

‘The political deadlock is life’ *Boris* and the satire of contemporary Italian media and cultural industries

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In 2007 the Italian production company Wilder launched a comedic television series of the mockumentary genre named *Boris* for the Fox Italia network. The original run of the series aired from 2007 to 2010 and comprised three seasons. Its success inspired the production of a feature-length film that was released in Italian movie-theatres in 2011. This article will address how the political climate in Italy informed *Boris*’ comedic form and its discourse on the Italian cultural industry as opposed to the humor seen in other comedic traditions. In particular, the political satire carried out in *Boris* will be examined with reference to Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of ‘modern parody’ and to the series’ positioning in a period marked by Italian television’s transition from a duopoly to a larger offer of entertainment.

***Boris*: an innovative ‘fiction’ in a changing media and political landscape**

Created by screenwriters Giacomo Ciarrapico, Mattia Torre and Luca Vendruscolo, *Boris* is a series that was destined for consumption within the broader entertainment offer made possible by the institution of the Italian digital television platform Sky Italia (owned by 21st Century Fox) in 2003. It is widely regarded as a television product that went beyond the quality standards that Italian network television had settled with in the period between the 1990s and early 2000s, when the production of television series was marked by the duopoly of the national public broadcaster RAI and Silvio Berlusconi’s Mediaset.¹ For example, in his 2007 review of the show in the daily newspaper *L’Unità*, journalist Roberto Brunelli defined it as ‘la cosa migliore che si possa vedere nel piccolo schermo, in quanto a fiction italiana’.²

With the English term ‘fiction’, Italians commonly refer to any fictional television series, although often the term can acquire a negative connotation related to the proliferation of soap opera-like shows that were championed on the RAI and Mediaset channels during the 1990s and early 2000s. ‘Fiction’ is a crucial term in *Boris*’ vocabulary, as the plot of the show focuses on a television crew of the fictional production company Magnesia, involved in the shooting of *Gli occhi del cuore*, ‘the eyes of the heart’, a soap-opera styled ‘fiction’ set in a hospital clinic

¹ *Boris*’ innovative role in the development of a higher standard of television ‘fiction’ has been addressed in two Italian publications: I. Pezzini, ‘Uno sguardo trasversale sulla fiction italiana: il caso Boris’, in: M.P. Pozzato & G. Grignaffini (eds), *Mondi Seriali, Percorsi Semiotici nella Fiction*, Milano, RTI, 2008, pp. 187-196; M. Brogna & M. Loi (eds), *Boris, la ‘fuoriserie italiana’*, in: *Script*, 46/47 (2009).

² R. Brunelli, ‘Papi, santi, divise, preti nun ve regghe chiù: fortuna che c’è “Boris”’, *L’Unità*, May 23 2007, p. 23, http://archiviostorico.unita.it/cgi-bin/highlightPdf.cgi?t=ebook&file=/golpdf/uni_2007_05.pdf/23SPE21A.PDF&query=boris (as accessed January 1, 2014).

that is broadcast on one of the national public network RAI channels, although it should be noted that RAI is not explicitly addressed as the broadcaster of *Gli occhi del cuore* in the *Boris* series.

Thus, in its playful narrative concept *Boris* suggests that it offers to its viewers the ‘reality’ of on-set production of ‘fictions’, although in actuality it too is a ‘fiction’, one that ironically dramatizes both its screenwriters’ first hand experiences from working on previous ‘fictions’, as well as a set of attitudes and prejudices the Italian audience has developed with regards to the by-product of popular culture they refer to as ‘fiction’.³

The narrative ‘vehicle’ by which viewers are introduced to the on-set ‘reality’ of television-making is the character of Alessandro, an intern in the directing division of the crew. The pilot episode of the *Boris* series recounts the first day of filming for the second season of *Gli occhi del cuore*, which we soon learn is a ‘fiction’ with little hope of surviving, as the airing of its first season has been interrupted by the network due to poor audience results. Alessandro approaches the set for the first time and becomes the ‘fifth wheel’ of a group of people who are constantly in fear of cancellation and, consequently, unemployment. *Boris*, the title of the series, is actually the name of a fish (named after German tennis player Boris Becker) that the fictional director of *Gli occhi del cuore* René Ferretti keeps next to his monitor during filming, for good luck.

The ‘fiction’ crew that *Boris* depicts makes no effort to produce a quality product of any artistic merit, but is simply content to ‘arrangiarsi’ (get by), doing the minimum necessary in order to avoid cancellation by means of superstition, drug consumption and maneuvering influential political allies. The way in which the series addresses the fact that the Magnesia crew is producing *Gli occhi del cuore* for the national public broadcaster RAI without explicitly referring to the latter is by showing us several times, during *Boris*’s run, how political developments in the country have an impact on executive decisions being made with regard to the making of the fictional series *Gli occhi del cuore*, and how members of the crew are either confirmed in their job positions or removed from them according to the political protection they manage to secure, rather than for their professional merits. The relationship between political status quo and creative and executive decisions within ‘fiction’ production inferred by *Boris* is a reference to the fact that RAI is governed by a nine-member Administrative Council: seven members are appointed by a committee of the Italian Parliament, while the remaining two are nominated by the Ministry of Economic Development. The Administrative Council’s term is three years long and renewable, although the lack of political stability in Italy makes it very hard for the renewal of the term to occur and, most often, new general elections determine a new RAI Administrative Council and, therefore, a substantial shift in cultural policy informed by the new political majority.

In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, when the parliamentary majority was often characterized by a large coalition led by the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party, it was common knowledge that the news and cultural programming boards for the three RAI channels were ‘divided’ among the leading parties in the

³ In respect to its ‘meta’ dimension as a television series about the making of television series, *Boris*’ tagline – ‘la fuoriserie italiana’ – is particularly clever. In fact, ‘fuoriserie’ is a term Italians use to refer to luxury cars like Ferraris or Maseratis as opposed to regular cars owned by families with an average income – which reminds viewers of *Boris*’ intent of differentiating itself as a television series beyond the poor quality standard solidified during the RAI-Mediatel duopoly. ‘Fuoriserie’ is, however, also the amalgamation of ‘fuori’, the Italian word for ‘outside’, and ‘serie’, also used in Italy to refer to television series – which delineates its narrative content of showing viewers what happens on set behind the cameras, outside what they are shown on screen within a regular television series.

coalition: RAI Uno to the Christian Democrats, RAI Due to the Socialists, RAI Tre to the Communist Party. The interference of political power within RAI's cultural policies has been further problematized as of 1994 when Silvio Berlusconi, owner of broadcast corporation Mediaset,⁴ was elected Prime Minister on three different occasions over the next twenty years, determining a situation in which, effectively, he had a strong control over all six major television channels with national coverage.⁵

***Boris*, the Italian cultural industry and politics**

A clear-cut example of *Boris*' depiction of the interference of politics within RAI's cultural policy can be seen in the third episode of its second season. Director René Ferretti is asked by the network to fire someone and, despite the fact that there are far more appropriate candidates to lose their jobs (such as the cocaine addicted director of photography), he settles with firing make-up artist Gloria because she is the only crew-member without political protection.⁶ In the following episode Gloria finds out that she is about to lose her job and goes on a rant about wanting 'to work somewhere where politics do not matter'. Nonetheless, she welcomes René's out-of-guilt offer to 'hook her up' with his political protector Andrea Vetuschi (whom we are never shown in the series) in order to save her 'fiction' job; Vetuschi, instead, finds her a position as 'Head of Personnel' at the Presidency of the Basilicata Region.

The satire of the impact that the political landscape has on RAI's cultural policy reaches a culmination in the last five episodes of *Boris*' second season. At this point, the network is adamant in replacing Ferretti with a new director, since he has made the crucial error of physically attacking his star actress – the daughter of an extremely powerful entrepreneur – and since his political protector, Vetruschi, has fallen from grace. The network, however, does not immediately fire Ferretti, but instead tries to lure him into the production of a 'fiction' miniseries based on the life of Renaissance philosopher, historian and politician Niccolò Machiavelli, a project that – Ferretti explains in episode nine of the second series – 'is a hoax and is never going to get made. It is rather a sentence, a mafia-like warning the network gives to directors they want to fire'.⁷

This plot-line climaxes in the second part of the series finale, in which the *occhi del Cuore* crew is forced to wait for the outcome of the political elections in order to complete an episode that will reveal the murderer of the 'fiction' character, 'the Count', and in order to learn which director will replace Ferretti, as shocking developments in the polls suggest that the expected victory of the Centre-Right led by Berlusconi may be overturned. 'They were talking of a marked victory of you know who' – explains network delegate Lopez – 'and the homosexual was perfect as the

⁴ Formerly known as Fininvest.

⁵ In a very notorious example of the degree to which politics have an influence over the state of affairs at RAI, in his capacity as Prime Minister in 2002, Berlusconi publicly attacked anchormen of political shows for RAI Michele Santoro, Enzo Biagi and Daniele Luttazzi, all of whom stopped obtaining work from the broadcaster soon later.

⁶ At this point of *Boris*' narrative, the second series of *Gli occhi del cuore* has unexpectedly become a successful hit. The nervousness of the network that demands a change of personnel in its crew is not a result of a lack of viewership, but rather a 'signal' requested by a network that is suddenly flirting with the idea of 'quality'. This momentary fascination is – network delegate Diego Lopez (Antonio Catania) explains to Ferretti – the result of (author and mass media theorist) 'Umberto Eco's sudden endorsement of Italian "fiction"... that asshole... now we are ruined!'. Thus, in this instance, the authors of *Boris* use this opportunity to foreshadow the notion that it is the entirety of Italy's cultural industry, and not just the politically 'swinging' RAI, that participates in the climate that encouraged the production of bad 'fiction' series such as *Gli occhi del cuore*.

⁷ The choice of a Machiavelli biopic as the 'hoax project' is particularly clever, as Italians often use the adjective 'macchiavellico' to describe convoluted power-struggle maneuvering, after the notorious statement 'the end justifies the means' in Machiavelli's political essay *The Prince*.

killer. [...] But now it looks like the other ones will win, and the homosexual cannot be touched'. However, the exit polls – Lopez finally informs the crew – reveal that the outcome is

a substantial deadlock that leads to a temporary Prime Minister/administrator such as Montezemolo.⁸ There's a slight improvement for the Northern League, which should not be underestimated, so we have to delete any reference to Rome, we have to keep vague; the drug-addicted sodomite cannot be from Bergamo anymore. [...] The culprit is the character of magistrate Anna Parvieri. The magistrature is a safe bet. It is an extraordinarily bi-partisan issue.

Most importantly, as a result of this uncertain political outcome, Ferretti is confirmed as the director for *Gli occhi del cuore*, as the network considers him – in Lopez's words – 'the mammoth of deadlocks. [...] The political deadlock' – Lopez explains with fervor – 'annuls all parameters; the deadlock is the turning point. The deadlock is life!'.⁹

In this humorous way *Boris* refers to the outcome of the 2006 general election – a deadlock with a narrow margin in favor of the Centre-Left, which produced a government that did not stay in power for more than two years – and, at the same time, foreshadows the outcome of the post-recession 2013 general election, a three-way deadlock between a renewed Centre-Left coalition, Berlusconi's Centre-Right (in the aftermath of the sex scandals involving its leader) and stand-up comedian/political activist Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle.

The third series of *Boris*, filmed during the summer of 2009 and aired for the first time in the spring of 2010, resumed the heavily politically-accented scope that characterized the second season finale. The two-part series premiere, entitled 'Un'altra televisione è possibile', follows Ferretti, who has unexpectedly abandoned *Gli occhi del cuore* out of artistic infatuation with *Macchiavelli's* qualitative potential, for Mediaset's studios in Cologno Monzese, Milan, where he agrees to shoot the pilot of a sit-com for one of Berlusconi's channels, entitled *Troppo frizzante*. In Cologno Monzese the director and his closest collaborators are offered drugs and beautiful women to sleep with and the director is treated like a revolutionary genius for his decision not to keep on thriving in RAI's mediocrity. He is addressed as 'the Roberto Saviano of "fiction"', with reference to the author of *Gomorra's* resistance to the pressures he received from the mafia during the writing and publication of his literary exposé.

Boris suggests that Berlusconi's is a presence that permeates the entirety of the Italian experience, as the relationship between intern Alessandro and assistant director Arianna comes to an end once she reveals to him that she votes for the media mogul and even actively campaigned for him in the past, a fact that he cannot accept, or even fathom. The playfulness of this narrative segment is augmented by the fact that the actress playing the character of Arianna is Caterina Guzzanti, the younger sister of Sabina Guzzanti, a former television comedian who directed two documentaries, *Viva Zapatero!* (2005) and *Draquila – L'Italia che tremò* (2010), that frontally attacked Berlusconi for his political control of the Italian media – even those he does not own – and for the poor handling of the crisis brought upon the city of L'Aquila by the 2009 earthquake.¹⁰

⁸ Luca Cordero di Montezemolo is the owner of *fuoriserie* manufacturer Ferrari.

⁹ In another thread of *Boris's* narrative, Lorenzo, the intern of the photography division, finds out that an uncle of his has won a seat in Parliament as a result of the election and, therefore, in the third season we see his revenge against his former torturers, the electricians.

¹⁰ Caterina's older brother, Corrado Guzzanti, is also cast in *Boris*, as the fictional actor who plays The Count, the villain of the *Occhi del cuore* 'fiction'. This role was Corrado Guzzanti's return to television,

As much as it addresses Berlusconi's political presence, *Boris* also ironizes on the contribution of his television company to the decline of Italian comedy: *Troppo frizzante*, the pilot Ferretti is asked to shoot, is a plotless amalgamation of catch-phrases authored by talentless comedians who have become popular in television broadcasts of cabaret routines reminiscent of *Zelig* and *Colorado Café Live*, two popular shows aired on Mediaset channels that launched the careers of catch-phrase comedians such as Ale & Franz and I Fichi d'India, all of whom have attempted transitioning to the cinema with qualitatively poor results.

Ferretti's experience in Cologno Monzese, however, is short-lived as his main focus is revolutionizing television with *Macchiavelli*. RAI's counter-offer is, instead, to put him at the helm of a new revolutionary hospital based show called *Medical Dimension*.¹¹ Set in the rough and underdeveloped landscape of Italian healthcare, instead of the private clinic of *Gli occhi del cuore*, *Medical Dimension* is supposed to be an uncompromising spin-off exposé 'à la *Gomorra*' that only retains the fictional protagonist of *Gli occhi del cuore*, in order to secure its viewership. Whereas the original 'fiction' shot by the fictional crew championed stale romantic plot-lines worthy of the worst soap-operas, *Medical Dimension* features corruption, swearing, suicide, euthanasia, the 'real' hospital world. Quality is its imperative, as the crew is asked not to 'smarmellare' (a neologism that the authors of *Boris* have coined to define the jam-like patina the filmic image acquires when all of the set lights are open to the maximum, as in soap-operas' photography) but rather to shoot 'artfully' with the aid of cutting edge technology such as Segway vehicles.

In the continuation of its third series, however, *Boris* negates the hypothesis that 'a different television is possible', as *Medical Dimension* is revealed to be a 'trap'. Not only does Ferretti find out, in the eight episode of the season, that this exposé is actually the by-product of the network's lazy screenwriters' plagiarism of an American television series,¹² but, in the eleventh episode of *Boris* Season 3, it is revealed to him by Lopez that

the network has no interest in *Medical Dimension* succeeding. [...] In fact, it was actually born to fail. [...] The airing of the pilot coincides with the Champions League Final. [...] You were chosen as director because they knew you wouldn't figure it out. [...] The whole sense of the operation is to show to the entire Italian television industry, networks, producers, directors, and the like that a different kind of 'fiction', today, in Italy is not only not possible, but even not desirable. Nobody wants it! Do you know what would actually happen if somebody produced a very well-made 'fiction' in Italy? [...] A whole vital system for the country would collapse!

Even though it does not take place at the end of the *Boris* television series – the final episodes are characterized by Ferretti's desperate attempt to write and shoot new material and reshape the existing footage of *Medical Dimension* in the editing room into a pilot episode for a third season of *Gli occhi del cuore*, which he sends to the network – Lopez's tirade is an appropriate conclusion for a 'meta-fiction' that was recognized as an innovative quality product that marked a time in which television

which he left after his own show *Il Caso Scafroglia* – also very critical of Berlusconi's career – was aired in 2002. Curiously, the father of Caterina, Corrado and Sabina, Paolo Guzzanti, is an adamant Berlusconi supporter and was elected as a member of the Italian Chamber of Deputies running for Berlusconi's party Forza Italia.

¹¹ This new Italian fiction's title in English indicates its presumed innovativeness and foreshadows the narrative twist concerning its origin.

¹² Thus the crew is about to shoot an episode in which the lead doctor is given a quail to eat while celebrating the Italian *Festa della Repubblica* and the inclusion of this non-existing culinary tradition reveals to them that the plot is carbon-copied from an American Thanksgiving episode.

making in Italy was transforming at an industrial and distributional level with the arrival and popularization of digital and satellite platforms.

Although it ironizes Mediaset and on Berlusconi, *Boris* cannot be catalogued as an explicitly left-wing endeavour against the figure of the media mogul, on par with Sabina Guzzanti's documentaries. In the conclusion of its third season, for example, Alessandro, after having copied a test, the answers for which he obtained by means of political recommendation, is promoted as freelance screenwriter for Magnesia and he is asked by the former *Occhi del cuore* screenwriters to join their leftist union 'Sceneggiatura Democratica'; thus, we are revealed that the leftist side of Italy's cultural industry is responsible for the imagined 'fiction' chosen as the quintessential by-product of the poor quality standards typical of the period of the RAI-Mediaset duopoly.

The series' cinematic appendix, *Boris - Il film*, confirms the impression that its authors' criticism is aimed at the entire Italian cultural industry, rather than a specified political entity within it. Its narrative replicates the structure of the series' third season, as Ferretti, now an outcast, obtains the rights to the film adaptation of *La Casta*, a new literary exposé that unveils the network of relationships existing between media-makers, the mafia, economic corporations and corrupt Italian politicians. Thus, he attempts a transition into filmmaking and uses the book's reputation to rally around him the leftist elite of Italian socially-engaged artistic cinema. This new crew is not put in a better light than the lazy and compromising Magnesia crew by *Boris*' authors: the leftists are shown to be arrogant, snobbish, annoyingly opinionated and off-puttingly elitist. The film – notably not produced by Fox, as the series was, but by RAI Cinema, the filmmaking division of the national public broadcast ridiculed in the majority of the *Boris* series – is concluded with the old *Occhi del cuore* crew, summoned by Ferretti to replace the leftist one, compromising once again and turning the film adaptation of *La Casta* into a *cinepanettone*, one of the often critically reviled film comedies that are released in Italy every year during the Christmas holidays season.

***Boris* and its comedic forerunners**

The institution of the Italian digital satellite television platform Sky Italia in 2003 has not only made possible the production of a 'different' television series like *Boris*: it has also contributed to the development of a certain taste among Italian viewers that informed its success, as in the years that preceded the airing of the first season of *Boris*, when two of Sky's channels, Fox Italia and Jimmy, aired a number of British and American sit-coms with a 'mockumentary' or 'meta' emphasis, such as the British and American versions of *The Office*, *Extras*, *Arrested Development* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

It can therefore be said that, as much as its narrative premise responded to the poor standards of Italian 'fiction', *Boris* was also the outcome of foreign influences that converged before its launch and informed its making and its reception. The two foreign series that *Boris* resembles most closely are *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Arrested Development*, both formally – they do not use the footage, typical of many mockumentaries, of mock interviews alluding to the notion that a documentary is being shot in the place where the narrative is set, in the same way that *Boris* avoids this strategy – and thematically.¹³ The former, created by Garry Shadling, focuses on

¹³ *The Larry Sanders Show*, an American series originally aired on HBO between 1992 and 1998, was never aired in Italy. However, it is widely considered as the progenitor of the 'mockumentary' sit-com genre and its crucial positioning in the history of television comedy has been certified by a vast number of awards, so it is quite verisimilar that professional television screenwriters such as the authors of *Boris* were familiar with it when writing their own show.

the making of an American late-night talk-show and it was inspired by the biography of real American talk-show host Johnny Carson, who was at the helm of NBC's *The Tonight Show* from 1962 to 1992 and who exposed audiences to Shandling's comedic talent by having him guest-host several times between 1981 and 1985. Even though the lazy and irresponsible characterization of most members of *Arrested Development*'s dysfunctional family closely resembles the traits of *Boris*' crew, Mitchell Hurwitz's show did not originally have a 'meta' dimension comparable to *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Boris*' 'making of' narrative premise. However, as the show faced the threat of cancellation after the first two seasons aired on Fox's American network and it became clear that its positive critical reception was not going to be matched by substantial ratings, Hurwitz and his collaborators started including references to their network's lack of support in many episodes of its third series.

Both *Arrested Development* and *The Larry Sanders Show*, however, have some elements that relate to the humor championed by *Boris* and others that differ from it. *Arrested Development* lacks the continuous reference to another television text that is a constant in *Boris* through the inclusion of large portions of the 'smarmellato' footage of *Gli occhi del cuore* and the 'rough' scenes from *Medical Dimension*, both used ironically to refer to trends in the Italian television industry; Hurwitz's show is similar though in its frequent references to the United States' political climate at the time of its making, namely George Bush's war against Iraq.¹⁴ Conversely, *The Larry Sanders Show* relied heavily on references to another television format – Carson's talk-show – but it lacked the political satire that can be found in both *Boris* and *Arrested Development*: Shandling's fictional talk-show host, Larry Sanders, often gets in arguments with his network over creative decisions regarding his show, but the network's concerns are always dictated by ratings, or lack thereof, and never addressed as the result of the network's supposed alignment with a given political entity.

Of course, along with the foreign mockumentary series that preceded it, a number of Italian comedic sources need to be taken into account when analyzing *Boris*' comedic form. Among these, the satirical genre known as 'comedy Italian style' (1958-1980) can be identified as a precursor to the emphasis placed on the political discourse in the *Boris* franchise. Film historian Peter Bondanella states that the emergence of this genre 'replaced the sometimes facile and optimistic humanitarianism typical of earlier film comedy with a darker, more ironic and pessimistic vision of Italian life',¹⁵ a definition that chimes, for instance, with *Boris*' pessimistic conclusion that 'a different kind of television' in Italy is not possible. Commenting on the social engagement credited to this film genre – which addressed diverse national issues at the time of its production, such as the interference of the Catholic Church in political discourse within the country in the 1950-1970 period, the negative social habits that developed as a result of the emergence of consumerism with the Economic Miracle, the resistance of former Fascist policies in the supposedly 'new' nation that the Resistance had contributed to forge, and the rise of terrorism in the 1970s – Bondanella states that the comedies of the 'Italian style' genre

¹⁴ The grandfather of the family at the centre of *Arrested Development*'s narrative is accused of having built real estate for Saddam Hussein in Iraq, his younger son is enrolled in the U.S. army and about to be shipped to Iraq as part of George Bush's war on terror and the twelfth episode of season three is set in Iraq and features a number of Saddam Hussein look-alikes.

¹⁵ P. Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, New York, Continuum, 2009, p. 181.

treated real social, political, and economic problems quite courageously and more successfully than overtly ideological films, particularly in their portrayals of dysfunctional social institutions, reactionary laws, and outmoded customs governing the relationships between men and women.¹⁶

Boris' overall emphasis on societal mores (embodied by the television crew's habits), politics and its questioning of the very possibility of a popular audio-visual text to inform change in the nation therefore make its humor at times close to the socially engaged humor championed by 'comedy, Italian style'. At other points, it suggests a reflection on the genre's legacy.

In general, though, texts belonging to this film genre lack the referential element that characterizes so much of *Boris'* narrative, with the inclusion of footage from *Gli occhi del cuore* and *Medical Dimension* as paradigmatic visual reminders of the standards of Italian 'fiction' crucial to its discourse about the state of Italy's cultural industry. *Signore e signori, buonanotte!* (1976) – a film co-directed by Luigi Comencini, Nanni Loy, Luigi Magni, Mario Manicelli and Ettore Scola – is one of the few 'Italian style' comedies to foreshadow *Boris'* 'meta' dimension, also focusing on the television-making industry. However, the majority of the best known films of the genre – Mario Monicelli's *I soliti ignoti* (1958) and *La Grande Guerra* (1959), Dino Risi's *Una vita difficile* (1961) and *Il sorpasso* (1962), Luigi Comencini's *Tutti a casa!* (1960), to name only a few – comments on Italian society by addressing it directly in its present state, or by offering a fictionalized representation of its past, not by recurring to explicit, consistent and continued visual reminders of other texts.

A 'parodical satire': *Boris'* comedic form

Linda Hutcheon has produced some influential work on the intertextual relationships existing between different cultural works, and in particular, the use of irony in the context of these relationships in modern art forms. Since *Boris* is a text in which both Italian and foreign cultural matrixes can be detected, and irony is the primary strategy by which *Boris* calls into question both social reality and the cultural products it establishes (either ridiculing or derivative) relationships with, her theoretical framework proves most appropriate in the attempt to define the series' meta-textual practice. She defines the textual practice of parody as a 'repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity',¹⁷ and 'a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text'.¹⁸ Other statements, crucial to this analysis of *Boris*, made by Hutcheon in her theorization of this discursive form are that a parodic text does not need to necessarily imitate another specified work, but that it can also ironically imitate a set of conventions typical of a genre or tradition,¹⁹ and that parody is not circumstantiated to texts with a ridiculing intent, although ridiculing imitations are among the forms of parody.²⁰

In light of these remarks, we can certainly identify the footage of *Gli occhi del cuore* and *Medical Dimension* extensively included in the *Boris* series (as well as the *cinapanettone* footage in the film) as parodic formations that do not so much imitate a specified 'fiction' or a specific *cinapanettone*, but rather, ironize sets of conventions developed within the Italian cultural industry in the last twenty years.

¹⁶ Bondanella, *A History*, cit., p. 181.

¹⁷ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 22.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 5.

Hutcheon states that parody is a ‘sophisticated genre in the demands it makes on its practitioners and its interpreters. The encoder, then the decoder, must effect a structural superimposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new’.²¹ In the case of *Boris*, a crucial aspect of its innovation in the context of Italian television depends on the viewer’s/decoder’s identification of intended allusions – from the explicit and continued allusion to the poor quality standards of ‘fiction’ produced during the RAI-Mediaset duopoly to more elusive allusions to Lars von Trier, the American serial *24*, Steven Spielberg’s film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and to *Boris*’ own critical reception – and the makers/encoders’ ability to create a new text that does not simply replicate ‘fiction’ by imitating it (in which case we would have either quotation or plagiarism, rather than parody) but repurposes it with ironic distance.

In this context the familiarity with encoding/decoding practices developed by the Italian viewership by assimilating foreign ‘mockumentary’ series seems a desirable, at times necessary, condition for the ironic discourse embedded in the *Boris* series. In a similar way, it can be said that the franchise’s sarcastic stance on the state of Italy’s cultural industry and on the interference of the political discourse within it required, in order to achieve the success it obtained as a parodic text, a shared skepticism towards cultural and political authority on the part of the viewers, in that a negative opinion of RAI as a political-cultural entity is crucial to understanding portions of *Boris*’ narrative. In this light, the ironic statement ‘the political deadlock is life’ is at the same time a sarcastic comment on the state of political skepticism and indecision within the country and also an affirmation that denotes how the humor of this particular ‘fiction’ text depends on it.

Going back to the satirical tradition of ‘comedy Italian style’, it is now necessary to call into question Hutcheon’s theorization of ‘parody’ and ‘satire’:

The obvious reason for the confusion of parody and satire [...] is the fact that the two genres are often fused together. Satire frequently uses parodic art for either expository or aggressive purposes, when it desires textual differentiation as its vehicle.²²

With its aggressive stance towards the interference of politics within the cultural industry arena, *Boris* certainly is a satirical text, but one that, unlike ‘comedy Italian style’, continuously uses parodic art. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two forms of satire – parodic and not – that relates to parody’s nature ‘as double-voiced discourse’²³ that ‘always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks’.²⁴ Hutcheon clarifies:

Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgements, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized. [...] In modern parody, however, we have found that no such negative judgement is necessarily suggested in the ironic contrast of two texts. Parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any real attack would be self-destructive.²⁵

This brings us back to the question ‘is a different kind of television possible?’ that *Boris* poses to synthesize its stance on the political climate of the country and the state of the Italian cultural industry, as well as to question the possibility of creating

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 33.

²² *Ivi*, p. 43.

²³ *Ivi*, p. xiv.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. xii.

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 43-33.

meaningful discourse within them. As we have seen, the narrative development of the series suggests a traditionally satirical, negative answer. Yet, outside the text, its very making and its positive critical and popular reception suggest a positive one, which is parodically – ‘repetition characterized by ironic inversion’ – alluded to in the series at the very moment of its negation within the text. Its comedic form as a series that carries out satire through an extensive use of the ‘double-voiced’ parodic practice imposes a certain degree of flexibility in its questioning the notion of meaningful discourse within the current Italian cultural landscape.

Whereas the ‘negative statements’ embodied by the direct satire of the ‘comedy Italian style’ genre flourished in a period of intense political engagement for the nation – from 1958 to 1980, with the student protests of 1968 at the epicentre of this timeframe – *Boris*’ sophisticated form of ‘parodical satire’ was born in a period of political indeterminacy, disengagement from the political discourse and skepticism about the possibility of social reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that, as much as foreign and Italian comedic traditions have informed *Boris*’ humor, which combines the satirical emphasis of ‘comedy Italian style’ with the referentiality typical of foreign ‘mockumentary’ series, its very own hybrid comedic form – not dissimilar from the form of the chronologically adjacent Nanni Moretti film *Il caimano* (2006), a film that alludes to how redundant the notion of making a film about Berlusconi is by narrating a film producer’s attempt to make a film about Berlusconi – was also the by-product of the confused Italian political and cultural industries that it so adamantly criticized. The series’ ‘double-voiced’ characteristic of negating satirically within the text, with its ironical representation of the ‘fiction’ standard of the duopoly period, while at the same time affirming outside of it, by means of its very own existence as an innovative quality ‘fiction’, reflects its positioning as a liminal by-product of culture produced in the context of a transitional period in which the means of production and consumption of entertainment in Italy underwent a major change. At the same time, however, its ‘double-voicedness’ reflects the state of political indeterminacy that produced a non-fictional deadlock in 2006 and a frustrating encore in 2013.

Keywords

Italian politics, political deadlock, mockumentary, Italian comedy, *Boris* (Italian sitcom)

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RIASSUNTO

'Il pareggio elettorale è la vita': *Boris* e la satira dei mass media italiani e dell'industria culturale odierni

Nel 2007 il network satellitare Fox Italia ha cominciato la produzione di *Boris*, una serie comica del genere mockumentary messa in onda sui canali Sky Italia dal 2007 al 2010. La trama di *Boris* narra le peripezie di una troupe televisiva alle prese con la produzione di una soap-opera per la RAI. In Italia la serie è presto diventata un prodotto 'cult'. Nella serie *Boris* i pigri e opportunisti membri della troupe televisiva fittizia sono rappresentati come succubi delle ripercussioni che gli sviluppi politici nel Paese hanno sul servile network per il quale lavorano. Gli attori nella soap-opera fittizia vengono rimpiazzati e la trama stessa della soap-opera viene riscritta a seconda delle nuove coalizioni che vengono formate in Parlamento e i membri della troupe sono costantemente alla ricerca di raccomandazioni e protezione politica. Per quanto satirizza lo stato del Paese, *Boris* mette anche in discussione il fatto stesso che l'industria culturale Italiana corrente possa produrre un discorso significativo. Con riferimento alla teorizzazione della 'parodia' da parte di Linda Hutcheon, questo articolo discute la rappresentazione che *Boris* ha tratteggiato dell'industria culturale, analizza il rapporto esistente tra la serie e tradizioni comiche Italiane che l'hanno preceduta (la 'commedia all'italiana') e il modo in cui l'ironia implementata dalla serie ricalca e/o diverge da quella tipica delle serie mockumentary estere che l'hanno ispirata (*Arrested Development* e *The Larry Sanders Show*).