

# MAPPING ROMANZO CRIMINALE. AN EPIC NARRATIVE ECOSYSTEM?

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## ABSTRACT

*Romanzo Criminale* is one of the few recent Italian media products that has emerged as a societal phenomenon and as a vehicle for the exportation of a national culture. It is a complex narrative which extends in time and space due to its various adaptations and intermedial crossovers. Following the path of complexity, drawing on Edgar Morin's work, *Romanzo Criminale* will be thought of as a complex system. As precedent studies on the intertwining of official and grassroots discourses show, *Romanzo Criminale* becomes a complex world, with its boundaries and internal organization. This paper will show that *Romanzo Criminale* can be studied as

a *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005), or a semiotic space defined by and which encourages the intertwining of texts and audience appropriations, creating an epic process. Some methodological perspectives used for mapping this phenomenon will be discussed, namely Franco Moretti's distant reading.

## KEYWORDS

*Romanzo Criminale*; complexity; distant reading; semiosphere; Epos; fandom.

## INTRODUCTION

*Romanzo Criminale* (2008-2010) is one of the few recent Italian media products that has emerged as a societal phenomenon and as a vehicle for the exportation of a national culture. The story of Il Libanese (Francesco Montanari), Il Freddo (Vinicio Marchioni) and Dandi (Alessandro Roja), petty criminals who decide to take over the illegal drug trade in the city of Rome and develop ties with the mafia and the highest powers, is taken from actual historic events. The basis of this epic narrative is not a text, but a rich collection of multiple stories and suburban legends, which became a collective Italian heritage. *Romanzo Criminale* portrays a topical moment within Italian history, the Years of Lead<sup>1</sup>, that are still an obscure chapter and space for discussions about political identity for many Italians<sup>2</sup>. Due to its various adaptations and intermedial crossovers, it is a complex narrative, which extends in time and space. In my hypothesis, this phenomenon can be compared to a neo-epic process, because of its multi-layer composition, its oral features and its role in the definition of a national identity. In fact, when analysing the impact of *Romanzo Criminale* in Italian culture, a strong interaction of official and grassroots discourses can be underlined (Boni 2011, 2013). Through parodies, discussions in boards, and fan fiction, viewers prolong the pleasure of the text, reinforce their social links with fellow fans by finding and sharing information about the content and by working out collectively new interpretations.

This paper will show that *Romanzo Criminale* can be studied as a *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005), or a semiotic space defined by and which encourages the intertwining of texts and audience appropriations. My aim is to understand how the interaction of texts and audiences causes the emergence of a complex system: drawing on Edgar Morin's work, methodological tools will be considered for the analysis of this phenomenon, in order to understand how it can be mapped (Morin 2007). The concept of epic will be explored for the description of this cultural and semiotic process and a methodology fit for its description will be defined. Some perspectives will be examined, focusing on Franco Moretti's work on *Distant Reading* (Moretti 2000, 2005, 2013). In the hypothesis

1 The Years of Lead was a period of socio-political disorder in Italy that lasted from the late 1960s into the early 1980s.

2 As seen in a "certain tendency" of national cinema starting at the turn of the century: *The Best of Youth* (Marco Tullio Giordana, Italy, 2003), *Good Morning, Night* (Marco Bellocchio, Italy, 2003), *My Brother is an Only Child* (Daniele Luchetti, Italy, 2007).

carried out here, distant reading can be the answer for such thing as an epic process. More broadly, it could be of use for the analysis of the interaction of television series, films and their audiences.

## 01 SEMIOSPHERE AND POLYSYSTEMS

*Romanzo Criminale* is a novel (De Cataldo 2002), a film (Placido 2005), and a TV series (Sollima 2008-2010). The series can be studied as a complex narrative (Mittell 2006, 2012), which is typically found in the contemporary media panorama, not only because of its stylistic features, but also because it makes good use of convergence culture strategies, like transmedia (Jenkins 2006). In *Romanzo Criminale's* vast and multi-layered storytelling, production, distribution and brand strategies converge, thus complexifying its seriality. Therefore, terms such as adaptation and transmedia do not suffice if we want to explain the pervasiveness of *Romanzo Criminale* in social discourse, resulting from the intertwining of industrial and fan practices. Also the strength of the story, which is firmly rooted into Italian culture has to be considered as a main reason for the success of this media phenomenon. Over the years, *Romanzo Criminale* has been reworked, imitated and remixed by fans who have transformed it into a constantly growing environment, sparking debates about history and politics (Boni 2011 and 2013). Various forms of grassroots textuality such as fan fictions, parodic videos, homages and artefacts of a heterogeneous nature build up *Romanzo Criminale* as a culture and as a world. From a pragmatic viewpoint, these activities have the role of domesticating the work: they are "deliberations" which build up the film—the book and the TV series — as a text and as a discourse (Soulez 2011). These activities also expand the work in the social sphere by constantly "deferring" its meaning and reframing it in localized contexts. Beyond textual, productive, distributive and branding mechanisms, typical of contemporary Italian "quality television" strategies (Scaglioni and Barra 2013), the permanency of these discourses in the public sphere can be analysed.

The elements that make up *Romanzo Criminale* are interconnected in a semiotic space, each one of them is linked with the others. Official texts, such as Giancarlo De Cataldo's novel, Michele Placido's film, and the series produced by Sky Cinema, share the same space (the world of *Romanzo Criminale*) that each of them help to define. In this environment, grassroots productions have the right to exist as well. Consequently, a

viewer's experience will not always be influenced by each text, but it *could be* at any moment. This influence could produce localized and specific interpretations.

It is worth noting that Yuri Lotman's notion of semiosphere is characterized by different speeds of functioning: notably, the borders, space of translation and creolization, always transform faster than the center (Lotman 2005). If we consider *Romanzo Criminale* as a semiosphere, we can see how fan practices contribute in creating a transformation or adaptation process to local contexts, that nevertheless define the identity of the whole. For example, fan dubbing in regional dialects does not have the same impact for every viewer. Yet, every time that these videos are watched on YouTube, it is possible to *relocate Romanzo Criminale* into a local culture through the use of language. Regional dialects bring out particular interpretations that shift, be it imperceptibly, the global meaning of the whole system, *for that one user*. Thanks to *spreadability* (Jenkins et al. 2013), predominantly through online channels, individual interpretations can proliferate and reach broader audiences than originally targeted. YouTube videos and discussions in boards function as entryways that guide how the work is read and contribute to differences in meaning.

User comments are often the space for sharing knowledge concerning more than one field, and are, for the fan, necessary for understanding whether the movie is worth the price of the ticket or the DVD, or for sharing their ideas after the viewing experience. They are *paratexts* (see Gray 2010, see also Mittell 2012). Using a systemic approach, though, they can be thought of as mini-worlds that, as a whole, build up *Romanzo Criminale's* semiotic space when paired with the official texts and constitute it as a world. Therefore, *Romanzo Criminale* emerges as a process that comes in a variety of meanings, emerging in specific moments and according to an individual's experience. At the same time, a global image of it, a systemic image, consolidates over time, due to the superimposition of single processes. In my example, up to this point, *Romanzo Criminale's* spatialization can take the form of a *polysystem*, or a set of concentric circles.

The concept of polysystem, elaborated by Itamar Even-Zohar, implies that the study of groups of canonic and non-canonic works highlights the appearance of organizing instances that are mainly contextual, resulting from shared practices from communities and institutions, within a larger semiotic space. Literary works are not considered separately, but as parts of the literary system. And each system can influence others, notably in the case of translation, phenomenon that

has to be considered within a network of effects and causes, instead of a transition from a source to a target text. The coherence of *Romanzo Criminale* is a matter of point of view, as it appears when considering the following phenomena:

- circulation and migration of fragments across discursive environments;
- remix and mash-up practices;
- counterfactual and counterfactual worlds in fan productions;
- translation phenomena.

*Romanzo Criminale* is an environment in which a culture's values are reworked. It is a moment of culture, perfectly working, sometimes incoherent, but systemic. It is important to mention that, from a pragmatic viewpoint, in order to study mechanisms of meaning-making, researchers should think intermedially and transmedially. A viewer's experience is built within a network. For example, links with a certain "poliziottesco" cinema should be considered: poliziottesco has become, over the years, a cult genre as user comments show<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, *Romanzo Criminale the series* has to be interpreted as a product of Sky, whose brand is adopted. The intermedial nature of the series requires the viewer to travel across many worlds, and cultures: viewers are "cultural omnivores."

## 02 A NEO-EPIC PROCESS

The contemporary media panorama is characterized by the flow of information, opinions, comments and emotions in online networks. The elaboration of our experience of a text is determined by its expression and through community exchanges. For example, a growing number of people share their opinions about a film online. Therefore, emotions are no longer intimate; they leave a visible trace that can be reinterpreted by a global community. Within this conceptual framework, fan productions have to be studied as forms of knowledge that give a new media form to the filmic experience. They incarnate an emotion within a network of discourses.

These actions are indicative of the convergence era as described by Jenkins: storytelling is collective, marked by multiple authors through various platforms, and by the circulation of media fragments. It can be interesting to compare the contemporary phenomenon to a resurgence of the epic form (see also Wu Ming 2008). In ancient epics, as it is known, bardic

3 See discussion boards such as Gente di rispetto: <http://www.gentedirispetto.com/forum/showthread.php?17828-Romanzo-Criminale-la-serie> (2014/12/26).

performances took place during banquets and contributed to the passing on of mythical songs. Bringing together heterogeneous fragments, bards' songs were collective memories, distinct from personal recollections of individual events, and gave a sense of global belonging. In his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1820-1829), Hegel defines the term "epic" as any event that is connected to a world and a nation, and expresses a nation's conscience (Lafaye 2003: 238). Indeed, *Romanzo Criminale* seems to function as a "song of a collectivity which attempts to gain a coherence, in the sense that a nation is progressively acknowledging its place in History"<sup>4</sup>. Notably, the oral dimension of the epic seems to be a feature of contemporary media. The interweaving of individual memories and collective experience is also at the core of today's grassroots activities that can be found on the Web, like the production and exchange of memes, often used in spreadable culture. Henry Jenkins compares transmedia storytelling to Bible stories (spread through stained-glass windows, frescos, and medieval performances): this new form of storytelling, typical of contemporary culture, possesses characteristics of a new orality, because it is free from the "logic of writing". Performance, and not only reading, is at the core of transmedia experiences: more similar to Lego bricks than a text, the narrative is pieced together by users, through the matching of fragmentary elements. Ideally, in a transmedia phenomenon, the journey across the multiple media devices that build it up is as important as an encounter with a single piece of narrative.

This oral dimension is central in epic phenomena (Dupont 1998): banquets were, for Ancient Greeks, a main ritual of civil society, and their ephemeral nature, that no book could frame or write down, was part of their cultural role. Within these collective performances, *how* a story was told was as important as the content of the storytelling. Consequently, not only the aesthetics of epic narrative can be underlined, but also the fact that epic is a cultural process. The transmedia nature of contemporary media ecosystems enhances the performative feature, bringing the story closer to users: parodies and discourses in boards show how a story can be constantly retold, without losing its cultural meaning.

The genealogy of epic phenomena is complex: in order to understand its composition, we need to take into account a process that grows over time, a process that is constituted by multiple, local, ephemeral fragments (Lord 2000). Over

the years, and thanks to its link to Italian history, *Romanzo Criminale* has become a polyphonic space, able to gather various texts, by multiple authors, functioning as a catalyst of grassroots productions, and providing answers concerning viewers' identity. For example, young viewers admit they felt closer to the characters because they looked like their parents in old pictures, or that, starting to collect information about one of the many songs that appear in the TV series, they discovered a part of Italian history that they did not know. Moreover, many discussions in boards expand from the analysis of the movie or the series to discussions about contemporary politics. Another reason for considering *Romanzo Criminale* a neo-epic phenomenon is because it provides answers to every member of the society in which it is made, functioning and spreading within a digital network that complicates its already transmedial nature.

### 03 THE HYPOTHESIS: FOR AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF COMPLEXITY

Our object can be compared to a serial ecosystem, or a product characterized by continuous replicability, an open structure and a permanent ability to expand (Pescatore and Innocenti 2012, Bioni 2013, Pescatore et al. 2014). Its expansion is made both by narrative and non-narrative elements: fans' emotions, for example, have a central role, if we consider them as performances. Within this framework, the nature of fan appropriations and rewriting practices can be studied, and a typology can be built. If we choose to limit ourselves to a textual approach, it would be possible to use the grid of hypertextual practices (Genette 1982), which would allow us to interpret the various forms of fan discourse through the categories of imitation and transformation. However, considering the phenomenon's transmedia features, the limits of such an approach are revealed. In fact, Genette assumed the existence of a hypotext (a source text) and at least one hypertext (a derivative text). As a narrative like *Romanzo Criminale* was reworked over the years by various players, its hypotext – the book – became lost in a serialization of linked adaptations, and was eventually replaced by a world. Instead of referring to only one text, derivative works refer more often to *Romanzo Criminale's* world, following a process of transcendence of the work (Genette 1994, see also Re 2012). When we study parodies that imitate *Romanzo Criminale* with a serious or satirical intention, the object is not only a text, but a set of characters with transfictional lives (Saint-Gelais 2011); for

4 "Chant d'une collectivité qui cherche à acquérir une cohérence, dans la mesure où un peuple prend progressivement conscience de sa place dans l'Histoire" (my translation), Bafaro, 1997.

example, *Il Libanese*, *Freddo*, *Dandi*, and their actions have become mythical through the texts that depict their story. Not one text, then, but a network of discourse, a polyphonic and polycentric space.

The heterogeneous features of media devices, the storytelling longevity and its dilation in directions that often are unpredictable for its authors require researchers to adopt an epistemology of complexity. According to Edgar Morin, to adopt complexity means to conceive the different parts of a system as intertwined. Complex (from the Latin, *complexus*) is what is woven together. If one chooses to think of *Romanzo Criminale* as a complex system, or as an ecosystem, a method has to be found, capable of singling out the study of different parts (medium-specific questions) from the study of the whole (the movements through which the serial phenomenon is understood as a world). Unquestionably, the two perspectives are linked together: one cannot be thought of separately from the other.

The hypothesis of *Romanzo Criminale* as a neo-epic process brings me to look for a way to keep together a vast set of objects of various nature, but especially two kinds of perspectives. In order to understand the process and its serial complexity, then to validate the neo-epic hypothesis, a microscopic and a macroscopic perspective are needed. On the one hand, Jenkins' ethnography of fan practices can be considered a tool for a microscopic view: it will help describe the interaction of audiences and texts. For example, a close analysis of the parodies, remixes, and discourses in fan discussion boards can shed light on a variety of appropriations and rewritings. On the other hand, it appears from the results of a genetical typology that the single fragments do not offer enough insight concerning the evolution of the transmedial whole: following the path of complexity, one needs to know how the whole develops over time. In this sense, Franco Moretti's work on distant reading can be useful in order to understand the serial phenomenon (Moretti 2000, 2005). Distant reading means

to undertake the analysis of small phenomena from afar, so that messages reveal little more than positions and linkages within social space [...] distance is [...] not an obstacle, but a specific form of knowledge: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models (Moretti 2005: 1).

## 04 SPATIAL THINKING

In the *Atlas of European Novel 1899-1900* (1998) Moretti considers the potential of a model for a geography of literature. Fernand Braudel's total history, developed in the cultural framework of the *Annales*, claimed that geography could explain cultural and economic history, since it focuses on long-term processes instead of single events, and it highlights phenomena taking place in geographical areas. Notably, Braudel raised the importance of the need for artistic atlases (Braudel 1959). According to Moretti, this is true even for literary history: atlases, or collections of maps, are visual representations that make connections visible, thus changing the way researchers look at texts. They make visible relationships and patterns that would otherwise be missed. Maps are not inert containers or boxes in which history "takes place", but active forces that fill and shape the literary field.

Moretti suggests the interpretation of relationships, patterns and recurrences within big literary corpora, and their visualization through maps. In *Maps, Graphs, Trees* (2005) he uses diagrams in order to model the evolution of features across a large corpus (i.e., all the occidental novels written in the nineteenth century). Moretti describes the result as a deliberate process of reduction and abstraction. In fact, when the object of knowledge takes the form of a tree, or a spectrum of variations, its structure no longer has similarities with any of the real objects that constitute it, and cannot emerge from any of them taken individually. The virtues of this modelling operation, giving visibility and coherence to a network of elements, underline the "systematic correlation between form and history".

The origins of cartography in art history can be found in Malraux's imaginary museum, and in Benjamin's and Warburg's atlas projects. These projects result from a model or a new mode of thinking, which was born with the photographic archive, and is able to represent space or sorting out information (i.e., gathering, classification, disposition in series) (Castro 2009: 2). Starting at the end of the 1990's, a geopolitical or topographical turn in Film Studies investigates the localization of film space. Within this field, researchers study, from a geographical perspective, new platforms, the omnipresence of digital images, and the growing role of world cinema. At the same time, it highlights the mechanisms through which informal logics shape the circulation of media content beyond centre-periphery connections, invading lateral spaces, and different places (Lobato 2012).

The renewed academic interest for serial phenomena in audiovisual research is complemented by some significant

attempts that validate, at least in part, the cartographic model. This is what cartographic software such as *Lignes de temps*, created by the Institute of Research and Innovation at Pompidou Center, tries to do. The software lets the user visualize a film on a timeline, and gives her or him access to each shot, represented as a segment. The user can colour code each segment to create an immediate view of the studied variation. In an experimental analysis carried out in parallel to my doctoral research in 2009, I attempted to map out, on a timeline, *Romanzo Criminale*, the film and first season of the series, by selecting meaningful variations such as the presence of female characters, sequences of “male bonding”, and the “music clip” sequences that appear at the end of each episode.<sup>5</sup> The observation of the timeline helps measure, through a graphic form, how frequently variations occur. This operation can be thought of as a sort of distant reading. This approach proves to be consequential, especially with regards to the TV series, thought of as the sum of episodes (many timelines can be superimposed in order to compare the frequency through the different episodes). Despite having a certain distance from the text, this software did not allow me to verify the validity of my “epic” hypothesis, since it does not allow the user to work with extratextual material (such as fan fictions, fan art, etc.). Even if some attempts were made (the option to visually compare a shot and a painting, for example), *Lignes de temps* is not a tool for intermediality since it does not allow for the comparison of heterogeneous media. Therefore, *Lignes de temps* is not appropriate for the analysis of TV series’ real uses. For a series, rumours that surround it have a central role: anticipation, obsession and anxiety that circulates among fans between episodes. An epistemology of complexity requires researchers to look for an object’s internal and external links. Therefore, how can distant reading be used for a television series?

It should be noted that, in 1997, Barbara Klinger raised the potential qualities of a Braudel-inspired total history. Methodologically, this approach would require, according to Klinger, a joint study of the various fields that define the role of a film within an epoch and a culture (Klinger 1997). For *Romanzo Criminale*, this would mean employing an analysis describing the variations and recurrences within a complex serial object (by definition, made up of many fragments and having a duration over time).

5 [http://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RomanzoCriminale\\_annotatiions.pdf](http://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RomanzoCriminale_annotatiions.pdf)  
[http://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RomanzoCriminale\\_annotatiions.pdf](http://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RomanzoCriminale_annotatiions.pdf)

## 05 MAPPING THE IMAGINARY WORLD’S SPATIAL CONFIGURATION

According to Moretti, maps can be two very different things: on the one hand, they are tools which can be used to study a literary chronotope, or the fictional space-time configuration, (Bakhtin 1981) – and in this case what matters are boundaries, geometry, spatial taboos and main roads shaping a novel’s internal processes, or the semiotic sphere around which a story aggregates and organizes. On the other hand, maps are tools used for studying literature in the historical space. Moretti suggests three models of diagrams: spatial, quantitative, and morphologic.

First, from a textual perspective, mapping can be considered a tool to define the environment corresponding to the story. Analysts extract pertinent elements from the narrative in order to make maps and diagrams, constructing a model of the fictional universe. The same idea can be found in Mark J.P. Wolf’s study of fictional worlds, described through the concepts of immersion, saturation and overflow (Wolf 2012). In this framework, a first answer to the epic hypothesis can be found if we consider that epic is an aesthetic form or narrative process. For example, think of the strong connotation of environments as spaces of conflict in *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-): the imaginary continent of Westeros is a theatre for battles between individuals or groups that aim at conquering the central power. Fans map the space identifying the different centres in constant struggle. The essential geography of *Romanzo Criminale* – made up of real spaces, such as Tor di Nona, Infernetto, Testaccio, San Cosimato, Trastevere, the Magliana bridge... – corresponds to Il Libanese’s dream of conquering the city and shapes the characters’ relationship to their opponents and allies, coming from different regions in Italy. Also, Libanese’s Rome is built through intertextual references that allow viewers to add nostalgic meanings to a (mostly cinematographic) past they know, especially for what concerns references to the “poliziottesco” style.

It is also worth mentioning that mapping is a very common fan practice. Maps are grassroots forms of knowledge that viewers like to share online, probably because there is a need to organize the complex set of textual, intertextual and intermedial information. Maps allow fans to dispose of a form which is more than the sum of the various texts and that can explain interrelations of disparate elements, their localization in real-life spaces and their role in the evolution of the narrative phenomenon. Also, maps are easily spreadable online. The collaborative organization of textual information under the form of a map can be found on the fan-made website

Davinotti, constructed using fans' local expertise<sup>6</sup>. In this website, maps of *Romanzo Criminale's* universe present the gang's favourite bars, crime scenes, and historical events mentioned in the novel, in the film or in the TV series (with unavoidable overlapping). They also give fans the opportunity to go and find actual film or series locations<sup>7</sup>.

Spatial cartography helps confirm my hypothesis. The epic model provides a collective answer to political issues (see also Goyet 2006), emerging from struggles of opposing factions or the struggle of an individual against stronger forces. Epic is a titanic venture, told through a reworking of legendary material, concerning historical places and events. Maps could make these struggles apparent. However, tracing the itinerary of a specific chronotope is not the only type of mapping that can be studied (also, the example of Rome lived in by the TV series could be considered mainly a geometrical rather than a geographical impulse). It shows how a text's world is built, yet it offers a partial image of *Romanzo Criminale* as a complex intermedial and transmedia phenomenon.

## 06 QUANTITATIVE DIAGRAMS

In the second case, Moretti studies the system of novel genres as a whole. A distant reading is made possible, here, through visualizing charts and graphs of complex data, extracted from large corpora.

Quantitative diagrams could explain a literary genre's tendency to mutate over time, and in *Romanzo Criminale's* case, the intertwining of centres and peripheries characteristic of a semiosphere, and of an epic process. The analysis has to move away from the single event, and the text. Instead, if it focuses on cycles and duration (an operation encouraged by serial phenomena such as TV series, transfictional characters or cultural series), and on sets of textual productions superimposed over time, the emerging image is quite different. Richard Saint-Gelais suggests models in the form of trees in order to explain such phenomena in literature (Saint-Gelais 2011), such as the long-lived Emma Bovary and Sherlock Holmes.

Sarah Sepulchre, researcher at the University of Louvain, wrote about a *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) "constellation," a term

used to explain the set of official digital platforms that accompany the famous AMC TV series. For *Romanzo Criminale*, a similar type of cartography can be observed in producers' strategies, like sharing infographics with chronologies on the official Sky Cinema Facebook page. When considering the transmedia nature of the phenomenon, it appears that there is a delicate balance between fragments and a whole. Cycles can be found in transfictional phenomena, expanding over time. By definition, transmedia storytelling cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts: it transcends the medium, and is conceived as a complex universe. Therefore, a transmedia phenomenon can be mapped, starting from the inventory of its existing forms. It is worth noting that transfictional phenomena such as expansion, modification and transposition (Ryan 2013) can also include user-generated content (Scolari 2009). Following this approach, notions such as author or textual analysis shift to the periphery of the analysis. Yet, cyclic effects can be studied: they take place over the long term, and often beyond any author's control, such as Morin's emergences. For *Romanzo Criminale*, we can think of the consolidation of the emotional power of nostalgic music, started in the choice for the movie soundtrack, and culminating in the massive reuse of the TV series' clip sequences by Youtubers<sup>8</sup>.

Cycles that are built from temporary structures within history's continuous flow may or may not result in repetition, but they always result in regularity, order, and shape (e.g., literary genres). Within this framework, *Romanzo Criminale* cannot be interpreted as the sum of individualized entities, but instead as a life cycle, determined by a set of texts and their interpretations, stratified over time, the validity of which depends on generations (of readers, of viewers) and on "general mutations of the spiritual climate." Also, these forms have to be studied together, following reciprocal filiations. Over time, the microlevel of stylistic mutations can be observed. This articulation has to be done, for serial phenomena, over an extended period of time.<sup>9</sup>

## 07 MORPHOLOGICAL DIAGRAMS

Texts are not adequate objects of knowledge for history and literary theory, according to Moretti. Instead, diagrams can be

6 <http://www.davinotti.com/index.php?forum=80013765> (26/12/2014).

7 Such a geographical obsession can be found in the game *RC-The Game*, developed with flash technology as a part of the marketing strategy carried out for the first season of the series in 2008. Players take the role of one of the criminals and have to perform different missions in various cities of the Italian peninsula.

8 Multiple clips featuring the death of Il Terribile (Marco Giallini) circulate on the Internet and have from 6.700 to 210.000 views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIXBBMrck6Y>) (27/12/2014).

9 Braudel's « longue durée » (1959).

considered objects of knowledge, since they allow researchers to grasp a large set of data, and to permit evolutionary processes appear. The fourth chapter of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* describes morphological diagrams that have the function of making literary mutations visible. Moretti notes that, differently from Darwinian evolution, cultural change is made from syncretism and divergence. It receives a strong push from the assemblage of different traditions. Comparing this thought with the importation processes studied in media theory, a complementarity with Jenkins' description of spreadable media emerges. Using Appadurai's concept of commodity, Jenkins remarks that, within Internet networks, the exchange value of media content differs from their use value (Jenkins et al. 2013).

In evolutionary theory, morphological analysis and historical reconstruction are two dimensions of the same tree. The vertical axis marks the passing of time, and the horizontal the entity of the morphological diversification. Both axes show an endless unfolding of separation and distinction. A species' characteristics, by branching out, create a morpho-space, ceaselessly growing. For example, Moretti identifies "clues" as the morphological feature specific to English detective novels.

A research project on "narrative ecosystems" carried out at the University of Bologna (Pescatore and Innocenti 2012, 2013, 2014) uses morphological diagrams inspired from Darwin's work. The biotic model suggested by Guglielmo Pescatore examines the evolution of a TV series' element, such as characters, over time. The frequency of a character's appearances onscreen, their place in the narrative, and their relationships to each other are studied using an approach that considers the series as a form of life. The model shows that a series' existence, just like an ecosystem, is guaranteed by mutations and adaptations to external clashes, over time.

Morphological diagrams, in this case, help identify the directions a series takes. Within this framework, the intermedial phenomenon of adaptations is interpreted as an evolutionary adaptation to historical context and to environmental pressures. This is always true if one thinks in terms of genre. For example, when considering *Romanzo Criminale* within a "neo-epic" genre, from an aesthetic and semio-pragmatic point of view, variations of this genre could be studied within Sky serial productions<sup>10</sup>.

Also, and more interestingly, this model could be proven valid for the analysis of a series' transmedia extensions and for the intertwining of official and grassroots productions.

Textual variations across different aids can be intersected with social discourse. In the case of *Romanzo Criminale*, microscopic features can be found within each of its various media incarnations. Therefore, the variations of these features, and adaptations, including grassroots productions can be studied.

## 08 AN EXAMPLE: VIEWERS' EMOTIONS, A TRANSVERSAL FEATURE

*Romanzo Criminale's* world was created from the superimposition, over at least eight years, of various authorial figures, intertwined social discourse, and fragments having a relational nature (think of the following relationships: viewer-text, viewer-world, but also viewer-other viewers). *Romanzo Criminale* as a system made up of these many (narrative and non-narrative) intersections keeps its vital strength over time. From my observation, the role of emotions in defining the neo-epic phenomenon and its spreadability over time appears. Grassroots productions can be considered as traces of emotions: thus, the neo-epic process at the core of *Romanzo Criminale's* system can be analyzed starting from their presence.

The hybrid nature of emotions, between narrativity and non-narrativity, raises interesting issues when analysing the case of *Romanzo Criminale*. Emotion is always present in viewers' comments. Declarations of love and hate are frequent (several fans propose to Dandi; others produce fan art *against* Donatella (Giovanna Di Rauso), a female dealer introduced in the series' second season and absent from the movie. Furthermore, some fan fiction authors state that the reason they started writing was the need to overcome Il Libanese's death.

In playful productions, such as parodies or pastiches, emotions also play an important role, which emerge in the choice of language. Editing techniques and the addition of strongly connoted music reveal and communicate pathos, violence, romantic love, or nostalgia, but also the desire to produce fan art in order to expand the story world (some fans state that they write in order to participate in the "achievement of the work's beauty"). Media content is not modelled by viewers' emotions; on the contrary, emotions have an influence on the appearance of "emergences," or unforeseen results. Emotions are not always considered acceptable in users' discourses. In some "poliziottesco" film fan communities, coolness may be considered a quality, and first-degree fan emotions are seen as the proof of an excessive affection that blinds critical skills. Thus, in expressing their opinion on the novel, the film, or the TV series some

10 See also Eugeni 2014.



fans declare war on emotion. According to these users, opinions are based on impartiality and universality, as well as on the desire to contribute to the growth of a collective knowledge. Acknowledging the limits between personal and universal does not always go without misunderstandings. Some fans claim to have control of their emotions, despite the fact that a part of context always has influence in shaping our emotions and determining our interpretations. A qualitative study can show that emotions are always present in meaning-making processes. Even when the user wants to maintain a “rational approach,” various emotional levels appear in online discourse whose content is not only conventional exchange of information. It is important to remember that emotions are elements that shape our imagination, since they are effects of meaning inscribed and codified in language (Greimas 1991/1993). According to Murray Smith, emotions are situated both in the text and in the viewer (Smith 1995). If emotions are considered as traces of a “passion,” though, and not as something that viewers passively feel, but also as something that they express, their localization is inevitably to be found in a space which is neither the text nor the viewer. Where do emotions leave the traces of their ungraspable existence? In the semiotic space that is created with texts and around them: a work’s world. Emotions are linked to individual experiences; therefore, they have to be studied “in situation” because they are detectable in the form of performances. At the same time, they can be shared, resulting in their attaining their full meaning.

Emotions activate these situations similar to what Dayan and Katz (1992) call media events: Il Libanese’s death at the end of the series’ first season, for example, is an event which catalyses most discourses and fan fictions<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, during summer 2010, a teaser between the first and second season helps keep online discussion alive, raising the possibility of the central character coming back, maybe as a ghost, and encouraging many discussions in fan communities.

A quantitative work on actual uses of television in the age of convergence could be done with a distant reading. Although Moretti concentrates on long periods of time, even a shortened timeframe such as the aforementioned media event can be selected and observed in its constitutive micro-traits. Big data of audiovisual consumption could be observed such as the number of tweets on the *Breaking Bad* (AMC) finale<sup>12</sup>. The participation of a large number of viewers

during a specific time-slot or on a determined day can tell researchers something about the impact of the series in fans’ social lives that close readings cannot display. An example of a distant reading, in this case, could be represented by sentiment analysis or semantic discourse analysis. This method could underline qualitative features and mobilise a large number of data: recurrences and variations in a series’ perception by audiences could be highlighted through the analysis of a vast corpus of comments, on a national or transnational scale.

Modelling data coming from sentiment-aware software could take the form of graphs or maps and could be a tool for the study of emotions in a neo-epic phenomenon. Distant reading could show how a serial system is made of many voices, even contradictory, and is not always narrative (can we consider memes or Facebook comments as narrative elements?), that rewrite old myths, and that, therefore, epic processes are at the same time the result of convergent technological and cultural practices, and a new oral form, based on collective sharing.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, *Romanzo Criminale* was first compared to a semiosphere, allying this perspective to polysystem theory. Within this framework, audience interpretations and official texts appear linked, creating a cultural continuum. Fan made fragments should not to be considered rhizomatic entities because they are not merely spreadable materials; on the contrary, hermeneutic operations and appropriation practices emerging within *Romanzo Criminale*’s narrative give life to a space for discourse. In addition to the internal serialization process typical of transfictional phenomena, and of narrative complexity (Mittell 2006, 2012), *Romanzo Criminale* is a complex system because of the rich semiotic processes happening over time. The very nature of *Romanzo Criminale* can be found in the notion of the neo-epic process because of its main feature: it becomes the space for the reinterpretation of the values and the identity of a society. Reworking recent historical events through a novel, a film, a TV series and a set of transmedia devices, it allows new audiences to discover a part of Italian culture, namely the Years of Lead, and it becomes the interpreter of contemporary political tensions. For these reasons, *Romanzo Criminale* is able to gather the multiple ways a society thinks itself, but also to lay down answers for renewing it, highlighting contemporary contradictions in politics and historiography.

11 Comparable to the famous “Who shot J.R.?” at the end of the 1979-80 season of *Dallas*.

12 September 29th 2013.

Even if *Romanzo Criminale* certainly is a very specific phenomenon in Italian culture, hardly comparable to other TV series or films, we can note that other TV series succeed in producing an epic work similar to what was discussed in these pages. *Gomorra*, for example, has a similar genesis: it is a literary best-seller inspired from real events (Saviano 2006), a film (Matteo Garrone, Italy, 2008), and a TV series (Sky Cinema 2014) which have all acquired enormous popularity over time. Also, *Gomorra* uses a hybrid enunciation technique, between documentary and fiction. The same composite feature can be found in the American context, in which *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012) plays on the ambiguity between real news and fiction, and encourages debates that surpass the space of the text.

Beyond textual mechanisms, but also due to some internal features such as genre, themes, or address to the viewer, epic emerges as an interesting form. Within the framework of complexity, its specificity can be understood as the result of texts and grassroots productions. Epic benefits from the serialization of a TV series or an intermedial relationship concerning transfictional characters. Within a play of variation and repetition, viewers find a space for reflection on their position in history.

An epistemology of complexity for media studies has to find its basis on the principles of order and disorder, and high-light emergences, those forms and meanings that appear only through the interaction of seemingly disjointed elements. It can then be helpful for understanding the interaction of different elements of television serial programmes, but also films, and their audiences. A distant reading, using maps and diagrams, can be a methodological tool for describing these complex processes and help in the study of such complex worlds, worlds that are increasingly at the core of interest of producers and creators.

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