Social change and media representations of rape: how TV series reshape the global imaginary on violence against women (and why)

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Violence against women is one of the most persistent and widespread phenomena that human societies know and in many contexts its practice still proves difficult to eradicate. On the other hand, its perception and acceptance as normative are rapidly changing in every part of the globe, thanks to feminism, policies derived from studies of gendered violence, and global phenomena such as #Metoo. In this change, the medium of television has played and continues to play a fundamental role, both as a receiver and diffuser of the collective imaginary, and as a generator of its transformations.
In this essay we ask about the specific logics that emerge from television narrative in relation to violence against women, especially around rape. Through a discussion of the different television formats and genres (fiction and non fiction, including broadcast, cable TV, streaming and video demand) we intend to examine the links beteween social change and television clichés in the representation of violence and rape, to see if and how these have changed over time. How does the culture of rape emerge and/or appear in various television genres and how is it changing in new streaming video content? What factors are most influencing the changes taking place in television representations of violence against women?

Introduction

A vast literature about gender violence tells us that violence against women (VAW) is a very persistent and widespread phenomenon and that its practice still proves difficult to eradicate (Krug et al. 2002; García-Moreno et al. 2005; Musso et al. 2020; UNICEF 2014; UN Women 2019; WHO 2013). But we also know that social representations of VAW and its alleged legitimacy are rapidly changing worldwide, thanks to the popularity of feminism and gender studies, policy and legislative change, and thanks to global phenomena such as #Metoo, Ni Una Menos, etc. (Banet-Weiser, Portwood-Stacer 2017; UN Women 2019; EELN 2020; Kornfield, Jones 2021; Nicholls 2021).[1]

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[1] Beside notorious movements like #Metoo and Ni Una Menos, with time, the social activism landscape was enriched by several contributions also coming from the art field, such as those promoted by Eve Ensler (One Billion Rising) and Elina Chauvet (Zapatos Rojos), that greatly impacted also non-Western countries, like India and South America.

In this change, the transformations in the imaginary and in social representations found in the public space play a crucial role, in particular through the policies of consumption, marketing, advertising and fictional universe conveyed by the media. In fact, the media have, historically, a fundamental role in social change and also in the redefinition of gender relations, not only concerning changes in the imaginary (Morin 1962), in the *aisthesis* (Benjamin 2012) and in *brainframes* (de Kerckhove 1993), but also because of the links that connect the history of media to the broader transformations of society, in particular to technical and productive aspects and to social customs and practices (Ortoleva 2008). Media, and television in particular, are also able to transform, in different ways, imaginary facts into real social facts, and *vice versa*. As already argued by Moles (1967), the media system

> had the potential to shuffle information and transform it into cultural facts, following a logic that sees the individual as a subject who receives and assimilates this irregularly sampled information into his own cultural environment. In a 'sociodynamic' perspective, consequently, imaginaries are not only an unreal dimension within which consumer-subjects are enmeshed, but rather the creative sphere within which symbolic creators operate (Raffa, Pronzato 2021, p. 295).

Of course, TV's ability to generate audiences and shape imagery does not occur in a social vacuum, but in a context already marked by precise gender patterns, where male and female are categorized and placed in precise relationships of power and domination, which in turn imply a particular relationship with violence (Giomi 2017a, p. 17 ff.). Television representations, in particular, are clearly responsible of a specific treatment of women's image and of its categorization in terms of objectification, hypersexualisation, dehumanization (Byerly 2008; Frederick et al. 2016; Fredrickson, Roberts 1997; Volpato 2011). At the same time, they tend to reveal *and* reinforce prevailing social patterns, even when they do not mechanically reflect them. In other words, also based on its structural features, they operate as *editors* and "definers of social reality" (Bennett 1982), insofar as they define the edge of the possible, the structures of plausibility, and the contexts of the obvious within which to situate behaviors and meanings. In particular, through a specific activity of framing (Goffman 1974) the

first partition of reality takes place, which serves to read and reproduce it. Television framing is what defines "which elements (events, characters, aspects, etc.) can be included in the story and what links they have with each other. This is a very delicate operation: the frame guides the identification of responsibilities and causes of a certain social fact or problem, therefore also the elaboration of solutions" (Shaufele 1999; in Giomi 2017b, p. 44; see also de Vreese 2005). As highlighted by Cohen (1963), although TV does not have the power to determine what audiences should think or prefer, it certainly have the role of selecting, framing and highlighting aspects of reality to be emphasized, that is, of suggesting "around what to think". One consequence of framing activity is to naturalize and symbolically legitimize some elements of social reality at the expense of others.

It is almost superfluous to note that historically, and until recent times, the meta-frame that has oriented the visions of the figure of the woman and categorized the VAW in the TV imaginary is based on the *male gaze* (Mulvey 1975; Oliver 2017) and its various and surreptitious declinations also in terms of (fe)male gaze (Abidin, Thompson 2012). If and how this meta-frame acts and eventually change in the media language in relation to social change and the new role of women in western society, is what we want to verify.

Although not able to accurately outline the mechanisms through which TV and other media influence the social imaginary, we know that they play a fundamental role in this change both as receivers and diffusers of the social imaginary and as sources of its transformations (Morin 1962; Ortoleva 2008; Abruzzese, Borrelli 2001). Their role is increasingly crucial, and the impact that the global diffusion of mediated ideas, images, and representations of reality has on common sense and socialization is now definable as a process of mediated construction of social reality (Couldry, Hepp 2017), or, even better, of *radical mediation*, with particular reference to the ability of media to generate and adjust affective moods and structures of feeling (Grusin 2015).

Violence against women is a global and persistent phenomenon that seems to be fostered by the same, globally diffused patriarchal imaginary. That's why it is profoundly important to try to understand the role and change in the media language of sexual violence (in its narratives, esthetics, iconographic and

cognitive dimensions). Besides, this social imaginary is becoming less and less the outcome of particular cultures, myths and local traditions, and increasingly the product of cultural industries able to syncretically absorb local myths and cultures (Morin 1956, 1962; Appadurai 1996; Taylor 2004; Parks, Kumar 2003; Stazio 2007). In this way, different cultural repertoires are merged for the sake of commercial interests, subsuming social stereotypes and identity strains and modifying the geography of social imaginary.

Moreover, since media and television reality are at the center of contemporary processes of socialization and radical mediation – where the "affective foundation of social order" takes place (von Scheve 2013; see also Illouz 2007) –, to address VAW and rape is crucial both for understanding the role reserved for women and the changes in the weaving of social bond (Musso 2012; Susca, de Kerckhove 2008; Tirino 2017).

In this paper we present some results of a research that has a cross-cultural approach[2] and is aimed at analyzing the social representations of gender-based violence in the public space, in particular the media. We speculate on the changes that are taking place in television language and clichés regarding the representations of sexual violence: how the use of female bodies and women's societal roles are changing, and according to what factors; and what content and internal logics are emerging from televised narratives around VAW and rape in particular. In the imagery of violence against women there is in fact a *canon* that more than others crosses the centuries and is reproduced with few variations both in works of art and in expressions of popular culture: this canon is about rape (Cretella 2013; Cuklanz 2000; Projansky 2001). In television language, rape holds a virtually "timeless" relational logic and meaning structure, which makes it a global topic and a "particularly versatile narrative element" (Projansky 2001, p.

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[2] This research is conducted by scholars with different backgrounds. Maria Giovanna Musso is a scholar of social change, social imaginary and violence against women since a systemic point of view. Rachel R. Reynolds is an Associate Professor of Communication and a Graduate Faculty member in the Communication, Culture and Media Program at Drexel University (Philadelphia), who is recently working around the portrayal of gendered violence. Dacia Pajé, M.A., is a A.B.D. in the Communication, Culture and Media Program at Drexel University, doing research on the construction and reception of sexual violence in television/streaming series and movies, and on their influence on and intersection with legal settings and the law. In addition to them, special thanks go to Michele Proietti for his contribution to the discussion, the bibliography and final review.

5), even though the structure of rape narratives varies historically, depending on cultural and national contexts" (ivi, p. 3).

In this article, we will consider, in particular, the transition from traditional TV to streaming video on demand services (SVOD). Through general observations of mediated images and different television products (traditional, cable TV, SVOD), our aim is to better understand:

> A)   How is the representation of rape changing, especially in new streaming video contents?

> B)   What are the evolving factors that play a more significant role in these changes?

We start with a brief historical description of the televised representation of sexual violence and of the phenomenology of television as a medium, its peculiarities and its structural changes over the last decades. We will focus particularly on the changing of the political economy of television production and how it is linked to subscription platforms and the use of web analytics. Furthermore, we will try to understand what professional and political power women currently have in the industry, and what role social movements have in changing societal representations and the collective imaginary they convey.

1. *The imaginary of rape, media and social change*

Violence against women is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, in which its multiple facets – factual, symbolic, structural, institutional and cultural – merge together in recursive paths reproducing a systemic logic where physical reality and the imaginary interlace[3]. Studies focusing on the complexity of this phenomenon highlight the peculiar and systemic characteristics of VAW (Heise 1998; Kelly 1988; García-Moreno et al. 2005; Corradi et al. 2016; Garneau 2017; Musso et al. 2020). Rape, especially – independently from the context in which it takes place (during war or peace time; in private or public space) – presents itself as simultaneously intimate and

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[3] For a deeper analysis of the role of the imaginary in the creation of the social reality, see Musso 2019a and all the essays included in the same volume.

political violence, rooted in patriarchal imagery that underlies gender identity even before and above the sexual relationship in the strict sense of the term (Brownmiller 1993; Nahoum-Grappe 1997; Bourke 2007; Corradi 2007; Seifert 2007; Cretella 2013; Bellassai 2013; Dobash, Dobash 2015; Musso et al. 2020).

Being connected to masculine domination[4], VAW maintains the characteristics of a recurring and *adaptive* phenomenon that manifests in every contexts, even progressive ones; VAW also leverages means of representation and adaption created by social change, including images that inhere in mass media (Aubrey, Frisby 2011; Galdi et al. 2014; Giomi, Magaraggia 2017) and digital technologies, which participate massively in the great metabolism of images. Studies on image-based violence (Powell, Henry 2017; McGlynn et al. 2017) bring to light new and specific forms of violence that pass through the screen and the use of new technologies (revenge porn, sextortion, etc.), involving aestheticization of VAW, reification of the female body, dehumanization, etc. (Galdi et al. 2014; De Vries, Peter 2013; Volpato 2011; DeKeseredy, Corsianos 2016).

These are forms of violence that would not be possible without these technological tools (Musso, 2019b) and, interestingly, the phenomena of objectification and sexualization typical of mass media – realized by depicting women as dismembered body parts with their faces omitted, wearing revealing clothing, exposing nudity, or adopting seductive and suggestive poses –, as social media becomes more established, are transformed into phenomena of self-objectification (Abidin, Thompson 2012; Aubrey, Frisby 2011; Bell et al. 2018; Coltrane, Messineo 2000; Mendes 2008).

On the other hand, in the last decades, there is no doubt that the successful political and social action of women's movements have partially contributed to changing perceptions and meanings of VAW, including its most exemplary expression: rape. Feminism and women's movements in general have played a crucial role in these socio-cultural changes that concerns all aspects of existence. They have, indeed, influenced customs and interpersonal relationships; modified the perception of women's role within the private and public spheres; and

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[4] For a deeper analysis of the meanings and implications of the concept of domination, as distinct from that of power, see Arendt 1970; Bourdieu 2001; Musso 2020.

mobilized political institutions in the fight against VAW, contributing to the partial reduction of gender gaps, both at the economic and socio-political levels

(Baksh, Harcourt 2015; Basu 2010; Chandra, Erlingsdóttir 2020; Vogelstein 2021).

Despite ongoing changes and new legislative guidelines – that also concern the mediated sphere[5] – have transformed the normative structure regarding VAW and its representations, television in Europe and USA continues to use women's bodies according to gender stereotypes (Buonanno 2020; Giomi, Magaraggia 2017; Griglié, Romeo 2021; Lauzen et al. 2008). In addition, efforts – including the Fourth UN Women's Conference – made to bring more women in media leadership roles and industry regulatory bodies, run up against the glass ceiling that still prevents women from accessing the top ranks and is hampered by a large pay gap (Griglié, Romeo 2021, p. 124; Newman et al. 2020).

Overall, both in factual and fictional genres, the televised language of VAW seems to be subjected to a contradictory tension (Giomi 2017a). On one hand, through precise (also pretextual) choices – fundamentally linked to agenda setting and news-worthy criteria – these genres have contributed to make VAW *visible* to the public opinion, spreading awareness around a phenomenon that has been *invisible* for a long time exactly because of its normalization and diffusion. On another hand, though, television, through stereotypical images, forms, and narratives, has contributed to normalize and legitimize VAW. Specifically, television has often used sexual violence as a voyeuristic narrative device, according to specific spectacularizing and aesthetic logics, especially in the visual register (Giomi 2017a, p. 19), using VAW for marketing and production necessities that are *presumed* to respond to public demand (Gili 2006, 2011).

Sexual violence and rape are, in fact, mainly used as fillers or hooks to engage audiences; nude images and objectification of women's bodies are still widely used to obtain viewers' attention (Scott 1998; Buonanno 2014; Gill 2009; Giomi, Magaraggia 2017; Panarese, 2014; Coltrane, Messineo 2000).

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[5] Important references are the Istanbul Convention and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995.

As a narrative that has inherited a long human history of stories about gender and violence (Tomaselli, Porter 1989) rape is often used as a device of voyeurism, included in stereotypic narratives that tend to reproduce rape myths,

secondary victimization and aesthetization of violence (see *inter alia* Hogan 2021; Kahlor, Eastin 2011; Reynolds, Musso 2019).

Although we must never forget the substantial difference that separates the sphere of fiction from that of reality, it should be remembered that the phenomena of aestheticization of violence on the fictional level play an important role in the recoding of real phenomena. To aestheticize also means "to make admissible, and even delightful, pleasant that which repels us" (Maldonado 2015, p. 25). In essence, the transfiguration of violence from the factual to the imaginary level, and its aestheticizing spectacularization, implies, among other things, a legitimization of what, according to the social norms of everyday life, is object of condemnation or rejection (ibidem).

This use of rape reinforces distorted and denigrating ideas about women which are present and widespread in the minds of people through the social imaginary. In following Projansky, "because representations of rape appear indiscriminately in nearly all genres, show types, and media" (2001, p. 17), it is necessary to adopt a transtextual critical perspective and, above all, to

> examine the ubiquitous nature of rape in the context of a 'media culture' in which media are interconnected through marketing, transnational conglomerate ownership, and diverse localized consumption and production practices; and in which media provide a cumulative set of discourses that saturate the cultural landscape and compete for spectators' attention (ibidem).[6]

As we know, the use and abuse of women's bodies in televised narratives has a long history, but some things are changing in recent years, especially in light of a new increasing global awareness around VAW as promoted by global social movements, like #MeToo. Notably, for sexual harassment and assault, #MeToo

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[6] In our case, in order to identify and discuss these trends in the representation of sexual violence in televisual storytelling, we will focus only on dramas, including medical and crime genres, with a few exceptions (like occasional women-centered comedies). Our discussion here is exclusively focused upon English language television available in the United States and Italy.

has recently shifted attitudes of important actors and conditions for television broadcast, resulting in a visible change in how sexual assault is portrayed in at least a few recent programs.

Whether the changes in the televisual representation of sexual violence are connected to social challenges and the new #MeToo *Zeitgeist*; or rather, to a complicated intertwining of productive, economic, and political processes, is a sociological question we dig into later. Our aim is, in fact, to analyze and understand how the televisual language about VAW has changed and how narratives and portrayals of rape are transforming in the new mediascape, which is characterized by media digitalization and globalization.

To explore these questions, we first discuss both the structural characteristics of television and the changes in the mediated landscape of the last few decades.

2. The Evolution of the Mediascape: new television and serialization

What makes television a unique actor in the production of the imaginary are certainly its properties of planned flow, its ability to produce cultural hegemony and generate audiences (Andrews 2017; Hall 1977; Fiske 1992; Williams 2014). The way in which television exercises these prerogatives has changed radically over time.

First of all, since the 1980s, in the period in which the market is no longer just "one of the main institutions of social life, but the only institution of reference and fully legitimized, a paradigm to which even the state and other public institutions tend to conform" (Ortoleva 2008, p. 53). In this phase, the information industry establishes as the most rapidly growing tech sector, and the media and the market constitute the indissoluble binomial on which the metabolism of the popular imaginary is based. In this period, with the outburst of commercial television, communicative strategies, content and visual language of TV programs change radically and television has been strengthening its competitive elements aimed at spectacularization and entertainment (Eco 1983; Prattichizzo, Gentile 2016; Ortoleva 2008).

The dissemination of images that explicitly depict scenes of sexual violence has increased dramatically during this period (Cuklanz 2000; Projansky 2001). This increase is at least partly related to the triumph of commercial networks and also to what has been called the "pornographic turn of the West" (Ortoleva 2008). This is a turn which marked, from the 1970s onwards – after having modified the press, magazine and film production of images of the female body – the pornographic reconversion of most media content, including television (especially in the private TV sector), to finally invade online environments.

Although the debate on the meaning of pornography and its relationship to VAW is very heated – and we cannot discuss it here (cfr. *inter alia* Paasonen et al. 2007) – it is nevertheless useful to note that the often sexist and denigrating content that such images imply for women is part of a broader phenomenon that crosses all areas of communication, language and representations, which is known as pornographication (or pornification). The term refers to the way in which the mainstreaming of pornography has become a widely recognized cultural trend, that tends to integrate pornographic logic, resulting in the hyper-sexualization, objectification, and commodification especially of the female body (see among others Boyle 2018; Magaraggia 2017; Paasonen et al. 2020; Tyler, Quek 2016). In this context, as Rosalind Gill points out, "the media (...) are paradoxically perhaps both the biggest source of "sexualized" representations, as well as the primary space where debates about "sexualization" are aired" (2009, p. 140).

In addition, more recently, the spread of the Internet and digital media reconfigured the entire mediascape. This has further changed the terms of production, distribution, and use of television products. Thanks also to phenomena such as convergence, remediation and serialization, media production is increasingly integrated, widespread and globalized.

TV series nowadays are the must-do/must-go TV products. With their complex structure they are able to address aspects of social reality which it was not possible to deal with before (Mittell 2015). They reflect and express the complexity and fluidity of social reality, and at the same time the integration of marketing logics in television production, remediation (Bolter, Grusin 1999) and convergence, which implies "the flow of content across multiple media platforms,

the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (Jenkins 2006, p. 2).

While the current transformations of the mediascape seem to lead to a marginalization of TV – compared to other more horizontal forms of media communication (social networks, youtubers, influencers, etc.) –, through online platforms and thanks to serialization, television continues to be part of our daily routines, converging with other media (Jenkins 2006; Scolari 2009). Its new position, implies increasing daily participation, both sensory and emotional, which takes on the characteristics of interactivity and globality (Jenkins 2006). This creates a new type of experience and a new relationship between text and viewers, based on participation and co-creation, as summarized by the concepts of post-viewership, and prosumerism (Beer, Burrows 2007; Ritzer, Jurgenson 2010; Zwick et al. 2008; Tirino 2020).

In this transition, it is not only the narrative complexity and the episodic structure that are extended to most of the television show schedule, but the episodic format becomes the televised genre *par excellence*. It can, in fact, integrate innovations with tradition, creative logics with standardized elements, thus improving the peculiar logic of cultural industry (Morin 1962; Stazio 2007). And, above all, it allows, through the use of analytics, to identify audiences' profiles and to create products that satisfy their expectations and address their anxieties (Brancato 2011).

Thanks to all these transformations, television persists as an integral part of socialization rituals, social recognition, belonging, and cultural conventions that develop around specific issues even at the global level (Lobato 2018), including violence against women.

Already in traditional TV, serial narratives were amplifying the *flow* effects, providing continuity and extension to storylines and engaging the daily life flow, pacing it according to their own timing. In fact, TV series were able to schedule the time of uptake, according to the routines marked by other social institutions - work, family, school, etc. In contemporary television, especially in SVOD, the uptake of TV series on demand is not associated anymore to such routines. TV

series are, in fact, available at different times and in different combinations, providing individualized audience experiences, based on a plurality of screens and freed from spatiotemporal constraints (Jenner 2018; Tirino, Tramontana, 2018).

Moreover, in times like ours, in which traditional socialization agencies are in crisis – especially family and school –, daily life organized structures and timing tend to fall apart. In this context, in which existential rhythms are individualized and divided, the uptake of TV series occurs in every crevice of life, producing what we can define as a *new simulacral rituality*. This tend to absorb viewers' time and attention in a way never experienced before (Stiegler 2014; Citton 2014; Campo 2020), and to substitute the loss of traditional rhythms with those of mediated consumption of images and contents. In this way the flow of televisual content, converging with other mediated and remediated experiences, tends to permeate and also substitute life experiences with its imaginary and real consequences (Baudrillard 1994; Boccia Artieri 2004; Musso 2019a).

We could therefore argue that, just like television violence in general, VAW and rape enter our daily lives intertwined with domestic practices – and it does so in a more widespread, subtle and embodied way.

For all of these reasons, it is particularly important to capture the development of televised representations of VAW, related to the more influent phenomena of social change that are occurring in recent decades.

3. A brief history of rape in TV dramas[7]

As Cuklanz stated, "the subject of rape provides a unique and important opportunity for the study of relationships between television programming and social change" (2000, p. 2). Even if solely focused on prime-time television, Cuklanz's study proved the importance of analyzing "how television negotiates positions on difficult and prominent issues and can offer evidence as to how fully or marginally the ideas of rape reformers have been accepted in the mainstream" (ibidem).

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[7] This paragraph is a synthetic rehash of a larger contribution by R. Reynolds and Dacia Pajè to this research.

Obviously, television writing and shows are reductive phenomena, that present a quick and highly formulaic treatment of characters and plot. This almost always reduces narratives, character development, and filmic style around sexual violence to accepted general ideas about rape, abuse, victims, and perpetrators that are prevalent in the social imaginary of contemporary viewers. Thus, TV dramas tend to strongly reinforce popular notions of what is rape. Historically, this is also easy to trace, where, for example, up until the 1980s, "romantic rape" was received by audiences as a normative kind of sexual encounter and, at times, also emblematic of great love (see Dutta 1999), until evolving feminist ideas about rape started to take over the social imaginary.

This cycle of taking up certain myths and reproducing them as central to their times serves as a good barometer for understanding popular ideas of sex, power, and violence. The short timeline below explains some of these changes in the last 50 years.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, crime and police dramas especially were employing the so-called basic plot, based on the socio-cultural constructs of "real rape" and "ideal victim" (i.e., a white, middle class, young, and vulnerable woman attacked by an unknown, criminally deviant man). In the basic plot, victims of sexual violence are usually presented as 'voiceless' and traumatized flat characters, without any real psychological introspection. In this narrative, rape propels the heroic efforts of the star of the show, a righteous male detective in the pursuit of justice (Cuklanz 2000).

In the 1990s, influenced by a post-feminist backlash that designated televisual representations of sexual violence to be harmful and ineffectual, televised narratives shifted to focus on the life of characters after their rape. This is when rape becomes a tool to develop characters in a longer arc; to quote Leigh Alexander, "it seems that when you want to make a woman into a hero, you hurt her first. When you want to make a man into a hero, you hurt … also a woman first" (Phillips 2016, p. 76). The new narrative plot is now characterized by a *conudrum of sexual violence* (Paje' 2020*)* which causes a two-way causality: rape is either the consequence/punishment for the *status quo* (it becomes a warning

against independence) or the cause for it; in this latter instance, women can either go through a feminist transformation where, during plot developments, they will turn into survivors (Projansky 2001), or rape will turn them into cold, mean, and masculine characters.

From the early 2000s until around 2017 (when the #MeToo movement took off), the narrative remains stuck in the post-feminist conundrum, but the trends shift to even more careful representations centered on victims and their post-trauma, while offering a more explicit critique of the system of gendered relationships. Nonetheless, previous narrative constructions are still present and intersect with contemporary ideologies around sexual violence.

During this period, two main frameworks can still be observed. The first is the *male gaze,* which takes the form of voyeurism through the sexualization of rape and objectification of victim's bodies. Examples of this frame appear frequently in the first twelve seasons of *Law & Order: SVU* (NBC, 1999-2011), in the first two seasons of *True Detective* (HBO, Seasons 1 and 2, 2014-2015), and often in *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005-2020), where sexual violence scenes are extremely sexualized and turned into deviant fantasies in service of psychological investigations of personality traits.

The second framework is that of the *tough woman,* where rape is used as an empowering and humanizing tool for victims who come into their own. For example, in the TV series *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), the rape narrative is used retroactively to make the hateful character of First Lady Millie more palatable to the audience. Overall, the *tough woman* framework is just another version of the life-after-rape narrative, in which the focus is on victims' empowering transformation, whereas their emotional distress and recovery are not relevant nor discussed.

More recently, as the #MeToo movement became popular and influential in Hollywood and above, television production started offering more nuanced representations, abandoning the victim-defining function that had been attributed to rape until then. Among the most successful productions, there are *Law & Order: SVU* (NBC, 2012 - ongoing), *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019), and *Broadchurch* (ITV, Season 3, 2017), with their explicit critique of the failures of

the criminal legal system when it comes to investigating and prosecuting sex crimes. In particular, *Unbelievable* may be defined as the right series at the right time: it has been considered by some as "the first TV crime procedural that has thoroughly internalized [the #MeToo] reckoning" (Berman 2019).

SVU and *Unbelievable*'s storylines provide a complex and deep depiction of women's experience of sexual violence and of criminal justice system issues. *SVU*, with its episodic structure, often shifts the focus on a criminal legal system that *could* provide justice, but silencing or developing victims in a superficial way (Hogan 2021). Nonetheless, both TV series offer detailed representations of sexual assault, flaws within the criminal justice system, the traumatic experience of undertaking a rape kit, and the epidemic rape kit backlog in the USA (Hust et al. 2015; Magestro 2015; Cuklanz, Moorti 2017; Hogan 2021).

After decades of white middle class women being the victim in rape narratives, intersectional representations start also appearing on the small screen in the late 2010s. *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-2019) deals with male rape, and *I May Destroy You* (HBO, 2020) centers on the life and post-rape trauma experience of a Black woman in London. The TV series aim, in fact, at reclaiming the unpleasant and terribly fraught path a survivor has to go through, giving up all the heroic embellishments typical of the 'ideal victim'.

Nonetheless, several pre-intersectional, white middle class frameworks still find their way in some recent portrayals. This is the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* (HULU, 2017 – ongoing), focusing on a white, appealing woman who fights for her own survival/justice, forgetting the bigger cause of fighting the dystopic patriarchal system which rules US society. Similarly, the *male gaze* still makes its appearance in important productions like *Mindhunter* (Netflix, 2017-2019) and *You* (Lifetime, 2018), with storylines focused exclusively on the psychological traits of the "charming serial killer".

The development and diffusion of on-demand and streaming video services, made TV series even more available and influent worldwide. Considering just the US context, SVOD services now account for 25% of total usage of TV (Nielsen

2020), while the largest growth market in streaming video subscriptions for Netflix, the leading firm, is in the Asia-Pacific region (Frater 2021).

One of the industry trends is to adopt narratives that amplify sexual violence to hook viewers and get them to return to the TV series. Streaming video platforms are also changing content, amplifying cliffhangers and extreme visual and narrative use of violence, in order to encourage consumers to engage in binge watching so to increase subscriptions and renewals patterns (Lobato 2018).

Content made explicitly for cable TV and SVOD, with no intention of ever appearing on traditional broadcast channels, has far more leeway in graphic portrayals of sexual violence. In fact, they are not submitted to the stricter regime which regulates the representation of violence on traditional TV, but only to business policy and strategy. Firms like Netflix and HBO developed their brands around the creation of highly explicit, "realistic" and gritty series and movies, which have drawn audiences' attention to the point of making them fans who closely watch, discuss, and promote television content (Steiner 2017).

Television shows on cable are branded in ways that serve to brand the entire channel and thus gain notoriety that sells more subscriptions. HBO, for example, has been a forerunner of "edgy" and highbrow television that deals in a seemingly realistic way with many of the life and death dramatic elements of human life, including the presence of sexual violence (DeFino 2014). This is an important element in much of the most popular series globally. For example, a renowned episode of HBO's show *The Sopranos* (s3, ep4), featuring a "frank" portrayal of a stranger rape, was awarded an Emmy and generated public attention and debate. In more recent shows, as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-2019), and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–), rape scenes are often graphically and voyeuristically presented, as part of the essential or central issues within the show (see Ferreday 2015; McCollum, Monteverde 2018).

Particularly, for fantasy and historical fiction genres, the setting of sexual violence as a mythical thing of the past – or a feature of dystopic futures – is extremely relevant so to make its hyperviolence feel more distant from a society in which would otherwise be unendurable (Ferreday 2015).

In order to understand how images and narratives of sexual violence come across specifically as a function of streaming video, it is important to understand how industry's means for creating and retaining subscribers/consumers/audiences is related to the concept of flow.

Viewer's habits are especially conditioned using data arranged through machine learning and algorithmic analysis. Essentially, the platform searches for patterns of habits and tastes so to provide compelling content, with the final goal of retaining subscribers. These data, enriched by those made available by other sources like social media, are also used to make content production decisions. Discussions on social media platform are systematically analyzed in order to collect detailed data about people's cultural preferences, imaginaries and collective dynamics of attention (Ciampaglia et al. 2015).

Within Netflix's own subscriber data, the company carefully constructs personal menus designed to entice viewers to log onto shows and continue to watch them and recommend them to others. The algorithms mix this personal viewing behavior with data on taste cultures – classifying people as typical audience members for certain kinds of TV and movies, starring, written and directed by particular people – in order to make decisions about whether to contract a new production (Markman 2019).

From viewers' perspective, the outcome of these processes is a personalized flow of content, different for every user (McKelvey, Hunt 2019), but experienced similarly and socially, even if in different moments.

Thus, cultural change, like the increased national and international interest in sexual harassment and assault, is also linked to these socio-technical systems which both reinforce and try to anticipate audiences' behavior and ideas, proposing and producing meaningful, groundbreaking and up to date contents. These, of course, have to address ideologically dominant and affectively salient topics. Hence, we can read in these terms Netflix's and HBO's attention, among others, towards VAW and rape.

Lastly, it has to be noted once again that, the same companies that led the changes in TV narratives and representations of sexual violence, still continue to

produce shows that embody traditional rape myths and, moreover, spectacularize suffering and violence.

A few conclusions

As we have seen, during the last 40 years, both the narratives and criteria that guide the choices in television production about VAW have changed, at least in part. More generally, the framing and characters (male and female) that are represented in television series changed too.

In the series that we have analyzed, over time, we have moved from a representation of rape based on an episodic and pathological frame – in which the "real rape" is acted by deviant or disturbed male figures on "real victims", defenseless and insignificant – to the double frame of eroticized violence and/or victim empowerment (Berns 2004), which entrusts the role of savior to the male detective and leaves to the victim the responsibility of his own redemption. To arrive, finally, to the most recent frame, characterized by a tendency to deconstruct rape myths and to attribute a new agency to the victim and to the female figures (including victim's friends, female detectives, etc.).

In particular, in the most significant series of this last strand (*True Detective*, *The Fall*, *Unbelievable*, etc.), not only the female point of view on rape is considered, but a certain complexity is restored to the events related to sexual violence, sometimes highlighting both the continuum typical of VAW (Kelly 1988), and its intersectionality and the link with precise models of masculinity.

These contents certainly represent an unprecedented perspective, and may be a turning point. Whatever weight they have in the imaginary now and in the future, we can meanwhile ask ourselves the reasons for this change.

Can we assume that the presence of a greater number of women in the media[8], together with the ideal and political force of social movements as #Metoo or Ni Una Menos etc., played a decisive role in this change? Should we believe

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[8] Even though significant changes have occurred, media and information industries are still a long way from gender equality. The International Women's Media Foundation found women in 26% of the governing and 27% of the top management jobs (2011, p. 9). According to Reuters Institute too (Newman et al. 2020), as of last year, women held only 23% of top editor roles, while globally 40% of journalists are female. Even in gender-equal Europe, women in decision-making positions are 30% in media industries (Ross 2014) and just 20% of directors in the audiovisual fiction sector are female (Jiménez Pumares 2021). So, as pointed out by

that the role of the *male gaze* in the creation of female characters and roles has changed (Mulvey 1975; Oliver 2017)? Or that the ethical sensibilities and moral responsibility of producers in choosing gender stereotypes has been modified (Panarese 2014)? Or should we believe that it is rather the production and market mechanisms, that have achieved this result? In this case it would be the adaptation of media products to the tastes of a certain segment of the paying, cultured and feminist public that has shifted the political-editorial line of some show runners and platforms towards the creation of products closer to the taste, sensitivity and agency of women.

In fact, this epochal change in the representation of rape has occurred almost simultaneously in time and culture with the extraordinary spread of the aspirations of the #Metoo movement and, more generally on the wave of an unprecedented diffusion of what is defined popular feminism (Kornfield, Jones 2021). But it also occurred in conjunction with the new way in which TV produces and distributes its products and in which these are consumed. We have seen how, since the 1980s, the dynamics of production and consumption of media products have changed, and competition between broadcasters has been exacerbated, producing a more pronounced tendency towards the spectacularization of violence and pornification.

More recently, digitization, the massive use of analitycs, and serialization, have amplified the role of large players on the global market, such as HBO and Netflix, changing the rules of the game in the production of characters and narratives, including those related to VAW. Netflix, in particular, has clearly integrated among the aims of its mission the social inclusion of marginal categories, especially women, distinguishing itself for its particular attention to issues related to diversity and for its tendency to be politically correct.[9]

Griglié and Romeo (2021, p. 124) there's no correlation between macro-level gender equality measures, as the Gender Equality Index, and the presence of women in decision-making and top management positions.

[9] "Netflix is recognized for its diverse programing. Diversity in creating, casting, and programming is an intentional priority not just a fashionable trend. (...) Although Hollywood popular culture still tends to elevate traditional voices that represent the majority culture, Netflix provides a digital platform where marginalized people are seen, heard, and are active participants, as actors and of the creative process, as producers, directors, and/or writers" (Fain 2019, p. 136).

In this context, it is difficult to say whether the feminist and post-feminist contents of the new television series are the testimony or the symptom of a radical upheaval in the media imaginary relating to violence against women and rape, given also the contradictory nature of some representations and the co-existence of such contents with other traditional representations, that are still sexist, misogynistic and full of prejudices.

The two hypothesis that can be easier formulated – one more 'romantic', centered on social, cultural and political changes – and the second one, more 'pragmatic', centered on the market logic – seem not sufficient to contain the complexity of the phenomena underway, and they need to be better explored. Especially in light of the fact that feminism, in recent decades, has not only become a popular phenomenon but has found itself at the center of a sort of neo-liberal editing. That is, like all popular phenomena, it has been drawn into the logic of marketing, which is able to engulf, redefining them, even the subversive content coming from social movements and the imaginary. Feminism was largely absorbed in the two trends of post-feminism[10] and commodity feminism,[11] becoming the object of advertising, fashion and consumption.

At this point of our reflection, we believe that an effort to understand the complexity of these phenomena sets the need for an in-depth study and, plausibly, an accurate integration of the two hypotheses in a bigger picture which should combine the market logic, the social and political change and the technological aspects that shape social change in our time.

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[10] Post-feminism is defined by Gill in terms of a "gendered neoliberal sensibility," constitutively "Western and white-centered," hinged around "individualism, choice and agency," and in which women's bodies are conceived of as a tool and a source of power, over which to exercise continuous (self-)surveillance, discipline and reshaping" (Gill 2017, p. 616).

[11] Commodity feminism is a long-standing phenomenon (Goldman et al. 1991). The concept was coined "to describe the harnessing of feminist messages to consumer products associated to the aesthetic depoliticization of feminism" (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer 2017, p. 885).

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