

# Actors and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy

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Published: July 14, 2022

## Abstract

This special section of the issue was published with the support of the PRIN 2017 F-ACTOR: Forms of Contemporary Media Professional Acting. Training, Recruitment and Management, Social Discourse in Italy (2000–2020), financed by MUR. The issue focuses on the impact that the COVID-19 crisis had on the work of actors and actresses in Italy. In particular, three main themes are addressed in the essays that make up the special section: the development of a televisual style celebrity and process of aesthetic hybridization conveying messages of solidarity and togetherness; the role of actors and actresses in awareness raising; the willingness of performers to expose intimacy and ordinariness as a way to connect to the public.

## 1 The Pandemic Strikes the Cultural Industries<sup>1</sup>

When sudden and unexpected historical events break into the public sphere they normally foster vibrant debates. During the COVID-19 pandemic, media experts and commentators have heavily participated in public discussions that, in light of the seriousness of the events, have at times been influenced by emotional readings of the real or fatalistic future prophecies about unavoidable and irreversible radical changes. Now that the COVID-19 crisis, although still with us, has loosened its grip, it is about time to calmly consider its impact on media systems. Of course, this special issue will not provide an exhaustive analysis, but we think this work is a first step towards a more balanced understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the pandemic. This issue focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on film and television and more specifically on the work of actors and actresses in Italy. Still, we think that some more general lessons can be learned from this collection of essays.

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1. The arguments and general structure of this introduction have been discussed collegially by the three authors. However, Luca Antoniazzi wrote the paragraphs “The pandemic strikes the cultural industry” and “The lockdown, ‘togetherness’, and stylistic convergence on screen”; Cristina Formenti wrote the paragraph “Intimacy and ordinary domesticity”; and Giulia Muggeo wrote “Post-COVID impegno?”.

We should first be clear about our analytical standpoint. Media and cultural analysis of the media industries and COVID-19 have taken different approaches. Some scholars have addressed the pandemic as a phenomenon with potentially broad and long-lasting consequences on the cultural industries. These analyses are mostly concerned with mid- to long-term evaluations of the media industries and their process of adaptation to new rules, new domestic consumption habits, and organisational and regulatory responses (see Cucco 2021, Salvador et al. 2022). Other scholars have looked at the pandemic over the months of the lockdown, the influence it had on viewership, the impact of media representation on the perception of the crisis and government interventions (see Fortmueller 2021, Ellis 2021). Most of the essays in our special issue focus on this second analytical point of view.

Within the televisual domestic space – the only social space for many during the lockdown – actors and actresses played a major role in informing and entertaining the people. In other countries, researchers have shown that the media influence of actors like Tom Hanks and Idris Elba has been superior to those of health authorities (Mututwa and Matsilele 2020). During the months of the lockdown, film stars played an unprecedented (social) role as the pandemic was an unprecedented phenomenon. Historically, the broad geographical scope of the crisis, the severity of the measures taken by public authorities, and the levels of anxiety ignited by what seemed an uncontrollable phenomenon, created an unparalleled environment of social and private communication. Many film stars, undressed of their glamour and their aura of exceptionality, engaged in their new role as educators and promoters of social responsibility – both genuinely and instrumentally (with some exceptions, like comedian Enrico Montesano).

On the other side of the spectrum – and the second reason acting is an interesting analytical starting point – ‘below-the-line’ actors and actresses have been among the most economically affected social groups involved in media production. Already suffering a chronic lack of social protection of their work, they have been heavily hit by production shutdowns. The pandemic sharply increased the already huge inequality between above and below the line cultural workers (Banks 2021, Comunian and England 2020). As we will see later in this introduction, this tendency ignited ambivalent solidarity campaigns by celebrities to provide visibility to struggling disadvantaged colleagues.

Across the essays we found three major overarching and overlapping themes that we will sketch in the next sections. The small screen became the neuralgic access point to information and entertainment and this created the impetus for a convergence towards a televisual style celebrity and process of aesthetic hybridization conveying messages of solidarity and togetherness. Another big theme relates to the role of actors and actresses in awareness raising. In this respect we found that the concept of *impegno* still holds meaning and it took centre stage in some of the analyses of our authors. Thirdly, many authors in this collection mused on performers’ public presence, the vulnerability of our time and an attention and willingness to expose intimacy and ordinariness as a way to connect to the public.

## 2 Stylistic Convergence and ‘Togetherness’

As mentioned above, traditional broadcasting television and VoD platforms played a critical role during the lockdown (Ellis 2021, Dixit et al. 2020). As shown by Antoniazzi and Barra in this issue, the lockdown and heavy restrictions have created a whole range of interesting media phenomena during the pandemic. The essay highlights two major trends in relation to actors’ and actresses’ public and televisual presence. Firstly, inspired by academic contributions from other countries, the authors observed the spread of televisual performance tropes within the broader media landscape. A couple of years ago Alice Leppert (2020) claimed that “[w]e are all television stars in a pandemic”. She referred not only to the fact that non-televisual celebrities were buying into the television-like public presence, but also that the proliferation of screen-mediated communication was pushing even ordinary people to mimic television celebrity attitudes and styles (Bennett and Holmes 2010). As the authors show, something similar has happened in Italy. Some prominent Italian theatre actors and cinema stars have starkly embraced a visual style that was clearly based on the feature of television celebrities bringing their ordinary life to screen. In general terms, COVID-19 has functioned as a catalyst of processes of syncretisation of creative styles, blurring the line of genres and hierarchies of prestige.

Secondly, the television space opened up to new symbolic forms, new performances providing an unusual space for performers from the adjacent fields of cinema and theatre. The permeability of the television space and the new strict safety rules have contributed to its reconfiguration as an innovative and unprecedented stage for actors and actresses of all sorts (see for example the programme *Ricomincio da Tre*). Even in the case of the reconfiguration of televisual spaces, as with ordinariness and domesticity, it has served the purpose of enhancing a sense of community togetherness and solidarity. One might say that television provided a space to non-television artists in challenging times.

Some stars have actively engaged in public campaigns or promoted responsible behaviours on their social media pages. Particularly interesting is to compare this private communication with the presence of actors and actresses in the framework of film festivals, *extra-ordinary* and public spaces par excellence that reopened right after the lockdown. Even here, we witnessed a break with the traditional tropes of media performances not only imposed by new rules and regulations but also aimed at both signalling the exceptionality of the crisis and stressing a sense of togetherness of the community of cultural workers and the broader national community. However, Cristina Formenti, Francesco Pitassio and Sara Sampietro in their contribution to this collection, showed the ambivalence of stars' public presence and the rhetoric of film festivals. Stars have remained at the centre stage of the film and television industries, but "now they appeared more as heralds of a category experiencing precarity rather than ambassadors of glamour and luxury." The authors unveiled the fact that solidarity and togetherness are merely linked to the exceptionality of the lockdown rather than to a real and profound reflection on patterns of inequality and injustice within the industry that the lockdown has exacerbated (see Sobande 2020).

Many passages in the essays of this collection point to the fact that the industry is striving to get back to normal, reaffirming organisational models and power structures. Actors and actresses are somehow part of this system, but they certainly retain autonomy. Some of them exercised their agency as genuinely motivated individuals aware of their peculiar role in society. As we will see in the next section, some of our contributors saw in actors and actresses' social engagement a new form of *impegno*.

### 3 Post-COVID *impegno*?

"This is the story of the making of *Cliff Beasts 6* and the brave people who fought heroically to bring distractions to humanity." This is how the American comedy *The Bubble* (Judd Apatow, 2022), a movie about the shooting of a film during the COVID-19 pandemic, opens. The focus of the story is on them, the "brave people," a group of eccentric actors – including old Hollywood stars trying to regain their lost success and young TikTokers with millions of followers – struggling with film shooting, COVID-19 protocols, quarantines and antigen tests. Apatow's film is one of the first to poke fun at the pandemic and at the effects that COVID-19 has had on actors and celebrities. The movie humorously depicts the vulnerability of the acting profession, but it also sheds light on actors' vanity, on their frivolousness, and on the privileged ways in which they were able to experience the lockdown and quarantine.

During the pandemic Italian actors and celebrities found themselves under the spotlight, a light (certainly less glamorous than the one they were used to) which allowed us to focus mainly on their vulnerabilities. During the months of lockdown, actors had an unprecedented visibility, which was exploited mainly on two levels: on the one hand they became the spokespersons for several awareness campaigns, including the popular #IoRestoACasa, demonstrating how actors and celebrities "can play a pivotal role in galvanising health awareness, utilising the immense social media clout at their disposal to amplify official health communication" (Mututwa and Matsilele 2020: 2). Even the emerging teen stardom, with the on- and off-screen engagement of young actors, participated in the #IoRestoACasa campaign, as Maria Elena Alampi's essay on the Skam Italia case study shows. The author focuses in particular on the role of young celebrities in normalising essential preventive practices against the spread of the virus, especially among the youngest generation, e.g. by giving resonance to the slogan #IoRestoACasa or by promoting the use of surgical masks.

In other instances, the actors' endorsement has extended within the diegetic reality, as shown by the success of the TV series *Doc - Nelle tue mani* and its protagonist Luca Argentero, a case study analysed in Alberto Scandola's essay. Scandola specifically argues about Luca Argentero's popularity and bankability after the

success of *Doc*. The essay also considers the actor's social engagement activities during the pandemic and reflects on the genesis of Luca Argentero's "ideal male" status.

On the other hand, many famous actors used social networks and all other channels at their disposal to make their struggles visible and raise awareness about the problematic situation facing the profession. Many of them petitioned and demanded financial help (especially to safeguard "below-the-line" actors) and a regulatory framework to protect their rights as workers, as discussed in Giulia Muggeo and Mariapaola Pierini's essay about UNITA's association. Sara Pesce also reflects on similar issues, although she focuses on the use of the actors' body and voice. In particular, Pesce reflects on the case study of the short film *Io sono... Italia* (2021), focusing on the act of "lending voice", that is, using the voice as a response to the conditions of life imposed by the lockdown.

This special issue of *Cinergie* captures the exact historical moment in which actors and celebrities have been forced to rethink their self-promotion practices and ways of interacting with their fans in accordance with an unprecedented closeness between star and audience. The long-term effects of this exhibited vulnerability, of course, remain to be analysed, especially with regard to how actors and actresses have leveraged self-branding and fandom to raise awareness on issues felt to be relevant. As Cliff Beasts (Keegan-Michael Key) says in *The Bubble*, describing his acting career: "During the pandemic I realised that we are all the same, but I thought that I was special".

#### 4 Intimacy and Ordinary Domesticity

The COVID-19 pandemic also confronted actors and actresses with the need to deal differently with intimacy and domesticity. On the one hand, the pandemic has caused, at least temporarily, a cut in intimacy on sets. Indeed, simulating intimacy on set became a source of anxiety for some screen performers. As intimacy coordinator Amanda Blumenthal (in Press 2021) explained to *Vanity Fair*, "kissing is probably the most high-risk COVID-related activity a performer could engage in". Therefore, solutions for conveying a sense of affection between characters without putting the actors and actresses interpreting them in a situation of danger health-wise, or in the condition to have concerns, had to start being sought.

On the other hand, during the lockdown period, forced to stay at home like everybody else, film stars were faced with the need to expose more of their domestic and private selves, or at least to do so in a way that differed from that adopted before the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, as Ann Larabee (2020: 257) underlined, "glimpses into celebrities' private lives, including their habitations, are essential to feelings of intimacy and kinship with them". Precisely for this reason, long prior to the pandemic, social media were already used by many actors and actresses to offer sneak peeks into their private lives. Yet, during the lockdown those more celebrifying glimpses into the domesticity of stars that emphasized their privileged status became no longer acceptable for many members of the public. Emblematic are the hostile comments and reactions that Jennifer Lopez's video of her family sheltering in the backyard of Alex Rodriguez's vast Miami compound attracted on social media when she posted it (see Hess 2020).

During the height of the pandemic, film stars were faced with the need to increase the access to their everyday lives that they offered to their fans but at the same time reconsider what they showed and how they integrated domesticity and intimacy into their pandemic star image. Indeed, on the one hand, they had to virtually let viewers into their private spaces, since for a screen performer staying afloat means among other things remaining visible, present in the minds and discourses of the viewing public, and virtually opening up their homes was the easiest and most straightforward way to do so considering the restrictions in place. Ylenia Caputo makes this apparent in her essay, which looks at how six key Italian Gen Z stars – Beatrice Bruschi, Federico Cesari, Rocco Fasano, Ludovica Martino, Benedetta Porcaroli, and Lorenzo Zurzolo – made use of their Instagram profiles both between March and June 2020 and October 2020 and January 2021 (i.e., during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy). Indeed, as for anybody else, suddenly, for actors and actresses their homes also became their workspaces, as Silvia Vacirca underscores in her essay on how Alice Pagani used social media during the height of the pandemic. More precisely, Vacirca makes apparent how, in making the FaceTime snapshot the main tool for the construction of digital intimacy, Pagani had to turn her house into a fashion photography set. And even stars more reluctant to exposing their private side, as is for

instance the case of Valerio Mastandrea, had to virtually let the viewing public into their homes if they wanted to still appear on TV or take part in other initiatives that normally see the presence of actors and actresses, since suddenly everything was happening online and that was thus the only way to attend.

On the other hand, however, more generally, to avoid upsetting their fans, especially during the lockdown period, actors and actresses had to choose wisely not only their backgrounds, make up, clothes and hair styles, but also what they shared of their pandemic everyday, aiming at highlighting more the ordinariness of their day-to-day existence rather than the extraordinary aspects of it as before. For instance, several actors and actresses – including Tom Hanks, Antonio Banderas, Giuliana De Sio, and Robert Pattinson – portrayed themselves as vulnerable human beings like anybody else by sharing that they had contracted COVID-19. A further example are the “quarantine” shots of Italian A-list film stars by photographer Riccardo Ghilardi discussed in Chiara Borroni’s essay for this issue. Indeed, as Borroni shows, in capturing them in their average, casual attires within their homes or in liminal spaces between the public and the domestic such as windowsills, balconies and terraces, these photographs return the ordinariness of the portrayed stars. In other words, Ghilardi’s photographs offer images of the portrayed A-list actors and actresses that are far from the celebrifying red carpet ones that up to then he usually returned of them in his shots.

Perhaps because of these shifts, some glimmers of ordinariness have also made their way into a few Italian titles with film stars as their protagonists that were distributed immediately after the lockdown. It is the case of the Amazon Original cooking show *Dinner Club* (2021-current) wherein, for instance, in the episode devoted to Pier Francesco Favino we find a scene in which it is stressed that often this A-list film star is the one who cooks for his daughters. In this way, even if just briefly, viewers are thus presented with an image of ordinariness that brings this actor who they usually see in extraordinary contexts (e.g., on red carpets surrounded by photographers, on stages accepting prizes, on sets, and so on) closer to them and their everyday. Another example is offered by *Vita da Carlo* (2021-current). Unlike *Dinner Club*, which falls into the reality show category, this further series produced by Amazon offers a fictional depiction of actor Carlo Verdone’s everyday life. Yet, in so doing, it often lingers on more ordinary aspects of his extraordinary existence such as difficulties encountered in dealing with his daughter or in having his maid respect his authority.

That said, seen from 2022, overall and as far as Italian film stars and the audiovisual industry are concerned, the experience of the pandemic and of the shutdown of sets seems, however, not to have determined the “monumental shifts” and long-lasting, “paradigm-shifting” changes that Kate Fortmueller (2021: 6-7) predicts for the Hollywood industry in her monograph *Hollywood Shutdown. Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID*. Most trends and tendencies here illustrated as characteristic of the height of the pandemic faded once the restrictions were progressively lifted. Indeed, in line with what is ongoing in all other sectors of Italian society (and beyond), a desire to make the new normal as close as possible to the pre-COVID-19 normal, to go back to “business as usual” seems to inform most pathways undertaken by actors and actresses in the post-restriction pandemic times that we are currently living in.

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