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The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent the importance of stories in consoling, healing, and being effective vehicles of useful information. The two case studies taken into consideration in this work are TV series special episodes created and aired during the first phase of the pandemic, and particularly during the first lockdown. *Parks and Recreation*'s and *Mythic Quest*'s pandemic episodes portray their characters' interactions on line, mirroring the real world and the necessary but painful social distancing. These episodes were moving and have a great value as testaments of the lockdown, other than having proved helpful in raising charitable donations. Due to logistic restrictions and to the intention of portraying reality as it was, the two special episodes were realized through video calls and portray characters video calling each other.

Keywords: audio-visual languages; comedy series; Coronavirus; COVID-19; healing narrative; mimesis; *Mythic Quest*; pandemic narratives; *Parks and Recreation*; TV series.

1. The importance of stories

There is nothing more powerful than a narrative. Several studies (for instance, Bower and Clark 1969; Haidt 2012; Dahlstrom 2014; Cometa 2017; Gottschall 2021) prove that a story is the easiest, more natural way of transmitting an information, that it fosters remembrance, and ultimately results in a deeper impact on its audience, to the point of influencing its choices.

From being a tool for memorising data – for instance in serial learning (Bower and Clark 1969) – to binding groups together, creating factions and even cults (Gottschall 2021), stories are a distinctive feature of humans – to the point that men and women can be defined as "storytelling animals" (Gottschall 2013). It is thanks to the ability of narrativizing the transmission of instructions that humanity have been capable of evolving (Cometa 2017), and through storytelling that science can still be communicated to nonexpert audiences (Dahlstrom 2014).

If the story paradox (Gottschall 2021) resides in a narrative's capability of infecting brains with superstitions and dangerous beliefs, on the other hand, the art of storytelling has the potential of comforting people in stressful situations and even that of healing pain, apart from being useful in providing instructions as to recommended behaviours to face a crisis. Storytelling has a pivotal role in constructing one's perception of self (as Haidt summarizes, "[biographical] narratives are not necessarily true stories; they are simplified and selective reconstructions of the past, often connected to an idealized vision of the future", 2012; see also Eakin 1999).

In 2020, the most recent *annus horribilis* of humankind and the year of a whole generation's biggest collective trauma, the COVID-19 pandemic, it was the incapability of making sense of the sudden global setback that worsened the astonishment of being threatened, as humankind, by an unknown, invisible menace (Mussgnug 2021; Puggioni 2023). The lack of a meaning and the uncertainty about the future characterized particularly the months of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March to May 2020, a period in which a great part of humankind have been deprived of social contact and found itself locked in their houses as a measure to prevent a potentially uncontrollable contagion.

As in one of the *topoi* of dystopic narrative, the known social structure had been threatened, but contrary to the commonplace of postapocalyptic stories, the world stood intact outside everyone's homes – it was there, but out of reach. Not only was everything where it was bound to be, but, as in the title of an Italian documentary on the pandemic, *Fuori era primavera* (it was spring out there): everything was flourishing, and the springtime heath was wasted on everyone's seclusion.

1.1. *The importance of stories during the pandemic*

The American organizational theorist Karl Weick defines a "cosmology episode" what occurs when "people suddenly and deeply feel that the

universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together" (Weick 1993, 633). Even if Weick's analysis is referred to organizational catastrophes, it is useful to pinpoint a pivotal aspect of the larger scale "cosmology episode" occurred in 2020: "a cosmology episode feels like vu jàdé – the opposite of déjà vu: I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me" (*ibid.*, 633-634). In such an unprecedented context as the COVID-19 pandemic, different kind of narratives have been called into question in different ways both to try to make sense of what was happening, and to shorten the forced separateness, to overcome the seclusion. Stories have proven to be the means through which it was possible to try to make sense of reality in different ways: people both turned to pre-existing narratives that could serve as models, and wrote new stories in order to both process their unprecedent situation and to reassure other people, to try to heal their pain.

As to the resort to pre-existing narratives, in the attempt to find a paradigm in literature, the *Decameron* has often been quoted during the first lockdown in the first half of 2020 (Power 2020; Pratici e Vettori 2020) and still is called into question (for instance, Angeletti 2023): parallels have been made between the country *buen retiro* of the Boccaccio's brigade in the XIV-century Tuscany, overshadowed by the Black death, and the contemporary lockdown. More consistently, humanity has turned to dystopic narratives (Mark 2022), recalling the literary transfiguration of a post pandemic world as in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) or fishing out sci-fi stories that portrayed scenarios of seclusion as E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1912): the former a short novel on the second generation of survivors in a world decimated by a mysterious disease, the latter a short story on an isolated humanity living under earth and whose fate is tied to a worshipped Machine. Movies and TV series have been consistently recalled during the first lockdown, in order to provide humanity for a frame that could support both a private and a collective sense of reassurance, a cathartic vision by safely witnessing the portrayal of characters that faced a menace and outcame it (Testoni *et al.* 2021). TreaAndrea Russworm, an associate professor of English who teaches dystopia in new media at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic explained that "People are reaching out to dystopian tales to see what's next. The impulse is to see how bad the situation can really get and ask yourself whether you could hypothetically survive that" (Chandran 2020). A

movie in particular, *Contagion* (2011), has been taken in consideration as almost prophetic, because it portrayed a pandemic and the consequent developing and releasing of a vaccine.

The second kind of appealing to narrative and stories during the pandemic, and the subject of this work, has been a creative one. Collections of short stories, novels and instant autofictions have been the creative outcome of the pandemic (Misra 2020), providing for the possibility to elaborate the trauma (for instance, the *Viral Imaginations: COVID-19* project: Mekel and Stetz 2022); audio-visual contents have also been realized, from those autonomously brought forth with a camera and an editing program or a remote editing crew – such as John Krasinski's YouTube short series *Some Good News* (Alexander 2020), or, in Italy, Maccio Capatonda's *Tg Casa 40ena* – to TV series revivals and/or special episodes. As to the latter, several obstacles had to be overcome, since the productive sector of audio-visual creativity had been almost entirely shut down by the impossibility of meeting and filming (Adgate 2021); but desperate times called for creative measures, and the logistic constraints have been encompassed in the story construction, becoming organically part of the diegesis. When the entire world was forced to transfer almost the entireness of their activities on line, the audio-visual narrative response to this scenario had to mirror reality: TV series and audio-visual fictional contents have been created according to the say that what can't be cured must be endured. If proximity was denied, it was in fiction as well as in reality.

2. TV SERIES AND A MIMETIC RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Even if since the beginning of the Pandemic – and mostly during the first lockdown – art and culture have been a consolatory refuge and a response to the availability of unexpected and unwanted free time, artists seemed to be the workers that had been mostly endangered by the economic crisis caused by the pandemic (*Culture shock* 2020; Adgate 2021).

As a reaction to the contingent threat to the audio-visual creative sector, some screenwriters, directors, and actors committed to realizing revivals of largely appreciated shows, even those that had been already ended a few years ago; the outcomes were meant to entertain people during the lockdown and, at the same time, to raise awareness about the preventive behaviours recommended by health authorities (washing one's hands, wearing a mask, and social distancing), and about the

necessity of charitable giving to humanitarian organizations. Comedy series in particular seemed to enhance in their pandemic episodes one of the features which have often distinguished them, i.e. a subterranean melancholy, almost always made explicit in the season finale, when the long-lasting acquaintance with beloved characters had to come to an end. Thanks to one of the specificities of comedy series, the prolonged familiarity with their casts (Rossini 2016; Barra 2020), they are the fictional equivalent of a safe place, and their characters a surrogate of an extended family; in a period in which there was literally no place apart from home, comedy series provided the otherwise impossible chance of paying a visit to an acquaintance, and revivals where the best way of getting together with one's connections – even if fictional ones. As Tanya Horeck noted in a paper called "Netflix and the Heal", "'Comfort TV', or what in some quarters began to be designated as 'kind TV', while certainly not a new notion, took on a different import in the midst of a growing worldwide death toll and grim conditions of social isolation that saw people separated from loved ones and disconnected from their daily routines" (Horeck 2021).

Due to the writers' intention of portraying the reality as it was, without hypocrisy, during the 2020 first lockdown, and to the logistic restrictions, which couldn't allow to be otherwise, TV series revivals and special quarantine episodes depicted a socially distanced world, in which each character was in their home, and this separateness was not only encompassed but remarked in the diegesis. Even if the story was about the characters, their lives being consistent with the previous narrative, it was the *actors*' constraints that dictated the screenplay, and so, for instance, fictionally married couples had to be diegetically justified in being in different places; during the most difficult phase of the pandemic, the semiotics of characters and their narratives were strongly connected to the actors' bodies and lives, as theorized by Erica Fisher-Lichte (2008). As a result, TV series' pandemic episodes have been mostly characterized by the audio-visual version of a theatrical staging, each character delivering her piece in front of a camera, seemingly in direct dialogue with the audience but diegetically video-calling on other characters; on line conferences and multiple calls have been conveyed as a collage of frames in a split screen. Therefore, fictional interactions were similar to those of people all over the planet, massively using Zoom, and this mimesis included technical issues and people's clumsiness.

As stated in Eric Auerbach's seminal work *Mimesis* (2003), one of narrative's functions is that of mirroring reality; in audio-visual nar-

ratives, as well as in literature, the act of narrative construction can be either manifest or hidden, and consequently the gap between reality and its representation is either highlighted or ignored. The two specular rhetoric choices can be connected to Bolter and Grusin's theorization (in *Remediation* 2001) of the opposing pairs: opaqueness vs transparency, hyper-mediation vs immediacy: opaqueness and hyper-mediation are referred to the choice of reaffirming the fictional nature of a content by constantly reminding the audience of being in front of a medium, assisting to a performance; on the opposite, transparency and immediacy tend to make the audience forget about the medium, and pretend to give them unmediated access to reality.

By forcing the shift of all human interactions on line, the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced what already was a tendency of the digital world, that is the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. The two case studies of this work are comedy series episodes produced during the first pandemic quarantine: they mirror reality hyper-mediated as it was, and by doing so are transparent in their depiction of social interactions during the lockdown: both narrative and reality almost entirely existed on screen, and human interactions were performed through windows on computers.

2.1. *A pandemic revival: "Parks and Recreation"*

Parks and Recreation special episode aired in April 2020, five years after its final episode and during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic, when most countries' people were experiencing the trauma of a lockdown. A mockumentary sitcom about an office in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015, NBC) starred Amy Poheler as the always optimistic character Leslie Knope, deputy director in an office full of co-workers that she motivates with her unshakable enthusiasm. The arc of transformation of her character had led her to finally being President of the United States, and the series ended as a parable about merit over calculus, with flash-forwards about each character of the show. The pandemic special episode has consequently been written as a revival, that is a narrative reprise of a TV series which had been concluded or cancelled (Brooks and Marsh 2003); it usually involves most of the original cast, and is diegetically coherent to the original series' narrative, encompassing the real-life time span meanwhile occurred.

Always focused on good intentions and the importance of friendship, *Parks and Recreation*'s special reunion episode is no exception, in

fact it features a series of video calls between the characters of the main cast to check on each other's mental health. The episode was organically written in order to reflect the 2020 real world, and the ten actors who played the main characters step back into the shoes of former co-workers video calling each other as friends during the lockdown. The revival had to renounce the format of mockumentary, since it prescribes the hyper-mediated pretence of one or several cameras and a crew realising a documentary about the characters (Formenti 2012); paradoxically, the video call expedient seems to enhance the presence of the medium, by making it even more visible, being the characters diegetically in front of a screen in their very interactions with each other, while the mock camera always ends up being more transparent, a window on character's reality. But even if the audience of the revival episode perceived the presence of several media (each character's screen), it resulted in a *mimetic portrayal* of the real world, in which every interaction had to be on screen, with the consequence that the borders between fiction and reality could be perceived as blurred; in fact, the lockdown days were a continual stream of visions (Pandya and Lodha 2021), from the Globe Theatre's shows to movies, TV series, and video-calls both for work and personal life.

An enjoyable reunion with old fictional friends in itself, but also the consolatory portrayal of affectionate closeness, *Parks and Recreation*'s revival shows how the forced separateness could be overcome day by day, and as pivotal could be creating a support network; as protagonist Leslie Knope explains: "This is the system, 7 p.m. phone tree, I call someone and they call someone else and we keep doing it until everyone has been reached". The "phone tree" system results in a progressively more split screen, in which long-term character-friends and actor-friends are shown in their fictional and real seclusion and lack of professional make-up and lighting (*Figs. 1-2*).

Being every actor in her own house, it was necessary to find a justification for fictional couples being in separate places, and so the clumsy Andy Dwyer (Chris Pratt) is accidentally locked in a shed, while Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) is volunteering as a nurse and quarantines accordingly; Leslie Knope, as President of the United States, is at work and calling from her office, while her husband Ben Wyatt is at home with their triplets.

Other than providing for entertainment and relief, *Parks and Recreation*'s special episode is greatly focused on raising awareness on the necessity of donating; the screens show (often diegetically) captions with links to the Feeding America Organization, and the actors, leveraging on their characters' roles as public officers, explicitly call on the audience's sense

of responsibility and generosity. Coherently with the focus on the necessity of togetherness and the importance of checking one's emotive wellness, the episode also promotes the National Alliance on Mental Illness, inviting the audience to check on supporting bodies. Within a month from its release (Hersko 2020) the *Parks and Recreation* revival succeeded in raising 3 million dollars for Feeding America: a tangible outcome for the call of fictional characters, and the prove that stories can impact on the real world (*Fig. 3*).

Figures 1-2. – Still images from "Park and Recreation"'s revival episode.

Figure 3. – Paul Rudd as Bobby Newport asking for donations.

As an episode of a comedy series, even if set during a pandemic, the *Parks and Recreation* revival encompasses several humorous gags, even if sometimes the result could have been darker than intended: when simpleton Andy Dwyer is invited to speak to children as his alter ego Johnny Karate, he advises them to wash their hands, but then his optimistic message turns in: "Things will go back to normal, they just have to, and it may not be today, it may not be tomorrow, and it may not be next week, may not be a year, or a hundred years, or a thousand years, *it may never happen*, but it will eventually". A joke from a consistently and comically incongruous character, it is now, from a safe position, tangible evidence of the uncertainty all humanity was facing during the days in which the show was filmed and made available.

Figure 4. – The cast of the revival of "Parks and Recreation" at the end of the episode.

The episode ends with the *Parks and Recreation* cast unanimously singing the *Lil' Sebastian (Five Hundred Candles in the Wind)*, a running song through the show, a eulogy to the eponymous fictional beloved pony. Once more, both cast and characters try to overcome the separateness between each other and with the audience. Singing together, however in a distance and a bad cover to Elton Johns, may have lifted the spirit (*Fig. 4*).

2.2. *A quarantine special episode: "Mythic Quest"*

A most recent and ongoing TV series, *Mythic Quest* (2020-, Apple TV+) released in May 2020 a special episode called *Quarantine*. The series had only premiered three months earlier, on February 7, 2020, with the simultaneous release of the nine episodes of the first season. The series followes the events of the studio in which is produced the beloved fictional Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) of the same name of the series. The first season had been focused on the interpersonal dynamics between some key figures of the production studio, mostly the creative director Ian Grimm (Rob McElhenney), the lead engineer Poppy Li (Charlotte Nicdao), and the head of monetization Brad Bakshi (Danny Pudi) before the launch of a game expansion called *Raven's Banquet*. In the first season finale episode, Poppy Li released a virus called "Blood Ocean" in the game world; as the fictional executive producer David Brittlesbee (played by David Hornsby) notes in the quarantine episode, "Releasing a disease into the game right before a global pandemic was not a great look".

The quarantine episode was written and realized after the production of the second season had been shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it was started and finished in three weeks despite the several constraints of the lockdown, and realized using 40 iPhones and 20 sets of AirPods, with each tool sent to the cast, that also had to download programs and follow instructions as to filming and even dressing; Rob McElhenney – who, other to play the lead character Ian is also one of the creator of the show, explains that

> Once they had the hardware on hand, the *Mythic Quest* team had the actors install prosumer-grade filming apps on the phones, including FilmicPro (the video software recommended by *Mythic Quest* cinematographer Mike Berlucchi) and MOTIV (for audio recording), and sent them all external Shure mics. They consulted remotely with the actors over FaceTime or

Zoom to location scout within their own houses. "We would walk around the house and figure out where's the best place to set the cameras, where's the best place for sound, and what's the best time of day, because we're using natural light," McElhenney said. (McHenry 2020)

The quarantine episode, as well as the *Parks and Recreation*'s one, mimetically portrays a series of video calls between the characters, that are co-workers but also feel affection for each other, even if only in an embryonal phase. Since this is a young series, and was only at its first season in May 2020, the relationships between the characters were far from being resolved and were mostly conflictual, which is encompassed in the special episode. Brad and David's conflict, for instance, emerges as the characters engage a Street Fighter challenge that ends in a substantial charity donation – and in the cutting of the loser's iconic moustache (*Fig. 5*).
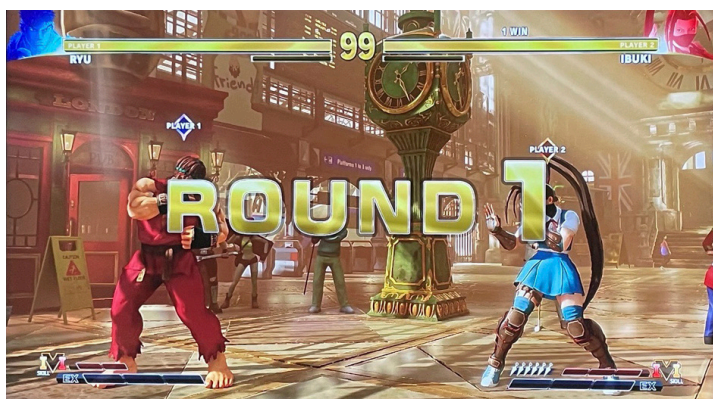

Figure 5. – The Street Fighter challenge between two characters.

The mimetic portrayal of video calls provided also for the possibility of coherently inserting the comic relief which typifies a comedy series, since the head writer of the game Longbottom (F. Murray Abraham) isn't capable of using any technological device, and then he accidentally sets on phone filters and slows down every exchange, using different platforms at the same time and addressing his texts to everyone. The phatic function of language (Jakobson 1960) is often used when communicating on a new medium, especially one that is not well mastered; in the *Mythic Quest* special quarantine episode, Longbottom typifies the clumsy user of a technology, always asking if he can be seen even if he has shut down the camera (*Fig. 6*).

Figure 6. – Longbottom's clumsiness in the "Mythic Quest" pandemic episode.

Apart from the efforts of maintaining the comic tone, the episode's writers chose to portray the characters' weaknesses and a mental breakdown. Creator and actor Rob McElhenney explained: "We wanted to tell a story that was authentic to the experiences that people [were] going through [that time], and also, we didn't want to do 30 minutes of Zoom jokes" (McHenry 2020). The episode not only portrays the fear of going outside his house of co-protagonist Ian Grimm (Rob McElhenney), but also the emotional crisis of main character Poppy Li (Charlotte Nicdao), who starts burying herself in work (in order to provide a fictional vaccine for the "Blood Ocean" in-game disease) and then melts down ("All my family are thousands of miles away, and I don't have any friends", she admits) (*Fig. 7*).

Figure 7. – Poppi Li's mental breakdown.

At the end of the episode, an agoraphobic Ian knocks at Poppi Li's door to hug her even through a mask and a full coverage jogging suit. It is useful to highlight once again that the original airing of the episode was

pivotal in reaching the maximum effect: when watched during the lock-down, this scene had a huge impact on a socially deprived audience. As Brian Grubb wrote in an immediate review, "The whole thing was a triumph of storytelling and capturing a moment in a human way" (Grubb 2020).
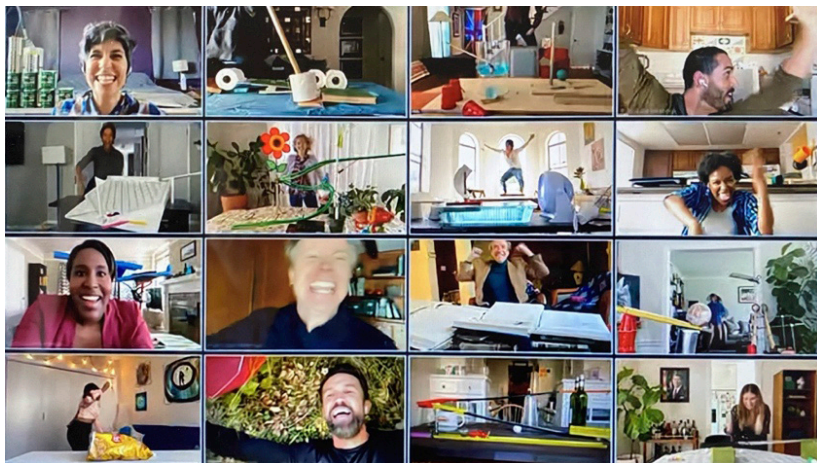

Figure 8. – Happy characters after the Rube Goldberg performance.

As in the *Parks and Recreation* special episode, the *Mythic Quest*'s quarantine episode also ends with a with a collective activity simultaneously performed by all the characters; in this case, a Rube Goldberg performance, that is an unnecessarily complicated choreography to perform a simple act (in this case, pretending to hand a chip from one screen to another); the effort is coordinate to simulate the unity of space, even if a virtual one. With the galvanising musical accompaniment of *Rocky*'s title track, through all the windows of the split screen a chip is handed from one character to another, and its transition from each one of the character's screens is set as Baroquely as possible, and requested a perfect coordination – at least a fictional one –; with Longbottom's screen black until the very last minute, jeopardizing the success of the challenge. It was a moving yet funny ending when seen in a time in which the audience was experiencing solitude and separateness, and a document of what was like to live during a major collective and individual crisis; "I suspect it marked the first time I have ever cried a little while watching someone eat a single chip" wrote Grubb (2020) (*Fig. 8*).

On April 16, 2021 aired a second special episode, called *Everlight*. The period was still full of uncertainties about the future, with cyclic reprises of the pandemic and the constant threat of new, more aggressive variants of the COVID-19 virus, and *Everlight* staged a festive office meeting, which had seemed almost impossible a few months ago, and was intended to give hope in the reprise of a normal life. As McElhenney explained,

> We wanted to put it in our rear-view mirror, so we broke an entire season of television that projects sometime in the future when the pandemic is a thing of the past. That said, we recognized we couldn't move on without at least acknowledging the fact that that transition would be difficult, which is why we made the standalone episode, 'Everlight'. (Weiss 2021)

2.3. *Minor revivals*

Other public figures step back in their beloved characters' shoes for the benefit of their public, even if in less structured narratives than *Park and Recreation*'s and *Mythic Quest*'s ones. *Community*'s cast was reunited for a re-reading of one of its episodes' screenplays, with the purpose of benefitting World Central Kitchen and Frontline Foods. *Community* is a TV series which portrayed a heterogeneous and mismatched study group in The Greendale Community College; the show had ended in 2015, but on May, 18 2020, when in Italy the lockdown had just became less strict, actors and actresses joined the remote yet simultaneous reading of the script of *Cooperative Polygraphy* (season 5, episode 4). Actor and rapper Donald Glover reunited with the cast for the occasion after having left the series during the penultimate season, and Pedro Pascal guest starred also. The episode was followed by a Q&A session and a podcast, "Which, as a fan, are both enjoyable and almost *therapeutic* to watch because it was just like seeing the beloved study group together again after all these years" (Clement 2020; emphasis added); in just two days, the reunion raised over one hundred thousand dollars for charity and had over 1.5 million views (*ibidem*) (*Fig. 9*).

In a still less structured way, *The Office*'s cast reunited to congratulate on the marriage of two fans; they were hosted in John Krasinski's *Some Good News*; the series run from 2005 to 2013.

As a contribution in raising awareness on the importance of prevention, *How I Met Your Mother* actress Cobie Smulders shot a video in which reminded the audience to stay at home. It was a new live version

of the fake music video *Let's Go to the Mall*, originally part of the comedy *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and performed in a piano version during the quarantine: in the 2020 edition, the lyric was changed in *Let's All Stay at Home*, and contained the lines "I have to go do Zoom school soon, / at least until we're all immune, / but that's just fine, / I'm gonna follow COVID guidelines" (Weisholtz 2020).

Figure 9. – The "Community" reunion.

3. Conclusion

Stories during the pandemic have been consolatory and useful; they provided for horizons of meaning when everything was uncertain, they functioned as a surrogate social life, and conveyed practical information on suggested behaviours to prevent an uncontrollable contagion and on the necessity of charitable donations to help those in need.

As a tool to interpret reality (Testoni *et al*. 2021), movies and TV series helped coping with a "vu jàdé" (Weik 1993, 633), an unprecedented situation. Not only the familiarity with characters engaged in the special reprise of their narrative provided relief, but the shows were vehicles of information, since, as Lucretius put it, it is useful to sweeten with honey the cup of the medicine. Narrative can sweeten information and make it more digestible and effective, if being what makes us human isn't enough.

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