Blob and its audience: making sense of meta-television

Giulia Previato,
MSc in Media and Communications

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation deals with the audience's interpretations of *Blob*, an Italian satirical and meta-televisual programme. The research was motivated by an interest in the peculiar production technique of this programme, consisting in the mere montage of pieces of other television programmes, with no explicit commentary. The starting point was the hypothesis, derived from literature on meta-television, that a television programme referencing other television texts may ultimately contribute to the viewers' awareness of the artificiality of the medium.

This empirical study aimed to examine whether this hypothesis could hold for Blob's viewers. Additionally, given the unique cryptic nature of the programme's form of communication, this research also sought to understand how the audience relates to it and makes sense of it. In-depth interviews were conducted with young adult viewers of the programme in order to explore these issues. The findings suggest that, indeed, by implicitly exposing the flaws of television, Blob can sometimes contribute to its viewers' critical and reflective approach to the medium. However, the findings also seem to indicate that this programme is considered equally (or even more) significant for its role as an observatory for television. Indeed, it appears that thanks to its quick fragmented nature, the programme can offer to its audience a concentrated panorama of Italian television, encompassing all types of programming and highlighting its most salient aspects.

INTRODUCTION

This research project was prompted by an interest in a specific television programme called *Blob*. This programme was deemed particularly intriguing for two reasons. On one hand because of its longevity: *Blob* has been broadcast daily since 1989 (Magrì, 2009). It is likely that any Italian person who watches television has come across it at least once. On the other hand, the programme is very peculiar, possibly unique. Indeed, there is nothing like it on Italian television. *Blob*'s singularity is due to its production principle, which could be defined as meta-television (Rajewski, 2011), or, in other words, television referencing itself. *Blob* is composed of clips from other television programming, ranging from dramatic news to soap operas or commercials, mashed together in what looks like a nonsensical montage. When watched more closely, however, the programme reveals its satirical and critical intent, as the juxtapositions of the clips are often based on humorous analogies or contrasts between them. A typical example is the combination of clips from newscasts or political programming featuring politicians and clips from films featuring coarse and vulgar characters.

The initial curiosity that motivated the investigation of *Blob*'s audience particularly concerned this uncommon type of communication, and the ways its viewers could make sense of it. The programme offers no explicit commentary, as the editing is limited to the occasional addition of sound and visual effect. While it is generally considered as a satirical programme (Domènech, 2007; Magrì, 2009), it can be argued that its message and meanings are quite ambiguous, and that audience members may understand it in ways that are different from the authors' intention or from other viewers' interpretations. Therefore, the starting point for this dissertation was the wish to examine viewers' various perceptions of the programme, and the elements they value in this type of communication, or, in other words, the reasons why they keep watching it.

Researching *Blob*'s audience provided the opportunity to explore different issues. First of all, it represented a chance to understand the potential role (or roles) the programme fulfils for its audience. Indeed, there is little research on this programme (Rajewski, 2011), and there seems to be no empirical research on its audience. Given that *Blob* includes all the various forms of Italian television, its viewers' interpretations are possibly indicative of their general attitudes towards Italian television in general. Secondly, studying *Blob*'s audience also represented a chance to explore and advance more general hypotheses on the relationship between meta-television and its viewers. Gray (2006) observes that there is little research on

the ways in which media deal with themselves, and on how some media texts can comment on other media texts. Therefore, considering the audience's interpretations of meta-television could help to understand the significance of television programmes dealing with other television contents by shedding light on the functions meta-television might perform for its audience.

Finally, this topic was considered worth investigating because of *Blob*'s potential contribution to the audience's ability to critically watch television. It can be argued that television in Italy is possibly very influential. On one hand, it appears that it is still relied on daily as a source of information by more than 80% of the population (Demos and Pi, 2010), implying that it is still a relevant and significant medium. On the other hand, Italian television has a very tight and controversial relationship with politics (Agostini, 2006; Grasso, 2003). Therefore, exploring possible instances or elements in the Italian panorama inviting the audience to be critical towards television's forms and contents could be particularly significant. In its own small way, *Blob* might be considered as a stimulus for a more critical reading of television's texts. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the audience's interpretations of this programme, in order to understand how it contributes to the way viewers approach television.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

Background: Italian television

Three phenomena related to Italian television should be introduced in order to better understand the position of a satirical programme like *Blob*: *lottizzazione*, deregulation and *videocracy*.

Lottizzazione

As explained by Cosentino (2012), *lottizzazione* refers to the allocation of the three Italian public television channels to the main parties in the Parliament. Rajewski (2011) points out how this necessarily entails a strong political influence on decisions regarding the personnel, the legislation, and ultimately, the content that is broadcast.

Deregulation

From the mid 1970s to the early 1980s the Italian broadcasting system underwent a process of deregulation and liberalization that eventually resulted in a duopoly, with the main six national channels evenly distributed between public (Rai) and private (Mediaset) broadcasting, with three main channels each (Cosentino, 2012). This deregulation also resulted in the lack of effective strategies to guarantee private television's quality and diversity, which are undermined by the profit-seeking orientation of Mediaset. Besides, the new configuration also harmed public television itself, which has become increasingly entertainment-oriented, in an effort to compete with its private counterpart (Rajewski, 2011). To further complicate the situation, one needs to keep in mind that Mediaset is also strongly related to politics as it is indirectly controlled by Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the main centre-right party (Rajewski, 2011).

Videocracy

This term refers to politicians' tendency to substitute formal political arenas for debate (such as the Parliament) with television talk show studios (Grasso, 2003). Grasso (2003) claims that the result of this trend is that politics is inevitably intertwined with television, and that they become almost the same thing, as politics take place on television. Because of this tight relation, dealing with the quality of information on television has a lot more to do with politics than it has with television itself (Agostini, 2006).

Arguably, all these phenomena raise concerns as regards the quality of television content and the ability of the audience to recognise television as a medium which is far from neutral and objective due to its relations to politics.

Blob

This dissertation considers *Blob* precisely in the light of its potential ability to emphasise Italian television's faults.

Blob is a five to fifteen-minute programme that has been broadcast daily since 1989 on public channel Rai Tre at prime time (Magrì, 2009; Rajewski, 2011). It is a montage of short clips

from television programmes broadcast the previous day (including newscasts, entertainment and varieties, films, talk shows and commercials) mixed with clips from Rai's historical archive and the Internet. The editing resembles the practice of zapping, and it is limited to the occasional addition of sound or visual effects. There is no commentary: the only verbal clue is the title of the episode, which can be more or less explicitly related to the content of the clips. While the combination of clips can seem casual, it is widely recognised to be a satirical (Domènech, 2007), ironic, sarcastic and critical (Rajewski, 2011) or parodistic (Preckel, 2008) device, based on the insinuation of analogies between the different clips. As Gray (2006) notes, once any two different texts are juxtaposed, they transform each other and their potential readings.

According to Rajewski (2011) the programme is primarily critical of television, and it aims at dismantling the idea of television (Italian television in particular) as a truthful and trustable medium by uncovering the strategies it deploys to construct reality and, thus, its artificiality. However, she claims that the critique can also be aimed at the specific content of the clips or to television's relation to politics and society at large. Similarly, Domènech (2007) argues that *Blob*'s purpose is to emphasise that television has the ability to manipulate reality.

As there is little literature on *Blob's* peculiar technique or on the programme itself (Rajewski, 2011), the following sections will review the theory and research dealing with the various aspects of the programme that are relevant to this dissertation.

Meta-television

Rajewski (2011) describes *Blob's* peculiar technique as meta-television, which can be defined as television criticising itself by revealing its own attempt to appear as reality (Olson, 1987).

According to Wolf (2011) the recent trend for meta-referential works sees an increasing production of critical meta-referentiality, as opposed to the uncritical type; and while this is true for the fields of art, literature and media, it is particularly prominent in media production, where it is usually aimed at uncovering the materiality of the media. Olson (1987) explains that '[m]eta-television is a form popular postmodernism [as p]ostmodern discourse lays bare the modernist artifice, exposing the inherently arbitrary and provisional nature of its artistic conventions' (Olson, 1987, p. 284). In other words, meta-television is able to

uncover the artificiality of television, and it is thus appealing to those who, either for playful of for more serious and critical purposes, want to oppose television's claim to naturalism.

Therefore, meta-television is inherently self-reflexive, as it exposes its own contrivance. According to Aden (1991) self-reflexive television programmes can contribute to viewers' media literacy and to their ability to consume television critically. Similarly, Rajewski (2011) suggests that meta-television can also contribute to the audience's awareness of the ways in which they generate meaning from the television text. As Gray (2006) suggests, media literacy 'lessons' taught by television might be more effective than those that come from the classroom, as they are received alongside the discourses they are critiquing.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that meta-television requires a certain level of savvy. Olson (1987) observes that in order for meta-television to be successful, the audience must be sophisticated enough to recognise the meta-reference. Similarly, Keazor (2011), discussing *The Simpsons*, argues that the audience is able to understand the show's meta-reference only if they are 'educated' (Keazor, 2011, p.477) viewers, that is, if they have been following the programme long enough to be aware of its style and representational frame.

The production principles: *Ilinx*, *detournèment* and flow.

Ilinx

Among the various meta-television techniques, Olson discusses the use of *ilinx* (Olson, 1987, p. 295), which he defines as a narrative non-sequitur or nonsensical disruption of the narrative. Interestingly, he recognises that while this technique is consciously employed by some television programmes, it is a narrative play that the audience itself can construct by flipping channels, as it results in a montage that can create comical or nonsensical patterns. Meaning, in the case of this type of *ilinx*, is that produced by the viewer. Arguably, this type of meta-television generated by zapping is what *Blob* offers every day to its audience. Since media users can be expected to try and make sense of what they see (Wilson, 2009), one can assume that they will try to use the textual pieces they are exposed to, to construct a coherent narrative. According to Wilson (2009), texts that are perceived as cryptic or incomprehensible (as instances of *ilinx* can often be) foster reflective reading, as viewers put into question their strategies in allocating meanings to the text. A similar point is made by

Sandvoss (2011), who suggests that when a text is alien to our previous experience, we tend to engage more reflexively with it.

Détournement

Blob's technique also resembles the practice of *détournement* (Plant, 1992, p.86). This artistic device was first introduced by the *Situationist International*, a journal published by a group of social revolutionaries from the 1950s to the 1960s (Plant, 1992). The 'situationists', mainly comprising artists and intellectuals, founded their theory in Marxist thought and were influenced by avant-garde artistic movements such as Dada and surrealism. *Détournement* consisted in the recycling of the products of capitalist society (including objects, images and sounds) in a subversive way, turning their meaning upside-down, by taking them out of context and placing them into new settings to create new meanings (Morreale, 2006; Plant, 1992, Vicas, 1998). While this subversive operation also had a playful side, it was above all a social critique to societies of spectacle, a form of resistance that was an integral part of their revolutionary intent (Plant, 1992).

Flow

According to Williams (1974/2003) 'the central television experience [is] the act of flow' (pp. 95-96). As Gray (2006) points out, the televisual text cannot have fixed boundaries, as the common modality of viewing (which includes the practice of zapping and a general disregard for the wholeness of texts) produces a text that is fragmented and riddled with gaps. Morley (2006) suggests that audience studies should be concerned with investigating this type of viewing, and the meanings that viewers draw from it. Therefore, investigating *Blob* and its audience also represents an opportunity to investigate the reception of television flow. Rajewski (2011) argues that *Blob* is able to reproduce the televisual flow that viewers are normally creating themselves, and by doing so is also able to highlight the fast-paced succession of fiction and facts on television. According to Pezzini (2002) although the programme is extremely fragmented, it manages to convey a sense of an identifiable and consistent television discourse (often a trashy and coarse one).

Satire on television

A central aspect of *Blob* is its critical and satirical attitude, which is engendered by its meta-televisual technique. As pointed out by Wolf (2011), metareference is commonly linked to fiction of humorous nature.

Satire, and more generally humour, have the potential to cast a new light on our everyday life, and allow us to observe the social order at a distance (Gray *et al.,* 2009). Gray *et al.* (2009) argue that satirical television has become one of the main genres people turn to in order to understand politics. They describe satire almost as a counterpart of news on television, because it stimulates viewers to question the information they are given and to challenge the presentation of political news as truth. According to Gray *et al.* (2009) engaging with satire requires a superior level of awareness and a cognitive effort on the part of viewers.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart is an example of satirical programming that has received much scholarly attention, also in the field of audience studies. *The Daily Show* is also a type of self-referential text with clear critical intent. It parodies traditional journalistic television programmes by subverting their conventions, and by de-contextualising their content (Gaines, 2007; Trier, 2008). If on one side research suggests that this type satire can foster viewers' critical skills and political knowledge (Baum, 2003; Gaines, 2007; Trier, 2008), it also seems that, at the same time, it can result in cynicism, which, in turn, can eventually lead to political disengagement (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Colletta, 2009; Gray, 2006). Indeed, by emphasising the deceitfulness of politics on television, satire can intensify the audience's disillusionment and sense of powerlessness (Colletta, 2009).

However, while recognising that humour is not necessarily resistive, as people can simultaneously enjoy the ridiculing of the powerful and accept the dominant political order, Corner (2012) objects to the idea that cynicism should necessarily be negative, pointing out that there is little evidence sustaining the condemnation of cynicism. Colletta (2009) also recognises that despite the risk of cynicism, satire should still be valued for its ability to question the truthfulness of television content, especially when it comes to politics.

Audience's interpretation of satirical texts

Rajewski (2011) claims that *Blob*'s editing makes it a semantically open text and that viewers need to be particularly active when they make sense of the programme. Indeed, she recognises that the audience does not necessarily understand it as a critical or ironic text. Perks (2012) makes a similar point about satirical texts in general, as she notes that viewers might not be able or willing to interpret them.

Johnson et al. (2010) found that audiences are active and critical towards satirical texts whether they get the joke or not. They even found that when viewers read the text as satirical, they demonstrated less critical engagement than those who did not interpret it as satire, as they felt that the text was not really carrying a message but it was just meant for entertainment (Johnson et al., 2010). This, however, seems to be the case only when viewers understand the text as mere entertainment and do not consider its ideological implications. Perks (2012) explains that humour and satire depend on the gap between the stated and the unstated meaning of the text.

In other words, in order to understand satire, the audience needs to recognise that the surface meaning of the text is different from (and often opposite to) to the meaning that satire identifies as corresponding to reality. Perks found that satirical texts can be considered polysemous: viewers interpret them in different ways according to their level of awareness of the discrepancy between the stated and the unstated meaning. And, according to Johnson *et al.* (2010), interpretation is greatly influenced by the audience's perception of the authors' intentions, because that is the starting point of the viewer's reading.

Television power and audience resistance

The assumption that the critical potential of meta-television and satire is worth investigating is based on the acknowledgment of the power that television – and the media – have, not only with respect to politics, but to everyday life.

Media scholars tend to assume that television serves the interests of the dominant groups in society, and that it does so by distributing meanings and ideas that are more favourable to them and by sustaining the ideologies that will perpetuate the status quo (Fiske, 2011; Lewis, 1991).

While the audience is generally believed to be active, that is, to be able to generate meanings from media texts that are different from those intended by the producers (therefore in line with the dominant ideology) (Lewis, 1991), the power of the audience cannot quite be compared to that of media institutions (Bird, 2011; Corner, 2000; Morley, 1993; Murdock and Golding, 1973). Nonetheless, instances of more or less conscious resistance to hegemonic meanings are significant in that they represent a potential for political change (Morley, 2006).

Hence, a central issue in audience research is individuating the conditions under which the audience is able to develop a critique of the ideological messages of television programming (Philo, 2008; Roscoe *et al.*, 1995). The significance of this issue stems from the fact that, as claimed by Seaman (1992), television's ideological messages will have a stronger influence on those who are not aware of the constrained character and the contrivance of television content and of the discourses left out by television programming. Consequently, being (effectively) critical implies being aware of the biases in the framing of the issues discussed (Roscoe *et al.,* 1995).

Meta-television, satire and self-reflexive texts, by emphasising the constructed nature of television, could be some of the conditions facilitating a critical understanding. While the literature reviewed above is quite optimistic in this sense, Michelle (2007) is more cautious, as she points out that being aware of the artificiality of the text does not necessarily imply a resistance to the ideological message. More specifically, she argues that being critical of the form of the text is not sufficient to resist its ideological meanings, as one also needs to be critical of the content.

Conceptual framework

The starting point of this research is audience studies and, particularly, the issue of audience's ability to critically engage with the meanings conveyed by television (Philo, 2008; Roscoe *et al.,* 1995). Audience studies also provide the rationale for the whole project, as they point to the need for investigations into the power relations between the media and their audience (Morley, 1993; Murdock and Golding, 1973; Seaman, 1992).

Since a central concern of the research is understanding how meta-television is interpreted, Olson (1987) and Rajewski (2011) are used as the theoretical basis, particularly in the analysis

and interpretation of the results. In particular, their claim regarding meta-television's potential to expose television's artificiality is inspected. Additionally, given the interest in the peculiar production technique of the programme, particular attention is given to how the aspects of *ilinx*, *detournément* and flow are interpreted and related to by the audience. In order to do so, the various hypotheses advanced by the literature discussed above are considered in relation to the interviews' data (the transcripts).

Theoretical work on satire was also considered while designing the methodology and carrying out the analysis of the transcripts. Specifically, two main aspects are examined: the viewers' attitude and their interpretations. In the case of attitudes, the relation between satire and cynicism are investigated (Colletta, 2009), while in the case of interpretation the focus is on the possible polysemous character of the text (Perks, 2012). When dealing with the viewers' interpretations, special consideration is dedicated to the ways they related to both the surface meanings and the unstated meanings of the programme.

Objectives of the research

The empirical work is based on two main research questions.

RQ1: How do people make sense of *Blob*'s satire?

RQ2: How do people make sense of and relate to *Blob*'s meta-televisual production technique?

It appears that so far there have been no audience studies concerning this specific programme. Therefore, the first objective of this research is to understand the relation of the programme with its audience, and also to explore the various hypotheses that have been advanced about this relation, in particular regarding *Blob's* satirical and critical nature. Therefore, the gathering of data and the analysis are aimed to investigate how viewers perceive *Blob*'s satire, its central meanings and its specific targets. In answering this first question, the objective is also to be able to situate the programme in the Italian media landscape, to understand how the audience perceives it in relation to the rest of television and particularly mediated politics.

The first question is inevitably related to the second one: in this case the aim is to explore the potential contributions of the programme's production technique to viewers' understanding of television, with a specific focus on the text's ability to elicit critical interpretations on the

part of the audience. The objective is to find evidence to either support or challenge the claim that this particular type of meta-television unveils television's artifice, and also to advance possible alternative hypotheses on the nature of the relationship between meta-television and its audience.

Satire, and more generally critical television, is rarely considered in reception studies (Johnson *et al.,* 2010). Therefore, this project could contribute to a further understanding of the role of satirical and critical texts. Additionally, since *Blob* is a unique programme both in Italy and abroad (Rajewski, 2011), this is also an exploratory research that can generate hypotheses on the relation between this peculiar meta-televisual technique and its audience.

The ultimate aim of the project, as mentioned above, is understanding how this specific programme and, more generally, meta-television relate to the power dynamics between television and audience, specifically in the Italian context. Hence, the question 'what does this tell us about the more general relation between audience and television?' will frame the interpretation of the results.

In order to narrow down the scope of this investigation, only young adults have been considered. As a consequence, this research will also provide some evidence on the relation between television and its younger audience.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Methodology

Given the nature of the research questions, qualitative methods were selected over quantitative ones. As Schrøder *et al.* (2003) suggest, if one wants to explore the mechanisms that underlie the audience's creation of cultural meanings from media content, qualitative methods, and interviews in particular, are likely to be the most effective method. Wilson (2009) claims that access to the meaning making process can be gained by listening to people discussing the text. Surveys, for instance, fail to capture the nuances of the interaction between the viewer and the text (Schrøder *et al.,* 2003).

Experiment was initially considered as a way to investigate the possible effects of being exposed to the programme. However, this method was eventually ruled out for various reasons. Firstly, it would have presented the same problem as with surveys (i.e. it would not have been possible to carry out a thorough investigation of audience's interpretations), and, secondly, it seemed unrealistic to assume an effect of the programme after a single viewing. Moreover, as suggested by Becker *et al.* (2010), testing the effects of a media text requires a preliminary analysis of the audience's perceptions of the text. Ethnography was also excluded because, as pointed out by Bird (2003), while the conditions of research would be more natural, it is not an appropriate choice when the researcher is dealing with an issue or a phenomenon that is familiar to him or her.

Finally, individual interviews were chosen over focus groups mainly because of the character of the programme. As mentioned above, one of the features of the text is its semantic openness (Rajewski, 2011): focus groups could have inhibited some participants from sharing their personal interpretation, as they might have thought that it was not the 'correct' one after listening to other participants' points of view. Schaefer and Avery (1993) argue that idiosyncratic understandings of a media text are best explored by using individual interviews: focus groups would result in less detailed accounts of individual interpretations.

Consistently with Schrøder *et al.* (2003) and Wren-Lewis (1983), it was deemed that the social aspect of meaning construction would still be (indirectly) included in the individual interviews, as the participants' experience of the social world is the basis for the interpretive repertoires they draw from when making sense of the text. Therefore, given that the central interest of the research were personal readings rather than the group consensus-forming patterns, in-depth interviews were considered more apt than focus groups (Schrøder *et al.,* 2003).

Following Gaskell (2010), semi-structured, in-depth interviews were selected over structured ones because of the need to leave enough space for unforeseeable topics or issues that respondents might bring up in discussing the programme (especially given its polysemous character). Besides, in-depth interviews were considered to be particularly useful in dealing with the text's interpretations, because, as claimed by Berger (1998) and Johnson (2002), they are the appropriate tools for exploring respondents' attitudes and ideas that are not fully articulated and readily available. Indeed, it was expected that most respondents would not have previously engaged in discussions about *Blob*, and, given the nature of the programme,

it was expected that some of the scenes would elicit vague impressions rather than clear interpretations.

From an epistemological point of view, this study is grounded on the principles of active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Therefore, the interviews were conducted and analysed with the objective of uncovering and exploring the mechanisms and strategies of meaning-making, and with the belief that expecting to unveil respondents' 'true' opinions would be unrealistic. During the analysis, each instance of talk was contextualised and particular attention was dedicated to the language used and to how the interviewer could have influenced the production of talk (both because of her mere presence and because of the type of questions asked) (Silverman, 2001). This specific approach was selected because of the unnatural character of the interview situation, as it was assumed that this would necessarily influence the respondents' accounts.

Various potential sources of bias were taken into account while conducting the analysis, as prescribed by Schrøder *et al.* (2003). The first was the fact that conversation took place in a face-to-face situation, which might have prevented some participants from sharing some of their beliefs and thoughts (Gaskell, 2000). Specifically, given that the programme is generally considered left-leaning (P: Papo[1], personal communication, June, 4 2013), some respondents could have been reluctant to share their political views. The second main source of bias was the fact that the episode selected for the interviews was shown twice (the first time with no interruptions and the second time with pauses in order to give respondents the time to comment on the single scenes). Hence, it is likely that people paid a lot more attention to it than they would have in a natural situation. Michelle (2007) and Wren-Lewis (1983) claim that audience research participants tend to be more critical in their interpretations than they would normally be. The third source of bias was the researcher: having a conversation about television with a media and communications student might have lead respondents to be more critical towards television's programming. Indeed, Berger (2011) observes that interviewees have the tendency to try and conform to what they assume the researcher is expecting. The biases described above represent the major disadvantages in selecting this method.

A brief textual analysis of the episode was performed before the interviews (see Appendix A). Morley (1992) argues that the text should be considered in audience research because despite the evidence that viewers can create very different meanings from a text, one cannot assume

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[1] One of *Blob's* authors, whom I contacted via email.

that interpretations are not constrained in any way by what is being watched. Indeed, while the *Blob* was thought to be potentially polysemic (Rajewski, 2011), it was also believed that the text should be considered as it necessarily imposed some limitations to the interpretation. The analysis mainly entailed tracing the original contexts of the clips and gathering information about the people featured in them and the issues discussed.

Finally, the authors of the programme were contacted (via email) as it was believed that their comments could provide helpful insights for this research.

Sampling: the episode and the interviewees

The episode was selected on the basis of representativeness. Most of *Blob*'s episodes include a mix of various types of programming, usually ranging from dramatic moments to very light ones. The episode selected was roughly ten minutes long and it included thirty-one clips from newscasts, films, soap operas, political talk shows, music videos, variety shows and commercials. All clips were taken from Italian public and private television, apart from the two music videos and a clip featuring a Lebanese talk show (these three videos were presumably taken from the Internet). The longest clip lasted 2.18 minutes, while the shortest lasted 3 seconds. Sixteen clips (roughly half of them) dealt with current social and political affairs in Italy.

The sampling of respondents, as suggested by Gaskell (2000) was aimed to gather the widest possible range of opinions about the programme (as opposed to random sampling). Given that *Blob*'s content usually deals with politics, the sample includes interviewees with different orientations. The respondents were also recruited on the basis of the familiarity with the programme: they had to be people who watched *Blob* at least once a week. It should be noted that this criterion imposed a constraint on the variety of the respondents' political orientation. Indeed, the programme is broadcast on Rai Tre (a traditionally left-leaning channel), and it is usually considered as left more than right leaning. Therefore, it was not possible to find respondents who watched it regularly and were right-leaning. However, familiarity with the programme was considered more important, as the objective of the research was to investigate the programme's audience. This allowed the researcher to ask more general questions about the relationship with the programme and their perceptions of it before watching the episode selected.

As mentioned above, the sampling was also restricted to include only young adults. This decision was based on two reasons: first, it allowed to narrow down the research scope, making it more manageable, secondly, it created an interview situation in which respondents felt they were talking to a 'peer', which was assumed to put them more at ease, and to feel more free to share potentially controversial opinions. More time and more resources would have permitted to include people of different ages, and possibly to compare the different age groups. Finally, since, as noted by Hall (Cruz and Lewis, 1994) the audience's interpretation cannot be assumed to be determined by socioeconomic differences, the recruiting process tried to obtain diversity along different fields, not only including educational and social background but also characteristics such as personal interests.

Interviewees were recruited through the researcher's personal network and through *Blob*'s official Facebook page. Fourteen people were interviewed: seven males and seven females. The average age was twenty-five, the youngest respondent was twenty-one and the oldest twenty-nine. Six of them were university students from different disciplines (law, political science, economics, psychology, philosophy and engineering), five were working in different sectors (a medical doctor, a factory worker, a photographer, a graphic designer and a waitress/painter) and three were unemployed (two out of these three were recent graduates looking for a job). All of them watched the programme regularly (at least once a week), but they differed in their levels of appreciation of the programme (ranging from those who would define themselves as fans to those who mostly watch it because the television is on).

Research tools

The topic guide was divided into three main parts. The first part included questions about the respondents' relationship with television and questions concerning their opinions on television and mediated politics. This part also included questions about the informants' relationship with the programme and their opinions about it. The episode was shown at the end of the first part, and the second block of questions was all related to the episode. At first respondents were asked to describe the video and to give their general interpretation of it. Afterwards, the video was shown again and the interviewees were asked to stop it whenever they wanted to comment on a particular part (either a specific clip or the association of two or more different clips). During the second viewing of the episode, respondents were encouraged to discuss what they felt the meaning of the sequences was, what they thought the intentions of the authors were, and whether or not they agreed with the representation of the content. The third part of the topic guide was dedicated to issues that might have not

emerged during the first two parts of the interview, such as their thoughts about the programme's audience (what kind of audience is it?), and their opinion on the range of interpretations that the programme can elicit (is it polysemous?). Finally, they were asked to mention something they did not like or they would change in the programme.

The topic guide was composed on the basis of the literature reviewed above and the research questions. The decision to show the video twice was motivated by the high number of clips included in the episode. It was expected that interviewees would find it difficult to recall many of the clips after seeing the video the first time, and it was concluded that in order to get a more comprehensive account of the respondents' interpretations the video should be shown twice (the first time to get a general impression and opinion, and the second time to explore the interpretations of the different sequences).

All the interviews lasted between one and two hours, and while, as suggested by Schrøder *et al.* (2003), the preferred location was the interviewee's home (where respondents are expected to feel more comfortable and at ease), five of them opted for the researcher's house. The interviews took place in the three weeks following the broadcasting of the episode selected. The objectives of research were illustrated at the time of recruitment but also before the interviews. The participants were also assured they would remain anonymous and they were asked to sign a consent form to participation. There were always five to ten minutes of initial small talk, and interviewees were asked to consider the conversation as an informal exchange. All interviews were recorded and transcribed immediately after they took place. During the first viewing of the episode the researcher took notes of non-verbal reactions, such as laugh or expressions of disgust.

The interview transcripts were analysed manually with thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Ezzy, 2002; Guest, 2012). As suggested by Ezzy (2002), common themes were individuated, both deducted from the conceptual framework and inducted from the data themselves. Deviant cases were also included, as prescribed by Guest (2012) and Silverman (2001). The transcripts were also considered individually in order to find associations between the various themes for each of the interviewees. In general, given the active interviewing approach, the analysis was conducted with specific attention to the way respondents related to the interviewer, to the type of discourses they drew from in order to construct meaning from the text, and, as suggested by Jensen (2012) to the implicit, unstated elements of the conversations, such as taken-for-granted premises that respondents did not believe they needed to specify.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

As explained in the methodology section, the transcripts were analysed manually with thematic analysis. The coding framework is presented in the appendices (see Appendix C). The presentation of the results will roughly follow the coding framework with reference to the relevant literature, while the general discussion will consider the most salient aspects and relate them to the research questions and the conceptual framework. The interviewees' names have been changed in order to grant them anonymity. The quotes included in the presentation of results have been chosen because they have been thought to be the most representative of the theme that is being dealt with. There was also an effort to try and include a similar amount of quotes from each interview.

Results

Italian television and mediated politics

Most respondents reported that they only watch television in order to relax, or because they are having lunch or dinner, but that overall, they watch it rarely. This was usually motivated by their opinion on television, which was generally quite negative. Many of them complained about the programming because of its low quality and its uniformity. Indeed, many also claimed that television should offer more cultural content.

They also described television as manipulative: on one hand it is perceived to have a huge influence on public opinion, and, thus, on politics, while, on the other hand, it is considered as a powerful seller of a certain type of language, stereotypes, ideology and consumerism, or, more generally, of a fake reality. However, some argued that the power of television only works on those who do not have alternative information sources at their disposal or on those who are not educated. Most respondents seemed to consider themselves quite immune to television's influence, with only one exception, Federica (25, economics student) who admitted that 'the influence is huge. I have seen it myself in my life [...] despite the fact that I can defend myself thanks to the tools I have'. This seems to be consistent with the so-called 'third-person effect' (Becker et al., 2010, p. 146), according to which people tend to assume that media have a greater effect on other people than on themselves.

Mediated politics were also generally perceived very negatively. Interestingly, some of the respondents blamed television for the low quality of mediated politics, and some went even further and claimed that television has a negative influence on politics in general, as Lisa (22, philosophy student), who argued that 'political language has adapted itself to television'. On the other hand, some interviewees found that the poor quality of mediated politics was a consequence of the poor quality of politics itself. As Mauro (23, factory worker) points out 'politics is pretty bad, so politics on television is bad as well', and others argued that television was serving politicians', and more generally powerful people's interests. Several issues were pointed out as regards the way television deals with politics. The most prominent across all interviewees was the spectacularization of politics on television, which the informants referred to as a 'show', a 'reality show' and a 'variety', where politicians become celebrities, or, as Paolo (22, law student) was bitterly noting 'great actors'. Another issue that was often mentioned was the deceiving aspect of mediated politics, seen as presenting a 'non-reality', as being 'not objective' and as intentionally excluding some issues or discourses. There was also general frustration with political communication, mostly because, in Matilde's (25, unemployed) words: 'politicians can say whatever they want and no one is ever going to question it'. Many maintained that journalists were responsible for this type of communication, either because they do not dare to contradict politicians or because they are incompetent.

Overall, the interviewees demonstrated to be rather critical of television, and demonstrated awareness of the close relationship between politics and television. However, some also recognised that their opinion might be inaccurate due to their limited familiarity with television programming.

Blob

Independently of their levels of appreciation of the programme, almost all the informants reported that they watch the programme because they happen to see it on television. This 'casual' mode of watching has a lot to do with the fact that the programme is broadcast around eight in the evening, right after the regional newscast, and around dinner time. The respondents watch the programme 'while cooking or setting the table or eating' (Bianca, 28, unemployed), and because 'I turn on the television and usually around that time you find *Blob*' (Luca, 29, medical doctor). Those who are still living with their parents also noted that they watch it because their parents do.

Blob's satire

All the respondents recognised that *Blob* has a critical and satirical intent. Indeed, many argued that the programme aims to entertain and amuse people, but also, and ultimately, to critique and denounce some aspects of politics and society. They identified various targets of the programme's satire. These ranged from the particular to the very general. Indeed, some respondents found that the aim of the programme is also to attack specific politicians. Others claimed that the critique is directed at the political class in general and at 'those politicians who have more reasons to be attacked' (Emilio, 23, engineering student), and they argued that this is what satire should be like: critiquing the most powerful people. Others believed that *Blob*'s satire is mostly attacking television and the low quality of its programming and its communication. As Elisa (26, psychology student) points out: 'They pick the worst programmes on television'. Some interviewees also found that the programme's satire deals more generally with the country's social tensions and current affairs.

The identification of the targets was influenced by the informants' perception of *Blob*'s politics. Indeed, those who perceived the programme as taking a specific side were more likely to argue that the satire was directed at specific politicians (on the opposite side). Paolo (24, law student) argued that *Blob* is quite obviously defending and serving the interests of Partito Democratico (PD) because the programme gives voice to 'those messages that PD would like to get through'. Most respondents claimed that the programme's politics are influenced by its channel (Rai Tre) and they concluded that *Blob* is left-leaning. However, while some of these interviewees found that this has consequences for the choice of targets, others defined *Blob* as 'super partes', and 'attacking everyone'.

The interviewees' opinion on the programme's politics also affected their evaluation of *Blob*'s satire. It was generally found 'funny', 'entertaining' and 'evil in a healthy way', and most interviewees valued it because of its critiques, which can 'prompt further reflection' (Sara, 23, political science student). A notable exception was Paolo, who argued that the programme's satire is entertaining but it clearly avoids criticising PD's politicians, and that it is 'superficial and […] deals with themes that are not significant and useful for us citizens'.

Paolo was the only interviewee who disagreed with the message and meanings he claimed the episode was conveying. The others fell into two cases. They either agreed with the meanings they identified or they felt that *Blob* is not a programme they can agree or disagree with. In

the first case, the interviewees observed that the programme usually confirms opinions they already have, and it is generally congenial to their political views. In the second case, the informants found that they could neither agree nor disagree with the programme, firstly because of its ambiguity, and secondly because of its satirical character, which made them perceive it as providing the basis or cues for further reflection rather than advancing a clear message for people to accept or reject. As Lisa (22, philosophy student) claims: 'it's not really about agreeing, it's more about the feeling that it elicits'.

Hence, it seems that, consistently with Johnson et al. (2010), viewers' perception of the authors' intentions has a great influence on the audience's interpretations of satire. Indeed, Paolo, who understood the programme as serving PD's interests, interpreted *Blob*'s satire as an attack to the party's political opponents, while the others, who argued that the authors are rather impartial, interpreted the satire as a critique to the whole political class.

As for the tone of the programme's humour, most interviewees found that it was quite bitter. Some also noticed that *Blob*'s satire can be very dramatic, and can make the viewers' angry, dispirited, or even nauseated. Nonetheless, all recognised that the programme usually manages to make them laugh. Most of them also argued that the programme's ultimate aim is not only to entertain people but also to invite them to reflect. Commenting on the authors' intentions, Gaia (27, waitress/painter) observed: 'it might be that they are trying to show people what we actually are, and to make them reflect'. Some went even further and argued that *Blob* is trying to foster social change.

Overall, while the programme can elicit negative feelings such as frustration and discouragement, the interviewees' comments on the ultimate objective of the programme suggest that *Blob*'s satire is not linked to a cynical acknowledgment of absolute powerlessness on the part of the viewers, but, rather, it is interpreted as a stimulus for reflection, and, in some cases, even action. Hence, the hypothesis advanced by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) and Colletta (2009), who suggested that satirical programmes can contribute to political disengagement, does not seem to hold for these *Blob*'s viewers.

Making sense of Blob's production technique

All the interviewees pointed out that *Blob*'s satire can be very cryptic. This was clearly related to the production technique. Indeed, many admitted they have trouble making sense of it

sometimes, because 'it is hard to understand why they cut some scenes and combine them with others' (Mauro, 23, factory worker). Carlo (21, unemployed) notices: 'I get bored sometimes because of the long sequences I do not understand'.

While not understanding some parts was common to all the participants, some assumed that it was because they did not get the meaning or the message, while others argued that some parts of the programme simply have no message or meaning.

In the first case, the respondents believed that all the clips' pairings are intentional and that the authors juxtapose them because they see a connection between the two (or more) scenes. Sara (23, political science student) argued:

> it seems like there is no logic in the pairings, but actually there is always a link between one clip and the following one. But the links are not immediate and straightforward, so sometimes I can't recognise the type of association they meant to create.

In this case, the respondents tended to point out that the programme is very intellectual, and therefore sometimes they could not understand the links between different scenes because they lacked the knowledge or culture necessary to be able to interpret it. Mauro (23, factory worker) argues that 'their target audience is quite cultured, so they have a certain kind of communication. And sometimes I cannot understand it'.

In the second case, the informants claimed that sometimes there is no connection between the different clips. Some claimed that episodes tend to be divided in different blocks of clips, each dedicated to a different theme. Others maintained that sometimes the association can be based on mere aesthetics (such as word play) rather than being meant to convey a meaning. Mattia (27, graphic designer) reflected on the production process and argued that 'if you think about the job they have to do every day, they don't even have the time to connect everything'. Some however, asserted that the occasional randomness in the programme was intentional, either because the authors want to be ambiguous, or because, as Gaia (27, waitress/painter) noticed: 'it's a bit artsy, so it doesn't have fixed rules'.

The respondents reacted in different ways when they could not find a meaning in a sequence. Some dismissed it as an occasional occurrence that did not prevent them from keeping on enjoying the programme. Others claimed that, even if they could not find a clear meaning, they still got something out of the sequence. Giorgio (26, photographer) explained:

'sometimes it's like a contemporary art painting, I mean, you don't always have to find a meaning, sometimes you watch it and at the end you're left with some feelings, sensations'. Similarly, Elisa (26, psychology student) observed: 'it's similar to when you dream. You wake up and you can't really tell what happened but you're left with a certain impression'.

Nonetheless, all the informants, even those who found the ambiguity of the programme frustrating at times, made positive remarks about the production technique. Most argued that the authors must be very cultured and witty or even that 'they are geniuses' (Elisa, 26, psychology student). The technique itself was described as 'refined', 'high browed' or 'brilliant'. It was also valued because of its uniqueness, as many noticed there is nothing like it on television, and it is a very 'peculiar type of communication' (Luca, 29, medical doctor).

Three main aspects of the production technique were found to be particularly praiseworthy by the respondents. The first was the lack of commentary, as Lisa (22, philosophy student) explains: '[*Blob*] offers a non-verbal type of communication [...], there is no one there to explain things to you, it is simply a completely different approach to communication'. The interviewees found that this makes the programme more impartial, because the message is not explicit, or because they make fun of people simply reporting their own words. The other two aspects are closely related to the lack of commentary. On one hand, the informants maintained that this specific technique allowed the programme far more freedom than other programmes. Indeed, they claimed that it is hard to censor or condemn *Blob* because 'it is not explicit, you are the one who is articulating the thoughts' (Federica, 25, economics student). On the other hand, the lack of commentary was associated with an active mode of viewing. Emilio (23, engineering student) argues that *Blob* 'stimulates the viewer to make an additional step, a greater effort, compared to normal television programmes that just pour everything on you and you have no space to elaborate it'.

Others pointed out that, compared to other programmes, it requires more attention, and it is more likely to stimulate reflection. These comments resonate with Sandvoss' (2011) and Wilson's (2009) arguments. Indeed, they both claimed that when people find it difficult to make sense of a text, their interpretation becomes more reflective.

Many also described the production technique as manipulation, because clips are taken out of context, and 'combining, cutting and editing different things can result in different presentations of an issue' (Matilde, 25, unemployed). However, they interpreted the programme's manipulation in different ways. Some argued that taking clips out of context

can deceive viewers. Others, though, pointed out that they are not really turning the meanings of the original clips upside-down, but they are just presenting them under a different light. Some also argued that the editing of clips is not deceiving because *Blob*'s audience is expecting it from the programme. One interviewee also advanced the hypothesis that *Blob* manipulates television content in order to make viewers aware of the possibility of doing so:

> maybe their objective is also saying 'look, you saw this in a newscast and you had an idea about it, now look at how I put it in the middle of other things, it can change your perception of it (Elisa, 26, psychology student).

Not only satire

Overall, according to the interviewees *Blob* is not just about juxtaposing clips on the basis of satirical analogies. Indeed, the informants reported that they also value the programme for other reasons.

Firstly, many found the programme worth watching because 'it is also a summary of current affairs' (Bianca, 28, unemployed). Emilio (23, engineering student) reported that he also watches it because it is a 'good summary of all television programming'. Similarly, many found it useful as a way to see how different programmes (especially political ones) choose to deal with issues on television.

Secondly, some interviewees claimed that the programme is interesting also because of the clips it chooses to include. Many reported that sometimes *Blob* manages to highlight specific issues that other programmes would not deal with and therefore risk remaining unnoticed. Some respondents also argued that they occasionally learn about new issues, programmes or even films thanks to *Blob*.

Thirdly, some claimed that *Blob* sometimes works as an 'electroshock therapy' (Paolo, 24, law student) either by putting many clips depicting the same thing near one another, or by highlighting the contrast between different things. For instance, commenting on the fact that many clips in the episode featured protesting people, Sara (23, political science student) observed that presenting them all together draws attention to the common features all these demonstrations have:

if you only watched one programme you wouldn't think 'look at the rambling way these people are protesting'. So if you see them all together you can make a kind of consideration that is different from the one you would make watching a single programme.

As for the case of contrasts, many argued that the alternation of clips featuring dramatic events and clips from entertainment and variety programmes was a way of pointing to the contrasts within the country, between 'those who are trying to change things [and] those who don't care, those who are shut in their own world and just party, represented by those who are singing and dancing on television' (Giorgio, 26, photographer), and also to point out how easily distracted the audience is. Matilde (25, unemployed) observed:

they show these people who are extremely angry for social and political issues, and then they combine them with programmes where this idiot is singing, and everyone claps and is happy […] and it makes me think about this aspect of Italians, who can get angry really fast but then they forget as quickly.

The combination of contrasting images is an element that Vicas (1998) describes as inherent in the practice of *detournément*. Vicas argues that combining two clashing images generates surprise, and surprise, as Sandvoss (2011) and Wilson (2009) argue, can stimulate reflection. Besides, Sara's comment seems to point to the fact that *Blob*'s production technique can unmask specific patterns. Indeed, other interviewees observed how, in the episode shown during the interview, many clips featured instances of usage of poor language or poor communication. It seems that by reproducing a concentrated version of the television flow, *Blob* can emphasise the character of the television discourse (as suggested by Pezzini, 2002), and help viewers put into focus some of its flaws.

Interpreting the text

As regards the episode that was shown during the interviews, there was a substantial variation among the informants' interpretations of the clips' juxtaposition and of the reason why a specific clip was included in the episode.

Some pairings were interpreted rather uniformly. For instance, the coupling of the second and third clip of the episode was understood in the same way by all the respondents, with only minor variations. As explained in the description of the text (see Appendix A), the

second clip features a politician from the main centre-right political party while she is talking about Berlusconi (her party's leader) at a political talk show. The other clip features a scene from a film: there is a couple in what looks like a bedroom, and the woman is clearly impressed by her partner's physical appearance. All the interviewees argued that this was an ironic critique directed at Berlusconi, and that the clips' combination was alluding to the sexual scandals Berlusconi has been involved in, with the third clip completing the second by suggesting that Berlusconi's new record is a sexual one. As explained by Paolo (24, law student):

> she is praising Berlusconi's records so you think [laughs] 'what can these records be if he did nothing politically speaking?' And then [Blob] associates it with the image of Berlusconi as a playboy.

On the other hand, some pairings were interpreted in almost opposite ways. One example is the combination of clips six and seven (see Appendix A). In one clip *5 Star Movement* (M5S) party's leader Beppe Grillo is explaining at a press conference that President Napolitano invited him for a meeting in a room with no mobile phone reception or wi fi. The other clip features a Vodafone commercial with people holding smart phones and a penguin singing 'we are all smart'. In this case some people interpreted it as a critique towards Grillo and the M5S's obsession with technology and the Internet, while others claimed that *Blob* was actually critiquing the old political class the lack of connectivity and communication in institutional places.

In other cases the pairings elicited various interpretations, as in the case of the combination of a political talk show and a scene from a Frankenstein film (see clips nine to fourteen in Appendix A). Frankenstein and his creature/monster were seen by different interviewees as representing different things: some saw them as Grillo and the M5S, others as the Italian voters and the unnatural coalition (which is now governing) of the main centre-right and the main centre-left parties, others as the President and the parties' coalition, while some only focused on the monster and saw it as representing people's angry reaction to the political talk show, or as an analogy with the country that does not seem to be able to wake up.

Most of the times, however, the interviewees commented on the single clips rather than on their combinations, and even the very choice of including the single clips was interpreted in different ways. For instance, the informants had different opinions regarding the reason why the authors decided to include the music video featured in clip sixteen (see Appendix A). For

some the clip was simply funny in itself, for others it was representing the Parliament's chaotic situation, some argued that it was included because of the lyrics, while some saw it as representative of trashy television programming and as an example of the silly things that distract the country from real problems.

Besides, as mentioned above, sometimes the interviewees reported that they could not make sense of some of the clips' juxtapositions or of the choice of including specific clips.

Blob, or at least the episode that was shown during the interviews, could be described as a polysemous text. However, contrary to what Perks (2012) suggests, the difference in viewers' interpretations is not due to their different levels of awareness of the gap between the stated and the unstated meanings. Indeed, the interviewees were generally well aware of the existence of unstated meanings, but they used different cues to construct them. Therefore polysemy seems to derive from the text's 'strategic ambiguity' (Ceccarelli, 1998, p. 404): in this case, according to Ceccarelli, the authors intentionally make the text ambiguous, usually to attract a wider public. As regards *Blob*, it seems more likely that the text's ambiguity is not actually meant as strategic, since it is probably inherent in the creative style of the authors (who want to create a considerable semantic gap between stated and unstated meanings), rather than an attempt to gain more viewers. It should also be noted that the interviewees' interpretations were always cautious, and they often observed that the real meaning might be different from the one they set forth.

Indeed, the informants seemed to be aware of the polysemous character of the programme. However, some argued that the differences in interpretations cannot be very significant, while others maintained that it is probably possible to understand it even in opposite ways. The interviewees claimed that the differences in interpretation derive from various factors, such as the text's ambiguity, the mode of watching (a distracted viewer was deemed to be less likely than an attentive one to notice some aspects of the implicit critique), and the viewer's background, life experiences and political views. Matilde (25, unemployed) explains: 'they can show you many things in ten minutes, so you're struck by the things that mostly fit the views you already held'. The informants often remarked that their own interpretation might not be the correct one because they were influenced by their own views. Gaia (27, waitress/painter), after explaining the meaning of a sequence commented: 'anyway, this is obviously shaped by what I think'. Additionally, interviewees generally believe that having a deeper knowledge of Italian politics, films and television helps to produce more nuanced and articulated interpretations.

The last point is closely related to the interviewees' perceptions of *Blob*'s audience. Federica (25, economics student) points out that: 'in order to enjoy the programme you have to be a certain type of person'. The general perception was almost of an 'elite audience', as 'it is obviously not for everyone' (Bianca, 28, unemployed). The informants described the programme's audience as cultured and as having considerable knowledge of Italian politics and current affairs. It seems that there is a certain degree of what Gray (2006), in his study of the audience of *The Simpsons*, named the '*Simpsons* snobbery' (Gray, 2006, p.138): the viewers also enjoyed the programme also because they felt they could understand references and meanings that other people would be unable to see. Hence, part of the reason why viewers enjoy watching *Blob* could also lie in the feeling of superiority derived by being able to understand the nuances of the programme's satire.

Discussion

Blob's production technique, and, arguably, the authors themselves, often render the text quite cryptic, by creating a considerable semantic gap between the stated meanings (i.e. the edited television content) and the unstated ones (i.e. the satirical critiques). Indeed, all the interviewees pointed out their difficulties in making sense of the text, which sometimes seemed to provide them with no useful clues to uncover the unstated meanings. Nonetheless, the informants valued and enjoyed the programme even in those instances in which the text did not seem to make much sense.

This seems to be due to the fact that the interviewees understood *Blob*, and, in particular, its production technique, as serving a number of 'functions' that are not strictly related to the unstated meanings of satire.

Firstly, it appears that viewers can also appreciate the programme because of the feelings it evokes. As some interviewees were observing, even if the meaning of a sequence is not clear, it still manages to communicate something. Secondly, in some cases *Blob* is not interpreted as an articulated satirical critique, but, more generally, as an observatory for television. The interviewees found that the programme acts as such in different ways. On one hand, it manages to highlight the contrasts of television. Many interviewees perceived that the combination of clips from entertainment and political programmes was meant to remark how television can easily distract the audience from serious issues. It seems that for viewers contrasting images are not just an element of surprise or unexpectedness that can engender

reflection -- as in the case of *detournément* (Vicas, 1998) -- but also a device that emphasises the actual contrasts that exist on television. On the other hand, the informants pointed to the fact that *Blob* manages to highlight certain aspects or patterns of television discourse by putting many similar clips one after the other. By reproducing the televisual flow, it also uncovers the features of the television discourse (Pezzini, 2002). Indeed, many people commented on the fact that the episode included many examples of poor communication, especially as regards mediated politics.

Besides, the reproduction of the television flow also seems to serve another function for these viewers: *Blob* presents a concentrated version of television. This aspect of the programme was valued because it allows viewers to keep informed on what television deals with, but also on how different programmes choose to deal with various issues. For some, it also represented a potential source of information, as it features many clips dealing with current affairs.

Therefore, for the interviewees *Blob* is a satirical critique carried out through the pairing of clips, as argued by Rajewski (2011), but it is also a constant reminder of what is on television, with a special focus on mediated politics. The fact that the programme is broadcast at prime time, alongside many newscasts, might contribute to the fact that these viewers also watch it as an alternative newscast that reports salient and interesting events that happened on television, but also, more generally, in current affairs.

As regards the programme's potential to invite critical interpretations and to uncover television's artifice (Rajewski, 2011), there are some elements that suggest that this potential is sometimes actualised. For instance, as discussed above, the interviewees found that interpreting the programme requires a certain degree of elaboration and can provide cues for further reflection. Besides, other commented on the fact that *Blob*'s ability to manipulate original television content and transform its meanings also functions as a warning for viewers, telling them that it is possible to misrepresent reality on television. Therefore, this meta-televisual technique can be seen as an instance of television revealing its own contrivance, thus confirming Olson's hypothesis (Olson, 1987). Additionally, the programme occasionally seems to stimulate viewers to be self-reflexive. Indeed, the ambiguity of the text rendered the informants especially aware that there could be other valid interpretations, different from their own, and that their personal views and experiences were influencing the meanings they were constructing.

However, it should be noted that these interviewees seemed to be quite aware of television's and mediated politics' flaws. Besides, all of them argued that they rarely watch television and that they rely on other sources of information. Therefore, it seems that for these viewers, *Blob* is more relevant for its function as an observatory for television programming rather than for the specific critiques it advances. This also seems to be confirmed by the fact that all the interviewees reported watching the programme in a rather distracted and casual manner.

It appears that the programme is especially valued because it is a daily reminder of the need to keep on being critical and aware of the quality of television and, especially, mediated politics. Besides, for some viewers it can also represent a glimpse of hope in the grim panorama of television programming. As explained by Gaia (27, waitress/painter):

> maybe [Blob] has a positive impact also because it makes you feel like you're not alone. Because when you turn on television, you see all these ridiculous programmes and you ask yourself 'have we all turned dumb?' But then you see Blob and you think 'no, wait, there is still someone who sees things as I do'.

Nonetheless, it is likely that only part of *Blob*'s audience perceives the programme in this way. Indeed, the interviewees made sense of the programme also based on their political views. Viewers who see the programme as serving a specific party's interests do not probably see the programme as fulfilling the role of sentinel, as suggested above.

Finally, these results are obviously not representative of the whole audience, but they provide an account of how some viewers relate to the programme and how they understand it. Besides, as discussed in the methodology section, the informants might have been influenced by the specific episode that was shown during the interviews. It is possible that a different episode would have elicited different comments, and, consequently, different results. Moreover, the interview situation might have induced them to be more critical towards television than they would normally have been, and it might have prompted them to pay a lot more attention to the programme than they normally would have done.

This research has contributed to the study of meta-television by investigating a particular case study, suggesting that television referencing itself can perform various functions for its viewers. This study has also offered useful insights for audience studies: the fact that these viewers watch and value this programme also because of its function as an observatory for television content suggests that they believe it is important to know what is on television and

how it is represented, because they are aware of the power of television. Hence, for some viewers, being knowledgeable of television might be as important as being knowledgeable of politics, because, as Federica (25, economics student) pointed out 'everything is political on television'.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation was prompted by a specific interest in an Italian television programme and its peculiar production principle. The audience's interpretations of the programme were investigated through in-depth interviews, which allowed delving into the viewers' relationship with it. In particular, this research was aimed to explore how the programme can contribute to the way people approach television. The initial hypothesis was that this specific type of meta-television could invite people to read other television texts more critically. The findings suggest that in general the programme can elicit many different interpretations, and that its meanings and messages are considered rather ambiguous. However, there are instances supporting the hypothesis that the text can invite viewers to approach television more reflectively and critically. Indeed, the interviewees observed that the programme manages to emphasise many of the flaws of Italian television, and that it can provide useful cues for further reflection.

Additionally, these results point to the fact that this meta-televisual production technique also allows the programme to function as an observatory for television, as a sort of alternative newscast viewers can turn to in order to see what the prominent discourses of television are and how issues are presented. Given that these viewers showed to be already quite critical of television, and considering that they reported not watching it very often, it seems that *Blob*'s function as a sentinel of television might actually be more relevant than its contributions to viewers' critical stance, at least for part of the programme's audience. Finally, the results suggest that this type of understanding of the programme is contingent upon the viewers' perception of the authors' intention and political orientation, and on the degree to which these are congenial to their own views.

Given that this research was confined to the study of young adult viewers, future research could consider different audience groups, in order to inspect whether the hypotheses advanced by this dissertation would hold for other viewers. In particular, it would be interesting to analyse the interpretations of a different age group or of frequent television users.

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APPENDIX

Textual analysis.

This analysis was carried out before the interviews took place, and it is meant both as an integrative tool for the analysis of the interview transcripts and as a guide for the reader.

The episode was 10.25 minutes long and it included 31 clips. All clips will be briefly described, and some comments and hypotheses on the possible associations between the different clips will be offered.

1) 00.00 – 00.22: this clip features the opening credits for *Un posto al sole* (literally: a place in the sun), the longest running Italian soap opera (17 years) set in Naples. The sequence depicts the main characters of the show one after the other. Blob's authors have edited the clip including notorious politicians' faces next to the characters of the soap opera, hinting to an analogy between the two. At the end of the clip the title of the soap appears, but a red letter "A" has been superimposed on the final "e" of the soap opera's title. The word "sola" is a Roman dialect term to designate a scam, a fraud. Various hypotheses can be made in this case. It should be noted that *Un posto al sole* could be considered as a phrase denoting the whole country, given the frequent associations between Italy and the sun. "Un posto al sole" could also be referred to a position of privilege. Substituting the word "sun" with the word "scum" could be referred either to the country as a whole or to those in position of privilege (i.e. the politicians who were featured in the clip, or the political class in general).

2) 00.22 – 00.35: this clip is from *Virus*, a weekly political talk show broadcast on Rai Due (one of the three main public channels). The clip features Mariastella Gelmini, a politician of the center-right main party (Popolo delle Libertà - PDL), and former Minister of Education. In the clip Gelmini is talking about Berlusconi (leader of PDL), explaining that he is a man of many records, and that he recently scored one more. She is probably referring to the many times he has been prosecuted, which is an argument that PDL politicians often present to substantiate the claim that left-leaning judges are involved in a conspiracy with the objective of eliminating Berlusconi from the political scene. The clip ends with Gelmini who says with an ironic smile: "Today he managed to score another record".

3) 00.35 – 00.48: this is a clip from a film featuring Barbara Bouchet, a German/naturalised Italian actress who starred in many Italian films in the 1970s. Most of these films are part of the "commedia sexy all'italiana" (Italian style sexy comedy) tradition. These films, particularly popular during the 1970s, were characterised by a mixture of comedy, eroticism and stereotypes. In this specific scene we see a woman (Barbara Bouchet), whose glasses are shattering because of the shock she is feeling. It is then revealed that her shock comes from the sight of a man who is standing naked (we can assume he is naked even if we can only see his torso and head) in front of her. The woman is then showed smiling as she lays on what looks like a bed and makes an appreciative comment. The man, still standing, smiles and says: "modestamente" (modestly). While the scene is not explicit, it is quite clear that the woman is impressed by the man's penis. The clip could be associated to the previous one. Indeed, Gelmini was talking about Berlusconi's records, and immediately after we are shown this scene: it seems that Blob is hinting to Berlusconi's sexual records, or, rather, to the sexual scandals he is involved in.

4) 00.48 – 01.16: this clip is from the entertainment programme *Studio 5*, which was broadcast during the summer of 2013 on Canale 5 (one of Mediaset's channels). *Studio 5* was created to celebrate the first 35 years of Mediaset history. Indeed, many guests of the programme were television personalities that had worked in Mediaset for years. In this particular clip we see Maria De Filippi, a well-known television presenter (usually on entertainment programmes), who is slow dancing with a man to the song *Only you*, by *The Platters*. The two are having a conversation about their past, and from their conversation it seems like they used to be close friends or maybe lovers. At the end of the scene we see the public in the studio clapping and cheering the duo dancing.

5) 01.16 – 01.19: this three seconds clip is taken from a commercial for a cream for cracked heels. The commercial shows a crowded beach where people start screaming and running away at the sight of a girl's cracked heel. The three seconds included in *Blob's* episode feature people running and screaming. While this seems quite random, it could be interpreted as a reaction to the previous clip.

6) 01.19 – 01.34: in this clip we see a press conference on Rai News 24 (a Rai channel that only includes news). Beppe Grillo (leader of the party MoVimento 5 stelle – M5S) is telling the journalists about the meeting he just had with President Giorgio Napolitano. In particular, he is pointing out that the room where the meeting took place had no (phone) reception and no wi fi connection. Sitting next to him is Nicola Morra, a politician of M5S, who is smiling at the words Grillo is saying.

7) 01.34 – 01.37: this is a clip from a Vodafone commercial. The commercial features what looks like a beach party, with many people holding smart phones. The protagonist of the commercial is a penguin who sings: "Siamo tutti smart" (we are all smart). The association with the previous clip in this case is quite evident. The M5S party is known to be very much linked to the Internet. Indeed, the movement was born on the Internet and promoting a "digital democracy" is part of their mission. This association, however, seems to be mocking the M5S's fondness for technology.

8) 01.37 – 01.42: during these three seconds, we see a Tg2 (Rai 2 newscast) anchorwoman who silently looks into the camera as she is waiting for something to happen. *Blob* often features these types of newscasts situations, where technical difficulties arise and journalists find themselves in awkward situations.

9) 01.42 – 02.21: this clip is taken from the political talk show *Quinta Colonna*, broadcast on Mediaset channel Tele Quattro. The clip shows a discussion between Marino Mastrangeli, a former M5S politician, and the host of the programme (Paolo Del Debbio). Mastrangeli was expelled from the party in April, 2013 due to his participations in several television talk shows, which was considered as a violation of the internal norms of the party. In the clip, the two are discussing the issue of Italian public debt, with Mastrangeli claiming that it is necessary to find those who are responsible for the debt and make them pay for it, and Del Debbio replying that the real issue is paying back the debt and not finding who is responsible. The general impression is that the discussion was not dealing with technical and in-depth information about the issue. The clip ends with Mastrangeli saying: "*I* do not have to pay it".

10) 02.21 – 02.23: the clip is taken from a black and white film. The clip shows a man wearing what looks like a lab coat. He is giving an electrical shock to a body laying on a table in front of him. The setting of the scene (which looks like a dungeon) and the appearance of the body are easily associated to the classic Frankenstein story.

11) 02.23 – 02.44: the clip is taken from the same programme as clip number 9. In this clip it seems that Mastrangeli is commenting a statement released by Grillo concerning the protests of No TAV, a movement against the construction of a high speed train line in Italy. Grillo declared that the people who were engaging in violent protests were heroes, and that the situation should be considered a civil war. Mastrangeli points out that the police force is a respectable and healthy institution, and that because of this a civil war would be impossible.

12) 02.44 – 02. 46: we see another clip from the Frankenstein film, with Frankenstein giving another electrical shock to the creature.

13) 02.46 – 03.08: this is another clip from *Quinta Colonna*, still featuring Mastrangeli, who, in this case, is arguing that the M5S should be governing the country, instead of an "unnatural alliance between former communists and former fascists". He is alluding to the current Italian government, which is mainly composed by ministers from Partito Democratico (PD, the main center-left party), and PDL.

14) 03.08 – 03.25: this is another clip from the Frankenstein film. At this point we see that the creature has finally regained life, but it is trying to strangle Frankenstein with one hand. Frankenstein repeatedly bangs the creature on the head with a hammer until it kills it. In the background, we hear laughter, which suggests, together with the acting, that this is a comedy rather than a horror film. The pairing of this film with the clips from *Quinta Colonna* can suggest various analogies, but two seem to be the most significant. On one hand, it could mean that Grillo acted as Frankenstein, as he created the M5S, he gave it life, but then politicians like Mastrangeli backfired, either because they disobeyed the party's rules (like, as mentioned above, that preventing M5S politicians from appearing on political talk shows), or because they show poor political and technical knowledge, and they end up hurting the party's image. If we stick to this analogy, the final film scene could represent Grillo suppressing Mastrangeli, as he actually did by expelling him from the party. On the other hand, the creature could represent the "unnatural coalition" between PD and PDL, with Frankenstein representing either President Napolitano, who supported the coalition, or the Italian voters, who are responsible for voting these politicians.

15) 03.25 – 03.40: the clip is from TGcom24, a Mediaset news channel (the private equivalent of Rai News 24). The clip features a statement by Maurizio Gasparri, Senate vice president and leader of PDL group in the Senate. The first words are not audible, but towards the end we can hear that he is saying that PDL Senators will have a meeting.

16) 03.40 – 04.12: the clip is taken from a music video. The song is called *Alfonso Signorini*, by Italian rapper Fedez. The lyrics of the song deal with some of the social and political problems of the country (such as unemployment and political corruption) and ironically present Alfonso Signorini as the solution to all these problems. Signorini is a television personality, and director of tabloid/entertainment magazine *Chi*. He is openly gay and he was in a relationship with Paolo Galimberti, currently a Senator for PDL: The music video consists in a party with people dancing, and Alfonso Signorini himself wearing a pink Superman suit. The lyrics at the end of the clip are: "the colour blue highlights policemen's eyes and for demonstrators there are leopard-skin helmets". Given the focus of this clip on Signorini and his connection to PDL, it might be that *Blob* was making an association with the previous clip, therefore hinting to the fact that a PDL's meeting would look something like this party, with Signorini as a guest of honour.

17) 04.12 – 04.41: this is another clip from the channel Rai News 24. A journalist is reporting on a demonstration that is taking place outside the Chamber of Deputies. She approaches one of the

demonstrators (a small group of M5S politicians sitting on the pavement) to ask him about the protest. The M5S deputy explains that they are not protesting, but they are ascertaining that PD is slave to PDL, and that both parties are slaves to Berlusconi. The clip ends with him saying that the country needs to wake up and realise that we cannot go on with this coalition. In this case, the association with the previous clip might be based on a simple word association (demonstrators were mentioned at the end of the music video), but it might also be alluding to the fact that these are not powerless and subordinate people, but, rather, being deputies, these are privileged (leopard-skin helmets) demonstrators.

18) 04.41 – 05.14: this is a clip from *Virus*, the political talk show from which clip number 2 was taken. The clip features Vittorio Sgarbi, a well-known art critic and politician, who often appears on political talk shows and is famous for his temperament (he is often involved in televised verbal fights, and he often uses strong language). In this clip, Sgarbi is talking about Silvio Berlusconi, and his speech is alternated with pictures of Caravaggio's paintings (the first to appear, right after the end of the previous clip, is Medusa). The background music to the whole clip is quite dramatic, as are his words. Indeed, he says: "there is nothing, good or evil, that is greater than Berlusconi". The clip ends with him saying "Berlusconi is engaged in a resistive action, he engaged in the resistance". There are no obvious links with the previous clip, but it should be noted that the image of Medusa screaming is the first appearing in this clip, so it might be meant as a reaction to the M5S deputy's words.

19) 05.14 – 05.19: this clip is from the 1977 film *Squadra Antitruffa*, an Italian detective film. The two characters of the scene are rather well-known in Italy. One of them is actor Tomas Milian, best known for his role as "Er Monnezza" (the trash, in Roman dialect), who was the protagonist of various movies in the 1970s, and is characterised by his vulgar Roman dialect language and his shabby and scruffy looks. In this movie, he plays detective (and former thief) Giraldi, also characterised by vulgar language and shabby looks. In this clip he is slapping character Franco Bertarelli, who is a thief. Franco Bertarelli is played by actor/comedian Bombolo, who often appeared in B movies as a secondary character. In the clip, Bertarelli is asking detective Giraldi to turn a blind eye (possibly in relation to one of Bertarelli's misdeeds). However, Giraldi replies: "I will turn both of your eyes blind" and slaps him. Also in this case, the association to the previous clip is not too clear. It might be a reaction to Sgarbi's words.

20) 05.19 – 05.25: this clip is from Rai Due's newscast Tg2. It features Renato Schifani, former president of Senate and now PDL Senator. His statement is quite general, as he is saying: "it's a delicate moment. We need to discuss, reflect and take the necessary actions in respect of democracy".

21) 05.25- 05.46: this clip was probably taken from the Internet. It features a Lebanese talk show, with a presenter/moderator and two guests. The two guests are discussing vehemently, and one of them throws water at the other. As the presenter tries to calm them down, the two stand up and throw sheets of paper at each other. Given that the language is probably unknown to most Italians, the content of the conversation might not be related to the previous clip, but there is a clear contrast between this scene and Schifani's words.

22) 05.46 – 07.04: this is the longest of the thirty-one clips. It is from *Virus* (the programme that was already shown in clips 2 and 18). We see a group of people in an unspecified (outdoor) location, and a reporter from the programme interviewing one of the people. From the interviewed man's accent and from his words, we can tell that it is somewhere in the South, probably around Naples. The man is very upset, and he is denouncing the fact that toxic industrial waste from the Northern regions of Italy is dumped in the Southern regions, and this is poisoning the soil and the people. While the man is talking, we see scenes of (presumably) piles of waste on fire, with firemen trying to extinguish the flames. The programme presenter and journalist Nicola Porro, who is in the studio replies by asking the reporter to ask the man who is responsible for the situation. At this point the crowd on location starts to shout different things at the camera. We never get to hear the man's answer because the clip ends with the reporter on location asking people to calm down and scolding a man in the crowd who tried to reach for the microphone.

23) 07.04 – 07.23: this is another clip from *Studio 5* (see clip number 3). There are two people on stage rapping rather awkwardly. One of them is well-known television presenter Pippo Baudo, who has been working on television for more than fifty years. In this clip he is wearing large "rapper" trousers, a large colourful t-short, a gold chain and sunglasses. The other person is another well-known television personality and presenter Michelle Hunziker. Baudo is rapping about his discomfort with the situation, and he is expressing the wish to go back to the fitting rooms to change. During the scene, the audience repeatedly claps.

24) 07.23 – 07.36: this clip is from Tele Quattro newscast Tg4. In this clip we see a group of M5S Senators in the act of taking off their ties and jackets inside the Parliament. One of them is Vito Crimi, who is explaining that they are doing this to demonstrate that the Parliament as it is, is not the type of Parliament they were elected for. During his speech we hear people clapping and shouting in the background. In this case the association seems to be based on the word association (Baudo mentions he wants to change his clothes, and the M5S are taking clothes off).

25) 07.36 – 07.52: this clip is also from Tele Quattro newscast Tg4. It deals with Grillo's holiday at the seaside. The clip shows some pages of the tabloid/entertainment magazine *Oggi*, where we see pictures of Grillo walking on the beach with his girlfriend and wearing mask and snorkel. The famous 1960's song *Pinne fucile ed occhiali* is playing in the background. The journalist is commenting the segment by pointing out that he is wearing the same diving gear he wore during his electoral campaign, when he crossed the Strait of Messina.

26) 07.52 – 07. 56: this is a clip from Rai Uno newscast Tg1. The clip shows the Pope throwing a wreath of flowers from a boat into the sea. The Pope was visiting Lampedusa, a small island which is the southernmost part of Italy. It is known as an entry point for migrants, mostly from Africa. The wreath of flowers was thrown into the sea in order to honour the memory of the many migrants who died in the attempt to reach the Italian shore. Blob added dramatic music to the scene, as if something terrible was going to happen.

27) 07.56 – 08.11: this clip is from another music video. The lack of visible channel icons suggests that the video was taken from the Internet. The featured song is *Sexy People (The Fiat song)* by Italian singer Arianna and American rapper Pitbull. The song was used for a Fiat 500 commercial in the US, and it includes parts of a traditional Italian song *Torna a Surriento*. The clip shows singer Arianna while she is signing and driving a Fiat 500 on the bottom of the sea. Interestingly, the Fiat 500 American commercial showed Fiat 500 cars diving under the sea in Italy and arriving to New York. The commercial explains that: "The next wave of Italians has come to America". Moreover, in the music video, rapper Pitbull is on a yacht surrounded by girls in bikini and the first words he sings are: "Yes, it's the immigrants taking over". Therefore, the association to the previous clip might be based on an analogy/contrast between the "stylish" Fiat 500 migrants and the real ones.

28) 08.11 – 08. 51: this is another clip from the programme *Quinta Colonna* (clips 9, 11, 13). The clip shows an argument between Alessandro Cecchi Paone, television presenter and journalist, who is sitting in the studio, and a man who is being interviewed by a reported at an unspecified location (where we see a group of people standing). We understand that they are discussing Grillo's statement about violent protester and civil war (see clip 11). Cecchi Paone is arguing that no one should ever mention violent protests or guns or weapons in general, because they remind us of Italy's dark times (he is probably alluding to the "anni di piombo", literally the "lead years", the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, which were characterised by violent demonstrations and terrorism), and they can only cause more deaths. The man on location (possibly a M5S affiliate) is arguing that no one ever mentioned weapons, and he just wants to report on people's real situations. He then concludes that when one is starving, he/she is forced to take extreme measures, and points out that people like Cecchi Paone instead do not need to worry about anything. During this discussion their voices are overlapping and they are both shouting. The audience in the studio repeatedly claps at Cecchi Paone's statements.

29) 08.51 – 09.24: this is another clip from *Studio 5* (see clips 4 and 23). We see Singorini (see clip 16), who is also the presenter of the show, and Rita Dalla Chiesa, another television presenter. They are singing well-known Italian song *La Felicità* (happiness) on stage, with a man playing a grand piano. We also see the audience, many of them standing, smiling and clapping to the song's rhythm. The song's lyrics are quite cheesy ("happiness is holding hands and going far away"), and the word "felicità" is repeated many times. The clip begins and ends with Singorini singing the word "felicità". The effect of the pairing of this clip with the previous one is of strong contrast.

30) 09.24 – 09.50: this is another clip from Grillo's press conference on Rai News 24 (see clip 6). Grillo is shouting that his anger managed to build a 9 million people movement, people he met on the streets. He then points out that, contrary to all other politicians, he does go in the streets with no body guards. This might be another association by contrast, because the last clip ended with the word "felicità", and this starts with "anger".

31) 09.50 – 10.25: this is another clip from the *Sexy People* music video (see clip 27). We see singer Arianna still driving under the sea, with an underwater highway in the background, and rapper Pitbull on the yacht. We later see American actor Charlie Sheen hibernated in a glass box with two semi-naked women. The box is opened and Sheen wakes up and gets into a Fiat 500. Sheen and Pitbull nod at each other and the car is thrown into the ocean with a catapult. As the car dives into the sea, the episode ends.

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