

# 1. Much More than a Narrative Genre

## Theoretical and Research Perspectives on Medical Drama

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Since its inception in the 1960s, medical drama has become one of the most relevant genres on the television scene and derives its name, on one hand, from the context in which events take place, usually in a hospital; on the other, it comes from the narrative development of medical cases, professional dynamics and sentimental relationships (Rocchi and Pescatore 2019, 2022). The widespread diffusion and success of the genre are consistently bolstered by the ongoing production and global circulation of medical TV series. For example, *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) is one of the longest-running scripted prime-time television series in the United States, and it is noteworthy that when *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), after being off the air for nearly a decade, made its streaming debut in January 2018, it swiftly claimed the title of the most-watched television series on Hulu (Harnick 2018).

Almost entirely due to television, the medical genre has attracted the attention not only of critics and researchers in the field of media studies, but also of providers of medical devices and more generally of medical professionals (Rocchi 2019). Kipke and colleagues (2023) identify *Grey's Anatomy* as one of the ten popular TV shows engaged in a collaboration with the entertainment industry to foster trust in science and research by incorporating clinical research storylines. Hoffman and colleagues (2023a), in their analysis of the impact of health storylines in fictional television programmes on viewers, emphasize that even if health content is common in other genres (i.e., primetime programmes, crime dramas, primetime comedies), medical TV series such as *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* were among the most studied within the scientific literature.

Audiovisual products from the U.S. hold significant relevance in the realm of medical genre literature, primarily due to the influential role played by the American cultural industry in shaping global television trends.

U.S. TV programmes have become reference models for other countries and “several features of contemporary American medical dramas can be identified in their Korean counterparts” (Pişçarac 2016). Moreover, these types of productions and dynamics are reflected in the emergent interest in non-Western medical dramas. For instance, Sarı (2023) recently conducted a cross-cultural analysis examining the most popular K-Drama of recent years both at national and global level, *Dr. Romantic* (SBS TV, 2016-2023), and the Turkish remake *Kasaba Doktoru* (*Town Doctor*, TRT1, 2022).

The aim of this chapter is not to conduct a literature review on the topic, as all the relevant references can be found within the contributions to this volume. Instead, it is intended to underscore the sustained interest in these research subjects and the vibrancy of the approaches and methodologies employed. Considering only the research published in 2023, it is clear that medical drama TV series continue to stimulate the curiosity of researchers from multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives. Among the most recently employed methods for analysing the topic, content analysis stands out. It has been employed to analyse trends and variations in organ donation portrayals (Quick et al. 2023) as well as to investigate the representation of neurological and neurosurgical diseases (Ismail and Salama 2023) in *Grey’s Anatomy*. In addition, Ambler and colleagues (2023) studied the demographics of patients represented and their respective health outcomes in both *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Chicago Med* (NBC, 2015-). Qualitative and quantitative content analysis has also been employed to investigate social discourses and reactions to the narrative inclusion of e-cigarette, or vaping, product-use associated lung injury (EVALI) storylines in three prominent primetime medical dramas (Hoffman et al. 2023b, 2023c). Considering online discourses, through a data-driven approach Antonioni and Holdaway (2023) investigated the reception practices and discourses on social media of *Doc – Nelle tue mani* (Rai1, 2020-).

Considering the aforementioned substantial influence of the U.S.’s audiovisual industry on global television content, Meimaridis (2023) has highlighted the importance of examining the fictionalization of U.S. institutions. Specifically, the author has concentrated on the portrayal of the medical institution in *Grey’s Anatomy* and argued that it fosters “unrealistic expectations towards real-world institutions, their members, and their roles in society”, perpetuating and reinforcing several myths.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has further motivated researchers to investigate how the public health crisis has been incorporated into the narra-

tives of fictional audiovisual productions within the medical genre, and how such portrayals can provide benefits to the audience. For example, Cambra-Badii and colleagues (2023) focused on the use of medical dramas as an educational tool to teach health sciences and humanities students about bioethical issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and they assessed the effectiveness of employing cinemeducation methodology for this specific purpose. Additionally, Alahmari (2023) conducted a study that affirmed the interest of medical students in medical TV series and elucidated how these programmes can serve as effective tools for imparting knowledge about the ethical dimensions of practicing medicine. Rauhaus (2023) used *New Amsterdam* (NBC, 2018-2023) as a case study to teach public administration theory and link it to practice for master's of public administration (MPA) students. On the other side, at the 17th World Congress on Public Health, Zago and colleagues (2023) analysed how public health issues are depicted in two highly popular medical dramas: *Grey's Anatomy* and *House M.D.* (Fox, 2004-2012). They underscored that topic concerning "healthy lifestyles (i.e., smoking abstinence) or vaccination were addressed only superficially, and the use of PPE (personal protective equipment) was also partially presented before the pandemic" (Zago et al. 2023: 469). Tian and colleagues (2023), measuring several factors (exposure to medical dramas; parasocial relationships with physicians in medical dramas; and trust in physicians in real life), concluded that enhancing audience engagement and psychological connections with media characters or figures can potentially reduce psychological reactance and enhance the effectiveness of educational and campaign programmes.

Therefore, taking into account the social and cultural value of medical drama, for the imagery and expectations it manages to spread about doctors and medicine in its broader sense, for the educational value it has for professionals and future professionals in the field, for the trust it can manage to create in medicine and science in general, further research is needed on the specific nature of this genre, which on the one hand has to take into account social environment changes and on the other a series of productive and narrative changes. Using an ecosystemic approach (Pescatore 2018) to the genre, we cannot fail to consider that medical drama, like other television genres, is "constantly in flux" (Mittel 2004) and somehow everchanging, "with its boundaries, investments and representations shifting to reflect cultural and industrial contexts and the tastes of its audiences" (Bignell and Woods 2023: 136).

If a genre's developments depend on internal and external logics and motivations, we can, however, consider that their hybridisation is one of the specific characteristics of television programming (Akass and McCabe 2007) and this hybridisation also takes on new forms and declinations today in the light of a media-savvy audience. For instance, the crime-medical drama is perhaps the longest-running form of hybridisation, as it brings into dialogue two of the most popular genres of television drama (Ridgman 2012); the medical teen drama is another interesting example of coalescence between genres to mention, given the success of *Polseres Vermelles* (TV3, 2011-2013) and its European adaptations *Braccialetti rossi* (Rai1, 2014-2016), *Club der roten bänden* (VOX, 2015-2017), *Les bracelets rouges* (TF1, 2018-) and the American *Red Band Society* (FOX 2014-2015).

Another example of mixed genres is the period medical drama, i.e. a medical show set in the distant past, for example *The Knick* (Cinemax, 2014-2015), or in a most recent past, as in *Call the Midwife* (BBC One, 2014-) and *Cuori* (Rai1, 2021-), to name just a few. In this case, of course, the historical setting makes it possible not only to follow the advances in medicine and the medical profession, but also to gain an insight into the society and culture of the period in which the series is set.

Among the most up-to-date hybridisations of the medical genre, we could mention the one that recounts, in a fictionalised and serialised form, real-life medical stories or events, often connected with extreme cases of medical malpractice, such as *Doctor Death* (Peacock, 2021-) and *The Nurse* (Netflix, 2023), or connected with disasters, as in *Five Days at Memorial* (AppleTV+, 2022), dedicated to the days of isolation experienced by the Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina. Another hybrid takes the shape of an action version of the medical drama, as explored, for example, by the Canadian series *SkyMed* (CBC, 2022-), whose protagonists are nurses, physicians and pilots working for an air ambulance service in the Manitoba region.

The aforementioned examples are only a few of the possible variations of contemporary medical drama, which, in this continuous work of mixological renewal, demonstrates on the one hand that it is a genre capable of evolving to meet the public's interest, even though it is one of the longest-lived on television, and on the other hand that it succeeds in capturing a number of problematic issues of contemporary society and turning them into part of its narrative.

As we have observed in this non-exhaustive survey, research on medi-

cal drama TV series encompasses various methods and approaches, offering a wide range of perspectives into which we can delve more rigorously, thanks to the contributions gathered in this volume. Below, we offer a concise overview of all these multi-perspective approaches, presented during the Media Mutations Conference, titled *Investigating Medical Drama TV Series: Approaches and Perspectives*, which was held in Bologna on May 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The conference was organised in collaboration with the nationally funded PRIN research project: *Narrative Ecosystem Analysis and Development Framework (NEAD Framework). A Systemic Approach to Contemporary Serial Product. The Medical Drama Case* to bring these different and varied approaches and methods into dialogue with each other and to sustain the principles at the basis of the narrative ecosystem approach and its multi-methodological core.

One of the research methodologies widely applied is qualitative, which can use both the classic tool of interviews with key informants and textual analysis to bring forth the imaginaries underlying the relevant narratives. In the first case, Daniela Cardini and Fabrizia Malgieri examine an extremely important topic: the views and perceptions of physicians on medical drama. Through a series of in-depth interviews, the authors investigate how physicians, as viewers, judge the accuracy of various aspects staged by medical series, focusing in particular on the case of *Doc – Nelle tue mani*. Their research is complemented by a further interview with the medical consultant for this series, a pivotal figure in the writing, directing and staging of the medical series.

In the second case, Natalia Riva and Matteo Tarantino analyse six Chinese medical drama TV series to investigate how they incorporate medical imagery to reflect evolving ideological constructs that mirror contemporary China's political orientation. They show how Chinese medical TV series dramatize various critical social relationships and change contributing to shaping the politics of fictional medicine.

Another research approach favours quantitative methods, which are very versatile. For instance, Paola Dalla Torre and colleagues focus on the significance of dialogue in TV series for character development, emotional engagement in the narrative and series' stylistic signature. The research analyses dialogue patterns in the medical drama TV series *House, M.D.*, finding a predominant star structure.

Alice Fedotova and Alberto Barrón-Cedeño use computational methods, specifically transformer-based models, to automatically classify segments

from the TV series *Grey's Anatomy* into three typical medical drama isotopies. The research employs both unimodal and multimodal approaches to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of automating content analysis for audiovisual media.

Greta Iapalucci utilizes Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, including topic modelling and sentiment analysis, to analyse audience reception on Twitter in relation to *The Good Doctor*. The findings reveal positive audience reactions to the show's portrayal of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and discussions mainly related to narrative and viewer-related topics, especially during the show's airing.

Giorgio Avezù explores medical TV series consumption patterns in Italy by analysing viewing data from Rai and Mediaset. The chapter reveals how medical dramas exhibit remarkable consistency in consumption across Italy due to their neutral settings and delocalized narratives. The author underlines how this geographical homogeneity reflects the genre's effectiveness and contributes to Italy's cultural cohesion in television consumption.

Among the various research objects that can be explored within the medical drama, central are health-related issues and how they are represented. For example, the representation of mental health, particularly among teenagers, is the core of two different contributions. Chiara Checcaglini focuses on three Italian TV series – *Oltre la soglia*, *Mental* and *Tutto chiede salvezza* – which attempt to give a more accurate representation of mental health problems, significantly choosing teenagers and young adults as protagonists. The author analyses whether and to what extent these series adhere to the medical drama genre and how different distribution choices have decreed their success or not.

On the other hand, Nicola Crippa and Mattia Galli, through quantitative content analysis, try to show how far the differences in representation of illness among young people are related to different production and distribution contexts. The Italian series examined (*Tutto chiede salvezza*, *Mental*, *Lea - Un nuovo giorno*, *Fino all'ultimo battito*) are variously aired on broadcast TV, on an OTT platform, and on the streaming platform of the Italian public broadcasting service.

Elisabetta Locatelli's article also focuses on mental health issues and introduces a case study of *TV Therapy* which can be considered to sit at the intersection of psychological therapy, social media, TV series and health communication more generally. The TV Therapy project began as a group therapy that used TV series as a trigger to initiate discussion on selected top-

ics and evolved with the Instagram profile of its creator and the production of a podcast of the same title. The grounded approach used by the author allowed her to make some remarkable reflections on health communications and its evolution.

Susanna Bandi and Federica Villa, using a medical humanities approach, explore the representation of autism and autistic individuals, asking whether and what stereotypes are employed and how they are used. They examine a corpus of various medical TV series, focusing in particular on the case study of *The Good Doctor*, whose protagonist is a doctor with autistic spectrum disorder. Significantly, the authors find that although this representation may be useful in making autism spectrum disorders part of the public discussion, *The Good Doctor* is a kind of ‘missed opportunity’ because the series reinforces one of the most widely used representations of autism, namely that of the autistic genius with ‘superpowers’.

Two studies explore how medical drama TV series incorporate the Covid-19 topic. Eszter Nádasi delves into five U.S. medical TV series (*Chicago Med*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *New Amsterdam*, *The Good Doctor*, and *The Resident*) and their Covid-19 storylines during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 seasons. She examines the portrayal of the pandemic, including its stages and common plot elements, while emphasizing the shows’ support for scientific approaches and safety protocols.

Allegra Sonogo investigates the embedding of the Covid-19 theme and sub-themes using a quantitative content analysis. She assesses the prominence of the Covid-19 theme and its connection to central narrative elements, including sentiment plot, professional plot, and medical cases plot.

Medical drama and its representations can also be investigated using a gender studies approach, as proposed by Rosa Barotsi and colleagues, who investigate how gender medicine has enhanced our comprehension of gender inequalities in healthcare. The chapter delves into the analyses of scenes pertaining to women’s cardiac events and eating disorders to assess the capacity of medical dramas, along with other genres and formats, in portraying the complexity of health and illness.

Marie Moreau focuses her study on the portrayal of gender stereotypes within the medical drama. Her interest is on male and fatherhood representation within the hospital context and how these have changed over time since the first TV series that could be considered as a turning point: *ER*. The other television series proceeding along this less stereotypical evolutionary path are *Grey’s Anatomy* and *New Amsterdam*, although the author

questions to what extent these may give rise to a new stereotype: the doctor father-hero.

As we have previously mentioned, issues, methodologies and approaches to the medical drama differ widely. Alice Cati and Deborah Toschi, for example, compare two different genres set in a medical settings environment, scripted products and docuseries, and consider their differences in terms of the representation of illness and its treatment. Their focus is on biomedical images, their use and their status in these different types of stories. On the one hand, in fictional products they reinforce the medical discourse; on the other hand, in docuseries they are part of the practices and modes of action faced by patients, who are the real protagonists of this kind of narrative.

Andrea Bernardelli's chapter examines the figure of the anti-hero and tries to understand how this figure comes to life in medical drama. Specifically, in medical drama the antagonist is illness, so in this genre the anti-hero protagonist is the sick doctor. The author uses two TV series as case studies, *House M.D.* and *The Good Doctor*, to prove his thesis.

Elisa Farinacci and Emiliano Rossi, using a production studies approach, analyse an unusual case for Italian medical seriality, the TV series *Cuori*, which can be labelled as a period medical drama. Through fieldwork, conducted on the set of the second season using various methodologies (direct observation, in-depth interviews with actors and other professional figures, analysis of promotional materials, etc.), the authors suggest that the accuracy in the reconstruction of historical details (pertaining to the medical/scientific domain, but also socio-cultural, the set design, etc.) is part of the public broadcasting service strategy to appeal to different and wider audiences.

Finally, Adeline Terry utilizes the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to analyse the initial two seasons of *House, M.D.*, identifying and categorizing 118 metaphorical expressions based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. These metaphors fulfil multiple functions, including simplifying medical concepts for the audience, employing euphemisms or dysphemisms to discuss diseases, injecting humour, and contributing to character development within the series.



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In Stefania Antonioni and Marta Rocchi (eds). *Investigating Medical Drama TV Series: Approaches and Perspectives*. 14th Media Mutations International Conference. Bologna: Media Mutations Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.21428/93b7ef64.8ac7a6ca>.