

## **The dawn of the living communities: for a mediology of horror fandom in *Dylan Dog*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Fandom activities and practices are a complex machine driven by fan participation and capacity of intercepting the relationships between media production and consumption, thus influencing the productive logics of cultural industry. In order to better understand some of the evolutions that fandom has recently undergone, this contribution intends to investigate the phenomenon in relation to the Dylan Dog franchise. Cult hailed by critics, Dylan Dog has been a momentous comic series, able to uniquely resonate and answer to the desires and identity needs of its audience (Frezza 1995, 2017). One key reason for its prolonged success and commercial fortune lies in its capacity to build a thick network of cinematic and literary references (to quote Eco, an encyclopedia: 1979) that the readers have to actualize, thus becoming themselves active devices of the texts (Abruzzese 2016). This in turn has encouraged, and been mirrored by, a series of fan practices taking part throughout the years. The intense relationship Dylan Dog entertains with his fans has transformed over time in line with the evolutions of the media system and their aging. Its fandom changed from niche communities with a strong internal homology (mainly composed of young horror fans) to expanded ones, whose fan practices, especially online, were markedly heterogeneous. Recchioni's arrival at the helm of the magazine was the fuse that exploded - through dynamics typical of the social web such as echo chambers, filter bubbles and polarized debates (Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2019) - (insoluble?) tensions between older and newer generations, earlier and more recent fans. This contribution wants to draw a comparison between the first fan experiences (Horror post and Dylan Dog Horror Fest) and contemporary ones taking place on the internet (forums, fanpages, and fanfilms), foregrounding the networks of cultural practices that are shaping fandom following or crossing generational divides*

**Keywords:** Dylan Dog, fan studies, digital fandom, horror, comics, media studies.

### *1. A 'frightening' success*

During his long career as a nightmare investigator, Dylan Dog has had to fight zombies, ghosts, and monsters of all kinds. He has loved hundreds of women and put up with an awkward Groucho Marx look-alike sidekick. Above all, though, he has tried to manage the affection of fans of all kinds: from the intellectual who loves comics - Umberto Eco (1998) claimed he could read the Bible, Homer and *Dylan Dog* without ever getting bored - to the passionate reader who has been faithful since the first issue and who is horrified by any change in the canon.

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<sup>1</sup> The two authors conceived, designed, discussed, and revised the text as a whole. Nonetheless, Lorenzo Di Paola originally wrote the sections 1, 2, and 3, Giorgio Busi Rizzi the sections 4, 5, and 6.

*Dylan Dog* was born from an idea of Tiziano Sclavi. The series - published by Sergio Bonelli Editore (from now on, SBE) - arrived in newsstands at the end of September 1986 and became in a few years a true editorial case, so as to overcome in sales, in 1991, *Tex*, which had been for a long time the top comic of the SBE. The 1980s saw a renewed success of the horror genre in which the strong public support suggests a reaction to the 'yuppism' typical of these years that with transnational logic (from Reagan's USA via Thatcher's London to Craxian Milan) created glittering and euphoric lifestyles:

The Yuppies are not defectors from revolt, they are a new race, assured, amnestied, exculpated, moving with ease in the world of performance, mentally indifferent to any objective other than that of change and advertising (advertising everything: products, people, research, careers, lifestyle!). One might have expected the orgy of the sixties and seventies to throw up a mobile, disenchanted elite, but that has not been the case: the members of this elite, at least in their own publicity, see themselves as mobile and enchanted. Their enchantment takes mild forms: they are motivated, but not impassioned; whether in business, politics, or data-processing, they present themselves as cosily effective. (...) But this easy life knows no pity. Its logic is a pitiless one. If Utopia has already been achieved, then unhappiness does not exist, the poor are no longer credible. (Baudrillard 1987, pp. 89,90)

*Dylan Dog's* hyper-quotationist horror managed to intercept these tensions, offering itself on the one hand as a sublimation and symbolization of contemporary reality, and on the other hand as a mediator with respect to a culture (the English-speaking one) that the general Italian public still knew relatively poorly, mostly through the lens of Anglo-Saxon popular culture (books, films, music). Sclavi (who had never been to the UK) further hybridized this material: the UK seen from number 7 Craven Road, London (home and office of the nightmare investigator) mixes news facts, fictional characters, and a background strongly anchored in Italian imaginary. In other words, *Dylan Dog* was able to understand and reframe the cultural ferment of an era, giving representation to marginalized or peripheral communities. Through its reworking of gory, splatter tropes in a postmodern, ironic and literary key, it immediately succeeded in having a very intense relationship with its readers, renewing the audience and the practices of the SBE in a direction that led the Italian comic strip to break the

already blurred barriers between *auteur* comics and popular ones. Alberto Abruzzese (2016) states that:

The fortune of this title is entirely entrusted to the reader, to the universe of readings, books and movies he has memorized. The Bonelli reader is the protagonist thanks to his own memory, to the experience of his own memory, to its automatic recall in the present.

Indeed, authors and readers have been able to navigate with ease *Dylan Dog*'s post-modern universe of quotes and references, disseminated by a writing capable of narratively stitching together the shreds of a frayed imaginary and relating to the present in a critical key, allowing the submerged social anxieties and fears that are often hidden or removed to emerge. As a matter of fact, not only horror urges us to face our fears and let ourselves be seduced by the darkness within us and at the same time. It penetrates the heart of the myth, forcing our imaginary to deal with the shadow of death and self-destruction that hovers over our history and society. By means of horror tropes, fiction can symbolize and sublimate the violence of blind and self-destructive capitalism, the anxieties due to the uncertainty of individual and social paths clash with the glossy and progressive beliefs that enliven consumer society. To this, one should add the importance of this network of references animated by *Dylan Dog*, requiring a constant activation of the readers' encyclopedic knowledge (Eco 1979) - the collateral effect of which resulted in the difficulties when translating it into other languages and (above all) to cinema, where the knot concerning the rights of some key references (Groucho as a sidekick, the beetle so reminiscent of Disney's Herbie) has not yet been untangled.

## *2. The effects Dylan Dog has on people*

If even today comics are considered by many as a childish medium, useful at best to get a few laughs, it is easy to imagine how a horror comic could violate the 'good taste' of the dominant culture. As Jeffrey A. Brown (2000, p.18) points out:

Because pursuing a leisure activity that is in “bad taste” is considered detrimental to one’s development, society often adopts a paternalistic attitude of wanting to save fans from the harmful effects of popular mediums. There is a moral backlash that accompanies all new and suspect forms of entertainment, from the early pulp novels and turn-of-the century movies to modern music videos and role-playing games (...). This moral condemnation of undesirable aesthetics and institutionalized regulation of the medium is particularly clear in the history of comics. The criticism of comics under the guise of “protecting children from the ‘corrupting’ influence” of the medium was almost solely responsible for the drastic decline in sales and the near death of the industry during the 1950s.

Understandably, Wertham's legacy, coupled with the constant censorial itches of the ruling classes, could not help but have a bearing on fan communities whose self-recognition was not negligibly due to their opposition to official culture. Indeed, according to Paolo Bertetti (2017, p. 1151), the spring that drives “fan to activism is social and cultural isolation and the desire to share one's passion, coupled with an almost religious vision of one's object of worship”.

Consequently, the fans gathered around *Dylan Dog* began to consolidate in the columns of the comics: *The Horror Club*, on the back cover, and the *Dylan Dog Horror Post*, a fan letter column, on the fourth page. The possibility of having a connection with the authors has always played a very important role in the creation of fandom (Bertetti 2017). The *Dylan Dog Horror Post* letter column had, perhaps, an even more important role at this early stage: for a fan, seeing their own letter published (notably in the original series) can represent a reason of great pride; moreover, the possibility of having a direct dialogue with the authors can strengthen the sensation of playing a role in the fate and direction of the comic strip. Stan Lee understood this very well and immediately began to run a letter column from the very first issue of the *Fantastic Four* to connect with readers and fans and to create a sense of complicity and community among them. The irony and the hyperbolic presentations of the stories - always preceded by high-flown adjectives and the playful nicknames of the authors (Stan Lee/The Man, Jack Kirby/The King etc.) were intended to establish a relationship of complicity with the readers. Cleverly, Tiziano Sclavi did something very similar with the two *Dylan Dog* columns. The nicknames with which he addressed his audience in *The Horror Club* – “Dear amoebas”, “Dear microcephali”, “Dear

bloodsuckers”, “Dear guinea pigs”, etc. evidently referred to a shared horror imaginary, and contributed to rewriting and breaking down formalities (both linguistic and social) while underlining a sense of common identity and of belonging to a shared community.

In the column, Sclavi gets closer to the readers, accompanies them in getting to know the authors of the albums, reprimands them, informs them, allows them to take a peek at the creative process and highlights editorial news and events that may be of interest to the community of fans. But the most distinctive feature of the column is surely the call to participate creatively in the visual and symbolic universe set in motion by *Dylan Dog*. This way, readers act as quality controllers for the series, criticizing, commenting and collaborating among themselves in a shared hermeneutic work (see Levy’s “collective intelligence”; see also Jenkins 2006) that leads them to adopt a (sometimes eccentric) scholarly stance towards the issues. For example, a reader, Massimo di Stefano<sup>2</sup>, conducts a statistical analysis of the albums 48 through 66, continuing the analysis of another reader published in issue 52. In its unconventional survey, Di Stefano counts the number of dead people (specifying the way they died), the number of times Dylan’s bell yells, the number of Groucho’s jokes (averaging per album), the number of times Dylan plays the clarinet and utters his trademark *Giuda ballerino!* exclamation, the number of times he was wounded and how many gunshots he fired (and so on). Similarly, Francesco Guadalupi<sup>3</sup> writes:

While reading Dylan’s mail, I realized that there is a strange force in it that stirs, that wanders silently. Every time I read readers’ messages my heart beats fast. I think of us Dylanites as so many brothers who have common interests and problems. People who really love life but who, more often than not, seem to be surviving rather than living (...).

In this sense, the nursery rhymes, the “grouchate” (that is, jokes and puns in Groucho’s style), the readers’ private confessions and their drawings - or rather, the fan art - display a great ability to re-appropriate the themes and imaginary of the series and transform this editorial space into a place where

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<sup>2</sup> In issue n.78, *I Killer venuti dal buio*, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> In the reprint of issue n.80, *Il cervello di Killlex*, 1996 (our translation).

production and consumption practices meet, and where fans have the opportunity to test their skills and establish relationships that will lead to the creation of an organized fandom centered on the figure of Dylan Dog.

As a consequence, Sergio Bonelli became determined to exploit the potential of Sclavi's character and to get to know the new audience it was attracting, very different, from a generational and medial perspective, from the old SBE audience, which was already predominantly middle-aged. Hence, he commissioned Stefano Marzorati and Elisabetta Crespi an event that could gather the younger fans around the most significant core of *Dylan Dog*, that they identified in the close relationship between cinema, horror and comics. Thus, in 1987, a festival dedicated to horror cinema under the aegis of Dylan Dog was born. The *Dylan Dog Horror Fest* was a completely free event that could be accessed by simply presenting a copy of the latest *Dylan Dog*. In this regard, it is very interesting to report the testimony of the artistic director Stefano Marzorati:

Elisabetta and I set to work with enthusiasm, elaborating a program of reruns of classics of the horror filmography and trying to obtain, through our American contacts, some previews that would make the program more attractive. We set out in search of guests who could enliven the evenings with their presence and, as proof of the profoundly underground soul of our film club, we managed to secure the participation of director Hershell Gordon Lewis, known to fans as the precursor of modern splatter, and Sergio Stivaletti, the greatest creator of special effects on the Italian scene and Dario Argento (...). That's how the *Dylan Dog Horror Fest*, the most atypical film festival on the international scene, was born, with a lot of enthusiasm, passion, and Sergio's complicity. After that edition, which turned out to be a completely unexpected success – every night the hall in Piazza Napoli was sold out – three more followed, in 1990, 1992 and 1993. (Marzorati 2013, pp. 58-59<sup>4</sup>)

It was the first opportunity for fans to meet each other, to meet the authors of the issues, to exchange copies of the comics, to participate in debates about the magazine and the horror genre – in short, to celebrate a 'liturgy' that could define their group identity. The fans appreciated the formula and the possibility of finding themselves in a scenario governed by a shared imaginary and a communal passion, as testified by the success of the event. In fact, the feedback was so

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<sup>4</sup> Our translation.

enthusiastic that in 1992 the festival occupied the spaces of the Palatrussardi, a sports hall known for having hosted concerts featuring names such as Frank Sinatra and Iron Maiden. The choice of the location testifies the importance of the event, so much so that the Chas Balun, writer and critic for various US horror magazines (including *Fangoria* and *Gorezone*), struck by the success of the festival dubbed it the ‘Woodstock of horror’ (ivi). Again, the words of the artistic director can give us an idea of the atmosphere that permeated this festival:

Every night, for seven days, Sergio and myself entertained an audience of about eight thousand spectators, who arrived at the Palatrussardi to watch the promotion of horror and fantasy films (mostly previews) and to meet the most beloved protagonists of the world horror cinematography. With a rock soundtrack and a stage worthy of Metallica, in an atmosphere of great excitement and fun, the atmosphere at the Palatrussardi was really a great event, what sociologists could easily define as a striking example of youth aggregation (Marzorati 2013, p.57<sup>5</sup>).



Figure 1: promotional poster from the 1992 edition of the *Dylan Dog Horror Fest*

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<sup>5</sup> Our translation.

Bearing in mind today's long crisis of Italian comics publishing, it's very impressive to watch the videos of the event<sup>6</sup>, in which crowds of young people flock with enthusiasm among T-shirts, gadgets and *Dylan Dog* books, in order to take part in an event that for the first time connected the world of fans, something unprecedented in Italy for horror fandom. It must be noted that comics fandom, on the other hand, had a rather different history, because since 1965 the Salone Internazionale dei Comics had been organizing an event that brought together artists, scholars and enthusiasts.

It is quite evident, at this point, how the birth of a fandom dedicated to *Dylan Dog* had been encouraged, channeled and organized top-down by the will of Sclavi (through the comics columns) and Sergio Bonelli (with the *Dylan Dog Horror Fest*), to create a community that would gather around the investigator of nightmares. Bonelli is evidently aware of the enormous emotional capital they had in their hands and of the possibility of putting it into play to engage and retain fans; thus, he decided to resort to licensing, an old commercial strategy that “allowed media companies to expand the influence of an intellectual property in every area of the consumer's life” (Tirino 2019, p.29). Fans, on their behalf, willingly aligned themselves with the proposals, praising them, integrating them in their practices, and taking part in it; but the hierarchical, one-sided nature of these gatherings is telling in respect to the peculiar nature of subcultures in Italy (and largely in Europe) when compared to contemporary US ones, which showed already a much more participated nature (significantly, Jenkins’ hugely influential idea of fans as ‘textual poachers’ dates back to 1992).

### 3. *Transmedia Dylan Dog*

Driven by Bonelli’s vision and good results in terms of audience participation, the expansion of Dylan's franchise was unlikely to stop at the printed page:

In fact, around this postmodern character, who lives nightmarish adventures openly inspired by horror films and literature (Romero, Carpenter, Argento, King's novels, Poe's stories, etc... ), and who has as his assistant an “original” copy of Groucho

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ-IEisKVpM&t=1098s>



Marx (a member of the Marx Brothers, a famous trio of American comic cinema of the first half of the twentieth century) [we can see the growing] desire of readers to see their favorite paper character come out of the comic form, in order to follow his adventures on other formats, perhaps interactive as video games, or more “institutional” as films. The fact remains that Dylan Dog is one of the most “alive” and fascinating figures of Italian fandom. (Lino 2015, p.10<sup>7</sup>)

Thus, SBE developed a cross-promotion strategy, expanding the franchise on different media, from video games to cinema, where a very important role was played by the merchandise that extended the media experience and allowed a collective reworking of that experience. Looking at the list of gadgets, it seems that no object had been left out of the marketing strategies deployed: school and clothing lines, lighters, stickers, calendars, cards and tarot cards, clocks, action figures, sugar packets, stamps, wallets, puzzles, board games, piggy banks, mugs, key chains, lamps and doormats. In a few years since the birth of the character, it is possible to find Dylan on a myriad of objects designed to strengthen the awareness of being part of a group, a community.

Considering the media landscape of the years in which *Dylan Dog* was born and formed, it is not surprising that the comic was also adapted into a videogame as early as 1988 with *Le notti di luna piena* (on Commodore 64, inspired by the 1986 eponymous comic book). The idea of the software house Simulmondo was to create a series of inexpensive games, in the form of interactive stories, that could capitalize on the success of their paper counterpart. This was one of the reasons why their release on newsstands followed a monthly basis, in order to align to the consumer habits of comics readers.

Cinema addressed the ‘Dylan phenomenon’ as early as 1994 with the film *Dellamorte Dellamore* by Michele Soavi. In truth, the film is an adaptation of Sclavi's 1991 eponymous novel, featuring the proto-Dylan character Francesco Dellamorte, in part because of the already mentioned difficulty of circumventing copyright issues concerning *Dylan Dog*'s characters and objects; but the desire to exploit the trail of the comics success through a film inspired by Dylan's themes and imaginary is evident. The Dellamorte storyworld met a first disappointed reaction, but eventually endured quite a cult success, to the point of becoming one

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation.

of the keystones of the *Dylan Dog* reboot conceived by Roberto Recchioni (new chief editor of the series since 2013). In fact, in Recchioni's rewriting of the origins of our hero we find Gnaghi, Dellamorte's sidekick, and we discover that Dylan, in the past, was the keeper of a cemetery infested by the living dead (just like Francesco Dellamorte).

Meanwhile, even the world of music paid homage to *Dylan Dog*, contributing to fuel that medial emotion that allowed the character to be a mirror, a metaphor and a megaphone for several social and media trends that animated the period. In 1995, 883 published *La donna il sogno & il grande incubo*, which already recalled, in its title, the atmosphere of the comic strip. Nonetheless, the cover of the record - drawn by Giulio De Vita - and the videoclip of the song *Il grande incubo* make the tribute to our investigator of the nightmare much more explicit. Furthermore, a few years later, in 1996, Dylan will 'cooperate' with Claudio Baglioni for the realization of *Le vie dei colori*. The character starred in a short story, drawn by Claudio Villa, which staged Baglioni's lyrics. The operation reached the cover of the magazine *Tutto Musica e Spettacolo*, in which Dylan and Baglioni, were portrayed together, back-to-back; the story was eventually published as a pocket insert of the magazine and reprinted in 2002 in *Super Book* n.23.



Figure 2: 883's *La donna, il sogno & il grande incubo* and the *Tutto Musica e Spettacolo* special issue

Looking at this brief excursus of the products that remediate the comic series or that in any case weave a medial relationship with it, it becomes clear that we are not faced with an example of transmedia storytelling - as elaborated by Jenkins - but rather, we are within a narrative ecosystem in which there is no precise strategy aimed at a coherent expansion across multiple media of the narrative world under consideration:

The difference between narrative ecosystem and transmedia storyworld is that, while the latter hosts a series of elements devoted to the expansion of a single narrative across multiple media, either in a cohesive and integrated form (in contemporary transmedia storytelling) or based on the recognizability of a key character (in many historical forms of transmedia storytelling), the narrative ecosystem includes a series of texts that can follow multiple types of relationships with the text-matrix and with the others present in the ecosystem, either according to the logic of dispersion, typical of transmediality, or according to the logic of translation, typical of intermediality (Tirino 2019, p. 27<sup>8</sup>).

What has been long peripheral in the *Dylan Dog* narrative ecosystem were fans contributions. Although they have participated from the beginning in the exegesis of the comic series and in the live events coordinated by SBE, they had for a long time allowed themselves less creative freedom than other fandoms, perhaps with the aim of deviating as little as possible from the textual canon because of a sort of self-imposed gatekeeping. Indeed, the most important factor in this process of media expansion was the recognizability of the character and especially of the atmospheres and imaginary put in place by Sclavi.

The arrival of the digital and a new curator of the title, however, was about to spark revolutions that would inevitably touch the world of fandom related to *Dylan Dog*.

#### *4. A new beginning*

If it is true that, as Paolo Bertetti (2017) says, we can find many characteristics of contemporary media fandom well before the advent of digital technologies, it is equally true that the digital has provided new tools and possibilities, capable of giving a new face to already existing practices and

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<sup>8</sup> Our translation; for a thorough explanation of the concept of narrative ecosystems, see Pescatore 2018.

processes, and opening new possibilities for what Boccia Artieri calls “individual forms of mass production”:

the multiplication of "means of mass production for the masses", such as blogs, wikis, etc., and the growing disintermediation structures for content distribution - such as shareware platforms, like YouTube for videos and Flickr for photographs - have foregrounded how much User Generated Content (UGC) counts (...) the exponential growth of affiliation to social networks has made it possible to experiment with participatory forms around shared information and entertainment practices, multiplying and innovating the opportunities for production and reproduction of social capital. (Boccia Artieri 2008, pp. 1, 2<sup>9</sup>)

As a consequence, participatory practices have found more fertile ground in which to develop. The vicissitudes concerning *Dylan Dog* and its fandom during the 21<sup>st</sup> century offer a perfect example of these dynamics: the paternal hand with which Bonelli guided and directed his audience seems to no longer work, while contributions from below, even dissident ones (for fandom is always “not cohesive”: Busse and Hellekson 2006, p. 6; see also Jonathan Gray’s idea of ‘anti-fandom’: 2005), proliferate.

While the first-generation fandom around *Dylan Dog*, as showed, had indeed been largely generated and channeled top-down by the efforts of Sclavi and Bonelli, who created the conditions and offered the tools and rules for the forms of aggregation (both physical and cultural) in which fans were actively involved, with the advent of the internet, a process of bottom-up change began, accelerated and accompanied by the affective dynamics following the appointment of Roberto Recchioni as chief editor of the series. This led to a reconfiguration of the *Dylan Dog* fandom which displayed not only a different relationship towards the franchise, but also a marked generational divide between fans, showcasing different fan practices and a fragmented loyalty to the canon that betray diverse ideas concerning the destiny of the series and the role of fandom itself. This, in turn, originated a further division between fans and SBE, which struggled to incorporate fandom practices under its umbrella as it did in the past, and reacted by reclaiming its role as fundamental gatekeeper of the franchise.

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<sup>9</sup> Our translation.

Recchioni's appointment in 2013, solemnly sanctioned by Bonelli's top management, was explicitly attributed to Sclavi's desire to modernize *Dylan Dog*. Recchioni was without any doubts a modern profile: young, capable to act as full author, having worked transversally on smaller projects as well as established publishers (Disney, Panini, and so on). Most of all, Recchioni was aware of the mechanisms of the web and came with a personal fanbase in a moment in which he was a prominent (yet quite divisive) figure in the Italian comics scene. Thus, the move quite clearly aimed to remedy the limits that, almost thirty years after the creation of the series, the franchise seemed to show, leading to a certain disaffection of the public which was also due to unwise strategic choices by SBE. The suspicion that the brand had been struggling to keep up with the times comes from observing the vicissitudes of both the comics and the various crossmedial branches of its franchise.

In fact, on the one hand, the comic series had lost appeal with its audience, as proved by the decline in sales that occurred during the 2000s. A few hypotheses can be made about the reasons for this disaffection: on the one hand, the conclusion of the cycle carried on by Sclavi up to issue 100, which suddenly filled many narrative gaps by revealing several hitherto mysterious elements of Dylan Dog's life. The moment of unraveling horizontal plots centered on suspense and lack of closure is inevitably risky because it is constitutively bound to dissatisfy the readers, who not only may disagree with specific plot twists, but are inherently brought back to a more passive role in their hermeneutic and social processes. Furthermore, the enlargement of the team of authors who progressively flanked Sclavi (at the expense of narrative consistency), the expansion of the audience that occurred as the comic consolidated, and the progressive globalization of the world had made the figure of Dylan Dog less cohesive (both in terms of writing and reception) and less credible as a mediator of the contemporary world. Dylan suddenly had found himself (especially in the eyes of potential new readers) to be a character from another time, disconnected from the political events and technological innovations of the present.

At the same time, Bonelli sponsored, blessed, or allowed a series of unequally successful adaptations: a ballet (in 1999, presented at the Teatro

Filarmonico in Verona); a radio comic book in 20 short episodes (broadcasted by Radio Due in 2002), followed by another 10 episodes in 2004 and a further appendix in 2016; and - besides the already mentioned *Dellamorte Dellamore* – the Universal's film adaptation *Dead of Night* (2010), whose production was rushed due to expiring rights, with unsatisfactory results in terms of both audience and critics' feedback. By all means, part of this strategy has been rethought recently, repurchasing the film rights to Dylan Dog from Platinum Studios after the failure of the aforementioned movie, shooting the *Dampyr* movie (which after a long and troubled production, also due to Covid, should see the light of day in 2022) and announcing a series on the nightmare investigator that is being talked about from 2019, but has yet to see the light of day.

In parallel with writing and institutional choices, the democratization, expansion, and connection of fan practices allowed and encouraged by the web resulted in the birth of several fan sites, from the most important (and most vocal in its non-aligned opinions) *Cravenroad7* to *Dilandogofili.com*, to the perhaps more obvious named *Dylan Dog fan club*. This went hand to hand with the presence of several fanpages on Facebook, text-only fanfictions, a vast fan art and, of course, cosplaying. This whole body of fan interpretations and fantexts was gradually moving away from the canonical direction of *Dylan Dog*. As fans moved out of institutionalized spaces such as the letter column or official events, it became impossible for SBE's management to limit and direct them.

Maybe more significantly, since 2011 four fan movies - to which we can add *Dylan - Dream of the Living Dead* (2017), the pilot episode of a speculated Serbian series, produced by Kevin Kopacka – were realized: *Dylan Dog: L'inizio* (2011) and *Dylan Dog - Il Trillo del Diavolo* (2012), two medium-length films produced by Roberto D'Antona's Grage Pictures; *Dylan Dog - La morte puttana* (2012), a feature film shot by Denis Frison; and the medium-length film *Dylan Dog - Vittima degli eventi* (2014). The latter is the most interesting case in terms of fan participation, since it was realized thanks to two campaigns on Indiegogo, obtaining a total of about 27 thousand euros that funded its shooting. The crowdfunding campaign was launched by the youtubers Claudio Di Biagio and

Luca Vecchi (The Pills) in collaboration with The Jackal, on whose Youtube channel the film is still visible.

As it often happens in similar cases, so much creative enthusiasm on the part of fans had not necessarily been shared by the heads of Bonelli, and it showed most clearly precisely in the public positions taken by Roberto Recchioni after his appointment as editor-in-chief. Talking about *Dylan Dog - Vittima degli eventi*, Recchioni (2013<sup>10</sup>) said: “The point to resolve is the node of rights. [The creators] will have a return in terms of image, visibility and career. (...) The Internet has opened up incredible opportunities, but also many questions that need to be answered”.

If, strictly (and legally) speaking, this position is unquestionable, it is a posture that is at least controversial with respect to fandom, trying to tame it muscularly by following logics that are difficult to apply (and often counterproductive) in the contemporary media landscape. And it was followed by equally controversial decisions and communications that further exacerbated the disaffection of part of the fan community. It is thus particularly interesting to investigate this split and see what originated such a divide.

##### *5. Roberto Recchioni vs. the world*

In fact, the relationship between Recchioni and *Dylan Dog's* fans was born as a love story. Shortly after his nomination, Recchioni traced an evolution of the character in a post/manifesto on the official *Dylan Dog* Facebook page, that he himself summed up in an interview:

Dylan Dog was born in the 80s. And he becomes the first real popular character to challenge the hedonistic values of those years, with all its doubts. Then, with the transition to the 90s, it becomes the perfect zeitgeist. These are the times of austerity, of political correctness, and Dylan is on the side of the monsters. Over time, and with Sclavi's abandonment, perhaps the character began to normalize a bit. At present, he lives a bit out of time, because he doesn't use a cell phone, he doesn't like technology. He embodies the spirit of the romantic man, he is sensitive and non-conformist, he only follows his personal path, his unquestionable moral values. And at the same time, he is a vector of doubt. His most beautiful thing is that in front of the monster he doesn't take the gun but tries to understand what

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<sup>10</sup> Our translation.

kind of monster he is facing, why they became one and what they feel. The only thing is that, in order to become again what he used to be, Dylan has to constantly change. (Bussi 2013<sup>11</sup>)

With his communication strategy, Recchioni was quite clearly doing two things: on the one hand, he was sanctioning Sclavi's *Dylan Dog* as canon and cult, thus trying to reconcile with first-generation readers. On the other, in the name of rediscovering the uncanny sensibility that marked the series' beginnings and with the purported aim of "always daring", Recchioni was about to start a renewal process articulated in three phases:

1. a first one (issues 325-336) in which the episodes already realized and foreseen by the previous curatorship were terminated, with some light changes aimed at modernizing stylistic details, especially regarding the language. It was a phase of programmatic declarations, like the one mentioned here, and baits given to the public. What stood out of this phase was Recchioni's knowledge and ability to control the mechanisms of the web, a good example of which were the rumors, circulated in 2019, about the possibility of a crossover with *Hellblazer*, based on the fact that at the time Recchioni was working on a story about the other investigator of nightmares, John Constantine<sup>12</sup>;

2. a second phase (337-386), in which a hard reboot was performed, and continuity reset. The new Dylan had an unkempt beard, different clothing, lost his classic exclamation, owned a smartphone and a tablet and was a regular drinker and smoker; his assistant was no longer Groucho, but Gnaghi, Dellamorte's sidekick. Some horizontal subplots began to peep out in a serial publication then based on self-concluding episodes. However, fans seemed to fall out of love with a product so different from the totemic object of their past, in spite of Recchioni's continuous reminders of the conceptual continuity with the early *Dylan Dog*, to which he declared himself extremely faithful. A testimony of this is his definition of the second phase as a downgrade carried out in order to "return to dare" in the 2016 documentary *Dylan Dog - 30 years of nightmares* by Marcello Rossi and Luca Ruocco, co-produced by Bonelli and premiered on the occasion of the *Dylan*

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<sup>11</sup> Our translation.

<sup>12</sup> Character created in 1985 by Alan Moore, John Totleben and Stephen Bissette and starring in DC Comics' *Hellblazer* series.



*Dog Horror Day* (a unique day celebrating 30 years of the detective – and, we may add, winking nostalgically at past festivals).

3. a third and (so far) final phase, characterized by several longer, horizontal stories (*Meteor Cycle*: 387-399; *Dylan Dog* 666: 401-406; *Mana Cerace*: 409-411), which increased to paroxysm the distance from the original *Dylan Dog* before changing again their narrative premises, with a second resetting of the continuity that moved the story to a Dylan from another universe, more similar to the previous one, as if the series had only been object of a simpler soft reboot.

This transition, however, has not been painless for the fans (notably the older ones), as demonstrated by the many contrary reactions exemplified by the petition, hosted on Change.org and relaunched by a dedicated Facebook page, to “save Dylan Dog” from Recchioni. Recchioni himself intervened, in his typical fashion, on the aforementioned dissident forum *Cravenroad7*, openly asking readers to “stop nagging”.

### Salviamo Dylan Dog



gaetano.de.roberto ha lanciato questa petizione e l'ha diretta a lettori e a 1 altra/altra

Con questa petizione si intende chiedere alla Sergio Bonelli Editore, CON GENTILEZZA E CORTESIA, di cambiare linea editoriale e sostituire l'attuale curatore del fumetto Dylan Dog Roberto Recchioni

174 hanno firmato. Arriviamo a 200.

Quando arriverà a 200 firme, questa petizione avrà più possibilità di essere inserita tra le petizioni consigliate!

Nome

Cognome

Email

Bologna, 40126  
Italia

- Sì. Fatemi sapere se questa petizione vince, e come posso aiutare altre petizioni importanti.
- No. Non voglio sapere se ci sono novità su questa e altre importanti petizioni.

**Firma questa petizione**

Non mostrare il mio nome e il mio commento su

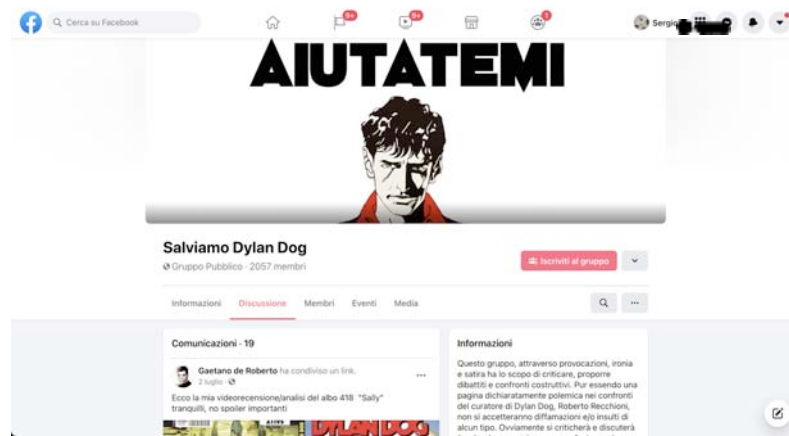


Figure 3 and 4: The petition and Face book page aimed at “saving Dylan Dog”

The people at Bonelli must have at least suspected that fans were growing disaffected with the series, because since 2014 the *Maxi Dylan Dog* title became first *Maxi Dylan Dog Old Boy* and then simply *Dylan Dog: OldBoy*, where the ‘old boy’ epithet signals that the stories are set in the ‘historical’ storyworld that accompanied the Bonellian hero until the advent of Recchioni. Incidentally, *Dylan Dog: Old boy* is part of a mammoth attempt by Bonelli to differentiate the editorial offer linked to the franchise, which has seen, alongside the main title, the publishing of an annual *Speciale Dylan Dog* (later set in a zombie-populated world and renamed *Speciale Dylan Dog - Il pianeta dei morti*); *L'Almanacco della Paura*, also annual, which became, in 2015, the *Dylan Dog Magazine* and was linked to the second reboot; the *Dylan Dog Gigante* collection; the *Dylan Dog Super Book* reprints; the *Dylan Dog Color Fest* series, published first annually, then semi-annually and finally quarterly; and the eccentric publications, such as the crossovers with *Martin Mystere* and with *Batman*, the spin-off *Dylan Dog presenta: Daryl Zed* and the *Grouchini*, a series of humorous mini-books also sold as a box set under the title *Grouchomicon - Il libro maledetto delle risate*.

It does not seem out of place to state that such a wide range of titles is an extreme attempt to maximize the economic return of a product that had gotten far away, both in terms of print runs and appreciation, from the splendor of its first decade, and aim at all the potential age spans and tastes of its heterogeneous audience. In this sense, the trio of issues published in 2021, in which the investigator of nightmares is accompanied by the singer Vasco Rossi, looks like a

desperate wink to aging fans that have hopelessly fallen out of love with their creature. How much of this disaffection is due only to the value of novelty per se - studies on nostalgia and fandom show quite clearly the correlation between the rejection of novelty by fans and their defense of their own identity continuity and the canon on which their subcultural capital is based (Geraghty 2014; Proctor 2017) - and how much instead is due to the series of unfortunate choices made in the last twenty years, is impossible to determine.



Figure 4: The recent Dylan Dog issues featuring Vasco Rossi

#### *6. (Fans') love in the time of social media*

Much more than a matter concerning the debates around its purported artistic quality or the idealization of its past glory, though, the vicissitudes underwent by the *Dylan Dog* franchise and its fandom are illustrative of a more general trend related to the evolution of communities, participatory and (sub)cultural practices after the digital turn (see Booth 2010) - and to the way SBE tried to read these changes and deal with them.

First of all, audiences are no longer clustered around cohesive communities as was more likely to be the case in the 1980s and 1990s - a situation that is all the more true if we take into consideration subcultures (and in particular youth subcultures), where very often the unifying factor and identifying element is at the same time the cause of the stigma to which one is subject and the reason to claim one's own difference from the others in the Bourdieuan sense (the case of the Italian censorship campaign towards horror comics is particularly telling).

Digital hyperconnection has instead trespassed geographical and generational boundaries, redistributing fan groups into heterogeneous yet asymmetrical communities, much more difficult to keep together once the hierarchical order that could be enforced in the enclosed space of the letter column is disrupted. In this scenario, the generational element has a double role, which is evident when looking at the case of *Dylan Dog*: on the one hand, a part of the current community of fans grew up with the series, crystallizing the moment of maximum popularity that (not by chance) also corresponds to the moment when most of them were young. On the other hand, the practices through which media products are enjoyed have changed profoundly. The generations that inhabited the media landscape of the 1980s and 1990s experienced a period of great cohesion and unity of (sub)cultural imaginary. Over the years, these imaginaries have frayed as a result of an irreversible change in the media diet, which on the one hand now allows the immediate retrievability of (almost) every source, every historical period, every cultural product, however remote and unobtainable; on the other, in a sad fulfilment of Jameson's reading of postmodernism, it does so by flattening historical depth, and condemning users to hyperstimulation and consequent information overload. The most visible consequence that this process has for the issue discussed here is that each subculture is superposing, but not necessarily hybridizing, with other ones - that, to give a practical example, horror lovers, fans of the early *Dylan Dog* and loyal readers of Roberto Recchioni do not merge with each other until reaching homeostasis, but remain separated elements of a fragmented whole traversed by unresolved tensions. Furthermore, one of the results of the digital turn on fan practices has been that of “empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production” (Pearson 2010, p. 84). SBE believed that digital prosumers could be as easily controlled as the pioneering communities of horror fans that they had been able to intercept and appeal thirty years earlier, underestimating how contemporary fandom is also, often, carried on “as an act of resistance” (Chin 2010, p. 2). Similarly, Recchioni professed the firm belief that his role of chief editor and fan *primus inter pares* allowed him to

deliberate on more appropriate and legitimate readings of, and reactions to, his ambitious reboot of the franchise. Yet, as Bennet remarks, what most often happens in contemporary fan communities, particularly through the web, is that “fans and anti-fans can express a conviction that they are reading the text in the correct way and these negotiations can subsequently enhance the strength and cultural identity of both, resulting in a collision of readings surrounding the (anti) fan object” (2014, p. 17).

In the case of *Dylan Dog*, this already complex picture is overlaid with further critical points: the general, structural crisis, in terms of sales if not downright courage, of Italian comics; the crisis of horror as an identifying subgenre, not surprisingly flanked by a liberation of the genre from its subcultural stigma and by an increasingly frequent presence of horror/weird tropes and elements in the mainstream imaginary<sup>13</sup>; the specific crisis of Bonelli, evidently struggling in the face of the aging of its historical fanbase, the participatory ways of 21st century fandom, and the reluctance of new fan communities to be guided as they once were; the even more specific crisis of *Dylan Dog*, which can in turn be reconducted to at least three internal elements: the lack of appeal and sense of exhaustion of its quotationist formula, which has perhaps finally been worn out after (by?) thirty years of constant success; the intrinsically anachronistic nature of the character of Dylan Dog, which does not seem that much at ease with a contemporary setting and whose UK is not believable anymore to those who live a globalized world; and the failure, in the face of contemporary sensibility, of the series dated approach to politically correct issues, both historical (the protagonist being on the one side a womanizer surrounded by one-issue female characters only meant to be seduced by his charm, on the other a tormented hero who nonetheless doesn't drink, smoke, or swear), and recently developed (most notably, the ableist pietism displayed by the Johnny Freak issue).

If the idea that a simpler, more readable time had ever existed is almost always a retrograde mirage, the rhizomatic complexity of contemporary reality

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<sup>13</sup> One can think about the most recent flagship productions of Netflix and Amazon and its overabundance of horror titles aimed more at a generalist but curious audience than at devotees of the genre: the two seasons of *The Haunting*; *Tales from the Loop*; *Them*; *Archive 81*; and so on.

seems to be a constitutive element of the days we live in. How much it is just a perceptive illusion - how much reality has always been like this, ignored by our gaze long trained to probe the detail in depth at the expense of the big picture and interconnections, and has simply been reconfigured by the digital - and how much instead it is a deep, radical and inevitable paradigm turn in practices, beliefs and tastes, only time will tell. What is certain is that the times they are a-changing, even if – as shown by the case of *Dylan Dog* - it is often difficult to keep up with it.

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