

Religious Dramas in Italy

Dramaturgical Models, Thematization, and Narrative Effectiveness of Biographical Miniseries¹

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Abstract

In this essay I will deal with the topic of religious miniseries for Television, that will be seen especially from the point of view of their dramatic structure. A genre that has been –and still is- extremely successful in Italy in this new century, it has had also some other products which have been a failure, at least in terms of audience. I will argue that, although many times audiences have shown to appreciate religious content, this content has to be created with a dramatic structure that conveys conflicts and emotions. I will shortly describe different dramatic models that are used, and their different outcome in terms of engagement of the audience.

Key Words

TV and religion; TV series; Italian TV dramas; Lux vide; Screenwriting.

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¹ This essay develops and updates some ideas partially published in some essays in Italian, particularly: Fumagalli (2008: 203-213, 2011: 137-155).

1. A successful television genre

All those involved in television in Italy know that in our country, religiously themed dramas have been and continue to be products that usually achieve great success. The reception given to these dramas is one of the true “phenomena” of Italian television in the last thirty years and is quite specific to our country, with no equivalents of this magnitude in other European nations. The miniseries on Pope John XXIII (2002), produced by Lux Vide, directed by Giorgio Capitani and starring Ed Asner, remains the most successful drama of the 2000s, with a 51% share and an audience of about 15 million viewers in the second episode. But alongside this, we could mention numerous miniseries – especially in the first 15 years of this century – that were the most-watched productions of the year or at least among the top three or five television successes of their season in the drama genre: in the first decade, the two miniseries on Padre Pio (one for Rai, starring Michele Placido, and one for Mediaset, starring Sergio Castellitto), then the various miniseries on Pope John Paul II (two for Mediaset produced by Taodue, and one for Rai, starring Jon Voight), the one on Mother Teresa, the drama on Saint Peter, the one titled *Chiara e Francesco*, aired in autumn 2007, also at the top of the ratings, the miniseries on *Saint Augustine*, and the one on Saint Philip Neri titled *Preferisco il Paradiso*, both aired in 2010...

The idea that religious dramas are easily appreciated by the audience has led producers and professionals, inspired by a religious inclination that we could generously define as “very generic” or “quite mild,” to venture into this genre. Between 2005 and 2015, many stories of saints were proposed to the two main networks, Rai and Mediaset, and these networks carried out a certain selection, mostly commissioning work to reliable authors and producers with good credentials, although some operations of questionable taste and outcome – as we will see – were not lacking. Fortunately, in these cases, the audience response was lukewarm, if not cold. A different discussion would need to be made for Sky, which entrusted Paolo Sorrentino, with the participation of HBO, with a very high budget for his series *The Young Pope* (2016) and *The New Pope* (2018), and then returned to religious themes with a series written and directed by Niccolò Ammanniti, *Il miracolo* (2018), and in recent years with the two seasons of *Christian* (2022 and 2023).

In these cases too, while critics applauded Sorrentino, especially for the first of his two series, the audience remained essentially niche, if not truly minimal, as in the case of Ammanniti’s series. In the case of Sorrentino, *The Young Pope* started its first episodes at around 900.000 viewers, that became around 500.000 in the following ones. The total audience (reruns in different days and times) reached a number of 1.400.000 viewers. *The New Pope* had numbers much smaller, that were about 200.000 for the different broadcasts (Sky Atlantic, Sky Cinema, etc.) of the first day. Numbers very similar to the ones of Ammanniti’s *Il miracolo*, that was around 250.000 viewers in the first day of release of the different episodes. Normally these numbers can become

doubles in the reruns of the week and on demand.² These are numbers that are from five to twenty times smaller than other series that we will mention soon: it shows that we are speaking of two basically different genres and approaches.

The Tv series mentioned above are Tv productions that share the fact of having a very authorial approach to the religious phenomenon, dictated more by the desire to express something personal (perhaps even to engage in a bit of psychoanalytic self-analysis) than to investigate and narrate the religious phenomenon in its essence.

It is an approach similar to the one of the new platforms, which in various ways and in different genres (often, curiously, the horror genre) approach the religious phenomenon and incorporate it into their productions (see, for example, *Midnight Mass*, a 2021 series for Netflix).

In Italy, we have two particularly striking cases of fictional long multi-seasonal series with explicitly religious characters as protagonists. We are talking about *Che Dio ci aiuti*, first aired in 2011 and now in its seventh season, with consistently high ratings, and, of course, *Don Matteo*, which is absolutely unique in the European, if not global, television landscape.

Its success, which has lasted for more than twenty years (the first episode aired on January 7, 2000), makes it one of the most striking cases of European television serials for viewer affection and ratings. The fact that it is a series explicitly inspired by Christian values and that its protagonist is not an eccentric, not a protester, but a one hundred percent priest whose main goal is to save souls, makes it even more surprising, raising many questions and challenging many clichés about television serials...

Moreover, it is a series practically not analyzed by cinema and TV scholars, a product with very little bibliography, compared to the thousands of essays found on series with much lesser cultural and social impact (for an analysis of how the series works and how it has changed over the years, see Fumagalli, Albani, Braga 2021, vol.2: 51-62).

But just to make a few references now, there are some surprising and noteworthy facts. In 2014, already in a context of fragmented audiences, declining shares, and the pulverization of audiences, the ninth season had a new surge in ratings, even higher than the previous seasons, with numbers that reached even then unthinkable figures: 7,922,000 average viewers, with a 29.3% average share for the entire ninth season, inaugurating a “second youth” for the series, a youth that still continues. *Don Matteo* is a product that seems to have enormous “usability”: its episodes have been replicated many times, at any time, on different Rai channels, often filling RaiUno’s summer daytime. Sometimes even the reruns in prime time have exceeded the 20% threshold. Apparently, despite such intensive exploitation, it has not tired the viewers.

The ratings of *Don Matteo*, like those of other recent Rai series (*Che Dio ci aiuti*, *Doc*, *Mina Settembre*, *Blanca*, *Imma Tataranni*, *Il Commissario Ricciardi*, *Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco*, etc.), thus pose a question and even a challenge to those who say that the audience has now fled, that it is impossible

² We have checked the numbers on Wikipedia, for Sorrentino’s *The Young Pope*, and in different pages in <www.davidemaggio.it> and <www.tvzoom.it>.

to achieve high ratings on generalist networks. Or worse, that to achieve high ratings on television, it is necessary to fill the products with sex and violence. The success of series like these raises more than one doubt about many theses that those who are familiar with scholarly literature on the topic now know by heart.

2. Irreversible secularization?

The success of religious dramas is one of the many signals (alongside the massive participation in events like the World Youth Days, the weekly attendance at religious services, which has decreased in some countries while remaining stable in others for decades) that reveal that a certain facile rhetoric about overcoming the religious dimension, the inevitability of secularization, etc., is all up for discussion. Sociological research attests, instead, that there are very different situations in different countries, depending on a thousand factors, including historical, cultural, ecclesiastical, etc. The difference, for example, between Italy and France, as well as between Great Britain and Poland, Germany and the United States, etc., is huge.³

To narrow down the object of analysis to something more specific, in these brief reflections, I will try to focus mainly on the dramaturgical models used by historical miniseries with religious content, those that depict a real historical figure. The attempt will be to illustrate how this type of television narrative encompasses deeply different, if not antithetical, models in how they approach the events of the life of a saint or sacred history. In this, I will also be aided by direct experience as a script consultant on some of these television products: I have played a role as a consultant for Lux Vide on some of the most well-known productions aired in the last 25 years.⁴

We have no space here to discuss the different semiotic approaches to narration, but, as it will be very soon evident, my analysis and reflections will follow that area of Semiotics that is more related to its Aristotelian origin, with some of its main concepts that refer back to his *Poetics* (see Chiarulli and Fumagalli 2018). The Aristotelian line of analysis of drama, with authors such as Wayne Booth, Robert McKee, John Truby and others, that in some way may be considered a minority current of Semiotics in some countries, is in fact gaining more and more ground, as it is proving to be very useful for practical and professional purposes, as it is more flexible and connected with the real organic texture of a drama, and helps a lot to analyze and create stories, especially for wide audiences, as one should do when working for mainstream cinema or television.

³ For Italy, see for example the books by Franco Garelli (e.g. Garelli 2020) and Bichi and Bignardi (2016). For a more general view about Europe see the report of the Pew Research Center at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.

⁴ I have served as a consultant for Lux Vide, with varying degrees of involvement in projects, starting with the 2000 miniseries on *Lourdes*. Later, I collaborated with the production company for *Maria Goretti*, *Giovanni Paolo II* (Rai fiction with Jon Voight), *San Pietro*, *Paolo VI*, *Chiara e Francesco*, *Sant'Agostino*, *Preferisco il Paradiso*, *Sotto il cielo di Roma* (Pius XII), *Maria di Nazareth*, and, to a very limited extent, for *Don Bosco*.

3. The topic or the quality of the story – what matters more?

Firstly, the myth that religious fictions succeed solely due to their themes needs debunking. There is not a suspension of the need for the typical viewers' engagement; they always expect to be emotionally involved. In other words, when faced with such fiction, the viewer does not enter a religious reverence before the screen, abandoning the remote control as if it were too profane for the subject matter. If the fiction does not please or convince, the channel can be changed without hesitation. An example from 2007 is a Mediaset miniseries about Don Luigi di Liegro (head of Caritas in Rome, who had passed away a few years earlier), starring the very popular – at that time – actor Giulio Scarpati. The miniseries titled *L'uomo della carità* had such low ratings for the first episode that the second episode was moved to the “brother channel” Rete 4.⁵

In cinema, a similar fate befell films like *Antonio Guerriero di Dio* and *7 Km da Gerusalemme*, both of which earned very little (receipts below 100,000 euros as per available information).

In all three cases, in my opinion, the reason was glaring script errors. The miniseries on Don Luigi di Liegro seemed to intentionally commit every mistake one should not make in a good cinematic biography.⁶ For instance, keeping the protagonist isolated, denying access to his inner world, and lacking dimensions of internal growth. In the case of the two theatrical films, though made with sincerity, enthusiasm and ample financial resources, the dramaturgical errors were equally conspicuous. The film about St. Anthony turned the Portuguese saint into a dull preacher who monotonously insisted on the same topic. In *7 Km da Gerusalemme*, the entire first hour lacked “directionality”, a path toward some direction, only clarifying and becoming more interesting toward the end but in a disjointed, episodic yet sincere and genuinely felt manner. However, sincerity alone does not make a good film.

It is always crucial, even in religious fictions, to work thoroughly on the characters, their problems, desires, to create what I have elsewhere called a “vertical” story that, in a few minutes, can establish a profound intimacy with the main character. This should make us much closer to them than we would in real life, making them our friends, close, intimate.⁷

⁵ The viewership results were 14.66% for the first episode and just over 9% for the second. In Italy in 2007, a good result for Canale 5 was over 20%. There are religious fictions (many of those mentioned earlier) that have exceeded 30% share.

⁶ For some pertinent reflections on the biopic genre, or the biographical film, see Arlanch (2007: 67-103) and Arlanch 2008, a volume entirely dedicated to the biographical film genre. Arlanch is the author, among others, of the screenplays for *San Pietro* (with Salvatore Basile), *Chiara e Francesco*, *San'Agostino*, *Sotto il cielo di Roma - Pius XII* (the latter with Fabrizio Bettelli), *Paolo VI*, and *Maria di Nazareth*, as well as several other miniseries with non-specifically religious content, all of which have been highly successful. In recent years, he has been the head writer for two of the biggest contemporary television hits in Italy, the series *Doc – nelle tue mani* and *Blanca*. See also the pages dedicated to the biopic in Seger (1992). I have dealt with the biopic, taking up some reflections by Arlanch and Seger and reflecting on my consulting experience, in Fumagalli (2019: 303-317, 2020: 164-174).

⁷ On the themes of “friendship” with the main character of a story, see the reflections of Booth (1983, 1988). I emphasize these elements in the analysis of the film *A Beautiful Mind* in Fumagalli (2020, vol. 2).

This idea is fully shared by the best American screenplay schools, and I must say that one reason why Lux Vide has achieved one success after another — both with religious fictions and other challenging biographical stories like those about Maria Callas or Edda Ciano, to the more recent successes of *Blanca*, *Doc*, *Diavoli*, *Buongiorno mamma*, etc. — is that since its inception, it decided to invest heavily in working on stories, taking the best from the Hollywood tradition and adapting it to the Italian context.⁸

At this point, it seems important to preempt an objection: discussing Hollywood dramaturgical models does not mean reducing the complexity of the story to the level of *Independence Day* (which, anyway, is much less banal than some Italian critics tend to think) or the *Transformers* saga. Even English films like *Billy Elliot*, *Notting Hill*, or *The Full Monty*, or seemingly “different” and bold films like *The Truman Show*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *The King’s Speech*, or *Inside Out*, are based on strong dramatic models. They also use classic narrative structures of Hollywood cinema⁹ (which are essentially universal structures): a three-act structure, a strong antagonist, subplots, a final climax with the protagonist’s awareness acquisition and transformation, etc. It is not surprising, then, that these same models can be effectively adapted to religious content fictions, as has indeed been done in the most successful cases.

4. Dramaturgical Models

Concerning religious dramas produced in Italy over the last 25 years, we think that we can divide their dramaturgical framework into four essential modes.

1. *Absence of models*. The first is a substantial absence of strong dramaturgical models. It is challenging for this to happen on television because both among television screenwriters and the Rai and Mediaset structures, which exercise a certain preventive control, there is a basic dramaturgical awareness. Therefore, it is difficult for substantially deconstructed stories like those of the aforementioned *Antonio*, *Guerriero di Dio* or, even more so, like *7 Km from Jerusalem* to pass, as they were productions intended for cinema and distributed in theaters. A different discussion would be necessary for the series on Sky, but we will not delve into that, also because as of our writing (January 2024), Sky Originals in Italy is changing its approach compared to the previous decade, when they broadcasted products like *Il miracolo* or *The Young Pope*.

⁸ It is also the educational strategy — obviously hyper-synthesized here in a slogan: there would be many other things to specify — followed in the Master in International Screenwriting and Production that we founded in 2000 together with my friend Luca Manzi, and which I still currently direct. It is no coincidence that many successful professionals (screenwriters, development managers, creative producers, network or platform executives) have been trained there.

⁹ For three somewhat different ways of framing the same basic model, see McKee 1997 (Italian translation: *Story*, *International Forum* 2001); Truby 2007 (Italian translation: *Anatomia di una storia* 2009); Vogler 1992 (Italian translation: *Il viaggio dell'eroe* 1998).

2. *Elementary oppositions.* The second possibility is to apply basic dramaturgical models (inciting incident, well-defined and strongly present antagonist, clear opposition between good and evil) in a very elementary and flat manner. The result may be trivial and simplifying, but it usually works. This occurred with the miniseries on Pope John XXIII broadcasted on Canale 5 under the title *Il Papa buono* (The Good Pope, 2003). The title itself is indicative of a choice of very elementary oppositions on which the narrative was played, not devoid of its effectiveness on the audience. The miniseries, directed by Ricky Tognazzi and starring Bob Hoskins, did not reach the peaks of Rai's "twin" (15 million viewers), but still had excellent ratings (almost 10 million viewers on average and a share around 35%).

3. *External and superimposed models and conflicts.* The third possible model is for those who take a story with a religious content, but, perhaps because they do not fully believe in the dramaturgical power of specifically religious themes or because they are accustomed to other types of stories, or maybe due to a lack of specifically religious sensitivity, they try to focus the story on conflicts and dilemmas that have little to do with the religious dimension. This happened with a dramatic mishmash titled *La sacra famiglia* aired on December 10 and 11, 2006, on Canale 5 with relatively low audience success (an average share of about 21%): «Clumsy attempt to reinterpret the story of the birth and childhood of Jesus, this miniseries, which claims to be inspired by the apocryphal Gospels, actually seems rather indebted to themes, tones, and narrative modules from novels and soap operas» (Cotta Ramosino 2007: 308-310). This is how Laura Cotta Ramosino begins her review-analysis, continuing with justified indignation:

To summarize the plot of the first episode, in fact, rather than the story of salvation, it seems like watching an episode of *Beautiful*: a girl running away from an unwanted marriage, a quirky widower still in search of love quarreling with his restless son for the possession of the aforementioned girl, attempts of rape narrowly averted, unwanted pregnancies and reparative marriages, resentful ex-girlfriends, but in search of redemption, lascivious and available neighbors. (Cotta Ramosino 2007: 308-310)

This is the model followed to some extent (i.e., less obviously off-center) by a fiction on Saint Francis aired on Canale 5 in 2002, produced by Taodue and starring Raoul Bova.¹⁰ In this case, deviations from the Franciscan story are of various types: Francis (who actually wanted to become a noble knight when young) becomes a "democrat" *avant la lettre*; his relationship with Chiara is shaped on the romantic cliché of a love story (although, in reality, the two had about ten years of age difference between them); an artificial opposition is created by Francis between "good" heretics (who translate the Gospel into the vernacular) and the "bad" ecclesiastical institution, etc.

¹⁰ *Francesco*, directed by Michele Soavi, produced by Taodue for Mediaset, aired on October 6 and 7, 2002, on Canale 5.

4. *Strong dramaturgical model and specifically religious theming.* It is, in our opinion, the most effective and relevant model, usually followed by Lux Vide productions, where an attempt has been made to “believe” in the specifically spiritual and religious potential of the story, without giving up on constructing dramatic arcs and conflicts that would capture the attention of a broader audience. Sometimes, for example, this attempt to find strong conflicts can lead to some more or less small exaggerations: for example, the attempt to find a “flesh-and-blood” antagonist can push screenwriters to accentuate, in the lives of the Popes, a certain conflict between the “good” (modern, open, advanced) Pope and “bad” curia members (retrograde, closed, reactionary). These are easy simplifications, which materialize in exaggerations and forcings compared to historical facts that are sometimes presented in the script, sometimes emphasized by the direction of actors with shots of perplexed looks, envious glances...¹¹ Obviously, where the life of the biographee itself has presented external conflicts and antagonisms, the risks of resorting to exaggerations or deviating from historical truth are much smaller: for example, in the case of the life of Giovanni Bosco, who had to face countless difficulties to start his “oratories”, or John Paul II, who had, before his pontificate, to deal with Nazism first and then communism. However, in general, fidelity to historical facts and the desire to work on true character arcs and relevant themes have ensured that products set up in this way (such as *Fatima*, *Lourdes*, *Padre Pio tra cielo e terra* with Michele Placido, *Mother Teresa* starring Olivia Hussey, *Saint Peter* with Omar Sharif, and various others already mentioned) were of excellent historical-biographical quality and beloved by the audience. Outside of Lux, it seems to me that, for example, *Padre Pio* with Sergio Castellitto, produced by Rizzoli for Canale 5 and directed by Carlo Carlei, and, although with an overall slightly lower quality, *Papa Giovanni Paolo I: Il sorriso di Dio*, writ-

¹¹ It is worth noting that authorship in Tv series is usually divided among at least four fundamental figures: screenwriter, director, producer, and network. To this, the artistic contribution — sometimes crucial — of the main actors should be added. But the matter is even more complex because some production companies have a true team of story editors and creative producers (or delegate producers) who thoroughly follow each project, both in the development phases, working closely with the screenwriters, and in the production and post-production phases, accompanying or supervising the work of directors, editors, and dubbers. Likewise, usually, the producers of Raifiction and the representatives of networks (usually Raiuno) actively intervene in the development of the project, for example, influencing the choice of actors and directors, intervening in the editing, etc. Naturally, network interventions are more significant when the project is entrusted to small or inexperienced production companies. As one can imagine, the final result — although perhaps excellent — is often the result of complex and sometimes heated negotiations among all these authorial instances, negotiations that become even more complicated in the case of an international co-production, where representatives of networks (and therefore funders) from different countries are involved, often expressing not only their artistic interests but also the diverse sensitivities of the audience. The complexity of managing these “voices” is one of the reasons why many Italian producers give up co-productions. From these considerations, it emerges how misguided — often surprisingly so — journalists and even television critics are, when they tend to attribute the artistic responsibility for a Tv series solely to the director, as if it were a film by Nanni Moretti... On the complex dimensions of authorship in cinema and fiction, see Chapter 2 of Fumagalli (2020, vol. 1), and for Italian Tv series see Barra and Guarnaccia (2018), which contains very concrete and interesting testimonies about the work of development managers, creative producers, and commissioners of recent major Italian Tv series.

ten and produced by Francesco Scardamaglia, directed by Giorgio Capitani, and aired on Raiuno in the fall of 2006, also adhered to these criteria.

As we argue extensively elsewhere (Fumagalli 2020, vol. 1: 164-174), the main issue in biographical films is to identify a theme that gives dramatic unity to the story and does not reduce it to a bundle of unrelated anecdotes. It is the theme (the universal dimension of human experience explored in this specific film: see McKee 1997 and Truby 2007) that helps choose which episodes to narrate and which not, because it is always about choosing an infinitesimal part of a person's life, even if you have 60 hours, like in *The Crown*, and not the typical two hours of a movie, or the approximately three hours of a two-part miniseries, or even the 8 to 10 hours of the series now made for platforms.

Then it is necessary to find a clear and powerful climax (especially when working in cinema, where the ending is crucial for word-of-mouth success,¹² unlike TV), connected to a character's transformation arc. It is also necessary to give the main character a reasonable number (realistically manageable within TV timeframes) of significant relationships, so that unknown characters do not constantly enter and exit, but we can see these relationships grow, mature, and signal both the maturation of our character and the changes he/she generates in those around him/her. Finally, to limit ourselves, of course, to a few and very brief general indications, if possible, authors should structure the story in the organic formula that works masterfully for audiences worldwide, that of the three acts Aristotle spoke about more than two thousand years ago.¹³

Among all, three very successful examples from a narrative and thematic point of view seem to me to be, among Lux Vide products, *Chiara e Francesco* (2007), *Sant'Agostino* (2010), and *Maria di Nazareth* (2012). All three written by Francesco Arlanch. The first, written under the supervision of Salvatore Basile and directed by Fabrizio Costa, completely avoided possible "romantic" shortcuts or anti-institutional deviations, completely absent in the life of the saints of Assisi, to try to faithfully render the lives of these two saints and their relationship, focusing on relevant spiritual dimensions and constructing an alternate editing of their lives that implicitly suggested correspondences, analogies, the reciprocal influences of the two deeply connected characters, even if they had very few opportunities to be together.

In *Sant'Agostino*, very effectively directed by the Canadian Christian Duguay,¹⁴ the theme of the story was the young Augustine's search for truth and his decision to stop using his gift of speech for power, but to put it at the service of his brothers, first as a Christian and then as the Bishop of Hippo. In

¹² A very powerful ending is, for example, in the recent film by Paola Cortellesi, *C'è ancora domani*: the strength of this ending, which gives a powerful uplift to the entire story, is one of the elements that, in my opinion, explains the extraordinary and totally unexpected box office success of the film. See my review at <https://www.scegliereunfilm.it/ce-ancora-domani/>.

¹³ See our comments in Chiarulli and Fumagalli (2018).

¹⁴ Duguay is a Canadian director who has worked for both TV and cinema, both in Hollywood and in Europe (*Human Trafficking*, *Belle et Sébastien*, *Jappeloup*, *Medici – Master of Florence*, etc.)

this miniseries, screenwriter Francesco Arlanch gave – respecting historical data but focusing on it from a television perspective – a fundamental role to Augustine’s mother, Monica (played in the miniseries by an important and experienced actress, Monica Guerritore), thus creating a strongly emotional perspective on the life of the saint of Hippo and giving the predominantly female audience of RaiUno’s Tv series a character with whom to identify and with whom to read (and be moved by) Augustine’s tormented and adventurous story.

In *Maria di Nazareth*, directed by Giacomo Campiotti, the challenge was to find a conflict and a transformation arc in a character, Mary, whom Christian tradition claims to be without sin. Here too, Arlanch’s and the authorial team’s solution (notably the then head of drama at Lux Vide, Sara Melodia, a woman of exceptional abilities, who sadly died prematurely¹⁵) is, in my opinion, intelligent and profound, again very respectful of the scriptural data and effective in facilitating empathy from the female audience: Mary is seen as a mother with a most lovable Son, who, however, must move from the role of a natural mother to that of a disciple and must fully accept the mission that the Son has to save mankind, that is, to die for them. She must also undergo a transformation arc, although without going from evil to good, from sin to grace. She must move from being the natural mother of a perfect and most lovable Son to being the co-redeemer who recognizes in Jesus her Savior and adheres to and participates in his work of redemption. Said like this, it might seem abstract, but in the miniseries (which was a great success with the audience and was broadcast in many countries around the world, including the USA), all this is dramaturgy, storytelling, choices in the face of dilemmas. To enrich the panorama of characters are two other women among the main characters: Herodias, who represents the negative pole, the one who surrenders to evil and to the logics of power and money, and Mary Magdalene, who instead undergoes a change from a normal life to sin and then, thanks to Jesus (but also thanks to Mary’s intervention), from sin to salvation.

5. Empathizing with the Saints

In addition to this reflection on underlying dramaturgical models, there is another important aspect that I would like to draw attention to. When working on biographies for cinema or television, one quickly realizes that the saint (if well narrated) is a kind of character with whom it is very easy to empathize. Just reasoning from a purely dramaturgical point of view, it becomes increasingly clear how saints are naturally likable characters. That is, if freed from the crust of clichés in which we sometimes embalm them, they are true “heroes”. Their lives are extraordinarily consistent and full, and, if well represented, cannot fail to captivate.¹⁶

¹⁵ See on her Fumagalli (2021: 50-52).

¹⁶ It was a conclusion that Louis de Wohl had reached independently: he was a great writer who, after converting, dedicated himself almost exclusively (also on explicit commission from Pius XII) to writing very popular biographies of saints. He wondered, in fact, where else he could find people so rich internally, who had fought such interesting battles, with such a strong ability to be loved by the reader.

When making biographical stories for cinema, for example, one usually has to embellish the real character a lot (think of stories like *A Beautiful Mind* or *Erin Brockovich*) to make them likable. When making biographies of “great” men in some field, there is a risk — if faithful to the historical truth of the character and if one goes deep — of bringing out all their limits and pettiness, often causing rejection in the audience: think of a not very recent James Ivory film about Picasso, Richard Attenborough’s cinematic biography of Chaplin in 1992, or biographical films that promised a lot but left the audience quite “cold”, like the recent *Elvis* or Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* or Clint Eastwood’s *J. Edgar*.¹⁷

In this sense, saints need much less dramaturgical makeup — usually, they don’t need any at all — than any other character. They are personalities of great charm: if you can look at them deeply, attentive to the personality of each one and away from stereotypes, their lives are often of extraordinary cultural, human, and spiritual fecundity. Just to stay with the example of St. Francis, think of the spiritual and civil scope of the revolution of the mendicant orders, with consequences ranging from the paintings of Giotto to the invention of the nativity scenes, from the valorization of the poor to the return to considering Jesus not only as the true inaccessible God but also as the true Man close to each of us. Often, as in this case, the physical, tangible, and even architectural traces of the life of a saint are still present in the daily life of millions of Italians.

6. What is Missing

All well, then? In a certain sense, one could answer yes, if one avoids falling into the stereotypes and dramaturgical traps mentioned above. However, there is still a dimension that Italian religious miniseries, having established themselves since the early 2000s as a grand popular narrative, capable of recalling the roots of our culture and values, have yet to fully explore, except for brief hints. It is the realm of true cinematic artistic expression. While there have been formidable acting performances (notably Castellitto’s portrayal of Padre Pio, widely acclaimed), there has not been a miniseries that attained the level of a genuine work of art, reaching aesthetic heights. This is not an easy task, but not impossible, at least in principle.

The curious thing is that if we examine the essence of cinema, it is almost by definition oriented towards a specifically Catholic perspective, as it has a structure we could describe as “sacramental”. Just as the sacrament is a tangible reality that serves to manifest the presence and efficacy of a non-tangible reality (grace), cinema, through the visibility of actors, images, light, and sound, in its highest and most successful forms, should aim to communicate profound inner experiences. The semiotic category that unites these two worlds and dimensions is the well-known notion of metaphor.¹⁸ If we can say that cinema,

¹⁷ The narrative construction is very effective in the biographical film about Freddie Mercury, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which was, in fact, a great worldwide success. The screenplay work was done very intelligently.

¹⁸ For some reflections on the metaphor that also refers to the dimensions of sacramentality, see Fumagalli (2003: 459-496).

by aiming to express inner worlds through the visible, is sacramental, we can also say that Catholic sacramental theology is somehow naturally “cinematic” or at least should contribute to building fully artistic films where all sensory components contribute to the aesthetic unity of the inspiring idea.¹⁹

Naturally, only a few authors and films manage to achieve this, so there is much ground to cover. Additionally, the mass audience orientation of TV series requires being extremely clear and explicit, at least in the fundamental lines of the text. In other words, refined and aesthetically valuable texts, like Andrei Tarkovsky’s films or more recent ones by Terrence Malick, would be evidently challenging and unacceptable for television audiences. Malick, for instance, in *The Tree of Life* (2011) and the more recent *A Hidden Life* (2019), a poignant biographical film about the farmer Franz Jägerstätter, who opposed swearing allegiance to Hitler, reached remarkable expressive and artistic peaks. Consider for example the audacity of attempting a visual representation of Paradise in the moving finale of *The Tree of Life*.

However, over the years, American cinema has provided examples of films that, while not specifically religious, have successfully dealt with spiritual realities in an engaging and effective way, utilizing the specific cinematic elements: dramaturgy, images, work on objects and environments, quality of light and music, editing, etc.

At times, these results are achieved by films seemingly far from what cinephiles would label as “engaged”, films that, when initially released, might not be considered suitable for cinephile screenings until years later, when they are reevaluated. Yet, some mainstream films manage to open metaphorical doors of great relevance. Consider, for example, *Forrest Gump*, an immensely popular film that opens with a feather falling from the sky and landing next to Forrest’s shoe. The film concludes with the same feather exiting the book Forrest holds while accompanying his son to the school bus, gently soaring back into the sky until it settles on the screen (on the camera) in the last image of the film. In the scene before the final one, standing by his beloved wife’s grave, Forrest had said, “I don’t know if we each have a destiny... or if we are all just floating around accidentally-like on a breeze... but I think... maybe it’s both... maybe both is happening at the same time...”. What does this feather, moved by the wind but certainly not by chance, present from the beginning to the end of the film, indicate? Does it suggest a certain protection from above — a kind of sacrament/visualization of God’s protection — that accompanied Forrest from the beginning to the end of the story? Perhaps. While screenwriter Eric Roth²⁰ likely left the meaning of this feather undefined for the audience to interpret, it still seems like an excellent example of “sacramentality”, a visual reference to something beyond, whether secular or religious.²¹

¹⁹ On these themes, see Lewerenz and Nicolosi (2005).

²⁰ Eric Roth is one of the most profound and interesting contemporary screenwriters, who has worked with Steven Spielberg, Michael Mann, Martin Scorsese, in films that are always original and important such as *Ali*, *Munich*, *Insider*, the more recent *A Star is Born*, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, and many others.

²¹ In any case, the feather is in the screenplay exactly as seen in the movie. The screenplay also specifies that the feather eventually rises towards the sky and goes up and down until it stops

Consider the aforementioned *A Beautiful Mind* which leads the viewer to share the illusion and then the disappointment of a mentally ill person, offering a profoundly internal and specifically spiritual experience, even if not directly religious.

The artistic peaks and communicative effectiveness of American cinema are quite challenging for us to reach. Moreover, all arts have needed time to mature aesthetically and establish themselves. Cinema is a young art form: it has just over a century behind it, and sound cinema only about ninety years. Moreover, experience teaches us that, to mature and flourish, art always needs a creative humus made by a certain number of talents working closely together, side by side. This was true for the great Hollywood cinema of the golden years (from the '30s to the '50s), as it was for Italian Renaissance painting, German symphonic music and Italian operatic music of the nineteenth century.

What we mean to say is that true art more easily emerges where there is a foundation of solid professionalism, established creative formulas, from which the great artist can then soar upwards. It is challenging for a single artist to create everything from scratch. Similarly, we believe that in religious fiction, we have likely reached that base of solid narrative professionalism that could, in the future, give space to truly artistic works in the fullest sense.

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right on the lens of the camera, transforming the image into black (see the screenplay at www.weeklyscript.com)

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