

MAIN THEME: 2. COMPETENCIA DIGITAL

2.1. SERIALITY AND TRANSITION EXPERIENCE IN ADULTHOOD: A STUDY ON EDUTAINMENT OF SERIALS

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ABSTRACT

The diffusion of entertainment platforms (i.e. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney +, etc.) represents a field of investigation of great interest. What are the reasons for the *Serials* success? On what strategies are *Serials* developed? What forms of learning do they generate and what forms do their educational processes take? The essay tries to focus on the concept of Edutainment, broadening the attention to the aspects of Embedded Education and Indirect Education in Adult Education. To do this we administered a questionnaire to a thousand members of some *fandom* groups of a well-known *Serial* (*This is us*), trying to gather their level of agreement or disagreement with respect to crucial and critical issues related to parenting, adoption and bereavement processing. These themes were chosen because they describe vital transitions that can be positive or negative. From the data emerged the importance of the concept of Seriality and its value for the formation of positive transition competences. At the same time this concept could be used to design training pathways for adults to foster positive transition processes based on problem-solving.

KEYWORDS: Transitions, Seriality, Embedded Education, Media Semiotics and Pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, in the contexts of pedagogical reflection, ample space is given to forms of implicit and indirect education, connected with leisure. The perspective of embedded education has, in fact, shown how the contexts of informal education contribute to educating, offering spaces for the construction of the Self-identity (Rubio Paralles 2007). It is, in fact, the natural contexts that activate processes of ‘taking shape’, configuring the identity of the people. Social psychology has in fact studied a lot the ways in which attitudes, habits and behaviors are developed in an indirect way (Katz 1960).

This happens naturally and spontaneously, in relation, especially to the process of imitation, which is one of the most usual elements of personal formation (Heyes 2001).

About this, the current context of media immersion offers a field of study of primary interest. The ITC company has in fact made this training process even more powerful.

Studies of media semiotics have shown that this process arises from the meeting of two strategies. First, media products respond to people's needs, offering products that seek to bind viewers, intercepting their needs, their value systems and their personal aspirations. Secondly, this process activates a second strategy that contributes to creating new needs, new signification and value systems, new attitudes and aspirations (Bignell 2002).

In our opinion, this is possible in a direct and thematic way, but it also happens indirectly, using specific communication methods and tactics, that are closely linked to the strategy of communication that is used. There is a very strong link, therefore, between the forms that the media take and the embedded education they activate.

2. JUSTIFICATION AND INTEREST OF THE TOPIC

The theme of Edutainment (Aksakala 2015) is strategic today, considering the wide pervasiveness of entertainment in people's daily lives.

The pandemic crisis has led to a significant increase in the aggregation platforms of television products that have occupied the days of many people, during periods of restriction. Consider, for example, that one of the most famous aggregators of multimedia materials in the sector (Netflix) in 2020 alone has increased its subscribers by 34 million, reaching 200 million users and the emerging 'star' of the infotainment market (Twitch), in the same year, has had an increase in viewing hours equal to 59.1% on an annual basis.

This has brought to public attention the question of the educational potential of entertainment. That is, we must reflect on how these contexts of leisure employment contribute in an indirect and incorporated way to the education of people, in terms of constructions of imaginary future selves. It is in our interest to study how these instruments in a continuous and simultaneous way, as demonstrated by all the reflection on media and visual semiotics (McLuhan 1964), are a mirror and a representation of current society and, at the same time, represent "formative agents", favoring the construction of adult identity.

In particular, it seems to us that we must pay attention, following McLuhan's well-known thesis on the forming nature of the medium, to the strategies that try to make the relationship with the multimedia products present in the aggregators of entertainment content continuous. In particular, attention must be focused on *seriality strategy* as multimedia production genre (in the case of television series) and as a loyalty strategy towards content producers (streamers).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Umberto Eco (1984) explained that a (television) series is based on a process of repetition, articulated in self-concluded segments (episode) characterized by self-sufficiency and marked by its own title. Within this container he distinguishes the anthology series that, while maintaining a unity of style, genre and theme, are characterized by a character diversification in each episode. Then there are the so-called *sitcoms*, which are characterized by a spiral trend that repeats itself, made of an initial equilibrium interrupted by a disturbance, a progressive escalation and a resolution of the initial problem that leads to a new equilibrium. Finally there are the real series characterized by fixed elements (usually a protagonist) around which from episode to episode alternate protagonists and different events. This is the case of *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996), where Eco states that enjoyment and entertainment is not characterized by the presence of the novelties of the episode, but is derived almost unconsciously from the permanence and continuity of the fixed elements, in this case by Mrs. Fletcher.

In addition to the Series there are the Serials, characterized by a narrative unit that covers the set of episodes that make it up. It can be of continuous serial type with a long or short seriality (mini-serial), characterized by a weak seriality.

In the case of the *Serial* the trend is cyclical and inserted in a saga, each episode is linked to the other and often interconnected by a twist (cliffhanger) that closes one episode and resumes the next; finally, the serial greatly simplifies the scenic and narrative aspects, but proceeds to a progressive complication of the plot. Uncertainty is the key to sustaining the relationship between audience and serial. The time length of the series brings the viewer closer to the characters, who 'grow' together in the triple concatenation between episode, season and episode.

In the so-called third *Golden Age* (Buonanno 2007), characterized by the presence of OTT multichannel platforms, seriality has become the protagonist of television entertainment that is characterized by new forms of personalized and customized consumption, which however hide some shadows (Castellano & Meimaridis 2021) and neoliberal intentions (Sim 2016).

Precisely the temporal articulation created by the serial – the true protagonist of the entertainment of OTT platforms – represents an element of connection with the formation of the human person.

There is, in fact, a close correlation between the construction of identity and seriality (Marshall, Davis 2014) that shows how the *medium*, with its peculiar configurations, represents the real message (McLuhan 1964). The literature has shown in various ways how there are many connections that relate precisely to the transitions that connect the forms of seriality with the life transitions.

This connection is for many also the basis of the construction of Idols (October 2019) and even of political systems (Goodlad 2012). Some years have shown that the mechanisms of seriality are also the basis of entrepreneurship (Lindgren, Packendorff 2003), following the definition of creativity of Guildford (1950) who interprets this attitude as the ability to reduplicate successful solutions in different contexts.

In the literature there is therefore the certainty that the massive diffusion of seriality is possible because it takes up some fundamental characteristics of the formation of the human person and, on the other, the use of the serial mechanism contributes, in turn, to determining specific forms of education.

4. OUTLINED AIMS

The research aims to show how the seriality strategy has a fundamental role in the viewer loyalty. But, above all, it wants to show that seriality is directly connected with the process of education.

In another way, people build themselves through the seriality processes. This would show not only the success of *Serials* today, but also their formative power for the construction of people's adult identity.

Studying seriality is therefore very useful for the design of continuous education paths of people. The *transition* of meanings that takes place between television serials and adult audiences, in fact, can offer interesting considerations on transitions in general (from those of life to those of work, i.e.) and on the forms that can favor continuous, fluid and successful transitions (Boffo 2018).

5. METHOD

5.1. Sample

In relation to the multi-channel nature of the media leisure experience, it was decided to use the world of *fandoms* as a Research Universe. In fact, the mass diffusion of *social*

networks has favored the creation of largely available groups of people who share an interest in a specific TV series (Scaglioni 2006). *Tele-cinephiles*, figures that have been attested precisely in relation to the Seriality phenomenon, are often dedicated to the activity of solitary *binge watching* on devices, other than television (Cardini 2014). The socialization activities of the individual experience, instead, use *social networks*, participating in blogs and *social* pages dedicated to TV series, writing in forums, publishing *fanvideos*, writing *fanfiction*, drawing *fanart*, directing *fanzines* or practicing *cosplaying*, up to comment live on the episodes, activating in the search for *Easter egg* and sharing theories and *spoilers*.

However, it should be remembered that the phenomenon of *fandoms* is older than social networks and dates back to the first form of narrative seriality, linked to *appendix novels*. Today, however, it acquires pervasive and broad forms and, above all, represents a research universe of primary interest for its function as a synecdoche of the entire Serial audience (Mittell 2015).

For this reason, an opportunistic sample of a thousand people from Italian and international groups belonging to fandoms of his television series was used. The present study is linked to the biographical data collected in a broader research, that concerned the declarative aspects related to the construction of adult identity in relation to a *Serial*, whose protagonists covered the 30-40 age group (*This is us*).

5.2. Survey tool, data collection and data tools

A questionnaire consisting of two sections was prepared: the first single close biographical part (3 items: gender, age, educational level) and the scaled second part, made by 12 items with a Likert scale of 6 options (strongly disagree – strongly agree) in relation to some statements, concerning specific thematic aspects, related to a specific *Serial*.

We chose the serial *This is us*, a *dramedy* created by Dan Fogelman and produced by *20th Century Fox Television*, which has won a lot of awards, aired since 2016, consisting of 91 episodes, divided in 6 seasons. Numerous studies have highlighted the formative value of this series for the management of family bereavement (William, 2017), for the positive configuration of parental tasks (Bobic 2019), for the reflection on the experience of adoption (Shepard 2017).

The three themes are three paradigmatic examples of transition – as we will explain during the discussion – that can show the forming effects of the seriality experience. Wanting to deepen each of these three themes, synthetic expressions were built, starting from the Serial plot, which were submitted to the judgment of the interviewees. Below we provide a table that associates the Items to the issues that we wanted to investigate.

Table 1- Semantic connection of Items

n.	Item	Meaning
1.	«During Kevin's preadolescent years, Jack tries not to repeat his father's mistakes by showing his son that he trusts him and demands that his expectations are not disappointed»	Parental experience
2.	«Looking at the way Jack approaches Kate, Kevin and Randall, I think it's right for a parent to try to maintain a dialogue with their children rather than imposing their own parental role»	Parental experience
3.	«After struggling with feelings of guilt, Kate believes it's better to adopt than to try for a new pregnancy»	Adoption
4.	«I can empathise with Toby when, not believing he's good enough for a son with special needs and unable to accept his illness, he ends up pushing Kate away.»	Parental experience

5.	«When Rebecca sees William's progress, she makes the tough decision to keep him out of Randall's life fearing that he will take him away from her. She then decides that living with this guilt is better than running the risk of having to separate from her son»	Parental experience
6.	«By identifying with Jack and Rebecca, I think I too would have made the mistake of underestimating the importance of Randall's belonging to a minority group and neglecting dialogue about the social issues facing his community»	Adoption
7.	«Shauna decides to leave Deja when she realises that her "new family" can offer her a better life»	Adoption
8.	«I appreciated Randall and Beth's decision to abandon the idea of adopting a child in order to choose to foster a teenager»	Adoption
9.	«The loss of both father figures, Jack and William, played a crucial role in Randall's psychological breakdowns»	Bereavement selfcare
10.	«I appreciated the way Rebecca managed to cope with the death of her husband by putting the loss experienced by her children first»	Bereavement selfcare
11.	«There are two reasons why Kevin insists on integrating Uncle Nicky into the family: the desire to make up for his father's mistakes and the desire for a reference figure who can remind him of Jack»	Bereavement selfcare
12.	«I felt how much Kate's life has been affected by the guilt she carries since the day her father died»	Bereavement selfcare

The item statements ask to judge some Serial events. They want to bring out how the narrated events create attitudes and beliefs towards strategic situations in people's lives. We wanted to understand if the serial narrative contributed to building a system of meaning, by process of identification and distancing from the narrative plot.

The questionnaire was submitted in Italian and English versions, in relation to the fandom nationality. The dosing period lasted two weeks in Spring 2021.

The survey was created by *Google Moduls*, inserting the questionnaire among the treads of the fandom. The data was reprocessed using *Excel Statistic*.

We got a total of one thousand responses (69,7% for the Italian version and 30,3% for the English version).

6. RESULTS

The questionnaire was answered by 9% of males and 91% of females. 36.5% are under the age of 30, 37% belong to the 30-50 age group, the remaining 26.5% are over 50 years old. 32.5% have a secondary school qualification, while 35.5% have a university degree.

Table 2- Summary table of the collected data

Item	Mean	Median	Mode	SQM
1	4.71	5	4	1.08
2	5.14	5	5	0.94
3	4.11	4	5	1.50
4	3.77	4	5	1.54
5	4.26	5	6	1.61
6	4.06	4	5	1.62
7	4.81	5	6	0.10
8	5.34	6	6	0.88
9	5.15	6	6	1.16
10	4.75	5	5	1.23
11	4.94	5	6	1.20
12	4.95	5	6	1.19

The *P-value* is 0.0027.

7. DISCUSSION

In general, it can be observed that the sample tends to agree with the statements proposed by the questionnaire. The feelings in front of the topics (sentiment) covered is medium high.

The level of empathy towards the problematic situations at the existential level demonstrated in the *Serial* experience is therefore high. It can therefore be said that the *Serial* success intercepts the predispositions of the public and, at the same time, contributes to forming through strategies of confirmation the systems of meaning of the spectators. The perception data collected, in fact, does not only ask to express an opinion, but to express a judgment towards peculiar *critical incidents* and problematic situations, which recall the theme of personal competence and its development.

In general, the study, which has a high rate of significance and manifests SQM data, showing a low dispersion of responses, shows the strategic role of multimedia narratives based on serial mechanisms in order to construction of meanings. At stake are not formal learning, but the development of components of judgment. Through the responses that investigate issues related to vital transitions (from youth to parenthood, from biological parenting to extended parenting, from sonship to the construction of personal identity after the death of parental figures) it can be seen how serial narratives have a fundamental role in the construction of the personal identity of adults.

It can therefore be said that seriality has a strong impact on the formation of the skills of the transition of people in the vital area. The process of identification, which seriality promotes, built on a process of transition in fading, follows and resumes the process of transition in fading typical of human existence. This proves the value of Luhan's Medium theory.

8. LIMITS OF THIS PAPER

The limit that we can record is relative to a longitudinal dimension. It is not possible to investigate whether vision has influenced the modification of feelings towards problematic situations.

About this, we are planning a qualitative research with in-depth interviews and focus groups, in order to have qualitative elements. They allow us to better understand the judgments evolution and the learning elements that are activated by the seriality experience. This is consistent with the intention of research that wants to study the development and mobilization of personal moral competences.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

We can say that the seriality success is realized by the ability that serial narration has to intercept the feelings of the viewers (sentiment). But that's not all. Serial phenomena also manage to generate changes in viewers' perceptions, developing judgments in the ethical and moral fields. Above all, because of the precise form they take in time and space, they manage to become forms of *Embedded Edutainment* that educate people to a model of continuous transition.

In other words, *Serials* are tools of indirect education that goes from life to screen and from screen to life. They represent a strong system of signification.

The study of the narrative plots of the series can be useful to diagnose the current situation of people, their value systems, their process of Self configuration.

This shows that pedagogical reflection can find great benefits from the study of Media Semiotics.

This also shows that it is necessary to understand the Edutainment concept more broadly and extensively, not only for its value of direct and intentional education, but for the indirect effects that its narrative and functioning forms generate.

Finally, the study shows that the success of training actions with regard to the positive competences of transition must use serial and continuous strategies. Only interventions that can unfold in time and space – as the *Serials* seriality does – can develop positive feelings and adequate judgment, developing a problem-solving attitude into the life.

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