Reading women's fiction.
Liala's novels between uniqueness and standardization

Leer ficción de mujeres.
Las novelas de Liala entre la singularidad y la normalización[1]

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Abstract. The aim of the paper is to analyse the case of the Italian writer Liala in the light of one specific aspect: the symbolic and crucial role of her work in the changes in Italian women's fiction from the 1950s. Liala's work represents a shift from the traditional narrative, where the role of the author is still crucial, to a writing process directly linked to the social, technological and distribution changes resulting from standardization and serialization in literature.

Keywords: *woman literature; seriality; standardization; cultural industry; middlebrow.*

Resumen. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el caso de la escritora italiana Liala, teniendo en cuenta el papel crucial y simbólico de su trabajo en la transformación de la narrativa de las mujeres italianas a partir de los años cincuenta. El trabajo de Liala representa un cambio de una narrativa tradicional, donde el papel del autor sigue siendo esencial, a un proceso de escritura directamente vinculado a los cambios sociales, tecnológicos y de distribución resultantes de la normalización y la producción en serie de la literatura.

Palabras clave: *literatura femenina; seriación; estandarización; industria cultural; literatura popular.*

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1. Liala's novels

In Italy women's fiction became a separate literary genre only in the 1930s. Although the origins of this genre can be retraced to the 18th century, women's fiction was for a long time contaminated by other elements such as drama, tragic events and murders. The case of Carolina Invernizio, a writer who engaged in a professional relationship with the publisher Salani for whom she wrote 123 novels, is crucial in this context. Ivernizzio's novels are interesting because, although they belonged to the category of women's fiction, they contained elements of the gothic novel and were inspired by them. The publisher Salani also had two specific series dedicated to a female audience: "*La Biblioteca della rosa*" and "*La Biblioteca delle Signorine*", published for the first time in 1912. These series served an educative purpose and intended to offer families, and young ladies in particular, pleasant and honest books selected from the literatures of foreign countries.

The real romantic novel, without the *noir* influences and the element of mystery, and without the educative purpose, established itself as a separate genre in the 1920s and the 1930s with Liala in Italy, Delly in France and Cartland in the UK. In Italy in 1931, Mondadori published the first novel by a writer who would grow to be one of the most famous and beloved authors in Italy: Liala, a pseudonym invented by D'Annunzio for Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti Odescalchi. The title of the novel was *Signorsì* and the first edition sold out in only 20 days. The style of this book, and of the subsequent romantic novels, was conditioned by her personal history. Liala got married to an older official in the Navy when she was still very young, but her new life was soon disturbed when she met an Airforce official who became her lover. The unlucky love was to end, as the official died during a military exercise. Liala started writing the first of 84 books to overcome her grief.

Her personal life permeated the plots of her novels, which were often set in a military context and particularly in a Navy realm; they were populated by passionate and brave male protagonists who embarked on heroic adventures and were famous for their courage in battle.

2. The turning point in women's fiction

The hypothesis of this paper is that Liala's novels represented a literary turning point in women's fiction. The role of her work in the transformation process of women's fiction deserves specific attention. Two trends characterized her work: the first was the central role of the author and the uniqueness of the novel; the second, apparently contradictory trend, was the onset of a process of standardization and serialization in literary work directed to a female audience. These two tendencies coexisted in the same novels.

The writer adopted a specific literary style that gave the text a degree of recognisability. Part of this uniqueness was found in the inspiration for the stories that were based on her private life. Her personal history, the troubled love story and the proximity of the military world provided the inspiration for the plot and setting of several novels. The writer's name, face and history became important defining elements of literary products, and influenced the reader's purchase decisions. On the other hand, Liala's novel saw the start of an efficiency system based on a mechanism of standardization, which would become more prevalent in the 1960s and would really break through in the 1980s (especially with the publisher Harlequin and the Harmony serial). Liala was a precursor of this tendency in women's fiction where the originality of the story lost its importance in favour of a serial production mechanism. After Liala, the publishers started to organize small groups of writers who worked on the production of books. The logic of the media industry dictated that as little time as possible should be spent on the realization of the book. The main reason for this trend was the competition with the other media, whose importance was growing and transforming the market in that period. The stories had to be written quickly with low production costs and had to face the competition of other media with respect to content, presentation and form. With the invention of radio, picture stories, advertising and television, literature started to change. The value of a book as an object decreased: it was no longer something people liked to collect. As a result of this new production method, the structure of the book became more recurrent and repetitive.

Books changed and became more and more similar to a colour magazine. This new process did not only involve the paratextual and typographical elements, but also the literary contents. With the shift of this genre from a middlebrow to a lowbrow level, the general quality of the books decreased. The lowbrow books were not meant to be read a second time or to be passed on to the next generation. They became more similar to simple consumption goods that could be used only once, such as a cartoon. They became an experience that ended exactly in the moment of its enjoyment. This trend was part of the media culture: an experience was consumed and disappeared immediately after use. The serial novel was chosen and used before its contents were considered. It provided the satisfaction of waiting for the next publication and reading pleasure was assured. The reader of murder stories or thrillers buying a novel knew that he would surely find a murder, reconstruction and investigation in the book. This type of novels seemed to invalidate the usual points of reference in literature. From the invention of photography, cinema and radio and until the advent of television, the formation of the language, of the values, of reading, increasingly passed through new textual constellations.

In this type of literary genre, the role and the image of the author changed and lost their central roles, because the reader only bought the brand, the publishing series, a specific type of plot. The book as a product was communicated through its packaging, through the cover and the paratextual elements in general. When the reader entered a bookshop to buy the book, he knew the narrative structure of the book that he would like

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to read. Women's fiction could be defined as middle-brow narrative[2], especially during the first part of the 20th century, when the role of the single author and writer was still central. Between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the genre assumed a more popular character (lowbrow literature) as a result the consolidation of the processes of industrialization and standardization of women's literature.

3. Book and seriality

During the First World War, the reading demand in Europe increased significantly[3]. A new public gained interest in books as a "product". The desire to buy the books went hand in hand with the desire of certain social classes to own new objects/consumer goods. It demonstrates the avidity of a new and emergent social class. The publishers responded to these needs by creating a narrative that could be defined as popular, which was pleasant to read. For this purpose, they used communication strategies, working on the book's paratextual elements, in order to promote the sales and the diffusion of the book.

The distribution channels also changed and books were sold in railway stations, at newsstands, from door to door. The publishing sector became an industry capable of producing wealth and profits. Just as in the industrial process, the production had to be well organized and resources had to be optimized.

Seriality represented a first solution to the need of the industry to optimize the relationship between resources and output. In addition, the patterns of places and characters created by the serials communicated an idea of rituality and resulted in a loyal reading public, proposing narrative schemes already known and trusted by the reader.

Aesthetics, Art history and Cultural Anthropology were all faced with the problem of seriality and reproducibility of products and artistic works. This matter was connected, in particular during the 1960s, with the discussion about the dichotomy between the élite culture and the mass culture, the latter being close to the tastes of the public and employing the techniques of reproducibility and seriality[4].

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[2] The concept of middlebrow was emerged for the first time at the end of the 1920 and referred in particular to the visual arts, but was soon extended to literature. A specific definition is given by Nicolas Humble, who in his essay *The Feminine middlebrow novel from 1920s to 1950s* defined middle-brow literature as a hybrid form that includes many kinds of novel genres, from the country novel to the dynastic sagas, the detective and teenagers' and children's literature.

[3] David Forgacs in *L'industrializzazione della cultura italiana (1889-2000)*, describing the development of the Italian publishing sector, pointed out that at the end of the 19th century, with the rise of urbanization and alphabetization, publishers and booksellers started developing a commercial approach to the market. In an interview held in 1895, the writer Arturo Colautti said that the time in which novels written just for the money were considered a shame was over and that literature was also subjected to the rules of the industry. This process is the result of a large expansion of the reading public during the First World War.

[4] Historically, serialization in the specific field of literature began as early as the 17th century but it reached its zenith in Britain in the 19th century. Throughout the Victorian period, novels in serial parts were published in abundance in newspapers and magazines, by far the most popular form, or in discreet parts issued in installments, usually twenty monthly issues. The greatest novelists of the time, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Thackeray and Joseph Conrad, chose to publish their newest works of fiction in these installments Serial publication enabled middle class readers to purchase novels that would be too expensive for them to purchase as a single edition. The publishing phenomenon sparked a growth not only in the number of people desiring to read, but also in literacy rates.

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In the 1980s, Umberto Eco said that: "*quando l'estetica moderna si è trovata di fronte alle opere prodotte dai mass media, ha negato loro ogni valore artistico, proprio perché esse apparivano ripetitive, costruite secondo un modello sempre uguale, in modo da dare ai propri destinatari ciò che essi volevano e attendevano*" (tr. When modern aesthetics was confronted with the works produced by the mass media, it denied their artistic value, just because they appeared repetitive, always built around the same model, in order to offer their audience what they wanted and expected) (Eco, Umberto1985:126)[5].

4. Culture is a product

These changes in the publishing sector were set in the context of a broader process of social, technological and distribution changes that originated mainly from the industrial and manufacturing world. The main aspects of these changes were the possibility of technical reproducibility, the multiplication of the products, the increase of consumption, the development of the concept of "mass" and the improved diffusion of information. These revolutions did not only influence the traditional market of goods, but, as Walter Benjamin said in *The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*[6], also involved the world of art and culture through the application of the principle of reproducibility in this sector. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the invention of techniques such as photography and cinema, cultural contents started to be reproducible without the need of manual labour. Photography and cinema to reproduce an artistic work deprived art of the concept of uniqueness[7]. Artistic work became easy to reproduce. They learned something from the industry and the world of advertising: it was no longer possible to wait for the public to visit the places conserving the cultural heritage. The public had to be conquered, no longer expected, and culture had to be seen and handled as any other product. In particular, culture learned two important lessons from the new world of production, distribution and communication:

i) how to produce a cultural product in a serial way, and how distribute it in the "market", taking into consideration new consumption and marketing places. The places where culture was traditionally diffused and sold (museums, expositions, library, bookshops) were replaced with or joined by others. The artistic works went out on the streets and entered the places of everyday life;

ii) how to advertise the product using the most advanced advertising techniques.

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[5] "L'innovazione nel seriale" di Umberto Eco in *Sugli Specchi e altri saggi*, Bompiani, Milano 1985, pp. 125-145.

[6] "Benjamin Walter (1986) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in John Hanhardt, ed., Video Culture: A Critical Investigation, Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books.

[7] In this historical context, the First Universal Expositions were organized, which consisted in large expositions featuring exhibits of arts and crafts, scientific discoveries and products of the industry and agriculture, provided by countries from all around the world. The first UE dates back to 1851 in London and the title was "the Great Exhibiton of the Works of Industry of all Nations", with 25 guest countries and 6 million visitors. After London, many UEs were organized in the most famous capitals of the world, including Paris, Vienna and Melbourne.

In the Italian market, Marinetti and Fortunato Depero were key figures in that period, because they effectively removed the boundaries and the rigid distinction between the industrial and advertising world, and the world of culture and art. For Marinetti, advertising meant self-publishing. Exhibition meant narcissism, rhetoric. The rhetoric of velocity involved the speed of communication, of the manifestos, of flyers and ads. Marinetti believed in the importance of effective communication activity aimed at communicating himself and increasing the ability to communicate cultural products. Futurism changed the way culture was represented as a product. The movement paved the path for a process characterized by standardization in artistic and literary production, where advertising played a significant role. In the *Manifesto dell'arte pubblicitaria,* Depero stated: *"L'arte dell'avvenire sarà potentemente pubblicitaria (...) tutta l'arte dei secoli scorsi è improntata a scopo pubblicitario*
"(tr. "the art of the future will be powerful advertising. All the artistic experiences of the past centuries are used for advertising purposes) (Fortunato Depero, *Manifesto dell'arte pubblicitaria,* 1932).

The publishing sector adapted to this dynamic context and became a protagonist in applying the industrial and advertising mechanisms. Particularly women's fiction played an important role in this standardization process and in the application of these new rules and methodologies to the contents.

5. The fixed structure of the women's narrative

Just as the thriller, fantasy and horror, the genre of romantic/women's fiction belonged to the media culture that produced a continuous mix of models, including the narrative one. The media culture also allowed free circulation of the works without the limitations of groups, tradition and culture. In this context, genres in which the difference between the iconic and visual aspect and the textual aspect is less important, such as women's fiction, became prominent. The visual and verbal levels interact, creating new literary typologies. As Michele Rak emphasized in *Rosa, La letteratura del divertimento amoroso* (1999)[8], the spread of romantic fiction was connected with the definition of a subject (the relationship between a man and a woman), of a stable structure (the final union reached following a conflict) and a production mechanism that focused on the interaction between different variants and adaptations to different local markets. This implied a poor and very simple structure of the book's plot. In the romantic novel, the most important part is the path the man and the woman have to follow to overcome the obstacles. i.e. the conflict. There are no doubts about the beginning of the story: the contact, the attraction between the characters, nor about the conclusion of the story: the union and happy end. For the reader, the interesting part is what happens on this path, in the development of

[8] Rak. M ichele(1999) *Rosa. La letteratura del divertimento amoroso*, Roma, Donzelli editore.

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the plot. For example, one of the most often-recurring structures is separation as a result of a social conflict. The differences between the two characters of the story are the elements that have to be overcome in order to reach a happy end.

Women's literature is the product of an industrial activity that employs reading and writing techniques (such as the "non stop": the reader does not have to go back while he or she is reading because he or she did not understand a word or an allusion) in a limited map of the imaginary (the ritual of contact between lovers) on a dominant topic (courting). The reader wants the novel to meet certain requirements: i) to be easily understandable ii) to require little interpretation activity, iii) to be always new, but at the same time always predictable, iv) to refer to familiar scenarios, v) to operate in a situation of intertextuality, referring to new places.

Umberto Eco studied the phenomenon of seriality applied to communication in general and in particular to literature, television and cinema, where the same contents are presented in a different way. In the case of commercial movies, comic strips, dance music and television series, the audience always has the impression to be reading, listening to and seeing something new, but in reality the content is always identical. Umberto Eco distinguished different types of seriality. Particularly useful are the concepts of *ripresa* (recovery) and *serie*(series). The recovery is the continuation of a successful theme. A successful theme is defined and presented in different ways by applying certain stylistic techniques. The series refers more to the narrative structure. There is a fixed situation with a group of main characters surrounded by a few variable secondary characters. The reader believes to be enjoying a new story, but in fact he or she enjoys the recurrence of the narrative structure. Indeed, besides the recurring situation involving the main stable characters, the changing secondary characters give the impression that the story is different from the previous one. Something changes in this recurrent structure, just to give the reader impression that he or she is presented with new content, but in general there is a recurrent structure.

6. Towards a recurrent narrative structure: Lialae

The recurrence of certain elements in Liala's novels and the presence of a stable narrative structure contributesto the creation of horizons of expectations in the mind of the reader. It builds on a frame, a database of narrative experiences that allows the interpretation of every other narrative text based on previous knowledge. This creates expectations in relation to specific situations, in particular connected to the context and to the screenplay. In Liala's novels, these cognitive horizons of expectations with respect to the narrative structure are mostly satisfied, providing the basis for a process of standardization of the publishing product.

The narrative elements in Liala's novels preluding industrial book production that probably paved the path for similar processes in the future are: i) the stories are set in

high-bourgeois and aristocratic realms. The purpose was to create a dreamlike universe for the readers consisting of rich salons, muffled and comfortable places (*Trasparenze di pizzi antichi*). The protagonists wear magnificent dresses, laces, glitters and are always preparing themselves to go to theatre, parties, dinners. Everything seems far from the poverty of Italian society between the two world wars and the reading activity becomes an instrument for women to escape reality; ii) the affiliation of most of the characters to the military realm and in particular to the Airforce, fully in tune with the atmospheres of the D'Annunzio novels (*Brigati di ali, Il pianoro delle ginestre*) iii) the presence of a conflict between an erotic and passionate vein and the rigidity imposed by the institution of marriage. Very often, the protagonist is a married woman (*Una pagina d'amore, Il peccato di Guenda*) or a woman who is soon to be married (*Un gesto, una parola, un silenzio*), and who is undecided between a physical passion and the love promise made through marriage. To indulge in her loving desire could mean to betray the marital promise made before God; iv) the presence of a social conflict that precludes the union of the two protagonists. The fact that they belong to different social classes is an obstacle to the lovers' dream; v) a major possibility of social mobility for women, through the institution of marriage, as opposed to significant rigidity in the positions of men, who are classified according to their social affiliation; vi) the constant presence of a difficult and contrasted love. The story is organized around the search for union between the two lovers. In general, this love is contrasted by the presence of some external obstacles, but there is always a happy end; vii). There is much attention to the woman's sensuality and to the world of senses, in particular to the sense of smell. Some phrases in the novels are real excursions in the olfactive universe (*Il peccato di Guenda, Il profumo dell'assente*), and it is through the senses that the woman can express her sensuality and her passionate desires. The woman described by Liala is a woman with traditional values, who at the same time starts to show signs of independence and is a person with specific desires.

All these elements in Liala's novels demonstrate how the structure and the contents of the woman's fiction started to change from the 1940s. Liala can be considered as a key figure in this change, who still embodied the characteristics of traditional narrativity, but was at the same time clearly evolving towards a new phase.

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