The Virus Filter: Retro-mediation, Dystopia, and the Remediation of Audiovisual Imaginaries[1]

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Abstract

The paper starts from a twofold observation. Firstly, as a "total social fact" (Mauss, 2016), COVID-19 has redefined crucial moments of individual and collective life (birth, marriage, death, etc.) and every dimension of human activity (economy, politics, culture). Secondly, the pandemic imposed a new iconography based on identifiable objects and practices (masks, disinfectant gels, supermarket queues, vaccine syringes, etc.) (Mitchell, 2017; Pintor Iranzo, 2020). In some ways, a reversal of dystopian narratives, literary and audiovisual of previous decades seem to many. Therefore, we intend to reflect on 'retro-mediation' as a new logic of remediation of past (audio)visual cultures fuelled by the feeling of living in a dystopian present. This logic directly connects with Richard Grusin's 'pre-mediation' (Grusin, 2004; 2010) processes. On the one hand, retro-mediation is shaped by the forces of pre-mediation, which, by simultaneously containing and fuelling anxiety about the pandemic management, foster emotional alertness and constant familiarity with the visual cultures of the virus. On the other hand, retro-media logics are defined by the virus' ability to affect our imagination since our bodies – authentic biological media – become the 'mediators' of contagion and, therefore, central factors in the re-imagination of the past. Thus, retro-mediation will be analysed as a media logic of re-imagining the past, which – in the wake of the reversal of dystopia in the present – takes the form of retroactive remediation through which users project symbols, icons, and dystopian elements, drawn from pandemic visual culture, onto the audiovisual images of the pre-COVID-19 years. The examples examined, taken from the TV series *The Big Bang Theory*, *POSE*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Pushing Daisies*, will highlight the sociocultural mechanisms brought into play by retro-mediation, capable of conditioning the forms of production, reproduction, and reconversion of social imaginaries (Marzo & Meo, 2019).

Keywords: Retro-Mediation, Radical-Mediation, Pre-Mediation, Dystopia, Social Imaginary, Visual Cultures.

Introduction

Many novels, movies and TV series have recounted future eras in which

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viruses ravaged humanity, changing the social structures of the Western civilization. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, could be conceived as a kind of inversion of a dystopian future, which has been reversed in everyday reality around the world, starting in the early 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic is a very clear example of a 'total social fact.' According to Marcel Mauss (1924), an event can be called a "total social fact" when it is capable of affecting all rites of passage of human beings and every sphere of social action. A full-bodied visual imaginary (Pintor Iranzo, 2020), populated by objects such as masks, disinfectant gels, syringes containing vaccines, and practices such as the discipline of access (the queue), immunization, and sanitization, was generated by multiple subjects before, during, and after COVID-19.

Our work intends to start from the concept of pre-mediation developed by Richard Grusin (2004, 2010). Indeed, this concept offers a theoretical framework within which we can reflect on a new media logic, to which we have given the name "retro-mediation." Retro-mediation is shaped by the affective and cognitive forces triggered by pre-mediation, which were produced both by those narratives that pre-mediated the pandemic and by the everyday rituals of institutional communication and news media.

As Grusin (2010) explains, pre-mediation serves a dual socio-communicative function. On the one hand, through information disseminated circularly by institutional agencies (the official sources) and the news media, it contains anxiety regarding an unknown future full of danger. On the other hand, however, pre-mediation feeds on this continuous production of data and information: in this way, it feeds disquiet and anxiety, as viewers are in search of continuous confirmation or denial of their concerns. Ultimately, the cultural logic of pre-mediation has fostered emotional alertness and intimacy with the iconography of the virus.

In contrast, retro-mediation can be defined as a media logic of re-imagining the past. At total social events, such as a war or, indeed, a pandemic, there is the reversal of dystopian scenarios in the present. On the basis of such concretization of dystopia in everyday experience, retro-mediation acts as a kind of retroactive remediation of cultural and media products of the past: we project onto them symbols and icons of the dystopian present.

As we will see shortly, retro-mediation can thus be interpreted as the embodiment of a massified dystopian gaze on pre-pandemic cultural objects, which are re-experienced based on the emotional experience of the viral catastrophe and the aesthetics it generated.

Pandemic Media

In the past three years, the world has faced a pandemic that has produced remarkable consequences on the daily activities of millions of people. COV-

ID-19 has changed our experience of the world in many spheres of daily interaction: education, work, health, leisure, and especially social relationships. Lockdowns have also changed our relationship with the media. Due to force majeure, individuals have perceived technology as the only concrete alternative to human relationships. Digital connections made it possible to bypass the prohibitions imposed by the emergency. Digital environments have assumed a primary function in educational and training processes, in commercial exchanges, and in almost all professional activities.

The effects of this scenario of profound mediatization of society and culture are evident: a notable rise in media consumption; the strengthening of imbalances and inequalities related to hyperconnectedness (generally attributable to various forms of digital divide); and the reorganization of entire sectors of cultural and media business.

In this context, our specific object of analysis was the proliferation of social-media imagery triggered by COVID-19, capable of profoundly affecting both the perception of everyday reality and the reinterpretation of audiovisual products "consumed" during the pandemic. This action of re-interpretation of pre-pandemic media products consists of attributing to particular objects and signs a meaning different from the original one due to the conditioning of pandemic imagery.

Our paper, therefore, aims to illustrate this socio-communicative process, which we call "retro-mediation," from a theoretical framework in which Media Theory, Sociology of cultural processes, and Film Studies coexist.

Social Imaginaries and Media Imaginaries

Our paper starts from two closely intertwined research questions.

1) Has COVID-19 changed the ways in which we construct and perceive social imaginaries? In what ways?

2) Can we identify a new media logic, called 'retro-mediation,' whereby we project the cultural anxieties generated by the pandemic onto the cultural products of the pre-pandemic era? What role do visual imaginaries of the pandemic play in this process?

As we mentioned earlier, COVID-19 in its globalized and mediatized dimension can be conceived as a true 'total social fact' (Mauss, 1924). Indeed, the pandemic affects every sphere of human action (political, economic, social, cultural, etc.) and every rite of passage in personal life (birth, marriage, funeral, etc.). It prompts sociologists and media theorists to reconfigure the conceptual tools at their disposal, with the aim of analysing the mutations of social imaginaries in greater depth.

Charles Taylor (2004) defines the imaginary as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on be-

tween them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 23).

These modern social imaginaries has three main characteristics: (1) "The way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings (…) is carried in images, stories, and legends (…)"; (2) "the social imaginary is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society"; (3) "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23).

Social imaginaries and media imaginaries, therefore, are not the same thing. However, media imaginaries can somehow contribute to the fortification or, conversely, to the devastation of social imaginaries. In any case, social imaginaries and media imaginaries are part of a larger collective imaginary, nurtured by contradictory dynamics.

It seems useful to us, therefore, to reflect on the relationship between these two essential symbolic and social structures. Media imaginaries can be conceived as an always-on communicative process (Abruzzese, 1973, 2007), a kind of processual and myth-making machine, continuously fed by an uninterrupted flow of media narratives (novels, movies, TV series, comics, video games, and so on). Media imaginaries concur to produce shared definitions of reality in the same way that social imaginaries do. Indeed, in the digital age, increasingly the social construction of reality is partially replaced by the media construction of reality, as Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2016) write. Within this theoretical framework, we intend to reflect on the concepts of pre-mediation and retro-mediation in relation to the profound mutation of imaginaries (social and media) activated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of pre-mediation, formulated by Grusin (2004; 2010), refers to the ability of information media (in particular, television) to pre-figure the future, presenting multiple possible scenarios, on occasions of crisis such as natural disasters, wars, and terrorist attacks.

Pre-mediation has the paradoxical ability to contain users' anxiety and, at the same time, to fuel it. On the one hand, it offers answers with respect to the uncertainties of an unknown future. On the other, it – through ritualized, daily appointments – nurtures a constant state of alertness in media users.

However, the digital mediascape is characterized by multiple media logics and no longer by a single media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979). As Couldry and Hepp (2016) state, in the last two decades we are dealing with a "media manifold," which is fluidly shaped through the fusion of multiple media, which hybridize with each other. This dynamic of re-mediation, theorized fully by Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), lays the foundation for the evolutionary trajectories of the global media system. The media system, in the digital age, is mainly characterized by a proliferation of communication and information spaces and, therefore, a democratization of media access. One of the effects of these processes is the intensification of pre-mediation processes.

Within this composite "media manifold," digital media and traditional media coexist and influence each other. Digital media act as true affective environments (Farci, 2019; Tirino & Castellano, 2020), mediating collective affectivity. Old media – television in particular – are still active players in pre-mediation processes. Old and new media, during the pandemic, similarly helped to pre-mediate future scenarios on the growth of infection curves, the number of deaths, the effectiveness of vaccines, and so on. In Italy, for example, two communicative rituals, such as the daily bulletin of the Civil Defense and the cyclical press conferences of the Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, have consistently pre-mediated future pandemic scenarios.

The digital mediascape is marked by a friction between different forms of pre-mediation. The pre-mediated future scenarios are very different from each other. Some achieve the effect of defending the legitimacy of public health policies. Other scenarios, however, challenge such policies: they criticize prevailing definitions of reality, fomenting phenomena such as conspiracy and denialism. Different forms of pre-mediation are related to as many ways of conceiving and imagining social interactions. Alongside 'intensive' pre-mediation, there is 'slow' pre-mediation. While the former is related to the crucial role of news media (particularly all news media, such as broadcasters providing 24-hour news), the latter is fueled by various types of narratives.

Novels[2], films[3], television series[4], and comics[5] have imagined dystopian fictional universes in which a pandemic, due in some way to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable spread of viruses, disrupts the social, political, and economic arrangements of the Western civilization.

On the basis of available statistics and data, research in the fields of Future Studies, virology and infectious diseases has, over the decades, outlined some scenarios, more or less likely, on the effects of possible future pandemics. These fictions can be conceived as forms of "slow" pre-mediation of visual imaginaries of the pandemic. In some way, the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced by many individuals as a kind of inversion of a dystopian future that materialized on the horizon of everyday life.

The joint consequence of this double movement of 'slow' and 'intensive' pre-mediation is that people experience a radical mutation of their social life.

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[2] *I am Legend* (R. Matheson, 1954), *Bladerunner* (A.E. Nourse, 1974), *The Stand* (S. King, 1978), *The Last Town on Earth* (T. Mullen, 2006), *World War Z* (M. Brooks, 2006), *The Fireman* (J. Hill, 2016).

[3] *12 Monkeys* (T. Gilliam, 1995), *Children of Men* (A. Cuarón, 2006), *Carriers* (A. Pastor and D. Pastor, 2009), *Contagion*, (S. Soderbergh, 2011).

[4] *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-22), *The Last Ship* (TNT, 2014-18), *Containment* (The CW, 2016), *See* (Apple TV+, 2019-22), *Station Eleven* (HBO Max, 2021-22), *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023-present).

[5] *Eden: It's an Endless World!* (H. Endo, 1998-2008), *Y: The Last Man* (B. Vaughn and P. Guerra, 2002-07), *Crossed* (G. Ennis and J. Burrows, 2008-10), *I Am a Hero* (K. Hanazawa, 2009-17).

Indeed, the pandemic has totally altered rituals, rhythms, circumstances and modes of social relations: it has forced individuals to rethink their very lifestyles. The 'new normal' has revolved around a re-design of physical spaces, including intimate ones, and a re-planning of cultural spaces.

As we mentioned earlier, the media narratives of COVID-19 produced the construction of a precise visual imaginary of the pandemic, based on elements such as masks, physical distancing, disciplining access to public activities, coffins, mass graves, personal protective equipment, artificial ventilation helmets, intubated individuals, syringes with vaccines, vaccination centers, empty streets and squares, and so on. This visual imagery has deeply shaped social imaginaries. In particular, it has affected the ways in which we imagine social interactions and relationships.

Moreover, the need to give coronavirus a recognizable face has stimulated the proliferation of different modes of representation. This need is also related to the need of many individuals to rely on the media (especially news media) to understand complex scientific concepts. Many artifacts (videos, posts, etc.) have been created to fulfill this deep communicative need. News media have processed data and information into visual devices, the goal of which is to make the virus cognitively and perceptually visible. Such objects are in effect post-media devices (Eugeni, 2021), i.e., media resources with which users come into contact at multiple levels (cognitive, emotional, etc.). During the pandemic, viewing images of the virus changed our perceptual experience of illness, risk, danger, and relationships, acting especially on the affective level. COVID-19 worked as a prompt (Floridi, 2014) to construct new visual artifacts. These particular objects function as techno-media devices, acting on and with the media users who view them: disposables and human actors form, therefore, a bio-technological assemblage.

From this perspective, we can think of retro-mediation as the result of a kind of short-circuit between media imaginaries and social imaginaries. Media imaginaries nurture a pre-mediation of catastrophe, affecting the restructuring of social imaginaries. Such restructuring of social imaginaries, in turn, shapes the ways in which we perceive and experience media narratives. Ultimately, retro-mediation is exactly this process of retroactive and emotional re-mediation, primarily directed at cultural products of the pre-pandemic past. More specifically, retro-mediation takes the form of the projection of feelings, emotions and affects, related to the 'new' ways of experiencing post-pandemic social life, onto films, TV series, novels, comic books and other cultural products of the pre-pandemic era.

Some Examples of Retro-mediation of TV Series

Let us now proceed to a quick analysis of four empirical cases of retro-me-

diation. The first example is from *Acting Up*, the first episode of the second season of the television series *POSE* (FX, 2018-21), which aired in 2019. *POSE* is an American television drama series about house and ballroom culture, an LGBTQ subculture prevalent in New York City's African American and Latino communities during the 1980s and 1990s. The episode begins with a sequence in which Pray Tell and Blanca, two of the series' main characters, take a boat to Hart's Island. Inside a small office, they explain to an official that they would like to visit the grave of Pray's former partner, Keenan. Later Pray and Blanca move to the grave site and are shocked by the sight of men dressed in protective suits who are carrying wooden crates (marked only with a number) to a mass grave. They go to the grave site and observe men in protective suits carrying numerically marked wooden crates in a collective pile. In the mass grave are piled the bodies of AIDS deaths that have not been claimed by their families.

The viewer who saw the episode during the pandemic makes a direct connection between the AIDS epidemic in LGBTQIA+ communities during the 1980s and 1990s and the COVID-19 pandemic of today. The bodies of those who died from the Coronavirus, in fact, were also hastily buried in communal burials, including in New York City. Both in the *POSE* episode and in the photos documenting the mass graves for COVID-19 sufferers, the tragic dimension of the health catastrophe is visually expressed by the burial of human beings, who have been deprived of the respect and *pietas* they should have rightfully been accorded.

Figure 1: Mass graves in 1990 New York City (*POSE*, episode *Acting Up*, 2019).

The second example involves the well-known sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-19). The protagonists of the series are young nerdy scientists (Tirino & Auriemma, 2021). The episode cited is *The Engagement Reaction*, the

twenty-third episode of the fourth season, which aired in 2011. The protago-nist Sheldon Cooper, along with friends, goes to the hospital where Howard Wolowitz's mother is admitted. As he is returning to the waiting room, the extravagant physicist spots a man who is coughing while on a gurney. Terrified of contracting a disease, Sheldon finds refuge in a room, not noticing that a biohazard sign is posted on the door. Once in the room, Sheldon runs into the dumb medical staff, who inform him that he will not be able to leave the hospital because he has been exposed to the virus. Sheldon, terrified, covers his mouth with his T-shirt and declares that he is fine to avoid forced hospital-ization.

In the scene with which the episode closes, Leonard Hofstadter, Raj Koothrappali and Howard Wolowitz, dressed in a protective suit, play cards with Sheldon, who is spending the quarantine period in the hospital. The viewer viewing the episode during the pandemic activates a direct connection between this scene and the numerous images of COVID-19 patients stuck in intensive care units. Before experiencing the nefarious consequences of the Coronavi-rus, Sheldon's paranoid obsession with protecting his own health would have provoked viewers to simply hilarity. However, in the post-pandemic affective atmosphere (Griffero, 2010), the dystopian gaze with which – during the pan-demic – we observe protective suits, physical distancing, and viruses triggers in viewers' minds an immediate deferral to the risk of infection. In the world of the "new normal," therefore, even Sheldon's delusional germophobia could be conceived as a legitimate weapon of defense against the unwanted effects of the disease.

Figure 2: Sheldon in quarantine plays cards with his friends, dressed in a protective suit (*The Big Bang Theory*, episode *The Engagement Reaction*, 2011).

The third example is from a dystopian series, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-present), based on a novel by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. The plot recounts a scenario in which the United States is ruled by a theonomic, totalitarian dictatorship that forces the few surviving fertile women, called "Handmaids," to bear children through forced intercourse with the Commanders. In the episode *Unfit*, the eighth episode of the third season, which aired in 2018, the Handmaids are inside the only supermarket they are allowed to go to. Suddenly one of the Handmaids, OfMatthew, steals a gun from one of the guards and threatens to kill Aunt Lydia, a kind of handler of the Handmaids.

In this case, retro-mediation manifests itself through projecting onto the TV series the anguish and tension that viewers experienced in situations where access to public services was strictly controlled and disciplined. Specifically, retro-mediation induces us to interpret as a general condition the imprisonment and disciplining that, in the TV series, is exclusively reserved for women and the Handmaids in particular. The tension that suddenly erupts in the supermarket scene calls to viewers' minds the frequent fights in stores, documented by video and photos, that occurred during the lockdown.

Figure 3: OfMatthew is taken away by Gilead's armed guards after throwing a fit in the supermarket (*The Handmaid's Tale*, episode *Unfit*, 2018).

The fourth example is perhaps one of the most interesting. *Pushing Daisies* (ABC, 2007-09) is an American television series in the comedy-drama genre created by Bryan Fuller and broadcast by ABC. The series centers on the character of Ned, a "pie-maker" who, since childhood, discovers the gift of raising the dead with a single touch. However, this power comes at a high price: in fact, a second touch from Ned kills for good, as he will discover with his own mother. In the pilot episode, *Pie-lette*, Ned brings his childhood love, Chuck,

back to life. However, he faces the painful condition of not being able to have any physical contact with her. In order to express their love, Ned and Chuck are forced to devise a series of devices, such as hugging machines and protective suits with improvised materials. As is well known, similar devices during the pandemic were employed on a large scale to enable fragile and isolated individuals to have physical contact with their family members without running the risk of being infected. In this particular case, retro-mediation works in two ways. On the one hand, the devices created by Ned and Chuck to "touch" each other in the TV series had a romantic and loving overtone. Instead, our dystopian gaze, trained in the pandemic-torn present, prompts us to interpret these objects as everyday contraptions that serve primarily to reduce the risk of infection and are, therefore, deprived of any dreamy tone. On the other hand, Ned's condition, which, in *Pushing Daisies*, is utterly personal and unrepeatable, in the "new normal" is extended to the whole of humanity. In the post-pandemic era, the viewer feels a deep empathy with Ned's character as he experiences his own suffering caused by not being able to touch and be touched by loved ones, especially the elderly and/or frail.

Figure 4: Ned and Chuck kiss, protected by a plastic wrap (*Pushing Daisies*, episode *The Fun in Funeral*, 2007).

Conclusions. Some Basic Principles of Retro-Mediation

Retro-mediation is thus a media logic of reimagining the past. It works as a retroactive and affective "repair," through which users project dystopian symbols, icons, and visual elements, drawn from the visual imagery of the pandemic, onto audiovisual objects produced in the pre-pandemic era. The examples

we have analysed allow us to enucleate the sociocultural processes that that retro-medation could activate.

First, it shapes social imagineries' production, reproduction, and conversion (Marzo & Meo, 2019). Retro-mediation allows us to transfer to cultural objects of the past the feelings of anxiety, distress, and disorientation experienced during the pandemic.

Second, it can be thought of as a dystopian response to the presentification and apparent impossibility of imagining a better future.

Third, retro-mediation functions in an opposite way to Zygmunt Bauman's (2017) concept of retrotopia. While the latter grants individuals emotional comfort through refuge in an idealized past, retro-mediation projects a dystopian present onto the cultural objects of the past.

Fourth, we can better explain the concept of 'retro-mediation' through Carl Plantinga's theory. Carl Plantinga (2009) introduced the concepts of 'emotional contagion', 'memory traces', and 'learned associations'. Emotional contagion is "the phenomenon of 'catching' the emotions of those around us or of those who we observe" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 125): an event's emotional sharing can influence the collective reaction. Similarly, in social media circles, for example, the general reaction to news about COVID-19 played a significant role in structuring widespread sentiment, which became the basis of that collective affectivity, conveyed primarily by images. On the other hand, 'memory traces' and 'learned associations' operate on and modify our experience. The emotions generated by watching a film, and, by extension, any audiovisual product, are "partly the product of learning" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 75). The elements that characterize any audiovisual work of fiction (music, storyline, etc.) activate memory traces connected to users' previous life experiences. According to Platinga, these memories work primarily on an emotional level: they activate emotional intensification uncoupled from the source from which they originated. Retro-mediation, however, operates oppositely. It materializes an affective state from the memory traces linked by the emotional contagion generated by the virus. These traces, reinforced by the previously illustrated pre-mediation, affect the way we view and experience audiovisual texts prior to the emergence of COVID-19.

Fifth, the media logic of retro-mediation can be learned through the agency theory elaborated by Alfred Gell (1999) about ritual visual artifacts. According to Gell, a human agent operates on the non-human agent (a totem, image, etc.), which, in turn, retroactively acts on the human (making him or her feel 'changed'). Similarly, retro-mediation acts on both emotional and cognitive levels and, therefore, results from these two intertwined levels. It derives from emotion because COVID-19 and its images work through emotional contagion, including memory traces and learned associations.

As mentioned above, retro-mediation materializes emotional states and revives them in the experience of visual objects made before the pandemic.

Therefore, retro-mediation is a process of media affect, emotional and cognitive and has retroactive value, especially when applied to audiovisual media.

It can be interpreted as an illusory process, perhaps even a kind of *pareidolia*. Retro-mediation takes the form of a retroactive reading that starts from the object in front of us: a movie, a TV series, a comic book, etc. Such retroactivity is triggered by the multiple acts of pre-mediation from which the visual imagery of the pandemic came to life, often re-signifying ordinary objects. Retro-mediation transformed, for example, a standard surgical mask into a COVID-19 symbol. This artifact evolves into an agent capable of activating associative memory, somewhat connected with the dynamics of emotional contagion. The repeatability of these processes for multiple artifacts, events, and phenomena build the basis for the visual imaginary of the pandemic, which sets up the symbolic *paraphernalia* of post-pandemic dystopia that users have at their disposal to retro-mediate past cultures.

Finally, we highlight three possible developments of our research.

First, it would be useful to investigate the interference between pre-mediation and retro-mediation processes: how do the two modes of perception and re-mediation of audiovisual narratives mutually influence each other?

Second, the media logic of retro-mediation could be investigated over a broader period to test both the symbolic-affective significance of the pandemic on media processes.

Finally, further research could examine the possibility that other events (natural disasters, wars, etc.) may activate similar dynamics of retro-mediation.

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