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***Women and the Italian television:
the end of an alliance***

Italian women have become increasingly free but at the same time less equal as far as their rights are concerned. The paternalistic idea of women's emancipation as mothers and workers that appeared in the Fifties and the Sixties, developed into an ever increasing eroticizing of the female body during the Nineties. In between there were struggles for civil rights, liberation processes, women's increased access to the labour market and to education, but also the development of neo-libertarianism as well as the crisis of the welfare state, which increasingly reduced previously established social guarantees and provisions. Television too followed this path, evolving from a form of social paternalism to a global economic patriarchy with neo-populist features.

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1. Representing the absent other

What does representation mean and what is representation? These concepts have acquired different meanings in the history of philosophy and politics, especially due to the various means through which absent subjects and objects obtain a new identity. Effectively, the etymology of the word *repraesentatio* evokes being vicarious. It refers to an image, an individual or an object that provides presence to what is absent. The human intellect becomes the driving force that represents conceptual objects, just as a political representative is the person who gives voice to and represents the interests of who is absent. Means of visual portrayal (from photography to the cinema, from television to the new media) now pose new questions concerning the subjects represented and the ideology existing in the interstices between reality and portrayal. This is why a specific analysis, addressed at identifying the configuration of social order imposed by patriarchal rules in the relationships between men and women, pauses to reflect on the problems involving media representation, as in the case of the female body. All this becomes more complex when seen from an inter-cultural point of view. However, cultural diversities are certainly not an obstacle to such an analysis, on the contrary. There are many common elements in the connotation of gender related social roles. Hence it becomes possible to build a bridge, that, while on one hand allows for more adequate

knowledge of one's own culture, on the other shows the way for fruitful research on gender elements shared by various cultures.

As an example I will refer to the change in "representation" of women on Italian television, in the sense of both the affirmation of new sexist ideologies and the lack of political representation. A deep gap between the images of women provided by both state and private TV channels and their real capabilities/competences has been created. Media portrayal and women's social roles seem to come into collision. But perhaps the ideology of stereotyped images and collective imaginaries "speak the truth". Italian women have become increasingly free but at the same time less equal as far as their rights are concerned. The paternalistic idea of women's emancipation as mothers and workers that appeared in the Fifties and the Sixties, developed into an ever increasing eroticizing of the female body during the Nineties. In between there were struggles for civil rights, liberation processes, women's increased access to the labour market and to education, but also the development of neo-libertarianism as well as the crisis of the welfare state, which increasingly reduced previously established social guarantees and provisions. Television too followed this path, evolving from a form of social paternalism to a global economic patriarchy with neo-populist features. Reflecting on the role and reductive portrayal/representation of women in Italian television becomes crucial in view of recent events involving "TV soubrettes running for election", having provided evidence of an obvious socio-political state of bewilderment. Should women in civil society just be passive onlookers?

2. Paternalism and national reconstruction

During the post-war period Italian women became the fulcrum of collective narrations like neo-realist portrayals, which freed them from centuries of invisibility. In films produced in those years women still appeared wearing traditional clothes, but proud to be able to contribute to the creation of a new political order. Images of women from all social classes and ages made the front pages, while for the very first time they were about to vote in local elections and then in the 1946 referendum, choosing between monarchy or republic. Women bore witness to the active role they played in battle of liberation from Nazi-Fascism and were the symbol of an inclusive democracy wishing to also create a new public sphere they could freely access. A republican constitution came into force on 1st January 1948 that asserted the equality between women and men.

Television – which under the name RAI (Italian Radio and Television initiated in 1945) began broadcasting on January 3rd 1954 at 11 a.m. – continued to portray a popular epic addressed at putting into practice the rules of the constitution also through mass communications. After all, Article 37 of the Italian Constitution states that "A working woman has the same rights and, when employed in the same job, the right to the same salary as a man. Working conditions must allow them to fulfil their family obligations and ensure

special adequate protection for mothers and children.” State television therefore on the one hand started to portray women as interested in reconciling their dual role and work burdens as mothers and workers, while on the other it supported a paternalistic concept of emancipation. As neo-citizens, women still needed to be protected and educated.

From being an appliance available to only the privileged, television soon became a crucial part of household furnishings. It then came to represent family unity and a sharing of interests. While initially it was a means that revolutionised daily life, television soon programmed family rhythms using a form of programming than was addictive. It also allowed people to acquire new knowledge and form a new collective imagination. Television soon became the expression of the new republican cultural hegemony, spreading Italian as the common language and allowing for the diffusion of literacy (“It is never too late”, as the teacher Manzi used to say in his successful literacy show).

In this first stage, therefore, television performed specific civic-pedagogic tasks and a mission founded on three pilasters: education, information and entertainment. Hence it could only be women-friendly; it was not technically hard to use, one only had to push a button. The traditional stereotype in fact portrayed women as unsuited for any exploitation, hence appliances had to be extremely easy to use otherwise women would have not bought them. However, the initial cognitive model for accessing the media was effectively elitist, in spite of its populist claims. In fact, it implied a moralist kind of censorship by those ruling the country (at the time adhering to the Christian Democratic Party - DC), who decided in a one-dimensional sense what viewers could see or not. Viewers were deprived of freely choosing programmes since religious beliefs were indicated as shared values, on the basis of which “common decency” should be assessed.

“Decency” was therefore also portrayed in the clothes women wore on television where a flower could be used to cover a neckline considered excessively revealing. Women’s bodies became soon a public space in which it was possible to assess the level of existing conflicts between traditions and modernisation. This impositions, however, became possible due to the state’s monopoly, or rather the intrusive control of the governments of the time. In 1975 the regulation of television became the responsibility of parliament. Forms of religiously-based political censorship added to misogynous sex-phobic attitudes followed thus the controversial “emancipation” process experienced by Italian women, alongside their increasing visibility in the public sphere as well as their representation on television.

3. Neo-populist sexualisation

In Italian collective memory the Sixties are linked to the idea of the “economic miracle” and an increase in births, marking economic wellbeing and cultural optimism allowing for better care for children. In the meantime the presence of women increased in all employment sectors, and, after 1963, women were

provided free access to all public offices. Next traditional conformism, state television too began to support images of "modern women", capable of being mothers and having a career, as well as being interested in increasing family wealth thanks to an income that provided them a financial autonomy. Soon women became the testing ground for social experimentation as well as the leading players for new consumption starting in the domestic sector.

Carosello (a TV programme presenting commercials that started on February 3rd 1957 and ended on January 1st 1977) became the final event of the day and, thanks to engrossing short stories and animations, managed to attract grown-ups, children and aged people too, presenting them with images of desirable objects. Entertainment became central in television programming with the appearance above all of undeniably talented and professional artists (but not yet journalists).

The Seventies marked a radical change from the previous social-economic order also at a symbolic level. Public images and collective imagination became filled with women's protest demonstrations, united in their public appearances claiming fair gender relations as well as for civil rights. Changes in the juridical order left a mark with legislations on divorce, family law and abortion now coexisting with the majority of the Catholic political party. Almost in a state of shock, television showed these changes just as it would do a few years later with the distressing images of terrorism. For the first time television portrayed a different image of "femininity". These were now autonomous and independent women resulting in the disappearance of previous stereotypes based on the idea of women still in need of protection. On television they began to appear as journalists and hosts of specific programmes. However, while the so-called "women's question" had by now become a public hot issue, it was still repressed within a reserve.

The Seventies were to result in another change in the television sector: the loss of state monopoly in public communications with the appearance of commercial channels. This trend was to explode in the following decade with the move from "paleo-" to "neo-television". Later on, in 1984 Silvio Berlusconi started his TV empire thanks to the then Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, who, issuing a Ministerial Decree, allowed private networks to broadcast all over the national territory.

This resulted in fierce competition between State and commercial broadcasting networks, finding a joint interest precisely in the representation of (neo-traditional female roles. This greater availability and freedom of access to information, however, also resulted in a reduction in the quality of what was offered. Interest in promoting goods to a broader audience became the prime objective, based on the mistaken equation that a larger audience meant a lower level of cultural interest. The regression of viewing became equal to the commercialisation of the female body, in a hotchpot of buying and selling wishes. Eroticization, bordering on pornography, once again made women's

bodies a public arena mystifying the object on sale and moved to new settings the market's imperatives.

This trend became radicalised during the Nineties. Feminine beauty became the *sine qua non* condition for all successful programmes, to the detriment of professional capabilities. Background no longer seems as important as a network of favours done and one's economic and political friends. Television's educational role was replaced by a continuous flow of images and words subsuming all genres (hence information, sport and culture) all under the umbrella of entertainment. Television became "generalist" and filled with medium-low contents (as one understands from the questions put in quiz shows), in spite of the increased number of citizens with diplomas and university degrees. In depth analysis of information, however, was no longer an indication of approval or high ratings.

Thousands of words become the backdrop for every programme. Talk-shows amplified private drawing-room areas and opened to an audience hungry for conviviality. As happens in the best chauvinist traditions, women were often invited not because of their competence or authoritativeness but because amusing, entertaining and not too challenging. Women became successful above all as entertainers, without however having many intellectual capabilities and qualities to show. Women improvised as "commentators", not so much because of their expertise on specific subjects, but rather thanks to their shameless ability to increase verbal brawls or to ridicule crucial issues. Women became "attractive" to audiences. TV show-girls, called *veline* (the object of desire for hundreds of thousands of adolescents) therefore became an exemplary media case. They seem creatures, who escaped the hands of their creator. While initially they were shaped as characters for social criticism and caricatures of gender stereotypes linked to the attractiveness of the female body, over time the *veline* became the incarnation of their own prejudice, denying the satirical object for which they were invented.

4. Private affairs for the masses

If it is true that paleo-television was a one-dimensional mean, while neo-television was founded because of the necessity of interactivity and including viewers (above all through people phoning in), televised neo-populism is however based on a false principle of "closeness" and "participation." The distance actually remains, in spite of the impression that viewer has when he/she thinks to play a leading role, managing to give his "ordinary life" "exceptional" importance. Hence, in spite of the intention of making known ignored stories and neglected people, reality shows do not portray "real life" or the authenticity of individuals, but rather the rhetoric of their mass dramatisation in rendering familiar persons who are not usually part of people's daily lives. And yet, the images of reality shows and their success do express a degree of truth; television appears to provide airtime for people wishing to participate and debate in a public arena, precisely because of the crisis experienced by representative democracy. But television's virtual space

is certainly not "free from all rules." And in the meantime viewers return to unexpected aspects of the private sphere.

One of feminism's key phrases was "the private is political", stating the fact that gender relations always have public value, too. No one ever expected a neo-populist shift of this expression. The narration of intimacy and sexuality has abandoned the strictly personal and psychoanalytical environment and has become a show in which "real" relationships become fiction within the process of transferring to the media. Controversies between genders, as well as gossip and backbiting, now occupy the area previously devoted to political and cultural analysis. Or rather, politics have assumed the colourful characteristics of family and intimate narrations. The *panopticum* for social-political control in Orwellian style seems therefore to have been replaced by the neo-voyeurism of neighbours. In this case too, however, images broadcast the truth. It portrays the irreversible changing of the mononuclear traditional Catholic family thanks to new types of families and relationships between genders (including homosexual, transsexual and transgender), in spite of the Catholic Church's constant political influence on the political debate.

Television hence mitigates pain, creates dependency and can weaken the value of public spirit. There is however a subversive element in this overturning of the meaning of the images shown. The paternalistic concept of emancipation has been replaced by neo-traditionalist and neo-populist tendencies that eroticise images of women and also place them in codified roles in the era of neo-libertarianism. As has happened in post-socialist countries, in Italy also the eroticising of the female body depends on the decreasing of social security, employment levels and social-economic rights obtained during the Seventies. In the meantime, in the course of the last decade the presence of women in the world of labour has fallen and now amounts to about 46% (after Malta, the lowest among the 27 countries that are member states of the EU) and on average they earn 27% less than men. Italian TV stations have lost contact with the real conditions experienced by women. Within the vacuity of the phantasmagoria of televised images there is also some truth: not only there is a persistent inequality between women and men but also a post-modern radicalisation of their conflicts.

5. Who/what represents who/what?

In her famous book on *The Conception of Representation* (1967), Hannah Pitkin theorises the idea of political representation as classifiable on the basis of four linked elements, such as: formal, descriptive, symbolic and substantive aspects, in the interrelation between the "being in favour of" and "acting for." Is it possible to employ this method in addressing the restricted representation/portrayal of women on Italian television? I believe that this is possible in two senses. On the one hand television does not portray women following the roles they effectively play within civil society and their real intellectual capabilities (they are the group with the highest number of university degree, obtained over the shortest period of time and with the

highest marks), while on the other it confirms the deficit of representation present both in the political sphere and in the managerial positions at the workplace.

Although there is a feminisation of the journalistic career and in spite of the work of important and talented professionals (although often anchorwomen are still chosen because good looking), if carefully observing the company organisation of the various TV stations, one can observe the dyscrasia between the presence and representation of women. The first woman to become President of RAI was Letizia Moratti in 1994, followed by Lucia Annunziata in 2003, both politically appointed. But a woman has never been at the head of state television as the CEO, nor is there currently a woman appointed as editor-in-chief of the news. In spite of sophisticated legislations on equal opportunities and the ratification of all European directives on this subject, there continues to be a significant sub-representation of women also in a key sector for the functioning of democracy, such as that of public information.

This example was not simply aimed at emphasising obvious deficiencies in political and cultural representation, due to the lack of women within the governance of the media, nor at stressing the hiatus between reality and media portrayal. It is rather a matter of symbolic violence: images now overwhelm even voices, hence the possibility for women involved to express themselves, in their own names and voice, or for those they represent. This is a paradoxical situation: basic freedoms women enjoy appear to decrease precisely in the public portrayal and in the spreading of sexist stereotypes. Women continue to be pictured by others using eroticising images, restricting their freedom to portray as best they can their own realities, expectations, potentials and talents. Hence they cannot recognise themselves in the images "others" provide of their factual condition.

Television becomes revolutionary because it subverts with virtual locations and avoid the creation of the public will, stressing basic problems that characterise Italian society and politics. Once again television speaks the truth: neo-populist attitudes are the symbol of a regressive representative democracy in search of a leader, capable of touching collective imagination, incrementing people's hopes and achieving what people expect to hear: the illusion of a better life. Berlusconi appears to incarnate these expectations, following the model of addiction to television and the repetitiveness of advertising messages. Perhaps for once, with his body feminised by plastic surgery, Berlusconi speaks the truth: the culture of appearance hides and deceives the concrete representation of life experiences. Here we can find a lever for subversion and a mean for placing in power a different imaginary: to create what does not yet exist, that is the conjugation between freedom and equality.

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