This paper gives an overview of the animated series *Ulysses 31* (1981), a French-Japanese co-production based on the epic poem *The Odyssey*, which introduced children and young audiences to Greek myths, relocating the original narratives into futuristic contexts such as the 31st century.

Twenty-five years later *Ulysses 31* remains a cult series, however it is also largely unknown since the images it invokes are buried in the memories of childhood. Although the series substitutes the wooden ships with spacecrafts crossing the universe of Olympus, *Ulysses 31* manages to capture some of the original relationships within Homer’s thesis, in spite of their eccentric portrait. The heavy use of *pastiche* takes us back to the 1980s and the emergence of the ‘new’ fantasy-driven science fiction cinema; thus it is important to examine and discuss the series’ employment of futurist aesthetics and technology in its exposé of classic mythology.

*Ulysses 31* is a good example of a successful series from that period. Employing traditional animation throughout – such as painting on cells, cut-outs and the use of the multiplane camera – the art of the series offers a distinctive style that would be virtually impossible to reproduce through more recent technology. This paper will examine this aesthetic and compare it to similar shows from that period in order to locate its place in ‘the future past’.

**Ulysses as a Cosmic Adventurer**

One of the characteristics of the series that becomes apparent initially is the noticeable coherence of the series’ concept. Different to Achilles or Heracles, who looked for glory and immortality, Ulysses was not the son of a God; he was just a man whose misfortunes became timeless. The mention of Ulysses conjures up thoughts of adventure, bravery, astuteness and challenging forces.

Before *Ulysses 31* creators Nina Wolmark and producer Jean Chalopin developed their project, writers from all ages have approached Ulysses as an archetype of human existence: Dante, Tennyson, Joyce, Cavafis… For the purposes of this paper I will only consider Dante’s depiction of Ulysses in the *Divine Comedy’s* eighth circle of Hell, doomed for his “crazy attempt” – his will to surpass Hercules’ Columns, no other line than the edge of the known world. For Piero Boitani, Dante’s visionary approach to navigation makes the Greek hero a pre-figuration of upcoming discoverers as Columbus, Vespucio or Elcano (Boitani 1992 p.15). Likewise, during the 20th century the spirit of geographical explorers is transferred to space pioneers, astronauts and scientists, as Carl Sagan pointed in his memorable series, *Cosmos* (Adrian Malone, 1980), saying: “We are at the shore of a cosmic ocean”, summing up all aspirations of space missions and anticipating the birth of a new Christopher Columbus – or a new Ulysses, crossing the universe to come back to Earth.

*Ulysses 31* was not an isolated phenomenon: exchanging the Mediterranean islands for lost planets suitable for all fantastic events, the series displayed a potential mix of magic and technology that kept fresh the intensity of the Greek hero’s adventures, re-elaborating the myth in a way that could only be imagined in that specific decade. If we ever lived in the future, it was in the 1980s. NASA had launched the two Voyager ships, as well as Europe and other continents
which progressively joined the renewed space expeditions. Equally Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977) and Star Trek (Gene Roddenberry, 1966-69) were projecting a vast influence in the notion of the future in entertainment, pervading the plots of many cinema and television movies – like V: The Series (Kenneth Johnson, 1984), a metaphor of WWII staged as an Alien invasion on Earth. Other animated series such as Once Upon a Time... Space (Il était une fois... l’espace, Albert Barillé, 1982) demonstrated how all great themes, such as the fight between Good and Evil, are transposable into scenery as far as the stars.

The Episodes of a Mythological Summa

This section will examine the existing concordances among the Homeric text and the series’ plot, as well as those episodes which significantly diverge from The Odyssey. Paying attention to its structure, the series gives some linearity to Ulysses’ journeys like previous cinematographic versions such as Ulysse (Mario Camerini, 1955). The curse of Gods starts in the opening episode and is not resolved until the last program, returning the dormant crew to life and restoring the route to Earth to the spacecraft memory. However, the rest of episodes can be followed at random, since they are self-conclusive and always reproduce the same basic outline: Shirka, the computer on board, locates a potential danger or problem, whose resolution opens the door for finding the route back home; the Gods or any other evil influence interfere in preventing the hero succeeding, but he finally settles the most immediate need, saving his life or any other’s.

All Homeric poems are reproduced using this outline as a figure in a mould. The futuristic scenery provides the pretext to re-invent the original premises in The Odyssey, but always staying with the spirit of each poem. If the struggle between Ulysses and the Cyclops symbolized the clash of civilization against a barbarian past – as Polyphemus breaks all the rules of hospitality – we can also read the fight of logos wanting to defeat the myth – the blind belief on old cruel Gods. Ulysses 31 recreates this specific conflict, when the hero defeats the Cyclops – now a Giant robot adored by blind servers who want to sacrifice young Telemachus – attracting the curse of ancient Gods against himself and his companions.

The secondary chapters from The Odyssey are liberally told, readdressing their subtext to meet contemporary worries. We can read an anti-drug manifesto in “The Lotus-Eaters”, bringing up to date the original premise to appeal to different age groups. On other occasions it becomes necessary to transform the literal foundations to make sense in the new spatial context: being in the poem aquatic monsters that cause shipwreck, “Scylla and Charybdis” become now gravitating forces that trap wandering spaceships into their magnetic field.

Likewise the episode “The Sirens” introduces space pirates searching for a hidden treasure, although the seminal image of the poem remains intact – Ulysses tied up to the mast while listening to the sirens’ song. Probably the secret to Ulysses 31 everlasting charm is the transmission of Homer’s tragic essence through a genuine sense of entertainment.

Due to an overarching educational purpose, the series exceeds the limits of The Odyssey to become a summa of Greek mythology. Ulysses meets characters like Sisyphus, Herathos or Theseus, who plead for Ulysses’ help to defeat a common opponent, or set him a trap under the influence of the Gods. Other times the interaction is not necessary since Ulysses, as a universal hero, replaces the classic figure – for instance, solving as Aedipus the Sphinx’ riddle. Exceptionally, some of these characters are subtly connected to The Odyssey universe, as Sisyphus – considered as Ulysses’ ancestor (Graves 1955 p.73) – or Atlas – father of Calypso – although these relationships are not mentioned and each of the episodes is strictly focused on their inherent symbolism. Moreover, the apocryphal encounter with the Olympic Gods evoke
meaningful values that deities personified in Greek mythology, staging abstract concepts such as the infinitude of time – “Chronos” – the fragility of cosmic equilibrium – “Atlas” – or the triumph of human will over destiny – “The Chair of Oblivion”.

Eventually, other episodes stop using the Greek culture as a referent since they follow a more recent mythology, paying tribute to the prolific science-fiction and even horror cinema of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Traces from Night of the Living Dead (George A. Romero, 1968) can be recognized in “The insurrection of the companions”, where the lifeless crew is suddenly reanimated to attack Ulysses. Similarly, “The Gap in the Doubles” recalls the film Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Philip Kaufman, 1978), or “The Black Magician” evokes Logan’s Run (Michael Anderson, 1976). Being a key title in the renovation of a whole genre, the influence of Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979) is noticeable in several storylines. But Ulysses 31 does not only condense the previous legacy of futuristic cinema; developed in the early 1980s, the series acts as a hinge between two decades, anticipating later issues. Thus “The City of Cortex” introduces a potential conflict between humans and an Artificial Intelligence, enacting the worries aroused by robotics and computing before this premise appeared in emblematic films such as Tron (Steven Lidsberger, 1982) or Electric Dreams (Steve Barron, 1984).

The Archetype of Hero

Following Plato in The Republic, the Greek heroes from the Trojan War were reincarnated as diverse animals: Agamemnon as an eagle, or Ajax as a lion; but only Ulysses would choose a human form to be born again (Chozas, 1996 p.186). This fable condenses the epic dimension of a character that rejected immortality and eternal youth, since only as a mortal man he could return home and meet Penelope again.

Known as Ulysses the Cunning, his eloquence and inventiveness are stimulated by the Goddess Athena. The modern Ulysses inherits such gifts, while tempered by certain ingenuity – as he often falls into his enemy’s traps. Some iconographic aspects connect Ulysses to more modern times: since technology allows him to fly as a bird, his approach is something similar to Marvel superheroes, endowed with superpowers or the restless dream to go beyond their human limits applying complex devices. However, Ulysses’ profile is substantially different to those Übermensch as he does not become a hero of his own volition, but rather because he is driven by circumstances.

In both series and text, Ulysses is portrayed as superior and yet ordinary man, displaying his different facets of athlete, engineer and artisan. Many episodes demand these special features from the hero: in “Aeolus”, the God of winds subjects Ulysses to pitiless games, but the hero prevails due to his agility and strength. Ulysses also performs by himself technological work – for instance, repairing the spacecraft engine – and not so sophisticated tasks – collecting minerals from the planets, instead of forcing these tasks onto his robots.

Another of classical Ulysses’ qualities is his physical appeal. Even in his forties, princess Nausicaa falls in love with him when he arrives to Scheria as a victim of a shipwreck. Equally women from all over the galaxy find the futuristic Ulysses very attractive, and most surprisingly he returns their affection. He decides to stay with Circe for ever when the magician reanimates his companions. Likewise he wants to keep Calypso away from doom, crying: “I will save you whether you want it or not!!” At this point the screenwriters take a risk by staying faithful to the poem and yet not offend a family audience; therefore these episodes end with the sacrifice of the female partner, thus restoring the initial balance to make each program always self-conclusive.
Inversely to the hero’s tragic loneliness in *The Odyssey*, the futuristic Ulysses does not cross this unfriendly universe on his own. He is represented as a Pater Familias, travelling alongside Telemachus, his son; Yumi, the alien girl; and Nono, a kind of pet-robot. This family cell somehow includes Shirka, the computer on board, whose female voice makes the spacecraft a character – a mechanical mother, in the absence of the human mother, Penelope. Although eccentric, this family is not dysfunctional and they work perfectly as a team, transmitting the values of cooperation and respect to a brave and wise leader.

In all his aspects, the modern Ulysses is a faithful character. Different to his ancestor, he rarely invents stories. Physically Christ-like, the blue of his eyes reflects the pureness of his heart, recovering the deep essence of the Greek archetype, irrepachable and magnanimous – in the etymological sense of the word, with a great soul – after centuries of being considered a negative character by the Roman and Christian tradition. Perhaps the episode that sums up this evolution is “Ulysses Located Ulysses”, where the futuristic hero travels to the past to help his precursor to defeat Penelope’s suitors: the program sums up the fight, saving the bloodthirsty killing that takes places in the poem, and inviting reconciliation when the modern Ulysses flies into the air before the suitors, who fall down on their knees mistaking him for a God – in the poem, it is Athena who addresses herself to the suitors’ relatives to prevent their revenge.

**The Religious Dimension**

While immortal, Greek mythology invested the Olympic Gods with human attributes, making them as capricious, unsteady and unforgiving as human beings. Since Ulysses attracts the anger of Poseidon when he arrogantly reveals his true name to Polyphemus, the original legend contains a moral preventing overconfidence as the most frequent human failure. But we can perceive in the series a significant difference between these divinities and all virtues that make Ulysses’ soul splendid, underlining his humanity: he fights for his child’s life but kindly avoids harming the Cyclops’ blind servers, who ironically pray to Zeus asking for revenge. Therefore it is the humanity of Ulysses which draws the anger of the Gods against himself, reinforcing the identification of the audience with the hero and intensifying the Gods’ role as malevolent villains.

Despite the obvious references to Christian values, we can hardly identify any kind of judgement on early religions in the series, as this futuristic Ulysses does not embrace any belief and only swears “by the Great Galaxy”. Close to the Vulcan officer’s motto in *Star Trek* – “the welfare of the majority is the welfare of the minority” – Ulysses’ dispositions to self-sacrifice will eventually save him and his companions in the Kingdom of Hades, satisfying Zeus’ expectations.

In spite of their malice, the portrait of the Gods evolves throughout the episodes to cushion Zeus’ eventual adjustment in attitude. Initially Zeus emerges from the infinite as the face of an old sculpture, intimidating Ulysses or blackmailling other characters to impede his success. In the middle of the series this anthropomorphic representation of the Gods is replaced by a rather abstract menace: the tridents, detached from Poseidon’s iconography – and an evil symbol in Christian culture – mostly appear as spacecrafts attacking the Odysseus, but other times become a voiceless signal of danger that identifies the Gods’ belongings or loyal servers. This iconographic oscillation might depend on the three directors that ruled the series, but ultimately facilitates an outcome alike to *The Odyssey*’s – since Zeus first drowns Ulysses’ crew but later facilitates the hero’s return to Ithaca.

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1 Due to his innate tendency to curiosity and ambition, which made him develop the Trojan horse, Ulysses enclosed some negative nuances for Roman people as they considered themselves scions of Aeneas, the last of Trojans.
Another significant contribution of the series in updating Greek mythology is the re-invention of Goddess Athena, Ulysses’ guardian, who played a decisive role in resolving his sorrows. She is represented by Yumi, the alien girl that joins Ulysses’ adventures from the first episode, as the concordance among both characters is justified from the iconographic and narrative point of view. Yumi, as Athena – also denominated the Goddess with owl’s eyes (Vidal-Naquet 2000 p.116), has brilliant yellow eyes, and she employs her nearby divine capabilities to protect her friends, exercising mental powers such as telepathy and telekinesis, or even elaborating predictions – in the same way as Delphos’ Sybille. Yumi’s special features and powers inherit the magic from ancient times, transforming it into the most similar option for a futuristic age, adding new nuances to the series’ dialog between the future and the past.

The Pastiche Aesthetics: Visions of a Future Past

Only revisiting Ulysses 31 from present day can be perceive the visions of the future past outlined on the title of this paper. The art direction not only transposed ancient elements to the 31st Century, but also included contemporary technology and fashionable items from the 1980s, generating a heterogeneous – and sometimes unlikely – image of the world of tomorrow.

Initially, the aesthetics follow the main premise of the series, harmonizing the costumes and characterisation of the main characters with echoes of the Greek culture: geometric patterns, short capes and tunics, metallic headdress that recall a laurel crown, and so forth. At times these references are apocryphal, as Ulysses’ lion head-like space helmet – belongs to Heracles’ iconography. Likewise the recreation of Olympus takes on classic architectural elements, mixing and alternating genuine ways to depict an uncanny dimension – but coherent with the series’ premise.

However, the presence of other historic influences in scenery and characterization seems casual, as we can see in ‘distant’ environments reproducing more recent artistic styles: “Nereo” takes place in a planet with powerful resonances of Italian Renaissance – actually a Venice-like city. The pressures of a commercial production did not allow the directors to develop a genuine aesthetic for each new environment, being necessary to imitate other successful models. As a consequence, cross references between the ancient and the science fiction meet in the same cinematic context: as an illustration, the galactic station of Troy resembles a Greek helmet and, simultaneously, it brings to mind the 174 station of Star Trek.

These references reveal the strong influence of popular culture on the art for the series, paying also an important tribute to the fantasy and science fiction French comic Utopias, like Moebius & Jodorowsky’s Incal. Paradoxically, the futuristic imagination of the 1970s and the 1980s had more in common with ancient legends than with contemporary reality, as can be noticed in the conception of technology. For instance, Ulysses’ favourite weapon is a light-sabre, similar to Jedi swords, because both sagas conceive the battles of the future as medieval hand-to-hand combat. Moreover, Ulysses’ weapon is dual because it can be used as a gun, although this concept is not properly futuristic since it borrows from the 16th and 17th centuries sword-guns.

One of the most endearing aspects of Ulysses 31 is the exhibition of technology consistent with the early Eighties. For instance, Circe keeps all the knowledge of the universe in a library composed of... cassettes. Equally, when the Black Magician introduces Ulysses into a virtual environment, the landscape is dotted with square pixels that recall the Atari computers’ graphics. Nevertheless we must consider that the series did not attempt to anticipate a credible technology for the future, but rather established an understandable code for the audience of that time.
However, *Ulysses 31* was one of the first series to combine computer animation with more traditional processes. The interaction of both, results in a daring use of visuals to describe the travels through this parallel universe, as well as specific details from the machines – like Shirka’s talking screen – that could be consistently depicted through the newest animation techniques. On the other hand, the use of standard techniques – painting on cells, cut-outs and multiplane camera – anticipates the aesthetic of following “Anime” series, prevailing movement and colour over representation and sometimes appearing close to artistic abstraction, as in the episode “Atlas” when the universe collapse is represented through a clash of colour waves and light flashes.

**When Yesterday Becomes Today and Today Becomes Tomorrow**

Eventually, two alternative visions of the future past coexist in *Ulysses 31*. On one hand, a whole cultural tradition that revives in the present – for the audience from whatever present, even decades after the series’ first release, thanks to a correct re-actualization of the context. On the other hand, since this fictional context necessarily quotes elements from the present, soon they are regarded as a *retro* portrayal.

In the first vision, Ulysses has been considered as a universal model of hero for subsequent periods and even latitudes, surpassing the Mediterranean region to cast its influence on other cultural traditions, as the echoes on *The Albatross* legend, *Beowulf’s Song* or Medieval Poem of *Mio Cid* demonstrate. Throughout history, the champion falling from grace, living in exile and not returning home until having completed a number of works – to eventually find love and redemption – has moulded the archetypal image of the hero independently of the person’s authentic biography.

As an archetype, Ulysses’ image is polymorphic because it absorbs the essence of upcoming ages, evolving from his epic portrayal to his deconstruction, as in James Joyce’s daring experiment. Since Ulysses’ travel represents life itself, every man from every time is *Ulysses*, remaining an everlasting *model of man*. Like the shipwrecked person, deprived of technology and other facilities, every human being behaves in similar ways, revealing the paradox of social evolution: although our way of life and environment have evolved enormously, the most profound wishes of humankind remain equal. This explains Homer’s poem in context as far as the stars, keeping alive the intensity of the hero’s misfortunes as well as the deepest symbolism of his travel, renewed for a platform intimately involved with the production of modern myths: the television series.

Inversely, in the second vision, contemporary elements like fashion and technology appearing on futuristic contexts are condemned to obsolescence, as they can hardly resist the critical eye from later audiences. And more drastically, technology inherent to cinematographic production, like visual effects – from stop-motion to computer graphics – experience the same *retro* effect when their manifestation unavoidably takes us back to their years of development.

Whatever we call modernity shortly becomes a legacy from the past. This is noticeable not only in science-fiction movies – often perceived as metaphors of current worries – but also in the historical genre, when the contemporary signs of identity pervade the fictional recreation of *any* historical age: as an illustration, young fancy blonde starlets inhabit Cleopatra’s palace in Cecil B. DeMille’s movie (*Cleopatra*, 1934), making an icon of 1930s American popular culture from such a stylized vision of Ancient Egypt. Moreover, since the futuristic genre demands an entire context to be invented, the projection of the world of tomorrow not only takes from contemporary aesthetics, technology and architecture, but also imitates other periods that can be considered
futuristic or, at least, eccentric, as observed in almost every science-fiction and fantasy series – for instance, the quotation of cultures in Stargate SG-1 series (Jonathan Glassner, Brad Wright, 1997).

This easygoing mixture is the cause of amalgamation, the addition of messages and symbols as transparent layers that do not obstruct each other, but rather compose the polyphonic – sometimes even atonal – discourse that characterizes Modernity. Amalgamation and eclecticism configure a regular phenomenon in contemporary art and culture, which grows to be extraordinarily widespread in commercial productions series for children and youngsters, since these audiences scarcely question the liberal reinterpretation of historic references – like the combination of Egyptian and Greek sphinxes in Ulysses 31’s respective episode, or Jewish and Maya legends in “The Second Arc”.

And the more audacious is this combination, the more breathtaking the effect becomes. Ulysses 31 played a lead role in the revitalization of the epic genre by taking the risk of re-inventing the entire context, while other conservative bets, such as Clash of the Titans (Desmond Davis, 1981), did not succeed in the updating of mythology: although this film dared to evoke some modern approaches – as the inclusion of a mechanical owl, akin to R2D2 – it achieved a weird collage effect rather than the French series’ brave synthesis.

Today Ulysses 31 remains an icon of the 1980s. It is an astonishing sign of modernity especially because fashion of that era frequently demonstrated a yearning – an infatuation with couture from an idyllic past – like the 18th century. Surely all of us still remember Prince, Adam Ant or Michael Jackson, wearing eccentric hacking jackets, or Elton John dressed like Mozart. In the 1980s, being antique meant being modern. Antiquity and medieval ‘chic’ permeated popular culture, mainly replicating itself in comics, cinema and TV. The allure of nostalgia explains the upsurge of fantasy cinema in that decade; a time when fuelled by fertile imagination producers employed emerging technologies to birth some of the most uncanny cinematic creatures.

The U.S. comic book Camelot 3000 (DC 1984) can be included, as Ulysses 31, in this stream of futuristic storytelling that borrows from Ancient and Medieval ages: King Arthur himself revives in the future to combat dark potencies embedded in evil magic and technology, commanded again by Morgana and Mordred. Equally Ulysses 31 represents that inversion of history, since the main character is condemned to the same course as his ancestor. These future worlds also assume philosophical and even politcal aspects from the past, such as Imperial governments or chivalry codes. In the series, Ulysses is introduced as the king of Earth; Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert also imagined a future Galactic empire administered by aristocratic figures. Moreover, Jedi knights honour code is like traditional Samurai rules – not in vain, Star Wars did not take place in the future but “a long time ago in a Galaxy far, far away…”. Historicism is absent from this modus operandi, since futuristic genre from the 1980s approaches more to fantasy – the depiction of an fictional universe – than to science-fiction – the feasible projection of current issues on upcoming ages.

Despite their obviously kitsch aspect, the view on the future, as well as on the past, help us to understand better the current philosophy and expectations of the specific age that imagined them. If we compare the futuristic cinema of the 1950s and the 1960s with its homologous during the 1980s, a profound fear and distress crosses the first one, while the second is characterized by a strong sense of evasion. While there existed a social and political frame that explained the sense of anguish in the first case, Ulysses 31’s naïf and progressive view on the future was the product of a hopeful and confident atmosphere.
Ulysses returns to Earth?

Nowadays, vintage culture prevails as a central model for design and fashion. Likewise, *Ulysses 31* emerges from oblivion due to its *retro* aspects rather than by its futuristic will, although the series’ general treatment remains more consistent than subsequent reinventions of classic mythology, such as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (Sam Raimi, 1994) or the Disney production for TV *Hercules: The Animated Series* (Phil Weinstein, 1998-99), which freely took the legend of that other hero as source of inspiration. *Ulysses 31’s* theme music, vintage aesthetic, sense of epic adventure and genuine innocence awakes fascination and melancholy in today’s adult audiences.

*Ulysses 31* was originally created to satisfy a double need: entertainment and education in cultural values. The interaction of European and Japanese studios, like DiC Entertainment and Tokyo Movie Shinsha, or BRB Internacional and Nippon Animation, was crucial to popularize these literary shows for children: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (*Tomu Sôyâ no bôken*, Hiroshi Saitô, 1980), *Dogtanian and the Three Muskehounds* (Luis Ballester, Shigeo Koshi, 1981) and *Around the World with Willy Fog* (Luis Ballester, Fumio Kurokawa, 1981) were also noteworthy productions. The series developed by Ghibli *Sherlock Hound* (*Meitantei Holmes*, Hayao Miyazaki, Kiosuke Mikuriya, 1984-85), which liberally borrowed from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s writings, could be regarded as the end firecracker of this Golden Age.

However, the animated adaptation of literary works is a nearly extinct genre in present day TV. Among all factors that contributed to its expiration, the multiplication of TV channels has given prevalence to other kind of animated shows, as Japanese animated science-fiction and fantasy series such as Akira Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* (*Doragon Bôru*, Daisuke Nishio, 1986), which format approaches to *soap opera*; or the animated sitcoms re-emerging in 1988 as a successful model of prime time series with *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening). Ironically, DVD, Wire TV and Digital TV channels have created new spaces for old series, a diversified cultural offering that appeals again to youngsters, but especially to adult audiences that want to re-visit the myths from their childhood. Only thus can *Ulysses 31* return from the Hades to Earth.

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**Index Card**

*Ulysses 31* (Uchû densetsu)
France, Japan (DiC Entertainment, Tokyo Movie Shinsha), 1981
Directed by: Bernard Deyriès, Kyosuke Mikuriya, Nagahama Tadao
Written by: Jean Chalopin, Nina Wolmark, Homer (poem)
TV-Series, 26 episodes of 30’.
Edited in Spain by Divimagic, 2003 (5 DVD).
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