

From paleo-TV to post-TV: seriality as the creative space of television

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Abstract: Starting from ‘Appunti sulla televisione’ (Eco, 1964) and from the suggestion that the television medium, although not yet considered to be at the centre of a creative process, is one of the ‘basic phenomena of our civilisation and that, therefore, it is necessary not only to encourage it in its most valid tendencies but also to study it in its manifestations’ (Eco, 1964: 317), it is possible, today, to trace a linear that from paleo-TV, passing through neo-TV, allows us to arrive at a reflection on the dimension of post-TV within which phenomena such as post-seriality (Brancato, 2011) and pop platform seriality come to life, new spaces of audiovisual fruition in which the creative and aesthetic process is not only definitively legitimised, but reaches the highest levels of experimentation. Therefore, the aim of the contribution is to trace within the post-televisual spaces those categories traced by Eco as early as the 1960s that explode in all their narrative power within contemporary television and serial products. From the power of analogy, passing through the precious value of obviousness, up to the necessary influence of lies and irony within the media narrative, always keeping alive that inescapable assumption according to which ‘if everything holds, the game is valid’, while pushing categories, forms and archetypes to their limits.

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1. Introduction

In his foreword to the collection of Umberto Eco's writings entitled ‘On television. Essays 1956-2015’ (2018), Gianfranco Marrone refers to Eco's answer when, in various interviews, he was asked how he liked to spend his evenings: “with his family, watching *Il tenente Colombo* or, depending on the times, *Don Matteo*”. This answer, besides making us smile, is indicative of how central the medium of television was in Eco's daily life, so much so that he followed its trajectories and metamorphoses carefully from its origins to its most recent transformations. As we read in the introduction, Eco analyses television ‘as a language, in the forms of communication it brings into play, in the technologies that support it, in the imagery it produces, in its cultural, aesthetic, ethical, educational and, above all, political outcomes. From the direct filming of the early years to the TV-truth and reality shows of recent years, from Corrado to Big Brother, from Mike Bongiorno to Derrick, Eco's re-flexions constantly denounce television strategies within the framework of a relentless critique against the various media populisms, which has always been the hallmark of his view of the media.



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My analysis, therefore, starts precisely from his 'Notes on Television' in *Apocalypics and Integrated* (1964), where it is clear how his reflection on television was constantly inclined to trace in it a series of potentialities (creative and otherwise) that were maligned and hardly accepted by the scholars of the time. Eco starts from the assumption that, between the 1950s and 1960s, television was one of the basic phenomena of our civilization and that it should not only be encouraged in its most valid tendencies but also studied in its manifestations.

2. Materials and Methods

Television, in its early years, is still out of a creative and aesthetic process, but it certainly has its own pedagogical function and represents a medium rich in potential lines of development in different directions and themes.

Eco traces, in particular, a new way of recounting events in direct filming: the live images, the organisation of the narrative in real time, the need to accommodate and include unforeseen events in the narrative give rise to a new type of narrative fabric that does not correspond to any of the aesthetic canons of those years, but in which, nevertheless, we can today find some traces of those ultra-pop aesthetics typical of contemporary narratives.

In an earlier essay 'The Case and the Plot. The television experience and aesthetics', written between 1956 and 1962 and published in *Open opera* (1962) Eco gave an international turn to television studies and began to theorise on a possible aesthetics of television, not only linked to television content (dramas, comedies, operas, shows in the traditional sense) but taking into consideration all communicative-productive phenomena in order to discover the artistic and aesthetic nature in them. In attempting to define some criteria of analytical theory and critical methodology (albeit borrowed from the literary field), Eco - right from his first approaches to the study of television - tries to put in order the ideas that people had about television, about the remote possibility that it could be the subject of 'serious' investigation. He speaks for the first time of canon of poetics, of the 'artistic value of the work'. The first cautious discourses on genres, on television aesthetics were attempted. The practice of television thus received a first, timid - but not so timid - theoretical seal and its language was compared to that of other narratives (cinema, painting).

Already on direct filming, Eco wrote: 'Direct filming is never a specular rendering of the event taking place, but always an interpretation of it'. A reflection of this kind, which today seems a truism, in the years of the first television appeared as a real revolution, a going against the tide, but also a wanting to push too far a process of aesthetisation of a medium that even for some scholars 'did not exist' because it constituted only a means of communication and, at most, a sociological phenomenon completely irrelevant from an aesthetic point of view. If Eco's idea was that to study mass culture it was necessary to cast one's gaze backwards, he believed that television, precisely as a sociological phenomenon, could establish tastes and propensities, of creating needs and tendencies, patterns of reaction and modes of appreciation such as to be decisive for the purposes of cultural evolution, even in the aesthetic field.

All these practices can be found today, in all their power, among social network and platforms, all spaces in which it is not only possible to trace an aesthetic dimension, but it represents on the one hand a fundamental strand of research related to media aesthetics and on the other an indispensable space for artistic experimentation.

The real turning point in television studies in Italy came in 1981 when Eco published the essay 'TV: lost transparency' decreeing the end of Paleo television (1954 - mid-1970s) - which had an exclusively pedagogical and cultural dissemination function and 'checked that the public only learned innocent things, even at the cost of telling lies' - and sanctioning the birth of what Raymond Williams had already defined Neotelevision in his essay 'Television: Technology and Cultural Form' of 1974 characterised by "a personal palimpsest composed of fragments of various programmes". The fragmentation of content is a concept that television scholars must necessarily confront today: the new narratives proposed by social networks are hyper-fragmented, pushing the dynamics linked to seriality to the limit, everything today bends to the aesthetics of the fragment, everything becomes a micro-episode of a narrative - of reality or fiction - that is increasingly fragmented.

Eco describes it as follows: 'the main characteristic of Neo-TV is that it talks less and less about the outside world. It talks about itself and the contact it is making with its audience. It does not matter what it says or what it talks about. It [...] tries to hold the viewer by telling him: 'I am here, I am me, and I am you'. The greatest news that Neo-TV provides [...] is this: 'I am announcing that you are seeing me; if you don't believe it, try it, dial this number and call me, I will answer you'. After so many doubts, finally one thing is certain: Neotelevision is real. It is true because it is a television invention'. The self-reflexivity of the medium and the highlighting of its modes of enunciation also occurs through new strategies: the exhibition of technical tools, auditions, mistakes and wrong takes, the unveiling of certain production routines. These are all dynamics that fall squarely within the aesthetic dimension of social narration and platforms. Today, it is possible to trace a line from paleo-TV through neo-TV to a reflection on the dimension of post-TV, in which phenomena such as post-seriality (Brancato, 2011) and pop platform seriality come to life, new spaces of audiovisual fruition in which the creative and aesthetic process is not only definitively legitimised, but also reaches the highest levels of experimentation.

Starting in the second half of the 1990s, the dimension of post-television began to emerge. TV is subjected to a disruptive force through the digital, giving rise to an epochal change, a shift of the magnifying glass from mass media to digital media that pushes traditional dynamics to their limits and frames them in a new type of fruition, intimate and private even if everything becomes content.

3. Discussion

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted. These transformations were the direct consequence of the crisis in television content, which was also confirmed by the emergence of new types of programs such as reality shows, which are well suited to the logic of the web because they are conceived as a full-time, multiplatform narrative. Among television genres, the one with the greatest capacity for experimentation is fiction. Sergio Brancato, as early as 2011, wrote in his Post seriality that 'TV-series and sit-coms: lend themselves to hosting laboratory procedures of redefinition of audiovisual writing and the declination of digital technologies. From this point of view, television activity is today globally more advanced than cinema itself, since rather than

operating on the spectacular rendering of new technologies, TV-series reformulate the relationship between creativity, technique and imagery, grasping some fundamental nuclei in the substantial overcoming of many traditional mechanisms of serial storytelling'.

If, therefore, the serial production of generalist TV has never deviated from the traditional progression of narrative events and the typical logic of modern seriality, today's platform narratives represent fundamental spaces for experimentation and the study of (new) social practices and allow us to 'plunder and retell the past in long and short forms, precisely in order to make the most of their narrative potential' (Ceccherelli and Ilardi, 2021) and to build a precious legacy to pass on to new generations.

Today it is possible to trace those categories defined by Eco already in the Sixties that explode in all their narrative power within contemporary television and serial products. From the power of analogy that remains one of the fundamental elements of the main consumer products, think, for example, of Black Mirror or Stranger Things. The precious value of obviousness that makes plots and structures of the narrative coherent without them escaping the necessary influence of lies and irony. Finally, that essential assumption remains alive according to which 'if everything holds up, the game is valid', even when pushing categories, forms and archetypes to the limit.

4. Conclusions

In analyzing the transformation of television, in the light of Umberto Eco's reflections, the aim was to identify in the experiences of enjoyment born within post-television some lines of future development, to compare them with past viewing experiences and to gather, from the outset, the first elements of an ongoing transformation which, in all likelihood, over the next ten years will give rise to a new room within the current mediascapes (Appadurai, 1990) in which seriality will play an extremely important role.

With regard to what has been defined as pop platform seriality and which is being attempted to be delineated as the most current development of television as a medium and not merely as a device, the first reflection to be made has to do with the realization that, in this era, 'form is content': experimentation goes beyond the story itself and concerns the physical structure of serial products rather than their thematic core. The second has to do with the Netflix platform which - from its birth in 2016 to today - has proved to be an indispensable forerunner and incubator of novelty. In addition to having revolutionized the way of distributing content, adopting a seasonal release model and not following the traditional television programming model, Netflix remains a fundamental reference point for the new generations - more so than Prime Video, Disney Plus and others - and continues to follow that experimental direction within the fruition process: immersivity, binge watching, second screen, which are typical phenomena of platform fruition, now have to measure themselves with additional elements such as interactivity, multiplatform experience, ultra-topical spaces and content fragmentation. Finally, it is possible to hypothesize that what has been defined, here, as pop platform seriality may indeed be configured as the ideal dimension of seriality interpreted as 'expanded reality' (Prattichizzo and Gentile, 2016) and as an effective and exciting creative laboratory space of television because it provides many possibilities for a fruition that can go beyond the traditional canons and enter

into spaces of production and vision with enormous potential, representing a fundamental device to investigate new social, cultural and generational practices.

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