1. Introduction

Over the last few years there has been an increasing number of advertising campaigns connecting technological goods with female images and characters. Women have held a central role in advertising since the very beginning of this form of communication, insofar femininity has always dominated iconic imagery and mass media scenario (Betterton, 1987; Berger, 1972). Nevertheless, the proliferation of associations between technology—an area commonly connected with man’s world - and female images is indeed something new and worth of investigation. This is more so as far as Italian advertising is concerned which has always been very traditional in his output and representations.

Technological products advertising seem to be an extremely interesting case study to analyze (continuities and) changes in women representation. This for a number of reason. In so far their aim is to promote goods with features of novelty, modernity and innovation these ads can not possibly rely on old gender stereotypes (for example the ‘heart and home’ woman described by Tuchman in 1978); they are rather forced to pursue new paths – not necessarily better but anyway different - in constructing gender identities. Besides, at a superficial glance technological objects seem to evoke an asexual/unisex imagery in which power dynamics between sexes are overshadowed by the astonishing and powerful possibilities offered by machines. In the light of the above considerations and taking into account the inherently innovating potential of technology as a cultural discourse, this study is particularly interested in understanding the impact of women’s massive presence on technology products advertising. On a one hand this may result in an evolution in the process of female audience recognition and legitimization in relation with technology and – more generally – can be interpreted as a symptom of positive shift from sexist ideology that dominate advertising and the media system at large. On the other hand, it could be just a further episode of woman’s image and body exploitation, being feminine redundancy a mere commercial strategy to seduce male target or female target through male gaze identification (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1982).

While addressing the above questions the paper will try to investigate the following issues: what are the main themes around which is articulated and constructed feminine identity in Italian technological advertising? To what extent women representation in these texts can be described as new and unconventional? How is the relationship between women and technology portrayed?

Technological advertising is extremely various and too wide a subject to be all included in one study. This work will focus on one product, that is mobile phone. Research has been conducted by means of qualitative analysis and has been based on television advertising, that is by far the way of communication more used by mobile telephone services providers. We concentrate on providers rather than devices advertisements as we thought that this communication had much more to do with symbolic values, lifestyle and identity/cultural models. More precisely, we analyzed the advertising history of the first and leading brand in this sector (more than 40 different adverts from 1995 until now). The selection criteria of the films were their significance in terms of representativity of brand communication strategy as well as woman presence and relevance.

Coming to the methodological aspects, the work has been based on a sociosemiotic approach which combines two different research traditions, sociological and semiological. A qualitative content analysis has been carried out to identify main themes and dominant models of femininity, while semiotic instruments have been useful to explore advertising codes and reinterpret their implicit latent meanings.
2. Making sense of advertising: gender dynamics and identity formation processes

As an element which permeates our everyday life and shapes our media experience advertising has long been the object of great attention and investigation. Issues like gender relations and sex stereotypes in particular have always been central to what has so far been an extremely rich and wide debate. As Sut Jhally put it, gender is probably the most heavily exploited social resource by commercial communication strategies. It is therefore not surprising that advertising has become a central socializing agent for cultural values connected to gender relations and identities. The reason for this is that “gender is one of our deepest and most important traits as human beings...What better place to draw upon than an area of social behaviour that can be communicated almost instantly and which reaches into the very core of our definition of human beings?” (Jhully, 1987:135).

As opposed to the great attention this subject has received within the anglo-saxon sociological and cultural studies debate, no research tradition nor comprehensive analysis on gender representation in Italian popular culture have been developed so far. From the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s, under the pressure of women’s movement, some works denounced the existence of an advertising sexism phenomenon. However, they were isolated voices coming from different, not comparable methodological frames. More recently few scholars have dealt with this topic on the basis of some quantitative and qualitative research work carried out on print advertisements (Capecchi, 1995; Petrillo, Formicola, 1999; Pomodoro, 2000). The conclusions they draw are similar and somehow consistent with the idea of an advertising scene characterized by continuity and change. First – these studies point out – nowadays female and male representations are more complex, many-sided and ambiguous if compared to the past. Even in the context of a traditional and catholic country as Italy actually is, we are no more confronting a situation in which woman is depicted as perfectly embedded in domestic and family sphere whereas man’s identity relies unquestionably on the old ‘bread-winner’ role. There have been important changes from the seventies and a process of modernization has taken place: contemporary images evoke more equal and interchangeable social roles, women are often represented as assertive and successful as man have been softened with feminine and affective features, more generally ads are set in an hedonistic and playful reality where both sexes figures flow and interact. However, in spite of these remarkable changes, far from suggesting an optimistic picture, the above studies also highlight the persistence of old stereotypes and woman misrepresentation. Issues they draw the attention to include the obsession with youngness and beauty, the objectification and commodification of woman body, the only slight presence of working women representations. More significantly, in line with some anglo-saxon scholars (Barthel 1988; Goldman 1992) these studies show a great deal of scepticism on the capability of contemporary female images to have a real impact in undermining male power. Advertising seem to have incorporated feminist-feminine values if not only to be more in tune with contemporary lifestyle but without really absorbing their social and political message: “with an extraordinary mediator strength advertising has learned how to combine different representative models, how to be diplomatic enough for its commercial aims not to be threatened” (Pomodoro, 2000: 85, my translation)

By taking on the number of interesting suggestions put forward by the Italian literature, the work aims at further developing feminist criticism of gender stereotypes in advertising and its specific concern with misrepresentation of women.

The core meaning of this program of research lies in the context of a widely debated concern in media studies, that is the relationship between media and processes of identity formation. How do media - in this case television advertising - act as an instrument of representation? To what extent does it reflect and to what extent does it shape gender differences and stereotypes? Together with focusing on media influence and processes of socialization, considering advertising as gender-forming technologies involves also a reflection on possible coordinates of a female cultural identity. As Capecchi and Demaria have stressed in their study on women representations in the news, this is a sensitive and controversial issue in feminist criticism; whereas some scholars adopt an essentialist approach and take certain features of female gender for granted, others endorse a view whereby categories of woman and female culture are themselves constructed by discourse and are never given a priori (Capecchi, Demaria, 2000). The theoretical framework of this essay is a culturalist and constructivist one: even when we refer to female culture we are talking about a discursive space, not a symptom of the ‘essence’ of gender but rather a mode of representation that construct gender by

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drawing on stereotypes, figure and images already available in the culture of reference. As De Lauretis has pointed out “the self-attribution of gender is an accumulation of habits, inclinations, repressions and ghosts that not attach themselves to an original body (...) but produce at the same time both a body for the subject and a subject for that body” (De Lauretis, 1999:10). The gender representations articulated by advertising work as a pool of meanings and identity models from which the viewers can negotiate their own subjectivity. It follows that they help to define what each of us understands and experiences as ‘female gender’, even outside of our role as television viewer; “if we accept this point of view, the issue is not if and how television (...) reflects, conceals or distort an existing female reality, but rather which female identity models it proposes” (Capecchi, Demaria, 2000: 7).

3. Technology, gender and power

Before moving to the cultural construction of technology through such an effective medium as advertising is, we had better define the notion of technology as used in this study. Technology is very often associated with machines, with tangible, physical artefacts. This is, according to the sociologists of technology Mackenzie and Wajcman (1985) just the first of three ‘layers of meanings’ of a technology, the basic and ‘hard-ware’ definition. Secondly, we can see technology as an artifact which is designed to achieve some human purpose. An artifact does nothing without some surrounding human activity and technology refers to this human practice empowered by the possibilities of the machines. More than this, there is a third layer of meaning: technology is a form of knowledge, technological things are meaningless without the ‘know-how’ to design, maintain and repair them.

As Wajcman points out (1991) women’s contribution have by and large been left out of science and technology history: like all aspects of progress, technology has usually been thought of as a masculine activity and creativity; similarly, the prototype of inventor has always been male. Over the last two decades feminist studies have begun to focus on the gender character of technology arguing that Western technological development itself embodies patriarchal values and identifying men’s monopoly of technology as an important source of their power2 These contributions well illustrate how gender differences and inequalities with respect to technology start from the very beginning of the socialization process: in western culture boys are expected to learn about machines, tools and how things work. By contrast, girls are not expected to know much about technical matters and instead are to be good at relationships and managing emotions. Not surprisingly, later in adulthood men are expected to be rational, objective and able to keep emotions out of their lives, all qualities very much in tune with a ‘technological world view’ (Bentson, 1988). Conversely women’s world is seen as more complicated and less logical, one filled with nurture and emotions, one involving commitment and responsibility to the others3. Far from being natural or self-evident, the link between masculinity and technology has been historically and culturally determined and has been developing within a context of a traditional division of roles where women’s experience is restricted to a narrow range of activities concerned primarily with the private world of the home and the family. All lead to what Cockburn describes as ‘the construction of men as strong, manually able and technologically endowed, and women as physically and technically incompetent’ (Cockburn, 1983:203). In conclusion we can see that focusing on gender lead analysis to cope with the concept of power rather than of difference: power is the most important message that male technology communicates. Technical competence can be considered as another source of man’s control over women being power over technology both a product of and a reinforcement for their other power in society.

More recently, with the advent of the ‘electronic era’ and the development of information technologies, a new debate has emerged among feminist studies. With an optimistic and rather euphoric spirit, some authors4 celebrate computer technologies as a promising and liberating new sphere characterized by sexual indeterminacy and a transgender imagery. According to this view, cyberspace can represent a post-modern stage in the relationship between women and machines, a new space for feminist activity. Allowing individuals to make experiences of free and multiple redefinition of sexual identities, these technologies seem to escape from traditional stereotypes on the one hand, and provide women with a route to

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3 See C.Gilligan, (1987), In a Different Voice, Harvard University Press.
4 We are thinking in particular at D.J.Haraway, A. R. Stone, S. Plant.
empowerment and enrichment, on the other. The figure of the ‘cyborg’ – put forward by Donna Haraway (1991) – epitomizes both the materialization of this newly developed relationship between women and technological machines and the overcoming of the dualistic opposition between masculine and feminine.

Given the above considerations, an investigation of the way technological cultural discourse is constructed in media texts acquires even greater relevance. Some works have well illustrated the extent to which media’s representation of men as experts and television’s images of a male authority using pseudo-scientific terms to conduct a show or a program is merely an exaggeration of the ordinary terms of communication between men and women (Betterton, 1988). What about advertising? What kind of female models does it represent and exploit in relation with technology? I have already said that Italian mobile telephone advertising is characterized by an almost unique presence of women. To what extent can we link this presence to female active and conscious use of technological devices? Can we say that women in advertising are empowered by the use of technology? In the following paragraphs we will try to answer these questions.

4. Advertising technology: an Italian case study

Before moving to empirical analysis and to the critical deconstruction of advertising films, some further considerations should be made. The first regards mobile telephone as a medium. One should not forget, in fact, the widespread diffusion and the crucial role played by this communication device in Italy. With an astonishing rate of increase and a high number of devices pro capite (more than 80 telephones every 100 persons according to the data3), this technology has very rapidly spread across all social classes in a way that has been defined by Italian scholars ‘epidemiological’. Whereas in the past mobile phone was a powerful status symbol and a way to mark oneself out, nowadays its meanings have become more complex and stratified. Bartoletti talks about a multiplicity of uses and meanings surrounding mobile telephone (Bartoletti, 2002). Far from being just a communication medium, cellular telephone has turned into a highly emotional commodity. It is a technological gadget for adults, a toy or a sort of pet for children, a crucial means of socialization for adolescents. Furthermore, Marrone emphasizes the consequences of mobile phones massive diffusion in terms of linguistic habits and social behaviours. He hypothesizes that the ‘explosion’ of mobile phone technology “rises questions about the creation of a new social ethic” in which the public/private boundary is at stake (Marrone, 1999:16, my translation). All this to say that addressing mobile phone advertising means dealing with cultural reconstruction and celebration of something which goes beyond a mere object of consumption, being a technology that has strong influence on social and communicative world.

Coming to the methodological approach, some further guidelines and clarifications should also be added. As we have already claimed in the introductory remarks this paper’s attempt is, on the one hand, to follow a ‘socio-semiotic’ method (that is to combine semiological with social analysis) and, on the other hand, to consider advertisements as texts which are both influenced and impinge upon the social sphere, offering forms of identification to their female and male audiences. Coming now to the details of the analysis, it is important to outline that the work on the advertisements has been carried out taking into account two different and interrelated levels of significance:

- the narrative and content level: the focus here will be on recurrent themes and roles within the stories, the aim being that of identifying values and meanings associated with female actors;
- the stylistic and discursive level: the focus here will be on the way the advertisements have been constructed and on the film language used by their directors; the aim being that of identifying language codes and the nature of the gaze offered to the spectator;

On the basis of this analysis our intent is to grasp ideological configurations inherent in advertisements and to reveal cultural discourse articulated on women and on women associated to technology.

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3 Source: Gpf survey, 2002.
5. Tradition and paternalism in Tim’s advertising

5.1 Brand imagery and communication strategy

Tim (=Telecom Italia Mobile) was the first company able to provide Italian consumers with mobile phone services. It was born in 1995 as a part of Italian public telephone company and for almost one year was the only player in the market.

Taken as a whole Tim communicative universe evokes a very traditional imagery with typical – almost stereotyped – Italian traits and characters. The majority of advertisements are pervaded with values of affection, intimacy and personal involvement. The dominant narrative theme is human relationships, always presented in very conventional terms. Family, the warm and hearty Italian family, constitutes the favourite subject and setting, together with other traditional and reassuring relational scenarios as the couple of naive adolescents, the young and romantic lovers, the ‘unisex’ group of peers. Nearly all individuals featuring in Tim advertising are depicted as belonging to relational networks and are defined on the basis of reciprocal emotional involvement. It’s almost impossible to find settings, situations or characters out of this paradigm, the roots of which lie in a traditional and ‘catholic-derived’ set of values and mythology: the centrality of love and affection, the holy institutions of heterosexual couples and family, values of protection and reassurance related to manhood, the beauty, the kindness and the fragility typically associated with the female identity.

Freedom, the other overtly present key value in Tim adverts (a high number of films take place in travel situations and have roads and means of transport as preferred settings) is always counterbalanced and somehow ‘normalized’ by relational availability and affective closeness. Viewers are never confronted with an existential or metaphoric notion of freedom; by contrast, freedom is to be understood in its ‘weaker meaning’ as simple dislocation, as ties absence and high mobility. It could be argued that in Tim stories freedom is just the physic, geographic context whereas connection to the others and relational exchanges possibility are the striking existential conditions for characters to move and for action to develop.

Quite obviously, in this symbolic environment mobile technology is celebrated not for its intrinsic benefits of power and efficiency but for its capability to connect people, to make our dear ones closer when for different reasons they are far away. More crucially, technology benefits and services are never appealing for their own but acquire value and meaning in the context of human events and relations. A process of technology humanization takes place and mobile phones are associated with traits of availability, usability and friendliness.

To sum up, it could be claimed that Tim advertising is mainly dominated by images of a ‘familist’ and national-popular world, protective and maternal on one side, conventional and conservative on the other. Furthermore, one can detect an evident strategy carried out by the brand aimed at exploiting some of the key myths underlying the Italian culture: the centrality of the family, the openness and friendliness of Italian people, the importance of being always connected and close to loved ones.

5.2 The female presence: roles, values and competencies

Against this scenario, female characters are so numerous and dominating that their presence could be rightly regarded as the red thread of all television advertising communication. In order to understand the reasons of such a ‘feminization’, one should consider the characteristics and competencies associated with women at a narrative level.

The best place to begin is by looking at similar and recurrent traits between the advertisements. If we first consider films between 1995-2000, we discover that women play an astonishingly similar and recurrent role: they are undoubtedly the protagonist of the stories, they are those who use and talk on the phone, but always as a means of relating with male characters. We see an adolescent on the train praying her boyfriend to say that he loves her, female teen-agers waiting impatiently for a love message to come, an attractive girl refusing to give her telephone number to a man because of his missing mobile telephone. Overall female relations to men are depicted in a very paternalistic and traditional fashion where mobile telephones seems to play a role of mediation and amplification. In this sense it is not surprising that, on the one hand, some films develop their plot around the ‘present’ theme (a man - boy, husband, father - who give a mobile telephone to a woman - girl, wife, daughter). On the other hand, we see that this paternalistic relation is more than one time expressed in its literal form, that is through the ‘mise en scene’ of a father-daughter relation. The only
female characters who escape this model are well known testimonials. However, they also tend to fit the subaltern and reassuring image commonly associated to woman. For instance, the actress Francesca Neri is shown while is running away from an hotel, leaving alone her boyfriend and – as an act of autonomous will and self gratification - deciding to buy herself a new mobile phone. Nothing wrong about it until one sees the male version of the same adv. Here, a famous Italian actor, Sergio Castellitto, after an argument presumably concerning dramatic art or important public questions, runs down flights of stairs of an ancient building declaring his intention to buy himself a mobile phone. That is to say, women world can be only one of intimate relationships and emotions (the highest of rebellion and assertiveness being spurred by the ending of a love affair) whereas men’s one is the ‘public’ one, and far more important domain of ideas, facts and meanings. It is not an accident that, the few mobile phones advertisements featuring male protagonists present fairly different characteristics from those women-dominated. Though ‘softened’ by a touch of self-irony, men have very active roles in the sense that they exploit technology as a means to exercise control on things and persons. They are shown while talking with mobile phone for business or while using these objects as precious means to seduce women. In any case male use of technology is mostly instrumental and self-related. To conclude one could say that, over the period considered, mobile phone, far from being an instrument conductive to women power or emancipation, it acts as a medium capable of extending in time and space male control on women lives, as a way for men to reinforce female dependence on them.

From 2000 until now two adv serials with all feminine protagonists have been shown. The impression could be that Tim’s strategy has shifted towards more modern and progressive female representations. As a matter fact, we are still confronted with a contradictory message where continuity and change coexist. In a first and successful advertising serial one sees three young girls travelling alone around Italy on a sailing boat and enjoying together their summer holiday. Some novelties in the way female image is depicted can’t be ignored: the three girls’ technical competence both in running the boat and using mobile telephone services; a general process of ‘smaterialization’ that has involved telephone interaction and that ends up with man’s disappearance from the scene; a positive representation of women complicity and entertainment. Nevertheless, one should also notice some persisting traditional traits which obfuscate the innovative potential of these advertisements. First, not only are the women young and good looking, but they embody the stereotype of the good girl, naive, romantic, and absent-minded. There is no sign of confidence and assertiveness in their personality, nor of any realism in the setting and the story. The sailing boat is a magic world that has little to do with the everyday life. Secondly, we see that the movement of action of this feminine union is confined geographically and psychologically to the family dimension: the destination of the trip is not – as someone might think - undiscovered lands or unknown people but the house of one of the protagonists’ grandmother in Venice. In other words, far from representing independent women travelling, Tim’s girls are the charming, reassuring ‘grandchildren of Italy’.

Another advert campaign which will be very interesting to consider for the scope of this analysis is the last Tim serial, where, again the role of the protagonist is held by a young woman. The first episode undoubtedly constitutes the apex of rebellion and transgression in expressing feminine identity. We see a girl who leaves her marriage celebration, runs away from all her conventional world ending up hitch-hiking with just her mobile phone in her hand. More crucially, technology here is not celebrated as a way to be in touch with parents and family but, on the contrary, as a way to find new friends (a telephone chat service is advertised). Nevertheless, this promising beginning is counterbalanced by a far less innovative sequel. In the following episode the girl calls the attention of a group of men due to her attractive looking: from being the subject of the action she turns into a passive object of male desiring gaze. In this situation technology comes back to its connecting and controlling function: while she is with her new friends the girl writes a reassuring message to the worried mother. The serial continues with some other episodes where the girl lives some unlikely adventures together with her crazy and funny grandmother. Again we see the omnipresence of family relations as a way of ‘normalizing’ feminine action, which is even diminished and ridiculed by unrealistic and comic situations (see, for example, the ‘mission impossible’ of making the grandmother escape from the clinic).

To sum up, it could be argued that this second and more recent phase in mobile phones advertising is indeed far more complex and ambivalent in relation to feminine identity construction. On the one hand Tim brand seems to flirt with an emancipated female image in order to be in tune with contemporary lifestyle, on the other hand some conventional representations are still present weakening any changes and innovations. Overall Tim’s communication, in spite of women great presence and modern appearance, keeps alive a
traditional and conservative narrative imagery based on sexual role division and on women relational dependence to men.

5.3 Structure, style and the construction of the gaze

Having explored images and representation at a content and value level, let’s now draw the attention to the discursive plane and to forms of textualisation. As far as the structure is concerned, Tim communication follows mostly a narrative paradigm. That is to say, in nearly every film we have, though in the condensed and hyperitualised form described by Goffman (1976), one or more characters, a plot development, a beginning and an end. More in detail, we can identify an evolution in the way narration is articulated through time. The beginning campaigns rely on the technique of ‘slice of life’ and show sections of reality more than telling real stories. Brand national-popularity express itself in its basic form that is talking about common people embedded in everyday life situations. From the ‘slice of life’ model Tim’s communication strategy progressively shifts towards proper narrative serials in which every new episode is the sequel of the previous one. Thus, we can identify characters with faces, names and clearly defined psychological traits as well as we follow stories that take place in a certain time and in a recognisable space. Finally, in the last and more recent period, Tim has produced commercial films which resemble little pieces of fiction. There is an increase in spectacle: images and sounds acquire a greater evocative impact. A cinema language is used and characters turn to be more like heroes and stars.

To the scope of our analysis is interesting to focus in female characters transformations along Tim’s communication structure evolution. In the first realistic period women – as shown in the earlier paragraphs – are confined to very traditional roles and competencies. Then, the more the narrative model moves towards fiction and far from reality, the more the brand introduces elements of change and innovation in feminine identity construction. It seems that feminine autonomy and overcoming of traditional sex roles division are allowed to be depicted just within the distancing and reassuring frames of imagination.

Coming to Tim’s advertising atmosphere, we see that women massive presence and dominating relational (vs functional) valorisation of technology play a central role in defining Tim’s style. Far from using rational or factual arguments, the commonly adopted discursive strategy aims at impacting emotionally on its audience. In order to do so Tim’s advertising opts for different expressive means: the rhetoric of happy ending, the comical and caricatural language drawn from typical Italian comedy, the argumentative (vs decorative) use of music that results in widening the emotional and involving power of stories.

Another interesting aspect worth recalling has to do with contexts and settings represented. On the physical level they are mobile and interchangeable: advertisements are set in various and always different places. On the social level they are mostly undifferentiated, being the focus on the family something culturally not discriminating in Italian country. Leisure time is the only common element in social environments shown in advertisements. Nearly all the stories take place in leisure time, the characters are always caught in free, enjoyable moments or in holiday. Very rarely we see working places, duty contexts or ‘routine’ situations. Again, this fact seems to us a significant and highly revealing evidence of the celebration of mobile phone as a ‘feminine way of being in relation with others’ rather than a ‘male performing technology’.

Moreover the frequent – almost constant – presence of a feminine ‘voice-over’ at the end of the advertisements should be also emphasised. Far from being informative or technical, and coherently to the maternal spirit that goes through Tim communication, this voice has mostly a reassuring function. Thus, not surprisingly it is female’s. It works like a psychological comfort for consumers, a channel for technology familiarisation. Perhaps more crucially, the massive presence of voice-over, together with a shooting technique that insists on pan shots (the camera moving to the right and to the left following moving objects and showing often a wide view at the end), lead the viewer to think that in Tim’s adverts narrator tend to be ‘omniscient’. In other words, voice-over and camera language express a sort of view from above, a superior glance from which stories are told and plot developed. As a result the relation between the brand – starting point of every narration – and his audience turns to be mostly asymmetrical and paternalistic.

The last aspect that should be considered is the way the gaze is constructed. As Capecchi and Demaria point out in their analysis of female image in Italian news, “the way in which a scene is shown not only defines a spatial pathway, but also indicates an affective and valorial one in relation to the domain of passions and knowledge” (Capecchi, Demaria, 2000: 9). Thus, if the way of showing determines the way of looking at what is shown, the inscription of sexual difference in television can also be seen in the gaze
offered to spectator, that is in the construction of the vision. Camera movements, play of lights and the
framing of the images can not only render female figure in different ways, but can also contribute to
strengthen values, roles and competencies. Feminist criticism has been denouncing for many years 'male
gaze' as a system of representation which dominates occidental culture. According to this, in most visual
representations male subjectivity tends to coincide with 'the eye' whereas that of female is reduced to what
the eye can see. This led to the depiction of female figure as a body, as an object of man’s pleasure, as a
spectacle to be admired.

What can we say about body-image construction and representation in Tim’s advertising? What form
of relation is there between female body and the audience? From the analysis of the films emerges what we
could be label as a ‘diplomatic position’ of the brand at this regard. For some aspects communicative
strategy appears perfectly in tune with male gaze standards. Let’s think for example to the characteristics of
women protagonists of the adverts. They are always pretty adolescents or young and attractive women. On
the contrary the few men represented fit into a wide range of age and are not necessarily good-looking. In
this sense we can say that women act as nice objects moving on the surface of the image and looking for
male voyeuristic attention or for female masochistic gratification (through male gaze identification.).
Nevertheless, for other aspects, we are not confronted with the penalising effects of male gaze. We don’t find
a complete commodification of female body as often happens in media images. Except perhaps for some
episodes of the last campaign, within Tim’s advertisements we can not speak of a complete transformation of
women characters into mere bodies. In very few cases female figures have just a decorative function and we
never run into images of women body dissection. Though probably driven by a moralist attitude more than
by a gender awareness, they tend to avoid lingering on female bodies and focussing on details like women’s
cleavage or legs. Venturing even further it could be argued that in some films the eye of the director adopts
methods that contribute to make the female figure active and autonomous. For example in the serial of the
sailor boat the spectator identify the three girls protagonist as subjects bodies that move and interact in a way
that is inseparable from their role and skills.

Once more, advertising proves to be a complex form of textualisation in which reassuring traits of
continuity coexist with elements of novelty and change. Pursuing the aim of drawing people attention and
not displeasing anybody, advertising tries to be everything at once: traditional and modern, normal and
different, always the same but every time different.

6. Conclusions

Our departing hypothesis was that a focus on technological sector could provide us with some
insights on changes undergoing in Italian television advertising concerning gender roles. Under the influence
of the euphoric and rather contagious spirit of certain feminist literature on new technologies, our assumption
was that the increasing association between women and technological devices - evident in Italian adverts -
could be regarded as a positive shift in advertising gender ideology. Perhaps naively we assumed that
modernity and novelty of consumer objects could be transmitted to the forms, settings, contexts in which
they were promoted and celebrated.

As a matter of fact, the analysis of Tim’s communication shows a quite conventional imagery where
women and men seem to preserve their classic roles. In particular, the construction of female identity
presents very few elements of novelty or rupture with the past. As we have seen in the earlier pages, on a one
hand women are represented as significant of Beauty and Youth, on the other they embody a relational and
affective competence. The traditional coincidence between female culture and private sphere - that is the
domain of orality, intimacy, and feelings - is not undermined. Even when they have a technological device in
their hand women are driven by emotions and relational needs. Paradoxically, the proximity to technology
tends to emphasise women existential fragility rather than stressing their active will and their technical
capability. Although women in Tim’s adverts are active users of mobile phones, technology for them is not a
way to extend their power on things and persons but on the contrary a means of reinforcing their dependence
on men.

Given this context, some few elements of novelty and change have been detected. Nevertheless, in so
far they are intertwined with traditional images and meanings, they appear weak, hardly convincing, driven
just by a consumer motivation. As some literature on advertising has suggested, it seems that advertisers
have learned how to combine different representative models, how to integrate in their messages feminine-
feminist values but previously emptied of their political meanings.
To conclude, how to interpret female massive presence in Tim’s advertising? Our idea is that this fact has to do with the personality of the brand and with the communicative strategy adopted in the Italian market. Within Tim’s imagery mobile service technology is not celebrated for its powerful performances, nor is the device presented as an end, as an object of attraction and consumption. More simply, mobile phone is shown as a means of communication and what is constantly remarked is the capability of connecting people and places. As we have seen, Tim opts for exploiting the ‘familist’ myth which is deeply rooted in Italian culture and identity. If the empowerment connected to technology is just a relational one, no surprisingly we find women rather men as major protagonists of the adverts. Perhaps more crucially, female presence seems to have something to do with the relation between the brand and its audience entailed in the narration. Somehow, the paternalistic mood in the way women are depicted and related to men constitutes the literal expression of another paternalistic relation, the one between a technological brand and its inexpert clients.
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