

The screen of power. Feminism and the regime of visibility

by Alessandra Gribaldo, Giovanna Zapperi

Preface to the book *Lo schermo del potere* (*The screen of power*, Ombre corte, Verona 2012)

This book is the outcome of a common need, both theoretical and political, to elaborate a feminist reflection on the intertwining of gender and visibility, starting from the Italian context. The topic of the image of women image has come to the fore as an emergency in conjunction with the sex scandals that accompanied the decline of Berlusconi-ism, strongly characterized by a renewed visibility of sexist ideas and behavior. Our contribution calls back to radical feminism as the key to interpreting the present, with the prospect of reconnecting it to crucial contemporary questions, starting with gender. Instead of addressing the downgrading of the female gender to eroticized and subjugated images and its more or less direct relationship with women's condition in Italy, our departure point was a critique of representation as a gendered domain and the answers provided by feminist movements. In fact, our aim was to problematize a series of questions that were raised by Berlusconi's sex scandals, but which have been constantly deferred to a more opportune moment, removed from the contingency and an emergency that seemed to call for a straightforward, immediate, compact and shared answer.

From this point of view, Berlusconi's fall has had a further effect of closure with regard to critical positions, in a context in which unity is presented as an indispensable condition for overcoming the political and economic crisis in Italy. The question of visibility was affirmed merely as a problem and then quickly shelved in order to concentrate on other topics that were deemed of greater political importance. The result was that a crucial field of analysis was taken for granted, with no chance for rebuttal. In the face of the economic crisis, topics relating to gender have, in fact, been set aside as secondary – if not downright superfluous – problems, while the shifting “image” of the top echelons of the state has been instrumental in weakening feminism's most critical demands.

If, on the one hand, it is clear that the production of gender functions within a series of mechanisms of domination that strongly involve the visual field, on the other, the problem identified with the images

of women has been perceived in terms of a screen, like something which blocks our vision, preventing the reality – of “women” as a category, of the female condition – from emerging in an intelligible manner. Public opinion has crystallized around “women’s dignity,” a dignity offended by the female role models presented by the media. It is precisely through analyzing how this productive area of gender issues was formed that the political, social and cultural intertwining that has constructed it can be unraveled and revealed. This complex intertwining is historically determined – and by no means should be taken for granted – and can be used to analyze the way the gaze constructs alterity, where gender is not isolated but also always articulated alongside race, sexuality and class. The visual dimension obliges us to confront the issues of origin and authenticity, of self-representation, subjectivity and agency.

Images of women thus become a prism that refracts generational relationships, growing racism and homophobia, sexual economics and new forms of labor. These nodes are traversed by the production of gender in contemporary Italy, where gender emerges as a dimension that is structurally more complex than simply the focus on women and their debased image.

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.” The image and the forms of subjugation inflicted on women are, in fact, indivisible from the many articulations through which difference is created. The female image as a screen of power has a double weight: on the one hand, it hides power dynamics through processes of naturalization and legitimation; on the other, it also represents a political field of negotiation and conflict, both a product and a place of production.

An emergency feminism, which responds to the collective intolerance of sexist representations, can only regenerate itself through critical theory. Theoretical and intellectual investigation cannot help but intertwine with political investigation: critique has a fundamental role to play in situations like contemporary Italy, where the need for unity and broad-ranging accords is presented as a necessity in order to face the emergency, and where, as a result, every critical position tends to be labeled as superfluous, if not downright harmful. In fact, it is necessary to overcome substantially defensive

positions that consider the expression of a rethinking of the categories and the demands of “discordant” subjects as a mere obstacle to a shared view of politics. Theory and politics can neither be separated nor juxtaposed, as if theory were an element that can only be legitimized within “non-emergency” contexts, labeled as premature, untimely or out of place: critical theory challenges the very sense of a legitimate time that systematically excludes it (Brown Wendy, *Edgeworks. Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press, New York 2005, p. 4).

In rendering increasingly evident the impossibility of distinguishing between political and private, Italian and global political events have proven feminism right. If “the time is now,” we don’t need redemption in order to make room for an image of women that is complete and dignified; rather, it must be re-invented. The critique of processes of naturalization of alterity, of the crystallization of identity, of the co-optation of every form of diversity, of the criminalization and marginalization of conflict and of the racialization of society is central to feminist politics. Topics regarding the feminization of labor – the extension of the characteristics which have historically been attributed to female labor, i.e. care-giving and reproduction – to the entire work sphere, the intertwining of identities, politics and the demands of situated positions and the structural violence of a productive system have become central junctions representing starting points for rethinking possible common politics.

As opposed to the temptation to set aside critical positions in the name of demands that focus on unity, a feminist reflection bringing together visibility, gender and the production of difference would clarify certain present crucial aspects, opening up to transformational possibilities as well. If, in fact, the visual field is traversed by relationships of domination, in its most unstable and variable element, the image could also represent an aperture, a possibility, whose potential lies in our hands.