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BUILDING THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN THE BESTSELLERS OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Abstract

This study constitutes the first ever sociological investigation of the contents of western bestsellers, published and examined between 1998 and 2017. The research project analysed the contents, action and values, as well as the pathways pursued in order to construct social identity and create the stories and characters portrayed. It emerged that the cultural industry aimed at producing works with a high level of readability capable of facilitating their diffusion among people of the lower-middle, higher-middle and higher classes of society. Some advance the hypothesis that, in the face of economic crises and slowdowns in the global economy, there has been an increase in the need for literary fiction, for escape and identification with problems, such as the loss of employment, the impoverishment of families and emotional instability, common to the so-called fluid society.

Keywords: sociology, literature, bestsellers, content analysis, imagination, marketing

THE PUBLISHING MARKET'S QUEST FOR BESTSELLERS

One may say that the western system of globalised capitalism or editorial neo-capitalism asserted itself in Italy in 1994, making its mark with the bestselling novel of the post-war period *Va' dove ti porta il cuore* [Go where your heart takes you] by Susanna Tamaro, published by Baldini and Castoldi. Translated into 35 languages, it was issued in over 6 million copies worldwide. After this book, the most striking Italian literary phenomenon

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was the resounding success of Andrea Camilleri's stories of police Inspector Montalbano as well as his historical novels, which simultaneously occupied the top 5 places in the bestseller ranking list. Between 1997 and 2001, his books sold over six and a half million copies in Italy alone, in addition to the French, Spanish, German and Japanese translations.

It was also in the 1990s that John Grisham erupted upon the publishing market. A former criminal lawyer who lent himself to the world of politics (from 1983 to 1990, he was a state representative for DeSoto County, Mississippi). At the age of 34, he completed his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, which he wrote between 5 and 9 in the morning, before going to work. Various publishers refused it, until it was published in a print run of only 5,000 copies by the Wynwood Press.

A decade later, Grisham sold the rights for the film version for \$6 million. In 1991, his novel *The Firm* remained in *The New York Times'* bestseller list for 47 weeks and was later made into a highly successful film starring Tom Cruise. The same happened with *The Pelican Brief* (starring Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington), *The Client* (with Susan Sarandon). Then followed an impressive string of successes at the rate of one book per annum, all published in Italian by Mondadori. A dozen legal thrillers, almost all of which were based on true stories experienced in the courtroom, totalled over 60 million copies and were translated into 31 languages. He became the trailblazer to the worldwide editorial successes of Stieg Larsson, Ken Follet, Danielle Steel, Patricia Cornwell, L.J. Smith (*The Vampire Diaries*) and E.L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) – not authors in the classical sense, but writers whose stories became the stuff of cinema and television fiction.

Today, from a point of view of sales, bestsellers which sell 30,000–40,000 copies a year are called fast-sellers, while long-sellers are those which people go on purchasing over a longer period at a rate of up to 5,000 copies per annum. These publications belong to the highest ranks of the canon of world literature and range from the Bible, to the Koran, from Homer to Manzoni, from Shakespeare to Marx.

Nielsen and GfK Retail and Technology, the most accredited sales-data collection agencies, treat books as if they were mere consumer goods, while literary agents and publishing houses define their marketing policies depending on whether a book may be deemed a cultural or a consumer product (Fondazione A.M. 2009).

The national and international sources consulted while researching this study were the rankings published by Booksellers, *Publishers Weekly*,

Nielsen,² the International Digital Publishing Forum, Amazon, l'Associazione Librai Italiani, l'Associazione Editori Italiani, La Feltrinelli and *La Stampa* newspaper's *Tutto Libri*.³ These ranking lists⁴ are drawn up and agreed on by individual publishers (who sometimes create series they actually call bestsellers), national publishers/booksellers' associations, individual websites for sales to the public, and provide weekly, monthly, annual reports.⁵ The present research team⁶ did not take data concerning long-sellers and major classics into consideration, as its aim was to examine current publications and present-day editorial policies in Europe and the USA. With this in mind, the team chose the titles of the first three novels and narratives which recurred most frequently in national and international ranking lists, for each year between 1998 to 2012, thus for a total of 42 titles.

The examined sample was the result of a strictly qualitative approach involving continuous consultations with publishers and booksellers, in an effort to define the meaning of the term bestseller itself and detect the limitations of the national and international rankings, sometimes inhomogeneous regarding sales data. The European Permanent Observatory on Reading⁷, like many booksellers, explains how elusive and changeable the meaning of bestseller can be, as it is often closely linked to the fame of the author and his/her work, to the influence of impressive reviews by the press (beginning with *The New York Times*) which can interfere with the relative data (Calabrese 2015), while also distinguishing between cultural works or consumer products. A consumer product, that is a consumer

² Nielsen, which deals with Global Consumer and Media Insights, has calculated that there were about one billion books of fiction in circulation in 2013.

³ The ranking published by *Tutto Libri* is produced by the Nielsen Bookscan agency and based on 900 bookshops to which 100 points are assigned to the best-selling new titles, all the others are calculated proportionately. It indicates between brackets how many weeks the title has been included in the ranking scale.

⁴ These sources were consulted periodically over 6 months during the year 2009.

⁵ The rankings are not the same from the point of view of the position of the books; sometimes they differ from the data published by the author on his/her personal Wikipedia page.

⁶ The research team, led by Marina D'Amato, included Anna Perrrotta de Stefano, Milena Gammaitoni, Francesca Anello, Valentina Punzo, Laura Giancaspero. The sampling was carried out by Marina D'Amato and Milena Gammaitoni, the construction of the analysis sheet involved the entire team over a 2-year pre-test period (2008–2010).

⁷ Michele Rak.

book, may sell millions of copies a year, even in a few months, only to disappear almost entirely from the market in as little as four or five years.

In addition, some of the major publishers often create special editorial series called “best sellers,” listing their own best-selling titles, regardless of sales on the western publishing market.

The team was aware of the fact that it could not depend on a homogeneous source of quantitative sampling because of the lack of a sole, univocal, shared account of sales and that there was discordance between the data made available by the various agencies and publishers. Despite these discrepancies, the top five titles for novels or works of fiction featured in the national and international rankings were always the same, albeit with differences when it came to numerical data.⁸

While the bestsellers selected for analysis of content were mostly novels, in some cases these included other kinds of narratives. A content-analysis card⁹ was drawn up by the team while reading the texts and subjected to continuous comparisons and verification on their part.

The five sectors the card contemplated were:

- 1) STRUCTURE/CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL;
- 2) STATUS AND ROLES: PROTAGONIST/CO-PROTAGONIST/ANTAGONIST;
- 3) ACTION/CHARACTERS/ATTITUDES;
- 4) VALUES AND DISVALUES OF THE WORK/PROTAGONIST/CO-PROTAGONIST/ANTAGONIST;
- 5) EPILOGUE OF THE STORY.

A final memo sheet was deemed useful in order to indicate any difficulties encountered by the readers regarding comprehension of the text and/or compilation of the form and an inability to formulate answers to issues posed by some of the closed questions.

⁸ These numerical discrepancies are attributable to the time when the sales data were gathered, and which agencies relied upon to analyse their sales data, and to whether publishers combined the sales data of their own publishing house with those of bookshops and for online orders. Although a single global datum is possible and published with the reprints of the books, these are completely uncertain.

⁹ The card contained 100 questions.

MARKETING FOR THE CREATION OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS

Today, *fiction* seems to be increasingly in need of *non-fiction*, to the extent that illustrator Brian Joseph Davis has created a website that permits us to see the faces of the characters in novels. In practice, thanks to software similar to that used by the police to create identikits and starting from the descriptions provided in the novels, one can generate and see the faces of Emma Bovary, Frankenstein, Lady Chatterley, Kurtz, Dorian Gray and others. Other blogs and websites deal with issues such as the protagonist people believe they resemble most, the food the protagonists of people's favourite novels eat, five things people would like to say to the characters they prefer, who they believe are the least reliable characters in recent literature (Bressa 2013),¹⁰ and so on. To these sites, we can add various schools of creative writing which teach people how to create *credible* characters.

We know that the sales figures which establish a bestseller are no guarantee that a book has actually been read. They do, however, indicate consumption, provide an indication of status, of belonging to a group in which experiences and opinions are shared.

A symmetrical dialogue between the author and the reader does not exist. A book conceals. It is like a veil separating the two distinct, not always communicating aspects of the acts of reading and writing, making them, today in particular, two counterpoised, opposite absences: namely, the absence of the reader from the realm of writing and the absence of the author from that of reading.

As this project was unable to say just how many people had actually read the bestsellers analysed here, the research team had to depend on the characteristics of its own way of reading and, therefore, of interpreting the best sellers taken into consideration.

The author is dead, as both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault found themselves admitting in the mid-twentieth century. Today, however,

¹⁰ The narrative voice is an element of the novel capable of changing the cards on the table: the interpretation that the reader gives to the events of the plot inevitably passes through the eyes of whoever is telling the story. However, in literature we sometimes come across characters who surprise us, who do not tell the whole truth, perhaps, or who simply tell their own version of the "truth".

the author and authors have found new life on the web, through the social media, in their characters recreated in novels such as *The da Vinci Code*, in places where one can experience emotions generated by fantasy and adventure. It suffices to recall the castle portrayed in *Harry Potter* where thousands of visitors strive to relive images and sensations; in some cases even the author of a book becomes the actor-character of a film inspired by his own fiction/non-fiction, like Dan Brown who tells us that he is to become a fictional character in a Japanese manga.¹¹ Readers know that everything is possible, all their curiosities can be satisfied and the author can choose to live again in hypertexts, if we may call them so, in places and non-places, as Joshua Meyrowitz once wrote (Meyerowitz 1995).

Susanna Tamaro has declared that when she decided, while sitting at her desk, to write the best seller: *Va dove ti porta il cuore* [Go where your heart takes you], the metalepsis was a door open to millions of potential readers, a technique where the construction of the “author’s make-believe is transformed by fiction to trigger the empathy of readers prepared to make what they are reading real” (Calabrese 2015. 36). So much so, that the reader becomes a co-author by actually cooperating in the serial writing of novels by interacting with authors on their websites, on social media, giving life to the genre of the spin-off where the fate of the characters becomes so playfully important that possible new developments and endings are proposed. This is not only the case of Harry Potter and his famous creator J.K. Rowling, but also of declaredly autobiographical-educational novels, such as *The Kite Runner*. These novels become bestsellers because everything was delocalised, the author-character’s body was in one place, his/her mind elsewhere, ready to become the characters of films and TV series.

It was the Romans who designated the persona and its derivate, the personage, as the *per-sonar*, namely he or she who *resounds through* the closely associated theatrical role and the mask they represented, on which notion Erving Goffman based the social-institutional experience of role theory. In the arts, the word protagonist stemmed from this because, from ancient times, the actor was a person who performed the principal dramatic role.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Gesualdo Bufalino published a dictionary on the characters of novels, defining the archetypes of

¹¹ Another example: in the film *Adaptation* 2002 where the role of the author appears to confront the screenwriter who has adapted her novel.

the literary imagination and the characteristics that make characters fascinating and unforgettable in the eyes of readers (Bufalino 1982).

Today, can what was said then be said of the bestsellers involving the last two young-adult generations: children, adolescents, adults and older readers? Above all, what traits emerge in the characters of the latest bestsellers? It is indicative that those who try their hand at analysing the characters of the bestsellers of the 21st century are rare indeed...

Stefano Calabrese provides some types and has described some recurrences of “meta characters”: thus, we have the *smart novel*, the *trans-novel*, the *immersive novel*, the *magical novel*, the *emotional novel*, definitions not closed in upon themselves, but communicating vessels where the watchword is always metalepsis.

In a kind of dialogue with Bufalino, Fabio Stassi published his *Libro dei personaggi letterari*¹² [A Book of Literary Characters], where, starting with the late twentieth century, he traces an imaginary and real pathway, as a reader, featuring up to as many as three hundred of the characters who have been his life’s travelling companions (Stassi 2016).

Likewise, the *Società Italiana delle Letterate* [the Italian Society of Women of Letters] holds seminars on the characters in novels, investigating the creation of female characters by writers and how these are experienced by readers.¹³

In 2013, *Science* published the results of some psychological research carried out by the New School for Research in New York confirming the intuitions that the economist Adam Smith had presented in the 19th century: “reading novels increases the levels of empathy between us and others, improves social perception and makes emotional intelligence much

¹² He presents the characters in chronological order, from the post-war period to today. They are all first-person narrators. Theirs are confessions – sincere, hilarious or melancholic, but all honest. These are characters that lay their hearts bare. Literary though not imaginary, because if they first came to life in a book and were brought together in another book, their destiny becomes even more powerful, condensed in a gesture, a moment, a detail that reveals their essence forever.

¹³ Interviews by Nadia Setti in preparation for the 2011 SIL conference in Genoa. The idea of proposing a questionnaire on the characters was informed due in part to having read “Nove domande sul romanzo” [Nine questions on the novel] (Nuovi argomenti, n. 37, 1959). At the moment, asking contemporary female writers to answer questions regarding the creation of female characters permits us to draw up an extremely significant index of the new figures emerging from and after: see www.sil.it.

more ready, that is, the ability to understand what others feel by feeling it ourselves. Readers conjure up mental images of the emotions and feelings of literary characters, experiencing a personal, almost physical transport (Kidd and Castano in Calabrese 2015, 31)".

In recent years, the worldwide production of novels has increased by 44%. The high readability of these novels facilitates their diffusion among lower-middle, higher-middle and higher classes of society. There are those who advance the hypothesis that, in the face of economic crises or slow-downs in the global economy, the need for literary fiction to evade and identify with the problems of the fluid society increases (Calabrese 2015). Among these problems we find loss of employment, impoverishment of the family and emotional instability.

Although the issue is underestimated far too often, it is evident that the social construction of reality and of people's identities also takes place through various artistic experiences: from fairy tales to textbooks, from music to drawing, from a museum visit to casual readings, all of which evoke images, sensations, ideas, perceptions concerning their own story, the present conditions of humanity and possible future scenarios.

It may also happen that a fan reader of a novel like *Twilight*, Erika Leonard, aka E.L. James, becomes one of the most read authors of 2012, having been inspired by the plot of vampiric relationships and transposing them into *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Kidd and Castano in Calabrese 2015, 23). "At this point, the reader enters the text immersively and, more than a story, finds a way of reading effects, characters and events that represent *readings of readings*" (Calabrese 2015, 25).

In the case of the bestsellers published between 1998 and 2012, and analysed here, the characters are ordinary men and women, no longer epitomes – "just as the characters of literature draw on reality, so reality has raised some characters up to the rank of witnesses of the truth, reducing their proper name to the status of a common name" (Bufalino 1982) – but extraordinary in their daily lives, heroes and heroines almost by chance, intelligent enough, but rarely brilliant. The function of these characters seems to be, predominantly, that of reassuring average human beings of their misery, rather than raising them up as heroic models of values and choices that never betray others.

There are some exceptions, however, such as the characters in Saviano's *Gomorra* intended to be denounced because "investigation, the story of a tragedy, a mapping of possible happiness are all missing, along with

those who resonate the screams, rewrite the stories, those who find the culprits, those who make reports, those who draw up the bibliographies of testimonies. These gaping voids are filled by theatre, by literature, referring to the entire extent of the void" (Saviano 2009, 195). Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* was an excellent response to Edgar Morin's *L'Esprit du Temps* and to Ogburn when describing the domain of cultural delay in the face of the advance of technology, and people's unpreparedness to address ethical issues, contradictions emerging from the accelerated development of technology compared with reflection and the need for a new humanism. Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, a historical, modern epic novel of political denunciation is another exception. Here the heroine and the female characters are strong, loyal, revolutionary. Then we have Andrea Camilleri's *Montalbano Stories*. Some other bestsellers such as *Chagrin d'école*, *L'Élegance du hérisson*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Va dove ti porta il cuore*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The City*, *El paraíso en la otra esquina*, *The Help*, *L'ombra del vent*, *The Language of Flowers*, create educational, emotional and biographical characters.

Among the best sellers, some well-known Italian writers emerge and, as Serkowska writes, make it possible, perhaps, "to go beyond the vicious circle of nostalgia and postmodernity with its perspective of self-reference, rewriting and infinite cross-textual mirroring games. The return takes place along different but intersecting pathways where it is necessary to talk about experience, rather than the object of representation" (Serkowska 2011, XII).

It is possible here to propose three macro categories: smart (Calabrese 2015), investigating, emotional-educational characters (according to Calabrese's classification).

In respect of metalepsis, these male and female characters act in the present, that is, in the reader's own time or in the very recent past, at least; they reside above all in the USA (31%), France (10%), the United Kingdom (10%) and Italy (10%), and most of the stories are set in domestic and urban environments.

The protagonists are mostly male (56%), youths (41%) rather than adults (36%). The majority of these small-scale heroes and heroines are students, children (33%) and are single (49%), while only 15% of them cohabit or are married. Though they are described physically (38% of normal build, 25% slim, only 5% overweight), none of them seem to possess extraordinary qualities. On the contrary, they appear to be ordinary people

(59%), certainly fascinating in their own way (46%), the clear majority of them of Caucasian origin (87%).

The co-protagonist is, more often than not, a man (46%), an adult (47%), and even though his status may not be stated explicitly 58% of the time, in 15% of the stories he is described as a son, single in 33% of all cases, married in 23% of them. Moreover, he is often a student 10%, a domestic servant (8%), an artist (5%), a householder (5%), a policeman (5%), a scientist (5%). In 59% of the cases he is described physically (normal 38%, overweight 13%, thin 8%) and differs from the protagonist more because of lack of charm than any physical trait; 38% deem him handsome, but he remains an ordinary person (56%), 69% of the time Caucasian, and 8% of the time Mongolian.

The antagonist, on the other hand, assumes a different role, 51% of the time he is a man. Although he/she is frequently older than the protagonists and co-protagonists (49%), they are married 28% and single only 8% of the time. Their profession is usually defined and structured more clearly than that of the other characters: a shopkeeper 39%, an entrepreneur 8%, a professional or policeman 5% of the time, while 13% of the time their work is not mentioned. In 46% of all cases they are described physically (normal 36%, fat 5%), held to be charming 18% of the time, beautiful/handsome at 16%, and ugly at 13%. These too are ordinary people in 41% of all cases, deemed extraordinary only 20% of the time. They are Caucasians in 51% of all cases and of African origin only 5% of the time.

The protagonists, both men and women act in an overbearing manner (50%), though the men appear more autonomous (45%) than the women.

The men (90.5%) are single more frequently than the women (86%).

The male antagonists are dominant in 63.6% of the cases, autonomous only 18.2% of the time. The females are dominant only 13% of the time.

What emerges, however, in a manner that is not immediately evident, therefore consciously or unconsciously, is how many of the roles attributed to women remain anchored in apparently submissive and passive actions only to surface as the machinations of astute co-protagonists or antagonists. We find some excellent exceptions in the protagonists of *Va dove ti porta il cuore* [*The Help, Go Where Your Heart Takes You*] and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*.

The relative and absolute characters created in twentieth-century novels prevail. Of these Enrico Testa writes that today they depend more on the construction of *relationships* between *people*, than on the characterisation

of single personae. These often have mobile, random identities, which “throw open the area of subjectivity to radical exposure to the other: to simple interlocutors, to the presence of *shades*, to an entire population of those who have vanished” (Testa 2009, 102), giving rise to a Wu Ming-style community: “Identity is a matter of hosting from the very beginning: dependence upon another irreducible, elusive replication meaning that the other has always pulsed within the Same” (Testa 2009, 102). Moreover, the obsessive passion for nothingness that Enrico Testa deals with converses with issues of contemporary sociology when measured against definitions of identity. From symbolic interactionism, to phenomenology, to structural-functionalism and the systemic theory, from the well-known theory of Bauman to Giddens’s essay on the crisis of intimacy, in Italy from Saraceno to Melucci and Sciolla, it remains incontrovertible that the etymological and mythological origin of the word “identity,” “idem,” connotes its tormented destiny in the western world.

With his *L’uomo flessibile [Flexible Man]* (1999), Richard Sennett had already described how the state of the continuous precariousness created by modern capitalism – unbridled liberalism – was impacting upon the way individuals planned and imagined their lives, by intruding upon the stability of life, both public (working, social relations) and private (family emotional, sentimental, friendship).

From this real state of affairs, a fictional reality arose in bestsellers with characters resembling the readers’ own siblings, no longer heroic, mythological figures to imitate or hope for, but *Idems* of western society.

The analysis of the roles of best-seller characters recalls the sociological analysis where Franco Ferrarotti always considered roles as a useful concept capable of mediating between the person as an individual and a social structure (Ferrarotti 1966).

The concept of role belongs to modernity and when representing the fragmentation of the subject in modern society, it is recollective of the central experience of literature, especially that of the nineteenth-century novel. In the 21st century, however, “the authors claim mixing with the characters of their fictions or blending in with the readership, to the extent that readers themselves become authors and give rise to fan-fiction like that of E.L. James, who wrote *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a *Twilight* spin off” (Calabrese 2015, 164). The roles of the characters are confused, therefore, as we have to address both the role of the author and the echo of readers’ requests regarding the definition of novels, thus, of serial characters.

In the social psychology of North America and at the dawn of American sociology, we find scholars such as Cooley and Mead speaking about the *looking-glass self* or the *generalised other*, which we might denote today in the creation of the characters of contemporary novels (which always convey the combined story of the author and the reader), based on images that subjects have of others, and on the ideas that influence their behaviour from childhood (*Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*...) and which, in turn, were affected by group consciousness. Mead used this concept in social theory when describing how “the individual has experience of himself as such, not directly but only indirectly, based on the particular opinions of other individuals within the same social group (...) so that he becomes the object of himself, just as other individuals are for him or his experience, objects; he becomes an object as such only by assuming the attitudes that other individuals within the same social environment or the same context of experience and behaviour, have towards him” (Mead 1934, 156–157).

According to Bourdieu, social actors are not simple automata who conform to the roles society imposes. On the contrary, they enjoy a certain freedom of action, are creative and unpredictable, and make use of that “practical sense” thanks to which they can adapt to the most disparate situations.

The characters of these bestsellers, even when magical, anthropomorphic or robotic beings Asimov or Bourdieu might have created, are evidence of a new *habitus*, a category into which, in the long run, all things shared by a certain class fall (patterns of behaviour, tastes, ideas, judgments) and which, considering the data of the present research on best sellers, cut across a variety of different lifestyles.

Today, we are faced with a ludic reader of leisure, the primordial *Idem* of the character, the contemporary extra. For this reason, Roland Barthes warns us that we are dealing with an unclear though simultaneously codified field, subject to restraints and constraints. The strength of the paradox lies in its ability to evade the hazards of coherent argumentation: no rigid dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity can exist, since “there is no objective or subjective truth in reading, but only a playful truth. Reading becomes an activity from which all effort evaporates. The freedom of the writable text is its production as a game, when the consumption of reading gives way to the powerful strength of desire” (Barthes 1999, 33).

The polymorphic, mobile *habitat*, deceptively shaped by dominant (male) protagonists, is actually the ambivalent, fictitious result of characters interwoven with the lives of male and female authors/author-readers; it “is not a destiny,” but rather an objectification of the “collective unconscious” expertly constructed by editorial marketing (just think of the collective action of editorial production as described by H. Becker), at the service of the cultural consumer industry, rather than aimed at forming a collective consciousness. It denotes a necessarily continuous lacerating, ambivalent dialogue incapable of providing answers to two contradictory messages with which Western culture, marked by the New Testament, has had to deal from the beginning, and which, if one may dare say so, proposes two conflicting messages: namely, love for the world and escape from the world.

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