

# Media and Gender

## History, Representation, Reception



a cura di  
Maria Elena D'Amelio e Luca Gorgolini

Bologna  
University Press

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# **It is (not) just *canzonette*: Symbolisms, representations and imaginaries in the lyrics of Italian singers in the 1980s**

*Gaspare Trapani*

*Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible*  
(Frank Zappa)

The perspective that song lyrics may be considered and analysed as literary texts, and of a specifically poetic type, and therefore open to interpretation, is shared by many academics. One advocate is the writer, Pier Vittorio Tondelli, who recognises such legitimacy in stating:

The need for poetry, an absolute and poignant need in the years of early youth, was satisfied for entire generations by memorising words and stanzas of songs: pop ballads, psychedelic, neo-futurist, intimate, sentimental, dreamy, political, ironic, demented lyrics, while erudite poetry remained in the territory of interpretations, exegesis, and tedious schoolroom elaborations<sup>1</sup>.

Within this context, despite all too commonly being referred to snobbishly as ‘canzonetta’, pop music attains a very important role in keeping with the genre’s enormous impact and potential in everyday life. Indeed, Gino Castaldo, music critic for “la Repubblica”, emphasises this fact: “By whoever it is imagined, a song only comes to life when it descends from the mouth of the singer into the midst of the people, when it is loved, used, crumpled, smeared

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<sup>1</sup> Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Quel bisogno di poesia*, in “L’Espresso”, 30 June 1985.

with reality, reinvented in the streams of a thousand daily occasions and by the power of collective feeling”<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, songs, as Lorenzo Coveri proposes, serve “as ‘cultural translators,’ capable of filtering literary experiences and linguistic interpretations and transmitting them to a mass audience, [... and are] increasingly a mirror, and ever less a model, of the complex linguistic and cultural reality of today’s Italy”<sup>3</sup>.

Following this brief introduction, I would like to provide a few words about the corpus – for reasons of admittedly limited space – of the songs chosen: they are mostly successful, hit records, with the common denominator of having been performed, and sometimes written, by female artists. And this latter option is not only because Italian female singers, similar to practices in other artistic spheres, are less studied and less present in the volumes on the history of Italian songs, for example, but also because of the particular insights they return to the analysis in question. As lyricist Gianfranco Baldazzi states: “the female singer is delegated the role of litmus test for changes in customs. More often than the male performers, female performers add an image to the songs they sing that tends to stand out as unique: she is the bearer, even at a gestural level, of novelty”<sup>4</sup>. He is also echoed by Coveri who asserts: “the song has to do with more than an act of oral communication and rather with an act of theatrical communication”<sup>5</sup>. The song, therefore, is not only a linguistic, musical or vocal act, but also a gestural performance.

Once again within the objective of narrowing the field down, I refer essentially to the musical period in the 1970s and 1980s, a period when Italy lacked any stable governments and, in the midst of an intense economic crisis, one is confronted with the Years of Lead, the assassination of Aldo Moro, the Ustica tragedy, the P2 scandal and numerous Mafia murders. There is certainly a need for entertainment, and this is reflected in the new private television and radio stations, initially regional then also national, the first colour televisions and the multiplication of nightclubs.

Furthermore, music gained colour and took its own path. In fact, a musical renewal began that accompanied the customs, consumption and habits of a

<sup>2</sup> Gino Castaldo, in Felice Liperi, *Storia della Canzone Italiana*, Roma, Rai Eri, 2016, pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzo Coveri, *Parole in musica. Lingua e poesia nella canzone d'autore italiana*, Novara, Interlinea, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Gianfranco Baldazzi, *La canzone italiana del Novecento*, Roma, Newton Compton, 1989, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> Coveri, *Parole in musica*, p. 15.

large slice of Italy, specifically of women, who tired of being mothers, wives or lovers eternally waiting for bouquets of roses. In particular, from 1977, in the wake of the Anglo-American influence and breaking with the Italian melodic tradition, punk-rock and metal rock developed in which, between provocation and irony, musical forms took shape, opposing the verbosity of song writing and diffused sentimentalism, with pressing rhythms and provocative performances, and not without erotic and sensual winks.

Female singers were particularly involved in this process: after all, should women have appeared to be among those most directly affected by the liberation of sexual customs that stemmed precisely from how the old morality had always denied them serene relationships with their bodies. Emiliano Longo, author of an illuminating essay on the poetics of Donatella Rettore, observed:

In particular, women, who immediately after the war had been relegated back into the domestic environment, confined to traditional roles within the family and substantially excluded from professional activities, abruptly accelerated a process already ongoing for at least two centuries through “dramatically” changing their ways of thinking and their attitudes, engaging in challenges to the “dominant male” in order to obtain a balanced repositioning of their roles<sup>6</sup>.

Once the dam had burst that which had hitherto been held back became a swarm of musical performances, truly worthy of theatrical shows incorporating: physical attractiveness, scenic presence, extravagant attire, uninhibited style, non-conformist manners, erotic charge, combined with an unprecedented ability to play irreverently with words and the singer’s own body.

Hence the numerous disguises, not only as a fashion of the time but as an inner, personal need not to fix oneself, as Pirandello would say, in stable forms while constantly questioning oneself through fantasy and creative imagination and countering the dullness or difficulties of everyday life. In a famous radio-lecture in 1966, Michel Foucault, questioning the relationship between body and space in various domains, perceives disguise as a way of entering into communication, through the “other”, with the supernatural:

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<sup>6</sup> Emiliano Longo, *Rettore specialmente. I testi e le canzoni dell’ultima strega della musica italiana*, Roma, Arcana, 2018, p. 11.

To mask oneself, to make oneself up, to tattoo oneself does not mean, as one might imagine, to acquire another body, one that is more beautiful, more decorated, more easily recognisable; to tattoo oneself, to make oneself up, to mask oneself is certainly something else, it is to make the body enter into communication with secret powers and invisible forces. The mask, the tattooed sign, the make-up, they deposit a whole language on the body: all an enigmatic language, all a ciphered, secret, sacred language, which recalls on that body the same violence of God, the deaf power of the sacred or the vividness of desire. The mask, the tattoo, the make-up place the body in another space, make it enter a place that does not immediately have a place in the world and make that body the fragment of an imaginary space that will communicate with the universe of the divinities or with the universe of others. We will be grasped by the gods or by the person we have just seduced. However, the mask, the tattoo, the make-up are operations by which the body is torn from its own space and projected into another.<sup>7</sup>

While true that, in *Nessuno mi può giudicare* (No one can judge me), Caterina Caselli was already showing no hesitation in choosing between two men to “embrace” already by the mid-1960s; ten years later, Loredana Bertè was launching *Streaking*, a concept album with a censored cover on sexuality lived in a free and provocative manner and, as the title indicates, including the exhibitionist practice of bursting out completely naked at public events; and, naturally, Mina who, in *L'importante è finire* (What is important is ending, 1975) and *Ancora Ancora Ancora* (More More More, 1978), songs by Cristiano Malgioglio and both censored, makes explicit reference to amorous embraces. The role of the female is, however, that traditional position of the passionate and tempted lover who yields before a domineering man, and certainly a very different bond from what Patty Pravo sang about in 1973's *Pazza idea* (Crazy idea), or the perverse situation of making love to one man while thinking of another:

Foolish idea of making love to him / thinking of being with you again / Foolish, foolish, foolish idea of having you here / while I close my eyes and I'm yours / Foolish idea, me smiling at him / dreaming of being with you Foolish, foolish idea of feeling you mine / if I close my eyes I see you.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Il corpo, luogo di utopia*, radio speech, 1966.

However, it was in 1978, with *Pensiero stupendo* (Amazing thinking), written by Ivano Fossati, a song about a love triangle, lovers' exchanges, intoxication and 'unusual' embraces, that the Venetian singer left her indelible mark:

And you, and us, and her between us; hands, her hands, and then us again...

The artist, in fact, interprets it with sublime perversion, even bestowing herself with a new futuristic and fetishist image: crested head, heavily made-up eyes, wide-eyed stare, plunging necklines, and a look with which she would scandalise the first Italian television evening shows. From the same album, one can also appreciate *Johnny's* lascivious delirium, in which she sings about a woman who decides to use the "services" of a gigolo:

Johnny, finish me off / go, my handsome gigolo / and in spite of me, you're  
begging / and in hindsight you're desiring.

One year later, in 1979, Gianna Nannini, from Siena, achieved success with her self-written *America*:

for today I'm with myself, I'm enough and nobody sees me / and then I caress my  
loneliness / and everyone has their own body which they can / ask, ask, ask, ask.  
She makes me dream with her hands on her hips as if she was America / He  
makes me fly going down and up and feeling he is America / She makes love  
to me thinking of someone else and makes up America / Makes love to me  
deeper and deeper and I am America.

The song clearly had nothing to do with America and, over a very solid rock beat, underlined by vaguely distorted rock guitars, was a clear hymn to masturbation. The album cover showed the Statue of Liberty holding a vibrator instead of the torch in a clear attack on respectability and Americans.

She was echoed on the same theme by Fiorella Mannoia who, in 1981, on the austere and traditional Sanremo stage, performed the song *Caffè nero bollente* (Boiling black coffee), with lyrics by Mimmo Cavallo:

But I like Judas / I can sell myself naked / alone on the bed / I embrace my-  
self, I fool myself / melancholic fasting / without anyone  
I don't need you / because I don't need you / I don't need you / because I  
don't need your hands / I'm enough

Four years later, in *L'aiuola* (The flowerbed), Mannoia turned to her beloved and asked him why "do you make the flowerbed dry up?" The sexual allusion seems legitimate as, years later, with the same title, the flowerbed emerges in a song by Gianluca Grignani as a clear sexual symbol.

Continuing with our female repertoire, Fossati wrote *Fatelo con me* (Do it with me) in 1978 for Anna Oxa, with lyrics conveying sadomasochistic submission that was first whispered and then increasingly aggressive.

It's usually easy because I don't shout / That it lasts is guaranteed because I  
don't move  
Try doing with me whatever you want / Try with me to stop dreaming / Do  
it with me... to me!

However, the list of songs and singers does not end here: from Viola Valentino, who in *Comprami* (Buy me, 1979) proposes to a man particularly unlucky in love, to Raffaella Carrà who, in *Tanti auguri* (Many congratulations, 1978), extols sex in all its forms, "in the country and in the city", as a solution to hatred and war. There is also: *Ti sento* (I feel you) by Matia Bazar (1985); *Violentami sul metrò* (Rape me on the metro) by Jo Squillo (1981); *Cocktail d'amore* (Love cocktail) by Stefania Rotolo (1979), *Ho fatto l'amore con me* (I made love to myself, 1980) by Amanda Lear, with the last two written by Cristiano Malgioglio.

Nevertheless, it is probably in *Kobra*, a song written and performed by Rettore, that the irony and ostentation of the sexual theme achieves its most complete and audacious expression as this song, more than the others, contains more than just allusion.

Here, in fact, there is reference to the male sex organ identified with a cobra and defined as "a frequent thought that becomes indecent" and "a noble servant who lives in prison". "Servant" and "frequent thought" of whom? Of the narrating ego, or rather, of the singing ego and, more generally, of the woman who in this way openly claims her active role in sexuality. Moreover, the song, a hit in 1980, goes further to describe the dynamics of a sexual relationship in its refrain:

The kobra unwinds / Turns around, nails me / Closes my mouth / Holds and  
touches me...

It is no coincidence that the music critic Gianni Borgna observed how the Venetian singer-songwriter: “Rettore knows how to exhibit obscenity with such wit that she appears almost innocent”<sup>8</sup>.

Echoing the words of Paola Tirone and Paolo Giovannetti, we may identify in the songs of these artists a certain “consumerist heterodoxy”<sup>9</sup> within which, thus, behind the abstractly standardised façade pop songs inevitably adopt, we may perceive an undeniably subversive potential. Therefore, normality and protest, conformism and antagonism seem to alternate, and every conformist and validating instance is always accompanied by an impulse towards the disorderly transgression of the balances prevailing in the collective imagination.

In addition, this holds true not only for the lyrics: we must state that for almost all of the performers listed above, the public was attracted not only by the words and catchiness of the songs but also by the personalities, costumes, extravagant hairstyles, disguises and stage gimmicks of their singers, and coupled with the always imaginative and innovative record covers that turned these artists into true icons.

In practice, their multifaceted and multiform performances were not mere vocal performances of songs but rather these were harmonised with mimicry and gestures and hence the singing also meant acting, moving on stage, and making theatre: a true spectacle.

However, this all seems to come to a halt in the mid-1980s. For some of these artists, their levels of success, probably due to a lack of acquiescence to the new record market demands, faded, as was the case for Rettore<sup>10</sup> and Oxa. In the case of others, such as Nannini, they turned to more reassuring Italian-style melodies

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<sup>8</sup> Gianni Borgna, *Storia della Canzone Italiana*, Milano, Mondadori, 1992, p. 349.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Coveri, *Parole in musica*, pp. 115-142.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, unlike many of her female peers, Rettore has never abandoned the aforementioned themes. In her long, rich and uninterrupted activities as an author, consistent with her poetry, she has continued to write and interpret daring texts with explicit sexual references. Let us cite, only by way of example, *Konkiglia* (2005), which she herself defines as the female response to *Kobra* (in which the “K” imposes itself as a graphic feature of continuity). Here the Venetian artist, with an evident allusion to the vagina, once again claims the right to self-determination, proclaiming: “Tonight, I close myself in konkiglia and woe to anybody who awakens me!”. Rettore’s career in 2022 experienced a just and well-deserved jolt coinciding with a pandemic imposing severe restrictions on freedom. A number of new singers – from Achille Lauro to Maneskin, from Rappresentante di Lista to Madame – felt the need to transgress and re-propose in highly spectacular performances and, even while adopting different styles and ways, adopting motifs strongly linked to gender issues, both in their lyrics and images. Rettore has both become a real source of inspiration and herself returned to the limelight with two extremely provocative pieces: *Chimica* (Chemistry), a clear eulogy to sex even without love, and *Faccio da me* (I do it myself), an ironic hymn to masturbation.

while still others, such as Mannoia, even repudiated these songs, eliminating them from their repertoires and turning to a more singer-songwriter style of production.

Simultaneously, the rising generation of female artists broadly focused on lyrics centred on feelings, aiming more at vocal virtuosity than spectacular or transgressive performances. A prototype of the fresh-faced singer was established with their repertoires, except in very rare cases, devoid of any provocative inputs.

This does not apply to the other half of the universe: male singers. In particular, rappers have been allowed to say anything, often making recourse to the most boorish violence and vulgarity, as happens in numerous songs by Skioffi, such as *Yolandi* (2017) in which, among numerous insults, he raps:

When the sun goes down, I vent my cravings on little Yolandi / I slam her  
against the wall, I remove the foundation with the force of my slaps / If she  
wants it hard, I give it to her hard / Maybe even more than I have to / I spread  
her thighs and open the doors wide

However, leaving aside these extreme examples, so to speak, singers are free to say whatever they want as is the case with Vinicio Capossela in *Che coss'è l'amor* (What's love) of 1992:

What is love / it's Ramona who takes to the field / and like a big-mouthed  
tart / she shakes it and shakes it / she's wearing high heels / and her ass is low,  
her belly is bare and she's wiggling / she's rocking her head like a nutter with  
the consent of her trusted friend

More recently, in *Non amo più* (I no longer love, 2007), Roberto Vecchioni, referring to the theme of the ageing of women's bodies, tells his twentyish-year-old companion:

Perhaps it's the mirror's fault reflecting the other man I was seeing then / the  
one who made me a bunch of promises and didn't keep his word / Perhaps  
the book I was reading is the song I thought was mine or perhaps it's simply  
my penis that no longer has any imagination

The examples, drawn from the male discography applying this type of language and imagery, are indeed numerous and not necessarily focused on any specific era. They serve as a starting point for a reflection that leads us to highlight

this controversial factor: why, in recent years, has the material of male singers, as opposed to female singers, continued to reference sexuality in the most diverse tones, as a “normal” theme, among any other? And once again: how would it sound today – applying the basic rule of gender role reversal – for a sixtyish-year-old woman to sing to her 20-year-old partner: “my vagina doesn’t have any imagination anymore”?

It is certainly a fact that, in 1983, Marcella Bella, perhaps not addressing a twentyish-year-old, sang in *Nell’Aria* (In the Air), written by Mogol: “my pussy is still there, she doesn’t speak but she says yes”.

Moreover, referring to the international female scene, how can we not mention Madonna, who has never ceased to play with her sexuality throughout her four decades of success, unhinging the conventions and convictions of American respectability and, just as one example among many others, I may cite *Erotica* of 1992?

Let my mouth go where it wants to  
 Give it up, do as I say  
 Give it up and let me have my way  
 I’ll give you love, I’ll hit you like a truck  
 I’ll give you love, I’ll teach you how to... ah  
 I’d like to put you in a trance, all over  
 Erotic, erotic, put your hands all over my body  
 Erotic, erotic

And in her wake: Rihanna, Beyoncé, Kate Perry, Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Rita Ora. Why are these female singers, all with careers that began after the careers of our female singers, still allowed to include this sensuality in the poetics of their songs and performances while in Italy this was only able to occur for a period beginning over 40 years ago?

Today, it seems clear that even in music – as in much of the Italian cultural industry – rather than risking new or more daring formulas, the option goes to choosing a neutral, monochord product that is neither too pronounced nor does it offend any sensitivities to guarantee sure and immediate success.

To provide but one example, the most popular Italian artist of 2017 was, according to the official Fimi (Italian Music Industry Federation) chart, Laura Pausini with her CD *Fatti sentire* (Make yourself heard). Of the title track, moreover written by herself, she writes on social media: “*Non è detto* (Not nec-

essarily) is a song that underlines the need to communicate, to free the heart to allow life to surprise us”.

These are some of the verses of this song:

And it doesn't mean that I don't feel anything / if I keep my gaze on your  
absent look / and if I trust the strength of a memory if anything / take your  
umbrella / let it be the shelter under the storm / if what I owe you is keeping  
my heart in the right place.

Indeed, although love songs are a prevalent genre in the history of national pop music, it has to be said that, in Italy, they are increasingly often reduced to an assemblage of commonplaces – rhythmic-stylistic and conceptual – that are transferred from one song to another, remaining substantially unchanged and often highlighting a poor lexicon in which feelings dominate sex, the soul rules the body, angelic love outweighs passion, dreamed love over carnal desire.

When this was not the case – for example, Milva in 1993 with *Uomini addosso* (Men on my back) and Iva Zanicchi with *Ti voglio senza amore* (I want you without love) in 2009, in which these two historic voices of Italian music claimed the right to sexuality regardless of age on the Sanremo stage – triggering a torrent of criticism that even led to their elimination.

In this sense, we may refer to an asexualisation or, considering this did not prevail in the past, a desexualisation of the way singers and their lyrics are presented. From the mid-1980s onwards, it is very difficult to find female Italian pop singers making plays with their bodies on stage, and with their sexualities in songs. As Ivano Fossati concludes: “You preclude yourself from putting all this at the centre of the song. And perhaps also of life. No bodies, no wrinkles but not even a hint of sensuality either”<sup>11</sup>.

In some cases, even beauty or the body are concealed, often resulting in aseptic performances with the aim of pursuing an ideal of the girl-next-door singer in which eccentricity and creativity are perceived as generating little credibility. As the journalist and music critic Michele Monina stated:

The fact that aesthetics have been pushed aside could be read as a step forward. Except that we have gone straight to the opposite, being beautiful, showing off one's physical appearance, playing with sensuality, has gone out.

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<sup>11</sup> Michele Monina, *Intervista a Ivano Fossati*, in “Il Fatto Quotidiano”, 16 December 2016.

There is a whole generation of singers and songwriters who have swallowed themselves up, pursuing a kind of anonymity that somewhat clashes with the idea of popstars<sup>12</sup>.

This paradoxically happens a lot in music, less in cinema and not at all in television, where the opposite would be absurd for a showgirl. And it is no coincidence that such opposite evolution (or involution) occurred in a television industry that, at precisely the same time, starting in the 1980s, was undergoing the advent of Berlusconiism, televisual even before political. Is this a coincidence or a possible explanation?

From the '*velinismo*' of television programs, such as *Drive-In*, through to the private conversations – like the *bunga* party – later made public between the Cavaliere and the '*olgettine*', if, on the one hand, the objectification of women, especially on television, has been accomplished perfectly, on the other hand, out of indignation and as a distancing, precisely in order to avoid being confused with that reality, that determined a sort of self-censorship in artistic-intellectual circles, proceeding with a veritable annulment of the body, and the elimination, even ironically, of any allusion that might include the sexuality or simple sensuality of women. Monina furthermore observed: "There was a desire to invent an opposition between those who use the intellect and those who work, who produce, as if one were an alternative to the other"<sup>13</sup>.

Elettra Deiana, an exponent of feminist thought, identified in this fossilisation of two such opposing positions a strength for Berlusconiism and, equally, the origins of a fragile reaction on behalf of society to this problem:

Berlusconiism has nourished and nurtured – in a pathological approach that knows no rest – that great shift in meaning, which we can define as a true anthropological shift, from the acceptance of the 'limit', as the measure of living, the acceptance of what is (or was) perceived as 'permitted' terrain, to the bulimic rush of 'everything and suddenly'; from coming to terms with the limit of the norm to intolerance, to indifference, to putting the norm on notice and to mockery of the norm, which one must get rid of<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Michele Monina, *Venere senza pelliccia. Quando il pop italiano s'è infilato le mutande*, Milano, Skira, 2017, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Elettra Daiana, *Sesso e Potere. La notte della Repubblica riguarda tutti*, in <http://www.universitadelledonne.it/altri%203.pdf> (accessed on 23 September 2022).

Even in music, female authors and performers have evidently not identified this limit, this watershed and, rather than daring, have preferred not to rebel against this Manichaeian vision – ‘respectable’ women and ‘disreputable’ women.

Therefore, once again, although in the opposite way to that happening in the world of television, the body, sexuality and sensuality of women is defeated, becoming a taboo, as Monina bluntly comments:

Berlusconism has deprived women, including those in show business, of the freedom to be women without immediately becoming objects (of desire, whim or objects for domination), standardising them all as more or less valuable pieces of *figa* (pussy)<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Monina, *Venere senza pelliccia*, pp. 18-19.