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Abstract: Journalist Loredana Lipperini astutely observes how in Italy “motherhood is the knot” in which are entangled different feminist philosophies, as well as patriarchal views of the maternal figure as the only acceptable version of female identity. In biopolitical terms, the maternal body is “the place where power expresses itself and where power, by assuming control of it, exercises its greatest repression (Lupperini 2007). This article aims to disentangle the “knot” of feminist aspirations and contradictory discourses on motherhood in contemporary Italy as it is explored in three Italian web series: Ivan Cotroneo’s *Una mamma imperfetta* (2013), Eva Milella’s and Elisa Giani’s *Malamamma* (2013), and Alessandra Bonzi’s *Oh mamma mia* (2015). Drawing on Italian, European, and North American feminist criticism, I demonstrate how, despite references to feminist discourses, these media narratives of motherhood cannot escape the pervasiveness of postfeminist neoliberal ideology, and ultimately confirm the power structures they aim to challenge or subvert. Though these series try to question the validity of postfeminist models of perfect motherhood, they remain deeply enmeshed in the same dynamics that have made them powerful and pervasive—thus displaying the tensions between conflicting ideals and realities that all imperfect mothers face in their daily lives.

Key Words: motherhood, postfeminism, web series, cyberfeminism, neoliberalism.

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Cybermoms and Postfeminism in Italian Web Series

GIOVANNA FALESCHINI LERNER

In a *New York Times* article published in March 1994, journalist Rosalind Resnick defined herself as a “cyber-mom,” appropriating the term with which her friends and family jokingly referred to her ever since she had begun immersing herself in the world of internet connectivity. In describing her motivations for spending time online, she mentioned on the one hand the convenience of having the tools for communication, news research, and household management at her fingertips, on the other the sense of community that the internet afforded her as a new mother who had left her job to work from home as a free-lancer.¹ Resnick’s story emphasizes the potential of the early internet to provide women with “a network of lines on which to chatter, natter, work and play,” as Sadie Plant, a pioneer of cyberfeminism, would write a few years later, but it also reveals the imbrication of technology and postfeminist discourses on motherhood and choice.² This article aims to explore the complex nexus of cyberfeminism and postfeminism that emerges in Italian web-based narrative representations of motherhood, and specifically three web series with very different production styles, audiences, and platforms: Ivan Cotroneo’s *Una mamma imperfetta / Imperfect Mom* (2013), Eva Milella’s and Elisa Giani’s *Malamamma* (Badmom), and Swiss-Italian journalist Alessandra Bonzi’s *Oh mamma mia* (2015). The analysis of these three case studies will show how, despite aesthetic and rhetorical echoes of cyberfeminist discourses, web-based narrative forms can hardly escape the pervasiveness of postfeminist neoliberal ideology, and ultimately confirm the power structures they set out to challenge or even subvert. It is important to recognize and engage critically with this tension, insofar as, as Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi have written, media have the power to produce “effetti di realtà e [...] un forte potere di colonizzazione dell’immaginario e delle aspirazioni femminili” (reality effects, and [...] a great power of colonizing women’s imaginary and aspirations).³

Cyberfeminism and the Maternal

The emergence of cyberfeminism is usually traced back to feminist biologist and posthumanist critic Donna Haraway’s 1985 “Cyborg Manifesto.”⁴ With the publication of Haraway’s essay, many feminist thinkers and scholars embraced the possibilities afforded by emerging Internet technologies as tools

¹ Rosalind Resnick, “Watch Out Nerds, Here’s Cybermom,” *The New York Times*, 16 March 1994, n.p.

² Sadie Plant, “On the Matrix. Cyberfeminist Simulations” (1996), rptd. in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 235. Though other terms have recently partially supplanted “cyberfeminism” (for example “networked feminism”, or even “post-cyber feminism,” as documented in the 2017 Institute of Contemporary Art Post-Cyber Feminist International Conference in London), I use it here to highlight the historical connections between the media strategies I explore and these earlier movements. Post-cyber feminists themselves do not see their position as opposed or beyond the goals of cyberfeminism, but use the prefix “post-” to define their positionality as no longer aspiring to a cyber future, but as living in it. (Hettie Judah, “Ungender, deprogram, urinate: improve your life with post-cyber international feminism!” *The Guardian*, 24 November 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/24/ica-ungender-deprogram-urinate-how-post-cyber-international-feminism-can-improve-your-life>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

³ Alessandra Gribaldo and Giovanna Zapperi, *Lo schermo del potere. Femminismo e regime della visibilità*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2012, 14, my translation.

⁴ Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 65-107, rptd. as “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth-Century,” in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991), 149-181.

of subversive resistance against suppressive gender regimes.⁵ Digital technologies were seen as enabling “women to engage in new forms of contestation and in proactive endeavors in multiple different realms, from political to economic.”⁶ The term “cyberfeminism” itself is analogous to the multiplicity of the internet and, from the outset, it included a vast range of discourses, theories, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital technologies. It was coined by Plant in the 1990s, almost simultaneously with the Australian art collective VNS Matrix. Plant argued that,

[C]omplex systems and virtual worlds are not only important because they open spaces for existing women within an already existing culture, but also because of the extent to which they undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousand years of patriarchal control.⁷

Similarly, VNS Matrix presented its collective project as “the virus of the new world disorder / rupturing the symbolic from within / saboteurs of big daddy mainframe.”⁸

The interest in cyberfeminist practices was initially connected to the disembodied nature of digital agency, which was seen as potentially liberating from the discriminatory realities of embodied experience.⁹ Some feminists were particularly attracted to the possibilities of “[g]ender bending, online activism and connectivity.”¹⁰ As Plant wrote at the time, cyberfeminism was a distributed “insurrection” that allowed for the emergence of “links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets.”¹¹ More recently, however, feminist scholars and thinkers, among whom Jessica Brophy, have argued that “lauding cyberspace as merely a disembodied utopian dream masks the processes and performances that re-create and re-enact oppressive normative social structures—*both* in cyberspace *and* in our shared bodily space.”¹² These critics have advocated instead for a refocusing on the body in ways that reject “the mind/body dualisms, historical constructions of gender, and cultural inscriptions of meaning that underlie the politics of class, race, gender, and age.”¹³ These positions are in line with the recent (re)turn of cyberfeminism to the body as an essential site of intersectionality.¹⁴ Swedish scholar Jenny Sundén argues that the feminist embrace of intersectionality itself should be grounded more firmly on notions of embodiment, which in turn would open up new possibilities for cyberfeminist engagements with “the increasing intimacies between bodies and technologies in a posthuman society.”¹⁵

Particularly important in this recentering of the body is the experience of maternity: breastfeeding advocacy groups, motherhood support groups, “momoirs,” and mommy blogs have

⁵ For a discussion of old and new views of cyberfeminism in its plurality, see Jessie Daniels “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 37, 1-2 (2009): 101.

⁶ Saskia Sassen, “Towards a Sociology of Information Technology,” *Current Sociology* 50, no. 3 (2002): 368.

⁷ Plant, “On the Matrix,” 325.

⁸ VNS Matrix, “The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st century.” <https://vnsmatrix.net/the-cyberfeminist-manifesto-for-the-21st-century>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

⁹ See Daniels, “Rethinking Cyberfeminism.”

¹⁰ Jessica Brophy, “Developing a corporeal cyberfeminism: beyond cyberutopia,” *New Media and Society* 12, no. 6 (2010): 929. See also Plant, “On the Matrix,” 328.

¹¹ Plant, “On the Matrix,” 335.

¹² *Ibid.*, 931, original emphasis.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 935.

¹⁴ See Jessica Beyer, “Women’s (Dis) embodied engagement with male-dominated online communities,” in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, eds. Radhicka Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, (New York and Bern: Peter Lang 2012), 161. See also Ann Phoenix and Pamela Pattynama, “Intersectionality.” Special issue on intersectionality. *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 187–192.

¹⁵ Jenny Sundén, “On cyberfeminist intersectionality,” in *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights*, eds. Malin Sveningsson Elm & Jenny Sundén (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007), 31.

proliferated online as instruments that help build communities of solidarity, as well as safe spaces in which to share personal narratives. Lori Lopez considers mommy blogging as a radical act of feminist praxis, “because it offers women the potential to build communities and challenge dominant representations of motherhood.”¹⁶ As Marina Bettaglio has written, in Italy the blogosphere emerged as a space of respite from the anxieties of motherhood, providing “a sense of community, a support network, a space of apparent freedom that assuages the solitude that accompanies many new mothers.”¹⁷ Mommy blogs in particular are perceived as opportunities to escape the high expectations of motherhood as well as outlets to express and explore mothers’ ambivalent feelings toward their new maternal roles. They thus seem to propose new ways of thinking about maternal practices.¹⁸

From a feminist perspective, the discursive re-appropriation of maternity and affirmation of individual maternal subjectivities is crucial because, as Loredana Lipperini observes, in Italy in particular “la maternità è il nodo” (motherhood is the knot) in which are entangled different feminist philosophies as well as patriarchal views of the maternal figure as the only socially admissible and healthy version of female identity.¹⁹ The maternal body—as biopolitical thought emphasizes—“è il luogo dove si esprime il potere e dove il potere, assumendone il controllo, esercita la maggior repressione” (is the place where power expresses itself and where power, by assuming control of it, exercises its greatest repression) as Lipperini writes.²⁰ Thus, the practice of mommy blogging offers itself as a space where women can respond to the profound need of “describing the adult female experience from the [view]point of females themselves,” as psychoanalyst Silvia Vegetti Finzi has written, and where they can frankly discuss the ambiguities and anxieties that define contemporary motherhood.²¹ But blogs, online forums and WhatsApp groups also become battlegrounds between diverging visions of the maternal. Italian women in particular seem to oscillate between philosopher Luisa Muraro’s “difference feminism” and “equality feminism.” Whereas equality feminism focuses on issues such as equal access to work opportunities, economic policies, political equality, and resistance to fixed gender roles, the Italian *pensiero della differenza* (sexual-difference thought), inspired by Luce Irigaray, and further explored in Muraro’s *L’ordine simbolico della madre / The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, emphasizes sexual difference and puts the maternal back at the center of women’s experiences and identity. For Muraro, the symbolic order of the mother is based on the recognition of a feminine genealogy through which language and knowledge are transmitted. In this way, Muraro affirms the mother’s generative function beyond her reproduction, her power of creatively engaging with the world and establishing female communities of solidarity.²²

These philosophical confrontations, moreover, cannot be extracted from the neoliberal policies and politics that constitute their economic context.²³ Though the internet itself was the result of military research and investment, it is now—and in the US especially after the current government’s attacks on net neutrality—firmly associated with neoliberalism, which Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff define as “a mobile calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-

¹⁶ Daniels, “Rethinking Cyberfeminism,” 32. See also Lori Kido Lopez, “The radical act of ‘mommy blogging’: redefining motherhood through the blogosphere,” *New Media and Society*, 11 (2009): 729–747.

¹⁷ Marina Bettaglio, “Maternal Momoirs in Contemporary Italy,” *intervalla: Special Vol. 1* (2016): 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Loredana Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n’è più d’una* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2013), 14, my translation. See also Massimo Recalcati, *Le mani della madre. Desiderio, fantasmi ed eredità del materno* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2015), 12.

²⁰ Loredana Lipperini, *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007), 77.

²¹ Silvia Vegetti Finzi, *Mothering: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Construction* (New York: Guilford P, 1996). See also Lipperini, *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine*, 90.

²² See Luisa Muraro, *L’ordine simbolico della madre* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1991).

²³ Daniels, “Rethinking Cyberfeminism,” 35.

managing, autonomous, and enterprising.”²⁴ The neoliberal emphasis on privatization and, ideologically and rhetorically, on individual freedom and choice, resonates deeply with post-feminism; according to Gill and Scharff, “postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.”²⁵ This pervasiveness touches on the very definition of the self, Gill and Scharff continue, focusing on “the extent to which we see contemporary modes of power operating increasingly on and through the making and remaking of subjectivities, and through ‘governing the soul’ (Rose 1989).”²⁶ Bettaglio sees this at work in Italian mommy blogs, where the freedom to give voice to one’s own “maternal subjectivity,” which access to cyber space apparently guarantees, is in fact “a means of self-construction, regulated by complex self-monitoring practices subordinated to economic forces.”²⁷ Thus, for instance, mommy blogs can become very effective publicity tools, as Claudia De Lillo, author of the blog <https://nonsolomamma.com> discusses in an online interview with journalist Andrea Coccia:

Quando leggi della vita di una mamma e ti ci immedesimi, ti fidi, quasi come se fosse un’amica, a quel punto è inevitabile che se lei ti dice che se compri una marca piuttosto che un’altra di pannolini la tua vita cambia, tu tendi a fidarti. (When you read about a mother’s life and recognize yourself in it and you trust her as if she were a friend, it is inevitable that, when she says that your life will change if you buy one diaper brand rather than another, you tend to trust that.)²⁸

De Lillo explains that in recent years she has regularly received product placement requests from advertisers (which she does not accept). Lipperini, too, writes that marketing executives see mom bloggers as “collaboratori” (collaborators) in partnerships that are aimed as much at sales as at research and development.²⁹

Motherhood Web Series

This complex interrelation of neoliberalism, (cyber)feminism, and postfeminism that can be detected in mommy blogs infuses other web spaces in which mothers’ experiences are narrated and explored in ways that often both challenge and embrace postfeminist ideas of motherhood. These include mommy vlogs (or video-blogs, often shared on proprietary YouTube channels) and web series, which are the focus of this article. According to the International Academy of Web Television, a web series is,

a series of two (2) or more episodes held together by the same title, trade name or mark, or identifying personality common to all the episodes that initially aired and was distributed anywhere in the world

²⁴ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ Bettaglio, “Maternal Momoirs,” 49.

²⁸ Andrea Coccia, “Mamme blogger nella giungla del web,” Interview with Claudia De Lillo, *linkiesta.it*, 10 May 2015. <http://www.linkiesta.it/it/article/2015/05/10/mamme-blogger-nella-giungla-del-web/25842/>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018. It is important to observe that, while Claudia De Lillo does not use “Nonsolomamma” for advertising purposes, her blog served as a launchpad for a successful career as a book author with the publisher TEA and, more recently, with Einaudi. Her books fall into the genre of the Italian “momoir,” which Bettaglio analyzes in a pioneering 2016 article.

²⁹ Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n’è più d’una*, 267. On the capitalization of mommy blogs, see also Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “What Ever Happened to the Mommy Blog?,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 28 January 2018. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/parenting/ct-mommy-blog-disappear-20180129-story.html>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

via the Internet using website technology [...], or is intended to distribute in such a way as the primary form of distribution.³⁰

This definition is inclusive of fictional and non-fictional content, and uses two main criteria for discrimination: seriality and the web as the original distribution platform. Web series can be fictional or documentary, scripted or unscripted, and can include vlogs and tutorials, alongside narrative series.³¹ Thanks to their formal adaptability, web series are hospitable to personal self-narratives and interrogations of existing models of motherhood, often within interactive platforms like YouTube, which allow for the creation of fandom communities. Moreover, the flexibility of the web series format allows for aesthetic and formal experimentations that are often accompanied by subversive feminist content—as, for example, in the Lesbian web fictions *LSB* and *Re(l)azioni a Catena* (Chain Re(l)a(c)tions). As *New Yorker* writer Rachel Syme observes, “It’s like small-screen Sundance all the time if you know the right URLs.”³²

In this article, I focus on three Italian web series that display the diversity of forms that the umbrella term “web series” accommodates, ranging as they do from a serial fiction—in the form of a video diary or vlog (*Una mamma imperfetta*)—to a series of tutorials on single motherhood (*Malamamma*), to a collage of home videos arranged by parenting topic (*Oh mamma mia*). All three attempt to critique the expectations of perfect motherhood and subvert the discourse of hyper-maternity through irony and humor, and are centered on the experiences of working mothers, who have to negotiate the demands of domestic and market labor. In my analysis, I aim to reveal and analyze the ways in which these three web series both display and navigate the tension between cyberfeminist stances and the pull of postfeminist social forces, and the relationship between these internal tensions and the contradictory discourses on motherhood in contemporary Italy.

Una mamma imperfetta

Maria Elena D’Amelio has written extensively on *Una mamma imperfetta* in an essay included in her edited volume, *Italian Motherhood on Screen*.³³ In this article, I aim to expand on her excellent analysis through a consideration of other web series, exploring the ways in which alternative representations of contemporary Italian motherhood are freer to emerge in the user-generated contents of social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. Thus, I suggest that one reason for the ultimate failure of *Una mamma imperfetta* to challenge postfeminist views of the maternal is due to its launch on largely mainstream platforms that leave less room for experimentation and risk, as well as its positioning within the genre of fiction.

³⁰ IAWT, 2015 IAWTV Awards Guidelines, <http://www.iawtv.org/rules-and-cost-to-enter-the-2015-iawtv-awards>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

³¹ David H. Schwartz and Susan E. Clarke, “What the F&\$k is a Web Series, Anyway?,” *The Huffington Post*, 6 June 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-h-schwartz/what-the-fk-is-a-web-seri_b_7252398.html. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018. Chiara Bressa, curator of the blog <http://worldwidewebserie.com>, narrows the definition down considerably, and argues that web fictions only should be considered web series (see her interview with Claudia Agrestino, <http://inchiostro.unipv.it/2017/05/11/cose-una-webserie-intervista-allesperta-italiana/>). Web. Accessed 25 July 2018).

³² Rachel Syme, “Why Web Series Are Worth Watching,” *The New Yorker*, 9 September 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-web-tv-series-are-worth-watching>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

³³ Maria Elena D’Amelio, “Motherhood 2.0: *Una mamma imperfetta* and the Representation of ‘Imperfect Motherhood,’” in *Italian Motherhood on Screen*, eds. Giovanna Faleschini Lerner and Maria Elena D’Amelio (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 257-273.

Screenwriter Ivan Cotroneo created, wrote, and directed two seasons of the cross-media production, *Una mamma imperfetta* in 2013. It included a web series, a television series, and a theatrical film release. The web series included 25 episodes per season. It was co-produced by production houses Indigo Film and 21, in cooperation with www.corriere.it and Rai Fiction. It appeared initially on the web platform of *Il Corriere della Sera* and was subsequently broadcast on Rai television. It also spawned a Christmas movie, *Il Natale della mamma imperfetta / An Imperfect Mom's Christmas*, which was distributed in Italian theaters for one day only, on December 17, 2013, and was then reprised on television on December 27.³⁴

Beginning from the title screen, *Una mamma imperfetta* plays with the concept of perfect motherhood: against the outline of an anonymous urban skyline the animated title appears initially as *Una mamma perfetta* (A Perfect Mom), with a big “im” prefix dropping down to “correct” the initial impression. In her study of contemporary constructions of motherhood, Sharon Hays discusses the idea of perfect motherhood in the context of intensive mothering, as a postfeminist ideology which dictates that individual mothers are primarily responsible for raising their children, and that this responsibility should be child-centered, emotionally and labor intensive, informed by expert advice, and involve tremendous amounts of money.³⁵ Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call this phenomenon “the new momism,” and derive its pervasiveness from the proliferation of certain media images of motherhood—and celebrity motherhood in particular—that proposes them as normative models for mothering.³⁶ Experiences of motherhood that do not conform are deemed bad and, at worst, deviant or monstrous. But given that only middle-class or affluent mothers can afford the accessories of intensive mothering, the new momism appears to be a heteronormative notion largely associated with white, economically privileged mothers, to the exclusion of poor mothers and mothers of color, as well as queer mothers or childless women.³⁷ Indeed, in the Italian context, Gribaldo and Zapperi explain, the term “Italian women” itself comes to designate,

[U]na posizione specifica, identificata sulla base dell'identità nazionale, della classe sociale, della generazione e della sessualità che riflette il punto di vista di quelle donne per lo più bianche, di ceti e di livello di istruzione medio-alto. (A specific position, identified on the basis of national identity, social class, generation, and sexuality, which reflects the position of mostly white women, of upper-middle class and [high] levels of education).³⁸

The four main characters of *Una mamma imperfetta* are thus, presented as typical Italian working mothers involved in (more or less) stable heterosexual marriages. Their interrogation of the notion of maternal perfection do not extend to their own positionality as representatives of “hegemonic femininity” within traditional family structures, which are naturalized and ultimately go unchallenged.³⁹

³⁴ ABC (owned by Disney) optioned the rights of the American remake(s) of the series. However, the 2016 box office success, *Bad Moms*, followed by *Bad Moms' Christmas* (2017), both written and directed by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore for STX Entertainment, may have undermined Disney's intention to develop and launch its own version of *Una mamma imperfetta* aimed at the American market. (See Nick Vivarelli, “ABC Options Remake Rights to Italo Cross-Media ‘Imperfect Mom,’” *Variety*, 7 October 2013. <http://variety.com/2013/digital/global/abc-options-remake-rights-to-italo-cross-media-imperfect-mom-exclusive-1200701937/>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018).

³⁵ Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 8.

³⁶ Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 18-19.

³⁷ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 20.

³⁸ Gribaldo and Zapperi, *Lo specchio del potere*, 55. My translation.

³⁹ The notion of “hegemonic femininity” was proposed by Mimi Schippers in a 2007 article that aimed to apply R.W. Connell's idea of “hegemonic masculinity” to femininity and also wanted to explore the intersection of both types of hegemony with other systems of inequality, like race or class. See Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity,

The frame of the series is a video diary (or a vlog) that Chiara – who provides the voice over commentary to the series – begins in order to take a break from the mad rush that is her life. The opening sequence of Episode One, “[Mi chiamo Chiara](#)” (My name is Chiara) consists of a series of frames in which Chiara – shot in medium close-up – looks directly at the audience through her laptop camera and introduces herself: “Mi chiamo Chiara. Ho una famiglia: un marito, due figli, un lavoro che mi piace....” (My name is Chiara. I have a family: a husband, two children, a job I like....) As Chiara begins her journal, she is interrupted several times (first by one child, then her husband, her other child, the housekeeper, and finally a co-worker) before finding a moment to record her thoughts on her attempts to be good mother and wife, a reliable worker, and also exist as an individual, to paraphrase her own words. She never succeeds, though, and always feels inadequate. Chiara’s on-video self-narration is cast as an opportunity to invite participation in an on-line community of equally inadequate mothers, who will find solace in sharing their own stories of imperfect motherhood.

Though these initial shots suggest a YouTube-inspired aesthetics of unmediated access to Chiara’s daily life, in fact the production techniques and visual style of *Una mamma imperfetta* are much closer to that of mainstream television narrative series. Each episode is thematically and narratively self-contained, implies familiarity with an unchanging cast of characters and locations, and embraces an aesthetic of narrative realism, with the occasional use of freeze-frame photography, animated maps, or other digital editing techniques. Some episodes are framed by Chiara’s addressing her virtual audience through her laptop camera at the beginning, and her shutting it down at the end, but despite this visual rhetorical device, the production value of the series is very high, thanks in great part to its experienced technical crew.⁴⁰ In this respect, the series aligns itself more closely with other productions created by Cotroneo for television—like *Una grande famiglia / The Family* (2012-2015) or *Tutti pazzi per amore* (All Crazy in Love) (2008-2012), both beloved by Italian audiences—than with the grassroots approach of mommy vlogs and blogs that it evokes in its frame story.⁴¹

On screen, the on-line community of solidarity that Chiara addresses in her opening in-camera monologue has a parallel in her group of friends, Irene, Marta, and Claudia, with whom she shares the experience of imperfect motherhood and a quick coffee between the children’s school drop-off and work. But the expectations of perfect motherhood infiltrate even this network of mutual support. Chiara herself doubts that Marta, mother to triplets, is a “good” mother: Marta does not hesitate to carve time for herself by dropping off her children at an indoor playground for hours at a time and watch a movie or go to a spa. She does not sacrifice her personhood, in other words, to her role as a mother, and fails to fit into the sacrificial mold of Italian motherhood.⁴² But if Marta’s maternal behavior makes Chiara uneasy insofar as it upends the ideal of a child-centered motherhood, Chiara herself struggles to conform to this model. In Episode One, one morning, when her alarm does not go off and she is late for breakfast, as soon as she gets up she is bombarded by her family’s demands: last-minute laundry needs, a tantrum on clothing choices, a distracted and forgetful husband; to which her (male) boss’s propensity for pushing work meetings to 6pm must be added – and she races to meet everyone’s expectations (including hers), always falling short and feeling a sense of guilt and inadequacy. According to psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati, these feelings are inevitable in

Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,” *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 85-102. For a definition of “hegemonic masculinity” see Connell, *Masculinities* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 77.

⁴⁰ For a complete list of the cast and crew, please see the Internet Movie Data Base. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3501196/fullcredits>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

⁴¹ I discuss comparative audience numbers in the last part of this article.

⁴² See Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n’è più d’una*, 183, and *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine*, 66.

contemporary Italy, where mothers navigate constantly the deep contradiction between their devotion to maternal care and their desire for self-affirmation:

la cura materna entra in aperto contrasto con l'accelerazione maniacale del tempo, totalmente priva di cura, che è cifra della nostra epoca dominata dal discorso del capitalista” (Maternal care is in open conflict with the maniacal acceleration of time, totally deprived of the dimension of care, which is the defining factor of our era, dominated by capitalist discourse).⁴³

Chiara, thus, feels that she is always *di corsa*, racing to fulfill the expectations of perfect motherhood.

Chiara's and her friends' imperfection is magnified in comparison to the perfect mothers, a category that includes “the organic mom,” “the playful mom,” and “the impeccable mother,” each of whom represents an aspect of motherhood that conforms to the selfless approach to postfeminist womanhood, centered on the primacy of children in women's lives. Chiara's perspective on these examples of maternal perfection highlights their unreasonable standards, especially as far as Mariolina, the impeccable mother, is concerned. Not only is Mariolina caring toward her own child, but she is thoughtful toward other children—including kids with food intolerances and allergies, whom she all magically accommodates in her baking—and always looks great. Her hair is nicely styled, her legs smooth and on display in a tight skirt, and she is always smiling and affectionate with her child. For Chiara and her friends, Mariolina represents the incarnation of an ideal of motherhood that they both unwittingly admire and criticize. This ambivalence is partly due to their being caught between perfect motherhood as a model of self-realization and the myriad obstacles that make having children an increasingly difficult choice in Italy, where a familist welfare system does not take on a fair share of the social costs of reproduction, making day care centers and other forms of paid child care virtually unaffordable, and where the burden of work-life balance falls almost exclusively on women, while men do not—for the most part—participate in domestic labor.⁴⁴

Indeed, at the same time that Chiara demonstrates, with her commentary, an awareness of the Foucauldian “technologies of the self” that a woman needs to deploy in order to conform to Mariolina's motherhood ideal, she seems incapable of challenging the social and cultural structures that make it so pervasive. This is particularly evident in her relationship with her spouse, Davide. In Episode One, when Chiara first enters the kitchen in the morning after realizing she is late, Davide announces proudly that he has made coffee—while she comments in a short aside to camera that she makes coffee every single day—but immediately specifies that he has also finished it, that she needs to make it again, and that he cannot find his car keys. Chiara helps him remember that the car keys are in the pocket of a jacket he forgot at his mother's house the night before—thus constructing his character as that of a man-child, whose relationship with his wife is not as different as that with his own mother. As the breakfast scene shows, Davide is as dependent on Chiara as their children are; he is not cast as an equal partner in the running of the household. To a certain extent, Davide is an example of the figure of the male *inetto*, as described by both Catherine O'Rawe and Jacqueline Reich.⁴⁵ The *inetto* is,

⁴³ Recalcati, *La mani della madre*, 16. My translation.

⁴⁴ See Gribaldo and Zapperi, *Lo specchio del potere*, 62; Chiara Saraceno, “Varieties of familialism: Comparing four southern European and East Asian welfare regimes,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 26, no. 4 (2016): 314-326.

⁴⁵ Catherine O'Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jacqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004).

gendered male and culturally specific to Italy because of his relation to the codes of Italian masculinity; he is obliged to effect a ‘performance of hyper-masculinity’ in the public sphere whilst concealing his ‘impotent, feminized’ core.⁴⁶

The casting of Davide as an *inetto* is particularly problematic insofar as media do not have simply a reflective relationship with their social context, but play “a constitutive role in the formation of attributes and characteristics of masculinity through which real historical men live out their identities as gendered individuals.”⁴⁷ The model of masculinity that Davide provides is one that is solidly rooted in traditional gender roles within the family and does not challenge the *status quo*, both representing and strengthening the marginal role that fathers actually play in Italian families.

Indeed, even if in *Una mamma imperfetta* there is one *real* perfect father, this character does not present a viable alternative to *inetto* fatherhood. Eugenio is a single father whose wife has abandoned him and their daughter, and he is represented as fulfilling both maternal and paternal roles. As O’Rawe discusses in her chapter on male melodrama, in Italian cinema the proximity between father and children is predicated on the absence of the mother.⁴⁸ In other words, it is only *because* Eugenio’s wife has left her family that he can assume fully his role as a father. O’Rawe points out that this kind of subplot evokes Hollywood films like *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) or *Ordinary People* (1980), where “mothers abandon families and the single father becomes the hero”; in her analysis, “the seemingly necessary and uninterrogated erasure of mothers opens up narrative and performative space for the experiences of ‘new father.’”⁴⁹ Within the context of comedy, however, Chiara finds Eugenio as threatening as the perfect mothers that play the role of antagonists in the series—for instance, his plan for the annual Nativity display in the apartment he shares with his daughter crushes all of Chiara’s ambitions regarding her own *presepe* (nativity scene). Moreover, Eugenio’s involvement in parenting his child deprive him of his own sexuality—in the eyes of Chiara and her friends, he is like another mother, ultimately incarnating the figure of the *mammo*.⁵⁰ The word *mammo* itself suggests a degree of male feminization, rather than evoking the possibility of an involved masculine paternity.⁵¹ It is this masculine paternity that Recalcati discusses in his somewhat controversial *Che cosa resta del padre?* (What is Left of the Father?). Recalcati traces—following Jacques Lacan—the “evaporazione del padre” (evaporation of the father) back to the rejection of authoritarian social and political models in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵² Without proposing a nostalgic return to patriarchal family structures, Recalcati argues that the father plays an essential role within the family, modelling for his children the alliance

⁴⁶ O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 11.

⁴⁷ Sean Nixon, “Exhibiting Masculinity,” *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 301.

⁴⁸ O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

⁵⁰ The term *Il mammo* (The male mom) is used as a title for a Mediaset sit-com that ran for three seasons on Canale5 from 2004 to 2007. Among the scholars who have explored and analyzed the figure of the *mammo*, O’Rawe mentions Simona Argentieri and Marco Deriu. The latter is also involved in paternal activism through the organization *Maschile Plurale*, which proposes “a more expansive understanding of masculinity and paternity and considers itself aligned with feminist principles.” O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 81.

⁵¹ The anxiety connecting male sexuality and shared parental and household responsibilities is not exclusively Italian. In 2013, sociologists Sabino Kornrich, Julie Brines and Katrina Leupp published a much-cited article in *American Sociological Review* presenting evidence that egalitarian heterosexual marriages and shared housework can result in less frequent sexual intercourse between spouses (“Egalitarianism, Housework, and Sexual Frequency in Marriage,” *American Sociological Review* 78 (2012): 26–50.

⁵² Recalcati, *Patria senza padre. Psicopatologia della politica italiana* (Roma: Minimum Fax, 2013), 109.

between Law and Desire, which would help them resist the anxieties of capitalist consumption and success.⁵³

In the last episode of Season One, “[I sogni son desideri](#)” (Dreams Are Desires), Chiara does seem to present an alternative both to her own man-child and to Eugenio’s feminized fatherhood. She openly dreams of a more attentive spouse, one who would make her dinner while she soaks in the bath tub, would take care of the children’s homework and would iron his own shirts. Guest star Riccardo Scamarcio plays this ideal husband in a fantasy sequence, which Chiara frames sheepishly and explicitly as such, reminding her audience that fantasy does not make everyday reality less meaningful.⁵⁴ Scamarcio, whose star persona evolved from teen heartthrob to interpreter of “quality cinema,” does not represent a feminized paternity in Chiara’s imagination—on the contrary, the episode closes with a sex fantasy.⁵⁵ But by relegating the figure of the perfect husband and father to the dreamworld, Chiara ends up reinforcing the double standards to which she is subjected: whereas she measures herself constantly against models of perfect motherhood, her husband remains unburdened and carefree. Chiara’s ironic gaze on motherhood, in other words, does not extend to the gender dynamics within her own marriage. On the contrary, as Episode Seven shows, it is Chiara who does most of the emotional work required to sustain her marriage. One of the ten rules by which any married mother must abide, she says, is never to complain to one’s partner: by complaining she risks turning him from supporter to opponent and critic. Worse of all, she would make herself look sexually undesirable.

If *Una mamma imperfetta* has the merit of representing mothers as desiring subjects, it does so within the solidly heteronormative framework of institutional marriage, which is never really questioned or even acknowledged as limited in its scope. This a-critical gaze on broader social structures extends to issues of class and ethnicity. Chiara and her friends, with their two-income households, belong unquestionably to an exclusively white, urban, middle class, and are thus able to live in Rome’s historic center, pay for their children’s extra-curricular activities, and employ (immigrant) nannies and housekeepers. Though Italy is the European country that employs the highest number of migrant domestic laborers to help working women’s with their own labor burdens, Chiara does not recognize her Eastern-European housekeeper’s work as crucial to the economic functioning of her own household, nor does she engage with the issues implicit in the gendered dimensions of domestic, elder- and child-care being increasingly delegated to immigrant women, but sketches the housekeeper’s character in stereotypical manner, as yet another ill-fitting piece in the puzzle of her own familial responsibilities.⁵⁶ She exaggerates her accent, temper, and tendency to break objects while cleaning, in order to show how she is alone in managing every single aspect of family life.

As Scamarcio tells her in the dream episode, “vuoi sempre fare tutto tu!” (you always want to do it all!) is the phrase that encompasses Chiara’s postfeminist problem. As Douglas and Michaels write, now that women can finally “have it all” it becomes clear that it is not actually possible to “have it all.”⁵⁷ *Una mamma imperfetta* thus exposes through irony and humor the gaps between expectations of perfect motherhood and reality, but it stops short of exploring the causes of these inconsistencies, like unequal standards for men and women in regard to child rearing and housework, or media

⁵³ Recalcati, *Che cosa resta del padre?* (Milano: Cortina, 2011).

⁵⁴ Riccardo Scamarcio (b. 1979) is an actor and producer, who rose to fame after playing the protagonist’s role in *Tre metri sopra il cielo / Three Steps Over Heaven*, Luca Lucini, 2004), a film adaptation of the eponymous young-adult novel by Federico Moccia. His subsequent filmography includes award-winning performances in *Romanzo criminale / Crime Novel* (2005) and *Mine vaganti / Loose Cannons* (2010) as well as roles for the theatre, television, and music videos.

⁵⁵ For a critical discussion of the notion of quality cinema in the Italian context, see *Italian Quality Cinema. Institutions, Taste, Cultural Legitimation*. Special issue of *Comunicazioni Sociali* 3 (2016), eds. Claudio Bioni, Danielle Hipkins and Paolo Noto.

⁵⁶ Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n’è più d’una*, 52; Cfr. Gribaldo and Zapperi, 64.

⁵⁷ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 25.

complicity in creating unattainable models of perfect motherhood. Could this be partly due to the fact that the series was written and produced by a man? Would women writers and directors be better able, perhaps, to expose the patriarchal power dynamics that force women into unwitting keepers of the same structures that enchain them to their roles as perfect mothers? Or, is postfeminism such a “dominating discursive system,” as Diane Negra puts it, that it necessarily invalidates any attempt at systemic critique?⁵⁸ In the case of *Una mamma imperfetta*, I would also argue that, as a product distributed through a mainstream newspaper platform such as that of *Il Corriere della Sera*, but ultimately meant for broadcast through a public television channel, this web series could not but “domesticate” Chiara’s stated subversive intent. The commercial dictates of appealing to as broad a public as possible, as well as the requirements of a fundamentally conservative genre such as the comedy, required Cotroneo to pair his criticism of contemporary models of motherhood with reassurances vis-à-vis the centrality of the maternal role to Italian women’s lives.

Malamamma

This centrality is the notion that Eva Milella’s and Elisa Giani’s *Malamamma* aims to challenge. Their series is different from *Una mamma imperfetta* insofar as it focuses explicitly on “maternal resistance” and is entirely produced and distributed by women. The series is video recorded, for the most part, in the authors’ workplace, a fishbowl in the newsroom of www.bigodino.it, an online women’s magazine based on a grassroots-journalism model and a good sense of humor (“bigodino” itself is a hair roller). The series includes thirty-three published episodes, which range from about 2:30 to about 8 minutes in length and were published online between November 2013 and September 2014. The first episode, “[Primo giorno in redazione](#)” (First Day in the Newsroom), shows the two journalists entering the newsroom while being filmed alternatively by the security cameras in the office and their own mobile phones, thus displaying the different point of views through which their experiences can be interpreted and narrated. If the surveillance cameras evoke the social scrutiny to which women who are mothers are subjected, the footage from a handheld cell phone reasserts their ownership of the visual narration of the vagaries of motherhood. In the very first sequence, we see Milella and Giani establishing themselves in their new office, through an alternation of high angle shots from the room’s security camera and middle close-ups that mirror the angle of a laptop camera, with the occasional use of time-lapse photography, as well. The alternation of different camera angles shows the tension between the vulnerability of the women’s position and their attempts—through their self-narration—to define motherhood in their own terms, beginning with affirming their identity as sexual subjects. In their first dialogue, indeed, Giani is worried that she cannot find her good-luck charms, which turn out to be three condoms purchased in three different parts of Europe, and which remind her that she remains a woman while also being a mother.

As they are instructed on the software that www.bigodino.it uses, they begin to discuss their content, in a dialogue that exposes their very imperfect motherhood. Milella asks whether it would be okay for her to post that she punishes her daughter when she makes errors with the subjunctive; Giani asks in turn whether it would be appropriate to write that, when she went to Cuba on vacation with her boyfriend, she did not talk to her daughter for ten days and did not miss her. (Milella responds that that would be fine as long as she specified that her daughter was safely staying with her father.)

⁵⁸ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism, Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007), 2-3.

Whereas Milella lives with her daughter's father, Giani is a single mother, who's friendly with her daughter's father but is dating a different man. Both are concerned with raising strong daughters who will not see themselves as "subaltern[e]" (subaltern, Milella's word) to charming princes, but rather as superheroes in their own lives. Hence comes the deployment of parenting techniques such as the masked washing-machine-emptying hero or the chronometer race to fetch cigarettes. All these examples, framed within the recurrent question, "posso scrivere che...?" (can I write that...?) make clear that Milella and Giani are aware of the pressure to conform to certain accepted standards of mothering practice in their online content, but use the (fictional) unmediated quality of the web series as a way to disrupt and resist these expectations. The title of the series, *Malamamma*, indeed points to a complete subversion of the ideal of the perfect mother.

The ongoing dialogue between Giani and Milella foregrounds some of the challenges of contemporary motherhood, such as the conflicting demands of child care and job schedules. Indeed, the choice to address their audience from within their office emphasizes the centrality of work in their lives. In an episode titled, "[Mamma sharing](#)," Giani realizes that she needs to work during the weekend and has no child care for her daughter, Margherita. She makes a round of phone calls to her mother and her mother-in-law, who are both unavailable and she ends up engaging in "mom-sharing" with Milella, who helps her out in exchange for other favors. Thus, Milella and Giani propose an alternative model to the familial childcare enterprise, one that involves a chain of solidarity and care among working mothers. The two women call this a "win-win" solution to a problem that afflicts working mothers, especially in Italy, where public childcare centers are scarce and have long waitlists, private childcare costs are exorbitant, and grandparents are often the ones who take care of grandchildren.⁵⁹ The lack of social structures of support for working mothers has been accompanied by an increasingly precarious job market and a significant decline in job security, which derived from a series of labor market reforms that began in the early 2000s. The consequent "flexinsecurity," based on forms of labor that emphasize workers' freedom and flexibility, while masking the loss of guarantees and contractual rights (the "gig economy"), puts increasing pressure on women to balance work and family, while postfeminist essentialist discourses effectively "excuse" fathers from the burden of domestic labor.⁶⁰ Faced with these obstacles, Italian women are often forced to withdraw from the labor market. With only 52.5% of women employed in 2017, Italy lags behind all other European countries—with the exception of Greece—in women's employment rates.⁶¹ Giani and Milella's employment structure seems to fit within the parameters of the gig economy—they need to work during some evenings and weekends; co-workers are occasionally seen bringing in their own children to the office when needed; and their own "gig" is the series *Malamamma* itself. However, though *Malamamma* presents itself as progressive, it never actually thematizes the precariousness of women's positions in the labor market and leaves the neoliberal economic model unchallenged.

Similarly, although Milella and Giani adopt a consistently irreverent tone and upend some of the traditional social structures that remained unquestioned in *Una mamma imperfetta*—for example, they are both unmarried, and they devote an episode to the argument that being single mothers is better than being coupled—even in that episode some of the unequal gender dynamics that

⁵⁹ See, for example, Bruno Arpino, Chiara Pronzato, and Lara Patrício Tavares, "The Effect of Grandparental Support on Mothers' Labour Market Participation: An Instrumental Variable Approach," *European Journal of Population*, 30, no. 40 (2014): 369–390.

⁶⁰ Fabio Berton, Matteo Richiardi, and Stefano Sacchi, *Flex-insecurity: Perché in Italia la flessibilità diventa precarietà* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

⁶¹ "Eurostat, Italia al penultimo posto nella Ue per tasso di occupazione," *La Repubblica*, 28 April 2018. http://www.repubblica.it/economia/2018/04/20/news/eurostat_italia_al_penultimo_posto_nella_ue_per_tasso_di_occupazione-194394400/. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

characterize *Una mamma imperfetta* are highlighted but not really challenged. There is an assumption, for example, that the man left at home for a whole day will not have cleaned up after himself or helped his partner with daily chores, but will have actually created more chaos and generated additional work for her. Similarly, an episode on the child's time with father is titled "[Aiuto! Un pomeriggio con papà. Il kit di sopravvivenza](#)" (Help! An Afternoon with Dad. The Survival Kit.) The argument is that a father spending time with his children will instantly turn into a child himself, incapable of planning for eventualities such as cold weather or thirst; it therefore the mother's responsibility to stock a backpack with items such as a snack and water, a warm hat, sunscreen, etc. The backpack itself needs to be easily recognizable to the clueless father and therefore needs to be as untrendy as possible; and no change of clothes should be included in it, lest the father take offence at the implication that the child will get dirty, muddy, or bloody during their time together. The tone of the episode—in which the camera adopts a different position from the ones detailed above, and Milella and Giani sit side by side in front of the laptop camera—is joking and ironic, but the message reinforces the notion of paternal incompetence and child-like behavior that does not allow for the possibility of an equal parental partnership. According to Lipperini, this is typical of mommy blogs and other online forums: "la figura del marito/compagno è praticamente assente; le donne sembrano sempre essere sole nell'affrontare le vicende della maternità, positive o negative che siano" (the figure of the husband or partner is practically absent; women seem always to be alone in facing the incidents of motherhood, whether positive or negative).⁶² When fathers do appear, they seem incapable of taking responsibility and create additional complications for women. Thus, if on the one hand men are encouraged to share in the labor of parenting, their role is marginalized and represented as optional.⁶³

In this respect, though other episodes return to the desecrating perspective of the "mala mamma," ultimately the series does not escape the postfeminist naturalization of motherhood that is pervasive in postfeminist discourse. Andrea O'Reilly traces this naturalization of a woman's maternal function to an ideology of gender essentialism, according to which mothering is a function best performed by the biological mother.⁶⁴ According to Negra, the twenty-first-century return to essentialist views of the maternal is partly connected to the anxiety about reproductive technologies that emerged in the West in the 1980s and 1990s, and their potential to sever the "natural" connection between woman and motherhood.⁶⁵

Oh mamma mia

We encounter more equitably shared parenting roles in *Oh mamma mia*, a web series produced by Media Tree and distributed by the Radio Televisione Svizzera in 2015. The series is the brainchild of Alessandra Bonzi, an Italian journalist based in Lugano, and her partner, Vito Robbiani, who together created it as theme-based collages of home videos, shot with their cell phones cameras over the course of their first child's first two and a half years of life, and interspersed with Bonzi's (and occasionally Robbiani's) pieces to camera. The series consists of ten brief episodes—Bonzi mentions 2 minutes per episode, but the actual length can reach about 4:30 minutes—each focusing on a specific aspect

⁶² Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n'è più d'una*, 270.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶⁴ Andrea O'Reilly, "Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century," *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010): 372.

⁶⁵ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 68.

of motherhood. As Bonzi explains in the very first episode, the idea behind the series is to share her own strategies of survival as a mother, and to discuss openly the feelings of inadequacy that seem to separate perfect and imperfect mothers. Like Chiara in *Una mamma imperfetta* and Milella and Giani in *Malamamma*, in *Oh mamma mia* Bonzi reprises the theme of perfect motherhood and debunks it as a myth, revealing the underbelly of the child-centered approach that postfeminist society and media propose as the maternal ideal.

In [Episode Two](#), Bonzi focuses on celebrity motherhood, taking her cue from the first public appearance of Kate Middleton a few hours after the birth of her second child, Princess Charlotte. As Douglas and Michaels point out, celebrity mothers are crucial tools of new momism, as they contribute to “media constructions of maternal guilt and insecurity, as well as the romanticizing of motherhood.”⁶⁶ Bonzi focuses on the way in which Middleton’s impeccable looks—though obviously the result of an expert personal care team and well-oiled PR machine—make all other mothers feel inadequate. Dictating an open-letter to Middleton, “Cara Kate” (Dear Kate), Bonzi points out all the differences between a royal’s experience of motherhood and that of a regular woman, who has no team of nannies to care for the baby day and night, no chefs to cook healthy meals, no domestic help to clean up after the baby. The episode concludes with a plea to Middleton to take a selfie showing—in solidarity with other mothers—the bags under her eyes and her swollen stomach, thus unveiling the truth behind the mythology of celebrity motherhood and its images of perfection.

[Episode Four](#) centers on fathers, but instead of presenting fathers as eternal children whose function is to provide for their families financially without taking responsibility for the labor of childrearing, Bonzi reminds her viewers that without fathers their lives as mothers would be hell. She also recognizes that, in order to establish an equal partnership, mothers need to let go of their own internalized need for perfection and open themselves up to different ways of being a parent. For example, if in the other web series the father’s tendency to play with his children as a peer rather than as a supervisor was seen as a sign of his immaturity and lack of sense of responsibility, in *Oh mamma mia* Bonzi encourages other mothers to take advantage of their partners’ playful traits to take a break after a long day of caregiving. She does not deny, of course, the arrival of a child brings disruption in the dynamics of a couple’s life: mothers and fathers will be exhausted from the lack of sleep and therefore more irritable; there will be disagreements on aspects of childrearing, etc. Yet, what is original in Bonzi’s treatment of these experiences is the fact that she describes them as shared by both father *and* mother—both are tired, both need to make decisions about their children, etc. Thus, Bonzi demonstrates the equality that is made possible when women are willing to share the parental sphere with their partners.⁶⁷ Indeed, though the ideal of perfect motherhood dictates that she should own a perfect body, here Bonzi subverts this model by applying it to her partner, Vito, and showing him in “before” fatherhood and “after” pictures.⁶⁸ Still, even in her more egalitarian outlook on parenting, Bonzi’s vocabulary tends to relegate her partner to an auxiliary role: fathers *help* with feeding the child; *help* by entertaining the baby when the mother needs to take a nap; *help* by keeping the child awake in the car so that he won’t fall asleep one second before arriving home, etc. Bonzi therefore still thinks of herself as the primary caregiver, while her child’s father plays a secondary role. Of course, this is due in part to the structures of the labor market and the legal provisions for parental leaves—in Switzerland only women have the right to take a salaried leave after the birth of a child; men have only one or two days off. Obviously, this encourages a greater role for women in taking responsibility for their children’s care; the recovery time after birth and the health advantages of breastmilk over formula

⁶⁶ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 113.

⁶⁷ Lipperini, *Di mamma ce n’è più d’una*, 39.

⁶⁸ Ann Hall and Mardia Bishop, *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 130.

for the baby constitute other factors that contribute to the emphasis on maternity rather than paternity. But in *Ob mamma mia*, the creative partnership between parents underlies the whole structure of the web series—as the [last episode](#), featuring Vito’s advice on how to calm their second-born baby, shows.

Conclusions

Una mamma imperfetta, *Malamamma*, and *Ob mamma mia* represent different media approaches to representing mothers’ anxieties vis-à-vis the notions of perfect and imperfect motherhood in contemporary society. Their tools range from user-generated-content platforms like Facebook and YouTube (in the case of *Ob mamma mia*), embedding a series in an established online magazine as Eva Milella and Elisa Giani do with *Malamamma*, or relying—like *Una mamma imperfetta*—on a cross-media distribution platform that includes new and old media, with the aim to capture the normally neglected but potentially powerful demographic of married women with children.⁶⁹ However creative and inclusive the outreach of these series intended to be, though, only *Una mamma imperfetta* achieved significant audience success. When first distributed on the free website of *Il Corriere della Sera*, the first season of the series obtained more a million clicks.⁷⁰ This interest did not translate into equally strong television viewership numbers. On the Rai 2 network, the series averaged audiences of about one million viewers, for a disappointing share between 4-5%. Compared with other works by Cotroneo, like the Rai 1 television series *Tutti pazzi per amore* (2008-2012), with an average share of 16% and *Una grande famiglia* (2012-2015) which averaged an audience of 7 million viewers (26% share) per episode, *Una mamma imperfetta* was a definite flop.⁷¹ Individual episodes of *Una mamma imperfetta* on YouTube—the only way that the series is now accessible to the public—have low viewing numbers that range from about twenty to fifty-five thousand viewers per episode. On an even smaller scale, the YouTube channel for www.bigodino.it has about thirteen hundred subscribers, and the thirty-three episodes of *Malamamma* have been seen fewer than seven thousand times. *Ob mamma mia*’s viewing numbers vary dramatically from about one to eight thousand views per episode on YouTube; its Facebook page has fourteen hundred followers. (For comparison, fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni’s “The Blonde Salad” Facebook page has 1.4 million followers). Though online comments by viewers offer positive feedback on the web series’ ability to represent humorously the challenges of parenthood, the viewership data show how hard it is to turn the rhetorical emphasis that these series place on counter-cultural discourse into actual practice.

This difficulty is partly connected to the broader economic and ideological context of the three web series. Though all three emphasize the cyber-feminist project of creating online communities of maternal solidarity, access, and resistance, and utilize comedy and irony as instruments of subversion against the unattainable standards of new momism, all three remain anchored in the neoliberal power and economic structures that have made postfeminism pervasive. As Angela McRobbie has written, these structures have embraced what she calls “a style of affluent, feminine maternity,” which includes

⁶⁹ This worked quite well for *Bad Moms* in the United States, where it grossed about \$113 million over the course of its 13-week theatre release after being produced with a \$20 million budget (Cfr. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=untitledlucasmoores.htm>. Web. Accessed 25 July 2018).

⁷⁰ Vivarelli, “ABS Options Remake Rights.”

⁷¹ Stefania Stefanetti, writing on the influential television blog www.davidemaggio.it questioned as incomprehensible the Rai leadership’s decision to renew the series after its initial low ratings. (Cfr. Stefania Stefanetti, “Una mamma imperfetta: La Rai premia il flop delle prime due serie con un tv movie natalizio!” 19 November 2013. <https://www.davidemaggio.it/archives/87179/una-mamma-imperfetta-la-rai-premia-il-flop-delle-prime-due-serie-con-un-tv-movie-natalizio>). Web. Accessed 25 July 2018.

a view of mothers as physically attractive, and active in the workforce.⁷² The same web technologies that have provided mothers with instruments of resistance against neoliberal ideologies have also been complicit with their power—allowing for the constant scrutiny of one’s performance of motherhood through social media, for example, or blurring the boundaries between mothers’ work in the domestic sphere and outside of it thanks to the web’s capability for remote forms of production, thus also making evident the connection between mothers’ productive and reproductive value. McRobbie calls this strategy of control “visual-media governmentality,” and sees it “as a regulatory space for the formulation and working through of many of these ideas” about woman, motherhood, and the workplace.⁷³ Though these Italian web series try to challenge the validity of images of perfect motherhood that neoliberal society embraces, they inevitably remain deeply enmeshed in the same dynamics that have made these ideals powerful and pervasive—thus displaying the ongoing tensions between conflicting ideals and realities that all imperfect mothers contend to in their daily lives.

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⁷³ *Ibid.*, 122.

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