

## SPECIALE **The Fantasy Harem: Prostitution and the Battle of the Sexes in Italian Film Comedy of the Early to Mid-1960s**

“All sublime nations resemble each other, [...] but when they start laughing, they all do so in their own unique way”<sup>1</sup>. Even in a film as internationally exportable as Fellini’s *8 ½* (1963), the traces of this specific, national laughter are worth recovering because they point to a particular trend in the representation of the conflict between the sexes in Italian comedy of the period. When Fellini’s alter ego, Guido (Marcello Mastroianni), fantasizes putting down a rebellion in his own personal harem, which arises as the women refuse to pass out of action and retire gracefully “upstairs” as they age, it is clear that Fellini makes a tongue-in-cheek gesture towards the regret felt by many Italian men about the closure of the state-run Italian brothel, and the way in which it continued to structure their sexual fantasies. Only a year later, perhaps influenced by Fellini’s film itself, and certainly by her interviews with a sample of Italian men about their sex lives, Gabriella Parca was to write:

In fondo [l'uomo italiano] ha l'animo, o le velleità, di un sultano. Il suo harem è rappresentato potenzialmente da tutte le donne che vede e desidera [...] Ma in pratica si accontenta di un harem assai più modesto: la casa di tolleranza. Era quello il suo harem, con tante donne tutte per lui, anche se non solo per lui. E quando gliel'hanno tolta ha subito uno choc da cui non riesce a riprendersi<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1958, after ten years of vigorous opposition to her proposal that had considerably weakened its original force<sup>3</sup>, socialist senator Lina Merlin had succeeded in getting a law enforced that sanctioned the abolition of the state-approved brothel or “casa di tolleranza”, on which the state had hitherto earned a tax income. In an earlier piece, I have already discussed two films made on the cusp of the brothel closure, and which deal directly with it, *Arrangiatevi!* (Mauro Bolognini, 1959) and *Adua e le compagne* (Antonio Pietrangeli, 1960)<sup>4</sup>. In both films possible forms of female economic independence alternative to prostitution are toyed with and dismissed, for reasons of comedic resolution in the former film, for semi-political reasons in the latter. Pietrangeli attempts to evoke sympathy for the women that many felt the adjustments to Merlin’s law had sold short. In this article I will look at the broader diffusion of direct and indirect responses to the closure that came in its wake on the Italian screen. I will continue to focus on comedy as the principal channel for the address of these contemporary issues. Melodramatic modes, closer to Moretti’s notion of the sublime, suggest a greater continuity in terms of their emphasis on victimhood and suffering<sup>5</sup>. In relation to the film comedies I will develop my focus on the relationship between nostalgia, fantasy and the increasingly thorny question of women’s increasing presence in the workplace and economic independence<sup>6</sup>, with a particular emphasis on how these interweave through a battle of the sexes comic form.

In the wake of major social upheavals that seriously threaten the gendered status quo in Italy, a particular emphasis on the relationship between prostitution and female entrepreneurship emerges on the Italian screen. This can be seen in the postwar period in the likes of films such as *La vita ricomincia* (Mario Mattoli, 1945), *Campane a martello* (Luigi Zampa, 1949), and *Napoli milionaria* (Eduardo De Filippo, 1950). In all of these films women’s attempts to make, save and manage money are undermined and ultimately stymied by their association with the stigma of prostitution. This speaks to a nervousness engendered by many women’s ability to cope without their menfolk during the war, and the notorious attempt to re-establish the postwar status quo. It is possible to read the closure of the brothels in 1958 as another major milestone in the disruption of gender relations with an impact upon the media. When examining the dramatic expansion of pornography that had taken place in Italy by the 1970s, Peppino Ortoleva suggests that in an early stage of this transformation the closure of the brothels contributed to that expansion:

## SPECIALE

Possiamo chiederci insomma se quella rappresentazione della sessualità maschile nei termini di una vocazione “naturale” al desiderio indiscriminato, allo sguardo indiscreto e indagatore, al possesso senza amore, rappresentazione che viene regolarmente invocata dai consumatori di pornografia a motivazione del proprio comportamento, non sia stata anche il frutto dell’azione di lungo periodo di una specifica istituzione sociale: il bordello, appunto, e i riti che ne accompagnavano la frequentazione. E se l’interrompersi improvviso di quest’abitudine acquisita e tramandata tra le generazioni non sia tra le cause principali del mutamento nei rapporti tra i sessi<sup>7</sup>.

In this period of rapid economic and social change, also relating to growing competition with television, there was much talk of the emergence of a “cinema postribolare” and the eroticization of Italian cinema<sup>8</sup>. References to the brothel become shorthand for dismissing cinema itself. In a “tavola rotonda su sesso e cinema” in 1965 Lino Micciché stated that: “È chiaro ormai, che al livello medio, il cinema italiano tende ad essere un cinema di foia, un cinema a metà strada tra il salotto delle case di tolleranza e i libri osceni”<sup>9</sup>. Ortoleva, on the other hand sees a very real substitution in cinema itself, and pornography more generally, for the function of the brothel within Italian society, emphasizing the substitution of represented sex for real sex.

More precisely, in the genre of “commedia all’italiana”, Natalie Fullwood identifies an increasing emphasis on the cinema’s legitimation of a male right to look upon the naked female body in the public leisure spaces of the beach and the nightclub<sup>10</sup>. In fact, it is here, rather than in the narrativization of prostitution or the brothel, that the most titillating encounters with the female body take place on screen. Significantly the only striptease that takes place in a prostitution narrative is in the case of Loren. As Fullwood argues, this is in part motivated by the tendency for major stars to be shown stripping in private spaces. Whilst there is no doubt that the inclusion of the prostitute motif in post-1958 cinema had a titillating intent, always inherent in this taboo topic, it is much less directly related to representing the sex act (which in fact Italian cinema could not do at that point), or even what was regarded as the next best thing: the semi-naked female body, which was, as Fullwood shows, predominantly the preserve of screen nightclubs and beaches, increasingly acceptable everyday spaces for its revelation.

### *Looking back to a pre-Merlin era*

The language used at the time of the brothel closure suggesting that the cinema replaced the brothel has inevitably generated confusion about representations of prostitution and the brothel itself. Since it is questionable whether, by 1958, the diminished number of brothels really serviced quite so many men as this attitude suggests<sup>11</sup>, what was perhaps most important by this date was its symbolic functioning, as Sandro Bellassai suggests: “si tratterebbe insomma di dire addio a uno spazio dal valore simbolico enorme per la costruzione e la riproduzione della virilità”<sup>12</sup>. This symbolic value explains why the brothel’s transition into cinema and its persistence there was almost inevitable. We need to push beyond a dismissal of cinema as tarnished by the brothel, or even replacing it, and look at what cinema in the period actually continues to do in its representations of the brothel and prostitution.

There has always been something intrinsically cinematic about the brothel space, which relates in part to its privileged place in art history<sup>13</sup>. However, as Fellini’s autobiographical telling of the fantasy harem, and the accounts in Parca’s book suggest<sup>14</sup>, for many Italian men nostalgia was always already built into the brothel experience since it was something associated with youthful rites of passage, with the initial mystery of sex. This relationship to the borderlands of childhood also offered the replication of fantasy childhood relations with femininity and the mother: the prostitute momentarily offered the fiction of immediate access on demand. Thus the brothel persisted on screen in part as a marker of a fantasy of regression.

**SPECIALE** Screen allusions to this fantasy made in the wake of the closure include *Matrimonio all'italiana* (Vittorio De Sica, 1964) (fig. 1), so called because Sophia Loren's character, Filumena, a former prostitute, manages to trick her reluctant lover of twenty years, Domenico (Marcello Mastroianni), into marrying and legitimating her sons, first by pretending to be on her deathbed and then by refusing to let Domenico know which of her three sons is his. The film contains two flashbacks that tell the lovers' story, an addition of De Sica's to the De Filippo play on which the film is based. In each of the flashbacks we return to the brothel where they first met. In Domenico's flashback, despite the World War II air raid, there is an element of humour and garish colour that connotes nostalgia for a world in which women knew their place. Maggie Günsberg has made the point that Loren's flashback is much shorter than Mastroianni's<sup>15</sup>. Not only that, despite showing some of Filumena's reluctance to service her clients, a loving attention to the atmosphere of the "salotto" and Loren's strikingly revealing attire provide a visual contrast with the older Filumena's manipulative, desexualized and vengeful witchlike "unruliness" in the scene preceding the flashback<sup>16</sup>.



Fig. 1

The choice to focus on the "salotto", as the ante-chamber of desire is common to many films that were to continue to return to the brothel space, suggesting that cinema was ideally suited to preserving, and possibly intensifying its pleasures<sup>17</sup>. Continued discursive confusion about the place of the brothel in Italian society is still reflected in the recent documentary *Case chiuse* (Filippo Soldi, 2011), which draws heavily upon many of the films mentioned here to narrate the history of the brothel<sup>18</sup>, alongside expert opinion, individual memories and photographic evidence. This technique suggests that cinema has come over time to provide Italy with a "prosthetic memory" of the brothel. Of course, Parca was also right to recognize the wave of intense nostalgia, which was also evident in the accounts found in *Quando L'Italia tollerava* by Giancarlo Fusco, the protests of Indro Montanelli in *Addio Wanda: rapporto Kensey sulla situazione italiana* (Longanesi, 1956), and the interviews recorded in Pasolini's film-inchiesta *Comizi d'amore* (1965), not to mention several attempts to revive the institution since then. No-one can deny the reality of the resistance put up to the Merlin law.

**SPECIALE** At the same time, this nostalgia reflects a pervasive nostalgia for the (fantasy of) the 1950s that Stephen Gundle has argued persisted through to the early 1990s across mainstream and soft pornographic production in Italy, from the popularity of Laura Antonelli to Tinto Brass, accompanying Italy's "partial" sexual revolution<sup>19</sup>. It would be very easy therefore to dismiss all those cinematic representations as nostalgia. However, does nostalgia merely express a longing for the irretrievable object, or as Pam Cook suggests, might it also express an effort to overcome its loss?<sup>20</sup> This interpretation makes more sense when we consider that simultaneously cinema was also attempting to interpret the place of prostitution in the post-Merlin era.

### ***Post-Merlin prostitution on screen***

Alongside nostalgic visions of the brothel, it is equally important to examine representations of contemporary prostitution, particularly since it was precisely the contemporary that Italy's dominant genre in this period, "commedia all'italiana", was interested in. How, for example, did women's changing rights affect conceptions of female agency, in particular once practitioners were granted more protection and pimps finally subject to prosecution? What spaces replaced the brothel when screening the contemporary? And who controlled them? It is not possible to answer all of these questions here, but cinema certainly profited from a new curiosity about these alternatives, which reflected those of the popular press. A good example of this excited (and certainly exaggerated reportage) can be found in Giovanni Ansaldo's column in *Tempo* in 1958:

Si direbbe che l'abolizione della prostituta prostituta, della prostituta con tanto di bollo [...] porta alla "fioritura" di nuovi tipi di prostitute, coperte, dissimulate, decentissime, capaci di esercitare la loro attività secondo gradazioni e *nuances* infinite, come se fosse un gioco o uno sport. In una formula più breve, l'abolizione del professionismo, e delle sue ignobili sedi consacranti, fa fiorire il dilettantismo, provveduto di tutti i mezzi che la tecnica moderna mette a sua disposizione, primo dei quali la macchina, questo sostituto ideale della "camera a ore"<sup>21</sup>.

*I piaceri proibiti* (Raffaele Andreassi, 1963), a film-inchiesta about different forms of prostitution was curious along similar lines, and part of a broader wave of exploitation films emerging in Italian cinema in the period. As we can see, the main focus of Ansaldo's excitement is inevitably the question of "where". A small number of films in this immediate post-closure period speak to an attempt on the part of men to create their own alternative brothel spaces, *La garçonnière* (Giuseppe De Santis, 1960) and *I piaceri dello scapolo* (Giulio Petroni, 1960), but in comedy these spaces fail, remaining precisely a fantasy, and suggesting a very real cognisance alongside all the nostalgia that the past cannot be recreated.

What also emerges alongside and intertwined with this wave of nostalgia is a distinct shift in attitudes towards female entrepreneurship. That Filumena Marturano, with her canny, secret savings and astute development of an older businesswoman's head should re-emerge in this moment, alongside the nostalgia for the brothel, is very telling. Films begin to address the successful new autonomous prostitute figure, able to control her own space, usually either a car, or a flat. These work with the nostalgia as part of a voyeuristic admiration for her sexy ability to "re-create" the experience of the brothel, and Italian cinema develops its own "Happy Hooker" variant. Russell Campbell argues that "Happy Hooker" films "depict prostitutes doing the work voluntarily, and with high satisfaction, [they] propose by implication that society be less hypocritical and embrace the profession"<sup>22</sup>. He explains that "the position has ties with the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the 'philosophy' of sexual freedom promulgated by *Playboy*"<sup>23</sup>. Whilst *Playboy* did not launch in Italy until 1972, the interest in sexual liberation can certainly be felt in this earlier period.

The final episode of *Ieri, oggi, domani* (De Sica, 1963) looks for an Italian variant of this, whilst still

**SPECIALE** weaving in nostalgia for the brothel. The heroine Mara, Loren once again, has her own flat on Piazza Navona, all the profits from her prostitution go to her, and she can pick and choose her clients as she will. Not only that, but she is able to subject her sexually excitable Bolognese client to a prayer session in place of the sex romp her provocative striptease leads him to expect (fig. 2). The client, Rusconi, is played by Marcello Mastroianni, acting up the infantilised male once again – subject to regular phone calls from his father. At one point he even threatens to don short socks and a little dress to play the “nipotina” himself, displaying a nervousness about the stability of gender roles that was sidelined all too obviously in this genre<sup>24</sup>. However, Mara interrupts her display and postpones sex because she has vowed one week’s celibacy as thanks to God for having returned her lovelorn neighbour to his rightful place in a seminary.



Fig. 2

Loren casts a peculiarly Italian slant on the “tart with a heart” or the “happy hooker” whose only crime is to want to please everybody. No longer under the control of the brothel, we nonetheless never see her outside the space of her flat, and even when she goes outside onto her balcony, where she encounters her neighbour’s grandson she becomes dangerous. Mara still feels a requisite amount of shame about her profession, craves children and, most importantly, is shown still to be under the control of the Catholic Church. Stephen Gundle has noted that the popularity of Sophia Loren and the very idea of Italy that her beauty represented was very much tied to nostalgia. Of her characters for De Sica in this period, he writes that “even in their transgressions, they aroused popular sympathy and approval”<sup>25</sup>. In this representation of Mara we see a recognition of the shift in patterns of prostitution, but still tied to old models of containment that the brothel offered.

As Alexander Walker recognized at the time, the De Sica films starring Loren as prostitute seem to be an Italian take on the sex comedy common in the US in the late fifties and early sixties<sup>26</sup>, and speak to Loren’s Hollywood fame at this point, since this combination of star and genre was undoubtedly aimed at international audiences. This US sex comedy, of which a film like *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) was a typical example, is described by Jeffers McDonald as “pitting woman against man in an elemental battle of wits, in which the goal of both is sex. Only the timing and legitimacy of this varies from gender to gender, with women wanting sex after, and men before or without marriage”<sup>27</sup>. In the Italy of this same period, where a woman’s virginity upon marriage was still expected, it was too early for ordinary women even to have this battle on screen in a comic frame. The question of sex before marriage for

**SPECIALE** women who are not professional prostitutes creates the much darker comedies of Antonio Pietrangeli, or the grotesque extremes of Pietro Germi. The prostitute's assumed promiscuity acts as a form of comic insulation, since the existing moral framework still assumes she has nothing to lose.

Away from the dizzying orbit of Loren's nostalgic stardom, comic representations emerged that implied a more threatening ability for women to continue as professionals, and even band together. In many of these films the prostitute figure is pitted against men in an attempt, not so much to postpone sex to preserve her virtue, as to preserve her source of income. If Loren's star quality enables her to preserve her virtue or her honour, less glamorous representations of the prostitute are only worried about the timing of sex in order to be able obtain payment (as in *Le massaggiatrici*, Lucio Fulci, 1962 or the "Roulotte squillo" episode of *Le motorizzate*, Marino Girolami, 1963), or occasionally marriage, but as a means of financial support, not for romantic reasons (as in the "Eritrea" episode of *La mia signora*, Luigi Comencini, 1964).



Fig. 3

That these women are upwardly mobile is well-illustrated at beginning of the film *Le massaggiatrici* (fig. 3), which opens with a form of prelude examining the changing hierarchy of the spaces of prostitution. A streetwalker curses the two attractive young prostitutes who have managed to get themselves a car for business, which we see cruise past in the foreground, turning gender relations on their head as the men get into the prostitutes' car. The Merlin law is immediately invoked as the jealous colleague comments darkly that "ora la Merlin farà chiudere pure le autorimesse". Natalie Fullwood has noted that a small number of women are shown driving cars independently in the "commedia all'italiana". Whilst, she argues, all these women have to pay a price for this independence, "they represent rare examples of female characters who are constructed with economic, as well as sexual, identities. Laura has a job at the Peruvian embassy, Pina at an agricultural consortium, Adriana as a smalltime actress, and Assunta as a model. It is significant that their economic independence is marked by their ownership and driving of cars"<sup>28</sup>. The prostitutes' burgeoning economic independence is indeed punished, and the battle of the sexes is flagged up almost immediately as the two girls have their car stolen by their clients and find

**SPECIALE** themselves back on the street. Although hampered by their “dumb blonde” sidekick, who had actually given one of the men the car keys, Marisa and another friend “l’avvocato” take control of the girls’ finances to purchase, by the end of the film, their own flat, after entering into protracted negotiations with a string of desperate and inept customers.

In this respect the film speaks to another aspect of the anxiety occasioned by the Merlin law: the invisibility of the prostitutes’ new spaces as they merge into the everyday. In an article in *L’Europeo* of 1958, “Comincia l’era Merlin”, Ghirotti writes that: “Tra gli annunci economici dei giornali compaiono ambigue offerte di garçonnières. La polizia sta indagando a Roma, sull’aumento dei canoni d’affitto per gli appartamenti ‘persona sola’ e sulla strana moltiplicazione degli ‘istituti di bellezza’”<sup>29</sup>. Again the exaggeration of the changes wrought by a relatively small number of women, some of whom abandoned prostitution altogether, are evident here, but the general mood of the popular press is reflected in this film. The storyline, however, takes the motif of the battle of the sexes further: as the women become embroiled in the insider wheeler-dealing taking place between some businessmen and a Christian Democrat politician, the canniest of them, Marisa (Sylva Koscina), manages to pull off the best deal on the businessmen’s behalf. The girl in the trio who calls herself the “avvocato”, studied law before taking up a more “lucrative” profession. She is able to confound both a professor and a police officer with her detailed knowledge of her new rights, reeling off the clauses of the 1958 law with reference to prostitution, and reminding them that now the law “punisce solo chi la sfrutta”. It is to her canniness that we impute the final joke, when the police round up all those calling themselves “massaggiatrici”, thereby arresting a “real” masseuse (Marisa Merlini), whilst the girls have relabelled themselves “manicuristi”. Merlini’s role, as the embattled Bice, whose real massage business is ruined, and whose husband is seduced by the girls, foregrounds the difficulty for working women to be perceived as anything other than “donne pubbliche”.

Similar prostitute “success” stories are seen in the “Roulotte squillo” episode of *Le motorizzate*, *Anonima cocottes* (Camillo Mastrocinque, 1960), *La vedovella* (Silvio Siano, 1964), or *La pupa* (Giuseppe Orlandini, 1963), in which women either establish themselves as independent prostitutes, or move into a new sphere of financial success altogether. *Anonima cocottes*, in which the prostitutes play the stock market to make their millions, reflects a persistent emphasis on canniness with money and female success.

Both Mary Wood and Maggie Günsberg cite the motif of prostitution as a common theme in Italian representations of the boom,<sup>30</sup> and there is no doubt that all these figures represent on a symbolic level the extremes of the wheeling and dealing that the economic miracle was felt to give rise to. Russell Campbell sees a particular blossoming of the prostitute screen type “the business woman” in relation to the economic miracle beyond Italy as well, in the likes of the film *Das Mädchen Rosmarie* (Rolf Thiele, 1958). Whilst the German film offers an “excoriating critique” of the economic miracle, he identifies *Anonima cocottes* as “a comic celebration” of the prostitute-business connection. It is typical, according to Campbell of the “business woman” typology to take one of these two very different directions: “The left-wing version enjoys a snug fit with the ‘official’ patriarchal line of deploring prostitution, whereas the right-wing version, aligned with ‘unofficial’ patriarchal ideology and buttressed by the global expansion of free-market forces, challenges this position head-on”<sup>31</sup>. In the Italian case the very specific references to the law, and to changing spatial arrangements, bring these “boom” representations into a direct relationship with the changes also brought about by the Merlin law, further muddying their ideological commentary. The comic mode of the “commedia all’italiana”, whilst heavily satirical in its emphasis on institutional corruption and individual greed, remains nonetheless captivated by the new narrative possibilities the business woman prostitute offers. In fact, as Campbell concludes himself, the “business woman” type “torn between conflicting ideological pressures” “remains poised at the intersection of prostitution and capitalism, carrying a burden of metaphoric significance almost too heavy for any fully realized individual to bear”<sup>32</sup>. However, it is also worth noting that the instances of female prostitute “business woman”

**SPECIALE** examined so far here in these “battle of the sexes” narratives present characters who trade (somewhat ironically) on narratives that emphasize their verbal resilience and character rather than their bodies – all too rare in the comedies of this period. We are intended to read all of them sympathetically, as variants on the “happy hooker” typology as well as the “business woman”, and enjoy them getting the better of male antagonists, who are either extremely corrupt, or repressed, usually both.

If the space offered by the car was one of the key features associated with the changing circumstances of prostitution, as suggested in Ansaldo’s article, it was also a key symbol of the boom itself, as Fullwood’s study shows<sup>33</sup>. The film *Le motorizzate* contemplates with patronizing fascination the possibility of female mobility, opening with a voxpop in which men voice a range of views on women drivers. This is followed by documentary footage of women drivers set to the lyrics of the song “Guarda che fata motorizzata”, with a reference to enchantment which underlines the absurdity of this gender role, but also reassurance as to her continued adherence to the “beauty system”, by emphasizing her attempts to apply lipstick whilst driving<sup>34</sup>. It is not surprising that this mobility is quickly linked back to prostitution in the second episode, featuring Lola (Bice Valori) who seeks to ply her trade from a caravan on the roadside under the label: “Automassaggiatrice”. A scandalized “moralista” calls the police, and, like the “avvocato” figure in *Le massaggiatrici*, we hear Lola comically rebuff the “brigadiere” with all the paperwork she could possibly need, permits and diplomas all in order, taking full advantage of her new legal rights. This scene reflects the popular journalism of Ghirelli, who wrote in 1958, in response to the closure, that: “Oggi le cose sono cambiate: ci vuole la flagranza del reato per mettere in moto la camionetta della questura; e soltanto se la ragazza non possiede documenti per l’identificazione si può portarla in camera di sicurezza. Il ‘fenomeno’ dilaga, l’adescatrice s’è fatta audace, il ‘pattuglione’ non la spaventa più”<sup>35</sup>.

Indeed the sketch continues as the “moralista” attempts to catch her “in flagrante” as a means of bringing about her legal detention. The emphasis here is on the absurdity of the new space as the overweight male client is driven to a secluded location whilst being thrown around the caravan and bombarded with Lola’s trinkets, domestic signifiers of aspirational femininity that typically adorn the “feminine” space of the boudoir. He is then licked by a cow through the window sending him running straight into the arms of the “moralista” who sets a trap and calls the police who arrest the pair, finally caught “in flagrante”. The episode refracts nervousness about female mobility, the closure of the brothels, but also fascination with emerging “new” alternatives and their comic potential. Sex itself, or titillating views of the female body remain at the margins (we have a brief shot of the semi-clothed couple at the end when caught “in flagrante”). Comedy is generated by mis-recognition of sex in this new space, just as in the confusion over the identity of the “real” masseuse in *Le massaggiatrici*. The “moralista” initially thinks the couple are engaged in sex, when in fact the client is writhing around in a horrified response to the cowlick. After being caught, we see an undeterred Lola back on the hunt for an alternative venue. She happily considers the purchase of a luxury boat in a showroom until the unwitting salesman reassures her that the police will keep her safe with their special launches. Whilst temporarily defeated by the “moralista” and police vigilance, we sense that Lola will continue her quest.

The luxury yacht is the central spatial focus of another prostitute narrative from this period, the episode “Eritrea” (Luigi Comencini) in *La mia signora*, starring Silvana Mangano and Alberto Sordi (fig. 4). The two characters end up on the luxury yacht of an Italian politician, when Sartoletti (Alberto Sordi) realizes that he can use “Eritrea” (Silvana Mangano), a prostitute he has met quite by chance, to get a building contract out of “l’onorevole” (Claudio Gora). Plotting to present Eritrea as his wife, he acts as a mini Pygmalion taming her Roman “popolana” ways and buying her new clothes, picking up here on a similar motif in *Le massaggiatrici*, in which it is Marisa who poses as Parondi’s wife. In both cases, humour and sympathy are generated by the prostitutes’ straight-talking, working-class lack of bourgeois “manners”. After this brief training, Sartoletti leaves her on the yacht to extort the favour he needs. However, Eritrea is now taking her role as wife seriously and slaps l’onorevole when he propositions her. When Sordi



**SPECIALE** berates her, she returns to the yacht and l'onorevole with a new determination. Sordi later meets her in unrecognizably elegant attire at an expensive hotel where she is introduced to him as the wife (presumably actual on this occasion) of another dignitary. As he stares at her in disbelief in a private moment, she bashes him on the nose affectionately and stalks off. The “battle of the sexes” narrative is particularly successful here because the prostitute character’s resilience surprises us. Silvana Mangano’s skilful characterization helps in this dénouement. There is one point in the narrative, when she begins to look fondly at Sartoletti, her pseudo-husband, and seems about to slip into the melodramatic narrative of the prostitute frustrated in love. Instead, she emerges as convincingly victorious and sweeps off with as much dignity as any former prostitute has ever managed on screen.



Fig. 4

### **Conclusion**

Alongside the striptease artist, whose prevalence in the cinema of this period Natalie Fullwood has underlined, the prostitute remains very much the default representation of the working woman in comedy in this period. In fact the portrayal of the striptease artist also inevitably slides towards the stigma of prostitution (see for example the figure of Monica in *Il moralista* [Giorgio Bianchi, 1959], one moment stripper, the next “ragazza squillo”). As Fullwood argues, we have very few screen instances of women workers in office spaces, as anything other than signifiers for sex. Drawing on the example of *L'impiegato* (Gianni Puccini, 1959), she argues that “the notion of the semi-naked female form as pleasurable commodity to be consumed by men spreads throughout the representation of women when they are granted spatial primacy [...] female characters must either signal sex or sexuality, or be relegated to the margins or rear of the frame”<sup>36</sup>. As Ortoleva suggests, in addition to the closure of the brothel, changes in female employment and growing female emancipation further unsettled the status quo, and further consolidated the turn towards pornography<sup>37</sup>, and the sexualised representation of women’s work was also part of this response. It is particularly significant therefore that sometimes, in a handful of films, the

**SPECIALE** emergence of this “new” entrepreneurial prostitute is juxtaposed with the representation of an older, more financially powerful woman, active in the public sphere. It is important because it reminds us, with Yvonne Tasker, that whilst women almost always signify sex, the ways in which women signify sex are still significant<sup>38</sup>.

The successful prostitute entrepreneur also represents and only partially assuages the growing threat embodied by increasing female power in the public sphere. There was no doubt that this growing power was present in the Italian imaginary in this period.<sup>39</sup> As early as 1954, popular magazines such as *Epoca* included features like: “Le donne che comandano”, looking at a series of women in management positions<sup>40</sup>. In reality there was a marked increase in the participation of women in the tertiary sector, suggesting, as Bellassai observes, that gender and work were no longer so neatly divided<sup>41</sup>. Nor should we forget that the whole Merlin incident was overshadowed, precisely, by the figure of a real older woman with public power and detailed knowledge of the law. This screen doubling is in fact exactly what we see embodied in the very trajectory of Filumena Marturano herself, whose younger prostitute self is doubled by an older, canny businesswoman, only tied to the private sphere by her younger prostitute self. In *Le massaggiatrici* there are in fact two older business women. If one of them, Bice (Marisa Merlini, aged 39), the real masseuse, is a victim of the girls’ savvy self-management, as discussed earlier, the other comes off rather better. The two hapless protagonist businessmen are in fact, in the pay of the wealthy wife of one of them, Signora Parodi, played by Laura Adani (aged 49). When she is first introduced to us, we see her reading the *Financial Times*, whilst her husband on the other end of the phone looks at through the private ads for a “ragazza squillo”, reinforcing the “naughty boy” dynamic that persists in these films. Ultimately, despite her antagonism towards the younger imposter, Signora Parodi recognizes that she stands to benefit most from the deal that prostitute Marisa manages to pull off on her behalf with the Christian Democrat politician.

This doubling tendency perhaps reaches its apex in Lizzani’s atypical film, *La Celestina P.R...*(1964), in which a youthful-looking Assia Noris (aged 52), in an attempted screen comeback, plays the glamorous, and ruthless procuress Celestina, who uses a combination of personal force, feminine charm, a steady supply of young, attractive women, along with a dissolute nobleman turned gigolo, to get the better of a number of wealthy Milanese businessmen. As businesswoman-procuress, Celestina herself is marked by the prostitute stigma, but the film is unique in underlining her attempts to hold this at bay: she is depicted as attractive enough to create confusion in her potential clients about whether or not she is offering her own body. Indeed, her only sexual liaison in the film, immediately consigned to the dustbin of “errors”, almost undoes all her successful wheeling and dealing. This is the only instance in which the portrayal of the older “businesswoman” takes the upper hand in the narrative thread, as a series of minor prostitute figures play in cameo roles. In the character of Celestina the film reflects on the impossibility for women of combining business and sexual pleasure thereby undermining the “happy hooker” typology (whilst nonetheless reinforcing it in the minor figure of her stupid, blonde prostitute protégée). Across a number of films this splitting mechanism makes persistent links between working women, women with financial control, and the prostitute. Entangled with the nostalgia for the brothel space, then, there is that “mix of aggression and anxiety that psychoanalysis has recognized in laughter”<sup>42</sup> about women’s changing roles, certainly as prostitutes, but more importantly, as working and earning independent women in general. This serves as a useful reminder that there is more to the proliferation of the prostitute theme in post-Merlin cinema than a descent into a “cinema postribolare”.

Danielle Hipkins

## SPECIALE Notes

1. Franco Moretti, "Planet Hollywood", in *Distant Reading*, Verso, London-New York 2013, p. 99.
2. Gabriella Parca, *I sultani. Mentalità e comportamento del maschio italiano*, Rizzoli, Milano 1965, p. 254.
3. For a full account of how "what Merlin framed as a liberating reform became a protective, moralizing law which upheld the isolation and maintained the status of prostitutes as second class citizens", see Molly Tambor, "Prostitutes and Politicians: The Women's Rights Movement in the Legge Merlin Debates", in Penelope Morris (edited by), *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2006, pp. 131-145, p. 131.
4. "Between Renegotiation Tactics and Failed Revolutions: Italian Brothel Films of 1959-60, the Public/Private Binary and Gendered Address", in Simona Storchi (edited by), *Public and Private Spaces in Italian Culture*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2013, pp. 99-113.
5. See for example the continued adaptation of French melodramatic fiction in films like *Camille 2000* (Radley Metzger, 1969) and *Bubu* (Mauro Bolognini, 1971), or the perpetuation of white slave films, such as *Schiave bianche* (Michel Clement and Umberto Scarpelli, 1960) or *Le magnifiche sette* (Mauro Girolami, 1961).
6. "Nel quinquennio precedente al 1958, sempre secondo i dati ISTAT, il lavoro femminile è nettamente in crescita: in termini assoluti le donne complessivamente occupate sarebbero in quell'anno, in migliaia, 5.243, mentre erano 4.065 nel 1954". Sandro Bellassai, *La legge del desiderio. Il progetto Merlin e l'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*, Carocci, Roma 2006, p. 49.
7. Peppino Ortoleva, *Il secolo dei media*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2009, pp. 174-175.
8. Mino Argentieri, "Tavola rotonda su sesso e cinema", *Cinema Sessanta*, no. 54 (June 1965), p. 27.
9. Lino Micciché, "Tavola rotonda su sesso e cinema", *Cinema Sessanta*, n. 54 (June 1965), p. 17.
10. Natalie Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space: Comedy, Italian Style*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York forthcoming.
11. Lina Merlin herself makes this point in a newspaper article in 1958: "La chiusura delle 'case', dove normalmente sono ospitate circa tremila donne incide ben poco sul numero veramente enorme delle 'peripatetiche' e delle 'ragazze squillo' che costituiscono una vergognosa piaga sociale". Lina Merlin, "Ho vinto la battaglia contro le persiane chiuse", *Oggi*, 27 febbraio 1958, p. 18.
12. Sandro Bellassai, *op.cit.*, p. 9.
13. "Artists have seen the brothel as a worthwhile subject: it carries its own drama and tension, its peculiar interplay of human relations, the paradoxical union of the everyday commonplace and the unexpectedly bizarre". G.L. Simons, *A Place for Pleasure: A History of the Brothel*, Harwood-Smart Publishing, London 1975, p. 8.
14. "Nel 50 per cento dei casi il primo rapporto sessuale è avvenuto con una prostituta" (although this did not necessarily take place in a brothel). Gabriella Parca, *op.cit.*, p. 41.
15. Maggie Günsberg, "Commodifying Passions: Gender and Consumerism in *Commedia all'italiana*", in Ead., *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005.
16. Several critics apply the trope of the "unruly woman" to Loren. See Pauline Small, *Sophia Loren: Moulding the Star*, Intellect, Bristol 2009, and Jacqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity and Italian Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2004.
17. These include: Roberto Rossellini, *Il generale della rovere* (1959); Mauro Bolognini, *La viaccia* (1961); Bernardo Bertolucci, *Il conformista* (1970); Federico Fellini, *Roma* (1972); Lina Wertmüller, *Film d'amore e d'anarchia* (1973); Tinto Brass, *Salon Kitty* (1976), *Paprika* (1991), and, much more recently the Rai TV mini series *Altri tempi* (Marco Turco, 2013).
18. It shows footage from *Arrangiatevi!*, *Roma*, and *La viaccia*, alongside stills from *Salon Kitty*, *Film*

**SPECIALE** *d'amore e d'anarchia*, and *Matrimonio all'italiana*, and Istituto Luce newsreel about the making of *Adua e le compagne*.

19. Stephen Gundle, "Emancipation, Eroticism and Nostalgia", in *Bellissima: Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy*, Yale University Press, London-New Haven 2007, pp. 191-222.

20. Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2005, p. 4.

21. Giovanni Ansaldo, "Epicideo per le case chiuse", *Tempo*, 13 febbraio 1958, p. 10. In fact, a year earlier in A. Gambino, "La libera professione", *l'Espresso*, 27 ottobre 1957, pp. 6-7, the journalist examines the "state of prostitution" and highlights the existence of "le ragazze squillo", "le case d'appuntamento", and "il massaggio" before the closures, claiming that the inhabitants of the "case chiuse" only make up 1% of women practising prostitution in Italy. This emphasis on hypocrisy with regard to questions of sexual "freedom", or at least the freedom for men to engage in sex with prostitutes, is also made evident in the frequent satirical representations of hypocritical male moralizing figures in many representations of prostitution in Italian comedy of this period. Their vociferous critique of prostitution is often shown to hide an addiction to, or profit from it.

22. See, for example, figures in *Il moralista* (Giorgio Bianchi, 1959), *Le massaggiatrici* (Lucio Fulci, 1962), the "Roulotte squillo", in *Le motorizzate* (1963), "Il complesso della schiava nubiana" (Franco Rossi, 1965), episode in *I complessi*.

23. Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2006, p. 230.

24. See Sergio Rigoletto, "Italian-Style Comedy and l'italiano medio: Strategies of Exclusion", in Lucy Bolton, Christina Siggers Manson (edited by), *Italy on Screen: Italian Identity in the National Imaginary and International Symbolic*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2010, pp. 35-49.

25. Stephen Gundle, *op.cit.*, p. 183.

26. Alexander Walker, *The Celluloid Sacrifice*, Michael Joseph, London 1966, pp. 205-206.

27. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meet Girl Meets Genre*, Wallflower Press, London 2007, p. 38.

28. Natalie Fullwood, *op.cit.*

29. Gigi Ghirotti, "Comincia l'era Merlin", in *L'Europeo*, 21 settembre 1958, pp. 18-21, p. 18.

30. Mary Wood, *Italian Cinema*, Berg, Oxford-New York 2005; Maggie Günsberg, *op.cit.*, pp. 60-96.

31. Russell Campbell, *op.cit.*, pp. 208-10.

32. *Ivi*, p. 229.

33. Natalie Fullwood, *op.cit.*

34. "The beauty system" is identified by the McCannells as one guaranteeing women's compliance with the gender hierarchy through observance of feminine beauty practices. See Dean and Juliet Flower MacCannell, "The beauty system", in Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse (edited by), *The Ideology of Conduct*, Methuen, New York-London 1987, pp. 206-238.

35. Gigi Ghirotti, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

36. Natalie Fullwood, *op.cit.*

37. "Il manifestarsi di un nuovo potere delle donne in tutte le sfere del vivere, dalle più pubbliche alle più intime, cosa che ha favorito, per compensazione e in parte per rivincita, la ricerca da parte di molti maschi di forme di rappresentazione simbolica nelle quali la donna fosse, al contrario, sottoposta e ricondotta al suo posto". *Ibidem*.

38. Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, Routledge, London 1998.

39. "L'immagine di schiere di donne bellicose in rapida avanzata su tutti i fronti della società, compresi ovviamente l'economia, il lavoro, le professioni, è in questi anni notevolmente diffusa presso l'opinione pubblica maschile [...] Non sempre la percezione generalizzata di tali cambiamenti risulta proporzionata alle effettive dimensioni del mutamento stesso". Sandro Bellassai, *op.cit.*, pp. 45-48.

- SPECIALE** 40. Anna Garofalo, “ Le donne che comandano”, *Epoca*, 17 gennaio 1954, pp. 34-5.
41. “Appare sempre più evidente che la stessa dinamica dello sviluppo economico contribuisce a indebolire fatalmente anche l’identificazione necessaria fra il lavoro e il genere fisicamente più avvantaggiato, nel momento in cui produce una moltiplicazione delle mansioni in cui non sono necessarie particolari abilità fisiche, come è il caso di molti impieghi nel terziario dove la componente femminile è in percentuale la più rilevante alla fine del decennio (35.9%)”. Sandro Bellassai, *op.cit.*, p. 49.
42. Franco Moretti, *op.cit.*, p. 99. Moretti describes this as “so typical of the emotional cosmos of the commedia all’italiana”.