

Crossbreeding the Media: Monstrous Adolescents as Outcasts Between Television and Music

Wednesday Addams and the Transmedia Production of Grotesque Others

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The essay explores pedagogical issues of identification, deconstruction and creation of otherness in contemporary forms of popular cultures: tv series and music. The present work begins with an analysis of today's trends in the consumption of television storytelling by the audience. It then proceeds in exploring the connections of pedagogy to key terms in Gothic fiction, such as Grotesque, Uncanny and Weird, by deconstructing scenes, characters and themes of the series *Wednesday*, written by Tim Burton. Furthermore, the article explores how music and television combine each other to create identities (i.e., teenagers as fearsome, monsters and Others), with particular references to adolescence, and which pedagogical issues are raised when (and why) teenagers identify themselves with outcasts. The essay will show how music emphasizes these themes and meanings, particularly through social media platforms, and how fans identify with the outcast through educative practices such as: identification, participation, creativity and imitation.

Keywords: pedagogy, gothic, television, weird, music.

Incrociare i Media: adolescenti mostruosi come marginalizzati tra televisione e musica. Wednesday Addams e la produzione transmediale dell'Altro come grottesco

Il saggio esplora le questioni pedagogiche di identificazione, decostruzione e creazione dell'alterità nelle forme contemporanee di cultura popolare:

serie tv e musica. Il presente lavoro inizia con un'analisi delle tendenze odierne nel consumo di narrazione televisiva da parte del pubblico. Procede quindi esplorando le connessioni pedagogiche con termini chiave della narrativa gotica, come grottesco, perturbante e strano, decostruendo scene, personaggi e temi della serie *Wednesday*, scritta da Tim Burton. Inoltre, l'articolo esplora come la musica e la televisione si combinino per creare identità (ad esempio, adolescenti come temibili, mostruosi e Altri), con particolari riferimenti all'adolescenza, e quali questioni pedagogiche vengano sollevate quando (e perché) gli adolescenti si identificano con gli emarginati. Il saggio mostrerà come la musica enfatizzi questi temi e significhi, in particolare attraverso le piattaforme dei *social media*, e come i fan si identifichino con gli emarginati attraverso pratiche educative come: l'identificazione, la partecipazione, la creatività e l'imitazione.

Parole chiave: pedagogia, gotico, television, strano, musica.

On Popular Culture, Characters and Television: Towards a Redefinition of Pedagogical Relationships

What constitutes the subject and the ideas behind who and what a subject could potentially be(come) are deeply intertwined with key pedagogical issues. Therefore, in discussing subjecthood from an educational as well as formative point of view, there are several aspects worth highlighting. First, subjectivity can never be seen as a neutral experience. On the contrary, being a subject is a lived and incarnated experience of the Self, whose formation is the sum of different situations, experiences, encounters that involve one's own identity as well as other subjects. That is, to be a subject is to live inside a constant set of intersubjective relationships (Erbetta, Ed., 2011). Second, given the fact that to become a full subject is to embrace and exists with the Other, in its inter-existence with otherness the subject is tied to the world – both social and cultural – in which it exists, and as such it is always historically, contingently and materially determined (Bertolini, 2006). Third, the definition of identity/subjectivity – or rather, which identities and subjectivities are allowed to exist and/or be represented is rooted within the shared values produced by a certain society. In this sense, the individuals are both *subjects* who create and shape cultural productions, as well as *objects*

defined by those same cultural representations (Trend, 1992). When it comes to cultural values, issues of how subjects have been (and are being) portrayed brings to the surface important pedagogical questions of who belongs and who is not part of those social and cultural spaces. Cultural Studies have been discussing the importance of all forms of cultures, both high and low, by highlighting how culture does not end with canonical cultural products (i.e., literature), but that it embraces the entire system of values and each subject's everyday life (Trend, 1992; Zoletto, 2011; Madrussan, 2021).

Over the last few decades, examples of popular culture, such as television and music, have been shaping ever growing communities of fans, whose sense of identity is deeply influenced by their favourite productions. Moreover, their participation directly shapes representations on the screen, as they enlarge fictional worlds with their own creative works¹ (Trend, 1992; Mittell; Celot *et alii*, 2021). As far as the dyad “belonging/non-belonging” is concerned, David Trend has highlighted that “the relationship of individual to community is one of sameness and difference, for communities² are identified by both what groups have in common and what sets them apart from other entities” (*ivi*, 1992, p. 82). These communities, which appear to be taste-driven at their very foundations, are based on different degrees of relationships that express as many levels of sameness and difference, experienced on different layers of reality. What happens inside these

¹ Fans' commitment to cultural products (that is: characters, plots, songs, places, games and data collection), is coupled with their direct creations based on their favourite shows/products. The topic of representation is thus expanded even further: as Jason Mittell highlights, fans create website where they can collect huge amounts of data on a given fictional universe. The scholar calls these production orienting paratexts. Furthermore, “viewers make intense investments in the romantic entanglements of characters, advocating for particular relationships in forums with other fans, often via ‘shipping names’ combining two characters” (Mittell, 2015, p. 128). Fans are not only represented: they want their own ideas, creativity and identities represented. Working on adolescent cultures, Henry Jenkins describes this relationship with popular forms of culture as grassroot: that is, something that starts from the bottom (like a plant's own roots) and works towards the top (Celot *et alii*, Eds., 2021).

² When it comes to the idea of online communities, those created by fans are called *fandom*. The term has been created by the union of the word *fanatic* (which means obsessed) and *kingdom*. The literal meaning of the word fandom is thus “the kingdom of fanatics”, people who are obsessed with a certain fictional production. As of today, the term indicates the “profound and powerful bond that people develop towards cultural products and famous characters” (Celot *et alii*, Eds., 2021, p. 133).

productive spaces online, is that people negotiate and form³ new cultural representations, based on genres, gender, race and ethnicity, class, power, etc. As far as characters are involved, latest television products seem to have been preoccupied with the creation of characters who not only represent marginalization and difference, but also make the theme of the outcast at the very centre of the attention of their audience.

Though not always correctly represented⁴, viewers engage with different forms of identity on the screen, with which they can relate to and question/change their own sense of Self. As Jason Mittell has pointed out in his discussion on contemporary television, characters⁵ represent the main point of contact with the viewers, who are drawn to television show by their appearances and by the actors/actresses who interpret their roles (Mittell, 2015). The encounter between television characters and the audience enlarges the latter's idea of intersubjectivity through what is defined as *parasocial relationships*⁶ (*ivi*). These are particular types of interactions that

³ The verb "form", here, is profoundly connected to the pedagogical idea of formation, which is strictly tied to the existential dimension of the subject. More specifically, it has to do with the craft and shaping of the individual's own existence and personality. What is important, here, is the existential plan the subject shapes through culture (Madrussan, 2019).

⁴ As many authors have discussed, representation is still a problematic component of contemporary television storytelling. When it comes to representations of gender, race, ethnicity, bodies, disability, for example, popular culture needs to be constantly monitored, as the display of characters and plots seem to be related (at least to a certain degree) to economical and marketing motives, as well as the reassurance of the more radical wings of their audience. This has deep pedagogical implications, especially when subjects (for example, teenagers) are exposed to cultural forms that represent identities whose characteristics are still presented to viewers as stereotyped (Caruso, 2021).

⁵ Character Studies have been a prominent part of contemporary discussions on media culture, from different forms of literature to television and cinema. The word "character" derives from the Greek *charaktér* (stamping tool), with the meaning of the unique stamp of personality of each human being. On the other hand, the Italian and French *personaggio/personnage* derive from the Latin word *persona* (the mask used by actors, and through which came their voices). Moreover, the German word *figur* comes from the Latin *figura*, suggesting a form that is in contrast with the background. Furthermore, there are at least three paradigms used to define the concept of character: that of humanlikeness, though made of abstract materials (words, images, sounds); their importance to the plot and story; the relationship between observed materials and its reception by the audience. Finally, characters can be analyzed from, at least, four different approaches: hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist/semiotic, cognitive. (Eder *et alii*, 2010, pp 10-82).

⁶ When it comes to Character Studies, it is worth highlighting that this concept came out decades ago in Media and Communication Studies. More specifically, the term "was

stem from the connection between the viewer(s) and fictional beings, in which people imagine themselves in a relationship with the characters of a given fictional world (Smith, 1995). These relationships are non-reciprocal, though they still influence the experience of watching, consuming and studying television lived by the audience (Mittell, 2015). Despite their being unbalanced, these bonds are created through a process called identification⁷ (Eder *et alii*, Eds., 2010): though the character *per se* does not interact with the viewer, it raises emotions, reactions, ideas and, more importantly, the representation of different experiences with which people might identify. Pedagogically speaking, then, characters represent *lived* and *embodied* fictional experiences through which subjects can modify, form or change their own personal traits or behaviours. Furthermore, it might educate to the fact that one's own place within his/her society or community might change over time, as the representations of characters could shift social groups from marginalized positions to the centre of debates about who is allowed to be accepted or not inside a given sociocultural environment.

If the representation of conflicting identities that defy stereotypes is a quintessential pedagogical issue, then to foster a process of portrayal which would promote truly diverse individuals there are three key components that must be considered: *bodies*, *stories* and *relationships* (Caruso, 2020, p. XI). The first element implies how characters embody different physical traits, in terms of aesthetics, shape and of how they show normative rules about acceptable/non-acceptable body forms. The second, on the other hand, is deeply tied to the essence of fictional products. Storytelling exists in a myriad of different forms, yet characters come into existence and are presente to the audience through it. Moreover, fictional beings are part of a specific plot,

first coined back in the 1950s by sociologist Donald Horton and his psychiatrist co-author Richard Wohl in a paper in a psychiatric journal (Eder *et alii*, Eds., 2010, p. 454). However, it seems to not have become a permanent, or at least widely established, term in media studies and psychology (*ivi*, p. 455).

⁷ As Murray Smith explains in his works on Character and Media Studies, identification is a key issue in parasocial relationships and it depends on three different psychological mechanisms: recognition, alignment and allegiance. The first indicates the ability to recognize not only the character across episodes and seasons, but one's own personality and identity traits. The second, on the other hand, implies having access to the realm of interior emotions of the character. The latter, implies a certain degree of empathy (though this is often indicated as a stand-alone principle of identification procedures) and ability to align one's one behavior and values to those of the character (Mittell, 2015, p. 129).

whose main purpose is to give sense to their existence in that particular world. The latter, complicates even further the bond between television and viewers: characters always exist as a constellation, a web of subjects and relationships (Eder *et alii*, 2010), much like the individuals' experiences in real life. These encounters are constrained by issues of time (each series has a beginning and an end) and of space (television shows are consumed through platforms and devices). However, pedagogical relations (both in the sense of relationships with and to culture, as well as with and to other subjectivities) might thus be established on different levels which touch the subject's experience of the world, whether it is fictional or real.

Monsters Who Walk Amongst the Humans: Pedagogical Reflections on Monstrous Outcasts and Otherness in Wednesday

Monsters (vampires, ghouls, ghosts, werewolves, zombies, etc.) have always captured the interest of the audience since the beginnings of literary productions. Ever since its blooming in the late 18th century, the Gothic genre has been preoccupied with the (re)definition of social norms which were (and in certain ways still are) connected to issues of normalcy and abnormality. Despite the great number of controversies that Gothic texts have sprung over the centuries, writers of this particular genre have succeeded in developing a set of memorable characters and a taste for controversial and negative aesthetics⁸. Confronting traditional societies, therefore, Gothic fiction has developed through excesses of feelings, fear and terror, irrationality over rational thoughts, imposing and sublime natural phenomena or environments and negative aesthetics (Botting, 2014). Writers of Gothic fiction openly question moral and social values of their times, by focusing on plots and characters⁹ that often display monstrous

⁸ According to the scholar Fred Botting, who has been studying and defining the characteristics of Gothic literature and fiction, negative aesthetics in Gothic texts are generated on two different levels: that of deficiency, which talks about the absence, exclusion or negation of common or traditional knowledge, facts or things; and that of the excess, that is an overflowing use of words, feelings, ideas and images (Botting, 2014, p. 6).

⁹ Gothic fiction is often associated to a series of well-known tropes and features: the presence of haunted building and gloomy places (such as castles, dungeons, graveyards, cemeteries, etc.); the clash of conventional social values, which are challenged by the existence of supernatural forces; the presence of family secrets and haunting figures who try to

features, extreme sexualities and non-conforming bodies, and that live at the very margins of society. Their bodies, stories and relationships thus openly challenge shared cultural values: they have deformed and unusual bodies, conflicting relationships and devious stories. In this sense, Gothic fiction has developed, more than other genres, the figure of the outcast¹⁰ in a variety of interesting ways. Monstrous identities are, pedagogically, uncanny and other in their very own definition: identifying with the outcast brings to the surface each individual's *monstrosities* – or rather, their differences, traits and non-conventional forms of identity.

Speaking of Gothic fiction, *Wednesday* is a recent and very popular tv series, developed in 2022 and directed by Tim Burton and available for streaming on the platform *Netflix*, that follows the adventures of Wednesday Addams, the daughter of Morticia and Gomez Addams, from the famous movie, comic and tv series *The Addams Family*, originally written by author and cartoonist Charles Addams in 1938¹¹. The entire series orbits around the contraposition between two worlds: normal individuals (who live in Jericho)

destroy the idea of family from outside of and within it; a deep relationship with nature, seen as something powerful, difficult to understand and where the presence of God and supernatural forces can be witnessed by human beings; a plot that usually revolves around two figures: the male villain (devious, angry, isolated, lustful and aggressive) and the female heroine (more submissive, in search of help and attacked by the male villain) (Botting, 2014).

¹⁰ According to Fred Botting, monstrous outcasts are “constructions indicating how cultures need to invent or imagine others in order to maintain limits. They are pushed in disgust to the other side of the imaginary fence that keeps norm and deviance apart” (Botting, 2014, p. 10).

¹¹ The show follows Wednesday and her high school experience: after a school accident in which she frees piranhas in a pool and hurts the group of students who had been bullying her brother, she is transferred to a new and special school, the Nevermore Academy in Jericho, America. There, she discovers that almost everyone at Nevermore is a monster: the students, the teachers and even the school principal, Larissa Weems. Soon, she starts investigating over a series of homicides that had been happening for quite some time around the city. During her staying at the Nevermore Academy, she discovers important fragments of her family's history, dating back to her twin ancestor, Goody Addams. The series, which has been an immediate success, brings on screen all the elements of the traditional Addams stories: dark and gloomy atmospheres, dark characters dressed in gothic clothes, entities and monsters, family secrets and awkward family traditions, as well as the famous undead hand, Thing, that follows Wednesday everywhere. Though the popularity of the Addams Family seems to be everlasting, its roots are undeniably grounded into the Gothic genre: weird, grotesque, gloomy, dark, the figure of the outcast has found in this series one of its best representations.

and monsters/devious teenagers (who live at the Nevermore Academy¹²). The latter is a special school for outcasts, monstrous and devious adolescents who struggle to find a place in conventional schools. What seems to be pedagogically intriguing about the character of Wednesday Addams is that she apparently fulfils the role of the monster, the beast that has been cast outside of society, without actually being monstrous. As a matter of fact, Wednesday looks exactly like a usual human being, without monstrous traits or hidden monstrosities. Despite her being insufferable towards any living being that crosses her path, the series has resonated throughout the Internet, springing a massive process of identification from the audience: social media have been filled with memes, images, videos, challenges where people have dressed, acted and danced like her. What is even more interesting, whereas processes of alignment and empathy towards a character include emotions, which highly contributes to the essence and character of people's identities, Wednesday is represented as the exact opposite: she never blinks, she is always dressed in black and she despises feelings (whether it is love, friendship, happiness or anger). Her character is an outsider even inside the Nevermore Academy for outcasts, yet an ever-growing number of people have been identifying *as* Wednesday Addams on social media. In a pedagogical sense, it might therefore be crucial to analyse her fictional character from at least two different (though related) points of view: the possible reasons behind the urge of identification towards the outcast and its relationship(s) with issues of *otherness* and *differences*.

The outcast has a long history of representation in horror fiction and its position as somewhat on the border of culture and society opens its role up to challenges and speculations on what subject, self and community are. In this sense, *Wednesday* displays a series of characters whose monstrosities display grotesque and weird characteristics for the audience themselves to reevaluate norms and identification. In terms of genre, both the grotesque and the weird have specific tropes and traits, as they have developed their own sets of characteristics: on the one hand, that which is grotesque is always associated

¹² As an academy specifically designed for monsters, one might not overlook the possible reference to one of the masters of Gothic fiction: the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. One of his most famous poems, *The Raven*, sees the animal in its title haunting a man who lost his wife and that repeats, at the end of each stanza, the verse "quoth the Raven, nevermore". Over the series, the Nevermore Academy is often seen as filled with crows and ravens, that are part of the Gothic and dark atmosphere of this school.

with liminality and borders. What is more, is that it portrays contamination, as a mixture “in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone”¹³ (Edwards, Graulund, 2013, p. 6); on the other hand, weird stories are “designed to disturb” and they “represent the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane”, while portraying “the strangely beautiful, intertwined with terror” (VanderMeer A., VanderMeer J., Eds., 2011, pp 7-8). Weird stories “remain universal because they entertain while also expressing our own dissatisfaction with, and uncertainty about, reality” (*ibidem*). Characters from Wednesday incarnate both of these traits: they are grotesque monster with weird resemblances to what is human. They have become outcasts precisely because they embody monstrosity and normality at the same time: Enid is a lycanthrope, Yoko is a vampire, Bianca is a siren, Xavier is a psychic, Ajax is a gorgon, Tyler is a Hide and Larissa Weems, the school principal, is even shapeshifter, which means that she can potentially impersonate everything she likes. They change bodies, they shift from humans to monsters and they defy common notions on reality: therefore, they have to protect the humans by staying inside the walls of the Nevermore Academy and far from Jericho. As part of their conflicting bodies, but at the same time the story reassure the human characters/audience that their own existence is confined, distant, away from common society.

Elements of the grotesque and the weird involve the presence of monsters in a human environment or body (Edwards, Graulund, 2013; VanderMeer A., VanderMeer J., Eds., 2011): in this sense, the body acts as a conduit between the audience and the characters, in which familiar and unfamiliar fuse with

¹³ It is not by chance, than, that the Grotesque shares many connections with psycho-analytical theories of the unconscious and the uncanny. First developed by Sigmund Freud, the unconscious describes a set of emotions, needs and feelings that have been buried deep inside of our mind. That is, they have been suppressed to allow the being to exist inside society. On a fictional level, the unconscious is the monster: buried inside, trapped and caged to protect people from its monstrous brutality and ferocity. The idea of the unconscious, however, is strictly related to that of the uncanny: in Freud's studies on the human psyche, the uncanny defines a series of traits and characteristics that exist between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Though at first these features might surprise the subject, they gradually get to recognize those traits as an integral part of their Self. As they were buried and forgotten in the individual's mind, they resurface and challenge the sense of integrity of the Self established over the years by the subject (Edwards, Graulund, 2013; Madrussan, 2017).

each other. Therefore, the familiar human body/identity lets the monstrous other come out from within, on the screen: what is other, monstrous and devious lies within these characters' identities as human beings. In a sense, "the experience of something being both foreign and familiar engenders the emotive responses of discomfort and alienation" (Edwards, Graulund, 2013, p. 6). From a pedagogical perspective, however, identification and alignment with grotesquerie and weirdness might invite further reflections on uncanny issues of Self, Other and identity – as Elena Madrussan highlights, the subject who sees a foreign reflection of him/herself is brought to a new level of recognition (Madrussan, 2017). Here, the screen incorporates and acts as a mirror, where each individual's traits of otherness are voiced by one of the monsters: the need to have an independent voice of the siren Bianca; the ability to see reality in other forms of the psychic Wednesday; the desire to find one's own social group and stop being judged for not achieving the required physical traits of the lycanthrope Enid. Self, personality and integrity are therefore rediscussed again through the characters: the individual sees new parts of their identity and the process of comprehension/formation of their own Self begins anew. Being an outcast might be a more common experience than many may think: the fact that almost all of the fictional beings in this series are teenagers exposes even further many of the problems, issues and questions that subject undergo as they go through this difficult (yet peculiar) stage of life.

Wednesday Addams is, first and foremost, a teenager and though she is not a monster, she still falls inside the category of the outcast. Or rather, she is an outcast within the outcasts, as she is often marginalized by the other monstrous teenagers at the Nevermore Academy. However, as Morticia Addams (her mother) explains, she has powerful psychic abilities. Furthermore, she can fight and she is extremely intelligent. As stated before, her character has sprung a wave of (uncanny) identifications with her features: her fictional persona debunks all the basic assumptions that lie behind the processes of alignment, allegiance/empathy and identification: Wednesday Addams is a character without emotions and feelings¹⁴. In what could be defined as a

¹⁴ Though she shows some sense of friendship, love and worry towards some of the characters: she seems to fall in love with Tyler (even though he is the monster that is responsible for the series of deaths around Jericho) and, especially, she becomes friend with her roommate Enid and the other members of her group. She is weird and an outcast, but her character still seems to remind the audience that she possesses her own degree of humanity:

“normal” school, she is outcasted, together with her brother, though she is stronger and protects both of them. It is true that the Self is and exists only when it is constructed through otherness and intersubjectivity (Bertolini, 2006; Erbetta, Ed., 2011; Madrussan, 2017), yet here identification happens between desires to let go of all bonds and relationships – to be an outcast exactly like Wednesday Addams. Fiction and reality, however, seem to be clashing against each other: in schools in the real world, unique individuals like Wednesday are often excluded, isolated and victims of bullying, violence, disempowerment and loss of agency (Burgio, 2017). The fictional world, on the other hand, changes contingent constraints imposed on agency, as the audience can *intentionally* choose whose side to take and, more importantly, which community to be a part of. When it comes to online communities, where there is a high degree of involvement in the production of creative materials by fans (Mittell, 2015) the key formative problem lies in what could be defined as *accountability*. In the real world (i.e., schools) subjects choose who is or is not part of their own community and often the process of inclusion/exclusion is fundamental to the creation of those closed social groups. As Giuseppe Burgio shows, bullying, violence and exclusion are often seen as a mandatory process to form one’s identity within a given group – especially during adolescence (Burgio, 2017). In this sense, language shares a fundamental role, as do widespread images on subjectivity, as “we name the hated strangers and (we) are thus confirmed in the tribe” (Coates, 2015, p. 60). Moreover, “there are people whom we do not fully know, and yet they live in a warm place within us” and “when they lose their bodies and the dark energy disperse, that place becomes a wound” (*ivi*, p. 65). Trapped between repressed and uncanny differences, the desire to be accepted and social constructions of who is defined as outcast, agency seems to be intentional and freely exercises online and in fiction, though it is far from being achieved in the real world. To deconstruct and pedagogically analyse how grotesque, weird and uncanny characters are showcased on television is to find new ways to not only conceptualize forms of the Self who are unconventional, but also to bring to the surface deeper connections people share with fictional beings. Or rather, to support each and every subject’s process of acceptance of all forms of difference and otherness, to turn the freedom and intentionality of

she is indeed different, cold and distant, while still retaining her own human feelings buried deep within herself.

fictional worlds into the realm of reality in which all subjects and forms of Self co-exist.

“I’m a Teenage Beast With a Furied Heart”: the Adolescent as a Monster Between Television and Music

Adolescence is a critical and essential stage of life. As Pierangelo Barone highlights, it is a complex system of changes and modifications that happen on at least four different dimensions: the material and physical body, which becomes different and is modified in its form and shape; the perception of time and space that are deeply modified, as the teenager enters further into the social space and begins to understand time with and through their bodies. Actions and behaviours often coincide with finding one’s own place within groups of peers, dealing with traumas (i.e., acting out) and constructing one’s image and identity; issues related to thinking processes, internal difficulties that emerge from the clash between thoughts on teenagers’ present identity and their (future) existential projects – namely, who and what to become as they are growing up and gradually moving towards the end of adolescence (Barone, 2009, pp. 93-126). Furthermore, in developing their own intersubjective space and identity, adolescents use and interact with different forms of culture and technology¹⁵. As Henry Jenkins has thoroughly analyzed in his work on participatory cultures, the creation of media contents is deeply intertwined with audience creation and, especially, to teenagers (Jenkins, 2009). This high level of participation and involvement from the viewers takes several and different forms: from the creation of wikis (online encyclopedias about a given series) to alternative versions of favourite fictional universes and to the development of forums where users share contents, information and stories about their favourite series (Mittell, 2015). As far as adolescence is concerned, teenagers are also highly involved in new forms of technology and technological production (Jenkins, 2009; Mittell, 2015), and this often contributes to the expansion

¹⁵ When it comes to television consumption, teenagers represent one of the most active and solid categories among tv audience. In terms of data, roughly 37% of the daily audience of the famous streaming platform Netflix is made of adolescents and the same platform has been identified as popular among Gen Z, Post-Millennials (i.e., those who were born after the 90s and the year 2000) (Caruso, 2021, p. 97).

of fictional worlds and storytelling. As they create and consume, they fuse together different media, in what Henry Jenkins describes as *Convergence Cultures* – that is a space where different forms of technologies and cultures collide and give rise to new, unique, cultural products (Jenkins, 2009). Furthermore, Media and Character Studies have been discussing the concept of *transmedia storytelling*: when media tell fictional stories they hardly ever use one single medium. Rather, their products often involve different platforms: television, board games, wikis, blogs, forums, books, music (Mittell, 2015).

Fictional worlds (characters, plot, places) travel across different media and educate the audience through different forms of meaning. Music, in particular, seems to be related not only to ways of expressing one's own sense of taste, but also to the idea of identity, self-expression and identification (Madrussan, 2021). Adolescents interact with music on different levels of consumption and use: conformism/rebellion, identification/consumerism, expression/production. On the first level, music is torn between countercultures and emancipative forces against dominant cultural ideas and more conformist pressures to share a collective sense of identity based on tastes and music genres. Secondly, music and sound produce identity through deep processes of identification with icons and bands (rock stars, pop stars, rappers, trappers, etc.), but they are also deeply embedded within issues of consumerism, which imbues the process of identity formation as well as identification with others. Finally, Cultural Studies have analyzed music as a form of expression deeply tied to cultural and social aspects and more recent studies have discussed how music is often the product of a series of choices actively made by fans, audience and viewers (Madrussan, 2021; Mittell, 2015). In a pedagogical sense, whether it is by conformism or rebellion, by listening or producing, music shapes the form(s) of teenagers' identities. When it comes to television series and shows, fans work with music on different levels: they accumulate knowledge, create playlists and associate characters, music and sounds. Then, they can actually change the original choices and recreate scenes with different music or sounds and they also share their creative contents through social media and the Internet. As Elena Madrussan discusses, there are at least two layers of the pedagogical discourse that are involved in such practices: one is about music as knowledge (genres, didactic, cultural) and the other is knowledge about the Self, discovered in the relationship between individual to music

(Madrusan, 2021, p. 93). It is true that television relies on characters to draw the attention of its viewers (Mittell, 2015; Eder *et alii*, Eds., 2010), though over the last decades, tv shows have often used music not only as a mere background effect through scenes where songs express actors and actresses' feelings, emotions, voices and thoughts.

Music contributes to the formation of one's identity and taste. Pedagogically speaking, the sense of engagement between character and viewer is strengthened through music and sound, as the audience not only listens to fictional beings' thoughts through lyrics and instruments, but also restructure their own sense of taste and identity by identifying with the lyrical characters developed by the screen/music connection. *Wednesday* has become extremely famous on social media precisely because of music, which is involved in one particular scene: during a school party organized at the Nevermore Academy, Wednesday Addams shares the dance floor with Tyler Galpin. In this scene, Jenna Ortega performs a series of dance moves that, far from being improvised, are actually the synthesis of careful studies conducted by the actress Jenna Ortega on specific music genres and references: gothic, punk and rock¹⁶. In this scene, there are two songs that play a fundamental role: one being *Goo Goo Muck*, by The Cramps¹⁷, and the other one being *Bloody Mary*, by Lady Gaga¹⁸. Though the two songs are different in terms of genre, they share a connection with *Wednesday*: the song by The Cramps was the original one, chosen by Tim Burton for the dance, while Lady Gaga's

¹⁶ According to Jenna Ortega herself, she was inspired by many different singers and bands. First, she has claimed The Cramps to be one of her favourite punk bands. In one of her interviews, she stated that her influences were: Bob Fosse, Lisa Loring previous dance as Wednesday Addams in 1966, Denis Lavant and Lene Lovich. Furthermore, she thoroughly studied gothic teenagers and their dance moves, as to make them part of her own performance (Presnell, 2022).

¹⁷ The song was released by the punk band The Cramps in their 1981 album, *Psychodelic Jungle*, as a cover to the original. Originally, however, the song dates back to 1962, when it was released by Ronnie Cook and the Gaylads. The Cramps were formed in 1976, by singer Lux Interior and the guitar player Poison Ivy. Over the years, their members changed. The band released their first album in 1980, *Songs The Lord Taught Us*, and their career ended in 2009, when Lux Interior died (Howard, 2023).

¹⁸ *Bloody Mary* first came out in 2011, as part of Lady Gaga's album *Born This Way*. Originally one of the six songs that were chosen for the initial run of the album, the song resurfaced in 2022, as the result of its association with the series *Wednesday* and officially entered the Billboard top 40, occupying the first place and sitting on the fourth place for several weeks (McIntyre, 2023).

Bloody Mary became part of it later on: it was, as a matter of fact, a choice made by the series' fans as they reproduced the scene on their social media. As far as their meanings are concerned, however, both songs fit the scene for various reasons, as they both strengthen the monstrous side of the adolescent characters (Wednesday and Tyler) and the connections the series shares with the Gothic genre.

Goo Goo Muck has a much more controversial meaning behind its lyrics, where the monstrous and violent teenager is the main protagonist: the Goo Goo Muck¹⁹ is a teenage monster that only comes out at night and begins to move across the city to look for its preys. As the song begins, "well, when the sun goes down and the moon comes up / I turn into a teenage goo goo muck" (The Cramps, 1981, lines 1-2). According to the song, the teenager "cruise(s) through the city" and they "roam the street" (*ivi*, lines 3-4). The lyrics speak directly to the listener and constantly addresses the audience by using the pronoun "you", especially during the chorus where a warning is issued: "you better duck / when I show up / the goo goo muck" (*ivi*, lines 5-7). Here, adolescence is conceptualized as the quintessential fearsome Other: monstrous in its very essence, dangerously coming out at night and constantly hungry (especially for sex). Though Wednesday Addams is the one who is dancing to the song, it is Tyler Galpin who best embodies the meaning of the text. As a matter of fact, he is a particular creature called "Hide"²⁰, someone with a dangerous monster trapped inside of himself and that comes out at night, killing every prey that crosses its path. Adolescence has often been conceptualized as violent, devious (Madrusan, 2017), with teenagers described as pathologized figures or as unruly and amoral. Many of these traits have also been related to changes in the physical body of the teenager (Barone, 2009). As Wednesday dances, the teenager monster is described in the song as a "beast", a "teenage tiger" that is "looking for a feast" (The Cramps, 1981, lines 16-19). Also, the song is filled with animal sounds that are constantly repeated throughout the text, such as "caw", "muck", "ooh" to strengthen the sense of bestiality and violence. The song plays on the grotesque sense of alterity inspired by adolescence, neither

¹⁹ The Urban Dictionary refers to the word Goo Goo Muck as "a double entendre meaning a vampire or a muff driver. Famously used in a Cramps songs bearing the same name" (Urban Dictionary, 2005).

²⁰ The beast Hide is a reference to the famous novel *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hide*, which was written by R. L. Stevenson in 1886.

childhood nor adulthood, as well as the fear of violence, riots and, also, sexual display exhibited by teenagers. Furthermore, the adolescent speaks as a first person, describing themselves and warning others, possibly the adults in the city: "I'm the night headhunter looking for some head / with a way-out body underneath that head, ooh / yeah, I'll get you, baby, with a little luck / 'cause I'm a teenage tiger and a goo goo muck" (*ivi*, lines 8-11). The definition provided by the Urban Dictionary, the expressions "to get some head" strengthens even more the strong sexual connotations of the song, as it means to receive oral sex from another person. Moreover, the head the hunter-teenager is looking for has a way-out body: a strange, aberrant physique, something that is perverse and freakish. Anti-social sexualities, seen as excessive and uncontrollable, are not only related to adolescence (in this series), but to Gothic fiction in general, as grotesque sexualities are one of its main tropes. To identify with Wednesday's dance, here, is to form an adolescent identity which is free of social constraints, adult rules of morality and capable of exploring sexuality in its multiple, malleable aspects.

On the other hand, the second song has a much different connection to the series: fans decided to use Lady Gaga's *Bloody Mary* to recreate the dancing scene with a remixed and faster version of the song. Though it still has references to the Gothic world, as the title refers to one of the most famous ghosts from horror stories, the main theme, here, is that of love (as opposed to the feral sexuality invoked by *Goo Goo Muck*). In the lyrics, the author refers to love from different perspectives: as fury, art and sacred. The opening lines convey that "love is just a history that they may prove / and when you're gone / I'll tell them my religion's you" (Lady Gaga, 2011, lines 1-3). The song asks for a certain degree of freedom from social constraints, as the lyrics adds that "we are not just art for Michelangelo to carve / he can't rewrite the aggro of my furied heart" (*ivi*, lines 20-21). Curiously enough, the character of Wednesday seems to be completely estranged from feelings of love to the point in which fans have claimed that she might be an asexual or queer character. However, if music truly might be the expression of identity, fans might have found a more literal sense to the song. As a matter of fact, the chorus indeed talks about dancing in a similar fashion as Jenna Ortega's character: "I'll dance, dance, dance / with my hands, hands, hands, / above my head, head, head" (*ivi*, lines 8-10). What is more important is that the love claimed by the song is devoid of any type of judgement: "I won't crucify the things you do" (*ivi*, lines 15-17), sings Lady Gaga, after the

lyrics inform us of the death of the lover. Here, the body links the audience's sense of identification and alignment to Wednesday's dance. Songs change according to fans' own tastes to better match the scene: the outcast dancing freely with uncannily weird movements that defy conventional images, in a room full of monstrous teenagers with dark creatures within their bodies. A pedagogical space where monsters cease to be monstrous and outcasts, whose sole objective is that of inclusion and acceptance. Adult morality and condemnation disappear, especially after the focus on the principal's smile of approval towards Wednesday: she is finally a part of the community. Adolescents' love is angry, furious, free and unmatched. It defies social ideas attached to teenagers and fights to affirm their agency, sexuality and belonging in the social group(s) of their peers.

From a pedagogical perspective, music is not a mere narrative tool that strengthens the scene, but it carries within itself deeper meanings attached to adolescence and its role as Otherness – or rather, as a life stage that is still trapped between given stereotypes, fears and misconceptions (Barone, 2009; Madrussan, 2017). Moreover, here music contributes not only to further improving fans' knowledge about a given series, but to expand its universe and push the boundaries of alignment with its characters. Fandom members have reproduced Wednesday's scene by dressing, dancing and moving like the character impersonated by Jenna Ortega and with the song *Bloody Mary* in the background. Fans have identified on multiple levels with the outcast teenager: dressed as gothic characters, praised her lack of emotions and her being weird. The monstrous teenager is conceptualized through different media at the same time, as fans perpetrate their inquiries and creations through *transmedia storytelling*. As Rune Graulund and Justin D. Edwards state, curiosity and interest in grotesque bodies and characters rise from the feeling that what we see is familiar (Edwards, Graulund, 2013). By recalling Freud's idea of the uncanny, of that which is familiar but was buried deep down our own self and now resurfaces, outcasts and monsters might be so celebrated today because they show the Otherness that dwells deep within each person's identity. The same Other that contributes to the creation and strengthening of communities: particularly within the teenage audience, where the ideas of belonging and non-belonging are fundamental concepts for the construction of their private and collective identities.

Gothic Pedagogy: What Could Monsters Teach us About Otherness

Music and tv series, as widespread forms of popular culture, not only enlarge the ideas on representation, but in their crossbreeding and transmedia storytelling they offer new pedagogical spaces for agency, belonging and identification. They also develop identities through taste, consumption and sharing, as the audience exists between the public display of taste, where teenagers and young people seek acceptance from their peers, and the construction of one's own identity and sense of self (Madrusan, 2021; Jenkins, 2009; Trend, 1992). Transmedia storytelling creates and shapes communities, as "conference groupings, also known as 'virtual communities', are quickly becoming a new means of meeting, associating, and exchanging massive quantities of information" (Trend, 1992, p. 102). Furthermore, "these new community affiliations represent their own forms of culture. This is the sort of culture made by people every day" (*ibidem*). When fans reproduce Wednesday's weird dance, they are *embodying* Wednesday: they carry within themselves the experience of being outcasts, different, in want of exploring love, intimacy and affection, their need to be part of a community. As Murray Smith states, one of the major features of identification is not only alignment, but *empathy* (Eders *et alii*, Eds., 2010): the idea of walking into someone else's shoes. These identities become culture – or better: cultures. The types of culture that are "not only something that hangs in galleries, but a substance that inheres the very fabric of life" (Trend, 1992, p. 102). These are the places where identities are formed, debunked and reconstructed, amplified – a sort of "third space", to follow Davide Zoletto's argument, where culture becomes a system of self-representations that disjoins traditional and crystallized forms of identity, self and representation (Zoletto, 2011).

Parasocial relationships, here, are taken further away from what Jason Mittell identified as people referring to characters as their tv boyfriends or girlfriends (Mittell, 2015), or what Murray Smith defined as attachment, investigation and identification (Eder *et alii*, Eds., 2010). Here, the association with fictional people is willing and intentional: fans chose to identify with Wednesday Addams and to, as much as reality might allow it, turn into her character. Videos, photos, TikToks, Instagram Reels made on the notes of *Bloody Mary* or structured as them acting like and impersonating Wednesday always claimed one, single statement: *I am Wednesday*. On a pedagogical level, participatory cultures have been evolving into impersonating cultures,

where the uncanny feelings of weird and grotesque traits shown by these characters resonate in the outcast on the other side of the screen. If it is true that on a certain epistemological and existential layer Wednesday embodies several teenage preoccupations (being accepted, independent, forge an identity that stands out from the masses), she also speaks for marginalized people, labeled as different. However, in one of the first scenes, Wednesday is expelled from the “normal school” where she is studying and forced to move to a “special” school, the Nevermore Academy. Nobody stands up for Wednesday or protects her in the “real” world. The transposition of parasocial relationships from the screen into reality still suffocate individual agency. Following the arguments put forward by Ta-Nehisi Coates, our world (the real world) is shaped by social relationships and broken down into different social groups, often in conflict with one another: straight, gay, white, black, rich, poor (Coates, 2015). The same happens in adolescence, especially in schools: in our plane of existence, social groups educate their members to rules of belonging and, especially, non-belonging. When it comes to popular culture, taste seems to have become a social marker that unites groups around the same tv series, music genres, songs, singers, bands, writers, graphic novels. So, why would all the Wednesday Addams in our world be marginalized, excluded and laughed at? Because of accountability – or rather, the face-to-face process that subjects have to go through when they stand up for the Other. While on the web people can easily choose their communities and produce their own cultures, in the real world these processes are still difficult to find. Studying the Gothic, the Monstrous, the Weird and the Grotesque Others from a pedagogical perspective, however, might shed some new light on the formative and educative relationships in our world, as well as some new mechanisms of identification with Otherness, in all of its powerful forms. So that the uncanny feeling of recognition of one’s own sense of difference might fully become an integral part of how subjects socialize, shape communities and welcome their members.

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