Communication, digital media and future: new scenarios and future changes

edited by
Elisabetta Gola, Andrea Volterrani, Fabrizio Meloni

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This volume collects a set of meaningful full papers of Medcom2020+1 international conference, which has been organized by the University of Cagliari, University Hospital of Cagliari, and University of Tor Vergata (Rome). The conference has been held online from the 17th to 19th June 2021, on "Communication, digital media and future: new scenarios and future changes", which is also the title of this volume. The general topic has been divided in 8 sessions which range from social media to screen culture, from media education to social communication, politics and multiculturalism. The general topic has been divided in 8 sessions which range from social media to screen culture, from media education to social communication, politics and multiculturalism The topics also embrace reflections on the experiences after-pandemic, that had a strong impact and caused many changes on communication and society. The proceedings of the conference include a selection of 22 papers out of the about one hundred talks from the conference.

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Mediology and Serial Narrative, In Literature and Beyond

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Abstract
Understanding the seriality evolution in narration forms, and the reasons for their evolution requests a multidisciplinary perspective, based on post-McLuhanian mediology, sociologies of imaginary – starting from Durkheim tradition - and on semiotics, cultural studies, internet studies, comparative literature. The serial narrative "technologies", in fact, re-mediate and focus areas of collective imaginary according to stable and shared rules; they serve to train and retain audiences while representing and controlling social and intrapsychic conflict; they are one of the most powerful catalysts for creating genres, mainstream works, cycles, fictional worlds, which constitute the spaces of fundamental aesthetic experience in every culture for co-production and socialization of the symbolic sphere. Technologies, together with hybridization processes and collective metaphors being structural components of the media, change over time, in the historical media-morphosis process. After briefly describing the current theoretical framework, this contribution tries outlining a general theory of the "serial engine" and of the seriality evolution over the long term: In fact, grounds and archetypes of serial phenomena are already recognizable in the literature (medieval, baroque, metropolitan). For this reason, the most intense restructuring periods may be found in the "return" of the narrative cycle in the twentieth-century multimedia environment, then in television post-series, and currently in the social networks' hyper-fragmentation and self-serialization.
Keywords: seriality, mediology, transmedia, self.serialization, cycle, genre

1. Introduction: Two Fields of Studies on Seriality

Understanding the evolution of seriality in narrative forms, and the reasons for their evolution: this matter configures an extended search field, challenging a multidisciplinary perspective based either on post-McLuhanian mediology, or other approaches, as sociology of imaginary, semiotics, cultural studies, internet studies, comparative literature studies. We mean by "Mediology" a current of studies with strong roots in the European culture of the 20s and 30s of 20th Century and a first theoretical basis in McLuhan in the 60s (but several other authors and orientations later, until today). Unlike other currents of communication studies, which are mainly oriented on the "effects", or on instrumental apparatuses (technologies and culture industry), or on situational dynamics of "communicative actions" exercised by "actors" (individual, social, political, economic ...), mediology studies processes in a holistic way and in the framework of long-term movements period, considering the media as the virtual environment of culture and human existence. Since virtualization largely affect the general evolution of the cultural ecosystem (e.g, cultural models, imaginaries and identity), and of human mind (and body, in terms of perception), the change in the media system ("mediamorphosis", according to the holistic vision of mediology), changes the cognitive patterns and the aesthetic forms, socially stabilizing imaginaries, myths, values, above all by creating virtual "places" populated with stories. Thus the forms of storytelling stabilize and evolve in subsequent eras in relation to the media. Among these, serial forms are fundamental for their power in stabilizing and extending cultural models, created in literary narratives, in the arts, in screen narratives, and today in digital networks.

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* This contribution, fully shared by the authors, was drawn up as follows: paragraphs 1 and 4 by G. Ragone; paragraphs 2 and 3 by D. Capaldi.

Many studies are focusing today on two gigantic and global phenomena: a) the serial, consumed on all devices well beyond television, and currently becoming central to the development of fiction for its hybridization and colonization with forms and technologies of digital cinema; and b) the serial forms widespread on social network platforms, which are increasingly important in our communication and living environment. Mediologists tend to share with other research fields, for example film studies, some basic theoretical frameworks, as in particular the concepts of transmedia and convergence, launched by Henry Jenkins, but moreover already developed by McLuhan, regarding the rapid hybridization processes of electric media: radio, for example, is a platform where forms, technologies of narration and contents of different media (newspaper, concert, variety, song, drama, but then also books, cinema, television) exploit public loyalty to add and merge different audiences. Historically, since the 1930s, there has been a real explosion and diffusion of serial forms in transfer from one medium to another (within increasingly pushed intermediate dynamics: from pulp novels to cinema or comics; from phonograph to radio, etc.). And the forms of transmedia seriality that are dominant today have started with Disney at an industrial level, that is the programmed diffusion of the same content units on multiple media and platforms. Thus, in fiction and beyond, the expansion and dispersion of a story is generated, which by transmedia storytelling maintains coherence and diegetic consistency (continuity and multiplicity: Disney stories such as comics, films, cartoons, serials, theme parks, gadgets and franchising, and so on…).

The typical processes of transmedia seriality in current forms are quite well known: the continuous recreation of the same storyworld (how many hundreds of continuations or re-writing of Pride and Prejudice, including the 50 shades of gray!); the well organized work process transforming a story to an actual articulated worldmaking, fixing characters, conflicts, hierarchies, rules, etc.; the milking that contaminates other worlds and mythologies in the narrative, while multimedia makes different communication flow and different spectacular traditions coexist; the re-boot, i.e. the abandonment of continuity in a series to recreate a story about the same characters and the same world from the beginning; the commercial side of the phenomenon, based on franchising, to expand consumption on additional markets; the importance of fandoms to produce other narration and reuse of content; etc. Moreover, the reuse in television seriality (and even before in cinema seriality) of inventions from literary seriality, which is a continuous practice of work in the cultural industry. Literary seriality has centuries of history behind it and is at the origin of many of the "technologies of storytelling". This type of narrativity has been accelerated with the advent of large global platforms, which distribute / produce fiction (but also many other forms of entertainment and serial infotainment), and often also absorb fandoms, orienting consumption in a multidimensional and transmedial sense: YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, etc. Within their networks, many production agencies work continuously re-elaborating and experimenting on the traditional forms of the serial story, focusing models dedicated to intensive, voracious consumption, and to binge watching repeated if possible on multiple media; therefore the models of transmedia storytelling, shared globally by billions of people of every culture, become strategically more and more important. The most famous example is perhaps Star Wars. As a tie in to the first film in 1977, Marvel's comic franchise was born (until 1986, 107 issues and 3 annual specials), which saved Marvel itself from a financial meltdown. Then almost 50 videogames (Jedi Fallen Order 2 was released with the last film of the saga in 2019). Then the cartoons: Star Wars Rebels (2014-2019) is an American 3D animated TV series made in computer graphics, produced by Lucasfilm and Lucasfilm Animation, set five years before the initial film and fourteen years after Revenge of the Sith. Then the TV series. The last one is The Mandalorian, launched by the Disney streaming platform. Not to mention Internet gigantic fandom movements, and gadget industry.

The situation of narrative seriality is at least partially different as regards the "deep" structure of communication in the social media environment. Are we here, instead, in a phase of actual rupture? The more general phenomenon is a reversal of traditional seriality in the hyper-fragmentation that dominates social networks, the environment where short sequences

taken from fiction or other material are broken up, to generate the very short videos or images that can become "viral" (also through reuse and parody). A recomposition between those short forms and the serial fiction (especially the situation comedy) occurs only partially in the web series, restoring audience loyalty processes. Moreover, a structural change trend has long been noted in the television serial itself, identified in a "post-seriality" seen as a tendency to abandon the classic sequentiality and recursion of the storytelling in favor of rhizomatic and simultaneous forms. So in Lost, so in other original inventions, which imitates or parodies the usual forms of television and videogames, as often in Black Mirror. But in networks the thrust towards practices that we will provisionally indicate as "self-serialization" is even more disruptive: a bottom-up seriality, based on the design of everyday life and one's own image, practiced by almost every individuals: from selfies to more elaborate products: the explosion of bloggers, stories posted on social networks, and emblematically of influencers, with their self-branding. "Instagramism", or "Instagram aesthethics", has been described by Manovich (2015 and 2019) as a creative but only weakly narrative operation (the way of arranging bodies in space, on the edges of the frame; filters and tricks; the "stories" as emotional-sentimental experiences). The overturning of the balance between image and narrative structures occurs - according to Manovich - precisely because serial storytelling is already largely organized by software. After all, the work of designers in social networking systems consists precisely in the development of this new type of aesthetic forms, in the invention and extension of models that are aimed at the possibilities of capturing, creating and exchanging information with digital technologies. Hence the centrality of browsers, big data, algorithms, but also of easy-to-use formats, and quick images to be absorbed and turned over on hypermedia platforms able to offer everything you need for consumption or entertainment. The movement is global and profound, and involves the entire ecosystem of communication on social networks (with infinite examples: from Pinterest, as a selection and collection of images, to SnapChat, with selfies made up in a clownish way and exchanged privately). The question is: have we therefore perhaps arrived at a solution of continuity in the millennial history of serial narratives, that is, in the systems in which Western culture virtually projects an entire world, suitable for experiencing syntagmatically complex events?

In summary: at least 4 serial phenomena are emerging on the web:

1) concentration of the consumption of fiction on large platforms, which often also absorb Fandom (communities producing narration and reuse of content): Netflix, YouTube etc., with a boosting towards addiction and binge watching of serial TV etc.)

2) fragmentation (how content is broken up and reused: Hitler and cupcakes),

3) Parodic Webseries (French Rìtals, The Pills). They attack the cliché, especially that of the mythologies of the information system, retaining audience loyalty with serial formats.

4) Self-serialization in social networks: it is based on the design of everyday life, and of one's own image. It boosts a creative, weakly narrative serialization. See for ex. Pinterest showing a similar trend in a collectible way (creative selection of images).

2. For a general theory on seriality

To understand if we really are at an epochal break, we still lack a general and long-term theory on seriality (see fig. 1). We can register only a few sporadic attempts, sensing the need for prospecting with a longer view (as Michael Evans' Robin Hood: medieval and post-medieval, 2005; or Roberta Pearson's on the stories of the Bible in cinema: Reframing culture, 1996 and 2014). For a general theory, in fact, it would be necessary to describe and interpret the establishment over time of serial forms of narration, what has historically happened in literature, in the arts and in other performative forms of the story. On this level it will be good to remember

that the theories of Simmel, Weber, Benjamin, Elias, Foucault, Bourdieu, McLuhan, Luhmann, Abruzzese and many other initiators and protagonists of the sociologies of cultural processes, collective imagination and media were founded, each at his way, on a historical-inductive study of the forms of the modern. They discovered paradigms and lasting models in culture and social formations by investigating the past, through real "archaeological excavations" on the origins of those forms: Their reasoning therefore goes backwards (eg. Weber about capitalism goes back to Protestantism, McLuhan to explain the electric age or radio goes back to ancient orality).

So here are the main research questions in this search field:

1) What are the pre-modern and modern (metropolitan) archetypes of current seriality?

2) Is it possible to construct a general theory on the forms and social function of seriality on the basis of historical phenomenology?

Mediology and serial narrative: a work plan…
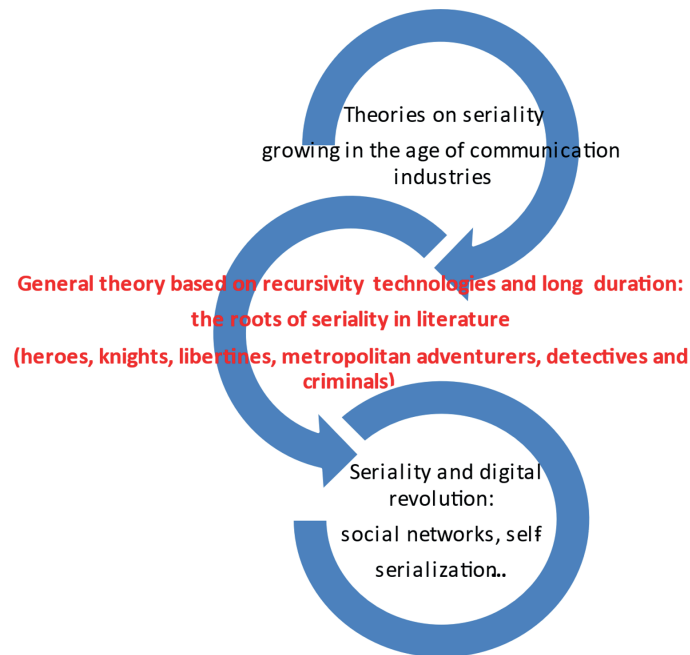
Fig. 1 – Mediology and serial narrative: a work plan

Regarding the first question, we believe that archetypes of seriality can be identified only by taking into account the radical changes in the media environment as a living environment (mediamorphosis). Mediologists, but also anthropologists, historians, philologists such as Goody, Ong, Febvre, Chartier, Darnton, Zumthor and many others are excellent examples of studies of this type in the last 20th century: they have dealt with cultural practices, perceptive and reception systems rising in relation to changes in the reading / writing medium over time.

The structures and figures that make up the rules / technologies of narration, in fact, change together with the technologies of communication, the conformation of media environments, and the "constellation" of collective imaginaries / metaphors. According to the mediological theory of McLuhanian tradition, these are the three structural components of the evolution of the media, as of any media event. The long story of serial narration has always implied con-

stant changes, "recoveries" of aesthetic and imaginary forms of the past, or radical solutions of continuity. But the research on archetypal forms and on the evolution of seriality cannot be resolved in a simple description: it is necessary to compare the phenomena with an explanation that tries to account for their social function. On the social level, the role of the rules / technologies of narration is fundamental in the consolidation of collective imaginaries. On the one hand they re-mediate, that is:

a) bring about the transfer from one medium to another with restructuring of the old medium into the new one (e.g. TV remedies radio, newspaper, cinema, theater, cartoon, music and all the previous spectacular forms, now converging);

b) and determine the transfer not only of the forms of the old media but also of contents and imaginaries, remedied and re-functionalized. Examples: Bridget Jones's Diary is a 2001 film directed by Sharon Maguire, a British romantic comedy based on the novel of the same name by Helen Fielding. Or: Jane Austen's novels with various remediations and re-functionalizations, and recently with thousands of online rewrites (the most famous in the erotic sense, the 50 shades of gray, born from a rewrite on the network of a novel published on Erika's blog Leonard.

On the other hand, in this way, through remediation, they focus areas of the collective imagination according to new shared rules, i.e. they focus the collective attention on narratives having a metaphorical meaning that is current in a given era (what explains their diffusion and their success if they are exploited by the cultural industry). Some infesting and self-evident examples: the Templars, between true history, novel, cinema, television, videogames, etc, metaphorizing the secret religious sects.;the Da Vinci Code accentuating the attention on the level of the conspiracy (detective story plus political intrigue), but also on that of the reusability of any fragment of content coming from heterogeneous historical and temporal contexts. Focusing is therefore a cultural process with important consequences in social life because - mediated by the technologies of serial narration - it serves to train and retain the public, while at the same time representing and controlling social and intrapsychic conflict.

On what can we base a theory of seriality more generally? Is it possible to describe the "engine", the "narrative technology" that makes it possible for the user to depend on a serial storyworld? On the semiotic level (according to a line from Genette, Palimpsestes, 1982, to Fabbri, 2021) seriality is based on two "figures": recursion and accumulation. Observing the history of cultures, it is evident that a certain rate of recursion is implicit in every human artefact, and in every action aimed at the use of artefacts: from the first weapon / tool (the club, the bone), to the first artistic expressions (the painted hands in the caves), up to popular and mass rites and stories. In addition to semiotics, other theories on this aspect, formulated by experimental psychology, can explain to us at least the bases of the phenomenon and its centrality in every culture. Antonio Damasio, one of the founders of neuroscience, considering the mind and body holistically, proved that in the chain of reactions responding to the sensory stimulus and binding together emotions, feeling, thought, the memory structures are already located at a basic level of "feeling", because they are "familiar", that is experienced countless times, and consequently automated. Every stimulus is always answered by pulling out the answers previously given from memory. In fact, the more familiar structures do not trigger new experience and new structures of feeling and do not tend to lead to conscious thought. Even when the emotions are violent or intense, but "familiar" because repeated a high number of times, an intermediate state is generated: a sentimental mood, not inclined in itself to cognitive thinking. In this intermediate state – the sentimental mood - the repetitive patterns also trigger the pleasure of variation: we play to bring the unknown back to the automated experience. So the sentimental mood becomes compulsive / accumulative: we recognize the variation and connect it to this intermediate state.

Therefore the experience of seriality is typically the one preferred by the mass media. It is possible, in advertising as in video clips or serials, to use automatic memory and feeling responses, producing loyalty based on this intermediate sentimental state, and on the pleasure of reproducing it in a collective game. Feel and play. Not "feel and reflect" as in art. The artists, aiming to trigger a reflective tension with the experience of the opera, often rely on the public's habit of receiving serial products, to be sure to capture their attention (Hugo, Dostoevskij, Verdi, Tarantino ...). At the same time they are able to work (with the weapons of irony, overturning, creation of a reverse shot, or nonsense) on the compulsive dependence of their public on serial habits and genres: from Lucianus to Cervantes, from Oldenburg to Warhol. Not training, in this case, but awakening ...

3. The serial engine
Keeping in mind what has been said so far, let's try to introduce a general scheme of the narrative "technology" to which the generation of seriality is entrusted in every imaginary production system (fig.2).
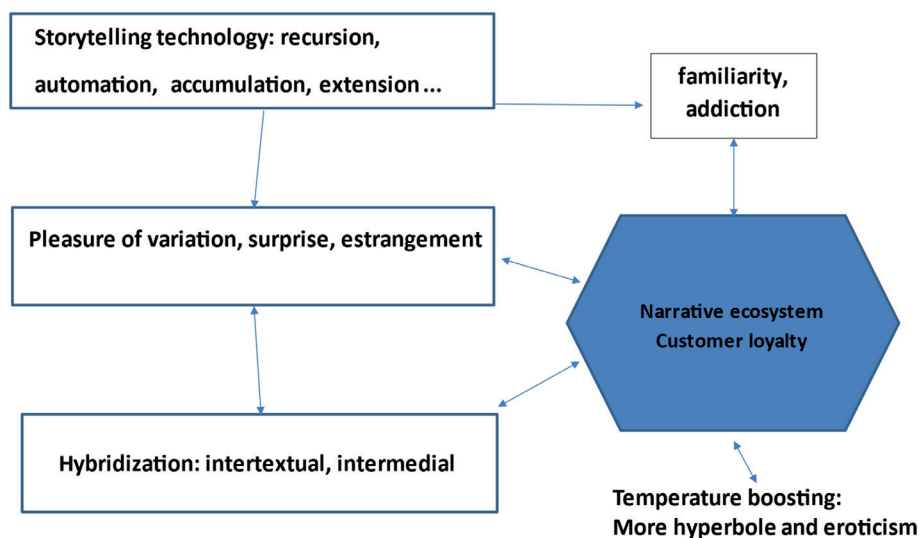
The serial engine

Fig. 2 – The serial engine

We partially derive it from semiotic theories on advertising (Ragone 2015b). What elements are constitutive, in general, of a serial system?

a) recursion, repetition

b) automation of the spectator's reaction (e.g.: a structure that produces an effect on spectators, such as the acknowledgment of an object or a character, allows to direct and control spectators reactions)

c) accumulation (the more you serialize, the more elements of the narrated settle in your memory, with an accumulation of repetitions that can go to infinity, such as in Beautiful, or in in certain types of political or religious communication

d) extension as an expansion of stories and characters in narrative wide environments (typical of sit-coms)

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The narrative seriality must therefore create familiarity and habit, but at the same time it feeds on the pleasure of variation, surprise and estrangement (estrangement: when you are in a familiar environment but breaking elements arrive and conflict with the narrative structures in which you became familiar). This is the technique of advertising: I familiarize you / I surprise you. These elements (recursive technology, creating familiarity, and accompanied by surprise), are necessary to form any narrative Ecosystem to which the public becomes loyal. But all this is not sufficient for an interpretation of the historical dynamics of seriality. Two other processes need to be kept in mind. The first is hybridization. The media are not only communication technologies carrying information. They are processes of hybridization of media between them (mixing forms, structures, contents, imaginaries, collective metaphors). For example: the ancient epic poem hybridized different media: versification techniques, spectacular performance, mythologies, ritual practices, music, etc.. Hybridization already takes place at an intertextual level, by assembling narrative systems of other textualities: Alexandre Dumas's Count of Montecristo hybridizes, for example, both the prison story (the If Castle), and the realist novel like Balzac, or Sue, with the feuiletton writing technique, and also with oriental exotic stories of colonial adventures, etc. Hybridization can also take place at an intermedial or transmedia level (see fig. 3): eg. Shakespeare's sanguinary Othello drama hybridized in melodramatic opera (therefore music, song, performance, scenes, dance, etc.). Or the Star Wars transmedia storytelling…Indeed, we can explain in general the evolution of genres by a hybridization of media: eg. the detective genre was born hybridizing crime news (newspaper), the circumstantial paradigm (detective and research of the scientist, see Sherlock Holmes), the metropolitan realist novel. And so on: new hybridizations and new genres with CSI (the work on the bodies representing the sick and violated social body) or Gray Anatomy (the pathologists).
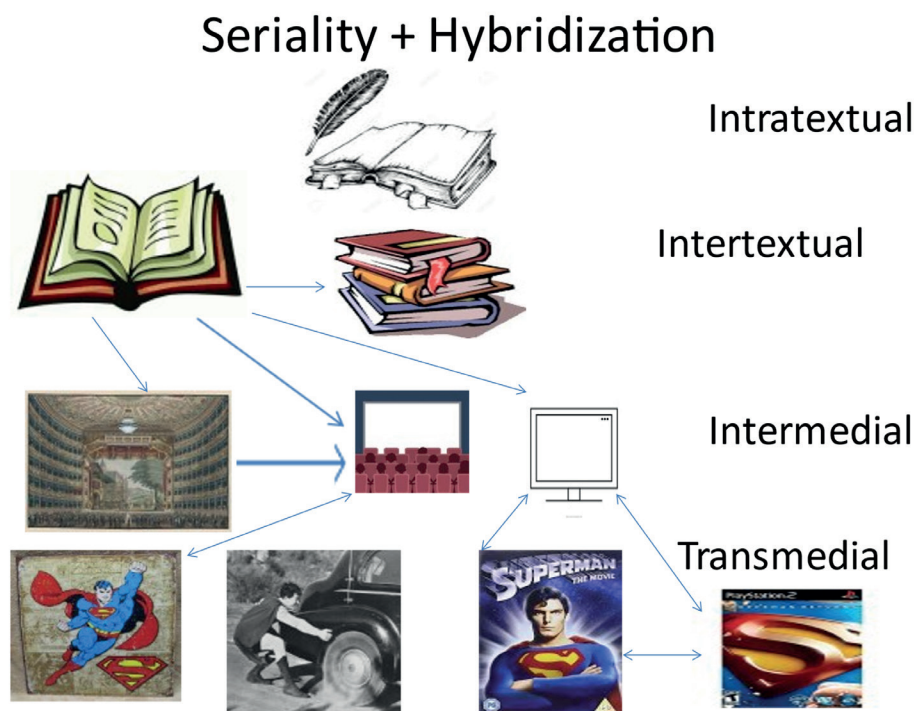

Fig. 3 – Seriality + Hybridization

The second other factor of the engine boosting is overheating, caused by the use of hyperbole and / or eroticism. We can observe dynamics of more or less intense overheating in a serial

structure (see initial box: recursion etc.). That is, some elements are overheated for feeding the narrative tension, trying to maintain loyalty, and to accentuate the involvement of the viewer. For example, the remake of the Postman it always plays twice, was made in strong colors and hot sex scenes because the viewer already knew the history. The Marvel cycle where the Super Heroes (Comics published by Marvel: Captain America, Hulk Thor, Hawkeye, Black Widow, and Spider-Man) are already hyperbolic in the initial comics, but not as overheated as in the last cycle of movies, where they hybridize with each other by adding them even in a super hyperbolic way, for example in Avengers 2012. In the Rambo cycle the character is increasingly hyperbolized, because it is necessary to sustain the tension in the viewer. The House of Cards political story was overheated with Sex and Power (as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth)… These are processes that explain the series, and also the descending parable of the series because it is necessary to invent new and increasingly hyperbolic elements to bring up the story.

Let's go back to the 4 levels of serial processes: Intratextual, Intertextual. Intermedial, Transmedia. And let us dwell on the intratextual level that allows us to understand what are the most important elements of recursion. What already repeats itself at the level of the single text? Formulas, Chronotopes, Typical actions, Rhetorical and Narrative Tropes, Typical characters, Recurring characters…

a) Formulas ("the dawn rose with pink fingers", pious fast Achilles, cerulean eyes Venus). Homer for example. The formulaic use is connected not only to the practice of memorizing a passage, that was rising in the environment of writing; it is mainly aimed at the oral practice of intertwine formulas, stylistic features and episodes put into verse. For example in the famous catalog of ships of the II book of the Iliad: the formidable memory capacity of these singers is well known.

b) Recursive chronotopes (the forest, the reception in the court, the police station…)

c) Typical repeated actions (the unknown knight arrives in the tournament and wins, a man meets a woman in the bar in the metropolis over a whiskey) (NOTA: whiskey indica quelli americani e irlandesi. Whisky quelli scozzesi. Forse è meglio mettere whisky?)

d) Tropes (they are both rhetorical figures and narrative figures, such as the agnition, or the entrelacement, or the cliffhanger - a "suspended" situation that refers to a sequel)

The Entrelacement (literally interlocking, interlacing) is a narrative technique used mostly by the French authors of the Arthurian cycle. It consists in making the narration continuously suspended and then resumed in several stories linked together, which take place simultaneously. To the reader this particular technique gives the feeling that the facts happen "around him". A well-known example of the use of this technique is Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando furioso. But many serials currently use it.

e) Typical repeated characters (the proud and arrogant knight, the magician, the shrewd, cynical and skeptical detective, the western bounty killer)

f) Character recurring in several episodes of the same text or series (Merlin, the Tenardier spouses in the Miserables,; Baron of Charlus in Proust (A love of Swann)

All the serial mechanisms already active in a text can widely expand into intertextuality: multiple texts reproducing the same structure. In the narrative tradition of literature there are two types of serial intertextuality: cycle and genre. In a cycle, the same characters and the same space / environment are reproduced from one text to another, with at least a relative logical coherence: the events can be arranged in parallel, without contradicting each other on the temporal level, or with prequels, sequels, expansions of the original nucleus, etc. The cycle trend is obviously dominant in the epic. A story is told that takes place in a place and in a sequence of several successive episodes (Iliad); or several episodes are told in different places and times, linked in a "cyclical" structure that incorporates several stories around a mythical hero: (Od-

yssey, Argonauts). Therefore prequels, sequels and incorporation of episodes from other epic traditions (eg Odyssey, Cypree, Aeneid) are always possible. The cycle is back in vogue forcefully (see both a Serial as Game of Thrones and a saga as The Lord of the Rings), with greater intensity gradually starting from the middle '800 (Rocambole, Sherlock Holmes, Dick Tracy, Rocky, The Avengers…). There have been times when, on the other hand, the genre has been almost totally hegemonic. This is an intertextual seriality in which the environments and the different tropes and situations are recursive, but not the characters. So each text is completely autonomous (in particular, the genre dominated the explosive era of the modern novel, from the beginning of the 1600s to the mid-1800s). Since the return of the cycle in the mid-19th century, the cultural industry exploits both the cycle and the genre.

4. Research perspectives

The historical evolution of cycle and genre serial forms is an important key to understanding the solutions of continuity and the reasons for the transformations of seriality. Of course there are many studies on single episodes, but having to draw a general line, we can try a periodization:

- Protoseriality: the ancient epic
- The invention of the cycle and of the archetypes of seriality in the roman of the XII-XIV century
- The explosion of the editorial "machine" from the chivalrous novel to the baroque (XV-XVII century), with cyclical seriality (romance), and with a first serial cultural industry, namely melodrama
- The genre seriality of the novel, which incubates the city environment from the late sixteenth century (XVI-XVII), then exploding in the metropolitan environment (XVIII-XIX century)
- The return of the serial novel and the cycle in a accentuated intermedial environment and then in the transmediality of the electric metropolis (19th-20th century).

Some final thoughts:

- - seriality in narration is one of the backbones of the entire modern Western culture, and not just a form of production of the cultural industry
- - the historical genesis of each system of serial narration can be identified. It takes place at a precise moment, through the hybridization of imaginaries and forms; and then there is a period of "maintenance".
- - the "playing field" (Elias) of serial systems as social relations phenomenon implies a specific mood (catatonic and compulsive, but also latent learning for conflict management, …); every great playing field a different one?
- - from the learning / training side, for example, the cyclical novel (XII-XVII century) seems a system to nourish … the subjectivity of the ruling classes who want to feel "kind" (from the "cor gentile" to the honnet homme, to the galan, to the gentiluomo …), and therefore it metaphorized the value of simulation and spectacular virtualization of evolving media
- - the genres of the novel (XVII-XIX) seem a system to nourish … the exploring subjectivity and already oriented to the prediction (and to the governance of the endemic schizophrenia between objectification and immersion) of the society in urbanization
- - fiction more and more produced in cycles in the electric age (XIX-XX) seems a system to feed … the imagination of evil and the drive to survive in the century of tragedies, globalization, ecstatic consumption, and the fear of end of the social
- - there is a substantial break with the network and self-serialization?

With this we got to the heart of our research theme.