Ilaria Moschini

“You should’ve seen Luke!” or the multimodal encoding/decoding of the language of postmodern ‘webridized’ TV series

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the postmodern multimodal language of some contemporary American TV series and its gradual hybridization with the language (and practices) of social media. The paper begins with the analysis of popular television texts that have experimented with visual/musical/narrative form in order to outline the main characteristics of their meaning-making processes. Then, it will explore the concept of “expanded transmediality” according to which audiences participate in the co-construction of narratives (Stein and Busse 2012) to highlight the top-down/bottom-up ongoing exchange in franchise storytelling and it will focus on the textual features of some fan-generated artifacts that enter into these global narrations and where fans exploit postmodern diegetic and editing forms. Finally, the paper will return to the analysis of television to investigate how the on-screen emergence of social media networks has influenced postmodern TV series in terms of their semantic and semiotic realization and/or fruition processes, giving rise to a ‘webridization’ of postmodern television textuality.

Keywords: multimodality, postmodern meaning making, TV series, transmedia storytelling, user-generated contents, webridization

Ilaria Moschini: Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies, University of Florence, Firenze, Italy. E-mail: ilaria.moschini@unifi.it

1 Postmodern ‘webridized’ textualities

The technological revolution and, in particular, the growth of the “New Media” has led to the emergence of new forms of ‘textuality’ that have progressively hybridized more traditional textual artifacts. I investigated this process – which I label “webridization” – when dealing with the digital evolution of American political discourse during the US 2008 presidential election (Moschini 2010). In that context, I noticed that the language of politics and institutional messages...
had turned into a hybrid public-private narration where official codes got massively mashed up with items of popular culture.

Such ‘webridized’ discourses often present a metatextual/intertextual/ironic register that is intrinsically multimodal since it merges different modes and codes of communication and it is natively postmodern because it re-adapts verbal, visual, and musical pieces, integrating them with original productions. In addition to this, many “webridized” texts – especially videos – present a diegetic form that is very similar to the so-called “MTV-style” (Buxton 1990) – a kind of storytelling widely spread in contemporary American TV series, characterized by intertextuality and a peculiar type of editing (Moschini 2011, 2012).

My aim here is to contribute to the study of ‘webridized’ textualities with the exploration of the main features of the above-mentioned “MTV-style” storytelling and its gradual hybridization with the language (and practices) of the Web. In particular, I will examine how the emergence of social media is challenging the textuality of contemporary TV series and how elements of postmodern television are affecting the textual realization of both verbal monomodal and multimodal user-generated artifacts.

The paper will begin with the analysis of popular TV shows that have experimented with visual/musical/narrative form (like Supernatural and CSI: Crime Scene Investigation) to outline the main characteristics of their postmodern meaning-making processes. Then, it will explore the concept of “expanded transmediality” according to which audiences participate in the co-construction of narratives (Stein and Busse 2012) in the context of a top-down/bottom-up franchise storytelling, and it will focus on the textual features of some fan-generated artifacts that enter into these global narrations. Finally, the paper will return to the analysis of TV series and investigate the extent to which the language and practices of social media are influencing postmodern television shows in terms of their semantic and semiotic realization and/or fruition processes.

2 An example of postmodern storytelling in contemporary American TV series

In Television’s Second Golden Age, Robert J. Thompson (1996: 13) identifies a style of television programming considered high as a consequence of its subject matter, form, and content. According to him, this new type of programming emerged with the development of the cable network in the 1980s and the 1990s, when US channels such as HBO started to produce television shows like The Sopranos and Sex and the City. Thompson (1996: 14–15) describes the characteristics of the
new TV by noting that contemporary shows present “a pedigree” because they are created by artists whose reputations were made in other, classier media; he adds that they have a variety of characters whose lives originate in multiple plots serialized in continuing storylines and “a memory” that refers back to previous episodes. As far as the diegetic aspect is concerned, Thompson (1996: 5) speaks of a “creolized generic heritage” that integrates comedy and tragedy, the writing of which is usually complex and writer-based, with self-conscious allusions to high and popular culture, but “mostly to TV itself.” As a consequence, the decoding process of these shows is quite complex and, referring to it, I may paraphrase Roland Barthes (1977: 148) and speak of the “birth of the viewer” who performs the role of an amateur archeologist collecting textual pieces and enacting a new audiovisual reading practice based on the decryption of all possible levels of meaning. Indeed, their structure is multilayered and – to various extents – constituted by a chain of interrelated and interconnected meanings, where different genres and visual styles get intertextually hybridized (McCabe and Akass 2007).

An interesting example of the “creolized heritage” Thompson speaks about is offered by the drama-horror *Supernatural*, a popular TV series (aired since 2005 by the American television network WB and then by the CW channel), which has highly experimented with narrative and editing form. My aim here is to explore its intertextual/metanarrative/parodic textual construction because this kind of storytelling – which could be labeled “postmodern” – has become common in user-generated contents shared on social media platforms (as I will show in the rest of the paper).

Conceived as a modern American Western, *Supernatural* tells the adventures of two brothers – Sam and Dean Winchester – who drive all through the States to track down evil forces. The first season of the series revolves around urban legends and otherworldly folklore, while – in its subsequent episodes – Christian myths are explored and, in particular, the eternal battle between angels and demons up to the Apocalypse. Since its storytelling is structurally based on intertextuality – both horizontal and vertical (see Kristeva 1986) – I would like to recall that horizontal intertextuality, or what Fairclough (1992: 85) calls “manifest intertextuality,” is the explicit quotation of a text within another text, while vertical intertextuality, or “constitutive intertextuality” (1992: 85), refers to the merging of prior texts into new texts which may assimilate, contradict, or ironically echo them.

In *Supernatural*, the main instance of “manifest intertextuality” is seen in the numerous quotations from existing books such as the *Malleus Malleficarum*, the famous fifteenth-century treatise on witches, or even the Sacred Scriptures themselves. The citations are usually the result of personal research carried out in libraries or through the Internet by the protagonists or by a father-figure char-
acter, Bobby Singer, who embodies the Proppian role of the helper. Rhetorically, the function of those extra-vocalized endorsed quotations is to underline the authority of the research outcomes and of the solutions chosen to fight and destroy evil creatures.

More complex is the diegetic construction of several items of “constituent intertextuality.” An example of vertical intertextuality integrated with metanarration is seen in the character of Chuck Shurley, the author of a series of books which mysteriously tell the adventures of Sam and Dean before they happen. The inexplicable omniscience of the youth is resolved in episode 4.18 (“The monster at the end of the book”), when the angel Castiel reveals that Chuck is actually a prophet of the Lord and that the books he is writing will be known, in the future, as *The Winchester Gospel*. The revelation is followed by a surreal dialogue between the angel and Dean that reaffirms the ideal kinship between Chuck and one of his famous evangelical predecessors, Luke:

(1) Dean: [about Chuck being a prophet] This is the guy who decides our fate?
Castiel: He isn’t deciding anything. He’s a mouthpiece – A conduit for the inspired word.
Dean: The word? The word of God? What, like *The New Testament*?
Castiel: One day, these books – They’ll be known as *The Winchester Gospel*.
Dean: You got to be kidding me.
Castiel: I am not . . . kidding you.
Dean: Him? Really?
Castiel: You should’ve seen Luke!

The dialogue is ironic and the communicative effect is the downgrading of the biblical Luke, rather than the upgrading of Chuck’s status. At an interpersonal level, the verbal exchange humanizes the angel, because it is Castiel who opts for an informal word choice, adopting Dean’s register.

In the series plot, the discourse on authoriality (writer/prophet/God) is extended with the introduction of fans, because *The Winchester Gospel* is at the same time a new chapter of the Sacred Scriptures inspired by God (the “actual author”) to the writer (God’s intermediary to humanity), and a cult book with a large group of fans who follow Sam and Dean’s adventures and digitally interact with Chuck. Interpretations of the “Scriptures” are thus given by fans in their websites and even “apocryphal” versions of the Gospel are written in user-generated stories – an example of the on-screen emergence of social media networks I will discuss later in the paper.

Such mythological *pastiche* presents another layer of meaning constituted by literary references, particularly to *Paradise Lost* from which the romantic vision
of Satan stems. In Milton’s epic poem, Lucifer’s fall from Heaven is described as an act of brave rebellion against his creator in the name of freedom. Analogically, the TV show presents Lucifer as “an outcast” persecuted by his heavenly brothers because “he has a mind of his own” (see episode 5.10 with the Dantesque title “Abandon all hope . . .”).

In the show, the function of intertextuality is two-fold: on the one side, it reinforces the epic aspects of the two brothers’ adventures, whose tragic lives follow the same arc of continuity of ancient heroes. On the other side, it gives an ironic modern version of mythology, when, for instance, the religious epic battle is portrayed as a western movie with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse driving modern American cars. The two-fold core of this “constituent intertextuality” is thus composed by tragedy and irony, the latter mostly deriving from the self-conscious acknowledgment of the process of modernizing/hybridizing ancient myths.

An archetypal sample is given in episode 5.8, “Changing channels,” where the archangel Gabriel entraps Sam and Dean in TV-land – a stream of television programs that comprises a color-bright sitcom, a medical drama, a Japanese game-show, and a police procedural series. Once the protagonists understand that “to play TV roles” is the metaphor chosen by the archangel to make them accept their roles in the Apocalypse drama, they start “playing” a parodic version of the characters of the crime drama CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. The climax of this self-reflexive mood is the meta-episode 6.15 (“The French mistake”) where the two brothers are sent by another angel to an alternative universe that actually is the set of the Supernatural TV show and where they play the roles of . . . themselves. In the same episode, Misha Collins – the actor who embodies angel Castiel and a regular Twitter user – tweets his followers about the strange behavior of Jared and Jensen (the two actors’ real names). What is interesting is the fact that those tweets have really been sent while the show was on air, as the Twitter page of the author proves (see Figure 1): it is a glimpse of interactive narration entering the plot of a TV show, a feature I shall analyze in the final section of this paper.

Finally, Supernatural highly relies on its musical components not only as a strategy to heighten the feelings, but also as an additive layer of meaning of the multimodal vertical intertextuality. Indeed, many of the show titles quote or reword famous rock songs (e.g., episode 5.1 named “Sympathy for the devil” after the 1969 Rolling Stones’ hit) and, frequently, become dramaturgical instruments. For example, “In my time of dying” (after a Led Zeppelin song) is the title of episode 1, season 2 that pre-announces what will happen to the protagonists’ father in the episode. Moreover, classical rock music and metal songs (mainly broadcasted by their car radio) accompany the protagonists in their journey all around America, both as diegetic sources and as extra-diegetic sounds. In episode 3.16
“No rest for the wicked,” for instance, Dean and Sam are in their car when the radio airs Bon Jovi’s song *Wanted dead or alive*, the lyrics of which (that I partially quote below) tell of a cowboy – riding “a steel horse” – who is “wanted dead or alive”:

[. . .] when I walk these streets,
a loaded six string on my back
I play for keeps
’cause I might not make it back.

I’ve been everywhere
still I’m standing tall
I’ve seen a million faces
and I’ve rocked them all

’cause I’m a cowboy
on a steel horse I ride
I’m wanted dead or alive [. . .]

The two boys realize that the song tells a story that echoes their actual lives of hunted people and they start singing the song along with the radio, thus endorsing its content.
The language of postmodern ‘webbridized’ TV series

3 MTV-style editing

The above-described metalinguistic use of music is one of the features of a kind of editing that has been labeled “MTV-inspired” (Buxton 1990:141), after the name of the American satellite channel launched in 1981 and dedicated to the celebration of music and youth culture. Although alternatives to traditional editing were first experimented with in the 1920s by early surrealist and dada filmmakers like René Clair and Luis Buñuel and, in the 1960s, by the French New Wave and, in the States, by Andy Warhol and John Cassavetes, it is only with the more recent emergence of musical videos that nonlinear storytelling has developed into a mainstream technique (Dancyger 2011: 163). Indeed, MTV programming was originally structured in small segments, rarely more than five minutes long, that featured the conventions of television commercials – “short formats, background music and fast montage” (Kinder 1984: 5) – and that created a fragmented visual style.

MTV-style editing is characterized by the “celebration of pace,” abundant intertextual citations, and disjunctive sequences, the composition of which breaks the traditional rules of montage (first of all, the call for invisible editing) in order to emphasize feelings and emotions. According to Ken Dancyger (2011: 165), MTV-inspired style has integrated the diegetic level with a multilayered approach, giving birth to “[a] part narrative, part atmosphere, sound intensive and image rich” storytelling. Many contemporary TV series have adopted – to various extents – this narrative approach and also fans try to reproduce it in their multimodal artifacts full of fast paced cuts, digital effects, and musical accompaniment.

An iconic example of MTV-style editing is found in CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, one of the most popular American television series. The drama and its spin-offs (CSI: Miami, CSI: New York) revolve around the process of solving crimes by finding and correctly interpreting given evidences and express their true nature that amounts to the celebration of science and technology. The CSI series are known for their unusual camera angles, percussive editing techniques, detailed technical discussions, graphic portrayal of bullet trajectories and methods of evidence recovery and crime reconstructions. All episodes are full of lengthy scenes where experiments, tests, or other technical components are accurately portrayed, with sound effects and/or accompanying music.

Anthony Zuicker, the producer, defined this technique as the “CSI-shot” (Tait 2006: 46) and Karen Lury (2005: 45) described it as an “extensive use of models and CGIs [computer-generated images] in sequences most often associated to the autopsy of the victims, where ‘snap zoom’ (accelerated zoom) sequences apparently recreate the entry of bullets, knives or even blood cells into the body.” “CSI-shots” usually come after the medical examiner’s explanations and start with a “flashcut” (a quick dissolve into white), followed by a close up of the vic-
tim’s wounds. These shots continue with fast zooms onto the victim’s body, while smooth cuts to computer-generated images and the use of the zoom at the same speed give the impression that the camera is now moving into the body itself.

The materiality of the bodies is emphasized by the sounds that accompany the sequence: apart from noises ideally connected to wounds (a gun being fired, a slicing sound, etc.), there are onomatopoeic slurps, thuds, ruptures, etc., which highlight the flashiness of the body. The direct frontal angle of “CSI-shots” neutralizes the perspective and encodes an objective attitude typical of scientific and technical images. At the same time, color saturation and focus provide a hyper-real and conceptual representation that reinforces its scientific modality (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 149). “CSI-shot” sequences are usually very short and fast and present a heavy integration of music and visual effects, peculiar to the MTV-style editing.

Two examples have been chosen here to show this technique: the first is taken from episode 18, season 3 of CSI: Miami (entitled “Game over”); the second is from “Gone baby gone,” episode 8 of the same TV show, season 7. The first extract lasts approximately 35 seconds and features Ryan Wolfe, one of the detectives of the Miami Dade forensic team, carrying on his lab experiments. An electronic musical piece leads the audience into the laboratory, at first with an evocative external shot framing the office building at sunset and then with close-up images of the detective. The montage is very fast and fragmented and its pace follows the syncopated rhythm of the synthesizers. The nonlinear editing is emphasized by a series of flash-cuts that favor the image–music synchronization.

In the second extract, the musical piece comes from the soundtrack of a 1990 science fiction movie – Total Recall – and is performed by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. The entire scene (48 seconds) is a synesthetic metaphor that portrays Calleigh Duquesne, the lab examiner, as a musical performer. The first shots present the technician preparing her instruments, while the orchestra is tuning its musical instruments. In the entire scene the sounds deriving from Calleigh’s gestures enter into a dialogic interaction with music and images, as in the two shots described below.

In the first (see Figure 2), a bullet is put on a slide: here, the action is given prominence at musical level by the intertwining of the iron fragment clinking on the glass with a drum beat and immortalized at visual level by a photographic black-and-white cut which contrasts with the typical saturated colors of CSI: Miami. In the second shot (see Figure 3), the string sounds are recalled at visual level by Calleigh’s hands “playing” the stick in a sequence that communicates the flow of time (split screen to be read left to right) suggesting a long and accurate in-depth analysis.
I argue that the lab scenes of CSI represent a strong example of MTV-inspired editing because, as Blaine Allan (1990: 9) points out, “music videos are irrevocably based on the synchronous relations of image and sound, music in particular.” Indeed, while “CSI-shots” usually feature the voice of characters reconstructing crimes in a “figure position” – that of “the most important sound the listener
must identify with and/or react to and/or act upon” (van Leeuwen 1999: 23) – “CSI-lab shots” are characterized by the absence of dialogue and by a composition of music and ambient sounds in a prominent place interacting with images at a paced flow.

4 Expanded transmediality

Many popular TV series (among which we find the above analyzed Supernatural and CSI: Miami) have their narrations dispersed across different media platforms for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. It is an additional feature of postmodern storytelling, which was labeled “transmediality” or “convergence” (Jenkins 2006, 2007) and which originates in an enhanced form of storytelling that helps the audience plunge into a fictional universe through a number of dispersed entry points, providing a comprehensive and coordinated fruition of a complex story.

Transmedia storytelling influences the inner structures of the stories that differ from the “close classical narratives” revolving around an individual plot or a single character and are based on fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their adventures. This process encourages an “encyclopedic impulse” in authors and activates the previously mentioned “intertexual games” in viewers (Jenkins 2007). In order to ‘fill the gaps’ of the narrations and ‘win’ this collective decoding game, viewers systematically seek and acquire information they share in the new global arena of the World Wide Web fandoms. Moreover, transmedia narratives also function as dramaturgical activators, because viewers continue to elaborate the story elements producing and uploading user-generated contents on fan sites. As Leavenworth (2011) affirms, “the many media formats in which each story is told seem to destabilize the boundaries between producers and consumers of fiction, a destabilization that weakens the authority traditionally associated with originality and that gives authors of fan fiction increased license to add to the ever expanding archive.”

Imitating the fans of Sherlock Holmes who, in the nineteenth century, insisted on the ‘return’ of the character after the author had decided to ‘kill’ him, modern media fans enter into a dialogic interaction with producers and ask to have their favorite shows on air and to provide desired plot developments. Usually, they do not interact on a personal basis, but as a community: it is the community that provides the authoritative interpretation of the cultural object and tries to preserve it even against its creators (Brower 1992). So, fans do not simply consume pre-produced stories, they actively fight for their survival, for their integrity, and for their consistency (Stein and Busse 2012). In addition, fans manu-
facture their own cultural products based on the shows they like in order to celebrate the series and repair their unsatisfactory or unexplored aspects. Their meaning-making processes feature a decoding practice based on close scrutiny, elaborated exegesis, and prolonged re-reading and do-it-yourself encoding practices (Jenkins 1992).

Actually, the encoding/decoding practices of fan communities are not new, as Jenkins clearly explained in his 2010 TED conference speech, but nowadays, the intertwining of transmedially dispersed source texts with their related digital artifacts has reached such an intensity that, as Stein and Busse (2012: 14) suggest, scholars are debating over a more expansive definition of transmediality where “audiences as well as official authors co-construct transmedia narratives, story-worlds, and frames for engagement.”

“Expanded transmediality” can be thus described as (at least) a bi-directional process where top-down media franchises exploit bottom-up participation, while grassroots involvement is progressively influencing the creation of television texts. Indeed, the emergence of social media networks is leading to the gradual hybridization of the language of television texts with the language (and practices) of the web. It is a progressive ‘webridization’ which is effecting TV series in terms of plots, interactivity in the fruition of episodes, the creation of ‘ecosystems’ made up of web platforms that ask for viewers’ participation, and – in the case of web series – narrative formats themselves, as I will show in the final section. In this context, postmodern language along with fandom decoding/encoding practices constitute the items of shared knowledge necessary to fully comprehend and enjoy extended transmedia contemporary TV shows.

To illustrate this, I will start from a brief overview of the tradition of the interpretative practices of media fandom, to concentrate on some examples of fan-generated texts, where fans exploit postmodern narrative and editing forms in their natively intertextual artifacts, thus integrating fannish hermeneutic practices with an encoding process that draws elements from the language of contemporary TV shows.

5 Fan/user-generated narrations

Since the emergence of the Amateur Press Association – which occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century – consumers have been exchanging grassroots re-writing of media contents. At that time, fans’ hand-typed and printed
meta-texts were mailed to a network of people sharing similar interests, while in the 1930s, the circulation of fan texts was enlarged by the creation of “zines” (amateur magazines), especially among science fiction fans. In those magazines, in addition to stories, there were also sections dedicated to letters where readers could comment upon fan fictions. By the end of the 1960s, there emerged the first organized media fan culture when fans urged NBC to return the Star Trek series to the air. The phenomenon exploded in the 1980s coinciding with the emergence of contemporary TV shows and was later amplified by the spreading of the Internet, when many “zines” started to be published electronically (Verba 2003 [1996]). Today, it is possible to find many web sites where viewers upload their user-generated texts partaking of a global, almost endless, diegetic/hermeneutic session.

The dominant appropriation strategy chosen by fans to create their meta-texts is the recontextualization of original material in order to fully experience the primary text beyond all the media channels offered by contemporary top-down transmedia storytelling. These artifacts transform borrowed materials from mass culture into new texts, the aesthetics of which recall the Bakhtinian heteroglossic notion of the authorial process according to which “each word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin 1981: 293). Fan-generated narrations are “heteroglossia in action” (Leppänen 2011: 237) as far as they re-mediate and re-signify original material through the use of a “range of discursive strategies, such as imitation, repetition, modification, and parody.”

Examples of fan-generated artifacts are fan fictions – stories written by fans of a TV series, using original characters and settings. Indeed, their canons were set by the literary science fiction tradition since the 1930s, when fans invented stories about their favorite characters, sharing them on the pages of amateur magazines (Hellekson and Busse 2006).

Fan fictions present a synesthetic communicative style, since very often they incorporate song lyrics into the story: sometimes the entire lyrics of a song are quoted at the beginning or at the end of a story to indicate how the song has influenced the author or to make a ‘statement’ on the story itself, or to set the mood for what is to come. Frequently, they are part of the story itself and work as the functional equivalent of a soundtrack, activating a multimodal reading of the written text (Moschini 2011: 205–206), as in the Supernatural fanfic (MetallicTaste 2009) quoted below, where Sam, one of the two protagonists, mourns his fiancée Jessica, killed by demons:

(2) [. . . ] Sam’s face was fallen. Jessica never left his mind and he mourned over how she had left his life.

In this world you tried, not leaving me alone, behind
There’s no other way, I prayed to the gods, “let (her) stay”
A sad smile crept over his face; whenever he remembered her he felt her comforting presence, erasing away the bad feelings.
The memories ease the pain inside, and now I know why.
All of my memories keep you near, in silent moments, imagine you’d be here
All of my memories keep you near, in silent whispers, silent tears. […]

The title of the song (Memories by Within Temptation) is given by the author in the notes that introduce the fiction and that constitute part of the co-text in the web page. Here, the lyrics (in italics) describe Sam’s thoughts in a sort of intimate ‘stream of consciousness’ and, with the song in mind, the readers can activate another mode of communication and begin to ‘multimodally’ experience the text. This kind of intertwining of lyrics and the story is a feature of MTV-style editing, where lyrics – usually from pop and rock famous hits – are turned into a narrative instrument, which literally ‘verbalize’ the characters’ emotions and often vehicle the authors’ point of view. It is a metalinguistic use of lyrics, inaugurated in 1984 by the authors of the famous NBC show Miami Vice, that has now become one of the widely accepted standards in US TV series and movies (Moschini 2011).

Shifting from ‘monomodal’ verbal fictions to multimodal products, the diffusion of home videotape recorders in the 1980s fostered the spreading of another kind of fan artifact (namely fan videos) stemming from the tradition of slide-shows projected during fan conventions. To create a video, fan artists use broadcast television footages and link them to commercial music in order to comment on the series narrative (Coppa 2006). Both TV images and songs gain new meanings from their association and very frequently, the song lyrics amplify, criticize, or parody aspects of the original series. Fan videos differ from professional music videos because their emphasis is on the visual component while, in MTV videos, the leading semiotic mode is music (Coppa 2008).

However, I argue that the postmodern narrative dimension of MTV videos has now become a feature of many fan videos produced by users and uploaded on social platforms of video sharing. They seem to integrate the hermeneutic tradition of fan communities with postmodern editing style, which has been rendered less challenging for non-professional users by the technological development of video-editing software, as the two examples I select will show.

YouTube’s Supernatural Music Video by CitiBoi909a well illustrates the features of a modern computer-generated fan text: it is characterized by rapid cuts

and digital effects that echo the notes of the soundtrack and its frame rate has been slowed down or accelerated to cope with the rhythm of the chosen song. It is a kind of editing that highly recalls the previously analyzed ‘CSI-lab shots’, where music in a “figure position” interacts with a flow of images trying to reproduce the same cadence of the sound.

Figure 4 shows comments on the video posted by other YouTube-users – and *Supernatural* fans – who discuss its editing style ("kinda the wrong moment to put that effect", “great editing!”). Their messages do not only comment on the editing style but also on the choice of the song. A decision the other fans perceive as “faithful” to the spirit of the show and, consequently, able to add a narrative piece to the transmedia *Supernatural* story since the fan artifact’s semiotic resources are exploited to “craft [a] discourse that resonates with the expectations, norms and preferences of fan fiction communities” (Leppänen 2011: 237).

---

**Fig. 4:** Comments posted to CitiBoi909a’s YouTube video
The ability to integrate images and music is a skill fan artists are well aware of, as an award-winning clip reveals. Here the author portrays herself as trying to find the right inspiration to create the fan video she wants to present at a Supernatural convention. The clip is a meta-text on the creative process that outlines both the author’s technical abilities and her interpretative skills. Indeed, the selection of the shots and their association with a song is not only a matter of the above-analyzed correspondence between pace and musical rhythm, it is also a matter of interpretation. A good fanvid is one that is able to render the true spirit of the series or of its characters, following a hermeneutic tradition dating back to early science fiction fandoms (Coppa 2008).

6 The ‘webridization’ of television texts

Returning to television, my question is whether the growth of the new media has influenced the textuality of postmodern TV series in terms of their semantic and semiotic realization and/or fruition processes.

As for the plot, it is possible to highlight the on-screen emergence of social media networks in many shows, a famous example of which is episode 4.5 of the police procedural CSI: New York (“Down the rabbit hole”). The story – the events of which take place in a digitally animated version of Manhattan – revolves around a murder victim who bears a striking resemblance to a famous avatar in the online role-playing game Second Life. The protagonist Mac Taylor, who is also the lead detective, is forced to enter into the game himself to pursue a suspect. At the time of the premiere, the interactivity of the episode was strengthened by a three-level online game on the show website where the audience could enjoy and enrich their CSI/Second Life experience.

The reference to social media in TV shows is a trend that seems to be increasing since the spread of Web 2.0. For example, in episode 6.8 of the supernatural drama Medium (“Once in a lifetime”), one of the protagonist’s daughters posts embarrassing videos of a man on a video-sharing website; moreover, many episodes of the second series of the comedy-drama thriller Castle feature the protagonist’s mother, a former actress and eccentric woman, who creates her profile on a social networking site with the help of her granddaughter; in episode 6.14 of the medical-drama House MD (“Private lives”) the doctors treat a girl who is a blogger constantly writing and posting all possible details about her life; in the

---

series finale of the crime drama *Numbers* (episode 6.16 “Cause and effect”) the FBI agents try to find a stolen gun tracking down useful hints on several social networks; and, in the already mentioned *Supernatural* show, the “prophet” Chuck keeps in touch with his readers on fan sites and even organizes a fan convention (episode 6.9, “The real ghostbusters”). As anticipated in the second paragraph, during the broadcasting of episode 6.15 of *Supernatural*, a more ‘interactive referent’ engaged with ‘real’ fans when the actor playing angel Castiel tweeted his followers about the strange behavior of his colleagues, Jared and Jensen (aka Sam and Dean).

Actually, in the last two years the ‘social fruition’ of TV shows has massively increased because not only networks have begun to communicate with viewers through Twitter during TV shows, they have also started to encourage the participation of followers on social platforms during the airing of the same shows, like for instance on the Facebook page of the network FoxCrime Italia,⁴ where viewers are invited to comment on the episodes of their favorite shows. Another case in point is *In Treatment*, the Italian adaption of the Israeli show *BeTipul*, where viewers are asked to enjoy watching the first five episodes of the series, accompanied by the Twitter comments of five experts (a journalist, a musician, a blogger, a psychologist, and a community manager) who give their personal point of view on the stories.⁵

Returning to the on-screen emergence of social media networks, also the pilot episode of the 2010 most popular US TV show, the musical comedy drama *Glee*, starts with its protagonists uploading and sharing videos on their pages on MySpace but, in addition, the show marks a step forward in the hybridization of television with the web, since it is constructed as a platform for single video performances.

The show (which has won the 2010 and 2011 Golden Globe awards for the best television series) revolves around a high school glee club – a high school choir – competing on the national contest circuit. In the words of its creator, Ryan Murphy, the show was conceived of as a sort of “post-modern musical” in the vein of Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* or Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* where the musical numbers are always performed in the context of a cabaret (Martin 2009). In the same way, the characters of *Glee* sing while on stage, rehearsing in the school clubroom or, alternatively, when daydreaming. Thus their strongly choreographed musical numbers (five to eight in each episode) are narrative slots that preserve a meaning even when extrapolated from the flow of the events.

⁵ http://mag.sky.it/mag/cinema/2013/03/28/in_treatment_5_commenti_su_twitter.html (last accessed June 2013).
*Glee* is a postmodern show because it is a *pastiche* of musical pieces, videos, and pop culture: its characters usually perform covers – not original songs – and very often they sing mash-ups, like the blending of Rihanna’s *Umbrella* and Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain* (episode 2.7 “The substitute”), sung by the Oscar-winning actress Gwyneth Paltrow. Moreover, especially in the second season, the musical numbers are not only Broadway-like performances, but also reproductions of famous music videos (e.g., Madonna’s *Vogue* or Britney Spears’s *Me against the music*), an explicit homage to both pop icons and MTV, with their paced editing style and glossy glamour.

The hybridization of the show is more evident in the second season where the story line becomes very loose. While the first episodes present a basic plot revolving around personal relationships and social issues, the second season episodes are only a ‘thematic’ excuse for singing sessions. For instance, in episode 2.5 (“The Rocky Horror Glee show”), the club director decides to have the Glee club perform the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as the school musical; in episode 2.12, “Silly love songs,” students sing romantic tunes in honor of Valentine’s Day; in episode 2.14, “Blame it to the alcohol,” the school principal asks the Glee club to find songs celebrating teetotalism.

The result is a textual structure made up of a series of videos held together more by the focus on the characters and their musical abilities than on the events. The ambiguity on what actually constitutes the basic unit of the text is strengthened by the show website where one can find both a section dedicated to single episodes and another to all the musical numbers (*Glee* clips): a section that highly recalls YouTube structure. The series itself can be seen as a top-down narrative version of the famous video-sharing website and I may add that YouTube actually functions as a recruiting channel for the *Glee* cast, since one of the recurring characters of the second season is interpreted by Darren Chris, a musician famous for the fan-made parodic musical dedicated to *Harry Potter*, which he created and uploaded on the same video-sharing platform.

The ‘webridization’ of the show is evident also in its franchise structure – a global brand that fully exploits transmediality and social media. Indeed, the series’ creators have given life to a sort of ‘ecosystem’ where *Glee* fans, the so-called Gleeks (from the combination of “glee” and “geek,” a person addicted to new technologies), can pass from television to online music stores, from web platforms to mobile applications. Indeed, the *Glee* franchise features a young adult book series, an iPad application, and a karaoke game for the console Wii. Moreover, all the songs covered in the show are released through the iTunes store in the version performed by the cast.

*Glee* is such a global phenomenon, attracting thousands of fans, that its producers have introduced a competition (“Biggest Gleek”) intended to measure the
participation of contestants on social networking sites. They have also organized audition contests where people can create their personal versions of the musical numbers and upload them on the official website. In this way *Glee* fans are enacting spontaneous bottom-up ‘traditional’ hermeneutic re-reading/re-writing practices and are, at the same time, participating in a top-down corporate-driven global karaoke. I argue, thus, that the *Glee* franchise is not only exploiting all media channels but is also trying to guide fans in their transformative processes.

Another example of interactive and transmedially dispersed fruition is evident in Club Psych, a “gamified website” (Werbach and Hunter 2012: 69) launched in 2010 and built around USA Network’s successful TV series *Psych*. The website allows users to watch videos, join the show’s fan club, and answer a trivia quiz. In addition, there is a mystery game called Hashtag killer that allows players to simulate interactions with the show’s characters over Twitter and Facebook. There is also a mobile app called *Psych Vision*, which enables fans to unlock prizes and chat with each other while watching the show on TV.

A far more extreme experiment in the ‘webridization’ of television formats, albeit a niche one, is that of the web series. I will here analyze *Web Therapy*, an Internet series that, in April 2010, the US cable channel Showtime decided to run on television after three years of successful online airing. The show, which has featured prominent actors, was created in 2008 by the L-studio as a form of commercial for the luxurious car brand Lexus. Originally, it was available only on the L-studio website, Lexus’s digital entertainment branch, and later it was hosted on Hulu, the American streaming video website – a shift that marked the liberation from the original advertising nature in favor of a stronger entertainment connotation.

The online television series casts as protagonist the Emmy award-winning actress Lisa Kudrow, a former member of the cast of *Friends*. The actress embodies Fiona Wallice, a therapist who has conceived of a new form of treatment where each session lasts a few minutes and takes place via webcam over the Internet using iChat. For the airing of *Web Therapy* on TV, the cable channel decided to assemble three online episodes into a half-hour textual unit, in order to re-create a format the audience is familiar with. Despite the re-framing, it seems that a high degree of shared knowledge is necessary to decode this textual artifact, as its linguistic canons originate in chat formats and online exchanges.

The series alternates typical webcam shots with screen casting – a digital recording of computer screen outputs enhanced by audio narration that enables the viewers to see both the analyst and her patients (see Figure 5). The show sim-

---

6 clubpsych.usanetwork.com (last accessed June 2013).
ulates an actual online interaction with close personal shots that include the head and the shoulders of the participants. The alternation of the personal shots makes the audience take the perspective of both the online exchangers, even if the leading point of view is that of Dr. Fiona Wallice, whose computer desktop is visible during the online sessions. Here, the computer screen functions as a co-text that sets the spatial borders of the communicative act and marks its temporal evolution any time Wallice modifies the saved files on her desktop – a quite familiar visual context for computer users but quite an unusual background image for a traditional TV show.

As a final example of hybridization, I select *Una mamma imperfetta,* an Italian web series launched in May 2013 on the online pages of *Il Corriere della Sera* and produced by RCS – the newspaper publishing group – together with RAI, Italy’s national public broadcasting company. The series revolves around the story of a mother trying to conciliate work with her family commitments. She tells her story in a daily video blog visually portrayed with typical computer shots, like the one shown in Figure 6.

In Figure 6, the conative-phatic function is activated by the eyes that visually enact a demand to the recipients. The homely setting and the close personal shots (that take in the head and the shoulders of the speaker) shorten the distance between the protagonist and the viewers. Such intimate shots are

alternated with classic movie scenes and narratively function as explanations of the video diary. Indeed, the series offers a mixture of web and television, where video blog storytelling authoritatively imposes meaning on TV scenes, making them structurally subservient. Moreover, the web show features an episode entitled “I love it,” which has not been enlisted in the episodes, where the protagonist and her three friends perform a song together in a sort of homemade music video. Finally, the web fiction is posted online and viewers can comment on it and on the ordinary life problems the series deals with: a postmodern blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality.

7 Concluding remarks

This paper originates in the investigation of the linguistic features of some contemporary American TV series and the ones of social media in order to find out how their textual realizations are mutually affected. Such exploration has led me into the complex realm of an extended transmedia narration – composed of texts coming from three different contexts of production (television, fandom, and social media) – where postmodern language along with fannish decoding/encoding practices constitute the items of shared knowledge necessary to fully comprehend and enjoy transmedia TV shows. In this context, TV texts appear to be hybridized – to various extents – with the language (and practices) of the web.
in terms of plots, interactivity in the fruition of episodes, the creation of participatory ‘ecosystems,’ and – in the case of web series – narrative formats, too. At the same time, fan-generated artifacts that contribute to these ongoing top-down/bottom-up transmedia narrative sessions seem to be exploiting diegetic and editing forms typical of contemporary postmodern television.

The decodification of such extended transmedia discourse is quite complex since it integrates linguistic analysis with an inter-semiotic perspective in order to understand how different modes combine to create meaning (Kress 2010). It also explores the practices of text design together with the fruition processes of the involved communities because they both shape the functions different modes ‘perform’ in such new texts and provide them with social and semiotic cohesion/coherence (Lemke 2009). Albeit complex, I believe this is a necessary interdisciplinary activity that linguists should pursue if they wish to meet the challenge of exploring the new forms of ‘webridized’ textuality.

References


Bionote

Ilaria Moschini is a researcher of English language at the University of Florence. Her main interests include US culture, political language, and media textualities. She has published several essays on the linguistic/semiotic analysis of texts from different discourse areas (politics, media, advertising) and a volume on the evolution of the American imaginary.