

The Comedic Compromise.

Politics and Comedy in the History of Italian Television (1969-1982)

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This doctoral thesis explores the relationship between comedy and politics in the history of Italian television from 1969 to 1982, focusing on television entertainment and the ways in which comedians, professionals, and variety shows engaged with politics in a context deeply intertwined with the party system (Ortoleva 1995, Menduni 2018, Grasso 2019). Comedy reflected and reinterpreted the crises, impulses and transformations that affected Italy at a time when television itself was undergoing changes with the introduction of colour and the end of the public broadcasting monopoly. Television institutions, political fragmentation, censorship, changes in political communication and the new public role of comedians all influenced television comedy, which at the same time was immersed in a constant process of comedic self-reflection. Politics, on the other hand, sought to overcome its crisis of legitimacy by progressively aligning itself with the medium and adapting to its dynamics: its relationship with mass culture, its spectacular horizon and its deeply playful – and therefore comedic – dimension. Against this background, three case studies are presented: the political impersonations of Alighiero Noschese; the history of the Second Channel under Massimo Fichera and the comic programmes it promoted, such as

Onda libera (1976-1977) by Roberto Benigni, the theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame (1978) and *L'altra domenica* (1976-1980) by Renzo Arbore; and finally, the widely popular variety shows of Sandra Mondaini and Raimondo Vianello.

The first part of the thesis is dedicated to the methodological and historiographical debate. The comedy programmes retrieved from Rai Teche's digital archive were analysed through a multifocal approach that brings to the cultural history horizon (Sorba and Mazzini 2020) insights from cultural studies of the media industry (Caldwell 2008; Barra, Bonini, and Splendore 2016), comedy studies (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009; Marx 2019), and political communication studies (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Tryon 2016). In order to connect the programmes to the broader industrial and political context, a central focus has been placed on backstage processes, where a constant negotiation takes place between "production cultures" that find mediation in the broadcasted television programme. Television comedy itself invites us to recognise "the intrinsic symmetries between the cultures of production and the production of culture" (Mann 2008, 24) in shows that are rich in insider references and industrially reflexive, asking the audience to recognise comedy in both



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its texts and its production conditions.

However, the backstage presented by (and on) the media is always a metaphor for the complexity of the production process, whose historical reconstruction requires the triangulation of different sources. Newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera* and *L'Unità*, and trade magazines such as *Radiocorriere*, *Altrimedia* or *Variety*, contain reports and interviews with comedians, professionals and executives, offering self-interpretations and explanations of decision-making processes. These are complemented by company histories, autobiographies and memoirs — sources that, although partial, illustrate the opacity and non-linearity of production processes. Rai's paper documentation is often unavailable, and some key documents were found in political archives, while consulting the Dario Fo and Franca Rame archives was also central. In addition, parliamentary acts can be valuable: when the spectre of censorship arises in public broadcasting, as in the case of Dario Fo and Roberto Benigni, parliamentary questions and debates can be read as re-mediations of production and distribution routines.

The amount of material collected for the period 1969-1982, as well as the need to maintain a coherent media and political context as a backdrop, obliged the research to focus within the framework of public broadcasting, stopping at the threshold of a phase strongly influenced by the Rai-Fininvest competition and the renewal of television languages. Although the broader landscape was considered, certain comedic experiences carried more weight in shaping the tension between comedy, politics and television. As such, the analysis prioritised exemplary cases of general trends. The study questioned whether the relationship between television, politics and comedy existed only in the mind of the researcher or was also present in the thoughts, intentions and practices of the era's protagonists. Three thematic cores emerged from this investigation, which are interlinked yet coherent enough to be analysed in separate chapters.

The reconstruction of the pre-reform Rai period follows Alighiero Noschese, the first to impersonate politicians on television: his experience reflects a challenging pursuit of proximity between comedian and institutions, through shows on the Programma nazionale like *Doppia coppia* (1969), *Formula due* (1973), and *Canzonissima* (1970-1972). Noschese inaugurated a central paradigm for the television relationship between politics and comedy: an ostentatious closeness and permeability with the political class, originating from the television visibility of the politicians themselves and the illusion of physical, character and verbal overlap between the imitator and the imitated. The analysis of the second channel under Massimo Fichera, on the other hand, follows a plurality of micro-cases, including the programmes of Fo, Benigni and Arbore. By juxtaposing the construction of the network and the launch of experimental programmes, the study explores the bilateral relations between these processes, how the project of a socialist network manifested itself in the comedic contents, and how the dynamics of the programmes influenced the evolution of the project, which, unlike Noschese's experience, was configured in terms of a television, comic and political 'disruption' closely linked to the implementation of the Rai reform. The third case focuses instead on the programmes of Sandra Mondaini and Raimondo Vianello, starting with *Tante scuse* (Programma Nazionale, 1974). With the help of writers Italo Terzoli and Enrico Vaime, the pair carried out a meta-TV operation, dismantling the rigid logic of variety shows and the selection process that takes place behind the scenes. They emphasised the difficulty of doing political satire on public television, the folly of any attempt to do so and, finally, the renunciation of political commitment. They maintained a relationship with politics characterised by distance and disengagement, but politics inevitably came into play, especially when it was stubbornly denied — a symmetry between their story and that of commercial

television, which they joined in 1982, never to leave again.

The research results illustrate, in the end, that the 1970s were crucial for the emergence of a highly diverse comedy, spanning styles, genres and objectives: classic variety shows gave way to programmes that mixed information and entertainment, while humour became increasingly pervasive in a mature medium that constantly interprets itself and the reality surrounding it, reducing everything to a banal, domestic dimension. Television comedy did indeed emerge as a key player in the collision between politics and spectacle, but the relationship between laughter and power

remained precarious, oscillating between self-ironic participation and coercive intervention by politicians. This dynamic also highlighted comedians' relationship with their context and audience, sparking debates about who their interlocutors should be — whether a mass audience or a passionate niche — and reflecting different views about the social role of comedy. As comedians became prominent figures, their humour was labelled as 'satire' or subject to 'censorship', two catchwords that underlined the new public significance of comedy, which entered the national debate, reflecting and channelling wider political tensions.

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