

REFLECTIONS ON EMOTIONS, POPULISM AND POLARISATION

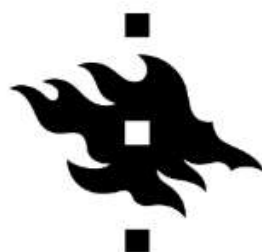
HEPP5 Conference Proceedings



Edited by Ilana Hartikainen and Olena Siden

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The Working Paper Series on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation

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Editors:

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HEPPSinki Research Group University of Helsinki

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Populist Narratives in Film and TV: A Conceptual Framework

by Dom Holdaway¹²

Abstract

This paper argues that certain film and television narratives can contribute to cultures of populism. In the first section, following an opening example, the paper presents two research projects that have this object of study. It subsequently presents a theoretical framework supporting this analysis, drawing from studies in populism, media studies and affect, and proposes the concept of the “populist narrative” in order to foreground the role of storytelling. In the analytical part, the paper expands on a handful of examples from contemporary Italian film and TV that deal with the theme of corruption, in particular through the recurrent motif of the “unlikely candidate”. The discussion section justifies the need to move beyond the text itself, highlighting the necessity for a mixed methodology to do so in future research.

Keywords: Populist Narratives, Political Cinema, Political Series, Affect, Unlikely Candidate

Introduction

At the end of *Joker*, the 2019 superhero biopic that narrates an origin story of Batman’s infamous foe as a dark, psychological thriller, the protagonist comes to be depicted as an anti-heroic symbol of resistance. Played by Joaquin Phoenix to great critical acclaim, Arthur Fleck, alias the Joker, lives through severe mistreatment and a series of disappointments which are exacerbated by his class position and mental health, with no institutional support available from the state or from the wealthy. Descending into a kind of delirium, he commits a series of homicides of privileged elites (bankers and a TV personality) who mistreat him. The actions become a rallying call and a form of resistance that galvanizes a certain sector of marginalized, under-privileged folks against this social elite, and Joker’s clown attire soon becomes a uniform of this group. This process is fully realized in the closing sequence of the film, when, during a riot, one “clown” murders Bruce Wayne’s extremely wealthy parents – initiating the Batman’s own origin story – and Joker is liberated from a police vehicle and elevated as leader.

There are evident parallels between this narrative and the populist movements that have profoundly shaped much liberal democratic politics in the Western world in recent years: both narrate a people that

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is shaped by a shared identity and an anti-elite politics, under a symbolic leader (of course, with much a more explicitly violent dramatic effect in the film than in real life). This parallel was noted in the reception of the film (in the press, e.g., Boot, 2019, Lawson, 2019, and in academic work, e.g., Sreepada & Dominguez Partida, 2022; Doidge & Rosenfeldt, 2021).

As much of this criticism illustrates, however, the populist allegory of *Joker* is contradictory and complicated by the incoherent, violent ideology promoted by Arthur Fleck. For instance, it is unclear to what extent we are invited by the film to support this anti-hero. The stark representation of his poverty, suffering and humiliation certainly inspires empathy and engagement; this is impeded, however, by the excesses of his violence. As Guillaume Mouleux has observed, the final sequence of the film is contradictory since, on the one hand, Joker is placed on the “alter” of a police car and “venerated”, representing “the triumph of evil (or, at least, of its ability to fascinate the masses)” and “the cult of personality” (2019, par. 24). Yet, on the other, the same veneration is inconsistent, “given the egalitarian symbol of the identical mask” since the scene shows a “collective subjugation” (2019, par. 24). In other words, the clown symbolism reduces and unites a people at the same level, and yet Joker himself stands out as a distinct monocrat: are the people truly equal to the leader?

Of course, we can agree or disagree with these arguments, we can push for certain interpretations of the film as more or less credible or literal political metaphors. Mouleux’s egalitarian mask vs individual leader argument, for instance, is perhaps not so convincing in the face of real-world experiences that do both, i.e., unifying the masses while preserving or even reinforcing the individual-centric cult of the leader, as per the “MAGA” red cap. Or, in the Italian context (to which I return in the bulk of this essay), the premise of equality that embodied the Five Stars Movements digital platform, that nonetheless gained prominence thanks to the specifically personal blog of its founder Beppe Grillo, beppegrillo.it (cf. Tipaldo & Pisciotto, 2014). One might nevertheless argue that precisely this contradictory relationship between singularity and mass reflects the nature of these same populist movements, hence the film comes even closer to representing them authentically.

Rather than disputing the coherence of these possible interpretations of *Joker* as a contemporary political metaphor, let it suffice, for now, to step back and recognize the importance that a populist allegory can be found in this kind of entertainment product. I would argue that this is significant *per se*, even before considering the nuances that lie in the specificities of its representation. As this example shows, fictional screen narratives have the capacity to offer frameworks of interpretation and spaces for debate about contemporary politics, far beyond the arenas in which we might habitually seek these out. The case used to introduce this paper is made particularly important due to its extreme visibility, as a Hollywood product (produced and distributed by Warner Bros., *Joker* made over \$1bn at the box office).¹ Of course, the intricacies of how populism is represented in film and TV will vary according to the scope of the production, the conjecture of its release and consumption, and its geographic/linguistic specificity. In the remainder of this paper, my examples will be taken from the Italian context, and therefore account for these specificities accordingly.

Taking its cue from this example, the objective of this paper is to reflect on the possible intersections

between audiovisual products, their cultures, and populist politics. With this in mind, the following discussion is predominantly conceptual and does not contain empirical data. In the first part, I outline how and why audiovisual narratives can be studied in relation to contemporary thinking on populism. Subsequently, in place of a fully-fledged, applied analysis and results, I offer a handful of exemplary Italian films and series, which reveal a handful of populist narratives.

The content of this paper results from two research projects. The first is the NETIAS CAT² project “Screening European Populisms (2008-2020): Audiovisual Fiction, Social Media, and Political Affect”, which ran from 2022-2024. Its aim was to study these intersections, between fictional audiovisual cultures and populist politics. The team consisted of five scholars working in communication, film, TV and media and digital humanities – and two stakeholders in youth participation and media literacy.³ This moreover gave rise to a second Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) project, supported by the Italian Ministry of Research and Universities (MUR) with National Recovery and Resilience Plan funding from the EU, entitled “Circulating Populist Sentiments in 21st Century Film and TV Fiction in Italy”.⁴ The two projects have in common the theoretical framework that I outline in the following section. They differ as the latter project is specifically dedicated to the Italian case – hence my choice to focus on this country for this paper – and it attempts to be more inclusive in relation to the intersections of populism and screen media. I acknowledge and am grateful for the support from both the MUR and the NETIAS; I also recognize that, though the words are mine, the thinking presented in the following is the culmination of many dialogues and conversations between the participants of these projects.

Theoretical Framework

As a conceptual working paper, here I do not work with specific empirical data. Rather, in what follows, my method is shaped by theoretical reflection and its application to a set of case studies. I situate populism, the media context and the potential role of fictional film and TV narratives in relation to thinking in cultural, political and media studies. In the next section, I illustrate this thinking in relation to a handful of contemporary Italian films and series. The examples are selected as they have specific narrative functions, dealing with corruption, and I limit myself to recent products (post 2010). However, these examples are illustrative and do not claim to be comprehensive.

It is notoriously difficult to offer a specific definition of populism that captures all the nuances of very many historically and geographically specific phenomena. Influential scholarship has interpreted populism as “thin-centered” and assimilable to other ideologies, defining it as a set of ideas that structure political action around a moral opposition between the people and the elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Other attempts to pin down this flexibility categorize populism as an impulse (Kazin, 2017), or a type of performance and “style” to be applied variously (Moffitt, 2017). In perhaps its most influential conceptualization, Laclau (2005) conceptualizes populism as a discursive strategy, a logic that articulates political action through empty signifiers that link social demands in chains of equivalence. While they vary

in terms of theoretical traditions and of the metaphors used to grasp populism's nuances – performance, impulse, discursive strategy – what unites this work is the centrality of the people and the way this notion is mobilized.

This paper, like the projects outlined above, recognizes this potential fluidity of definition and application, but builds on their commonality. As such, the definition of populism used here is a mode of political articulation and practice that is reliant on narrative (I return to this nuance shortly).

This perspective finds confirmation in the extremely successful and influential “neo-populist” movements of recent decades (Mudde, 2004). Various political groups have come to threaten liberal democracies (Pappas, 2019; Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020) by exploiting a wave of successive “crises”: the financial collapse of 2008, migration, Brexit, Covid-19, the invasion of Ukraine, etc. (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The populist worldview hegemonizes these events by applying simplified narrative interpretations of them. Exemplary features of such narratives include the rhetorical construction and idealization of an ethnically defined “people” as custodians of sovereignty; their habitual relationship to a charismatic leader, with interactions that go beyond traditional forms of mediation; a social binary between the “people” and a corrupt elite or external enemy; contempt for traditional political processes and attempts to infringe its systems (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Judis, 2016).

This process is evidently profoundly reliant on the forging of positive and negative affective bonds. Between political commentary and social movement studies, scholars have focused specifically on the roles that negative and positive emotions have in shaping political action. On the one hand, anger is shaped around the perception that a frustrating event is certain, externally caused, and unfair – this has been studied in political science through appraisal theories (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). Fear, too, can be applied as a narrative mechanism to “read” the outsider (Wodak, 2015). On the other, positive affect can influence movement formation, bringing people together and providing them with a common sense of identity (e.g., Goodwin, et al., 2001; Hoggett, 2015). The interpellation (and pseudo-participation) of “the people” relies on narrative processes and affect production, rather than a stable ideological framework.

Furthermore, this performative narrative is mobilized by the media, something that has only been accelerated within the context of what Hepp and Couldry (2016; see also Hepp, 2020) have called “mediatization”, where the media come to shape all elements of social reality. The concrete iteration of this is in the context of populism is apparent in the ways digital (including social) and traditional media function as a tool and a vehicle for politicians and political movements (Mazzoleni, 2008, Krämer, 2014). In the digital age of convergence, political narratives are subsumed into a complex flow of all the media – including fictional media, to which I return below.

Read collectively, this theoretical work leads to an interesting constellation of understanding, whereby populism can be understood as a discursive mode of political articulation that is reliant on a form of storytelling. Populism is dependent therefore on what we might call “populist narratives”. Rather than simply providing yet another term to describe how populists give form to political action, however, the use of the word “narrative” here seeks to emphasize how the logic that articulates political action necessitates a storytelling function (narrative), and a platform (the media). To offer a working definition, then, the

“populist narrative” is the rhetorical account or worldview that are used by populists to mobilize political activity, that is boosted to the context of mediatization.

Of course, any political movement uses narrative to offer visions of change. To understand what is specific about populism, let us refer briefly to Paul Saurette’s suggestion that populism can be understood as “an archetypal political narrative”. As such, it is

immediately recognizable and emotionally powerful to many audiences in our current political context. That is not simply because the specific populist version of this story has been told so many times before over the last decade. More importantly, it is because the populist narrative itself follows deeper, older archetypal cultural narratives that have structured many of the basic stories in Western culture, religion and philosophy, over hundreds and thousands of years. From this perspective, populist discourse is not simply a specific set of arguments or principles or ideological beliefs or values that frame our “thinking” or seek to intellectually convince us. Rather, populist discourse is an emotional story that tries to move us emotionally (Saurette, 2019, p. 17)

For Saurette, this reasoning makes it easier to understand why populism has gained such momentum in recent decades. Though this reading might risk simplifying a socially complex phenomenon, what is certainly useful and relevant in Saurette’s account is the identification of key narrative tropes: the lead protagonists (the people), one or more antagonists (e.g., the elite), and an “emotionally charged clash between good and evil” (2019, p. 17).⁵ To put this in even simpler terms, we might suggest that what is specific to the populist narrative is its foundation of the people as a subject, while the storytelling by politicians then fills in any further details about the specifics of that subject (they are defined, for instance, ethnically; to whom they relate or are contrasted).

Working in terms of narrative is evidently compatible, moreover, with the “cultural approach” to populism proposed by Juha Herkman, which understands the political phenomenon as “an affective identification and signification process in which a political identity is constructed through the use of various ideologically or morally laden cultural symbols and markers of the people and their alleged enemies” (2022, p. 8). Herkman’s definition of populism follows a similar reasoning as that outlined above, including an emphasis on processes of identification. These, I would argue, are implicit in the creation and characterization of subjecthood in the populist narrative. Herkman moreover places a very productive emphasis on the “cultural processes of significations” within populism (2022, p. 35), therefore not only foregrounding how its politics is fundamentally connected to identitarian issues, but how these, in turn, are forged and reformed by the cultures that surround us.

Taking inspiration from Herkman’s work, we can posit an additional hypothesis, that cultural products could function as one (of many) points of influence within this process. While the contributions of the informational and social media texts to populism have (understandably) been important objects of scholarly interest, the wider role of fictional culture has been surprisingly less studied, with only a handful of exceptions (Coladonato & Sangiovanni, 2019; Schober, 2019; Pagello, 2020; Sorolla-Romero, 2021). This is particularly surprising as current social changes – those presented by populist movements as “threats to tradition” – are essentially shifts in cultural values, exploited and articulated into “culture wars”

(e.g., Furedi, 2018), which are mobilized by culture, the media and the arts. Thus, as Moran and Littler (2020) convincingly argue, culture can inform and mobilize for populist narratives, a means to anchor and give it meaning, and hence cultural studies as a discipline is an extremely valuable resource to interrogate this phenomenon.

Though any fictional cultural form could have relevance in this regard, there is value in studying film and seriality for three reasons. The first is tied to the enormous political importance of analogue and digital screen media: as the legacy of the most important “galaxy” of the 1900s (Casetti, 2015) and the core of the contemporary entertainment industry. Second, film and serial narratives have a vital formal characteristic, considering the ease of their truth claims and their ability to incite emotions (cf. Singh, 2014). The third reason is the theoretical legacy of film and television studies, which has been particularly attentive to media-industrial contexts, to aesthetics, and to reception, refining a variety of theoretical and methodological tools capable of analyzing politics from production and distribution to representation and reception. Cinema and TV/web series have a vast potential to carry, contest or influence political messages and meanings, and this is facilitated by their significant economic and cultural weight, while film & TV studies have honed the tools to study this. This is applicable in the context of populism where, as we have noted, narrative is especially imperative to mobilizing the people around cultural values.

To shift to a much more practical frame, then, this paper – and the projects mentioned above – move from this reasoning to an analysis of contemporary fictional film and TV products, within the European and specifically Italian contexts. The macro research questions that the projects seek to ask are: (1) what kinds of historical and contemporary infrastructures – such as media networks or production companies – enable the circulation of populist narratives on screen? (2) How do film and television series represent populist politics, via themes, people or political movements? (3) What do political actors and audiences do, concretely, with audiovisual media content relating to populism? And, finally, (4) to what extent are fictional screen media and politics more broadly aligned within broader populist discourses?

To address these questions, the projects mentioned above have been working with case studies of production companies and networks, films/series and their audiences, as well as the uses of audiovisual references in political communication. In addition, the projects have traced the historical infrastructures of populism in film and TV (industrial dynamics, circulation, representation). In this way, the research is both textual, i.e., looking at representational agendas, but also contextual, as we want to investigate the reception and impact of these texts with audiences – in particular using digital media studies of social networks. In the following section, I will expand on a handful of representational examples that, however, connect also to the notion of studying a wider discourse.

Analysis and Results

In order to illustrate this thinking more concretely, in this section I examine how populist narratives, as defined in the previous section, can emerge within film and serial products. In the following section I reflect on how this thinking can be expanded beyond the text, to its context. To do this, I examine in

particular one recurrent figure, that of the average person who becomes a political leader (the “unlikely candidate”). For reasons of space, and in line with the second ongoing research project mentioned above, here I limit myself to the Italian context.

One of the foremost elements of populist narratives in the Italian political sphere during the 2010s and 2020s has been anti-corruption. It should be noted, this is clearly tied to a larger anti-elite/anti-establishment, “drain the swamp” sentiment that has fed into many populist movements across the continent and beyond. One evident example of screen content that has captured this feeling, between national and global levels, is the Spanish TV/web series *Casa del papel* (Aléx Pina, 2017-2021) – also influencing grassroots activism in the symbolism of the Salvador Dalí mask (Pagello, 2020).

In Italy, an anti-corruption impulse informed the Lega party’s anti-Rome rhetoric and was fundamental to the Five-Star Movement’s striking growth, peaking in coalition leadership in the late 2010s/early 2020s (cf. Conti & Memoli, 2015; Ceccarini & Bourdignon, 2016). The theme of corruption also appears within a range of fictional film and TV productions. On the side of dramatic representation, a handful of examples are the glossy Sky Italia series 1992, and subsequent seasons 1993 and 1994 (2015-2019), and the films *Loro* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2018), all of which tell the story of Silvio Berlusconi and the political backdrop of his governments. Films like *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2015) and *Gomorra* (Matteo Garrone, 2008) offer more specific, action-based representations of corrupt power and the mafia, leading to “spin off” series. On the side of comedy, films like *Whatsoeverly* (Giulio Manfredonia, 2010), *Viva l’Italia* (Massimiliano Bruno, 2012), *Quo vado?* (Gennaro Nunziante, 2016), *It’s the Law* (Ficarra & Picone, 2017) and *Natale a cinque stelle* (Marco Risi, 2020) focus on the political class or on politics at a smaller, more regional or personal levels, making real or possible corruption a constant point of reference and object of ridicule.

Across all of these products, we see narratives of corrupt activities: satirical or critical representations of self-interested businessmen and politicians, often involved in illegal activities or extra-marital affairs; disregard for normal people or honest politicians; mistreated groups of marginalized subjects, especially migrants; shady agreements between politicians and the mafia or the church. These texts contribute to a wider narration of corruption that has a cultural weight in Italy, inserted within that flux of media products mentioned above and contributing to the frameworks we use to understand the phenomenon. While this does not necessarily equate to a populist narrative per se, it is easy to hypothesize how this tendency could inform more general frames of political activity.

One motif that leads us to a more explicit populist narrative can be identified within what Valerio Coladonato (2022) has called the “unlikely candidate”, referring to an “average man” who – by corrupt design or by mistake – becomes a politician, often even a leader⁶. Already strikingly common as a motif, the figure is made more complex by the range of registers in his representation – at times dramatic, at others ironic – as well as the way it evokes real politicians that shifted from other fields to politics: Silvio Berlusconi the singer, businessman and football club owner; Giuseppe Conte the legal academic; Beppe Grillo the actor and comedian; even the banker and later technocrat leader Mario Draghi.

A handful of examples of this include: Pietro Bosco in 1992, who becomes a Lega Nord deputy after saving another politician in a fist fight; Giuseppe Garibaldi in *Welcome Mr President!* (Milani, 2013),

elected to the highest station in Italian politics as a joke, due to the eponymous Risorgimento hero; Giovanni Ernani, parachuted in to replace the his identical twin and left-wing party leader, fled in the face of decreasing support, in *Long Live Freedom* (Andò, 2013); businessman Cetto La Qualunque who, in *Whatsoeverly*, decides to run as Mayor in his town to avoid prison; Franco Rispoli, an ex-businessman turned politician, now prime minister with a fabricated CV, who is more interested in sleeping with a centre-left politician than in any specific political agenda. It is helpful to dedicate a little more attention to the first two examples of these, to make more explicit the generic codes used to narrate this figure.

The three seasons of *1992*, *1993* and *1994* series map the shift in the character of Pietro Bosco from a “normal guy” – an army veteran who fought in the gulf war, a rugby player and a drinker – to a honed politician and a part of the system. This is a slow process, with the nuance that the greater length of a serial narrative enables. Indeed, as Dana Renga has illustrated (2019, pp. 175-177), Bosco is a “complex man”. At times he has a coherent, admirable moral code, helping the most marginalized, like his friend from days in the army, or denouncing the corruption of old politics. At others, though, his behaviour is terrible: he is intolerant and violent; at one point he assaults and almost fatally injures his girlfriend, after having discovered that she had an abortion. This complexity ties fundamentally to his representation as an improbable candidate, precisely because the series emphasizes, ironically, the dynamics used to “construct” this kind of personality – reducing his character to a public persona.

Bosco’s movement into politics takes place by chance, when he rescues a (fictional) Northern League deputy, Gianni Bortolotti, from an attack by a group of Albanian men. This action positions Boschi as a righteous and generous Italian – with an evident ethnic dimension – an identity immediately used by the party to launch the candidate. In the first season, his “rough around the edges” character proves incompatible with this manipulation. Despite the party’s attempts to control him, his nature continues to emerge (for instance, in a sequence when he improvises a speech), and this ultimately proves desirable for the electorate. It is interesting to note, therefore, the way *1992* contrasts the “manufacturing” of the everyday candidate as something negative, while Bosco’s genuineness is more positively represented. In this way, the series puts forth a positive notion of politics by “the people”. And though the series does not present Bosco as a uniquely positive or heroic figure, his attempts at politics do appear to be genuine, despite, perhaps because of, his lack of experience.

Not only does the series foreground how the unlikely candidate is literally fabricated, it also maps its deconstruction through inexorable corruption. This is depicted through the relationships that Bosco has with two different father figures: Bortolotti, the Northern League deputy, and Gaetano Nobile, an older deputy of the Christian Democrat party. Bortolotti teaches Bosco the party line, helps him find his feet and supports the character, also as a friend. Nobile, on the other hand, teaches Bosco the art of politicking, of offering and calling in favours. These kinds of agreements initially create difficulty for Bosco, when he is forced to go against his own moral code (he is obliged to vote approving an agreement with a Mafia-led company for army supplies). He learns how to play and quickly becomes astute, though: not only does he carry out his own agreements and manipulations, but he even betrays both father figures for personal interest: to advance his girlfriend’s television career, to protect his own position, and to try to help an army ex-colleague who has post-traumatic stress.

Overall, then, the image of the unlikely candidate is subjected to often contradicting nuances. On the one hand, the series does appear to present Bosco in a positive light, creating a kind of anti-hero, precisely because of his insistence on remaining true, where possible, to his moral. The image of Bosco is also driven by emotion, namely anger, for the injustice of Italian society at the time that has abandoned him despite his service. This representation is troubled, however, by the connection to the party's problematic ideology and his excesses of violence. It is made more complex still by the ease with which he learns betrayal and manipulation, even of his closest allies, for self-protection. The image remains pessimistic and bleak, then, in the way it creates a genealogy of corruption that leads from the Christian Democrat, Nobile, to the Lega Nord, in Bosco. Any appreciation or sharing of the anger that had characterized the character's drive at the beginning of the series therefore easily mutates into a broader sense of resigned disillusionment for the unchanging nature of politics.

We can see a more positive model of an "unlikely candidate" in the character Garibaldi in *Welcome, Mr President*. As mentioned, he becomes president of the Italian Republic precisely because he shares the same name as the Risorgimento hero. Though initially parachuted in as a kind of joke, Garibaldi survives longer than his corrupt adversaries would hope, driven to do right by the people. The clash between this drive and his desire to help his friends and family, and a romantic relationship with his assistant, eventually lead Garibaldi to resign, precisely because he realizes this behavior is another form of corruption. He does this through a televised speech that presents the moral core of the film. With a serious tone, he declares:

Should anyone else resign? Maybe you! You, when you point the finger and say "politicians are thieves!". But then you dodge taxes, double park, or get paid off the books in order to save some cash. You: you aren't a politician but you'd like to be, so that you can help your family, and snag something for yourself too. You, when you who manage to get a CAT scan quicker than everyone else, because you are friends with the doctor...

Garibaldi continues with a few more examples of this kind, before concluding, "It's always 'someone else' who is dishonest. But who really is that 'someone else'?" The grammar of the film here adds to the power of the sequence: Garibaldi speaks into the camera, breaking the fourth wall, and charging his speech with a kind of anger and disillusionment. This sentiment is echoed and emphasized as we see the effect of his words on the people watching the speech.

Unlike the previous example, *Welcome Mr President* is a comedy that decries the state of corrupt politics. Garibaldi's adversaries are an unnamed trio of politicians from right, the centre and left-wing parties, working on behalf of a core of four nameless "powers that be" (played, ironically, by directors Lina Wertmüller and Pupi Avati and by critics Steve Della Casa and Gianni Rondolino). They are depicted in satirical, absurdist tones. Thanks to the resignation sequence, however, the film's message evolves into a (slightly) more profound point about the nature of corruption and shared responsibility.

Discussion

Despite different formats and registers, the representations of unlikely candidates in *1992* and *Welcome Mr President* share a few striking characteristics: a bleak perspective on the state of corrupt power, behind the walls of government buildings; the insistence that corruption happens even to unlikely candidates with the best intentions, for seemingly innocent reasons, i.e., the desire to help their loved ones. These products also share the same affective tones, that shift between anger and disappointed resignation.

Drawing on unlikely candidates in *Welcome Mr President* and a handful of other films, Coladonato has argued that this motif transcends mere representation, revealing a deeper notion of Italian politics:

In our country in particular, the unlikely candidate embodies the endemic incompleteness of the relationship between the citizen and republican institutions: it reflects a general orientation that unites a broad mistrust in the political system with the subjective perception of a lack of competence and interest in participating in public life (Coladonato, 2022, p. 58, my translation).

Hence, more than just a satirical criticism, the unlikely candidate snapshots a “feeling” among the Italian population, a disillusionment and an exhaustion with the political class. It moreover encapsulates a wider disconnect between the people and public life. The shift from a mere representation in films and series to a wider cultural discourse is only further attested, as mentioned, by recurrent narrative motifs and affective charges used to depict this figure across different genres (drama, comedy, satire) and with more or less positive models (Bosco or Garibaldi).

The phenomenon outlined in relation to the two fictional audiovisual texts studied with a little more detail here also has the potential to be extrapolated, to grasp in much more detail how this figure functions reflects the current conjuncture, filters and reflects a political feeling, and potential contributes to voter behavior. In other words, to understand whether the populist narrative depicted here also translates to a populist narrative that truly shapes political action. This brings me back to the projects that were outlined in the introduction to this paper, which have, over the past few years, been attempting to do precisely this.

To interpret the unlikely candidate and the populist narrative more widely, therefore, within broader cultural discourses on corruption and the perceived need for alternative politics poses a methodological necessity to go beyond the text itself. To do so, the research projects outlined at the beginning of this essay have been working in four intersected directions:

- i. Examining the wider historic infrastructures and production contexts of content that contains populist narratives. In particular, the projects have begun to study the production companies that make high-quality, glossy content with political themes, such as Groenlandia, producer of *The First King: Birth of an Empire* (Rovere, 2019), or The Apartment, which made *Mussolini – Son of the Century* (Wright, 2025). It has also included work on film and TV production by politicians, such as the works of Èliseo Entertainment, under the leadership of Luca Barbareschi.⁷

- ii. The reception of the films and TV series. Our reception studies of populist narratives in films and series seek to understand whether and how their political themes translate to audiences and broader political discussions. These analyses have been focusing in particular on social media (following, for example, Valera-Ordaz, 2017), especially YouTube (comments under clips and videos) and Letterboxd (reviews), relating to specific films in a sample of populist-themed products, or moving from specific themes that also intersect with populist interests (in particular, migration).
- iii. The uses of film and television as points of reference within wider political discourses. This is a necessary area of study that seeks to complement the text-based approach so as to understand how film and media cultures circulate more broadly within political discourse. Faced with the difficulty of tracing this particularly slippery object of study, our team has been working on speeches or appearances by populist leaders that reference film culture (for instance, Salvini dressing as James Bond at the Venice Film Festival, cf. Bragadini, 2020).

This is, in short, the direction that the research of the two projects cited in opening have taken. Though we focus on specific case studies, each one adopts a necessarily open perspective. Looking at the bigger picture requires mixed-method analyses: of context, content and uses and of the narratives position within a wider discourse. In this way, our aim is to understand more fully the concrete role that fictional screen content can play in promoting or challenging populism itself, or fertilizing the terrains that allow it to grow, through the adoption, enhancing or challenging of what I have defined here as populist narratives.

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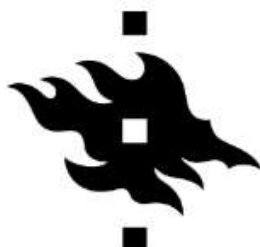
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