

### 'It has to mean something...': Reading the success of the Italian soap opera *Vivere*

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# 'It has to mean something . . .'

## *Reading the success of the Italian soap opera*

### *Vivere*

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**ABSTRACT** This article attempts to provide an answer to this question and reveal the reasons for the success of *Vivere* (*Living*), one of the first soap operas to be set and produced entirely in Italy over the last few years. Both text analysis and audience reception analysis are used to prove a specific hypothesis: that its popularity – which is comparable to no other Italian soap – comes from its ability to allow viewers to identify with its characters without forsaking the typical ingredients of a Hollywood series, central to the TV habits of the Italian audience. Here, soap operas – the ultimate popular narrative – are considered in their twin roles of ‘anthropological repertory’ and breeding ground for an active production of cultural meanings. The article relates the success of *Vivere* to the social assets of the country which produces and consumes it, while discussing the social uses of a home-grown soap opera through which the community portrays itself.

**KEYWORDS** *audiences, cultural identity, Italy, reception, soap operas, social uses, Vivere*

I've never been into soap operas and *The Bold and the Beautiful* least of all (all those swimming pools and open fires!) – but I'm a real fan of *Vivere* . . . It has to mean something, doesn't it?! (46-year-old account executive)

## **Introduction**

In this article I propose a study of a recent example of popular Italian television, the soap opera *Vivere* (*Living*). First aired on 1 March 1999 and skilfully handled by the showbusiness and advertising industry, after a few months this soap had already built up a cult following. Both its 4 million daily viewers and the popularity of its actors made *Vivere* the ultimate media phenomenon within its genre.

The creation of home-grown soap operas destined for the domestic market is viewed within the context of a general change in Italian

television. From the mid-1970s onwards, the transition from a monopolistic order to a free market affected the television industries of many European countries, including Italy. Rising costs and stagnant resources resulted in the arrested development of Italian programmes and the purchasing of increasing numbers of foreign TV films and series (Menduni, 1996). This inevitably led to a weakening of the narrative force within the medium and had widespread repercussions on the symbolic and cultural aspects connected to its consumption.

The gradual move within the television drama sector towards an industrial production system from the mid-1990s onwards, dramatically changed the quantity and features of domestic product. In 1999 – when *Vivere* was first aired – the number of hours of Italian drama broadcast peaked to reach the highest point of the decade (580 hours), despite the fact that the production capacity of the Italian television industry is still rather limited in comparison with other European countries. Until the mid-1990s, Italian television had only been producing TV films and mini-series of a maximum of two to four episodes, but over the last 10 years, genres and formats that were previously purchased abroad have been proliferating: the Italian audience has been offered an increasing number of home-grown serials, medical and police dramas, sitcoms and soap operas.

The content and language of all these programmes were moulded to the form of native values and models, directly reflecting national society. According to some scholars, the process of ‘indigenizing’ the narrative product thus would rescue the imagination and habits of the TV audience from the invasion of American programmes (Buonanno, 2000), giving Italian television, too, the chance to regain the original role of the medium: that of a ‘central story-teller system’ of its own community (Newcomb, 1988: 89). In effect, the renewed ability of Italian television to attract the audience over the last few years seems to confirm the importance of ‘cultural proximity’ (Straubhaar, 1991: 41) as a factor in programme choice. This may also be the key factor in the success of *Vivere*: domestic and more recognizable characters, settings and stories facilitate identification on the part of the spectators, thus adding an ‘extra-pleasure’ to those which are typical of the soap opera’s genre and format (Buonanno, 2000). But a number of other home-grown soaps were launched at the same time as *Vivere* (*Un Posto al Sole* [*A Sunny Place*] in 1997 and *Centovetrine* [*One Hundred Shops*] in 2001) and they were equally focused on portraying contemporary Italian society. However, none of these gained as high rating figures as *Vivere*. My research hypothesis is that the success of the ‘Channel 5 Italian soap opera’ – as the broadcaster used to promote it – comes from its ability to invoke the audience’s cultural identity, while strategically reproducing the appeal elements of a Hollywood series.

Both text analysis and audience reception analysis are used to put this hypothesis to the test. First, I shall highlight the combination of innovation and convention that characterizes *Vivere*’s formula and the



influence of international models in the construction of its particular aesthetic experience. My goal is to demonstrate that different cultural forces are at work here: in addition to the many features common to American serials, *Vivere* presents certain other forms that are typical of European soaps and, at the same time, builds on precise mechanisms of cultural referencing to the national context.

Second, the results of fieldwork are presented. I shall consider the nature of the narrative pleasure offered by *Vivere* and the different conditions which determine, for each viewer, the appreciation of the programme. In particular, I intend to evaluate the role played by its borrowings from American soaps, as well as by its location within the Italian cultural matrix.

In order to investigate further the importance of the indigenous nature of the soap in its success, first, I shall try to clarify how a perception of cultural proximity is produced in the viewers, exploring which elements of the common experience, everyday lives and symbolic order have to be captured and reflected for the soap to express a shared sense of 'Italianness'. Second, if the soap succeeds in representing 'Italianness', it is reasonable to assume that its very consumption takes on an important function in terms of identity construction. Finally, there is a discussion of the social uses of this soap, through which the community portrays itself; I will consider whether it acts as a source of symbolic material (Silverstone, 1994) that the viewers may use to reinforce or negotiate their sense of cultural membership.

## **Methodological considerations**

The audience reception part of this article is based on the results of in-depth interviews. I selected a sample of 16 heavy viewers of the programme (all the participants used to watch *Vivere* at least three or four times a week), differentiated by four variables: gender, age, profession and level of formal education (which is classified as 'high' or 'low'), and average television consumption, with particular reference to soap operas and serial drama (each viewer is classified as 'heavy viewer' or 'not a heavy viewer'). From the cross-section of these variables, I identified eight distinct categories.

The way in which I found the participants represents a further confirmation of the huge popularity enjoyed by *Vivere*. I asked my friends and family members to spread the word that I needed participants for research on this soap opera. I used them to gain access to people with as varied a socio-demographic background as possible. Within a week, I had received phone calls and emails from more people than I actually needed. The only category of respondents that I had to actively search for was that of young males with a high level of education which, after a while, I was able to source through my social network.

I described the research to my participants in the following terms: I was very curious about the success of *Vivere*, of which I was not a keen fan, because the soap opera was not my favourite genre, although I occasionally watched these programmes. This must have led them to think that I was not properly an 'expert' in the field, a conviction that I think benefited both the nature of our relationship and the quality of their feedback. I got the feeling that oftentimes the 'balance of power' was tilted in their favour: they viewed me as somebody unfamiliar with their 'object of value', acknowledging their expertise and willing to learn from them. Some of them consequently adopted a 'pedagogic' demeanour and I encouraged this type of interaction throughout the length of my inquiry; besides being a challenging and instructive experience, their 'pedagogic' attitude enabled me to solicit deeper explanations and more detailed answers about their perception of *Vivere*'s characters and stories as well as about the generic patterns of soap opera. Interviews took place during the second season of broadcasting (2000–1), when the programme had already consolidated and strengthened the success gained in its debut, firmly placing itself at the top of the Italian audience's preferences. I met each participant about once a week for two months, each time for about 40 minutes. I asked general questions about their likes and dislikes and what they considered 'typical of Italy', as well as more specific ones about certain aspects of the plot.

### **Text analysis: *Vivere*, a prime-time soap**

*Vivere* is aired on Channel 5, which is owned by the commercial network Mediaset (whose primary shareholder is Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi), Monday to Friday at 14.00. It is preceded by *The Bold and the Beautiful* (at 13.00) and Channel 5 News (at 13.30). Each episode lasts 30 minutes and almost 200 such episodes are broadcast each season. *Vivere* recounts the lives of several families that live in Como, a rich northern Italian town. Each family is different in terms of its socio-economic status, values and lifestyle. The characters belong to different generations: 20-year-old boys and girls, studying or working, people in their thirties and forties and those in their fifties and sixties, from a wide range of professions (from medicine and law to business). The main themes are focused on the major and minor difficulties that go with everyday life and personal relationships (family troubles, love life, friendship, professional conflicts, etc.).

While the narrative structure of *Vivere* is typical of daytime soaps and the problems faced are equally traditional, we may also recognize many elements of the prime-time soap, such as the tendency to broaden the boundaries of the genre to include formal and thematic features typical of other genres (Geraghty, 1991). This choice widens the audience beyond the traditional target and *Vivere* takes it into account, introducing various hospital and detective-based storylines. From these origins, a tight narra-



tive rhythm develops with frequent peaks of suspense which position the programme at a distance from the 'province of the slower-paced, reflective drama', as daytime soap operas have been traditionally defined (Skill, 1983: 140). A final observation within this context concerns the assorted typology of the main characters in the soap. Many of them are men and there are several storylines aimed at the male public. Without setting itself up as a family product as *Dallas* did (Ang, 1985), *Vivere* is clearly inspired by generalist aims, which are confirmed in the varied socio-demographic nature of its audience.

According to Christine Geraghty (1991), the aesthetic experience typical of prime-time soaps consists of three fundamental genres: melodrama, realism and light entertainment, blended in different strengths by American and British productions. In *Vivere*, the presence of melodrama and romance is in response to a precise strategy of maintaining parallels with *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Conversely, the stress on realism represents a more interesting and original feature of the production. It is on this basis that the soap centres its claims of cultural autonomy, compared to American productions:

We will be the opposite of *The Bold and the Beautiful*: Italian, recognizable, realistic. We'll be about emotions but the characters won't be impossibly beautiful, but rather normal and possible. (Pisanti, 1998: 4)

In setting its stories in contemporary Italy, presenting ordinary people and situations of everyday life that are able to reflect the daily experiences of its viewers, *Vivere* positions itself apart from the high-society world of *The Bold and the Beautiful* and draws closer to the British prime-time soaps, such as *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street*, *Crossroads* and *Brookside*.

### **The European influence: the model of the 'community soap'**

In the British prime-time soaps, also defined as 'social realist drama', we find the creation of a community identified by specific and geographically defined settings (a motel, a street, a neighbourhood); the attempt to reproduce a given regional experience (the Midlands, London, Liverpool or Manchester); and exploration of working-class culture and problems. Marked regional references are used to authenticate the realism to which these soaps aspire. This feature also accounts for the integration of local dialects in the characters' speech. Although *Vivere* is also set in a specific geographic context – the region of Lombardy – the soap's language is definable as standard Italian. Given the strong sense of cultural difference that still exists among Italian regions and the presence of over 50 local dialects, using the Lombard one as the soap's language would contradict the purpose of establishing a sense of place and belonging which might be shared by viewers from all over the country.



The interest in presenting contemporary society, and the focus on working-class experience which are apparent in British soaps, can be traced back to that realistic-documentary approach to film-making which has characterized British cinema since the 1920s and which has been carried into television productions, becoming a trademark of quality and seriousness (Geraghty, 1995). *Vivere* certainly does not have the same tradition behind it, but it does share with the British serials a common cultural mould and, like its British counterparts, represents an application of a more general and distinctively European model: the sub-genre of 'community soap' (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998: 171). Many of these soap operas, which came out at the end of the 1980s in various European countries as public broadcasting programmes, identified themselves with a set of culturally-specific characteristics: the creation of a community as a metaphor for an ideal of modern society, the discussion of social problems and a marked pedagogical intent.

*Un Posto al Sole*, the first soap opera ever produced by the state-owned broadcaster RAI, fits perfectly into this category but so does *Vivere*, which is produced by a commercial network. Stories are often built on social conflicts and the most current and recurrent problems in Italy, such as micro-criminal organizations, unemployment, ethnic tension and teenage drug-taking. In an attempt to 'increase the familiarity of the portrayal' – as an interviewee noted – many stories are initiated by current issues in the news (kidnapping – a particularly Italian phenomenon – as well as clandestine car races and the diffusion of rave parties). We even find explicit references to key players on the national stage.

The idea of community created in *Vivere* is also very similar to that found in European soaps. In American serials, such as *Dallas*, family is a self-sufficient structure which does not leave any room for outsiders: anyone else may be perceived as an enemy or threat. In community soaps, this closed group is opened up to include 'a whole neighbourhood of ordinary families' (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998: 164), which forms a harmonious world based on the ethic of sharing and the acceptance of reciprocal differences. The characters of *Vivere* know how to sacrifice their own interests and wrap themselves in a network of mutual solidarity, both moral and economic, which overcomes generational, regional and status disparities. Clearly, certain values are never taken for granted: as in the case of other European soaps, notably the English ones (Franco, 2001; Geraghty, 1991), the sense of community is placed as something to aim for, an aspiration which can only be obtained through everyone's commitment. A few characters in *Vivere* are less inclined to cooperate and often display deviant behaviours, which risk destabilizing the unity of the group but whose effects are systematically neutralized by the actions of other characters.

If an attempt to offer 'an idealized and nostalgic vision of living together' (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998: 165) is a trait typical of all



European community soaps, it takes on a further meaning in relation to the specific conditions of production and reception of *Vivere*. Since the construction of the community and the preservation of its integrity centre on the extension of the role of the family to a wider group, the importance of this institution as the nucleus of society is stressed. This trait goes perfectly with the Italian cultural substratum, which is deeply ingrained with a familial component. In particular, the all-embracing neighbourhood of *Vivere* has its fulcrum in one family, the Bonellis, who run the inn where the characters meet. They endorse the ethos of hard work and good old values, typified by their humanistic outbursts and civic virtues (although these are also qualities shared by other characters). The centrality of this family group indicates that, in the Italian adaptation of the European community soap, 'nostalgia' is for some aspects of traditional societies, where families had to rely on each other for support and, often, for material subsistence. Social bonds were stronger and not yet jeopardized by the individualistic subjectivity of today. In support of this analysis, *Un Posto al Sole* also presents the same structure and ideological concern as *Vivere* (the simple-minded and genuine family of the concierge functions as a point of reference for all the families and groups of people living in the condominium, which is the setting of community).

### **Hollywood! Hollywood!**

While realism is a trait of British productions, the prevailing aesthetic experience in American prime-time soaps lies in light entertainment. It has been observed that pleasure in programmes such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty* may be compared to television programmes such as talk shows, cabaret or musical comedies. In each case, viewers are given the opportunity of forgetting the real world and becoming part of a reality which is 'completely fabricated, artificial and separate', where everything is pervaded with a sense of excess and lavishness (Geraghty, 1991: 27). What produces this effect is the visual attractiveness of the soap's locations, the characters' glamorous and extravagant clothes, hairstyles and make-up. In programmes such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, it is also coded through the use of high-key lighting, which makes everything showy, reproducing something of the look of a Hollywood film (Allen, 1997). The emphasis on spectacle and visual pleasure which is created through these means becomes a strong attraction for some viewers, even more important than the plot, as confirmed by the reception analysis of *Dallas* (Ang, 1985) and, in the case of the Italian audience, that of *The Bold and the Beautiful* (Capecchi, 2000).

In *Vivere*, too, the influence of the American soaps is felt most strongly on the level of scenography, primarily in the decoration of the sets and in the impeccable appearance of the characters. The interior of the apartments and the look of each character are knowingly 'packaged'



according to their social level, in an attempt to code the different classes and social realities in terms of visual representation. On the one hand, we have proof of the realist aims which pervade the soap, while on the other hand, it is the very diversification of the *milieu* of its characters which allows *Vivere* to present contexts, situations and lifestyles that absolutely express the values of light entertainment. Consequently, the Channel 5 soap abounds with glamorous settings and perfectly groomed women, expensive clothes, exclusive restaurants, villas with marble flights of stairs, elaborately furnished rooms and liveried house staff.

In conclusion, the appearance of the programme is characterized by elements which reproduce the 'slick' style so typical of Hollywood soaps and explicitly evoke the atmosphere of *The Bold and the Beautiful*. This effect is strengthened by the presence of many storylines gravitating around the world of haute couture. There is even a studio producing luxury lingerie, owned by Eva Bonelli, called 'Eva Futura': a local and more downmarket version of *The Bold and the Beautiful's* 'Forrester Creation'. According to Stefano Traini (2002), the cult status gained by this latter soap in Italy is mostly due to its foregrounding of the fashion world. This context is particularly effective in capturing the audience's imagination and setting it in motion, because of its visual implications and the success of Italian fashion in the international arena, which is perceived as a source of national pride. This explains *Vivere's* slavish imitation of some aspects of *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

### **Audience reception analysis: a first look at viewers' narrative pleasure**

In this section and in those following the results of audience research are presented. First, I shall evaluate those factors which contribute to the narrative pleasure that viewers derive from *Vivere*: the indigenous nature of the programme and its three different genres, melodrama, realism and light entertainment.

As far as light entertainment is concerned, these are above all the characters who play the most important role in the seductions which are typical of this register. The prediction on the part of *Vivere's* storywriters that viewers would appreciate characters 'not impossibly beautiful' as in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, seems to have been contradicted by the participants' comments: many of them like *Vivere's* characters precisely because the actors performing them are so good-looking and trendy. Characters become objects of spectacle, even a source of pleasure in themselves and for themselves, completely independent from the narrative:

I really like Andrea: he's always so elegant and well dressed, he's got style . . . even if in the soap his character is the bad guy, false and immature. (33-year-old male web designer; high, not a heavy viewer)



Nevertheless, at the same time *Vivere's* characters are perceived as 'Italian, recognizable and realistic', as the storywriters expected them to be:

Common people living in Italy: yes, I think this is the reason why I got curious and didn't switch to another channel the first time it was aired . . . I've always asked myself: 'how can they watch that stuff?' . . . and now . . . still can't believe I got into a soap opera . . .! (27-year-old male professional football player; low, not a heavy viewer)

This quotation shows that the domestic setting of the soap is an element of great attraction, not only to the habitual viewers of soap operas, but even to those who have always disparaged American productions: *Vivere* has 'initiated' many viewers to the genre. However, the geographical and cultural proximity of the world represented in *Vivere* brings with it a high risk factor. Viewers become more critical and tend to withdraw the trust that they have placed in the programme even where, watching foreign productions, they are willing to suspend their disbelief (Capecchi, 2000). The presence of situations, behaviours or relationships that are distant from the direct experience of viewers is scarcely tolerated: it jeopardizes the possibility of getting directly involved in the emotional flux of storylines and enjoying the typical pleasures of melodrama. The strongest reactions, however, are towards narrative devices and solutions that the viewers have already seen in *The Bold and the Beautiful*. In this case they feel betrayed, as if the soap is failing to keep its promise of originality, Italianness and, above all, realism:

First they copied from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the titan, with 'Eva Futura' which is the rough copy of 'Forrester Creation', and Eva herself who for her great ambitions goes from father to son . . . and in record time goes from secretary to great designer (absolutely absurd, to get to this it even took Brook a lot . . . and with that I've said everything!). I'm sorry, but the quality of *Vivere* is really going downhill like this. (20-year-old female shop assistant; low, heavy viewer)

The conditions which determine the narrative pleasure for each viewer vary greatly, as does the weight given to the different genres which make up *Vivere's* aesthetic experience. To be more precise, the attention given to the realist dimension depends on the type of investment that the viewers put into the programme and on their 'reading competence'. Sometimes the interviewees' main expectations concern the possibility of finding in the soap a projection of their own desires or escaping (some aspects of) reality: in these cases, the primary source of involvement in *Vivere* is situated in the very representation of a world different from their own daily experiences:

My favourite story was that of Emilia and Luca, because in real life a woman of 35 would never fall in love with a 23-year-old, but I wish it could be like that because their love was passionate but also sweet, they cared about each other. (16-year-old female student; high, heavy viewer)

Familiarity with narrative mechanisms typical of the genre may also generate more 'clement' attitudes towards the programme's lack of adherence to the external world. This is particularly true if we look at the different reactions towards the presence of the so-called 'hermeneutic codes' (Modleski, 1979: 12) – those elements in a narrative which effect a delay in the solution of a problem and, in so doing, increase the narrative tension. Errors and obstacles, such as people seemingly dead, mistaken identity and kidnapped children – although not as frequent as in *The Bold and the Beautiful* – are barely tolerated by those viewers who were attracted to *Vivere* by its promise to portray ordinary situations. Conversely, others see the component of exaggeration produced by these devices as an important ingredient of the 'fictional pact' (Wolf, 1981: 11) which is made in watching soap operas. These viewers appreciate the kind of pleasure, such as suspense and sensationalism, that is produced by exaggeration:

I think, of course it's a soap, sometimes they say and do things which are over the top, like Letizia yesterday who wanted to shoot Alfio or when everyone thought that Eva had drowned in the lake! But this is part of the appeal, because when these things are happening they take your breath away! (36-year-old female bank clerk; high, heavy viewer)

### **Contradictions, or rules of the game?**

Apart from the different importance given to realism by each viewer, I was very struck by the fact that almost all the interviewees spontaneously referred to *The Bold and the Beautiful*, whether to explain the reasons for their fidelity to *Vivere* or to criticize the fact that 'its quality is going downhill'. Marked out as the indisputable 'queen of absurdity', the American programme is then used as an essential (negative) reference point from which to judge the verisimilitude of the world represented in the Italian soap.

The most interesting fact, at first glance, is that none of my interlocutors, not even the most attentive and critical, often ready to discern 'rough copies' of the American titan everywhere, seem to notice that one of its aspects has really been carbon-copied: that of the *mise en scène*. Textual work has shown that light entertainment values are mostly emphasized at this level of production, resulting in an unjustifiable quantity of glitter, silk lingerie, high heels and characters too good-looking and sexy to be perceived as 'common people'. On the contrary, the numerous 'improbable things' identified by the viewers, defined as '*The Bold and the Beautiful* style', rarely included references at the figurative level of the text. In part the absence of this type of valuation could be seen as going back to the very strategic makeover operation carried out on the surface of the programme: all those visual elements which are typical of the Hollywood soaps are accurately covered with a varnish of regionalism



in order to make them more palatable to their audience. Yet, this explanation is insufficient: the lack of 'improbable swimming pools and open fires' is amply compensated by abundant other details which, equally, violate the empiricist notion of realism to which many fans pay great attention. Lack of a critical sense? Irremediable contradictions of popular culture and its fans? The (apparent) ambivalence of these reactions, once again, depends on the complex nature of the soaps' typical pleasures. The values of light entertainment characterize the aesthetic and cultural form of these productions as much as realism; they are by now so deeply rooted in the 'televisual memory' – in both the expectations and preferences of the Italian audience – that their presence is seen as an essential component of the genre. As Ien Ang notes:

The hegemony of American television and film has habituated the world public to American production values and American *mise en scènes*, such as the vast prairie or the big cities, the huge houses with expensive interiors, luxurious and fast cars . . . Such images have become signs which no longer merely indicate 'Americanness', but visual pleasure as such. (Ang, 1985: 55)

On the one hand, the visual fulfilment derived from splendour, sumptuousness and excess far from the average viewer's experience and, on the other hand, the satisfaction which comes from being able to identify with a world which is seen as ordinary, do not necessarily interfere with each other nor do they necessarily indicate a contradiction in the viewers' decoding process. Put simply, they are pleasures from distinct and independent semiotic systems, light entertainment and realism, both perceived as part of the rules of the game. It is symptomatic that in the very few cases in which a lack of plausibility regarding 'characters who are always elegant even when at home' is noted, interviewees add that all this is, however, 'attractive to see'.

### **A very (too?) Italian soap**

Interviewees were asked how accurately *Vivere* represented contemporary Italian society. Their answers dealt with the text on two levels: the first being thematic, which includes the settings, characters and storylines shown (denotative level); and the second, ideological, referring to values embedded in the text (connotative level). One storyline in particular gave me the opportunity to investigate to what extent the symbolic universe constructed in the soap reflected the viewers' perception of their cultural identity. During the two months of interviewing, it captured the attention of all my interlocutors, who hardly talked of anything else. It was quite a 'paradigmatic' story, constructed in a way which is relatively common in soaps and seen more than once in *Vivere* itself. It concerned a love triangle, in which the man, Alfio Gherardi, married with children, betrays his wife

with his young business partner, Eva Bonelli. To complicate the situation further, friendships and family ties which link the two families and other members of the community are wound in (Alfio is an old friend of Eva's parents, the Bonellis; Eva had previously had a relationship with Alfio's son who then married Chiara, who is Eva's sister, etc.).

The viewers explained their interest in this affair, saying that the conflicts on which it was based played 'with the open nerves of our moral laws' (25-year-old male student; high, not a heavy viewer). In effect, there are many specific cultural aspects referred to: the destabilizing nature of this relationship, according to the interviewees, comes from the violation of a series of norms, tacit and explicit, which they consider as the basis of social order. First, there is the violation of a sacrament, the marriage tie, which in itself provides a reason to reproach and condemn ('it's a knotty story: just to start with, a married man with a family runs away with his young lover', 36-year-old female bank clerk; high, heavy viewer). Second, the story also violates the so-called *fides*, the implicit pact embedded in the cohesion of a group. For Alfio betrays his friendship with the Bonellis, thus jeopardizing the whole relational order and value systems on which the small community is founded:

I can understand why Eva's parents didn't even want to hear about them, if one of my friends got together with my daughter . . . it's a very difficult issue to get over. (59-year-old male retired plumber; low, not a heavy viewer)

The atypical nature of the relationship also comes from its deviation from the precise norm of 'customariness' which foresees a substantial homogeneity between love partners: there is a large age difference between Eva and Alfio, a feature which for many of the interviewees 'clashes with one of the most widespread taboos in Western culture, one which is particularly strong in Italy' (46-year-old female account executive; high, not a heavy viewer). Additionally, there is the difference in civil and social status, the position that the two hold in the community: Alfio is married with children, while Eva is a young woman without ties; he has the established social and economic position of a self-made man, whereas she comes from a modest background and is making her first moves in a professional field (in the highly competitive and selective field of entrepreneurship).

I initially found the scandal provoked by this relationship surprising: anyone familiar with the genre conventions should be aware that the violation of each one of the norms described is almost inevitable in soap storylines. For example, relationships between two people with a substantial age difference are the order of the day, given the need to come up with new plots and the limited number of fixed characters. For the same reason, class permeability is a feature of all long-running narratives (Valerio, 1992). If, however, the cultural context of the audience is taken



is indeed foreseen by the soap's storywriters who, knowing how to create a risqué storyline, are capable of capturing the spectators' attention, provoking their prejudices and challenging their taboos, before ultimately reinstalling and consolidating the dominant moral order through an ad hoc epilogue. This epilogue is inherently predetermined from the outset of the storyline. The polar characterization of the two characters, the nature of the values damaged in their relationship and their importance in the symbolic order of Italian society mean that the story can only conclude in one way: Eva becomes the scapegoat of the situation in which initially, they were both equally guilty. The instinctive prejudices with which the collective 'common sense' would view a rookie businesswoman such as Eva become stronger if we consider that we are talking about a woman who is, furthermore, both young and beautiful, and that Italian culture still carries a chauvinistic heritage. Thus Eva becomes the focus upon which viewers' tension is released and the point of resolution of the conflict. While the crafty Brook of *The Bold and the Beautiful* can indefatigably 'move from father to son', Eva can only receive the censure of the whole community. Her parents kick her out of the home and thus re-establish the troubled moral order.

This choice responds perfectly to the expectations of the most conservative sections of the viewing public, which, contrary to my expectations, include many young people ('It serves her right, she's a family wrecker, a social climber', 19-year-old female student; high, heavy viewer). Above all, the brusque interruption of this faithless relationship is valued because it saves the dearest value to the viewers:

We care about family and the things in *The Bold and the Beautiful* make us laugh. There, after they've been married for five minutes, they start betraying each other almost straight away; here too, people are unfaithful, they split up but in the end, if they're married, they often get back together. (50-year-old female hairdresser; low, heavy viewer)

This tendency of the married couple to reunite is widespread in the plots of Italian TV drama and may be traced back to the increasing instability of the marriage tie (Livolsi, 1998). This phenomenon, which occurs throughout modern societies, is more problematic in Italy for obvious reasons connected to the Catholic tradition. The innate aim of relaxation in TV dramas is also felt in *Vivere*: the programme must (at least) partially create a compromise between its identity as a soap opera (in which the constant division of couples plays a major role in the propulsion of the narrative) and the imperative to show a reassuring representation of the family unit and its integrity. The process of cultural adaptation, or 'transculturation', as it was called (Chan and Ma, 2002: 7) of the American forms of soap opera is mostly evident in the construction and resolution of conflicts which call upon burning issues, cultural taboos and common prejudices.



## The social uses of *Vivere*

The reactions provoked by the developments in Eva and Alfio's affair serve to demonstrate the social functions that watching *Vivere* takes on in the viewers' experience. The epilogue was not popular with all my interviewees:

I didn't like the way that it finished, but the authors probably realized that these storylines aren't much appreciated and had it had a happy ending it would have been too unrealistic . . . I've noticed that they generally don't end well: even the relationship between Emilia and Luca, where there was a large age difference, didn't last long. (18-year-old male electrician; low, not a heavy viewer)

The responses of those who disagree with the authors' choice but still try to explain the reasons behind that choice display the nature of the viewers' meaning-making process. In some cases, the reality presented by *Vivere* matches their perception of the outside world; in the soap they look for and find confirmation of their assumptions and definitions of Italian society. In other cases, however, it is from the confrontation with the text that their own notions of Italianness are brought into discussion. Certain moral norms, models of relationships and ways of behaviour are not shared by the audience, but the television representation acts as a 'criterion' (Casetti and di Chio, 2000: 267), providing indications and interpretations of what is to be considered as culturally specific:

They kicked her out of the home! I couldn't believe it at first: I could have understood had it been a neo-realist film, but not a television series in 2000 set in a European city . . . then when I thought about it again it all fits in, absolutely. Italians are great traditionalists, paranoid about respectability at all times and that type of relationship in normal society is probably still covered with shame. I think it can only be found in the showbusiness or the upper classes. (24-year-old female newspaper reporter; high, not a heavy viewer)

*Vivere* is appropriated by its viewers and transformed into a resource with which to construct social reality and (re)negotiate their identity, both individual and collective. In interpreting this affair, the interviewees draw on widespread stereotypes, on the beliefs and social representations that surround 'collective space' and also on personal experience. In any case, the decoding of the text is developed in relation to the Italian context in which it is produced and consumed. The background to the reception is formed of both the macro context, i.e. the totality of the general coordinates identifying Italian culture and society, and the micro context, i.e. the personal experience and subjective position of each viewer.



## Conclusion

The text analysis carried out on *Vivere* fully confirms the mixed nature of soap operas, which plays on a wide variety of aesthetic experiences and genre conventions. *Vivere*'s narrative formula, in particular, seems to be characterized by a constant dialectic between realism and the typical values of light entertainment, which form the ingredients of an 'aesthetics of escapism' (Dyer, 1973: 23). The complex interplay of different elements is reflected within the variety of narrative pleasure that viewers derive from the programme.

In line with its stress on realism, *Vivere*'s formula is characterized by a strong commitment to portray Italian reality and contemporary social issues. This brings the programme into the sub-genre of community soap, which expresses European autonomy and cultural specificity. This characteristic has a great effect on reactions to the programme. The promise of cultural proximity becomes a double-edged weapon, creating loyalty and interest but also a continuous challenge for the soap. Many viewers expect *Vivere* to be both the most original and the most realistic of the soaps in every way: whether for internal coherence (that constitutes the 'possible' which is staged) or for external realism. Referential aspects belonging to the outside world and everyday life cannot be superficially represented, because they will be the object of universal scrutiny.

In addition to evaluating the role of cultural proximity in the success of *Vivere* and in its ability to attract a mass audience, I also tried to explain *how* this perception is produced in the viewers. Based on the results of audience reception analysis, my conclusion is that viewers pay special attention to the representation of familial and interpersonal relationships. The norms which govern emotional life and sexual behaviour clearly stand out as particularly 'sensitive' areas and main sites of investment by my interlocutors: the ability of *Vivere* to articulate common experience and create a notion of Italianness which may be shared, is then measured on this terrain. The fact that the participants reacted strongly to love affairs between two characters of markedly different ages confirmed this analysis. In underlining the risqué nature of this kind of relationship, when the partners are not condemned *tout court*, the most common argument of respondents is that such affairs threaten marriages and friendships ties, thus troubling the harmony of *Vivere*'s microcosm. The sense of community and the preservation of family integrity are shown to be powerful sources of the programme pleasure and primary elements of the viewers' cultural identity. This proves the efficacy of *Vivere*'s formula which, while assimilating the community soap model, further stresses the role of family as a structure providing nurture, support and cohesion to the whole group. If the soap's moral condemnation of 'atypical' or extra-marital relationships is appreciated, it is because it provides a relief from the emotional consequences of real life, where marriages are increasingly





unstable. It is worth adding that the short life of 'knotty affairs' not only distinguishes *Vivere* from American soaps, but also represents a peculiarity within the European sub-type. In German soap operas, for example, it is acceptable for older men to have affairs with much younger women, often going on to marry them (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998).

Even when there is no match between the frameworks of knowledge and ideological positions of broadcaster and audience, watching the soap seems to have an impact on the viewers' cognitive and geocultural mapping (Hall, 1980). In the analysis of the above-mentioned storyline, I noticed that some of my interlocutors renegotiated their cultural identity, acknowledging that a certain dose of bigotry and moral conservatism still flutters in their culture. Similar 'confessions' emerged throughout my ethnographic inquiry, notably on sex-related issues. Many respondents pointed out *Vivere's* tendency to dramatically reduce the 'level of sexual promiscuity' that is typical of soap operas and, according to them, *Vivere's* sensual scenes are softer and more 'chaste' than those in *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Once again, my interlocutors traced back this feature to the need to integrate the most typically appealing elements of the genre, such as spicy affairs, without hurting the sensibilities of the domestic audience.

Unsurprisingly, the interaction of old age and low level of formal education often produced the most conservative reactions to spicy affairs. But this does not necessarily mean that the younger and more educated were more tolerant. I was struck by the marked tendency of some teenagers to condemn betrayals and 'atypical' relationships, which can be interpreted as a function of the need for unambiguous moral models typical of an age when personality is being formed.

A variable differentiating participants and that influenced their responses to the programme was familiarity with the genre conventions: this was shown to be a relevant parameter, allowing heavy viewers of soap operas to grasp better the peculiarities of *Vivere* as an indigenous product by means of comparison with foreign programmes. Conversely, the role of gender differences was less relevant than I expected it to be. The main differences were found in viewers' focus of interest: women were more inclined to comment on romance and interpersonal relationships, while men tended to pay more attention to the sphere of work or to the crime-based aspects of the soap. Curiously, both male and female respondents appeared to be attracted by the light entertainment values of the soap (although this was not the case of older male viewers): the presence of formal codes typical of Hollywood soaps, such as the emphasis on the fashion world and the great attention to visualization, was shown to be highly important to the appreciation of the programme by all its fans. This can be considered as an effect of the Italian viewers' familiarity with the language of American productions, which have always had a pivotal role in their TV consumption habits. Other reception works have reached similar conclusions: Marawn Kraidy's (1999) inquiry into young



Maronites' consumption of Egyptian, Mexican and American soap operas, for example, suggested that American norms of production were the standards by which media products were judged.

In conclusion, the results of text analysis and fieldwork confirmed my research hypothesis: to comprise a foolproof recipe for success, it is precisely the contextualization of *Vivere* against an Italian backdrop, combined with the assimilation of the American model. Stylistic borrowings from Hollywood soaps are found in *Vivere* more than in any other Italian soap; what is interesting to note, however, is that most of the participants do not acknowledge such an influence. To the Maronite viewers interviewed by Kraidy, slick production values symbolically marked 'Westernness', whereas *Vivere*'s penchant for glamorous *mise en scènes* and perfect-looking characters seems to have lost any geocultural connotation. My respondents no longer perceive them as a heritage of American serials: more simply, they are considered as part of the cultural and aesthetic form of soap opera, the primary components of the genre's DNA. The presence of these components in *Vivere* makes it a soap opera to all intents and purposes. Or better, an *Italian* soap opera to all intents and purposes.

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