

The revenge of Asia Argento: Desecrating celebrity as a means of celebrity culture *

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The pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years, thanks to the connective media that are progressively involving in both the celebrification and celebritisation process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. What is new in the contemporary media system is that is that the intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person’s social position. Moreover, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past. The aim of this article is to reflect on this phenomenon, starting from the analysis of the very controversial Asia Argento’s case. To briefly summarize the events, Argento was recently involved in two different sexual scandals: in the one involving Harvey Weinstein, she was among the first actresses to speak out about powerful producer’s sexual assaults, playing the roles of both victim and heroine, even if she was also criticised and strongly condemned by public opinion. In the one involving Jimmy Bennett, who said she sexually assaulted him when he was 17, she played the role of oppressor.

Within a few months (less than one year) the media and the general public attacked Argento, while putting her in the very center of public debate, celebrated and exploited her renewed visibility and success (to be clear, she was forgotten for a while as a celebrity), and then dumped her again (celebrating her as a victim, in the end). Asia Argento’s story is an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity. Beyond the opportunities for gossip provided by the media’s presentation of this series of events, this ongoing and hasty relationship between celebrification and desecration requires an in-depth analysis.

Keywords: celebrification, degradation rituals, scandal, reputation, media, morality

On October 18, 2018, at the end of the X Factor episode “Home Visit,” Sky confirmed that Asia Argento had been replaced as a judge of the talent show, starting from the next live episode. The intentionally neutral announcement by host Alessandro Cattelan came at the apparent end of a narrative that began approximately one year ago, in which actress Asia Argento, daughter of the famous horror movie director Dario Argento, has been cast by the media in the roles of heroine, whore, penitent, and victim — not necessarily in this order — in a schizophrenic way. As a matter of fact, this trial ended with an apparently clear-cut verdict issued by the Italian mainstream media, which for months has fueled a carousel of

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opinions and emotions, packed with audiences who are sometimes accomplices, sometimes antagonists, and always noisy.

To briefly summarise the events, Asia Argento was among the first actresses to speak out about powerful producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults, the revelation of which led to the well-known #MeToo campaign. In contrast to the solidarity that Weinstein's victims received elsewhere and to the credibility attributed to Argento in other countries¹, in Italy Argento herself was immediately the victim of a terrifying online ritual of degradation that — not surprisingly — was very often initiated by women. As Andrea Hajek pointed out, “the criticism was often accompanied by verbal insult and scorn, ranging from reprimands for not having rejected Weinstein's sexual advances, to condemnations of her continued collaboration with the producer in subsequent years, during which she suffered further abuse” (2018, p.139). Conservative newspaper *Libero* published an op-ed by Renato Farina with the headline: “First they give it away, then they whine and pretend to repent”.² While Argento was giving an interview about the assault accusations, journalist Mario Adinolfi tweeted that the actress was attempting to “justify high-society prostitution”.³ In other words, in Italy the echoes of this rebellion against sexual violence have taken a peculiarly nationalist and chauvinist turn, and “only very few voices have dared to question the gendered relations of power that make this form of sexual abuse both possible and widespread” (Zambelli, Mainardi, Hajek, 2018). This very controversial matter involves both the sexist male perspective and, one might say, the failure of feminism in Italy, as underlined by Guia Soncini in *The New York Times*⁴ who vividly stigmatized how Italian feminists view themselves as a gendered and generational separate community..

Other critics approached the situation from a different perspective; many interpreted and condemned Argento's decision to speak out about sexual assault as an opportunistic way of advancing her career. Her delayed accusations against Weinstein were thus seen as an attempt to gain media attention for herself. As a matter of fact, in the same period Argento was hired by the TV network Sky to be on the jury of *X Factor 2018*. However, no one has remarked on the media's exploitation of Argento's growing visibility and her convertibility into economical resources.

What happened after these events was a complete reversal of the scenario. In August 2018, after the unexpected death of her partner, the famous chef Anthony Bourdain, Asia Argento settled a complaint filed against her by a young actor and musician, Jimmy Bennett, who said she sexually assaulted him when he was 17. Instantaneously, Argento went from being one of the most prominent activists of the #MeToo movement to an alleged rapist who traumatised Bennett, affected his mental health and damaged his career. Moreover, as newspapers reported, Asia Argento paid Bennett \$380,000 in order to avoid a public denunciation, which appeared to confirm her guilt. Consequently, Asia Argento was dumped by the #MeToo movement and fired from *The X Factor*, as reported above.

Beyond the opportunities for gossip provided by the media's presentation of this series of events, what is most relevant about this story is that within a few months (less than one year) the media and the general public attacked Argento, while putting her in the very center of public debate, celebrated and exploited her renewed visibility and success (to be

clear, she was forgotten for a while as a celebrity), and then dumped her again (celebrating her as a victim, in the end). Far from being linear, this ongoing and hasty relationship between celebrification and desecration requires an in-depth analysis. Asia Argento's story is an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity.

Celebrity as a process

Asia Argento's case is an effective demonstration of the idea that celebrity is a process rather than a static position, and it provides us with additional dynamic perspectives on celebrity culture that we need to address here. First of all, celebrity culture is the result of a twofold process — “celebritisation” (Boykoff and Goodman, 2009) and “celebrification” (Gamson, 1994; Turner, 2006) — connected to a mediascape that is defined both by traditional mass media and, nowadays, by the internet. It is worth underlining that these two processes take place on both a social and cultural level (celebritisation) and an individual level (celebrification) (Driessens, 2013a). More specifically, “celebrification” refers to the process that transforms ordinary people or public figures into celebrities, while “celebritisation” has to be interpreted as a meta-process, as the democratisation of celebrity.

The second point here is that these two processes have experienced extraordinary growth in the age of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008), in which the balance between the media industry and the audience is redefined as both a top-down, corporate-driven process and a bottom-up, consumer-driven process. As a matter of fact, the pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years, thanks to the connective media (Van Dijck, 2013) that are progressively involving in both the celebrification and celebritisation process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. In particular, ordinary people who gain visibility and fame are legitimated as celebrities in the mediatised performative society; equally importantly, the size and diversity of social media networks offer a widespread, active and participatory audience with which to engage. In contemporary society, the pervasive digital circulation of content through traditional and social media enlarges the audience and increases people's engagement with celebrities. The media constantly manage a complex and intensified representation, where the person's status dynamics are constantly negotiated and evaluated by the audience, who witness such processes through their participation and everyday interactions. As Dyer states, celebrity becomes an area of negotiation between media, audiences and celebrity itself rather than merely a media production (Giles, 2000) to be consumed, worshipped, and adored, imposed by media industries through a top-down process of distribution. To a certain extent, celebrity can be conceptualised as a meaningful step in the complex and dynamic

consumer experience of audiences, who actively build their everyday identity, choosing their favourite celebrities on the media shelves.

The ideas of negotiation and consumer experience evoke a dynamic view of celebrity, in which mainstream media and social media platforms inhabited by audiences cohabit and cooperate in defining our social symbolic imagery, which is mostly made up of celebrities. This leads to the third point of this reflection: the growth of visibility and increase of speed in producing celebrities is not only a matter of media marketing, but above all a social and cultural process. While the politics of producing celebrity may be conjunctural and contingent, nobody denies that celebrification and celebritisation have the power to generate “real-life” consequences, and that celebrity also has to be analysed as a cultural formation with a social function. Celebrity is not only a category of media text, nor is it merely a genre of media discourse. Celebrities are constituted discursively (Turner, Bonner, Marshall, 2000, p. 11), are implicated in the construction of audience cultures, and are central figures in many of the dominant discourses about identity, gender and sexuality. As Turner (2010) points out, celebrity culture is one of the areas through which we can trace the new role for the media: as the generator or author of social identities.

Mapping the cultural functions of celebrities (and stars) may help us to understand how they articulate ideas about identity, personhood and individualism in contemporary society and how the audience may affect these areas. Moreover, as Couldry (2002) argues, being visible in the media means to be at the very center of the world and to have the opportunity of ordering the world itself. In this sense, we may read the media as the social arena where celebrities constantly emerge through public and semi-private (but always visible and detectable) performances which are recognised and validated by audiences as an expression of both celebrity status and consistency with social norms.

What’s more, within the new mediascape, celebrities can further be seen as a process in that they function as a set of circulated strategies and practices (boyd and Marwick, 2011) that are publicly built, represented and negotiated. In other words, “celebrities” are performances and social practices that involve a community’s shared values and specific social roles.

However, due to the aforementioned technological and cultural turn, nowadays the media rituals related to the celebrity as a process are not only enhanced in terms of the number of people involved, but also hastened in comparison to the past. As Driessen (2013b, pp. 11–12) points out,

this sheds light on the demographics of celebrity culture: because of visibility’s contradictory forces, namely the need for renewal as well as the scarce public’s attention, there is only a small core of celebrities with longstanding careers and international allure, next to a mass of temporary and disposable “celetoids” (Rojek 2001) and celebrities (Brighenti 2007, p. 334; van de Rijt et al. 2013).

As a consequence, the duration and to some extent the consistency of celebrity may be less predictable than in traditional media, while media representations provide the audience with multiple and often contradictory symbolic materials which need time to be

parsed. If audiences need time for processing information and producing social meanings, the never-ending circulation of content within digital platforms hardly provides users with that time. This raises the question of how both the speed and evanescence of media scenario may affect the celebrity process. Moreover, how deep could those discourses of reflexivity, produced by the audience in the evanescent and temporary time of a social media tap (e.g. a tweet or a Facebook like), actually be?

Understanding desecrating rituals within the new media eco-system

What is new in the contemporary media system is that the intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person's social position. Moreover, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory and the relationship between newcomers and outcomers within each field, accreditation and degradation rituals can be considered as a specific function of the celebrity field, with old celebrities being humiliated, new stars being created overnight, and vice-versa.

Even if literature about celebrity is mostly focused on authenticating processes, recent events, such as the epic, tragic, failure of reputation of well-known stars and public figures (like Kevin Spacey and the aforementioned Harvey Weinstein) forced us to reconsider the very idea of celebrity desecration. As we know, “in the market and in politics, a degradation ceremony must be counted as a secular form of communion. Structurally, a degradation ceremony bears close resemblance to ceremonies of investiture and elevation” (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421) and may have onerous effects on both career and private life. These rituals aim at removing people from a place of value and confine their range of eligibility and intelligibility within a community. Garfinkel’s full ceremony is performed out loud and in public because the degraded person is defined as such by “the denouncer” and “the witness” who all together define “the perpetrator” as out of society’s standards and motive of “moral indignation [as] a social affect” (p. 421).

This idea of degradation rituals was used by Giglioli et al. (1997) to describe the 1994 trial of Sergio Cusani as intensely mediated. As Cavicchioli points out, politicians were involved on two different levels of judgement: first of all, they were concerned about their guilt and the consequent punishment when they were in the tribunal, but, just as importantly, they were scared of the effect of the trial on their image, credibility and awareness because of their media visibility (“figura”, in Cavicchioli’s words).⁵

In contemporary society, this kind of ritual is generally managed through media representations, which are progressively changing and expanding in the new media ecosystem. From TV to social media, the witness of this ritual is the dispersed but now definitely networked audience (Rainie and Wellman 2012) who scrutinises and judges the penitent, suffering and experiencing the same feelings of shame, failure, guilt, and regret,

thanks to media visibility and pervasiveness. Consider, in this sense, the role of television as a socially authorised place for celebrity confession: according to Redmond, “One can find in the contemporary self-disclosure, or television therapy talk-show, a corresponding secular and mediagenic enactment of the ‘private’ Sacrament of Reconciliation, and ‘public’ persecution ritual [where] the talk-show host thus becomes a supra-charged redemptive icon” (p. 150) who may promise salvation. Within this scenario, the TV audience is represented as hidden and mostly silent attendees of this ceremony, even if the redemption process can start only thanks to the active complicity of fans. However, the more the audience becomes active and noisy and their participation through online platforms increases, the more these rituals become a never-ending public trial where the roles of both the audience/witness and the celebrity/perpetrator drastically change.

The role of the audience is once more crucial: accreditation and degradation rituals without witnesses do not have a social impact. If we consider social and convergent media as a public arena in which to share emotions — as in Zizi Papacharissi’s idea of affective publics (2015) — people’s affective labour is now playing a fundamental part in both the rise of new stars and in the failure of old ones. At the same time, the penitent celebrity may explore diverse roles within the new media scenario: he or she can be the penitent in the public space of a mainstream TV show as well as a self-taught lawyer through his or her profile on social media. And his or her online claims can be spread and intensified, while constantly negotiated and evaluated by the audience through their participation and everyday interactions. Moreover, these claims can once more be exploited by media mainstream in a sort of meta-communication process, resulting in a vicious circle. Of course, this process is enhanced by celebrities’ recent use of social media in order to strengthen their connection with fans by engaging in relationships that are less mediated than they were in the past. Celebrities, as boyd and Marwick (2011) state, used to show their friendliness and proximity to the public by interacting with fans, answering their questions and mentioning them in their posts, so as to formally establish mutual understanding by using linguistic references to outline fandom membership (Andò, 2016). As celebrities use this preferential channel to share thoughts, emotions and feelings with audiences, it is quite clear that we have to reconsider the celebrity process itself and in particular the role of degradation in it. Could we consider desecration as a new form of sacralisation? Considering the increase of velocity in the contemporary celebrity process, can the desecrating process be a new strategy to achieve endorsement and authentication? And in the case of Asia Argento and other former stars, may we say that a new opportunity for visibility and success comes at the price of being publicly humiliated or seen as losers by the audiences? Is the celebritisation a form of abjection?

Private life at stake: how to gain visibility through desecration and convert it to celebrity capital

Another aspect we have to take into account is that desecration very often revolves around celebrities' private lives. As Turner argues, "the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity (...) occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (...) to investigating the details of their private lives" (2004, p. 8). In traditional media, this process could be seen as an economically-driven artifice ("celebrity culture is secular", as Rojek states; 2001, p. 74), facilitated by media institutions that produce and promote celebrities and put them into a position of very public intimacy by turning their private lives into stories and commodities to consume. As a matter of fact, the increasing visibility of the private on the media stage (as in Erving Goffman's idea of back-stage and front-stage, 1959) has completely transformed the relationship between public figures and the audience, removing barriers to previously restricted information (Meyrowitz, 1985). However, when it comes to social media, it is worthy to note that celebrities themselves have a more active role in managing their private sphere (boyd and Marwick, 2011) that becomes public even when it is at the very center of degradation rituals. We used to consider the constant struggle between public and private as a meaningful effect of the transformation of communication media and, consequently, of both the nature of visibility and the relations between public and private (Thompson, 1995). In this sense, we may refer to the case of Asia Argento as a scandal, as scandals are symptomatic of this broad change in the development of modern society.

In Asia Argento's case, her private life was (and still is) the site of both her success and humiliation. It is the starting point for her recognisability, a precondition for being considered a celebrity. According to Driessen, recognisability, and more specifically the "accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations" (2013b, p. 16), constitutes the celebrity capital which is a kind of capital that can be converted to other kinds of capital, as in Bourdieu's definition of field (1993). In this perspective, celebrities need to be analysed not as people with a strong individuality, extraordinary characteristics and a specific agency, but rather as a productive relationship between media industries, celebrity agents, audiences and of course celebrities themselves.

This interpretative frame can be useful to analyse Asia Argento's case and, at the same time, to examine the non-linearity of the convertibility of celebrity capital into other resources. Throughout her story, her private life is at stake — neither her competences and skills, nor her star qualities, but her private life which accrues media visibility and projects recognisability on her. Argento unexpectedly achieved media visibility when she accused Harvey Weinstein. Where Argento was before this event is not clear; what is clear is that she was no longer in the public eye, in Italy or abroad. Her relationship with Weinstein and her public condemnation of Weinstein in an article by Ronan Farrow⁶ positioned her within a specific political network of people, mostly women, resulting in the #MeToo movement (which from that moment became her social capital, her valuable contacts). Upon joining this network, Argento's private experience turned into political

capital (as in her speech to the European Parliament⁷) and increased visibility in the media, especially in Italy: in many interviews after the news came out, she presented her truth about Weinstein, even facing criticism and blame from journalists and the public, especially women. All this media exposure provided her with greater visibility and recognisability (symbolic capital) in the public eye, whether her reputation was affected positively or negatively. Her story was no longer a matter of private affairs but a political (the relationship between sexuality and power) and social (the gendered judgement and the “whore stigma”: see Zambelli et al., 2018) issue. Even if her involvement in these experiences was mostly related to the scandal and not directly to her career and qualities as an actor, singer, director and producer, her social and political capital was undoubtedly converted to celebrity capital when she was employed as part of the jury in the Italian edition of X Factor 2018. As a matter of fact, this episode confirms the monetisation of her experience and the convertibility of celebrity capital into economic capital. On the contrary, when she was fired because of the sex scandal with Jimmy Bennett, her economic capital disappeared but the episode turned her into a victim of the media, adored by fans and by colleagues (both a new social and celebrity capital).

What is worth noting is that in this complex and unpredictable process, Argento’s fame is reinforced thanks to fandom and, in the end, even public opinion, at first so critical of her, is progressively assuming a more positive, or at least neutral, position. What we once could have called media scorn results in this case in numerous opportunities for visibility. At the end of degradation ceremonies, the penitent usually comes out defeated. In the contemporary media scenario, the proof of desecration (i.e. the post for Bennett and their picture together on Instagram) coexists with the messages for her fans released after her final episode of X Factor, re-opening this never-ending story.

Celebrity, scandals and morality

According to Silverstone (2007), the media have a relevant role in defining a social, civic and moral space. They are building our moral universe, a moral space within which the other appears to us and where we may find tools to connect (and disconnect) to others, using frame-worlds to understand our everyday life and, in a certain sense, orient our behaviours according to a more general moral order. This relation between media and morality may help us in addressing our last reflection on Asia Argento’s case. If, in Silverstone’s idea of mediapolis, “we will or will not find ourselves alongside the other in his or her dignity, [and] we will escape or not the ‘consequences of the failures of representation’” (Dayan, 2007, p. 114), how do we analyse Argento’s scandals and representations from the moral perspective of the inhabitants of the mediapolis, namely, the audience?

In Asia Argento’s media trial we may observe a moral attempt at degradation, enacted by both the media and the audience, which at the end was not effective. Then what went “wrong” with Argento, compare to other very famous cases of degradation with real private and public consequences for the perpetrator? The concept of scandal may clarify the

matter: according to Thompson, a scandal is a “conduct which offended moral sentiments or the sense of decency (...) Scandal thus involved a transgression of moral codes which could be, but did not have to be, religious in character, and with reference to which the action or event was denounced” (2005, p. 39). As a matter of fact, Argento was involved in two different scandals: in the one involving Harvey Weinstein, she played the roles of both victim and heroine, even if she was also criticised and strongly condemned by public opinion. In the one involving Jimmy Bennett, she played the role of oppressor. In both cases, she gained public disapproval for her private sexual conduct, but if we pay attention to the evolution of the story, she generated more disapproval when she was the victim than when she was the oppressor, especially because the media industry turned her into a new kind of victim when she was fired from X Factor⁸.

Moreover, we may say that in the first case, Weinstein’s scandal fit into the Italian patriarchal framework of social rules and norms about sexuality, generating a public debate and media degradation rituals against Argento: she is easy to cast in the role of the “bad woman” compared to an ideal “good woman” who is expected to refuse money or career opportunities rather than engage in illicit sex (Hajek, 2018). In the second case, the morality (or ethics?) of the media prevailed, becoming, along with Argento, the very protagonist of the scandal, redirecting the audience’s attention to different issues.

Again, Thompson argues that scandals

may (and often do) seriously damage the reputations of the individuals whose actions lies at the center of the scandal (...) Reputation is a kind of resource, a sort of “symbolic capital” that individuals can accumulate, cultivate, and protect. It is a valuable resource because it enables individuals to exercise a certain kind of power. (2005, pp. 46–47)

In Argento’s case, her symbolic capital and supposed power were more recognised by the media system (and their audience) when her celebrity capital was turned into economic capital. Conversely, her supposed political power related to her public accusations of sexual harassment was immediately reduced to silence by the media and the audience while she could be read through the lens of “whore stigma”. It is not surprising that she gained the main stage of visibility (e.g. in the TV show *Non è l’arena*) when she discussed Bennett’s case⁹, playing the role of penitent who attempts to rebuild her credibility and to move fans’ feelings.

As Rojek points out, “The fallen celebrity may never regain the former level of elevation in the public sphere. But confession can produce a more nuanced relationship with the public, in which frailty and vulnerability are recognised as the condition of embodiment, common to celebrity and fan alike” (2001, p. 89). Following Rojek, we may say that Argento received a great deal of affective empathy from fans through her penitent representations in TV shows: redemption processes involve the active complicity of the audience and, as Redmond underlines,

the televised celebrity confessional is above all an emotional form of communication that attempts to draw the viewer/fan/reader into an affective economy of inner feeling and authentic sentiment. The

ordinary citizen is asked to connect with the celebrity's emotions, to simultaneously self-sense, and to confess through and in their sentient bodies. (2008, 156)

However, the televised confessional related to the Bennett case was performed not as a collective degradation ritual with the promise of salvation, but as a tool to create a new reputation (rather than restoring the damaged reputation). What is more, the interview was aired in the same period as X Factor, where Argento was one of the beloved protagonists and during which she masterfully managed her presence on social media. As a consequence, on the same stage designated for degradation, she presented herself as a victim because she was going to lose her role on X Factor and everybody was aware of it and supported her through social media. In a very short and condensed time (less than twelve months) the media circus exploited her visibility in a way that forced the audience to assume contradictory and often ambivalent opinions

The new media ecosystem is made up of traditional mainstream media whose schedule is now forced to reckon with the much faster time scale introduced by social media. In this scenario, even the mass media, which could have fixed and preserved symbolic content in a relatively durable fashion compared to the temporal flow of social interaction, failed. In digital media, as in face-to-face communication, "the contents of symbolic exchange may have a fleeting existence: words uttered may rapidly fade away, and the preservation of symbolic contents may depend on the fallible and contestable faculty of memory" (Thompson, 2005, p. 52). After all, as we know, the enunciative productivity of the audience that can "occur only within immediate social relationships" (Fiske, 1992, p. 39) is progressively turning into textual productivity in the digital era (Hills, 2013), as in social media posts, while maintaining the ephemeral nature of social interaction.

Another question here is: may we consider Asia Argento's case within the frame of morality? What kind of morality we are discussing here? It is worth noting that this case brings to evidence moral (and more precisely political) issues related to gendered power, which are clearly essential in both the sexual scandals involving Argento. On the one hand we may analyse Asia's behaviour as consistent with the sensibility of both post-feminism and neoliberalism: Asia can be considered the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism as much as the active, freely choosing, self reinventing subject of postfeminism (Gill, 2008): On the other hand, the moralist backlash against Asia clearly demonstrates that in Italy the post-feminist discourses are far from being a reality, while the gender equality has not been achieved and an unequal system of power relations is still at work. As Hipkins states about the phenomena of "velinismo and "whore-ocracy"

The important contribution that postfeminist theory could make in this debate is to open up understanding about what is 'new, unique, and distinctive about media representations of gender at the current moment, what ma[kes] them different from straightforwardly pre-feminist or anti-feminist portrayals'. The role of the 'velina' in Italian culture has evolved in tandem with the growing forces of neoliberalism, and deserves analysis as a particular form of 'new sexism' (2011, p.430)

However, for the sake of brevity, I suggest reflecting on the relationship of media and morality, in the sense that media allows people to be responsible and moral individuals

within a society that is more and more represented by media as a moral space (Silverstone, 2007). What is worth noting here is what Silverstone defines as the “proper distance” in mediated everyday life: proper distance means no distance at all in regard to the other and the opportunity to deal with others even if physically distant — a “required proximity” which is, in the end, what Argento built with her audience, a sense of intimacy that is co-created by celebrities, (media industries) and fans through social media. It is emblematic in this regard the role played by the TV show and official social media during X Factor first audition in Pesaro (June, 9, 2018): Asia decided to participate in the audition the day after his partner’s death and her choice was presented as an act of courage, deeply supported by the TV show¹⁰. This event resulted in a process of humanization of the (bad) celebrity and of affective appropriation by the audience (2178 likes on Facebook; 1141 likes on Twitter related to the editorial staff’s announcement ; 4634 likes and 318.287 views on Facebook, 213.440 views on Instagram; 942 likes and 18.600 views on Twitter).

She gained visibility and fame because she positioned her story close to the affective public. This is something that she could not achieve when she presented herself as the victim of a sexual predator, re- victimised by journalists, public figures, intellectuals and (a mostly female) audience.¹¹

Why this self-disclosure was unsuccessful compared to the other is hard to discern. One of the reasons may be identified in her appropriation of the frameworks of “postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that sees individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and selfregulating” (Gill, 2008, 438): as we know, in Italian society victim blaming is still widespread and based on the very well-known leitmotif “se l’è cercata” (she brought it upon herself) (Zambelli et al. 2018), especially when the sexual assault is committed against a “bad” woman or girl, not consistent with the ideal representation of women (even that neoliberal “perfect” competitive women discussed by McRobbie, 2015). Moreover, in Italy the battles for sexual freedom and self-determinism have already encountered strong resistance; while post-feminism considers sexual economic exchange a conscious and legitimate decision, in Italy women who break social rules and norms about sexuality are labeled as “whores” and, in contrast, the seductive power of men is celebrated (as in the case of Silvio Berlusconi, analysed by Hipkins, 2011).

Conversely, when Argento came as a penitent to the stage of a TV show, her reputation was already normalised through her appearance on X Factor: she was no longer the bad girl with upraised middle finger, but a strong, unlucky woman who was suffering and whose “carnal” performance of pain was first highly scrutinised and then accepted by the audience¹². In a certain sense, we may argue that Argento’s case is more a matter of moralism than morality. Following Dyer’s analysis of charisma, we may think of Argento’s ambivalent effectiveness in terms of “the relationship (...) between stars and specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture” (1979, in Holmes, Redmond 2007, p. 83). In other words, her charismatic appeal probably also emerged because of an uncertain, unstable social order (Italian feminism and patriarchal male culture) that she provided with a mixture of sexuality and innocence.

To conclude, we may say that in this case scandals and degradation rituals did not achieve the expected result. If for Rojek (2001), scandals are conservative rituals of collective absolution that tend to preserve the status quo and reaffirm a collective sentiment and ideas, here we may read scandals as the starting point for a transformation. The celebrity desecration, then, becomes an integral part of the celebrification process, even one of the most meaningful steps. At the provisory end of this story, what is relevant is not her guilt or her innocence but her ability to exploit all the official and unofficial media complex representations, with audience complicity, managing her multifaceted role as a victim, a whore, a penitent, and finally a renewed star, adored by fans and journalists while walking the Rome Film Festival red carpet.

Biographical note

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Notes

¹ Argento has spoken out about sexual harassment both in Hollywood and Italy and given high-profile talks on the subject at Harvard University and at the Cannes Film Festival.

² <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/opinioni/13264032/harvey-weinstein-renato-farina-scandalo-sessuale-hollywood.html>

³ "Surreale intervista in ginocchio di Bianca Berlinguer ad Asia Argento che prova a giustificare la prostituzione d'alto bordo". <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/10/18/mario-adinolfi-paragona-asia-argento-a-una-prostituta-e-facebook-gli-blocca-il-profilo/3921074/>

⁴ As in Guia Soncini's article "The Failure of Italian Feminism," <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/italian-feminism-asia-argento-weinstein.html>

⁵ "In altre parole, specialmente per chi aveva un ruolo pubblico fino ad allora mai messo realmente in discussione, si trattava non solo di tutelare la propria fedina penale, ma anche di salvare la faccia. Sulla sedia dei testi si sono avvicendate n gran numero di persone che hanno dovuto fare i conti, chi più chi meno, col fatto di rendersi credibili, non perdere l'autorevolezza di cui erano investiti dal loro ruolo pubblico e dimostrarsi innocenti o quanto meno, il più possibile innocenti. È dal dosaggio di questi diversi scopi e dal modo in cui sono stati messi in atto che emergerà la "figura" complessivamente fatta da ognuno dei testi, così come dall'imputato" (Cavicchioli 1997, pp. 98–99).

⁶ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>

⁷ https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/womens-day-2018-closing_1151765-V_v

⁸ The Facebook post created by the editorial staff gained 7625 likes and 1793 interactions. <https://www.facebook.com/xfactoritalia/posts/2068219666529683>. It is worth noting that the official communication by editorial staff before the Live episodes (https://twitter.com/XFactorItalia/status/1037283799946747905/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1037283799946747905&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.quotidiano.net%2Fmagazine%2Fxfactor-2018-giudici-1.4140884) was less focused on Asia, and more on the new member of the jury. This is to say that audiences rapidly turned their opinion and interest.

⁹ Even if she apparently approached the TV show (Giletti's program *Non è l'arena*) as a penitent searching for salvation, she presented a different version of the facts: "**Mi è saltato letteralmente addosso**. Mi ha spogliata, mi ha messa di traverso sul letto, mi è salito sopra e abbiamo fatto sesso completo senza usare neanche il preservativo. Io ero fredda ed immobile. Dopo mi ha detto che ero il suo desiderio sessuale da quando aveva 12 anni". In this attempt, she restored her role as sexual assault victim instead of rapist.

10

https://twitter.com/xfactor_italia/status/1005466957888524288?s=21

<https://www.facebook.com/119587301392939/posts/1953652817986369/>

https://twitter.com/XFactor_Italia/status/1006477146255183873

<https://www.facebook.com/xfactoritalia/videos/1956749187676732/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Bj66mHthN3e/?taken-by=xfactoritalia>

<http://xfactor.sky.it/2018/06/12/asia-argento-ringrazia-pubblico-x-factor/>

¹¹ As she declared: “In seguito a questa maligna e pubblica verifica, questa **rivittimizzazione**, questo rivivere il mio trauma di continuo in pubblico, sono caduta in una profonda e cupa depressione per diversi mesi”.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8q---OxWTY>