THE CONTEMPORARY CIRCULATION OF ITALIAN CINEMA ACROSS US TELEVISION AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS: METHODS, LIMITS, MAIN PATHS

Abstract
This essay investigates the presence of Italian cinema in United States television schedules (on networks as well as basic and premium cable channels) and in the libraries of America’s main on-demand digital platforms. It maps the spaces that are currently available, the national films screened, and the ways and forms in which they are presented to audiences. The analysis raises theoretical and methodological questions on the importance (and yet the difficulty) of understanding the specific role of television and the digital media in film distribution after the theatrical release, while offering perspectives on the main routes by which Italian films are made available, presented and contextualized for US viewers.

Keywords
Italian cinema; television; digital platforms; scheduling; distribution.
ISSN: 03928667 (print) 18277969 (digital)
DOI: 10.26350/001200_000027

1. THE ROLE OF TELEVISION SCHEDULES AND ON-DEMAND SERVICES IN PROVIDING A PLATFORM FOR FILMS

In recent years, the film life cycle in the media scenario has grown more complex and flexible. The traditional stages of distribution have become compressed and changed place; new platforms have altered and enriched the context; in general, windows once deemed secondary (in order and in importance) have now acquired a different role. In parallel with these changes and bound up within them, more content has begun to circulate on a global scale, as once-secondary markets open up and become consolidated. These innovations naturally also affect the possible outlets for Italian cinema, or, rather, for much of it. The proliferation of distribution options, both beyond cinemas and abroad, offers useful opportunities for exposure to international audiences, who therefore form (or recalibrate) to an extent their notion of Italian cinema and Italy itself. The process is neither automatic nor invisible, but as this opportunity has come about – albeit by trial and error, by experimenting, failing and experimenting again, through compromises and
best practices – Italian films have achieved a vibrancy (and a visibility) like never before on the television channels and on-demand platforms of many other countries.

This article, which is part of a broader research project on the international circulation of Italian cinema (CInCIt, PRIN 2015), focuses on the presence of Italian films in US television schedules and in the major streaming services available in the country. It aims therefore to explore the many ways of exporting national cinema and the various operations that contribute in shaping the idea of Italian cinema, and Italian culture, in the context of a particularly crucial media system. Indeed, the United States has one of the most mature and articulated television and media markets, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and therefore it was selected to test relevant research questions in a pilot analysis. A first section of the essay will deal with some theoretical and methodological issues on the role of films in TV schedules and non-linear libraries. The following two sections will present the results of a survey on the Italian movies in the US television and digital context respectively, thanks to a four-month mapping of available schedules and catalogues. In the final part, the article will analyse these findings, at least partially answering our initial questions, highlighting how the increased space for Italian cinema in these major, secondary distribution windows in the US is often still quite random and in many ways challenging, thus setting the ground for further research in this area.

In addressing the general role of cinema in television and digital platforms, and more specifically the presence of Italian films in the US media scenario, various open issues arise. Tracing the progress of Italy’s cinema in US schedules and on OTT platform catalogues presents a series of methodological inquiries that still receive relatively little attention, all told, in studies of convergent television.

The schedule is a key tool in the television industry. Building it prudently has always been vital to the medium’s development. It shapes the networks’ identity and positions them in the eyes of the viewers, while ensuring that the medium continues to exist, day by day, as the programming habits of the past evolve into its prospects for the future. It is also one of the less explored fields in television research, especially now that its role is to some extent up for discussion in today’s digital arena. Indeed, as content, channels and platforms have proliferated, the nature of TV scheduling has changed, and it has become a link in a chain that is increasingly harder to map. And yet it is a crucial object of study, especially in order to probe approaches to distributing audio-visual content, film included:

> At the heart of much TV research are fundamental questions: what was produced, where was it shown and when? That essential listings information provides the metadata skeleton for online delivery now but also the driver to locate lost content from the past. In terms of research it’s a springboard for comparative analysis and opens up areas such as scheduling.

Schedules appear in daily and weekly papers, on the web, in apps and interactive menus of TV-sets. But besides periodical libraries and catalogue index databases, no archive exists of this detailed history of what has been and is on television. Only the more

---


traditional television institutions keep archives and produce yearbooks for consultation that provide useful information to that end.

The rest of the data is quickly lost, so any study must start from a painstaking reconstruction of what was broadcast and what is – or was – available in the digital-platform catalogues. The latter compete with the television networks for the same audience’s attention and can reshape the traditional audiovisual landscape to suit themselves. They have introduced original ways of organizing and offering television content, ways that are even more temporary and evanescent than the schedules, which are at least still printed in newspapers. “The way platforms present and filter content is fundamentally distinct from the flow of linear broadcasting. Television is acquiring – unevenly, but substantively – a database form”\(^5\). This personalized, individual database is accessible via apps with interfaces tailored to the screen being used, but it lacks that public dimension that is crucial to the social construction of the schedule, feeding off a shared group style of consumption and generating the mass interest that now only prized television events can inspire\(^6\).

Linear schedules and non-linear platform catalogues are comparable in one sense, though. For “both index the range of content available through a particular distribution system, and thus delimit – without determining – the likely range of textual experiences available to audiences through that system”\(^7\). With Netflix, there are “unofficial comparator website[s] such as Unogs (Unofficial Netflix Online Global Search), Allflicks, or Netflixable, which make Netflix’s international catalogue data available in an easy-to-use format”\(^8\), archived in some cases month by month. This provides an interesting tool for comparing the offerings of different countries and underpins a public debate fuelled especially by fans, bloggers and users, often picked up by the mainstream media, on the scale and perceived quality of a nation’s on demand catalogue.

A second order of issues, closely linked to this, concerns how research might handle unofficial sources. These are used (as well as or instead of professional ethnographies) to gain insight into scheduling logics and approaches that would otherwise remain invisible and hidden. Most of the information on the schedules is still bound up between the public dimensions of TV institutions, as they shape their identity and promote themselves, and a private dimension that is “the fruit of a self-reflective process within the television industry that has remained behind the scenes”\(^9\). Editorial, commercial and professional factors\(^10\) that are less stratified but still binding – especially in economic and license rights terms – also control how content is sourced and offered on non-linear television. In both cases, then, investigating the motivations behind the choice, or non-choice, of specific content leads researchers to a systemic approach, combining official and unofficial sources and undertaking in-depth studies of the organizations and professionals who control the networks and what they screen. Many recent (and not-so-recent) studies\(^11\) have taken precisely this approach, analysing schedules to determine the

---

\(^7\) Lobato, “Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix”, 243.
\(^8\) Ibid., 245.
\(^10\) Ibid., 48.
prevalence of certain genres, textual strategies, formats or national production contexts in specific US or European channel programming. By combining schedule analysis with interviews with industry professionals and access to strategic market data, they have lifted the lid on television institutions, while seeking to explain the kind of cultural and textual experience available to viewers. These studies therefore reveal a rich set of practices, approaches, criteria and objectives that, once identified, can be observed and applied elsewhere, too.

A similar approach is needed to progress from analysing schedules to studying the “curation” and handling of catalogues in non-linear TV, identifying the tactics used there. According to Lotz, these are “evident among portals – tactics derived from the revenue model, the target market, and intellectual property owned by the portal, among other factors”\textsuperscript{12}. Similarly, Lotz notes that “curation – although largely untheorized – differs considerably from scheduling, and parallels to the rich insight available about scheduling strategies must now be created for commercial library curation”. Moreover, what may be attributed in schedules to the human element (and to professional criteria that are not always immediately clear) is ascribable in the structure of catalogues at least partially to the grey area of recommendation filters, whose sophisticated algorithms control and personalize SVOD services.

Analysis, finally, must also encompass the local/global dynamic and the relationship between the cultural factors behind a national television station’s programming decisions and globalized trends, which is necessarily mitigated by an array of specific local factors in the creation of the over-the-top operators’ offerings. As Ellis states,

The character of a national scheduling battle constitutes a formidable site of resistance and resilience in the face of any globalizing tendencies that might bear down upon it […]. Any imported show is inserted into this context of scheduling and its cultural identity is significantly altered as a result […]. The factors that make every nation’s television specific […] are produced and reproduced within the dynamic process of scheduling\textsuperscript{13}.

In this context, it must therefore be asked if this notion of the schedule as a process where local meets global to create a culturally sensitive object can also be extended to the country catalogues of Netflix and the other non-linear services. That is, to those variable-sized “corpuses of licensed or owned content distributed by a particular platform at a given time” that naturally “change over time and across space”\textsuperscript{14}. The data on the extent of the catalogues, however, are misleading. They tell us nothing “about the quality, cost, or value of the videos in question”\textsuperscript{15} and whether or not the titles have been contextualized and evaluated considering on production and distribution parameters: whether they are original productions or broadcast after acquiring the licence rights,
in which territories they are available, into which languages they have been dubbed or subtitled, and when their licences expire.

Like schedules, then, on-demand-service catalogues are essential study objects to “look more closely at the national origin of content within the platform and what this means for long-standing debates about TV flows, cultural imperialism, and cultural synchronization” and to recognize Italian cinema’s role in these platforms’ offerings in other countries. New methodological tools are certainly needed, and this essay hopes to contribute partially in shaping them.

2. A POSSIBLE MAP: ITALIAN CINEMA ON US NETWORK AND CABLE TELEVISION CHANNELS

“Secondary” windows such as linear television and on-demand digital platforms are proving increasingly important in film and audiovisual-content distribution, both economically and in the burgeoning ways of bringing texts and audiences together. This is a consequence of the long-term processes of digitization and convergence in the overall media and television industry (both globally and in individual countries), and the progressive consolidation of a multichannel television scenario alongside the emergence and rapid establishment of numerous digital non-linear repositories. Such later windows in a film’s national and global life cycle, however, often appear anything but clear and coherent. Their fragmented trajectories, timescales and circulation methods represent only part of the wide range of available possibilities. The presence of Italian-made or Italian-language films in another country’s television schedules and digital libraries, then, is the test-bed for examining the many and varied expansionary drivers characterizing today’s media scenario, as well as the real, practical difficulties that somewhat hold them back. This article presents the initial results of a mapping exercise on the potential openings available to Italian cinema, along with an analysis and assessment of Italian films’ concrete presence on television channels and non-linear platforms. The research focused on the US media arena, which offers an especially broad, rich and stratified scenario, and it lasted four months (September-December 2017). Both multichannel linear television and the on-demand digital services have reached maturity after a long and complex gestation, offering (at least potentially) ample scope for the distribution and circulation of films, including Italian ones. It was also necessary to focus on a narrow contemporary time period and to carefully inspect it and provide a snapshot, given the often transient if not fleeting nature of the spaces investigated and the available information. Another reason was the desire to verify the films’ presence (and to piece together an image of Italian cinema and its national labels, brands and stereotypes) in a coherent, uniform time period, where the same distributed titles remained available (with their associated licence rights) on the same TV channels and non-linear platforms (without new players, closing, or rebranding). This made it possible both to delineate the rather sporadic presence of Italian films on US television and in the para-television arena,

16 Ibid.
and to investigate and infer at least some of the underlying logics, criteria, agreements and key principles. After probable screenings at film festivals and a theatrical release, secondary windows as television channels and non-linear platforms in the US enable a further extension of the life-cycle of quite a large number of Italian movies. However, these televisual and digital trajectories are often independent from the first release, and carefully planned by producers and distributors: most license rights acquisitions of this kind of relatively poorly-valued content are made in bulk, through volume and output deals; moreover, the latter phases of scheduling, presentation and promotion follow distinct, medium-specific logics.

The American television scene is structured on several levels. Audiences – free-to-air network and channel viewers as well as basic/premium cable subscribers – can access content in different ways. There is a varied offering of films corresponding to that stratification (some screened as premieres, soon after theatrical release, others broadcast from a library), including Italian films. US television’s historical peculiarity, as regards networks that broadcast across the entire federal territory thanks to an intricate web of agreements with local affiliates, is that the genres that usually figure in the schedules do not include films – with the exception of an occasional major media event. There is more room in the free-to-air segment with daily programming run directly by affiliates locally, and by independent networks at regional level. But, here too, film transmissions are intermittent, sporadic, and only rarely is a selection of international films provided. CUNY Television (affiliated with City University of New York), for example, has film screenings and discussions, sometimes featuring Italian and European movies either in dedicated seasons (“City Cinematheque”) or as part of specific initiatives (often aimed firmly at film critics and experts).

There are more spaces dedicated to film (and often explicitly branded as such) in the basic-cable arena, where viewers pay the cable/satellite service provider a monthly subscription to access a bouquet of themed channels. That the offering is skewed towards US-made (Hollywood/indie) films is hardly surprising, yet interesting signs are emerging of an openness to Italian cinema, directly and indirectly. In the latter case, some dedicated film channels emanate an impression of Italy mediated through US eyes, with the old ‘chestnuts’ of fashion, passion, creativity and good living making an appearance, albeit without direct access to the films. Cinemoi, for example, airs specials on the Venice Film Festival, focusing, however, only on the US productions in (or out of) competition. Fox Movie Channel screened *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003), a US romcom set in Italy and with Italian actors (such as Raoul Bova), several times in the period in question. On the other hand, basic-cable channels do offer the occasional Italian film, mostly classics or genre works. Sony Movie Channel, for instance, aired *Django* (Corbucci, 1966). Turner Classic Movies, which has a strong interest in cinema history, gave *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, Visconti, 1960) a late-night slot. A third way of sorts, linked to the second strand of classics for film buffs, is programming around festivals and events. The Sophia Loren retrospective in the annual TCM Classic Film Festival dovetailed with not only a public ceremony and a commemorative book but also a dedicated block of films screened on the channel (on 2 November 2017), with the line-up of *Marriage, Italian Style* (*Matrimonio all’italiana*, De Sica, 1964), *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (*Ieri, oggi e domani*, De Sica, 1963), *Two Women* (*La ciociara*, De Sica, 1960), an original documentary and *A Special Day* (*Una giornata particolare*, Scola, 1977).

Contemporary Italian cinema is found on premium cable, with a bouquet of channels whose subscribers pay an extra fee to view special, exclusive content,
including premieres. The key to the offering here is not a film library but the more recent, ‘fresher’ titles. This focus means, on one hand, that there are even fewer Italian films than on basic cable. On the other, however, it does something to update the image of Italian cinema, including recent releases along with other US and ‘global’ titles in a distributor’s package, as well as more dated works chosen for their quality and prestige. In the months in question, HBO’s schedule had no Italian films (compared, for example, to a selection of Spanish films occupying an entire channel, admittedly for a much larger audience), apart from the indirect idea of ‘passionate’ Italy implicit in *Swept Away* (Ritchie, 2002) with Adriano Giannini, a remake of *Swept Away... by an Unusual Destiny in the Blue Sea of August* (*Travolti da un insolito destino nell’azzurro mare di agosto*, Wertmüller, 1974). Showtime and Cinemax do offer some English-language Italian films in their schedules (and on related on-demand platforms). Often, however, they eliminate the explicit references to the country of origin (setting excepted), presenting the films under a broader banner of global contemporary cinema. On Showtime, *Tale of Tales* (*Il racconto dei racconti*, Garrone, 2015) aired several times in marginal slots (late evening and night-time) on ancillary channels Showtime Beyond and Showcase, with a summary that omitted to mention the director’s name while noting the international actors Salma Hayek and Vincent Cassel. The film was categorized under genres like “drama” and “fantasy”, and lumped in indiscriminately with other titles. The Cinemax channels, which cater for action and adrenaline fans, showed *A Bigger Splash* (Guadagnino, 2015); although the director is named here, the other packaging dynamics are very similar, spotlighting the international stars, and with a late-night slot and genre classifications such as “drama” and “crime”. Starz, lastly, distributes Italian films in a different way. Its catalogue includes *For a Few Dollars More* (*Per qualche dollaro in più*, Leone, 1965) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C’era una volta il West*, Leone, 1968), both presented as westerns (complementing some American classics of the genre) and as films by “top directors” (placing Sergio Leone in a canon, alongside Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese and Mike Nichols).

*Italian films do appear on US TV – more on basic and premium cable than on the networks or local channels – albeit in an inevitably limited, sporadic, even random fashion, where much depends on the availability of license rights, the different windows for each film, and the distribution deals and packages that bundle quite different films together. Nevertheless, at the same time, their inclusion clearly reveals some prevalent approaches to selecting and scheduling that at times seek to highlight difference (with references to the cinema of the past or to stereotypical sunny Italian settings), albeit at others aim to erase it altogether (to position the film in a uniform programming flow).*

### 3. Italian Cinema on American On-Demand Video Platforms

Italian cinema’s presence, while somewhat occasional and haphazard on television networks, seems to differ when it comes to the offerings of streaming-video, which, unbound by linear programming limits, in theory could offer a richer selection. In the period analysed, despite the absence of completely reliable catalogue data, Amazon and Netflix were found to offer a rather modest number of Italian titles in the US: under 100 on Amazon and only 25 on Netflix, with slight variations from month to month.

Jeff Bezos’ platform has more because it is both transactional (with the possibility to buy and rent titles individually from a large catalogue) and subscriptional (with the Prime Video brand allowing a smaller choice). Partly because it is larger, Amazon’s
range of Italian titles shows no particular signs of having been properly curated or organized. It contains some relatively recent films, including *Mia madre* (Moretti, 2015), *People Who Are Well* (La gente che sta bene, Patierno, 2014) and *10 Rules for Falling in Love* (10 regole per fare innamorare, Bortone, 2012). It also includes classics, like *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (Uccellacci e uccellini, Pasolini, 1966), and genre films, with *The Black Cat* (Gatto nero, Fulci, 1981) and, surprisingly, even *An Adventure of Salvator Rosa* (Un’avventura di Salvator Rosa, Blasetti, 1939), an “Italian-style cloak-and-dagger” movie\(^\text{19}\) that stands out as the only specimen of its genre. There is also a wide array of below-the-line titles that were never theatrically distributed in Italy, seemingly made especially for a ‘mass-dump’ on digital platforms, like *Gladiator Games* (Milla, 2010), to name just one.

The Netflix selection is more ordered and accessible. The available films can be found in a dedicated sub-category under the overarching genre of “International Movies”. Most titles are quite recent, on the whole, with no library classics at all. On close inspection, there are some principles that coincide and overlap in informing the approach to choosing and organizing the titles. Netflix recognizes the Italian films which have enjoyed some international success, often as prize-winners at major festivals or with an authorial authority given by the directors and actors involved. Examples include *Gomorrah* (Gomorra, Garrone, 2008), *Suburra* (Sollima, 2015, with a Netflix-produced original TV series as a prequel) and *Deadly Code* (Educazione siberiana, Salvatores, 2013), all action films with similar visual styles. The authorial dimension is reflected in productions with an international flavour, like *This Must Be the Place* (Sorrentino, 2011), *The Best Offer* (La migliore offerta, Tornatore, 2013) and *I Am Love* (Io sono l’amore, Guadagnino, 2009), or in selected films from the festival circuit, such as *Black Souls* (Anime nere, Munzi, 2014), *The Dinner* (I nostri ragazzi, De Matteo, 2014), *The Wonders* (Le meraviglie, Rohrwacher, 2014), *Sworn Virgin* (Vergine giurata, Bispuri, 2015) and *Misunderstood* (Incompresa, Argento, 2014). There are lighter titles, too, often comedies, from *Welcome Mr. President* (Benvenuto presidente, Milani, 2013) to *They Call Me Jeeg* (Lo Chiamavano Jeeg Robot, Mainetti, 2015), *Slam* (Slam: tutto per una ragazza, Molaioli, 2009) to *La coppia dei campioni* (Base, 2016), and *Like Crazy* (La piazza gioia, Virzì, 2016) to *Me, Myself and Her* (Io e lei, Tognazzi, 2015). Low-budget, small-circulation action films also figure, acquired specially to fill out the catalogue, like *Morning Star* (Boni and Ristori, 2014) or *2047 Sights of Death* (Capone, 2014). Finally, the catalogue is completed through numerous documentaries that regale Netflix users with a rich array of images and stereotypes, presenting a foreign-friendly fix of the traditional aspects of Italian identity. Two award-winning works by Gianfranco Rosi – *Sacro Gra* (2013) and *Fire at Sea* (Fuocoammare, 2016) – are included, while themes of protest and social activism, in evidence already with *Fuocoammare*, also echo in *Too Much Stress from My Heart* (Lirosi, 2015). The fashion world makes an appearance, with the documentary on Franca Sozzani by her son (*Franca: Chaos and Creation*, Carrozziini, 2016), as does the world of cinema (*How Strange to Be Named Federico*, Scola, 2013; *S is for Stanley*, Infascelli, 2015) and even former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, in *My Way* (Friedman, 2016).

Hulu, a third mainstream subscription service in the US that is directly linked to some TV networks, contains just a handful of Italian films (8 or 9, varying from

---

month to month). Nearly all are recent: auteur films with an international outlook (like *Gomorra, Habemus Papam/We Have a Pope*, Moretti, 2011, and *I Am Love*), some more dated but still impactful works such as *Pinocchio* (Benigni, 2002), small documentary productions, like *Chlorine (Cloro)*, Sanfelice, (2015), *Arianna* (Sanfelice, 2015), *The Special Need* (Zoratti, 2013) and *Piccoli così* (Angelo Marotta, 2014), and low-budget action movies as *Dead Gamers/Virtually Dead* (Bertola, 2014). Catalogued among the genuine Italian films there is also a stereotypical presentation of Italy in the form of the Canadian film *Mambo italiano* (Gaudreault, 2003).

If we broaden our scope to include also transactional services (Apple’s iTunes, Google Play, the Tribeca Film Festival on demand, Vudu and xFinity, with a dozen Italian titles each), the picture is largely unchanged. Once again, national stereotypes often become self-fulfilling prophecies, while many works are chosen more for their functional value (their genre, their marketability to several countries) than for quality or any other specific characteristics.

4. WHAT KINDS OF SPACES, WHAT KIND OF METHODS… AND WHAT KIND OF ITALIAN CINEMA

The previous paragraphs map out tentatively the televisual and digital spaces that host Italian cinema (among other material) and that offer, present and frame it for US audiences. The exercise has identified abundant – yet fragmented – opportunities to access this content and a certain narrowness, both in the selection of the titles that are actually available and in the prevailing means of justifying and contextualizing this offering in the flow of programming and catalogues. The expectation that a panoply of channels and platforms might imply a similar abundance of films, in particular Italian ones, has been only partially confirmed. The US media system’s complexity and stratification must also be taken into account. More generally, although the many secondary windows in a film’s life-cycle after theatrical release are gradually gaining in economic and symbolic importance, the sector is still inevitably hard to pin down and reconstruct accurately. There are methodological issues intertwined with structural problems and constraints.

From this perspective, the (relative) lack of available data along with television’s and digital platforms’ (significant) lack of memory both merit immediate mention. This study’s approach, as a contemporary snapshot, has been shaped directly by a distribution system that, in the US and elsewhere, makes no particular dedicated communication and promotion effort and no long-term commitment to a type of content, film, that is always somehow ancillary: cinema is not an original product but one for which a broadcaster ‘simply’ acquires a temporary licence and broadcast rights. The traces of a film’s life on TV, as documented in the schedules published in traditional media and online, vanish – or become hard to obtain – just a few days after broadcast. They make way for information about other titles and upcoming screenings, reflecting what is but a fleeting moment of interest and a merely commercial use of those artefacts. Even viewing figures, reviews and media articles can only go so far to fill out the picture and add depth. Similarly, for digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon, it is hard

to obtain both an overall view of their entire catalogue (whose precise extent is often semi-hidden, to make it seem fuller than it really is) and a stable, diachronic picture as it evolves over time (with films that appear and then disappear at the start and end of their licence period, in a rapidly changing scenario). More difficulties still come from the lack of consumption data (which is not published), access difficulties due to geo-blocking mechanisms, and the impact of algorithmic personalization, compensated only in part by fandom communities and other semi-professional intermediaries who try to document the past or offer a more complete ‘TV guide’ for interested users.

This dearth of data and information both in the contemporary scenario, despite the seeming state of an information overload, and above all in a historical perspective, is interwoven with the power of digital and television “production cultures”21, which try to be invisible but rarely are neutral. Indeed, they strongly influence the single choices and the context in which these are made and from which they draw value. A film’s positioning on a television channel is never divorced from editorial, economic and commercial considerations. It takes account of the channel’s history and brand, audience expectations and all the other programming22. For alongside and sometimes in place of an evaluation of each title, different and sometimes contradictory factors intervene to determine how it is offered to the public. A film’s availability in a network’s offering or in an on-demand platform’s catalogue can depend on wider-ranging decisions – and even chance factors – associated with the acquisition of licence rights and their cost, the film’s inclusion in a volume deal or package of dozens or hundreds of titles, and the contractual small print that permits some uses and prohibits others23. Similar considerations apply regarding how an individual film is promoted on-air, on-platform and elsewhere. Indeed, the editing of the trailer, the promotional image and text, and the categorization by keywords (which triggers a chain of suggestions) are the product of decisions that differ according to whether TV channels or on-demand services are involved24, decisions that once again are made by a group of professionals with their various ideas and habits. TV’s mediating role (including at national level), with its processes and professionals, is well established. And the same goes for the only superficially dis-intermediated on demand platforms, where the “politics of content aggregation”25 actually produces more layers of mediation26.

Unsurprisingly, then, the ‘short memory’ of the film airings or offerings on television and digital platforms also translates into a more general ‘lack of history’ in

---


22 Ellis, “Scheduling: The Last Creative Act in Television?”; Barra, Palinsesto.


24 Lobato, “Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix”.


the actual film content they transmit. Indeed, television, be it free-to-air or premium, draws on the latest films and on an essentially somewhat narrow repertoire of ‘classics’ and ‘genre films’. And the on-demand services water down the choice of available titles based on similar considerations of ‘freshness’, ease of supply (in the context of major license deals) and specific if limited exceptions. On the one hand, then, this betrays both the multichannel scenario’s promises, with a supposed offering for every target group and every interest, and those of the on-demand arena, with the ‘celestial jukebox’ replaced by a disappointingly limited library availability. On the other, the turnover of titles is high, and the films aired are mostly in the initial distribution windows soon after theatrical release – thus destined to disappear and be replaced in just a few months.

Within this intricate web of factors, approaches, habits and potential best practices, this mapping (a partial and momentary snapshot though it may inevitably be) of Italian cinema on US networks and digital platforms spotlights how a series of films made in Italian language or produced in Italy have been recently ‘labelled’ and presented to US audiences, and how these types of content are at least partly integrated with local production and distribution practices, brands and expectations. Even amid the typically abundant offering of an advanced contemporary media scenario, Italian cinema has certainly found more outlets, although the process is slow and still patchy, where every step (from acquiring rights to scheduling and promotion) is important, and every film must earn its place in the field. In light of the professionals’ ideas of ‘practicality’ and concreteness, and the frequently haphazard choices that are made – into which too much should never be read (rather, they should be viewed in the context of interlinked processes, relations and hierarchies) – a few editorial criteria can faintly be discerned. These factors are only partially tied to a global idea of “Italian quality cinema” built through film festivals, institutions and international academia27, and more operatively constructed on trial and error processes, on the concept of an implied audience and on television and digital medium-specific logics. On some occasions they play to varying degrees with a stereotyped idea of ‘Italianness’, on others they gloss over all differences in favour of a generic international appeal (with global stars and narratives, in English), or even remould classic categories like author, genre, the ‘great classic’, action and spectacle (regardless, sometimes, of the film’s quality). And it is this mix of industrial and editorial factors that ultimately shapes the image that a large chunk of the US audience – and, thus, the global audience – has of Italian cinema.