

The Madonna Paradox: How I Learned to Love Cleaning Commercials

Anthony Dion Mitzel (March 08, 2012)



Since today is La Festa della Donna here in Italy and many other countries around the world I thought I would take some time to observe what's actually happening with the image of women on Italian TV. And since the television is the single most referenced medium of communication in Italy, I guess you can say it's relevant.

How can a Catholic country bursting with images of Mary be so inclined to hold simultaneously conflicting views about women?

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I can't help but feel strange when I hear men who still have a 1950's mentality about women say things like "women can't drive", "all the best chefs are men", so on and so forth. While talking to a colleague the other day about this article, he told me that his friend who is in his thirties said to him once, speaking about his girlfriend, "lei stira, cucina, lava...insomma è brava". That is "she irons, cooks and cleans, she's good." I think you get the picture.

Hallmark should come out with a card for this demographic, "Amore, I love you for the domestic things you do and not for the person you are".

Sometimes there are images of women on TV that are still rooted in the submissive, not to be taken too seriously housewife/girlfriend. In a word, innocuous. A close second would be frivolous. The other day my doctor said it wasn't like that here anymore. And I would agree, to a certain extent. Maybe men are starting to lend a hand more and more around the house. Some men. Does that mean they should be congratulated for cleaning up after themselves or doing at least half while women have been obliged to do it for centuries? Even if men are doing more around the house their position as head hasn't been disputed. Men choose to do something or not, women have to or it won't get done. Italian television reinforces this concept.

I won't tell you the company but in one commercial for a particular bathroom cleaning product there is a man telling two female roommates his mother is coming to visit. The young women are giggly and clueless. The man steps in, calms things down and shows them how to use the product. In another commercial from the same brand there is a black cat jumping through their window, a broken mirror and the sounds of organ music a-la Dracula are heard. He dismissively tells them they are being silly because the girls are jumping up and down due to being scared by the transpiring events. The hysterical woman, par excellence. He once again goes on to show them what to do. Yeah right.

If anything, these commercials just don't make any sense when you consider Italian women do the lioness's share of housekeeping. If anybody's going to tell someone what to do, it's going to be the other way around. Just ask a zoologist which gender of lion catches the prey.

In another commercial for a famous shoe company there is a man looking for his shoes which he can't find. His wife or girlfriend finds them, but she can't seem to figure out why the box feels empty. As if it never occurred to look inside. Upon this exchange the man in a patronizing tone states that they are in fact in the box but are so light that she didn't notice them. He goes on to tell her this, as if she couldn't figure it out for herself. The classic "I told you so". She gives a ditzy headshake and smiles as if to agree with him conceding that she is rather dim. I recognize it's supposed to be funny but at whose expense? Naturally the woman's, never the man's.

So why are things like this? I don't know, but I have an idea. For one, take a look inside almost every basilica, church or chapel and you will see images devoted to Mary, mother of Jesus. From this there is a tangible reverence for the idea of the mother figure and even the mother/child bond. But when you click on the tube, it all changes. Reverence doesn't necessarily translate to respect. From the sexually explicit "veline" (young, scantily clad showgirls) of the evening satirical show *Striscia La Notizia*, to the plunging necklines of the evening news anchorwomen, women seem to be falling right into the sex pot trap in order to get you to pay attention. One can see a lot of flesh for little money. But whose fault is it and is something going on right in front of our eyes? Yes and I call it The Madonna Paradox. When the mind holds two diametrically opposed views which manifest in reality, here enters the paradox. In this case, a reverence for Catholic iconography of the Virgin Mary, love for Mom and at the same time a clear acceptance of disrespect for the image of women on TV. It appears there is a tie in the match between Mary vs. Magdalene.

We still haven't arrived at a place where we have images of strong working women. Statistically among more advanced nations, we have some of the lowest female participation in politics and business. While many of the most thriving countries have figured out ways to incorporate women whether just by cultural change or actual legislation, we are lagging behind. In order for people to see that society is becoming more equal women need a sustained profile on television with images



that show them differently than they have been portrayed. Where is the commercial with mom working late and dad needs to feed the kids? Taking into consideration how this economic crisis has disproportionately hit men, scenes like this are becoming the norm. Advertising companies should take heed.

I'm sure there are men out there helping with the kids, washing clothes and cooking but they do not have a public profile. They should. It will only help Italian and Italian American men shed the "mammone" image. In reality men should want to see a change in the way they are portrayed on television just as much as women. Younger generations these days have two income earners mainly out of necessity and more balanced images on the airwaves should represent this fact. Things are changing and some of these Mad Men type companies might want to start making commercials that reflect what's actually happening and not what I see as the propagation of a status quo that doesn't exist anymore. It comes across as a last ditch effort to save what some believe was a "normal" traditional family dynamic. As if any family is "normal".

Here's my idea for a commercial: we see a woman sitting at a desk. It's dark, late. In front of her is a desk filled with books and papers. A cleaning person opens the office door and says, "oh, I'm sorry, you're still here. It's late". She glances down at the family picture and just as she checks her watch, the phone rings. Her spouse is on the other line telling her not to worry about the kids or dinner. It's all taken care of and to get home when she can. She smiles. Enter product plug.

And by the way, if you see the card I mentioned in a store, let me know so I can get my royalties.

Buona Festa della Donna, Donne!

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