

**Taking the pulse: Gender, sexuality and social identity
in the new millennium**

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ABSTRACT

At first glance, post-2000 Italian cinema may appear to be undergoing a new, though still limited, golden age, the main characteristics of which are an increased presence of women, the expression and portrayal of ‘alternative’ sexuality, and the representation of social identities sufficiently durable to survive (and possibly thrive in) the volatile present with its apparently limitless “liquid” flexibility, deregulation of social relationships, and loosening and transformation – if not total crumbling – of social, religious and working institutions that Zygmunt Bauman describes in his seminal 2003 book *Liquid Modernity*. This article offers an overview of gender, sexuality, and social identity in Italian cinema from 2000 to the present day, that by its very nature is not exhaustive but focuses on the most significant examples and trends in films and data, assessing the progress, or lack of it, achieved in that period.

Introduction

At first glance, post-2000 Italian cinema may appear to be undergoing a new, though still limited, golden age the main characteristics of which are an increased presence of women in a variety of roles both on and off screen, the expression and portrayal of ‘alternative’ sexuality, and the representation of social identities sufficiently durable to survive (and possibly thrive in) the volatile present with its apparently limitless “liquid” flexibility, deregulation of social relationships, and loosening and transformation – if not total crumbling – of social, religious and working institutions (Bauman 2003). This article offers an overview of gender, sexuality, and social identity in Italian cinema from 2000 to the present day, focussing on the most significant examples and trends in films and data, and assessing the progress, or lack of it, achieved in that period.

Women in Italian Cinema

In Italy, the number of professional women working in cinema (as actors, costume designers, musicians, directors and producers, to mention only a few roles) has never been so high (Gonzales de Sande 2012: 1065-1074). Yet the ‘celluloid ceiling’¹ remains largely intact. Women, who have successfully worked in cinema in Italy since its very beginnings, have only very recently been afforded continuous attention with studies concentrating on divas,² directors and other roles,³ and on gender in general. Initiatives such as film festivals, with women artistic directors at the helm, and dedicated websites now promote Italian cinema by women directors and starring Italian actors (Hipkins 2008: 213-234 and Ross 2010: 164-177).⁴ For example, 2011, marked the year in which a publication finally and formally established women’s presence in the industry: *I Morandini delle donne: 60 anni di cinema italiano al femminile* (Iacobelli 2011).⁵ Morando Morandini Sr,⁶ who every year since 1999 has published his famous collections of film reviews, *Il Morandini*, with the publisher Zanichelli, co-authored *Morandini delle donne* with his namesake nephew Morando Morandini Jr. Together they placed two women on the ‘iconic pedestal’ of Italian cinema: Sofia Loren and Anna Magnani (Mazzocchi 2011).

Without wanting to diminish in any way the importance of these two actors, it is natural to wonder why Italian cinema has not been able to create other distinctive female figures. It is undeniable that these two actors and their memorable performances and portrayals have left an indelible impression on Italy’s social imaginary (and beyond). One need only think of the example of Pina’s improbable heroism in Roberto Rossellini’s 1945

¹ This is a term used by Martha Lauzen to discuss the difficulty women have in accessing the cinema industry and reported in Scarparo, S., Luciano, B. (2010) ‘The personal is still political: films “by and for women” by the new documentariste’, *Italica*, 87.3, Autumn, p. 488.

² Dalle Vacche, A. (2008) *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema*, Austin, University of Texas Press; AA.VV. (2009) *Il bello delle donne: speciale cinema femminile*, special issue of *Filmmaker’s magazine*, 3/2009, Rome, Bunker Lab. See also Stephen Gundle’s research on beauty, divas and the Italian *star system* – <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/staff/gundle/>

³ For example Elvira Notari, a little-known film director of the early cinema years, to whom from 1987 to 2002 the Festival del Cinema di Venezia dedicated a prize (later renamed Premio Lina Mangiacapre), studied by Giuliana Bruno in *Rovine con vista: alla ricerca del cinema perduto di Elvira Notari* (Milan, Dalai editore, 1995); and a later generation of living Italian women filmmakers represented by Lina Wertmüller – whose biography by Tiziana Masucci was only recently published under the title *I Chiari di Lina* (Rieti, Edizioni Sabinae, 2009) –, and Liliana Cavani – researched by Gaetana Marrone in her book *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000) – and their contemporary screenwriter Suso Cecchi D’Amico – to whom the famous screenwriter, playwright and film critic Tullio Kezich, together with Alessandra Levantesi dedicated, in the year of her death, the book *Una dinastia italiana. L’arcipelago Cecchi D’Amico tra cultura, politica e società* (Milan, Garzanti, 2010).

⁴ With regard to initiatives dedicated to women’s cinema in Italy, please see the initiative of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia and Cineteca Nazionale “La sottile linea rosa”, with screenings held at the Cinema Trevi in Rome – <http://www.romanotizie.it/r-esistenze-la-sottile-linea-rosa-appuntamenti-con-il-cinema-delle-donne.html> –, the site *Cinema Donna* – <http://www.cinemadonna.com> – and the *Festival internazionale di cinema e donne* <http://www.laboratorioimmaginedonna.it>

⁵ The book is accompanied by the DVD, produced by Kitchen Film, *Chiacchierando con le amiche*, where Morandini Sr meets and talks to women who have worked in Italian cinema (Sofia Scandurra, Marina Piperno, Wilma Labate, Patrizia De Clara, Donatella Finocchiaro, Fabiana Sargentini, Emanuela Piovano, Gisella Burinato, Donatella Maiorca).

⁶ Died on October 17 2015.

film *Roma città aperta/Rome, Open City*, whose character was based on Teresa Gullace, a symbol of Roman Resistance. She was killed by Nazi soldiers while trying to speak to her husband, whom they had imprisoned. Yet, if Anna Magnani and Roberto Rossellini have managed to embed this episode forever in our cinematographic memory, why has the same story been recently reworked in the docu-film *Anna, Teresa e le resistenti* (Matteo Scarfò, 2011)? The importance of the Resistance is undeniable today, especially when revisionist tendencies lie in wait of opportunity (Vellini 2013: 35-44), but is there really a need to seek refuge in a past more or less remote in order to remember “un esercito di volontarie della libertà che restituirono senso e valore al ruolo della donna nella società italiana” – to remind women of the role they held yesteryear in order to spur them into action today?⁷ This is not an isolated incident: *Eravamo Donne Ribelli - Narrazioni Femminili della Resistenza* (Primo Giroladini, 2005), *Innamorate della libertà* (Remo Schellino, 2005), *Staffette* (Paola Sangiovanni, 2006), *Bandite* (Alessia Proietti, 2009), *La memoria degli ultimi* (Samuele Rossi, 2014), *Non ci è stato regalato niente* (Eric Esser, 2014) are just a few examples set in the same WWII era, but there are others that look back a little further, like *Il Risorgimento delle donne* (Michele Imperio and Fabio Pagani, 2011) and *Tre donne nel Risorgimento tra amore e rivoluzione* (Alessandra Ciotti, 2012). All of these are documentaries that look back to a period in which women fought and risked everything for freedom. Not just their own but everyone’s.

A Gramscian look to the past is certainly necessary, but is it mandatory always to look back in time in order to find ‘exemplary’ women? The answer to this question seems to be an unequivocal ‘Yes’ if the reaction of *La Repubblica*’s film critic, Claudia Morgoglione, is anything to go by. “Finalmente un film al femminile” (Morgoglione 2010), she wrote on the release of the film *Il primo incarico/The First Assignment* (Giorgia Cecere, 2010), at the 2010 Venice International Film Festival. In fact, she went on to specify that the film was directed “da una donna, la debuttante Giorgia Cecere, prodotta da una donna, Donatella Botti, (con una storia) tutta centrata su un personaggio femminile forte, volitivo, determinato, poco convenzionale”.

The screenplay focuses on the story of Nena, a young southern Italian teacher who, in 1953, must leave her home to go on her first placement in a remote inland area. For her interpretation of this role the actor, Isabella Ragonese – who was also presenting the festival that year – was named by the film critic as the “madrina militante” of the festival whose, “presenza tradizionalmente poco più che decorativa [... spetta] portare una ventata di cinema dalla parte di lei”, correctly insisting that of the 41 films available that year very few offered strong female roles. Perhaps one should not be amazed that there were so few women’s films entered in the competition, given that at the Box Office the low-budget film *Il primo incarico* grossed only €194,509⁸ against the over €43 million of the top-earning film for 2010/11 *Che bella giornata* (2011, Gennaro Nunziante) with an estimated budget of €6 million.⁹ Leaving aside all issues of quality and artistic value – the film was described by *Variety*’s film critic Jay Weissberg as being “the kind of unexceptional drama, light and only mildly entertaining,

⁷ From the trailer <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbKSWAEMLvc>. At the beginning of the trailer the titles actually make a reference to the film and the actress, as well as the heroine herself, “Un viaggio nella memoria di un soldato italo-americano (...) e nella storia di Anna Magnani e Teresa Talotta Gullace, la “sora Pina” di Roma città aperta.”

⁸ The film was part of the special project *Schermi di qualità* that promotes and subsidises screenings of Italian and European art cinema. *Il primo incarico* obtained a *Schermi di qualità* (SdQ) index of 81%, falling outside the best 20 such subsidised films of 2011. Il Mercato e l’Industria del Cinema in Italia: Rapporto 2011, Fondazione Ente dello Spettacolo, p. 272 - http://www.cineconomy.com/2011/pdf/Rapporto_Cinema_2011.pdf

⁹ Up to 31/12/2011 – <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1724553/> and <http://movieplayer.it/film/boxoffice/italia/2010/>

that fills up satcast movie channels condescendingly geared towards women” (Weissberg 2010) – the 2008 study ‘Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films’ confirms how filmmakers holding an equal/similar budget obtain equal/similar results at the Box Office. In other words, the gender of the director does not determine the size of the film’s profit; and the same can be said of protagonists of differing gender: the difference is all in the budget. The greater the investment, the greater the takings (Lauzen 2008: 1). The reality, however, is that films with more women in important roles, in front of or behind the camera, have smaller budgets, suffer inferior distribution and run for shorter times in cinemas (Lauzen 2008: 2).

Vito Zagarrìo, in his book *La meglio gioventù*, has identified two major factors in the latest offerings from Italian cinema: the emergence of women in key positions in the film industry and an increase in their production of documentaries (Zagarrìo 2006: 9-11).¹⁰ The numbers are unequivocal: from 2000 to 2008 Italian women directors have shot 88 films, 119 documentaries, 109 short films and 4 animated films; before the year 2000 they had shot a total of 46 films, 74 documentaries, 120 short films and 7 animated films (Scarparo & Luciano 2010: 488). The significantly increased number of films shows how, despite the difficulties women face in breaking into the industry in general, and the perennial problems finding, in particular, adequate funding and distribution, the transfer from short films and documentaries to feature films has become a realistic, creative aspiration. The documentary – whose ‘personal’ nature generally allows women directors to touch on themes dear to them – had already in the Sixties beckoned as a fruitful creative path for women directors. For example, Liliana Cavani, one of the distinguished women of Italian cinema emerging in the 70s, chose this path and it is a choice still available today.¹¹ Maria Spada’s films prove this, alternating, as they do, between documentaries such as *Poesia che mi guardi* (2009), and feature films such as *Come l’ombra/As the Shadow* (2006) and *Il mio domani/My Tomorrow* (2011).¹² In *Poesia che mi guardi* (2009), Spada evokes the emptiness of the present and the hope for a different tomorrow by focusing on women’s experiences that can build bridges between past and present. In this film, two women, an Italian poet and a foreign artist, appear as mere shadows, living and dying in a present reality that seems to ignore their very existence. Spada, a director of note among other things, is one of the few in Italian cinema who does not shirk at representing the corrosive and corrupt present as superior to what has gone before, looking to a better future.

The present, after all, is not particularly rosy and this is reflected in cinema. Lorella Zanardo, Marco Malfi Chindemi and Cesare Cantù in their *Il corpo delle donne* (2009) have felt the need to document the role that female images on television in the last 50 years have played in devaluing women in Italian society; whilst Marcello Garofalo was driven by his television experience to write *Tre donne morali* (2007), offering intertwined interviews with three highly educated well-spoken and brilliant, yet ironically fictitious, strong female characters discussing the morality of the world of television, cinema and the arts. Scholars like Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo have noted that there is no scarcity of films in which women pay a high price in the workplace, and even when they obtain some degree of success on the job, they risk paying a much higher price in their private life. This is illustrated

¹⁰ See also within it, Paterno, C., ‘Un cinema al femminile’, 135-142.

¹¹ Liliana Cavani also dedicated a TV film to the women in the Resistance *La donna nella Resistenza* (1965).

¹² Bertozzi, M., ‘Scusi, dov’è il documentario?’ in Zagarrìo, V. (ed., 2006) *La meglio gioventù: Nuovo Cinema Italiano 2000-2006*, Venice, Marsilio, 115-122 and (2008) *Storia del documentario italiano. Immagini e culture dell’altro cinema*, Venice, Marsilio, 293-297 and Scarparo, S., Luciano, B., ‘The personal is still political: films ‘by and for women’ by the new *documentariste*’, *Italica*, 87.3 (Autumn 2010) 488.

by the character Elsa, in *Giorni e nuvole/Days and Clouds* (Silvio Soldini, 2007), who returns to work but then has to fight to keep her relationship alive with her husband who does not cope well with their role reversal.¹³ Even mature women struggle, as is demonstrated by Laura Morante, whose female characters – born during the height of the feminist movement and who now find themselves in their menopause years – feel forced to ‘reinvent’ themselves in the film *CilieGINE/Cherry on the Cake* (2012). Angela Finocchiaro, who plays the protagonist in *Eva dopo Eva* (also known as *Ci vuole un gran fisico*, Sophie Chiarello, 2013), another film on this theme, explains in an interview that Italian culture “non prevede una visibilità particolare per le donne che passano quell’età”.¹⁴ Women who, in mainstream films such as *Parlami d’amore/Talk to Me About Love* (Silvio Muccino, 2008), still feel the need to question themselves on the age gap that separates them from a younger partner, demonstrate how the patriarchal system and its values still powerfully prevail in a culture that is struggling with the concept of gender equality, especially when it is complicated by financial crisis. The documentary *Una su tre/One in Three* (Claudio Bozzatello, 2012), takes things one step further, investigating the statistics to which the title makes direct reference that indicate how one woman out of three suffers violence at the hands of her partner. This in a country where in 2012 more than one woman was killed every two days, totalling 124 victims of what is unhappily termed ‘femminicidio’. And the numbers are rising every year (Ansa 2015).¹⁵

In Italy women’s lives are beleaguered by numerous requests for care from family members – be they elderly, ill or minors – and by lack of social services, as well as a generalised difficulty in finding work (Istat 2007). It is even more so at society’s margins, where Italian cinema tends to linger in order to investigate phenomena such as (legal and illegal) migration and exploitation. These are two areas in which Italian cinema still manages to keep its political bite, though it seems to have lost interest, other than playing to a generic sensitivity, in gender issues. Feminism no longer attracts a large female audience at the movies or at the polls, indeed quite the opposite. The only moment of strong feminist association post-1970s was the “Se non ora quando?” movement. This began in January 2011 with a woman’s appeal in answer to the sexual scandals that had involved the ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi and gave rise to a demonstration on 13 February the same year.¹⁶ Interest soon fizzled out, however, despite the persistence of a generalised wish for change and emancipation in society at large and in the cinema. In an interview, the actor Carolina Crescentini made the following comment:

Da noi sono molto rari i ruoli femminili a tutto tondo, le donne nei film sono sempre la spalla, il riflesso del protagonista maschile. Ma le domande che

¹³ Luciano, B., Scarparo, S. (2013) ‘Donne al lavoro: il precariato e la femminilizzazione del lavoro nei film *Signorina Effie* di Wilma Labate, *Mi piace lavorare – Mobbing* di Francesca Comencini e *Riprendimi* di Anna Negri’, in Hope, W., d’Arcangeli, L., Serra, S. (eds) *Un nuovo cinema politico italiano? Volume 1: lavoro, migrazione, relazioni di genere*, Kibworth Beauchamp, Troubador, 21-32.

¹⁴ Anon., ‘Angela Finocchiaro: “Eva dopo Eva è un film di donne”’, 19/6/2011. <http://www.cinemaitaliano.info/news/13354/angela-finocchiaro-eva-dopo-eva-e-un-film.html> and Anon. ‘Una donna uccisa ogni due giorni: femminicidio, 98 vittime nel 2012’, *la Repubblica*, 7/10/2012 – http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/10/07/news/una_donna_uccisa_ogni_due_giorni_femminicidio_98_vittime_nel_2012-44054644/?ref=search

¹⁵ See also Iacona, R. (2012) *Se questi sono gli uomini*, Milan: Chiarelettere.

¹⁶ Not without protests from the so-called “femministe storiche”. See the online petition – <http://www.petizionepubblica.it/?pi=mobdonne>. Cfr. Ronzoni, M., ‘Se non ora quando: ma è proprio solo moralismo?’ in *MicroMega*, 25/5/2012 – <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/se-non-ora-quando-ma-e-proprio-solo-moralismo/>

questa situazione genera dovrebbero probabilmente essere poste agli sceneggiatori, più che ai registi. Oltretutto in Italia di solito sono le donne che trascinano gli uomini al cinema, e quindi sembrerebbe evidente che, se non altro da un punto di vista esclusivamente commerciale, bisognerebbe avere più attenzione per l'universo femminile e creare dei personaggi più ricchi di sfaccettature. (Crescentini 2011)

Numbers are on her side. According to the article 'Dati cinema 2012: Il box office è nelle mani delle donne', the majority of devoted cinema goers are 30- to 40-year-old women (Gallozzi 2011). This phenomenon has been on the rise over the last few years according to Chiara Bruschi's article 'Box Office: il 2015 è l'anno delle donne!' (Bruschi 2015). The statistics raise the question: if the audience is mainly constituted of women, why not ask for more cinema made by women? It is not a question of setting one gender against the other, as the titles of Fausto Brizzi's comedies *Maschi contro femmine/Men Vs Women* (2010) and *Femmine contro Maschi/Women Vs Men* (2011) seem to indicate. Rather it is a question of strengthening rising numbers by giving more support to films written and directed by women, making room for a greater number of women in cinema-related professions and producing films that reflect the complexity and contradictions of life today, without perpetuating gender stereotypes exclusively tied to a male imaginary.

Masculinity

It is unlikely that a change of such magnitude will take place spontaneously or quickly. The industry is trying to defend (and possibly improve) its management of government subsidies and tax incentives, its maintenance of the Cinecittà studios, and its high levels of professionalism, just as it is trying to cling to its strong male identity. If the celluloid ceiling is still prevalent in the industry, it has been eroded on screens. A 2012 photographic exhibition of Italian actors titled 'Ciao maschio' – a homage to Marco Ferreri's 1978 film by the same name (*Bye Bye Monkey* in English) – seemed to want to bid farewell to, rather than celebrate an old macho/latin lover model of the past.¹⁷ In fact in contemporary cinema, we are witnessing a rebirth of the 'inetto', the 'man without qualities'. This character – passive, weak and lacking masculinity – seems to take a leaf from Italo Svevo's books, a character who, "underneath a façade of presumed hypermasculinity is really the anti-hero, the Italian inetto (the inept man), a man at odds with and out of place in a rapidly changing political, social and sexual environment" (Reich, 2004: xii). The comedies *Pranzo di ferragosto/Mid-August Lunch* (2008) and *Gianni e le donne/The Salt of Life* (2011), both interpreted and directed by Gianni Di Gregorio, provide classic examples. In the first he portrays a broken man riddled with debts who, in order to pay them off, is forced to look after three feisty older women as well as his mother. Left alone in Rome, during the mid-August holiday, he becomes a full-time carer for his 'guests' while around him all the other men are off to the sea-side with their families. In the second film the protagonist is a married man who has just retired and is looking for a new love interest. The women already in his life (mother, wife, daughter) either ignore him or boss him around and all the women he is interested in comically ignore him. Even when he resorts to prostitutes things go charmingly awry. The world has moved on for Gianni, leaving him puzzled and confined to what the young now call the *friend zone*, or bland friendship.

¹⁷ Held at the Casa del Cinema in Roma, from 13 July to 11 September 2012.
http://d.repubblica.it/argomenti/2012/07/13/foto/mostra_attori_roma-1144238/1/

Similar, though more unexpected, is the figure of the *inetto* in tragic discourse and even more so as the romantic victim in domestic melodrama. Rebecca Bauman analyses this figure in the chapter ‘L’inetto e il melodramma maschile: *L’uomo che ama* di Maria Sole Tognazzi’, that focuses on the 2008 film but also provides a cinematic evolution of this character from the 50s to the present day (Bauman, 2014: 95-103). What is interesting is that these male characters seem to have not only assumed the role that traditionally was reserved for female characters, but also to have moved it to centre stage. The male protagonist has thus been feminised via the (ab)use of codes of melodrama that see the male character as the central force of narrative, even when passive. The film *L’uomo che ama* (2008) focuses on the disintegrating romantic life of Roberto, a forty-something pharmacist. He is unable to move on to a fruitful love life because of, as he sees it, a previous failed relationship. Bauman explains how, “Sebbene altri film italiani abbiano raffigurato uomini nel pieno di una crisi personale, [*L’uomo che ama*] è l’unico ad utilizzare il linguaggio cinematografico del genere melodrammatico per narrare in ogni dettaglio il tormento psicologico di un uomo nei suoi momenti di vulnerabilità” (Bauman, 2014: 96-7).

This role reversal is an interesting development in what is a new and growing area of study, as films try to tackle the volatile times in which we live, where roles are changing in all areas.¹⁸ The erosion of masculinity seems also to indicate, at the very least, an ambiguity in the understanding of gender and gender awareness, the study of which has widened to include sexuality, queer and the whole spectrum LGBTQI both in Italy and abroad (Ross & Scarparo 2010: 160-163).

Sexuality

Italian cinematic representations of the complexity of sexual identities have significantly multiplied in the last fifteen years. Films of considerable interest that present controversial homosexual relationships, however, still encounter great difficulties in terms of distribution. Such was the case with *Il compleanno/ David’s Birthday* (Marco Filiberti, 2009) whose debut saw the film screened in only 14 cinemas. The plot of this film shows a budding same sex relationship between a married man and the son of a friend that ultimately results in the accidental death of the man’s wife. Popular comedies with queer themes meet with fewer difficulties. The romantic comedy *Diverso da chi?* (Umberto Riccioni Carteni, 2009), portrays an aspiring gay politician who ends up having a child with his conservative female rival, eventually setting up an odd *ménage-a-trois* to look after the child, is an unlikely

¹⁸ For theory on masculinity in cinema see Reich, J. (2004) *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 27, for the role of “inetto” see 104. Among the growing number of research publications on the topic please see Scott, J., ‘Hunk, He-Man, Mensch, Milquetoast: The Masks of Masculinity’, *The New York Times*, 13/2/1999; Zhang, G. (2012) ‘Italian male travellers at the borderline: Masculinities and liminal spaces in Lamerica and *Il ladro di bambini* by Gianni Amelio’, *The Italianist*, Vol. 32(2), pp. 238-255; Butters, G. Jr., (2014) ‘Masculinity in film: the emergence of a new literature, CHOICE: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries, pp. 955+; O’Rawe, C.G. (2014) *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan; Rigoletto, S., (2014) *Masculinity and Italian Cinema: Sexual Politics, Social Conflict and Male Crisis in the 1970s*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press; Champagne, J. (2015) *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan; Bisoni, C. (2015) ‘Io posso offrirle soltanto l’immenso calore del mio affetto: Masculinity in Italian Cinematic Melodrama’, *The Italianist*, Vol. 35(2), pp. 234-247; Baumann, R. (2015) ‘Divi ambigu: Ferzan Özpetek’s Starstruck Gaze’, *Italian Studies*, vol. 70(3), pp. 389-401.

family-centred comedy which, however, enjoyed good box office returns (€3,214,000) and was nominated for numerous prizes.¹⁹

The most important auteur who is developing a poetic in this Italian cinematic area is the Turkish-born director, Ferzan Ozpetek. He has achieved a multitude of successes and attracted audience and mainstream critical following, though according to Duncan “his well-financed products are often criticized for their relatively unchallenging narrative and aesthetic structures which, superficially at least, do little of the work that queer as a contestational category aspires to carry out” (Duncan 2013: 258). In his first films the director introduced characters who were exploring their latent sexuality or living it secretly, directly or indirectly – *Il bagno turco/Hamam* (1997), *Le fate ignoranti/His Secret Life* (2001) and *Saturno contro/Saturn in Opposition* (2007) – and later facing its rejection: *Mine vaganti/Loose Cannons* (2010). Ozpetek’s films adopt themes that allow the audience to come close to questions of gender and sexuality and unusually feature “some of Italy’s major male stars such as Stefano Accorsi, Luca Argentero, Pierfrancesco Favino, and even Riccardo Scamarcio in gay roles” (Duncan 2013: 258).

Both his 2001 and 2007 films were recognised to be of ‘interesse culturale nazionale’, or national cultural interest, by the Italian Direzione Generale per il Cinema del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali and have been aired a number of times on national television. The latter is notoriously conservative and very much tied to audience preferences,²⁰ and these characteristics have delayed acceptance of gender and sexuality themes and issues, therefore any break from the conservative stance is a welcome change. Only in 2003, with a five-year delay and almost ten years after the first national Gay Pride parade, held in Rome in 1994, was the American 1998 sitcom *Will & Grace* aired on television (Italia1, Fox Life and La5 from 2003 to 2006). Created by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick for NBC, and 8 seasons old, the series features protagonists and secondary and recurring characters who openly declare an alternative sexuality (gay and bisexual). The new and more controversial television series *The New Normal* (created by Ali Adler and Ryan Murphy for NBC in 2012) in which a gay couple face more demanding issues, such as a homosexual family with a surrogate mother, has been aired in Canada (CTV) and in Great Britain (E4), but has found only pay TV airtime in Italy in 2013 and will probably not be aired on Italian State television. In a state in which the legal framework for gay couples is the same today as it was in 1945, such contemporary themes tend to be rejected and even though they are potentially precious in changing the nation’s general attitude towards homosexuality, they perhaps do very little for the entertainment of the gay viewer. Derek Duncan writes:

The hypothetical queer Italian spectator does not limit himself to national products and indeed will probably have a film culture that is self-consciously international in orientation. The hugely informative website, cinemagay.it, is a strong indicator that, from an Italian perspective at least, queer culture is not a domestic business. The site gives ample coverage to films of gay interest from

¹⁹ There were nominations at the David di Donatello awards for Umberto Carteni as Best New Director, Claudia Gerini as Best Actress, for Luca Argentero for Best Actor, and Filippo Negro for Best Supporting Actor; nominations at the Nastri d’argento for Umberto Carteni for Best Comedy, Marco Chimenz, Giovanna Stabilini, Riccardo Tozzi (Cattleya) for Best Production, Fabio Bonifacci for Best Story; nominations at the Globi d’oro for Umberto Carteni for Best First Film and for Best Comedy; and a nomination at the Ciak d’oro for Claudia Gerini as Best Actress.

²⁰ See Boria, M., ‘Silenced Humour on RAI TV: Daniele Luttazzi, Sabina Guzzanti & Co.’, pp. 97-109, and Rothenberg, N., ‘Political Cleansing and Censorship in Public Television – A Case Study of Michele Santoro and Enzo Biagi’, pp. 217-230 in Ross, C., Brook, C.J., Albertazzi, D., (2009) *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition under Berlusconi (2001-06)*, London, Continuum International Publishing.

across the globe. (...) It is probably (...) accurate to see it as expressing, amongst many other things, the perceived absence of a gay presence in Italian cinema with adequate spectator appeal. (Duncan 2013: 256-7)

In Italy, a space for homosexual cinema was created 30 years ago with the opening of the 'Rassegna di film internazionale con tematiche omosessuali', now TGLFF – Torino Gay & Lesbian Film Festival. For years TGLFF had a predominantly male focus but it has opened, as the name suggests, to include other sexual identities. It is thus also slowly becoming possible to discuss long latent themes such as lesbianism, whose cinematographic visibility – not to mention its literary, academic and social manifestations – has been marginalised by male homosexuality (Tommasina 2010: 253).

Daniela Danna's article 'Lesbiche italiane sulla scena pubblica negli anni duemila' confirms how still today "le donne lesbiche si nascondono nel privato" (Danna 2010: 219-234). The paradox of the representation of what Guido da Verona or Pitigrilli would have termed 'amore saffico' is evident: in mainstream cinema, mainly from the U.S.A, the representation of female homosexuality is often merely a voyeuristic parenthesis in the main filmic narrative. Sequences such as the one present in *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983) in which Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve – softened by veils, diffusion filters, and Delibes' music – exchange caresses, or the one in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) where the passionate scene between Naomi Watts and Laura Harring adds absolutely nothing to the main plot, come to mind. Young, beautiful women are shot with the same lighting and technical effects used by glossy magazines such as *Playboy*, so the few attempts to represent a sexuality alternative to the one tied to male imaginary are to be commended. In Italy, literature has started to present the normality of homosexual couples: Sciltian Gastaldi has written from a male perspective *Angeli da un'ala soltanto* (2004) and *Tutta colpa di Miguel Bosé* (2010), while Elena Stancanelli has done the same from a female perspective with *Benzina* (1998) declaring "io non riconosco neanche la differenza tra eterosessuale e omosessuale; davvero non so di cosa parliamo quando diciamo normalità" (Ross 2004: 247).²¹ Her novel was adapted for film by Monica Stambrini in *Benzina/Gasoline* (2011) and "la leggerezza con cui è raccontata la nascita di un amore 'diverso', cresciuto in un'anonima stazione di servizio, è forse il carattere più forte e indimenticabile di un film che descrive in realtà una tragedia", that is the accidental death of the mother of one of the two young female protagonists at the hands of the other, and their escape from the crime scene (Nucci 2007).

'Normalisation' is a recent luxury, as the film *Viola di mare/Purple Sea* (Donatella Maiorca, 2009), adapted from the book *Minchia di re* by Giacomo Pilati, reminds us. Both titles are a reference to the sequential hermaphrodite fish *Coris julis* that is born female but whose sex changes with age and size; the fish of this species is born female and, if it dies of old age, it dies male, just like the protagonist of this nineteenth-century love story. The plot rewrites and fictionalises a true story: Pina must become Pino and marry Sara in order to avoid scandal, and take on the role of a man for the rest of her life. More recently the film *Il richiamo/The Call* (Stefano Passetto, 2009) has tried to imagine the beginnings of homosexual desire in the life of two women who enjoy heterosexual relationships with their partners. During a trip to Patagonia, that distances the two protagonists from their normal relationships and social restrictions, Lucia (who has cancer) and Lea fall in love. The ending is ambiguous, though it is certainly positive for Lucia, the elder of the two women, who recovers her health. Her doctor goes so far as to speak of rebirth: "Io credo che lei sia una donna normale, con normali risorse a cui l'esistenza ha dato la possibilità di nascere per la

²¹ I would like to thank Sciltian Gastaldi, Alessandro Vecchiarelli and Vito Zagarrìo for the preliminary discussions and suggestions that have helped to shape this article.

seconda volta". It is evident that this second birth or chance is not only a reference to her newly found health, but to her new sexuality.

It would appear that a similar rebirth is being enjoyed by Italian cinema which, in the last few years, has presented more and more films with a central LGBTQI theme and is no longer simply using stereotypical, more or less grotesque characters tied to these themes as was the case in the *commedia all'italiana*. Even in comedy, the films of the 'rebirth' period propose more complex characters. This is the case, for example, in the film *Una piccola impresa meridionale* (Rocco Papaleo, 2013) where Rosa Maria has left her high school sweetheart and husband Arturo, played by Riccardo Scamarcio, for the blonde Valbona in an unexpected sexuality reversal. The woman prefers to keep her homosexual love affair secret, not only because she fears it will not be accepted by her conservative mother, her priest brother or indeed by the whole community. Eventually her family will come to terms with her sexuality but the town, invited to the opening of their new family lighthouse hotel, will walk out on their wedding ceremony, confirming her fears.

Conclusions

A common trait that characterises many of the films discussed here is a minimalist analysis, one where the gaze is focused on the microcosm of personal events that offer glimpses of the effective macroscopic changes that Italian society is undergoing in this millennium. What is noticeably missing in mainstream films in general is a more forceful critique of society. These films are often simply locked in a personal sphere and the endings are of personal resolution, positive and reassuring, that deliberately ignore wider civic and social responsibilities. Overall there is great potential and quantitatively Italian cinema seems to have opened (or at least unlocked) its gates for women, ushering in, one hopes, a fresh, golden age of new directors, new productions, new themes. Caution is advised as the apparently glowing new reality is extremely fragile and precarious; low budgets together with inadequate distribution and promotion continue to marginalise films that have women at the centre of their production, and the same can be said of productions tied to minority themes. When analysing the main financial sources backing Italian films of no immediate popular appeal, what becomes evident is the importance of the Fondo Unico dello Spettacolo and of State subsidies. Unfortunately for Italian cinema, these have been diminishing and in 2011 were "al minimo storico di investimenti dal Fus: il cinema, dati alla mano, è l'industria meno sostenuta dallo Stato" (Mangione 2011).²² Recently the Italian Government has invested in cinema and the Minister Dario Franceschini at the opening of the Mostra Internazionale del Cinema in Venice has said: "È stato un anno di grande impegno sul cinema che ha portato ad un incremento di risorse e investimenti internazionali (...) So che c'è ancora molto da fare ma sono orgoglioso del lavoro fatto" (De Marco 2015). There is a slight increase in the number of private investors, but these prefer mainstream productions and 'guaranteed' returns, as can be inferred by the number of films that recycle characters borrowed from television and popular, entertaining themes, and this situation is exacerbated by the growing role enjoyed by Medusa Film.²³ When we link all the given data with the glacial pace of social and legal change in Italy, a process exacerbated, as always, by the media, politics and

²² See also ANICA 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015.

²³ The film production company owned by the mass media company Mediaset S.p.A., controlled by Silvio Berlusconi.

the Catholic Church,²⁴ we are left with a picture of a country that tends to drag its feet behind the most advanced Western nations. Italy and its cinema struggle to come to terms with twenty-first-century protean modernity and with the ever-increasing solicitations for change. Will Italian cinema try to lead change or will it continue to drag its feet? That remains to be seen.

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²⁴ Danna, D. (2010) ‘Lesbiche italiane sulla scena pubblica negli anni duemila’, *Italian Studies*, Vol. 65, n.2, July, 2010, 234.

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