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## Feminists in the Courtroom: Observational Filmmaking and Militancy in *Processo per stupro* (1978)

Marta Cerreti

One of the most famous Italian feminist slogans of today asserts that “le strade sicure le fanno le donne che le attraversano” (streets are only safe when women walk through them). The slogan responds to the right-wing suggestion to militarize public spaces as the preferable way to keep women safe. To the patriarchal and statistically biased equation “more police make you safer,” feminists reply, “more women make you safer,” thus reclaiming the value of women’s self-organization and independence. The feminist slogan overturns the idea of women as fragile and requiring men’s protection, and instead reconfigures their bodies as potential tools for political resistance.

Along the same lines, this article emphasizes the revolutionary impact of marginalized bodies occupying spaces normally held in Western countries by predominantly middle-class white men. One of these places is the courtroom, which in Italy, until the 1960s, was only regulated by men.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, Italian feminists considered the effectiveness of attending rape trials and arrived at a breakthrough: the presence of politically aware women in the gallery exerted control and called attention to the patriarchal mechanisms embedded in the justice system.

Congruent with this strategy of conspicuous surveillance is the documentary *Processo per stupro* (A Trial for Rape), one of the most powerful illustrations of the violence endured by women who take their rapists to trial.<sup>2</sup> Produced in 1979, when the Roman feminist group Collettivo Femminista Cinema di Roma chronicled a trial for gang rape, *Processo per stupro* was the first documentary of a rape trial broadcast on Italian national state television and is considered a milestone by experts of Italian cinema.<sup>3</sup> Often referred to by scholars as an event with historical consequences, the documentary is, however, rarely addressed as a film, let alone explored in depth.

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<sup>1</sup> Law 1176 art 7 (1919) expressly excluded women from filling public positions entailing public judicial authority, the exercise of political power, and the military defense of the State. Only in 1963 did the national legislature promulgate women’s right to access any public office and profession, including in the justice system. See *Gazzetta ufficiale italiana*, Act 66/1963, Art 1,

[https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/vediMenuHTML?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1963-02-19&atto.codiceRedazionale=063U0066&tipoSerie=serie\\_generale&tipoVigenza=originario](https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/vediMenuHTML?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1963-02-19&atto.codiceRedazionale=063U0066&tipoSerie=serie_generale&tipoVigenza=originario).

<sup>2</sup> *Processo per stupro*, directed by Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Rony Daoupoulo, Paola De Martiis, Annabella Miscuglio, and Loredana Rotondo (Rome 1979). Hereafter cited as *Processo per stupro*, with timecode and page number. The timecode refers to the complete documentary, a copy of which is kept at the Cineteca Nazionale of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. The page number refers to the transcript of the documentary (see Maria Grazie Belmonti et al., *Un processo per stupro: dal programma della Rete Due della televisione italiana* [Turin: Einaudi, 1980]).

<sup>3</sup> Nadia Filippini argues for a correction to the current vulgate that considers *Processo per stupro* as the first trial to be broadcast on television, since on October 26, 1976, RAI did broadcast *Scatola aperta: la ragazza di Verona*, a documentary about the 1976 Verona trial for rape. Realized by RAI reporter Franco Biancacci, the forty-two-minute documentary chronicles the feminist mobilization outside the courtroom, reproduces short clips filmed in the courtroom, and presents interviews with the lawyers. However, there is a difference between producing a documentary about a trial and documenting the trial itself. *Processo per stupro* marks the first time a trial for rape was broadcast on television. See Nadia Maria Filippini, “Mai più sole” contro la violenza sessuale: una pagina storica del femminismo degli anni Settanta (Rome: Viella, 2022), 8, 107–14, 129, 125–30.

Of the few contributions to analyze the documentary in detail are Sara Filippelli's 2011 article "Le ragazze con il videotape" (The Girls with the Videotape) and Christian Uva's *L'immagine politica* (Political Image) from 2015, which both offer fascinating close readings of certain sequences. More recently, Milly Buonanno dedicated a chapter of her 2020 co-edited anthology *Genere e media* (Genre and Media) to the documentary, considering it to be a media event that transformed Italian society.<sup>4</sup>

My intervention will uncover, through textual analysis, the two stories encompassed by *Processo per stupro*. The first is that which is circumscribed by the sixty-three minutes of the documentary—that is, what we see on tape—whereas the second and more complicated story concerns the six women who took up the video camera and subsequently challenged the Italian state television establishment. If the first story reveals the violence of the judicial system, the second unveils the violence of the information system; and both expose the power dynamics between popular social movements and institutionalized powers. With both these levels in mind, this article will trace the parable of *Processo per stupro* from its original genesis within the feminist struggle of 1970s Italy up to today, while also outlining the general content of the documentary and meditating on the role of television, videotaping, and editing.

The question at the core of the documentary is the non-neutrality of the language of information. The feminist filmmakers, caught between their desire to put forth an ethos of the image that would be responsible and autonomous, on the one hand, and their awareness that inhabited reality is always already charged with meanings, on the other, produced an observational documentary that, in turn, coined a new cinematic language. No voiceovers or interviews disrupt *Processo per stupro*; the film captures the courtroom in long takes which both enhance "the impression of lived or real time," as Bill Nichols affirms, and reiterate the strategy of conspicuous surveillance.<sup>5</sup> My investigation of the editing choices identifies how this observational mode serves a militant purpose, and how the filmmakers' recourse to an observational position promotes viewers' active reflection and accountability. The encounter between feminism and new cinematic technologies such as videotape, together with the brief alliance between television and militancy, enabled the production of an unprecedented film language that could critically account for reality.

Forty years after its production, *Processo per stupro* remains a vital reminder that women's rights can be revoked and therefore must continue to be defended. Four months after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, which gave U.S. states license to outlaw abortion, in October 2022 the new far-right government in Italy appointed Lorenzo Fontana, an ultra-Catholic politician known for his antifeminist and homophobic politics, to the third-highest office of the Italian state (President of the Chamber of Deputies). Around the same time, in the northern city of Ravenna the magistrate serving as the Giudice dell'Udienza Preliminare (GUP) of the local tribunal acquitted a man of sexual violence charges by accepting the defense that he did not hear the woman's "diniego sussurrato" (too softly whispered denial).<sup>6</sup> Reflecting, then, on the story of six filmmakers who

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<sup>4</sup> Sara Filippelli, "Le ragazze con il videotape: la tv secondo Loredana Rotondo," *Bianco e nero*, 571 (2011): 97–107; Christian Uva, *L'immagine politica: forme del contropotere tra cinema, video e fotografia nell'Italia degli anni Settanta*, (Milan: Mimesis, 2015); and Milly Buonanno, "Processo per stupro: femminismo, televisione, testimonianza," in *Genere e media. Non solo immagini: soggetti, politiche, rappresentazioni*, ed. Milly Buonanno and Franca Faccioli (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2020): 17–40.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38.

<sup>6</sup> "Assolto da stupro, 'il no di lei non è stato colto,'" *Rai News*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/09/assolto-da-stupro-il-no-di-lei-non-colto-6e4f294c-b19b-4071-8489-011bcfa4c4b8.html>

embraced a videotape and powerfully merged art and activism is no mere academic exercise but, instead, a civic duty: the chance to imagine a feminist alternative to recent history.

## The Origin of the Idea

The 1970s marked a period of civil and juridical reform in Italy. Among other laws passed in this decade were the introduction of divorce in 1970, the regulation of the rights of working mothers in 1971, and the new Family Law of 1975, which revoked the male head of household's right over his wife, along with the 1974 nationwide referendums on divorce and abortion. Despite the official recognition of equality in large sectors of social life, women's subordination remained substantially unaltered. Though the feminist movement had grown out of the political Left, it was consistently sidelined even on the Left, as revolutionary leftist men replicated the same patriarchal mechanisms of the capitalist society they sought to overthrow.<sup>7</sup>

The women's liberation movement that took hold in Rome and Milan in the 1970s originated from women's dissatisfaction with the organized Left. In response to the hierarchical language of exclusion embraced by their male comrades, second-wave feminists proposed horizontal forms of organization, as articulated by small, leaderless circles of women. Through the practice of consciousness-raising, women could meet and coordinate political struggles, an ambition solidified with the founding of the Casa delle Donne (House of Women).<sup>8</sup>

The Casa delle Donne was established on October 2, 1976, when militant members of the Women's Liberation Movement occupied Palazzo Nardini in Rome. The telegram the women sent to authorities read: "Abbiamo bisogno di uno spazio dove poter organizzare le nostre lotte, dove poter sviluppare la nostra creatività, dove incontrarci e crescere politicamente" (We need a space in which to organize our struggles and develop our creativity, a space where we can meet and grow politically).<sup>9</sup> At the core of this occupation was the demand for safe spaces in which feminists could discuss alternative possibilities of language and praxis, produce counterculture, and coordinate original political actions. In just a few months, the Casa delle Donne became the headquarters of numerous feminist groups who enthusiastically supported each other's struggles on the issues of abortion, work, health, and sexual violence.

In April 1978, during the second year of occupation, the Casa delle Donne hosted the International Conference on Violence Against Women, a historic event that emphasized one pressing issue over all others: women's shared fear of reporting rape. This reluctance stemmed from the typical secondary victimization pursued by the justice system itself, as women were blamed at trial for having provoked the aggressions they had undergone and were forced to defend themselves from insulting accusations. Among the participants in the Rome conference was the

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<sup>7</sup> One of the most compelling reconstructions of women's position within the organized left can be found in Alina Marazzi's 2007 documentary *Vogliamo anche le rose* (*We Want Roses Too*). See also Elena Petricola, "Parole da cercare: alcune riflessioni sul rapporto tra femminismo e movimenti politici negli anni Settanta," in *Il femminismo degli anni Settanta*, ed. Teresa Bertilotti and Anna Scattiglio (Rome: Viella, 2005), 199–224; and "Il femminismo nell'Italia che cambia" in Fiamma Lussana, *Il movimento femminista in Italia: esperienze, storie, memorie* (Rome: Carocci, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> On Italian feminism in the 1970s, see Franco Restaino, "Il pensiero femminista: una storia possibile," in *Le filosofie femministe: due secoli di battaglie teoriche e pratiche*, ed. Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 3–77.

<sup>9</sup> Giuseppina Ciuffreda and Stefania Raspini, "Inchiesta: il femminismo questo sconosciuto," *Effe* (1979): <https://effeivistafemminista.it/2014/09/il-femminismo-questo-sconosciuto/>. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

Collettivo Femminista Cinema di Roma, a group of filmmakers founded in 1971 from within the other large feminist group of that decade, the Movimento Femminista Romano.

In 1973 the group had written a manifesto, *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale* (For a vaginal, clitoral cinema), that conceptualized cinema as a tool for militancy. The Collettivo took as their point of departure a shared awareness of the way that culture at large functioned. They understood the wide diffusion—and therefore power—of audiovisual media and understood likewise that the national information system worked to maintain established roles and canons. Taking advantage of the introduction of videotape to the consumer marketplace, which made cinematic production more affordable, the group decided to produce alternatives to the products of the official media system:

Questa nostra scelta è solo un mezzo. Non significa che ci facciamo illusioni su quello che rappresenta l'industria cinematografica e su quello che rappresenta il cinema all'interno della nostra società...I prodotti più sovversivi sono assorbiti dal mercato tramite l'incasellamento negli ampi margini della cultura alternativa. Sfuggire alla mercificazione è impossibile se non si modificano i rapporti di produzione e di scambio.

Our choice here is merely a means. We have no illusion about what the film industry and cinema represent in our society...The most subversive products are absorbed by the marketplace and pigeonholed into the wide margins of alternative culture. The avoidance of commodification is impossible so long as the relations of production and exchange are not transformed.<sup>10</sup>

Among the Collettivo's members were Annabella Miscuglio, who founded the movie club Filmstudio and was one of the most prominent figures in the arena of independent filmmaking; Rony Daopoulo, a graduate in film direction at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and founder of the Collettivo Femminista di Cinema, who co-produced the 1973 film *Aggettivo donna* with Miscuglio; and Loredana Rotondo who, at the time, was a screenwriter and programmer for the Italian national television network RAI.<sup>11</sup> During the conference, the Collettivo filmed the entire assembly, aiming to make a documentary about the event; but the material wound up being monotonous, and thus unsuitable for television.<sup>12</sup> The Collettivo came to the decision that instead of filming women narrating their own experiences of sexual violence, it would be more effective to directly show the violence of the Italian justice system. One year later, their documentary *Processo per stupro* marked the first time a trial would be broadcast in Italy.

### **A Trial for the Trial: The Court's *Second Rape***

Late in the evening of April 26, 1979, *Processo per stupro* was broadcast on Italian national television. The documentary chronicled an episode that had not caught the attention of the national

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<sup>10</sup> Collettivo Femminista Cinema di Roma, *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale* (Rome: n.p. 1973). The manifesto is available at: <http://www.generazioni.net/collettivo-cinema-femminista>.

<sup>11</sup> In 1979, Miscuglio had already realized more than ten short films in Super 8mm (including *Fughe lineari in progressione psichica* [1975], *Puzzle Therapy* [1976], *Rony* [1976]), and had co-produced *L'aggettivo donna* (1971), and *La lotta non è finita* (1973) with Rony Daopoulo.

<sup>12</sup> Filippelli, "Le ragazze con il videotape," 100: "Ridondante e autoreferenziale, non adatto a un pubblico televisivo."

media: in 1977, an eighteen-year-old woman named only as Fiorella—her surname was removed from the documentary to protect her identity—had accused four men of gang rape: Rocco Vallone, Cesare Novelli, Claudio Vagnoni, and Roberto Palumbo. After initially admitting the allegation to the arresting officer, the four men changed their story, later claiming that the intercourse was consensual and that Fiorella had agreed to spend the night with them in exchange for 200,000 lire (the average employee's monthly salary at the time). The case was brought to court, where a trial over a gang rape soon became a trial over whether Fiorella had lied.

Fiorella's lawyer, Tina Lagostena Bassi, and the director of the Italian national broadcast channel Rete Due, Massimo Fichera, helped the Collettivo to obtain permission to film the trial, whose first hearing took place in May 1978 in a courtroom in Latina, some forty miles south of Rome. During its first television broadcast, the sixty-three-minute documentary directed by Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Paola De Martiis, Rony Daopoulo, Annabella Miscuglio, and Loredana Rotondo attracted three and a half million spectators. Thanks to widespread interest in a second airing, the documentary was broadcast by the RAI once more in October 1979. This time around, nine and a half million viewers tuned in. In total, thirteen million Italians peered inside the Latina courtroom that year and discovered what feminist groups had been denouncing at length: in court, raped women often suffer a "second rape," as the assault's violence is extended through well-established victim-blaming practices.<sup>13</sup>

As recorded in the documentary, Fiorella had to defend herself against the violent accusations of the other parties' lawyers, who called her a prostitute and laughed at her testimony. While the judge was respectful of the male lawyers and their defendants, he was patronizing towards Fiorella: "Come vedete non avete bisogno di sostegno morale. Come vedete non siete sola. Siamo tutti padri di famiglia" (As you can see, you don't need moral support. You are not alone, we are all fathers of families here).<sup>14</sup> In his defense argument, attorney Giorgio Zeppieri argued that the accusation of rape was incompatible with the fact that all four men with whom Fiorella had performed oral sex ejaculated in her mouth: "Il coito orale si compie con una prestazione che è tecnicamente qualificata e che esprime una serie di atti voluti perché non c'è attività tecnica se non c'è volontà" (Oral coitus is achieved by a highly qualified performance, which is the expression of a series of deliberate acts, because there wouldn't be any skilled activity without will).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he described the act of cunnilingus executed by Vallone on Fiorella as an act of love, adoration, and respect: "E chi la pratica? Il violentatore? È il violentatore che si inchina, bacia, adora? [...] È l'amante che può fare questi gesti [...]" (Who does this? A rapist? A rapist would bow down, kiss her, adore her? [...] Only a lover performs these acts!).<sup>16</sup> On the basis of these sexual acts, he concluded that the charges of rape were false.

His fellow defense attorney Angelo Palmieri took a different tack, instead arguing violently against women's desire for emancipation: "Che cosa avete voluto? La parità dei diritti. [...] Se

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<sup>13</sup> The formulation "second rape" appeared for the first time as title of Lee Madigan and Nancy C. Gamble's book, *The Second Rape: Society's Continued Betrayal of the Victim* (New York: Macmillan, 1991). Though it conveys the same meaning of "second assault" and "secondary victimization," I here privilege the use of "secondary rape" to emphasize that the insistence with which the institutions interrogate women who suffered rape can be as devastating as the rape itself. For a further discussion about the terminology, see Moriah Silver, "The Second Rape: Legal Options for Rape Survivors to Terminate Parental Rights," *Family Law Quarterly*, 48, no. 3 (2014): 515–37, 516; Rebecca Campbell et al., "Preventing the "Second Rape": Rape Survivors' Experiences with Community Service Providers," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 16, no. 12 (2001): 1239–59, 1240.

<sup>14</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:22:40, 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 0:50:15, 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 0:52:05, 71.

questa ragazza si fosse stata a casa, se l'avessero tenuta presso il caminetto, non si sarebbe verificato niente" (What did you want? Equal rights. [...] If this girl had stayed at home, if she had been kept close to the hearth, nothing would have come to pass).<sup>17</sup> He concluded, on behalf of men, that "il femminismo già comincia a fare strada anche nel campo della difesa. Quindi la violenza la subiamo noi!" (feminism is already beginning to make its way even into the field of legal defense. Therefore, we are the ones suffering violence!).<sup>18</sup> This revealing assertion indicated that, in that courtroom, feminism itself was on trial.

In her closing statement, Lagostena Bassi had to remind the court that she was the prosecutor, not the defense; after an hour of documentary footage in which Fiorella is tormented with insulting questions about her past, Lagostena Bassi's rebuttal makes viewers, in turn, remember that Fiorella is the one pressing charges: "Ci sono un'infinità di riscontri e c'è questo tentativo di trasformar[li]" (We are witnessing the attempt to transform every piece of evidence into something else).<sup>19</sup> Wisely placed at the end of the documentary, the claim leaves even the most passive and distracted viewer shaken, because it highlights the contradictions of a justice system that minimizes women's suffering and, indeed, pursues them rather than the accused.

The documentary ends with the final verdict. After finding the men guilty, the court sentenced three of the men to one year and eight months in prison, and the fourth to two years and four months. However, each of the four offenders was granted parole and released that same day. They were required to pay compensation for harm of two million lire to Fiorella (around \$3,500 USD in 2024), a sum which may be even more disdainful than the granting of parole, as the amount was identical to the initial settlement Lagostena Bassi had refused, countering that Fiorella wanted justice, not a "bribe." The fact that the judge, after finding the defendants guilty, subjected them to the same monetary sanction their lawyers had already proposed constitutes the ultimate gesture of derision in a trial where the justice system failed to support Fiorella.

With respect to its official judicial outcome, *Processo per stupro* is one more entry in the long history of unpunished rapes in Italy. The novelty of the documentary, however, is the way in which it sheds light on the patriarchal mechanisms at play in rape trials. By lingering on the judge's skepticism toward Fiorella's testimony and the defense lawyers' victim-blaming, the filmmakers allow the secondary violence implemented by the justice system to come into full focus. *Processo per stupro* thus emerges as a trial against the trial itself, charging the judicial institution with connivance in patriarchal violence: the institutional practice of "second rape," Lagostena Bassi reminds us in her closing remarks, effectively decreases the probability that women will report rapes to the authorities, and this, she denounces, is "solidarietà maschilista" (chauvinist solidarity).<sup>20</sup>

## The Feminist Approach to Images

National television, regrettably, reinforces systems of power by using apparently neutral and objective language, thus priming its audience to think that what is displayed is the only, unproblematic reality. But, to employ Michel Foucault's terminology, truth is always subordinated

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 0:56:18, 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:57:15, 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 1:01:07, 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:38:49, 61: "Se si fa così è solidarietà maschilista. Perché solo se la donna viene trasformata in un'imputata, solo così, si ottiene che non si facciano denunce per violenza carnale" (This is chauvinist solidarity: by treating women like this, you are ensuring that no complaints of rape will be filed in the future).

to power, and reality is arranged by this relationship.<sup>21</sup> *Processo per stupro* successfully realized its filmmakers' ambition to overcome the apparent neutrality of information. Essential for this aim was their reflection on the notion of the "neutrality of language," which protects political institutions and the media. For the Collettivo, this purportedly neutral language was the legacy of a patriarchal system that promoted a standardized vision of society based on asymmetrical power relations. Such an awareness led the six filmmakers to produce a documentary that questioned the theoretical validity of the reality univocally offered by these institutions. In her article "La provocazione inevitabile" (The Unavoidable Provocation), Rotondo elaborates on the Collettivo's filmmaking ethos:

Convenimmo che avremmo lavorato insieme, partendo dal presupposto che la realtà non parla da sola, che non è uguale per tutti, che non è sempre la stessa... Accade che alcune persone o soggetti sociali nuovi (per esempio, in questi anni, le donne), cominciando a nominare ciò che conoscono autonomamente, contraddicano la realtà fino ad allora conosciuta. Questa contraddizione, questa produzione di senso diverso, può dar luogo ad "immagini vergini" mai viste prima.

We decided we would work together, starting from the shared assumption that reality does not speak for itself, that it is not equal for all, and that it is not always the same... It happens that some new social subjects (for example, in recent years, women) by naming what they autonomously know, contradict reality as it was known until that moment. This contradiction, this production of a different meaning, can produce "virgin images," something never seen before.<sup>22</sup>

Indispensable to the production of new meanings was the dismantling of the tools used by established power. With respect to Italian state television of the 1970s, this new film grammar demanded viewers be directly exposed to the violence of the juridical system without the mediation of voiceovers or commentators (most commonly older, white, heterosexual men) delivering paternalistic speeches.

It is no coincidence that the Collettivo wrote *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale* in 1973, the same year in which Claire Johnston published her *Notes on Women's Cinema*, which inverted the common understanding of documentary as a faithful description of reality: "Any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of the cinema/depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is affected."<sup>23</sup> Although the filmmakers of *Processo per stupro* should not be forced into the 'feminist realist debate' of the 1970s, their emphasis on the role of language in effectively engaging with reality demonstrates their awareness of the larger debate, which they did partly echo.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the aim of the group was to "produrre forme nuove

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. and ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> Loredana Rotondo, "La provocazione inevitabile," in *Parole incrociate: donne e comunicazione. Due convegni*, ed. Silvia Garroni, Silvia Neonato, and Stefania Pietroforte (Turin: Editrice Cooperativa Libera Stampa, 1986), 82–88, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Claire Johnston, *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 29.

<sup>24</sup> The so-called "feminist realist debate" refers to the discussion between feminist film scholars in the 1970s, most of whom supported the anti-realist (formalist) side by arguing that the styles comprised by *cinéma vérité* and realism could not challenge reality. See Johnston, *Notes*; Ann E. Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of The Camera* (New

di linguaggio, capovolgendo l'ottica con cui comunemente si guarda la realtà, specialmente quella del rapporto uomo-donna" (produce new forms of language by overturning the perspective with which one commonly looks at reality, especially in the analysis of the man-woman relationship).<sup>25</sup>

Christian Uva correctly notes that *Processo per stupro* is the landing point of a theorization that began around 1976 when Miscuglio and Daopoulo organized *Kinomata*, the first Women's Film Festival in Italy. The dominant practice of cinema, in their analysis, only pretends to reflect reality, while it functions merely as a "falso specchio [che] chiude la figura della donna in un grande univoco coro" (false mirror that forces women into a big univocal chorus).<sup>26</sup> Yet refusing to depict reality, they continued, is not a satisfactory alternative to the dominant mode of representation. Rather, militant filmmakers must redirect the mirror-function of the camera towards a much more complicated entanglement of images in order to shatter the cinematic "false mirror."

The filmmakers' preference for observational documentary, then, should be seen less as an aesthetic expedient and more as an attempt to rethink the relationship between image and viewer. The observational mode, on the one hand, recalls the feminist practice of attending trials to surveil and contain sexist behaviors in court. At the same time, it also safeguards major freedom for the viewers, who ultimately exercise responsibility for passively accepting or actively denouncing what they see. The film balances the need to let the viewer autonomously make sense of what is screened against the filmmakers' awareness that reality never speaks alone but is instead always interpreted and interpretable. Throughout the film, the Collettivo strategically repurposed the observational mode of documentary filmmaking. They deployed this style, which had been embraced by the *cinéma vérité* movement and which was intrinsically realist in purpose, to show that the hegemonic cinematic representation of reality is as biased as the reality with which it supposedly engages and demands sociopolitical action in response.

In an interview with the International Association of Women Philosophers, Rotondo explained that a fundamental step in creating an alternative television language was the re-organization of the on-set work, mostly enabled by the new, more lightweight technology of videotape.<sup>27</sup> Videotape was, first of all, less intrusive than older film equipment, and made the mediation of cameramen and video technicians from RAI unnecessary. This innovative approach to the materiality of image-making was in itself revolutionary: to directly handle and touch the instrument of representation is to mark its reality with one's fingerprints, without mediation.<sup>28</sup>

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York: Methuen, 1983); and Eileen McGarry, "Documentary, Realism and Women's Cinema," *Women and Films* 2, no. 7 (1975): 50–59. Dalila Missero points out that "the essays of Johnston, Mulvey and Lesange were translated and discussed in [the Italian feminist newspaper] *Effie*," thus certifying the assimilation of international feminist film theory within Italian feminism. See Dalila Missero, *Women, Feminism and Italian Cinema: Archives from a Film Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Rotondo, "Provocazione," 87.

<sup>26</sup> Bindi Alberti, "La donna nel sistema di significazione," in *Kinomata: la donna nel cinema*, ed. Annabella Miscuglio and Rony Daopoulo (Bari: Dedalo, 1980), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Loredana Rotondo, "Quando vita, lavoro e politica 'giocano' insieme: intervista a Loredana Rotondo," interview by Federica Castelli and Alessia Dro, *IAPh-Italia*, November 4, 2016, <http://www.iaphitalia.org/quando-vita-lavoro-e-politica-vanno-insieme-intervista-a-loredana-rotondo/>.

<sup>28</sup> The reference to the fingerprints is suggestive of the debate about indexicality in media studies. The indexicality of the cinematic image was first theorized by Peter Wollen, who linked C.S. Peirce's semiotic definition of "index" to Bazin's conception of cinematic realism. In Peirce, index is a sign (i.e. a footprint) that exists in relationship to its referent (i.e. a foot). In film theory, indexicality has come to signify the film's one-to-one relation to reality. See Peter Wollen, "The Semiology of the Cinema," in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969): 116–154. The Collettivo's theoretical starting point, however, is closer to Tom Gunning's claim that

Second, videotaping allowed for lengthy recording, thus ensuring the filmmakers could capture the amount of material necessary to compose the most effective observational documentary in post-production. Videotape was also more affordable than other technologies and thus, in Laura Mulvey's famous formula, "changed the economic conditions of cinematic production," allowing for the development of an "alternative cinema."<sup>29</sup>

Dalila Missero's recent study denounces the mythicization of the videotape, rightfully asserting that the discourse about the potential of these technologies overshadows the economic constraints that originally led women filmmakers to choose them, namely, the economical and gender-based limitations and difficulties women had in accessing public and private funding for films.<sup>30</sup> It must nonetheless be acknowledged that the intertwining of new technologies and feminist militancy in the 1970s incubated a new cinematic language capable of original description and engagement with social and political events. When asked what it meant for her to be the one to hold the camera rather than another, invariably male technician, Rotondo replied: "significa poter affrontare nuovi contenuti, nuove relazioni, nuove forme di organizzazione del lavoro e quindi più ampia possibilità di produrre linguaggio" (it means to be able to tackle new kinds of content, new relationships, new forms of organizing the work, and thus a greater possibility of producing new forms of language).<sup>31</sup>

As much as videotape had a relevant role in the production of *Processo per stupro*, what turned the film into an extraordinary event was the fact that the documentary was made *for* and broadcast *on* national television. According to Milly Buonanno, it is only by considering *Processo per stupro* as a television program that can one appreciate the source of its power, namely that for the first time, millions of viewers witnessed a trial for rape from their own homes.<sup>32</sup> The Collettivo intended to bring the story of Fiorella into the domestic space of Italians, as evidenced by the fact that when interviewed in 1979, Miscuglio affirmed: "quello che ci interessa è portare la nostra informazione alle donne chiuse nelle case" (we want our information to reach those women whose life is restricted to the space of their homes).<sup>33</sup> Two years before, Daopoulo had already discussed the need for the feminist movement to work with the institutions of television in order to reach a wider audience.<sup>34</sup>

These statements attest to the significant change of strategy towards institutional information that the feminist movement undertook around the mid-1970s. Although other trials for rape had already been covered by the mass media, in those cases feminism and television were only working

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cinema deals not with reality but with realism, that is, with an impression of reality that is determined by the filmmakers themselves. See Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," in *differences* Vol. 18 No. 1 (2007): 30–51, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 834.

<sup>30</sup> Missero, *Women, Feminism and Italian Cinema*, 149. The idea of a "revolution within the revolution" came to Italy from the United States: in 1971, Michael Shamberg wrote *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Henry Holt, 1971), emphasizing that the videotape promoted a relationship between social instances and artistic products. In "Il video di parte," Anna Lajolo and Guido Lombardo explain that the obvious limitations of the videotape—for instance, the slim margin for editing—soon became its strengths, for the audience could thereby grasp reality without mediation. See Guido Lombardi and Anna Lajolo, "Il video di parte," in *Dissensi tra film video televisione*, ed. Valentina Valentini (Palermo: Sellerio, 1991), 269–295. See also Uva, *Immagine*.

<sup>31</sup> Rotondo, "Quando vita, lavoro e politica."

<sup>32</sup> Buonanno, "Processo per stupro: femminismo, televisione, testimonianza," 25.

<sup>33</sup> Adele Cambria, "Sono femministe non traditrici," *Il Giorno*, October 18, 1979. Quoted in Uva, *Immagine*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Rony Daopoulo, "Amore di cinema: intervista a Rony Daopoulo," interview with Maricla Tagliaferri, *Effe*, April 1977, <https://efferivistafemminista.it/2014/11/amore-di-cinema/>.

next to one another, the former by taking advantage of the coverage of the latter, and the media by chasing newsworthy events.<sup>35</sup> *Processo per stupro* was instead the product of a more articulated bond—or, to use Buonanno’s formulation, “alleanza anomala” (anomalous alliance)—between feminism and television.<sup>36</sup> The story of the Latina gang rape had not been covered by the mass media, nor had the trial itself been a newsworthy event until the documentary was broadcast on television. The collaboration between the public television network RAI, the judicial system, and the feminist movement was not, then, a temporary alignment imposed by the urgency of the situation, but the result of a pondering and weighing of the advantages, limits, and contradictions of this new alliance.

For Uva, *Processo per stupro* is a “non-identifiable audiovisual object,” somewhere between the television product and the militant video.<sup>37</sup> This hybridity is partly the result of the synergic work of six filmmakers who came from different political experiences and backgrounds: while Miscuglio and Daopoulo were theorists and practitioners of independent feminist filmmaking and their work was mostly produced within alternative circuits, Rotondo worked for the television industry. Facilitating this collaboration was the filmmakers’ 1978 joining of the *Maestranze e Tecnici Cinema* (Cinema Workers and Technicians) cooperative, which coupled militant claims with institutional demands. The filmmakers’ constant balancing of distinct forces and circuits, each with its constraints and requirements, is entirely reflected in Uva’s designation of *Processo per stupro* as a militant film for television.<sup>38</sup>

One of the most important theoretical points of the 1973 manifesto *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale* reads: “Vogliamo spiegarci, non giustificarci. Spiegandoci, ci ricerchiamo e ricercandoci ci capiamo e troviamo la strada per liberarci” (We want to explain ourselves, not justify ourselves. To explain is to self-investigate and by doing so we understand each other and find the way to free ourselves).<sup>39</sup> The first sentence reconfigures women as active subjects of history rather than passive objects that need to justify their existence, while the second reframes this desire to explain themselves as part of an enduring self-discovery and a quest that is only achieved collectively, as the plural “we” signals. Only by scrutinizing each other can women discover and understand themselves. This twofold movement is embedded in the story of the making of *Processo per stupro*: the group filmed the trial to *explain* to the public what women who report rape endure in the courtroom. But in the film’s execution, any authoritative gesture of explanation is withdrawn so that the viewer has a more direct confrontation with the image.

In summary, in the act of filming, the Collettivo was less preoccupied with proving a specific thesis and more interested in observing and understanding. With its almost unlimited capacity for recording, videotape certainly played a central role in achieving the observational effect, enabling the filmmakers to enter the courtroom with no firm expectation of what they would capture but

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<sup>35</sup> The first courtroom trials for rape largely covered by the Italian mass media took place in Latina (the “Circeo massacre”) in 1975 and in Verona in 1976, respectively. See Filippini, “*Mai più sole*,” 8–9, 78. Both trials were “highly publicized” and became “media event” chronicled *live*. See Buonanno, “*Processo per stupro*: femminismo, televisione, testimonianza,” 26.

<sup>36</sup> Buonanno, “*Processo per stupro*: femminismo, televisione, testimonianza,” 25: “alleanza anomala tra femminismo e televisione.”

<sup>37</sup> Uva, *Immagine*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Annamaria Licciardello argues that a real “osmosis” took place in Rome between the feminist movement and the workers of the film and television industry. See Annamaria Licciardello, “Io sono mia: esperienze di cinema militante femminista negli anni Settanta,” *Zapruder* 39 (2016): 86–93, 91. See Missero, *Women, Feminism and Italian Cinema*, 144; Uva, *Immagine*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Collettivo, *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale*.

with plenty of time to discover it. But it was by viewing the images together and collectively assembling them in the course of the editing process, and then sharing the product with the vast television-viewing public, that the filmmakers comprehended a more profound truth about the reality of “second rape” in the courtroom—in turn allowing them to generate change in Italian civil society.

### **The Editing: An Invitation to Reflection and Action**

Once the Collettivo filmmakers decided they would film a rape trial, they then needed to identify the kind of documentary they wanted to produce—a choice that followed years of critical reflection on what cinema was and what it should do. Their manifesto had already announced:

Il cinema, per la sua stessa forma di spettacolo, si pone in modo autoritario nella misura in cui non consente un dialogo diretto (invece di parlare “con,” parla “a”) e non permette di uscire dal solito rapporto spettacolo-spettatore passivo. Far seguire le proiezioni da dibattiti e discussioni serve certamente a uno scambio di idee e chiarificazioni, ma muovendosi nell’ambito di un cinema che si vuole porre come stimolo, bisogna anche che la spettatrice si ponga in un’altra ottica... Il nostro è un appello alla riflessione e alla critica che diventano azione.

Since cinema is spectacle, it also is authoritarian, for it does not allow direct dialogue (it speaks “to” instead of speaking “with”) and does not permit any distance from the usual passive spectacle-spectator relationship. Organizing debates after film screenings is certainly one way to promote the exchange of ideas and clarifications; however, since we work and live in a context where cinema is intended as a stimulus, viewers should also position themselves differently...Ours is an invitation to bring in reflections and criticisms that will then become action.<sup>40</sup>

The production and editing choices in *Processo per stupro* hence resonate with the filmmakers’ theoretical definition of cinema as neither neutral nor democratic. At the same time, the Collettivo aimed at eschewing a kind of “feminist realism” in which a voice-over commentary would follow the representation of an over-schematic, Manichean reality. Indeed, when reflecting on militant cinema, Miscuglio asserted that in it “ideological discourse [often] overshadows the text instead of being implied in the structure,” thus becoming overly didactic and unpleasant to watch.<sup>41</sup> Determined to create an alternative product—a cinematic experience that would promote critical reflection without being pedantic—the Collettivo refrained from escorting the viewers through the images toward their interpretation.

Apart from a few intertitles at the beginning and end of the documentary, the film demands the audience’s acute attention. For Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo, *Processo per stupro* is the first example of an observational documentary in Italy.<sup>42</sup> Every aspect of the film, from the way it is shot to the editing choices, is constructed to make the viewer forget that a camera is

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Miscuglio, “An Affectionate and Irreverent Account of Eighty Years of Women’s Cinema in Italy,” in *Off Screen: Women & Film in Italy*, ed. Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti (New York: Routledge, 1988). 151–64, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo, *Reframing Italy: New Trends in Italian Women’s Filmmaking* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2013), 107.

involved, giving the impression of a linear timeline of events that viewers may well be spying on through a cinematic “keyhole.”<sup>43</sup>

The first scene presents a group of women arguing outside the Latina courtroom. They are the mothers of the men accused of raping Fiorella. One mother declares: “Non hanno fatto niente di male. Nun l’ha ammazzata a ’sta ragazza. S’è andato a divertì. Certo che gli piaceva pure a lei andare a divertirsi, se no non ci andava co’ mi figlio” (They didn’t do anything wrong. They didn’t kill this girl. He [my son] just had some fun. She wanted the same thing, or else she wouldn’t have gone with him), with another adding that “sono le donne oggi che fanno schifo!” (women are the disgusting ones today!).<sup>44</sup> The camera follows their movement, the image trembling. Suddenly, the camera moves backward, suggesting a desire for distance from the despicable discussion. This scene is fundamental to setting the bar for the entire film, as it shows that, in accordance with filming in an observational mode, the filmmakers did not edit out the apparent contradictions of women blaming a victim of rape; they refused to flatten out the complexity of that reality. When the camera resumes, the viewers find themselves in the Latina courtroom, where the rest of the documentary takes place.

The film is shot on two half-inch videotapes. For the first twenty minutes of the film, the two cameras move around the room, abruptly shifting their gaze from one speaker to another. Filippelli reports that once the filmmakers reviewed the first images, they realized that using two moving cameras made the footage confusing.<sup>45</sup> As a result, for the second part of the documentary, they changed strategy: one camera was affixed to a tripod to keep the court and the lawyers constantly in the frame, while the other camera moved around the room to capture details like facial expressions and body language as well as people’s silences, thereby affording viewers time to reflect on what they saw. The editing also aligns with the filmmakers’ desire to let reality seem to speak for itself through the video medium. To avoid sensationalizing the trial, they chose black and white over the novelty of color video and decided against adding any non-diegetic sound. Neither the audio nor the video was enhanced during the editing process, as a way to underscore the film’s “truth effect.”<sup>46</sup> Voiceovers feature only at the beginning of the documentary for context and captions are employed to inform viewers about the date of the hearing and the speakers’ names, and occasionally to make thick dialect understandable to a national audience of standard Italian speakers. But these interventions are minor and do not intrude on its portrayal of the brutality of the trial.

Although artificial dramatization is avoided, the postproduction choices realized an illuminating and distinctive juxtaposition of different scenes: by focusing on the male lawyers laughing at each other’s jokes and winking at the judges, the documentary highlights these men’s need to advertise their virility in front of other men, thus echoing the same performative masculinity also found at the base of gang rape. The contrast between the lawyers, filmed from below, and the shots of Fiorella’s hunched back conveys her discomfort as well as the dissonance between the imposing justice system and the female survivor reduced to a disposable body.<sup>47</sup> While the stationary camera transmits Fiorella’s tension to the audience, the moving camera lingers on the attendees, thus capturing the indignation of the women in the courtroom. This

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<sup>43</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>44</sup> *Processo*, 0:00:20, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Filippelli, “*Mai più sole*,” 102.

<sup>46</sup> Daniela Brancati, *Occhi di maschio. Le donne e la televisione in Italia: una storia dal 1954 a oggi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011), 76.

<sup>47</sup> Filippelli, “*Mai più sole*,” 103; Uva, *Immagine*, 110.

combination of wide and detailed shots suggests an asymmetry between the claim that “la legge è uguale per tutti” (the law is equal for all)—a phrase often appearing the wall behind the judges in Italian courtrooms—and the fact that its application is linked to a specific body whose gender, ethnicity, age, social class, and spoken dialect all matter. Formal equality clearly does not correspond to substantive equality.

By favoring the juxtaposition of Fiorella and the accused, the filmmakers also record her transformation over the course of the documentary. When she first enters the room, her eyes move frantically, fully expressing her disorientation, but her walking body is immobile, lifeless, and, in subsequent scenes, she speaks with a low, trembling voice. Later on, however, when she confronts one of the defendants, Fiorella looks fearless and, when he claims to have had previous sexual encounters with her, she interrupts him with an exhausted yet forceful voice: “Non è vero e tu lo sai che non è vero. Dico, guardami in faccia quando lo dici. Ah, io ti sto a rovina”? E tu che mi hai fatto? Non mi hai rovinato?” (It is not true, and you know it. I’m saying, look at me when you say that...Oh, I am the one ruining you? What did you do to me? Didn’t you ruin me?).<sup>48</sup> Through the film’s editing techniques, Fiorella emerges not as a passive victim but as a strong survivor, weakening the dualistic conception that contrasts a passive victim with an active victimizer. This provocative way of editing is thus a political statement, as it reiterates the injustice of the law through its sequence of images. At the same time, the observational mode allows for what Rotondo called the “ambiguity of the message”: the absence of sympathetic or didactic external interference, together with the use of long shots, provide the viewers with enough space and time to autonomously judge the images and evaluate the social reality they inhabit.<sup>49</sup>

## Trial as Spectacle

Observational documentaries require their subjects to feel so comfortable in front of the camera that they may forget they are being filmed. Viewers of *Processo per stupro* may be astonished to see that, despite the presence of cameras, the defendants did not modulate their vulgarities, nor did their lawyers rein in their obnoxious statements. At best, these behaviors suggest that their acknowledgment of the cameras’ presence in the room was very low, though the boom microphone is remembered as having been somewhat intrusive; at worst, they prove that sexism was so deeply embedded in that courtroom that the lawyers felt free to employ such expressions or that the presence of the cameras encouraged them to be even more pitiless toward the victim. Though they had been advised that senior executives from the RAI had granted permission to film the trial, the lawyers evidently could not take six women with a video camera seriously enough. Whatever the cause of the subjects’ failure to modify their behavior for the camera, their desire to perform for the courtroom exceeded any need for caution on their part.

Trials have a strong theatrical component apart from and unimpacted by the presence of a camera: in Italy judges and lawyers wear robes (recalling the ancient Roman toga), and their arguments are often constructed as dramatic monologues. In *Processo per stupro*, the defense lawyers harangue the plaintiff while employing different theatrical modes. Palmieri’s habit of giggling, pausing, and turning around to see the reactions to his words makes him resemble an actor for whom the courtroom is his personal stage; at one point, he is so absorbed in his monologue that the judge must interrupt him. Zeppieri, conversely, proposes convoluted scientific explanations to support his claim that the intercourse was consensual, makes remarks in Latin, and

<sup>48</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:28:30, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Rotondo, “Provocazione,” 84.

uses lofty language such as “le fauci avidi di costei” (her greedy jaws), referring to Fiorella.<sup>50</sup> He even quotes Gabriele D’Annunzio to mask the violence of the rape, narrating how one of the defendants “bacia teneramente [Fiorella] su quella che il divino Gabriele chiama ‘la seconda e più trepida bocca’ da cui sugge il piacere di lei” (tenderly kisses [Fiorella] on what the divine Gabriele calls ‘the second and more anxious mouth’ from which her pleasure emerges).<sup>51</sup> His closing argument resembles the speeches of the most famous lawyer of Italian literature, Alessandro Manzoni’s Azecca-Garbugli, ultimately blurring the lines between reality and fiction.<sup>52</sup> The filmmakers, therefore, did not need to seek out dramatization, as what happens in the courtroom is already a show with its peculiar ceremonies, obsolete rituals, and symbolic gestures—and the resulting film invites reflection both on the relationship between trials and spectacle and on the documentarians’ aspiration to keep the film’s political intentions from devolving into entertainment for television.

Long before the making of the documentary, the Collettivo had been discussing the question of spectacle. In 1976, Miscuglio and Daopoulo wrote about the dialectical relationship between the act of reproducing reality and the fact that this act of representation influences reality itself, by either reinforcing or weakening certain mechanisms inherent in it: “nella rappresentazione spettacolare...tradizione e istanze innovatrici si mescolano. La realtà è colta nelle sue contraddizioni” (in the spectacularized representation...tradition and new demands mingle together, and reality is caught in all its contradictions).<sup>53</sup> Yet they argued that, despite the ambivalence of representation, the development of a new feminist consciousness might disclose new possibilities for cinema.

*Processo per stupro* possesses a particular status in Italian media history as the first time a trial was shot for television. In *Giudici e telecamere* (Judges and Videocameras), Fulvio Gianaria and Alberto Mittone reflect on the difference between television as spectacle and television as information. They argue that, although courtroom dramas are usually consumed for the pleasure of spectacle rather than for the sake of the truth, *Processo per stupro* is unique in that it captures the trial’s reality as it becomes a highly dramatic spectacle, thus forcing viewers to give it the same degree of attention that they would were they physically present in the courtroom.<sup>54</sup> Instead of offering the morbid experience of voyeurism, *Processo per stupro*, with its modest black and white aesthetic, together with the presence of dense and often unclear dialogues, guards against spectacularization; on the contrary, the documentary’s demand for constant attention trains viewers to watch differently, turning them into morally aware witnesses.

The specific sexist spectacle staged in *Processo per stupro* originates in the fact that, for centuries, men have only shared public spaces and positions of power with other men. This has perpetuated an environment in which they have felt confident enough to speak contemptuously of women and have met, in turn, only unconditional support from their colleagues. Even before the advent of televising courtroom proceedings, the admittance of attendees contributed to the spectacularization of trials; but the public these lawyers were addressing would have simply indulged their jokes. Explicitly aiming to counterbalance the asymmetries between men and women in the justice system, Italian feminist groups started to attend trials in the 1970s. Defense

<sup>50</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:50:54, 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:51:30, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> Annabella Miscuglio and Rony Daopoulo, “Un’esperienza,” in *L’almanacco: luoghi, nomi, incontri, fatti, lavori in corso del Movimento femminista italiano dal 1972* (Rome: Edizioni delle donne, 1978), 135–37, 136. Also in Miscuglio and Daopoulo, eds., *Kinomata*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Fulvio Gianaria and Alberto Mittone, *Giudici e telecamere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), 50.

attorney Palmieri refers to this strategy when bemoaning that feminism had infiltrated the justice system, a claim that his fellow attorney Zeppieri reiterates when he notes that Fiorella has come to trial on the “feminist warship.” Referencing an earlier trial at which feminist activists were in attendance, he shrilly proclaims: “Ma qui si stanno rovesciando i termini! Qua ci violentano se non stiamo attenti!” (Everything is turned upside down. They will end up raping *us* if we are not careful!).<sup>55</sup>

The male lawyers’ indignation when acknowledging the feminist presence in the courtroom proves that politically aware women exert a function of control when they sit among the public. In Rotondo’s straightforward phrasing, *Processo per stupro* is thus an indefinable product, somewhere between documentation and representation.<sup>56</sup> While it replicates and documents the monitoring strategy feminists had already undertaken, it also frames the story from a specific angle. This hybridity substantiates the frail line that separates reality and fiction: far from transforming reality into a spectacle, those videotapes simply capture the already present and constant intermingling of these two realms.

### Destined for Censorship and Independent Circuits

The day after the first broadcast, the national newspaper *La Stampa* published a front-page article titled: “La tv ha portato in tutte le famiglie il dramma di una donna violentata” (TV brings the drama of a raped woman to all Italian homes). The journalist Ugo Buzzolan described the documentary as meticulous, implacable, and immediate: “il fatto grosso è che un processo simile abbia avuto una diffusione per milioni di spettatori con quella terribile immediatezza di cui la televisione è capace” (what matters is that this trial has been seen by millions of viewers through that fierce immediacy television is capable of).<sup>57</sup> In Buzzolan’s understanding, the public television network RAI likely waited more than a year to broadcast the documentary due to the difficulty of convincing executives to include it in their programming. But only four months after its release, the documentary had already won the Prix Italia award for Italian television, had been presented at the Berlin Film Festival, and had been named a finalist at the International Emmy Awards.

The documentary was such a sensation that, when RAI broadcast it again in October 1979, it did so during primetime. The day after this second broadcast Buzzolan wrote another article, titled “Processo per stupro dal premio alla replica” (“*Processo per stupro* from award to rebroadcast”). Once again he dwelled on the immediate form of the documentary and its social importance but now also reflected on the technical value of the sequences, asserting that these were able to capture both the subjects’ personalities and moods and the tension in the courtroom.<sup>58</sup> Despite the critical and popular success of *Processo per stupro*, the documentary would have to wait to be broadcast for the third time a full twenty years later, in February 1999, and this time only at 11:00 pm.<sup>59</sup> This lapse had nothing to do with marketing, as the documentary had already fully proved its potentiality: in just the first year after its release, RAI was able to sell it abroad twenty times, at a total profit of \$100,000 USD—nineteen times the documentary’s cost of production.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the

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<sup>55</sup> *Processo per stupro*, 0:48:15, 69.

<sup>56</sup> Rotondo, “Provocazione,” 84.

<sup>57</sup> Ugo Buzzolan, “La tv ha portato in tutte le famiglie il dramma di una donna violentata,” *La Stampa*, April 27, 1979, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Ugo Buzzolan, “*Processo per stupro* dal premio alla replica,” *La Stampa*, October 19, 1979, 17.

<sup>59</sup> “Vent’anni dopo torna *Processo per stupro*,” *La Stampa*, February 13, 1999, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Rotondo, “Provocazione,” 83.

absence of further broadcasting in those years reveals that the interlude of openness at RAI had come to an end.

In 1975, riding a wave of public excitement around recent leftist legislative reforms in the sectors of work, education, and health, the radio and television system was also reformed to give each network more autonomy over its programming. In the parceling-out (*lottizzazione*) of the RAI's television channels between Italy's chief political parties, the channel Rete Uno went to the conservative Christian Democrats, while Rete Due was awarded to the Socialists.<sup>61</sup> At the risk of broadcasting less than polished programs, the director of Rete Due, Massimo Fichera, decided to make "transgressive television."<sup>62</sup> So from 1977 to 1981, during the same years in which Italy expanded fundamental civil rights, including the right to abortion, Rete Due broadcast the overtly feminist talk show *Si dice donna* under the direction of section chief Marina Tartara. But the progressive forces faced a backlash in 1981, amid flagging popular enthusiasm and strong attacks from the Church, as exemplified by the censorship imposed that year on *AAA Offresi...*, a docufilm on prostitution made by the same filmmakers of *Processo per stupro*.<sup>63</sup> The documentary was censored three hours before its transmission and never shown, and Rete Due director Fichera and the Collettivo were not only accused of violating privacy but were legally indicted for exploitation of prostitution (they were acquitted a full thirteen years later). After this experience, Fichera was removed from RAI, marking the end of what Loredana Cornero identified as a "Feminist RAI."<sup>64</sup> Under the guise of having to compete with the new private networks, RAI removed many innovative and putatively inconvenient programs from the national channel lineup, including *Si dice donna*, and conveniently forgot *Processo per stupro* in the miasma of the Teche RAI archives.

On April 24, 2021, in an article about a recent and well-known Italian story of gang rape in the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, journalist Gian Antonio Stella addressed the long censorship of *Processo per stupro* by RAI. He hypothesized that "qualche avvocato che, finalmente a disagio per i toni, le battute da bordello, le insinuazioni usate...chiese il diritto all'oblio" (some lawyer, at last uncomfortable with tone of voice used, the brothel jokes, and the insinuations they had made... must have asked for the right to be forgotten).<sup>65</sup> As a matter of fact, when, in December 2023, I requested a copy of the documentary from Teche RAI for research purposes, I was informed that "viewing the documentary is restricted due to legal reasons."<sup>66</sup> The legal impediment might well be the "right to be forgotten" to which Stella refers, a measure defined by art. 17 in the General European Data Protection Regulation. Yet further investigation is needed, for it remains

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<sup>61</sup> Law 103 of 14 April 1975 "transferred control of the RAI from the executive (i.e. the government) to parliament and replaced a monopoly under the hegemony of the Christian Democrats with a monopoly shared out between networks." See Elena Degrada, "Television and its Critics: A Parallel History" in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 233–47, 241. See also Enrico Menduni, *Televisione e società italiana: 1975-2000* (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), 41–43, 53–55.

<sup>62</sup> Brancati, *Occhi di maschio*, 65–66.

<sup>63</sup> *AAA Offresi...*, directed by Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Rony Daopulo, Paola De Martis, Annabella Miscuglio, and Loredana Rotondo (Rome, 1981). Using hidden cameras and microphones to record conversations between a sex worker and her clients, the documentary put male solicitation at the center of the investigation. See Sara Scalia and Antonio Zollo, "Processo alle autrici del programma tv bloccato dalla censura. Véronique va in tribunale. Una prostituta, i suoi clienti, una cinepresa: fu vero scandalo?" *L'Unità*, October 24, 1985, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Loredana Cornero, "La Rai femminista: il caso 'Si dice donna,'" *Quaderni del CSCI* 11 (2015): 128–35; and Loredana Cornero, *1977: quando il femminismo entrò in TV* (Rome: HARPO, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> Gian Antonio Stella, "Un *Processo per stupro* che non ha mai insegnato nulla," *Corriere della Sera*, April 24, 2021, 32. The article refers to the charges for gang rape against Ciriaco De Grillo, Edoardo Capitta, Francesco Corsiglia, and Vittorio Lauria.

<sup>66</sup> The email exchange is dated December 23, 2023.

unclear whether the specific circumstances under which the right to erasure is applicable qualify for *Processo per stupro*.<sup>67</sup>

The failure of Italian state television system to provide its public service of programming free from censorship is emphasized by the fact that while the streaming platform RaiPlay today only provides a ten-minute clip of the film, the complete documentary is available on YouTube. It is ironic that such an important film is only accessible online in low quality through a private platform that might remove the content anytime.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, although the film is still on YouTube in seven ten-minute clips, in January 2024 the link to the full documentary was removed for copyright reasons. This anecdote sheds light on a set of challenges often encountered by feminist scholars. As Laura Di Bianco writes in *Wandering Women*: “investigating women’s cinema from a feminist perspective has always been a matter of making the invisible visible” and, if I may add, of finding alternative channels to contrast the institutional erasing of women’s history.<sup>69</sup>

Despite its explicit or implicit censorship, *Processo per stupro* has lived a brilliant life outside the institutionalized circuits of RAI. For the last forty years, the filmmakers have toured the documentary around Europe, the US, and Japan, making use of the most common screening modality for independent films: a screening followed by a discussion in schools, at film clubs, and as part of social initiatives. The urgency and complexity of the film’s message could not be silenced, and the documentary would become a decisive tool to make sense of the world and even to change it. Indeed, in 1980, one year after the broadcast of *Processo per stupro*, Italy saw a proposed law against sexual violence brought to the Parliament by popular initiative. In 1981, the so-called “honor killing”—in which a man murders his wife for having an affair—ceased to be considered an “extenuating circumstance” in homicide cases. That same year, the legal loophole which allowed the charge of rape to be nullified if the victim later married the assailant was closed. Finally, the law against sexual violence, instituted in 1996 at last, considered rape to be a crime against the person instead of against public morality. Such modifications to Italian law were the result of years of feminist demands and endless debates and cannot be reduced to a single, decisive event. But surely debate outside of strictly feminist circles was nurtured by the widespread viewing of *Processo per stupro*.

I agree with Buonanno that excessive emphasis on the circulation of *Processo per stupro* in alternative cinema circuits may risk overshadowing the fact that the enormous cultural impact that the documentary had on Italian society—the reflection on stereotypes and secondary victimization that it fostered—had everything to do with the medium of broadcast television. However, one must also account for the fact that after 1980 the trajectory of *Processo per stupro* moved away from Italian television without the documentary losing its capacity to stimulate reflection and shock in the viewers. If anything, the film’s exclusion from Italian state television’s institutional channels complicates its story and promotes further reflection on the unsatisfactory considerations with which institutions treat women’s artistic and life experiences.

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<sup>67</sup> The General Data Protection Regulation GDPR, art 17 is available here: <https://gdpr-info.eu/art-17-gdpr/>. The circumstances for the application of the right to erasure include: (a) the personal data are no longer necessary in relation to the purposes for which they were collected or otherwise processed; (b) the data subject withdraws consent; (c) the personal data have been unlawfully processed.

<sup>68</sup> The 10-minute video on RayPlay: “Processo per stupro: l’arringa di Lagostena Bassi” is available here: <https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/processoperstuprolarringadilagostenabassi>. When I started writing this article, the full documentary was available on YouTube. The documentary is, as of this writing, available on YouTube in 7 clips at this other link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaTmbLzyWmk&list=PL8CECAD6B8604F5A5>.

<sup>69</sup> Laura Di Bianco, *Wandering Woman: Urban Ecologies of Italian Feminist Filmmaking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), xiii.

In conclusion, beyond the rape at the core of the documentary, *Processo per stupro* bears witness to two compounding stories of institutional violence, one perpetrated by the judicial system and the other committed by the information system. By alternating between these two stories, this article has discussed the powerful social force enacted by the intertwining of the observational mode, the medium, and the Italian feminist debate about language and reality. The present reconstruction of the intricate reception of the documentary proves that the six filmmakers succeeded in doing what they had deemed impossible in their manifesto *Per un cinema clitorideo vaginale*: they created a product so subversive that it could not be absorbed into the marketplace. A result of the peculiar encounter between feminist struggles, the new technology of videotape, and the brief but rich interval of openness at RAI, *Processo per stupro* is a unique cinematic product. While the work's relevance today is primarily linked to its performative power to change Italian society while simultaneously filming the latter, the documentary is also instrumental in helping us continue to imagine ways in which the new social subjects of the twenty-first century can produce change through art.