THE 'FANTASIA' OF WOMANHOOD:
HOW WOMEN MAKE SENSE OUT OF MIXED MESSAGES
IN ITALIAN TELEVISION

A Master's thesis for the AMMA 2003-2004
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As in many Italian institutions, the operative word in Italian television is fantasía: variety, assortment, array. The word itself already has a fantasía of meanings: derived from the Greek for both ‘image’ and ‘imagination’, it can also mean ‘imagination’, and ‘imaginative caprice’. Present in everything from ice cream concoctions to textiles, fantasía can characterize anything as long as it is eclectic and pleasing to the senses.

Fantasia might well be the only way to encapsulate the varied landscape of Italian television, where programming runs the gamut from hybrid talk-reality shows to gameshows-gone-lounge acts, sequin-spangled dancers and all. Then there are the variety shows themselves, the extreme specimen, featuring a full band, live audiences, and on any given episode, interviews with anyone from scientists to small town heroes, as well as circus acts, animal stunts, telephone games, and visiting children’s choirs.

The representation of women on Italian television, however, is a fantasía unto itself. From the doting mother standing up for her ne’er-do-well son on a talk show, to the high-styled soubrette-turned-actress fighting her way through the latest reality show, every extreme of womanhood—within traditional bounds—is represented. As Pastacaldi writes:

The woman the media presents has to be everything, extremely pure and extremely sexual, a faithful wife and an unfaithful lover. She is the ideal protector of the domestic sphere, and of its hundreds of products. As an option, once in a while she claims to be intelligent. (Pastacaldi 2003).

Cast in a role of impossible dimensions, as Pastacaldi contends, women have seen their hyperbolic images linked directly to market interests, with sex-appeal fueling sales. She further notes the historical irony that women should now find themselves so represented on television, years after the dramatic women’s movement of the 1970s:

After emancipation, after the conquests in the workplace, here are women once again forced back into their most submissive role. That of object, with the pretense of making them subjects. (…)
the soubrette is not only an actress, she is a symbol, a metaphor that the media have pasted onto real women...a stereotype of women, whom the market wants to transform into testimonials and consumers of everything (Pastacaldi 2003).

While the soubrette’s presence serves as an ironic counterpoint to the advances made by feminists, she can also be seen as representing the stubborn reality of Italian women, who still comprise a subaltern category in Italian society. Following Pastacaldi, the soubrette’s superwoman ‘power’ is her very loss of power, her return to object status while masquerading as a subject, a spokeswoman. She is the poster girl for our era in which Michael Taussig claims (in his formulation of mimesis): “…the commodity economy has displaced persons, if not into things then into copies of things flaring with a life of their own” (Taussig 1993: 231). Her power is inextricably linked to her role as an idealized, satisfied consumer: a living testimonial.

This living testimonial can play an important role in Taussig’s model of mimesis*, which supposes that people perceive power in images and consumer items just as they have long perceived the power of the Other. In an attempt to harness that power, people may mimic the image or person, or appropriate some related item, a consumer fetish object. Such attempts at personal power grooming fit in with Goffman’s (in Finkelstein 1991:179) description of our era of “impression management,” when people try to anticipate and shape the judgments others will make about their appearances, especially their bodies. Finkelstein (1991) notes that body and dress in particular are a means of symbolically representing social status and power to others. How we inform our standards of what kind of body and dress are the most prestigious and good is a complex process, partly personal but inextricably linked to local society. Finkelstein argues that nowadays, the value of appearance “relates more to the ways in which they were obtained...the technology of appearance” (Finkelstein 1991: 183).

As a medium that brings others into the most intimate spaces of our homes, television is often held responsible for cultivating a culture of excessive impression

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* based on Walter Benjamin’s formulation of mimesis, and drawing from anthropological accounts of mimicry and fetish production in colonial encounters.
management'. Women, who are seen as especially 'susceptible' to the influence of television images (see Bordo 1993) have become the subjects of numerous studies exploring the psychological processes behind television viewing (see Botta; Harrison, Hendriks, Livingstone, Martin et al). More recently, researchers have favored cognitive development theory to consider the effects television viewing might be having on body and identity development (Payne 2001).

Although cognitive theory considers the effects interaction and social reinforcement have on gender identity development, the scientific nature of the studies conducted tends nevertheless to isolate women in the viewing process, looking for an action-reaction correlation. Such approaches produce useful information about women's attitudes towards images and often their own bodies, but necessarily ignore the context of television viewing, and television's symbiotic relationship with other institutions in viewers' lives that also inform the way they interpret images.

Considering the specific case of Italy, I will argue that television can also be seen as an apparatus functioning in a larger hegemonic system, of which women form a subaltern category. Programming reiterates the hegemonic messages women encounter already on a regular basis via other institutions in their lives, and unifies them in a disjointed but visually appealing summary. In Italy, these messages confront women with a series of traditional ideals of womanhood and women's roles in society for example: that she be at the same time beautiful, modest, seductive, innocent, and faithful; that she take equally excellent care of her body, family, and home; that she have a husband, children, and parents, for all of whom she has time; that she be cheerful, talkative, and connected to the outside/professional world—but with a relaxed approach that does not demand the spotlight. An impossible act to follow.

Focusing on young women viewers (between the ages of 18 and 34), this study will use an ethnographic approach to examine what messages women perceive in television programming, and how they relate those messages to their own lives. Unlike the unfortunate sociopath in _A Clockwork Orange_, we are not forced to watch programming, but choose when to watch television, and what to watch (or to stay in the

* Anne Becker produced a strong case from her research in Fiji suggesting a link between the introduction of Western programming in the country and a subsequent dramatic rise in eating disorders among women.
room to keep other viewers company). We furthermore approach programming with a full load of our own personal and social baggage, which affects how we interpret what we see. Television viewing in a busy kitchen is not the same as film viewing in a hushed cinema; the clanging of dishes, the ringing telephone, the smell of sautéed garlic reminds of where we are. On the other hand, images of sautéing garlic might have particular indexical associations for an Italian (traditional cooking methods, a long time in the kitchen, a nurturing grandmother) that are present for a foreigner. In both senses, a context-based study is necessary to understand what viewers are seeing in the images they watch.

In order to set the stage for this study, the next section offers a brief description of the landscape of contemporary Italian television; followed by a section that considers the socio-political situation of young Italian women today.

Setting the stage

*It is 7 PM on Tuesday, and two well-known male comics are sitting next to each other at a long desk. Both are in their forties, dressed in dark sports jackets, and both sport serene smiles. On top of their desk, two young women in their early twenties are dancing energetically to heavy beat music. One is blond, the other brunette, both wear heavy make-up—even for television—and tonight extremely short lime green mini-skirts and tops. The men watch as the women dance, arching their necks for a better view. Finally the dance sequence is over and the two women kneel on either side of the desk—one in front of each comic—and smile sideways at the camera. The comics joke with each other that they could do the dance much better, make a few remarks at which the dancers open their mouths in stage laughter at the audience, and then the women rise and exit the stage.*

This is the beginning of *Striscia la Notizia* ("Shred the News"), a current events satire featuring recent bloopers in the news, and one of the most popular nightly shows. Although it is broadcast on Berlusconi's Mediaset channel Canale 5, it might just as well be broadcast on the state run RAI network; these days, there is little difference in programming content.
That was not always the case. Before the advent of 'Berlusconization', television was entirely state-run and consisted for the most part of the nightly news, live shows and performances, varieties, feature films, and the famous Sunday night sceneggiato, a roughly six-episode mini-series, usually based on an historical or literary tale. Things started to change in 1974 when Silvio Berlusconi, then a real estate developer with a law degree, created a local closed circuit cable channel to service Milano-2, a residential development he had built in the late 1960s. Within a year it was ruled legal to operate local television stations. By 1978 he not only owned many local stations in different regions, but also broadcast programming simultaneously on them—creating a de facto national network. Fortunately for Berlusconi, a year later in 1980 the legislation changed again to allow the existence of national networks that would rival the state-run RAI. By 1984, Berlusconi’s three network channels were up and running (www.ketupa.net, 2003). Unlike the RAI, Berlusconi’s networks relied heavily on foreign fiction programming, which was much cheaper to buy than it would have been to produce original programming. They also featured a great deal more advertising.

The success of Berlusconi’s approach put pressure on the RAI to conform, just as financial pressures demanded it economize, and soon the RAI was also broadcasting more foreign fiction programming, and airing more commercials. The glitzy aesthetic of Berlusconi’s stations took more time to cross over, but eventually even the leftist RAI 3 followed suit. Now it is virtually as easy to find dancing girls, reality shows, and American programs on a RAI station as it is on a Mediaset channel. Moreover, now that Berlusconi, nicknamed among other things La Sua Emittenza (a play on “his eminence” meaning ‘the broadcaster’) is also the elected head of the government, and therefore also the official head of the RAI, he can be seen to control 90% of the country’s media—including his private holdings of Italy’s largest publishing house, Mondadori, and the daily newspaper Il Giornale.

Berlusconization, however, has not confined itself to the media. One journalist offers the following definition:

A way of life in which people lived in houses built by Berlusconi; watched television controlled by Berlusconi, shopped at supermarkets owned by Berlusconi, at in restaurants built by
Berlusconi, and relaxed on Berlusconi television courts or watching his soccer team (www.ketupa.net, 2003).

The fact that this quote is taken from a website is not by chance; Berlusconi’s practice of censoring the media has drawn international criticism, but has yet to be curtailed. Reporters without Borders cite the case of the popular evening show Blob on RAI 3 which features news bloopers, whose episode scheduled for October 8, 2002 was blocked from airing; its title was “Berlusconi against the world.”

Surely much of what appears to be Berlusconization is simply zeitgeist; one could argue that he was a man born at the right time. Berlusconi is, regardless, the uncontested king of consumerism in Italy, and television is heart of his kingdom. During the glitzy Berlusconi decades—from the 1980s to the present—as variety shows and dancing girls all but disappeared from other European television landscapes, all that vanished from the Italian screen was part of the soubrette’s costume. If women’s roles on television can be said to have remained subordinate, women’s experiences in real life have not been much different.

Women in Italy: “...something is just not right”
The popular press in Italy offers some of the most salient cultural commentary, especially with regards to women’s experiences. In an article on the experience of womanhood among the younger generation in 2000 (reporting on a conference on the same theme), Franca Rita Porcu writes that young women are creating a façade to mask deep uncertainty and misgiving:

If you ask them, they’ll tell you they feel at home in their own bodies. They’re young, they know how to make themselves look beautiful, they study, they work, they have a boyfriend who respects their ‘space’. Diets, sports, fashion: they know everything. A culture reaped from women’s magazines and television...and yet something is just not right (Porcu 2003).

Young women are supremely informed about appearing, seeming, performing. The messages are perhaps the same that have long been sent to women from various
institutions and sectors—but they are amplified and delivered simultaneously: Be independent, be a devoted daughter, wife, and mother, eat heartily, stay slim, have children, stay youthful, be modest, ambitious, seductive, virtuous; demand your due, don’t ask too many questions, don’t rock the boat.

These young women have grown up in an environment where women are officially entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men—but in reality, the situation looks somewhat different. The government, including the current Berlusconi administration, is still largely comprised of men. In his article “Misogynist Democracy”, Paul Ginsborg cites a statistic indicating that in the history of the Italian republic there have been just 26 female ministers in national government, as opposed to 1425 male ministers (in Pastacaldi 2003). Professional opportunities are also more difficult to obtain. Although university enrollment was even between genders by 1980, and today female enrollment continues to increase over male enrollment, the subsequent search for employment can be bitter for women. Ginsborg (2001) writes that they come face to face with the Italian ‘old boy’ network, especially in the upper economic levels, where personal connections are decisive, and largely restricted to men. In today’s already difficult job market, Ginsborg writes, many women are frustrated, even despondent—an especially dissatisfactory situation when considering the ambitions and early successes of the initial women’s movement in the 1970s. Once women do find employment, they are paid on average 27% less than their male counterparts (Pastacaldi, 2003).

Although women have increased their numbers in professional arena and are overall a much stronger presence in the workplace, many things have not changed since Counihan (1999) conducted her research in the early 1980s on changing distributions of power among a group of women working and living in Florence. Then as now women were in general paid less than men for equal work, but they faced even greater obstacles in obtaining higher-status jobs. Counihan maintains that employment outside the home nevertheless improved women’s social status with regard to men, whom they now also encountered as fellow workers. Employment also gave them more financial freedom; and reinforced their self-confidence and sense of independence.
At the same time, the women in Counihan’s study reported feeling dissatisfied because they had ‘lost control’ over their households, traditionally the woman’s stronghold. Some still did all the housework as well as work full-time outside the home because they claimed their husbands and brothers were unwilling, or were incapable of meeting their (the women’s) high standards of tidiness. The women’s ambivalence about renouncing power over the household (in favor of the uncertain power of a position outside the home) was further revealed in the politics surrounding food preparation, once a major source of domestic power (and pride) for women. Some jealously guarded their cooking skills, while others refused to learn in the first place so as never to be ‘trapped’ at home.

This ambivalence over renouncing traditional roles—and the power they entail—for an uncertain and often subordinate position in the workplace continues in the present. In her article, Porcu later refers to women’s “fragility” and “uncertainty” as they embrace outward signs of independence—piercings, tattoos, midriff-revealing clothes—but in reality seem incapable of exercising independence in their own lives. “The leash has been lengthened—not cut,” she concludes. She cites the high number of women who do not have children as partly resulting from this essential insecurity (along with lack of affordable child care, long study times, and career ambitions).

“Mai dire—“Hegemony”? (a theoretical framework)
Considering women’s continuing subordinate role in Italy, especially under the current, (arguably oligarchic) Berlusconi government, Gramsci’s model of hegemony is a useful tool for understanding how those who have power, as well as those who have little, support the status quo. Rarely has there been such a “tangled knot of power relations” as Crehan (2002) describes hegemony, as can be found today in the Italian government and industry boardrooms. It goes without saying what Gramsci posits in one prison note: that the “State” should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the ‘private’ apparatus of ‘hegemony’ or civil society” (in Crehan, 2002). Much like the Moderates of Gramsci’s time, the “organic intellectuals” who form “a vanguard of the upper classes...to which they belong” (Gramsci in Crehan,
fill government positions for Forza Italia. As Blattman (2003) argues, the media are run from the top, monitored, and at times censored.

If the media are broadcasting hegemonic messages, they are being received in households and workplaces already ruled by the structure, as Counihan’s (1999) study shows. Traditional power divisions along gender lines seem firmly entrenched in the minds and homes of the women she interviews. The space for power relocation that might have been created by the decline of the Church’s influence over the last decades, as well as the shrinking and geographical dispersing of the family, seems instead to have been neatly annexed by a television that broadcasts traditional messages. People are watching more than ever, and viewing statistics confirm any suspicions: household income and education levels have an inverse relationship with the amount of time spent watching television.

This, however, is a view from outside; to consider women’s experiences and how they negotiate their day-to-day lives in such a situation, it is necessary to look closely. As Emily Martin writes:

> If women are one of these ‘muted’ groups, subject to a relatively great degree of oppression...we must have extremely sensitive ways of looking for evidence of women’s consciousness of their situation and for a wide variety of forms of objection or resistance (Emily Martin 1987: 22).

Considering Italian women’s interpretations of the television programming they watch, the messages they perceive, and how they do and do not relate them to their own lives should shed light on how they manage. First, however, it is necessary to adopt an approach for studying female viewership.

**Approaching the female viewer**

Viewers (or ‘spectators’ as they are more often called in film theory) were until the mid-1970s thought of as exclusively male. Women were simply not discussed; it was either assumed they would view films the same way as men, or it was just not a point of discussion. The rising women’s studies movement eventually posed hard questions to film theorists. In 1975, Laura Mulvey gave the feminist response *par excellence* to Hollywood cinema and Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory in her essay "Visual
Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema”, in which she argued that while men indulge in scopophilia, women are excluded, and “can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”.

Waterhouse summarizes Mulvey’s subsequent revision of this argument, where she stated that women can in fact “engage in scopophilic activity”...but that we do so wearing ‘transvestite clothes’.”

She [Mulvey] suggests that the female spectator accepts her masculinization in ‘memory of her active phase’. Indeed since childhood the female spectator has become accustomed to putting herself in the position of the male spectator, seeing herself and other women through his controlling and critical gaze” (Waterhouse 1993).

Mulvey’s arguments (as well as Waterhouse’s own in subsequent paragraphs) ask compelling questions about the role of the female film viewer in a male-oriented cinema. A drawback to film criticism, however, is that it tends to restrict itself to the theoretical level. Mulvey and Waterhouse, among others, go on to advocate female filmmaking that uses new, unconventional visual vocabularies*. The emphasis lies furthermore on the (theoretical) process of men’s identification with the onscreen hero, as well as castration anxieties aroused by the onscreen woman. What was once psychology is today more of a literary interpretation. There seems to be little actual interaction between contemporary psychologists who are interested in audience studies, and the film theoreticians and scholars who consider the same issues from a different perspective.

The social sciences have taken a stronger interest in the effects of the visual media (mostly television, but also cinema) on viewers especially since increased television viewing has been associated with an increase in violence among men, anorexia and bulimia among women, and obesity among in both. Research from a cognitive psychological perspective focuses on individuals and categories of viewers, sometimes also considering socio-economic and ethnic background information. Current research in this field makes a strong case for the argument that certain

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* Mulvey made a brave attempt to put theory to practice in her experimental film The Laughing Medusa, but ultimately was more successful in demonstrating how difficult such attempts can be to watch; pleasure tends to remain at the narrative cinema.
personality types respond to media images more readily or forcefully than others. In effect, some people should be more ‘susceptible’ to images and attempt to emulate them. Botta’s (2000) comparative study of Black and white adolescents in America concludes that ethnicity can affect responses to media among women, and that white women in general are more driven to emulate models. These conclusions are supported by Hendriks (2002) in her examination of the effects of television viewing on females’ body images. She indicates five main elements of cognition:

1. **Symbolization**: assigning meaning and interpreting images. In this case, viewers interpret and evaluate television images, especially female models.

2. **Self-regulation**: the ability to control one’s behavior, again relevant in our example in as much as female viewers might alter their behavior to emulate a model on television.

3. **Self-efficacy**: the degree to which an individual believes she is capable of achieving her goals. A woman who feels highly capable of achieving her goals might set higher ones for herself, and is arguably more likely to take the initiative to make changes she perceives as desirable.

4. **Self-reflection**: the ability to distinguish between accurate and faulty thinking, which might include confirming stereotypes or reinforcing ideas.

5. **Observational learning**: the ability to learn vicariously, especially when the individual lacks information from other sources. The individual must pay close attention to the model, identify with it, and perceive it as desirable. For this reason, she argues that viewers “actively seek out” their models. For example, a woman who feels the body on screen is desirable and valuable, feels capable of attaining it, and is encouraged to try, might alter her behavior to do so.

(Hendriks 2002)

Hendriks’ model offers a useful breakdown of the elements of cognition especially relevant to interpreting television. This approach furthermore shifts attention to the specific case of the female viewer, and allows her subjectivity, as opposed to the female viewer in film theory who is figured either as an object denied subjectivity, or, as Waterhouse argues, an impossibly absolute subject.
At the same time, since this approach focuses on cognitive processes, it can be seen to isolate the viewer’s mental processes, as though the only stimulus is the television. Again, such an approach might be more useful in the case of Western cinema film viewing, where the viewer, seated in a dark, quiet room, is encouraged to ignore the outside world. Television, in contrast, is viewed in the midst of the most mundane surroundings—usually our homes—and is often viewed with other people, or while doing other things. Distracted, the viewer may give onscreen images less rapt attention, but may interpret images and messages more according to her own circumstances.

In order to give more attention to contextual influences on viewers, an ethnographic approach can be especially useful for developing an understanding of viewers’ responses to television images, and how they interpret them. Through ethnographies of media and viewership Lila Abu Lughod and Faye Ginsburg have shown the important role television can play in reflecting or creating national identity, as in Abu-Lughod’s studies of Egyptian television in “Finding a Place for Islam” (1993). Content can take a subordinate role to viewers’ interpretations of it in as they articulate the messages they perceive, as is the case in Liebes and Katz’s The Export of Meaning (1990), a further exploration of Jen Ang’s 1982 study of the reception of Dallas across cultures.

The present study takes an ethnographic approach to considering what (mixed) messages Italian women perceive in television, and how they relate them to their own lives, in order to have a better understanding of how they negotiate the different demands that tradition, personal ambition, and convention dictate within a larger hegemonic system.

The next chapter will address the methodology used to design and conduct the project.

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* It is ironic that after years of feminist film theoreticians and critic’s refutations of Lacanian-based models of cinema viewership, cognitive psychologists who surely have a different political agenda are arguing along the same lines as the original psychoanalytic film theoreticians. Breaking down the actual identification processes seems to point out differences in women’s reasoning skills, as though there must be a faulty step women take to identify more closely with television images than men do, thus making them weaker before the images, or more “susceptible”.

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CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Study type & design
In order to identify some of the messages Italian women encounter in the media as well as other familiar institutions, and how they negotiate them, I designed a small-scale, exploratory study to be conducted over the course of six weeks (from mid-May to July 2004) in Siena¹, Italy. The project would center around five participants I would then collect data through unstructured ethnographic interviews conducted in two cycles:

- The first cycle was to start within the second week of arriving in Siena, and would take place in front of the television and would be aimed at establishing a rapport with the participant and identifying themes emerging from her response to TV content.
- The second cycle, which was to start some two weeks later, would be more in-depth interviews exploring the themes established, also with reference to life histories.

*Participant observation was to supplement the data.*

Sample population
The objective was to find five (though I ended up with six) young women between the ages of 18 and 34. This age group was selected following statistical guidelines used for charting underweight among women (these ages had a dramatically higher incidence than other age groups and male age cohorts).

The women would be resident in or around Siena, which was chosen as a location because of the city’s small geographical size, and its large student population from different parts of Italy. I hoped to find participants from different regions to be able to

¹ Siena is a small city (pop. Approx. 50,000) in the middle of Tuscany, in what’s considered the center (though distinctly northern half) of Italy—though geographically it is not. It is an old city wealthy from banking and tourism with a large university (approx. enrollment: 10,000), steeped in tradition, filled with associations both openly established and clandestine.
consider the differences regional affiliation might have on women’s perception of messages.

Sampling Strategies

I intended to use the snowball sampling method to find participants; and also, with an aim to increasing diversity, to approach potential participants through signs, as well as in person in public places. The results were in keeping with Paul Ginsborg’s (2001) description of the reality of the Italian job market in *Italy and its Discontents*: contacts proved invaluable, and cold-call efforts were fruitless.

After painstakingly designing a poster to recruit participants (offering the possibility of free English lessons/help for the interested), pounding the cobblestones from university departments to gyms, cafés, libraries, laundromats, I was dismayed to find the next day that nearly every single sign had been torn down. I repeated the operation, this time dating the signs, and adding ‘please do not tear down’ on the off chance that the guilty party had a conscience, but to no avail. (Someone suggested it might have been a jealous English teacher, protecting his or her turf.)

In the interests of time, I quickly accepted defeat and focused my efforts on social ties. I got up early and stayed out all day, late into the night, talking. I became a regular at several cafés in different parts of the city: this one frequented by ‘employees’ (*impiegati*) in the morning, the Internet café at midday filled with students and *Leocorno* contrada members, Diluvio for the aperitif hour where older students and young employees mixed till the dinner hour, and then Rosie’s late at night with the would be literati. In between hours without appointments were spent sitting in the piazza greeting acquaintances, in group classes in the gym (chatting before and after), in the library garden, and wherever else I found an entrance to talk to someone. My efforts fortunately paid off; new acquaintances had friends who had friends…and within days I had five willing participants.

*Tra il dire ed il fare...*

It was all too easy; I had forgotten to factor in the flexibility of scheduling in Italy. Enthusiasm does not equal commitment, or as the Italian aphorism goes, ‘between
saying and doing lies the ocean’ ("tra il dire ed il fare, c’è di mezzo il mare"). Put more simply in my case, it was the beach; I had arrived just at the onset of summer weather, and many of my would-be participants were carried away by the prospect of catching their first rays. How many text messages brightened my screen: ‘Hi Cate! I am at the beach! I’ll call you when I get back to town, maybe in a few days.’ Then there were of course other obstacles: exam retakes, visits to parents, summer festivals, car trouble. Two of the five would-be participants I had found those first days actually followed through. I started interviewing them, continued my social efforts, and hoped for the best. After a week I had another friend of a friend, and had also contacted a woman who had posted signs for an English language exchange, but was interested in working with me (and also chatting in English). The fifth participant was the happy by-product of my concurrent (and equally challenging) housing search; I got the room and one of my new flatmate’s agreement to participate in the project. Later, her sister also volunteered.

My Italian friends could not hold back their ‘I-told-you-so’s when I recounted the lengths I had gone to to find my participants. “Think of the easiest way of doing things,” my lawyer friend told me, “then make a negative print, and now you have your instructions for how things work here.”

The following table shows my six main participants, their ages, and their home regions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Home Region</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viola</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sardinia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuela</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Apulia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentine</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Lombardy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federica</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Tuscany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alisa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sicily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Apulia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection techniques

Of necessity, the two-cycle structure became a single block of time, during which I met with the participants as often as possible, and at their convenience. Meeting often and discussing informally was important in establishing an easy rapport, so that participants would feel comfortable voicing their impressions and opinions. The goal was to conduct a candid conversation; I did not want them to feel pressure, or that their comments were pronouncements that had to be thought out carefully. The more often we spoke, the easier it was.

Watching television was necessary for identifying messages the participants perceive, and inasmuch was also a useful springboard for discussing themes close to their hearts. We watched television at my home and theirs, usually alone, though sometimes one of their friends or roommates would join us. They selected the programming (or held the remote and surfed); I would ask them about the content at first, that is, to explain what was happening, who a person was, what they thought of some incident or product. More often than not, however, they volunteered their impressions without prompting, and in so doing gave me a sense of the messages they perceived.

I then interviewed them privately in their homes, in cafés, or in the piazza (with the minor inconvenience that we inevitably were interrupted at least a few times by acquaintances) as they liked. Interviews were again informal, and in-depth, focusing on themes the participant had identified, as well as themes that I had noted from other interviews, and other issues relevant to the participant, including life history.

I also often met them informally in the evenings, or sometimes by chance at social events; Siena is a small city, and although people tend to identify themselves with distinct ‘scenes’, centered around particular locales, it is inevitable to run into everyone you know on the street on your way there\(^2\). Three of my participants were acquainted with each other; the other two were more recent arrivals and explained they

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\(^2\) In fact, from five to eight in the evening, it is an institution; the nightly „walk“ takes place along the main thoroughfare, where old and young stroll along, greeting each other, ostensibly heading home or out for dinner, although it is never clear.
had not yet branched out socially beyond their colleagues. (This matter became a theme in our discussions.)

Although I had planned to conduct participant observation, I was surprised how enriching the opportunity to spend time with them in social settings proved to my research. It was a chance to observe them interacting with different people under different circumstances, sometimes acting quite differently or voicing different opinions from those they had related privately to me. One moment that struck a chord with me took place when I was out at a café with Viola and several acquaintances. In our conversations, Viola had stressed her resolution to be independent, her efforts to support solidarity movements for women's rights as well as other minority groups. At the café, together with two other female friends we had been invited to a spontaneous dinner party some 20 minutes outside of the city by car—which we did not have. Viola said, “But it’s no problem, we’re girls, some nice man will help us.” I waited a moment for the ironic tag, which to my surprise never came. I discussed the incident with her later, and it struck me once again that there is an ocean between saying and doing.

There was of course a difference in the frequency of meetings with my participants. Valentine and Viola, who were available from the beginning of my stay, met with me at regular appointments throughout the weeks, whereas Federica and Alisa met more frequently with me in the span of about three weeks, and Manuela was my flatmate for the last four. Nevertheless, I felt in the end that the level of confidence in our conversations was about the same for all participants. Personality was inevitably a determining factor in the speed of developing a rapport; Valentine says she is somewhat reserved by nature, though in time she opened up; whereas Alisa is an unstoppable whirlwind of opinions, and says she always has been. My experience teaching English proved useful in prodding the conversation at necessary points in both cases.

A happy surprise for me, however, was that my beach-going project enthusiasts did indeed return from time to time to talk with me, watch TV, and offer their impressions. Although we did not have as much time to work together, their input has been very valuable to me, and some of it has been included in my analysis.
Data processing and analysis

All interviews (with the exception of two short ones with Valentine) were conducted in Italian, which I later transcribed from noted and translated into English. I processed the data manually, identifying common themes and differing viewpoints that came up in conversation.

Ethical considerations

Before my participants agreed to take part in the project, I made certain they had a clear understanding of the nature of the research and the methods I would use (specifically TV watching and commentary, in-depth interviewing). They were informed that they had the authority to tell me not to include any comment or incident in my data which they regretted. I promised them furthermore that I would protect their confidentiality by assigning them pseudonyms and altering any conspicuous details that might reveal their identity. They were aware that this research is for academic purposes, and that the data collected was part of a master’s thesis project for the AMMA.
UNIT 2: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Preface

It is five o'clock on an early June afternoon in Siena, Italy, and Manuela, 21, is sitting at the kitchen table eating a bowl of Special K. The box lies open in front of her, and every now and again she sprinkles a handful into the milk. Still groggy from an afternoon nap after taking an engineering exam in the morning, she is unusually quiet, and stares fixedly at the television. She is watching an entertainment magazine program on Mediaset’s Channel 5, featuring mostly Italian celebrities. I stand behind her, making coffee. I don’t recognize the grinning brunette being interviewed. When I ask, Manuela answers, “Oh, she’s the one who won the last Big Brother. Did you see it?” I tell her I didn’t. “She’s nice (simpatico). It was a close call at the end. Now they’re doing a calendar with her—just her I think.”

Suddenly the camera cuts to a low angle shot of the young woman with a red feather boa, black underwear, and haltered stockings. “Racy,” I joke. “But look at how chubby she is! Look at that!” Manuela protests. She shakes her open hand at the screen. “Go on a diet! I mean, if you know you’re going to be on TV in your underwear, to be in a calendar, wouldn’t you try to lose a few kilos? It’s not like they told her yesterday! I would be too embarrassed!”

I look at the screen and try to see what she’s talking about—and am surprised I didn’t notice before. The woman has rounded shoulders, full thighs, thick, muscular calves. She twists and her flesh folds slightly at the waist. Suddenly I see myself, and most of the bodies from my gym locker room, and feel somehow exposed.

“It would be hard to go on TV,” I comment.

“Yeah...” says Manuela. “I’d want at least 6 months to get myself into shape.”

In fact, though incontestably slim, Manuela is on a diet already; she announced it two days before when she arrived from the grocery store laden with boxes of Special K, a case of non-fat milk, and light yogurt galore. She eats Special K most of the day, and one meal of vegetables, sometimes with meat. “I have to wear a bathing suit when I go home!” she often wails, laughing. I notice, as if in response to her cry, the box of Special K sports the added tag “Ready for a bathing suit in just 2 weeks!”

Although it is common in Italy to talk back to television, the television does most of the talking. It is a constant commentator in many homes, the background music for meals, conversations, cleaning, cooking, studying, even quiet time. An accepted presence in the most intimate household spaces and moments, television constantly offers another view of the world; to see from a distance, and through comparison, identification, or association, to see ourselves from a distance.

The messages television transmits are not simply the explicit messages of programming content; they are also the messages created through the juxtaposition of
disparate images and programs. The sometimes disjointed presentation of women on television—the woman as everything to everyone, as Pastacaldi describes her—is a message in itself, perhaps in keeping with what Emily Martin formulates as women’s “general images of their selves” as “...chronically fragmented” (1987: 194). The way women may recognize themselves in television images, admire or reject them, gives an impression of some of the different ways women see themselves; sometimes traditional, sometimes iconoclastic.

Since Counihan conducted her research in 1982 and 1984, women have dramatically increased their numbers in the workplace, gradually also at upper management levels. The ambivalence women in her study expressed over relinquishing domestic power for an uncertain fate outside the home still has its vestiges today, as my participants told me. This pervasive sense of ambivalence, or mistrust, seemed to run throughout our discussions, part in parcel with another underlying issue: competition and divisiveness among women. In fact, these issues seemed to form the root of every discussion, whether we talked about their mothers and their upbringing, regional differences between their homes and Tuscany, romantic relationships, career goals, family plans, friendship, or physical issues of beauty and aging. Television furnished us with a variety of conversation topics, but the messages the women perceived, their interpretations of and associations with them, proved a touchstone for discussing some of their pressing concerns.

In the following unit, to present some of the recurring messages, along with the themes they inspired, I have divided the material into four chapters centered around popular types of programming: News; Variety and talk shows; Fiction and reality; and Commercials. Each chapter begins with a description or example of the programming in question, followed by a section presenting some of the themes and discussions that came up while viewing, including how the participants related those themes to matters—and dilemmas—to their own lives. At the end of each chapter is a brief summary and analysis of that material.
CHAPTER 3: MIXED MESSAGES—NEWS

If my participants are any indication of popular sentiment, then nobody likes Emilio Fede. The newscaster and director of Mediaset's Rete 4 newshour, Fede is notorious. "He's good friends with Berlusconi," my participant Viola told me.

"He was there when he was elected. You'll see on the news, it's all Forza Italia, and he gives open political commentary. It's so dangerous; imagine, there are people watching who actually think this is the news, that he is a responsible journalist. But all he does is give his opinion."

Fede is a middle-aged man in a suit, and indeed appears adamant about everything he says. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to broadcast the slogan you are about to hear, chanted by demonstrators today in Rome; it is a shame to this country that such people feel the need to say such things in public," he said as a preface to coverage of a leftist demonstration against Italian participation in the occupation of Iraq. At others times he demonstrates his authority in the studio by criticizing reporters or technicians on the air. "What's this? That's totally unprofessional," he shouted on the air to the off-stage workers when the visual link to a correspondent failed.

The latest addition to the Fede newshour is an example of equal opportunity employment gone awry. Gone is the weather-casting colonel in his decorated uniform, the Italian standard weatherman; instead, hovering in a split screen slightly larger than Fede's half is a grinning young woman in a sleeveless, midriff-baring shirt.

"Who is that?" I asked my participant Manuela the first time I saw her.

"Oh, she used to be Miss Italy." Manuela told me.

Fede is addressing her, eyebrows arched:

"What are you wearing now? What's that on your shirt?"

"My shirt?"
"Yes, what’s that there on your shirt? That, that...there!" he says, pointing to the screen. "That?"
"Yes, what is that?"
"That’s Betty Boop!"
"Who?"
"Betty Boop!"

They banter a bit more, using plenty of precious airtime, until she begins to give a hesitant weather report, faltering and laughing nervously each time Fede corrects something she says.

When I ask after the colonel, Manuela smiles.

“Oh, yeah! I think there’s still the colonel on RAI 1—che forte. But Rete 4 is only using former Miss Italys now. It’s their new policy.”

Manuela seems to find the situation relatively normal. Valentine and Viola in contrast have strong objections. “That porco,” Viola says. “Hiring that idiot so he can stare at her breasts.” Valentine is more subdued. “It’s upsetting,” she says. “Like that’s all women can do, smile and look nice.”

In stark contrast to Fede is the (then) RAI 1 head newscaster, Lilli Gruber, who at the beginning of my fieldwork was still giving the number one nightly newscast on Italian TV. Whenever Gruber was mentioned, the word forte, or strong, inevitably came up, though it was not always intended as a compliment. Gruber is a woman in her mid-forties (though she looks younger); like Fede she is a fixture on television, and extremely connected in different sectors. Her newscast for RAI 1 has a more traditional format (befitting the channel, which is the oldest in Italy) than Fede’s, and she is known for posing tough questions.

Viola is a die-hard fan of Gruber. “Che donna in gamba!” (There’s a woman who knows what she’s doing!), was her first reaction to my mention of her. Manuela was more cautious. “Mamma mia, she’s strong, Gruber,” she responded when I asked her opinion. Without qualifying the statement, she suggested Gruber was too strong, perhaps invasive. One Wednesday—market day—Viola called me very excited. “You have to
come to the market, now!” she tells me. “It’s the Gruber!” she tells me before I can ask, affecting a northern accent. “She’s here! Campaigning!” Viola explains that Gruber has left her post at the RAI to run for the European Parliament elections for the Ulivo coalition—the political enemies of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia. I catch up with Viola, and in no time after entering the market we encounter Gruber herself, who is handing out promotional material and talking with the shopkeepers. “How strong—and how petite she is!” Viola remarks. She gives me a promotional postcard, and I take it home and leave it on the kitchen table leaning against the wall so I will remember to talk with Manuela about the matter. Later that evening, I find the postcard is gone and no one knows what happened to it.

**Discussions: Equal opportunity employment**

Talking about Gruber and Fede, the conversation turns to women’s professional opportunities in Italy, as compared to men’s. After the major women’s movement in the 1970s, and the attempts to balance the workplace and make laws more gender neutral in the 1980s, the 1990s to the present have seen women continue to struggle for the equal opportunities they have been assured of in law and theory. In practice, things are sometimes frustratingly different.

Nearly a year after graduating with a degree in banking, Ariana, Manuela’s older sister, says she has finally found her first job, a trainee position with a Tuscan bank. “I’ll work as a teller,” she says. “You have to start somewhere! …It’s so hard here. It’s terrible in Italy. The people who know someone, who are connected, they get jobs right away. All the Sienese in my course headed straight for their fathers at the Monte dei Paschi. But the rest of us? What are we going to do? You wait and wait and wait. I finally found something, thank god, but look how long it took! And my grades were good and everything, I finished my studies quickly. It doesn’t matter. You have to know someone.”

“And then, if you and a man are up for the same job, and he has the same grades and the same qualifications, they’ll always take the man. I don’t know why that is. It drives me crazy. But it’s just like that. That’s Italy.”

It is also the Italy that Paul Ginsborg describes, where in the professional world connections and clientelism are everything, and women are left by and large out of the
game. The tendency to favor males is furthermore deep-rooted and far-reaching, starting in the home. Ariana and Manuela note that their parents never questioned whether they would leave the family business to their son or one of their daughters; it was assumed that the son would take over and the daughters would find employment elsewhere.

Though each of the women I spoke with was studying at or had graduated from university, many were uncertain about their commitment to their careers with regards to the prospect of having a family. Federica and Valentine both spoke with admiration of their mothers' professional successes, but complained that their mothers had been absent when they were growing up, and had given priority to their careers over their children. Though Valentine had been quick to point out that men can now take paternity leave when they have a child, and that "a lot will change because of that," she nevertheless said some time later that if she had children of her own, she would not work full time as her mother, a journalist, did, but would stay home. At 23, however, her goals are to get a master's in communications, and then to move to a developing country and work for several in public information communications.

Ariana, who is already working, is the most specific about her career goals, and often expressed the desire to make a lot of money. "Women have to take care of themselves," she says. "That's why I'm working. I'm going to make my own money, I'm going to take care of myself." She often says she would never marry, that men cannot be trusted, but this was usually in anger after an argument with her boyfriend; she has a tumultuous relationship with a young man four years her junior, also from the South. At other times she says she wants to have a family, but in the distant future. "I still have time; I'm little!" she says.

Viola shows a general reluctance to enter the standard working world. "I can't work 9 to 5—I know that much," she says. "I really can't bear the thought of jumping into the working world in some company. I can't do it. I would rather work on projects, things that interest me. Freelance." Interestingly, each of her friends I speak with says the same thing.

Viola says she heard about a potentially interesting training program to be a radio speaker for the RAI in Rome. "I heard about it because of a friend, she graduated with me
and is doing that now. But she didn’t want to tell me about it. She doesn’t want me down there. She has always been competitive with me.”

In fact, there does not seem to be a great deal of solidarity among women. Women who make their way do not seem to make great attempts to make the situation easier for those who come after them. Some women seem simply to prefer dealing with men. I was surprised by the following incident involving Ariana and Manuela, especially given some of our previous conversations: in order to negotiate a new contract, the women met with their landlord, a young woman of about 30, who was accompanied by her fiancé. Dissatisfied with the arrangements the landlord was suggesting, Ariana began to address the fiancé, who in reality had no say in the matter. He responded and took an active part in the conversation, and once they reached an agreement, Ariana said: “It’s nice to deal with someone intelligent for once.” The female landlord was predictably infuriated, and in fact lunged at Ariana, repeating regional epithets. “Can you believe that crazy bitch?” Ariana asked later. “And to think she has a boyfriend,” she added.

Analysis: Every woman for herself

The women I spoke with seem to believe that institutions as well as working conditions in Italy favor men, but they seem reluctant to try to change things, and sometimes even participate in favoring males. Although nearly everyone I spoke with said they disliked or even hated Fede, his newshour graced the screen many times when we watched TV together—and they controlled the dial. Fede’s presence is resented but accepted; he seems to represent the well-connected raccomandati, or sinecure, a familiar figure in Italy. (Like many other successful men in the media, he is known to be a member of the Masonic lodge to which Berlusconi belongs.) Fede plays the traditional role of the tyrannical male, telling everyone what to do and how things are, micro-managing the weather forecast, flirting with the weather girl in a way that lacked the flippancy of most Italian television banter.

In contrast, several of the women admired Lilli Gruber for her standard professional approach to the news, but others objected to her as appearing too “strong” for a woman. As we will see in the ‘Variety’ section, Gruber does not resemble other female hosts on television, who are characterized by their unbridled cheeriness. In
general her image must be appreciated, since her sudden entrance into politics and bid for the European parliament was successful. Nevertheless, Valentine and Manuela seemed especially hesitant to speak of her. I thought perhaps Valentine’s close relationship to journalism (as a communications student with a journalist mother) might make her more critical, but both she and Manuela seemed simply to dislike the character she presented on television: a tough woman.

Overall, the young women I spoke with disagreed with the credo of the previous subgeneration’s working woman that women can ‘have it all’. A few felt they had been somewhat neglected as children because their mothers attempted to achieve this goal, and said they would not make the attempt to have a family and a full-time career at the same time. Valentine, who says she wants children in the future, was well-informed about men’s right to take paternity leave, and brought it up when discussing challenges women face in being hired for jobs; nevertheless she said she has no intention of sharing childcare responsibilities with her future partner.

In this sense, the women are on one hand motivated to have a career and financial independence, but on the other they are attached to the traditional [read patriarchal] patterns of their grandparents’, where the woman stays home with the children. Like Valentine, they are aware of the possibility for change and valued it, but seem to distrust it, and do not want to opt for it in their own lives. The expressed resentment over the obstacles in women’s career paths that defy legal rulings demanding equal opportunity for women, but most (excepting Alisa) said they would eventually stop their careers themselves to make time for their families. It is again important to note that none of them has clear plans for starting a family; most have career and university plans that will take them beyond the age of thirty, meaning that if they follow them and then start a family, they will likely be part of the Italian trend of a late-start family with few children.

The women seemed prepared to pursue career goals despite the challenges they perceived; in fact, like the Fede newshour, they seemed to accept what would elsewhere be considered discrimination and harassment as an inevitable struggle one has to face. Valentine was the most positive about women’s chances in Italy, arguing that the professions are indeed merit-based, since state exams guard their entry. She argued
furthermore that in certain fields it was an advantage to be an attractive woman, such as in public relations, but mentioned no case where it is problematic to be a woman.

Other demonstrated a greater reluctance to change the current situation by embracing favoritism of men in certain regards. After one conversation about competition among women, Alisa, a law graduate working for a domestic violence legal counsel center, said: "I like men better. I like men. I just get along with them better." Alisa, it should be noted, is a gay woman; she is in love with a woman, and has many female friends, but she says she finds the competition between women too detrimental sometimes for an effective working relationship. Other women I spoke with seemed to value men over women in spite of themselves. For all her frustration that men might be preferred over her in the job search, Ariana showed a clear preference for dealing with a man in working out the apartment contract deals. Indeed, she probably had a basic personality conflict with the woman, but her incredulity later that the "bitch" had a boyfriend suggests the value she attaches to having a man by a woman's side.

When I discussed the incident with Ariana in more depth, she voiced resentment over the woman's easy life. I was surprised how much she knew: that the woman had inherited real estate in Siena and did not have to work since the rent she collected was enough to live on. Ariana seemed most incensed about the fact that she was engaged to the man who had accompanied her, and that they lived together in the country. More than money, she seemed to feel the woman did not deserve a man.

Italian feminist writing has often argued that there is a lack of solidarity among women, especially in the professional realm. My participants seem to confirm the allegation, though most are not yet active professionals. It seems that women are often unwilling to help even friends succeed in their professional lives (as in Viola's case) out of fear that what they have will be taken away from them. Others sometimes resent other women for what they have. They seem to accept the idea of working in existing social and professional systems, despite the acknowledged injustices. They seem to want to get by, and do not trust efforts to change the situation. As for feminism, it is the "f" word. Each one told me the same: "Ooo, I'm not a feminist."
There is a corps of Italian celebrities who man the myriad variety and talk shows, monopolize the celebrity coverage on magazine shows, and appear in sundry commercials. They are household names, to the point that programs are often described by saying simply that this or that person is in it. As Pastacaldi wrote, the women are at once “everything, extremely pure and extremely sexual, a faithful wife and an unfaithful lover...the ideal protector of the domestic sphere...and its products. As an option, once in a while she claims to be intelligent.”

Perhaps after Maria de Filippi, one perfect match for this description is Antonella Clerici, who is known to have graduated with a law degree before beginning work as a television journalist and eventually becoming what could be termed a professional host. One of her current shows is another hybrid talk-reality format called “Adesso, Sposami” (“Marry Me, Now!”), where frustrated lovers appear dressed for their own weddings, lure their partners to the set under false pretences, then pop the question and wait tensely for an answer.

Watching on a Tuesday evening, Viola appears incensed. “Did you hear that?” she asks me, then mimics for my benefit: “’Ah, you look so lovely now in your wedding dress, so feminine! [To the imaginary audience] Usually she goes around in sporty clothes and tennis shoes, but the night of her friend’s wedding, she had made up her face and was dressed up, and that’s how she conquered her boyfriend’s heart.’ Deficiente!”

On screen, the pasty young woman with frizzy reddish hair has returned on stage prepared for nuptials, just in case, and while Clerici gushes, the camera tilts up and down to show the transformation piece by piece. The woman smiles, looking even more nervous than embarrassed, and says nothing. “Of course,” Viola said facetiously. “If you want a man, you have to wear heels and make up and show yourself off. What else are you going to do?”
I am reminded of her sarcasm a few days later when I enter the kitchen where Manuela and her two friends are sitting around the table eating dinner in front of the television. It is about 9:30, and primetime on Channel 5. On screen I recognize the usual suspects: two smiling, long-haired brunettes in identical bathing suits, listening attentively and responding to questions posed by a familiar celebrity in a gray suit.

“What—is this Miss Italy?” I ask. “No—Velline!” they reply in unison. An easy mistake. Instead of competing to become Miss Italy, they are competing to become one of the two featured dancers on the popular variety/news satire Striscia la Notizia. The winners will spend a season dancing in revealing costumes on the desks of the presenters, who are dressed in suits. They will then kneel on the desks and reply to a joke or two before leaving. After being introduced every weekday for a TV season, the public will know their names, they may have opportunities to do commercials and be paid especially well, or even to pose for a calendar. And, almost inevitably according to Valentine, they will date soccer players.

“That’s what soubrettes do,” she tells me.

There is an awkward silence when I enter the kitchen, and I realize the young women are a bit embarrassed to be watching the show. A woman is being interviewed.

“Ah! A Sicilian!” one of Manu’s friends finally calls out. “What an idiot,” the other replies. “Let’s switch to soccer; at least there are some handsome men!” she proposes, and switches the channel. There is an important match in the European finals tonight, the Netherlands versus Portugal. “I love tall blond men!” the second friend calls out. “I like the Portuguese better!” Manu replies. “I’m blond; I like dark men!”

They are doing just what men are expected to do watching women on TV: making comments about their appearance.

Discussions: looking at the ‘look’

Valentine objects to the ubiquitous soubrettes on television. “The thing that really upsets me are the dancing girls,” she says. “I mean, here’s a woman on TV who doesn’t have the right to talk.” Unlike the velline on Striscia who are called by name and, for a decade, have been allowed to say a few words in each show, most soubrettes dance, smile, and return backstage. The advent of reality shows has changed the system somewhat; now
that several shows are documenting the selection process and involving the audience, soubrette wannabes are speaking up. Valentine finds this even worse. “It’s like they really try to find the stupidest ones, so that if they ever do talk, it’s really stupid. They do it on purpose, I think; like women are so stupid that’s all they can do, just stand there and smile. I guess they’re on there to appeal to men, but it’s upsetting.” Unfortunately, one of Valentine’s favorite programs, the gameshow *Passaparola*, is famous for its team of soubrettes, called *letterine*. “I try to ignore them,” she says.

Not only are the soubrettes the poster girls for sex appeal on television, they are also classic representatives of a popular concept, *la ragazza solare*, the girl with the sunny disposition. They always smile, and those who have the occasion to speak are cheerful and forgiving of any joke at their expense. The term *solare* appears to be reserved for women and girls; mothers often describe their daughters as such, and value the trait. The sunny girl expresses extreme delight when running into friends and acquaintances; the friend does not just look good (*stai bene*)—she looks fabulous (*stai benissimo!*). Things are not fine; they are wonderful. The sunny girl can handle anything, and moreover, she is ecstatic about it. My participants often used the term to describe their friends; Ariana was the only one who applied it to herself, but everyone around her agreed.

There is a real life phenomenon parallel to the soubrette phenomenon on television, at least regarding appearance: going out. If the soubrettes’ costumes are relatively extreme for their variety shows, young women also dress in an extreme variant of their day to day wear when they go out on the town.

At Manuela’s house on a Friday evening at around 11 PM, Ariana and Manuela are almost ready to go. They skipped a theater performance in the early evening in order to prepare “calmly” (*con calma*) to go out for drinks. Ariana is in the bathroom with the door open, finishing drying and curling her hair. Manuela, already dressed in a white mini skirt, midriff-length T-shirt and short denim jacket, is walking around shoeless looking for her cell phone, which is playing a lilting tune somewhere nearby. Ariana switches off the hairdryer, and the two sisters stand in the hallway and struggle into three-inch heels. “I only wear these when Ariana’s here!” Manuela laughs. “I always get stuck in the cobblestones!” Ariana smiles and shakes her head. They look strikingly different.
from three hours ago. Their eyeglasses have been replaced by contacts, their long hair worn down, Ariana’s carefully curled. Both are completely—to me dramatically—made up. They head down the stairs to the same street Manuela jogged up just some hours before with a sweatshirt tied around her waist because she would be too “ashamed” (mi vergogno!) if her T-shirt rode up to reveal her stomach while she ran. In the evening, different standards apply.

This is the time to socialize and make a good impression (bella figura). Manuela says it is particularly important to look “OK” tonight for her, because she has a crush on one of her classmates and is going to meet him together with a group of friends. Ariana says she is also more nervous tonight about her appearance, because she has recently gotten back together with her ex-boyfriend, and will meet him later.

We arrange to meet in front of a popular café an hour later, and I find Manuela and Ariana standing together with a group of seven other young women, friends of theirs. They are all frowning, discussing what to do, but in two’s and three’s. To me, they look nearly identical in dress, hair, make-up, and I notice from their accents they are furthermore nearly all from the South. They seem to have a group look; they remind me of soubrettes, dressed uniformly to the nines, moving in unison, no one speaking up.

My participants all cited friends and peers as having a strong influence on how they dress. For the most part, they socialized with different groups that each had a different “look” (the English word is used in Italian). They also cited external influences on their tastes like shop windows, magazines, and television. Dressing badly or inappropriately was often linked to shame. Viola and her friends often told me that appearances were not important to them, citing their eclectic, retro-style dress. Another time, however, Viola also had me come with her as she arranged a seven-visit session of light-pulsation therapy to remove facial hairs that bother her, and which will cost four times her monthly rent. She also has a nose ring that caused her problems with her family. “I guess I dress differently at home in Sardinia than I do here,” she explained. “There’s more pressure down there, maybe—I mean, there are my mother’s friends. For her it’s really important that I don’t embarrass her. Shame is a big deal. She’s over 70
now and maybe her ideas are from another time. One time she visited me when I had a nose ring, I thought she would kill me, but in the end her final comment was, ‘just don’t come to [her town] like that; I’ll be ashamed.’

Viola added as a case in point that young Sienese women are usually very smartly dressed in a mainstream, trendy style, and suspects that there is a lot of pressure among them to keep up appearances. Federica, my Sienese participant, confirmed feeling pushed to dress a certain way, and to socialize with people from her own community. “Everyone knows everyone from here,” she said. “People from outside don’t always realize that; it’s different for them.” For Valentine, Siena has a much more relaxed atmosphere than Milan and the elite private university where she used to study. “It was like going to school in a shop window!” she said. “You wouldn’t come in a big baggy pullover and trousers—you just wouldn’t. You’d feel strange.” Valentine still does not wear big baggy pullovers; each time I see her she is dressed in bright colors with matching accessories.

All my participants expressed having particular expectations for themselves and others for dress at different times of day. They also made a strong distinction between ‘home’ and ‘outside’. In the households where I stayed, the residents most often wore pajamas or sports clothes at home until just before they went out, when they changed and prepared themselves. “I learned it as a child from my grandmother,” Valentine explained. “She made us change our clothes as soon as we got home, in case we got dirty.”

Beyond presentable clothes, the young women’s bodies are a focal point of their appearances—and their efforts to tailor them. Ariana, Valentine, and Manuela all go to a fitness studio regularly (though not in the summer months, when many close), while Federica runs. Viola and Alisa do not do sports. Viola is underweight. “I eat so much!” she says. “I can’t gain weight—I’d like to!” She says she is quite satisfied with how her body looks, however. “I’m thin (sottile), and I like how that looks, it suits me.” She says she would like to do sports for her health and for muscle tone, but is afraid she would lose too much weight in doing so. Her doctor recommends it, however, as she suffers from low blood pressure and is anemic, and complains of having no energy. “I eat only

*Manuela told me later that, dressed to the nines, she did eventually meet the classmate she liked. When I asked her how it went, she said she was not sure; she had felt nervous and spent most of the time talking
junk (Schifezze),” she says. “I never learned how to cook because my mother is such a good cook. She always knew exactly what I needed to eat to be healthy.” Viola rarely eats at home other than toast in the morning, and rarely makes it to the grocery store before closing time. She eats mostly sandwiches and snacks at the aperitif hour. “I drink a lot of beer,” she says, smiling.

Manuela in contrast, though also slim, is on a diet, eating Special K for two meals daily, and otherwise avoiding carbohydrates. Her sister Ariana, who is underweight, says smoking keeps her at her ideal weight. In addition to sports, she uses an electrode device to stimulate muscle activity in the abdomen and gluteus. “I saw it advertised on TV and it really seems to work,” she said. Sometimes Manuela borrows it, but she says, “It feels strange! I don’t like it!”

Women’s eating habits seem to spark even unsolicited commentary at times. A male friend of Manuela’s roommate often said when entering the kitchen “Ma che fai? Mangi??” (“What are you doing—eating??”) as a joke, and asked extensive questions about the food. Manuela always answered by laughing and defending her eating in a sheepish voice. “It’s lunch—I haven’t eaten today!” or “It’s just spinach and chicken!”

A similar situation proved more awkward with Valentine, who is slightly overweight. We had met on a particularly hot afternoon and decided to drink something in a café. The waiter brought a bowl of peanuts, which Valentine especially likes, and she ate most of them. Next to us, a boisterous group of middle aged men called for the waiter to bring more peanuts, and possible potato chips if he could find them, as they had finished theirs. He nodded silently and on his way stopped to clear our peanut bowl. “Wow, you have an appetite!” he said with a grin. Valentine blanched, then blushed. Later, after we had left, Valentine said: “It’s so hot...I haven’t been eating much these days...” It was clear to me she still felt ashamed by the waiter’s remark.

Such remarks were common for my participants to make when we were watching television, however. “What a cesspool,” (Che cessa!), Viola often said when we watched an interview with one actress or another; someone clearly not so much of a cesspool that it prevented her screen career. Asking her about the alleged ‘cesspools’, the conversation turned to Chelsea Clinton, who years back had the unfortunate nickname of “Cessa” about engineering.
Clinton in Italy. "Well, it’s awful to say, but she really was an ugly girl," Viola said. "She looks a lot better now." When I remind her that she was about 12 or 13 when her father became president, she responded, "Yes, but why didn’t they do something? I mean, poor thing—you know she’s going to be on TV all the time, and looking like that!" My participants seem to apply the same standards to people who appear on television as they apply to themselves before leaving the house; if they don’t look good, it is a matter of shame. “Even Berlusconi got plastic surgery,” Federica joked. “—Not that they could do much for him.”

Analysis

Just as they judge women on television, women seem to judge themselves and others constantly when they go out in public. Making a good impression, a bella figura is armor against critical eyes and acid tongues—especially one’s own. A woman’s appearance can be a source of pride or shame, not only personally, but also for those who associate with her. The controlling eyes of family, peers, and local acquaintances have an effect on women’s dress, more directly on what they do not wear. Viola does not wear a nose ring in her hometown; Manuela does not wear a cropped T-shirt during the daytime.

My participants’ criticisms of women on television generally reflected concerns they reported having about themselves, that is, what they were concerned others would think of them. This one was too fat, that one too stupid, the one over there dressed like a prostitute (troia). Even pre-adolescent Chelsea Clinton was not safe from criticism. At times, Italy feels like a fashion police state, where women constantly check themselves and those around them when they go out in public. Men in general are seen as less discriminating*; women, true to the role of the subaltern in a hegemony, enforce the standards to which they hold themselves.

In addition to their dress, women’s bodies are also the objects of self-regulating and public commentary, as are their eating practices. Manuela is dieting to become thinner, while Ariana smokes to stay thin, and Viola ignores advice to exercise in order to maintain her weight and body type. Meanwhile, men often tease women about eating,
like Manuela’s roommate’s friend; I never heard the “What are you doing—eating?!” remark posed by anyone but a man to a younger or same-age woman. Even a waiter—a total stranger—saw fit to comment on Valentine’s appetite when she ate the peanuts he had served her, and this in the face of the neighboring table, a group of decidedly overweight men who were calling for more snacks. His remark was meant to shame her, and it did; she had made a brutta figura, a “bad impression”, by eating heartily.

The source of the rail-thin ideal is the subject of heated debate, especially since it is often held responsible for the rising rates of disordered eating among the country’s young women, and the already dramatic prevalence of underweight among age groups between 18 and 35. Certainly the presence of the fashion industry, a source of “Made-in-Italy” pride, can be taken into account for promoting a certain ideal. It is difficult to be in Milan and not see a model, and even more difficult to watch television without running into them. As is the case in all developed—and now many developing countries—the ideal body promoted in the media is thinner than ever. Despite the buxom, iconic beauties of Claudia Cardinale and Anna Magnani, however, Italian media—and Italian women—have long preferred images of slender women. During the Mussolini era, even before the fashion industry as such began in Italy (tracing its roots to the post-war years), women rejected the husky female images promoted by the government, as well as the matronly fashions it advocated (Beevor 2000). On the other hand, in a country where the classic simile for ugliness is “brutta come la fame” (ugly as hunger), starving oneself has clearly not always been a virtue.

Tomes have been written on the matter, and none as yet can offer a definitive conclusion. My interest in this question sparked the development of my research project, but it is far beyond the scope of this study. More relevant to the issues at hand, perhaps, is to consider what the thin ideal the women accept means. Winkler offers a compelling explanation:

The ideal female body may signal refusal of a “purely reproductive destiny” while simultaneously displaying obedience to the ideals delineated by medical and consumer culture. Surely, this is a hard
act to perfect; like the ballerina, the ideal woman must work hard, with no guarantee that her work will ever produce its desired end. (Winkler)

Thus the thin body can be seen as another mixed message, rejecting fertility and motherhood on one hand, but conforming to consumer culture on the other.

The thin body *par excellence* on Italian television is of course the soubrette, to whom some of my participants said they objected. The young women nevertheless continued to watch shows featuring soubrettes—and even shows dedicated to selecting soubrettes from a crowd of hopefuls. The soubrette is a familiar image, and in addition to the ideal of thin beauty, she is also happy, docile, and young. These qualities are expressed in the more acceptable term of “sunny disposition”; the cheerful, good-natured, well-behaved girl. (These are not qualities for men, or even little boys.) That backstage the soubrettes are jockeying for more close-ups, more airtime than their fellow / rival dancers, is a known fact but on stage remains hidden beneath their winning smiles. Whether or not they are also intelligent is largely irrelevant when most soubrettes do not have the opportunity to express themselves in words.

Even in real life, appearance seems to be a favored mode of expression in certain circumstances. Viola’s objection to Clerici’s argument that a woman uses high heels to attempt to win over a man may not be universally valid. Manuela, who found it difficult to speak to the classmate she liked, tried to express her interest through her dress. Once she finally did have a conversation with him, she discussed engineering—not the usual stuff of television banter. When Manuela joined her friends, however, who were all dressed in the same highly styled manner, they formed an identifiable, impenetrable group wandering the evening from place to place like all the other groups (in Siena there rarely is a destination). They were like a troop of soubrettes: matching, keeping each other in line, not talking to anyone outside.

In Italy, friendship between women can be a treacherous ground. Manuela often complained of her friends’ erratic behavior, especially of being snubbed by them for no clear reason. She said it was difficult to make friends outside of her department (and in engineering there are few women already) because women are often closed to the idea of getting to know another woman. (Men, she said, are more receptive, but she never felt
entirely convinced that they had no ulterior motive for friendship.) Manuela also had recently had the difficulty of having to move house. She chose not to move into an apartment with other women for fear of their cattiness—in accordance with her older sister’s advice. Viola and Valentine confirmed this problem; both have had difficulties in the past with female roommates, and prefer to share apartments with men.

Her experience confirms the situation Ginsborg (2003: 105) describes, based on results of the 1986 Eurisko survey, that shows women, though especially housewives, were the most likely to declare having few friends. Ginsborg attributes this fact to women’s being “blocked” by family obligations from the working world, which indeed stands to reason; I would argue however that at least to a small degree, competition between women can also stifle friendships among those with the opportunity to foster them.

Although they report feeling pressure from family, friends, and peers, women are the agents that enforce adherence to (or at least acknowledgement of) physical beauty ideals. There is a strong sense of competition between women that often manifests itself in criticism of appearances. Like the soubrettes on television, women sometimes have groups of friends or peers for whom they seem to feel a stronger sense of competition than camaraderie. Dressing up to go out may be one way of seeking the attention of potential romantic interests, but it is also a way to assert one’s position in a group.
CHAPTER 4: MIXED MESSAGES—FICTION & REALITY

It is a Wednesday morning at around 10 AM, and Manuela and her sister Ariana are chortling into their cereal over a black and white film on RAI 2.

"Who is she??" the old man sitting with his cane next to him in the armchair belts forth.

"No one, no one!" a young man with a moustache pleads, his eyebrows arching.

“What were you doing?”

"—Nothing! We were just talking! We went for a walk—“

"—And let everybody see you!! That’s it! You’re going to marry her!”

"—But I don’t know her!!”

“You’ll marry her, and that’s final!!”

"-O--!!"

“O-o!” mimic Ariana and Manuela, and explode laughing. “It’s exactly our dialect!” Ariana explains to me. “It’s just the accent from our town, but even stronger because it’s old!” They teach me some words in dialect and explain what’s happening. The young man was seen in public with a young woman, so to save her reputation he has to marry her, or her family will come after him. “And don’t think that it’s so different today, because it’s not!” Ariana says.

All my participants said they grew up watching films on television, and that feature films are their favorite television programming. Before the advent of Berlusconization in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were more films on broadcast TV. Nowadays, late nights and mornings are still good times to catch old films, especially on the RAI, thanks to their considerable archives. Nowadays at primetime, movies are usually more recent Hollywood films, and have to compete with a heavy sprinkling of reality shows. Reality shows are reinvented each season, pushing the limit that much further (“They had sex on Big Brother!” Manuela tells me.) One of this season’s most popular is a show featuring celebrities who must live together in a Tuscan country house doing things the way they were done two hundred years ago, grinding their own grain, tending animals, and so forth. Some of the celebrities on the show are former
country house doing things the way they were done two hundred years ago, grinding their own grain, tending animals, and so forth. Some of the celebrities on the show are former stars of other reality shows; they enjoy what Neal Gabler (1998: 163) calls “the Zsa Zsa factor” (after Zsa Zsa Gabor); being famous for being famous. They are also often famous for a regional way of talking; the tough Neapolitan man, the feisty Sicilian woman. Like talk shows, reality shows give ample airtime to non-actors from around Italy who often speak and act in regionally marked ways—and are not necessarily ‘politically correct’.

At the elusive ‘after lunch’ hour I meet Viola at a friend’s house where Uomini e Donne is already in full swing. One man must make the difficult choice of selecting the love of his life among three (to me identical looking) brunettes, having already narrowed the choice down from twenty. With each episode the choice narrows as he dates and rejects potential matches. To Viola the choice is clear. “The one on the right is an idiot, the one in the middle has a faccia di merda, but the one on the left is really cute. And she’s from the Veneto. Listen to how she talks!” she tells me. “It’s just like my ex-boyfriend.” Viola’s friend disagrees. “The one in the middle is much cuter—much cuter. But she’s so annoying; typical Roman, talks talks talks.” I ask them what they think of the young man. “Oh, he’s an idiot,” Viola says. “A total idiot,” her friend agrees. “Look at him; hair gelled back just right, outfit from the store window, physique from the gym—what do you think he does all day? He doesn’t work, he’s obviously not a student, he’s a do-nothing. These are the people you get on TV.” Viola is quiet. We leave before the final selection is made.

Later that afternoon I join Manuela in the kitchen where she is again eating a bowl of Special K, this time watching the American sit-com The Nanny. When I ask her what accent the nanny has, she tells me she is from Frosinone. “It’s all a big joke about that—that she’s the southern woman with big hair and make up who wants to get married.” It makes me laugh, and I tell Manuela that in America she’s Jewish from Queens. Manuela seems shocked. “O, I never realized—this show is from America!” she says. “Well, it works anyway!” Watching, I am impressed how well it works; instead of Yiddish, the nanny’s retorts and asides play on the dialect of Frosinone, south of Rome towards
Naples. Moreover, the aesthetic, the intrusive relatives, and the importance of food fit the stereotype.

**Discussions: Regionalism, or “Moglie e Buoi dai paesi tuoi”**

Regionalism is as much a source of debate in Italy as it is a source of humor. Television is widely held responsible for the development and promulgation of the standard Italian language, so the use of dialect on the screen is subversive, offering great comic potential, or suggesting that the speaker is backward and does not know any better. Watching an old film set in northern Apulia, Manu and Ariana found the use of dialect as funny as the situation depicted.

The sisters insisted that the situation has changed very little from the scenario we witnessed with the shotgun wedding. “So many young girls—really young! 12, 13—are dressing ten years older and going to the discos, drinking, having a great time and then they get pregnant, so they get married, have another child,” Manuela said. “The only difference now is that they get divorced after that. So you get a 24 year-old mom with three children and two ex’s. It’s crazy!”

Ariana added that she feels the attitude of Southern men has not changed since the time of the film, perhaps the early 1950s. She told me that with her old boyfriend from home, with whom she maintained a long-distance relationship for four years, she was not “allowed” (*non dovevo*) to look at other men; walking in town she had to keep her eyes cast downwards.

“But I only like Southern Italian men,” she says. “They’re terrible, though. They treat you like a slave—really like a slave! ‘Bring me a cigarette’, and all that…but they’re very passionate. They’re very attached to their women, you really feel their love. In the North, they’re colder. Maybe they’re more fair, but they’re more passive…I would miss that.”

When I asked her, she told me she had never dated a Northerner; it’s her impression from living in Siena, but mostly from television. “I might have to move to Milan for work in the next few years, but I will only date Southerners!” For now, Ariana has her on-again off-again relationship with a young man from Naples. Her arguments with him, which take place in front of everyone at home, often in the kitchen, echo the
debates on talk shows. One late Sunday afternoon, after a peaceful lunch, they began arguing because Ariana’s boyfriend has been flirting with other girls. In defense, he wavered in and out of dialect. “O, it’s who I am; take it or leave it!” Ariana and Manuela both shouted at him for his “southern” attitude, although they too are from the South. Then Ariana exploded. “I am a beautiful girl! You think I can’t do the same thing every second of every day?” Finally after they made up and he left, Ariana sat at the kitchen table with her head on her hand.

“I know he’s wrong,” she said. “I’m just someone who can’t be alone. I’m really in a bad state then (sto male).” Manuela heard this from the other room and comes to the doorway. “Alone? Wha-?” she said dramatically. “Who’s alone—you have me! Who am I?” She came into the kitchen and sat on Ariana’s lap, and they laughed as the chair broke.

The tradition of having a relationship with someone from a similar background is evidenced throughout Italy in the popular saying “Moglie e buoi dai paesi tuoi” (Wives and oxen from your own region). In the past, one had little choice, but today, although she has emigrated, Ariana says in effect that she wants to keep her choice as narrow. She says she feels wronged by this boyfriend, as she did by the last, but seems unwilling to look for a different partner. Instead, when we were watching television after a bad encounter with her boyfriend, she said: “I don’t want to marry. I hate men.” She was flustered for a second, then added, “I mean—I mean of course I like men, I’m only attracted to men, for the love of god…but I don’t trust them.”

Federica told me of similar pressures in Siena. “When you’re from here, your family really wants you to marry someone else from here. ..Sienese only date Sienese…. Parents used to organize parties and only invite the children who came from good families….Two of my friends married really young—when they were 21 or 22—and both of them are already divorced. And then there’s my cousin—she’s also one of my closest friends. Oh, this was unbelievable. She started dating this Sienese guy whose dad is—well, a very important person here, very wealthy. And her dad, my uncle, is also very well-connected here….anyway the families were really happy and they were dating for five years, and then what happens? She decides she can’t go on with him and dumps him. Her family freaked out. ‘How can you do this to us? He was perfect! Can’t you change
your mind?’ Can you imagine? It was so terrible. She got really depressed. It got so bad that she finally moved out, now she has her own apartment.”

Federica feels that unconventional family circumstances spared her the brunt of this pressure and made it possible for her to move away from Siena, and ultimately branch out when she returned. Federica says she does not know if she will marry. “My upbringing was unusual. My parents split up, there was a scandal of sorts. I saw my mother dating; she had several serious boyfriends over the years, but she never married again, and I think that was her choice. She had married very young, had been a housewife, and then everything changed, including her values. I think I understand that; I think I learned it, too.” She added that she would never go out with a fellow Sienese again.

Similarly, Alisa has also distanced herself from her native region in Sicily since moving to Siena six years ago to study, although she still maintains strong ties with her family and friends, and visits often. She said that as a gay woman, “If I’d had to stay there I would have killed myself.” She has not told her family she is gay, and says she never will. “I’m happy, they’re happy,” she said. “I am who I am, I do what I feel is right.” Alisa’s and Federica’s distance seems hard-earned. My other participants said they felt their regional ties had a stronger influence on them. None of them said she planned to return to her home region. Federica, who is still in Siena, wants to go abroad, as does Ariana. Ariana, Viola, and Alisa said returning to live in their home regions was out of the question. Manuela said she would consider returning to the South for a job opportunity, but added that there is little likelihood of that, given the employment problems there.

Issues relating to fidelity and infidelity in relationships seemed particularly tied to regional background. The taboo against female adultery remains especially strong among Southerners. One of the worst insults for men continues to be cornuto, telling a man he is a cuckold. This is part of the motivation behind Ariana’s experience of having to walk with her eyes averted when she was dating her first boyfriend. It is also a reason why she will likely not have another boyfriend from that same town; although they broke up, she was ‘his’. Meanwhile, crimes of passion involving revenge after betrayal still fill the cronaca nera pages of Italian newspapers. Alisa points out: “In Italy until the mid-1970s
you could kill your wife if you caught her with another man, and you were pardoned by the law. A woman who killed her husband when she caught him with another woman would go to jail.” Even today, such crimes often yield lighter sentences than other acts of violence.

In the past, my participants said, it was more acceptable for men to betray women. Today, despite their disapproval, my participants seemed resigned to it. A 30-year-old student, also from Apulia, told me about a crisis she had last year when she discovered her boyfriend was seeing another woman. After moving home for a period and seeing a psychiatrist, she decided to return to him. Now she says she is very worried about getting older. She said, “My boyfriend’s good friend always tells me: ‘When I’m 60 I’m going to be surrounded by women, and when you’re 40 no one’s going to look at you anymore.’ He says that a woman who hasn’t made it by 25 is finished. And I hate it!” She added, “The only thing attractive about older men is power, when they’re successful. And I think when an older woman has the same power, she is also attractive. But up till now, very few women have been in the position to have power!” Ariana seems to be drawing the same conclusion, announcing that her work is her first priority whenever she is upset with her boyfriend, whom she suspects of having affairs.

It struck me as odd, however, that though I had heard so many men were unfaithful, and there was such a strong cuckold taboo, I had not heard of any perfidious women. I asked an acquaintance, a 26-year-old woman from Palermo. “I have a moral objection to it because I discovered my fiancé was unfaithful just before we were supposed to get married,” she prefaced, “but a lot of women I know—friends of mine—cheat on their boyfriends. They just hide it better. And they don’t just cheat on their boyfriends, they go out with their boyfriends’ best friend, things like that.” She told me that in her social circle in Palermo she has developed a bad reputation, because she has dated casually since her broken engagement (rather than find a new long-term relationship), and is thus considered promiscuous. She told me, “A friend of mine who has a long term boyfriend, who is one of those who never go out anymore after finding a boyfriend, was supposed to meet me one evening. This woman has been cheating on her boyfriend with a friend of his for months, lying, telling her parents she was sleeping over at a friend’s house, having him drop her off at her house, pretending to open the front
door till he drives off, then sneaking around the corner where the other boy is waiting. She called me before we were supposed to meet and said, ‘Sorry, I can’t come. My boyfriend doesn’t want me going out with you in public.’ I mean, you lie about everything else, why don’t you lie to him about me, too?” she reasoned.

After Uomini e Donne, I asked Viola about the problem of having a promiscuous reputation. “You just have to be clever and do what you want,” she said. She added that the smaller and more southern the town in Italy is, the more important (and scrutinized) the woman’s reputation.

Analysis: keeping a safe distance, or a close watch
Regionalism is often considered a joking matter, launching stories that begin, “Well in my town…” My participants, all living on their own in Siena, studying or beginning their careers with the goal of stability and independence, spoke of their hometowns as the site of a past life; even Federica, who grew up in Siena. They seem nevertheless to continue to take traditional messages from their regions seriously, and to hold on to, what could be considered, the devils they know. Instead of trying to change things they disagree with or that seem disadvantageous to them, they simply maintain their distance.

Living in Siena, those far from home are free from the watchful eyes of relatives and neighbors, and do not have to worry so much about developing a ‘bad reputation’—which would reflect back on their families. My acquaintance from Palermo felt burned enough from her broken engagement to put her reputation on the line, as it were; she dated several different men, and as a result was blacklisted by her friends’ boyfriends, who did not want their girlfriends to associate with a puttana, as she put it. The irony of the situation is bitter: a woman who on the surface is a traditional, devoted girlfriend, who does not make eye contact with other men in public, swear, or go out without her boyfriend can secretly live freely go with whomever she wants. The woman who is honest with her partners is branded loose and excluded. If she had done the same thing in Siena, as an outsider she would not have drawn so much censure. (For a Sienese, however, the ramifications would have been similar.) Women generally have more social freedom in the Center and North; the South, as Manuela and Ariana put it, “is thirty years ago”. They seem resigned to accept it; the woman from Palermo says she will live with
her situation, and my participants say they do not want to live in their home regions anymore.

Voices from the South are heard daily on television, especially in reality shows where photogenic everymen are given ample airtime to spell out their views. They often speak of the elements of traditional life as their grandparents lived it, when people married, married young, and married their neighbors. The women I spoke with in Siena, though most of them would not be considered wealthy, all had the economic advantage of being able to study and live on their own. (Coming from the South to the Center and North to study is an even greater investment, since incomes are markedly lower in the South, and prices far higher in the North.) The women have all put off marriage and having a family indefinitely, with the priorities of finishing their education and starting their careers taking precedence.

Although Federica was able to distance herself by leaving her city for a year (and by limiting contact with her contrada (an extremely close-knit sort of neighborhood community association in Siena), she acknowledged the pressure a close community can place on an individual to conform to their expectations through the example of her cousin. Her own father's rebellion from the role he had taken on as head of household, and her mother's subsequent transformation not only into a breadwinner but also a driven professional affected her point of view.

Ariana, in contrast, continues to seek out Southern men for relationships based after the traditional model, although she has suffered in such situations in the past. She says she is unwilling to consider a relationship with someone from elsewhere; instead she formulates her situation as one of two alternatives: either supporting a problematic Southern man, or being career-driven, professionally successful, and single. I believe she really does like Southern men; at the same time, if she wanted to remain single and focus on her career, even more tradition-minded people from her region could understand her decision not to marry such wild boyfriends.

Most of my participants speak of romantic relationships, after their careers, as a focal point for the future. Valentine, Manuela, and sometimes Ariana also spoke of marriage as a goal. They each said they felt, however, that men were untrustworthy, and especially that they were unfaithful. Federica and Viola, whose parents divorced, said
marriage was something they felt unsure about. Viola said she cannot imagine staying with one person for very long. The women are in the awkward position of looking forward to a time in the near future when they are completely independent and making their own life decisions, but at the same time are afraid of losing the security of the traditional systems they know, despite their burdens.
Several of my participants, but especially Manuela and Viola, said they enjoyed watching commercials. “Sometimes when I’m reading in front of the TV, I only look up when the commercials are on, because they sound more interesting,” Viola explained. Commercials can be considered the most direct and urgent messages on TV because they are aimed at selling lifestyles, and with them, products.

Commercials are also the most directly interested in keeping women in the role of consumer. The products aimed at women range from household cleaners to food items to personal care products—one of the fastest growing sectors, as Ginsborg (2001) notes. Those products and commercials aimed directly at women seem to play on women’s particular, perhaps also traditional fears: fear that something will happen to the children, fear that they will age rapidly and lose their looks, fear that the household will run amok.

A much-advertised product that does not exist in my country—despite the American obsession with germs—is an anti-bacterial wash that can be used for edibles, just in case water is not enough. The commercial shows an informed mother who has just purchased fruit at the market which—unbeknownst to her—had fallen on the dirty sidewalk a few moments before. A close up shows the viewer a petri-dishful of paramecium on the peel. Fortunately she dips the fruit in the antibacterial wash, so that when a little hand reaches up to grab a piece, the audience sees in a repeat of the petri-dish view that there is not a paramecia in sight.

Another ad addresses the dreaded problem of “Bucio d’arancia” (orange-peel skin), or cellulite. A close up on a young woman’s disgruntled face after a shot of the
orange skin lets us know that even she suffers from cellulite. The ad promotes a new cream that rehydrates the skin to reverse the effect, just in time for bathing suit season. We see the young woman again, this time smiling confidently and striding away.

Food poisoned children and cellulite are just two of the dangers against which television warns; commercials also promote their messages in a more constructive approach, as in the following: A woman walks out of a massive stone building, looking pensive. She walks up to a waiting sports utility vehicle, and sits down in the passenger seat. “Well?” asks the apprehensive-looking young man at the wheel. “I’m already in the second month,” she answers, then smiles excitedly. The young man grins elatedly. Then, a look of worry. He glances to the backseat. “We’re going to need a bigger car!” She looks back. We see the spacious interior of the car, filled with sports equipment, a bird cage, magazines, and sundry articles—notably classifiable as male hobby items. “Honey, maybe we could clean it out a little…” she suggests cautiously.

Discussions: Mothers and sons
Viola shakes her head. “It’s all about the family these days,” she says once the commercial is over. “It’s Berlusconi, ever since he took over again. Marriage and children—because nobody’s getting married or having children!”

By and large, the women’s reactions to mothers on television was palpably mocking. The Italian mother has become a stereotype people love to make fun of; a doting, almost maudlin presence whose devotion—especially to her sons—is so intense as to inspire feelings of guilt\(^3\). Images of mothers seemed to be charged issues for the women I spoke with, who were reminded of their own, sometimes turbulent relationships with their mothers. They also discussed the possibility of becoming mothers themselves, and how they would and would not want to be in the future.

All the mothers of the women I spoke with worked outside the home, except for Alisa’s. Valentine and Federica’s mothers had also studied and graduated from university, and Valentine and Federica were the two participants who felt their mothers were very satisfied with and dedicated to their work. They were also the two who said

\(^3\) Many comparisons have been drawn between the cult of Mary and Italian filial devotion.
they had felt somewhat neglected by their mothers growing up. Federica’s experience is extreme, since she was alone at home during the week as an adolescent while her mother was working in Rome. Valentine, in contrast, grew up with both parents and a sister close to her age, and was taken care of by her grandmother (who lived with the family) while her parents were at work. Viola, in turn, who was often home alone when her (divorced) mother worked late, expresses sympathy for her mother, although they have always had a turbulent relationship. “She worked so hard, really... and she had to take care of me. Twenty years di merda.” Viola says her mother was successful in her work, and had always wanted a profession, but that her job itself as a government employee was not very fulfilling. She says she believes her mother did the best she could for her, noting that her mother opted to pay to send her to Catholic primary school.

When I asked about the women’s fathers to compare, they seemed to have different expectations of their time commitments. Elisa says she is very close to her father, and saw him evenings and weekends growing up, when he was home from work. Viola’s father lived in another city and traveled a great deal in their region for work, so she saw him only sporadically; she says she feels close to him, however, and appreciates that he, like her mother, afforded her opportunities he had not had, like the chance to study. Valentine also says she has a good relationship with her father, and admires him for his success at a demanding job that requires international travel. He was home less than her mother, but it was easier for her to accept.

Women’s attitudes seem to undergo a change when they find themselves in the role of the mother. Viola’s friend Gaia had her first child at the age of 22, before any of her peers, nearly all of whom are still childless. Today she is raising her 7 year-old boy together with her ex-boyfriend. Her situation has been unconventional from the start; she lived for several years in an occupied house in the country (a commune of sorts) before moving to her own apartment with her son. Summers she takes him for long bicycle tours of Italy, and during the year she often brings him out with her friends, sometimes till late. At the same time, however, her friends tease her for starting to sound like the television stereotype. One day she complained that her son is too handsome. “The little girls are already starting to phone,” she told us, laughing. “I tell them: This is Martino’s mama. Who is this? What do you want? Why do you want to speak to him?” I have to protect
him. I remember what it was like to be a little girl!” she says. “Watch out for the mom!!” (Attenta alla mamma!) one of her friends shouts. The others laugh.

Viola and Valentine both say they hope to have children—but express anxiety over the economic realities. “It’s so expensive to have a child, mamma mia!” Viola tells me as we watch a television commercial showing a children’s birthday party. “Food, clothes, daycare—it’s impossible! You need money. Do you know how much it costs to have a baby?” Valentine asks me the same question a few days later. “I saw an ad for supermarket specials on TV,” she said, “and a box of diapers—that lasts what, two days?—cost 20 Euros, on sale!” She said she can’t imagine how poor people can afford to have children. “It’s not just that—it’s also the food, the clothes, the furniture—it’s so expensive! And of course, you want to have nice things for the baby, feed it good food...no, I don’t see how it works! And especially these young people you see!”

With fewer and fewer children being born, there seems to be more attention given to children’s needs, and a demand for greater resources than before. Images of the happy family furthermore compete for airtime with stories of philandering husbands and broken marriages. Even this contradiction is mirroring Italian social reality, where tradition mandates that people marry and found families, but many couples live unofficially separated for decades and have a series of relationships. The participants who came from divorced families—Viola and Federica—reflected particularly on the risks of marrying to conform to social convention. Both women were more open to the idea of having children outside of a stable relationship, but said they were intimidated by the idea of having to raise a child on their own.

I did not expect my childless participants to have very specific ideas about the responsibilities they would expect a future father to bear in raising a child, but I found they had nothing to say on the matter except that the child’s father should be “there”. In general there seemed to be a prevailing attitude that men are incapable of domestic duties. In one sequence where a man is seen making a huge mess in the kitchen as he tries to cook a simple meal for his child, Manuela exclaimed, “He’s like my brother! You leave him alone in the house and tell him to clean it, you’ll come back and it’ll be even dirtier than when it started. No hope.” Viola had similar complaints about her male roommate. “He doesn’t clean—I mean ever—and the then when I finally tell him, ‘O, it’s

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your turn!' he waits till I’m at home so I can see him clean. And he can’t do anything! He waves the broom around and knocks everything over, and has all the cleaning supplies on the floor, and I have to close my door so I don’t see it. And then he’s so proud: ‘Look, I cleaned!’”

Despite their protests, however, the women also reported having limited experience themselves with many household chores. Out of all the participants, only Federica had experience doing laundry before leaving home, and Valentine had waited until this year to stop bringing her laundry home on the weekends. She says she still has to learn how to iron. Although Manuela and Ariana complained of having to help in the kitchen while their brother sat at the table, they both later said they did not know how to cook; their mother was so good at it, there had never been any need.

Another factor in traditional family power distribution that my participants brought up in our discussions in response to images of the family—though it rarely appears explicitly on television—is the matter of domestic violence. Alisa, who has been working with family abuse cases, is quick to note that family abuse is widespread in Italy and largely goes unreported. She says: “One of the most messed up things in this country is the violence—and you think it’s on the street? You think it’s the mafia? The hell it is; it’s the family! And nobody’s going to accuse their father, brother, grandfather…I’ve seen weird shit!” It is considered outmoded but still relatively normal for parents to strike their children. Alisa recalls that her mother slapped her regularly and also threw things at her when she misbehaved as a child and adolescent, but her father hit her only once. “You know those slaps where you have the mark on your face for days?” she asks. “My father does manual labor on the train tracks, his hands are like sandpaper—boof!” she imitates. Viola was also slapped by her mother growing up, and often beaten with a belt. She said the neighbors called the police several times to intervene, but when they came she never told them what had happened. Surprised by my participants’ experiences, I asked other women I knew in Siena about physical abuse as children and adolescents. I was even more surprised to find that also among them, only one said she had been beaten by her father (the neighbors also called the police often in her case, and she eventually left home at age 16), whereas several others said their mothers had beaten them. None of them ever reported abuse to the police.
Analysis: a woman’s place...

The goal of having a family seems to loom large in most of my participants’ minds, reinforced by external reminders from the media, as well as relatives, and the community. Perhaps partly because they are all still students or at an early stage in their careers, they nevertheless had no clear ideas about how they would accomplish their different goals of having children, a career, and in some cases living abroad. None reported having specific ideas about what the responsibilities of a future father of their children should be. They mentioned that he should be available and accessible, which seemed to indicate they expected he might be busy working, in keeping with the traditional model of the family.

The idea that men are incapable of doing anything in the household also supports this traditional model of the two-parent family, where the father goes out to work and the mother stays home to run the house and raise the children. When men are seen fumbling in the kitchen or in the hallway with a mop, the rote reaction is often, “what do you expect?” The domestic male as a bull in a china shop is certainly a popular one on television. After the men’s sweetly pathetic attempts fail bombastically, their wives or mothers—sometimes even their young daughters—appear with knowing smiles and handy domestic swipes, spot removers, or whatever the product may be. In our discussions as well as in more casual situations, my participants echoed the belief that men cannot manage domestic chores. Nearly all the women I spoke with (excepting Federica), however, said they are themselves as helpless around the house as the men they laugh about. They seemed to consider it a temporary problem, since they did not yet have homes of their own; their mothers were in charge of the family homes, and despite having their daughters assist with basic tasks, they did the work themselves.

Counihan (1999) examined attitudes towards housework in depth in her research in Tuscany in the early 1980s, arguing that women were reluctant to give up control over domestic matters because the household was a secure source of power, whereas work outside the home was uncertain. Most of my participants’ mothers took the middle of the road; except for Alisa’s, all the mothers worked full-time outside the home and still cooked the family dinner at night. The traditional family model changed for them; instead of having a father who worked and a mother who stayed home and ran the household,
they had fathers who worked and mothers who worked and also ran the household. Viola, who was alone at home with her mother, expressed her awareness of the effort this required on her mother’s part. As the same time, it could also be said that she accepted her mother’s work because of the sacrifice she was making to do it; her mother had little time to herself. Valentine, in contrast, says her mother is very dedicated to her job, and says she resented it a little when she was growing up. Unlike Viola’s mother, Valentine’s mother was the second income earner in their household, and since both parents were professionally successful, it was not financially urgent that both work; she wanted to. The children’s grandmother was available as a reliable caregiver, so she furthermore had little reason to worry when she left for work. Valentine seems to have resented the fact that her mother chose not to stay home with her and her sister. It does not bother her that her father did the same thing.

In her own life, Valentine has to reconcile different expectations: that she will pursue her career ambitions, have a family, and stay home with her children. Again, as the saying goes, tra il dire ed il fare, c’è di mezzo il mare; talking and actually doing are often two separate things—which seems to be the way of the world of mixed messages. Women can agree with one message, and agree with another that perhaps conflicts with the first, but which one finally prevails in a critical moment?

Despite an unconventional lifestyle and railing against such behavior in her private life, Gaia has found herself filling the shoes of the traditional over-protective mother, already concerned that little girls are phoning her son. She is not the mother of television commercials, with anti-bacterial swipes and a knowing smile, but she is reacting to something that seems deeply embedded in the experience of Italian women: the threat of other women.

The women I spoke with, though in their twenties, were familiar with betrayal by men; excluding Alisa (who dates women), each one had a story to tell from her own experience with boyfriends which ended in the dramatic revelation that he was unfaithful. Several women I spoke with had also grown up with philandering fathers. Of these women, some shared Viola’s attitude that it was simply their fathers’ characters that they needed the attention of other women; another woman told me she could sympathize with her father, since her mother was “difficult” and they fought often, but could not divorce.
for religious and social reasons. Knowing about their fathers’ affairs, the women often seemed to feel like accomplices. All said they did not discuss these matters with their mothers. The father-daughter bond could in this way disrupt the bother-daughter relationship. A mother-son relationship, in turn, as Ginsborg (2001) points out, can be one of the strongest interpersonal bonds to be found, since a mother often views her son as the one man she can trust.

There is a strong current in Italian television promoting the traditional family: a domestic mother, a working father, several children, an immaculate household. This family is a cornerstone of the hegemonic system in Italy, keeping women and children in their places, men working, and everyone dependent on consumer products. Women’s interpretation of television images of the happy family, however, are often informed by their own experiences with their fathers and partners of betrayal. There is furthermore sometimes an undercurrent of violence in the traditional image that seems to create a further sense of mistrust among women. Mothers-in-law are to be dreaded, even daughters cannot be trusted completely, and other women present the threat of alienating the partner’s or son’s affections. The often destructive reality of traditional family dynamics is difficult to hide. Perhaps this is one reason women like Viola and Federica (and sometimes Ariana) say they might not want to marry, and consider having children on their own.
UNIT 3

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

A great deal of attention has been given to the (possible) effects television has on the body, especially the female body. Finkelstein (192) writes that “The value of appearance has been grossly inflated” in modern times, and that women are more vulnerable to culturally defined ideals of physical appearance because of their subordinate status” (182). After my research in Italy, I concur with the sense of Finkelstein’s statement, but question the notion of women’s ‘vulnerability’ as related to images. As women, and arguably members of a subaltern category of Italian society, my participants seemed to exercise agency in selecting the images they admired. They also at times expressed disapproval of deviant images, and used television images as criteria for judging themselves and those around them, contributing to an already-existing, strong sense of competitiveness between women. Images are the tools handed to women in the greater hegemonic structure of contemporary Italian society with which they can police themselves and others—but also manipulate to get what they want.

The mixed messages television sends women are not different from messages women encounter elsewhere in their daily lives; the television messages are, however, more direct, more attractively presented, have more exposure, and appear virtually juxtaposed in the same medium. The desire to emulate a particular image, or espouse a certain attitude, can be seen as a coping mechanism, an attempt to draw power from an image in order to dispel a larger sense of vulnerability, stemming from the awareness of women’s overall subordinate status.

Messages

Television can be seen as performing a dualistic role: on one hand reiterating traditional messages of womanhood, often under the guise of contemporary life; and on the other depicting a means—specifically, through conforming to certain standards and ideals—of
‘getting by’ in a still not quite equal world. The messages my participants reported perceiving were not restricted to physical appearance, but addressed all aspects of life: personal, social, and professional. Though Italian television features a variety of unconventional situations in reality and talk shows, the contents of the messages my respondents reported were not individually different from messages they indicated receiving from conventional institutions like the Church, the government, the fashion industry, and the family. My participants noted, however, that depictions of motherhood and marriage have become more prevalent in recent years, along with the usual emphasis on youth, beauty, and cheerfulness. Disparate images of womanhood can be represented by the same actress; the mother, the dancing girl, and the polished professional. The woman on television, as Pastacaldi (2001) argues, is all things to all people.

As my participants said, however, it is not just the images of women that convey messages to women viewers; shows featuring men were perceived as sending strong messages about womanhood, as well. Emilio Fede’s weather girl—though my participants deemed his interaction with her on his newshour esagerato, or “beyond the limit”—is one example that often came up to demonstrate the importance of good looks in getting ahead*, and the sometimes irrelevance of training or skills. The way men banter with women and make asides on shows like Striscia, the way they often remain on stage when the women are sent off after their dance or interview on varieties, offer anecdotal confirmation of women’s peripheral role. The man is—literally—almost always running the show.

Watching television, my participants sometimes voiced objections to certain messages—like Viola’s objection to Antonella Clerici’s musings in Adesso Sposami on the importance of beauty—which they later contradicted in discussions or social interactions. In Viola’s case, after arguing that beauty is unimportant, she later made the case to her friends that it would be very easy for them to get a ride to a neighboring town with some male acquaintances because of their good looks. Ariana also often made a point of deriding southern men on television, but in real life was dating one. A certain amount of inconsistency is inevitable, but some of these contradictions indicated to me a

* The concept of ‘getting ahead’ is not restricted to professional success, but is also applied to one’s personal life, especially finding a wealthy partner.
point of friction where an individual applies different messages in different situations. Perhaps in private, talking to me as an anthropologist, Viola wanted to give me the impression she was disinterested in appearances, and Ariana wanted me to think of her as someone who disapproved of machismo. In public, Viola wanted to get a ride to the other town with her friends, and Ariana, as she sometimes explained, did not want to be alone, and liked the drama of southern men.

Selecting one message for one situation, and another for another, women exercise agency in order to achieve the goal at hand. Discussions with my participants led me to concur with Winkler’s argument in her study of women and print media that women are not attacked by images, but make active choices in what they look at and admire. Although she objected to the dancing girls, Valentine enjoyed the show Passaparola and watched it anyway. Manuela made jokes about soubrettes, but watched Velline, the contest to become a soubrette (though she seemed embarrassed about it), and watched the Fede newshour with the Miss Italy weathergirl—which Viola would immediately switch off in a rage. Ariana seemed to enjoy very much watching the old film set in Apulia, and looking at the traditional lifestyle depicted.

As noted, the women often spoke humorously of what they watched, perhaps partly as a way of distancing themselves from some of the messages they did not want to associate themselves with—or for me to associate with them. In fact, though the women voiced strong judgments, they seemed generally wary of being judged. One area in which this became apparent was the importance attached to dressing properly to go outside. Whereas at home they might wear sports clothes or pajamas and slippers the whole day, going out involved careful grooming, as though one were going on stage. Even to go out running Manuela took special care in dressing, and was particularly interested in making sure her abdomen was covered, although in the evenings she often wore cropped shirts. It was a different time, and a different look; she said she would be ashamed. When she did go out for the evening, she and her friends dressed up and dressed similarly—as did all the other participants and their friends, with the exception of Alisa. Manuela’s outrage at the neophyte calendar model who was not very slender can be seen as an expression of vicarious shame.
Watching television, in turn, the participants censured women they felt did not look right, from the average-weight calendar model Manuela objected to, to Chelsea Clinton. A particularly telling incident took place when the women changed the channel from Velline to the soccer game, but commented extensively on the men’s appearances; to me they seemed to be commenting as they thought men might comment on Velline). As Winkler writes, it is as though they were “at once the surveyor and the surveyed’...learning to internalize the gaze of others in order to police their own visual image” (Winkler 220). Or, put otherwise, judging lest they be judged. The women were not only critical of appearance, but also commented on their (lack of) intelligence, talent, or training. Nearly every time we saw Maria de Filippi, the popular Mediaset talk show host who has several projects on the air, Viola reminded me that she was Maurizio Costanzo’s wife, and suggested that that is the only reason she is on the air. Yet it is well known that Filippi graduated from university with honors in law and worked as a media consultant before transferring to television production; she is surely well-connected, but it is difficult to say she is unqualified.

Women’s judgments and anxiety over being judged furthermore express some of the sense of competition they seem to feel with other women. Italian feminist writers like have speculated that women’s reluctance to help each other has stalled the progress of the women’s movement that made advances in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Women who succeed in male-dominated arena do not often make an effort to make the process easier for the next women; rather, they continue the policy of favoring males. In my study (and concurring with Ginsborg 2001), women described the difficulty of finding female friends beyond one’s childhood circle. Manuela and Ariana both recounted difficulties they had in finding housing in Siena because of problems living with other women in the apartments. “They can really be bitchy and closed,” Ariana told me. At the same time, Ariana displayed some competitiveness in her argument with the landlady, whom she later described as having more than she deserved, especially a man.

Several of my participants, however, also expressed frustration at gender-based obstacles women face when they compete with men to secure employment and earn an equal salary, or to organize their personal lives along side family-unfriendly work schedules. They also lamented the lack of representation women have in the current
government (although past governments were similar). In effect, women seem to want to see women have more professional success in Italy on a large scale, but are leery of supporting change on a personal level. A similar example is Valentine’s remark that women now have an advantage that men can also take family leave when a child is born—but that she would not have her partner do that when she has a child.

Valentine’s ambivalence towards change seems to be endemic—and recalls Porcu’s description of the young woman of today who knows her rights, wants her privileges, but nevertheless is still uncertain and reluctant to let go of the more restrictive past. Indeed, change seems to remain on a surface level, in tattoos and piercings, and in the letter of the law, but not in practice. Ariana has moved north and started her career but still has a traditional southern boyfriend. Viola expresses the desire for an unconventional, independent life, but still relies on her parents for financial support.

The reluctance women may feel in committing to either traditional or contemporary roles makes a pick-and-choose model of accepting messages a more attractive option. Finkelstein writes of women’s ‘vulnerability’ when confronted with media images and cultural ideals, but it might be just as appropriate to speak of women’s ‘temptation’ to adopt media images; they offer clear cues for how to look or be in a certain situation. In fact, a woman might follow one model of behavior in one circumstance, and another in the next. Without going to extremes of behavior, the women can voice different opinions and exude different attitudes without repercussion in order to get what they want. The fantasia of women on television is tantamount to the fantasia of women’s attitudes in real life. La donna e’ mobile because she has to be in order to reconcile being a young southern Italian woman who gets stuck in high heels on cobblestone streets, who studies engineering at a Tuscan university but has to wash her older brother’s dishes when she visits her parents.

**Womanhood the commodity**

Young Italian women face a delicate situation—much like the one Counihan described in her research in Tuscany in the early 1980s—in which they must reconcile traditional images of womanhood with contemporary life demands and issues. Television caters to them by offering pre-packaged exemplars of womanhood: the woman as commodity.
Finkelstein, summarizing Baudrillard, describes modern social life "as dominated by the ephemera of images. Most often these images are selected by the individual in much the same way that items of apparel or purchasable objects are selected" (184). The women on television are, as Pastacaldi writes, pure images; they appear as things or commodities, which subsequently attempt to sell more commodities. Taussig takes this view a step further in his formulation of mimesis, when he argues:

...the commodity economy has displaced persons, if not into things then into copies of things flaring with a life of their own, briefly animated (as Disney has taught us) by animal life stirring in the thickets of an ever-receding lost nature (Taussig 1993: 231).

The women on screen are already objects, almost caricatures of female roles. In this sense, women can be seen to bring the mannequins on the screen to life when they emulate them. Taussig writes that such acts of mimesis are attempts to harness the object's—in this case, the on-screen woman's—perceived powers. Even though she often appears in positions subordinate, the woman on screen has a clear role, and has moreover the power of drawing the gaze, and thereby attention. The reason for emulating an image is thus similar to the explanation Manuela gave for why a young woman might want to become a soubrette: it is a way out of the situation they are in, perhaps a way to a better life with certain advantages, often financial.

Considering the case for mimesis in the context of Italy's particular commodity economy, however, brings the argument back to hegemony. Silvio Berlusconi, who virtually singlehandedly changed the structure of Italian television, and ushered in the glitz that characterizes current programming, is now once again the conservative, elected head of the country, and thereby also in charge of the RAI. Not since the days of the RAI television monopoly has TV had such a united front, where the networks seem to air identical programming, and political messages are almost the same. As the Church and family continue to decline in size and influence, television is gaining ground in the Italian household; in addition to the usual television set, 47% of Italian households now have two, 24% three, and 8% four (Pastacaldi). My participants also noted that over the week they spend more time with the television on—alone or with others—than with any other institution or individual. Gramsci once imagined an alternate mass culture that would
arise to defeat the ruling hegemonic system; television, it seems, is that dream deferred. It seems to be an expression of mass culture, but in reality programming is carefully crafted to appeal to the mass audience by the commodity economic forces that fund and control it. Women, as Pastacaldi argues, are consumers; it is not in the interest of the consumer products industry that they should change their habits in viewing or buying. Instead, they should continue policing themselves and others, and remain as tied to the different images of womanhood that television promotes in order to maintain sales of anti-cellulite toning gel, prepared tortellini, and anti-bacterial kitchen swipes. Television sometimes dresses in the garments of the modern, but ultimately promotes the traditional.

In Conclusion

When Ariana and her boyfriend fought, he shouted, “I am the way I am—take it or leave it!” Infuriated, Ariana replied that it was no way for him to reason with someone he loved. Later on, however, she said with a sigh that she knew he would not change. Women’s attitudes towards effecting change in Italy seem similarly resigned. They express frustration at their (sometimes) limited opportunities, for example the continuing preference for males in the workplace. At the same time, they generally do not take a direct, confrontational path to assert their equal rights (and an equal power position) in their own lives.

Women instead seem to fight with the weapons they are given. Taken together, equal status before the law, patience, and sheer number form a great tool for effecting change. The burgeoning number of female students will eventually overwhelm the job market with educated women, and although the inside (old boy) track to the elite will surely continue, as Valentine pointed out state entrance exams to the professions will continue to give women a fighting chance. Furthermore, the government (and social) interest in raising the country’s still dwindling birthrates—despite the pro-family campaign in the media—will have to focus on making social institutions more accommodating to women or see the situation become more extreme. Taking my participants as a case in point, though they had a lot to say about how they would raise children, none of them had plans to have children in the near future. They also had no
concrete ideas about how to manage working and raising children, though they already expressed anxiety over the financial aspects.

Meanwhile, women continue to listen to mixed messages of femininity, to play the roles they deem appropriate, sometimes contradicting themselves, in order to achieve their goals, or harness power they need.

**Recommendations**

Media and media perception is a fertile ground for anthropological research, but continues to be largely overlooked in the field. As is the history of nearly every form of popular entertainment and mass cultural expression, in the beginning, television continues to be for the most part frowned upon by the academic world. As television spreads to ever more remote locations in the world, however, the need to understand its effects—dangers and potential—becomes that much more urgent. We know so little, and what information we do have is often contradictory or incomplete. The different disciplines engaged in media research tend to work in isolation, their findings often remain in a vacuum, and far from the people from whom they are drawn.

The breath and import of television’s effects on people cannot be understood through psychology, film analysis, economics, or audience studies alone—nor can it be understood without any of these. Working within the discipline of anthropology, ethnographies of media and viewership are a useful platform to contribute to our understanding of how we relate to—and through—television programming. Anthropology also has the necessary inter-disciplinary tolerance to incorporate elements of other fields of study that enhance the broader picture. As television becomes more of a global obsession than a pastime, the need to understand the medium in all its elements is crucial.

Considering the specific case of this ethnography, the easy introduction to a wealth of discussion subjects evoked by television—some that might have been difficult to broach had it not been for the shared viewing experience—shows that television-based studies can be an effective means of eliciting people’s thoughts and opinions. Placed in the context of broader observations, beyond the viewing room and in social situations, they show us the skid marks of ideals and values at play in daily life.
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