

Green Narratives, Ecology and Sustainability in Contemporary Television

Exploring Narrative Ecosystems

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The Seriality Series

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Growing Green

Environmental issues and ecological sensitivity in Italian unscripted TV

Paolo Carelli

◀ ABSTRACT

Green topics are constantly growing in the field of media, both in production policies made up by producers and companies, and in representation styles of media content such as movies, documentaries, TV series and TV programs. However, while in scripted products these themes seem to impose themselves with greater difficulty due to complex attempts to integrate them into autonomous storylines, unscripted TV reveals as a potential genre to spread issues related to sustainability and green and environmental challenges. Based prevalently on real settings and people and aimed at narrating aspects and situations near to everyday life, unscripted TV could represent an ideal space to represent green and eco-friendly topics more directly than scripted programs. The essay wants to explore the role of green issues in Italian unscripted television; since the so-called “TV of the origins”, green and environment aspects have often characterized programmes such as reportages, documentaries, cultural and scientific TV magazines and many other genres. In recent years, due also to the proliferation of thematic channels and streaming platforms, the theme of “green” has grown with a lot of dedicated programmes of diversified genres and points of view about a complex and multifaceted theme, from the climate change to the fight against food waste, from the exploitation of food and wine traditions to the preservation of natural landscapes and biodiversity. In many recent cases, “green” has become a keyword able to identify the title of the programs (from Rai’s *Play Green* to Mediaset’s *Green Storytellers*, until Warner Bros’ Discovery’s *Green Table*), shaping a new trend that refers explicitly to a renewed sensitivity about a global problem.

KEYWORDS

Sustainability; green; television studies, TV history; TV genres.

Green topics in media studies: a brief overview

In recent years, green and ecological topics have seen increasing attention within media studies (Maxwell and Miller 2012, Parham 2016); following the growing role of sustainability (in its environmental, economic, and social dimensions) in policies and agendas of international institutions¹, these issues began to affect the field of media in both production and representation aspects, concerning narratives, rhetoric and languages. One of the crucial questions that the media industry is trying to answer regards the ways “film and audiovisual production meets the concept of sustainability” (Cucco et al. 2022: 161). In this perspective, many studies investigated the role of green policies and protocols built up by production companies, national and local institutions, regulators, distribution actors (such as festivals or other associations) to reduce environmental impact and pursue a direction towards greener screens (D’Urso 2022; Kääpä and Vaughan 2022). At the same time, sustainability is represented within media content through different and various rhetoric, genres, and strategies, often tied to the increasing relationship between media and places, which is one of the most interesting ways to promote locations and their identities. With the proliferation of the so-called “location studies” (Hallam and Roberts 2014), we are now observing a reconceptualization of the locations in media and audiovisual products for their impact on tourism industry and, more in general, on other cultural and economic aspects; in this sense, green topics are ever more relevant to redefine tourism practices and to stimulate new attitudes towards sustainability². Green tourism is, in fact, one of the most

¹ See the 17 Sustainable Developments Goals established in 2015 as part of UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

² On the role of “green” aspects in the relationship between media and sustainable tourism, see Schröder and Hahn (2013).

relevant trends of this industry; after the pandemic emergency, the role of sustainability in defining the choices of tourists and travelers is considerably growing, particularly in the direction of environmental respect and diversification of locations and destinations³. Thus, green issues are nowadays crucial to gather, in a holistic approach, the transformations of tourism industry and the “changed connection of media production and representation with more compelling considerations, needs and challenges at a planetary level” (Carelli 2023: 11).

The role and the use of sustainability issues in media studies could be reassumed in two opposite fields: on one hand, we can observe a tendency to study the relationship between media and sustainability from a larger perspective, tied to the role of information and media in shaping the public debate around these themes, while on the other hand it's possible to retrace the way media and popular culture are able to stimulate sustainable practices through the representation within the content. The first area refers to sustainability as a topic through which media contribute to delineate a public sphere (news coverage, useful information, promoting relevant issues about climate change and environmental issues) and finds a pivotal role in works about strategic communication and media policies (Cox 2013). The second area is well explained by the perspective by Geoffrey Craig (2019), where he underlines the role of media content (television and entertainment genres, in particular) in developing a growing attention and sensitivity to sustainable practices. As Craig explains, in fact,

the media texts of sustainable living variously negotiate issues of sustainability: they are implicated in production and industry demands and often locate everyday sustainability in the contexts of the existing consumer society although it is also the case that the stories and images of sustainable living in newspaper stories, television programmes, online sites, and advertisements sometimes provide projections of the possibilities of a more environmentally friendly existence (Craig 2019: VIII).

³ For a detailed recognition of the transformation of tourist practices and their relationship with media and communication, it is fundamental to point out the research carried out by CeRTA (Research Centre on Television and Audiovisual Media at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) with Publitalia '80 – Mediaset Group. This constant research saw the production of four annual reports about this topic. See all the reports at the website www.comunicazionemediaeturismo.it.

In this sense, unscripted television reveals itself as a strategic genre and way of representation of sustainable and green topics, due to its propensity to work on “real life” (Holmes and Jerwin 2004: 2) and realistic settings.

The use of green rhetoric in Italian television history

Since its origins, Italian television has articulated green issues in different programs and rhetoric⁴. In this evolution, we can retrace different historical phases, where ecology, environment and sustainability became part of television content. A first phase began in 1954 with the birth of Italian Public Service Broadcasting and developed through at least two main genres: reportages and documentaries on one hand and the so-called *rubriche* (news programs aimed at a specific and professional audience) on the other. One of the most paradigmatic and iconic titles is *Viaggio lungo la valle del Po alla ricerca di cibi genuini* (1957): this was a journey alongside the Po, the longest river in Italy, from the source in Piedmont region to the delta in Emilia-Romagna region, through the language of the so-called *inchiesta*, one of the main genres of earlier Italian television. In twelve episodes, with a mix of documentary and journalistic approach, the writer Mario Soldati made a sort of “reportage” that was an example of “cultural anthropology” (Grasso 2003: 811), focusing on food and folkloric identities in post-war Italy. Another documentary was *L'agricoltura in Italia* (1960), directed by Giuseppe Dondi, that highlighted, in six episodes, “the stories of small farmers and cultivators [capturing] the spirit of agricultural entrepreneurship of the time” (Carelli et al. 2022: 197). On the other side, this first period of green, agricultural and environmental television was characterized by more technician programs, such as *La TV degli agricoltori* (1955), that provided useful information for the farmers, who still represented a social and organized community (Di Corinto 2013).

A second phase took hold from the Seventies, when the previous genres were replaced by the so-called *rotocalco*, a less technician and more popular approach in exploring green and environmental issues with ritual weekly appointments (above all on Sundays), such as *A come agricoltura* (1970),

⁴ For a first exploration of the role of green issues in Italian television history, see Carelli, Scaglioni and Sfardini (2022).

then transformed in *Agricoltura domani* since 1978. In this sense, the most important program was *Linea verde*, first aired in 1981 and still present in Raiuno's schedule. *Linea verde* "marked the definitive 'popularization' of agricultural issues" (Carelli et al. 2022: 198), promoting a new slow culture also through urban and metropolitan audiences and inaugurating a new engagement between producers and consumers (Grasso 2003).

Then, another phase of the relationship between ecological issues and television representation begun from the Nineties, in a period characterized by both new cognizance toward environmental problems and a transformation of national television system, with the stabilization of private commercial broadcasters, arose in previous decade. In particular, *Ambiente Italia* was a programme produced by Testata Giornalistica Regionale, the local news department of Italian Public Service Broadcasting, aired from 1990 to 2016 and created after Chernobyl disaster and emotional consciousness that followed; with *Ambiente Italia*, themes such as pollution, sustainability, safeguard of natural resources entered into generalist television production and traced the path of a widespread interest for nature and green over the world, aspects that characterized programmes like *L'arca di Noè* (1989-1994) or *Alle falde del Kilimangiaro* (since 1998); these TV magazines changed the way to narrate planet risks "combining an informational documentary approach, focused on the protection of natural ecosystems, with the topic of travel and the discovery of the most uncontaminated natural places" (Carelli et al. 2022: 198). The hybridization of genres and the "touristization" of environmental issues represented the main two approaches through which Italian television looked at these crucial and increasingly felt arguments in a period of deep social and media transformations.

After the completion of digital terrestrial television process (occurred in 2012), eventually, green and ecological issues appeared in television offer through new rhetoric such as cooking shows or tutorials, new talents from the web (bloggers and influencers) and also new channels on the back of the thematization of television, for example with food or nature channels, such as Sky Nature, aired on pay-tv satellite platform since 2021. Environment and ecology became moreover popular and aimed at stimulating practices and attitudes, in particular alongside the way of "zero km", sustainability and rediscovery of natural landscapes and local traditions.

Sustainability and green in Italian unscripted TV

A systematic analysis of the role and representation styles of “green” in Italian unscripted TV programs has not yet been realized; however, as recently pointed out by Anna Sfardini (2023) it is possible to identify different rhetoric of the way sustainability in its complexity (and therefore also green issues) could be represented within this genre. In underlining a substantial presence of sustainability in unscripted programmes⁵, the author highlights some recurring trends which characterized content related to sustainability, such as the capacity of this kind of programmes to develop spin-offs and ancillary content, the promotion of encouraging small daily practices (waste reduction, plastic free), the appreciation of “made in Italy” as peculiar tradition of the country or the promotion of Italy as a green and technologically and energetically clean country. Alongside these trajectories, the author proposes a model to read the discourse rhetoric of sustainability in TV programmes combining two directions: the contrast between preservation and transformation as key drivers to explain the role of sustainability in the society, and the distinction between implicit and explicit references to sustainable practices or ideals. In this sense, four different models emerge: one that “refers to the programmes characterized by the main theme of preservation and implicit expression of the place” (Sfardini 2023: 50). In this kind of programmes, references to the Earth, agriculture, and to the myth of the past are frequent. A second model is characterized by a preservation approach but combined in a more explicit way: in this rhetoric, TV programmes emphasize the role of human behaviors and social and institutional acts to defend the nature, the environment and ecosystem through sustainable ways of life. A third rhetoric is that we can retrace in those programmes where sustainability is implicit and not exhibited and at the same time the focus is on its transformation potential; this rhetoric is clear, above all, in products aimed at the enhancement of artistic and historical heritage

⁵ Drawing on annual monitoring of unscripted TV programmes in Italian TV offer, the author highlights that around 9% of total offer in seasons 2021/22 and 2022/23 is related to sustainability aspects. Some of the results of the cited research have been presented by Paolo Carelli and Anna Sfardini at 11th BAFTSS Conference “Sustainable Futures: Ethics, Responsibility and Care in Film, Television, Screen Studies and Practices”, held at University of Lincoln (UK) on 3rd-5th April 2023.

or in content where there is a strong mechanism of rediscovery of ancient crafts in a regenerative process. Lastly, the fourth model could be found in programmes where the responsibility and the “call to action” for a collective effort in the direction of the improvement of the society is explicit and their function is to stimulate engaging practices for a better use of the resources of the planet. In these programmes, in particular, the term “green” is often used to describe and define the content in order to make visible and clear the orienteering and the purposes of the product itself. This emphasis on the term “green” is something new in editorial and promotional strategies of Italian broadcasters and platforms and defines a more specific interpretation of sustainable issue in national unscripted TV.

Telling the “green”: three cases from Italian contemporary TV

In recent years, in fact, the term “green”, and the consequent issues which it loads, has become moreover crucial in Italian unscripted TV programmes, to the point that it identifies a growing number of titles. In this sense, at least three products have emerged as significant in the use of a paradigmatic storytelling approach, related to specific players and their single business models and all of them characterized by the cooperation with brand or firms; they are branded entertainment⁶ titles, revealing a new and original approach to the use and the narration of environmental sustainability in unscripted television.

Play Green – Coltivando la sostenibilità is a TV magazine available on RaiPlay, the Italian Public Service Broadcasting streaming platform, since 2022. This program moves from the idea to explain and deeply investigate the term “sustainability”, widely used and spread. The singer and storyteller Lorenzo Baglioni meets people who concretely act for the safeguard, preservation and protection of the Earth, and tells their stories traveling throughout Italy. In his journey, the host promotes the stories of many people working in this direction, such as agricultural entrepreneurs, scientific communicators, artisans, engineers able to explain and warn about the risks

⁶ For a detailed overview of the concept of branded entertainment, see OBE – CeRTA (2020). For a specific analysis of the use of branded entertainment products in Italian TV offer, see also Scaglioni (2023).

and consequences of human beings and actions on the future of the planet. *Play Green – Coltivando la sostenibilità* is produced in collaboration with Mutti, a brand of the food sector, known for the quality and excellence of its tomato sauces and passatas; each episode has a duration of about 16-18 minutes and presents the testimony of people engaged in actions to improve life and conditions of the planet, interspersed with short music pieces and followed by brief speeches by Francesco Mutti, chief executive officer of the brand that sponsors the programme, and other people working in the same company, where they talk about history and actions made by the company in the field of sustainability. In the following table, we can observe the variety of the guests interviewed, the diverse issues of sustainability in which they are involved and the practical actions they planned and implemented to protect and make our planet more sustainable.

EPISODE	GUESTS (JOB)	PLACE	SUSTAINABILITY ISSUE	ACTION
Ep. 1	Enzo Suma (nature guide)	Ostuni (Apulia)	Marine plastic pollution	Foundation of "Archeoplastic" museum
Ep. 2	Sergio Maggioni (sound artist)	Adamello glacier (Lombardy)	Melting of glaciers	Recording of glacier sound
	Giulia Alessandri (farmer)	Parma countryside (Emilia-Romagna)	Zero-mile cultivation	Relaunch of family farming company
Ep. 3	Fabio De Rosa (artisan)	Pontedera (Tuscany)	Exploitation of animals	Creation of "vegan" shoes (without animal skin)
	Denia Franco and Manuela Bocchini (farmers)	Cerveteri (Lazio)	Safeguard of biodiversity	Permaculture (foundation of a sustainable human settlement)
Ep. 4	Francesco Magistrali (explorer)	Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna)	No impact travels	Worldwide explorations without motor vehicles
	Andrea Bada (diver)	Ligurian Sea	Sea pollution	Recovery of wrecks in the seabed

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Ep. 5	Maria Pascucci (primary school teacher)	Alessandrino Neighborhood (Rome)	Reuse and recycling collection	Teaching and practicing recycling collection in classrooms
	Marco Pellecchia (biologist)	Parma countryside (Emilia-Romagna)	Protection of the environment	Renaturation and tree planting
Ep. 6	Marco Faimali (scientist)	Genoa (Liguria) – Institute of Marine Research	Safeguard of marine ecosystem	Conducting research on impact of plastic in sea environments
	Marta Valoti (eco-influencer)	Bergamo (Lombardy)	Reduced consumption	Creation of a digital community on culture of “minimalism”

It seems clear that the concept of “green” contained in the title is to be understood in the broader perspective of environmental sustainability, intercepting many of the goals of Agenda 2030 of United Nations. In the private broadcasting sector, a programme that has put the emphasis on green and sustainability is *Green Storytellers*, a travel and science TV magazine available since 2021 on MediasetInfinity, the streaming platform of Mediaset, the main commercial broadcaster in Italy, and in some cases aired on thematic channel Focus, of the same company. In this programme, the hosts Marco Cortesi and Mara Moschini, two actors and storytellers prevalently active in theatre and digital platforms, have an adventure trip to discover stories of people living in an ecological and sustainable way; *Green Storytellers* represents an interesting point of view around green issues focusing on extreme experiences of people who have chosen practices and behaviors for improving life conditions of the planet. Three seasons have been released. The first season, released in 2021, is composed by eight episodes and approaches the concept of sustainability in a wide perspective, while the other two seasons are conceived as spin-offs focused on specific themes: *Green Storytellers – Food Rescue*, released in 2022 with six episodes located in six different Italian cities (Bari, Florence, Bologna, Turin, Rome and Milan) is centered on the struggle against the waste of food and the promotion of local culinary traditions, while *Green Storytellers – Into the Wild*, produced with the support

of WWF and released in 2023 with eight episodes, is dedicated to the most important projects of preservation of biodiversity in the world. In this sense, the programme has been able to create a sort of franchise potentially replicable every season around different dimensions and meanings of sustainability. *Green Storytellers* is a project built through a bottom-up strategy; in fact, the product has been created by the cooperation between Infinity Lab, the Mediaset creative factory aimed at intercept and promote the work of independent creators and filmmakers, and Produzioni dal Basso, the first and most important crowdfunding platform in Italy. Focusing on the first season that addresses sustainability in all its different dimensions, the following table synthesizes the issues represented in each episode and the role of national associations and organizations in promoting sustainable values and cultures.

EPISODE	GUESTS (ASSOCIATIONS)	PLACE	SUSTAINABILITY ISSUE
Ep. 1	Plastic Free Association	Po Delta (Veneto and Emilia-Romagna)	Plastic pollution
Ep. 2	Alfio Scandurra (blogger)	Palù di Livenza (Friuli-Venezia Giulia)	Slow lifestyle
Ep. 3	Comunità Frizzante	Rovereto (Trentino)	Production of sustainable beverages
Ep. 4	Progetto Rifò	Textile district of Prato (Tuscany)	Production of sustainable clothes
Ep. 5	Linda Maggiori and Alessandro Torrini (bloggers)	Rome/Vatican City	Slow mobility (cycling)
Ep. 6	Rete Semi Rurali	Scandicci (Tuscany)	Safeguard of ecological biodiversity
Ep. 7	Sea Sheperd	Capo Milazzo (Sicily)	Safeguard of marine ecosystems
Ep. 8	Rifugio Pian dei Fiacconi	Marmolada Glacier (Veneto)	Safeguard of mountain environments

A third example of an unscripted TV product strictly tied with green issues is *Green Table*, aired since March 2023 on Food Network, the thematic channel entirely dedicated to the food culture and service of Warner Bros. Discovery group. *Green Table* is a magazine with theatre director and actor Vittorio Vaccaro, who travels throughout Lombardy region to discover and narrate the activities of farms and agricultural holdings; in his journey, that in the first season of the programme has been constituted by six episodes of about thirty minutes each, Vaccaro meets entrepreneurs, local producers and manufacturers with their products (vegetables, cheese and many others) and techniques. The aim of *Green Table* is to make known a crucial sector of regional economy and discovers secrets and activities of virtuous farms of the territory contributing to develop a new perception of rural rhythms and their evolution and transformation in contemporary society. The programme acts also as a proposal for a renewed attention to “zero km” products and genuine gastronomy habits.

The following table reports the guests of each episode, the location of their agricultural company and the food or beverage cultivated and produced. The episodes focus on specific techniques adopted by the farmers and then they end with the host in his kitchen cooking and preparing dishes with the processed raw materials.

EPISODE	GUESTS	PLACE	MAIN PRODUCTS
Ep. 1	Azienda Agricola Baioni	Cassano d'Adda (Milan)	Vegetables and cereals
Ep. 2	Società Agricola del Parco	Abbiategrosso (Milan)	Craft beers
Ep. 3	Cascina Poscallone	Abbiategrosso (Milan)	Oriental vegetables
Ep. 4	Azienda Agricola Chelidonia	Montevecchia (Lecco)	Honey production
Ep. 5	Cascina Gabana	Cascine San Pietro (Milan)	Dairy products (cheese)
Ep. 6	Azienda Agricola Orini	Gaggiano (Milan)	Rice

Conclusions

Green and sustainable issues are increasingly growing in Italian unscripted television, due to a need by the audiences to be addressed and informed about the emergencies of our contemporary societies, the risks of the planet and a diffused sensitivity to the opportunities for changing lifestyles and attitudes. As the most relevant medium in the multi-platform ecosystem, television still plays a crucial role in promoting styles, identities, and functions; unscripted, above all, seems to be more relevant than other genres due to its ability to show real life and represents it through a wide range of sub-genres and narrative mechanisms. The focus on three specific programmes which contain an explicit reference to the term “green” in their titles helps us to catch the centrality of this issue in strategic and editorial perspectives adopted by broadcasters and platforms and, at the same time, to delineate the most effective languages and rhetoric to spread an ecological culture through unscripted content. Albeit different ways of representation, due to the peculiar nature of each single player, the three programmes identified share some common elements: first of all, they belong to the sub-genre of magazine⁷, that is that kind of programmes characterized by in-depth analysis with the formulas of educational approach and “rubrica” and all these programmes share the presence of a host, highlighting the crucial need of a figure of mediation to make more familiar to the viewers the concepts taken into account along the episodes. Then, we could notice how all these programmes privilege the narrative mechanism of seriality with a documentary approach; *Play Green*, *Green Storytellers* and *Green Table* are composed by a succession of self-concluding episodes each of which constitutes a stage of a travel made by the hosts. Lastly, just the mechanism of the journey throughout less known national and international locations is the third aspect common to the programmes; the discovery and the promotion of green and sustainable issues are considered effective when their rhetoric is tied to travel and adventure, because green and environmental sensitivity is not only a pedagogical theme developed in hierarchical dynamic, but it is substantiated through the narration of experiences and the direct contact with people and communities who are concretely committed every day to improve the planet in which we live.

⁷ For a detailed overview of the sub-genres of unscripted in Italian television, see Scaglioni (2023; 2024).

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GROWING GREEN. ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND
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