

POPULAR CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction

One of the defining phenomena of most contemporary cultures and societies is the increasing penetration of the Internet. Social media, including blogs, apps, social gaming, microblogs, and last but not least social networks, have opened the doors to people's participation in the public arena of cultural, political and social debates, subverting the top-down model of broadcasting and challenging the role of elites and mass media.¹ Virtually everyone who has access to these digital platforms can express their opinions, creativity and social interaction in the form of texts, images, and audiovisual materials, as well as order food, locate themselves in space, keep and share records about their health, and so on. The digital convergence of old and new media has taken postmodern cultural and social practices of hybridization between high culture and popular culture to the next level, overcoming class distinctions in unprecedented ways. "Folk culture(s)", "subculture(s)", "mass culture(s)" and "postmodernism" converge on the same media and overlap in different ways. In this respect, as I argue in this chapter, "digital popular culture(s)" seem to encompass all the definitions previously given to "popular culture": they are cultures made by the people for themselves, as they gather communities with similar interests; but, they can become mass phenomena, when they reach popularity with or without the collaboration of mass media. Moreover, they "remediate" stories, cultural models, ideologies and lifestyles from other media cultures such as newspapers, movies, television, radio, advertising, comics, as well as literature, theatre, fine arts of the past and the present.²

The premise of this volume offers a unique opportunity to reflect on how popular culture has evolved from mass media to digital media in Italy. The Marxist Antonio Gramsci's reflections on the cultural industry's products and how their expressive forms convey ideological content and embedded world views still prove to be relevant to understand the relationship between Italian culture, politics and society today. Gramsci defines "folk culture" as an "*agglomerato indigesto*" ["unbearable conglomerate"] of fragments of all the world views which have succeeded in history (*Notebook 27*). At the same time, he argues that "folk culture" expresses some creative and progressive instances which can contribute to inform national culture. His concept of "hegemony", which means the intellectual and moral leadership of the dominant groups in society, well summarizes this double perspective, when it describes "popular culture" as a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the culture of the elites and/or mass media and the culture of the 'people' emerging from below. In this perspective, his analysis of popular narrative fiction in the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates how characters and stories can convey ideological models for the society. For example, he identifies the origins of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* in serial literature - a typical example is Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Montecristo* (1846), whose protagonist Edmondo Dantès becomes a model of justice for the people (*Notebook 8*). Gramsci's interpretative theory later influenced Umberto Eco who successfully combined the Gramscian methodology with his own semiotic approach to cinema, comics, advertising, and journalism. In *Il superuomo di massa* (1976), for example, Eco explores how the two power forces, mass media, on the one hand, and the need for popular justice emerging from the masses, on the other, are negotiated in some serial literature, novels, movies, and other arts. Eco argues that, through its heroes, serial literature proves to well represent the populist and pre-Marxist reformism of the 19th century.

The Internet, new media and digital technologies have introduced a new cultural dominant which requires a re-assessment of Gramsci's interpretative theory and methodology, as well of Eco's semiotic approach, in relation to our contemporary social and techno-cultural scenario. From a media perspective, if Gramsci's reflections on culture mainly revolved around literature, on the one hand, and *lived cultures*, on the other, with a special focus on the relationship between class and power, and Eco reformulated them through semiotics in the context of mass media culture, we clearly need to rethink how their methodology can be adapted "when old and new media collide" in the digital age of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006). Italian society has also significantly changed from Gramsci's times. Various waves of immigration have made it more diverse, although cultural integration has been difficult. Italians are generally more educated -but not significantly more than in

¹ According to the 'Digital in 2018 report', 34 million of people in Italy are active on social networks. The most used social network is *YouTube* (21 millions), followed by *Facebook* (20,4 millions), *WhatsApp* (20 millions), *Facebook Messenger* (13,3 millions), *Instagram* (11,2 millions), *Twitter* (7,8 millions), *Skype* (7,1 millions), *LinkedIn* (6,1 millions).

² See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).

Eco's times³ and they have been exposed to decades of mass culture. We are facing old and new emancipatory challenges, considering that Italian society is still considerably retrograde in terms of sexism, racism, and support to civil rights. Scholars in Cultural Studies have taken Gramsci and Eco's theories beyond Gramsci's focus on class and power to include gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and ultimately identity as a composite mix of all these categories. Today, the convergence culture of the digital age raises new methodological questions.⁴

In this chapter, I will first examine how popular culture has evolved from mass media to digital media and how bottom-up practices have significantly shifted attention from the figure of the "*superuomo di massa*" to "empowered self-made celebrities". I will then address how the construction of *meanings*, the formation of *identities*, and issues of *otherness* have morphed in the new media scenario, by drawing upon three significant case studies such as the "brand Gomorra"; the "brand Chiara Ferragni"; and finally, the "brand The Winx Club".⁵ I will draw upon these case studies to address, respectively, the construction of *meanings*, *identities* and *otherness*, although each of them could be used to address and discuss any of the other two categories. Understandably, popular culture in the age of digital convergence cannot be exhausted in these practices, as we are still in a transitional phase where, for generational reasons, mass culture, digital culture and high culture do not intersect for every single Italian in the same proportions. Yet, these case studies are particularly representative of three originally different cultural fields (literature, fashion, animation), Italian provenance areas (Naples, Milan, Marche), and target audiences; most significantly, they have been successful in the "digital globalisation" (Sigismondi 2012) of their brand. In the conclusion, I will highlight why this concept has become so crucial in people's social representation in digital media and what future critical perspectives this presents for the humanities.

"Popular culture" from mass media to digital convergence

In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015), John Storey aptly remarks that "popular culture" combines two complicated words, "popular" and "culture", which, in their association, have taken different meanings over time. A mindful discussion about this topic thus requires, first, a definition of this conceptual category. In his 1983 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams suggested three broad definitions of "culture". First, "culture" can be used to refer to "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (90). In this respect, great philosophers, great poets and great artists play a significant role in the development of a society. Second, "culture" can be used to indicate "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (Williams 1983, 90). This definition refers not only to intellectual or aesthetic productions, but also literacy, festivals, cultural habits, youth subcultures, sport. In a nutshell, this is what we can also call *lived cultures* in most urban societies. Third, "culture" can be used to suggest "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (90) which contribute to the production of meaning—what the structuralists and post-structuralists call "signifying practices". According to Williams, "popular" has instead at least four meanings: "well-liked by many people", "inferior kinds of work", "work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people", "culture actually made by the people for themselves" (237).

In line with these interpretations of "popular", a first definition of "popular culture", as suggested by John Storey, is "culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people" (Storey 2015, 5). A second way to define "popular culture" is in terms of a "residual category" with a certain pejorative connotation: "popular culture" is "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (5). In other words, popular culture refers to those texts and practices "that fail to meet the standards to qualify as high culture" (5-6). A third definition of "popular culture" is as "mass culture" which developed with the rise of publishing and broadcasting (radio, cinema, television) in the 19th and 20th centuries. It results from people's exposure to the same cultural products, values and lifestyles. Especially from the 1950s on, mass culture has been often associated with American culture (and the "American dream")—whose influence on other cultures has more commonly been defined in terms of "Americanization". On the wave of the Cold War, various European intellectuals, for example those of the Frankfurt School and, in Italy, Pier Paolo Pasolini, have seen in this phenomenon an attempt to spread the capitalist ideology and instill wishes and desires which led to consumerism and cultural standardization. In this perspective, "mass culture" is seen as "a hopelessly commercial culture [...] mass-produced for mass consumption" [...] which represents a threat for either the

³ See the data about people who attained tertiary education in Italy in the last 30 years in comparison with other countries. <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>

⁴ Scholars such as David Forgacs, Robert Lumley, Robert Dombroski, Dino Cervigni, Norma Bouchard, Beverly Allen, Mary Russo, Michele Cometa, and Graziella Parati have significantly advanced this field in Italian Studies. Invaluable has also been the scholarship produced on mass culture by Stephen Gundle and David Forgacs, for example in *Mass culture and Italian society. From Fascism to the Cold War* (2007), which has been also investigated by other Italianists in cinema and literary fiction, from the *cinepanettone* to Elena Ferrante.

⁵ The term "brand" is not used here with any specific connotation, but to emphasize that, whether the final purpose is commerce, strong popular brands today share similar communication strategies.

traditional values of high culture or the traditional way of life of a ‘tempted’ working class” (8). A fourth definition of “popular culture”, following again the meanings suggested by Williams, is a culture that originates from the people - in this case, “popular culture” corresponds to “folk culture”. A fifth definition of “popular culture”, as suggested by Gramsci, is as a “compromise equilibrium” between the culture produced by the elites and/or mass media and the emerging from below, oppositional culture of the people”. In this perspective, “popular culture” is a site of struggle, based on “resistance” and “incorporation”, between classes, genders, races, economic powers, and so on. In this respect, Stuart Hall (2009), the father of Cultural Studies, argued that “popular culture” theories are about the “constitution of the people”, where the people is a variety of social groups in society. Along these lines, as Fiske (2001) noted, “popular culture” is what people make from the products of the cultural industry—mass culture is the repertoire, popular culture is what people make of it with the commodities and the commodified practices they consume. A sixth definition equates “popular culture” with “postmodernism”, a culture which does not recognize the boundaries between high and popular culture, celebrating the end of an elitism constructed on arbitrary distinctions of culture. For some critics, this is the final victory of commerce over culture (Storey 2015, 12).

While these theories are still central in the investigation of popular culture today, most of them belong to another era of cultural history; one which was still strongly rooted in the mass media culture of 20th century. Mass media such as television, cinema, radio, newspapers and advertising continue to be influential at a cultural level today. However, first, they have transformed and become part of a system of media convergence; second, they do not fully represent the media landscape. Numerous other digital platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Wordpress, Instagram, online newspapers, video games, collaborate and/or compete with the cultural production of so-called “old” media. Moreover, in the digital age, popular culture results from a variety of practices which can be initially exclusive of a specific social and cultural category (“the people” or subaltern groups, “communities of fandom”, masses, elites), but typically tend to move across these class distinctions creating new cultural phenomena and products, as I will discuss in more detail below.

Digital technologies have become endemic of our cultural landscape at many levels: in terms of *lived cultures*, including literacy, cultural habits, subcultures, social life; in terms of artistic activity; and, finally, by shaping the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development of society, as the digital turn in the humanities demonstrates. The previous definitions of “popular culture” seem to all co-exist, in a way or another, in the contemporary digital society. Consciously or unconsciously, these cultural practices are in fact “widely favored or well-liked by many people” who regularly use them to perform daily activities to communicate, socialize, work, learn, access and produce knowledge and creativity, entertain themselves, and so on. Very popular apps like Google Maps, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Skype, Dropbox, Subway Surfers, LinkedIn, Academia.edu have changed the ways we interact, speak, gather and disseminate information, situate ourselves in space, etc. In their early days, many of these practices were considered as “avant-garde” in relation to mass practices and “residual” in relation to high culture—examples include the first experiments of electronic literature which set the ground for today’s blogs, among other digital genres, as well as the first online chat boxes which preceded dating apps and social networks. Digital culture(s) have also many features in common with mass culture. Phenomena like social media influencers, for example, borrow the cultural models of mass media stardom and authorship, as well as the aesthetic styles of television, cinema, and advertising, but they adapt them to the more typical informal style of social media where private and public spheres mix seamlessly. Chiara Ferragni, to mention the most successful Italian social media influencer in 2018, has become a fashion icon for young generations from all over the world, who admire her self-enhancement, activity level, ideal and stability. Arguably, in their constant hybridization of artistic genres, styles and media, digital popular cultures also share many aspects of postmodernism. Twitterature, for example, has developed as the publication of classics such as *La luna e i falò* in tweets. Likewise, many lit-blogs mix the traditional journal practice of publication of texts from “high culture” with a style of debate which is often closer to personal informal chats. Finally, the premises of digital culture(s) as bottom-up cultural practices resonate with the definition of “popular culture” as cultures “made by the people for themselves”, namely for other people with similar interests, values, desires. Especially in Italy, it would be inappropriate to equal the “folk cultures” of Gramsci’s time with the tweets, Facebook updates, and Instagram images of today’s people, as they result from decades of mass culture and locality, where locality, in most cases, corresponds to urbanization. However, in the way they express social and behavior customs, level of education, linguistic inflections and symbolic gestures of localities, one can argue that they are the new “vernacular cultures”.⁶ Unlike the “folk cultures” we used to associate to non-urban cut-off communities, contemporary ones are often the combination of national and international mass culture, local and global societies, individual experiences and education. They can be produced by individuals or groups

⁶ The Internet and social media undoubtedly also lend themselves to a variety of ethnographic research and convey more traditional ‘folk cultures’ (for example, various websites include dictionaries from Italian dialects to Italian and vice versa, on local traditions and folk events or communities of immigrants, such as the *Archivio del folklore italiano* of the Teche RAI, *La cooltura* or *The Italian network of folk culture*, but they do not make the most of the full expressive and creative potential of the Internet and new media). <http://www.teche.rai.it/archivio-del-folcllore-italiano/>; <https://www.lacooltura.com/category/folklore-tradizioni-popolari/folklore-italiano/>; <https://www.reteitalianaculturapopolare.org/en/>

and they are spread quickly and widely, if they attract the attention of either big brands, companies, mass media and/or institutions, they reach masses, and they can have a moral, political, commercial or educational impact.

Crucially, in this new socio-technological scenario, one may wonder whether a cultural studies perspective is still relevant and what its object of study would be when it comes to identify power relations, forms of incorporation and resistance and epistemologies of *otherness*.⁷ In digital culture, meanings are not only produced at the surface level of representation of contents (stories, images, audiovisuals), but, as Lev Manovich has very well explained in *The Language of New Media*, also right in the structural levels which organize and manage imaginaries and social relations, namely code, interface, software, database. It seems to be still appropriate to argue that in these sites where “collective social understandings are created”, “popular culture” is a terrain on which “the politics of signification” is played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world (Hall 2009, 122–3). Thus, what are the emancipatory challenges we are facing today and in which “apparatuses” and “forms of representations” should we look for the elusive core of convergence?

Italian popular culture(s) in the digital age

Digital practices are informed by decades, and even centuries, of local cultural history—namely they are intertwined with national and regional folk cultures, mass cultures, and high cultures; they incorporate national and international avant-garde practices; they are influenced by national politics and society. At the same time, cultural globalization implies a constant negotiation of meanings, identities, and forms of otherness with other languages and cultures. The definition of popular culture(s) in the age of digital convergence is thus inevitably plural: cultural objects and practices, and therefore cultural models and values, can become “popular” as the result of either a collaboration of mass media, such as literature, cinema and television, such as the phenomenon of Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* [*My brilliant friend*]; or a collaboration between avant-garde practices, subaltern groups, print media and social media, such as the Wu Ming foundation; or as a collaboration between vernacular cultures, social media and mass media, like Michela Murgia’s *Il mondo deve sapere* [*The World Must Know*], or a collaboration of mass media, social media and advertising, as the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts of showgirls, actors or singers, as well as those of micro-celebrities and influencers, as in Chiara Ferragni’s case; or as a collaboration between high culture, mass media and social media, such as in lit-blogs, or from numerous other combinations of media cultures. Arguably, the definition of “popular cultures” in the digital age encompasses a variety of mixed media cultures.

The division between these categories and classes has never been more fluid than today. Even more than mass culture, popular culture(s) in the digital age “result from a web of negotiations, concessions and compromises, as well as various, often tacit, forms of opposition, noncompliance, and resistance” (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 3) in relation to either vernacular culture, mass culture, avant-garde practices, and/or high culture. Within this context, another possible definition of “digital popular culture(s)” is vernacular cultures, avant-garde cultures, high cultures, forms of mini-celebrities, and digital productions, which have successfully addressed the desires and needs of large numbers of people, becoming “popular” through digital platforms; a popularity which is measured in number of followers. To mention only some examples on Youtube, which is apparently the most used social network in Italy, YouTubers such as *Me contro te* (3,2 million followers), *WhenGamersFail Lyon* (2 million followers) or *Two Players One Console* (1,5 million followers) have created new genres of entertainment, such as self-made teen comedy (*Me contro te*), online gaming which blends with animation (*WhenGamersFail Lyon*), online gaming which blends with video-radio running commentary of the two players (*Two Players One Console*).

In the diverse cultural scenario of digital convergence, these new hybrid texts, genres and practices need to be examined individually in terms of textuality, genre, aesthetics, author-audiences relationship, but also in their relationship with each other, when they expand narratives across multiple media. Their “cultural value” results from the intersections of cultures, aesthetic forms, genres they mix—what imaginaries they contribute to form, what senses they stimulate, how their convergence of artistic genres encourages a certain type of social relationship between users, and so on, how they raise questions about digital culture and society, among other

⁷ As Tony Bennett clarifies in ‘Popular culture and the turn to Gramsci’ (2009), “the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by forms of opposition to this endeavor. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which—in different particular types of popular culture—dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are ‘mixed’ in different permutations” (96). The definition of “otherness”, as it emerges between the lines of Bennet’s quote, refers to what is subordinate, oppositional and/or ultimately excluded from hegemonic identities, representations, cultural practices, because it does not comply with the agenda of the dominant ruling classes. For centuries, this has often been associated with issues of social injustice and inequality related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability which, across centuries, have been perceived as “different” and/or “inferior”. When we talk about cultural class distinctions, “otherness” can also mean “residual” -in this perspective, some popular genres such as crime fiction or romance, were considered as “other” in respect to “high literature”. In either case, this proves how “otherness” is often a socially constructed category and it can be negotiated across time and cultural and social categories which were previously excluded can be integrated.

aspects of our contemporary societies. Below, I will analyze some of these aspects, by concentrating on how meanings, identities, and forms of otherness are constructed in the digital age.

I. Meanings

So, to start with, what's new in the way *meanings* are constructed in the digital age? As a result of media convergence, transmedia storytelling, namely the development of stories across multiple media platforms, and intermedia works or practices, namely the fusion of two or more artistic and non-artistic media, have become a common practice in professional and non-professional forms of communication and creativity. Consequently, stories, poetry and images, are often developed across different semiotic systems which are occasionally combined, as it happens in the case of intermedia syncretic genres such as webcomics. Forms of transmediality and intermediality first imply transcoding and/or integrating different semiotic systems; but, when they construct meaning, at national and transnational levels, they also involve the integration of different media cultures (vernacular culture, mass media culture, high culture) in both a synchronic and/or diachronic way. I will briefly discuss this point in relation to the "brand Gomorra", drawing upon a recent book, *Il brand Gomorra. Dal romanzo alla serie TV* (2018), in which Giuliana Benvenuti has effectively demonstrated how Roberto Saviano's bestselling novel *Gomorra. Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra* (2006), originally welcomed as the literary case for a new and long overdue season of Italian 'impegno', has instead progressively been transformed into a transmedia cultural phenomenon.

Gomorra is an investigative book which mixes fiction and journalism to explore business activities of the Camorra, an Italian mafia-like criminal organization which operates in the Naples area, by the author/narrator Roberto Saviano. The genesis of the book is quite significant from a media perspective: it was originally published online on the blog *Nazione Indiana*, it was later edited by the writer Helena Janeczek, and it was finally published as a non-fiction book by Mondadori in 2006. It started attracting the attention of the masses during its launch at the television program *Le invasioni barbariche*, directed by Daria Bignardi. In 2007, the book was adapted into a theatrical performance directed by Marco Gelardi. In 2008, it was adapted into a homonymous film by Matteo Garrone, produced by Fandango. In 2014, the book became the pre-text for a television series which goes well beyond the adaptation, expanding the stories in new directions. From his first appearance on TV, Saviano himself, *in carne e ossa*, has also become part of the transmedia narrative he has created, revitalizing the well-known item of author/character popularized first by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* and then by Pasolini in his actual engagement, in first person, in his own works and public arena. Saviano has turned into an iconic figure of Italian television, which, especially in Fabio Fazio's RAI 3 program *Che tempo Che fa*, has transformed him into an oppositional, emerging from below symbol of morality, truth, justice, counter-hegemonic narratives against criminal powers. Along these lines, his narratives have been expanded to social media (Facebook and Twitter, in particular) to address social and political issues, making him fill the gap of an icon which had been missed since Pasolini's death: the *intellettuale impegnato*.

The novel, the theatrical adaptation, the film adaptation, the TV series and the identity construction of the Saviano character as a media icon all lend themselves to medium-specific analyses. What is particularly interesting in this context is how all these different cultural productions have intersected and contributed to the meaning of the "brand Gomorra". The novel draws upon a tradition of literary *impegno*. As clearly indicated in the well-known "Io so" section of the book, Saviano has remediated the intellectual figure of the *intellettuale organico* Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose role has been extended to Facebook and Twitter and newspapers, television and other mass media in the form of *parrhesia*. Yet, as mentioned above, by mixing fiction and reportage, as well as intermedia references to cinema, television, and pop culture, its style is postmodern and *Gomorra* can be considered as an intermedia brand which has integrated different national and international mass media cultures, ultimately resulting in the figure of the "popular hero" on Italian television. How the "brand Gomorra" has been remediated and exported abroad is another question which addresses the transnational construction of meanings and opens another chapter which I will not discuss here.

II. Identities

The second question regards *identities* and how these are constructed in an increasingly fragmented society. The Internet and social media have favored the rise of "communities of fandom", as Henry Jenkins aptly noted in *Convergence culture* (2006) and *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture* (2012), adding a new category to those of "the people", "masses" and "elites". At the same time, convergence culture allows significant fluidity across these categories. The cultural production is more and more diversified to respond to the multiplication of media platforms, new genres and devices, as well as to accommodate the tastes of a heterogenous plurality of audiences. The fragmentation of society and the diversity of models, values, and cultural references which inspire the cultural production has also led to even more hybrid identities which result from different digital and non-digital communities, mass media and local environments, Italians and immigrants, and so on. There is virtually space for all identities: in its current phase, the web can represent either small groups, *niches* or bigger communities, but, especially for older generations, in Italy it is still mass media, such as newspapers, television, cinema, in collaboration with social networks, which convey the shared

values of nations. Younger generations, the so-called “Millennials”, however, tend to identify more with micro-celebrities and influencers, who originally remediate and blend cultural models, genres, values, lifestyles and forms of entertainment of mass media, but in a social media style. Avant-garde practices can quickly transform into mass phenomena, as it happens on YouTube. Digital media are indeed the platform where new creative genres are created and where folk cultures, mass culture and high culture are negotiated to form “popular cultures”. Service of web TV such as Netflix, for example, which build upon the models of TV series, are one of the sites where these negotiations are possible, especially for younger generations. In comparison with American web series though, Italian productions are still under-represented. The two Netflix original Italian series which have been produced so far, *Suburra* (2017)—prequel of the homonymous film (2015), inspired by the novel written by Giancarlo De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini—and *Baby* (2018), a teen drama about the scandal of the Roman call girls in the Parioli neighborhood, reflect the darkest aspects of the Italian capital: crime, violence, dysfunctional families, crisis of positive collective values, ultimately perdition. Younger generations tend to find more positive and inspiring models in the so-called “influencers” of social media, namely people who have built a reputation for their knowledge or expertise in a specific field. In a nutshell, they encompass, in different ways, a key social and cultural quality of our times: they are “empowered”.

The brand “Chiara Ferragni” is an excellent example to illustrate how mini celebrities can reach the level of influencers and transform self-branding in both an advantageous business and a lifestyle model. Ferragni was born in Cremona, Italy, in 1987. At the age of 22, she started her fashion blog which, two years later, was nominated as “Blog of the moment” by *Teen Vogue*. In December 2013 she published an Italian eBook *The Blonde Salad*, which also gives the name to her very popular blog. She currently lives between Milan and Los Angeles with her husband, the rapper Federico Lucia, *alias* Fedez. Through the various social networks, especially her Instagram account, which counts 16 million followers, she uses the story of her life to advertise clothes, shoes, beauty products, her lifestyle and, recently, her own shoe line. The secret of her popularity, Ferragni claimed in an interview, relies in being a young “self-made woman”. Undoubtedly, she represents an Italian and international young model of female emancipation which has emerged from below and therefore contrasts with the idol culture of fashion advertising we were used to in the 20th century. Instagram Story makes her “one of us”, closer to normal people; at the same time, her self-branding style blends the popular Milan fashion culture, the Los Angeles cinema celebrity culture, romance culture, advertising, fashion magazines, and various other cultural models, in a successful *formula*. Yet, her success, as a Harvard study has demonstrated,⁸ is also since she has been faithful to her aspirations, keeping her ambitions high and waiting for the right opportunities to arise.

III. Otherness

In its early days, the Internet, new media and digital platforms have been a vehicle to convey different forms of cultural *otherness* in relation to mass media: and, more precisely, to experiment avant-garde arts and forms of communication (see, for example, net poetry); to convey cultural protest or opposition (see, for example, forms of hacktivism such as *Anonymous*); to give space to unheard artistic voices (see, for example, the rise of new writers and poets whose consensus has been based on fandom); to document live events, in collaboration and/or competition with mass media journalism, with photographs, tweets, videos produced by any users and shared with others on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and so on. These bottom-up practices have been progressively integrated in social media, mass media and high culture. To some extent, one could argue that social media, as bottom-up practices, potentially convey any form of *otherness*, as they allow anyone to speak. Yet, they are also a powerful medium to consolidate group identities and stereotypes. Much needs to be done, for example, in terms of how stories, images, audiovisuals conveyed through digital media, as well as the infrastructures which channel them, produce collective imaginaries and contribute to shape reality. It could be argued then, that the elusive core which escapes such virtual imagination is where forms of otherness can be claimed.

The brand ‘Winx Club’ lends itself for an analysis of how a digital production, started as animation and later become a more and more immersive form of transmedia storytelling for young children and teens, plays an important role in constructing cultural models and instill values in future generations. Originally born as Iginio Straffi’s CGI animation series in three seasons (2004), followed by an animated film which is the continuation (2007), a sequel, *Winx Club 3D-Magica avventura* (2010), and two seasons of the Netflix original series, *The Winx World* (2017), the story world has been strategically conceived as a form of transmedia storytelling to spread across multiple media platforms, such as magazines, illustrated and interactive novels, video games, and entertainment sectors, such as toys, stationary, clothing, parks, fast food restaurants. The Winx Club has also been used by various companies to promote social and cultural events—in 2010, they were chosen as ambassadors for the region Marche at the Expo in Shanghai; in 2012 they have become the promoters of a campaign for green economy launched by Symbola and published in the book *Green Economy. Magie verdi per un mondo migliore*.

What immediately stands out is that, despite the Italian origin of the author Straffi, the Winx Club does not seem to relate to any aspect of Italian culture and society, as previous examples of internationally renowned

⁸ <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=48520>

Italian directors had done. We must wait until the Netflix original series (2017) to recognize some characters of our Italian media world, such as Morgan. Rather, what we are exposed to is an imaginary world of fairies and supernatural creatures which is not based on real people or facts; but to whose themes, stories, characters, most girls in the world can relate—the Winx Club has been broadcasted to more than 150 countries. As Paolo Sigismondi remarked, “the Winx Club franchise has been able to successfully insert itself in the competitive global media landscape targeting young children with a global business strategy, exploring the potential of ancillary revenue streams above and beyond the media exhibitions, having an origin in the local Italian media market, albeit not appearing to draw on the rich Italian cultural heritage in the themes and images proposed, but rather to be influenced stylistically by the Japanese *anime* tradition” (Sigismondi 2015, 272).

Unlike Roberto Saviano and Chiara Ferragni, the protagonists of the Winx Club (Bloom, Stella, Flora, Techna, Aisha and Musa) are not real people who have emerged from below and later acquired the status of “celebrities”. This is totally irrelevant for the age group they target, namely young children and, especially, teenage girls, who are interested in the fairy outfits, hair styles, personalities of their idols, and just want to get immersed in their fantastic world. In doing so, the Winx Club offers a global imaginary to millions of girls in the world, creating a *koiné* of cultural models for future generations.⁹ For the more analytical eye of parents and teachers, the fairies apparently represent a positive model of empowered girls who have built their personalities on their unique qualities and can thus inspire younger generations to become future leaders (or influencers). By addressing issues of gender and diversity, they seem to overall satisfy adults’ progressive desire for diversity considering also that this aspect is emphasized in the protagonists’ different personalities, styles, characters. The opinion of international critics has not always complied with this interpretation. The minimal sexy clothing, the representation of unrealistic body images, the stereotyping about teen dating, as well as violence, are some of the aspects which they have found below expectation in terms of emancipatory instances, in comparison with Pixar and Dreamworks (Sigismondi 2015, 281). Understandably, given the global dimension of the Winx Club imaginary, the issues of otherness raised by some may be contested by others. While in more emancipated countries, the stereotyping of dating, for example, can strike more easily, in more traditional regions of the world, it may be either unnoticed or perceived as positive. In this case, the “compromise equilibrium” seems to be entrusted with the critical communities of adults, such as families, schools, and similar institutions, in the different countries. They will be responsible for the definition of “otherness” and for providing future generations with the critical tools which will allow them to identify the elusive core of such a global imaginary which seamlessly and powerfully mixes Japanese *anime* with American culture.

Conclusions

The term “brand” first emerged in the late 1880s to indicate goods like Coca-Cola which stood out from competition. David Ogilvy, the “Father of Advertising,” defined brand as “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes”. It is a “person’s perception of a product, service, experience, or organization”, according to the *Dictionary of Brand*. It is not a logo, it is not an identity, it is not a product, but, as Marty Neumeier defined it, a brand is “a person’s gut feeling about a product, service, or organization”. In mass media culture, we were used to see goods advertised on multiple media platforms, such as television, magazines, advertising boards, gadgets, and so on, with the specific purpose to construct a brand of the product. We were exposed to various representations of the same object in our daily life experiences and, finally, we synthetically got a sense of what that item meant to us. What lies behind the most successful brands was a well-thought and coordinated strategy of communication meant to provide a package of meanings, suggest model identities, connect with the masses’ wishes and desires.

In the age of convergence culture—where social media have allowed virtually anyone to engage in a strategy of self-branding and where mass media need to collaborate with new media to achieve effective communication- people’s identities, like goods, are constructed as “brands”. While this might not come as a surprise, what strikes is how this results especially from the new media scenario in which we are immersed. The increased tendency to take a “distant reading” of the reality which surrounds us, including people, events, news, in combination with the fragmentation of representations across multiple media, the overwhelming quantity of data and cultural stimulation we are exposed to each day, the attention deficit which affects more and more people, especially the Millennials, the rapid evolution of technologies, all make us more prone to grasp the sense of the world through branding. The concept of “branding” today goes well beyond promotion, advertising, publicizing to potential masses for commercial purposes. “Brand” today is how we manage to effectively communicate and understand the meanings deriving from the variety of cultures which blend in our stories, images, life styles. It is a snapshot of the multiple cultural intersections which constitute today’s advanced societies; it is thus crucial to develop the critical tools for a close reading of this emerging transmedia textuality made of digital and non-digital media. This is after all the challenge of “compromise equilibrium” which digital humanities, cultural and media studies will face in their relationship with digital popular cultures.

⁹ In their project *Winx Nation. educare la futura consumista*, Ellen Neremberg and Nicoletta Marini Maio are currently examining this topic.

