

## 18. “No Pulp Scenes on Raiuno!”

The Case of *Cuori*, an Italian Medical Drama on Broadcast Television<sup>1</sup>

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### ◀ ABSTRACT

Since its inception, broadcast television in Italy has cherished and safeguarded its pedagogical vocation. Among its aims, Rai is compelled to provide a plausible and accurate (or verisimilar) representation of Italy’s national identity and sociocultural history throughout its programming. This function has been manifestly accomplished through the news and documentaries. In the last two decades, however, more experimentation has been carried out on TV dramas. A peculiar example is the 2021 medical drama *Cuori* (Riccardo Donna), co-produced by Rai Fiction and Aurora Tv, which aired on Raiuno’s primetime. Set in 1960s Turin, the series is inspired by true historical events regarding a group of Italian pioneers of medicine who revolutionized the field of heart surgery, experimenting with new techniques and challenging the limits of science of the time. Building on an extensive fieldwork research conducted on the set during the shooting of the second season of the series, we wish to focus on how a media company as Rai can adapt the format and narrative structure of a contemporary medical drama such as *Cuori* to its public service mission. We will address this issue from a production standpoint which will analyze the use of a multiplicity of historical sources and consultants to develop the plot, set design, costumes, and actor performances. Our preliminary findings show that a calculated blend of historical accuracy with the standards of the medical genre was set in place to appeal to a wide Italian audience.

### KEYWORDS

Medical drama; public service; national history; production strategies; ethnographic fieldwork.

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<sup>1</sup> This work is the result of a collaboration between the authors in all parts of the essay, which was conceived and written cooperatively.

## Introduction

Turin, Italy, 1967. The race for the heart transplant is the dream of Cesare Corvara, chief of cardiology at The Molinette Hospital and founder of the first Italian department of cardiac surgery, together with Alberto Ferrari, his most talented protege. The arrival of Delia Brunello, one of the first heart specialists returning from the United States and endowed with an extraordinary diagnostic ability, will soon unsettle the hospital balance. Set in the fervid atmosphere of the Italian Sixties, the series develops around high-risk surgical interventions, subtle power struggles, ties of friendship, and past love affairs.

The concept of *Cuori (Hearts)*, period-medical tv drama aired in 2021 by the first channel of the Italian public broadcaster, takes inspiration from true historical events regarding a group of pioneers of medicine who challenge the limits of the medical practice of the time by revolutionizing the field of heart surgery. Those were the years in which cardiology was making the most advancements and its main exponents became actual stars in the society of the time. Big personalities, exceptional skills, and the constant challenge to write new pages in the history of medicine are only a few of the topics featured in the successful tv series *Cuori*.

By no means exhaustive, this article provides an explorative account and examination of the preliminary results of a research project started in 2021. We conducted a qualitative analysis of this product, focusing on the intersection of its main textual elements with specific aspects of its production chain, and offer some final interpretative possibilities. Building on two fieldwork expeditions conducted on the set during the shooting of its second season of the series, we focus primarily on the way that a media company such as Rai can adapt the format and narrative structure of a contemporary medical content to its public service mission. The inquiry delves around two different research question, concerning (i) the positioning of



the case study within the editorial policies of the State-owned broadcaster and (ii) the narrative use of history, both in a perspective of genre and in the philological reconstruction which underlies the whole production.

Since its inception, broadcast tv in Italy has cherished and safeguarded its pedagogical vision, also through a meticulous representation of the Country throughout its programming, especially in the case of tv dramas and *Cuori* is no exception. The series is coherent with a typically national fictional *corpus*, as demonstrated in the first section of the chapter, an aspect that sheds light on the specificities of health-related titles in the context of a public corporation service and of its serial production.

After some details related to the research design and a methodological outline, the core of the contribution explores the use of a multiplicity of historical sources and consultants to develop the plot. In particular, based on the in-depth interviews conducted with professionals and other stakeholders, attention will be drawn to the audiovisual materials – often sponsored by Rai itself – deployed before and during the creation of the series. Our first findings show that a calculated blend of historical accuracy, the structure of the medical drama, and a substantial dose of romanticised subplots was developed to appeal to a wide Italian audience. In conclusion, we will address some final remarks on the aspects which still need to be expanded, mostly in respect to future research avenues.

## **Which Medical Drama? The Editorial Positioning of *Cuori***

Commissioned by Rai Fiction, *Cuori* is a co-production between Rai and Aurora tv (part of multinational tv factory Banijay), written by Fabrizio Cestaro, Mauro Casiraghi and Simona Coppini and directed by Riccardo Donna.<sup>2</sup> Among others, the cast include Daniele Pecci, Matteo Martari and Pilar Fogliati, and the series was created thanks to the support of Piemonte Film Commission and Rai's local production centre in Turin. The first season of *Cuori* was broadcasted on flagship channel Raiuno on a weekly basis and in the format of two episodes/evening, from October 17 to November 28, 2021, with an average audience share of 18.4%;<sup>3</sup> the programming of the second season is scheduled, also on Raiuno, for the first week of October 2023 (and, thus, will not be included in the analysis since it was not yet released at the time this chapter was written).

Two are the components which, at an editorial level, are worth noticing. First, *Cuori* is a domestic, self-produced drama – or “fiction”, as it has commonly been referred to since the early '90s (Carini, 2013) – which encompasses and reflects its broadcaster's mandate. In line with Rai's programming, *Cuori* should accordingly be framed as a product called upon to strengthen the public service mandate and commitment. It should not be forgotten, indeed, that “contemporary Italian tv fiction production is the result of both a long historical tradition and a complex broadcasting scenario” (Barra and Scaglioni 2015: 65). The classic pedagogical matrix of the public service has often arisen in “hagiographic miniseries, socially committed fiction and relevant comedies” (Ibid.), which became emblematic genres of Rai's productions and distinct editorial lines. Public service operates as a cultural bond and civic aggregator in a landscape increasingly dominated by digital fragmentation, in the attempt to forge a sense of communal belonging while shaping Italian citizenry, fulfilling criteria of transversality, inclusivity and connection with the whole territory (see Buonanno 2012a, 2012b, Cardini 2004, Colombo and Scaglioni 2008, Grasso 2004, Menduni 1998). In the wake of the *sceneggiato* footprint, public tv drama is first and foremost required to construct and reflect a

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<sup>2</sup> The genesis of the series (concept and first contacts with Rai) dates back to 2017, as emerged during an interview with the producer Giannandrea Pecorelli.

<sup>3</sup> This was quite a satisfactory result, in line with the average share audience of the channel.

national epic, against the backdrop of a “common denominator programming, appealing to all social groups and unifying its viewers” (Bettetini 1990: 115) and according to the audience’s “needs of organization, interpretation, symbolic mediation and understanding of everyday life” (Silverstone 1999: 41). Such a distinctive “Italian style”, perfectly embodied by a title like *Cuori*, can be traced back to the context of its broadcasting channel, Raiuno. As clarified in Rai Fiction’s guidelines,<sup>4</sup> as well as in the company annual budget report<sup>5</sup> and in the editorial presentations of the last few years,<sup>6</sup> “Raiuno targets a general viewership, totalizing the highest geographical and population coverage in Italy [...]”. Thus, “Raiuno’s offer comprises popular stories directed to all the segments of the audience, strong in terms of values and able to portray weaknesses and hardships, with recognizable but not stereotyped characters.” Furthermore, “Raiuno is a prestigious and reliable channel, asked to deliver with respect and elegance its contents, detecting the spectators’ demands with sensitivity, professionalism, and responsibility.” Those signature features are all upheld by the case here analyzed, starting with the contamination of genres displayed by the series, in line with the tendency of blending narrative strands that engage the viewer through original textual hybridizations and (re)-compositions. From this standpoint, Rai’s fictional genres are not conceived as isolated factors, but rather as tightly interdependent entities.<sup>7</sup> Suspended between tradition and progress, continuity and rupture, *Cuori* seems to follow a unique path towards medical drama. At a closer look, *Cuori* features a hybridisation of genres, incorporating a marked romantic strand focused on the private experiences of the characters involved in the medical main thematic line. This romance-filled emotional center provides a warm and engaging narration, developing what may be defined as a “tabloidization”

<sup>4</sup> Rai Fiction’s guidelines are available here: <https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>5</sup> Rai’s financial documents are available here: <https://www.rai.it/trasparenza/Financials-b5a1b45c-a875-4d42-ba62-e51518b57fa7.html> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>6</sup> Reference materials can be reached at the following links: [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1688733601975\\_Rai%20Fiction.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1688733601975_Rai%20Fiction.pdf); [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1656340198662\\_Fiction.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1656340198662_Fiction.pdf); [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1624537267327\\_FICTION%202022%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1624537267327_FICTION%202022%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf); [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1624353498300\\_PALINSESTI%20RAI%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1624353498300_PALINSESTI%20RAI%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf) (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>7</sup> This tendency is confirmed by Rai’s editorial scheme (see <https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html>, last accessed 28-07-23).

of the medical genre, as Valentina Esposito underlines in a review published on *Cinematographe.it*:

The story of *Cuori* is as ancient as the world, but so universal that it appeals to every spectator: the eternal fight between reason and sentiment. [...] *Cuori* is a sentimental medical drama, and its vintage setting and historical flavour offer a vivid aesthetic. [...] For these reasons, *Cuori* is a promise and a pleasant break from other Rai's productions, which always tune on the same frequencies. [translation by the authors]<sup>8</sup>

Appealing to the same taste for melodrama which made the *fotoromanzi* so popular in Italy, the consistency of the series with the hospital genre is mostly visible in the professional dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Once more, *Cuori* seems to certify how the perimeter of the genre bends and vanishes when attempting to label it, exhibiting a constant tension between fixed elements and variations. The audience of Raiuno face what could be defined as the 'spectacle' of medicine, commodified for the use and consumption both of the medium and its average audience, not devoid of some representational limits (e.g., the omission of obscene or pulp scenes). Confirming the genre "isotopies" identified by Pescatore and Rocchi (2019) as the grounds of the typical plot structure, the medical plot of *Cuori* appear as a pretext to narrate something else, from love affairs to collective stories of social empowerment, that draw parallels between the ethical dilemmas of that time with contemporary aporias raised today by genetics and by scientific innovations more broadly. Whether being "realistic or ridiculous" (Harris and Willoughby 2009), medical details are surely functional to the attractiveness of the product, thanks to the pathetical components intrinsic in the genre. Moreover, in *Cuori* the hospital emerges as a microcosm where emotions are heightened, acting as an emotional booster for spectators.

It has been highlighted that *Cuori* adheres to medical genre structures, mixing horizontal and single-episode narratives, while breaking away from some of its canons, resulting in an inter-genre and thematically spurious

<sup>8</sup> The full review is available here: <https://www.cinematographe.it/focus-serie/cuori-storia-vera-fiction-rai/> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>9</sup> According to Rai's editorial lines, the professional genre "develops around organisations or professional institutions with the aim of representing human and business relation dealing with those universes" (see <https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html>, last accessed 28-07-23).

series. Some additional elements seem to confirm this thesis. Firstly, the depiction of gender equality and the fight against male prejudice embodied by the Delia's character and her fight against gender bias in the workplace (analyzed in detail in the following section). Her fight against prejudice is meant to reflect the societal changes taking place in 1960s Italy such as generational conflicts, women's rights and the breaking down of barriers between public and private spaces. Secondly, *Cuori* offers an insight into the biopic genre, understood by Rai as "the celebration of exemplary characters or leading exponents of the past" and of the "Italian genius".<sup>10</sup> This becomes apparent when thinking about the real people and events that have inspired the series, which echo the commitment of the public service in shaping a shared national identity. Memory, present and future thus converge creating an aspirational atmosphere that revel the self-evident educational tendency of all Rai's productions.

Lastly, *Cuori* also shares some of the features of the period drama by setting the events and characters in a near past. The subplot, dotted by the character's private stories, is a mixture of collective reference able to cater to an intergenerational audience by exploiting the so-called "retromania effect", which foregrounds an optimistic and positive portrayal of the 1960s.

As John Caughie writes about the period drama, "history becomes the present in costume" (quoted in Buonanno 2012a: 122). The rehabilitation of history becomes here the added value of the series, establishing a syntony with the current sensitivity, in a time dominated by a sense of uncertainty and disorientation towards the future. When retrospective, the televised past presents a reassuring vision of a stable and comforting landscape, acting as a connector between modernity and memory, which enacts and renews the original public service charge. *Cuori*, therefore, heralds the cultural mission of Rai as a socially committed drama able to attract large audience thanks to an edifying tone and plot, as Paolo Sutera reports on TvBlog:

Undoubtedly, *Cuori* is a travel back in time, but the historical context becomes an occasion to actively catch the attention of today's audience. [...] No futuristic instruments, nor new technologies, but a way of living this profession with courage [...]: this allows the series to develop without the

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<sup>10</sup> A detailed explanation of Rai fiction genre's is provided here: <https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html> (last accessed 28-07-23).

anxiety of having to compete with contemporary hospital seriality. [...] *Cuori's* story is suspended between the past and the present. [translation by the authors]<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, *Cuori* does ultimately become a magnificent historical novel, which sacrifices complexity for accessibility in both content and language, especially concerning its least accessible medical ingredients: the inevitable compromise that a mainstream tv series cannot avoid suiting large audiences.

### **Fieldwork and Methodology: a “Hands-On” Approach**

We had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork research at the Lumiq studios in Turin on two different occasions (November 14, 2022 and January 16, 2023), which allowed us to consolidate our relationships with the above-the-line professionals and creative figures, expand our network of informants, and co-reference the possible changes in the work discourses and practices on the set between the beginning and end of the shooting (Caldwell 2008).

The fieldwork experience was facilitated by our connection with the producer of the tv series, Giannandrea Pecorelli (founder and current CEO of Aurora Tv), whom we met during a previous research project,<sup>12</sup> which led us to the set of another period daily drama: *Il paradiso delle signore* (Rai1, 2015-). This previous experience is worth mentioning as it allows to draw

<sup>11</sup> The full reviews is available here: <https://www.tvblog.it/post/cuori-recensione> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>12</sup> Fieldwork research at the Videa Studios (Formello, Rome) on the set of the TV series *Il Paradiso delle Signore*. The research falls within the Bologna unit's work of the State-funded 2017 PRIN *F-ACTOR. Forme dell'attorialità mediale contemporanea. Formazione, professionalizzazione, discorsi sociali in Italia (2000-2020)* (*F-ACTOR. Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourses in Italy (2000-2020)*). Further information about the project (Principal Investigator: Francesco Pitassio; Responsible of the Bologna unit: Luca Barra) can be found here: <https://italianperformers.it/it/> (last accessed 28-07-23). On the website, a couple of reports edited by Emiliano Rossi about the on-field experiences at the Videa and Lumiq Studios can also be reached (<https://italianperformers.it/it/articoli/la-via-italiana-al-medical-depoca-visita-sul-set-di-cuori/> and <https://italianperformers.it/it/articoli/tutti-i-colori-del-paradiso-sul-set-di-un-daily-drama/>, both last accessed 28-07-23).



insightful parallelisms at the productive level. Although there are no formal crossovers in the series (even though the epoch partially overlaps), clearly the work relationships established between professionals during the shooting of *Il paradiso delle signore* have created a network of alliances that carried over to *Cuori* (Holdaway 2017) and to other tv contents produced by Aurora Tv. Let us think for example at actors such as Neva Leoni, Marco Bonini, and Alessandro Tersigni who have worked on both sets. The first fieldwork, thus, opened the doors to the set of *Cuori*, privilege that can be connected to two main factors. On the one hand, in Italy there seems to be an underlying desire shared by television producers to validate their work both within and outside the industry. As noted in previous experiences (Farinacci 2022), the university is often considered as an important gatekeeper in the cultural context. This aspect resonated true particularly due to Rai's national public service mandate, "due to this peculiar expectation, the interviews disclosed an unexpected wealth of information that might have been otherwise inaccessible" (Ibid.: 151). On the other hand, the knowhow and reputational capital (Ebbers and Wijnberg 2012) that we gained through the experience on the set of *Il paradiso delle signore* gave us more freedom and independence during the fieldwork, as we were granted full access to the set, actors, and creatives working in the different departments.

The approach adopted addresses television and media as complex entanglements of production and distribution cultures (Caldwell 2008, Szczepanik and Vonderau 2013, Barra, Bonini and Splendore 2016); in virtue of this, the instrument of in-depth interviews was prioritized to collect evidence and scientific data on the specific case study here discussed. In particular, the "studying down" approach (Mayer 2008; see also Nader 1969), which involves interactions primarily with producers and creatives, was implemented by more informal conversations and long observations of the shooting practices on set. These unofficial exchanges became possible due to the mediation of an intern, who arranged our visits and meetings at the studios. Her presence impacted the research on two levels. On the one hand, her participation during the semi-structured interviews allowed us to establish a more informal setting limiting the formality and control over the conversations that the presence of higher standing above-the-line professionals would have ensured. Starting with a "meeting between professionals" dynamic (Bruun 2016, Kraub 2018), the semi-structured interviews were enriched by personal anecdotes especially during our second visit. On the other hand, however, her lower standing position, combined with our status as young researchers,

did not exercise sufficient pressure on some of the informants to find time to talk to us, creating long waits between each interaction.

The data collected on the field was then supplemented by follow-up interviews, email conversations, and the collecting of archival material that was used by the screen players, set designers, and costume designers to create the series. From the perspective of media production studies, the constant triangulation of the various sources implemented represents a fundamental methodological standard. On this basis, an analysis of additional paratextual sources was also accomplished, with a specific focus on trade and promotional documents (i.e., press kits, media releases, advertising), as well as on semi-public industrial documents dealing with the commissioner and its broadcasting strategies (i.e., schedules, marketing plans, ratings). Finally, to better contextualize its reception, some journalistic accounts and reviews of *Cuori* were included in the desk research.

## **The Historical Validity of *Cuori*: Sources and Philological Reconstruction**

*Cuori* is a medical period drama that follows the genesis of the scientific and technical discoveries that lead in the late 1960s to the first heart transplant and to the development of an artificial heart in Turin's cardiac surgery department of the Molinette hospital. As previously mentioned, this product tries to find a balance between historical fact, a major concern for Rai, the medical genre, and melodrama (Byrne et al. 2022: 2). The tv series follows the story of a group of doctors who wants to revolutionize medicine. The historical narration of the innovative surgeries is mixed with a fictitious soapy running plot that follows the power struggles between surgeons, the rekindling of past loves, friendships, and infidelities all set in Italy's near past.<sup>13</sup>

As Joseph Turow asserts, “medicine as a profession is very much in style on television” (2010: 1). The interest in this genre is not a recent phenomenon, “there has been a long relationship between medicine and the small screen, and many of tv's most popular shows, on both sides of the Atlantic, have been medical in focus” (Byrne et al. 2022: 1-2).

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<sup>13</sup> Compare the tagline of the series available at: [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/16245372673\\_27\\_FICTION%202022%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/16245372673_27_FICTION%202022%20AFF%20RID%20OK.pdf) (last accessed 28-07-23).

American medical drama has certainly made strides in gaining popularity among national and global audiences (Rocchi 2019). In this national context, the medical genre has proven to be a powerful outlet for sociopolitical critique by narrating how current news impact the characters (and in turn also the audience) personal experiences (Turow 2010). Popular tv shows including *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *New Amsterdam* (NBC, 2018-2023), just to mention a few examples, incorporate and discuss in their plots controversial policy (such as the 2022 overturn of abortion rights in the United States), or injustices connected to the privatized healthcare system, or the racial discrimination inherent to specific treatments and diagnoses. While shows set in the present become "soft power" assets, capable of swaying public opinion to demand social change, period medical dramas function in a slightly different way.

Generally, historical dramas have been recognized as key role players within national audiovisual cultures across the Western World, acting both as an international 'shop window' and as catalysts to "generate major debates at home on the role of the past in contemporary national identity construction" (Bangert et al. 2016, xviii). These products tend to present the past as a "visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films" (Higson 1993: 109). In the case of medical dramas this nostalgic fascination for the past is ever so curious as they explore "aspects of history [*that*] the modern viewer is least likely to feel nostalgic for; these pre-antibiotic, pre-anaesthetic, often unsanitary pasts are not places most of us would want to be a patient in" (Byrne et al. 2022: 2). Thus, in such products the attractiveness of the past does not so much lay in reliving the hardships of pre-modern medicine, but in the exploration of "gender and class politics that surrounded patient care, the moral and philosophical implications of scientific advances and experimentation, and the changing nature of the increasingly powerful medical profession" (Ibid.), as well as "the attractiveness of the leads and their romantic entanglements [*that*] help us to forget or forgive some of the less pleasant historical realities of the past under consideration" (Ibid.: 5).

In other words, medical period dramas represent issues that are still pertinent today both to offer commentaries on the issues surrounding medicine in the present day, and to retrace and praise the scientific innovations achieved within specific national contexts. In fact, period medical dramas such as *Cuori* "showcase doctors, nurses, and midwives at the forefront of modernizing their professions, sometimes risking their own lives to save

others” (Ibid.) in a way that celebrates a country’s past achievements and consolidate its shared national identity, as detailed the previous sections.

In this direction move most of Rai’s self-produced products and international co-productions. As mentioned above, Rai’s public service charter as the Italian Republic broadcaster requires stringent guidelines to follow. One of the regulations that Rai’s service contract must follow, involves the creation of products that provide a plausible and truthful representation of the present and past Italian cultural context and identity. Rai’s attention towards broadcasting films and tv series that feature historically accurate, or



at least verisimilar, required the above-the-line creators and artisans of *Cuori* to engage in extensive archival research to write the script, construct the set design, and train the actors.

Against this backdrop, one of the goals of *Cuori* is to portray the historical events that lead to the development of the first Italian artificial heart. The race towards this medical innovation is narrated following the professional and private stories of the main characters of the series: Cesare Corvara and Alberto Ferraris, who are inspired by two historical figures, respectively Achille Mario Dogliotti – the first doctor in the world to perfect the application of the heart-lung machine for extracorporeal circulation – and Angelo Actis Dato, who developed a series of patents in the field of cardiac surgery (including the artificial heart, designed together with the engineer Roberto Bosio, and the first Italian pacemaker, which will be narrated in season two). The character of Delia, instead, is based on the life of Helen Brooke Taussig, an American pioneer of pediatric cardiology in the 1940s, who, having lost her hearing, listened to the heartbeat through her fingers – a skill that has been fictionalized in the series as Delia's perfect pitch.

To ensure a high degree of authenticity, the production of the series involved extensive documentation and assistance from medical professionals. The son of Angelo, Guglielmo Actis Dato – current chief cardiac surgeon at The Molinette hospital – was invited to actively participate as a consultant on the set along with Gino Lavista, a very young perfusionist, employed in the 1960s to control the machinery in Professor Dogliotti's operating room.<sup>14</sup> In fact, many of the cases featured in the episodes were taken both from the private and clinical notes of Angelo Actis Dato and Gino Lavista, as well as from actual footage that was shot during the operations recorded in the documentary *Caso 127*,<sup>15</sup> and from other source material such as the book *Viaggio nel cuore. Storia e storie della cardiocirurgia*, a historical account written in 2012 by Ugo Filippo Tesler. As the TV series editor confirms during our interview, "every case that is described in *Cuori* comes from a story by Angelo Actis Dato, like in the case of the cross-circulation between the newlyweds" (Cristiano del Monte, editor)<sup>16</sup> that we see in epi-

<sup>14</sup> A full description of the plot is published on *Radiocorriere Tv* (no. 40, year 90, 04-07-2021), [https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1633336843531\\_RdTv\\_N40\\_US.pdf](https://www.rai.it/dl/doc/1633336843531_RdTv_N40_US.pdf) (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>15</sup> *Caso 127*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2NaG1OJNzg> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>16</sup> All interviews in this work have been translated by the authors from Italian.



sode two. Furthermore, all the scans and ECGs performed in the series are part of Actis Dato archival source material. Even the audio recordings of the heartbeat's defects that Delia hears from the patients are “absolutely realistic [...] for every heart ailment the audio comes from real cases”<sup>17</sup> (Cristiano del Monte, editor).

In addition to relying on the images drawn from *Caso 127* and on the expertise of its scientific supervisors, Rai has made extensive use of its own archival material: Teche (the company owned video library). Other au-

<sup>17</sup> Interview held at the Lumiq studios (Turin), January 16, 2023.

dio-visual resources used to create *Cuori*'s plot were the reportage *1968. L'anno del cuore* (aired by Rai in its titular year), the documentary *All'estero per guarire* (also broadcasted by the public service in 1968) and other video fragments showing cardiovascular technologies of that time.

Let us look, for instance, at episode 13 when on December 3, 1967 the news breaks of the Italian defeat in the run for the heart transplant by the hand of Dr. Christiaan Barnard at the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa.<sup>18</sup> The characters find out about this extraordinary medical achievement on television where the footage playing is the authentic news feed that Rai broadcasted on that day (which also acts in the series as a sort of tele-medicine tool).<sup>19</sup> Thus, when watching the series all the audiovisual media inserted in the narration are archival materials either coming from Rai Teche or from the personal documentation of the Dato family, which originate as a high-impact metalinguistic device, deployed also in the promotional clips prepared by the digital department of Rai.<sup>20</sup>

The narration of the breakthroughs in the medical fields are accompanied in the TV series by representations of the changing Italian sociocultural context of those years. First, it discusses the ethical controversy that surrounded heart transplants with a strong and open opposition coming from the Catholic Church, which saw in the harvesting of a beating heart a form of murder. This ethical debate is clearly shown in several episodes: when the bishop of Turin refuses to undergo surgery at The Molinette hospital because such research is being developed (01x03); when the Head of the University of Turin refuses to host a conference on the topic (01x05); when a delegation of Catholic doctors abruptly interrupts the conference demanding to shut down the project (01x06), and at the end of the series when a family withdraws their consent to donate their son's heart for Dr. Corvara's own transplant (01x16).

<sup>18</sup> The success of Barnard's surgery found a wide coverage within Rai's internal and external publication, as emerges from the archive of *La nostra Rai* magazine, house organ for employees (archive research held by the authors on May 2023).

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, *Christiaan Barnard, il cardiocirurgo che effettuò il primo trapianto di cuore* on Rai Teche's video collection, <https://www.teche.rai.it/2021/09/christiaan-barnard-il-cardiocirurgo-che-effettuo-il-primo-trapianto-di-cuore/> (last accessed 28-07-23).

<sup>20</sup> As underlined by our interviewees, the promotional material of the series was conceived to offer a "full overlapping" between the actual frames of *Cuori* and the original audiovisual materials of the epoch broadcasted by Rai.

Within the context of the medical practice in Italy, *Cuori* also touches on problematic issue of mental illness, which is narrated through the story of Alberto's sister who is afflicted by depression. In the 1960's mental illness was vastly treated with the controversial electroshock therapy, which was performed behind the closed doors of mental institutions. For a reform of the psychiatric system, Italy will have to wait until 1978 when Parliament approved the Basaglia Law (Mental Health Act), which imposed the closing down of all psychiatric hospitals to be gradually replaced with a range of community-based services. This topic is only partially developed in this first installment, but it is further explored in the second season.<sup>21</sup>

As already mentioned, another social issue depicted in the narration is related to the social standing of women both in the healthcare system and in Italian society more broadly. Although there is no outright reference to the feminist movement, which started to become vocal in those years, the issue is addressed on different levels: in the anthology plot when, for instance, the issue of women reproductive rights (abortion in Italy won't be legalized until 1978) is brought to the forefront when one of the nurses becomes pregnant outside of wedlock; in the running plot when the partially fictionalized character of Delia struggles to affirm her status among the colleagues and hospital staff (a plotline that reflects more contemporary sensibilities).

From the storytelling point of view, medical tv series have privileged different gazes onto the medical world depending on the decades when they were produced. Contrarily to the time period depicted in the series, *Cuori* seems to blend the narrative structures of 1960s and 1970s medical dramas, which focused on the “political-economic environment” (Turow 2010: 3) of the medical profession, with a more contemporary sensitivity towards the “doctors' personal lives and the time that doctors must establish relationships with patients” (Ibid.) – a shift that is detectable in medical dramas produced from the 2000s onward.

This openness towards the interworlds of the physicians, however, does not fully follow the more post-modern approaches that contemporary period dramas have embraced, that is understanding “precepts of fact, truth and history [*as*] carry[*ing*] the same status as invention, fable and myth, and any rigidity or distinction in relation to these terms collapses” (Cooke and

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<sup>21</sup> See the editorial presentation of Rai's 2023/2024 season available here: <https://www.rai.it/portale/La-fabbrica-delle-storie-86dc82f3-3f7a-4f7a-9b06-bf21e4185832.html> (last accessed 28-07-23).



Stone 2016: 259). However, we could venture to say that there is a peculiar "Rai way" to approach post-modern heritage dramas, which adopts a slight banding of historical facts to appeal to modern audiences as in the case of the construction of Delia's character. Through Delia, in fact, the series leans towards a more contemporary sensibility for gender equality by narrating her struggle that a gifted female cardiologist had to face to gain the respect of the all-male surgical team of *The Molinette*, as the actress Pilar Fogliati underlines:

Delia arrives from the States, and in America [...] a woman is more socially accepted, jobs and so on. So, she arrives at the hospital wearing an open lab coat, a mini skirt, and shows no fear in speaking in front of men simply because she is strong, because she is very competent, and she cannot believe it when she sees that not only her colleagues but [*also*] her patients feel calmer being operated on or diagnosed by a man. So the social thought that was well rooted, and the beauty of this series in my opinion, is that I didn't want to interpret a pissed off Delia who screams and says "you have to respect me", but I wanted her to show how she uses silence and her intelligence in a very effective way, that is, "I am competent", "I give you my diagnosis which is the right one". So her work will speak for itself.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the director of the series, Riccardo Donna, seems to confirm those reflections: "[...] Delia has the perfect pitch, as many musicians, and that's why she does not auscultate: [...] a prodigy of medicine who is not worried to wear a mini-skirt on the job".<sup>23</sup>

To adhere more closely to Italy's medical and social context, which exceptionally witnessed the presence of women doctors, Delia's character had to be written as exceptional from different points of view. Firstly, she possesses the unusual and fictional gift of the perfect pitch, and secondly, she underwent her medical training in the United States. The historical figure of Helen Brooke Taussig, from which the character of Delia takes inspiration, is unsurprisingly also North American. Thus, coming from an apparent more egalitarian research environment in the United States, the character of Delia – both localized and globalized – represents a *unicum* for her gift and expertise

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<sup>22</sup> Interview held at the Lumiq studios (Turin) January 16, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Interview to Riccardo Donna available as a podcast here: <https://www.spreaker.com/user/10480135/intervista-a-riccardo-donna> (last accessed 28-07-23).

acquired abroad, as highlighted in episode 7 in a dialogue between Corvara and Cavalier Tosi, the investor from the Fiat automotive manufacturer:

Corvara: “[...] in Houston, the doctor [*Delia Brunello*] worked with the research group that is developing the artificial heart, [...] she knows more than anyone else here”

Cavalier Tosi: “I don’t doubt it, but we’re not in America here”.

Delia’s fight against prejudice is exacerbated also by her status as Corvara’s wife, which is seen by the other doctors as the sole reason for her privileged position and treatment at the hospital. This struggle, however, is functional to the melodramatic love triangle more than an outright feminist manifesto. As the season develops her abilities are recognized shifting the focus on women’s conditions to secondary characters and to the anthology plot.

When examining the close correlation that *Cuori* has with Italian history, we can observe how this medical drama does not simply wish to *look at* and *use* the past to understand the present, but to highlight a part of Italian history that is less known by national and international audiences. While Italy’s reputation is usually connected to its cultural and artistic past, first and foremost the Renaissance, *Cuori* highlights the nation’s contributions in the medical field, coherently with Rai’s nation branding strategy.

## **Final Remarks and Future Research Avenues**

The aim of this chapter is to relay some of the preliminary findings that emerged from the fieldwork research conducted on the set of *Cuori*. Far from being an exhaustive account of all the aspects that surround the creation of this TV series, our intent was to explore some of the creative choices that were adopted in the production process with particular attention to the meticulous work of historical documentation conducted by Rai and Aurora tv’s professionals.

As strongly remarked by all the above-the-line creators and actors, *Cuori* wished to depict the achievements and struggles of a group of doctors who strived to change the face of modern medicine. The Italian past that this TV series represents is exposed and deeply connected to the wider global context: those doctors have worked and traveled around the world keeping close contact with the international scientific community. *Cuori* also regis-

ters the deep changes that Italian society was undergoing in the 1960s: the audience face a society that is experiencing an economic boom and questioning its traditions and values, slowly pushing the boundaries of religious beliefs and patriarchy.

Despite its positioning within Rai's editorial lines, the choice to revisit and celebrate Italy's past through a medical period drama is quite curious, given the dearth of this genre among Italian television productions. Together with some additional productive strategies, this is a phenomenon that deserves further investigation especially given the green light that *Cuori* received for a second season and the success obtained by other medical dramas, such as *DOC - Nelle tue mani* (Rai1, 2020-), currently distributed both on Disney+ and Amazon Prime Video.

The role of OTT players is another aspect that should be further explored in relation to the success of medical dramas as Netflix acquired the distribution rights of *Cuori* in 2022 and added the series to its catalogue (the acquisition is connected to the legal requirements imposed by EU to the streaming players active in the continent). Thus far it only appears to be featured on the Italian library but given the streaming platform's interest towards Italian narrations that have the potential to resonate also in the global market (Barra 2017), it would be interesting to monitor if and where this tv series may circulate in the future. Future steps of this research could finally focus on the audience reception of such a portrayal of Italy: a nation that was at the forefront of medical and technological innovation, able to overcome the more common and widely exploited nostalgic images of the past glories, from Ancient Rome to the Renaissance.

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