Mediated narratives in the current world

Interview with Milly Buonanno

Milly Buonanno is Professor of Television Studies at La Sapienza University of Roma. She is the founder and director of the Observatory of Italian TV Drama and the head of GEMMA (GEnder and Media MAtter) research programme. Her scholarship include television theory and history, TV drama, feminist media studies, journalism. She is the author and the editor of more than fifty books and her work has been translated into English, French, Spanish, Portuguese. Recent publications are the monographs *Italian TV Drama and Beyond. Stories from the Soil, Stories from the Sea* (2012), and *The Age of Television. Experiences and Theories* (2008) both published by Intellect. She is co-editor of the *Sage Handbook of Television Studies* (2014). Here the researcher shares her knowledge on these various fields, culminating with a discussion on the bond between them: the narratives.

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Tríade: You are one of the Italian sociologist pioneers in the field of television *story-telling* research. In this field, perhaps more than any other, we can track the evolution of the blending, sometimes merger, of the entertaining and news gender. The line between fact and fiction seems increasingly tenuous. How do you see this phenomenon?

Milly Buonanno: The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is to be found in all theorizing about narrativity, from Aristotle to Genette to Ricoeur. Although such a dichotomy may displease not only those who rightly criticize the postulate of a polar opposition between fact and fiction, but also the many who more radically claim that one cannot decide between one and the other, or that there is now a total post-modern conflation of fact and fiction, nevertheless the distinction cannot be avoided if one is to recognize the special nature and the unique modus operandi of the narrative imagination. We can express this dichotomy (which in truth is by no means irreconcilable) in various terms; but in any case we are dealing with the difference between the true and the plausible, the real and the possible. There are without

doubt crossings, intersections and frequent borrowings in multiple forms between the two categories: historical television drama and dramatized news reporting, fictionalized biography, historical reconstructions resembling great novels, docudrama, creative non-fiction and much else. But however much these combinations may demonstrate that fact and fiction may meet at various degrees of approximation along a continuum, a perceptible trace of the original gap will always reside in the different 'truth-claims', in the different nature of the proofs that a story requires in support of its veracity. For a factual or historical narrative the 'truth-claim' will inevitably involve the empirical reality: where the events being narrated took place, where the characters depicted actually lived. The veracity or falsity of the story are measured against this external reference point, which is implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) invoked as much by the text as by readers or viewers, in all those cases where there is an interweaving of history or news and fiction in the narrative. This does not apply to fiction, which is free from the shackles of a referential nature, although not from the stringent conditioning of verisimilitude. The credibility of War and Peace does not rest on the historical truth of the Napoleonic wars; nor do we consider that the book is untruthful because it cannot show or refer to any documentary proof of the existence of Natasha Rostova and Pierre Bezuchov. But it is true because it is in the highest degree plausible in accordance with the proper order of symbolic and imagined reality; this somehow incorporates and subjugates the historical-factual element to fictional narrative's primary intention, which without doubt remains the narration of possible reality. One may protest that the modern tendency to conflate fact and fiction goes well beyond the limits of a nineteenth-century historical novel. But there is no need to accept without question the post-modern rhetorical and the promotional strategies that emphasize allegedly unprecedented practices of hybridization between cultural forms, which are and remain distinctive and yet open to mutual interweaving and influence.

Tríade: In the case of Italy, it is impossible not to remember Calvino's proposals, which seem to serve both for fiction and journalism. What do you think of his proposals?

MB: Among the six Calvino's proposals for the (at that time) next millennium my favorite is definitely visibility because in this lecture, taking the cue from a Dante's triplet, Calvino offer us profound philosophical reflections on the imagination, which he defines both

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as means to attain knowledge and as a repertory of what does not exist but might have existed. He is a writer and here he masterfully elaborates on the source of inspiration of the narratives. Some proposals, such as exactitude, fit in better with journalism; multiplicity, which refers to the endeavor to capture and render the complexity of the human experience and of the events of the world, may serve in principle both for fiction and journalism, but it should be taken into serious consideration especially by this latter. In fact contemporary journalism is proving to a large extent inadequate to account for the increasing complexities and the risky intricacies of the world we live in, and it is my conviction that the mushrooming of online-news sites and social networks is making more harm than good on this specific point. Finally I have to admit that I find it difficult to agree on the virtue of quickness. The emphasis on immediacy and acceleration has been a peculiar feature of modern thinking, and has been further accentuated in recent times, in parallel to the embedding of digital technologies into our everyday routines. Perhaps the proposal to challenge, instead of endorsing, today's unquestioned culture of speed should be more appropriate for the current millennium.

Tríade: As one of the Italian pioneers of the gender perspective in socio-communicational studies, how do you evaluate the issue "women and the media"? Is journalism making a good coverage of this subject as complex per se? Or the crisis that journalism suffers since the rise of the internet, with a consequent reduction of in-depth reports, is resulting in shallow and simplistic coverage, which do not account for the phenomenon reporting? Likewise, the academic world are producing relevant research or just doing fast science, i.e., producing papers to be presented at conferences and published in journals?

MB: In 2010 I've set up in my department an ongoing research program that I've named GEMMA; being the acronym of "GEnder and Media MAtter", GEMMA overtly declares my stance about the crucial importance that must be ascribed to the dyad gender and media. Indeed the relationship between the two components of the dyad has perhaps never before been so challenging and complicated as it appears in the contemporary scenario, which is characterized by dramatic change in the media landscape and by redefinition of the boundaries, as well as pluralization, of gender identities. We live as never before in a media-

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supersaturated world, owing to the increasingly proliferation and interconnection of technologies and cultural forms of communication. This situation may not necessarily entail per se a generalized intensification of the grasp of the media on our lives, but it creates the conditions of an expanded communication environment in which the power of the media, essentially the symbolic power of defining and constructing reality, "of imposing the vision of legitimate divisions", to say it with Bourdieu, today finds extensive scope and unprecedented wide variety of sites of production and diffusion.

We are concerned precisely with this power when we interrogate and investigate the gendered and gendering dimensions of the media – as discourses, institutions, technologies and so on – in order to grasp and understand the role they play, always at the intersection with other social and cultural forces, in influencing processes of gender identity formation and development. And since both the notion and the lived experience of gender identity are today in a state of flux, and the male/female dichotomy (whether predicated upon traditional essentialist positions or on theories of the social construction of male/female differences) has been transcended by a broader spectrum of gender identities, it becomes evident that the intellectual challenge of doing gender and media studies is more stimulating, demanding and 'tricky' than ever.

As for journalism in particular, national and international researches provide repeated evidence that gender equality is hard to come by in news coverage, although it progresses at different (low) pace in different countries. Internet is not the guilty, but it is important for us to become aware that it is not even the champion of gender justice in present times.

On the academic side instead we are witnessing in recent years a resounding revival of gender and media scholarship, as is testified by the wide array of published monographs, articles, themed issues of international journals and conferences that bring into focus and illuminate the diverse features of the relationship between gender and the media of communication. In Italy this area of research has been somewhat marginal in the academic agenda during the first decade of 2000s, but is now regaining attention and interest by scholars. GEMMA can be considered both a testimony and a driver of this turn.

Tríade: How do you see the evolution of the relationship between women and media in recent decades? The image of women on television has evolved like it has in the real world?

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MB: Let me clarify first that, despite being a convinced feminist, I have never shared the feminist posture of hostility that Carolyn M. Byerly has aptly named 'the paradigm of the misogynist media'. Encapsulated in this paradigm is a vision of the media, and mainly television, as fundamentally embroiled in conservative gender ideologies that allow for representational politics that undermine and trivialise women's gains in society, while pretending to take them into account. Although such a vision certainly captures one of the most insidious inflections of the women-and-media relationship – and one that calls for a high level of attention and criticism – nonetheless it needs to be transcended, so as to allow us to regard and understand the complex patterns of this relationship from broader and more nuanced analytical perspectives. The challenge that is worth tackling today implies going beyond (without disregarding or minimising) sexualisation and women's disempowerment and containment in popular culture: in order to explore also the progressive and empowering potential of the media, as they have to a lesser or greater extent integrated elements of feminism. At least alternatively, gender and media studies might take into account the role of media in helping to naturalize feminist ideas and desires and hence to improve women's status. If and how media play a part in supporting progress and not merely gender containment is a matter of interest to communication scholars, who are (or should be) highly concerned with the capacity of media to produce change.

On these premises, I maintain that television may operate in given circumstances as a resource for women's empowerment. For instance, in her excellent study on post-broadcast American television Amanda Lotz has demonstrated that the shift to a multichannel environment has allowed to challenge the "male epicenter" and to pave the way for an unprecedented diversity of female-centered TV dramas and newer and more complex gender definitions and identities. By the same token, we must bear in mind the possibility that the hybrid and contradictory nature of post-feminist culture, which informs in varying degrees the discursive constructions of gender in today's media, may allow for more veridical rendering of the equally hybrid and contradictory nature of the identities and subjectivity of women. A fair number of feminist scholars have undertaken fruitful work in this direction, producing nuanced and comprehensive analyses of popular TV drama heroines that embody ambivalence and conflicts, progress and challenge really experienced by contemporary women in everyday life. Obviously we should be wary of conceiving television as a hall of mirror; television is a site where gender definitions and representations are constructed, maintained, altered, remodelled. Without this being a mimetic reproduction of the evolving reality, images of women in television are evolving too.

Tríade: In the context of new digital environments, how do you see the role and place of the television media in the world today?

MB: The vanishing centrality, the obsolescence of broadcast television following the proliferation of the narrowcast channels and the spread of new digital media has turned into a key issue within contemporary media studies, thus making 'the end of television' (with or without question mark) a familiar trope in scholarly discourses and opening the way to a redefinition of the present-day television phase in terms of post-broadcast or post-network era. Is television really dying? In a sense, we could say that television has never been so healthy and triumphant as nowadays: it has entered an age of 'plenty' characterized by unceasing proliferation of channels, uncontainable spread of output across media, screens, platforms, and national and transnational phenomena of fully-immersive, addictive fandom that was unthinkable in the old days when audiences were known as 'couch potatoes'. But on the other hand it may be said that owing precisely to the transformation undergone by the medium in the digital age, television as we know it is coming to an end. The leading cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner has recently coined the definitions of 'broadcast pessimism' and 'digital optimism', to encapsulate two diametrically opposed stances concerning the fate of television. The proponents of broadcast pessimism argue that we are witnessing the inexorable obsolescence of traditional television – the television of sharedness, of family togetherness – under the disrupting, disuniting impact of media digitization; the digital optimists, on the contrary, welcome the rise of the post-broadcast era which – by disclosing an unprecedented range of contents, and allowing unrestrained time, space and modes of access to an array of platforms, screens, outputs – is deemed to democratically satisfy individual needs and demands of free choice and control in the sphere of the television experience. The two antithetical perspectives converge to provide the same diagnosis that television is over. Consequently, accounts of the end of television have turned into a strong tendency within media and cultural studies and something of an orthodoxy has emerged especially within the reach of the 'digital optimism'. But there are also instances of resistance to this orthodoxy, by those in the academia (including but not limited to Graeme Turner, Toby Miller, John Ellis, Paddy Scannell, myself) who – without obviously denying processes and phenomena of substantial change brought about by the conjuncture of spreading digital technologies and other influent societal factors – challenge nonetheless the universalizing claim that broadcast television is over; and draw attention to the multiple signs and evidences that broadcasting is still alive and well, despite declining share, in most countries around the

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world, and even holds central or dominant position in many hugely populated locations (like China, India, Brazil, Mexico …). We do not even need to leave the Western world to find, for instance in Italy, a television market in which the broadcasting channels still gather almost three-quarters of the audience share. The Italian market today finds itself in the phase of moderate audience segmentation which, according to Denis McQuail, corresponds to the 'central-peripheral model'. At this moment, although the multiplication of channels makes it possible to enjoy a wide range of TV programmes both outside and on the edge of the mainstream, the generalist networks continue to occupy centre-stage on the TV scene and to achieve combined ratings in excess of two thirds of the audience.

As a matter of fact, what television will become tomorrow in myriad countries around the globe cannot be predicted, and what television is today responds to a large extent to structural and contingent factors specific to each location, notwithstanding the undeniable impact of transnational and globalizing trends. Thinking of Italy again, the demographic structure of the population that comprises a high rate of ageing citizens, joined to the (declining but still considerable) resilience of the Mediterranean tradition of the 'strong family', plays an important role in securing the broadcast television a still dominant position. Hence, we should be wary of granting replicability or normativity to just one single pattern of television development, which usually coincides with the North-American model.

This is not to deny that broadcast television has been challenged and weakened to varying degrees by the new powerful trends that have rapidly emerged and spread, in the context and under the impact of what has come to be known (embraced in fact) as the 'age of convergence'. In this age, owing especially to the advent and growth of online platforms and the increasing number of available digital devices and services, the conditions of possibility have been created not only of unheard plenty of choice – which has not gone without its own rhetoric of liberation and control – but, even more important, of diversified practices of television access and viewing. Since these new practices take advantage of both time-shifting and place-shifting options enabled by digital technologies, they easily escape from the so-called 'tyranny of the schedule' and from the monopoly of the television screen, thus allowing for (much celebrated) 'anytime-anywhere' customized patterns of media use. But we should be wary of confusing condition of possibilities with determinants, trends with shifts, additions with substitutions. For conditions of possibility to be actualized, many societal, cultural, economic factors must come into play, well beyond the 'technological magic'. And it remains to be seen whether emerging trends, embraced by enthusiastic early adopters, will pave the way to a new mainstream/long-term shifts or will remain a minority

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phenomenon, or a situational one: id est a phenomenon mostly pertaining to the youth and young adulthood phases of the life-course. As for substitutions, in actual fact the new televisions do not displace the functions of the older television of the mid-twentieth century, but complement them, as Paddy Scannell reminds us. If we resist the temptation to conceive of the television becoming as a clash of old and new, where the old is sooner or later destined to surrender to the overwhelming advance of the new, we can find evidence that in contemporary television landscapes long established technologies and cultural forms co-exist with their emerging counterparts, putting at audience disposal different and yet compatible, complementary resources able to satisfy equally different and compatible desires and demands. Furthermore, we should be looking for continuities, not just for breaks, between the old and the new. For instance: there is strong evidence that the desire and the practice of sharing media experiences remain crucial even in the digital environment.

In early nineties Herbert Schiller wrote an article titled "Not yet the post-imperialist era". I will rephrase Schiller's title to conclude: "Not yet the post-television era".

Tríade: By which genres and formats Italian television is known today in the world?

MB: Regrettably, the Italian televisual story-telling has for some time now entered a rather stagnant creative phase, which entails neglect and disregard of domestic fiction by critics, intellectuals, academics, younger and educated viewers who seem to be infatuated to a greater or lesser degree with the American so-called 'quality TV'; a 'transatlantic romance' with the (admittedly, often excellent and innovative) TV drama originated in the United States, mainly in the cable television environment, is in full swing in Italy – but it must be added that this phenomenon extends itself well beyond Italy. However there are not a few exception. First and foremost the hugely successful Il Commissario Montalbano/Inspector Montalbano (Rai, 1999–), a long running police series, set in a sun-drenched, baroque corner of Sicily, the home of a fascinating, unconventional figure of detective created by the best-selling writer Andrea Camilleri; the series has been widely exported and has even suited the demanding tastes of British viewers. Worth mentioning too is the domestically hyped and internationally well received Romanzo Criminale/Crime Novel (Sky, 2008–2010), the first Italian drama aimed at the niche audiences of satellite subscription channels, which has reconstructed with unusually harsh realism the story of the rise to power during the 1970s of a famous criminal gang that reigned in Rome for almost two decades.

Furthermore, even though the productive capacity of the domestic television industry has consistently decreased over the last decade, due to budget cuts, Italy turns out to be a major producer of miniseries in Europe. A liminal form on the borderline between film and television, the miniseries – which in Italy is preferably made in just two episodes – holds a special place in the cultural history of television drama, as it embodies a longstanding dislike of seriality within the national television culture. Systematically over the years the miniseries has dominated the top ten, building at the same time the 'tradition of quality' of Italian TV drama; this tradition owes much to the high degree of cultural respectability usually associated to the historical, biographical, religious, literary and social sources from which the majority of Italian miniseries takes inspiration.

Tríade: There are some successful contemporary narrative formats, such as American sitcoms and movies, as well as the Brazilian soap operas. Still, storytellers from all around the world are seeking new formats and languages, such as the new six o'clock novel in the Brazilian Globo Network, called *My Little Piece of Ground*, whose concept is "A little fantasy can become the most fabulous reality." From the narrative point of view, how do you see potential developments in contemporary media narrative?

MB: There are ferments in the field, as always happens in phases of change: web series, transmedia storytelling, shortcom or sketchcom, and anything else, are trying to blow fresh air into the established repertoire of formats and genres, formulae and languages to which media narratives have traditionally recourse, and owe their long-lasting success and popularity. These experiments of inventiveness and creativity are to be received with interest, to the extent they are likely to expand the range of the cultural forms in which the imagination may find narrative expression in contemporary media. However until now we have to do with instances of novelty: it remains to be seen whether or not they will produce real innovation in the field of media story-telling, complementing and even influencing older, well experimented (and in turn always becoming) narrative forms.

Tríade: You talk about the figure of the mythical hero in contemporary media, noting the contributions of American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), author of *The Hero*

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with a Thousand Faces (1949), which was enriched by the study of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1885-1961) and the pragmatism of Hollywood screenplays analyst Chris Vogler, who adapted the campbellian concept to the demand of today narratives by changing the term hero to protagonist of the story. How do you explain the paradox that the current stories, in the context of a global consumer culture geared to leisure, still depict 'everyday heroes', many of them with exemplary lives? Why, in your opinion, the heroic ethos persists, even in an anti-heroic or post-heroic society?

MB: When we talked earlier about gender, media and the alleged demise of television, I hinted at two points that may help to clarify the issue, something of an apparent paradox, you raise in your question. The first point concerns the power of defining reality. Reality is a site of contest between different visions that compete in order to affirm their own definition; from time to time the winner is the most powerful and resourceful competitor in the given circumstances, but this is hardly a guarantee that the most comprehensive and reliable vision has prevailed. The other point concerns the syndrome of obsolescence that seems to be a systematic recurrence in modern thought, whenever we are faced with change; id est, processes of evolution and becoming are hastily labeled in terms of radical break with the past, and the advent of a post-something era is willingly acknowledged.

Back to heroes and heroic ethos in a post-heroic society. Clearly we cannot deny the existence of gaps and discontinuities between the present and the past, as far as heroic conceptions and actions are concerned – new types of heroes have joined and overshadowed older figures – and it's equally undeniable that a rhetoric of anti-heroism has won over the long-held rhetorics of heroism. However, the compelling definition of post-heroic society that has emanated from intellectual circles and has become received wisdom today renders only half the truth; in fact it doesn't account for the more complex and nuanced picture resulting from the presence, alongside and in tension with post-anti-heroic cultural trends, of phenomena of persistence and resilience of heroic figures, deeds, lives, stories, in reality and even more in the imagination. Maybe heroes and heroism are no longer what they used to be, but they are still with us. There is plenty of common and extraordinary heroes (alongside a more recent rise of anti-heroes) in contemporary popular culture, in film, television, graphic novels narratives; and there is not even shortage of super-heroes and legendary heroes, handed down to us by ancient mythology and epics. Regardless of received definition of reality, most of us continue to yearn for and enjoy narratives of heroes and heroism, and the heroic imagination that still inspires much of popular narratives is there to fulfill our desire.

Or we might rather assume – acknowledging for the sake of argument the definition of post-heroic society – that in so doing the narrative imagination symbolically compensate for the impoverished heroic dimension and ethos of everyday life.

Tríade: On the method of life histories: what are the biographic narrative genre tensions in the contemporary world? Studies such as George Custen (1992) indicated that less than 3% of the produced films were biographical narratives. This scenario certainly changed, in a universe of digital environments, celebrities, and the increasing visibility of ordinary people on television and other media. In your opinion, what is the impact of this increase to the biographical genre and his scientific studies?

MB: George Custen has maintained with good reason that "publicly defining fame" is the cultural role of the biography genre; it should therefore come as no surprise that this genre – as much popular with publics everywhere as it is disparaged by critics and overlooked by scholars – is influenced by, and also serves as an indicator of, the shifting conceptions of the fame over time. Fame is to be understood as a form of 'glorious renown', traditionally associated with well deserved respect. The very existence and raison d'être of the biography genre rests on the cultural acknowledgement and the social esteem of fame acquired by men and women who have displayed outstanding endeavours and achievements in the most diverse fields of human action. Such a demanding requirement, which makes fame be a relatively scarce asset, has certainly not disappeared altogether from the contemporary cultural horizon; but it has been eclipsed or undermined by the rise to prominence in popular culture of entertainment as the privileged realm in which fame is pursued and easily achieved nowadays. The so-called celebrities are the embodiment of this readjusted conception of renowness, which turns fame into a commodity largely available and, more importantly, often unconnected to any achievement or recognizable excellence.

Accordingly, the biography genre – or biopic, in cinema and television jargon – has made progressively larger room to famous figures of the world of entertainment and show-business, that have joined and to a certain extent superseded the traditional figures of the greats of history, politics, arts, science. Even ordinary people, 'unremarkable' individuals who were suddenly and fleetingly pulled out of the anonymity of their everyday lives by some unexpected and disruptive event, have in some cases become the protagonists of television biopics. If we are witnessing a democratization of the fame agenda, or rather the reverberation

through the biography genre of the growing visibility of ordinary people on television – what Grame Turner critically defines as a "demotic turn"– may offer television scholarship a challenging dilemma to discuss and reflect upon.

When all is said and done, it remains true and worth highlighting that biography genre has regularly helped the film industry to achieve outstanding successes and even prestigious awards, and never ceases to be a resource of popularity and reputation for broadcasting and narrowcasting channels alike. In Italy, for instance, the biopics are the emblem of the quality fiction of public television; biographies of popes and saints, of anti-nazis and mafia-heroes, of political leaders, of sport champions, of music stars, even of mafia bosses, have always achieved huge audiences. Not critical acclaim, though (but you can't have it all).

Tríade: German anthropologist Christoph Wulf, from the Free University of Berlin, defends narratology as a research method. In this perspective, narrating the investigated object is a way to better enlighten it, i.e., to understand it better. In this context, how do you see the life story as a research method or technique? Indeed, in your view, would it be a method or technique?

MB: Narrative, any kind of narrative, is too complex to be rendered in terms of mere technique. Instead I fully agree with the assertion that narrating is a way of better enlightening the things of the world; it reveals reality's unexplored potential and its perspectives that pass unnoticed, it brings repressed experiences out into the open, sheds light on things we cannot see and anticipates the unexpected that we do not manage to foresee, settled as we are in the repetitiveness of everyday life. The capacity of narrative to become an instrument of knowledge and to yield meanings has unquestionably helped to nourish the sort of 'addiction to the story' that seems to have been a universal and ubiquitous constant in human history. The very etymology of the word is eloquent in this respect; the term 'narrative' originates from an old Sanskrit root – 'gna', meaning 'to know' – which then split in Latin into 'narro' (I tell) and 'gnarus' (knowing). Promoting knowledge, which implies understanding the human things and experiences, constructing a comprehensible world and communicating it in form of a structured tale: these are two inextricable values of the narrative. On these premises, there is no doubt the life stories can be an invaluable tool for providing access to the depths and nuances of human individualities, disclosing actions and sentiments, minds and souls of notable people to our awareness. Not by chance the biographical-narrative approach

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has become widely recognized as an established and fruitful method of qualitative inquiry in the field of social research. Obviously the biography as a genre of narrative fiction is not the same as a scientific method for what concerns demanding requirements of faithful correspondence to the objective reality. But the imagination has its own compelling ways to construct knowledge and truth, and make them resonate in our consciousness.

Tríade: From your perspective, what is the importance of Italian communication studies in the global scientific community arena? The Italian research is most influential in Europe, particularly in the sphere of the Latin languages?

MB: I cannot affirm that Italian communication scholarship, in general, has made an impact on the global scientific arena; certainly this was not for lack of originality, significance or excellence of theory and research produced in Italy, but rather due to poor visibility of a large part of our work. In actual fact, the Italian language can hardly allow for wide circulation beyond the restricted borders of the nation. Not by chance, when Italian scholars achieve to get published in other languages (mainly English, needless to say) through diverse international venues, they are likely to make a significant impact on the scholarship in the field. I can testify this from my personal experience, and I'm not the only exception (think for instance of Paolo Mancini as for journalism studies). However the situation is in flux and I'm confident that in the near future Italian communication studies will achieve recognition on broader transnational scale, as the younger generations of Italian scholars are now successfully competing for visibility in international journals and conferences, thus paving the way for a more appreciable and influential role of the Italian scholarship in the global scientific arena.

Tríade: What is the scenario of Italian communicational community today? Like the Anglo-Saxon world scientific, qualitative research are facing restrictions on acceptance for publication in international journals? Its scientists also face the motto dilemma of "publish or perish"? How Italian scientists are facing this challenge?

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MB: As you may know, over the last few years the Italian academy has been taken by storm by the establishment of a national system of periodical 'evaluation of quality' of the scientific work produced by each scholar. The allocation of State funds to the public Universities and Departments (the absolute majority in Italy) and the career and salary of teachers and researchers depend, at least in part, on the results of this evaluation, which is carried out by national and international peer reviewers, having also recourse to bibliometrics indicators when appropriate. Not surprisingly, this has helped to trigger within the academic circles symptoms of the 'publish or perish syndrome', from which the Italian scientific community had been previously immune to a large extent. The field of communication studies has not remained untouched by this syndrome. Therefore, there is a rush to publish, also because in some cases quantity matters regardless of quality; for instance, in the absence of at least five publications over the last quinquennium, being a member of a doctoral board is no longer permitted. We are witnessing positive and less positive repercussions of the newly diffused imperative to publish in order to survive in academia. In my opinion a worrying consequence is that scholars are now less motivated, or not at all, to produce monographs. As writing a monograph takes much longer than an article, or a chapter for an edited collection, the extended time commitment it requires proves unsuitable for scholars who struggle to meet the publication quota. Monographs are further discouraged by evaluation criteria that posit the equivalence between any kind of scholarly writing, be it a treatise or a paper. Consequently the current rush to publish is a rush to publish articles more than anything else; and since 'internationalization' has easily become the most heralded evaluation criterium, Italian communication scholars have started to channel an unprecedented flow of submissions to international journals. On their part, some Italian journals both printed and online make now room to articles in English in order to expand the readership. These combined tactics are making Italian communication scholarship more visible beyond national borders, which is a move for good as I have remarked in my previous response.

Concerning the other point you raise in your question, it is my firm conviction that what is at stake today in our field of studies is not so much the old (and returning, I agree) opposition between quantitative and qualitative approach, as the truly damaging divide established between the alleged old media and the so-called new media. The latters now provide our field with the privileged objects of study – by virtue of their novelty, trendiness, and the aura of the digital – and also have the lion's share in the allocation of the research funds. I am seriously concerned with this growing imbalance of interests in the research

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agenda of contemporary media scholarship, which finds reflection and, in a sense, canonization in many national and international journals.

Tríade: Despite all challenges, narratives in their various forms are still luring and delighting readers, listeners, viewers, Internet users, and cinephiles. In your opinion, what the power of narrative lies on?

MB: Narratives are a delight of our life: they are our fairy-tales and our myths, our moral tales, the burning fire of imagination whose flame, as Walter Benjamin said, gives warmth to our cold and wretched life. This applies to all the systems and forms of story-telling that have succeeded and joined one another in the history of human societies. Every age has invented and narrated its own tales of imagination, in the expressive forms and the media that were available at the time. With a marvelous simplicity Roland Barthes has acknowledged and made us conscious that there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative: it is simply there, as life itself.

Stories of imagination have important cultural significance, offering precious material for understanding the world we live in. Without faithfully mirroring reality, and without actually distorting it, stories select, refashion, discuss and comment on issues and problems of our personal and social life. Regardless of formulae and genres, language and aesthetics, their fundamental nature is that of 'interpretative practices'. This is how anthropologists define all forms of symbolic and narrative creation, starting with the myths and legends, through which human beings in all eras have expressed their own vision on the world and have given meaning to daily life.

On this last point, the great cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner has affirmed that narrative structuring is the indispensable tool for giving order and meaning to the flow of events that would otherwise be chaotic, cognitively and emotionally out of control. Far from being only the prerogative of specialists – story-tellers, authors of every sort of fiction, conveyed by every form of media – narrative structuring has constituted and still constitutes a collective resource for mankind. Had story-telling not offered the possibility of reconstructing an intelligible representation of world experience, we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience. Therefore we need to take narratives seriously. Another good reason for doing so is that they provide a stage for social reality and organize and display the dramaturgy through which society represents itself to itself. Individual stories may have been more or less successful and effective in this respect, just as the modes of representation can be realistic or

fantastic, comic or dramatic; however, narrating society, representing it to itself, is in each case what narrative systems do.

But, of course, what makes narratives powerfully fascinating is the freedom to transcend reality that is the privilege of the imagination, and endow it with a disruptive, captivating force. This freedom allows for the revelation of possible worlds of life and action, where the events being narrated could have taken place and where we could live (and symbolically do live while we are immersed in the story). Narratives of imagination transfigure reality, putting it in a certain sense into the subjunctive, the verb mood that expresses a fact or a state as being not real but possible, supposed, desired or feared. They create a gap between the world of everyday life – cold and wretched according to Benjamin, impoverished by everyday routines according to Gadamer – and the world of fiction; in such a way the stories of the imagination tempt us into thinking of alternatives beyond real life. Sometimes, when the disruptive force of the imagination is at his highest, these fantasized alternatives manage to transfigure life as it is lived, causing 'seeds of subversion' disseminated in the narrated story to germinate.

But even when this does not happen, we owe to narratives the access to a plurality of possible worlds that help to expand the horizons of our lived experience, thus symbolically satisfying the unquenchable human desire to live many lives. To quote the powerful statement of Paul Ricoeur: narratives multiply the experiences of eternity.

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