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Title: Voracious Dolls and Competent Chefs: Negotiating Femininities and Masculinities in Italian Food Advertisements of the 1990s-2010s

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Author: Francesca Calamita

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Author Bio:

Francesca Calamita is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing, Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London. She holds a PhD in Italian Literature from Victoria University of Wellington where she taught Italian Language and Culture as well as European Studies. Dr Calamita is currently working on a monograph on the fictional depiction of eating disorders in modern and contemporary Italian women's writing. In February 2013 she co-organized the symposium *New Perspectives on Gender in Italian Culture and Society* and she is currently co-editing a special issue of the journal *altrelettere* which will host a selection of articles developed from the event at VUW. She has recently co-organized a cross-cultural seminar, *Paradoxical Languages*, on the representation of anorexia and bulimia in Italian, French, Spanish and German women's writing at IMLR.

Abstract:

Food advertisements on Italian television and other media are populated by glamorous angels of the house, who look after their families by nourishing them with healthy food, or voracious dolls, whose appetite recalls sexual hunger. Similarly, men are depicted as breadwinners, thus reinforcing their stereotypical role in the collective imaginary, as creative chefs, whose expertise in the kitchen is unquestionable, or as postmodern Adams, whose greedy food consumption is a result of their women's lustful behavior, as depicted in the biblical episode of Eve and the apple. Framing my investigation within the debate on present-day female and male identities and cultural expectations placed on women and men in order to fulfill societally approved roles, I analyze a number of selected food-related advertisements and reality shows on cooking and dieting of the 1990s-2010s and explore what they communicate about contemporary femininity, masculinity and gender roles to their audiences.

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Voracious Dolls and Competent Chefs: Negotiating Femininities and Masculinities in Italian Food Advertisements of the 1990s-2010s

FRANCESCA CALAMITA

In Western culture, the multifaceted relationship between women and food goes as far back as the biblical episode of Eve and the apple. In the first meeting between a woman and food we can already capture its metaphorical meaning: temptation. From History to Gender and Women's Studies, from Sociology of Food to Theology, several disciplines have contributed to the debate on the consequences of Eve's sinful bite.¹ For example, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Fiorenza Tarozzi start their analysis on women and food over Western history with a discussion of the *Bible's* "Genesis." As Muzzarelli points out, ever since Eve's gesture, gluttony has been regarded as one of the worst sins, whereby it symbolizes an excessive desire for something else.² As a result, over the centuries Catholic ideology, supported and driven by patriarchal society, has perceived women as *peccatrici di gola* and it has influenced female eating habits by suggesting what they should and should not eat in order to conform to the ideal femininity of a specific time. A dichotomy has characterized the relationship between women and food for a long time: on the one hand, women have been identified as those in charge of feeding their families, but, on the other hand, they have not been allowed to eat qualitatively and quantitatively like men. At the same time, women have used food as one of the main instruments of their daily work in the household. Tarozzi suggests that cooking is traditionally a women's duty, whilst food preparation by men includes an artistic element. Indeed, women have been perceived as the essential cooks for the family but not as chefs, a title often reserved only for men.³ Throughout history they have been *regine della casa*, *massaie* and *cuoche*; in other words, a series of different nouns that all signify the same task: domestic chores. The relationship between women and food gains such importance that as a result we could state that "la donna è cibo."⁴

In *Dinner Roles*, a monograph on food and gender in American culture, Sherrie Inness reminds us that in postmodern times men are more involved than ever before in cooking at home, and yet preparing daily meals for the family is still perceived as an activity for women; in Western culture everyday male cooking is interpreted as a societally approved task only if it includes a certain category of food, such as meat, which recalls hunting and, in turn, traditional ideas of masculinity,⁵ or as I have already pointed out, an artistic meaning.⁶ Hearty eating has been associated with masculinity since the beginning of Western history and some rich dishes have been reserved for men and only recently perceived as food that could also be enjoyed by women. At the same time hypocaloric and low-carbohydrate dishes, such as yogurt or vegetables,

¹ In particular on Eve, the apple and its fictional portrayal see: Patricia McEachern, *Deprivation and Power: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998); Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Tamara Heller and Patricia Moran, eds., *Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

² Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, "Parte Prima – Il Medioevo e l'età moderna," in Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Fiorenza Tarozzi, *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2003), 1-9.

³ Tarozzi, "Parte Seconda – La società contemporanea," in *Donne e cibo*, 134.

⁴ Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Lucia Re, eds., *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia. Prospettive interdisciplinari* (Bologna: Clueb, 2005), 13.

⁵ I am referring to "the canonical narratives of masculinity" as defined by Raewyn Connell, who uses the expression "hegemonic masculinity" to describe a powerful, both economically and physically, white, heterosexual man whose ideas deeply influence the socio-cultural environment and in turn the existing structure of gender and related "gender competence." Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 77; *Short Introductions: Gender* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 100.

⁶ Sherries Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 17-19.

have been traditionally associated with femininity. Anna Colella has conducted extensive research into Italian bourgeois eating habits in the nineteenth century. She reminds us that from the Unification of Italy to the early twentieth century, red meat was among those foods which were not considered suitable by both medical and cultural ideologies of the time for middle-class Italian ladies, who were asked to choose a balanced diet to improve their instable feminine nature which was driven by biological age; whilst red meat is nowadays regularly eaten by women, it still falls in the category of male food in the collective imaginary.⁷

In postmodern times feminist scholars suggest that women are still required to hold back their desire for the food they prepare.⁸ Paradoxically they are involved daily in food-related tasks, from grocery shopping to table setting, however cultural conventions encourage them to embrace bird-like eating attitudes and to pursue a slim body shape in order to fulfill societal expectations of the ideal femininity. Susie Orbach, the acclaimed psychoanalyst of Princess Diana and author of the best-seller *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), in the preface to the 2006 edition of the book suggests that over the last two decades “thinspiration”⁹ has become a global phenomenon:

In classrooms around the world girls swap tips on how to eat less, how to ratchet up their exercise and how to mimic those perfect bodies they see staring out at them from music videos, TV soap, the catwalk, magazines and billboards. Somewhere they know these bodies aren't quite real. [...] But no matter. The deluge of visual images that wallpapers our world has seeped into all of our consciousness.¹⁰

The unrealistic model of femininity proposed by the media around the world: a tall, slim doll with a flat abdomen and skinny legs, who, however, has an harmonious body shape with large breasts and curvy hips, is deeply influencing the thinking of both younger generations and older women about the way they should look. Naomi Wolf wrote the much-debated monograph *The Beauty Myth* in 1991, in which she analyzed images of women in a number of advertisements from a feminist perspective. As the author suggests:

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us... [D]uring the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing specialty... More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers.¹¹

In Italian popular culture of the 2000s a very similar discourse was addressed by Lorella Zanardo in the well-known documentary and book *Il corpo delle donne*, whose analysis focuses on the model of femininity broadcast daily by commercial television in the age of Berlusconi.¹² As she demonstrates in her analyses, Italian programs are populated by silent showgirls, whose role contributes to the sexual objectification of women through the media.¹³ *Belle e mute*: this is how

⁷ Anna Colella, *Figura di vespa e leggerezza di farfalla. Le donne e il cibo nell'Italia borghese di fine Ottocento* (Florence: Giunti, 2003), 23.

⁸ Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (London: Penguin, 1993), 41.

⁹ I am borrowing this expression from Emily Goodwing's *Thinspiration: An Introduction to the Dangerous World of Eating Disorders* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2011).

¹⁰ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), vii.

¹¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 10.

¹² The Italian and English versions are available on-line: http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/?page_id=89, accessed January 1, 2014. For the printed edition, see Lorella Zanardo, *Il corpo delle donne* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010).

¹³ As Rossella Ghigi suggests, these unrealistic, yet appreciated and imitated, models of femininity, deeply influence young generations. Many Italian teenagers, who are bombarded by their presence on TV, understand that they

Italian television depicts Italian women. Over the last decade *veline*, *schedine* and *letterine* have become alternative nouns to describe silent women whose role only involves dancing and smiling while the host of the TV show comments on them, sometimes sarcastically. In a similar discourse on postmodern womanhood in *Sii bella e stai zitta*, Michela Marzano points out that in present-day Italy, women are still divided into two stereotypical categories: virgins or whores. Indeed, she states that the 1968 slogan “Non più puttane, non più madonne, ma solo donne”¹⁴ has theoretically been accepted but in practice the aforementioned categorization is still a socio-cultural issue:

[...] mi sono dovuta arrendere all'evidenza: la regressione delle donne italiane non è solo un mito [...]. È una realtà. Una realtà triste che emerge non solo quando si leggono i giornali o si guarda la televisione, ma anche quando e soprattutto si discute con la gente [...] si assiste a discorsi maschilisti e retrogradi.¹⁵

Similarly to Wolf in the American socio-cultural context and Zanardo in postmodern Italian society, Marzano highlights that the objectification of women's body, “la mercificazione del corpo della donna,” and gender stereotypes in advertisements and television programs are fundamental parts of present-day popular culture.¹⁶

Over the past few years, western men have been experiencing a similar socio-cultural pressure to conform to the unachievable models of masculinity presented by media. Present-day popular culture is progressively proposing a controversial model of masculinity which includes an extremely gym-toned and shaved body, similarly to the one societally approved for women. As Rosalind Gill, Karen Henwood and Carl McLean suggest, “the male body has become an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look” and it has shifted from “invisibility” to “hypervisibility” in the media over the last few decades.¹⁷ For example, in late 2013 the Italian satirical program *Striscia la notizia* launched *i velini*, two young muscular boys, who, exactly as their female counterparts, dance and smile around the hosts of the show, thus playing the part of *belle e muti*. It is interesting that this provocative message comes from one of the programs that has promoted Italian women's objectification for almost three decades. The message received by the audience, however, is not about gender equality but about objectification of both female and male bodies. By promoting men as show-boys rather than women as showgirls, *Striscia la notizia* does not empower Italian women; it broadcasts models of femininity and masculinity which objectify both sexes.¹⁸ In a similar way to women's bodies, men's bodies have become “a project,” which communicate identity and emotions.¹⁹ It is worth noting that in her 2009 book *Bodies*, Orbach discusses anorexia, bulimia and binge eating in relation to contemporary western

embody an unachievable model of femininity; they question their social status, however they would still like to look like them. See Rossella Ghigi, “Nude ambizioni. Il velinismo secondo gli adolescenti,” *Studi culturali* (3): 2013, 431-456.

¹⁴ Michela Marzano, *Sii bella e stai zitta. Perché l'Italia di oggi offende le donne* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), 39-45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ Rosalind Gill, Karen Henwood and Carl McLean, “Body Projects and the Regulation of Normative Masculinity”, *Body and Society*, 11 (2005): 37-62 (39-40).

¹⁸ The *velini* were soon replaced by regular *veline* and in early 2014 employed on stage together with their female counterparts, due to a consistent decline in viewership which amounts to about two million people. It is worth noting, however, that along with the *velini*, one of the two female presenters was also replaced, the professional comedian Virginia Raffaele, who performed parodies with intelligence, thus suggesting that Italian viewers were not ready to embrace the cultural changes proposed by Antonio Ricci but preferred the stereotypical role of *belle e mute* on screen. Indeed, the comedian embodies a new model of femininity which combines beauty, irony and intelligence. For the data on audience share see http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/10/10/striscia-la-notizia-via-velini_n_4076258.html, accessed April 18, 2014.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

male identity.²⁰ Anorexia, a complex pathology where body politics and gender negotiation play major roles, is, significantly, now included in discussions on masculinity in postmodern times thus suggesting that present-day men are facing similar socio-cultural issues to those that have been experienced by women for a long time.

As Rebecca Swenson emphasizes in a discourse on food and gender roles in American television, if men prepare food, this act must not demasculinize them. If cooking does not include meat preparation, which, as we have seen, is a leisure activity traditionally associated with masculinity, this should be “a cause for an applause” and undoubtedly an event which takes place rarely. Similarly to Inness, the author suggests that over the last few decades conventional gender roles in the kitchen have been changing, more men are involved in food preparation than ever before, whilst the dualistic ideology of men as breadwinners and women as devoted homemakers plays a major role, both in the social context and in its fictional portrayal on screen and page. Even if many culinary programs on American and British televisions, and more recently in Italy, are hosted by men, in those where the presenter is female there is a constant connection between food, femininity and domesticity.²¹ For example, the popular cookery programs of Nigella Lawson, which are also broadcast regularly on Italian commercial television, teaches women how to cook in their everyday life while Buddy Valastro on both sides of the Atlantic in *The Cake Boss* teaches the art of patisserie to his audience.²² From December 2013 the chef Alessandro Borghese has been the protagonist of the show *Alessandro il Conquistatore*, a cooking competition which involves other foreign male chefs from Turkey, Russia, Australia and the USA. In this program cooking does not recall domesticity but as the title suggests, is equated to a battle which in turn recalls the rhetoric of virility and power. In Italy male celebrity chefs, with the exception of a few names such as Giancarlo Vissani and Carlo Cracco, have not yet reached the same visibility as the well-known Jamie Oliver in the UK, Australia and New Zealand or Mario Batali in the USA, however it should be highlighted that reality shows on cooking hosted by men have been broadcast regularly only recently on Italian television.

My contribution to the debate on the portrayal of femininities and masculinities in present-day media will focus on food advertising; in this paper I argue that food advertisements often display ideal figures who embody different models of femininity and masculinity: on the one hand glamorous angels of the house who look after their families by nourishing them with healthy food, on the other hand “living dolls”²³ whose appetite recalls sexual hunger.²⁴ In each of these cases, the message received by female audiences is that food is synonymous with something else: affection, lust, sin or emotional shelter. Similarly, men in food advertisements play three stereotypical roles: they are depicted as breadwinners, thus reinforcing the traditional narrative of “hegemonic masculinity,” as creative chefs, whose expertise in the kitchen is unquestionable, or as postmodern Adams whose greedy food consumption is a result of their women’s voracious and lustful behavior, as depicted in the episode of Eve and the apple. As Rebecca Fasey suggests, “Television advertising has a long history of reinforcing traditional sex role stereotypes whereby the representation of women is passive, nurturing and situating in the home whereas the representation of men is physically active, assertive and seen beyond the

²⁰ Susie Orbach, *Bodies* (London: Profile, 2009).

²¹ Rebecca Swenson, “Domestic Divo,” in Carol Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 137-154.

²² Rebecca Fasey suggests that Nigella Lawson’s programs focus on comfort food, festive meals and more generally by sharing details of her private life they create a bond between the host and her female audience. See Rebecca Fasey, *Masculinity and Popular Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2008), 126-27.

²³ I am borrowing this expression from Natasha Walter’s *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010).

²⁴ As Elisa Giomi remarks: “[d]a schermi o cartelloni, ovunque, ci si trovi, si affacciano mamme sorridenti che servono a tavola, lavano i pavimenti, cercano strategie per combattere cuscinetti adiposi o rughe o cattivi odori, oppure modelle super sexy come oggetti del desiderio ammiccanti per un pubblico maschile.” See Elisa Giomi, “Pubblicità sessista, servono le norme,” in *In Genere Web Magazine* <http://www.ingenero.it/articoli/pubblicit-sessiste-servono-le-norme>, accessed April 14, 2014.

confines of the domestic sphere.”²⁵ Furthermore, reality shows on dieting, where the effects of food on the contestants’ bodies play a predominant role, often display overweight women and men whose shape and unhealthy eating habits are under sarcastic judgment, thus contributing to the complex discourse of ideal femininity and masculinity in postmodern times. In this article I shall analyze some selected food-related advertisements and reality shows of the 1990s-2010s in Italy, framing them within the discourse on contemporary female and male identity, as described by Zanardo, Marzano, Connell and others, as well as exploring what they communicate about femininity, masculinity and gender roles to their audiences.²⁶

In the 2013 television advertisement for the tomato sauce made by Barilla, a brand which is synonymous with Italian cuisine worldwide, gender roles play a major part. A glamorous angel of the house is cooking a meal for her family; “la mamma prepara ogni cosa a regola d’arte, con amore”, says the narrator, over a nostalgic piano piece, while the father is waiting for his dish to be ready, “il papà ha sempre fretta,” and their children are drawing pictures of their perfect nuclear family. Furthermore, the voiceover makes a significant statement in this advertisement: “quando arriva il momento, in cucina tutti prendono posto,” thus suggesting that cooking for the family is still a woman’s task and a major means of displaying affection: a way for women to demonstrate their love to the other members of their family.²⁷ This scenario recalls Mulino Bianco’s stereotypical Italian family which characterized Barilla’s bakery products press and TV ads from 1990 to 1999.²⁸ As Arthur Lizie reminds us in a discussion on food studies and communication, in the past few decades scholars have suggested that men in food advertisements, just like their female counterparts, are associated with stereotypical gender roles, however these fictional constructions have less negative socio-cultural consequences than those associated with contemporary womanhood.²⁹ Indeed, in the Barilla advertisement, the father plays the breadwinner who is waiting for his dish; he steals a little bit of sauce while his wife is preparing the dish but this is the only moment where he has something to do with food before being served for the meal. Besides which, the voiceover, clearly states that he is always very busy and therefore unable to take care of domestic chores. Exploring food advertisements and gender roles in modern and contemporary America, Katherine J. Parkin suggests that “Throughout the twentieth century the ideology that identified women as homemakers and men as breadwinners held strong [...]. Advertisers’ most fundamental message to women [...] was that *food is love*. [...] They encouraged women to show their love for others with food and promised that women could earn their family’s love by serving certain foods.”³⁰ This is exactly what is still depicted in the 2013 Barilla advertisement. Furthermore, according to Carol J. Pardun, even if in

²⁵ Fasey, *Masculinity and Popular Television*, 139.

²⁶ In this article I insert my investigation into Zanardo and Marzano’s analyses; however other scholars of gender studies are engaged in discussions on the representation of femininity through Italian media. In particular see Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi’s *Lo schermo del potere. Femminismo e regime della visibilità* (Verona: Ombrecorte, 2012) which addresses the issue not only from a feminist perspective but also from an anthropological angle, particularly in relation to the intersection between visual culture, gender and power. For a political agenda about gender awareness in European advertisements see also Elisa Giomi, Silvia Sansonetti and Anna Lisa Tota, “Women and Girls as Subjects of Media’s Attention and Advertisement Campaigns: the Situation in Europe, Best Practices and Legislations,” *ricerca svolta per conto del Parlamento Europeo, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs*, 2013, pp. 118.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/474442/IPOLFEMM_ET%282013%2947444_2_EN.pdf, accessed April 14, 2014.

²⁷ The 2013 Barilla advert is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x20SLw2KBiA>, accessed December 26, 2013.

²⁸ See <http://www.mulinobianco.it/storia-e-pubblicita/la-comunicazione/1990-99/la-famiglia-del-mulino>, accessed April 25, 2014)

²⁹ Arthur Lizie, “Food and Communication,” in *Routledge International Book of Food Studies*, ed. Ken Albala (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 27-38 (32-33).

³⁰ Katherine J. Parkin, *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006), 1-30.

postmodern times many women work outside the household, “they are still depicted as being in charge of all household chores. They are also more likely than men to be shown as responsible for food selection and meal preparation in the home,”³¹ exactly as I have pointed out in my reading of the Barilla advertisement. A controversial debate has exploded recently after the chairman of the world-famous pasta company, Guido Barilla, declared in an interview to Radio24: “Non farei mai uno spot con una famiglia omosessuale. Non per mancanza di rispetto, ma perché non la penso come loro, la nostra è una famiglia classica, dove la donna ha un ruolo fondamentale.”³² Women’s stereotypical role in the kitchen in Barilla’s advertisements is thus confirmed indisputably by the company chairman’s declaration.

In the 2013 Christmas advertisement for Ferrero Rocher, a chocolate praline that is famous worldwide, the protagonist is Lorenzo who is taking care of the festive season’s most important dinner, that of the 25th of December. Although audiences do not see him setting the table and cooking, they clearly understand that Lorenzo has invited a large number of friends to his party and that he is in charge of every detail; early in the morning he goes to a forest near home and collects some wood to make a little box which can be filled with the Ferrero Rocher bonbons. While this advertisement apparently proposes a ground-breaking subject, that of a man who is charge of a Christmas party, traditionally an activity which involves the women of the family, his role is well highlighted by a subtitle at the beginning of the advertisement which states: “Lorenzo: Maestro e Chef,”³³ thus justifying his actions and protecting his identity from being demasculinized.³⁴

Food commercials often link women, food and sexuality, particularly if high calorie dishes or indulgent desserts are advertised, as I shall explore shortly. In the early 1990s a popular ad for Mortadella Cuor di Paese by Ibis proposed two opposite models of femininity; on the one hand a conventional mother, who is responsible for feeding her family with tasty meals, including this cured meat, on the other hand a young and more provocative saleswoman who is responsible for attracting customers to her shop where the mortadella is sold. This product is characterized by a heart-shaped image in its centre that is also strictly related to the two models of femininity proposed by the advertisement. For the mother the heart is synonymous with affection but for the saleswoman it is synonymous with seduction. Indeed the young woman wears a heart-shaped jewel on her cleavage on which the camera zooms in while the narrator says “un cuore grande!”³⁵ These two opposing models of femininity, the caring mother and the seductive saleswoman, recall the two different meanings of food often associated with women: affection and lust. Men in this advertisement are represented by the young boy who faints at the sight of the beautiful saleswoman and her provocative V-neck dress, thus stereotyping male roles in advertisements as those who succumb to women’s voracious sexuality. The boy here plays a young Adam who in the collective imaginary was seduced by Eve and her sinful behavior.

³¹ Carol J. Pardun, *Advertising and Society: An Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 1998.

³² The whole interview can be accessed at <http://www.radio24.ilsole24ore.com/notizie/lazzara/2013-09-26/guido-barilla-spot-famiglia-122352.php>, accessed December 26, 2013.

³³ The 2013 Ferrero Rocher advertisement is available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=600VXbjwQgI>, accessed December 26, 2013.

³⁴ In the reality show “Bake off Italia: dolci in forno,” which is based on “The Great British Bake Off,” contestants bake cakes and pastries to win the title of the best amateur baker in Italy; desserts are judged by Ernst Friedrich Knam, who is known in Italy as “Il re del cioccolato” and Clelia D’Onofrio who is the editor in chief of the famous collection *Il cucchiaino d’argento*. In the episodes Knam plays the part of the chef who gives suggestions to the contestants with scientific authority and judges their dishes with military attitudes while D’Onofrio is labeled by the voiceover simply as “la signora de *Il cucchiaino d’argento*”; she displays a maternal behavior towards the bakers. Similarly to the Ferrero Rocher advertisement Knam’s role is highlighted by his nickname “Il re del cioccolato” which protects him from being demasculinized while D’Onofrio is rarely addressed as “chef,” she is labeled as “un’esperta di gastronomia.” Furthermore Knam wears a chef uniform while D’Onofrio judges desserts and pastries in her everyday clothes.

³⁵ The 1994 advertisement “Mortadella Cuor di paese” is available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DZ15rY9zoI>, accessed December 26, 2013.

Similarly, the documentary *Il corpo delle donne* briefly shows an advertisement linking women and food consumption which I find particularly appropriate to explain my argument. An attractive woman is eating artichokes while a male voice in the background says “Il gusto della seduzione.” In this word game, eating and sexuality come together, thus depicting a woman who eats food which, however, metaphorically recalls sexual hunger and satisfies a male collective imaginary of lust. A series of similar advertisements are broadcast every day on Italian television and published in Italian magazines and newspapers, such as the 2013 commercial for the chocolate liqueur *Mon Chéri* where the camera zooms on a pair of bright red female lips that are sensually squeezing a cherry.³⁶ Among others, I would like to focus on the international “Magnum Temptation” campaign by the renowned ice-cream brand Algida (known as *Streets* in Australia and New Zealand, *Good Humor* in the USA, *Wall’s* in the UK) which explicitly links seduction, lust and food indulgence. This series of advertisements began in 2007 and they starred Eva Longoria. At the beginning of one of the clips, the actress states: “Le brave ragazze dicono che non bisogna cedere alle tentazioni, ma loro non hanno mai giocato il mistero.”³⁷ In this video, eating a chocolate ice-cream is compared to sexual pleasure in a glamorous framework which plays with the multifaceted meaning of the word “appetite.” While apparently broadcasting a sexually liberated woman, this advertising campaign cultivates the dichotomy of food as lust and food as nutrition. Indeed in this advertisement eating ice-cream is associated with gluttony, which is related, in turn, to sexual pleasure. In this advert food is also equated to self-expression and it is used to speak about what kind of femininity the actress is embodying. Indeed, she states that her name is Eve and therefore she cannot resist temptation, thus recalling the biblical episode of Eve and the apple and the Catholic interpretation of women as unstable individuals who lack self-control. As Susan Bordo suggests, “when women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food, the hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite. [...] Women are permitted to lust for food itself only when they are pregnant;” in other words, when they can justify their desire for food.³⁸ Eating ice-cream as a metaphor for sexual appetite is precisely what this advertisement depicts. Furthermore, whilst the male character in the background may play a more mature Adam than the one personified by the young boy in the Mortadella Cuor di Paese advertisement, he too succumbs to Eva’s voracious attitude towards ice-cream and sexuality.

The Sicilian company Zappalà has proposed a series of press advertisements in the late 1990s which explicitly equate women’s body parts or their maternal function to their dairy products (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). A comprehensive gallery of the images is available on their website.³⁹

Here food is compared to women’s body, thus recalling both eating and sexual appetite. Studying images of women in advertisements, Anthony Cortese suggests that “a key component of the passive, subordinate role is that women lack a voice.”⁴⁰ In the Zappalà advertisements not only do the female protagonists lack a voice but the shot also zooms in on one of their body parts, thus reducing them to sexual objects. The female body parts, not the object, are the visual products that gain attention through this metaphorical connection. In these posters not only do women not eat the products they are advertising but they are depicted as the food itself; as I have pointed out in the introduction, the connection between women and food is so important that often women become food. Mozzarella is regarded in Italian culture as a light meal and

³⁶ It is available on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1f4_6n2ffP4, accessed April 22, 2014.

³⁷ The 2007 “Magnum Temptation” campaign is available on www.youtube.com/watch?v=9M2uC4pCHPY, accessed December 12, 2013.

³⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993), 110.

³⁹ See <http://www.zappala.it/comunicazione>, accessed May 22, 2014. From the early 2000s their campaigns have been focusing on regional and national identity in agreement with their most recent vision and mission.

⁴⁰ Anthony J. Cortese, *Provocateur: Images of Women and Minority in Advertising* (Lanham: Littlefield, 2008), 59.

therefore a product which usually targets women rather than men, however in this advertisement by equating women's body part to food the campaign is also addressed to men who are supposed to be attracted by the sexual connotation of the images. In this light, the advertisement is offensive not only for women, who are objectified, but also for men who are perceived as customers who could potentially buy the product for its lustful connection. The female body is an all-pervasive presence in Italian advertisements, even in commercials that promote products completely unrelated to food and consumption; the Zappalà advert exemplifies how it is completely objectified, pulled to pieces, and used as an instrument of attraction for the male audience by Italian media.



Figure 1. This press ad of mozzarella Zappalà shows a portion of a female's back, but the caption hints to her breasts: "Zappalà Mozzarellas. Imagine them."



Figure 2. A second press ad of mozzarella Zappalà shows the female's breasts and the caption is more explicit: "Zappalà Mozzarellas. The beautiful things of Summer."

Over the last few years, cooking, dieting and makeover reality shows have populated Italian commercial television, thus contributing to the debate on how women and men should look, what they should eat, and which model of femininity and masculinity they should embrace in order to achieve societally approved roles, exactly as food advertisements do. Most of these shows are not produced in Italy but imported from the UK and the USA, thus proposing global models of femininity or masculinity rather than national ones, exactly as it happens for international food campaigns of worldwide sold products; however, both Italian commercial and cable networks have gradually started to buy the foreign formats and to remake the Italian versions of these worldwide popular reality shows. For example, the Italian chef Cracco replaces the American chef Gordon Ramsay in “Hell’s Kitchen Italia” (Sky1 HD) and in March 2014 Mediaset launched “Come mi vorrei” (Italia1), inspired by the American series “Plain Jane.”

Among weight loss reality shows, I would like to mention the popular “The biggest loser [Sfida all’ultimo kilo]” and “Supersize vs Super skinny [Grassi contro magri].”⁴¹ As Elizabeth Horsley suggests, the main message from these reality shows is that fat is bad, and something to be very ashamed of. In particular, “The biggest loser” is compared by the scholar to a “familiar fairytale”, where the contestant was an “ugly duckling” who transforms into a “swan” over the months in which the challenge takes place.⁴² The contestant is losing his/her weight while he/she is also improving his/her personal life: for example if he/she was single he/she meets an ideal partner, his/her troubled relationship with someone’s else in the family suddenly improves, his/her work career takes off and so on. Similarly, by going through a style makeover, in “Come mi vorrei” the young female contestants gain immediate confidence in their interpersonal relationships, particularly in attracting boys of the same age. The received message is that losing weight or changing physical appearance brings happiness and control over one’s life. This is particularly problematic; it is, indeed, the same mechanism that those who suffer from eating disorders employ. For anorexic and bulimic women and men, to choose not to eat means to become strong, to empower themselves while, paradoxically, they are destroying themselves. In addition, to binge or to be described as someone who enjoys food is equated to shame. As Angela McCarthy and Margi Thomson suggest, anorexia stimulates pride, bulimia brings feelings of a lack of self-control, similarly to other psychopathologies which include addiction. Encouraging women and men to embrace this attitude is extremely dangerous.⁴³ As Horsley points out, the final product is presented as a “thinner, happier, prouder” individual.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the scholar tells us that the heavier the female character, the more negative comments are made about her from men and these comments are often followed by audience laughter.⁴⁵ Similarly in a recent episode of “Come mi vorrei”, the host, Belen Rodriguez, who fully embodies the model of the stereotypical show-girl on Italian commercial television, compares the female contestant, who likes wearing oversize dresses to hide her body shape, to a “sacco di patate,” thus provoking the co-host’s laughter.⁴⁶ In a discussion of fat-shaming, emotions and womanhood, Kim Chernin, who along with Orbach is one of the most noteworthy feminist scholars on eating disorders, reminds us that “women are directed to turn their dissatisfaction and depression towards their bodies. They are encouraged to look at their large sizes as the cause of the failure they sustain in their lives.”⁴⁷ Reality shows on dieting encourage both women and men to associate their body weight with their emotional fulfillment, thus embracing the same mechanism on self-esteem and feelings described by Chernin.

⁴¹ “Grassi contro magri” is broadcast in Italy on the channel Real Time, “Sfida all’ultimo kilo” on Cielo.

⁴² Elizabeth Horsley, *Portrayal of Weight and Healthy on Reality TV* (MA diss., University of Kansas, 2007), 70.

⁴³ Angela McCarthy and Margi Thomson, *The Hungry Heart: Anorexia and Bulimia* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1996), 10.

⁴⁴ Horsley, *Portrayal of Weight and Healthy on Reality*, 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁶ http://www.video.mediaset.it/video/come_mi_vorrei/full/454788/lunedì-21-aprile.html, accessed April 22, 2014.

⁴⁷ Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 160.

Postmodern culture has normalized these paradoxical and self-destructive behaviors towards body and food. For example, an Italian female size 46, a British 12 or an American 10, is now considered a plus size, and those who fit a 42 or 44 are on the boundary between slimness and curviness.⁴⁸ Women are bombarded by messages which suggest they must become superwomen: angels of the house, superb mothers, highly competent workers, beauty queens, perfect mistresses; as Luisa Stagi notes in a discussion on the Italian social context and eating disorders, these socio-cultural expectations deeply influence the development of anorexia, bulimia and binge eating.⁴⁹ I am not suggesting that dieting and makeover shows increase the number of anorexic and bulimic women, as well as men, but that, like advertising, they influence the individual's relationship with food, particularly they contribute to normalize the so-called practice of fat-shaming that, as I have pointed out, is widely employed in this context.

From 2008 to 2011 “Cotto e mangiato” (Italia1), an Italian large viewership reality show on cooking, which recalls Nigella Lawson's programs, was hosted by Benedetta Parodi who describes herself in these terms: “sono una mamma indaffaratissima e una donna che ha trovato nella cucina una passione e l'ha trasformata in un lavoro,” thus proposing a do-it-all model which tends towards the “superwoman” status, as described by Stagi.⁵⁰ The collective imaginary has depicted women as those responsible for feeding their family for centuries; in her programs, which include also the popular “I menù di Benedetta” (La7, 2011-2013), Parodi accomplishes this task perfectly. Nevertheless, her proposed model also suggests a new ideal femininity to embrace, that of a business woman, who has transformed a societally sanctioned role into a career. Parodi is a busy mother, fashionable woman and competent worker, however she does not consider herself a chef or is perceived as such by her audience and is therefore still trapped in the socio-cultural boundaries which require women to feed their families as part of their main daily duties, as I have pointed out in the introduction by referring to Fasey's reading of Lawson's model of femininity.⁵¹

The representation of women and men in food-related Italian advertisements and reality shows of the 1990s-2010s contributes to the present-day discussion on ideal femininity and masculinity in postmodern culture. Women appear to be divided into categories that still portray them as perfect mothers or voracious mistresses, thus perpetuating the stereotype of virgins and whores; at the same time, food is often a significant tool which they manipulate to make their members of the family happy or, as I stated at the beginning of my article, women become the food itself, as we have seen in the Zappalà press advertisements. Men play the strong breadwinners, thus perpetuating the rhetoric of “hegemonic masculinity,” the competent chefs, whose suggestions are unquestionable, or the victims of an aggressive and uncontrollable female sexuality as in the Eve, Adam and the apple's biblical episode. Eating food, especially sweet food, is a sign of lack of control which recalls both lust and greed and is equated with sexual pleasure; furthermore it is precisely in the advertisements for sweet dishes, desserts, ice-creams and snacks that women are portrayed as sexually voracious and men as victims of this lustful scenario. In present-day Italian society a new model of femininity is emerging, that of the “superwoman”

⁴⁸ On the Italian TV channel Real Time the reality show “Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss [Abito da sposa XXL]” has recently appeared, in which obese women look for their wedding dress at the Manhattan atelier Kleinfeld Bridal. The original program, “Say Yes to the Dress [Abito da sposa cercasi]” broadcasts American brides in search of their perfect wedding dress. By creating a dedicated TV program to large sizes, the production company, Half Yard, divides women into slim and fat, thus contributing to the global phenomenon of fat-shaming and increasing body-image concerns.

⁴⁹ Stagi Luisa, *La società bulimica. Le trasformazioni simboliche del corpo tra edonismo ed autocontrollo* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000).

⁵⁰ <http://www.benedettaparodi.it/>, accessed April 20, 2014. The show is currently hosted by Tessa Gelisio.

⁵¹ “Cotto e mangiato” differs from other large viewership cooking shows such as “La prova del cuoco” (Rai1); here the TV host, Antonella Clerici, is not in charge of the kitchen and program at the same time as Parodi is, but surrounded by co-hosts, chefs and contestants. She cooks along with them but always under their guidance, thus occasionally crossing the line between TV presenting and domesticity.

which, as we have seen, is partially embodied by Parodi in “Cotto e mangiato” and “I menù di Benedetta.” On the one hand the launch of a do-it-all model on Italian TV contributes to dismantle the dualistic perception of women as caring homemakers or provocative dolls in the collective imaginary but on the other hand to pressurize women into achieving unrealistic standards of beauty, efficiency at home and competence at work, which in turn make them feel constantly inadequate in every sector of their lives, as Stagi has suggested in a discourse on contemporary identity and eating disorders.

By employing real people, rather than fictional characters, reality shows on dieting, makeover and cooking propose ideal models of femininity and masculinity whilst also interfering with their viewers’ life, encouraging them to contact the TV hosts and ask for some help in improving their appearance and cooking skills. The advertisements and reality shows which involve food, whether its preparation, consumption or its effects on the body, that I have analyzed communicate a series of complex messages about what food means for contemporary Italian society: they suggest to women and men what to buy, what to eat, how to look, which models of femininities and masculinities to embrace and more generally they contribute to the construction of postmodern identities. They represent and reinforce stereotypical images of women and men, as described by Connell, Giomi, Ghigi, Marzano, Zanardo and others, and demonstrate the urgent need to disseminate positive gender role models in Italian media.

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