Seriality Across Narrations, Languages and Mass Consumption

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To Be Continued...

Edited by

Alfonso Amendola, Linda Barone
and Novella Troianiello

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CHAPTER ONE

MEGA BIBLION[1]:
SOME SUGGESTIONS ON THE EPIC
NARRATION BETWEEN THE HOMERIC
POEMS AND "GAME OF THRONES"

STEFANO AMENDOLA

Foreword:
Serial (super)heroes in ancient and modern Times

The hero, after saying goodbye to his friends and foreign allies for the last time, gets on his vessel to finally return to his own homeland. This brief caption describes the end of the last episode of the Japanese anime *Goldrake*, an ending which, if we eliminate its unusual features (the main character's name, Actarus; the presence of a spaceship, not simply a ship; the existence of a planet — not a land — of origin), could describe the departure of any other classical hero (Amato 2006; Winterbach 2006; Rogers 2011: 73-86; Wieber 2017). It might apply equally to the ancient Odysseus, for example, who leaves the island of the Phaeacians, says goodbye to his hosts, and finally returns to Ithaca to defeat his enemies — the suitors of his wife, Penelope — once and for all (Billi 2018).

In *Goldrake*, as in many other Japanese animated series, there is a small detail that differentiates the last episode from the other ones, which, I believe, almost all the young viewers do not notice. In the last frames of the finale, the Japanese ideograms おわ appear in the bottom right corner of the screen. These can be transcribed as "Owari" and translated as "The

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[1] The adage *mega biblion mega kakon* ("a big book is a big evil") is attributed to poet, scholar, and librarian of ancient Alexandria, Callimachus. He criticized writers who produced epics in the ancient (Homeric) manner; Callimachus preferred the short form and his poems were admired for their polished refinement.

End". They replace つづく, which can be transcribed as "Tsuzuku", and which are always present in the previous episodes. "Tsuzuku", seen by many as the signal of the end and, therefore, of the end of the enjoyment, actually hid, and still hides, the promise of renovating expectations, creating a ritual. "To Be Continued," the message that characterises the current TV series, and signals that the story goes on, it has not arrived at a final end yet, shifts to "The End". "Tsuzuku" and "Owari" are two *formulae*, mysterious to many, which I would like to use to illuminate the first, naïve, Italian contact with the narrative mechanism of seriality, which characterises the Japanese TV series that aired in Italy for the first time in the mid-70s (Pellitteri 1999; Teti 2011). The story can no longer go on without interruption; the longer narration is separated, temporally as well as formally, into specific and repeated modules. In this mechanism, "Tsuzuku" is a useful symbol through which to communicate the suspense that is proposed to the spectator. It confidently reassures that spectator that he or she will soon enjoy a new step towards the possible resolution of the story they are following (Carini 2013). The Japanese term is not much different from the expression "La suite à demain", printed on page 3 of the newspaper *La Siècle* on 14th March 1844, with the name of Alexandre Dumas at the end of the first published episode of "Les trois mousquetaires", one of the greatest feuilletons of the XIX century. The feuilletons, just like a serial novel or a dime novel, can represent the "materials" that belong to a possible "archaeology of modern seriality" (Benassi 2000; Aubry 2006; Capaldi-Ragone 2016: 45; Garin 2017; Winkler 2018: 9-30).

The formulaic Homeric poetry:
Alcinous' Apologue(s) as an example of ancient seriality

To investigate the possible ancestors of the present "To be continued", we can go backwards and analyse past ages and means of communication. We can then reach the dawn of literary history, those Homeric poems that have affected the imagination and the narrative structures of the West. Of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it is probably the latter that allows a deeper consideration of narratological character, as we can see in the *Tell me* (*Odyssey* 1.1-2: "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices, driven far astray after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy"[2]) that opens the poem, which corresponds to *sing* in *Iliad* 1.1 ("The wrath sing, goddess, of

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[2] The translations of Homeric poems are taken from Murray 1919 (*Odyssey*) and Murray 1924 (*Iliad*).

Peleus' son Achilles..." (Zambarbieri 2002, 166). The first sentence of the poem provides the topic of the story as well: a hero (greek: *andra*) known for his past, his achievements, his journey and the suffering it caused him, and not for his name (as happened in the *Iliad* for Pelides Achilles). Odysseus, a multifarious man who travelled a lot from Troy to Ithaca, is the core of the narration, even though the hero cedes the role of the narrator to the binomial Muse/poet throughout the poem. In books 9-12, known as *Alcinous' apologues* (Niles 1978; Scully 1987; Most 1989, 21–24; Cook 1995, 65–92; Hopman 2012), the hero, having reached the Phaeacians, tells his hosts about some adventures that, until this point, haven't had any space[3], and that are recovered through an efficient flashback. In the hall of the King Alcinous, Odysseus is no longer the "subject of the story" but the storyteller (Liberman 1970; Beck 2005; Zekas 2016; O'Sullivan 2017). He outlines the ten stages of his journey by drawing his extraordinary itinerary from Troy to the island of Calypso:

1. The Cicones.
2. The Lotus-Eaters.
3. The Cyclops and Polyphemus,
4. Aeolus, Keeper of the Winds.
5. The Laestrygonians.
6. Circe.
7. The House of Hades.
8. The Sirens.
9. Scylla and Charybdis.
10. The Cattle of Hyperion.

The great story of the *Odyssey* — the journey of Odysseus towards Ithaca — is temporarily shattered into ten single, brief tales (Alden 2017). In modern and serial terms, we can say that 10 *episodic plots* are added to the *running plot* (Odysseus' *nostos*), in which antagonists (armies, monsters, witches, ghosts, divinities) and locations (natural paradises, caves, palaces, afterlife) are offered to the unchanged protagonist.

As it happens in any season of any TV series, the different episodes adhere to an experienced directing strategy whose purpose is to increase the pathos and the suspense of the events, or to better catch the Phaeacians' attention (O'Sullivan 2017). In Odysseus' story, there is an

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[3] The poem begins, in fact, with Odysseus about to leave the island of the nymph Calypso after seven years; that is, with the very moment that precedes the arrival of Odysseus, victim of a shipwreck in Scheria, the land of Alcinous, Arete and Nausicaa.

alternation between episodes with a happy ending and others that end tragically and that seem to move the hero away from his primary aim – Ithaca (Privitera 1991: 3-19; de Jong 2001: 222-227). This pattern of positive and negative events can be found in the first five stages of the journey (from the Cicones to the Laestrygonians). In this first half, the fleet that departed from Troy and follows Odysseus (12 ships and their respective crews) is reduced to just one boat, that of the hero. While in the odd episodes some of Odysseus' companions die, in the even ones there are no losses to his crew. What efficiently emphasises this well-constructed serial structure is the formulaic character of Homeric diction, which offers testimony — maybe — of one of the "oldest ancestors" of the present "To Be Continued". The ends of each of the first five episodes of the apologues and the switch to the following adventure story are always signalled by the same verse, "Thence we sailed on, grieved at heart" (de Jong 2001). It appears five times, at *Il.* 9.62 (after the episode of the Cicones), 9.105 (after the Lotus-eaters), in 9.565 (after Polyphemus the Cyclops), in 10.77 (after Aeolus), and in 10.133 (after the Laestrygonians). In three cases, at the ends of the odd stages of the journey (where, as it has just been said, some of the Greeks die), the Homeric formula is extended through the addition of a second modular verse ("glad to have escaped death, though we had lost our staunch comrades"). By making this addition, the poet both portrays the mood with which Odysseus and his companions will continue their adventure and underlines the tragic character of the just-finished episode.

The serial narrative device used by Odysseus as a storyteller successfully engages a huge audience, involving the public in a very extraordinary way (Doherty 1995: 65-75). When he threatens to interrupt the story because it is now night-time, the Phaeacians remain speechless and fear that they will inevitably have to wait to listen to the end of the story:

> But I cannot tell or name all the wives and daughters of heroes that I saw; before that immortal night would be gone. Now it is time to sleep ... So he spoke, and they were all hushed in silence, and were held spellbound throughout the shadowy halls (...) (*Odyssey* 11.328-33).

Only the authoritative intervention of King Alcinous and his inviting promise of a richer reward for the storyteller-hero (pay-per-view TV?) avert Odysseus' threat and let the story continue without any interruption:

> ... and your tale you have told with skill, as a minstrel does, the grievous woes of all the Argives and of your own self. But come, tell me this, and

declare it truly, whether you saw any of your godlike comrades, who went to Ilium together with you, and there met their fate. The night before us is long, marvelously long, and it is not yet the time for sleep in the hall. Tell me these wondrous deeds. I could hold out until bright dawn, such time as you would be willing to tell in the hall of these woes of yours."(*Odyssey* 11.368-376)

This almost bulimic way in which Alcinous and the Phaeacians "consume" the story of the hero's adventures seems to anticipate the ultramodern practice of enjoying all the episodes of a TV series season without interruption, episode after episode ("binge-watching"), thanks to the existence of *TV on demand*.

An *epic* link between ancient and modern:
Odysseus' great-nephews

The progress of the Odyssean story, episode after episode, with the Homeric formula that demarcated the different narrative segments, allowed a first contact between ancient narration and modern seriality. Another contact — as underlined in a recent essay by Jesse Weiner — is represented by the word epic [4] (Weiner 2017: 25-58). The adjective efficiently qualifies both the Homeric poems, which are the ultimate expression of ancient epic, and a (sub)genre of the modern fantasy narrative: that is, the epic fantasy. It is the use of the word "epic" that gives Weiner the opportunity to compare the work of George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (from this point on *SIF*) with the classical *epos* and, above all, the Homeric one. To create these brave and suggestive links between modern and classical works, Weiner follows what is, at the beginning, a quite common path: he tries to track down characters and situations in Martin's saga that could have plausible antecedents in Homer (Weiner 2017: 25-58). Remaining within the Homeric scope, he compares the Odyssean pilgrimages to the researches made by some of the characters in Martin's work, such as Bran Stark reaching the three-eyed crow or Brienne of Tarth finding Sansa again. He also compares Circe to Melisandre, underlining a topic dear to the ancient world, the affinity of the woman (irrational element of the society) to magic and the instability that it causes. A journalist, Chiara Poli, author of *Il mondo de Il trono di Spade*, tried to study these comparisons and make similar ones. A chapter of her book (Poli 2015) is dedicated to the possible classical sources of

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[4] See also Paul (2013) for previous considerations about the survival of ancient epics in cinema.

SIF. Here, we can find some parallels: Robert Baratheon and Achilles (they both embody the brave hero and the warrior inclined to rage and moved by anger); Ned Stark and Ulysses (as he is wiser and more sensible than Achilles/Robert); Tyrion Lannister and Ulysses (both would be able to fight and win against stronger and taller enemies, such as Polyphemus, thanks to their slyness and intellect); Helen of Troy and Lyanna Stark (two women whose charm and beauty caused wars and contests among heroes of different populations and houses); and Cersei and Clytemnestra (they are queens who, in order to usurp male power, dare to kill their own husbands).

This research takes into account not only the characters but also the nodal moments/scenes of the narration. For example, both Weiner and Poli read, in the third-season episode "Red Wedding" (where Lord Tywin massacres the Starks), a possible echo of some of the Homeric moments marked by the violation of the *philia* relationship (a sacred relationship that binds hosts). It recalls, for example, the hospitality denied to Odysseus by the Cyclops who is feasting upon the flesh of the Greek hero's friends, or Odysseus' own killing of his enemies, the Proci, which he effects through deceit and costume. The parallels in the Season 5 episode "The Dance of Dragons", which focuses on the killing of Shireen as a sacrifice to the Lord of Light, are more convincing. (Note that this episode only occurs in the *Game of Thrones* TV series, not in *SIF*, though there is a possibility it will form part of Martin's long-awaited next novel.) It is a sacrifice demanded by Melisandre, and to which there is no opposition from Shireen's father, Stannis, who is more interested in winning the battle than in his daughter's life. The death of Stannis' young daughter cannot but remind us — as Potter underlines in the blog Popular Culture of the University of Nottingham[5] — of the mythical episode of Iphigenia[6] (see also Lushkov 2017). Just like Shireen, Iphigenia is sacrificed to a god by the indication and will of a magician/soothsayer – Calchas – and without any opposition from her father, Agamemnon, who accepts the cruel ritual in order to guarantee his army will reach the walls of Troy. Like Shireen, Iphigenia does not know her terrible fate: the maiden arrives in Aulis, deceived, under the pretext of getting married to Achilles. Both Agamemnon and Stannis pay for the deaths of their

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[5] "Iphigenia in Westeros: Greek Tragedy Meets Game of Thrones", availabe at: http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/popularculture/2016/02/05/iphigenia-in-westeros-greek-tragedy-meets-game-of-thrones/

[6] This character is (probably) only quoted —under the name Iphianassa—in the *Iliad*, but her events can be found in the tragic works of Aeschylus and Euripides, which take their inspiration and subjects from epic.

daughters at the hands of a woman: the former is killed by his wife Clytemnestra (a female character that the ancients represented as having male features: "woman in passionate heart and man in strength of purpose", Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* l.11), and the latter killed by Brienne of Tarth, also a "transgender" character and a very Amazonian warrior-maiden.

Epic fantasy and Homeric epic:
To the roots of Jon Snow

Now that we have reviewed some comparisons between ancient and modern epics, it is possible to highlight how these similarities can be considered as nothing more than simple and charming suggestions that seem to move two distant worlds closer together. We can almost never find definite philological evidence to support hypothetical literary affinities. It seems that too many Ulysses inhabit the popular universe of *SIF*: although Homer — some other poet — labelled his hero as versatile and manifold from the beginning (Greek: *polytropos*), it is difficult to attribute to Odysseus the "paternity" of such a varied crowd of modern characters.

To these comparative suggestions I would like to add others — perhaps less charming — concerning the story device and the narration method that may align ancient Homeric and contemporary epic fantasy. To do this, we have to start with the few definite traces that the modern author — G. R. R. Martin in this case — has "revealed" about his personal relationship with the ancient. The first piece of evidence concerns the literary genre chosen by Martin, and the way he places it in his *SIF*:

> (...) Tolkien wasn't a direct influence to me when I decided to write *A Song of Ice and Fire* although my books are in the fantasy canon that Tolkien improved. I mean, fantasy is very ancient. We can find it in the Iliad or in the Gilgamesh Poem, but Tolkien turned it into a modern genre, and A Song of Ice and Fire shares some of these patterns but not all of them. For example, I pretend to offer a dirty fantasy, more raw than Tolkien's. (Martin 2012)

Here, the author draws a family tree of his épopée by placing at its roots two of the most ancient sagas in the literary history of the West (*Iliad*) and of the East (*Gilgamesh*). Fantasy stems from the ancient, reaching Martin through Tolkien (Grossman 2015: 139) that he read for the first time when he was 12. The Homeric epic, and the *Iliad* in particular, is part of the web of cultural references that Martin himself

claims is at the root of *SIF*, but what does the modern author owe to the ancient one? We can learn something more about this topic from an extract from Martin's interview:

> (...) My characters are not black or white, like the traditional fantasy cliché. I don't have the typical white side, with very good people, and the bad side, composed by ugly and evil people who only wear black clothes. I've been always very impressed by Homer and his Iliad, especially the scene of the fight between Achilles and Hector. Who is the hero and who is the villain? That's the power of the story and I wanted something similar to my books. The hero of one side is the villain of the other side (Martin 2012).

The "impression" that Martin had from reading the *Iliad* (especially the final fight between Achilles and Hector) actually reflects the current scholarly consensus. This consensus holds that many of the qualities emphasized in the *Iliad* that were traditionally positive, and that used to be considered good (love of the country, defense of the city, familial bonds, religiousness, pity, disposal to sacrifice), belonged to the Trojans — that is, to foreigners/barbarians. Potentially negative characteristics (rage, anger, extreme violence, deceit), on the other hand, were associated with the Greeks, who, from the point of view of the Greek poet, had to appear as the only heroes of the story (see Jaeger 1953: 42 n. 26, Scully 1990: 110, Giordano 2006; Kohen 2013). The overcoming of the dichotomy of the fantasy (good protagonist vs. bad antagonist), the co-existence of positive and negative feelings in the same character (i.e. heroism and violence, intelligence and deceit etc.), the possibility that the readers (or the spectators) can have conflicting feelings (love/hate, fondness/aversion, sympathy/horror) for the same character: these are some of the "gifts" that Martin supposedly obtained from reading Homer. Martin, in fact, owes to the famous ancient poet the "killing"/dissolution of the ideal hero, always beautiful and good (the *kalosagathia* of the archaic Greek world). In his novels, he prefers protagonists in which he can mix good and evil, creating characters that are less clean and more hybrid and human. To sum up, it is from Homeric poetry that Martin obtains the trait that moves *SIF* away from the canonical model of epic fantasy: the lack of a protagonist immediately ascribable to the category of good guys. The writer makes permeable, if not inexistent, the border that separates good and evil. It is this cancellation of such a clear polarity that highlights the difference between Martin and his most recent model, Tolkien. While in *The Lord of the Rings* the hero, Frodo, risks corrupting his soul due to the influence of an external force (the ring), in Martin's works evil is already inside the characters, a part of their natures that can influence their actions.

A song for Jon:
A tribute to the father of classic epics?

Thanks to its ancient antecedent, the reader can interpret *SIF* as an epic narration (or fantastic-epic) with a less dichotomous register, but — to use the author's words again — one that is dirtier, more confused, hybrid. This renunciation of a clear and polar structure seems to already clash with the title that Martin chose for his work, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This title can be considered Empedoclean, with two primordial elements (*roots* for the Greek philosopher Empedocles), ice (that is, water) and fire, which can easily be imagined to be in conflict with each other. In fact, those who know the evolution of the novels or the TV series, but also the rich interpretative reading that circulates on the web and in the fandom, are well aware that the title could actually hide a key plot element. In a vision that Daenerys Targaryen had, a *song of ice and fire* is a chant that Rhaegar Targaryen, a heroic warrior but also a talented musician, promised to arrange for his son Aegon, born of his legal wife Elia Martell:

> The man had her brother's hair, but he was taller, and his eyes were a dark indigo rather than lilac. "Aegon," he said to a woman nursing a newborn babe in a great wooden bed. "What better name for a king?"
> "Will you make a song for him?" the woman asked.
> "He has a song," the man replied. "He is the prince that was promised, and his is the song of ice and fire." (Martin 1998: Chapter 48)

But the paternal song is not only dedicated to Aegon; it alludes to another son of Rhaegar, Jon Snow. Snow, one of the most important heroes of the story, is always presented as the bastard son of Ned Stark, even though his parents are supposed to be Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. If Martin's next book confirms the development that has already occurred in the seventh season of the TV series, the title of the entire saga — a quote from Rhaegar's song — would predict the fate of the protagonist of the story, Jon Snow, whose real name would be (again) Aegon, and who would embody the heroic "prince that was promised". He is the only one who has the two elements in his blood: the fire of the Targaryens (and of the dragons) and the ice of the Starks.

If it were so, the title would acquire a very significant affinity with the *Iliad* 1.1 verse that gives the title to the poem:

> The wrath *sing*, goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles

As Weiner notes, this affinity could be represented by the reference to the *Song* of the *aoidos* (Homer, *medium* of the invoked muse, and Rhaegar in *SIF*), the means of the poetry and tale (Hintersdorf 2016). It could also be strengthened by the reference, either direct or indirect, to the hero of the épopée (Achilles and Jon Snow), indicated by the reference to his birth (son of Peleus = son of Ice – Stark mother of Winterfell – and Fire – Targaryen father). Through this reference to the classical world that can be immediately seen in the title of his work, Martin could recall a bond between his story and the well-known epic genre of the ancients, of which this epic fantasy could be considered a valid descendant.

Lost in (Italian) translation?
From epic song to medieval chronicles

In light of what has just been said above about the possible relationship between ancient and modern, it is curious that the late Sergio "Alan" Altieri tried to translate *A Song of Ice and Fire* into Italian as *Le Cronache di Ghiaccio e Fuoco*. Here, the song that refers to a specific, and perhaps crucial, element of the saga (the song of Rhaegar for one of his sons) is replaced by *cronache*. It is true that the word "chronicles" is widely used in the fantasy world (e.g. *The Chronicles of Narnia*), but the choice of the translator may be read as a homage — I don't know how owed or useful — to the truly medieval character of the saga, as declared by Martin himself (Facchini 2017: 48-67). The author has, on several occasions, admitted that he took inspiration for the fight between his seven kingdoms from the historic War of the Roses. In the Middle Ages, an age full of conflicts between houses and families, the chronicle — a form we can already find in antiquity — emerged as the predominant historical genre (Dunphy 2010: 274b-282b). In light of this, the switch from *A Song* to *Le Cronache* could be read as a passage from epics to story, from poetry to prose. A passage to historic reality is not Martin's intention. On the contrary, he reaffirms the greater possibilities fantasy offers compared to the restrictions of the historical novel:

> (...) the problem with straight historical fiction is you know what's going to happen. If you know anything about the Wars of the Roses, you know that the princes in the tower aren't going to escape. I wanted to make it more unexpected, bring in some more twists and turns. (Martin 2014a)

> A story on the War of the Roses can only end one way! I like not knowing. The suspense, the tension. I wanted something with the scope of historical fiction without the restrictions of knowing the end. (Martin 2000)

Martin's words, outlining his preference for fantasy, and therefore for the epic story rather than "historical fiction", could be provocatively compared to those of Aristotle in the *Poetics* about the relationship between poetry (epic and dramatic) and history:

> The difference between the historian and the poet is not that between using verse or prose... No, the difference is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 9.1451b, 1-8)[7]

From *Mega Biblion* to (tele)vision: How to show an epic story?

This quote from the *Poetics* offers us the means to examine the difficult relationship between *SIF* and the TV series *Game Of Thrones*. Aristotle's work outlines a theory about the poetic genres of the Greek world and the relationship between epic narration (aural and oral literature) and dramatic poetry (the tragedy).

Here again, Martin's words (let's keep in mind that he worked as a screenwriter for a long time) offer another reflection:

> Initially, all the interest in it was as a feature film. Peter Jackson made the *Lord of the Rings* movies, the movies hit big, making tons of money, and Hollywood is basically imitative. ... And they started looking around at all the big fantasy series (...) And they came to me, to make features, but my books are bigger than *Lord of the Rings*... So I didn't see how it could be made into a movie. And of course some people wanted to make it into a series of movies: "We'll do it in three movies, like Lord of the Rings!" (…) Other people wanted to take the approach of, there are so many characters, so many stories, we have to settle on one. ... But that didn't work, either, because the stories are all interrelated. They separate but they come together again. But it did get me thinking about it, and it got me thinking about how this could be done, and the answer I came up with is – it can be done for television. It can't be done as a feature film or a series of feature films. So television (Martin 2014b).

According to Martin, the main problem in bringing *SIF* to the screen is the boundless length of his work (the *mega biblion* of the quoted Callimachus' aphorism), a single narration – for obvious editorial reasons

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[7] The translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* are taken from Halliwell 1995.

at the beginning – divided into a trilogy and then into two trilogies[8]. The length of the story is the main thing that distinguishes the classical epic from the tragic genre in the *Poetics* (Lucas 1968: 221; Halliwell 1986: 259). Dramatic works are shorter because they will not only be recited by the epic poet, but also represented on the stage in front of a real public:

> (...) epic matches tragedy to the extent of being mimesis of elevated matters in metrical language; but they differ in that epic has an unchanging metre and is in narrative mode. They also differ in length: tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within a single revolution of the sun, or close to it, while epic is unlimited in time span and is distinctive in this respect (though to begin with the poets followed this same practice in tragedy as in epic). (Aristotle, *Poetics* 5.1449b, 9-16)

> But epic has special scope for substantial extension of size, because tragedy does not allow multiple sections of action to be represented as they occur, but only the one on stage involving the actors; whereas in epic, given the narrative mode, it is possible for the poem to include many simultaneous sections, which, if integral, enhance the poem's dignity. So this gives epic an asset for the development of grandeur, variety for the hearer, and diversity of episodes, whereas sameness soon cloys and causes tragedies to founder. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 24.1459b, 23-31)

However, Aristotle, talking about the epic poetry and its relationship with the theatre, says that:

1. The epic story is the preferential starting point for the realization and creation of dramaturgical works ("crumbs from the great banquets of Homer", as Aeschylus himself defined his works)[9]. Both the poetic genres are based on the imitation (*mimesis*) of noble people and of very important episodes (in epics imitation is achieved through the story, while in tragedy it is achieved through action).
2. The Homeric epic is the most suitable for performance on a theatrical stage. Homer, perhaps a proto-tragedian (Halliwell 1986: 261-266), gave unity to his narration, although he knew the considerable length of the story:

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[8] The imagination of Martin modified again this editorial structure further. By now, the saga should be composed of seven volumes: the fourth and fifth of which, *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, represent the division of what, at the beginning, was thought of as a single book. Also *The Lord of the Rings* was divided into three parts by the editors as well, even though it was a single novel.

[9] Aeschylus *fragment* 112a Radt.

That is why, as I said earlier, Homer's inspired superiority over the rest can be seen here here too: though the war had beginning and end, he did not try to treat its entirety, for the plot was bound to be too large and incoherent, or else, if kept within moderate scope, too complex in its variety. Instead, he has selected one section, but has used many others as episodes, such as the catalogue of ships and other episodes by which he diversifies the composition. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 23.1459a, 30-37)

Emphasizing the unity and compactness of Homeric narration, the Stagirian underlines how

Accordingly, with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* a single tragedy, or at most two, can be made from each; but many can be made from the *Cypria*, and more than eight from the *Little Iliad*. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 23.1459b, 2-5: see Valgimigli 1964:189-190 n. 279)

Here, the relationship between epos and tragedy is expressed in mathematical terms, as will happen later in the Aristotelian text, with the proposal for a new arithmetic proportion between the two literary genres:

Epic is distinct in its size of structure and its metre. As for length, the definition already given is adequate, since it should be possible for beginning and end to be held in a coherent view. This will be feasible with plot structures shorter than the early epics, but equivalent to the length of a group of tragedies offered at one hearing. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 24.1459b, 19-22)

The expression "group of tragedies offered at one hearing", although not interpreted in a unique way (Lucas 1968: 222 *ad l.*; Whalley 1997: 130 n. 241), may refer to the three tragedies that each playwright presented in just one day during the *Dionysia*: the right length of the epos, that is of the oral story, would be equalized to that of the trilogy of tragic plays staged in the theatre of the ancients (Halliwell 1986: 282-284). The trilogy was also, as I have suggested, the model Hollywood producers proposed to Martin as a means of expressing his unique and ongoing epic-fantastic narrative in pictures, on the big screens of cinemas.

As we have seen, the modern epic will be a television story divided into episodes. It is seriality that will allow Martin to preserve the length of his work rather than sacrificing it with a trilogy. In making this choice, Martin refuses to kill someone: him, the father of epics, that Homer whom Aristotle himself (hypothetical ancestor of some movie producer) would have "tragically" sacrificed, tearing apart his poems into … tragic trilogies.

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CHAPTER TWO

MESSING WITH BLACKNESS IN
SNL'S *BLACK JEOPARDY!*

PAOLA ATTOLINO

Introduction

Black Jeopardy! is a parody of the famous American television quiz show *Jeopardy!*, featuring a contest between three challengers, who compete on a wide variety of topics, from history to current events. The brainchild of writer Bryan Tucker and head writer Michael Che, *Black Jeopardy!* has taken the form of a recurring sketch on the well-known American variety show *Saturday Night Live* (henceforth *SNL*). So far, it aired five times, from March 2014 to April 2018.

The host, Darnell Hayes (played by *SNL* cast member Keenan Thomson) and two of the three contestants are black, whereas the five skits featured Louis C.K., Elizabeth Banks, Drake, Tom Hanks and Chadwick Boseman respectively as 'the third contestant', the one who does not fit the stereotype of a lower class black person and spends the whole game confused as no questions nor answers make sense. As it is a stereotypical parody of *Jeopardy!*, all categories and questions are in fact answerable only by 'genuine' blacks. The only category the third contestant can answer is 'White People', but only because for this category any answer is acceptable, which ironically symbolizes that black people are not interested in understanding white people. It is interesting to point out that one of the show writers, Bryan Tucker, is white. He told *Vulture* magazine:

> I had the idea brewing for a little while. If you're white, and you're in these worlds, like I am a little bit, you're still not totally part of things. There's a shared culture if you're black that you just have and if you're white you just don't have. I was overhearing some people on the street, and they were talking about this one person in the neighbourhood that a bunch

of them knew, and there was a familiarity there that I didn't have, and I thought, Oh, I wonder … It started brewing in me that there might be a sketch in this (Shilling 2018).

As *Black Jeopardy!* emphasises the divide between white and black culture in the USA, this paper aims to investigate to what extent the five skits highlight black stereotypes regarding race, language, and socioeconomics among many others. Focusing on the 'outcast' contestant of each episode, some of the jokes[1] about black and white culture will be considered from different perspectives, in an attempt to discover if the historically positioned hegemonic roles of black and white cultures are reversed effectively.

A few words about parody, race and the comic frame

We are backward-looking explorers and parody is a central expression of our times

(Macdonald 1960: xv)

As a self-referential art form, parody involves the imitation of a style in such an exaggerated way as to make its features more visible. As it "signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 2002), parody involves a foreground and a background narrative, a surface message embedded in – but set in ironic contrast to – its context. Ironic exaggeration makes obvious the need to acknowledge and interpret the multiple relationships between the two narratives. This exaggeration, whether subtle or obvious, is necessary to prompt the decoding of parody's fundamental intertexuality; otherwise, parody simply becomes plagiarism or a reinforcement of the surface narrative. In the area of visual literacy in particular, Paul Messaris (1994) argues that visual parody is only possible if people are familiar with the original work being parodied.

    Although it is a parody with massive use of mockery and comedy elements, *Black Jeopardy!* plays an important social role beyond entertainment. The comic frame, in fact, allows attention to the complexity of a situation by 'dwarfing' it, in other words by placing such a situation in

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[1] I personally transcribed the jokes presented in this paper from the official *Saturday Night Live* YouTube channel, where all the episodes are available: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqFzWxSCi39LnW1JKFR3efg
(Accessed: August 23, 2018).

a larger context (Burke 1984). Racial comedy performances, for instance, have a potential to raise awareness about racism in society, as they may effectively alter 'the system', providing the order is "presented as capable of accommodating the needs of the out group" (Carlson 1988: 319). Thus, the comic frame turns out to be particularly effective for addressing race in America without the patronizing straightforwardness that comes with the tragic frame:

> The inability of some whites to recognize the way in which they are privileged by skin colour would be better understood in the comic frame with the white person being a clown rather than a tragic scapegoat (Purtle and Steffensmeier 2011: 226)

However, it is worth noting that the comic frame's power to avoid scapegoating is not meant to absolve people of the responsibility of being racist, but instead allows individuals to challenge the supremacy of whiteness. Moreover, the comic frame addresses people who are not typically thought of as 'racist', but rather whites who involuntarily propagate whiteness:

> Race relations itself has been such a complicated, difficult and painful issue for so many Americans for so long that free and open discussion of racial matters may be difficult for people (Brummett 2008: 3).

Far from being a 'postracial' (race is not relevant) and a 'colorblind' (race is not seen) society, "American society is in fact *hyperracial*, or *hyperracializing*" (Alim 2016: 3). That is, American society is still mainly oriented to and structured by race.

As will be discussed in the next paragraphs, the use of the comic frame in *Black Jeopardy!* is meant to overcome the cultural divide between black and white people, by paradoxically emphasizing it.

Episode 1: the professor of African American Studies

The first episode of *Black Jeopardy!* aired on March 29, 2014 and featured Mark as the outcast 'third contestant'. Mark, played by white Mexican-American stand-up comedian Louis C.K., introduces himself as "a professor of African American Studies at Brigham Young University", a notoriously predominantly white school (Mulani 2014). He thinks he fits the show perfectly, convinced that his education qualifies him to know about black culture. Actually, during the game his embarrassment demonstrates that he is unable to interact with black people. He cannot

answer any of the first questions, which are related to topics that only Amir and Keeley (the two black contestants, portrayed by *SNL* cast members Jay Pharoah and Sasheer Zamata) understand.

The lack of interaction between black and white cultures is also emphasized by the use of black stereotypes to affirm hyperbolically the "exclusiveness" of black culture and to create a huge divide between Mark and the other people in the skit, in other words between white and black. The first of these stereotypes pertains to black language. As Pennycook (2000) suggests, people do not use language based on their identity, but rather use their language to "perform" identity. The idea of performativity is outlined, first of all, in the name of the categories, which include, for instance, black expressions like "Psssh!" an onomatopoeic exclamation used among black people to reduce the worth of any previous speech[2]. Moreover, a clear example that feeds on black language stereotypes comes about when Keeley (one of the two black contestants) is given the prompt in black English "She do hair", and she answers with the stereotypical black sounding name "Alyzae". According to the rules of the game show, an answer is correct only if it is uttered in the form of a question, so Keeley just changes the intonation, winning the approval of the host and the audience, but giving Mark an awkward feeling of unfamiliarity. Confused and frustrated, he asks if there will be any question on black history, receiving from the host a disarming answer: "Hey man, relax! What we get is what we get!". Mark's lack of awareness of the gap in understanding between black and white cultures is highlighted also by his answer to a question about unemployment: to the prompt "It's been a minute since he got a job" he assumes "he" is a black man, provoking the mute indignation of the other two contestants and the show's host. As soon as Mark turns to the "White People" category (for which he will realize later that any answer is correct) and begins winning money, the "final bell" comes and the black host announces that time is up since "as usual, we started late". This statement engages in another well-known black stereotype embodied in the acronym CPT, "Colored People Time". For black people the expression is an inside joke used to underline their "blackness", as it refers to their peculiar notion of time, their feeling of being in harmony with seasons and natural rhythms, "in" time rather than "on" time (Smitherman 2006). For white people, instead, the expression CPT represents blacks' indolence and lack of punctuality, hence it is connoted not only as a stereotype, but also as a racist joke.

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[2] Cf. urbandictionary.com

The episode is effective racial comedy, as it purposely calls attention to the misreading in American society that studying slavery and black history makes someone familiar with black culture and, above all, aware of hidden racism.

Episode 2: the lady who does not see colour

The second episode of *Black Jeopardy!* aired on November 14, 2015. The two black contestants are once again Amir and Keeley, whereas this time the white participant in a fish-out-of-water scenario is Allison, played by American actress Elizabeth Banks. When the host introduces her, she flaunts her politeness so much so that he reminds her: "You know that this is Black Jeopardy, right?". Allison's answer is surprising: "Oh, I dated a black guy once, so I don't see colour. It is just Jeopardy to me". It should sound like a non-racist statement, but it will have the complete opposite effect as the show goes on. After failing to answer several questions, Allison is given the prompt "After everything he did, he try'na act like he don't owe us an explanation", and she answers with no hesitation and nodding in self-assurance "Who is Bill Cosby?", but it is wrong, as the right answer is Tom Brady. Indeed, both Cosby and Brady were the protagonists of two different scandals at the time of the episode. In 2015, in fact, there were allegations that black actor Bill Cosby had raped several women (Ember and Bowley 2015), whereas football quarterback Tom Brady was involved in the *DeflateGate* scandal[3]. The choice of Brady as the right answer may signal that in the black community it was hard to acknowledge that Cosby may have been guilty of such shameful conduct.

Anyway, after getting the Cosby answer wrong, Allison expresses her frustration saying, "As a white person I just don't know how to answer these questions", and the host makes fun of her replying, "Oh I'm sorry, you're white? I don't see colour". The joke is thought provoking: claiming to ignore the colour of somebody does not necessarily mean to be against racism, but may mean to ignore different heritages and cultures. Another example in the skit is offered when Allison choses the "It ain't like that" category and is challenged with the Daily Double special question, "Who killed Tupac?". She pompously answers, "I'm gonna say Tupac was killed by a corrupt justice system", but the show's host highlights that the clue

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[3] *DeflateGate* was a National Football League controversy, which involved the allegation that the New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady deliberately deflated footballs used in their victory with the Indianapolis Colts in the 2014/2015 Championship (McLaughlin 2015).