The difficult path of US sitcoms into Italian TV schedules

Abstract
The essay traces the history of US sitcom genre on Italian television, highlighting the different stages that have occurred across the 60 years of its development: the failed stunt of I Love Lucy and the subsequent disappearance of the genre in the Sixties; the shaping of US sitcoms as programming mainly intended for children and teenagers, with titles as Happy Days becoming part of tv dei ragazzi in the middle of the Seventies; the abundance of half-hour series on commercial television and their consequent reappearance on PSB across the Eighties; the ‘Italianization’ process that has affected many shows in the Nineties; lastly, the diffusion and dispersion of sitcoms in contemporary multichannel scenario. Building on the basis of the historical work on both situation comedy and Italian television, this contribution aims to connect the ‘double history’ of the genre in the two countries, articulated through direct reflections and big distortions, and to highlight as well the ‘mediation’ role of both the destination culture and the Italian TV and media system. The analysis of such a marginal phenomenon could nevertheless provide useful insights on the dynamics of circulation and adaptation of TV products, genres and imaginaries, and put into spotlight the ideas, pre-comprehensions and working habits of the national television industry and the tastes, needs and expectations of the audience, which are both culturally and historically grounded.

Keywords
Television history; sitcom; media industry; distribution practices; international circulation.

1. introduction

A seemingly simple genre, or a group of stratified and wide-ranging texts? Situation comedies – sitcoms, for short – often manage to be both at once. That is especially so in television schedules in countries outside the United States, where the genre arose and developed: in Italy, the first imported sitcoms began to appear in the offering of public service broadcaster RAI, that still had monopoly status; they met with ups and downs, an uncertain welcome, and periods of success, careful handling and sudden plenty.

Situation comedy is considered a central genre in American television. Gilbert Seldes was convinced that “comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves”\(^1\); David Marc found in television comedy and its main forms (variety and sitcoms) the roots and motives for the development, and then habitual and daily success, of a medium

that reaches all Americans’ homes; Horace Newcomb deems sitcoms “the most fundamental and ‘simple’ genre”, the real quintessence of the medium; while Janet Staiger considers only sitcoms as examples of “blockbuster television”. Sitcoms occupy prized peak-viewing slots into the American networks’ schedules: these shows are “prime-time network television’s most consistently popular genre”, immediately becoming “the mainstay, the bread and butter, of prime-time television”. At the same time, the sitcom genre “dominates prime time” and is “ubiquitous”, appearing across numerous channels at various times. In a nutshell, sitcom is the “ideal TV genre”.

The reason is its great strength: simplicity. Simplicity means flexibility of production, adaptability to different formulae and different players and capacity to reinvent itself over time without losing its identity. But its durability derives also from its ability to fit into different timeslots, enabling it both to provide worthwhile viewing at some important points in the schedule and to act as a filler, plugging holes and smoothing wrinkles in the daily schedule. Finally, it is simple to decode, making it natural, familiar and ‘easy’ both for the industry professionals and, above all, for the audience at home.

Nevertheless, its (apparent) simplicity is also a constraint. On one hand, if “we all agree upon a basic understanding of what a sitcom is, so no further elaboration is needed”, then we risk failing to define the genre’s characteristics properly or boiling them down to just a few distinctive traits. On the other, sitcoms’ ‘natural’ ease of viewing is not enough to explain the evolutionary changes within the genre through American TV history, let alone the difficulties of both scheduling and reception that the same programmes have encountered in a different TV scenario, like the Italian one. Indeed, as a genre bound up with American society’s zeitgeists, traditions and mores, sitcoms have often failed to achieve the same success elsewhere; sitcoms score fewer hits abroad than do other genres. As many research on adaptation and “localization” of global media and television content in different countries have shown, not only similar texts can be interpreted and incorporated differently by different audiences, but each set of cultural intermediaries, production and distribution routines, goals, logics, traditions and habits.

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6 R. Butsch, “Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms about Class and Gender”, in Edgerton, Rose, eds., Thinking Outside the Box, 111.


12 The so-called “production culture”, according to J.T. Caldwell, Production Culture. Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television, Durham: Duke, 2008. On media logics and their production routines and professional intermediaries, see also: T. Gitlin, Inside Prime Time, New York: Pantheon Books,
adds original meanings and values to sitcoms, and strongly influences their possible success. As a result, the ‘US sitcom’ in its Italian edition (i.e. dubbed, filled with Italian commercials, inserted into different schedules and broadcast by different networks) or in other local versions is also a (slightly, at least) different text, with a partially original ‘national’ development.

This essay aims, then, to trace the history of American situation comedy on Italian TV, on first the RAI public-service channels, then the major commercial networks, and finally their free and pay digital counterparts, in a closer examination of the genre’s ‘national mediation’ for Italian television and its mechanisms of adaptation and distribution\(^\text{13}\). The contribution intends to discuss the two strands of an interwoven ‘dual history’ of US sitcoms in their two contexts – origin and destination –, spotlighting where the American and Italian trajectories have gone hand in hand and where they have parted company, while emphasizing the mediatory role played by the target culture and by the media industry that articulates it. This analysis follows on directly from not only the English-language research on situation comedy\(^\text{14}\), but also several historical studies on Italian television and media\(^\text{15}\), and the Italian works exploring US TV series and – less often – sitcoms\(^\text{16}\). Reconstructing the history of the advent and subsequent development of the American sitcom in Italy means seeking to understand how, in a peculiar “synchrony of the asynchronous”, the Italian television system manifests the “coexistence of phenomena rooted in mutually very distant historical epochs”\(^\text{17}\), as very significant gaps opened up and later were bridged. This analysis also entails grappling with the now established historical separations into “paleo-television” and “neo-television” periods\(^\text{18}\) or into the three ages of “scarcity”, “availability” and “plenty”\(^\text{19}\). An historical approach is essential here, based on textual and contextual sources, on a careful examination of schedules and viewing figures, on the reactions of journalists, professionals and other opinion leaders


\(^{17}\) Ortoleva, *Un ventennio a colori*, 22.


\(^{19}\) Ellis, *Seeing Things*. 
in newspapers and magazines, and on an analysis of internal documents from the audio-visual industry and how it presented itself publicly (through ads and promos).

The advent in Italy of a ‘foreign’ genre like the sitcom thus became primarily the object of a ‘distribution history’, concerning the products, when they were scheduled, the broadcasters’ strategies, the viewing figures, the corporate vicissitudes and the critical, journalistic and media reactions to the various series. More than a history of American-sitcom viewing in Italy, this is the story of its fortunes on the national television schedule and flow, of the alternation of successes and flops, false dawns and never-ending repeats. From this standpoint, eventually, the Italian case constitutes an important example per se, while at the same time providing a model and a method for further research on other national histories and on different media products.

2. THE EARLY DAYS. SOME TRIALS, A BIG ERROR

American sitcoms debuted in Italy on Saturday 6 February 1960 at around 10 pm, when Canale Nazionale, then the only public-service network, run by the RAI, aired an episode of *I Love Lucy/Lucy ed io* (1951-57)\(^{20}\). Italian TV had started broadcasting regularly just a few years earlier, in 1953, and still had a compartmentalized, precisely defined weekly schedule of mostly domestically produced programmes. Series from abroad – mostly US – were used sporadically, with just a few popular dramas, like *Alfred Hitchcock Presents/Alfred Hitchcock presenta* (1955-65) and *Perry Mason* (1957-66). Comedy, in a form as strongly associated with American culture as the sitcom, was less straightforward to be incorporated in the monopoly television schedule, as *Lucy ed io* proves. In the States, the series had established the rules of the game and its production model, gaining enormous success, even inspiring copious spin-offs and making stars of its leading actors. “Selling *I Love Lucy* […] abroad turned out to be a goldmine for Desilu”\(^{21}\), Ball’s production company, although in Italy *Lucy ed io* fared much worse than expected. Despite being launched in a glare of popular press coverage\(^{22}\), the series impressed neither viewers nor critics; it was pulled after just thirteen episodes.

Newspaper reviews show why: here, Italian critics acted as cultural intermediaries, framing the text for national viewers and inserting it into larger media discourses. *Corriere della Sera*, the leading national daily, annihilated America’s biggest sitcom in just a few lines: “As for *Lucy ed io*, part of a series of American TV films featuring Lucille and Desi Arnaz, let’s just say that it was a very modest and naïve sketch based on a pair of handcuffs that would not open. That’s it”\(^{23}\). Its evening supplement, *Corriere d’informazione*, in contrast, was more expansive:

> In America – they say – it has been a raging success, turning modest Hollywood actress Lucy Ball into a ‘star’. The same goes for Desi Arnaz, her husband in real life too, a ‘big shot’ at CBS, the station with 40 million viewers stateside. We do not know if the batch of *Lucy ed io* episodes that our broadcaster has bought has anything better than the poor farce about the handcuffs that aired on Saturday. We can but hope. Saturday’s screening was a

\(^{20}\) This was the fourth episode of the second season (*The Handcuffs*). The decision to start with a random episode and to carry on in no particular order evinces RAI’s difficulty in handling a long-lasting foreign series.


disappointment. Its acting style and forced, clownish comedy were reminiscent of a pre-War light-entertainment Hollywood B-movie. Its humour is so artificial that no Italian comedian would dream of exhuming it now, so passé has it become.

The perplexity that greeted the first sitcom to reach Italian screens had two main and interdependent causes. The first was the lack of adequate ‘ways in’ and traditions for the viewers, and even the industry professionals, to properly decode an unfamiliar genre. Terms like ‘situation comedy’ or ‘sitcom’ were never used (and would not be, in Italy, for several decades); the preferred words were pejorative expressions like filmetti (short films) and farsette (little farces) or the more generic telefilm (TV series). The shows were broadcast out of sequence, without following the continuity demands of a long series. And repetition, a vital mechanism for building affection for the characters and engagement with the storylines, was impossible in schedules then based on individual episodes only. The other problem was the perceived ‘weakness’ of the comedy, which fell flat and seemed even backward compared to the domestic variety offering. This impression derived both from a failure to understand the genre and from a great and evident difficulty in translating and adapting, made even more obvious by the canned laughter in the background. The sitcom laugh track became a favourite target for the critics: it was considered emblematic of the invasion of American products, seen as light, throwaway and superficial. Critic and humorist Achille Campanile, for one, often lamented in his articles about the artificialness of the laughter and how jarringly raucous it was, given how weak the (translated) lines were. Sarcastically, he noted how “our TV has thought fit to buy even the (American) applause and guffaws”, considered a mark of excessive enthusiasm compared to the narrative weakness.

The first US sitcom to air in Italy was thus an isolated experiment:

*I Love Lucy* (*Lucy ed io*), by some way the most popular programme on all American TV [...], made a fleeting and uninspiring appearance [...], disappearing before it could become habitual viewing, handicapped as it was by the dubbing, no minor shortcoming for a programme originally broadcast live before an unseen studio audience [...]. In Italy, the live laughter remained, combining with the ‘translated’ gags to give the impression of ‘canned laughter’, a complete turn-off for Italian audiences of the day.

The still-strong cultural resistance to Americanization, typical of a PSB in a paleo-television era strongly imprinted with the tripartite Reithian vision of informing, educating and entertaining the nation, allied to the production and distribution failure of *Lucy ed io*’s attempt to familiarize Italian viewers with a new and still not fully understood television genre, kept American sitcoms off the schedules for nearly twenty years. Just when sitcoms were cementing their position in the USA, becoming popular pillars of the schedules in the Sixties, then gaining in relevance and addressing major social themes in the early Seventies, Italian television ‘turned its back’ on the genre. The sole exception during these years, hidden within the children’s TV roster and considered akin to a kids’ drama series, was *The Addams Family*/*La famiglia Addams* (1964-66), aired in 1966 on Secondo Canale – the RAi’s second network, set up in 1961.


3. INSIDE ‘TV DEI RAGAZZI’

In the late Sixties, children’s TV – the so-called ‘tv dei ragazzi’ slot and its surroundings – was the vehicle for American sitcoms to make a slightly more lasting return to the Italian public channels (and national homes). The first exemplar, *Family Affair/ Tre nipoti e un maggiordomo* (1966-71), was broadcast on Rete 1 from 1976. This was followed by *Happy Days* (1974-84), which was shown stripped every evening at 7.20 pm from 1977 and exploded in popularity over the next two years, becoming a major hit and a real cultural phenomenon.

The antics of Fonzie and the Cunningham family thus became staple fare for younger viewers, offering a model considered traditional, wholesome and reassuring, in contrast with another Italian TV hit of the time – *Goldrake* (1975-77) – and Japanese anime in general. The American ‘canned laughter’ then symbolized a return to Western values that seemed to have fallen out of fashion; their importance is confirmed not only by the viewing figures but also by how the shows seeped into the everyday habits and behaviours of a generation:

The great Fonzie, surfing the wave of success on the first channel, became part of the furniture for at least 15 million Italian children, with his ripped blue jeans and black leather jacket […]. Hundreds of thousands of Italian kids learned to walk, or rather swagger, like him, to copy his gestures, to lean on a motorbike like him, to say ‘Wow’ and give the thumbs up […]. The incredible viewing peaks that *Happy Days* recorded in the States had not yet arrived in Italy. But things were heading that way […]. We can leave it to the psychologists to explain why, in such hardened times as those, The Fonz, who would never hurt a fly, was keeping millions of Italian boys and girls glued to the screen and why, in such disenchanted days, a series set in the fabulous Fifties […] was so very successful in Italy, too. Italian boys wanted to be like Fonzie; the girls fell in love with him. Perhaps our views of young people, enthralled only by violence and invincible supermen, need recalibrating?^27

For the Americans, this sitcom expressed a nostalgic desire to surround themselves with the familiar after the turbulence of the early Seventies, idealizing a 1950s past that may never really have existed. However, this idealized world was actually so successful at penetrating the collective imagination that it won over an (Italian) audience that certainly had not experienced those years in the same way but that struggled, nevertheless, to identify with the more ‘modern’, contemporary representations of America. *Happy Days*, a sitcom that was still not recognized as such, being considered just a children’s programme, became a cultural phenomenon. So much so that it forced the RAI to repeat past episodes, a then rather uncommon practice in the monopoly television: “After countless letters from the public (the TV series broadcast at 7.20 pm having attracted over 12 million viewers), Fonzie and co. will stay on our screens […] with a popular selection of the first series of *Happy Days*, aired in 1977”^28.

This series’ success blazed a trail for other imported sitcoms to arrive on Italian television. Still mainly aimed at younger viewers, they were broadcast sooner and sooner after their first airing in America, batched into seasons to help cultivate viewer loyalty. In 1978, Rete 1 broadcast *Eight is Enough/La famiglia Bradford* (1977-81). And in 1979, Rete 2 screened both the first *Happy Days* spin-off, *Mork & Mindy* (1978-82),

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with Robin Williams, and *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975-79), entitled *I ragazzi del sabato sera* (Saturday Night Guys), riding on the back of the big-screen success of *Saturday Night Fever/La febbre del sabato sera* (1977) and one of its young stars, John Travolta.

A cinema lead-in proved useful again for the Rete 1 screenings, in 1979, of *M*A*S*H* (1972-83), comedic spin-off of Robert Altman’s 1970 film of the same name. What won space in the public TV schedules for this unique sitcom and its surreal comedy, after the upheaval following the 1975 RAI reform, was the perception that the subject matter was serious. This view was underscored by the choice to use not the American original, but the version without the laugh track that the international distributors had already prepared for the UK market. Two decades after *Lucy ed io*, canned laughter was still ‘kids’ stuff’, a barrier to both credibility and success with the wider audience.

After the disastrous attempt with *Lucy ed io*, even the belated discovery of sitcoms suitable for teenagers confirmed, therefore, that Italy’s monopoly TV was the full embodiment of an age of scarcity, where space for international products was limited and often only Italian original productions could succeed. For years, sitcoms struggled for a foothold in the schedules (for reasons often unrelated to the genre itself); even when they gained one, they were often misunderstood. The success of Fonzie and *Happy Days* showed that a new taste had developed, but it would be the commercial channels – Silvio Berlusconi’s Fininvest, in particular – that profited from it.

### 4. A GREAT (AND BELATED) PLENTY

The advent of the private TV channels and their gradual development into Italy-wide commercial and distribution networks opened a new chapter in Italy’s relationship with American situation comedy, as the thin pickings of the monopoly years gave way to a confused, incoherent flood of foreign programming. The new private local channels’ need to fill the schedules with endless low-cost drama and entertainment programmes prompted the local networks to make liberal use of ready-made products bought from abroad, and especially the US. These included numerous sitcoms, often imported years after their original airings, albeit as second fiddle to feature films and drama series. Examples in 1978 included such classics as *Hogan’s Heroes/Gli eroi di Hogan* (1965-71) and *Bewitched/Vita da strega* (1964-72).

The real breakthrough, though, arrived only with the private nationwide commercial TV stations: first Canale 5, owned by Silvio Berlusconi (1980), then Rusconi’s Italia 1, and Retequattro, founded by the Mondadori publishing house (both 1982). In 1982, Italy “became the top importer worldwide of American programmes […]. Italian stations imported 12,865 programmes from the United States at a total cost of 113.5 million dollars”\(^29\). From as early as 1983, though, “the more the networks competed to buy films, the fewer were left; consequently, film prices rose, and the buyers turned their attention to TV series instead, which costed less”\(^31\). This shift reflected the interest in types of shows hitherto undervalued and underused, programmes that could give the

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\(^{29}\) *Gli eroi di Hogan* returned to newspaper headlines in summer 2003, when the then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi said he had been thinking of a character in the sitcom, broadcast also on the Fininvest networks, when referring to German MEP Martin Schulz as ‘kapo’.  


\(^{31}\) *Ibid.*, 278.
schedule clear shape and a strongly ‘American’ flavour, therefore presenting it as more modern and innovative than the RAI’s. In the next few years, Fininvest’s acquisition of first Italia 1 (in September 1982) and then Retequattro (August 1984) finalized the cultural and political strategy for launching commercial television and the ‘American’ stamp that went with it, from the modular schedule structured into set 30- or 60-minute slots (albeit soon abandoned) to the various US series’ great promotion and success. Furthermore, as early as 1979, Berlusconi had set up Rete Italia, a company trading in programmes on international markets. On one hand, TV series gained in prominence and importance, providing the commercial stations’ early successes, notably Dallas (1978-91). On the other, broadcasters often used series and sitcoms as ‘filler’ and ‘stopgap’ materials, given their modularity and repeatability, and they would maul the episodes’ order and structure to make way for adverts.

Partly because of sitcoms’ earlier sporadic, patchy deployment, the early Eighties saw an indiscriminate dash to re-use old shows, often “entirely undermining their historical consequentiality by presenting them out of context”. They resuscitated and gave greater visibility to the sitcoms already broadcast by the RAI, like Happy Days, M*A*S*H (both on Italia 1, from 1983) and I ragazzi del sabato sera (Canale 5, from 1985), or by the panoply of local TV stations, such as Vita da strega (Italia 1, from 1983). And they also brought other big US hits to Italy, ten or even twenty years after their original US first broadcast. Lucille Ball took centre stage again on Italia 1 (1984) and then Retequattro (1985-86) with The Lucy Show (1962-68), a spin-off of Lucy ed io. The entire strand of ‘fantasy’ late-Sixties sitcoms was brought back to a new Italian life: besides Vita da strega, the Fininvest networks screened I Dream of Jeannie/Strega per amore (1965-70), My Favorite Martian/II mio amico marziano (1963-66) and The Munsters/I mostri (1964-66). The subgenre of ‘relevant’ early-Seventies American comedy that reflected deep social changes also found a healthy position in the schedules, a few years down the line. Indeed, The Mary Tyler Moore Show/Mary Tyler Moore (1970-77) was broadcast in the early evening on Canale 5 from April 1982, alongside Alice (1976-85), while Three’s Company/Tre cuori in affitto (1977-84) aired on Retequattro from September 1984. One of America’s most successful sitcoms, All in the Family/Arcibaldo (1971-79), snuck almost unnoticed into the Canale 5 early-evening schedule from 1983 to 1984: it was even preceded by one of its own spin-offs, Maude/Una signora in gamba (1972-78), screened on the same channel from June 1982. But the first American sitcom to be a big hit on Italian commercial TV would be another Arcibaldo spin-off, The Jeffersons/I Jefferson (1975-85). An early-evening fixture on Canale 5 from 1984 to 1989, and later repeated at various times, the exploits of Archie Bunker’s black former neighbours drew large audiences and helped to crystallize an Italian image of the sitcom (through the type of comedy, setting and main characters) that would have repercussions for the success of later shows.

The old American sitcoms were selected according to thematic and temporal criteria. The confusion between series, seasons and episodes; the long delay since the original airings; the frequent changes of channel and timeslot; entire seasons compressed into just a few weeks; the numerous repeats – these were some of the ways in which the sitcom, often ‘outdated’, became the glue that kept the commercial networks’ schedules together. It had lower status than original productions and prime-time dramas, certainly,

but its frequent and repeated presence made it a well-known and much-loved genre, especially among younger viewers. American sitcoms’ invasion of Italian commercial TV screens in the early Eighties enabled then Italy’s networks to ‘realign’ themselves with the American output, discovering a ‘backlog’ of programmes, characters and episodes that had long gone unscreened in Italy.

In the process, commercial TV continued to distance itself from the public-service competition, also by highlighting the ‘new’ offerings from across the Atlantic. From the second half of the Eighties, sitcoms were often broadcast just a year or two behind the American screenings. One example was *The Cosby Show/I Robinson* (1984-92), another big hit screened from spring 1986 on Canale 5. The humour centred on the life of an upper-middle-class black family (originally the Huxtables; in Italy, the Robinsons) and benefitted from a certain similarity with *I Jefferson*. The show debuted in prime time, where it would stay, even after moving to Italia 1, until the episodes ran out in 1993. The alignment with the American scheduling (albeit with the added delay for adaptation and dubbing) further complicated the handling of long series, as new episodes and repeats from earlier seasons overlapped and cut across each other. Nonetheless, it allowed greater prominence to be given to some shows, which for the first time became flagships for the networks: series like *Cheers/Cin Cin* (1982-93) and *Family Ties/Casa Keaton* (1982-89) are good examples.

The advance of the commercial networks – especially the Fininvest ones – met with a somewhat belated response from the public broadcaster, following the track beaten by the private networks. On one hand, it seized what was left in the main international distributors’ library: from autumn 1985, Raiuno aired *Taxi* (1978-83) in the late afternoon, with the episodes in random order, adding an Italian song – Umberto Balsamo’s *Io vivrò* – as closing theme. Then, from March 1987, it was the turn of *The Brady Bunch/La famiglia Brady* (1969-74). On the other hand, new shows were broadcast, aligned with the American schedules: by tradition, pride of place went once again to the sitcoms of greatest appeal to children, teens and their families, like *Alf* (1986-1990) on Raidue from December 1988 and *Full House/Gli amici di papà* (1987-95) from October 1989.

Although the decade had been marked by the (disorderly but massive) invasion of these series, it is notable that the term ‘sitcom’ was used but rarely, often relating not to the imported American products but rather to their first domestically produced imitations. However, the context had changed considerably: commercial networks introduced American flavours into the schedules; the sitcom was a recognisable genre with a first tranche of successful shows, loved by the Italian audience (like *I Jefferson* and *I Robinson*); and the plentiful supply had made the genre an important ingredient in the media diet and television preferences of whole generations of viewers.

5. A ‘REDUCED’ AND ITALIANIZED SITCOM

In the Nineties, the television scenario had settled into an effective duopoly between the three RAI networks and their three Fininvest (from 1996, Mediaset) counterparts, whose networks abandoned any inclination to ‘Americanize’, preferring a policy of direct national-popular competition with the public broadcaster. Albeit indirectly, this scenario influenced American sitcoms’ fortunes in the national channels.

For one thing, there were less timeslots available in the schedules. Whereas the most successful sitcoms were still repeated in less favoured positions, their quantity
was not comparable with that in the previous decade. And the more recent shows, now aligned with the original broadcasting schedule, struggled to impress Italian audiences. Only teenage sitcoms, suitable for all the family, won high ratings and occupied prime slots; a notable example on public-service was *Home Improvement/Quell’uragano di papa* (1991-99), on Raidue from 1995 to 2005.

The public and commercial networks tried to react, to shape the sitcom afresh in the Italian image, by making wholesale adaptation changes, including rewriting plot lines and altering basic traits of key characters in some shows. In the past, there had clearly been scope for reflecting Italian tastes, as titles were completely rewritten and hard-to-pronounce character names replaced with more familiar or ‘funny’ equivalents (e.g. Archie Bunker became Arcibaldo, and the Huxtables turned into the Robinsons). But in the Nineties, the step change in quality was evident. It was not confined to sporadic alterations, but included major edits that made the Italian edition a different text in its own right. An early example was *Roseanne* (1988-97). In Italy, the series with Roseanne Barr and John Goodman became *Pappa e ciccia*, shifting the focus from the female lead to her overweight husband; Roseanne turned into Anna Rosa, acquiring Italian heritage and a thick Neapolitan accent, often bordering on dialect. The show was broadcast on Canale 5 from 1992 to 1997, in a late-night slot and later on summer afternoons. The best-analyzed case of Italian localization is *The Nanny/La tata* (1993-99). In Guido Leone’s adaptation, Fran (Drescher), a Queens girl and Jewish-American Princess, loses all vestiges of Jewishness, emerging as Francesca Cacace, who had come to the States directly from Frosinone, a provincial town in the Ciociaria area south-east of Rome, bringing her accent with her. The Italian version underwent “drastic modifications, leaving unexplained the visual presence of Jewish elements in the series”.

In addition, some major changes in the family relationships saw Fran’s mother, Sylvia, become Francesca’s aunt Assunta, while her father became uncle Antonio, and her grandmother Yetta another aunt, this time of the same name. To give the American sitcom a national-popular makeover, the most marked cultural differences were removed (notably the Jewish heritage, although the mother, not immune to romantic dalliances, was downgraded to an aunt). What is more, regional dialects were introduced, with functions akin to a classic stereotype. Although somewhat cavalier in its disregard for the original text, leaving the producers open to accusations of “political incorrectness” and “overconfidence”, the rewrite did bring success, as the longlasting high ratings and many reruns showed. The series aired initially on Canale 5 in the afternoon (1995-97) and then moved to the early evening on Italia 1 (and various digital networks, where it continues to be broadcast a decade after it went off air in the States). Similar modifications are evident also in Tonino Accolla’s adaptation choices for an ‘adult’ animation like *The Simpsons/I Simpson* (1989-).  

Despite the ‘Italianizations’ and the persistence of the traditional family sitcom, the public and commercial networks were struggling to follow the latest trends in American situation comedy, especially with shows where the family or workplace family is re-

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placed by a group of friends in a metropolitan setting. The risk then was that the Italian audience was presented with a dated conception of the sitcom, which in its country of origin was successfully seeking innovative approaches. A prime example is *Seinfeld* (1989-98), the last American network-TV blockbuster\(^{38}\), broadcast in Italy on Video music, on TMC (from 1995, at 1 pm), and in later years scheduled erratically on pay TV channels. Another case is *Ellen* (1994-98), broadcast on the public service first on Raitre in the early evening (1999) and then in the morning on Raidue (2002); despite the high visibility from DeGeneres’s coming out, scheduling choices restricted the show to a marginal role. A third example is *Frasier* (1993-2004), a spin-off from *Cin Cin*, aired on Italia 1 from 1999 to 2002 in rather irregular night-time slots.

Even *Friends*, the last time the state broadcaster lined up a flagship sitcom in Italy, had a particularly complex history. The first four seasons were aired between summer 1997 and spring 1999 on Raitre access prime time (between the evening news and the start of prime time shows), gaining a steadily growing following even when the new episodes were replaced by repeats. The subsequent seasons moved to Raidue, first at a similar time, then in the early evening and late at night, with two episodes a week. And the final season, in summer 2005, had a Monday evening prime-time slot on Raidue. This, though, was an exceptional case, deliberately nurtured by the network because of the sitcom’s growing importance in both public discourse and critical debate. But for a few exceptions, the generalist networks had less and less room for sitcoms. It would fall to other channels to revive a genre that was losing its shine.

6. ANOTHER PLENTY (IN A NICHE)

The first decade of the new millennium, finally, saw the American sitcom on Italian TV experience together a reversal of fortunes and a return to its origins. For after twenty years of strong presence in the commercial networks’ schedules and, to a lesser extent, on the RAI public service, and after various attempts to mould situation comedy to a (real or presumed) Italian ‘popular’ taste, by extensively editing the scripts and fiddling with the schedules, the generalist TV stations gradually abandoned the genre. Ultimately, it was confined to a few channels and time slots, and limited to the typical successful subgenre of family and teen comedy. The sitcom found itself marginalized. However, the approach to the genre was changed: while *Lucy ed io* and, in general, all the shows imported to Italy until the early Nineties drew criticism for being too lowbrow, trite and trivial, now it was the most educated social demographics that ‘defended’ the sitcom and its often sophisticated humour, heir to the American comedy tradition. For that reason, too, sitcoms vanished from the generalist networks but found a new home, and a similar if not greater plenty than in the commercial schedules of the Eighties, in the smaller channels that sprang up on the digital platforms.

The main networks focused on family sitcoms like *Dharma & Greg* (1997-2002) and *According to Jim/La vita secondo Jim* (2001-09), on Italia 1. The series were broadcast in their entirety and repeated several times. But the family format did not always guarantee a hit. Some shows were enormously popular in the States but flopped in Italy: *Everybody Loves Raymond/Tutti amano Raymond* (1996-2005) made only sporadic ap-

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\(^{38}\) Staiger, *Blockbuster TV*. 
pearances on Canale 5, while *Two and a Half Men/Due uomini e mezzo* (2003-) has been a summer-afternoon fixture on Raidue since 2006.

A more complex question was how to find room for sitcoms like *Will & Grace* (1998–2006). *Italia 1* stripped the first seasons in summer 2003 during access prime time. Encouraged by this success, it tried a prime-time slot in December 2003 but had to abandon the experiment after three weeks, and revert to the early evening. A sitcom “deemed too sophisticated” highlighted the gradual reduction in the offering on the main networks, due to audience fragmentation and the schedulers’ greater “timidity”. The sitcoms’ retreat from major networks, though, left greater opportunities for pay channels. *Will & Grace* was one of the first series to air via satellite before making it to the free-to-air channels, thus creating a time lag between viewing opportunities: from September 2001, the show was broadcast on Telepiù Bianco before moving, with the launch of Sky Italia, in 2003 to Fox and 2004 to Fox Life.

As satellite pay TV took off, after a slow start in the Nineties, and digital terrestrial TV (DTT) introduced a multichannel system of small free and pay networks, there were important repercussions for the US sitcom in Italy. In an exponentially growing offering of platforms, bouquets and networks, sitcoms played several roles, regaining the ground lost elsewhere. These networks – first the pay channels on satellite or digital terrestrial, then their free mini-generalist counterparts – broadcast a great number of series that would not have been given houseroom in network schedules, because they had departed from the classic model or they were deemed too sophisticated or risqué (or both). A similar ‘plenty’ applied to repeats, too. Episodes of current or recently finished sitcoms were amply repeated, with airings of old seasons, themed evenings, marathons, and reruns several times during the day or week. The chance to see favourite episodes again and again is a fundamental staple of the genre, but when different seasons of the same show appear at the same time on different channels, it can be confusing and leading the sitcom itself to early exhaustion: *Friends*, again, has seen repeats aplenty. Under the controversial title *E alla fine arriva mamma!* (Finally, here’s Mum) – reminiscent of the Italian title translation of the movie *Along Came Polly*…e alla fine arriva Polly (2004), and later dropped for the original title – the series debuted in 2008 in an early-evening slot on Italia 1, but the poor viewing figures saw it pulled after three weeks, to re-emerge later in the morning and early afternoon.

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39 A. Grasso, “*Will & Grace, una coppia sofisticata*”, *Corriere della Sera*, 2 July 2003.


In short, the 2000s brought the sitcom to new distribution channels (on television and online) but accentuated the process of its gradual specialization and fragmentation into subgenres, corraling much of the US output into the ‘safe backwaters’ of niche and cult viewing. American situation comedy, available to probably an unprecedented extent on Italian screens, in an ‘ordered chaos’ unlike that of the early commercial networks, is also increasingly distant from the television mainstream of the RAI public service and the major commercial networks. In the past, only a few shows became hits, never the genre as a whole. And in recent years, the idea of ‘bringing America to Italy’ or ‘Italianizing America’ has been almost entirely dropped in favour of creating narrower interest-viewing communities. Although, for over thirty years, sitcoms were seen with suspicion and distaste by intellectuals and journalists (while the public gradually took them to heart), in the last decade and a half, sitcoms in Italy have become a favoured cornerstone of a quality television\(^{43}\) that is even becoming elitist, followed no more by a mass, national-popular audience but by aficionados, devotees and fans.

7. CONCLUSIONS

As this account clearly shows, the story of the American sitcom’s fortunes in Italy interweaves with numerous other factors: changes in Italy’s television and media landscape; the development of international circulation; the evolving relationship between national identity and an idea of America, real or imagined\(^{44}\); and the mutual relationships of mass popular culture with its highbrow and folk counterparts. Many key issues were associated with internal factors, such as the narrative and textual characteristics of the shows, how they were promoted, how they could be adapted for the foreign audience, the professionals who mediated them for the new context, their specific working routines and habits\(^{45}\), and Italian viewing traditions, tastes and expectations.

American sitcoms had a bumpy ride on Italian TV, often with unexpected turns. This journey was marked with sudden changes of course and continual refinements, in the stages outlined (which always tended to overlap and blur together): the failed experiment of *I Love Lucy* and the genre’s subsequent disappearance in the Sixties; the shaping of US sitcoms as programming mainly intended towards children and teenagers, with shows that became part of mid-Seventies’ *tv dei ragazzi*; the abundance of half-hour series on commercial TV and their consequent reappearance on PSB through the Eighties; the ‘Italianization’ process that has affected both texts and paratexts in the Nineties; and lastly, the diffusion, multiplication and spread of sitcoms in the contemporary multichannel scenario. In a rapidly changing arena, the role of public broadcasting has been multifarious: providing the first vehicle for the genre in Italy but without fully understanding its import; holding it back during the monopoly period, only partly compensated by the success of *Happy Days*; chasing after the plenty that would be exploited mainly by its commercial competitors; patiently building a new centrality for the genre, with *Friends*; and as a digital operator helping to insert the sitcoms into minor channels.


The powerful link between the American sitcom and its fatherland is certainly one of the most important factors that have hampered, or at least slowed down, the genre’s establishment as a habitual part of the Italian viewing landscape, leaving aside a few moments of ‘American infatuation’, like the birth of the commercial networks in the early Eighties and, more recently in the 2000s, the renewed critical attention for quality TV series. American sitcoms have certainly never been a genuinely popular genre on Italian TV. Even the term itself had a long struggle to enter common parlance; even today, the generic expressions *telefilm* or *serie tv* are preferred. In general, the feeling is that of an ‘unidentified (textual) object’ not fully or properly decoded, of a series of products approached with great caution by those working on them (leaving them marginalized in the schedules) and given a lukewarm welcome by domestic viewers, with just a few notable exceptions (*Happy Days*, *I Jefferson*, *I Robinson*, *La tata*, *Friends*, etc.).

The reasons are many. But the upshot is often a industry professionals’ self-fulfilling prophecy – “sitcoms don’t work, so they won’t work” – that is rooted in the genre’s long tradition and that has brought about and perpetuates a major cultural time lag and hence a powerful dichotomy between two aspects – the American sitcom per se, and the American sitcom in Italy – that are closely related but also largely independent. Full of surprises and unexpected twists and turns. Just like the sitcoms themselves.