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**Web Series as an Heterotopic Space.  
An Analysis about Black Mirror and the  
Italian Web Series Lost in Google**

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## **Web Series as an Heterotopic Space. An Analysis about Black Mirror and the Italian Web Series Lost in Google**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is meant to analyze some web series such as *Black Mirror*, by *Charlie Brooker* (2011/2013) and the Italian *Lost in Google*, by *The Jackal* (2013), through a re-reading of the concepts of utopia and heterotopia by Foucault (1984). Is it possible to define web as an heterotopic space? If web series are products of an heterotopic space, which narrative relationship is built between reality and imagination? *Black Mirror* is based on the idea of "screen" as "window" (Sobchack 1992): window through which it's possible to explore a reality empowered by the media stationing capability. In fact *Black Mirror* suggests that all technological means, from mobile phones to tablets, are "black mirrors" in which every aspect of the human nature realizes to the paradox. *Black Mirror* also suggests an horizon where distance between ego and the world outside does not exist anymore just because all filters (media, windows, etc.) become media-worlds. The narrative structure of the serial product is set on a plane where symbolic "pours" in imaginary and reality becomes an "effect" given by this pouring. Web series would be a product of the negotiation process between medium, identity and identification. A process that, on one hand, is based on the nature of "capitalism" itself, empowering, through the web, the industrial nature of the "series product". On the other hand, web series, exactly because they are built for the web, sacrifice their seriality character to a shared writing where imaginaries are floating and continuously rewritten, as in *Lost in Google*.

### **Key Words:**

### **Contact Information of Corresponding author:**

This paper is meant to analyze some web productions seen related to the heterotopias theory by Foucault. Can a media product be defined as an “other space”? More precisely, can a product which is spread over the web convey the “difference” among the spaces where we live? Which characteristics must an online spread media product have to be connoted as an heteropic space?

To understand how a webserie can be defined as an “other space” (heterotopia), it must be clear how production, distribution and fruition's practices are related to the webserie's contents. The aim of this short article is to figure out the webserie characteristics and to understand if its contents configuration is essential to separate itself from other serial products able to be found online and offline. From 90's to nowadays, the production, the distribution and the fruition's scenarios of the serial product are deeply changed.

Series, once prerogative of television, gradually moved to web.

Changing the medium, consequently has changed even the message, or rather the synthesis between form and content in the serial product: what's created on and for the web, known as webserie, is completely different from a serial product created for television.

Contaminations between television and web led some theorists to talk about “connected television” or rather about a media environment connected to another media environment, which products are “re-mediated” through the passage from one media to another.

At the core of this process, there is the serial product, just because the television seriality is one of the phenomena where the fans' attention is concentrated the most<sup>1</sup>.

The fandom phenomenon, inserted into fruition practices, allowed the rise of the webseries product. The first webserie is American: it's “The Spot” created in 1995 by Scott Zackarin, realized when web just led out and scripted with the audience chat comments and e-mails.

This serie comes before the video sharing websites and activates an exchange with the audience that discloses some web 2.0 practices. From “The Spot” on, the webserie evolution is pretty fast in the USA (otherwise in Italy webseries spread all over the web in 2009).

According to Sergio Brancato<sup>2</sup>, three are the evolution factors: first factor is related to digital devices technology (from information languages optimizations to HD camera introductions); the second factor is related to the cultural nature or better the most grown proficiency of the digital audience that allows viewers to immediately understand what's experimental and what requires the use of new formats and narrative tools, moreover the sharing and participation

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<sup>1</sup>About this issue: Jenkins H. (1992). *Textual Poachers. Television fans and participatory culture*. NY: Routledge; Baym N. (2000). *Tune in, long on. Soaps, fandom and on line community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

<sup>2</sup>Brancato S. (2013), *Post-serialità. La fiction oltre i media di massa*, in Buonanno M. (edited by) (2013). *Tempo di fiction. Il racconto televisivo in divenire*. Napoli: Liguori.

practices in the construction process of the serial products cause the consumption rising; the third factor is related to production.

The global economical crisis has indeed affected the tv series production's costs and web has offered the possibility to considerably reduce these costs and to look for funds for the most interesting projects. Dylan Dog, Vittima degli eventi, a project launched in 2013 by Luca Vecchi (The Pills webserie's director), by Claudio di Biagio (Freaks producer) and by the group The Jackal (creators of Lost in Google) is a case study: this project is based on crowd funding, or better on the possibility that the audience can pay for the movie production.

There's the need to make the audience interact with whom is producing and distributing, in a logic of loyalty but also of participation.

In Lost in Google (The Jackal) every episode is written and created on the base of the audience suggestions. The funny thing is that, these suggestions, are included in the story as a cartoon bubble while the suggestion itself is happening on the screen.

Who's watching the episode can read this suggestion, which was written in the comments section below the previous episode, and can watch how they realize it in the story.

It's not just a narrative tool or a language syncretism from different medias, but an evolutive application of the trans-media storytelling<sup>1</sup>.

In Lost in Google, the main character Simone is swallowed inside Google after typing "Google" in the Google bar. His friends Proxy and Ciro try to find him while the audience suggest them what to do.

An example:

Ciro: (talking to Proxy while she's eating a banana): Why are you eating a banana?

Proxy: Because somebody suggest me to do it, in the comments section.

Ciro: Which comments?

Proxy: The one you can see below the video. We do what they ask us to do.

Obviously, keeping an eye to the comments selection, has forced the creators of Lost in Google to expand the creation times between episodes (three or four months each episode).

The usual pace of the serial product is put aside for the time-shifting<sup>2</sup> which fit perfectly with the web use, changing the rhythms of the media consumption linked to the television product.

To sum up, which are the characteristics that a serial product must have to be defined a webseries?

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<sup>1</sup>Jenkins H. (2008). *Transmedia storytelling. Moving Characters from books to films to videogames can make them stronger and more compelling*. In: <http://www.technologyreview.com/biotech/13052>.

<sup>2</sup>For *timeshifting* is intended the use of the time for the show fruition. Time which is no more bond to the broadcast but it's bond to the users choices. About this point Gillian J. (2011). *Television and New Media*. New York: Routledge.

We define a webserie as a web-native serial product divided in webisodes, broadcasted following the time-shifting and place-shifting<sup>1</sup> logics, whose content is generated by users and producers in a transmedia storytelling logic and with different media languages, all presenting in a syncretic way, helping to eliminate the fourth wall<sup>2</sup>.

This definition completes, according to me, the webserie definition written by IAWTV: A “web series” is defined as a series of two or more episodes held together by the same title, trade name or mark, or identifying personality common to all the episodes that initially aired and was distributed anywhere in the world via the Internet using website technology<sup>3</sup>.

All these elements help to define webserie as a place where it's possible to express user choices and participation. This form of expression reaches up its top through the webseries content structuration that, not by chance, proposes an alternative view of reality.

About that, it can be interesting to have a look at webseries following the heterotopia theory by Foucault, from the point of view of the content study, to understand if there's a recurring idea in how webseries are made.

In Heterotopia<sup>4</sup>, Michael Foucault analyzes the “other spaces” matter.

In other words Foucault starts with a prerequisite: alterity is related more to Time than to Space.

Therefore location, extension and dislocation are defined as space comprehension structures but also as elements able to set up his own configuration.

Foucault defines heterotopias as “different spaces [...], other spaces, a sort of objection at the same time mythical and real of the space where we live.” (2010, p.13). He asserts that heterotopia has an imaginary concentration, a complex of ghost-elements that make it an hybrid space where there are real and fantasy elements at the same time.

This definition gives the idea that media are heterotopic spaces, because of their ability to transmit representation forms and micro and macro (media) stories between people.

These representations and stories integrate reality and sometimes they offer a mythical alternative.

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<sup>1</sup>Ivi, p. 135

<sup>2</sup>The idea that there's a sort of wall between spectator and the artwork was created by Diderot in the work *De la poésie dramatique (1758)*. Bertold Brecht talk about its breaking, referring to the greek theater and related to the theatrical realism birth.

<sup>3</sup>Can be found at: <http://www.iawtv.org/rules-and-eligibility-for-the-2014-iawtv-awards/>

<sup>4</sup>Foucault has produced lot of works where he talks about the space and the heterotopia matter. We can find them in Foucault M., *Dits et écrits*, edited by Daniel Defert and Françoise Ewald, Gallimard, Paris, 1994 (vol. I, vol. II, vol. IV). Some of these texts have their contents, in some more recent edition, systemitized. For this paper, two text in particular were chosen:

- Foucault M. *Spazi altri. I luoghi delle eterotopie*, edited by Sergio Vaccaro, Mimesis, Milano, 2002;

- Foucault M., *Eterotopia*, edited by S. Vaccaro, T. Villani e P. Tripodi, Mimesis, Milano 2010.



Let's transfer to the web the same principle that Foucault uses for heterotopias to better understand the relationship between heterotopic space and webserie.

First principle: there's no world culture that doesn't create heterotopias.

This principle is the start to understand the heterotopia virtual nature, disregards from being technically virtual.

A space can be heterotopic if a series of connotations are assigned to it and these connotations make it "other" when related to everyday life, even if it's absorbed by everyday experience.

The heterotopic space exists and it's defined by precise boundaries.

This statement is true for the web, as it can be declared for sacred places, reserved or forbidden. Web has a defined place in people's everyday life and the boundaries of its relational various spaces have rules and behavior regulations defined by context (netiquette, privacy rules, various social networks rituals, etc.)

Second principle: every heterotopia has a precise function inside society, developed on the basis of synchrony with its own culture and it is, due to this synchrony, changeable.

New technologies are an example: the cellphone, born to be a mobile device to communicate, becomes smartphone and enables other interactions (visual, auditive, vocals, etc.).

A smartphone can be heterotopic if we think about media as heterotopic spaces or better as alternative spaces, or other spaces, opposite to everyday spaces, full of imaginaries and imaginations.

This principle works the same for the web. Born with specific purpose (as a military organ) and then always recreated by the consumption practices, till it gets an hybrid configuration.

Third principle: heterotopia can juxtapose, in a real place, different places and different spaces, incompatibles between them. Foucault on this point is very clear and he reports some movie and theater examples. The right connection to do is with the web, which integrates perfectly the online and offline relationships, till they become complementary. Social networks are the full realization of the third principle of heterotopia, because they are hybrid spaces, not completely public and not completely private, living in an unique place and perfectly synchronous (not without contradictions).

Fourth principle: heterotopias are bond to time. They work when they set up an absolute break with traditional time, an effect that Foucault called heterochrony. On this point Foucault discerned different heterochronies: some are bond to practices of infinite time accumulation (for i.e. museum) and some are bond to chronical and recurring practices based on ritual (fairs, tourism, resort, etc.).

Without any doubt web is able to achieve both operations. As an other space, it sets up relationships based on infinite time accumulation (what's on web stay on web...) as in profiles, channels, diaries, etc.

As a place of relationships and practices is, at the same time, object of chironal rituals. Like extemporary hangouts use for specific purpose, such as Skype or WhatsApp.

Fifth principle: heterotopias always suppose an opening and a closure system that isolates them and at the same time make them impenetrable.

There are places where sometimes you can enter and sometimes you need specific authorizations and allowances. About this point, Foucault couldn't know that he described the web so properly. Hybridization between public and private spaces, separation between places where you're allowed to enter and where you're allowed only if you have some specific authorizations are more or less the password, login, authentication and registration system asked to people to enter to networks and platforms. Web integrates free-entrance with the authentication entrance in a native way.

Sixth and last principle: heterotopias develop a function with the surrounding environment. These are Foucault words:

They have the task to create an illusory space that indicates how even more illusory is every real space [...]Or, instead, they creates an other space, a real space, so perfect, so accurate, so well arranged that makes seem our as chaotic, messy and not so well arranged<sup>1</sup>.

Here it seems clear that the application of the last principle describes, on one hand, the configuration of the virtual spaces on the web as illusory places (Second Life is an example) and, on the other hand, describes chat rooms and forums where the structure of the conversation spaces can be replaced or integrated with the offline spaces.

Let's go back to the webserie: Lost in Google breaks the fourth wall and talks with its audience, listens to their concern and is built with those contributions from the scriptwriters and from the watchers.

Webseries become a place where imaginaries gathers in the audience, but even in the user imagination, because he asks to see on screen what he imagines and suggests, he dreams to be a real ghost actor in the webisode, his comment becomes a real role.

These six principles of the heterotopia are set up as an effect given by the medial context (the web) and they are preparatory to convey alternative actions in relation to the natural unfolding of the story, of the main tale.

What's the point of eating a banana while searching for Simone? The action requested by the spectator/scriptwriter is an exercise of his becoming "other". This expression of alterity is limitless (the only limit is to stay in the webisode) and then expresses itself till the most extreme act: suggesting the main character death.

Since the webserie space is an effect of heterotopia, Simone, the main character, dies and then resurrects because of comments. This is acceptable because of the implicit recognition of the webserie as a place of expressive possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup>Foucault M. (2002), *Spazi altri. I luoghi delle eterotopie*, edited by Sergio Vaccaro, Milano, Mimesis, p. 31.

Lost in Google is then a perfect example of webserie according to the definition we have provided.

The question is: if a serie is not webnative, can be an heterotopic space?

This part of this analysis is meant to understand the idea that the serie can be an heterotopic space even if it's not webnative.

Clearly the difference between serie and webserie is significant for the fruition and interaction practices related to the content, but not for imaginaries that seem to coincide, to mix, to refer one to other continually.

An example is *Black Mirror* (by Charlie Brooker, 2011- Channel Four):

*Black mirror* is based on the idea of screen as window<sup>1</sup> (Sobchack 1992): window through which it's possible to explore a reality empowered by the media stationing capability. In fact *Black Mirror* suggests that all technological means, from mobile phones to tablets, are black mirrors in which every aspect of the human nature realizes itself to the paradox. *Black Mirror* also suggests an horizon where distance between ego and the world outside does not exist anymore just because all filters (media, windows, etc.) become media-worlds. The narrative structure of the serial product is set on a plane where symbolic "pours" in imaginary and reality becomes an "effect" given by this pouring.

This serie was broadcasted on the English channel, Channel Four. The peculiarity of this serie is that, even if they have the same elements - title, theme and creator - every episode is directed by a different director who have his own way to frame Brooker's script.

According to Daniela Panosetti<sup>2</sup>, *Black Mirror* has dystopian narrations where media are filters that let the narrations change from de-individualisation representations to those who convey a personalization excess.

In the pilot episode *The National Anthem*, the first Minister has to walk through an ordeal. To save a girl's life, he has to have an intercourse with a sow, live on television. This blackmail, committed by the kidnapper, is broadcasted on youtube and is spread around the country with paradoxical and baffling effects.

After being exposed to the public eye, the Minister can't avoid this exposition or he would risk his assignment, so his act is heroic but even abject<sup>3</sup> at the same time: audience don't want to watch it, but they can't help watching it.

Everyone sees himself reflected in the Prime Minister figure, asking: what would I've done in its stead? Heterotopia becomes here a narration topoi. An other place, a reality mixed with imaginary that reshapes boundaries between me and the other. Here is the third principle or better the juxtaposition of spaces incompatible between

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<sup>1</sup>Sobchack V. (1992). *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup>Panosetti D. (2012). *Black Mirror. Distopie del vedere*. In: *Ocula. Semiotic Eye on Media*, February, can be found at: [http://www.ocula.it/files/PANOSETTIOculaFlux\\_Saggi\\_\[380,080Kb\].pdf](http://www.ocula.it/files/PANOSETTIOculaFlux_Saggi_[380,080Kb].pdf)

<sup>3</sup>The use of terms such *abject* and *abjectness* are used by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva J.(1981) *Poteri dell'orrore. Saggio sull'abiezione*, Milano, Spirali.

them: the public space represented by the Prime Minister, the private space represented by the intercourse consumed in public.

The fifth principle takes place in the second episode 15 Millions of Merits where the citizens of an hypothetical future society must produce “merits” pedaling and nourishing a system based on media. Every day, pedaling, they are forced to watch commercials on television gaining merits. With these merits, it's possible to skip commercials, to decide what to watch and to take part to a talent show which has, as a prize, the possibility to live outside of the production system, without pedaling. Every communication and experiential context is subjected to entrance and exit rules, with specific and controlled permissions. Every system (inner, based on merits, or outer, which promises freedom) is at the same time closed but penetrable with some normed and specific actions.

Every episode of Black Mirror have in common a principle: media are an heterotopic places, other spaces through which is possible to ramify reality in parallel, differentiated, alternatives or even integrated in the living experience paths.

In the episode The Entire History Of You (that ends the first season) every men has an hard disk memory integrated with his body, which has the purpose to record live life. Everyone can see a memory again, share the vision or delete it. Here is the principle of the heterochrony and of the infinite accumulation of time which expresses itself in the subjective memory technologization. Or in Be Right Back where the technology implications are made extreme when, because of a grief, the main character takes part to a project that provides a perfect copy of the dead person programmed with audio-video and textual materials of his life (video, e-mails, photos, phone calls).

Real and unreal, dream and wish live at the same time showing the aberrant and altered effects of this coexistence.

In the end, as cinema was indicated by Foucault as heterotopia, we can affirm that series, because of the characteristics till here highlighted, can be indicated as an heterotopic space. These are two kinds of spaces: the first is an heteropia structured in two communicating levels, one is web (as a diffusion and a fruition context of the serial product) and the other one is the serie itself, which content is characterized by dynamics of the place that spread it.

Lost in Google, as a webserie, corresponds to this description.

The second kind is, instead, a production based on the concept of heterotopia.

Content traces the heterotopic space in which the spectator can project himself. This capacity of the serial story make possible to activate a projective path, where heterotopia expresses itself between a subjective imaginary and collective imaginary filtered by a television screen. Black Mirror corresponds to this description.

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