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DESIGN MEETS ALTERITY

CASE STUDIES, PROJECT
EXPERIENCES, COMMUNICATION
CRITICISM

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Edited by Salvatore Zingale

Design Meets Alterity

Case Studies, Project Experiences, Communication Criticism

FrancoAngeli 

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Media Representations, between Androcentrism and Alterity

1. The androcentric gaze

The forms of representation of women conveyed by communication artefacts, and by the media system as a whole, constitute a ground for reflection to study the relationships and the effects they have on the construction of individual and collective biographies, which influence the perception of the Self and of the Other (de Beauvoir 1949; Ghisleni 2004; Heller 2017; Capecchi 2018).

When one reflects on images, in fact, one thinks about *visual texts* that present themselves as the result of a process of *figuration*. A process that passes through a principle of emphasis and exclusion and which restores, precisely through the translational passage of the representation, a certain image of the “female” or the “male” giving visibility to two notions considered as *reciprocal alterity*, both determined by the interpretative filter of the him or her that generate them.¹

At the same time we reason on the value conveyed by the representation within the media circuit, a representation that sanctions the existence of the protagonist, that is, at the moment in which the image finds space in the media scene and becomes the bearer of a social affirmation (Pinotti and Somaini 2016). And if, as Costa (2011: 121-122) recalls, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that there is a relationship if, and only if, a being feels watched by another being – when they feel the gaze of the other on themselves –, we can believe that the representation of a subject in the media scene is the condition which guarantees the gaze of others on them and, therefore, which certifies their existence vis-à-vis the other, thus contrib-

¹ The reasoning starts from the dominance of a binary model “M-F” which, culturally, has rooted forms and conventions referring to the two universes and assumed, more generally, as points of reference even where one wants to promote other models.

uting, through the various forms of staging, to formulate the manifestations of genre.²

In this framework, the notion of alterity allows us to reflect on the forms of representation of women in the media, addressing the discourse starting from some recurrences in which alterity is substantiated. In examining the notion, we can in fact formulate distinctions and circumscribe what I have called forms of *denied, violated, distorted, relegated, silenced* alterity and which I will introduce below.

It is a reflection that moves from an androcentric vision, in which men are considered as the “human race” and women as “other”.

Androcentrism, as is known, functions to sustain and reinforce the power of men in society, therefore, it fosters gender inequality by disguising the masculinity of the male gender under the rubric of the *neutral standard* (Bem 1993; Bailey, LaFrance and Dovidio 2019). It corresponds to a principle of *separation* which indicates the division of male and female as opposite principles to which is correlated that of *hierarchy*, which considers the male as a *norm* including the world with respect to a female which is determined, however, as a *deviation from the norm* (Bucchetti 2021).

To designate the phenomenon we speak of *male as norm* (MAN), of *universal male*, of *man as default* (Kotthoff and Wodak 1997), up to the point of indicating the “false neutrality” of the male when «passing off as universal what is only of man» (Sabatini 1987). These are all expressions that imply the female as *alterity*, and whose effects fall on every area of our social and cultural dimension, and which we can verify precisely through the analysis of some *clusters* of images, useful for identifying the “excluding matrices”. These are matrices that contribute to fuelling disparity and gender inequalities, which cancel the existence of identities themselves or harness them, stiffen them, confine them, thus giving rise to crystallized and stereotypical sets.

Therefore, the role played by communication design and its responsibilities is at the centre of the discussion: through the design of artefacts, cultural

² Representation on the media scene contributes to the construction of gender models since images always assign us skills, a theme which, as Cristina Demaria recalls, concerns each of us, in the moment in which every day we carry out the *performance* that allows us to put on stage our “manifestation” of gender. (Reference is made to Demaria’s speech in the Design and Alterity 2021 cycle of seminars: “Alterity and gender cultures: the semiotic gaze” <<https://www.designealterita.polimi.it/incontri/cristina-demaria>> (11 August 2021).

contents, identities, social relationships, lifestyles are defined which see the project as interpreter and witness of the ways in which a society designs itself and structures itself (Papanek 1971; Baule and Bucchetti 2012; Resnick 2019).

2. Denied alterity

When *male as norm* (MAN) prevails, what is implemented is a form of denial of alterity which appeals to that notion of *neuter* which alludes to an original duality, of which only one side has been able to develop, however, with the pretext of being the only one possible.

I will give some examples to be clearer. If in a newspaper, to illustrate an article dealing with educational experiments in a high school context, I choose, with the sole purpose of figuratively anticipating the theme, an opening photo that portrays four male teenagers caught on the starting blocks, ready to compete, in terms of the production of meaningful effects, what I produce is an inference between the object of experimentation and the reality that promotes it, interpreting the experience described as exclusively male. In this way no mental association with the female is activated: the universe to which we refer, through the image, is exclusively male.

Similarly, if to illustrate an article on the longevity of the human being I opt for an illustration in which male figures are put in sequence, represented with all the distinctive features (truthful elements, physical details, clothing) that characterize the different age groups, I shape a portrayal that completely excludes women from the iconic narrative. Just as, every time in schematization processes, for example to iconographically describe the composition of the members of an organization, I choose pictogrammatic representations based on male figures, underlined by formal details such as a jacket and tie, I am making a choice that does not speak of “human beings” who play a certain specific role, but of males, denying the recipients of the message even the possibility of prefiguring the presence of women, who are completely excluded from the discourse. The reasons are to be found in the nature of the visual statements which respond to a principle that refers to its referent, and this happens, in a particularly evident way, when the level of detail of the image is higher. That is: the higher the level of iconicity, the greater the adherence to the object in question.

We are faced with cases in which the visual text conveys the “male” by denying the existence of the “female”. In which man is used as the measure

of things: a principle evident in language and linguistic structures (Violi 1986; Demaria [2019] 2003); in the Italian language the male is used as a universal neuter, hiding the power gap between men and women, and thus reproducing a social order.

According to the principle of *male as a norm*, male linguistic bias works to exclude and deny women and their role. And more precisely, the same grammatical and semantic asymmetries, which punctuate the language making it “sexist” in the general unawareness of the speaker (Sabatini 1987; Robustelli 2012), can be found at the base of the iconization mechanisms, in the context of the design of visual statements when they translate into figure as Pierre Bourdieu said:

The strength of the male order is measured by the fact that it does not have to justify itself: the anthropocentric vision imposes itself as neutral and does not need to be expressed in discourses aimed at legitimizing it. The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the male domination on which it is based. (Bourdieu 1998: 17-18, author’s translation)

3. Violated alterity

Perhaps one of the most obvious categories is constituted by what I have defined as *violated alterity*; within this notion are included representations of women that show the female body deprived, in various ways, of her dignity. The reference, on the one hand, is to the images in which the woman is communicatively “used” as a *sexual object*. Images which, as is known, constitute a crucial³ question and which are the result of a hypersexual culture, grown according to a widespread model of hypertrophic communication which has amplified, distorted, repeated to the point of obsession, a female portrait that has reached the point of fixity, in which the exposed body responds to seductive logics and porno-soft codes.

³ A theme subject to study and interventions on various scales and in various fields: see the European Resolutions (European Resolution 2008/2038 (INI), European Resolution 2012/2116 (INI), European Resolution 2017/2210 (INI)); the 2013 conference “Media and the Image of Women” (Conference of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission); studies in the legislative, sociological, semiotic fields and in the field of communication design: D’Amico (2020), Migliucci (2013), Giomi and Magaraggia (2017), Cosenza (<giovannacosenza.wordpress.com>), Bucchetti (2012, 2015, 2016, 2021); the actions promoted by groups of activists and associations such as Lorella Zanardo (2010) and DonneinQuota.

The women, in this case, are portrayed according to a principle of exaltation of faces and bodies, based on which the direction criteria are subordinated to the emphasis on anatomical details and the creation of explicit references to the sexual sphere. The echo of pornography expands into non-pornographic culture (McNair 2013), the fragmentation of visual signs, symbols and verbal expressions typical of porn, migrate and contaminate mainstream culture according to a principle of heteronormativity, from *pre-orgasmic* expressions,⁴ to references to fellatio or *facial cumshot*.⁵ Explicit or allusive depictions, frequently flanked (or sometimes replaced) by verbal forms that reinforce the references through expressions that mortify the woman (“Trust me... I’ll give it to you for free”, “Put it at 90 degrees”, ...⁶) not only for the content they convey, but for the underlying declaration: the presence of a subject who feels entitled to make these statements is nothing but the sign of further verbal violence.

Observing the media context, it is easy to check to what extent the drift described pervades the various sectors: the advertising sphere, as well as the universe of music videos or television entertainment, but also the information field (just think, in sports information, to shots reserved for female athletes).

But alongside the infinite cases of soft-porn portrayal, we can also include other forms of violated alterity. Among these I want to mention the *female mannequins*,⁷ portrayed in expressionless poses and depicted as inanimate objects, marked by the fixity of the gaze and, more generally, all the women shown *lifeless*, face down, fainted, deprived of any vital trait, to name a few more recurring forms of posing that populate the iconography, for ex-

⁴ Thus are defined the forms of portrayal that show the woman with facial expressions attributable to those found during orgasm, according to what emerged from a study published in the «Journal of Nonverbal Behavior» which gives an account of an experiment carried out to identify the “Prevailing Action Units” thanks to the use of the Facial Action Coding System – FACS.

⁵ *Facial cumshot* is an English slang term that refers to the sexual practice in which a man directs his ejaculation onto his partner’s face. An example can be found in the photographic image created by Terry Richardson for the 2007 Sisley “Fashion Junkie” campaign.

⁶ These are just some of the many examples of communication campaign *headlines* that have given rise to city billboards.

⁷ See the research *Come la pubblicità racconta le donne e gli uomini, in Italia*, conducted by Massimo Guastini (Italian Art Directors Club) with Giovanna Cosenza, Jennifer Colombari, Elisa Gasparri (Alma Mater University, Bologna) <<https://youmark-images.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/23201455/Come-la-pubblicità-racconta-gli-italiani.pdf>>, online on 4 January 2024.

ample, in the field of fashion⁸ and which seem to have become the stylistic hallmark of many photographic services.

Women posed to be there available, ready to be used, enjoyed, consumed: objects in front of a gaze (first the photographic lens, then the recipient's eye) that frisks their bodies and, also for this reason, violated.

4. Distorted alterity

In gender representation there are visual statements that express, instead, a "distortion" of alterity.

Once again, the observation of the women depicted in the communication campaigns returns a repertoire of images useful for broadening the reflection, focusing attention on the women portrayed as *emotional*. We are faced with a further example of discriminatory representation (Goffman 1976; Bucchetti 2012; Scanu 2012; Nadotti 2015) capable of demeaning women.

The advertising field provides many cases concerning different product sectors, more or less popular brands, of national and international importance, referring to consumer products, services, promotions, cultural initiatives. More precisely, I want to dwell on a specific *type* that falls into this category, i.e. on the images that portray *amazed women* (Bucchetti 2021).

This *cliché* sees the woman portrayed with her eyes wide open, wide open, wide-eyed and open mouth, with her hands on the sides of her face to mark her mood. She is an astounded, amazed, bewildered, surprised woman,⁹ shown in a state in which the irrational aspects prevail and in which an approach that excludes logic and rationality a priori is privileged, in which, that is, the woman is deprived of her awareness.

On the one hand we can observe how this type of image is relegated to the field of representation, lacks referentiality, being difficult to refer to experiences or situations experienced in everyday social contexts. On the other hand, it is useful to underline how we are not dealing only with a

⁸ There are numerous cases in this sense. Just as an example, I mention the advertising campaign launched in France by *Maison Saint Laurent* on the occasion of the Autumn/Winter 2017-18 collection, during *Paris Fashion Week*: the key image of the campaign was at the centre of the controversy precisely for having depicted a woman in a pose of evident submission (as well as for the excessive thinness of the model).

⁹ The depiction of facial expressions, which today finds its focus in the category of *bewildered* people, was studied by Goffman. See, in particular, the text on *Gender advertisements*, also *licensed withdrawal*, in which representations of moods such as fear or laughter are analysed.

cliché, but with representations of emotions that have an implicit effect. In advertising communications, women more than men are depicted in involvements that psychologically remove them from the social situation, leaving them disoriented and, presumably, as Goffman (1976 [1987]: 57) recalls, dependent on the protection and goodwill of others who are (or could be) present or implicated in the narrative.

These forms of *distorted alterity* do not only concern the adult woman, we can in fact find the same compositional system in the representation of young girls. What derives from this is the affirmation of a female figure who, since childhood, does not seem to be sufficiently equipped to face reality, on whose face an expression is regularly imprinted that translates into the ingenuity of those who are amazed in the face of the obvious.

In fact, gestures, expressions, postures reveal not only how we feel but, through their impact, contribute to a process of normalization, together with the disposition of embodied cultural values across the scene.

5. Relegated alterity

In her text *De senectute* about the male universal, Francesca Rigotti states: «Man is the all-embracing human being. He is the anthropological universal. Then, perhaps, as its extension and emanation, beside, behind, below, somewhere, flattened on its physical, biological, bodily condition, there is also the woman» (2018: 14).

And it is precisely starting from this idea of “extension” and “emanation” that I want to introduce the *relegated alterity* that we can recognize whenever we are faced with logics pursued, for example, in the context of so-called *gendered marketing*. That is when, in the universe of products, those without specific markers are implicitly addressed to the male gender, while a female version is added to them, interpreted and translated according to the canons of the so-called “for her” (Bucchetti 2016).

The product designed for female consumers, which would not require any type of specific variation, either ergonomically or functionally, as in the well-known case of the *Bic for her* ballpoint pen,¹⁰ thus represents one of

¹⁰ A product created to differentiate itself from the standard through an aesthetic variation of finish and colour, made explicit through the expression “for her” alongside the name plus the “sleek design” declared on the packaging.

which, an interpretation of the one designed for men, becoming expression of an androcentrism that tends to mark the female gender more than the male, even when it includes categories and groups in which men and women are equally represented.

Using the language of Bem (1993), women are considered, even in this case, a specific sex in relation to men who instead represent the neutral.

The interpretation of the products, which is often based on the translation process entrusted to *pinkification* (Bucchetti 2016: 110), as Silvia Pizzocaro recalls, in many cases «also expresses a lowering of the cultural level, of language. As if the gender version of the object corresponded to a more commercial version, to a low-level object, of poor quality to the point of being channelled into the dimension of kitsch».¹¹ But it also has to do with the contents that are reworked to be themed according to the inclinations considered proper to the female universe. An example for all: a quiz game, catalogued among educational and scientific games,¹² which provides for the “*girl*” interpretation in which the repertoire of objects on which the game is structured changes, in which clothing, accessories, footwear of various shapes take the place of natural elements, sweets and games that accompany the male version instead.

6. Silenced alterity

With the last category, that of silenced alterity, the perspective is reversed. In fact, there is a gap: the absence of mature, elderly, old women (Moretti 2012; Casnati 2022) who, in the universe of media representation, are ignored and therefore silenced. An absence that draws attention to the phenomenon of *ageism*, a term used to describe, more generally, the discriminatory attitudes based on the age of a group of individuals (mature and elderly), and which confronts us with the one that Rigotti (2018: 13-14) – referring to what Susan Sontag wrote – defines the “double discrimination”, for which the old woman suffers the “double standard of ageing”: if ageing is difficult for everyone, for women it is a little more so.

¹¹ We report an observation that emerged during the dialogue on “gender and design cultures” published in the volume *Design and gender dimension. A field of research and reflection between project cultures and gender cultures* (2015).

¹² Reference is made to the educational and scientific games of the Clementoni Sapientino line, the *talking Sapientino* and the “*girl*” *Sapientino*.

It is an issue fuelled by the forms of representation conveyed by the media, which support and increase the obsession with youth and the denial of ageing; a question that makes almost understandable:

[...] the aesthetic diligence of some women on themselves: women who prefer to strive to maintain the image of youthful beauty, rather than resign themselves to entering that devalued world. Women who can't stand the idea of becoming invisible, ostracized or pitied. (Rigotti 2018: 64)

A phenomenon that also manifests itself in other ways. For example, in the *Teenile* (a term that comes from the crasis between *teenager* and *senile*) or in the distinctly commercial one of the *Quinq'ados*, the “fifty-year-old adolescents” for whom, in the field of clothing, adolescent sizes and shapes are adapted to the build of women, responding to the idea that women in their fifties should always be looking for an age that is now behind them.¹³

In a society that places the body and physical attractiveness at the centre of female question, when women lose the characteristic features of youth, they also lose their role, thus becoming invisible. The case relating to Hillary Clinton's presidential run for the White House was emblematic. When, following the spread on the web of some of her *candid* close-ups of her face, that is, not “posed” or retouched, the candidate was fiercely attacked by violent criticism because she appeared too old.¹⁴ Awakening offences that reaffirm discriminatory and harmful principles based on the “natural” qualities that man's ageing implies – seriousness, authority, wisdom, credibility, charm, etc. –, compared with the disaster that instead affects the woman with whom decay, contempt, degradation, drying up are associated (Caputo 2009; Murgia 2011; Rigotti 2018; Cantarella 2019).

According to a study on the media representation of the female figure, male individuals and young people would be privileged (although this

¹³ See Francesca Casnati's work entitled *Anti-ageism. The media and age: a gender obsession* (Master's degree thesis, supervisor Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, Politecnico di Milano, a.y. 2015-2016).

¹⁴ See what was reported on the case by the newspaper *la Repubblica* from the pen of Vittorio Zucconi: <<https://www.repubblica.it/2007/12/sezioni/esteri/usa-hillary-rughe/usa-hillary-rughe/usa-hillary-rughe.html>>, online on 4 January 2024.

does not happen only in the media), to the detriment of women who have passed their youth (Lipperini 2010).

The invisibility of the no longer young woman¹⁵ is perpetrated, with only a few exceptions that seem to constitute the only models in which her presence is admissible:¹⁶ on the one hand, the narratives in which she is called to promote products or services for the elderly (moreover through the interpretation of decidedly younger women compared to the age group to which they are addressed), on the other hand when she is called to play the role of the *grandmother* or the *old nutcase*, responding, in this case, to *clichés* that ridicule the figures of elderly women turning them into real caricatures.

7. Media space and public space

As I have reasoned, there are different discriminatory forms conveyed by images, representations of alterity which, in various ways, do not recognize it but violate or cancel its specificity.

Each of them constitutes an iconic act that has an effect on the subjects for whom it is intended, influencing with its own statement so that it can acquire a certain habit of behaviour (Bredekamp 2010) and, therefore, contributing to disseminate and promote distorting models, incapable of restoring the plurality of reality.

The media space offers models; the images we perceive, what we see, structure our experience of the world contributing to the construction of collective memory, but also influencing the ways of meeting, of being put in contact with the other. The media spaces we inhabit therefore express our experience of alterity.

Public space is recognized as having the value of allowing individuals to interact through discussion (Arendt 1958), of encouraging encounters with the other and, therefore, of space that allows me to discover who I am. But if we admit the parallelism between public space and media space, the limits of the picture examined show up clearly. When the media space acts through the reiteration of partial and crystallized models, it denies a plural

¹⁵ I deliberately chose the expression “no longer young” to include all the different age groups, up to old age.

¹⁶ See what has been published by Kite, Deaux and Miele (1991).

public space, capable of guaranteeing the recognition of alterity and, consequently, of being functional to the encounter with the other.

The theme of recognition (Honneth 1992) and the theme of the forms of depicting women are linked in a media space that must be able to make space for knowledge, negotiation, but also for the construction of the *we*, of plurality, of alterity.

What has been considered up to now leads us to affirm the importance of the observation work still to be done around the “excluding matrices”, to investigate every form of visual statement that contributes to fuelling gender disparity and inequalities, therefore to place at the centre of this reasoning the role of communication design which must know how to disciplinarily strengthen the processes that characterize it, raising the awareness of male and female designers with respect to the *normative* function of which images are the bearers.

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