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lo schermo del potere. femminismo e regime della visibilità [the screen of power. feminism and visuality in contemporary Italy]

Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi, Ombre corte press, Verona, 2012, €13.00 (Pbk), 123pp., ISBN: 978-8-8975-2229-4.

The theme of the representations of women in contemporary Italian media has become the object of intense political debates recently, in connection with a series of sex scandals that marked the final phases of Berlusconi's government. The sexism that has been dominating mainstream media—and particularly television—is often taken as an epitome of Berlusconi's immorality and corruption. Several women's and feminist groups have denounced the distorted representation of women promoted by mainstream media. Lorella Zanardo's documentary *Il Corpo delle Donne* (Women's Body), for instance, has assembled footage of the constant TV display of young female bodies made uniform by plastic surgery, and has argued that 'real women' have been erased from media representations. As the sex scandals have unfolded, and as many escorts and showgirls have revealed their participation in Berlusconi's private parties, the exchange of sexual favours for economic and political privileges has also increasingly been criticised. On 13 February 2011, the women's activist group *Se Non Ora Quando* (If Not Now, When) mobilised several thousand women in a national demonstration against sexism and 'for women's dignity', expressing an explicit anti-government stance. Afterwards, the governments that have followed the fall of Berlusconi have been particularly keen to emphasise their moral and righteous image, particularly in connection to women's representations in the public sphere.

Gribaldo and Zapperi critically engage with these debates, providing an innovative contribution to debates on gender, visual culture and feminism in contemporary Italy. The book is structured in five chapters. First, the authors address constructions of femininity in the visual field in Italy between the real and the imaginary. Second, they address how images of femininity are tied to other constructions of alterity and difference related to race and class. In their third and fourth chapters, they tackle the feminist discussions related to the sex scandals and the commodification of women's bodies in Italian media and politics. Finally, they provide a critique of the idea of 'woman' as unitary subject through visual culture and postcolonial feminist theory. The aim of the book is to rethink the complex interconnection between visual culture and gender through the instruments provided by postcolonial and visual feminist theory, and to overcome the simplified opposition between 'fake images' of

1 I am quoting here the English translation of the Introduction, available at: <http://www.uninomade.org/the-screen-of-power-feminism-and-the-regime-of-visibility/>, last accessed 16 April 2014.

2 *Ibid.*

femininity and 'real women' that have dominated the discussion. As Gribaldo and Zapperi note, 'the visual field is a crucial area for feminist reflection, starting with a problematization of questions that involve a multiplicity of subjects who do not necessarily identify with the category of "woman"'.¹ As they argue throughout the book, images of women are not only a matter of gender, but also reflect different types of power relations based on ethnicity, class, generation and labour. Therefore, the gendered dimension of 'visuality' 'is structurally more complex than simply the focus on women and their debased image'.²

The authors are particularly critical of interventions that encourage 'Italian women' to claim back their 'morality' and 'dignity' by rejecting artificial media images and by claiming back their real selves. While these interventions have had the merit of disrupting the sexist imagery present in Italian visual culture, they also invoke the category of 'normal' women as a counter-image, as the reality 'hidden' behind the fictional images created by television. According to the authors, this image of 'proper' femininity takes motherhood as the 'figure par excellence of completeness and self-realisation' (p. 62), perpetuating conservative ideas about womanhood and sexuality. In the numerous discussions related to women's commodification, this positive image of 'authentic', moral femininity has often been opposed to the negative image of the *velina*, the Italian TV showgirl, whose 'artificial' body stood for the corruption, distorted freedom of choice and loose morality that characterised the Berlusconi regime.

Against this binary opposition between 'real' and 'false' femininity, the authors analyse the intertwining of visuality, gender and desire, taking visual representation as a 'technology of gender', after Teresa de Lauretis (1987). The visual field, they argue, is not separated from 'real' femininity, but instead is a crucial site where gender is produced and reproduced, both at the subjective level and at the level of social representation. In the visual field, power hierarchies are constantly reinstated, but also contested and subverted through different forms of identification and desire. Gribaldo and Zapperi thus invite us to engage with the visual, rather than reading it as purely 'artificial'. Instead of opposing 'false' and 'real' femininity, feminist critique should take into account how the visual is an integral part of contemporary female subjectivities. According to the authors, new feminist imaginaries could therefore be developed by appropriating the transformative and conflicting potential of images and of the visual field. The theme of subversive visual imaginaries, however, is not addressed in-depth, and it would have been interesting to push the analysis further, referring to transformative images of gender and sexuality that circulate as counter-examples.

The authors are, in fact, more interested in critically deconstructing the current terms of the debates in contemporary Italy, and in providing a new theoretical basis for feminist visual studies. Another merit of the book is that it points out that a feminist critique of the visual cannot exist without postcolonial theory. As such,

feminist critiques of the media cannot focus on sexism only, but should also take into account racism and homophobia, and notably the naturalisation of racism and hetero-normativity through sexualised images of femininity and masculinity (for instance, the orientalising and sexualised image of Berlusconi's 'harem' proposed by his critics). In re-stating this point, the authors place themselves in dialogue with other recent works dealing with the Italian political, social and cultural landscape from an anti-racist and postcolonial perspective.³

Another relevant discussion raised by the authors is that related to intersections between gender, age and class. While in feminist discussions the showgirls and escorts involved in sex scandals were often denounced as preferring easy money to a proper job, these comments rarely included a materialist analysis of precarious labour relations in contemporary Italy. The book interrogates the current Italian neo-liberal system, in which the boundaries between spectacle, economy and politics have become increasingly blurred, and in which young women are encouraged to comply with the 'feminisation of labour', meaning with a system in which individual connections, nepotism and attractiveness have become strategic resources to access wealth. In this context, the female body can sometimes be used as a tool to subvert unequal power relations, as in the case of Ruby, the young migrant escort who managed to blackmail Italy's most powerful man. As the authors argue, when the older generations evoke stable employment and motherhood as founding elements of womanhood and femininity, they risk not being heard by younger women, for whom these ideals seem to be unattainable, due to the precarity and unemployment that particularly affect younger generations.

As aptly pointed out by Gribaldo and Zapperi, the representation of real 'Italian women' often used by the activist group *Se Non Ora Quando* and by other critics is itself an artificial construction, which makes invisible how womanhood and femininity are fractured along the lines of generation, class and ethnicity. By unravelling the relation between feminism, gender and visual culture, the authors underline the plurality and diversity of feminist temporalities, gendered identities and political subjectivities that characterise contemporary Italy. Their contribution encourages us to rethink visual representation from a feminist perspective, and to analyse gender conflicts in their intersection with other social conflicts, notably those related to migration, racism and precarity.

reference

de Lauretis, T. (1987) *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

3 See, for instance, the special issue of *Darkmatter* on 'Challenging Italian Racism': <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/category/issues/6-challenging-italian-racism/>, as well as the book *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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