

# Metropolis and the media in the contemporary TV representations

## La metrópolis y los medios de comunicación en las representaciones televisivas contemporáneas

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### Abstract

This paper aimed at analysing the relationship between metropolis and representation. Therefore we focus on TV series *Mad Men* in order to describe how, in the New York of the Sixties, consumerism and the mainstream media (Cinema, TV, Radio, Press) were the pillars on which the mass society built itself. In accordance with the same logic, in the second part, the analysis of *Gossip Girl* has meant to investigate and show the unchanging centrality of the metropolis in the most recent social and cultural processes driven by the digital media and the communicative modes of the social networks. The narration of the two historical periods, describes an interesting circularity between the metropolis, the historical-social phenomena that occur within it, and the medial forms of representation that describe it. These three elements establish a relation of in-turn influence in which it appears impossible to distinguish a causal succession. A metropolis like New York is thus the scenario and the protagonist of the TV representations at the same time. It is therefore possible to say that it continues to be the dominant territory and a source of inspiration for the contemporary television.

**Key Words:** Metropolis; TV representation; mass society; network society; social imaginaries.

### Resumen

El artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar la relación entre metrópolis y representación. Por lo tanto, nos centramos en la serie de televisión *Mad Men* con el fin de describir cómo, en la New York de los años sesenta, el consumismo y los medios de comunicación (cine, televisión, radio, prensa) fueron los pilares sobre los que la sociedad de masas se construyó a si misma. De acuerdo con la misma lógica, en la segunda parte, el análisis de *Gossip Girl* ha servido para investigar y mostrar la centralidad inmutable de las metrópolis en los más recientes procesos sociales y culturales impulsados por los medios digitales y los modos de comunicación de los *social networks*. La narración de los dos períodos históricos describe una circularidad interesante entre la metrópoli, los fenómenos histórico-sociales que se producen en ella y las formas mediales de representación que la describen. Estos tres elementos establecen una relación de influencia a su vez en la que parece imposible distinguir una sucesión causal. Una metrópoli como New York es, por tanto, el escenario y el protagonista de las representaciones televisivas al mismo tiempo. Por lo tanto, es posible decir que sigue siendo el territorio dominante y una fuente de inspiración para la televisión contemporánea.

**Palabras clave:** Metropolis; representaciones televisivas; sociedad de masas; red social; imaginarios sociales.

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## The metropolis and the image of the self

In this paragraph we rebuild, by reading some passages of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, the relationship between metropolis and representation. In particular, will be presented the following nodes: a) the effects of modern metropolis on individual sensibility and social organizations; b) redefining the concept of lifestyle as an identity and social form; c) the forms of individual and collective representation, of which television service is the point of arrival, in light of changes introduced by the metropolis.

*The Metropolis and Mental Life* is dated 1903; it is directly related to Simmel's previous essay *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), in particular to its second part dedicated to money and its impact on lifestyle. Together with the subsequent essay, *The Philosophy of Fashion* (Simmel, 1905: 303-313), it constitutes the highest and most overt reflection Simmel dedicates to the metropolis and its consequences: fashion, allegory and morals, distraction and attention, freedom, solitude and lifestyle. The two essays articulate a sophisticated set of images that reveal details of the metropolitan experience from the inside.

The metropolitan type rests on the following psychological premise: "[T]he intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (Simmel, 1903: 103). The number, frequency and intensity of the stimuli available and alluring in the metropolis is much greater than in the provincial town. Such seemingly insignificant variants as quantity and speed cause a qualitative leap in individual experience: the self is projected into a new techno-sensorial world, which challenges its previous mental balance. In order to adapt to the new rhythms of life, the self strengthens one particular organ: "Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality" (Simmel, 1903: 104). This organ, which occupies the upper strata of the mind, can be defined as: "the most adaptable of our inner forces. In order to adjust itself to the shifts and contradictions in events, it does not require the disturbances and inner upheavals which are the only means whereby more conservative personalities are able to adapt themselves to the same rhythm of events" (Simmel, 1903: 104). The response to stimuli is moved to a malleable and dynamic psychic zone able to sense and neutralize as many stimuli as possible. As a means of absorbing and processing stimuli from the outside, emotionality is overcome, and becomes a mode of the past, consistent with provincial life, but totally inadequate for metropolitan life. If the provincial town is a *medium* that requires distinct practices and forms of organization, the metropolis is a *medium* that stimulates new strategies of aggregation. The technological difference between the provincial city and the metropolis reflects itself in the difference between a *moral*, and an *allegorical* intention, between a mode characterized by the preservation and

repetition of habits, and one which instead tends to build and undo them rapidly, thus acknowledging that habits are ephemeral and illusory.

The metropolis weakens pre-existing boundaries between subject and object by conferring to the medium, rather than to the self, the power of originating historical and social processes. The advent of a new medium deviates and regenerates the course of time, by creating a new mental condition, and the potential for new modes and possibilities of living. The self is pure energy, the vital and inviolable structure that justifies the presence of things, because things exist only insofar as they are being used; but the self is also a mere reflection of the outside, the ever-developing product of the pressures coming from society.

The individual proceeds as if suspended and daydreaming in the middle of thousands of “shocks” or stimuli. While being seduced by lights, posters, gazes, passers-by, noises, colours and shop windows, the individual is able to let all these stimuli quickly glide away. In other words, the individual wanders through the streets of the metropolis *distractedly*; an organ is strengthened, one that is light, resilient and dynamic, half way between consciousness and unconsciousness, capable of neutralizing any new stimulus or prompt from the outside. Distraction does not represent a degraded form of experience; it is an active and effective device: it allows an individual to keep pace with the rapid and fast dispersing rhythms of the metropolis without inner upheaval, and it allows millions of people to live side by side, putting up with, and ignoring one another. From a different perspective, distraction creates a problem far from easy to solve: is it possible to make this multitude of stimuli meaningful? Is it possible to obtain a clear and distinct image of the self, of one’s characteristics and of one’s potential? Distraction is a broad perception but can only glide over things. As does everyday life, it flows rapid, light and uninterrupted. Consciousness can only surface by renting the veil of this *continuum*, by suddenly and momentarily interrupting the flow of experience, allowing the subject to leap to a higher mental level offering a sharper representation of the self. A continuous interplay or a to-ing and fro-ing between distraction and attention comes about, where the former serves to live with a life populated by stimuli that leave little space for thought, and the latter serves to register a quantitative and initially indistinct series of events, later to be transformed and elaborated into self-consciousness. The life of the self unfolds in a *pars construens*, which is swift, conscious and unconscious, and in a *pars destruens* slow, lucid and entirely dependent upon the former. Indeed, it is only possible to deconstruct something once experienced, and then, only by working on it. To deconstruct means to mortify, to treat living things as if they were dead objects, but also to enhance experience, to cast light on it: the individual follows life in a “reverse direction”, focusing on details, on interferences and gaps in the narration, on those parts in which a clear and linear sequence leaves room for additions, for sudden interruptions and turns that modify and recreate the event experienced. The self makes a leap to a higher mental level, and, in this kind of transfiguration, reaches a “high observation point” from which to look back and gain a distinct though provisional image of its own

characteristics and potential, of its own strengths and weaknesses. In this moment of self-awareness, the self is lifted toward a liminal dimension, half way between life and death, a dimension which grants a “better and deeper perspective”, but which also numbs the senses. Consciousness appears to be essentially tactile, a reflection of experience, but also, automatically, a distancing from it: it is a prosthesis of experience, as well as a weapon against it.

Money, allegory and a multiplicity of stimuli produce an unprecedented psychic phenomenon: “The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as is the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless” (Simmel, 1903: 106). On the one hand money causes a levelling of the difference between values and objects, the public and the private, interiority and exteriority; on the other hand, the speed at which different experiences follow each other makes them appear a mere prosthesis of the everyday. The excitement produced by the multiplicity of different situations encountered turns into its opposite: the feeling that all experience is ephemeral, vain and illusory. A circular and potentially infinite process aimed at its own self-reproduction originates within the self: illusion and disillusion, renewed illusion and renewed disillusion. Free from morals and a sense of duty, the individual lives life in the real or imaginary pursuit of *pleasure*. Pleasure is not derived from achieving a goal, or from preserving and safeguarding given values; it rather derives from a psychic condition of openness and alertness, nourished by illusions and disillusion related to things, people and experiences. The persuasion that illusions will materialize one day is the drive of individual life. However, it is not the realisation of illusions that matters; rather it is the tension that generates around them: the idea of *being able* to realize them (Campbell 1987).

From a different perspective, an individual’s independence from the process of social change constitutes an integral part of freedom. Within narrow social groups, the creation of boundaries, and a closure toward the outside coincide with the imposition of strong ties on the individual. In order to hold a distinct role within the social group the individual is stuck with a precise function, and his freedom of action is accordingly reduced: “In the measure that the group grows numerically, spatially, and in the meaningful content of life, its immediate inner unity and the definiteness of its original demarcation against others are weakened and rendered mild by reciprocal interactions and interconnections. And at the same time the individual gains a freedom of movement far beyond the first jealous delimitation” (Simmel, 1903: 107-108). When social groups grow in size, and open up toward the outside, they also change from a qualitative viewpoint: their boundaries and unity tend to loosen, and the individual comes to enjoy a freedom of action never experienced before the advent of the metropolis. This freedom offers the possibility of asserting one’s particular *style of life*, and of transforming one’s imaginary world into a series of the minutiae of daily life: sex, clothes and consumption in general. Within a

narrow and close social group the individual feels a strong sense of belonging; however, this is countered by a limitation of freedom. On the contrary, within larger social groups, and therefore within the metropolis, freedom expresses itself also in the loss of a precise recognition of one's social identity. In the metropolis everybody continues to have an identity and a role, bound up with his name; a person's profile, however, is more fragile, because it becomes less noticeable, and is inextricably linked to situations of anonymity.

Freedom and solitude are responsible for greater qualitative differences within social groups, yet they also imply the domination of modal strategies over final strategies, and of the private over the public sphere. Building one's own original, albeit marginal, profile, requires a deep interiorization of practices, tastes and choices. Once a tool for class differentiation, now an individual's lifestyle is perceived as a second skin, something which can make us visible to others as well as to ourselves. As a result collective, vertical and codified identities weaken in favour of individual, private and provisional identities, intrinsically validated merely by their presence. Cohesion is not built through imitative processes, or generally shared values, but derives from unstable dynamics, resting on the interiorization of the other as a necessity for happiness and self-realisation. In this context, to live means to recognize one's habits, and to control and negotiate them with others' continuously. The individual no longer needs to be in conflict with the external world, but simply to partake in it by learning how to *play the game* along with, and better than the others.

### *Media and representation*

In the metropolis the birth of a new medium corresponds, in individual consciousness, with the multiplication of ideal images, in which the individual and the collective attempt to remove imperfections from the product and any defects in the social system.

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old [...] At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated –which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primary history "*Urgeschichte*" – that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society –as stored in the unconscious of the collective– engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. These relations are discernible in the utopia conceived by Fourier. (Benjamin, 1999: 4-5)

Novelty at first seems to be an *angelus novus*, a circumstance soon to become daily practice, yet is still shapeless, and nascent. During this phase the new has two sides to it. It appears as a reflection and a derivation from the old: early photography recalls painting, cinema literature, the metropolis the municipality, and the web television. Paradoxically, however, the new also raises expectations and desires, a political and social potential that asks to be made manifest, and, if necessary, destroys the ties and divisions posed by the old system. At an imaginary level,

a breach between “present” and “recent past” is thus created. This breach feeds the need typical of every generation to take its distance from the immediately preceding epoch; “to each generation the one immediately preceding it seems the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable” (Benjamin, 1999: 64). In order to impose its difference and originality, the new elaborates a series of discourses that push individual and collective imagination back to a remote past, to the fantasy of an original society, without social bonds, class divisions or social actors. These discourses represent man in an idyllic condition, full of humanity, but completely immaterial and decontextualized. Such discourses temporarily suspend experience and the social equilibrium, and they correspond to the sensation or illusion that the need for a social equilibrium can be finally overcome. Utopias are only apparently detached from the present, while, in fact, they constitute an extension of it, if not a defence. They do not aim to realize their project, but to perfect novelty: “to give machines a more human face”. Utopias pertain to a dormant or subconscious phase, lasting only until the new has entirely taken over in everyday life. Novelty transforms into a “working machine”, capable of combining its original objectives – commerce, wealth and consumption– with the human needs that have developed meanwhile. The transformation of *myth* into *habitus*, of a blind and instinctual force into a clear and neat situation inseparable from action entails a simultaneous redefinition of the functions, values and powers of the various social actors.

The shift from myth to habit also manifests itself when we divert from the general level of social life to the particular one of individual microhistories: “[W]hereas the education of earlier generations explained these dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children” (Benjamin, 1999: 388). In both cases, social life and the individual, the metropolis is the cause of the whole process, the space that fills the existence of individuals and the collective with infinite events that are discontinuous from each other, and disconnected from past experiences. Under these circumstances, identity coincides with the infinity of situations experienced, and is led purely by chance, far from any image of perfectibility. As a result, the individual feels deeply estranged from the structures and institutions that used to protect an identity that was both individual and collective. Growth is fragmented, and takes place in solitude as the individual progressively recognizes the traces left by experience on his current behaviour. Recognition happens at those moments when time is suspended and the *continuum* of existence is interrupted. Thus individual existence becomes populated with fragments, figures and images that layer upon layer, over the course of everyday life, have stratified and merged with the self. In an instant there is a kind of leap from a latent preconscious and distracted level to a lucid and conscious one. The potential, characteristics and circumstances determining everyday action then appear clear and distinct, even though they remain provisional.

Growth coincides on one hand with, the events experienced by the self, and, on the other, the way in which the self elaborates these events. Previously separate, growth and knowledge now

merge: every single piece of new knowledge will add a further peg –vital to one's personal growth, yet replaceable. This means that self-knowledge is indissolubly linked to the experiences that produced it, and to the self. It also means that self-knowledge is left to chance, because nothing ensures that the self will ever gain self-knowledge. The "collective self", once immediately guaranteed by the family and the church, now redefines itself only partially through a self that elaborates experience and relates it to others. Knowledge and memory can no longer be considered as chronological systems of objective experiences, but become ephemeral and discontinued processes, dependent on the self and the experiences that made them possible. Should new media, capable of stimulating different reflections and memories, replace the historical experiences of the metropolis and the media in the organization of everyday life, their whole body of critical materials would inevitably be destroyed or decay. Knowledge and the medium form a system at once close and chaotic: *close*, because only a specific medium originates and seals in a distinct organisation of knowledge, *chaotic*, because a medium can bring infinite variations and possibilities of knowledge even to a single individual.

The isolation of the self and the consequent loss of any sense of the finality of time bring everyday life centre stage. The *everyday* becomes the matrix of all experiences but also a system of modes and practices whereby the self reassesses the value, function and sense of ongoing events. Before becoming a habit, every single event presents itself to the individual as a potential narrative. In this phase it is experienced as a myth or a daydream, as a blind and instinctive force that demands to manifest itself. Daily use, repetition, and self-observation transform that potential into a familiar *habitus*, circumscribed and perfectly recognisable. A repeated experience becomes absorbed and integrated into behaviour, one more fragment of the history of one's psyche. The sense and meaning of the various experiences come together in the self only *a posteriori*: things do not have an intrinsic or autonomous value. Their meaning only surfaces when the self makes an image of them, when it recognizes and relativizes them as prosthesis of everyday happenings. The crucial question here is not, what does that specific event mean? Rather, what does that event mean for me, what is its impact on my daily life, and how does it stand in relation to the previous experiences I have interiorized? On this premise, the self experiences and interprets even great social structures, such as religion and politics, not as holistic systems, but as small fragments or details "stuck" between the folds of clothes and daily actions. The self appears to itself as a system always *in potential*, eligible for sudden reconfigurations, but constantly aiming toward illusory or concrete pleasure. The self is a dynamic singularity that cannot be pinned down; its action is justified by its relation and communication with other singularities. Interaction with people is unavoidable, yet justified by mere interest (not in the sense of personal benefit). People spend time together for the sake of pleasure, aesthetically, in the original sense of the term, and in order to enjoy themselves, not for political or ideological reasons, or for a distinct purpose.

The metropolis, as described in this paragraph, should be seen as the urban space in which developed the cultural industry of the twentieth century. It has historically been the place where the main languages of the media system were developed and elaborated. For this reason, the article will look at the *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007-2015) and *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz, 2007-2012) television series to describe how New York was the scenario of mass and network society

### **New York–Babylon. The conflict between traditional cultures and consumerism in the America of the Sixties**

Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. In it are inscribed the architectural figures of the *coincidatio oppositorum* formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures. On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production. (De Certeau, 1980: 143)

According to Michel de Certeau's description, New York is the perfect place where to *invent the ordinary*. The present of the American metropolis "invent itself, hour by hour, in the act of throwing the acquired away and challenging the future". New York's ordinary condition is therefore its perpetual transformation. This characteristic reflects itself both in New York society's variety of trends, habits, values and behaviours; and in the city's urban and architectural history, marked by the construction of higher and higher buildings on the ruins of the past. In this sense, Gangs of New York's ending scene is rather meaningful. According to what has been observed, the French scholar interprets the American metropolis as the space within which the typical processes of the modernity, that is the cyclic destruction and reconstruction of the *status quo*, take their place. Together with other metropolises, then, New York is the western modernity's emblematic place, and certainly the strongest symbol of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, De Certeau's research reveals another aspect: in the monumental reliefs of Manhattan the spectator *reads* the urban space in which he finds himself immersed. Consequently, the architectures *write* themselves, and have been written, in the urban environment and in the social imaginary produced by the culture industry at the same time. Without stating it explicitly, De Certeau discloses New York's capability of playing the role of the ideal place of mass communication, where thousands of contents are shown through film and TV screens, and fixed on press and publishing industry's pages. Thus, the dweller of such a place is, firstly, a *spectator*. This means that experiencing such an environment is only possible through *sight*. Sight therefore becomes a fundamental fact-finding mean of understanding and dealing with the spreading of media images within the metropolitan flows (McLuhan, 1964). New York's urban development occurs in a way simultaneously to the development of its inhabitant's ability of finding his way around thousands of stimuli that affect his sight. Standing in front of such an abundance of races, styles, skyscrapers, streets, masses, signs and sources of inspiration, the inhabitant of New York produces a selection and a distinction based on value about his horizon, which is hardly



different from the one told by Simmel about eighty years before. This is most likely to point out that the basis of the experience of the metropolis observed by the Berlin-born philosopher have not entirely faded away, at least in relation with the image of New York in the Seventies as described by De Certeau. As Davide Borrelli has rightly pointed out:

The experience of the metropolis appears to be too dense, variegated and kaleidoscopic to be lived exclusively as an actor, and it is for this reason that the personal existence expands itself and scatters up to the point of duplicating in the condition of *blasé*, of being a spectator. (Borrelli, 2010: 35)

Thus, being a spectator is a condition, maybe the condition, that pertains to the metropolitan experience, and therefore one of the basis of the evolution of the nineteenth century culture industry, that is strongly focused on the picture and the collective desire of living, by means of it, the *elsewhere* of the metropolis (Abruzzese, 1995; Fiorentino, 2007).

As known, the interest of the TV authors towards New York strongly cropped up again at the end of the nineties, thanks to the so-called *golden age* of serialization. In order to create their works, a number of productions have revitalized the culture industry's interest in the "brutal contrapositions" of the metropolitan experience<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, as happened during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, the culture industry has been able to dig into its past, sectioning and assembling "pieces" of stories and imaginaries deposited during more than a century of cinema and television, this way continuing to remove pictures and symbols from the tradition to put them back in the field of exhibitive value (Benjamin, 1936). *Mad Men*, one of the most successful work of modern serialization, belongs to this second category. Matthew Weiner's series tells the stories of a group of advertisers in the New York of the Sixties. The excellent historical reconstruction offered by the series highlights a particularly relevant connection of that time: the link between the media system, consumption practices and the metropolitan experience. The strictly metropolitan conflict between traditional and modern cultures is one of the series' *topoi*, being a characteristic not only of the general setting, but also of the protagonists' past and fate.

From this point of view, the sixth episode of the first season, *Babylon*, is exemplary. It shows an interesting interpretation of the American culture of consumerism, tightened between two conflicting tensions: one of them with the traditional religious cultures, the other one with the subculture of the young and the artistic avant-gardes. The two conflicts are both represented by the main character Don Draper, he himself a symbol of the historical and cultural gap between traditional societies and the society of consumptions<sup>3</sup>. In the first case, the troubled relation that Don's agency establishes with a new customer, Israel's minister of tourism, highlights the

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<sup>2</sup> From *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007) on, numerous TV series have chosen the metropolis, its cultures, its conflicts and its ways of living as key elements of the narration.

<sup>3</sup> The episode begins with a flashback. After having fallen from the stairs, Don Draper daydreams an event of his childhood. Set in a typically rural environment, shows the birth of Dan's stepbrother in his house. Such a leap in the past demonstrates that Draper himself embodies the transition between traditional society and the metropolis.

difficulty, and at the same time the inescapability, of the translation of traditional religious elements –the exodus– in the field of advertising commercialization. In the second case, Don is brought by his lover, a young artist, in a Greenwich Village bar, where he will get in touch with the artistic and anti-conservative avant-gardes of that time. Fatally, the meeting reveals his lack of involvement in that kind of world.

The narrative style of the series discloses the central importance of the mass culture in comparison with the others with which it conflicts. On the one hand, being on a collision course with Israel's nationalistic religious feeling, the advertisement renounces to the strong linkage with the origins of this culture to make itself impressive to the *sight* of new tourists. Don Draper's work plays the same role that Benjamin used to attribute to the reproduction technique, that is:

It removes the object of reproduction from the tradition's domain. [...] Its social meaning, also in its positive form, in fact primarily in it, is not conceivable without the disruptive and cathartic one: the dismembering of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. (Benjamin, 1936: 23)

On the other hand, as Abruzzese (1995) has pointed out, through its negative work, the avant-gard ends up offering new productive processes and fruition practices to the culture industry. The experimentations carried on in the New York avant-garde are concerned with:

The consumer's sensitiveness rather than that of the producer. [...] Thus, there was room for the experimentation of consumption practices that fifty years later would have become commonplaces of the late mainstream TV. The spectator's *zapping* and the programmer's *blob* emerge from the fashions' widespread work. (Abruzzese, 1995: 45)

As childish as it appears in front of Don's eyes, the need for distinguishing of his buddies is therefore part of these De Certau-theorized brutal contrapositions, typically related to the metropolis, that the mass society and the culture industry will be able to put in practice in their socialization processes.

The mass culture's picture offered by *Mad Men* can thus be summarized in the following Morin's words: "mass culture integrated and at the same time includes itself in a multicultural universe, lets itself be restrained, controlled, censored (by the State, the Church) and, at once, tends to erode and dismember the other cultures" (Morin, 1962: 16). This serial therefore appears as an exemplary object of research for the culture and media studies. Nevertheless, a question remains: why was a product showing the society of the Sixties so successful with a recent years' audience?

Our lack of trust in these times of crisis unavoidably pushes us to desire something opposed to the stock market indexes, the spread and the widespread ethic of austerity and sacrifice. Thus, if we think about our present, all we can do is dreaming something different, ending up desiring stories and symbols of a merry past that in our feeling does not belong to us anymore. This way we can understand the success of the TV series about the economic boom and the modern metropolises' great season. Offering the audience what it currently does not own, this way

stimulating its attitude to desire, reaches the goal of making the series' fictional past tremendously current, since it is that to be, now, the object of desire.

### **New York and the Digital Networks**

While *Mad Men* shows the mass society built on the streets and palaces of New York, the *Gossip Girl* series, which we are going to analyze, describes the impact of web 2.0 on social relationships. Despite this diversity, the metropolis still be the theatre and the main protagonist of the two television representation.

In a highly stylized portrayal of Manhattan, the story of a group of young adults from various social classes takes place involving stories of love, betrayal, drugs, violence, and friendship. All of which is commented on by "*Gossip Girl*," a blogger who reveals and "guides" the events and hidden secrets under the glossy appearance of the Upper East Side. *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) is without saying a teen drama, a televised narration that addresses a young audience which is usually attracted to the bizarre adventures and exploits of the adolescent age that favors the processes of recognition, identification, and derivation. The series stands as an indicator of a new form of experience that takes shape with digital media, updating and reconfiguring past innovations of modernity that were immortalized in European literature between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The series salvages and modernizes a deep well of concepts and themes from history: cynicism, success, power, love, friendship, pleasure, and fashion, providing its viewers with a clear fresco of contemporary life.

The story is set on a dual backdrop of metropolitan life and digital networks: Social media seems to have absorbed reality without giving a way to understanding the matrix. Posing the problem of distinguishing between a copy and the original, between true and false, which is a matter of shielding; what is found attractive are the scandalous lives of the Manhattan elites and in order to get to know them, one must entrust a blogger with a mysterious identity: "*Gossip Girl*," which has become an actual database forged by and preyed upon by all the youth of the Upper East Side. At the beginning of every episode, the camera focuses on the symbols of a city that has become all too familiar thanks to years of Hollywood filming. In the intricate plotlines of *Mad Men*, in the journalistic articles and myriad of personal reporting which has filled YouTube and Instagram, every glimpse of New York seems to have become iconic: a city of contemporary collective imagination.

After a tour of this metropolis, the viewer is introduced to the residences of the protagonists who belong to two different worlds: the young royalty of Long Island and the commoners of Brooklyn (the former being super-rich and the latter more "naïf"). This is the first moment of contact with 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic literature that touches on the dichotomy between provincial and metropolitan life as one of the most significant elements of its narrative. Usually, the transition from a rural to an urban setting was the heart of the tale. For a moment think of Honoré de

Balzac's novel *Illusions Perdues* (1837-1843) and his protagonist Lucien de Rubempré, a young poet who in order to pursue his dreams of glory takes a trip to Paris and arrives in the big city as a young man who will begin a long process of training that will lead him to shed his typical provincial life traits and progressively assume the semblance of a man who sparked the fire of life which resuscitated the walking dead of his native land and replacing them within their time with actors and no longer existed as residue. With the entry into the great western metropolises, especially London, Berlin and Paris, a life worthy of being told began. In his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Baudelaire would become the first to sketch the characteristics of the citizen who best suits modern life, describing the metropolitan type as a concentration of pleasures who ignores duty and instead follows a religion of leisure.

This description could be used to sketch the characteristics of the young New Yorkers from *Gossip Girl*, though their times and places are radically different from those described above. In fact even in the series attention to pleasure, seduction, public opinion, and waste are the aspects that characterize common life. The differences all lie in the dimension assumed by this lifestyle: no longer an evolved form, though elitist, but instead an extended state of existence. A lifestyle that the metropolis first and television subsequently after gradually imposed on its inhabitants or viewers, thus making it the dominant lifestyle. As in any TV series, even *Gossip Girl*, there is a point of connection where all the intrigue arises and where all the bonds are made, "the place that creates the bond" (Maffesoli, 2007): the school. Rich and "poor," elite and those on the outside all find themselves in the same school. The metaverse that allows the mixing and confrontation of cultures that the layout of the city and its economic organization instead keep separate. Failing to consider this, *Gossip Girl* would not be different from other cult shows cut from the same cloth like *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *The O.C.* (2003-2007), and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012). But instead those who attentively followed these teen dramas could not have ignored the discontinuity that this series alone marks in comparison with its counterparts. Although the main elements of a teen drama are all present – friendly and intimate relationships, conflicts with parents, and educational environments– for the first time there relationships are facilitated: means of communication are spread and invaded. Material life, specifically the aspects on communicative platforms are intertwined and eventually fuse together. None of the protagonists, except the parents who belong to a different generation, can live without their smartphone or computer, in other words without being connected. In the seventh episode of the second season this reality is exposed in an all too obvious way: the school principal announces to all the students who are entering high school that the use of cell phones will no longer be allowed in the school building and all the students are inevitably left stunned, thinking this is some sort of bad dream and now having to tragically live detached from their own sociality. It is a scene notably portrayed with much distraught through the use of montage editing.

The following scene opens in the girls' bathroom with a student having a nervous breakdown set on by cell phone withdrawal, frantically simulating typing on the buttons of the phone but only hitting air. As she falls into depression all around her friends try to console her and help her relocate one. This is a moment that shows a previously dormant situation: digital media is the main character heard in the narration it represents the territory that the storyline is treading upon. Networks have the same role of the city in organizing the lives of the characters. We do not notice the distinction between reality and the virtual world because all that concerns that latter produces material effects and because narration assumes the point of reference of digital. This is a moment that shows a latent situation: digital media is the main protagonist of the narration because they represent the territory in which it is taking place. The network has the same value as the metropolis in organizing the lives of the protagonists; we do not notice the distinction between reality and virtuality, because all that concerns the virtual produces material effects and because narration assumes the point of reference of the digital natives, that is, of those subjects belonging to the generation that grew up with and on networks. Being a native to these networks means not having experience their disruptive advent in the electronic media landscape, hence taking the digital world as a part of their natural living space and environment. This change is reflected in the style of the tale being told: in *Gossip Girl*, the networks are integrated into the mediascape and the blog is inhabited with the same spontaneity with which the Island's streets are inhabited and imposing itself as the second environment capable of producing meaning and thus producing a "pluralisation of experience" (Scannel, 1996). In this territory, even more than in school, the placements of the subjects do not count, the identities are crushed and each is free to move in a communicative flow that is steered by instinct and senses. Social media and New York in this series cover the role of immersive worlds, complete places where you experience a complete life and have no need for foreign environments. They are self-sufficient dimensions that seem to protect and at the same time isolate their inhabitants. There is no contact or external contamination: they are immunized environments where life can express itself in its full power without fear of infection. Even the Humphrey family despite coming from Brooklyn legitimately shares the same environment. It is that small viral dose that the system is ready to take to produce the necessary antibodies, Humphrey is accepted because he does not jeopardize the security of this system. If for the time in a television series means of communication play a key role, until eventually becoming an actual protagonist, the intuition is without a doubt from the author, Josh Schwartz, who in order to give an accurate representation of today's teenagers could not separate their symbiotic lives from digital media. The entry of personal media into everyday life produces a chain of alterations in human relations. In this series, for example, the idea of secrets seems to disappear completely, which has always been winning mechanism in writing an audio-visual product. In the case of *Gossip Girl*, the blog brings to the forefront any private background information of the characters by imposing a complete sincerity in interpersonal relationships. This is why dialogues often have a certain brutality and violence that cannot be found in other TV series because digital reality pushes and

accelerates this material in a way that makes any sort of filter useless and eliminates any inhibitory brake.

### *Sentimentality and Cynicism in Digital Media*

*Gossip Girl* also displays another type of change, portrayed by the dialectical relationship between two paradigmatic figures: Dan Humphrey and Chuck Bass. Dan is surrounded by a certain aura, at times boring, and is a good guy who always does the right thing. A kind of lingering from the past that disappears in front of Chuck's imaginative force, the inventor of a nouvelle *mechanical flânerie*. Aboard this limousine, he is frequently flanked by attractive young ladies and always ready to give in to urges of pleasure. If Dan is the last remaining vestige to a well-known television tradition, one that is rooted in the likes of Ricky Cunningham, followed by Brandon Walsh, then Lucas Scott, then Chuck is a zero point in narrative television, a by-product. His character is an infuriated animal who takes life by the horns, ravages it, and leaves it to die in order to decide later on whether or not to save it, but always and exclusively out of pure enjoyment. Chuck lives in an unstable ethic that does not follow any moral compass, he is unpredictable and fascinating. His figure could in some ways conjure of images of *American Psycho* protagonist Pat Bateman, a young stockbroker in the New York financial district in the 1980s who, with shrewd madness, has fun committing brutal murders of friends, enemies, and mistresses. Chuck on the other hand, instead of expressing his dark side with violence but encloses it in an antisocial frame, produces a narration of himself in the light of day and reveals himself as a contaminant in the lives of others by others and making himself the norm through the pathos of his flesh. The young writer is the actualization of the provincial man from Simmelian memory. Relationships with the world around him would be based on sentimentality and long duration, forms of sociality that persist in modern life but appearing as the strenuous attempt to remain clinging to the past by refusing to change. The ethics of Brooklyn's youth very often seem anachronistic and adapts to the increasing technology of Manhattan that is represented in the series with difficulty. It requires a not only a strong camouflage, dynamism, and irreversibility but also a reconfiguration of its psychic apparatus and the possession of a series of features of psychological prostheses that enable it to adapt to its environment. Not unlike how it was at the beginning of the twentieth century when Georg Simmel (2009), like we have write in the first paragraph, was able to write about it by studying the nascent state of metropolitan life.

If we recall the main characters of other series of a similar genre that may have traits common to those of Chuck Bass, we would discover that any comparison is inappropriate for two reasons. Primarily, if you exclude *Beverly Hills 90210* and its spin-off, there is no teen drama with an urban setting. This makes it impossible for any comparison because New York City, understood as a great communicative platform, is the sine qua non for the existence of this new postmodern dandy figure. Urban life generates other forms of life that through their appearance and physical

features join the inorganic vibes of the city. That belonging to Chuck, moreover, is not simply a tormented existence that dramatically lives as its own projection in the future. His life is completely captured by the present, nourished by the immanence of a reality that leaves no room for an metaphysical escape. It is therefore improper to compare it to the slight tormented character of Dylan in Beverly Hills 90210 which albeit fascinating, lacks any sort of innovation as he is very much tied to a beat-generation imagery –think of his passion for surfing, vintage Porsches, Harley Davidsons, drug addiction, alcoholism, and so on– with a morality and appearance brimming with Hollywood clichés. Chuck is not a countercultural character and is less subversive. He is a true bad guy and the viewers are not interested in seeing him grow a heart but deep down want to see him persevere in his own cynicism –his truly distinctive trait.

The *kynikos* (cynic) is a figure shaped by life in a metropolis, following the changes from a state of marginal eccentricity in the first urban stages to the condition of "integrated antisocialism" in communicational metropolis. Chuck's look is a "shiny and bad" cynic because he refuses the naive glasses donned by his peers as they look into the world. This allows for a pragmatism that overwhelms every conventional limit, making him often streetwise but not in a ghetto-life sense, but exerting because of its deviance an infinite charm. Furthermore, as Peter Sloterdijk masterly writes: "in a society in which no real moral alternative is offered, and potential counter-powers are largely involved in control systems, it happens that no one is feeling outrage for the cynicisms of power. Much less or devoid of alternatives is a modern society, the greater its dose of cynicism" (Sloterdijk, 1983: 37).

The contemporary television narrative, and *Gossip Girl* in particular, is littered with figures of cynicism, lust, and evil. Characters emerging from traditional dialogues between good and evil to become increasingly complex, indefinable, and real. Their tactical ethics is the symptom of a reconfigured reality in which the overriding element of human action is no longer vision but the view: long periods cease to be the horizon that attributes meaning to existence which is instead perceived as a succession of ephemeral moments whose story is linked to the unexpected circumstance. The inscrutable seems to have lost all charm, while what is closer and more visible becomes essential for a gesture, an action, a loving relationship. Burning hedonism induces man to a relentless pursuit of pleasure: life consumes in a single instant that which brings with it the significant elements of what follows. The metropolis, cinema, and television have written and continue to rewrite the grammar of human experience by transforming it into an abstract succession of interweaving episodes in a fabric of logical events. Life goes on and every juncture contradicts its past, losing the value of totality: every single instant assumes an exclusive and self-sufficient meaning that, while tied to others through rhapsodic connections, assumes the shape of a mosaic that can be left fragmented or reorganized by a trained eye.

The effects of the metropolis and digital media immortalized by Josh Schwartz in the series can therefore be referred to as successive forms of experience. Digital networks amplify the possibilities offered by the metropolis as they exasperate them and change their quality but do

nothing but modernize them. For this reason, the viewer who approaches *Gossip Girl's* vision cannot imagine the series as a constant evocation of the anthropological traits immersed with the advent of modernity.

### **Dwelling the serialization. Metropolis and the media in the contemporary TV representations**

Considering the metropolis as the matrix of languages, technological systems and cultural and communicative processes of the twentieth century culture industry was a particularly felicitous idea of the culture and media studies. The peculiar experience lived inside it, governed by the social meaning and the temporal rhythm of the trends (Simmel), and the influence of technology on the means of expression of its production, consumption and art apparatuses (Benjamin), have set the ideal conditions for a radical transformation of the western societies. Such a context, so deeply marked by the separation between the subjective element of existence and the objective whole of the abundant metropolitan space, has given rise to a desire for a mediation, a bridge between the subject and his endless world. As known, this fracture has been fixed by the media's capability of spreading through the metropolitan social fabric (phones, radio, TV) or including more and more conspicuous masses of population within their actual or virtual space (press, cinema).

In view of these facts, it comes with no surprise that along with being the place of culture industry, the metropolis has also been the place and the subject of its narration. In the Nineties, the metropolis' function in global cultural processes seemed to fade away in favour of the post-metropolitan dimension of digital networks and the megalopolises. Right in the moment in which the metropolis and its typical media –cinema and TV– were bound to disappear according to the theories of the *apocalyptic and integrated* (Eco, 1964), New York came back at the centre of the stage thanks to the so called *golden age* of TV serialization. *Sex and the City* had already revealed this new tendency that would have found its actual realization in the period that goes from *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007) to *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013-), of course including *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008), *Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men* and other countless productions.

As noticed in the previous paragraphs, then, New York has to be meant as a virtual metropolis and a urban and cultural symbol of the twentieth century. Historically, it has been the place in which the main cultural, social, political and aesthetical innovations linked to the development of the media system were given rise and found their realization. For these reasons, the present work has aimed at analysing the TV series *Mad Men* in order to describe how, in the New York of the Sixties, consumerism and the mainstream media (Cinema, TV, Radio, Press) were the pillars on which the mass society built itself. In accordance with the same logic, in the second part, the analysis of *Gossip Girl* has meant to investigate and show the unchanging centrality of the metropolis in the most recent social and cultural processes driven by the digital media and



the communicative modes of the social networks. The narration of the two historical periods, notwithstanding the differences that is fatally possible to encounter, describes an interesting circularity between the city, the historical-social phenomena that occur within it, and the medial forms of representation that describe it. In a way, these three elements establish a relation of in-turn influence in which it appears impossible to distinguish a causal succession. A metropolis like New York is thus the scenario and the protagonist of the TV representations at the same time. It is therefore possible to say that it continues to be the dominant territory and a source of inspiration for the contemporary television.

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