PREMIO: excellence

Trashopolis: The Digital Recycling of "Trash Television" in Neoliberal Italy

Salvatore Giusto

2021

Trashopolis: The Digital Recycling of "Trash Television" in Neoliberal Italy

Salvatore Giusto
Department of Sociology
Bishop's University

PREMIO : excellence

Collection Hors-Série No. 7

Gagnant de la bourse Marielle-Pandolfi, 2018

PREMIO **: excellence** est une collection hors-série réservée aux étudiants de tous les niveaux. Chaque numéro est dédié à un seul auteur dont la soumission a été jugée et acceptée par un comité d'évaluation.

é@a

Trashopolois: The Digital Recycling of "Trash Television" in Neoliberal Italy

A Digital Freak-Show

Carmen is a notorious neomelodic singer. [1] In fact, she belongs to a controversial class of semi-professional performers specializing in neomelodic singing (*la neomelodica*), a pop-folk music genre extensively circulating within the mediascape of Naples, Southern Italy, since the early 1990s (Giusto, 2019; Pine, 2012). Being extremely fashionable among the Neapolitan lower classes, neomelodic singing regularly intermixes traditional Neapolitan vocal styles with more recent international sonorities (e.g., American rock music, Latin American dance music, Northern European electronic music; Perna, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, the lyrics of most neomelodic songs typically feature apologetic narratives and aesthetics on the Camorra (see fig. 1), a particularly violent and politically influential Neapolitan Mafia-like drug cartel (Giusto, 2020; Pine, 2012; Ravveduto, 2007).

This criminal syndicate is in turn a major financial investor in most neomelodic houses of music production, as well as the local mass-media outlets that concretely circulate the works of art by the most famous neomelodic singers among the Neapolitan public (Ravveduto, 2007). Consequently, neomelodic singers of Neapolitan popular class background such as Carmen tend to circulate and commercially promote their artistic productions through Camorra-sponsored (or otherwise Camorra-managed) local radio stations and TV channels (Giusto, 2020).

---

[1] Given the involvement of "Carmen" with organized crime, I will not reveal her personal identity in this paper for obvious reasons of privacy and personal security. I have therefore replaced her name, as well as any other personal identifier such as the title of her songs and music videos, with a series of pseudonyms, which the singer herself has suggested to me.

I met with Carmen in March 2014. Back then, I was conducting ethnographic research on the dynamics of cultural production and informal political mediation emerging from the systemic involvement of criminal organizations, such as the Camorra, in the Italian media industries. I had managed to conduct an ethnographic interview with this locally popular neomelodic singer in the humble single-room apartment she inhabited, which was in turn located in one of the many lower-class neighborhoods punctuating the urban space of contemporary Naples. During our interview, Carmen did not deny her underworld connections and the crucial role they played in her professional and artistic lives. When I asked her about the most effective media platform through which she promoted her music productions, however, I was surprised to hear that the media outlet in question was not managed by gangsters at all. Rather than responding to my question through some local crime story (as was the case for many other neomelodic singers I had previously interviewed), in fact, Carmen introduced me to Trashopolis.

"Trashopolis: Your Daily Dose of Perdition" (*Trashopolis: la vostra dose quotidiana di perdizione*) is a digital blog produced by Ciro Ascione, a fiftyish Neapolitan high school teacher with a middle-class background (see fig. 2).[2] This online blog is one of the oldest and most popular Italian websites focusing on Italian local TV content, having been visited by almost four million internet users since its original founding in 2007.[3] At least when Carmen showed me the Trashopolis website for the first time, the slogan featured on the front space of this blog's home page eloquently summed up its provocative content and scope. It stated: "If you were looking for free pornography as the average internet user does, this time you have found something a lot more offensive than that." As in a multimedia freak show, in fact, Trashopolis hosts a vast array of politically incorrect video clips. These were originally broadcasted in Italy by so-called local "trash TV" networks of every sort (including those sponsored by the

---

[2] See Trashopolis' home page at: http://www.trashopolis.com/ . Last time accessed: 22/10/2021.

[3] I have inferred such data from the website itself (see the previous footnote), as well as from my subsequent ethnographic interviews with Ciro Ascione.

Camorra) over the last three decades, and subsequently selected, uploaded online, and wittily reviewed by Ascione in person.

Among those clips was a particularly cringe-inducing neomelodic music video featuring Carmen herself. This clip was a re-mastered version of the official video of "'A Femmena 'ro Capoclan" (English: *The Woman of the Camorra Boss*), a popular neomelodic song performed by my ethnographic informant a few years before our interview, and originally circulated among the Neapolitan popular class publics via Camorra-sponsored local TV networks. The aesthetics of the neomelodic video, as well as the lyrics of the pop-folk song from which it was inspired, were explicitly violent. They illustrate the melodramatic life-story of a Camorra boss's wife promising the bloodiest vendetta against "those dirty rats," who dared to denounce the criminal deeds of her husband to the police. Trashopolis listed Carmen's music video within an *ad hoc* "neomelodic" playlist. Moreover, the website introduced the clip through a short satirical commentary by Ciro Ascione, which was in turn followed by several interactive posts by internet users ironically denigrating or supporting its controversial contents. When I asked Carmen about how it felt to see her own music video being mocked online by random people, she provided an interesting reply:

> People can write whatever they want on Trashopolis. I am honestly very happy with that, as long as they will keep on talking about me! Let's face it: my songs are not for everybody. However, I really want them to be known by everybody, because they represent my own interpretations of the world. What would be the point of singing otherwise? […] Trashopolis is a lot more powerful than any Neapolitan local TV network, because it is famous on a national level. This website concretely helps me to promote my music and public image outside of the Neapolitan ghetto where I live and its organized-crime cultural logics. It does not matter if Trashopolis makes my songs look even more controversial than they are. Thanks to this super famous satirical website, one of my videos has even been aired on national TV once!

A few weeks after my meeting with Carmen the neomelodic singer, I had occasion to conduct a further ethnographic interview (once again, on issues of organized-crime-sponsored Italian media) with Roberto, a roughly thirty-year-old Neapolitan sociologist serving as the project manager of a well-established anti-Camorra NGO. Among several other questions, I asked Roberto about what types of local media contents he enjoyed watching during his free time, as well as if he was by any chance a personal fan of neomelodic local TV contents. This vocal anti-Camorra activist and well-educated member of the so-called Neapolitan civil society responded to me: "I really do not pay much attention to this sort of trash TV contents, unless they are re-posted online by Trashopolis."

Roberto then insisted on taking a break from our interview, in order to show me a couple of very improper (but indeed wickedly funny) Trashopolis videos on his iPad. The protagonist of the first video was Peppe Fetish, a forty-year-old Neapolitan TV entertainer of popular class background and self-claimed expert of BDSM sexual practices. In the clip, Peppe solemnly preached against the conservative attitude of Southern Italian people toward sexual freedom while greedily licking the feet of a sex-worker. The second video featured Gennaro, a greasy-looking televisual fortune teller. Gennaro openly made fun of the tragic misfortunes of those asking him for advice on live TV via premium-rate phone calls and creatively insulted them for wasting their money, rather than comforting his spectators with any good news about their future (see fig. 3). After enjoying a good laugh on these two inappropriate pieces of "trash" television, Roberto told me:

> I know! I know! Trashopolis is no pedagogical matter. [he laughs] However, there is still a lot to learn from it. This website features the uncensored voices of the contemporary Italian popular classes. It is like an open window on postmodern Italian folklore. Its videos may be offensive to some people, but they are also honest and creative pieces of cultural production, at least if you compare them with those aired by most current Italian national TV networks. […] These videos may have been trash television when they were produced and broadcasted by their original local TV networks, but they end up smelling like freedom once they get posted online on Trashopolis.

How can the digital circulation of explicitly controversial media production, such as those featured on the Trashopolis website, elicit spontaneous appreciation among such a socially diverse fan base, while positively furthering collective processes of trans-class cultural production? How can they discursively challenge the neoliberal regime of social representation characterizing the current Italian national mediascape? How can the digital interactions between the author and the various digital publics of Trashopolis express original forms of counter-hegemony through the symbolic recycling of so-called local "trash TV" contents? What are the potential shortcomings of these ironic activities of digital recycling? This paper will provide answers to these questions.

In order to do so, I will ethnographically engage with Trashopolis through three distinct (but intertwined) analytical steps. First, I will contextualize the processes of cultural productions instantiated by Trashopolis within a broader analysis of the role played by the national and local media industries within Italian class politics during the last century. Second, I will present an ethno-biography of Ciro Ascione. As such, I will describe the digital deeds of the author and webmaster of the Trashopolis website as counter-hegemonic political reactions against neoliberal instantiations of Italian mediacratic state-power. Third, I will redefine "Trashopolis" as an extremely creative digital ground of cultural production and civic engagement, which strategically aims at recycling socially despised local televisual narratives into creative instruments of socio-political change, while controversially empowering the specific types of lower-class subjectivities characterizing their original authors and performers.

Figure 1: A particularly explicit frame from a Neapolitan
neomelodic music video representing the life-story
of an arrested Camorra boss in apologetic terms.

Figure 2: A self-portrait of Ciro Ascione,
the founder and webmaster of Trashopolis.

Figure 3: Gennaro the televisual fortune-teller,
as he appears in a popular Trashopolis video.

La Televisione Trash

The massive popularity garnered by the Trashopolis satirical blog over the last three decades, as well as its counter-hegemonic role vis-à-vis current Italian national media productions, can be fully grasped only in light of the central role played by the mass-media within Italian class politics. As shown by a vast literature in modern Italian studies, the inner functioning of the Italian public sphere, as well as the dynamics of political mediation interconnecting variously empowered classes of Italian citizens to state-power, has hinged on mediacratic dynamics of mass publicity since at least the early 20th century (Gnagnarella, 2010; Zagarrio, 2007; Gisborg, 2005; Bindi, 2005; Pandolfi, 1998). While assuming different shapes depending on the specific institutional contexts in which they were embedded, these dynamics of mass publicity overall reproduced the cultural hegemony of state-monitored cultural producers over their popular class publics, while allowing the latter to effectively partake in national debates only through their potential access to information technologies (Viroli, 2011; Panarari, 2010; Gramsci, 2006 [1930]).

This historical trend can be traced back at least to the early 1920s. During that decade, the Fascist regime responded to the extremely diffused conditions of illiteracy characterising the Italian popular classes of the time with the development of a technologically advanced public media industry, over which the totalitarian state enforced violent conditions of monopoly (Zagarrio, 2007). Through the pervasive circulation of nationalist propaganda, such as that connoted by state-funded radiophonic and cinematographic broadcasts, the Fascist public media industry effectively (as well as controversially) allowed the Italian popular classes to establish sensorial forms of personal engagement with the public sphere, perhaps for the first time in history (Giusto, 2011). The national media therefore became the most diffused platform of cultural production, political relationality, and sensorial mediation through which the Italian poor could partake in national discourses, while concretely introducing the state as a persistent presence within their collective memories, personal experiences and social class identities (Anderson, 1986; Zagarrio, 2007; Giusto, 2011: 302).

Far from being a Fascist feature only, the mediacratic role played by the public industries of cultural production in the articulation of Italian state-citizens relations, as well as their outcomes in terms of national class politics, did not disappear after the Second World War. From 1947 until 1982, the newborn Italian Republic continued to manage the national media industries through administrative logics of public monopoly, which were not totally dissimilar to those implemented by the previous totalitarian regime (Zagarrio, 2007: 121). In 1954, for example, the relatively young republican Italian Parliament re-branded the former Fascist apparatus of radio broadcasting, the so-called URI (Italian Radiophonic Union), as the RAI (Italian Radio and Television): a state-owned multimedia in charge of managing, *inter alia*, public television (Gnagnarella, 2010: 62). The Republic thus introduced television as an institutionally monitored public infrastructure. As such, early Italian television aimed at further "modernizing" the country through the "re-education" of Italian audiences into an "imagined community" of slightly nationalist inspiration, which was planned to emerge from the compulsory conversion of the Italian popular classes into literate components of

the state-regulated cultural mainstream (Anderson, 1986; Fanchi, 2002: 69).

As a matter of fact, early Italian public TV explicitly instated the dichotomy between national upper and lower classes (and their respective public aesthetics) at the centre of national debates, while overly stressing the cultural inadequacy of the latter vis-a-vis the former (Pandolfi, 1998: 288). During the 1960s, for example, a popular TV show entitled "It's Never Too Late: Course of Working-Class Education for the Rehabilitation of the Illiterate Adult" broadcast elementary school classes on prime time (Bindi, 2005: 142). The paternalistic linguistic registers employed by the teacher/anchorman of the TV show, together with the regular presence of Southern Italian farmers and elderly women wearing backward-looking traditional regional costumes amid his students/performers, reified essentialist representations of the Italian popular masses (see fig. 4). As such, early Italian public television hinged on processes of linguistic and aesthetic standardization, which depicted the "illiterate" national poor as defective subjects in need of being "rehabilitated" through their culturally productive access to the public mass-media (Bindi, 2005: 144).

From the early 1950s up to the end of the Cold War, in short, the Italian state-managed national media continued to serve as pivotal tools of socio-political mediation between the state and its publics, while expressing systemic conditions of cultural hegemony over the popular classes in a top-down manner. In the first place, this was because the supposedly "educational" contents circulated by the Italian national public media regularly mirrored the agenda of the capitalist classes supporting the institutional actions of the state. Secondly, it was also because the historical functioning of the Italian national media outlets depended upon political processes of public relationality, which were institutional in nature. The management of the RAI TV networks, in fact, was directly supervised by the Italian Parliament at least until the mid-1980s, and were therefore strongly influenced by contextual electoral trends.

As alluded to above, this historical trend was further renegotiated at the end of the Cold War. This was due to the liberalization of Italian private TV networks, which was effectively promulgated in 1984 by the center-left party coalition supporting the Italian government of the time. It was also due to a series of radical neoliberal reforms implemented between 1994 and 2011 by Prime Minister and mass-media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (Giusto, 2020; see fig. 5). The ongoing neoliberal reforms of the national labour market engendered a large-scale precarization of Italian workers (Molè, 2011), which extended the hegemonic discourses historically aimed at the Italian popular classes to the increasingly depleted Italian middle classes (Pipyrou, 2014; Lanoue, 2011; Dematteo, 2007). At the same time, further neoliberal reforms of the Italian mediascape, especially in the field of television, widely circulated individualizing modalities of mediaticratic access to the public sphere amid the Italian "publics/citizens" (Giusto, 2020; Panarari, 2011; Viroli, 2011; Ginsborg, 2005).

The Berluconian neoliberal turn represented a shift in the dynamics of hegemony through which the Italian state had previously excluded the poor from the apparatuses of cultural production (Panarari, 2011), which historically prevented the national popular classes from "giving a centralized expression to their aspirations and needs" (Gramsci, 2006 [1930]: 65). As in a reality show à la *Big Brother* or an American wrestling match, where fictional illustrations of the TV performers' public selves and overall social capital implicitly connote stereotyped and populist dynamics of social classification, the aesthetics characterizing Italian national TV formats from the mid-1990s onwards provide their lower-middle class audiences with overly neoliberal representations of their supposedly precarious, economically interested, and politically disengaged role in society (Panarari, 2011). In so doing, the ongoing circulation of anti-intellectual cultural productions furthered the hold of the national elites over the Italian imaginary. By the same token, it simultaneously inspired the Italian subaltern classes to partake in illusorily self-legitimating processes of social affirmation through market-mediated acts of televisual fruition and/or direct participation in the production and circulation of populist TV contents (Giusto, 2020; Molè, 2013).

In this context, the term "trash television"[4] (in Italian: *la televisione trash*) got increasingly employed by most Italian middle-upper class intellectuals, and especially those opposing the neoliberal reforms by Berlusconi and his institutional successors, as a depreciative label standing for two distinguished meanings. In the first place, this derogatory term critically addresses the populist formats broadcast by the Italian (public and private) national TV networks from the 1990s onwards (Ginsborg, 2005; Viroli, 2010). Secondly, it also labels a vast array of TV contents, which several minor Italian power holders (including criminal organizations such as the Neapolitan Camorra) use to produce and broadcast through local TV networks as grass-root articulations of the post-Berlusconian aesthetic milieu (Bettetini et al., 2004). Depending on their budgets and scopes, these two TV formats share different contents. However, they are both intended to represent self-claimed "authentic" forms of Italian popular class culture through the simultaneous employment of neoliberal regimes of media production and populist visual rhetorics.

In this sense, the fact that both the national televisual mainstream and most local TV productions have been labeled as "trash television" by the contemporary Italian middle-upper class subjects such as Roberto the anti-Camorra NGO project manager defines the common populist attitude of these two types of Italian TV productions as an ongoing discursive tool, rather than a mere product of Berlusconi's reforms (Zizek, 2009). By the same token, the elitist connotations of the term "trash television" further illustrate it as a commentary on class (Giusto, 2020). In fact, the depreciative fashion in which contemporary members of the so-called Italian civil society employ the term "trash television" implicitly index to subaltern modalities of participation in the production and circulation of (either national or

---

[4] As reported by Thornton Caldwell (1995), the term "trash television" originates in the field of American media studies, where it defines a profit seeking "mode of [cultural] production privileging techniques deprecated by the higher televisual guises" (196) out of its employment of profanity, hyper-sexualized aesthetics, and low-budget visuals (see also: Giusto, 2020).

local) public knowledge, while further re-branding Italian neoliberal "rednecks" as a culturally "trashy" imagined community à la Benedict Anderson (1986).

Due to the eviction of national TV contents from its digital collection of local televisual "monsters" (e.g., Carmen the neomelodic singer, Peppe Fetish, Gennaro the insulting fortune teller, etc.), Trashopolis explicitly aims at subverting the parallel regimes of social representation respectively displayed by the post-Berlusconian media and their upper-class detractors, as well as the contextual approach to class politics that they have both complementarily engendered in Italy over the last three decades. As such, the satirical blog by Ciro Ascione calls for a radical divide between top-down and bottom-up "trash-televised" representations of neoliberal Italy's popular classes, while viewing the latter only as worthy of producing socially positive cultural meanings through their online re-circulation. Through this move, Trashopolis implicitly criticizes the post-Berlusconian mode of cultural production and televised civic engagement from which the "trash TV" content of the Italian mediascape historically and aesthetically emerged. By the same token, it also re-defines Italian local "trash television" (together with the contextual lower-class forms of televisual expressivity that inform them directly) as potentially subversive grass-root alternatives to other mechanically reproduced tools of mass-mediation regimenting neoliberal dynamics of class-consciousness in post-Berlusconian Italy.

In short, the impressive success of Trashopolis's digital blog, as well as its surprising capacity to co-involve socially diverse cultural operators such as Carmen the Camorra-sponsored singer and Roberto the anti-Camorra NGO activist, seems to depend on this website's capacity to fill the gap between the populist registers through which the post-Berlusconian media represent the Italian poor and the depreciative tones through which most Italian intellectuals historically address lower-class processes of publicity that are not inspired by state-monitored pedagogical intentions. Trashopolis ultimately attempts to re-signify (and overall "recycle"), therefore, populist local TV productions into popular voices of contemporary Italian social

S. Giusto

discomfort, while turning their supposedly "trashy" aesthetics into ironic fields of cultural negotiation and potential political change.

Figure 4: An evocative frame from an episode of "It's Never Too Late: Course of Working-Class Education for the Rehabilitation of the Illiterate Adult," a popular TV show broadcasted by the RAI (Radio Televisione Italiana) from 1960 to 1968.

Figure 5: A photographic portrait of former Italian PM and private mass-media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi.

Feeding the Troll

The popularity enjoyed by Trashopolis is largely based on its capacity to elicit counter-hegemonic commentaries on the mediacratic regimes of social representation and civic participation that permeate the Italian public sphere, as well as the dynamics of social alienation and overall class struggle they have historically framed. The life-story of the founder and webmaster of Trashopolis, in tandem with the motivations inspiring him to engage in digital forms of cultural production since the late 1990s, confirm this political interpretation of the satirical blog.

When Ciro Ascione founded Trashopolis in 2007, he had already been a famous (if not a notorious) public figure among many Italian internet users for almost a decade. As it emerged from the interviews that I conducted with Ascione in May 2014, the reasons inspiring the Neapolitan high school teacher's digital fame during the early "Internet Age" were political in nature. From the early 1990s up to the mid-2000s, in fact, the soon-to-be author of Trashopolis regularly used to design, enact, and achieve ironic and extremely surrealist forms of online activism aimed at the disciplinary subtext of mediacratic power. Consequently, the high school teacher used to be known across the thick web of digital contacts that he restlessly cultivated on the early online social media as "the most powerful Internet troll of Italy." Far from bullying random victims, Ciro systemically designed his trolling as iconoclastic and humorous pranks aimed at national and multinational mass-media holdings, whom Ciro held accountable for the conditions of social alienation and political apathy involving the neoliberal popular classes on a transnational scale.

Generally speaking, the Neapolitan high school teacher's pranks (or, to use Ciro's own words, his "ironic acts of digital activism") involved the *ad hoc* creation of extremely grotesque, explicitly vulgar, and

S. Giusto

overall "impossible to believe" fake news[5] involving the media holdings in question. Ciro took care of publishing and massively circulating fake news from multiple accounts he had previously created on the online social media across strategically selected networks of digital contacts and internet-based opinion leaders (the so-called "influencers"), who may or may not have been aware of the veracity of this surrealist narratives. Once the fake news created by Ciro turned viral on online social media, they were regularly treated as real information by rather distracted Italian and international press agencies plumbing the internet for potentially rewarding scoops. As in a digital chain-reaction, these press agencies would then re-circulate Ciro's fake news among most of the (either private or public) analogic media holdings supposedly in charge of providing the public with accurate information.

Ciro's most spectacular activity of trolling concerned the massive diffusion of particularly unrealistic fake news on the evil deeds of a totally fictional character supposedly working as an actual cadre of the Fox Broadcasting Company (an authoritative American private media holding internationally known for its right-wing take on public information), whom the Neapolitan internet troll ironically named as "Dick MyCousin." According to the narrative strategically circulated online in 2008 by "the most powerful troll of Italy," Dick MyCousin had developed a personal hatred for the American cartoonist and satirist Matt Groening, who also worked for the Fox media holding as the creator of the popular TV cartoon series *The Simpsons*. Due to the feud involving the supposedly all-mighty company and the cartoonist, Dick MyCousin supposedly obliged Groening to murder Marge Simpson 'live' and subsequently evict such a beloved character from *The Simpsons* TV show.

Back in 2005, this piece of online info-garbage by Ciro became so widespread across multiple online social media profiles, Internet

---

[5] I define here the term "fake news," with Allcott and Getzkow (2017), as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false" (213). By extension, as claimed by Edson (2017), the term fake news also generally defines "viral [online] posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports" (2).

blogs, and specialized websites managed by hard-core fans of *The Simpsons*, that even Fox News (that is, a TV network managed by the same mass holding that broadcasts the cartoon in question) reported it live as a real information, while vocally asking the phantomatic Dick MyCousin to reconsider his murderous hit on Marge Simpson. A few weeks and some activities of fact checking later, Fox News ended up discrediting its own supposed scoop on *The Simpsons* as nothing more than an extremely well designed prank. At that point, Ciro Ascione published an online post in which he declared himself as the author of the fake news in question. In so doing, he publicly argued that neoliberal mainstream media holdings such as Fox Broadcasting Company were incapable (and probably also disinterested) of subjecting the information they provide to their audiences to the most basic processes of fact checking. These corporations did not provide accurate representations of reality and should not be considered as trustworthy institutions. Consequently, as Ciro claimed at the end of his online post, big media corporations such as the Fox should have been replaced as soon as possible by internet-based free sources of public information.

The eminently political intensions at the core of Ciro's early activities of digital trolling kept on inspiring the Neapolitan high school teacher even in more recent times. When I asked "the most powerful troll of Italy" what his opinion was on the recent online proliferation of fake news by far-right digital activists and their violent xenophobic outcomes in terms of cultural production, Ciro replied:

> I'm not surprised that many bad people currently create and circulate fake news. The cultural hegemony exercised by the mainstream media has turned us all into selfish little monsters. For example, it has turned me into a troll and a lot of other people into fascist pigs. But being a monster or a troll does not necessarily mean one is evil or xenophobic. I was the very opposite of a far-right activist! […] Back in the 2000s, I used to create fake news because I believed that it was finally time to expose the mainstream media for what they truly are. I believed that it was time for monsters such as myself to take over their own spaces of public communication and realize themselves as critical

individuals. I wanted to play with stereotypes and create subversive contaminations between lower- and upper-class pop cultures, in order to empower the former and express fierce criticism of the latter.

Ciro's activities of digital trolling ended in 2007, in conjunction with the inauguration of the Trashopolis satirical blog. According to the Neapolitan high school teacher, this decision was motivated by at least three reasons. In the first place, Ciro noticed that an increasing number of people were turning to the web as an alternative source of information. This convinced him that the primary objective of his former campaigns of trolling had been somehow accomplished. Secondly, as hinted by the previous ethnographic intervention, he also noticed that the creation and circulation of fake news was increasingly becoming a standardized practice of political misinformation among younger digital communities, who contextually expressed (and got publicly associated with) political values and intentions very far from his own. In light of this trend, Ciro feared that being potentially associated with more recent groups of fake news creators by the Italian public opinion could have jeopardized both his personal reputation and the overall credibility of the political claims that he had so powerfully expressed during his early campaigns of trolling.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Ciro noted that the discursive and aesthetic registers through which younger Italian internet users from popular class backgrounds approached the online social media during the late 2000s was still largely influenced by the regimes of social representation and neoliberal civic engagement that dominated the post-Berlusconian national TV networks. Due to the massive investment funding at their disposal and the rising popularity of internet-based information technologies, the Italian mainstream media holdings were in turn aggressively investing in "wannabe innovative" (*innovative nella loro testa)* dynamics of online mass-mediation. The former digital troll thus decided to redirect his humor, skills, extensive online contacts and overall political efforts toward a more compelling online project.

This new online project, which ended up being Trashopolis, not only would explicitly aim to construct and circulate truly alternative lower-

class counter-aesthetics to oppose the hegemonic regimes of social representation broadcast by the national Italian media. More importantly, it would elicit such aesthetics out of subversive interpretative processes of semiotic re-signification using the current Italian neoliberal imaginary against itself. In Ciro's own words:

> The spontaneous televisual creativity of the Italian popular classes embodies the inner contradictions of the contemporary world. In fact, the performers of most local trash TV shows implicitly express these contradictions through original cultural imaginaries, which constitute counter-hegemonic forms of expressive avant-garde. Most Italian educated people refuse to understand that. More often they approach local trash TV out of self-claimed conditions of intellectual superiority. They do not understand that any positive cultural change cannot start but from those who are culturally oppressed. Trashopolis does not stand with these intellectuals. Trashopolis moves in the opposite direction. Trashopolis stands with the ignorant.

Following these ideological guidelines, Ciro should have necessarily selected and show-cased the (self-)ironic videos, the controversial aesthetics, and the overall regime of social representation featuring the newborn Trashopolis website as counter-hegemonic re-significations of the "proudly trashy" local TV productions spontaneously emerging from the Italian neoliberal popular classes. According to Ciro, moreover, this strategy would have allowed the newborn Trashopolis blog to achieve simultaneously three important political goals. The first goal was that of empowering the original authors and performers of the former televisual videos featured on the blog, who would have suddenly improved their social visibility and overall mediatic weight on a national scale. The second goal was to delegitimize any hegemonic depreciative interpretations of the aesthetics spontaneously circulated by the lower-class performers and publics of local "trash TV" outlets. The third goal was that of providing the middle- and upper-class users of Trashopolis with an opportunity to embrace the lower-class aesthetics in question, in order to personally engage in counter-hegemonic processes of socio-political self-awareness. In Ciro's own words:

> Trashopolis is a virtual platform where the most diverse lower-class cultural producers, moving from Gennaro the fortune teller up to Peppe Fetish, can freely express themselves and have their voices preserved for posterity. At the same time, it is also a self-ironic space where the educated upper classes can mirror their own subjectivities in the social trash in order to understand that maybe they are a piece of trash themselves. Finally, it is an ongoing interactive workshop where lower class and upper-class internet users can freely play together with all that trash and build up something brand new, which maybe will not necessarily smell like trash anymore.

As it clearly emerged from this short account of the ethnographic interviews that I have conducted with the original author and webmaster of Trashopolis blog, the enduring popularity enjoyed by this website necessarily needs to be intended as the outcome of specific political intentions. Far from constituting mere activities of trolling, in fact, the simultaneous digital interactions of upper- and lower-class publics with the controversial multimedia contents featured on Trashopolis have been intentionally designed to instantiate innovative forms of social representation and counter-discursive processes of cultural and political change.

The Two Faces of Digital Recycling

Ciro's politically inspired attempts to design, implement, and promote the Trashopolis digital blog as a counter-discursive tool of cultural production and social mediation ended up generating viral success via internet-based mass-communication. Since its original foundation in 2007, Trashopolis attracts socially and ideologically diverse internet users, who passionately exchange with each other on a daily basis feedback, mockery, and passionate reviews on the satirical website's caustic contents. Through these ongoing activities of communicational reciprocity and ironic information exchange, the Italian online followers of Ciro's satirical blog co-contribute to overall class consciousness and to original socio-political dynamics of publicity — that is, a mass-mediated mode of political action and social identity formation, which emerge from the organized circulation of multimedia texts addressed to virtually unknown others (Graan, 2016: 280).

As suggested by both Ciro himself and the interviews with Carmen and Roberto that I discussed earlier, the trans-class digital interactions characterizing the daily life of the Trashopolis website allow for extremely diverse subjects, such as Camorra-sponsored neomelodic singers and anti-Camorra members to simultaneously participate in common activities of semiotic recycling involving the multimedia contents of the satirical blog. Considering the previous claims on Trashopolis by Roberto the anti-camorra activist, these digital activities of interpretative re-cycling do not necessarily seem to legitimate the literal contents of the local "trash TV" videos in question on the cultural level. By means of collectively shared irony, they instead transform the potentially toxic outcomes of local "trash TV" contents into productive means of neoliberal class-consciousness and overall socio-political change.

From an analytical point of view, the activities of semiotic recycling entailed by the popularity of Trashopolis' (as well as their counter-hegemonic subtexts) largely depend on two systemic features that characterize the satirical website. The first of these is constituted by the fact that Trashopolis encourages its users (including the original authors of the local "trash TV" videos featuring its cyberspace) to post unmediated personal commentaries on its multimedia contents and exchange with each other in real time heartfelt opinions about their aesthetics and meanings.

The extremely interactive features illustrating the technical functioning of Trashopolis and the digital sociability of its users in fact allow its diverse publics to partake in overlapping "fantasies of immediacy, that is wishes for direct proximity between communicating actors," where they seek to reclaim agency over the marginalizing regimes of social representation of the neoliberal Italian mediascape (Eisenlohr, 2009: 278). Accordingly, those entertaining online conversations on Trashopolis share similar (mass-)mediated conditions of relational labour and social visibility with each other, which symbolically equates them as fellow members of a common "digital class" of cultural producers (Elyachar, 2010; Brighenti, 2007).

S. Giusto

The second systemic feature that allows for Trashopolis' socio-political function of semiotic recycling is constituted by the fact that the satirical website encourages its socially diverse digital users to interact with each other through explicitly ironic linguistic registers, which bridge their respective personal experiences of the websites' controversial videos as a sort of trans-class *lingua franca*. These ironic linguistic registers do not emerge spontaneously from the online conversation entertained in real time by the Trashopolis users, as it would happen in a self-managed virtual chatroom. They are instead somehow discursively pre-set by Ciro Ascione himself as a communicational track to be followed by the other members of the Trashopolis digital community through his introductory commentaries. In so doing, the ironic registers through which the Trashopolis videos are concretely introduced end up being implicitly interpreted by users as a pre-condition to communication that makes such contents available, accessible, and, so to speak, interactively "re-interpretable" by the Italian digital publics at large.

Moreover, the ironic and "politically incorrect" linguistic registers featuring Trashopolis further connote the digital interactions entertained by its socially diverse publics in counter-hegemonic terms, while experientially bridging their respective cultural interpretations of the blog's video contents. As claimed by Herzfeld (2001), in fact, the ambiguous interpretative outcomes of any display of irony allow its performers to establish conditions of "cultural intimacy" with their contextual publics, which reveal, "those aspects of their cultural identity that are considered sources of external embarrassment but that provide insiders with common sociality" (64). These ironic forms of sociality, in tandem with the shared conditions of cultural intimacy they engender, permit those expressing irony and their public to affectively, "unravel the complexities of their [respective] experience of crisis" (Pipyrou, 2014: 533). In so doing, they implicitly induce ironic performers and audiences to "redirect" simultaneously the hegemonic discourses that frame their lives toward critical interpretations (Pipyrou, 2014: 534). Therefore, as further suggested by Marcus and Fischer, predicaments of irony such as those circulating on the Trashopolis digital platform would immediately

reveal the socio-cultural positionalities of their authors and performers vis-à-vis their contextual publics, while allowing them to articulate counter-hegemonic critiques of the discourses and their frames of reference (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 13).

Nevertheless, the specific features characterizing the inner functioning of the Trashopolis blog, as a culturally productive digital tool of counter-hegemonic (mass-)mediation, may also potentially entail problematic outcomes, which might have been overlooked by its own creators and users. While bringing socially peripheral aesthetics back to the centre of the current Italian collective imaginary, for example, Trashopolis also elevates the social visibility and overall mediatic fame enjoyed by local "trash TV" performers to a national scale. As hinted in an earlier intervention by Carmen the neomelodic singer, all in all this is the main reason why most local "trash TV" performers are glad to express their consent to the uploading of their original videos on Trashopolis.

The free promotion granted by Trashopolis to the original authors of its contents, moreover, allows the website to re-signify and empower their "trashy" public images to the point of transforming them into vocal tokens for the existential mediascape inhabited by the Italian poor. Nevertheless, as suggested by Lukacs' (2010) ethnography of contemporary "reality TV," the personal mobility entailed by the transformation of lower-class local TV performers into national celebrities concretely risks transforming the subversive meanings connoted by their public personas into commodities to be re-appropriated by the national media market through the same neoliberal logics that Ciro intended to challenge.

Among other things, this potential shortcoming of Ciro's digital activism may inspire non-ironic interpretations of the caustic videos featured on Trashopolis. This could in turn inspire their extended publics to legitimate the irreverent, profane, and somehow "offensive" contents of such videos. Indeed, Carmen the neomelodic singer concretely made a living out of the free promotion that Trashopolis granted to her Camorra-sponsored visual narratives. In spite of her consistent participation in Camorra-sponsored local TV shows, she

did so to the point of considering Ciro Ascione's blog as her most important means of artistic promotion.

By the same token, it emerged from the ethnographic interview that I conducted with the neomelodic singer that the overwhelming success of Carmen's videos on Trashopolis motivated the subsequent acquisition and re-airing of at least some of these controversial media contents by an national TV network. The relocation of Carmen's music clips from an ironic interactive platform of digital mediation to the post-Berlusconian televisual mainstream, which is instead characterized by individualizing dynamics of mediatic fruition, could have potentially contributed to circulate and legitimate Camorra-friendly cultural values among their audiences (Ravveduto, 2007). If such a consistent number of fans spontaneously express their open sympathy toward Carmen's violent take on the socio-cultural life of the Neapolitan social peripheries and its symbiotic relation with organized crime, in short, this has perhaps to be seen as a collateral effect of Ciro's digital activities of cultural recycling.

In a similar fashion, the increasing popularity of the Trashopolis website among the public of the Italian national mainstream media might risk transforming the name of this blog into further neoliberal brand marketing, rendering fictitiously subversive aesthetics and digital processes of relationality as trendy commodities (Nakassis, 2012). If this was the case, Trashopolis' capacity to produce and circulate in counter-hegemonic processes of cultural production and trans-class (mass-mediation would end up being severely jeopardized. By the same token, the potentially subversive imaginaries promoted by the grass-root, lower-class aesthetics denoting the Trashopolis videos would become politically ineffective as those proverbially originated by the transnational marketing of Third World mass-produced T-shirts with the face of Che Guevara printed on them.

This latest risk seems especially acute. This is because, as argued by Mazzarella (2006), the apparently unmediated modalities of linguistic interactions and social networking of interned-based forms of mass-communication are in no way immune to mediacratic processes of neoliberal governmentality. In fact, the digital interactions between

online cultural producers such as Ciro Ascione and their digital audiences, together with the dynamics of publicity emerging from them, are structurally dependant on technocratic and highly disciplining tools of linguistic expressivity, which are in turn designed and globally marketed in neoliberal terms by Silicon-Valley-like multinational producers of internet software (Mazzarella, 2006: 500).

Considering this further reflection, Ciro's innovative approach to digital activism could implicitly hide a very much-unintended dark side. Far from being inspired by the counter-hegemonic political intentions of the authors and users of Trashopolis, this dark side could potentially corrode the original spirit of the satirical website, while implicitly transforming it into a further mediacratic tool of neoliberal governmentality out of its own technical features.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have evaluated the dynamics of cultural production and social mediation engendered by the online circulation of ironic, controversial, and "politically incorrect" local "trash TV" videos on Trashopolis, a popular satirical website produced by Neapolitan digital activist Ciro Ascione. Building on the historical analysis of the role played by the national media industries within Italian class politics, I have defined Trashopolis as a counter-hegemonic reaction to the neoliberal regimes of social representation and the mediacratic modalities of civic engagement promoted by the Italian national media industries. By the same token, I have also addressed the satirical blog as a critique against the equally disciplining depreciative attitude of most current Italian intellectuals toward forms of media entertainment, which are not expressively designed to rehabilitate the popular classes from their (very supposed) cultural deficiencies.

The subsequent account of my ethnographic interview with Ciro Ascione, as well as the life-story I have collected from Trashopolis' webmaster, further confirmed these political interpretations of the processes of cultural production and digital mediation engendered by this controversial website among trans-class pools of Italian internet users. Trashopolis' capacity to elicit counter-hegemonic forms of

S. Giusto

cultural production is based on the processes of semiotic recycling through which the digital public of the website re-interpret in subversive terms the performances and public personas of Italian local TV artists of popular class background, thus promoting original dynamics of class consciousness through the re-evaluation of historically deprecated lower-class aesthetics.

As it further emerged from my ethnography, moreover, the interpretative processes of digital recycling allowed by Trashopolis do not arise by happenstance. They have been envisioned and promoted by "the most powerful troll of Italy" as original forms of digital activism. In so doing, the digital recycling of Italian local "trash TV" aesthetics ultimately aim at instantiating trans-class conditions of counter-hegemonic publicity. These socio-political dynamics of publicity formation are in turn reliant on the forms of relational labour reciprocally entertained by the authors and the digital publics of the caustic multimedia contents featured on Ciro Ascione's popular blog, as well as the state of cultural intimacy emerging from the ironic registers disciplining Trashopolis (as well as the digital interactions that this website allows for) in (counter)discursive terms.

On the one hand, Trashopolis' mass-mediated activities of digital recycling constitute a political challenge to the forms of governmentality exercised by private and public mediacratic powerholders in contemporary neoliberal Italy. They implicitly jeopardize the regimes of social representation that directly inform the social identities and the hegemonic modalities of civic engagement through which the lower classes interact with the national public sphere. On the other hand, the subversive processes of cultural production elicited by Trashopolis constantly face a strong risk of being jeopardized by the inner technical features of the blog itself, as well as the neoliberal conditions of social visibility and personal mobility that the website offers to the original lower-class authors of its controversial videos. While Ascione would probably assert that such risks are the necessary price to be paid to have culturally productive "fun" at the expense of the Italian mainstream media industries, the potentially positive and negative socio-political

outcomes of Trashopolis' popularity seem inextricably connected to common trans-class dynamics of digital mass-mediation.

In conclusion, a precise evaluation of the counter-hegemonic activities of cultural production and digital (mass-)mediation put in motion by the satirical blog in question (and their effects on Italian society) will require more ethnographic work to be conducted among the producers and consumers of so-called "trash TV" media contents and their digital re-airings. Meanwhile, the Trashopolis case study discussed in this article will continue to stand as a provocative example of the ongoing tensions of interconnecting digital and televisual forms of mass-mediation under mediacratic conditions of neoliberal governance. By the same token, it will also call for a critical redefinition of the Italian post-Berlusconian mediascape as an extremely controversial, but overall complex and vibrant, space of cultural production.

S. Giusto

References Cited

Allcott, Hunt, and Gentzkow, Matthew, 2017, Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election, Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 31 (2): 211–236.

Anderson, Benedict, 1986, Imagined Communities, New York: Verso.

Bettetini, Gianfranco, Braga, Paolo, and Fumagalli, Armando, 2004, Le logiche della televisione, Milan: Franco Angeli Editore.

Bindi, Letizia, 2005, Bandiere, antenne, campanili. Comunità immaginate nello specchio dei media, Rome: Meltemi Editore.

Brighenti, Andrea, 2007, Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences, Current Sociology, Vol. 55 (3): 323-342.

Dematteo, Lynda, 2007, L'idiotie en politique. Subversion et néo-populisme en Italie, Paris: Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Edson Tandoc, Lim, Zheng Wei, and Ling, Richard, 2018, Defining "Fake News", Digital Journalism, Vol. 6 (2): 137-153.

Eisenlohr, Patrick, 2009, Technologies of the Spirit: Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction, and the Dialectics of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius, Anthropological Theory, Vol. 9 (3): 273-296.

Elyachar, Julia, 2010, Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo, American Ethnologist, Vol. 37 (3): 452-464.

Fanchi, Mariagrazia, 2002, Identità mediatiche. Televisione e cinema nelle storie di vita di due generazioni di spettatori, Milan: Franco Angeli.

Ginsborg, Paul, 2005, Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power, and Patrimony, New York: Verso.

Giusto Salvatore, 2020, Through the Looking-Glass: Televised Politics in Contemporary Populist Italy, in: PoLar: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, 43 (1): 87-102.

Giusto Salvatore, 2019, "One of Us": The Neomelodic Music Industry as a Camorra-mediated Space of Subaltern Publicity in Contemporary Naples, in: Global Crime, Vol. 20 (1): 134-155.

Giusto Salvatore, 2011, La Fabbrica dei Sogni. Italian Cinematography, Collective Memory and National Identity, in: Visual Anthropology, Vol. 24 (4): 287-305.

Gnagnarella, Giuseppe, 2010, Storia politica della RAI: 1945-2010, L'Aquila: Textus Edizioni.

Graan, Andrew, 2016, Strategic Publicity. On the International Intervention and the Performativity of Public Communication in Postconflict Macedonia, Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory, Vol. 6 (3): 277-303.

Gramsci Antonio, 1930 [2006], The Southern Question, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Herzfeld, Michael, 2001, Irony and Power: Toward a Politics of Mockery in Greece, in: Fernandez, James and Taylor Huber, Mary (ed. by), Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice. and the Moral Imagination, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 63–83.

Lanoue, Guy, Mirza, Vincent, and Pantaleon, Jorge, 2011, The Impending Collapse of the European Urban Middle Class: The European Union's De-naturing of Time and Place, Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology, Vol. 2 (1):153-172.

Lukàcs, Gabriella, 2010, Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Marcus, George, and Fischer, Michael, 1986, Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Mazzarella William, 2006, Internet X-Ray: E-Governance, Transparency, and the Politics of Immediation in India, in Public Culture, 18(3): 473-505.

Molè, Noelle, 2013, Trusted puppets, tarnished politicians: Humor and cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy, in American Ethnologist, 40 (2), pp. 288-299.

Molè, Noelle, 2011, Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nakassis, Constantine, 2012, Brand, Citationality, Performativity, in American Anthropologist, Volume 114 (4), pp. 624-638.

Pandolfi, Mariella, 1998, Two Italies: Rhetorical Figures of Failed Nationhood, in: Schneider, Jane (ed. by), Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country, New York: Berg, 285-290.

Panarari Massimiliano, 2011, L'egemonia sottoculturale. L'Italia da Gramsci al gossip, Turin: Einaudi Editore.

Perna, Vincenzo, 2013, Killer Melodies. The Musica Neomelodica Debate, in: Fabbri, Franco and

Plastino, Goffredo (ed. by), Made in Italy: Studies in Popular Music, London: Routledge, 194-206.

Pine, Jason, 2012, The Art of Making Do in Naples, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pipyrou, 2014, Cutting bella figura: Irony, Crisis and Secondhand Clothes in South Italy, in: American Ethnologist, Vol. 41(3): 532-546.

Ravveduto, Marcello, 2007, Napoli…Serenata calibro 9, Naples: Liguori editore.

Thornton Caldwell, John, 1995, Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Viroli Maurizio, 2010, The Liberty of Servants. Berlusconi's Italy, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zagarrio, Vito, 2007, Primato. Arte, cultura, cinema del Fascismo attraverso una rivista esemplare, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.

Zizek, Slavoj, 2009, Berlusconi in Tehran, London Review of Books, 31 (14), pp. 3–7.