

“It’s Better to Be a Fascist than a Faggot” – Alessandra Mussolini

Julia Heim, Baruch College

The contemporary climate surrounding LGBT rights in Italy is fraught at best. On the one hand, in 2016, civil unions were legalized for same sex couples, on the other, right-wing and church groups are leading movements to reaffirm the compulsory heterosexuality of the family, and perpetuate fear about the dangers of gender variance (see, for example, the religious right’s celebration of ‘family day,’—during which one politician was quoted as saying “if I had a gay son I would burn him in a fire”).

This recent socio-political see-sawing surrounding LGBT rights is not only reflected in the Italian television industry, it is also in part created by it. This is not only a question of taking a cultural studies approach to media’s influence on society; in Italy this link is a direct result of the fact that different public television channels are controlled by various political parties. So, for example, as the new right-wing populist government appoints Marcello Foa as Italian public television’s new president (a man who believes that Hilary Clinton participates in satanic dinners featuring menstrual blood, and breast milk), and as ex-prime minister and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi is quoted as saying “it’s better to chase young girls than to be gay,” it should come as no surprise that administrative advisors for RAI (the Italian national television and radio broadcaster) like Rodolfo De Laurentiis make statements such as: “Gay couples cannot be contextualized in our legislative rules and RAI must only air positive models.”

Acts of censorship, especially on imported content are, it would seem, par for the course. “Inappropriate” gay kisses, like the one with Chuck Bass in *Gossip Girl* (E03 S06), or the gay marriage ceremony episode of *Un ciclone in convento*, are simply eliminated. But there is pushback, from left-wing politicians, LGBT groups, and television viewers. For example, using the hashtag #RAIomofoba [homophobe RAI], viewers protested the censorship of a gay kiss on *How to Get Away With Murder*. After re-airing the uncensored episode, RAI2 publicly rejected the criticism, claiming, “there was no act of censorship, it was merely a case of extreme modesty.” In light of the fact that until very recently words like “abortion” or even “armpit” were not allowed on TV, this censorship could almost appear to be progress.

Just as this “progress” doesn’t necessarily feel like positive change aimed at creating a more inclusive culture, neither is the “progress” enacted by those claiming to advocate for LGBT rights and visibility. There is, no doubt, an increase in the number of LGBT characters on Italian television, and many of

these representations are nationally produced—see, for example, all of Ivan Cotroneo’s shows. And, in 2016, Italy introduced the Diversity Media Award, which celebrates works containing positive portrayals of underrepresented groups. Change is indeed happening. Until recently LGBT people on Italian television were depicted as exoticized, foreign “spectacles.” This over-the-top otherness, has, in the last decade, drastically disappeared, mainly because the neo-liberal center-left, in an effort to promote inclusivity, has replaced this spectacle of difference with extreme sameness. It isn’t that being gay is wrong, it becomes wrong only if it is different: namely, if it strays from normative models of gender and sexuality. We need only look at the government’s 2009 anti-homophobia public service announcement, in which the final slogan reads: “Reject homophobia. Don’t be the one who’s different.” This kind of “normalcy” is perpetuated by contemporary Italian television, and what we have are LGBT characters that desire the same things their straight counterparts do: monogamy, domesticity, and procreative futurity; a move which frames these desires as natural and universal.

In order for this sameness argument—the liberal tendency to equate all gay love to all straight love—to work, all difference must be erased. The result is a proliferation of sexless homoaffective relationships, monogamous couples or desire-less singles, extremely binaried gender presentations, and near total linguistic erasure. LGBT people are thus intelligible if they look and act like straight people. There isn’t, therefore, much difference between depictions that render LGBT populations “spectacles,” and ones that “normalize” them; both affirm the ideological foundations at work in the naturalization of heteronormativity. In both cases “difference” is extremely negative, and the erasure of this difference ultimately cancels out any possibility of sexual legibility. If homosexuality is an identity based on certain kinds of sexual desires and expressions, but is presented as sexless, what kind of identity is it?

There are consequences to this that extend beyond television’s borders and into the lives of not only LGBTQIA+ populations, but also of migrants, people of color, and other non-cis, non-white, non-hetero, differently abled Italians. In a country where there are over 50 reported victims of trans/homophobia a day, and boatloads of migrants are dying in Italian waters, these media messages matter.