007, p. 334; van de Rijt et al. 2013).

As a consequence, the duration and to some extent the consistency of celebrity may be less predictable than in traditional media, while media representations provide the audience with multiple and often contradictory symbolic materials which need time to be

parsed. If audiences need time for processing information and producing social meanings, the never-ending circulation of content within digital platforms hardly provides users with that time. This raises the question of how both the speed and evanescence of media scenario may affect the celebrity process. Moreover, how deep could those discourses of reflexivity, produced by the audience in the evanescent and temporary time of a social media tap (e.g. a tweet or a Facebook like), actually be?

## **Understanding desecrating rituals within the new media eco-system**

What is new in the contemporary media system is that the intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person's social position. Moreover, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and the relationship between newcomers and outcomers within each field, accreditation and degradation rituals can be considered as a specific function of the celebrity field, with old celebrities being humiliated, new stars being created overnight, and vice-versa.

Even if literature about celebrity is mostly focused on authenticating processes, recent events, such as the epic, tragic, failure of reputation of well-known stars and public figures (like Kevin Spacey and the aforementioned Harvey Weinstein) forced us to reconsider the very idea of celebrity desecration. As we know, “in the market and in politics, a degradation ceremony must be counted as a secular form of communion. Structurally, a degradation ceremony bears close resemblance to ceremonies of investiture and elevation” (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421) and may have onerous effects on both career and private life. These rituals aim at removing people from a place of value and confine their range of eligibility and intelligibility within a community. Garfinkel’s full ceremony is performed out loud and in public because the degraded person is defined as such by “the denouncer” and “the witness” who all together define “the perpetrator” as out of society’s standards and motive of “moral indignation [as] a social affect” (p. 421).

This idea of degradation rituals was used by Giglioli et al. (1997) to describe the 1994 trial of Sergio Cusani as intensely mediated. As Cavicchioli points out, politicians were involved on two different levels of judgement: first of all, they were concerned about their guilt and the consequent punishment when they were in the tribunal, but, just as importantly, they were scared of the effect of the trial on their image, credibility and awareness because of their media visibility (“figura”, in Cavicchioli’s words).<sup>5</sup>

In contemporary society, this kind of ritual is generally managed through media representations, which are progressively changing and expanding in the new media ecosystem. From TV to social media, the witness of this ritual is the dispersed but now definitely networked audience (Rainie and Wellman 2012) who scrutinises and judges the penitent, suffering and experiencing the same feelings of shame, failure, guilt, and regret,

thanks to media visibility and pervasiveness. Consider, in this sense, the role of television as a socially authorised place for celebrity confession: according to Redmond, “One can find in the contemporary self-disclosure, or television therapy talk-show, a corresponding secular and mediagenic enactment of the ‘private’ Sacrament of Reconciliation, and ‘public’ persecution ritual [where] the talk-show host thus becomes a supra-charged redemptive icon” (p. 150) who may promise salvation. Within this scenario, the TV audience is represented as hidden and mostly silent attendees of this ceremony, even if the redemption process can start only thanks to the active complicity of fans. However, the more the audience becomes active and noisy and their participation through online platforms increases, the more these rituals become a never-ending public trial where the roles of both the audience/witness and the celebrity/perpetrator drastically change.

The role of the audience is once more crucial: accreditation and degradation rituals without witnesses do not have a social impact. If we consider social and convergent media as a public arena in which to share emotions — as in Zizi Papacharissi’s idea of affective publics (2015) — people’s affective labour is now playing a fundamental part in both the rise of new stars and in the failure of old ones. At the same time, the penitent celebrity may explore diverse roles within the new media scenario: he or she can be the penitent in the public space of a mainstream TV show as well as a self-taught lawyer through his or her profile on social media. And his or her online claims can be spread and intensified, while constantly negotiated and evaluated by the audience through their participation and everyday interactions. Moreover, these claims can once more be exploited by media mainstream in a sort of meta-communication process, resulting in a vicious circle. Of course, this process is enhanced by celebrities’ recent use of social media in order to strengthen their connection with fans by engaging in relationships that are less mediated than they were in the past. Celebrities, as boyd and Marwick (2011) state, used to show their friendliness and proximity to the public by interacting with fans, answering their questions and mentioning them in their posts, so as to formally establish mutual understanding by using linguistic references to outline fandom membership (Andò, 2016). As celebrities use this preferential channel to share thoughts, emotions and feelings with audiences, it is quite clear that we have to reconsider the celebrity process itself and in particular the role of degradation in it. Could we consider desecration as a new form of sacralisation? Considering the increase of velocity in the contemporary celebrity process, can the desecrating process be a new strategy to achieve endorsement and authentication? And in the case of Asia Argento and other former stars, may we say that a new opportunity for visibility and success comes at the price of being publicly humiliated or seen as losers by the audiences? Is the celebritisation a form of abjection?

## Private life at stake: how to gain visibility through desecration and convert it to celebrity capital

Another aspect we have to take into account is that desecration very often revolves around celebrities' private lives. As Turner argues, "the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity (...) occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (...) to investigating the details of their private lives" (2004, p. 8). In traditional media, this process could be seen as an economically-driven artifice ("celebrity culture is secular", as Rojek states; 2001, p. 74), facilitated by media institutions that produce and promote celebrities and put them into a position of very public intimacy by turning their private lives into stories and commodities to consume. As a matter of fact, the increasing visibility of the private on the media stage (as in Erving Goffman's idea of back-stage and front-stage, 1959) has completely transformed the relationship between public figures and the audience, removing barriers to previously restricted information (Meyrowitz, 1985). However, when it comes to social media, it is worthy to note that celebrities themselves have a more active role in managing their private sphere (boyd and Marwick, 2011) that becomes public even when it is at the very center of degradation rituals. We used to consider the constant struggle between public and private as a meaningful effect of the transformation of communication media and, consequently, of both the nature of visibility and the relations between public and private (Thompson, 1995). In this sense, we may refer to the case of Asia Argento as a scandal, as scandals are symptomatic of this broad change in the development of modern society.

In Asia Argento's case, her private life was (and still is) the site of both her success and humiliation. It is the starting point for her recognisability, a precondition for being considered a celebrity. According to Driessen, recognisability, and more specifically the "accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations" (2013b, p. 16), constitutes the celebrity capital which is a kind of capital that can be converted to other kinds of capital, as in Bourdieu's definition of field (1993). In this perspective, celebrities need to be analysed not as people with a strong individuality, extraordinary characteristics and a specific agency, but rather as a productive relationship between media industries, celebrity agents, audiences and of course celebrities themselves.

This interpretative frame can be useful to analyse Asia Argento's case and, at the same time, to examine the non-linearity of the convertibility of celebrity capital into other resources. Throughout her story, her private life is at stake — neither her competences and skills, nor her star qualities, but her private life which accrues media visibility and projects recognisability on her. Argento unexpectedly achieved media visibility when she accused Harvey Weinstein. Where Argento was before this event is not clear; what is clear is that she was no longer in the public eye, in Italy or abroad. Her relationship with Weinstein and her public condemnation of Weinstein in an article by Ronan Farrow<sup>6</sup> positioned her within a specific political network of people, mostly women, resulting in the #MeToo movement (which from that moment became her social capital, her valuable contacts). Upon joining this network, Argento's private experience turned into political

capital (as in her speech to the European Parliament<sup>7</sup>) and increased visibility in the media, especially in Italy: in many interviews after the news came out, she presented her truth about Weinstein, even facing criticism and blame from journalists and the public, especially women. All this media exposure provided her with greater visibility and recognisability (symbolic capital) in the public eye, whether her reputation was affected positively or negatively. Her story was no longer a matter of private affairs but a political (the relationship between sexuality and power) and social (the gendered judgement and the “whore stigma”: see Zambelli et al., 2018) issue. Even if her involvement in these experiences was mostly related to the scandal and not directly to her career and qualities as an actor, singer, director and producer, her social and political capital was undoubtedly converted to celebrity capital when she was employed as part of the jury in the Italian edition of X Factor 2018. As a matter of fact, this episode confirms the monetisation of her experience and the convertibility of celebrity capital into economic capital. On the contrary, when she was fired because of the sex scandal with Jimmy Bennett, her economic capital disappeared but the episode turned her into a victim of the media, adored by fans and by colleagues (both a new social and celebrity capital).

What is worth noting is that in this complex and unpredictable process, Argento’s fame is reinforced thanks to fandom and, in the end, even public opinion, at first so critical of her, is progressively assuming a more positive, or at least neutral, position. What we once could have called media scorn results in this case in numerous opportunities for visibility. At the end of degradation ceremonies, the penitent usually comes out defeated. In the contemporary media scenario, the proof of desecration (i.e. the post for Bennett and their picture together on Instagram) coexists with the messages for her fans released after her final episode of X Factor, re-opening this never-ending story.

### **Celebrity, scandals and morality**

According to Silverstone (2007), the media have a relevant role in defining a social, civic and moral space. They are building our moral universe, a moral space within which the other appears to us and where we may find tools to connect (and disconnect) to others, using frame-worlds to understand our everyday life and, in a certain sense, orient our behaviours according to a more general moral order. This relation between media and morality may help us in addressing our last reflection on Asia Argento’s case. If, in Silverstone’s idea of mediapolis, “we will or will not find ourselves alongside the other in his or her dignity, [and] we will escape or not the ‘consequences of the failures of representation’” (Dayan, 2007, p. 114), how do we analyse Argento’s scandals and representations from the moral perspective of the inhabitants of the mediapolis, namely, the audience?

In Asia Argento’s media trial we may observe a moral attempt at degradation, enacted by both the media and the audience, which at the end was not effective. Then what went “wrong” with Argento, compare to other very famous cases of degradation with real private and public consequences for the perpetrator? The concept of scandal may clarify the

matter: according to Thompson, a scandal is a “conduct which offended moral sentiments or the sense of decency (...) Scandal thus involved a transgression of moral codes which could be, but did not have to be, religious in character, and with reference to which the action or event was denounced” (2005, p. 39). As a matter of fact, Argento was involved in two different scandals: in the one involving Harvey Weinstein, she played the roles of both victim and heroine, even if she was also criticised and strongly condemned by public opinion. In the one involving Jimmy Bennett, she played the role of oppressor. In both cases, she gained public disapproval for her private sexual conduct, but if we pay attention to the evolution of the story, she generated more disapproval when she was the victim than when she was the oppressor, especially because the media industry turned her into a new kind of victim when she was fired from X Factor<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, we may say that in the first case, Weinstein’s scandal fit into the Italian patriarchal framework of social rules and norms about sexuality, generating a public debate and media degradation rituals against Argento: she is easy to cast in the role of the “bad woman” compared to an ideal “good woman” who is expected to refuse money or career opportunities rather than engage in illicit sex (Hajek, 2018). In the second case, the morality (or ethics?) of the media prevailed, becoming, along with Argento, the very protagonist of the scandal, redirecting the audience’s attention to different issues.

Again, Thompson argues that scandals

may (and often do) seriously damage the reputations of the individuals whose actions lies at the center of the scandal (...) Reputation is a kind of resource, a sort of “symbolic capital” that individuals can accumulate, cultivate, and protect. It is a valuable resource because it enables individuals to exercise a certain kind of power. (2005, pp. 46–47)

In Argento’s case, her symbolic capital and supposed power were more recognised by the media system (and their audience) when her celebrity capital was turned into economic capital. Conversely, her supposed political power related to her public accusations of sexual harassment was immediately reduced to silence by the media and the audience while she could be read through the lens of “whore stigma”. It is not surprising that she gained the main stage of visibility (e.g. in the TV show *Non è l’arena*) when she discussed Bennett’s case<sup>9</sup>, playing the role of penitent who attempts to rebuild her credibility and to move fans’ feelings.

As Rojek points out, “The fallen celebrity may never regain the former level of elevation in the public sphere. But confession can produce a more nuanced relationship with the public, in which frailty and vulnerability are recognised as the condition of embodiment, common to celebrity and fan alike” (2001, p. 89). Following Rojek, we may say that Argento received a great deal of affective empathy from fans through her penitent representations in TV shows: redemption processes involve the active complicity of the audience and, as Redmond underlines,

the televised celebrity confessional is above all an emotional form of communication that attempts to draw the viewer/fan/reader into an affective economy of inner feeling and authentic sentiment. The

ordinary citizen is asked to connect with the celebrity's emotions, to simultaneously self-sense, and to confess through and in their sentient bodies. (2008, 156)

However, the televised confessional related to the Bennett case was performed not as a collective degradation ritual with the promise of salvation, but as a tool to create a new reputation (rather than restoring the damaged reputation). What is more, the interview was aired in the same period as X Factor, where Argento was one of the beloved protagonists and during which she masterfully managed her presence on social media. As a consequence, on the same stage designated for degradation, she presented herself as a victim because she was going to lose her role on X Factor and everybody was aware of it and supported her through social media. In a very short and condensed time (less than twelve months) the media circus exploited her visibility in a way that forced the audience to assume contradictory and often ambivalent opinions

The new media ecosystem is made up of traditional mainstream media whose schedule is now forced to reckon with the much faster time scale introduced by social media. In this scenario, even the mass media, which could have fixed and preserved symbolic content in a relatively durable fashion compared to the temporal flow of social interaction, failed. In digital media, as in face-to-face communication, "the contents of symbolic exchange may have a fleeting existence: words uttered may rapidly fade away, and the preservation of symbolic contents may depend on the fallible and contestable faculty of memory" (Thompson, 2005, p. 52). After all, as we know, the enunciative productivity of the audience that can "occur only within immediate social relationships" (Fiske, 1992, p. 39) is progressively turning into textual productivity in the digital era (Hills, 2013), as in social media posts, while maintaining the ephemeral nature of social interaction.

Another question here is: may we consider Asia Argento's case within the frame of morality? What kind of morality we are discussing here? It is worth noting that this case brings to evidence moral (and more precisely political) issues related to gendered power, which are clearly essential in both the sexual scandals involving Argento. On the one hand we may analyse Asia's behaviour as consistent with the sensibility of both post-feminism and neoliberalism: Asia can be considered the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism as much as the active, freely choosing, self reinventing subject of postfeminism (Gill, 2008): On the other hand, the moralist backlash against Asia clearly demonstrates that in Italy the post-feminist discourses are far from being a reality, while the gender equality has not been achieved and an unequal system of power relations is still at work. As Hipkins states about the phenomena of "velinismo and "whore-ocracy"

The important contribution that postfeminist theory could make in this debate is to open up understanding about what is 'new, unique, and distinctive about media representations of gender at the current moment, what ma[kes] them different from straightforwardly pre-feminist or anti-feminist portrayals'. The role of the 'velina' in Italian culture has evolved in tandem with the growing forces of neoliberalism, and deserves analysis as a particular form of 'new sexism' (2011, p.430)

However, for the sake of brevity, I suggest reflecting on the relationship of media and morality, in the sense that media allows people to be responsible and moral individuals

within a society that is more and more represented by media as a moral space (Silverstone, 2007). What is worth noting here is what Silverstone defines as the “proper distance” in mediated everyday life: proper distance means no distance at all in regard to the other and the opportunity to deal with others even if physically distant — a “required proximity” which is, in the end, what Argento built with her audience, a sense of intimacy that is co-created by celebrities, (media industries) and fans through social media. It is emblematic in this regard the role played by the TV show and official social media during X Factor first audition in Pesaro (June, 9, 2018): Asia decided to participate in the audition the day after his partner’s death and her choice was presented as an act of courage, deeply supported by the TV show<sup>10</sup>. This event resulted in a process of humanization of the (bad) celebrity and of affective appropriation by the audience (2178 likes on Facebook; 1141 likes on Twitter related to the editorial staff’s announcement ; 4634 likes and 318.287 views on Facebook, 213.440 views on Instagram; 942 likes and 18.600 views on Twitter).

She gained visibility and fame because she positioned her story close to the affective public. This is something that she could not achieve when she presented herself as the victim of a sexual predator, re- victimised by journalists, public figures, intellectuals and (a mostly female) audience.<sup>11</sup>

Why this self-disclosure was unsuccessful compared to the other is hard to discern. One of the reasons may be identified in her appropriation of the frameworks of “postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that sees individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and selfregulating” (Gill, 2008, 438): as we know, in Italian society victim blaming is still widespread and based on the very well-known leitmotif “se l’è cercata” (she brought it upon herself) (Zambelli et al. 2018), especially when the sexual assault is committed against a “bad” woman or girl, not consistent with the ideal representation of women (even that neoliberal “perfect” competitive women discussed by McRobbie, 2015). Moreover, in Italy the battles for sexual freedom and self-determinism have already encountered strong resistance; while post-feminism considers sexual economic exchange a conscious and legitimate decision, in Italy women who break social rules and norms about sexuality are labeled as “whores” and, in contrast, the seductive power of men is celebrated (as in the case of Silvio Berlusconi, analysed by Hipkins, 2011).

Conversely, when Argento came as a penitent to the stage of a TV show, her reputation was already normalised through her appearance on X Factor: she was no longer the bad girl with upraised middle finger, but a strong, unlucky woman who was suffering and whose “carnal” performance of pain was first highly scrutinised and then accepted by the audience<sup>12</sup>. In a certain sense, we may argue that Argento’s case is more a matter of moralism than morality. Following Dyer’s analysis of charisma, we may think of Argento’s ambivalent effectiveness in terms of “the relationship (...) between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture” (1979, in Holmes, Redmond 2007, p. 83). In other words, her charismatic appeal probably also emerged because of an uncertain, unstable social order (Italian feminism and patriarchal male culture) that she provided with a mixture of sexuality and innocence.

To conclude, we may say that in this case scandals and degradation rituals did not achieve the expected result. If for Rojek (2001), scandals are conservative rituals of collective absolution that tend to preserve the status quo and reaffirm a collective sentiment and ideas, here we may read scandals as the starting point for a transformation. The celebrity desecration, then, becomes an integral part of the celebrification process, even one of the most meaningful steps. At the provisory end of this story, what is relevant is not her guilt or her innocence but her ability to exploit all the official and unofficial media complex representations, with audience complicity, managing her multifaceted role as a victim, a whore, a penitent, and finally a renewed star, adored by fans and journalists while walking the Rome Film Festival red carpet.

### Biographical note

Romana Andò is Assistant Professor of Audience Research and Fashion & Consumer Experience at Sapienza University of Rome. She is the Head of the Master Programme in Fashion Studies at Sapienza. Her research interests concern audience studies, media consumption practices, online fandom, TV engagement and social television, YouTube content creators, visual social media and fashion consumption. She is the coordinator of Social TV Observatory at Digilab Sapienza She is the editor of *Audience Reader* (Guerini, 2007), *Youtube Content Creators* (with Alberto Marinelli, Egea, 2016) and has authored several articles and book chapters about audience and online fandom practices.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Argento has spoken out about sexual harassment both in Hollywood and Italy and given high-profile talks on the subject at Harvard University and at the Cannes Film Festival.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/opinioni/13264032/harvey-weinstein-renato-farina-scandalo-sessuale-hollywood.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Surreale intervista in ginocchio di Bianca Berlinguer ad Asia Argento che prova a giustificare la prostituzione d'alto bordo". <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/10/18/mario-adinolfi-paragona-asia-argento-a-una-prostituta-e-facebook-gli-blocca-il-profilo/3921074/>

<sup>4</sup> As in Guia Soncini's article "The Failure of Italian Feminism," <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/italian-feminism-asia-argento-weinstein.html>

<sup>5</sup> "In altre parole, specialmente per chi aveva un ruolo pubblico fino ad allora mai messo realmente in discussione, si trattava non solo di tutelare la propria fedina penale, ma anche di salvare la faccia. Sulla sedia dei testi si sono avvicendate n gran numero di persone che hanno dovuto fare i conti, chi più chi meno, col fatto di rendersi credibili, non perdere l'autorevolezza di cui erano investiti dal loro ruolo pubblico e dimostrarsi innocenti o quanto meno, il più possibile innocenti. È dal dosaggio di questi diversi scopi e dal modo in cui sono stati messi in atto che emergerà la "figura" complessivamente fatta da ognuno dei testi, così come dall'imputato" (Cavicchioli 1997, pp. 98–99).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>

<sup>7</sup> [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/womens-day-2018-closing\\_1151765-V\\_v](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/womens-day-2018-closing_1151765-V_v)

<sup>8</sup> The Facebook post created by the editorial staff gained 7625 likes and 1793 interactions. <https://www.facebook.com/xfactoritalia/posts/2068219666529683>. It is worth noting that the official communication by editorial staff before the Live episodes ([https://twitter.com/XFactorItalia/status/1037283799946747905/photo/1?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1037283799946747905&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.quotidiano.net%2Fmagazine%2Fxfactor-2018-giudici-1.4140884](https://twitter.com/XFactorItalia/status/1037283799946747905/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1037283799946747905&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.quotidiano.net%2Fmagazine%2Fxfactor-2018-giudici-1.4140884)) was less focused on Asia, and more on the new member of the jury. This is to say that audiences rapidly turned their opinion and interest.

<sup>9</sup> Even if she apparently approached the TV show (Giletti's program *Non è l'arena*) as a penitent searching for salvation, she presented a different version of the facts: "**Mi è saltato letteralmente addosso**. Mi ha spogliata, mi ha messa di traverso sul letto, mi è salito sopra e abbiamo fatto sesso completo senza usare neanche il preservativo. Io ero fredda ed immobile. Dopo mi ha detto che ero il suo desiderio sessuale da quando aveva 12 anni". In this attempt, she restored her role as sexual assault victim instead of rapist.

10

[https://twitter.com/xfactor\\_italia/status/1005466957888524288?s=21](https://twitter.com/xfactor_italia/status/1005466957888524288?s=21)

<https://www.facebook.com/119587301392939/posts/1953652817986369/>

[https://twitter.com/XFactor\\_Italia/status/1006477146255183873](https://twitter.com/XFactor_Italia/status/1006477146255183873)

<https://www.facebook.com/xfactoritalia/videos/1956749187676732/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bj66mHthN3e/?taken-by=xfactoritalia>

<http://xfactor.sky.it/2018/06/12/asia-argento-ringrazia-pubblico-x-factor/>

<sup>11</sup> As she declared: “In seguito a questa maligna e pubblica verifica, questa **rivittimizzazione**, questo rivivere il mio trauma di continuo in pubblico, sono caduta in una profonda e cupa depressione per diversi mesi”.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8q---OxWTY>

## Sbarchi mediatici. Pratiche di consumo mediale e rappresentazioni socio-narrative del fenomeno migratorio \*

Guido Di Fraia \*\*  
Università IULM

Elisabetta Risi \*\*\*  
Università IULM

The paper analyzes how certain practices of media usage can contribute to the construction of collective imaginaries and representations of some social phenomena. In particular, it discusses how practical differences in the use of the media (traditional and digital) and news by young people generate an imagery related to the issue of immigration. Starting from some "classic communication" theories, and supplemented with more reflections on the social representations, an empirical research was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The essay will be focused on the qualitative study conducted through qualitative interviews based on a sample of 40 individuals between the ages of 20 and 26. The study confirms that the perception of the migratory phenomenon is strongly modeled on the stereotypical images that the media circulate. The media and visual narratives shape the imaginary so much that what does not circulate through the media, people do not have images or stories.

**Keywords:** imagery, social representation, immigration, agenda setting, cultivation theory, migrants, media

### Introduzione

La rapida e costante evoluzione dei mezzi di comunicazione e delle tecnologie a essi collegate a cui si è assistito negli ultimi decenni e l'integrazione/ibridazione dei dispositivi mediatici già presenti nell'epoca dell'analogico (radio, cinema, telefono, TV, ecc.) con i media digitali (computer, smartphone, ecc.) ha esteso l'industria culturale, andando ad alimentare un immaginario posto *oltre il senso del luogo* (Meyrowitz, 1995). Le cifre di tale evoluzione sono tanto più evidenti nelle routine di connettività ubiqua (*mobile*) che configura un'interazione online caratterizzata da margini sempre più ampi di sovrapposizione rispetto all'intorno sociale *offline* degli utenti. La diffusione delle pratiche

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\*\* Email: [guido.difraia@iulm.it](mailto:guido.difraia@iulm.it)

\*\*\* Email: [elisabetta.risi@gmail.com](mailto:elisabetta.risi@gmail.com)

di adozione e *domestication* di queste tecnologie nella vita quotidiana, pur non essendo avvenuta in maniera uniforme rispetto alla popolazione, ha portato gli studiosi a parlare di un vero e proprio mutamento di paradigma delle forme e dei modelli della comunicazione umana (Di Fraia, 2011).

Castells (2009) parla di “era delle autocomunicazioni di massa” per segnalare il doppio statuto del pubblico, produttore e consumatore di contenuti, reso possibile con la diffusione dei cosiddetti social media. Nella società contemporanea le comunicazioni interpersonali, le comunicazioni di massa e le auto-comunicazioni di massa, tuttavia, non tendono a sostituirsi l’una all’altra, quanto piuttosto a integrarsi e completarsi a vicenda, in un complesso processo di sopravvivenze, ibridazioni e sviluppi dei media e delle pratiche sociali di appropriazione e uso degli stessi. Anche lo scenario che caratterizza l’informazione giornalistica si è evoluto verso un *sistema media ibrido* (Chadwick, 2011) nel quale, da una parte, i media “tradizionali” e quelli digitali concorrono alla produzione di un flusso di *news* (Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2014) costante e incessantemente in crescita sino a diventare “eccedente” rispetto a qualsiasi possibilità individuale di ricostruzione unitaria del senso. Dall’altra parte, gli elementi di questo stesso flusso si rispecchiano e moltiplicano all’infinito negli spazi digitali attraverso quella che può essere definita una forma di distruzione partecipativa dell’informazione,<sup>1</sup> generata dalla condivisione dei contenuti degli utenti in quanto “pubblici connessi” (Boyd, 2008) o “news prosumer”. In un perenne stato di connessione, tali pubblici partecipano attivamente a forme di distribuzione dei contenuti inserendosi nel contesto di convergenza culturale tra media mainstream e conversazioni dal basso (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Canali digitali “social”, dimensione “always on” dell’esperienza quotidiana e pratiche diffuse di utilizzo dei canali stessi paiono offrire alle persone possibilità mai date prima di informarsi e reperire notizie sui più disparati argomenti, secondo un modello di flusso caratterizzato da un’immersione costante nello streaming delle news che ormai le raggiungono attraverso i canali digitali senza alcun bisogno di attivarsi per esporsi ad esse. News che, soprattutto sui media digitali, risultano fortemente incentrate su dimensioni iconiche (immagini e video) che tendono progressivamente a cannibalizzare i contenuti testuali divenendo in un certo senso elementi decisivi rispetto alla notiziabilità degli eventi. Le metriche algoritmiche su cui si basano tali canali, infatti, attribuiscono loro una capacità di engagement molto superiore rispetto alla semplice testualità.

A partire da questo contesto, il presente lavoro descrive uno studio che ha avuto come obiettivo quello di analizzare se e come determinate pratiche d’uso e di fruizione dei media possano contribuire alla costruzione di configurazioni collettive e rappresentazioni di alcuni specifici fenomeni della realtà sociale. In particolare, ci si è chiesti come differenze pratiche di utilizzo dei media (classici e digitali) e di “comportamenti di consumo” delle news da parte dei giovani generino configurazioni diverse dell’immaginario relativo al tema dell’immigrazione, un fenomeno oggetto di molta informazione (giornalistica) e dibattito sui media italiani, sia *mainstream* che online.

I fenomeni migratori sono parte essenziale della storia dell’umanità, che diversamente non sarebbe nemmeno pensabile senza il costante movimento alla base di ogni

mutamento. È altrettanto vero che le migrazioni di massa, ancor più se gestite male o non gestite affatto, possono comportare problemi di difficile risoluzione.

La rilevanza del fenomeno migratorio verso l'Europa è, come noto, diventata tema di forte impatto e polarizzazione politica, e ha investito esponenzialmente anche l'area mediatica. In questo scenario l'informazione affronta sfide peculiari quando circola sui media, poiché le notizie (soprattutto sul web) impongono semplificazioni, immagini e considerazioni che, quando entrano in relazione con fenomeni di ostilità e *hatespeech* relativi all'accoglienza e all'integrazione multiculturale, possono amplificare opinioni pregiudiziali (Girasella, 2017; Muller & Schwarz, 2018).

Partendo dal presupposto che l'*immagine-mondo* messa in forma dalla mente collettiva sia sovradeterminata alle immagini-mondo prodotte da ciascun individuo determinando la (rappresentazione della) realtà sociale (Dilthey, 1998), l'indagine qui descritta si poneva, nello specifico, l'obiettivo di comprendere la relazione esistente fra le diverse tipologie d'uso dei media e di esposizione alle *news* e l'immagine percepita (in termini cognitivi e valutativi) dell'immigrazione in Italia. Per rispondere a tali domande è stata condotta una ricerca empirica, con un approccio quali-quantitativo, che si è focalizzata sui consumi mediatici della fascia dei giovani italiani (di età compresa fra i 20 e 26 anni) e sulle rappresentazioni e atteggiamenti di questi ultimi rispetto al fenomeno migratorio.

## Il background teorico di riferimento

La ricerca, che cerca di ricostruire la rappresentazione del fenomeno migratorio riferita ad alcuni specifici soggetti (i giovani italiani), si muove all'interno di un quadro teorico basato su alcune delle principali teorie "classiche" sviluppate riguardo agli effetti dei consumi mediatici sulla percezione della realtà e la formazione dell'immaginario collettivo.

L'immaginario può essere definito come quella parte del patrimonio simbolico che un sistema sociale utilizza per comunicare (Abruzzese, 2001) attraverso le immagini (Durand, 1996) intese nel duplice senso di "oggetti del mondo" e di rappresentazione mentali in rapporto a un modello. In termini epistemologici l'immaginario, dagli originali tentativi definitivi di ampia portata di Durand (1998) che lo descrivono come "l'inevitabile rappresentazione, la facoltà di simbolizzazione da cui tutte le paure, tutte le speranze e i loro frutti culturali zampillano continuamente dal milione e mezzo di anni circa che l'*homo erectus* si è innalzato sulla terra", viene progressivamente a legittimarsi in ambito disciplinare come dispositivo teorico adatto al pensiero complesso e utile per l'analisi di alcuni processi della società contemporanea.

L'immaginario si ridefinisce nel tempo in relazione all'ambiente per strutturare il rapporto degli esseri umani con il mondo (Boccia Artieri, 2002). A Simmel si deve l'idea di una negoziazione tra razionalità e immaginazione, tra individuo e immaginario collettivo, tra materiale e immateriale, dove il soggetto è impegnato a collegare i fatti/gli oggetti/le percezioni con le rappresentazioni/gli ideali/le immagini mediante continui "compromessi"; negoziati che risultano indispensabili, poiché solo la sintesi tra razionale e immaginario permette all'individuo di darsi una forma coerente e di dare un senso al mondo che lo

circonda. Il collante che tiene insieme la società consiste nell'organizzare e "ridurre" le distanze tra i due piani (dati reali e rappresentazioni immateriali) mediante la creazione di immagini simboliche, che assicurino sia lo sviluppo dell'immaginario sociale, sia la potenziale soddisfazione per i singoli (Simmel, 1918).

In termini più specifici, l'immaginario su cui si focalizza il presente articolo è quello associato al tema della *migrazione*. Tema che può forse essere considerato come (ri)costitutivo di una delle cosiddette *grandi narrazioni* (Lyotard, 1981) che si è andata ad affermare negli ultimi decenni nel mondo occidentale. Una narrazione dinamica ed in costante evoluzione, che si costituisce e si declina in relazione all'evolversi dello *spirito del tempo*. È infatti nel fluire del tempo che la dimensione immaginativa emerge sotto forma di quei fenomeni, di quei fatti sociali che ne determinano le sue condizioni discorsive. Rispetto alla fine delle grandi narrazioni della modernità, l'immaginario riaffiora nuovamente (Marzo, 2015) e viene utilizzato in riferimento a quel modo di produzione, scambio e consumo dei *miti* d'oggi, surrogati del mondo religioso (Debord, 1997).

All'interno dello spazio mediatico iper-complesso e iper-saturo della contemporaneità, l'immaginario transita tuttavia sempre più attraverso le logiche del frammento "rizomatico" (Cioni e Marinelli, 2010; Deleuze e Guattari, 1980) del post su Facebook o del messaggio in 140/280 caratteri di Twitter, per fare solo due esempi, in forme quindi de-localizzate, de-contestualizzate e de-temporalizzate che danno vita a *immagini reticolari e sfrangiate* della realtà sociale (Castells, 2008). Immagini rispetto alle quali più complessa e articolata diviene, inevitabilmente, l'attività ricostruttiva del senso e mitopoietica, sia a livello individuale che collettivo. Dopo mezzo secolo di egemonia televisiva e alcuni decenni dall'avvento pervasivo del digitale, "la relazione tra la forma estetica collettiva e la soggettività degli individui che ne è alla base diviene sempre più osmotica e molecolare" (Ragone, 2015).

Non è un caso se è proprio a seguito dell'affermarsi su larga scala del medium televisivo che alcuni approcci di studio empirico sugli effetti dei media iniziano a focalizzarsi proprio sulle capacità degli stessi, e della televisione in particolare, di fornire le risorse iconiche e mitopoietiche necessarie alla generazione di immaginari condivisi. È quello che sostanzialmente si propongono di fare, in particolare, la *teoria della coltivazione* (Gerbner, 1980) e, su un piano più rivolto alla dimensione puramente informativa della fruizione mediale, quella dell'*agenda setting* (Shaw, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993).

Per quanto sviluppatasi in un universo massmediale significativamente diverso da quello attuale, tali teorie offrono modelli interpretativi relativamente "fluidi" e riapplicabili, con dovuti accorgimenti, anche al nuovo ambiente mediale (Morgan, Shanahan, Signorielli, 2015).

La teoria della coltivazione considera le audience come un insieme di persone in grado di esercitare un'azione relativamente attiva e selettiva rispetto ai contenuti mediali disponibili nel proprio contesto di vita. Tale teoria attribuisce inoltre grande importanza al tempo di esposizione ai media e tiene conto anche degli elementi ambientali e sociali in cui il pubblico è inserito: "*people are born into a symbolic environment with television as its mainstream*" (Shanahan, Morgan, 1999). Nonostante i limiti della teoria della coltivazione

(cfr. Gauntlett, 1998), l'elemento più significativo di questo approccio, ciò che lo rende sintonico al presente studio, è la prospettiva di lunga durata e per certi versi "immersiva" dell'esposizione, ritenuta in grado di generare rappresentazioni e percezioni condivise del reale (non a caso si parla di processi di "coltivazione" dell'immaginario individuale e collettivo). Tra le ipotesi di questa teoria vi è quella relativa alla costruzione di visioni "distorte" della realtà in base all'esposizione a più o meno mezzi di informazione: se una persona spende infatti la maggior parte del proprio tempo fruendo di contenuti televisivi, indipendentemente dal format o dalla tipologia di programma seguito, avrà un tempo ridotto per utilizzare altri media o informarsi mediante essi, e ciò può condurre, sempre secondo la teoria della coltivazione, a un modo di vedere e interpretare il mondo ristretto e limitato all'universo mediatico creato dal quel medium. Gerbner e colleghi (1980) hanno definito la cosiddetta *Mean World Syndrome*: dalla loro ricerca, svolta confrontando le statistiche ufficiali relative alla criminalità in determinate zone con il percepito dei soggetti coinvolti nell'indagine, rilevarono che coloro che spendevano un tempo maggiore di fronte allo schermo televisivo temevano più degli altri di essere aggrediti o divenire vittime di violenza, avendo elaborato un immaginario estremizzato rispetto alla frequenza con cui si verificavano nella realtà episodi pericolosi di natura criminale.

Per riadattare la teoria della coltivazione all'ambiente contemporaneo e all'Information Age (Castells, 2010) si deve però guardare in modo dinamico e longitudinale agli effetti che l'esposizione mediale può avere sull'immaginario dei soggetti. Prima dello sviluppo e della diffusione dei media digitali i contenuti e le storie mediali erano identificabili e venivano divulgate da un numero limitato di mezzi, ma altrettanto non si può dire per le pratiche mediali contemporanee. Alcune ricerche hanno dimostrato il generarsi di interpretazioni e rappresentazioni diverse dei medesimi fenomeni sociali se estrapolate da storie e contenuti narrati da un numero di media più ampio e attraverso canali frammentari come quelli digitali (Morgan, Shanahan, Signorielli, 2015). Sebbene questi contenuti riguardino maggiormente narrative di tipo personale (status di Facebook, tweet, ecc.), piuttosto che narrazioni pubbliche o di finzione, essi divengono comunque parte delle storie che complessivamente danno forma alla visione del mondo degli individui. In questa maniera, anche proto-storie e notizie frammentarie che si ricevono divengono parte attiva nella costruzione dell'immaginario collettivo.

Altro punto di riferimento del presente lavoro è, come si è detto, quello dell'*agenda setting* (Shaw, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1993) riferito al fenomeno migratorio, poiché quest'ultimo costituisce una delle tematiche trattate in modo approfondito e con alta frequenza nell'agenda dei media. Anche a seguito della diffusione del digitale, i media continuano ad assegnare maggiore o minore rilevanza a determinati temi che divengono, conseguentemente, le problematiche di fondamentale importanza per i cittadini, che le riconoscono come le più urgenti da trattare; ma ciò che effettivamente cambia nel nuovo ambiente mediale sono i processi e le logiche che fanno emergere certe notizie e tematiche come rilevanti rispetto alle altre. Le riflessioni più recenti hanno sviluppato alcuni elementi di studio che ben si ricollegano alle due teorie sopra citate, tra cui la sovrabbondanza comunicativa, la difficoltà a monitorare l'autorevolezza delle fonti, la scarsità di tempo per la fruizione delle notizie, la diminuzione della soglia di attenzione

delle persone. Tutti questi elementi finiscono congiuntamente per generare una fruizione relativamente superficiale alle news. È quindi lecito chiedersi se questa evoluzione dei canali informativi e la trasformazione del giornalismo in *citizen journalism* (Altheide, 2013), uniti alla necessità di produrre notizie con un ritmo sempre più elevato da parte dei differenti “soggetti” attivi della produzione e nella circolazione delle informazioni, abbiano effettivamente ampliato le possibilità di informazione e approfondimento e, nel caso, se e come le persone abbiano realmente iniziato a costruire diete informative più complete e complesse.

Questo scenario pretenderebbe, infatti, un pubblico/utente più attivo e critico a livello di scelta e utilizzo dei media per soddisfare determinati bisogni (informativi, relazionali, di intrattenimento, etc.) di quanto effettivamente non avvenga; se da un lato i pubblici connessi (secondo il filone teorico della teoria degli *usi e gratificazioni*, Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974), sono orientati verso uno scopo che essi cercano di realizzare attraverso l'uso attivo e dinamico dei media, dall'altro le logiche di produzione, divulgazione e ricezione delle notizie sono sempre più macchiniche/algoritmiche.

Un ulteriore aspetto da considerare nello studio dei processi di generazione dell'immaginario e delle rappresentazioni condivise della realtà è quello relativo ai meccanismi percettivo-cognitivi che l'essere umano tende ad attivare nei confronti dei contenuti simbolici e iconici con cui entra in contatto; sia che provengano dai media più arcaici, da quelli elettronici o da quelli digitali. Tra questi meccanismi rientrano ad esempio il cosiddetto il *bias di conferma* e il *backfire effect*.<sup>2</sup>

Tali processi di selezione e filtro hanno a che fare con la necessità della mente umana di mantenere un certo equilibrio cognitivo. Gli approcci sociologici avevano affrontato il tema dell'interpretazione della realtà e della costruzione di senso, introducendo concetti come quello della *sospensione del dubbio* (Schutz, 1962). L'essere umano tende a interpretare la realtà quotidiana secondo schemi già precedentemente acquisiti attraverso l'esperienza individuale e i processi di socializzazione. Questa necessità, definita da Schutz *epoché dell'atteggiamento naturale* nei confronti del mondo, deriva dai principi di “economia cognitiva” che regolano il funzionamento della mente umana. All'interno delle risorse interpretative fornite dal *senso comune* (Jedlowski, 2005), diversi aspetti della realtà esterna ci appaiono come *normali*, conosciuti, e *date per scontati* (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Schutz, 1962).

Se è vero, dunque, che l'essere umano tende a ricercare conferma e coerenza rispetto a quanto è già noto, l'applicazione di modelli algoritmici e tecnologie di *machine-learning* (Agichtein, Brill & Dumais, 2006; Das et al., 2007; Hannak et al., 2013) ai contenuti veicolati attraverso i media digitali possono essere considerati una vera e propria estroflessione tecnologica che si sovrappone ai meccanismi di economia cognitiva sopra descritti. Il rischio è, infatti, che gli algoritmi che regolano il flusso di notizie a cui i soggetti hanno accesso sia talmente personalizzato da andare quasi inevitabilmente a generare le cosiddette *filter bubbles* (Parisier, 2011; Pfeffer et al., 2016), vere e proprie “bolle informative” all'interno delle quali solo determinati argomenti e opinioni riescono a emergere e affermarsi, mentre prospettive diverse e critiche rispetto ai pensieri degli utenti rimangono escluse (Sunstein, 2001; 2007). Nei canali digitali, infatti, da un lato sono le

stesse connessioni fra persone, che si attivano principalmente per omofilia, a funzionare come primo filtro, in un processo selettivo che finisce per dar vita a *sympathy groups* (Zhou et al., 2005). Dall'altra parte, sono i *meccanismi algoritmici* attivi sui social network per l'interpretazione degli interessi dei soggetti (destinati a diventare sempre più performanti con il diffondersi del *cognitive computing*) che, facendo visualizzare alle persone contenuti coerenti con ciò che hanno già apprezzato in precedenza, agiscono come un secondo filtro. All'interno delle bolle informative che si generano sulla base di tali meccanismi, si creano e si diffondono idee che rinforzano conoscenze e visioni pregresse della realtà. Connesso al fenomeno delle filter bubbles vi è il concetto di *Echo Chambers* (Sustein, 2009), ossia ambienti comunicativi all'interno dei quali le opinioni che si costruiscono e a cui si viene esposti sono estremamente conformi. Gli utenti stessi, messi davanti alla scelta di un determinato materiale informativo, preferiscono infatti quello più affine alla loro linea di pensiero pregressa (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Munson & Resnick, 2010).

È cercando di tener conto dello scenario mediale complesso e articolato sopra brevemente ricordato che lo studio condotto ha analizzato, da un punto di vista empirico, come le pratiche della fruizione mediale abbiano effetti su una specifica declinazione dell'immaginario, rappresentata e connessa con il fenomeno migratorio.

## Oggetto di studio e disegno di ricerca

Per rispondere alle domande che lo studio si pone, si è deciso di costruire un modello di ricerca quali-quantitativo su un campione di giovani italiani dai 20 ai 26 anni (sia studenti, che lavoratori, o studenti-lavoratori).

Diverse ricerche hanno preso in esame il rapporto fra le fasce più giovani della popolazione e i media digitali (Corecom Research, 2016; Oco Koljic et al., 2012), indagando le loro pratiche di informazione. Il frammento di giovani italiani che sono stati inclusi in questo studio rientra in quel segmento appellato con l'espressione di "nativi digitali" (Prensky, 2001), costituito dalle prime generazioni per le quali la tecnologia è divenuta elemento integrante e imprescindibile della quotidianità. Tale categoria, essendo limitata ad una fascia anagrafica di età, è stata recentemente discussa per la sua incapacità di dare conto delle differenze sociali e culturali all'interno della categoria stessa. Hargittai (2010; & Hinnant, A., 2008) ha infatti dimostrato che i nativi digitali non si distinguono da altre fasce d'età per capacità di utilizzo dei media digitali e che al loro interno esistono differenze di alfabetizzazione ai media digitali dovute alle differenti sfere sociali di provenienza.

Tuttavia, alcune ricerche del Media Insight Project (2015), riportano che la maggior parte dei giovani italiani compresi fra i 18 e i 35 anni non sia interessata alla ricerca costante di news, ma ne viene comunque in contatto. La maggior parte di essi ammette di informarsi attraverso Facebook su base regolare e il 68% dice di reperire la maggior parte delle proprie informazioni/news proprio tramite i social media (Millennials and News, 2013), consultati soprattutto attraverso dispositivi mobile in pratiche di fruizione *always on*.

Una pratica di uso che potrebbe condurre a una visione del mondo modellata prevalentemente da notizie che giungono agli utenti attraverso le logiche algoritmiche proprie di tali canali.

Connettendo, quindi, le questioni indicate nel primo paragrafo di questo lavoro con le abitudini di consumo mediale dei giovani, ci si può dunque chiedere fino a che punto la loro *dieta mediale* e l'insieme delle news con cui vengono in contatto finisca per dar vita a rappresentazioni della realtà parzialmente o fortemente distorte, in quanto originatesi per lo più sulla base di opinioni o notizie provenienti da fonti non autorevoli.

Nel contesto dell'"imagocrazia" (Bovalino, 2018), le opinioni si formano su flussi di immagini, nel livellamento dei contenuti e nella sovrapposizione dei messaggi. Ne è un esempio la schizofrenia comunicativa con la quale viene trattata la questione migratoria, tra umanitarismo e allarmismo, accoglienza e rifiuto, apertura e chiusura, in un amalgama di ingredienti diversi e umori contrastanti.

L'immigrazione, come fenomeno distintivo dello scenario contemporaneo, rappresenta una sfida rilevante per il sistema dei media, visti nella loro capacità di costruire rappresentazioni sociali e di indirizzare l'opinione pubblica. Per quanto le migrazioni costituiscano da sempre un fattore di grande importanza nella dinamica della popolazione mondiale e nei flussi di persone che si spostano da e verso il nostro Paese, il dibattito sociale, politico ed economico risente di produzioni discorsive e visive, più orientate a modellare i confini nell'immaginario sociale e a rimarcare la distinzione tra "loro" e "noi", che non a fornire indicazioni utili per sviluppare politiche di integrazione e cittadinanza (Musarò, Parmiggiani, 2014). Un consolidato patrimonio di ricerche sottolinea le difficoltà e le distorsioni in cui l'immagine mediale dei fenomeni migratori (nelle sue diverse dimensioni) appare congestionata.

Sintetizzando di molto i termini della questione, i migranti emergono nei media confinati all'interno dell'associazione stereotipizzante criminalità/immigrazione, che delimita i confini del campo rappresentativo e iconografico, costruendo e articolando il frame sicurezza (Binotto, 2015); richiedenti asilo e rifugiati non sembrano subire esplicitamente tale distorsione, ma ciò va collegato al limitato numero di storie che li riguardano che trovano spazio nei media, in cui differenti tipologie e storie delle persone migranti si confondono e si diluiscono in immagini indistinte (Binotto, Lai, 2015).

Il nostro studio si propone di comprendere quali immaginari di un fenomeno complesso come quello dell'immigrazione siano presenti presso i giovani italiani in relazione alle relative diete medialità; e se, all'aumentare del numero e della varietà delle fonti medialità a cui i diversi giovani sono esposti, aumenti anche la possibilità di figurare una rappresentazione del fenomeno migratorio meno condizionata da effetti di *filter* o di *echo*. Entrando nello specifico della ricerca, i dati analizzati sono stati ottenuti tramite tecniche sia qualitative che quantitative:

- La molteplicità fenomenica dell'immaginario ha suggerito la scelta di uno studio in primo luogo induttivo, secondo gradi di osservazione che possono procedere da punti micro-molecolari di osservazione della realtà sociale. È stata quindi condotta una prima fase di ricerca qualitativa, costituita da 40 interviste in profondità. Le interviste sono state svolte in presenza (faccia a faccia) a soggetti di età compresa

tra 20 e 26 anni, con una suddivisione equa tra studenti e lavoratori (che vivono nel Nord Italia, per circa l'80% in Lombardia). Il campione dei giovani è stato costruito con un disegno non probabilistico (*snowball effect sampling*).

- La seconda fase di ricerca si è svolta attraverso una survey. Il campione dei giovani che hanno partecipato a questa fase di indagine è stato costruito con un criterio a scelta ragionata (*theoretical sampling*), per un totale di 200 soggetti rispondenti con un'età media di 22 anni. Sono stati considerati complessivamente validi 192 questionari compilati, dal 47% di uomini e dal 53% di donne.

In questo paper ci concentreremo tuttavia solo sulla fase qualitativa dello studio condotto sui giovani, che ha permesso di ricostruire le diverse forme di espressione del loro immaginario associato al fenomeno migratorio, più o meno orientate e stereotipate.

## Pratiche ed effetti di fruizione mediale dei giovani

Nella società contemporanea non solo si sono modificate le tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione, ma è cambiato il modo di adottarle e utilizzarle. Se fino a una ventina di anni fa era possibile ricostruire la composizione dei consumi mediali delle persone, poiché apparivano scanditi da tempistiche precise, oggi la pervasività dei media e il loro uso continuo da parte di soggetti "always on" rende complesso delineare i momenti in cui *non* si sia effettivamente esposti a qualche stimolo mediale. Nell'era della *deep mediatization* (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018) e della *datafication* (Couldry & Hepp, 2016) la costruzione dei significati e degli immaginari condivisi passa attraverso i media come mai era successo in precedenza.

Alla luce di questi cambiamenti si cercherà di definire in quale modo la varietà dell'esposizione mediale dei soggetti influenzi la rappresentazione di un fenomeno sociale complesso, come quello dell'immigrazione.

Le interviste condotte confermano la pervasività dell'esposizione mediale e la molteplicità dei canali informativi a disposizione dei soggetti, che includono tanto informazioni provenienti dal web, quanto notizie provenienti dai media *mainstream* e, soprattutto, dal canale televisivo. Vengono ad esempio citati i programmi TV seguiti e anche siti di news legati alla cosiddetta informazione "locale". I componenti del campione mostrano tuttavia un uso prevalentemente ludico-ricreativo dei social media, che rappresentano i canali primari all'interno dei quali circola l'informazione tra pari (seguendo l'ottica degli *usi e gratificazioni*; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Si può dunque presumere che gli effetti a livello cognitivo siano legati in modo primario alla sfera personale-relazionale e in misura molto minore all'ambito informativo, e nello specifico alla ricerca e lettura di notizie di cronaca/attualità, ovvero alle news su "ciò che accade nel mondo".

Una significativa eccezione a questo schema è rappresentata dalle notizie di stampo sensazionalistico, tanto più se associate a immagini a elevato impatto emozionale (le cosiddette *foto-shock*). L'esempio dai resoconti empirici legati al tema dei migranti è quello della foto, scattata a settembre 2015, che ritrae su una litoranea il corpo senza vita del

piccolo Aylan (Alan Kurdî). Si tratta di un'immagine dal forte valore emotivo che, in brevissimo tempo, è divenuta *icona* della tragicità della questione migratoria ed è stata in grado di dar luogo a un dibattito di respiro internazionale amplificato *dal basso* all'interno dei social network.

Il fatto che alcuni eventi specifici, come quello rappresentato dalla foto in oggetto, acquisisca un significato ed una visibilità globale enormemente più ampia di quella che solitamente viene attribuita al "macro-tema" del fenomeno migratorio, è un'attribuzione di senso che si attiva sulla base di un meccanismo socio-cognitivo-mediale secondo cui la morte di un bambino meriti una considerazione speciale anche rispetto al fatto che quasi tutti i migranti rischiano di perire nelle condizioni disumane del viaggio, e un numero comunque inaccettabile di loro muoia realmente.

Nonostante la pervasività dei media digitali, dal quadro che gli intervistati restituiscono sul panorama mediale in cui sono immersi, emerge il ruolo prioritario delle agenzie di comunicazione e delle grandi testate giornalistiche che continuano ad avere, anche nel nuovo contesto comunicativo, un ruolo da cassa di risonanza e amplificazione dei contenuti che si attiva trasversalmente tra media tradizionali (soprattutto televisivi) e online. Anche un panorama mediale che permette – e, anzi, amplifica e incentiva – la condivisione di informazioni tra pari, abbassando notevolmente le relative barriere d'accesso, non sembra dunque aver intaccato in maniera decisa il consolidato ruolo di *professional gatekeeper* e *agenda setting* (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Shaw, 1979) di agenzie e testate. In questo scenario il *citizen journalism* (Altheide, 2013) risulta sì in ascesa, ma ancora in difficoltà a imporre le proprie tematiche e i propri argomenti; compito molto più facile, invece, per chi opera nel panorama mediatico da più tempo e con maggiori mezzi economici e quindi ha una maggiore conoscenza e padronanza delle logiche algoritmiche dei social media.

Rispetto al complessivo flusso informativo di origine mediale si formano quindi grandi camere d'eco e si afferma la scomparsa dell'alterità in termini percettivi e cognitivi.

Il fenomeno delle *filter bubbles* sopra descritte, intese come "quel personale ecosistema di informazioni che viene soddisfatto da alcuni algoritmi" (Parisier, 2011), sembra quindi essere una conseguenza a valle dei suddetti processi, che anche i risultati delle nostre interviste tendono a confermare.

### ***Rappresentazioni socio-narrative e storie prototipiche legate al fenomeno migratorio***

In linea con la tradizione sociologica francese, le rappresentazioni sociali teorizzate da Moscovici (1989) costituiscono forme collettive di elaborazione della conoscenza rispetto alla realtà: non sono il risultato di costrutti mentali individuali ma si affermano tramite la lenta sedimentazione dei significati e delle immagini nella società. In virtù della loro natura di esseri limitati, gli esseri umani hanno la necessità di ricorrere a queste forme di semplificazione che rendono convenzionali oggetti, persone ed eventi tramite due processi: l'*oggettivazione*, cioè la trasformazione dell'astratto in immagini concrete

(Moscovici, 1989, pp. 57-60), e l'*ancoraggio*, cioè la riconduzione dell'estraneo a una categoria concettuale già nota e convenzionalizzata all'interno del sistema di conoscenze socialmente condivise (pp. 46-47).

Il modello interpretativo utilizzato in questa ricerca ha cercato di operare una lettura in ottica *grounded* (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Si è passati dai concetti, emersi dalle interviste chiedendo all'intervistato di concettualizzare il fenomeno anche attraverso immagini (*oggettivazione*), a categorie (desumibili soprattutto nei processi narrativi di *ancoraggio*), ad un modello assiale di ordinatori concettuali che potesse sintetizzare e racchiudere le rappresentazioni socio-narrative dell'immigrazione. Per esempio, in termini di oggettivazione, agli intervistati è stato chiesto di descrivere "l'immagine che viene loro in mente" quando pensano alla parola *immigrazione* e alla figura *dell'immigrato*. Questo perché il processo di creazione delle immagini del migrante può essere interpretato come un meccanismo psico-sociale descritto nel quadro delle rappresentazioni sociali di Moscovici (1976; 1984; 1997): le descrizioni che designano il migrante, infatti, sono forme dell'espressione delle diverse rappresentazioni sociali di questa figura.

Nelle verbalizzazioni dei giovani intervistati emerge una rappresentazione sociale che sembra ritagliata su alcune caratteristiche ricorrenti che concettualizzano l'immigrato come un uomo (maschio), giovane-adulto, proveniente da una regione africana. Un'immagine fortemente stereotipata, e di origine prevalentemente televisiva, che finisce per generare quel cortocircuito tipico delle rappresentazioni sociali che Moscovici descrive come l'associazione di un concetto astratto e complesso ad un'immagine che finisce poi per diventare esaustiva del concetto stesso.

Negli ultimi decenni, sulla spinta di quella che è stato definito il *narrative turn* delle scienze sociali, il concetto di rappresentazione sociale di Moscovici è stato ulteriormente sviluppato e arricchito evolvendosi in quello di *rappresentazione socio-narrativa* (Di Fraia, 2004), che riconosce anche la dimensione narrativa, oltre alle immagini e ai concetti, tra gli elementi costitutivi.

A favorire le funzioni di ancoraggio, sedimentazione e progressiva *ossificazione* delle storie (Di Fraia, 2004) sono soprattutto i media. Per "funzionare", le immagini devono essere costantemente riprodotte e riattualizzate in narrazioni ripetute innumerevoli volte; spesso le versioni e i linguaggi sono diversi, ma gli elementi simbolici che ne costituiscono l'ossatura sono riconoscibili e condivisi. Concordemente con questi elementi di carattere teorico, l'immaginario emerso dai resoconti degli intervistati attinge fortemente a storie mediali, svincolandosi spesso dai vissuti concreti. Questa volatilizzazione dell'immaginario avviene soprattutto grazie alla capacità dei diversi media di farsi –secondo modalità diverse in relazione alla specificità del mezzo stesso – luogo comune e collettivo di elaborazione condivisa di elaborazione del senso, in contrappunto e sovrapposizione rispetto alle esperienze concrete del singolo. Il processo socio-mediale di volatilizzazione dell'immaginario corrisponde alla produzione e alla diffusione delle cosiddette *immagini-mondo* (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Addensandosi intorno a determinate figure e a specifiche storie, il ricordo viene reinterpretato in una "visione" collettiva, o in un contrasto tra visioni diverse (Ragone, 2014).

A riprova di ciò, nel corso delle interviste raccolte i processi di ancoraggio operato dai soggetti avviene spontaneamente attraverso racconti in cui viene oggettivata l'immagine del barcone di profughi che approdano sulle coste italiane inserendola in una storia prototipica: la "storia della salvezza/speranza" del migrare da una situazione di disagio/guerra/povertà a un "lieto fine", auspicato e attribuito dagli intervistati stessi ai protagonisti di questa storia.

Nelle storie *prototipiche* (Di Fraia, 2004) presenti nell'immaginario dei giovani, l'immigrato (che arriva genericamente dall'Africa o, a livello più specifico, da Tunisia, Egitto, Libia, Siria) fugge per necessità da una situazione di guerra ed emergenza, racimolando il denaro per pagare il viaggio o lo scafista. Una volta arrivato in Italia, si sforza di imparare la lingua e trovare un lavoro, con il fondamentale supporto di associazioni e volontari, confrontandosi quotidianamente con gli ostacoli rappresentati dal multiculturalismo e dall'integrazione.

"arriva in Europa e non vengono riconosciuti gli studi fatti, la sua laurea non vale niente"; «entra una cultura e in una mentalità differente. Riesce a trovare lavoro per racimolare il denaro e rifarsi una vita migliore»; "penso che gli ostacoli maggiori siano quelli di farsi accettare in una cultura diversa dalla sua, anche per motivi religiosi".

La traccia stabilizzata degli eventi presente nelle narrazioni raccolte con le interviste è desumibile dal "titolo" attribuito ad esse dagli intervistati stessi: "*viaggio della speranza*", "*in cerca di fortuna*", "*verso una nuova vita*", "*never back down*", "*non mollare*". L'auspicio dei giovani pare dunque essere orientato secondo una conclusione (anche questa stereotipica) da *happy ending* di derivazione narrativo-cinematografica, costituita dall'accoglienza e dall'inizio di una nuova vita nel Paese di approdo.

La rappresentazione socio-narrativa fa emergere la sua funzione di ponte tra le informazioni sui fatti sociali e le conoscenze dei soggetti, rispecchiando il tentativo di ancorare il fenomeno degli sbarchi (reso sconvolgente dagli eventi legati ai naufragi) a una raffigurazione cognitivamente accettabile, se non rassicurante, attraverso lo slittamento forzato del senso della storia "dalla tragicità alla speranza". A fronte di un fenomeno complesso, probabilmente poco conosciuto e intrinsecamente "disturbante" come quello migratorio, i giovani da noi intervistati cercano una corrispondenza con l'immagine più *rassicurante di qualcosa di "già sentito" e di "già conosciuto"* (Moscovici, 1997, p. 264). Attraverso una costruzione narrativa, le immagini della barca/barcone (soprattutto di fonte mediale) vengono quindi inserite in una storia dotata di senso, alla base delle quale possiamo leggere il processo di ancoraggio a un archetipo narrativo sedimentato nel nostro immaginario, un vero e proprio mito fondativo che rimanda al viaggio per mare con epilogo positivo (di cui possono essere esempi l'odissea di Ulisse o l'arca di Noè). Il viaggio afferma il suo carattere metaforico o meglio il suo qualificarsi come metafora nell'immaginario collettivo diffuso dai media (Abruzzese, 2000).

Ricostruendo dalla maggior parte delle interviste raccolte uno "scheletro di storia" (Di Fraia 2004, p. 180), si può dunque dire che il giovane adulto di origini africane, che approda sulle coste italiane dopo un duro viaggio in barcone, sia il nucleo consolidato

della rappresentazione socio-narrativa condivisa dalla totalità dei giovani intervistati, vale a dire quell'insieme di caratteristiche fondamentali che danno significato all'immagine rappresentata a cui i soggetti si rifanno. Rispetto al tema in oggetto si conferma quindi un'ampia *echo-chamber* (Sustein, 2009), all'interno della quale si consolidano opinioni che sembrano quindi condurre alla scomparsa dell'alterità percettiva e cognitiva: “vorrei distanziarmi dalla tipica immagine dei telegiornali. Ma è difficile. Se ci penso, faccio fatica a raccontare un'altra storia che non sia quella del barcone di profughi”.

Questo aspetto viene evidenziato in alcune ricerche recenti sull'immaginario relativo al fenomeno migratorio (Ruggiano, 2016) nelle quali si configura la strutturazione di un “discorso dominante”, associabile al modello della *propagazione*, caratterizzato da una certa “pressione verso l'uniformità” che integra oggetti socialmente rilevanti di rappresentazione in un quadro di concetti convergenti. Riemerge quindi il noto effetto dell'*agenda-setting* per cui gli argomenti a cui prestare attenzione e la rilevanza a loro attribuita deriva in gran parte da come e quanto i media vi puntano i riflettori.

### ***I livelli della rappresentazione socio-narrativa mediale***

L'immigrazione, anche – se non soprattutto – in quanto elemento di forte polarizzazione all'interno dell'arena politica nazionale, costituisce un argomento presente nelle *agende* della maggior parte dei media italiani, rappresentando anche una parte importante dei contenuti veicolati sui canali social. Si tratta di un fenomeno particolarmente complesso, che naturalmente non potremo approfondire in questo contributo, attraverso il quale si metteranno invece in luce le forme dell'espressione delle diverse rappresentazioni sociali della figura del migrante che compongono l'immaginario dei giovani.

Come si è cercato di illustrare nella Fig. 1, si afferma quindi uno stereotipo narrativo-visuale intorno al migrante che approda sulle coste, riconducibile ad alcune possibili cause che vedremo in seguito.

Attorno a questo nucleo immaginifico orbita un'area narrativa periferica più articolata, differenziata e complessa, che deriva in maniera maggiore dalle esperienze vissute dei soggetti. A nutrire quest'area periferica è – a un primo livello – l'incontro con l'Altro attraverso un'esperienza diretta, che porta ad arricchire la rappresentazione di un'altra dimensione, senza però intaccarla, poiché le rappresentazioni socio-narrative che si sviluppano sono parallele.



Figura 1. I diversi livelli della rappresentazione sociale.

Le narrazioni medialì si concentrano prevalentemente sugli sbarchi e sulle difficoltà di arrivo dei migranti e di gestione di coloro che approdano, mentre di rado raccontano ciò che succede a queste persone in seguito; si fermano all'immagine dello sbarco e del "problema delle coste", rimanendo circondate da un'ampia fascia di "non detto" che va a rinforzare quindi tutte quelle storie che restano "sospese".

Nella grammatica dei resoconti narrativi raccolti dai giovani si riconoscono invece una partenza e un arrivo, caratterizzato generalmente da un finale auspicato o sperato:

"trovano un lavoro regolare o meno, dopo tante difficoltà riescono ad integrarsi e a far venire qui la loro famiglia"

"gli ostacoli che dovrà superare sono il trovare lavoro senza documenti ma riuscirà comunque a farcela trovando un lavoro non in regola che gli permette di mantenersi e mandare qualche soldo alla famiglia in Tunisia"

"per la mia storia mi immagino il lieto fine: immagino che riesca a riunirsi alla sua famiglia e che si realizzi"

Il finale della storia viene talvolta raccontato come un *processo integrazione* del soggetto immigrato, ma emergono anche alcune narrazioni in bilico o di difficoltà (il lavoro non in regola, la mancanza di risorse, i conflitti culturali).

"questa storia non ha ancora un happy end"

"quindi semplicemente in questo momento la storia dell'immigrato non finisce, è un immigrato che vive una tensione costante tra casa sua e una cultura che non è la sua, con cui lui è in tensione"

“alla fine comunque è bello, perché è estate e non c'è la guerra, però è comunque difficile, senza carte né niente”

Il lieto fine non sempre è esplicitato in maniera spontanea nei resoconti empirici, ma emerge quando viene sollecitata dall'intervistatore la ricerca di un finale delle storie degli immigrati che giungono nel nostro Paese. In questi casi si avvia un processo di normalizzazione, per cui questi soggetti giungono dopo varie peripezie alla “terra promessa”, ricostruendosi un futuro in un altro paese. Sembra emergere la potenza mitopoietica del racconto dell'esodo, che ha radici antropologiche nella nostra cultura di riferimento.

“è un finale comunque positivo e quindi alla fine riesce ad avere una casa a costruirsi una famiglia e riuscire alla fine ad ottenere l'amicizia delle persone che vivono lì”

“Riesce ad ottenere i documenti una volta arrivato in Germania. Raggiunge il suo scopo, si crea una vita stabile anche se la sua famiglia è morta durante un attacco alla sua città d'origine in Libia”.

La verbalizzazione di un esito negativo o incerto fa parte del rimosso dell'essere umano, ma anche del rimosso mediale. Si assiste, in altri termini, al tentativo di avvicinamento dell'*alterità* tramite un duplice processo di rimozione: tanto sul piano della produzione della notizia, quanto sul piano della ricezione/rielaborazione della stessa. Nelle storie medialità si va alla ricerca dell'happy end veicolando in maniera estremamente limitata quel “lato oscuro” costituito dalle storie tragiche di migranti morti in mare o le storie “sospese” di coloro che rimangono per diversi anni ad attendere il proprio destino nei campi profughi.

“c'è poca informazione sulla vita dell'immigrato che decide di rimanere dopo il primo mese ad esempio. Cosa fa un immigrato dopo due anni per esempio? I media parlano sempre e soltanto del problema dell'arrivo.”

Come già specificato, i volti le storie di profughi che passano attraverso i media attivano un processo di rimozione tipico della natura umana. Nel “visibile”, che diventa oggetto di racconto dei media, rientrano le forze dell'ordine, gli uomini della Protezione Civile e tutti coloro che sono impegnati nel processo di salvataggio (tutti loro, adottando la terminologia narratologica, si possono ricondurre alla figura dell'“aiutante”), ma restano invece “invisibili” nella rappresentazione della realtà le storie degli immigrati e approfondimenti necessari per analizzare più in profondità un fenomeno complesso.

Esistono informazioni e dati che restituiscono una dimensione quantitativa e oggettiva di tali fenomeni, e anch'essi vengono veicolati dai media in più occasioni: tali notizie tuttavia rimangono a un livello espressivo in forma di “numeri” o “statistiche”. Per questo motivo non sembra avviarsi quel processo (tipico delle rappresentazioni sociali) di oggettivazione: nella mancanza di un'immagine (mediale) visuale, questi elementi faticano a sedimentare nel ricordo di chi fruisce di queste informazioni.

Come scrive Abruzzese (1988), il dominio della scrittura nella divulgazione delle “storie” si è dissolto in un ambiente plurimediale e frammentato a dominanza audiovisuale, dove dagli Ottanta la televisione si è affermata come modello paradigmatico per un nuovo ambiente di vita, nel quale è la ripetizione delle notizie di cronaca e delle immagini-brandelli di memoria che va a sostituire quella che poteva considerarsi la storia relativa a qualche fenomeno. Tuttavia, va notato che, se quello che è visibile e messo in risalto sui media è fondamentale per comprendere la costruzione di una rappresentazione sociale, anche tutto ciò che rimane escluso riveste un’importanza decisiva nella formazione di un immaginario collettivo.

### ***La costruzione dell’immaginario tra esperienza diretta e mediale***

L’edizione 2017 del Trust Barometer di Edelman, basata su una *survey* sottoposta a oltre 33.000 persone in 28 Stati, ha affermato la definizione “*trust in crisis*”: a livello globale la fiducia media nei confronti dei mezzi di comunicazione ha segnato un declino più consistente rispetto a quello di tutte le altre tre macro-istituzioni esaminate (aziende, Ong, governi). Quella citata è solo una delle ricerche che fotografano un atteggiamento di disillusione e scetticismo nei confronti dell’attendibilità delle informazioni e delle notizie trasmesse dai media. Nella maggior parte dei casi questo giudizio non è riferito in modo puntuale a una singola fonte, ma al contrario risulta trasversale e generalizzato, tanto rispetto ai canali tradizionali, quanto riguardo ai canali social: anche nelle interviste raccolte nella nostra ricerca è l’informazione in quanto tale, indipendente dalle singole circostanze, che viene ritenuta di per sé da prendere in considerazione con scetticismo.

Sui social network pesa in modo particolare lo stigma legato allo scandalo delle *fake news*, protagoniste del dibattito politico e pubblico nel corso degli ultimi mesi: nelle interviste raccolte si parla di “*immagine falsata*”, di “*bufale*” e si dichiara che i “*social network sono il cancro per quanto riguarda le informazioni*”.

Anche sulla base di questo scenario si possono interpretare i tentativi da parte dei giovani intervistati di “normalizzare” il fenomeno migratorio, rifuggendo da sensazionalismi e allarmismi. Consapevoli di affrontare un tema delicato, vale a dire il rapporto con l’Altro, gli intervistati attuano strategie discorsive di tipo prevalentemente difensivo, cercando di far trapelare opinioni per lo più neutre/positive rispetto al fenomeno. I giudizi di valore sono attribuiti prevalentemente agli “altri”, dipinti come coloro che sovrastimano il fenomeno.

“pensano che ci siano tanti immigrati in Italia, ma invece non è vero”.

Anche i media sono considerati responsabili di queste valutazioni pregiudiziali a causa del loro atteggiamento emergenziale:

“i tg esagerano con il fatto che gli immigrati sono pericolosi. Esaltano tutto il negativo, per creare video scioccanti o generare terrorismo psicologico. Dovrebbero invece concentrarsi sulle molte persone che sono lì ad aiutarli”.

In queste prese di posizione entra comunque in gioco il fattore della desiderabilità sociale tipico del setting di intervista, tanto che nelle interviste condotte non appaiono praticamente mai opinioni polarizzate in negativo che associano l'immigrato al tema del deviante o a fenomeni di criminalità o illegalità.

Il fenomeno migratorio, per quanto sia oggettivamente complesso e pluridimensionale, viene descritto invece come un *non-problema* di cui ci si informa soprattutto attraverso il "sentito dire" e forme di socievolezza nelle relazioni faccia a faccia, che rappresentano delle fonti di informazione *rimediata* di notizie di origine *mediale*:

"molto spesso non ho il tempo di leggere o guardare la televisione... navigo su Internet ma velocemente, ho solo Facebook ma lo uso poco, per leggere cosa fanno i miei amici. Delle notizie di cronaca ne sento dire a tavola, ne parlo con mia mamma o con mia nonna, quando siamo a cena. Loro hanno invece più tempo per guardare i programmi televisivi".

Infatti, quando i soggetti non si informano direttamente riguardo al tema, gli spunti di riflessione e gli argomenti di discussione relativi sono basati su informazioni ed eventi che sono stati evidenziati sui media tradizionali e poi rimediati da altre persone, come ad esempio i propri familiari (potenzialmente meno abili ad utilizzare dispositivi digitali, e più legati alle rappresentazioni della realtà costruite dai media tradizionali).

In materia di immigrazione, i dati e le statistiche ufficiali pubblicate dall'ISTAT e dal Ministero dell'Interno<sup>3</sup> restituiscono un quadro visibilmente diverso rispetto a quello ricostruito nell'immaginario socio-narrativo degli intervistati, modellato sulle rappresentazioni medialità alle quali sono stati esposti.

Secondo i dati di ricerca diffusi dall'Istat (2017), le percentuali più alte relative ai flussi migratori sono costituite da cittadini comunitari, o provenienti dall'Est Europa e che riescono ad ottenere un regolare permesso di soggiorno. Tali categorie sono marginali a livello mediatico ma, viceversa, sono presenti in modo più assiduo negli incontri della vita quotidiana: sono meno "visibili" mediaticamente, ma ci sono più occasioni di "incontrarle" personalmente.

Le percentuali minori sono quelle relative ai rifugiati politici, ai cosiddetti profughi. Su questi però si innesta la rappresentazione mediale del fenomeno (visuale) che con effetto *priming* viene continuamente riconfermata e costituisce la prima associazione spontanea negli intervistati rispetto all'immigrazione. In altri termini, i rifugiati politici sono visibili a livello mediatico ma, al contrario, molto meno presenti nel vissuto dei giovani. I numeri di chi cerca protezione in un altro Stato equivalgono a meno dell'1% della popolazione mondiale ma la relativa rappresentazione mediatica è perennemente allarmistica. Di norma, le analisi sull'apporto socio-economico degli stranieri al sistema Paese e le esperienze di integrazione di quelli che ormai sono, di fatto, "ex-stranieri" vengono risucchiate dal vortice di sensazionalismo legato a ristretti fatti di cronaca riconducibili al fenomeno migratorio, che statisticamente sono fisiologici ma vengono esasperati nei media. Stando al rapporto finale della Fondazione Censis pubblicato nel 2002, l'immagine degli immigrati e delle minoranze etniche nei media si gioca tra la commiserazione in occasione degli sbarchi e una cronaca quotidiana di denuncia dei comportamenti devianti

a opera di cittadini extracomunitari senza permesso di soggiorno. Il migrante figura quindi come vittima o carnefice, quasi mai come protagonista di esperienze di integrazione (Girasella, 2017).

I giovani (e gli attori sociali in generale) si trovano quindi a esperire un ambiente mediale in cui il territorio di finzione sfocia sempre più nella vita quotidiana. I media operano nel *coltivare* un contesto simbolico di immagini convergenti e stereotipate; l'attività dei soggetti è quella di sintonizzare realtà e immaginario, commistionando le immagini sullo schermo con quelle di vita quotidiana. L'immaginario non rappresenta semplicemente i vissuti, ma lo fa in modo complesso: li *pre-senta*, ovvero li precede, come fossero immagini già viste, già esperite a livello di immaginario appunto (Boccia Artieri, 2002).

La rappresentazione stereotipata del fenomeno migratorio emersa nello studio non porterebbe tuttavia i giovani intervistati ad aderire alla narrazione *denigratoria* dei migranti. I giovani intervistati conservano una visione neutra/positiva dei migranti (in contrasto con le narrazioni che li presentano come clandestini o come criminali. Dai racconti degli intervistati (tenuto conto che le verbalizzazioni nelle interviste sono soggette alla cosiddetta "*desiderabilità sociale*") il flusso di messaggi mediali non ha intaccato la loro opinione sui migranti, me ne ha modellato l'immaginario, dato che la maggior parte delle persone non vive a contatto quotidiano con gli immigrati per cui si costruisce un'idea del profilo del migrante soprattutto attraverso i media.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni si può comprendere il motivo per cui, una volta sollecitati a raccontare le proprie relazioni dirette con gli immigrati, gli intervistati abbiano raccontato storie che si discostano in maniera evidente rispetto alla rappresentazione socio-narrativa del migrante raccolta nella prima fase delle interviste. Tra di esse possiamo citare, ad esempio, quella del compagno di classe moldavo, il cui padre è arrivato in Italia con mezzi di fortuna; la badante dell'Est Europa della nonna disabile; il portinaio egiziano; la donna delle pulizie ecuadoregna.

Rispetto al quadro complessivo di rappresentazioni socio-narrative dell'immigrato emerse dalle interviste effettuate, si è cercato di racchiudere i risultati emersi in un quadro concettuale che tenesse conto dei racconti che gli intervistati hanno utilizzato per descrivere la figura che associano ad esso. A questo proposito sono stati utilizzati due assi interpretativi relativi rispettivamente a:

- la fonte informativa, che può essere rappresentata in un asse che va da quella diretta ("ci ho parlato"), a quella mediata (esperienze riportate da Altri significativi), a quella mediale (media locali e nazionali, online e non);
- l'esperienza rispetto alla propria vita quotidiana, che può essere vicina o lontana.

Nel primo quadrante la fonte informativa è diretta (in prima persona oppure riportato da altri significativi) e l'esperienza vicina al soggetto. Nel secondo quadrante la fonte informativa riguarda rappresentazioni mediali provenienti soprattutto da notizie (online e non) locali o del territorio, relative a dati e immagini che l'intervistato riporta senza avere esperienza in prima persona, ma avendone talvolta un'esperienza mediata ("*la mia amica che fa la volontaria presso la Caritas*"). Nel terzo quadrante l'esperienza non è vicina al

mondo vissuto dal soggetto, ma emergono figure idealtipiche di cui la fonte informativa è diretta. L'ultimo quadrante infine è dedicato alle rappresentazioni mediali su mondi di esperienza non prossimi.

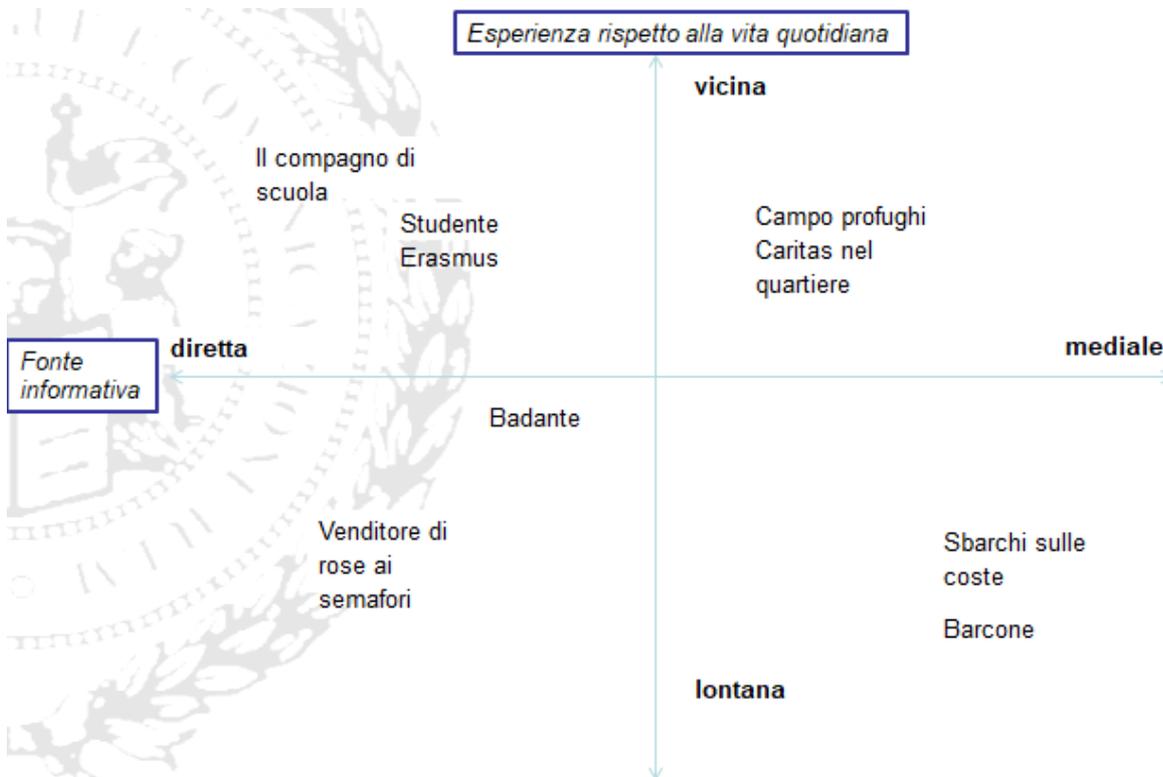


Figura 2. Le figure idealtipiche delle rappresentazioni socio-narrative.

Il disaccoppiamento fra vissuto e rappresentato, decretato già dalla scrittura e iperconsolidato nell'epoca della *deep mediatization* (Hepp, Hasebrink, 2018), viene superato quindi superato attraverso le forme di riappropriazione simbolica della rappresentazione di fenomeni complessi e articolati come quello migratorio.

## Conclusioni

Il presente contributo descrive la parte qualitativa di una più ampia ricerca che aveva l'obiettivo di ricostruire le rappresentazioni socio-narrative del fenomeno migratorio in un campione di 40 giovani italiani esplorandone le relazioni tra le diverse declinazioni delle stesse e la fruizione medialità dei soggetti. Assumendo come modello empirico di riferimento quello di rappresentazioni socio-narrative (Di Fraia, 2004) per la rilevazione empirica del costrutto, l'indagine ha utilizzato come approcci di riferimento di sociologia dei media, tanto la *teoria della coltivazione* quanto quella dell'*agenda setting* in quanto caratterizzate da un livello di generalità concettuale in grado di renderle applicabili anche agli scenari comunicativi contemporanei, se pur molto diversi da quelli rispetto a cui tali teorie erano state originariamente elaborate.

I risultati emersi riconfermano la prevalenza e la forza del materiale iconico di origine mediale nei meccanismi mitopoietici di generazione degli immaginari collettivi. Nonostante la disponibilità pervasiva dei contenuti di tipo informativo per (giovani) soggetti costantemente online e cognitivamente immersi nel flusso incessante dei media sociali, le conoscenze diffuse rispetto al fenomeno appaiono fortemente stereotipate e frutto di meccanismi di semplificazione cognitiva e di processi sociali di elaborazione collettiva della conoscenza sociale ben modellizzabili e coerenti con il modello delle rappresentazioni socio-narrative. Un'altra interpretazione possibile è che è sia proprio per l'eccesso di contenuti e micronarrazioni che si danno nella forma del frammento rizomatico, destinato nella maggior parte dei casi a una fruizione rapida e superficiale, che l'immaginario relativo al fenomeno migratorio finisce per modellizzarsi (attraverso processi di oggettivazione e ancoraggio iconico narrativo) attorno ad alcune immagini di origine prevalentemente televisiva (rilanciate all'infinito dai social media) dalla forte valenza emozionale e mitopoietica (gli sbarchi, il migrante necessariamente maschio e nero, ecc.). Così, tra le infinite possibilità di rappresentazione e approfondimento, le costruzioni rappresentative semplificate e veicolate originariamente dai media tradizionali diventano stereotipiche del fenomeno migratorio nell'immaginario collettivo, confermando visioni pregiudiziali. La ricorsività di questi contenuti iconici di sintesi risulta per altro in sintonia con i processi conseguenti le logiche di diffusione algoritmica tipica dei social media e delle *echo chamber*, in cui si tendono a proporre in serie agli utenti contenuti simili a quelli già fruiti, riproducendo amplificando e confermando narrazioni e rappresentazioni della realtà precedenti. A tali immagini, che finiscono per coincidere e ad esaurire l'intero spazio dell'immaginario relativo al fenomeno, si contrappongono, in maniera difficilmente conciliabile, le esperienze dirette degli intervistati rispetto al fenomeno migratorio nel nostro Paese (la badante della nonna, il compagno di classe, il nero che questua o lavora nei campi, ecc.).

Ma l'aspetto probabilmente più interessante dell'immaginario relativo al fenomeno migratorio ricostruito sul campione di giovani intervistati è, ancora una volta (Di Fraia, 2004), riconducibile alle sue *zone d'ombra*, ai vuoti iconici e narrativi delle rappresentazioni socio-narrative. Tali vuoti costituiscono delle vere e proprie cartine tornasole dei processi socioculturali di costruzione dell'immaginario collettivo. In questo caso, il vuoto più significativo è quello relativo ai centri di accoglienza e, più in generale, a tutto ciò che succede tra l'arrivo attraverso i barconi della speranza (immaginario di origine mediale) e la presenza più o meno integrata degli extra-comunitari di cui gli intervistati hanno esperienza nella quotidianità.

Negli ultimi decenni si è imposto un discorso umanitario caratterizzato da rappresentazioni stereotipate delle persone in situazione d'emergenza (Musarò, Parmiggiani, 2014): organizzazioni umanitarie promuovono campagne di raccolta fondi per le "vittime", usando produzioni discorsive che enfatizzano l'alterità (e lo scaltro tra "loro" e "noi"), ponendo l'accento sulle distanze piuttosto che sulle prospettive di integrazione .

I meccanismi di costruzione delle notizie e di "rimozione del disturbante" messi in atto dai media *mainstream*, e in particolare dalla televisione, rispetto alle condizioni di vita dei centri di accoglienza si dimostrano quindi efficaci anche all'interno del nuovo scenario

comunicativo digitale che, in teoria, dovrebbe offrire possibilità infinitamente maggiori di narrativizzazione e quindi di presa di coscienza anche di questi aspetti del fenomeno migratorio. La mancanza di racconti, da parte degli intervistati, riguardo la fase intermedia della vita dei migranti, sembra dunque confermare la dipendenza dalle narrazioni (tele)visive per la modellazione dell'immaginario. Il flusso ridotto, se non del tutto assente, di immagini relative a tali aspetti non risulta in grado di "nutrire" a sufficienza i canali digitali e di dare avvio ai meccanismi di rilancio e diffusione di questo genere di contenuti all'interno del web sociale, facendoli così rimanere fuori dagli elementi che contribuiscono alla costruzione della rappresentazione iconica del fenomeno migratorio. In altri termini, di ciò di cui i media non parlano, le persone non hanno immagini o storie.

In questo modo, questi stessi contenuti, colpevolmente rimossi da parte dei soggetti istituzionali di generazione delle notizie, finiscono "risucchiati" in una *spirale del silenzio* trans-mediale, risultando quasi inesistenti nell'immaginario sull'immigrazione.

## Nota biografica

Guido Di Fraia è professore associato presso l'Università IULM di Milano. E' titolare degli insegnamenti di "Metodologia e Tecnica della Ricerca Sociale" (laurea triennale) e di "Strategia e tecniche di marketing digitale" (laurea magistrale). Le aree di particolare interesse scientifico riguardano lo sviluppo socio-comunicativo del web, narrazioni mediali, processi identitari e costruzione sociale della conoscenza.

Elisabetta Risi, assegnista di Ricerca presso l'Università IULM di Milano, collabora da gli insegnamenti dedicati allo studio della società contemporanea e all'evoluzione dei media. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano la precarizzazione del lavoro, i processi sociali e comunicativi connessi allo sviluppo del web, narrazioni mediali e identità.

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<sup>1</sup> La moltiplicazione delle fonti e la produzione sempre più rapida di news portano con sé alcune problematiche importanti, come quella della verifica delle fonti e dell'autorevolezza delle stesse.

<sup>2</sup>Il *bias di conferma* è il meccanismo, ampiamente dimostrato a livello sperimentale, per cui le persone tendono a ricercare, selezionare e interpretare le informazioni ponendo maggiore attenzione, e attribuendo maggiore credibilità a quelle che confermano le proprie convinzioni o ipotesi, mentre propendono ad ignorare o sminuire informazioni che le contraddicono. Un fenomeno che agisce in maniera tanto più rilevante quanto più gli argomenti trattati suscitano forti emozioni o che vanno a toccare credenze profondamente radicate nel soggetto. Inoltre, secondo la teoria del *backfire effect*, il cervello umano è portato ad ingannare sé stesso pur di mantenere una sorta di situazione di tranquillità e stallo. Se una notizia o un'informazione vanno contro a qualcosa in cui si crede ci possono essere diversi tipi di reazione, ma più l'argomento trattato sarà legato a argomenti emozionali a cui la persona è estremamente legata, meno sarà disposta a cambiare il proprio punto di vista sulle proprie credenze (Kaplan, Gimbel & Harris, 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> A gennaio 2017 la ricerca Istat sulla popolazione nazionale (2017) riporta che in Italia risiedono 60.589.445 persone, di cui più di 5 milioni di cittadinanza straniera, pari all'8,3% dei residenti a livello nazionale. Nel 2016 la popolazione straniera è aumentata di 20.875 unità. Dal database ISTAT si rileva inoltre che gli immigrati con permesso di soggiorno nel 2016 sono stati complessivamente 3.931.133, per la maggior parte provenienti dall'Est Europa (Albania, Ucraina, Moldavia), da Cina, India, Pakistan e Africa (Marocco, Egitto, Senegal) – Istat Data Warehouse (<http://stra-dati.istat.it/Index.aspx>). Riguardo invece gli arrivi di rifugiati e richiedenti asilo, sono state stimate 123.600 persone giunte nel 2016, per la maggior parte Nord Africani (più del 75%), ma anche provenienti dal Medio Oriente e dall'Europa dell'Est (dati sui richiedenti asilo del Ministero dell'Interno Italiano – <http://www.interno.gov.it>). Dal 16 luglio 2017 gli arrivi in Italia si sono drasticamente ridotti, tanto che il periodo 16 luglio – 31 dicembre ha fatto registrare un calo del 78% rispetto allo stesso periodo del 2016. (Dati: Ministero dell'Interno, UNHCR; Report ISPI-Cesvi, 2018).