

Talking to Aldo Grasso About TV, Jersey Shore, The Sopranos...and When Politics Dictates the Line Up

Letizia Airos (October 31, 2010)



Journalist, television critic, professor of radio and television history at Catholic University in Milan, Aldo Grasso moderates a forum entitled "Television" on Corriere della Sera's website where he has established a direct line of communication between readers and television programs

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He is an appropriate person who can rationally engage in a discussion about controversial programs such as [Jersey Shore](#) [3] and [The Sopranos](#) [4], talk about both American and Italian television, and reflect on the media's influence and the politics that seek to influence the media. We met him in New York and report excerpts from our conversation here.

"I was immediately struck by The Sopranos. I found the first season fascinating. Not just its content, but its production, how it was made. I later learned that the more traditional Italian-American organizations had started to protest it. But the most surprising thing for me was seeing Italians ride this wave. I remember when [Gianfranco Fini](#) [5], then Secretary of Alleanza Nazionale, came to America and participated in the protests, condemning the stereotypes."

And so Aldo Grasso began a direct debate with Fini in the pages of [Corriere della Sera](#). [6] "Before taking these positions, wouldn't it be better to learn more about the issue that we're discussing?" Grasso wrote, suggesting that Fini had never watched an episode of "The Sopranos." If had he seen it, "given his intelligence and sensitivity, he certainly would not have protested it."

The story continued, and the series became more successful while the controversy surrounding it grew. "But it was a backwards argument. A mobster who goes to a psychiatrist cannot be seen as stereotypical mobster."

When Grasso came across Jersey Shore on [MTV](#) [7] he thought, "Here we go again. It's the same story repeating itself. They're not watching the programs, they're not discussing the content, but they do have an overarching fear of stereotypes."

In one of your articles you described "Jersey Shore" as entertaining and educational. What did you mean by that?

"The two things are connected. In this case the combination is very important because you watch a program when it's entertaining and this, in turn, opens up new worlds that you aren't familiar with."

"The 'guido' phenomenon was completely new to me; I knew nothing about it. It was an extraordinary discovery to see that there is a way of relating to italianità that is no longer a stereotype but, if anything, has become a topos, a standard representation."

"There are young, second- and third-generation Italian Americans who live like this, who use lots of hair gel, who act in a certain way, who speak in a certain way. They are the children of [Saturday Night Fever](#) [8] and [Grease](#) [9]. A new world opened up to me and I entered into it. It was interesting, first of all, from the perspective of representation. You could understand from the way they spoke and expressed themselves how others viewed them."

"American television series have always been very successful in Italy, and they have always shown the American world, but up to now they were full of young, cute blonde girls..."

"In this case, a slice of Italy in America was now on display. For this reason I found it instructive: it allowed us to discover something new in an entertaining way. I think that's what deserves the most attention. I do not find it offensive to anyone."

In the history of Italian television has a particular program ever generated such strong "political" reactions?

"Recently there have been these types of 'political' reactions to television programs. Berlusconi has long complained that Italian television dramas focus too narrowly on the mafia. But we should also realize that Italian dramas about the mafia are the only ones that sell abroad. Italian TV usually gets to the border of Chiasso and stops there. The Piovra mini-series was one of the few successful television series abroad."

What kind of television programs do these critics suggest instead?

"It's always a maudlin portrait of everything Italian. Berlusconi invokes an Italy that is positive, hard-working, and creative but from a dramatic point of view it's ridiculous. It doesn't hold up."

"Over the past 10, 15 years, Italian television has relied on one type of biographical drama that airs in two episodes, which is almost always a hagiography. So it's the 'lives of saints' – and they are always politicians, athletes and sport stars, real saints, captains of industry, etc."

"One particularly good program that aired recently was [R \[10\]omanzo Criminale \[10\]](#) [10] Crime Novel], a series about the famous Magliana gang, the criminal political machine that ruled Rome in the 1970s. It was a fine production, but from the point of view of the image presented, it's really embarrassing. What emerges is a portrait of Italian institutions that's mortifying."

"So here's the eternal problem: what's valid from a dramatic point of view can cause problems from a political point of view. If we care about social image, then the embarrassment of institutions is understandable. But if we begin to analyze the process, which do we choose? Something interesting from a dramatic point or something rewarding from an institutional point of view? When you choose the latter, it's often one-dimensional and boring."

The charges of defamation that some Italian-American organizations have hurled at "The Sopranos" and "Jersey Shore" are comparable to those of Berlusconi, who thinks that Italian dramas about the mafia damage Italy's image abroad. We are faced with an unwavering attitude that is so-called "patriotic-nationalistic." Politics then dictate the rules of drama, art, etc....

"Yes, the pretense is that politics determines the outcome; rather than making an effort and attempting to dissect and understand a symbolic device, politicians stop short and focus on the most mundane and obvious images."

"What politicians in Italy have never understood, with respect to television, is that everything revolves around the 'construction of identity.' It's not what's said directly on television that has a strong social impact. What matters most is what's said in an indirect way. Television has been instrumental in the construction of a national Italian identity, but that hasn't happened by broadcasting a prime minister's speech or political talk shows...."

"Let me give you an example. The process of acquiring fluency and literacy in standard Italian and the role that television has played in that process has been plagued with misunderstandings for years. Up to now, credit has always been given to Maestro Manzi's shows which were directed at people who were not literate, saying that 'it's never too late to learn' and telling them to watch this or that series...."

"The reality is that the country learned to speak standard Italian through many other successful shows such as [Lascia o Raddoppia I \[11\]](#)Double or Nothing], perhaps the only program with a genuine cult following at the time."

A "Similarly, political debates rarely affect viewers' choices. There are programs that do not focus squarely on politics but deal with politics in a different way, and they are much more effective. For example, there are afternoon shows for young people, and several in the morning. They convey an idea, a certain ideology, without ever declaring it overtly."

"We are therefore faced with a complex problem from a symbolic point of view.... If you only look at the most obvious content – how Italians are portrayed, for example – a huge mistake has been made. We need to look at the 'code of communication,' understand how a series is structured and grasp the linguistic complexity. It's only by doing this kind of analysis can we understand the different types of representation and ultimately say something more meaningful. But politics rarely takes this next step."

And Romanzo Criminale [Crime Novel], which you mentioned earlier, conveys its own negative message....

"If we were to erase all of the anti-heroes from the history of literature, theater, film, there would be very few characters left. From a dramatic point of view, the anti-hero is always far more interesting than the hero. We must acknowledge that there may be anti-heroes simply because it's a fact."

"There is an interesting question that we, of course, must ask: what justifies the presence of an anti-hero in a story? The reason can be found in an aesthetic point of view. The only ethical question that applies to art is, 'Is it done well?' 'Is it linguistically compelling and complex?'"

Let's go back to The Sopranos and the type of mobster portrayed in that series compared to the Coppola's The Godfather. The television series seems to destroy the image, the myth. It makes him insecure, weak. A gangster has never been depicted in this way....

"From a narrative perspective, The Sopranos is one of the best American television series produced in recent memory. Even if we looked beyond the Italian-American element, it would still be a very interesting series. The genius of The Sopranos' lies in its ability to simultaneously show us the mafia while depicting other aspects that we would have never considered before."

"There are still the typical mafia stereotypes, including heinous criminal acts...but at the same time it's as if Tony Soprano's therapy sessions do not belong to him alone, but to the whole phenomenon. What comes out expresses his vulnerability, and the family's role is completely different from how a mafia family was depicted before. It's a middle class family with its own problems, especially raising children who turn against their parents. There's an incredible level of complexity. The mafia becomes a pretext and has nothing to do with old stereotypes. The interesting aspect in this story is the portrayal of this vulnerability and everything else that goes against the mafia's usual iconography, including the characters' insecurities: they are the real victims!"

"It's still a story set in an area controlled by the mafia. But I find nothing offensive about it. It seems to me that destroying the traditional image of the mafia from within has been an enormous service to Italy and to Italians-Americans."

Getting back to Jersey Shore, from a sociological point of view, and not from the standpoint of media studies, you compared the cast to similar Italian characters, "i tamarri" [the idiots]. These types of young people exist all over Italy, not just in New Jersey....

"I found this very interesting. Usually when "i tamarri" [the idiots] are depicted in Italian movies or on television, they become caricatures. They are never shown for who they really are - unless it's a good documentary but that's extremely rare."

"What happens on Jersey Shore is significant. These aren't caricatures but far more realistic and captivating photographic portraits. I think that a caricature might be offensive, but a realistic representation can't be. This understanding brings a level of depth that allows me to fill in the gaps in some way. If I see an accident on the street, I find myself faced with a very dramatic moment, but it's not that I think that life is all drama."

"I think that reality shows are interesting, even when in the case of [Grande Fratello \[Big Brother\]](#) [12], we're in the 10th or 11th season, and frankly, it becomes annoying. But there are times when those young people's defenses are completely down and they don't even notice the television cameras. What emerges is a portrait of a certain group of young people that is much more interesting than what it is often scripted."

So the value of Jersey Shore is wrapped up in the genre of reality show. The television cameras were



turned on and they showed us a certain reality that no writer would have been able to script.

But many people say that the cast was pushed to exaggerate....

The general claim is that there's a tendency to play up some things because the cameras are rolling and the cast knows it. But we must try to understand the image while keeping the frame in mind. We must assess what we're seeing in terms of this framework. It's not a documentary, it's not investigative journalism. We should not confuse the two – it's a reality show.

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This is a question more for parents than for scholars. Don't we have to worry about our kids who might see this show as a model, as an ideal way of life?

“The discussion here is more complex. Studies on the effects of media have shown that there is no cause and effect relationship in a direct way. It's as if television were a family member, a guest who talks about some things. The relationship is there, but it's indirect.”

“It's also not true that kids watch that much television. They do so in a casual, and, again, indirect way, like the Internet. So they won't watch an entire episode, but only the parts they choose to see.”

“Finally, to determine the impact of television it's important to consider the mediation of the family, which plays a key role. Let me give you another example. Many studies have indeed shown the negative influence of television, especially on children who were left alone in front of the television for several hours, often in low-income families where parents used the television as a kind of babysitter while they were at work. It was also found that there were no books, no newspapers in those homes. In short, where the mediation of the family is not relevant, television's effects are felt more profoundly. But as the family structure becomes more complex, and mediation becomes more pronounced, those effects are reduced. So the problem is not so much television, but the family structure.”

“If we bring the discussion back to Grande Fratello [Big Brother], we see that these models take hold where there are few defenses. Where there's a strong family structure, where people talk and discuss, the effect is minimal and very often it's actually experienced in an ironic way.”

We should also discuss the issue of political control over television programming. We see this in both Italy and America when groups want to protest certain depictions which they have deemed harmful or defamatory....

“In Italy, the real detrimental effect, not only by Berlusconi but by all politicians, occurred when RAI Television and public service stations were completely taken over. It's a mistake to rely on political officials rather than media professionals when it comes to broadcasting. This determines and hampers the image that television creates and presents. For example, all of the television dramas produced in Italy over the last 20 years have had some political implication. One drama was made to satisfy one political group, another was made for another political group, and so on.”

“The real trial that Italian television is going through has to do with the excessive influence of politics. And every time a politician becomes interested in film, television, and theater, he does it in a very unrefined, one-sided manner. They have only one goal – to show a positive image. A dramatist's aim is completely different.”

“As for Italian Americans, I think they carry the rhetoric of fascism with them. Historically there hasn't been a way for them to absorb and process the change. They understood the stereotype of one national identity, but they have not gone through the process of understanding the next one. Without knowing it, as they fight the stereotypes created by others, they unwittingly become victims of the same stereotyping.”



“Then I watch RAI International and I want to tear my hair out. Italian-American organizations should fight for RAI International. How is Italy being portrayed? They could broadcast programs such as Jersey Shore while contextualizing and explaining them, and engaging in interesting and thought-provoking discussions....”

Among other things, this could help Italians understand how difficult it is to be “G2,” second- and third-generation Italian American....

“Definitely. They could really invest in it and add English subtitles to Italian news programs, since many Americans of Italian origin, particularly young people, no longer speak our language. These are obvious opportunities that RAI has missed. They claim that they have little money but the issue is that the budget could be allocated differently. Italian-Americans would do better to complain about RAI International instead of how American television represents italianità.

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