

Passing the Remote: Community and Television Viewing in *Woobinda* and *La guerra degli Antò*

Monica Seger

In the 1990s young Italian authors paid television a great deal of attention. The medium appears in texts by Tiziano Scarpa, Luisa Brancaccio, Niccolò Ammaniti and others as a transmitter of ideologies, a referent for common understanding between characters and a constant source of background buzz. Television also functions behind the scenes in selected texts of this era, serving as a stylistic model upon or against which authors base a television poetics, or set of guidelines, for their narrative content and formal approach. I consider here two such texts, Aldo Nove's *Woobinda* (1996), and Silvia Ballestra's *La guerra degli Antò* (1992). *Woobinda*'s television poetics surface in a truncated style that evokes the practice of zapping, or quickly changing channels, while that of *La guerra degli Antò* arise through a format modeled upon serial or talk show programs.

Both Ballestra and Nove highlight television as a primary text in 1990s Italian culture, one that can be positive as well as problematic. They call attention to its social magnitude by privileging it throughout their books, with characters constantly glued to the screen whether in groups or alone. In episodes of collective viewing, television is a source for togetherness and broad dissemination of information. At the same time, it also serves as a tool through which to tune out other people and focus on individual experience, and as a means to distance viewers from the primacy of actual events. In each text an understanding of events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the first Gulf War (1990-1991), or the Rwandan Civil War and eventual genocide (1994), is exclusively mediated by televised representation.

Italy in the early 1990s was, as it has often been, a country and culture in delicate balance. It was suspended between economic stability, associated mass consumerism and, thanks to a lingering emphasis on social commitment held over from the '68 era, the rumblings of a critical younger generation. As Donald Sassoon notes, the decade just prior had been one of "euphoria and consumption" (1997, 75), due to a remarkably high Italian Gross National Product. This resulted primarily from a general European economic recovery in the later half of the 1980s but was also shaped by particularly Italian factors, such as a stabilizing of the lira and a weakening of trade unions. While clearly positive in many ways, not the least of which was a stronger sense of national identity, such financial and material comfort also had negative consequences, leading to an "unquestioned acceptance of hierarchy,...increased power of monopolies and oligopolies, ...new and deleterious influence exercised by commercial television," and "mass passivity in strong contrast to earlier social patterns of mobilization" (Ginsborg 2003, 96).

While "new and deleterious" in the 1980s and 1990s, the effects of Italian commercial television were not all negative in its earlier stages. Although TV sets first became officially available in the country in 1954, they were not commonly found in many private homes for years to follow. The only access that a great number of Italians had to television at this time was in the social centers and bars where they would flock to

watch evening variety and game shows. Not only did they watch programs with their neighbors, they watched the same program at the same time as other neighborhood groups throughout the country; for its first seven years Italian television hosted only one channel, the government run RAI, joined by RAI 2 in 1961, RAI 3 in 1979, and a host of private channels around the same time. According to Marino Livolsi, the emergence of private channels in the late 1970s and early 1980s greatly altered the place of television in daily life. Livolsi writes: “un’offerta così ricca ha creato nella gran parte degli italiani una dipendenza che nasceva dal poter trovare, ogni sera, almeno un programma capace di attrarre l’interesse di un vasto pubblico” (1998, 7). No longer communing in the public sphere, Italian television viewers were also no longer viewing the same program, but they were still linked by what Livolsi defines as a television dependence, “una sorta di sottile coazione a vedere ciò che passa sul piccolo schermo, non importa cosa sia” (ibid., 7-8). The presence of choice, he writes, had a dulling effect.

The widespread passivity described by both Livolsi and Ginsborg was not completely universal, as evidenced by the social criticism to be found in cultural productions such as the very works to be studied here. In portraying a culture marked by consumption and compliance through the use of the comic and grotesque, authors such as Ballestra and Nove speak for a generation not satisfied by the results of the previous decade’s success, and they are not the only ones to have done so. During the mid 1990s many young authors wrote in a graphic, pulp-inspired style that often mocked or criticized contemporary society. Tiziano Scarpa, Niccolò Ammaniti, Isabella Santacroce and Daniele Luttazzi are just some of the authors that come to mind. These voices were grouped together, largely by the publishing industry and mass media, under the moniker *i Cannibali*.¹ Riddled with the imprint of a consumer-obsessed and mass-media-filtered contemporary culture, the texts that *Cannibali* authors produced were often violent, sexually explicit and intentionally exploitative of a twentieth-century obsession with consumerism and the cult of fame and celebrity. Their formal structures often displayed either an apparent lack of concern for established literary and social codes, or an intentional destabilizing or dismantling of canonical texts and their forms. While both authors were associated with the group, Ballestra was not nearly as closely linked to it as Nove. This is due largely to *La guerra degli Antò*’s 1992 publication date, which places it just prior to the *Cannibale* boom. It is also due, however, to the nature of the author’s narratives, void of the gore of more overtly ‘cannibalistic’ texts and focused instead on the daily lives of friends and families.²

La guerra degli Antò came fast on the heels of Ballestra’s literary debut, the short story collection *Il compleanno dell’iguana*, published just one year earlier. It is, in fact, a continuation of that work’s opening story, “La via per Berlino,” a coming-of-age tale of four friends who share the nickname Antò and are bored to death in the provinces of Pescara. In this story, as well as the book to follow, the Antòs and friends are discontented with the mainstream culture surrounding them and seek, without much luck, a greater sense of meaning in their punk-oriented and self-proclaimed difference. *La*

¹ This rubric is generally accepted as having come from the title of the 1996 Einaudi anthology *Gioventù cannibale, la prima antologia dell’orrore estremo*. Pierpaolo Antonello would have us note, however, that the term is also connected to the magazine *Cannibale*, founded in 1977 (2007, 39).

² For more on the *gioventù cannibale* see Lucamante (2001), Pezzarossa (2009), or entries in encyclopedic works such as Borsellino and Pedullà (2001) and Marrone (1999).

guerra degli Antò is driven by the frenetically witty voice of its narrator, who reads as an alter-ego to the author. It furthers the story of the Antòs and the scattered mishaps they encounter between Pescara, Bologna and Amsterdam during the time of the first Gulf War. Talk shows and news programs are featured heavily in the text, with two different subplots dedicated to friends watching television together and another dedicated to the filming of a missing person's show about one of the Antòs. On top of all this television within the text, Ballestra's first-person narrator, known as Sballestra,³ employs a TV show format for her own narration. She chattily addresses readers in the role of host and steadily jumps from one subplot to the next just as a scene's drama escalates, leaving us with collectively bated breath. Notably, both levels of reliance on television, thematic and structural, have to do with community here. The watching and making of television connects communities inside the text, just as her narrative technique—what Tommaso Ottonieri calls “un modello deviato/deviante di soap-opera” (2000, 48)—shapes us, her readers, as a community of our own.

A community of readers is, of course, quite different from those iterations of television-based community described within the text. The former is purely imagined, while the latter share physical space and verbal communication. In his work on authority and community, Clarke Cochran defines community as: “a group of persons who share a basic human value and who, at least to some extent, are aware that they share it.” He goes on to say: “This sharing and awareness create an internal bond among them, making them fellows in the same community, setting them apart from others, and conferring an individual and collective identity which is special and unique” (1977, 547-548). A text has the ability to cultivate a shared value among those who read it, if it is successful in convincing us to care about its content and narrative outcome. This is a particular sort of shared value, limited to the span of the book and the time spent reading it, and one that is, in many ways, only apparent, never to be materialized. As readers of a given text, we will most likely never encounter many of its other readers.

It does, then, seem rather dubious to apply the awareness factor of Cochran's formula to a community of readers. The problem is easily resolved in *La guerra degli Antò*, however, through the narrator's use of direct address in the second-person plural. Not only does Sballestra address readers using the ‘voi,’ she goes so far as to narrate supposed collective action on our part: “Purtroppo, già dopo il secondo paragrafo—lo vedete anche voi—la sua punteggiatura è a pezzi” (2005, 89); include herself as part of our group: “e anche noi, lettori miei busbàni, siamo grosso modo alla fine” (179); and assign elements of her own identity to us, as well, furthering the idea of shared experience: “Se non avessimo ventidue anni e non fossimo tanto cinici, magari gli diremmo ‘Poveretto!’ Invece, non possiamo fare a meno di pensare: ‘Ben ti sta, razza di sfigato’” (181). While it may indeed be a limited or hypothetical experience, as readers of Ballestra's work we are almost left no choice but to imagine ourselves part of a community, linked by our scripted investment in the text—*almost*, but not entirely. Deciding to accept our role in the imagined ‘voi’ takes intellectual engagement on our part, in a dynamic—not passive—willing of community.

In spite of this individual dynamism, community is still ultimately dependent on authority in this discussion (we are only linked if the narrative convinces us of this fact) just as Cochran argues that authority depends on the existence of community. He writes:

³ The negative ‘S’ in Sballestra marks the narrator figure as the anti-Ballestra, an alter-ego as opposite.

“authority can exist only within the context of a community; authority can exist only where there is a community to anchor and buttress it” (ibid.). Commonly understood as the power to influence thought or behavior, authority needs a group of thinkers or actors to exist. The success of Sballestra’s story, then, the authority of the text that she narrates, depends on whether we are convinced to keep reading, following her from one subplot to the next. In the context of community and receptive groups, a text that successfully exerts its authority is one that commands us to follow its codes, shaping the very sorts of reception that we perform.

While *La guerra degli Antò* jumps between storylines, *Woobinda*, Nove’s debut prose work, positively sprints from one mini-narrative to the next, never to return. His text is a collection of forty vignettes grouped, like merchandise, into eight lots. Each vignette takes only a few pages to underline the shallow vanity and gruesome insensitivity of modern man. Their topics range from affinities to cellular phone brands, makes of cars or Burger King menu items, to familicide over bath products and the experience of watching television programs like *Non è la Rai* and *Programmi di accesso*. Each new narrator begins his or her vignette in a flat tone remarkably similar to the one before it, suggesting, through repetition, a global absence of individuality. Through this technique, Nove realizes Foucault’s proposal that the act of speech allows for language itself to override the authority of the speaker (1987). As his characters internalize and utilize the language of television, their unique identities and sense of real rather than imagined agency are nullified. And as the book unfolds, the ever-changing but oddly familiar voices become tokens of desperate solitude under the medium’s glow. Narrators speak of themselves, their lack of fulfillment, and the desires they have crafted around consumer products and television personalities.

Like Ballestra, Nove borrows not only the themes of television programming but also a certain rhythm of television viewing for his text. Jumping from one piece to the next he constructs ‘clips’ or ‘spots’ with his writing, evoking the practice of zapping, or quickly changing channels, as his narrators end mid-sentence once a point has been made or climax reached. The difference between Nove and Ballestra’s televisual models is exemplified in the distinction between a cliff-hanger plotline and the zapping of channels. A cliff-hanger brings us to a known point in the story, one just *prior* to thematic climax. It only temporarily ends an episode, however, doing so with key language signaling that we must wait to learn the results, or with graphic clues in the form of ellipses. Notably, this is a technique that, while much used in the televisual format of the serial drama and even, now, the nightly news, in fact comes from the world of literature. We need only think of great epics such as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* for an example. In contrast, zapping between channels is distinctive to newer media such as radio and television. It is not interested in allowing the prolonged excitement or delayed gratification of almost reaching a thrilling conclusion but instead seeks a quick assessment. Relying on the stock conventions of genre programming, it summarizes a program’s primary plot and moves on, seeking new stimuli. As readers forced to follow this model with Nove’s text, we must constantly move forward in our attempts at interpretation, seeking to assess the main point of each vignette before the next one arrives.

So engaged with how viewers and readers receive and process information, both texts explore the dominant and minority viewer group patterns associated with gender in the work of media, as well as reading, reception theorists. The unfolding of Ballestra’s

story overtly recalls the talk shows and soap operas thought to be favored predominantly by women. *Woobinda*, in turn, calls forth the aforementioned act of zapping and relies on themes of violence and androcentric pornography, which are largely identified in media theory as male-oriented.⁴ To be clear, the gendering of a work is not reflected by its content in this discourse so much as by its method of delivery and, moreover, the type of viewing or reading that it promotes.

In his 1992 study *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins relies on reader-response theories elaborated in the edited volume *Gender and Reading* (1986), in order to explore television fan culture. He explains that men tend to read texts for authorial meaning, accepting the primary plot scripted by the author and “maintain[ing] the narratives’ pre-existing focus on a central protagonist” (109). Women, on the other hand, experience a narrative as a world, conceptualizing themselves as engaged in conversation with the text, be it print or television, and focusing “on a narrative’s ‘world’ rather than on its plot” (108). Ien Ang’s work supports that of Jenkins, as she too argues that gendered schemas are evident in a male television viewer’s attention to and acceptance of primary plot. This is to be contrasted with a female viewer’s focus on what is often the secondary plane of a text, namely the plane of interpersonal relationships (1995, 127).

The distinction these scholars make between types of reception, primary (plot-driven) and secondary (relationship-centered), is quite productive for Ballestra and Nove’s texts, while their attention to gender is considerably less so. Their discussion of gender does serve one important function, however, when re-scripted in terms of communication, language and identity. As both Jenkins and Ang caution in their works, it is reductive to turn to gender distinction without unpacking the categories used, a task both authors approach in terms of an Althusserian interpellation. If men and women tend to respond to a text in certain ways, they argue, this reflects the communicative coping lessons learned alongside gender-typing that begins before birth. The way in which many people respond to a text thus reflects sex-role stereotypes learned from the moment that we are called into subject-hood, yet another transition based on language. For just as the *langue* of television dominates negotiation of meaning in the texts at hand here, language itself shapes our social identities in the first place. As scholars such as Judith Butler, Deborah Cameron, and Luce Irigaray have explored, the language that we speak, and that speaks us, largely reflects one socially dominant (male heterosexual) group⁵.

For the work of Jenkins and Ang to successfully inform a reading of *Woobinda* and *La guerra degli Antò*, gender must be supplanted in favor of this general category of socially dominant communicative group. Thus, rather than emphasizing gendered subjectivity, not clearly delineated in these texts, I focus on the notion of dominant and minority receptive groups. Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin explore such a binary with

⁴ Mark Andrejevic cites “women ages eighteen to twenty-five” as “the predominant demographic to which reality TV caters” (2004, 9). Henry Jenkins writes of gendered viewing and the American program *Beauty and the Beast* and states that: “action plots held the prospect of enlarging its share of male viewership,” citing an interview with the series writer George R.R. Martin (1992, 127-128). As for ‘zapping’ and gender, Jenkins’ description of the “the new youth consumer” is particularly apt: “his scraggly dishwater blonde hair hangs down into his glaring eyes, his chin is thrust out, his mouth is turned down into a challenging sneer, and his finger posed over the remote. One false move and he’ll zap us. He’s young, male and in control” (135).

⁵ See for example Butler (1999), Cameron (1985), and Irigaray (1985).

what they call “muted group theory,” which considers how a mainstream language is formed and used in a given group. In their work on reading patterns the authors explain:

The theory proposes that language and the norms for its use are controlled by the dominant group. Members of the muted group are disadvantaged in articulating their experience, since the language they must use is derived largely from the perceptions of the dominant group. To some extent, the perceptions of the muted group are unstated in the idiom of the dominant group. In order to be heard, muted group members must learn the dominant idiom and attempt to articulate within it. (1986, 21)

Members who identify with the dominant group will not only have greater ease in expressing themselves, but also in interpreting and accepting messages from other sources. Members of the muted group, on the other hand, learn “how to find their own pleasures in stories that reflect the tastes and interests of others, how to shift attention away from the narrative center and onto the periphery,” to once more cite Jenkins (1992, 114). Working within the dominant idiom, they seek out those tools of expression that more closely adhere to their perceptions and values.

Conceiving television as possessing its own codes or language, the work of Jenkins and Ang, which deals explicitly with television viewing, presents the dominant group as that conversant in the lexicon of primary plot. It establishes the muted group, on the other hand, as that which must satisfy itself with what surrounds primary plot. While a dominant group member focuses on the solving of a crime in a mystery, a muted or minority group member will pay more attention to a secondary plane of budding romance, or the relationship between the main detective and his sidekick. Based on the work of Marino Livolsi, I propose that the dominant group in the Italian viewership watches not only for authoritative narrative but for immediate communication of the whole narrative arc, and for known patterns. As Livolsi writes, “la ripetizione e standardizzazione dei programmi televisivi finisce col ridurre la complessità del mondo che appare sul piccolo schermo a poche tematiche: la violenza, l’amore, la cronaca (che propone gli stessi argomenti e personaggi), il parlare molto di soldi” (1998, 11). As this is the televised norm, a dominant group viewer will know to focus on these elements.

Prime examples of each reception pattern, both dominant and muted, are to be found in *La guerra degli Antò* and *Woobinda*. Ballestra explicitly works from the position of the muted group in her text, focusing on the plane of the interpersonal. At the same time, she also delves into the realm of dominant viewing patterns by her use of an authoritative narrator who informs readers exactly where to direct their attention. Although it ostensibly tracks the straight narrative of the Antòs in flight, *La guerra degli Antò* favors the muted group by emphasizing scenes of community, togetherness and social relationship, and thus privileging these elements over plot or final outcome.⁶ A predominance of interpersonal relationships over plot is underlined by the narrator’s frequent use of cliff-hangers, which serve to further distance readers from narrative

⁶ *La guerra degli Antò* is left largely unresolved, as the book ends with the two missing Antòs returning home to an uncertain fate.

conclusion. Nove, on the other hand, parodies and blows up—or cannibalizes—the narrative codes of the dominant group, just as his text troubles the waning presence of secondary plane, that favored by the muted group, in a ‘reception’ of society at large. Never overtly veering from a primary plot model, *Woobinda* is hyper-focused on succinct action or the communication of one clear message. Though its vignettes may end in mid-sentence, they only do so after the prime message has been communicated. As we shall see, however, the isolation and desire for social recognition of its protagonists ultimately paints as striking a portrait of the need for community as *La guerra degli Antò* does.

Before even contemplating the content of *Woobinda*’s 3rd vignette, “A letto con Magalli,” readers are led by the piece’s formal structure into a primary plane reception, stepping into the role of dominant group member, in this case as readers rather than viewers. As with each vignette in the collection, here Nove’s narrator employs an abrupt, direct delivery, using the television-modeled text to control our reception. “A letto con Magalli” features a female viewer imagining her experience of a televised world. This suggests a muted group sort of reception, yet in the hands of Nove it quickly devolves into an isolating experience with a singular focus. The tone is set for such a focus by the structure of the printed text, which ends, like all the other vignettes in *Woobinda*, so abruptly as to favor the brief attention span of a channel flipper.⁷ There is no time for narrative build up, no space for a secondary plane, and the message of the piece is immediately delivered: when Maria, the narrator, watches the announcer Giancarlo Magalli on television she imagines the fame that would come from sleeping with him, period.

The vignette’s adherence to a dominant group categorization is furthered by the fact that Maria’s experience of reception, her viewing within the text, has a singular focus that actively negates interpersonal relationships in both fantasy and reality. Speaking of the universality of going to bed with another person, Maria notes “ma alcune persone sono famose, la gente le vede in continuazione e pensa com’è scopare con quello lì che parla quando tu stai guardando la televisione mentre mangi con tuo marito la suocera i figli” (2005, 17). In this brief and rare depiction of a communal activity, sharing a meal with family, no communion is actually taking place. The presence of the television allows Maria, or ‘tu,’ to focus her energies on an imagined world and avoid communication with those around her. An impersonal form equivalent to the use of ‘si’ in Italian or ‘one’ and the emerging singular ‘they’ in English, ‘tu’ could very well refer to the reader in the above passage. Nove thus has his narrator Maria perform a function not unlike that of Ballestra’s narrator Sballestra, who also directly addresses readers. Yet Sballestra calls to us in the plural, while Maria uses the singular. Once more, individual experience is emphasized, in spite of the physical presence of others.

A secondary plane focus is again evoked and then dismissed by Maria’s imagined interaction with Magalli. She states the reason for her interest in the announcer quite clearly: “se vado a letto con mio marito, nessuno dice niente. Se vado a letto con Magalli ne dicono tutti” (ibid.). Maria does not fantasize about the physical act of intercourse with Magalli so much as its result. Her desire to be discussed by others does reflect a certain interest in social existence, but again it is one lacking direct communication and exchange. Just as the imagined interaction with Magalli has nothing to do with Magalli as

⁷ Fulvio Senardi notes, furthermore, that in *Woobinda*: “lo sguardo rimane di norma maschile anche quando l’Io narrante è femminile” (2005, 94).

a person but rather as a symbol, the event of people talking about Maria does not actually bring her into direct contact with them. It does, however, identify her status in a term she can measure, fame. Maria's dreams of being elevated above those around her through celebrity status reflect a desire to be a main character rather than part of a collective cast. Her primary interest is to be noticed, to be 'read' on the scale of pop stardom expressed on the television screen, as she seeks a relationship of comparison rather than one of exchange. In this way she might enter the consciousness of others, but she will do so as an object of value and not as a member of a community aware of sharing values.

Maria's underlying anxiety mirrors that of many of *Woobinda's* narrators, who yearn to be acknowledged as distinct from the masses. In pieces such as "Senna"⁸, "Quando si spaventano sono fortissimo" and "Protagonisti," we encounter other narrators who express this same desire to be recognized in the public eye. In the world of *Woobinda*, it seems, one can only attain value by entering, as a symbol, directly into the discourse of celebrity. Lucio, the narrator of the episode "Carla Bruni," speaks for all of the book's narrators, and in essentially the same voice, when he declares his motivation for his own television based fantasy: "perché io attendo soltanto che qualcuno di molto importante si accorga di quello che valgo" (113).

Just like Maria, Lucio watches television in the non-communicative company of family—his sleeping son—and fantasizes about an onscreen interaction with media personalities, Roberto il Baffo and Carla Bruni. And, just as for Maria, the end result in Lucio's imagined reality, a realm "più sottile, più reale" than life, is an elevation of his value in the non-televised world. In contrast to *La guerra degli Antò*, which focuses on talk shows and newscasts presenting a filtered version of lived reality, television serves in *Woobinda* to project an alternate reality, one in which characters are able to enact a different and better life, if only ever in fantasy. This life inevitably reflects the mass-market ideals promoted by the language of television. Furthermore, its brief narrative trajectory always ends with the protagonist's fantasy of his or her true worth finally being recognized by others. A more complete version of the citation above reads: "perché io attendo soltanto che qualcuno di molto importante si accorga di quello che valgo e che quel giorno i miei figli e mia moglie, i vicini e chiunque di fronte a me si presenti sarà ridotto a servizievole pubblico acclamante" (ibid.). The ingrained assumption that he deserves something better breaks down social bonds, as Lucio's desire for social elevation necessitates the reduction of neighbors and family to positions of service. The influence of a television-based model of relationship is underlined above by the use of the word *pubblico*, which may be one's public or one's audience. Accustomed to being part of the audience himself, Lucio believes that he will gain status once he is *on* the screen, as this is where authority is held.

It is for this sort of social distancing that I emphasize the isolated individuality of *Woobinda's* characters, despite the wealth of existing criticism that speaks of them as a unified group. Fulvio Senardi, for instance, describes *Woobinda* as: "quaranta brevi episodi in cui prende la parola una soggettività disseminata, eletta a portavoce della psiche di massa colonizzata dai media dell'immagine; una soggettività plurale, priva di spiccate connotazioni individuali perchè intrappolata" (2005, 29). The narrators do

⁸ The narrator of this piece confesses: "quando ero bambino sognavo di diventare così famoso che se fossi morto ogni persona della terra mi avrebbe toccato la bara piangendo. Allora sarei stato più vivo che in ogni momento che ho trascorso fino ad adesso, allora morendo avrei incominciato a vivere davvero" (53).

undoubtedly speak in the same monotone and express the same desires, desires ingrained by television's product advertisements, codified beauty standards and endless series of climaxes or punch-lines. For this reason, they fall together into a dominant group, one that is not necessarily male but that is at ease with and yet numbed by a succinct, plot-driven narrative, a script 'authored' by the realms of television and goods. Their collectivity, however, ends there: although they speak the same language and share the same desires, they are unable to actually communicate these desires to one another. To illustrate this we need only consider the vignette "Cip e Ciop." "Cip e Ciop" features two friends who only speak to each other with a monotone "cip" or "ciop" because, as the narrator explains, "tutta la settimana si parla in ufficio al telefono con la gente non si fa altro che parlare. Se un vigile ti ferma devi parlare. Se una persona per strada ti chiede che ore sono devi parlare" (102). In a world in which communication has been reduced to forced function, language and impulsive expression no longer meet.

The very title of Nove's text points to both the social magnitude of television and the absence of organic communication and interpersonal relationship at the base of the work. *Woobinda* is a reference to the Australian TV program *Woobinda* (Animal Doctor), about a veterinarian in the outback. The program lasted for only two seasons, 1969-1970, but was popular in many countries outside of Australia, Italy included, for years to come. Nove's use of the program's title for his book, as well as for one of the vignettes between its covers, has multiple implications. To begin, referencing the program identifies serial television as a point of common cultural reference and integral formative experience for Nove's protagonists and readers, who may easily have come of age in the 1970s like the author himself. The campiness associated with that particular show then serves as a foil for the heavy, often violent content of Nove's vignettes. Furthermore, associative conjuring of the program's thematic focus, the adventures of a wild animal doctor, establishes the contemporary world of Nove's text as a modern, mediated jungle. It also presents the work as a post-modern bestiary, one in which protagonists are the animals and *Woobinda*, the world of television, the frame that holds the compendium together. Yet in a medieval bestiary each animal is noted for its particular significance while here all characters merge as one. It is this final point that brings us to the greatest function served by reference to the program.

Woobinda (Animal Doctor) becomes both emblem for an era lost and lament for an age in which television, as in Ballestra's text, was capable of leading to a sort of community. Giuseppe, the narrator of the homonymous vignette, concludes the piece with a comparison between a younger generation's allegiance to the cartoon character Barbapapà, and that of his own 30-year old cohort to the character of *Woobinda*. He writes of Barbapapà: "Era un cartone animato di destra, un cartone animato della Lega Lombarda perché non aveva un discorso suo di fondo come *Woobinda*, che ci faceva sentire uniti, quando uscivamo la sera a suonare i campanelli nel 1979 avevamo in mente quella cosa lì, ci faceva sentire uniti tutti" (20). The discourse at the base of *Woobinda* (Animal Doctor) is a simple one, as is often the case for those pieces of the past resuscitated by Cannibale texts. It is also overtly positive: the protection of wild animals and aboriginal rights. United by this shared value, Giuseppe and his young peers form a true community as defined above by Cochran. Notably, the period for which Giuseppe years, contrasted with *ora* (the present), is marked by the year 1979. This is the same

year in which Livolsi argues that television culture changed for the worse in Italy due to the arrival of cable programming and its subsequent, dulling access to choice.

With the non-regionally specific, uninflected tone and syntax of his 1990s narrators, Nove desensitizes readers to graphic sexuality and violence as we are obligated to revisit the same themes in our abrupt move from one sketch to the next. As Tommaso Ottonieri writes: “Degradando lo stile, optando per uno (stilizzatissimo) non-stile, cioè riducendo programmaticamente e poeticamente lo stile allo standard di un linguaggio-staccato...noi, lettori, perdiamo ogni orientamento, siamo attratti nella trappola della rappresentazione, spogliati dei già illusori e incongrui ‘strumenti per difendercene’” (2002, 116). Forced to go along with the zapping, readers become unwittingly attuned to a specific cadence and lexicon, as well as the structure of the sketches. That is to say, we almost anticipate the piece’s sexually, violently or morally shocking punch-line. We can, of course, ‘change the channel’ by moving onto the next story, but it will be eerily the same. Here are the first sentence or two pronounced by five different narrators: “Sono Marco. Sono un uomo, giovane” (98); “Sono un ragazzo buono e semplice, dei Gemelli” (101); “Mi chiamo Maria, ho ventisette anni e sono del Toro” (107); “Sono un ragazzo di trent’anni. Mi chiamo Lucio. Sono del segno Cancro” (112); and “Mi chiamo Marco e sono un bel ragazzo dell’Aquario” (115).

As he conditions readers in this fashion, Nove also causes us to take part passively in a model of the devaluing of life and language at stake in his work, paying each passing sentence less mind as it resembles those that went before. We are led to read in a way that closely mirrors Livolsi’s description of post-1970s television viewing. He writes: “In molti casi non si vedono programmi nella loro interezza, ma un surreale mix di generi diversi ‘incollati’ a caso, dove una decodifica distratta ‘mette insieme’ cose viste in quel momento e nel passato. Frammenti senza storia e senza contesto.” Just as he concludes, “il disordine è più apparente che reale: tanto i programmi sono tra loro molto simili, si rifanno tutti a pochi generi collaudati” (1998, 8). Nove thus provides us through his text with the very experience that has led to the actual alienation and desired social recognition of his narrators, using form to inform content. By engaging with both dominant and muted group models of reception, *Woobinda* exposes a culture in which, transfixed by the language of the television, individuals have lost the tools for authentic communication.

Where *Woobinda* negates interpersonal relationships and group identifications, *La guerra degli Antò* fosters them, just as it, too, explores and troubles a dominant group/minority group paradigm. By focusing on the group of Antòs—so linked in community that they share a common name—as well as the clusters of friends and family that spiral out from the core grouping, Ballestra situates her readers’ attention decidedly on the plane of the interpersonal. As readers we are so caught up in the descriptive web of relationships within the text that we often lose our handle on its plot, thus adopting the role of the muted group. Dominant group reception patterns also enter the picture here, doing so primarily through narrative content, as in an early episode featuring one Antò as he watches pornography. The narrator Sballestra’s analysis of the episode does not allow this sort of reception to slide by unchallenged, however, and ultimately confirms a narrative tendency towards engagement in community and culture, what Jennifer Burns calls Ballestra’s message of *impegno* (2001). As narrator, Sballestra deftly employs the codes of television to deride the results of a passive and asocial type of reception,

precisely that which we see enacted by Nove's narrators. Using the rhetoric of a television host, a punk parallel to the Raffaella Raffai character in the text, she directs Antò Lu Purk back out to the world and away from his primary plane experience at the Dutch cinema.

Although her description of the pornographic film is straightforward, it is also comic, and she criticizes the stagnant type of viewing that the film's result-based storyline promotes. After Antò watches and marvels "che storia" (11), Ballestra scoffs, expressing disappointment when the experience of the film sends him right back to the dormant patterns of the life that he left in Italy, largely centered on smoking hashish on the couch. To his credit, Antò does attempt to view the film on a relationship plane, as we note when Sballestra says, addressing Antò, "hai speso l'equivalente di ventinovemila sanguinose lire italiane nel tentativo (insensato) di scoprire quali ambigue relazioni e filarini legavano i tre protagonisti" (12). While her tone is typically tongue-in-cheek, there are enough clues in the passage to suggest that she inserts this line not solely to poke fun at Antò's true motivation.

Although fascinated, he is indeed startled by the lack of nuance in the film, not satisfied by the one pointed message of the author of that text, sexual climax. The genre of the film, like the genres privileged in *Woobinda*, does not allow for the exploration of social relationship. In a humorous nod to semiotics, Antò tells himself "la mancata conoscenza delle lingue estere m'ha impedito l'accesso alle procedure di disambiguazione dei frammenti" (ibid.). Not only is this a winking reference to the type of debate surely in vogue with the 1992 DAMS (Drama, Art and Music Studies) crowd at the university of Bologna, it is also a confirmation on the part of Ballestra, as author, that Antò is at an interpretive disadvantage. With the term "lingue estere" we suspect that he is referring not only to Dutch, the spoken language of Amsterdam, but also to the narrative norms of the porn cinema with which he may not be familiar. As a member of the muted group in both environments, Amsterdam at large and the *Analdrome* cinema, he does not have the right tools to interpret the text and is unsuccessful in his attempts to watch for primary plot, to join the ranks of dominant group viewer.

A different sort of viewing experience, one overtly focused on community, comes as a group of the Antòs' friends gather together in their Bologna apartment. In stark contrast to the lonely Antò Lu Purk, the friends busy themselves by making a communal dinner. They are active and productive, working for the good of the group. What truly brings them together though, and what truly draws the newly arrived Antò Lu Zorru, a second Antò, into the circle, is the act of watching news reports of the War in Iraq. When one of the friends turns on the television for the seven o'clock news all gather around the set to watch the latest correspondence from the Gulf. The simple fact of their being together allows them to perform a viewing that is in opposition to Antò Lu Purk's physically isolated viewing at the book's opening.

The social relationship promoted by this act of collective viewing reflects the minority group habits outlined by Jenkins et al above. Although their understanding of the war is likely to have been distorted by television, the friends recognize that the programming represents a certain reality and are able to make connections back to their own lives, as well as those of others. It is this last part that most sets them apart from Nove's characters; they are still aware of the realities of others in their social group. When Antò Lu Zorru, fleeing Italy under the assumption that he has just been called to

war, is horror-struck at the images of destruction on the screen, “Fabio di Vasto capisce tutto,” through a simple glance, and “gli passa una mano sulla spalla, cerca di riscuoterlo” (ibid.). More important than Antò’s ability to connect televised reality to lived reality is Fabio di Vasto’s capacity to link his viewing practice to a drive of empathy, as the news causes him to feel and express concern for his friend.

The true political commitment of these characters and Ballestra’s attitude toward the levels of socio-political involvement among her peers are debatable. What is pertinent in this context, however, is how the viewing of serialized television allows it and community to be somehow harmonious. This is the case whether the program is the ongoing saga of the *Guerra in the Gulf* or the ongoing saga of *Date un nome al fuggiasco*, the missing persons program about the Antòs themselves (160). Returning to the notion of reception patterns, the viewers in *La guerra degli Antò* read the texts on the screen with an attention to secondary planes, such as interpersonal relationships, that reflect a reception modeled on muted group habits. In displaying, for example, a sense of collective familial attachment to certain journalists such as Michele Santoro, “il cugino di tutti noi” (88) or the beloved Lucio Manisco, “il padre di tutti noi, Manisco” (85), they express a feeling of connection between the events on the screen and their own community, however abstract. Comparing this to the imagined relationship in Nove’s *Woobinda* between the narrator Maria and the presenter Giancarlo Magalli, we recognize a stark contrast. While Maria proposes a fantasy involving only Magalli and affecting, in truth, only herself, in *La guerra degli Antò* “tutti noi” are grouped together in relationship with Santoro or Manisco. The emphasis is toward inclusivity, rather than exclusivity. *Noi* corresponds to the friends of the Antòs and Sballestra, to all Italians and even to us, the readers.

Ballestra’s text primarily engages with a minority group reception, describing characters whose television viewing is centered on interpersonal relationships within the story and guiding our reading of the work in the same direction through its form. It also draws, however, on the realm of authoritative narrative, that linked by reception theorists to a dominant viewer group. The text’s authority, its ability to convince us to keep reading without questioning, is enacted by its narrator, Sballestra. After an introductory adjustment period in which she allows her readers to familiarize themselves with the rhythm of her work, Sballestra identifies herself. She is careful to assert her identity both in and outside of the book, interacting with characters yet also pausing to share comments such as: “Probabilmente l’ideale sarebbe stato accludere un demotape al testo, ma pare che i costi sarebbero tremendi. Così mi hanno detto quelli dell’editrice” (38), which place her outside of the text.

This dual position is a privileged one, and it is one that she shares with readers. She asks our advice as outside observers, albeit rhetorically, about her own sorry lot: “Ora, secondo voi cosa dovrebbe fare una poveretta di cronachista” (163), while also bringing us into potential relationship with her characters, always explicitly addressing us in the plural: “Dovesse venirvi in casa, non lasciategli toccare nulla,” (81) and: “Antò Lu Purk ridacchia. Se non lo conoscessimo così bene scommetteremmo, sbagliando, che è cotto come un cammello” (155). In these examples she is amicable as she steers our reading toward one founded on relationships, but she can also be more direct. When describing the poor handwriting in Fabio di Vasto’s journal, for instance, she informs readers, as cited earlier: “lo vedete anche voi” (89), offering us no option but to agree. Finally, she is

careful to ensure that her conversation with readers is not unilateral, as in the aside: “Come dite? Oh yes, anche la sottoscritta c’era” (73). By inferring our unstated ‘line’ Sballestra, or Ballestra, writes us, in a sense, into the text. Along the way, she uses the authority associated with the dominant receptive group (a delivery that prohibits viewers or readers from questioning the narrative) in order to encourage a reading that fits the patterns of the muted group, more attentive to interpersonal relationships. In this way, she confirms Crawford and Chaffin’s assessment that “in order to be heard, muted group members must learn the dominant idiom and attempt to articulate within it” (21). She also goes beyond, not simply learning the dominant idiom but reshaping it to become her own. Once more we see that the categories of reception theory are particularly useful in this multi-media literary context once they become de-centered.

La guerra degli Antò and *Woobinda* engage two very different types of delivery to craft complementary explorations of the process of reception. Their uniqueness materializes in exactly how they engage with the annulling, or protection, of individual voice through a form of dominant language. In *Woobinda*, authority lies with television, the language of debased culture itself, while in *La guerra degli Antò* the author asserts her authority, via a fictional alter-ego, by mutating the codes of this same language. Each text serves an important function: Nove’s details an ultimate impasse in a culture’s ability to assert subjectivity through language, while Ballestra’s suggests a means of possible bypass. In emphasizing the models of television reception depicted within and foisted upon readers by these texts I do not wish to lock them into a binary. I propose instead to demonstrate how the coping mechanisms of the muted group are successful precisely in their adaptation of the dominant group’s tongue and conclude that the path to individuality may just be paved with collectivity.

Bibliography

- Andrejevic, Mark. 2004. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ang, Ien. 1995. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. New York: Routledge.
- Ballestra Silvia. [1992] 2005. *La guerra degli Antò*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Bleich, David. 1986. “Gender Interests in Reading and Language.” In Flynn and Schweickart 1986, 234-266.
- Burns, Jennifer. 2001. *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000*. Leeds: Northern Universities Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cameron, Deborah. 1985. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.
- Cochran, Clarke E. 1977. “Authority and Community: The Contributions of Carl Friedrich, Yves R. Simon, and Michael Polanyi.” *The American Political Science Review* 71 (2): 546-558.

- Crawford, Mary, and Roger Chaffin. 1986. "The Reader's Construction of Meaning: Cognitive Research on Gender and Comprehension." In Flynn and Schweickart 1986, 3-30.
- Flynn, Elizabeth A., and Patrocino P. Schweickart, eds. 1986. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1987. "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," translated by Brian Massumi, 7-59. In *Foucault / Blanchot* by Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot. New York: Zone Books.
- Gagliano, Rita. 2001. "Il protagonista-consumatore e la merce-segno: il percorso iper-consumistico di Aldo Nove ne 'Il bagnoschiuma.'" *Narrativa* 20-21: 285-96.
- Gargiulo, Gius. 1999. "Una maleducazione sentimentale televisiva: gli scrittori cresciuti davanti al video: Aldo Nove e Luca Doninelli." *Narrativa* 16: 183-203.
- Ginsborg, Paul. 2003. *Italy and its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State 1980-2001*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1989. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Livolsi, Marino. 1998. *La realtà televisiva: come la Tv ha cambiato gli italiani*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Lucamante, Stefania. 2007. "Cannibali." In *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*, vol.1, edited by Gaetana Marrone, Paolo Puppa, and Luca Somigli, 373-374. New York: Routledge.
- , ed. 2001. *Italian Pulp Fiction: The New Narrative of the 'Giovanni Cannibali' Writers*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Manai, Franco. 2005. "Guerra in trincea e guerra in televisione." *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 3: 29-55.
- Nove, Aldo. [1996] 2005. *Woobinda*. Rome: Castelvecchi.
- Otonieri, Tommaso. 2001. *La plastica della lingua: stili in fuga lungo un'età postrema*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Pezzarossa, Fulvio. 1999. *C'era una volta il pulp. Corpo e letteratura nella tradizione italiana*. Bologna: CLUEB.
- Pomilio, Tommaso. 2001. "Le narrative generazionali dagli anni ottanta agli anni Novanta." In *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, edited by Nino Borsellino and Walter Pedullà, 671-680. Milan: Rizzoli Larousse.
- Sasson, Donald. [1986] 1997. *Contemporary Italy: Economy, Society and Politics since 1945*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Senardi, Fulvio. 2005. *Aldo Nove*. Fiesole: Cadmo.