

***‘Dai che mi vesto da puttana!’***  
**Cultural Representations of Prostitution**  
**in Italy, 1955-1990**

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the University of Leicester

by

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University of Leicester

2012

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This thesis considers the mediation of the symbolic representation of the (female street) prostitute by the media in the second half of the twentieth century in Italy. The reality of 'being', 'acting' or 'working' as a prostitute during this complex period between the Italian economic boom, the emergence of worker, student and feminist movements, and the transformation of the Italian sex trade in the late 1980s, has undergone a series of cultural and strategic misrepresentations. The unexpected emergence of a small, unusually well-organized and self-conscious group of prostitutes opened a critical front: questioning and unsettling established representational narratives on paid sex, and breaking the loud silence of Italian feminism on prostitution.

This research provides new insight into what these narratives - produced both by prostitutes themselves and by others - simultaneously reveal and conceal: prostitutes and violence against them, masculinity and gender identities. The historical silence of prostitutes, the gaps and precisely what is omitted from the documents require multiple and simultaneous levels of investigation and interpretation framed within an interdisciplinary approach. History, cultural studies, gender and feminist film studies are brought together, allowing the investigation of a range of sources, such as fiction, feminist writings, autobiographies, films, alongside Government Acts, newspaper articles, oral and archival documents. Most of the chosen texts and films have not been previously studied in any depth; their analysis contributes to identify the cultural strategies used to deal with, defer or 'resolve' social anxiety towards, and within, gender and gender relationships. This thesis investigates the relationship between feminism and prostitution and provides an understanding of the way that prostitutes have found a public voice, while it reveals the subversive connotation implied in the act of prostitution as 'performed', and thus reinterpreted, by prostitute activists.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks first of all to the University of Leicester, which awarded me a University Open Research Scholarship. This project, however, would have never been possible without the constant intellectual and emotional support and patience of my PhD supervisor, Sharon Wood, who trusted me more than I trusted myself throughout these, sometimes very difficult, years. I was lucky to share office as PhD student with Emma Staniland, with whom conversation was always stimulating and helpful. I would like to thank Chloë Heffernan and her supervisor Bernadette Luciano from the University of Auckland, without whose generosity a section of this thesis would never have been written. I am also grateful to Danielle Hipkins for allowing me to read her article 'Francesca's salvation or damnation?: Resisting recognition of the prostitute in Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà*' before its publication.

I would like to thank Giorgio Boccolari, Sebastiano Tringali and Cristina dell'Orso, respectively of the Archivio Cesare Zavattini (Reggio Emilia), Centro Ligure di Storia Sociale (Genoa) and Mediateca Toscana (Florence), for their help and assistance. Giovanni Focardi, researcher at the University of Padua, Sara Mori and Francesco Catastini, members of the researcher team of the Centro Romantico-Gabinetto Vieussex in Florence, were extremely helpful.

I would like to express my gratitude to the women of the Coordinamento donne FLM whom extraordinary political commitment remains a lesson worth heeding. In particular, I would thank Paola Pierantoni for making my stay in Genoa an enjoyable, fruitful and warm experience. I am deeply grateful to Carla Corso and Pia Covre for

allowing me to ‘dig’ in their archive and enjoy their intelligent company, acute sense of humour and generous hospitality in Pordenone.

I am indebted to my mother Liliana Arabelli and Alessandra Contini Bonacossi, external examiner for my Master’s degree in History at the University of Florence and dear friend later on, who warmly encouraged me at the beginning of my journey without, unfortunately, seeing the end.

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## Introduction

Two sharp whistles. Four men materialize in the darkness surrounding the couple. Nadia frantically tries to escape, chased by a fifth man. She loses one shoe, then the other when he grabs her and pushes her into the mud. For what seems a long time he holds her down; he throws her panties in her lover's face, shouting 'Vuoi vedere come si fa all'amore?'. Then he rapes her while his improvised gang holds Rocco back. Another whistle, a train this time, punctures the tension and the scene ends in a terrified, and terrifying, silence.

It was 1960. Luchino Visconti was asked to cut this dramatic scene from *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. Considered 'di un ardimento quale raramente si è visto',<sup>1</sup> Nadia's rape was chilling and breathtaking; anything but obscene. There is no nudity, no titillating innuendo. Its obscenity, if there is any, lies instead in the graphic exposure of the brutal depiction of rape as manifestation of power, and in the wretched complicity of the men who participate as spectators. Obscenity,<sup>2</sup> if such there is, might also be detected in the unforeseen disruption of the stereotype of the prostitute. Nadia, one of the most vibrant characters of the film, is not a nameless, common prostitute; instead, she is fully integrated into the complex dynamic of the Parondi family. An individual in her own right, her rape casts her once more into the role of disposable object and clashes with

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<sup>1</sup> 'Di un ardimento quale raramente si è visto [...] orrido rito tributato a quel falso senso dell'onore che trascina a tanti eccessi la gente primitiva'. Pestelli, L., 1960. Un forte film di Visconti «Rocco e i suoi fratelli». *La Stampa*, 7 September, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> According to Joan DeJean (2002:2), 'obscenity no longer has any essential affiliation with sexuality but refers instead to ethical issues'. She notes that '*obscene* seems [...] to be taking on two new meanings: first, any subject that we find hard to look at and therefore do not want to see represented (thus, someone will say of a video documenting a death that it is obscene); second, a semantic catchall for actions we consider morally indecent'.

the viewer's knowledge of and sympathy for her. Far from being 'consumed' or denied, in the cinematic moment her individuality and personhood are, rather, shockingly expressed and affirmed by the actions of the rapist and his accomplices.

The evocative and paradigmatic force of this scene epitomizes the condition of many Italian women and gestures to the parameters of much of their experience: rape, honour, and prostitution. In the 1960s, female sexual respectability was a source of concern -especially in Southern Italy - and its loss could jeopardize the honour of a man and his entire family. The Fascist penal code, still in force, firmly supported the anxious demand for compensation for irreparable damage. A 'proper' marriage could 'restore' the loss of virginity and save both rapist and honour, while extenuating circumstances were regularly applied in cases of a crime of honour. Husbands, fathers or brothers who killed unfaithful wives, dishonoured daughters or sisters, and if necessary their seducers and lovers, could reasonably hope for a very light sentence. Mothers who killed their illegitimate children to protect their own honour could rightly and optimistically appeal to the clemency of the judge.<sup>3</sup>

A female prostitute had, obviously, few legal grounds on which to complain against a rapist as the law 'required that a woman must have had "honour" to protect and preserve' in the first place (Bettiga-Boukerbout, 2005:238). Nevertheless, the shadow of a doubt hung as a threat over any woman, particularly over those

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, for instance, the decision made by the court of Catania in 1965 is utterly understandable: the primary school teacher Gaetano Furnari, having killed the seducer of his twenty-year-old daughter, was jailed for less than three years. While the sentence met with the approval of many, the daughter was publicly condemned as the one at fault. A few months later, however, the case of Franca Viola, a Sicilian girl who sent her rapist to prison and refused to marry him, caused a national debate, scandal and also approbation.

increasingly employed in the new jobs created by the Italian economic boom that opened society to a degree of freedom never before imagined. Nadia, as she emerges from *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, belongs to this problematic moment, trapped as she is between tradition and the new. Despite her being a prostitute, she is depicted as the one who maintains her own sense of integrity and independence, taking her life a step further than the men and the other women who inhabit Visconti's masterpiece. Still, as required by the conventions of melodrama, she pays cruelly for her choice.

The purpose in this thesis is to analyse the cultural discourse that built up and surrounded the figure of the prostitute in Italy during the twenty-five years following the introduction of the Merlin law in 1958, along with the cultural shifts, challenges and dislocations which began in the 1960s. It will focus on the representation of the prostitute throughout the dramatic transitional period from the 1960s up to the mid 1980s, when the economic boom, the students' and workers' movements, and the feminists' struggles seem to call into question the basis of Italian society. Prostitution, too, was a target of these overall changes. The Merlin law, abolishing the regulatory system and legalizing prostitution, had dismantled the institutionalized figures of both prostitute and client. Many prostitutes, freed from the 'official' brothels, joined others already working on the streets, changing urban scenarios, or 'renewing' their activity under more ambiguous or clandestine forms. Furthermore, the clients, now deprived of the social legitimacy guaranteed by the brothel system, were transformed into faceless strangers. Exposed to the public gaze, street prostitutes, even more than before, became the object of curiosity, social studies, deprecation or paternalistic empathy. Throughout

the 1960s and 1970s, as a ‘hot’ topic of the ‘cronaca cittadina’ or ‘cronaca nera’, the newspapers made column-inches for them especially as contaminating or dead bodies, sad victims of jealousy, criminal racket or the ‘occasional’ aggressive client. The call girls who populated clandestine and higher-class circuits, on the other hand, provided more piquant or glamorous material for newspapers. The ‘accidental’ discovery of a ‘casa squillo’ by the police excited the journalists, who hoped – usually unsuccessfully - to bring to light the names of prominent clients in the manner of Christine Keeler.<sup>4</sup>

Female street prostitutes are, to a greater extent than call girls, at the centre of this work that, given the time frame and approach chosen, excludes trafficked women and adolescent or child prostitution. Although during the 1970s the media and EU reports discuss both phenomena,<sup>5</sup> they become contentious issues only in the late 1980s when they change dramatically the nature and ethnic composition of street prostitution in Italy.<sup>6</sup> What has not changed, however, is the contempt directed in particular towards street prostitutes. It has been rightly noted (Weitzer, 2010a:13) that ‘certain experiences are generic to prostitution (coping with the stigma, managing client behaviour, [and] avoiding risks)’. Women working outdoors are more likely to experience intolerance and violence than are their indoor colleagues. It is no accident that some of the

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years this Italian journalists’ dream has finally become reality with the explosion of the Sircana, Marrazzo and, above all, Berlusconi’s sex cases, widely covered by national and international media.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Council of Europe. Consultative Assembly, 1979. *Documents: Working papers*. Strasbourg, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> In the early 1980s transsexual migrants from Brazil and other South American countries started to appear along the streets of Italian cities, then followed by an increasing number of female migrants from Nigeria and, after 1989, from East Europe (Aghatise, 2004; Beccucci and Garosi, 2008:23-24; Di Nicola *et al.*, 2009). According to *Telefono Azzurro* and *Eurispes* ‘l’Italia è al primo posto in Brasile [...] tra i Paesi Europei nel praticare turismo sessuale’ (cited in Crisafi *et al.*, 2010:41).

prostitutes' movements originating in Europe between the 1970s and 1980s were promoted mainly by street workers: these were the women who protested against their non-citizen status and the stigma that renders them more likely to become victims of widespread violence by clients and police alike.

The disturbing visibility of street workers is certainly at the base of this symptomatic difference; the recurrent campaigns for the re-opening of brothels and against street prostitution, promoted since 1973 (Danna, 2004:166), seem to confirm this. Politicians of various affiliations and levels periodically 'exhume' the prostitutes from their streets and target them with unusual zeal in the name of 'sicurezza e decoro cittadino'. Mara Carfagna, the Equal Opportunities Minister for Berlusconi's government, began her mandate licensing in 2008 the last of a number of draft bills against outdoor prostitution and its clients. Questions of class and gender are not explicitly addressed yet are relevant to the attitude incorporated in the proposals. Generically depicted as powerless, exploited, undereducated and indecent, the street prostitute catalyzes what may appear morbid interest, hatred, or guilty indifference. Whatever she may be, even 'ugly, dirty and bad', the street prostitute and her rapid service seem to have endless appeal, nurturing both male and female fantasy while provoking lively and bitter debate. Beginning from the acknowledgment of this repulsion-attraction, this research focuses on the cultural representation of the female street prostitute as this emerges from a range of texts. It will explore what the representation seems to bring into conflict, or hide from view: violence, sexuality, masculinity and gender relationships. It is not, then, a sociological study of the 'real'

prostitute and her clients; rather, it is an analysis of the cultural strategies used to deal with, delay or 'resolve' social anxiety towards, and within, gender and gender relationships.

The figure of the prostitute, as may now be claimed, has been heavily surrounded and shaped by a growing body of narrative with a 'scientific' status in which 'popular' culture and feminist thinking have found, or tried to make, their space. Criminology, psychology, sociology, juridical and medical contributions have delineated the frameworks that have ensnared women prostitutes over the last two centuries into what seems a crystallized picture. In a study of their representation, it is necessary thus to be aware of the long-term and indirect effects cast by the simultaneous multiple discourses on prostitution. Despite all of their ambivalence, feminists have allowed the reader to tear away some of these screens which previously obstructed our understanding of prostitution and reframing it within a historical perspective. Nevertheless, while they have also opened the way for the prostitutes' own intervention, feminists have often found themselves unprepared to listen to the new protagonists as equal and dignified interlocutors. The following sections will provide an overview of these narratives from a historical and theoretical perspective, concluding with the outline of the structure and the chapters of this thesis.

## Hidden from history: the making of the in/visible prostitute

Feminist social historians have recovered the historical dimension of prostitution hidden by and buried under a significant proliferation of medical, moral and juridical discourses. Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, class and the state* remains the key text in opening up an unexplored field where prostitutes are the subject of historical enquiry, highlighting some of the mechanisms underlying the 'making of the prostitutes an outcast group' (1982:213). The work, conceptually focused on class (Bartley, 2000),<sup>7</sup> examines 'how sexual and social ideology became embedded in laws, institutions, and social policy' and demonstrates that

[I]deology [was] not [...] an abstract system, but something more fluid, reflective of the power dynamics of Victorian society and responsive to changing historical circumstances (Walkowitz, 1982:5)

For Walkowitz, the Contagious Diseases Acts introduced in England between 1864 and 1869 to control the spread of venereal diseases 'were not simply the expression of a programmatic and coherent social policy towards "fallen women" [...]; they were instrumental in crystallizing and shaping many of these social views' (1982:5). Prostitutes, being assumed to be solely responsible for spreading diseases, as suggested by the medical literature, were submitted to close regulation. Compulsory health examinations and medical treatments, restrictions on movement, and enforced

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<sup>7</sup> Her approach directly refers to Michel Foucault's work with its great, although problematic, influence on feminist history and thinking. One Foucauldian legacy is the notion of power associated with knowledge and the theory of the control over sexuality as 'a strategy for exercising power in society' (Walkowitz, 1982:4). For a discussion on Foucault's legacy, *see*, for instance, Featherston, L., 2006. Foucault, Feminism, and History. In: L. Burns, ed. *Feminist Alliances*. Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, pp. 77-89.

registration with the police made it difficult, if not impossible, to leave what was for many a temporary activity. Nevertheless, as Walkowitz demonstrates, prostitutes were far from being passive objects of intrusive policy and acted as a resistant subject in showing a previously unthinkable degree of agency.

The fear of venereal diseases became the conventional justification for measures that, rather than preventing the contagion, in the nineteenth-century imposed strict control over all women. Among European countries to adopt similar norms, such as France, England and Russia, Italy had one of the longest-lived and most restrictive policies on prostitution (Gibson, 1986). The legislation enacted in 1861 was substituted by two more libertarian laws in 1888 and 1891 following the protests of a pressure group including feminist emancipationists. The First World War registered a step back towards repression, confirmed by the Mussolini Law of 1923, which was abrogated only in 1958. Neither the stigma attached to the prostitutes, nor their marginalization, were, though, affected by the new law, as the prostitutes' movement later brought to light. The connection between disease, death and sexuality – incarnated in the figure of the prostitute – had by then become integral part of the public and private imaginary on prostitution.

Ever since Walkowitz's seminal text and the important work by Mary Gibson on the Italian case, an increasing body of research has addressed prostitution, questioning its most endurable clichés and disclosing its complexity (Gilfoyle, 1999:117-141). Direct and indirect contributions from other disciplines, influenced by second-wave feminism, have allowed historians to dismantle established narratives and recover



different voices. Feminist criminology, in particular, has convincingly criticized the foundations of criminal anthropology in an attempt to overcome the lasting and pervasive heritage of its founder, Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso's *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893), became a landmark text widely reprinted and translated: 'no other study can rival [it] in its influence on subsequent thinking about women and crime' (Rafter and Gibson, 2004:23).<sup>8</sup> For Lombroso, crime was a 'form of natural retrogression' of men and women to primitive times, though he states, 'women's natural retrogression [is] prostitution, not crime' (Lombroso and Ferrero, 2004:185). He then classified two kinds of prostitutes, the born and the occasional: if a 'lack of modesty and moral insanity' (213) is the cause of the born prostitute, occasional prostitutes

[W]ithout negative circumstances [...] would have joined the ranks of those frivolous, brainless women who can be found in large numbers in all social classes, especially the upper ones. [E]ven while loving their children and their family, they allow themselves to be easily led into adulterous and above all stupid adventures (223).

Lombroso based his theories on pre-existing assumptions about women's nature and 'the ancient conflation of female deviance and sexuality' and 'helped establish "normality" itself as a standard' – not a safe concept for women who were nonetheless considered 'inherently deviant' (Rafter and Gibson, 2004:27-29). Despite the criticisms

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Lombroso, C. and Ferrero, G., 1895. *The Female Offender*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895; *La femme criminelle et la prostituée*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1896. For an overview of Lombroso's theory and his influence see Rafter, N. H. and Gibson, M., 2004. Introduction. In Lombroso, C. and Ferrero, G. *Criminal woman, the prostitute, and the normal woman*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, pp. 3-33. See also Miller, E.C., 2008. *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

addressed more towards his methodology than to the results of his study, Lombroso's book had an undisputed influence up to the 1970s, not only in Italy but also in the United States and the UK.

His dominion was seriously questioned for the first time only in 1973 when Dorie Klein published *The etiology of female crime*, a pioneering critique of the theories on the female offender.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with Lombroso, Klein outlines the 'continuity between' his work and those of other authors, from Freud to Konopka, who all saw (female) criminality 'as the result of *individual* characteristics [...] uniformly based on implicit or explicit assumptions about the *inherent nature of women*' which is regarded as '*universal*' [emphasis in the original] (2003:183). She contested their a-historical approach emphasising the sexist, racist and classist connotation of these assumptions and their roles in serving 'to maintain a repressive ideology with its extensive apparatus of control' (2003:201).

Three years later, Carol Smart published *Women, Crime, and Criminology* (1976), a landmark text in the development of feminist criminology. Carol Smart criticised, as did Klein, existing studies that 'refer[red] to women in terms of their biological impulses and hormonal balance or in terms of their domesticity, maternal instinct and passivity' (1976:xiv) showing how 'the subordinated position of women in contemporary industrial society [was] rarely addressed (107). Moreover, she pointed out

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<sup>9</sup> Klein, D., 1973. The etiology of female crime: A review of the literature. In E. McLaughlin, J. Muncie and G. Hughes, eds., 2003. *Criminological perspectives: essential readings*. London: SAGE, pp. 182-210.

how criminology and legal systems had regarded prostitution as an exclusively women's question and neglected the issue of male prostitution and male clients (93).

Ever since these early studies, an increasing number of feminist scholars have followed their example, dismissing biological explanations and directing their research towards, and within, a gender perspective.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, despite the impressive acceleration of interest, feminist criminology has not been less influential in Italy than in other contexts.<sup>11</sup> According to Tamar Pitch (1995:86-102) it seems a fact that, although Italian feminism has played an important role in 'refram(ing) a number of questions of (potential) interest to criminology', such as rape, family violence and child abuse, '(a)n Italian feminist criminology does not exist'.

Nor has much been written on prostitution in Italy also from an historical perspective. Important contributions have come from Anglo-American scholars, such as Mary Gibson (1986), Sherrill Cohen (1992) and John K. Brackett (1993).<sup>12</sup> More recently, research in Italy has explored some neglected aspects such as, for instance, the debate on the Merlin law (Bellassai, 2006) and the impact of the World War I on soldiers' and civilians' sexual behaviour and the military and political response to the 'proliferation' of prostitution (Franzina, 1999; Sema, 1999; Ermacora, 2007).

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<sup>10</sup> For a recent overview on feminist criminology see, for instance, Miller, J. and Mullins, C.W., 2009. The status of feminist theories in criminology. In F.T. Cullen, J.P. Wright and K.R. Blevins, eds., 2009. *Taking Stock. The Status of Criminological Theory*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, pp. 217-250.

<sup>11</sup> See: Civita, A and Massaro, P., eds., 2011. *Devianza e disuguaglianza di genere*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

<sup>12</sup> See also Macrelli, R., 1981. *L'indegna schiavitù. Anna Maria Mozzoni e la lotta contro la prostituzione*. Rome: Riuniti; the issue of *Memoria: Rivista di storia delle donne* on prostitution, 1986; Mazzi, M.S., 1991. *Prostitute e lenoni nella Firenze del Quattrocento*. Milan: Saggiatore.

There exists a difficulty in seeing prostitution as a legitimate subject of historical enquiry; this could be explained by the ambiguous dis/engagement from prostitution expressed by Italian feminism, the lack of academic influence of women's and gender studies, and the overwhelming sociological literature on immigrant or trafficked prostitutes. Moreover, the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s has renewed the link between death and sexuality resulting in an alarming level of parliamentary activity. During the XIII legislature (1996-2001), for instance, eighteen draft bills on prostitution were presented to Parliament (Danna, 2004).<sup>13</sup> Thirteen of these recommended the reintroduction of compulsory medical examination for prostitutes as a means of protecting the public's health from AIDS and other STDs. None was approved; yet they testify to the lasting power of certain discourses surrounding and constructing prostitution.

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<sup>13</sup> In addition, six draft bills 'di iniziativa popolare' were presented to the Parliament. It is worth notice that during the previous three legislatures (1987-1996), the Chamber of Deputies discussed eighteenth draft bills.

## **Feminists' and prostitutes' narratives: from violence against women to violence against prostitutes**

Kate Millett, recalling the first feminist conference on prostitution held in New York in 1971, admits that the attitude of audience and contributors was ultimately 'judgemental, meddlesome, and ignorant' (1975:13). First, all had to confront, and try to free themselves from, the enduring moralistic views on what activist prostitutes soon began to refer to as 'sex work'. First formulated in the late 1970s by Carol Leigh (Leigh, 2004:12), the term "sex worker" 'helps to unify peep show dancers, strippers, and prostitutes. Prior to this, other workers in the sex industry would not identify with prostitutes. This is a term invented so we could have some solidarity' (Leigh, quoted in Quan, 2006:342). It also suspends moral judgment and emphasizes the importance of free choice over exploitation or victimization. It is precisely around the concepts of 'sex work', free choice and agency that second-wave feminists have continued their debates, leading up to the ongoing questions of the abolition, criminalization or decriminalization of prostitution (O'Neill, 2001; Doezema, 2002; Sullivan, M.L., 2007; Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2009; Koken, 2010). An impressive body of literature now provides an insight into the many articulations of these debates, originating in the UK and USA then broadening to include contributions from all over the world.

Among such a variety of positions, radical feminists seem to form a more compact and politically influential front, rejecting the idea that prostitution is either

work or ‘one example of “sex without love”’ (Pateman, 1988:198). They tend to place prostitution on ‘a continuum of sexual exploitation and violence against women’ (Sullivan, M.L., 2007:43), as men’s pleasure ‘requires the annihilation of women’s sexual integrity’ (Dworkin, 1981:47). More precisely, in Catharine MacKinnon’s words (1989:137), ‘[w]hat is called sexuality is the dynamic of control by which male dominance [...] eroticizes and thus defines man and woman, gender identity and sexual pleasure’. If this is so, ‘there is no such thing as a woman as such; there are only walking embodiments of men’s projected needs’ (1989:119). As a consequence, no choice or agency may be actually attributed to women: prostitution, being a systematic, ‘intentionally organized’ (MacKinnon, 2006:29) form of violence against women, is never a choice (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997). More recently, radical feminists have focused on the harmful consequences of prostitution, thus reinforcing the ‘victimhood’ perspective surrounding in particular the sex-trafficking issue. In their view, neither legalization nor decriminalization can reduce ‘the physical, emotional, and social harms of prostitution’ (Farley, 2004:1): recognizing it as a job is merely a means of denying its inherent violence ‘in order to keep the business of sexual exploitation running smoothly’ (Farley, 2006:109).

Criticism against the ‘victimhood’ perspective has been advanced by those feminists who embrace the prostitutes’ cause in the name of civil rights, adopting a ‘pro-sex work’ position. They acknowledge the ‘choice’ argument, implied in the ‘sex work’ definition, although their understanding of ‘choice’ is open to nuanced interpretations, such as ‘informed consent’. Nevertheless, the ‘consent’ argument has

been recently deemed untenable, given that it endlessly opposes coercion (Falola and Afolabi, 2007:222) and reinforces the distinction ‘between forced “innocent” victims and consenting “immoral” prostitutes’ (Doezema, 2002:22). In other words, it allows governments to address anti-trafficking policies that have little to do with the protection of the rights of sex workers and migrants (Doezema, 2002:20; Agustin, 2007; Kinnell, 2008).

These scholars suggest locating the issue of prostitution within a new framework that ‘would incorporate elements of labour rights, insisting that sex workers be treated as legitimated workers, rather than as moral reprobates’ or helpless victims (Doezema, 2002:25; Carline, 2009, 2011; Weitzer, 2010a). Several studies (Chapkis, 1997; Sanders, 2004; Vanwesenbeeck, 2005) demonstrate in fact that ‘sex workers [...] are not simply victims, also not “liberated” women who have escaped patriarchy – but they are fully realized and agentic human beings performing work inside a complex web of personal and social contexts’ (Koken, 2010:61). Thus, the new perspective would unveil within the sex industry the complexity of gender relations, which cannot simply be reduced to a question of oppressors, oppression and disempowerment. ‘Most importantly’, states Jo Doezema (2002:25), ‘this new framework may be able to move beyond the legacy of repression [...] because it will be developed by sex workers themselves’.

Another criticism against the radical feminist position is that in dismissing ‘sex workers’ opinions and choices’ and ‘stereotyping clients as uniformly abusive and sadistic’, it ‘diverts attention from other kinds of societal violence and [...] assailant’

(Kinnell, 2008:28-30). Violence against prostitutes is a largely forgotten issue, obscured by what is now considered the more ‘politically’ acceptable battle against violence against women. By assuming that prostitution is in itself violence against women, radical feminists encourage - more or less voluntarily - law enforcement that increases, rather than reduces, hostile attitudes and prostitutes’ vulnerability (Selby and Canter, 2009:14). Paradoxically, the same extraordinary political and cultural challenge that eventually exposed the scale of violence against women in the 1970s has turned out to be a theoretical and practical *cul de sac*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, stepping

[A]way from the realities of sex workers into a black and white dichotomization of what we believe the realities of sex workers to be, we silence their voices, overlook their needs, and ultimately make decisions, enact laws, and reinforce the stigma that endangers them (Biancardi, Hicks and De Graaf, 2010:15).

Only recently, an increasing amount of international research has begun to investigate the extent to which women working in the sex trade are targets of psychological and physical violence (Lowman, 2000; Kinnell, 2002; Brooks-Gordon, 2006), which has been included among other forms, from sexual coercion to female infanticide (Watts and Zimmerman, 2002).

A diametrically opposite perspective is summarized by the poet, performance artist, graduate student, and activist ho’, Leslie Bull, interviewed for *Street Roots* (Zuhl, 2006): ‘I was victimized by rapists, beaters, haters, momos, thieves, and cops, but not by ho’ing’. In her statement, Bull reclaims what radical feminists reject: agency, experience and another point of view on violence. In other words, she dismisses the

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<sup>14</sup> Since Brownmiller’s seminal text *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, promptly translated into Italian (1976), an impressive body of literature on violence against women has been published.



‘easy way out’ implied in the victimhood perspective in favour of the expression of her own uncomfortable narrative. Leslie Bull is one among the several sex workers to have engaged in the process of ‘coming out’; their activism emerged with the USA prostitutes’ movement in the early 1970s. From its beginnings as a protest against police brutality, the movement soon built an agenda based on ‘human rights, sexual freedom and diversity amongst women’s experiences’ (Sanders, O’Neill and Pitcher, 2009:9).

A similar trajectory was followed between the late 1970s and 1980s in France, England, Canada, Germany and Italy, leading to the First World Whores Congress hosted in Amsterdam in 1985.<sup>15</sup> At the core of their action is the acknowledgment of their occupation as work; the ‘agency’ argument is opposed to the victimhood trope offered by radical feminists. Two important texts were then published in the late 1980s (but never translated into Italian) summarizing what the movement had learned and wanted to say: *Sex Work. Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (Delacoste and Alexander, 1987) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Pheterson, 1989).<sup>16</sup> The former was conceived as ‘a space for women to write about their lives’, documenting their ‘resistance on issues that have been previously either invisible or distorted by sexist ideology’ (Delacoste and Alexander, 1987:12). The latter is a chronicle of the prostitutes’ own public response to the repressive policies and it provides an insight into

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<sup>15</sup> Shannon Bell underlines (1994:99) how the ‘prostitute struggle is a pluralistic struggle’ as it is inscribed within, and reflects, the tradition of liberalism, the anti-pornography radical feminism and the ‘psychiatrization of the prostitute which constructed prostitution as sickness and sexual addiction’.

<sup>16</sup> See also Pheterson, G., 1993. *The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness*. *Social Text*, 37, Winter, pp. 36-64; Nagle, J., ed., 1997. *Whores and Other Feminists*. London: New York: Routledge; Kempadoo, K. and Doezema, J., eds. 1998. *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. London: New York: Routledge.

the international prostitutes' rights movement and the formulation of a politics based on 'self-representation of whores and alliances between women' (Pheterson, 1989:3-28). More recently, USA prostitutes' organizations have promoted the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers – returning, in some ways, to the reason driving their first protests.<sup>17</sup>

Shannon Bell has noted (1994:101) that the prostitutes' request 'is not a demand for equality in spite of difference but [...is] based on the distinct difference of being a prostitute', rightly pointing out that

What lies just beneath the surface of the demand for legal rights and equality is a doubly transgressive ethical gesture: an affirmation of a 'negative' identity and a revaluation of values through the recognition of commercial sex as being as valid as non-commercial sex.

From this point of view, the activity of the Italian Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute surely represents a doubly transgressive ethical gesture, a living challenge that feminists and political institutions still tend to disregard.

Second-wave Italian feminists paid little attention to prostitution throughout the 1970s, as they were drawn to more pressing issues such as family law, divorce, abortion, and violence. Their occasional support for prostitutes was based on an assumed sisterhood among women, all confronting male oppression. Apart from the press reports, the literature available to them focused on psycho-pathological and penal aspects. The publication of *La moglie e la prostituta: due ruoli, una condizione*

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<sup>17</sup> For a more exhaustive overview on the prostitutes/sex workers movements *see*, for instance: Lopez-Embury, S. and Sanders, T., 2009. Sex workers labour rights and unionization. In T. Sanders, N. O'Neill and J. Pitcher, eds., 2009. *Prostitution: sex work, policy & politics*. London: Sage, pp. 94-110.

(Apruzzi *et al.*, 1975) and the translation of Millett's and Brownmiller's texts in 1976 provided feminists with some first theoretical directions, signalling a cultural shift.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Italian feminists did not easily engage in the problematic challenge led by the founders of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute only few years later. The battles for civil rights clashed with the image of the prostitute as ultimate symbol of the exploitative, patriarchal system. In 1984, Roberta Tatafiore, feminist and supporter of the Comitato, underlined what was a crucial point:

[P]rima di qualsiasi discorso ideologico di lotta per l'abolizione della prostituzione, [c'è] la libertà di stare nel mondo come prostitute senza essere criminalizzate. È mio interesse, oggi, subito, che le prostitute siano libere. [...] sono convinta che la società controlla le prostitute per controllare la sessualità di tutte le donne. Una lotta per l'abolizione della prostituzione salterebbe questo passaggio. Per questo è ideologica, perché salta l'analisi della situazione di controllo in cui siamo immerse tutte.<sup>19</sup>

As in other countries, however, the emergence of AIDS and trafficking as social issues has strategically shifted attention from civil rights, accelerating the 'institutionalization' and neutralization of Italian feminism. What remains is a kind of ambivalent acquiescence, blended with mocking denigration, towards the client who conceals the role s/he plays in the act of prostitution. The prostitutes are thus kept in the spotlight yet are still invisible, which allows the client to keep a low profile. As Berlusconi's scandals have recently demonstrated, despite the clients' ambivalent social position (confirmed in some ways by the Prime Minister's proud statements) they nevertheless

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<sup>18</sup> This new trend was signalled in 1976 by some newspapers. See, in particular: 'Sussurri e grida dal marciapiede', 1976. *La Stampa*, 25 September, p. 5. See also later publications, such as *Donne di vita, vita di donne* (Blumir and Sauvage, 1980), which gave voices to the prostitutes.

<sup>19</sup> Archive of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute. Rapporti con Roberta Tatafiore, letter, typewritten (1984).

enjoy a kind of tolerance.<sup>20</sup> This attitude has more to do with the homophobic, Catholic- and male-dominated Italian culture than with an ‘emancipated’, equal society. Paying for sex with a *female* prostitute is not the ‘best’ representation of masculinity yet it is a demonstration of a ‘normal’ sexual drive; Berlusconi’s statements and performances thus draw the admiration of a wide section of the community. With few non-academic exceptions (Cutrufelli, 1981; Belmonti *et al.*, 1981; Corso and Landi, 1998), no research has seriously addressed the figure of the client. More recently, some original attempts have been made to investigate the need for paid sex, as well as the issue of violence against women, from a male perspective (Ciccone, 2009), while official institutions have explored such needs in relation to the demand for trafficked women (Di Nicola, 2009).

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Mr Berlusconi said he had never paid for sex. He added: I never understood where the satisfaction is when you're missing the pleasure of conquest’, quoted in BBC, 2009. Berlusconi denies paying for sex. *BBC News* [online] 24 June. Available at: < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8116003.stm> > [Accessed: 17 November 2010].

## **The research**

The temporal framework chosen for this work **revolves** around at least two landmark moments in which women become highly mobile protagonists. During the economic boom between the 1950s and 1960s, they ‘migrate’ from their own homes to workplaces, combining traditional roles with the mirage of potential economic independence. Throughout the Seventies, unpredictability characterizes women’s mobility; they riot in squares and streets in both small and large cities well beyond May 1968. ‘Il corpo è mio e lo gestisco io’, they cry in an extraordinary burst of self-liberation and awareness. It is not only a slogan; it is also a political programme, a personal project, a public threat. The rape of a woman is now an event that cannot be hidden but must be acknowledged in all its revealing violation of will and body ownership. Women’s mobility seems thus to run alongside, and through, their claimed sexual self-determination, and vice versa. More than ever, their sexual behaviour would be compared to that of the prostitute, who both threatens and controls through her very existence the daily life of a non-prostitute: a non-prostitute woman

[Si presenta] agli occhi del mondo sempre come una prostituta potenziale, cioè sempre all’erta a fare quello che le prostitute fanno – ovvero rappresentare l’erotismo come merce in vendita – ma ben attenta a non superare quella soglia oltre la quale la legge [la] inquadra e [la] mette a posto in uno statuto speciale (Tatafiore, 1984).

The question is whether or not she deserves that gaze of contempt, that verbal abuse, or to be raped. It is symptomatic that female prostitutes entered centre stage as political

subjects precisely when feminists began their retreat from the political scene. The censorship of AAA. *Offresi* and the first of the repeated defeats of the ‘antistupro’ draft bills in the early 1980s come after the most recent successful feminists’ battle in the pro-abortion law. Women prostitutes suddenly appeared, demonstrating an unexpected authority that the non-prostitutes were obliged to recognise. The prostitutes were neither ghosts, nor pariahs but citizens as are any others; claiming respect for their rights and their struggle against violence, they spoke on behalf of those among them who remained in the shadows. At the same time, they undermined the whore/‘madonna’ dichotomy, juxtaposing their own narratives and incarnating themselves in a real, desecrating rather than fantasized body/persona.

Despite appearances, the coming out of the prostitutes is far from being a sudden explosion of awareness. From the early 1960s subtle shifts could be detected in the representations of the prostitute that might allude to the dissolution of both her monolithic image and the stigma surrounding her. It is neither a linear nor a clear process and it plays on multiple levels that might cancel each other out. There are young women who, having gained access to education, workplaces and entertainment beyond the home or to new information, thanks to the new televised media, tend to modify their behaviour. Again, the censorship of *La Zanzara* (Crainz, 2003:205) in 1964 and Franca Viola’s case in 1965 are emblematic, and might provide an understanding of these problematic trajectories.

Prostitutes are still silent yet are continuously named and ‘performed’ as inhabiting not only streets and clandestine brothels but also film, fiction and

newspapers. While the latter claims to provide the ‘real’ image of the prostitute formed at the ‘journalist’s objectivity’, the former can articulate and bend this imag/inary towards and through their artistic (and ideological) codes. Moreover, in the case of the cinema, the relation between audience and cinematic characters produces, delivers and deposits extra meanings that are difficult to grasp fully. Thus, what is interesting here is how the prostitute is represented by these media and what this representation might or might not say about women themselves, irrespective of their condition, and about gender relations. It is important to understand the extent to which these representations merge into, or reject, ‘official’ legal and medical imperative discourses. Because of prostitutes’ silence and marginalization, their missing hi/story and identity need to be revealed and interpreted as interwoven with the socio-cultural and economic challenges faced by Italian society between the 1960s and the 1980s. Violence may be part of this representation, not always as fact but as assumption, citation, and inference or simply as another silence. It is crucial thus to recognize how violence *per se* is represented, its symbolic significance, and what it may add or conceal.

This research engages in an interdisciplinary approach in which history, cultural studies, gender and feminist film studies, allow more in-depth interrogation of a range of sources – from fiction to Government publications, from filmic texts to autobiographies, from oral to archival documents, from newspaper articles to feminist writings.<sup>21</sup> Choosing such a variety of documents may raise methodological questions

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<sup>21</sup> For an overview on Italian cultural studies see Forgacs, D. and Lumley, R., eds., 1996. *Italian Cultural Studies. An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Parati, G. and Lawton, B., eds., 2001. *Italian*

given to their own nature, origin and purpose, as the enduring tension between ‘orthodox’ historians and cultural studies practitioners demonstrates (Pickering, 1997, 2008; Brabazon, 2005). Women’s and social history, gender analysis and the influential work of some historians, such as that of Luisa Passerini (1979; 1984; 1988) focused on memory, subjectivity and representation,<sup>22</sup> have challenged the hierarchy of these conventional, ‘verifiable’ sources.<sup>23</sup> Tara Brabazon (2005:48-49) rightly states that ‘(f)licking through government reports does not display the truth’ as

Women, as much as indigenous and black communities, gays and lesbians, the working class and youth, have been sliced from time, space and historical evidence. [...] Actually, there is no singular truth to be recovered or lived experience to be revealed: only lived ideology can be explored.

In other words, precisely this variety in sources of ‘information’ *and* representation is able to broaden the view on prostitution; the silence of the prostitutes, the gaps and the ‘un-said’ of the documents require multiple and simultaneous levels of investigation and interpretation. Scholars from other fields, such as literature, communication, film and media, have also engaged in such interdisciplinary approach to ‘representation’ providing interesting contributions. Tanya Horeck’s *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004), in particular, is a particularly convincing example. Her work looks at

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*Cultural Studies*. Boca Raton: FL.: Bordighera Press. Graziella Parati (2001:viii) well defines cultural studies ‘as an inherently interdisciplinary field and demand a particular blending of practice with theory’.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on the role of individual and collective subjectivity in the process of history making, see Passerini, L. and Geppert, A.C.T., 2001. Historians in Flux: The Concept, Task and Challenge of *Ego-histoire. histoirein*, 3, 2001, pp. 7-18.

<sup>23</sup> On this point see, among others, Chaudhuri, N., Katz, S.J. and Perry, M.E., eds., 2010. *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.



the representation of rape and raped woman across a range of written and visual texts, from Rousseau to feminist writers, from film to reality TV.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of *performance* elaborated by Judith Butler as a way to approach gender construction, provides an additional theoretical framework that could allow an understanding of certain aspects to have emerged from, and are related to, representation. For Butler (2004:154),

Gender is in no way a stable identity [...] from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*.

As it is considered potentially inherent to the feminine ‘nature’, the stylized repetition and representation of the act of prostitution both constitutes and could simultaneously challenge gender identity. ‘Performing’ their own prostitution within this restricted gendered framework, women prostitutes - regardless of their fictional, cinematic or ‘real’ status - continuously expose the hidden mobility of gender notion and force us to revise and renegotiate the imposed limits of sexual relationships.

In this research the cinema, and in particular popular cinema, has offered unexpected suggestions, anticipating or recognizing signals of displacement that have

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<sup>24</sup> See also McMaster, L., 2008. *Working Girl in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women*. Vancouver: UBC Press. More recently, the conference held in Exeter in 2010, ‘Representations of Prostitution, Sex Work and Sex trafficking between the 19th and 21st Centuries’, has brought together a wide range of studies and approaches. See: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/research/conferences/cissge/>

not always found similar echoes elsewhere. As will be shown, cinema has developed an enduring fascination with the figure of the prostitute and the issues related to the use of sexuality for whatever purpose. Russell Campbell (2006) has recently provided a rich account of this fascination, which has also had good box-office results (Hipkins, 2007; 2008). In Italy, where the male-dominated industry of cinema replicates women's condition in 'real' society, the prostitute's character is and remains a leading role for any actresses (Carrano, 1977). Moreover, because of its nature, cinema brings to light that which is often obscured or undervalued in other forms of documentation. The prostitute character is not placed in a vacuum; she is in dialogue with its fictional world and with, above all, its male partners.

Precisely for these reasons cinema provides a useful source of investigation able, as it is, to gather, narrate, reinterpret and then disseminate *'le rappresentazione e le pratiche condivise, i contenuti del visibile e dell'immaginario di soggetti collocati nel tempo e nello spazio'* (Capussotti, 2004:21). Some scholars, for instance, state that the prostitute character in post-war cinema stands for the Italian nation-state (Marcus, 2000; Landy, 2000). Danielle Hipkins (2008), on the other hand, links the discredited brother and sister prostitute pairings - protagonists of a number of post-WWII Italian films - to the collective political guilt about Fascism and the 'crisis in masculinity'. Film studies and in particular feminist film theories, starting from the seminal contribution of Laura Mulvey (1975), have provided fruitful tools of analysis for the filmic texts. However, as Enrica Capussotti warns (2004:26), the film and its vision have to be related with *'una serie complessa di sollecitazioni che attraversano altri spazi culturali ed esistenziali'*. In

other words, welcoming the suggestions of cultural studies, ‘la rinegoziazione dei significati non avviene [...] solo in rapporto con il testo filmico, ma con una pluralità di altri testi e repertori culturali’.

## **Structure**

Laws represent perhaps the most orthodox sources for the ‘institutional’ framework that should inform and shape not only policies but also culture and perception. The first chapter discusses the many ways in which Italian legislation has had a powerful influence on women’s lives through disempowering them and depriving them of basic civil rights. Starting from the concepts of sexual ‘promiscuity’ and violence, Chapter one provides a historical outline of the juridical approach to prostitution, adultery and rape. In particular, it will show how Italian legislation leaves men outwit the law, regardless of their condition as prostitutes’ clients, rapists or murderous guardians of honour; it maintains an acquiescent attitude towards violence. Chapter One provides, further, an account of the long process for the abrogation of the cause of honour and the battle for the acknowledgment of rape as a crime against the person. A parallel overview of the ‘public opinion’ expressed at the time by some of the national newspapers will show more clearly the contradictions of a legislation that was not always ‘synchronized’ (Passerini, 1996:145) with the cultural changes occurring in ‘real’ society.

The Italian penal code, in defining sexual-related crimes on a moral-honour based system, relegated violence against women to obscurity. Violence, in all its forms, was not an occasional occurrence in women’s lives; it could constitute a conspicuous element of their sexual relationships. Nevertheless, it remained an unnamed issue for

which no adequate words were available until feminism found them. The crime of Circeo, which exploded in the newspapers in 1975 and which is analyzed in the final section, was surely a cultural turning point in the emerging debates on violence against women.

Chapter Two focuses directly on the representation of violence and how it informed women's stories and media narratives years before feminist analysis. Two collections of letters written by women and female prostitutes, published in 1959 and 1955, are analyzed in order to explore the strategies put in place to articulate, deny or misrepresent violence, victims and perpetrators. The last part of the chapter focus on a forgotten murder of a prostitute that took place in 1965 in Milan, widely covered by national and local press, and here chosen as a case study. It shows the ambiguous, and sometimes very crystalline, role played by the newspapers in delivering and reinforcing a representation of violence as inherent to the life of prostitutes. The section suggests that these representations worked as a smokescreen to disguise rather than reveal the nature of that violence, further contributing to estranging prostitutes from the rest of society. Moreover, it exposes the full deployment of the discursive apparatus that constitutes and 'domesticates' the prostitute's representation.

The suffocating atmosphere of pre-May 1968 was suddenly subverted by the explosion of second-wave feminism, which redefined and accelerated the process begun with the students' and workers' movements. Feminists brought new issues under the spotlight, elaborated a different way of approaching women's questions, and provided the 'words in which to say' the unspeakable. Prostitution remained, however, low down

the Italian feminists' agenda, despite the emergence of American and French prostitutes into the public arena in the mid-1970s. Chapter Three will investigate how and why the feminist consciousness-raising process failed to cope with, or barely skimmed, the surface of the questions posed by the act of prostitution. The reading of different narratives produced over the 1970s will show the extent to which the figure of the prostitute was internalized and yet suppressed similarly to a taboo. Starting with the *Prostitution Papers*, as a paradigm for the future positions taken by Italian feminism, Chapter Three will then analyze the Italian press reaction to the French prostitutes' demonstrations, displaying - as did the newspapers - considerable unease in dealing with this news subject. Reticence, intimate resistances and conventional views emerge, too, from those documents written by Italian feminists and here selected and revised: from Carla Lonzi's work to the 1978 June issue dedicated by the magazine *Effe* to prostitution.

The last section will explore the attempt made by the Genoese *Coordinamento donne FLM* in the early 1980s to address the issue of prostitution. The group, one of the many formed within unionized industries, chose a more complex perspective as it confronted internal representations of the prostitutes within an historical, legal and cinematic framework. The *cul de sac* in which other feminists had found themselves was thus avoided; two decades of Italian women's lives and practices were bridged. Interviews with members of the *Coordinamento* offer a rich as well as insidious terrain of interpretation. The historical data here acquire a secondary value since they are already assumed as 'facts'. Rather, the emotional and representational elements brought

back to life by the rational act of recalling disclose both feminism's boundaries and its achievements.

Chapter Four, *Ghosts on Stage*, takes a step further to focus on the analysis of two case studies: the censorship of *AAA. Offresi* (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981), a film documentary on the clients of a call-girl, and the coming out of the Italian prostitutes (1982). These two events disturbed the comfortable 'consumption' of both the most traditional images of the prostitute, and the romantic tale of what a 'normal' female sexuality should be. On the one hand, the ghost figure *par excellence*, the client, was highlighted – yet such visibility was nonetheless immediately dimmed by a strategic censorship lasting thirty years. Breaking a long silence and creating a Comitato per i diritti civili, on the other hand, allowed the prostitutes to emerge from the realm of the representation to the concreteness of their lives and claims. In addition, they brought to light violence as an element related more closely to society's attitude towards prostitutes than to the act of prostitution itself.

Chapter Five gives the floor directly to the prostitutes' voices. It discusses two texts, originating as oral documents and initially not intended for publication, although released in 1976 and 1991. The texts may be considered the first examples of testimonial literature by prostitutes to appear in Italian publishing. Both interviewees are Italian, working mainly as street prostitutes yet from very different social and geographical contexts, and in their early forties when they agreed to tell their stories. Nevertheless, while the first, Gavina C., maintained her anonymity, the other did not intend to conceal her identity as she was already known: Carla Corso, co-founder of the

Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute. These two texts broke the rule of silence, thus are able to intercept and intersect opacities and contradictions within Italian society, including feminist practices and theories. The voice of 'Otherness' is thus opposed to institutional or better-accepted narratives; it calls into question established gender roles and expectations. A comparative reading will establish whether or not, and to what extent, pre-existing representations have been internalized and what kind of self-representation the two interviewees have juxtaposed or performed. Moreover, and again, the role and the nature of violence in the trajectory of their lives and the ways in which the two protagonists interpret or elude this threat will be investigated.

The concluding Chapter Six examines a selection of filmic texts. It describes its findings on the basis of various considerations, with no pretence of 'covering' or 'illustrating'; instead, it suggests potential directions for in-depth analysis. The choice of filmic texts focuses mainly on the comedy genre, while a thriller has been included because of its particular significance for the present thesis. The comedy genre has played an important role as mean of expression of the anxieties generated by the social and economic changes in Italian society (Wood, M., 2005:164). More than and differently from other genres, it has obliquely highlighted the contradictions lying beneath the surface of 'new' and old models of masculinity and femininity.

The selection of films, although introduced in chronological sequence, does not suggest 'progress' in time and/or in a positive direction; rather, it focuses on how cinema has articulated, or obscured, certain recurring aspects to have emerged from the texts analyzed in the previous chapter and related to the representation of prostitution,



violence and masculinity. Most of the films chosen have been produced more in response to contingent factors than to ‘authorial’ pretensions, although the majority are made by well-known directors. Some of these works gained at their release a certain degree of popularity, yet have been unjustly forgotten or dismissed as less important *oeuvres*. For this reason, they might provide different or, at least, less conventional narratives as ‘their’ representations of prostitutes seem to suggest. Among them, for instance, Pietrangeli’s filmic transposition of the best-selling, and now forgotten, novel *La parmigiana* by Bruna Piatti (1962), which both open the chapter. The following two sections analyze other examples of Italian comedy, showing how this genre has worked on, with and against pre existing and predominant codes and materials. The unconventional, and underestimated, thriller by Franco Ferrini, *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (1987), closes the last section. It provides a demystifying and revealing insight into some of the most enduring tropes, such as those of the victim or of the catalyst of violence, and cinematic expedients employed to reinforce those narratives and prevent their subversion.

The multiple-level analysis conducted in this research is an effort to highlight rather than to conceal the complexity of the reality of prostitution and of the lives of those who work in the sex trade. The analysis suggests an open yet critical attitude towards any position that seeks to impose, or has actually imposed, a dominant view on the matter. It invites the critical examination of prefabricated and unidirectional ‘truths’, with the reminder that those same ‘truths’ have been profoundly damaging in terms of rights and freedoms.

## Chapter 1

### ***De bello fallico*<sup>1</sup>: Law, Body, and Sexual Desire**

In February 1958, the Italian Chamber of Deputies passed Law 75, better known as the Merlin Law, which abolished the regulation of prostitution and state brothels. Ten years of intense debate finally resulted in a law that slightly reduce women's inequality; the bill obviated the requirement for any kind of registration and recording of women working as prostitutes, as well as the provision of compulsory medical examination and treatment. The running of brothels, whether state or private, was forbidden.

In 1981, fifty years after its introduction, the infamous Article 587 of the Fascist Rocco Code was abrogated. Finally rejected in law was the anachronistic notion of 'crimes of honour', according to which 'a man who murdered his adulterous daughter, sister or wife could be sentenced to three to seven years' prison, instead of the 30 years that was the standard punishment for other murders' (Gori, 2004:62). In the same year the national referendum against the abortion law (Law 194) was defeated.

In 1996, after 20 years of debates, Parliament finally recognised rape as a crime against the person. Until then, sexual violence had been considered as a crime against morality, and an Article of the Rocco Code condoned its cancellation 'by marriage of reparation' (Wood, S., 1995:195).

These three examples are only some of the many that can demonstrate how the issue of women's freedom and self-determination has been framed in Italy. They also

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<sup>1</sup> Tatafiore, R., 1996. *De bello fallico. Cronaca di una brutta legge sulla violenza sessuale*. Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa.

demonstrate the extent to which this issue is constructed around sexuality, sexual behaviour and ownership of the body through sexual regulation (Smart, 1981:40-60). In their extreme practice and symbolism, prostitution and rape encompass and articulate the anxieties raised by the threat of women's sexual autonomy and agency. This chapter will provide the legislative and historical framework that shaped prostitution and its representations in Italy between the late 1950s and mid-1980s. The focus will be on the juridical approach to the concept of 'promiscuity', or irregular sexual behaviour including infidelity, which seems to run through and anchor the theme of honour, male power and the ownership of the female body (Self, 2003). In particular the path and the implications related to the Italian laws on prostitution, the abrogation of the 'crimes of honour' Article, the first public discussions about violence against women and the 'unsaid' on violence against prostitutes will be examined. The extent to which Italian legislation was part of - and indeed helped to maintain - a broader acquiescent attitude towards violence will be underlined.

Promiscuity is a vague concept with a strong moral connotation. According to Don E. Marietta (1997:68), its notion 'seems to refer to relationships outside of marriage, and usually it implies more than one partner'. However, he specifies, 'whether a person is considered promiscuous or not depends on current social standards and the moral codes in effect at the time'. Given this, the distance between a *promiscuous* woman and a prostitute might become generously imprecise, the latter often overlapping the former, as Helen J. Self explains (2003:33): 'the social and cultural understanding of the prostitute and prostitution frequently crosses the

boundaries of adultery and promiscuity or any form of sexual behaviour outside the marriage'. Nevertheless, the real or imaginary violation of the female body, to which has been 'entrusted' male honour and power, has been perceived as intolerable crime - regardless of women's consent or feelings.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century legislation has progressively codified on sexual matters, following apparently contradictory directions. The former tended towards the infantilization of women; it operated through their exclusion from citizenship and the ownership of their own bodies. The latter placed upon women the responsibility for their sexual behaviour, thus securing the removal or dissolution of male responsibilities. Men could kill their unfaithful wives, their seduced daughters and sisters and/or their lovers then face a symbolic rather than actual punishment. It was within this context, for instance, that Gaetano Furnari - a primary school teacher - was jailed only for two years and nine months for killing the man who had seduced his twenty-year-old daughter in 1965.<sup>2</sup> While the sentence was enthusiastically welcomed, the daughter was publicly condemned as the one at fault.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, rapists could save themselves through entering a marriage of reparation or through discrediting their victims in a public trial. The case of Franca Viola, who firmly refused in 1964 to marry her rapist, thus provoking scandal and a

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<sup>2</sup> The victim, an academic, married, and father of one son, had long been in the habit of seducing his female students. His assistant stated: 'Mi sia consentito tacere i tanti nomi delle ragazze che hanno avuto rapporti con il professore', in S.L.P., 1965. Drammatico interrogatorio a porte chiuse della ragazza che fu sedotta dal professore. *La Stampa*, 18 December, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Sapognaro, F., 1965. «Fu Mariella ad irretire il professore che suo padre uccise freddamente». *La Stampa*, 21 December, p. 5. See also: Sciascia, L., 1966. Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani. *L'Ora*, 3-4 January, p. 3.

storm of debates, is now part of Italian cultural and social memory. Later on, the broadcast of *Processo per stupro* (Belmonti *et al.*, 1979) a shocking film documentary directed by a cooperative of women and produced by State television, revealed the defensive strategy generally adopted by barristers in a trial for rape. A more or less patent process of denigration took place against the victims, thus building an aura of dubious morality that resulted in the destruction of their reputations. A non-prostitute woman had to provide evidence of her irreproachable reputation as her violated body brought to light distrust and rejection, rather than empathy. It is thus no wonder that a prosecution for the rape of a prostitute - seldom if ever denounced and proved - could have no better outcomes. It was generally reduced to robbery or deemed, as it still is, a relatively minor issue as a prostitute would supposedly be less traumatized by the offence than would a non-prostitute.<sup>4</sup>

If such a well-disposed attitude towards killers and rapists was codified by law, clients of female prostitutes benefitted even further from legislative silence. These clients simply disappeared from police records, media accounts or sociological studies, as stigma and criminalization were heaped only on the prostitute. By virtue of a tacit agreement, the clients' presence was merely taken for granted and rarely investigated. The clientele 'è destinata a restare nell'ombra' a journalist admitted reporting on an illegal network of 'procurers' and well-known wealthy clients discovered in Bergamo in

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<sup>4</sup> See Sullivan, B., 2004. Prostitution and Consent: Beyond the Liberal Dichotomy of 'Free or Forced'. In M. Cowling and P. Reynolds, eds. *Making Sense of Sexual Consent*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 127-140.

1977.<sup>5</sup> Discovered having paid (or unpaid) sex with minors, they could not be prosecuted without a parental lawsuit.<sup>6</sup> If asked to testify against clandestine brothel managers, clients ‘per ovvii motivi [preferiscono] non farsi vedere in aula’ [emphasis added].<sup>7</sup> While clients’ identities were in general protected by the media, those of women, or even minors, involved in prostitution were very often reported and also not infrequently enhanced with photographs.

Although the double standard implied in the legislation concerned women as a whole, prostitutes have been much more deeply affected, which is hardly surprising, given the ambiguity and contempt surrounding their profession. Prostitution might be seen as the most extreme representation of female ‘sexual promiscuity’; or as the most and last problematic *milieu* in which to exercise rights and freedom (McElroy, 2002); or as a contract freely agreed between a prostitute and the client (Ericsson, 1980). The woman’s body, being the symbolic and actual site of man’s power and self-representation, has in its ‘integrity’ the key element of the relations among men and the ‘value’ of women. Prostitutes, on the other hand, from the lowest level in women’s hierarchy, seem to challenge that ‘axiom’ by restoring, absurdly enough, both their integrity and dignity through negotiation and money. In the whole-male realm of

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Però sono state trovate agendine con alcune centinaia di nomi di persone di Bergamo e provincia, di industriali lombardi, di facoltosi torinesi...’, in Tagliaferro, P., 1977. Bergamo: cinquanta ‘squillo’ danno i brividi alla città. Scoperta un’organizzazione clandestina diretta da due donne e tre uomini. *Corriere della sera*, 16 February, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> (Anon.), 1963. Cinquanta «squillo» nell’agenda dagli 11 ai 14 anni. *L’Unità*, 24 March, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Manca, S., 1968. Il P.M. chiede sette anni di carcere per la «compiacente» Paoletta Ippolito. *La Stampa*, 18 January, p. 6.

bourgeois negotiation, the passage of money from men to female prostitutes obstructs, rather than completes, the full realization of male power.

Prostitution might also be considered the most visible critique of the contemporary socio-economic system where an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities lead individuals to be exploited rather than being free to make a choice. However, it might represent the result of the patriarchal system (Barry, 1979) and a form of violence against women (Dworkin, 1981, 1987; MacKinnon, 1993). Ultimately, it is both an implicit attack on male identity, as prostitutes reject the mythology of romanticized female sexuality, and one of the most contentious areas of confrontation among women. Whatever one's attitude to it, it is a fact that prostitution is periodically put into the spotlight by media and politicians. In an outburst of alarming messages, they recall attention to morality, venereal diseases, criminality and, more recently, child sexual exploitation, without looking thoroughly at any of these issues. Thus prostitutes end in a storm, a gale-force wind of censure that forces them under the renewed scrutiny of law and police.

The first section of this chapter will provide an insight into the Italian legislative approach to prostitution from Italian unification to the Merlin law. It will look at the ways in which laws denied any civil status to prostitutes, which would 'produce' (or attempt to produce) what is defined in Foucauldian terms a 'disciplined body' (Foucault, 1975). It will show how this legislation was actually a threat to all women, as it crystallized their social vulnerability on the grounds of a real or presumed sexual availability.

The following section will be an account of the parliamentary process for the abrogation of the cause of honour. Begun in 1961 and completed twenty years later, this long judicial path testifies to the value still attributed to the symbolic and real ownership of female body. As well as giving an overview of the parliamentary debates, the section will explore the reasons lying behind such resistance to change.

The last section will discuss neither draft bills, nor the parliamentary debates on the rape law; rather it will show when and how the public perception of sexual violence started to be modified. For this purpose, the section will focus on a specific case of rape, the crime of Circeo, which provoked a passionate outcry of public opinion in 1975. This tragic episode in Italian society suddenly transformed rape against women from an unavoidable yet silenced occurrence to an urgent and pressing issue.



## 1.1. Sexual promiscuity: Prostitution

Since the nineteenth century, the battles for the construction and consolidation of the national States and the economic and social transformations of Western societies have included a specific repressive control of prostitution. It was in the name of public order, morality and, in particular, health, especially that of the soldiers, that European governments justified their policy against female prostitutes. A different set of words became thus more common in juridical, medical and daily discourses. Sexual in/continence and, for instance, venereal diseases, tolerated brothels, im/modesty, white slavery, public health and morality; such issues played their role within the two main legislative models conceived to deal with prostitution: regulation and abolition. As has already been shown (Walkowitz, 1980; Gibson, 1999), these discursive strategies were a useful tool for displacing attention from, and re-orienting the approach to, class and gender inequalities and sex.

In Italy the regulation of prostitution took place on a vast scale following alarmist accounts that proclaimed the spread of venereal diseases. Cavour, the Primer Minister of the new Italian State, in 1860 issued a decree that regulated and legalised *meretrizio* within authorized brothels throughout the whole kingdom. The Cavour regulation allowed for the compulsory medical examination not only of prostitutes already registered,<sup>8</sup> but also of women suspected of being prostitutes or infected by

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that sixteen-year old girls could register themselves as prostitutes yet not marry without parental consent. This was not the only patent contradiction of the civil and penal system of the newly unified Italy.

venereal diseases. As a consequence, the police increased its power; arbitrary abuses became a daily component of prostitutes' lives and a threat to all women. Moreover, the combined system of *case chiuse* (brothels) and compulsory inspection and treatment encouraged and facilitated the exploitation and institutionalization of prostitutes. As Mary Gibson (1999:35-36) notes, although the regulation was an ingenious combination of repression and the preservation of prostitution, it partially failed in its purposes. The prostitute's resistance to the police and medical control was indeed continuous, availing itself of any small margins of action left by the law. The regulation was nevertheless wholly endorsed by medical associations and gained consensus in Europe – so much so that several nation states, such as, for instance, Britain, Germany, and Russia, adopted similar policies, although in the main they were limited to the main municipalities.

#### 1.1.1. *Abolition*

Regulation was not the only legislative approach to prostitution. Abolition of the State regulation of prostitution was indeed advocated by a growing number of opponents throughout Europe. According to these opponents, regulation was just the result of the double standard within legislation that denied rights to all women, thus encouraging prostitution and immorality without preventing venereal diseases. In addition, they believed that 'through a proper education and a conscious self improvement men could tame their sexual instinct and thus remove the "necessity" of [...] prostitution' (Gibson, 1999:46). In other words, abolitionists promoted chastity for both men and women. Their cause found supporters particularly in England, where the introduction of a

regulatory policy had provoked strong protests (Walkowitz, 1980; Bartley, 2000),<sup>9</sup> as well as in Italy and France. Nevertheless, unlike Italy and England, where the campaigners finally broke the resistance of their governments, French parliament steadfastly refused to discuss any issues related to prostitution (Corbin, 1978; 1990).<sup>10</sup>

The Italian abolitionist campaign was substantially led by Left-wing politicians and early emancipationists, such as Anna Maria Mozzoni, Sara Nathan and Jessie White Mario, who engaged in a long battle against regulation (Gibson, 1999:37-75; Macrelli, 1981). They garnered the crucial support of Josephine Butler, abolitionist leader and founder of the English Ladies' Association and, in 1875, of the International Abolitionist Federation (Gerodetti, 2004:585-619; Sharp, 1998:159-182).<sup>11</sup>

In 1888, the Italian abolitionists welcomed the abrogation of the regulation and the introduction of a different set of rules thanks to Francesco Crispi. His most important innovation was the closure of the Health offices and *sifilicomi*, and the abolition of the compulsory medical examination. It was, however, a brief success only, as the Home Minister Giovanni Nicotera enacted in 1891 a new regulation, a compromise between the decrees of Cavour and Crispi. According to this law, the

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<sup>9</sup> The British Parliament had indeed approved the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864, 1866, and 1869 that introduced police and medical control over any women suspected of prostitution, as well as known prostitutes offering their services to the soldiers and sailors in port towns: 'as in Italy, concern for the health of the military constituted the initial pretext for the introduction of regulation', in Gibson, M., 1999. *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915*. Second Ed. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> In 1802, Napoleon introduced the medical inspection of those prostitutes who followed the armies. The regulatory system was ideologically enforced by the 'sanitary engineer' (Parent-Duchatelet, 1981, first ed. 1836) and repealed only in 1946. Alain Corbin (1990:315-316) underlines the uneasiness felt by French parliamentarians in dealing with sexual matters.

<sup>11</sup> Butler's untiring campaign was finally rewarded in patria with the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886.

registration or enrolment of prostitutes were prohibited, although madams had to provide the authorities with a list of the women working in their brothels. The police could keep brothels and single prostitutes under surveillance and were authorised to send to the hospital those prostitutes who refused surgical examination. In 1905, some aspects of the Nicotera law were mitigated by the Health Regulation, which considered the complete separation of police from sanitary intervention. It remained in place until the Fascist era, when a different approach was adopted.

#### 1.1.2. *The White Slave Trade*

The success of the English abolitionist cause was in part due to the scandals of the white slave trade exposed by the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. The publications of ‘lurid and prurient’ articles on trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and girls caused more public anxiety than the ‘plague’ of venereal diseases and clandestine prostitution (Self, 2003:43-48; Gibson, 1999:59-71; Walkowitz, 1980:246-252). A fervid propaganda campaign against white slavery was immediately organized by the Church and women’s associations and, although ‘the evidence for widespread involuntary prostitution of British girls at home or abroad [was] slim’ (Walkowitz, 1980:247),<sup>12</sup> the cause had international repercussions (Limoncelli, 2010, 2006:31-59).

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<sup>12</sup> For Judith Walkowitz (1980:247) the white slavery scandal ‘had all the symptoms of a cultural paranoia’. Nevertheless, the trafficking and autonomous ‘mobility’ of women and girls working as prostitutes were not unusual phenomena throughout the world. They were often related to the pre-existent male immigration, to women’s economic condition and to the ‘natural’ turnover practised in the brothels (Corbin, 1990:275-298). Some scholars have recently addressed these particular aspects. See, for instance, Fischer-Tiné, H., 2003. ‘White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths’: European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880-1914. *Indian Economic & Social*

The white slavery campaign found supporters also in Italy after the turn of the century, gaining the active approval of the Catholic Church and revitalizing feminist associations (Gibson, 1999:61-68; Pieroni Bortolotti, 1963).<sup>13</sup> The flourishing of these groups, however, marked the abandonment of the critique of sex and class privileges and the notion of equality endorsed by the earliest feminists; these were superseded by more conservative views. As Mary Gibson explains (1999:64), ‘(s)ince the image of the victim of white slavery was that of the young and innocent girl, women of all ideological positions could agree that she deserved to be defended, both from the trafficker and from her own unnatural desires’. Thus, on the one hand, bourgeois female organizations ‘became less political, less concerned with workers, [...] and ultimately, after 1910, nationalistic. They focused their attention on welfare, education, and protection of the family’ (Gibson, 1999:63). The Mozzonian leagues, on the other hand, absorbed by the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), moved from emancipation issues and sexual inquiry to less dramatic positions relating to women’s perceived *natural* role, that of motherhood. Despite the efforts of those such as Anna Kuliscioff, the woman question had no real appeal to the socialist party.

The new turn taken by both women’s associations and historical prohibitionists, such as the Catholic Church, explains the warm support given to the white slavery crusade – and its fascination. The clamour surrounding the campaign removed, in fact,

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*History Review*, June, pp. 163-190; Lee, C., 2003. Prostitutes and Picture Brides: Chinese and Japanese Immigration, Settlement, and American Nation Building, 1870-1920. [on line] Available at: <<http://www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg70.pdf>> [Accessed 10 May 2010].

<sup>13</sup> The first association, the Lega Promotrice degli Interessi Femminili, was founded by Mozzoni in Milan in 1881, and was followed by local similar leagues and other organizations during the 1890s and in the early years of the twentieth century.

attention from both the repressive aspects of the international response and the still operating system of the *case chiuse*, legitimizing ‘additional’ intrusions into women’s lives. In other words, women and girls, depicted as vulnerable subjects at the mercy of their own weakness as well as male vice, needed to be rehabilitated and re-educated to their more traditional roles of wives and mothers. The concept of womanhood extraneous to the public arena and revolving around its authentic ‘natural’ attitudes was thus reinforced (Gibson, 1999:70-71).

#### 1.1.3. *A (new) pretext: the First World War*

The First World War brought about a modification of the policy on prostitution, revitalizing both regulation and repressive attitudes. The impact of wartime both on women’s and men’s intimacy and daily life was remarkable; changes in the general attitude towards sexual behaviours took place during and because of the conflict (Daniel, 1998; Grayzel, 1999; Warring, 2006). Concerns about the spread of venereal diseases among soldiers engaged on the war front or in the training camps were frequently expressed by military hierarchies. In order to guarantee the effectiveness of military units, different measures were developed by states and army authorities. Following a general trend (Brandt, 1987; Simpson, 2000; Grayzel, 2002),<sup>14</sup> the Italian

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<sup>14</sup> The proliferation of ‘military’ brothels was a European phenomenon. While France promoted regulated houses of prostitution behind the lines and in the war zone, Germany supported brothels, having in Brussels the centre of prostitution in Western front. On the other hand, given the recent campaigns against white trade slavery, British military hierarchies never officially promoted brothels. The problem was obviated by the British government that shifted all concerns onto the prostitutes introducing in 1916 and 1918 several restrictions on civil liberties. Despite the protests of feminists and social purity activists the regulations were abrogated only after the end of WWI.

Supreme Command officially started to promote and authorize the creation of brothels for soldiers and officers. That meant protecting them from ‘unregulated’ women and preventing ‘vari perversimenti sessuali (omosessualismo, stupri, sadismo)’ (Franzina, 1999:97; Sema, 1999; Ermacora, 2007).

At the same time, the Prime Minister Salandra re-introduced by decree the compulsory medical treatment of women found infected (Franzina, 1999:96). Soldiers were submitted to similar sanitary obligations, invited to attend lectures on the dangers of venereal diseases, and provided with condoms.<sup>15</sup> Intervention in and surveillance of civilian’s sexual behaviour became more zealous and repressive, focusing in particular on the prostitutes, as well as on those single or poor women of doubtful reputation. The growing fear of espionage activities perpetrated by the ‘enemy within’ contributed to intensify these disciplinary actions; the internment of civilians became common practice throughout the conflict. Women, however, were at far greater risk of being interned for sanitary or security reasons on the basis of their real or alleged sexual promiscuity. Once again, in the name of national security, female sexual behaviour became the object of scrutiny and suspicions (Ermacora, 2007:10-11).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the ban of sex education in Italy, see Wanrooij, B.P.E., 1990. *Storia del Pudore: La Questione Sessuale in Italia, 1860-1940*. Venice: Marsilio.

<sup>16</sup> The internment of women became common practice also in other countries. For the American case, for example, see: Bistow, N.K., 1998. *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering during the Great War*. New York: New York University Press; Brandt, A., 1987. *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Diseases in United States since 1880*. New York: Oxford University Press.

#### 1.1.4. *From Fascism to the Merlin Law*

Between 1923 and 1940 a set of laws were passed under Mussolini's dictatorship in order to isolate prostitutes from the 'healthy' part of society, precisely when the cult of motherhood became part of Fascist ideology (De Grazia, 1992). As a whole, the new legislation not only re-asserted most of the pre-existent rules (Sorgato, 2009:7-8), but also introduced surveillance over those prostitutes who worked outside the authorized brothels. Although prostitution was tolerated, the police could arrest a woman suspected of having a venereal disease, for refusing a medical examination or merely for '*sosta provocante*' (Gattei, 1984, cited in Bellassai, 2006:25). Moreover, the transmission of sexual infections 'was transformed from a minor offence into a crime against the race' (Nerenberg, 2001:113). In other words, while male access to paid sex was preserved and secured, a disciplined female body was produced in the name of public health. Being institutionalised in brothels and trapped for life by criminal and sanitary records, women had few opportunities for leaving prostitution, and thus experienced a strong sense of separation and vulnerability.

The end of the Fascist era did not mean the repealing of the laws or changing of attitudes towards prostitution; on the contrary. When in 1948 the socialist Lina Merlin, supported by the new Constitution, presented to the Parliament her draft bill for the abolition of the *case chiuse*, she probably could not have expected to have to wait ten years for its approval. The number of legal brothels and registered prostitutes declined during the decade 1948-1958, yet her bill was stigmatized by members of the health and



legal professions, politicians, and opinion makers (Bellassai, 2006, 26-31).<sup>17</sup> Closing the *case chiuse* implied giving back to prostitutes their power over their lives and constitutional rights. Sarcasm, irony, alarmist reports on venereal disease, erudite speeches on the special ‘lost’ nature of prostitutes, and a widespread misogyny were the ‘weapons’ deployed by the antagonists of the project. The debates failed to examine either the unequal nature of gender relationships, or the patent contradiction - in terms of civil rights - lived by a part of society; they investigated neither the nature of male sexuality nor the male demand for commercial sex. Male sexual desire was, and had to remain, an invisible presence.

Nevertheless, all of these difficulties, although not resolved, were overcome: the Merlin Law was passed in 1958 and is still valid. The law not only established the end of the *case chiuse* and registration system, but also allowed street prostitution or prostitution of a woman in her private home. It prohibited trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution, as well as *all* forms of aiding and abetting. Moreover, it contemplated the creation of a special corps of police composed of women. The Minister of the Interior was to promote specific institutes (*patronati*) in order to guarantee the *tutela*, the *assistenza*, and the *rieducazione* of the liberated prostitutes. Article 8 added: ‘Negli istituti di patronato [...] potranno trovare ricovero ed assistenza, oltre alle donne uscite dalle case di prostituzione [...], anche quelle altre che, pure avviate già alla prostituzione, intendano tornare ad *onestà di vita*’ [emphasis added].

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<sup>17</sup> See also Pitch, T., 1986. La sessualità, le norme, lo Stato. Il dibattito sulla legge Merlin. *Memoria*, 17, pp. 24-41; Azara, L., 1997. *Lo stato lenone*. Melzi: Cens.

Protection, assistance, and rehabilitation, honest life: these words evoke a stringent and paternalistic approach.

The Merlin law had lost track of its original aim. According to Merlin's original view, both prostitutes and clients would be involved in the safeguarding of public hygiene, without compromising personal freedom. 'What emerged from the debate was a vitiated version of what had been proposed a decade earlier: gone was the presumption of equality between men and women, and in its place was a moralistic and paternalistic [...] tone. The focus of the law ratified in 1958 became *prostitution*, not the abolition of the *case chiuse*' (Nerenberg, 2001:114). It was a compromise between libertarian and repressive intentions, as some of its articles increased to excessive and dangerous levels the discretionary powers of the authorities.

The year 1958 was a milestone then for civil rights, as women prostitutes were apparently to enjoy a freedom never known before. The reality, however, fell far short of expectations. Although prostitution was not considered illegal, it was bounded by a network of prohibitions that heavily circumscribed the civil rights of prostitutes. Article 3 of the Merlin law, for instance, punishes 'chiunque, in qualsiasi modo favorisca o sfrutti la prostituzione altrui'. This Article was strictly interpreted by the Supreme Court. A person who voluntarily gives a lift to a prostitute may be punished for abetting, while a cleaner working for and being paid by a prostitute risks being prosecuted for exploitation. Even accepting a present paid for by the money gained by a prostitute may be condemned; obviously, too, a prostitute cannot rent a flat if it is to be used as her work place (Viglietta, 1986:33).

In addition, under Law 1423/1956, peripatetic prostitution should be prosecuted as ‘contraria alla morale pubblica o al buon costume’. The police authority could admonish a prostitute for changing her lifestyle and/or could punish her through issuing the *foglio di via obbligatorio*. According to Article 157 of the *Testo unico delle leggi di pubblica sicurezza*, in fact, ‘a person domiciled in a certain commune might be compelled to return to that commune and prohibited, in the absence of prior authorisation, from returning to the commune from which he had been expelled’.<sup>18</sup> This article interfered with the freedom of circulation both inside and outside the Italian Republic and ‘opened the door to the possibility of arbitrary and capricious acts of part of the authority’ (Evans, 1968). Prostitutes particularly have been affected by this Article. Notwithstanding the laws – or because of them – prostitutes have been obliged to work along the streets in such a way that might put at risk both their liberty and life.

Several attempts were made over time to reform or abrogate the Merlin law. Part of the media periodically supported those parliamentarians who launched their alarming campaign against street prostitution. Nevertheless, given the invisible and relatively comfortable status accorded to the clients by law, not all proposals had a long life. The suggestion to fine both clients and prostitutes began to arouse some interest, especially among the most conservative and populist politicians, only in the late 1990s (Danna, 2006).

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<sup>18</sup> Evans, M., 1968. The Italian Constitutional Court. *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 3 July, pp. 602-633.

## 1.2. 'Cose o Persone?' Unchaste wives, daughters, and sisters

Bartolomeo Visalli uccise a colpi di pistola la propria moglie scoperta fra le braccia dell'amante, Carmelo Costa. La pena dell'uxoricida fu minima; ma il Costa si vide condannato ad un 'risarcimento danni' di 1 milione e 300 mila lire, a favore dell'assassino.<sup>19</sup>

When in 1981 the crime of honour was finally abrogated the relatively detached press reaction ranged from Lietta Tornabuoni's comment (Non più «disonorati») to the few lines published by the influential women's magazine, *Noi Donne*:

Da oggi il matrimonio riparatore non 'ripara' lo stupro, il delitto d'onore è punito come qualsiasi altro omicidio, per l'infanticidio sono previste attenuanti soltanto per la madre che si trovi in 'condizioni di abbandono materiale e morale', altrimenti si prevede la reclusione da 4 a 12 anni.<sup>20</sup>

These half-hearted reactions probably resulted from the timing of the abrogation. Repealing Articles 544, 578, 587, and 592 of the Rocco penal code took more than twenty years. The norms granted extenuating circumstances for four crimes; a man charged of rape could avoid the sentence by marrying his victim, thus extending extenuation to his accomplices. The abandonment of a newborn baby was punished with one year of imprisonment. Any person who killed his/her spouse, sister or daughter on discovering an illicit carnal relationship risked no more than seven years of prison, while the same code inflicted a minimum of 21 years for murder. Finally, infanticide for

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<sup>19</sup> (Anon.), 1963. Il delitto d'onore. *Noi Donne*, 12 March, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> (Anon.), 1981. La causa d'onore non c'è più. *Noi Donne*, 15 August - 4 September, p. 23; Tornabuoni, L., 1981. Non più «disonorati». *La Stampa*, 24 July, p. 1.

reasons of honour was subject to a lenient sentence. In other words, the Italian penal code recognized the social relevance of honour as a value that *must* be defended and, once lost, restored. It revealed the acceptance of the notion of male and family honour as residing in the ‘integrity’ of the body and sexual behaviour of women. It confirmed and reinforced yet again male ownership of the woman’s body. It also contributed to the exclusionary strategies employed by women against those who did not conform to social norms.

This section provides an account of the parliamentary battle for the abrogation of these four Articles begun in 1961 and definitively concluded only in 1981. While Italian society was rapidly modifying its customs and some extraordinary results in terms of rights were achieved, Parliament found itself unable to progress at a satisfactory pace. Although the legislative debates will not be discussed in detail, such ‘incapacity’ will be linked with the contemporary lack of discussion on, and definition of, violence against women. For this purpose, an analysis follows of a selection of articles on crimes of honour published by two newspapers, *La Stampa* and *l’Unità*, and the women’s magazine *Noi Donne*, between 1958 and 1981. All were in favour of abolishing the extenuating circumstances for *causa d’onore*. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace in their accounts not only their respective differences, but also the subtle shifts in perception occurring as women’s political awareness developed.

From a legislative perspective, the battle against the *causa d’onore* started officially in April 1961, when two socialist senators, Luigi Renato Sansone and Giorgio

Fenoaltea, presented a draft bill for the abrogation of Article 587.<sup>21</sup> The proposal was deferred to the Parliamentary Commission and the end of the legislature stopped it from proceeding.<sup>22</sup> Successive attempts made over the following twenty years were characterized by a surprising sequence of failures. In 1963, for instance, Giuliana Nenni, Tullia Caretoni Romagnoli and Giorgio Fenoaltea advanced a second proposal with no success.<sup>23</sup> In January 1966, it was the Minister of Justice, the republican Oronzo Reale, who announced his project for the partial reform of the Civil and Penal Codes, including the revision of the family law and the abolition of the crime of honour. Again, six months later, a group of Socialist senators submitted the abrogation of numerous Articles, including number 587,<sup>24</sup> and in February 1968 Oronzo Reale reiterated his proposal calling attention to the ‘opera educatrice della legislazione’.<sup>25</sup> A later, similar proposition tabled by the socialist Giuliano Vassalli had no more success.

Undoubtedly, the Democratic Christian parliamentarians were among the main obstacles that stood in the way of the reform. If approved, it would have had great influence in modifying the position of both women and men within the family and

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<sup>21</sup> *Senato della Repubblica*, 1961. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 11 April, p. 17280.

<sup>22</sup> Curiously *La Stampa* reports the initiative only two months later. See Adelfi, N., 1961. Si attende dalle Camere che aboliscano la semi-impunità per i «delitti d'onore». *La Stampa*, 24 June, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Giuliana Nenni and Tullia Caretoni Romagnoli asked also for the abrogation of the Articles of the Penal and Civil Codes ‘in materia di adulterio, e concubinato’ and ‘in materia di patria potestà’. Together with four other Socialist parliamentarians, Emilio Lussu, Gaetano Barbareschi, Giuseppe Alberti and Ugo Bonafini, they proposed to amend those articles related to the ‘filiazione illegittima ed adulterina’. See *Senato della Repubblica*, 1963. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 25 June, p. 44. It is interesting to note that the majority of the proponents were members of the Socialist Party.

<sup>24</sup> See *Senato della Repubblica*, 1966. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 2 July, p. 24455.

<sup>25</sup> Illustrating the proposed abrogation of the crime of honour, Oronzo Reale stated that Article 587 ‘dà al cosiddetto motivo di onore un valore che la moderna società considera giustamente eccessivo e ingiustificato’, in: *Camera dei Deputati*, 1968. Atti Parlamentari, IV Legislatura, Disegni di legge e relazioni, 6 February, disegno di legge n. 4849 presentato dal Ministro di Grazia e Giustizia Oronzo Reale, Modificazioni al codice penale, p. 10.

within society as a whole. In a press interview, Oronzo Reale openly accused the DC of ostracising the project ‘non tanto per l’abolizione del delitto d’onore quanto per le proposte di cancellare il reato d’adulterio e di legalizzare l’uso della pillola anticoncezionale’.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that while Parliament finally approved several controversial draft bills, the abrogation of the crime of honour and, above all, the reform of rape law were long neglected. The law allowing legal divorce was in fact enacted in December 1970, the Family law in 1975, and the Abortion law in 1978. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Constitutional Court had abrogated the Articles 553, 559 and 560 of the Penal Code which, respectively, punished contraceptive propaganda, a wife’s adultery and a husband’s concubinage.

The battle in Parliament for the abrogation of these anachronistic Articles was never definitively abandoned, at least not by Tullia Caretoni Romagnoli. In July 1976, she submitted yet another proposal which was debated in November 1977, only for it to be deferred once again to the Parliamentary Commission.<sup>27</sup> The senator of the Independent Left Group, Antonio Guarino, opposing this manoeuvre, expressed his indignation and astonishment that they were still debating ‘alla fine di questo anno 1977, niente di meno che dell’abolizione del delitto d’onore [...e] dell’abolizione del matrimonio riparatore’.<sup>28</sup> By deferring the project to the Commission, he added in his passionate speech, they were writing ‘un’altra pagina nera, la pagina nera della rinuncia,

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<sup>26</sup> Referring to the contraceptive pill, Reale then added: ‘è chiaro ormai che adotteremo le decisioni del Pontefice’. In: De Luca, F., 1968. Reale accusa la DC delle mancate riforme. *La Stampa*, 4 April, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> «Norme per la tutela dell’uguaglianza tra i sessi e l’istituzione di una Commissione parlamentare di indagine sulla condizione femminile in Italia» (4). See: *Senato della Repubblica*, 1976. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 9 July, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Senato della Repubblica*, 1977. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 9 November, p. 8472.

del rifiuto, del ritardo, quanto meno, nel decidere l'abolizione del delitto d'onore'.<sup>29</sup> Tullia Caretoni Romagnoli, right but nonetheless unheard, declared that 'si trattava di dire in qualche modo *simbolicamente* al movimento delle donne che questa Assemblea è con loro e rifiuta norme che sono paurosamente superate' [emphasis added].<sup>30</sup> The draft was passed finally by the Senate in December 1977, although the ultimate procedure was never completed. On 17 July 1979, Carla Ravaioli and Giglia Tedesco, jointly with twenty other senators of the Independent Left Group and the Communist Party,<sup>31</sup> presented a further proposal. The II Justice Commission passed the bill in May 1980 and it finally became law on 5 August 1981.

What may appear particularly striking is the passive resistance of the parliament, exemplified by its willingness to indulge in continuous procrastinations as regards the repeal of this historical relic, as Antonio Guarino well describes:

Non solamente abbiamo indugiato nella scorsa legislatura, ma in questa legislatura abbiamo rinviato di giorno, in giorno, di settimana in settimana, di mese in mese la discussione e la decisione su questo disegno di legge.<sup>32</sup>

This appears even more surprising in the light of the contemporary legislative changes and the ongoing modification of the public customs and response to crimes. While women could make use of their own bodies in the variegated world of the sex industry without substantially breaking the law, they were (at least symbolically) prevented from

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8479.

<sup>31</sup> «Abrogazione della rilevanza penale della causa d'onore» (112). In: *Senato della Repubblica*, 1979. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 17 July, pp. 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> *Senato della Repubblica*, 1977. Seduta Pubblica. Resoconto stenografico. 9 Nov., p. 8472. The same day, *La Stampa* publishes a letter by Antonio Guarino in 'I lettori discutono', the column dedicated to the readers' comments. See Guarino, A., 1977. Delitto d'onore. *La Stampa*, 9 November, p. 11.



enjoying the same degree of responsibility and autonomy within family boundaries. Inexplicably, the same Parliament, which came to a favourable resolution in the matter of divorce, family law, contraception and abortion, was unable or unwilling to make further steps. There were difficulties; those encountered in the battle for the rape law, started in the late 1970s, testify both to the degree of awareness and the forms of resistance to this call for the assumption of male responsibility. The symbolic value implied by those rules evidently had deep roots; their abrogation could accelerate the dissolution of the male *status quo*. While divorce, abortion, contraception and, in some measure, Family law, could have positive consequences for men, the abolition of *causa d'onore* would have meant an emblematic – if not real – end to their impunity. It would have marked another rupture in the male prerogatives over women's bodies and destinies in the family fortress.

Alessandro Galante Garrone, in an article published in 1963, rightly analyzed the concept of honour described as 'impastato di carne e sangue', 'proiezione del sesso', and based on the idea of woman as '*cosa e non come persona*'. Recalling the first failed attempt to address the problem in 1961, he wondered whether or not 'finirà la barbara indulgenza accordata al «delitto d'onore»'.<sup>33</sup> Galante Garrone's comment was only one among several articles on this issue periodically published by *La Stampa* over the period in question. In 1961, for instance, the newspaper announced the Sansoni-Fenoaltea

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<sup>33</sup> Galante Garrone, A., 1963. Finirà la barbara indulgenza accordata al «delitto d'onore»? *La Stampa*, 26 June, p. 5.

proposal alluding to an imminent abolition of the «delitti d'onore».<sup>34</sup> In 1964, it published an articulate contribution by the president of the First Section of the Turin Court: 'Sesso e onore. Un'aberrazione giuridica e morale'.<sup>35</sup> Again, in 1966, Oronzo Reale's bill was given four columns on the front page,<sup>36</sup> and in 1977 *La Stampasera* dedicated two whole pages to the triumphal announcement of the coming abrogation of the article.<sup>37</sup>

The nature of the interest granted by *La Stampa* to this matter was related more closely to the Turin and Piedmont context, characterized by a massive presence of Southern migrants, than to any civic sense. According to Salvatore Lupo (1996:251), in fact, Agnelli's newspaper echoed the prejudices against Southerners and their customs symbolized precisely by the crime of honour: 'public opinion could not tolerate the contagious spread of archaic habits'.<sup>38</sup> Extensive coverage was given to those crimes perpetrated by migrants, both men and women, or in the Southern regions of Italy. It is also true, however, that the same hostile Northern citizens could fully enjoy the extenuating circumstances of Article 587. In 1977, for instance, the Milan Assizes

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<sup>34</sup> Adelfi, N., 1961. Si attende dalla Camera che aboliscano la semi-impunità per i «delitti d'onore». *La Stampa*, 24 June, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Germano, E., 1964. Sesso e onore. *La Stampa*, 15 February, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> De Luca, F., 1966. L'articolo 587 sul «delitto d'onore» sarà modificato entro la fine di febbraio». *La Stampa*, 4 Jan. p. 1; Guidi, G., 1966. Discordi i giuristi sul delitto d'onore. *La Stampasera*, 5-6 January, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Costanzo, S., 1977. Tutto è cambiato, anche l'onore. *La Stampasera*, 10 November, pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Todisco, A., 1960. Non è una vertigine il delitto d'onore ma quasi sempre trappola premeditata. *La Stampa*, 22 March, p. 3; Todisco, A., 1960. Il Mezzogiorno non è concorde nel giudicare il «delitto d'onore». *La Stampa*, 1 April, p. 3. (Anon.), 1960. Quando l'onore diventa follia. *La Stampa*, 9 October, p. 2. Tito, M., 1963. Non più delitti d'onore a Caltanissetta dal tempo della grande fuga verso Torino. *La Stampa*, 29 January, p. 3. 1973. Curi, L., 1973. Sta scomparendo nella Sicilia la donna che uccide per onore. *La Stampa*, 18 December, p. 11.

sentenced a night guard from Mantua to four years and six months imprisonment for having killed a man in order to ‘vendicare l’onore offeso’.<sup>39</sup>

In 1970 *La Stampasera* published a brief contribution by Luisella Re, ‘La donna come «cosa»’. The journalist, commenting on the striking conclusion of Furnari’s appeal trial,<sup>40</sup> underlines how the ‘«delitto d’onore» è negare l’eguaglianza dei sessi ed imporre alla donna un marchio di inferiorità, *quasi* un marchio di «cosa»’ [emphasis added]. She reflects on the concept of family honour, considered as a ‘patrimonio dei maschi di casa, padre, marito o fratello and based exclusively on the ‘comportamento erotico delle donne’. Re shares Galante Garrone’s views, but goes a step further: a woman ‘può disporre del suo patrimonio e del suo lavoro, *ma non di sé stessa*’. She then bitterly concludes: ‘dopo la guerra, l’Italia non fucila neppure i criminali più feroci, ed è bene che sia così, ma la pena di morte può ancora essere inflitta da un parente geloso del suo «onore» alla donna «peccatrice»’.<sup>41</sup>

*La Stampa* slightly modified its approach over the late Sixties and Seventies in reporting tragic cases involving the crime of honour. The term seemed less frequently used in the headlines or, at least, it seemed no longer to fit the context and the shifting perception of the crime. More space was given to the description of the killer, usually a man motivated now by an ‘assurda gelosia’, and the abusive and oppressive relationship with the victims. The influence of feminism began to emerge from the pages of the

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<sup>39</sup> Fabbri, M., 1977. Assassino per «onore» condannato a 4 anni ed ora è già in libertà. *La Stampa*, 24 October, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> See above, this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> Re, L., 1970. La donna come «cosa». *La Stampasera*, 26-27 March, p. 3.

newspaper, as revealed by some articles published in the late Seventies. Donata Gianeri, for instance, announcing Carettoni's proposal, depicts the *status quo*:

Anche l'onore ha un sesso: maschile senz'ombra di dubbio. [...] Il codice ha sancito questo principio, permettendo all'uomo di difendere l'onore e lavarlo col sangue [...]. E a lungo gli uomini hanno sparato e sgozzato per difendere [...] l'onore offeso; piegandosi anche a magnanime nozze riparatrici quando a offenderlo fossero stati loro. E a lungo le donne hanno accettato botte e nozze riparatrici e si sono fatte ammazzare, in nome dell'onore maschile. [...] S[e] tutto va bene, siamo agli ultimi spari.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, in 1977, another tragic case induces the publication of a contribution by Carlo Moriondo: 'Le donne perdonano gli uomini sparano'. Analyzing what has often been called 'delitto passionale', he notices how men are overrepresented among perpetrators and women among victims, then offering an explanation:

L'uomo [...] è persuaso che tutto gli è dovuto e che non deve nulla, preferisce uccidere anziché separarsi perché vuole infliggere una «punizione» e [...] fermare l'immagine della donna, per sempre, ad un «prima», [...] impedire che sia di un altro.<sup>43</sup>

The question is now configured beyond legal rights. Both journalists focus on the representation of masculinity, male fragility and fantasies about women as feminist criticism unfolded at the opening of the battle against sexual violence.

As the mouthpiece of the Italian Communist Party, *l'Unità* gave wide coverage to party affairs, political, international events and, of course, financial and work issues. It also covered national and regional affairs thanks to its local editions but, unlike in *La*

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<sup>42</sup> Gianeri, D., 1977. L'«onore» non salverà più chi ha ucciso perché tradito. *La Stampasera*, 28 November, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Moriondo, C., 1977. Le donne perdonano gli uomini sparano. *La Stampasera*, 29 November, p. 3.

*Stampa*, crimes of honour were not reported in *l'Unità* with the same alarmed frequency, style and perspective. This does not suggest it neglected the matter: on the contrary. In 1965, for instance, the lenient sentence for Gaetano Furnari was remarked upon as an: 'inaudita sentenza', 'abberrante decisione', 'inaccettabile verdetto'.<sup>44</sup> The author, Giorgio Frasca Polara, outlined facts and protagonists in a tone of abrasive sarcasm:

[U]na ragazza [...] va in città a studiare; trova un professore vitellone al quale piacciono le avventurette con le allieve e ci sta; salvo poi a raccontare in famiglia di essere stata «sedotta». Poi, improvviso, il delitto; cioè la «vendetta» di un padre «disonorato». Poi, ancora, l'arresto del maestro [...]. Infine, l'orgia rettorica in Assise.

Polara obviously deprecates the victim while also blaming the girl for not taking the responsibility for her own sexual choices. The journalist then refers to the speech of the defendants who, after making the apology of the crime of honour, depict the young seduced woman as a 'prostituta o giù di lì'. However, he goes further by reporting, in the same article, the decision just taken by the Palermo Assizes: a man, found guilty of the theft of '50 carciofi e 10 galline', had just been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and two years of 'casa di lavoro'. Polara thus bitterly concludes that 'alcune decine di carciofi e qualche gallina valgono, per la Giustizia, più del doppio della vita di un uomo'. Given the editorial policy of *l'Unità*, the article inevitably shifts from the critique of the 'formule del codice Fascista' inherited (here represented by

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<sup>44</sup> Frasca Polara, G., 1965. «Delitto d'onore: 2 anni e 11 mesi. *L'Unità*, 24 December, p. 5.

Article 587) to a wider critique of class and social inequalities. Any other issue, such as gender inequality, is irrelevant.

As in *La Stampa*, in the late Seventies the echo of feminist debates on violence begins to permeate the pages of *l'Unità*. In 1977, for example, the announcement of the Senate's approval of the Caretoni draft bill is linked to the battle against violence:

[L]'abrogazione [...] è solo un primo passo: occorre affrontare il più generale problema della violenza, tenendo presente che dall'analisi della violenza contro la donna si può ricavare un dato sintomatico, se non esclusivo, della nuova violenza che ha assunto così gravi dimensioni nella vita sociale del nostro paese.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, a blend of conventional concern and lukewarm engagement seems to characterize the approach of *L'Unità* to the matter. The newspaper mirrored the views of the Communist Party so little inclined to accept suggestions not only from the feminist movement, but also from its own women's association, the Unione Donne Italiane (UDI). As will be demonstrated, this impervious attitude, which alienated part of the feminists, together with the rigid structure of the party, was among the causes that affected from within the unity of the UDI.<sup>46</sup>

Until that moment of crisis, however, the Unione Donne Italiane fought its cultural and actual battles against inequalities sanctioned by Italian law, thanks also to its mouthpiece, *Noi Donne*. The women's magazine organized as early as 1958, for instance, the seminar 'Indulgenza per i delitti d'onore?' in its editorial office, to which

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<sup>45</sup> Co. T., 1977. Scompare dal codice il «delitto d'onore». *L'Unità*, 15 December, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Marisa Rodano, historical member of UDI, recalls her experience: 'Eravamo prigioniere di uno schema superato, eravamo legate ad antichi equilibri politici e, intanto, attorno a noi, tutto stava cambiando'. In: Rodano, M., 2010. *Memorie di una che c'era. Una storia dell'UDI*. Milan: Saggiatore, p. 205.

were invited a female lawyer, a psychiatrist, a journalist, a theatre actress, and a male lawyer.<sup>47</sup> In 1963, the magazine seemed to change its strategy, publishing a series of inquiries on crime of honour, adultery, *potestà maritale*, and *patria potestà*, with the aim of calling the attention of press, public, and parliamentary candidates on those ‘articoli che danno vigore e autorità di legge all’ingiustizia, alla discriminazione, [...] in contrasto con la nostra costituzione.’<sup>48</sup> As an example of injustice, the article reported the momentous decision handed down by the Rome Court of Appeal in 1962 regarding a case of uxoricide for honour. In 1945, Bartolomeo Visalli was sentenced to a very lenient punishment for having shot dead his unfaithful wife while her lover escaped. Two years later, Visalli made a successful claim for compensation against the surviving lover who appealed to the Court in 1949. It took almost thirteen years to reach a decision that rejected the appeal and granted compensation to the offended husband because:

[I]l Visalli, oltre al grave turbamento psichico per l’atroce ingiuria sofferta e la notorietà del fatto, soggiacque a perdita di attività lavorativa a seguito della detenzione subita per l’effetto dell’uxoricidio da lui commesso, alle spese processuali e di difesa che dovette affrontare e al trasferimento della famiglia in altra residenza per sottrarsi al disdoro che lo circondava.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> (Anon.), 1958. Indulgenza per i delitti d’onore? *Noi Donne*, 1 June, np. They were respectively: Ada Picciotto, president of the Associazione Donne Giuriste; Giovanni Bollea, prominent child neuropsychiatrist; Ruggero Zangrandi, well known and controversial journalist for Paese Sera; Carla Bizzarri and Giorgio Pirani.

<sup>48</sup> (Anon.), 1963. Il delitto d’onore. *Noi Donne*, 24 March, pp. 6-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. See also R.S., 1962. Uccise la moglie adultera l’amante gli paga i danni. *La Stampa*, 28 March, p. 9. The case was also quoted by *Der Spiegel*: (Anon.), 1965. Aufforderung zum Mord. *Der Spiegel*, 20 January, pp. 67-69.

This case embodied the inequality and the absurdities of Italian society and its juridical system. The murdered woman disappeared: she no longer counted; *her* body no longer counted; her name was forgotten. Even her homicide had lost any ethical value. She was dead; her death had cancelled her earthly obligations. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she was killed twice, once by her dishonoured husband then by the law. The husband's honour was partially restored, somehow 'resuscitated', by a tribute of blood and money.<sup>50</sup>

The involvement of the Unione Donne Italiane in the abolition of all forms of inequalities undoubtedly remained stable over the years. Nevertheless, the *delitto d'onore* did not seem to be a priority.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note, in fact, that the parliamentary battle for the abrogation of the cause of honour was led mainly by the Socialist Party until the late Seventies, when the Communists became more proactive.<sup>52</sup> It is also true that the political and economic situation itself contributed to diverting attention from what could be considered a marginal issue. Given that and the strong tie between PCI and UDI, an omission by *Noi Donne* is hardly surprising. The magazine

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<sup>50</sup> A sort of pagan 'salvezza' (salvation) reached not through Jesus's blood, but through the blood of the woman; not through Jesus's sacrifice, but through the woman's sacrifice.

<sup>51</sup> In 1975, *Noi Donne* in its special issue on International Women's Day focused on denouncing the injustices and violence of which the Italian women are still victims: 'Queste violenze [...] hanno un nome preciso. [...]: diritto di famiglia, maternità, aborto clandestino, consultori [...], asili nido, disoccupazione, lavoro nero, crisi, scuola, casa servizi sociali'. In (Anon.), 1975. I delitti contro la donna nell'Anno Internazionale della Donna. *Noi Donne*, 12 January, np. While the right of family is included among the injustices perpetrated against women, there is no mention of the issues directly related to the crime of honour or rape.

<sup>52</sup> In 1977, *La Stampa*, quoting *La Repubblica*, reported a protest organized by UDI in front of the Palazzo Madama, the house of the Senate, where the Carettoni's draft was to be discussed: '«Se mi violenti mi puoi sposare; se ti tradisco mi puoi ammazzare»; «La marcia nuziale non cancella la violenza carnale»; «Articolo 587 = licenza d'uccidere». Gli slogan, riportati a caratteri giganti e colorati sui cartelli in testa al gruppo delle aderenti all'UDI [...], venivano scanditi a ripetizione davanti a palazzo Madama'. In: (Anon.), 1977. Gli altri dicono. *La Stampa*, 10 November, p. 15.



neglected, while announcing in 1981 the abolition of Articles 587 and 544, to name the first proponents, the socialists Sansone, Fenoaltea and the untiring Tullia Carettoni Romagnoli:

[È] stata finalmente cancellata dal codice penale l'attenuante della «causa d'onore», dopo cinque anni di battaglie parlamentari condotte soprattutto da Carla Ravaoli, per gli indipendenti della sinistra, e Giglia Tedesco, per i comunisti'.<sup>53</sup>

In its understandable attempt to transfer most of the merit of this success to the party, *Noi Donne* forgot to emphasise and question the meanings concealed beneath twenty years of extraordinary passive resistance. Already focused on the next vital issue, such as the battle for the rape law, UDI and *Noi Donne* neglected to investigate in depth the nature of both their actual position within the party and their relationship with the male membership.

Analyzing the whole process is critical; it suggests that the abrogation of Articles 587 and 544 came at a strategic time, namely, when the campaign for the rape law was introduced into Parliament. In other words, the cancellation of those Articles sounds more like a concession than a civil conquest, for another battle and another moment of resistance were imminent. Transforming rape from a crime against morality to a crime against the person, as demanded by feminists, required a cultural and social transformation. Tamar Pitch rightly states (1995:164) that 'issues relating to sexuality, while in the first instance concerning women, in reality put into question the relation between the sexes and the constitutive part they play in all other relationships'. As with

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<sup>53</sup> (Anon.), 1981. La causa d'onore non c'è più. *Noi Donne*, 15 August - 4 September, p. 23.

the regulation of prostitution and the abolition of the *causa d'onore*, so the legislation to reform rape law was subject to resistance and prevarication, as will be shown in the following section.

### 1.3. Rape: ‘Gli stupri ci sono perché non c’è una legge antistupro’

Roberta Tatafiore, in a small publication, significantly entitled *De bello fallico. Cronaca di una brutta legge sulla violenza sessuale* (1996), expressed her concerns about both the modality in which the rape law reform was promoted and the actual law approved. In January 1995, the weekly women’s magazine *Anna* published an inquiry into sexual violence, urging Parliament to discuss the rape draft bills still pending. Two hundred thousand signatures were collected in its favour; the law was discussed and surprisingly enacted the year after, on 14 February 1996. For Tatafiore (1996:7), *Anna*’s initiative mobilized and, at the same time, diverted public opinion towards a presumed emergency, as if to say that: ‘gli stupri ci sono perché non c’è una legge antistupro’.

Researchers such as Tamar Pitch (1995) and Roberta Tatafiore (1996) have already analyzed the long road that led to the approval of the rape law after twenty years.<sup>54</sup> They have highlighted the contradictory role played by feminists and women politicians in this campaign, as well as some of the controversial aspects contained in the final law. On the one hand there is the sex-phobic twist acquired by the draft bills after the first proposal (Tatafiore, 1996:15);<sup>55</sup> on the other, the ‘withdrawal of autonomy which the mandatory prosecution seemed to embody’ (Pitch, 1995:167). Nevertheless, this last section will analyze neither the draft bills, nor the parliamentary debates on the

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<sup>54</sup> See also Tacchi, F., 2009. *Eva togata. Donne e professioni giuridiche in Italia dall’unità a oggi*. Turin: UTET, pp. 176-180.

<sup>55</sup> Tamar Pitch also affirms that ‘in the space of twenty years we have passed from the celebration of a liberated sexuality as an element of creativity, joy, of a truly revolutionary change, to a discourse which sees in sexuality only the negative: (violence (against women and children), emotional disorder, and death (from AIDS)’. In: Pitch, T., 1995. *Limited responsibilities. Social Movements & Criminal Justice*. London: Routledge, p. 163.

rape law. Rather, it attempts to outline the traces of resistance and potential modifications in the public perception of rape detected and displayed by some of Italian newspapers and magazines in the late Seventies. In other words, the process of naming the violence in such a way that was unthinkable only a few years before (Pitch, 1995:157) will be shown. Focusing only on a specific case as reported by some newspapers within a very restricted time will show how (and when) sexual violence was transformed from a silenced crime against morality to a problematic 'issue'.

In this process of naming, a tragic turning-point was represented by the crime of Circeo, which marked a nebulous 'before' and a dark, terrifying 'after'. The bodies of two girls, both raped and tortured, were discovered in the night of 1 October 1975 in the boot of a car parked in a residential area of Rome. Only one survived; three men from the *Roma-bene*, well known to the police as *picchiatori Fascisti*,<sup>56</sup> were formally accused. One escaped while the others stood trial. Both were sentenced to life imprisonment. The press coverage of this case, which provoked an unprecedented outburst of protests and emotion throughout the country, was unusually responsive. For Italian newspapers, reporting on sexual crimes became more common over the late Sixties and mid-Seventies. Nevertheless, they did not venture, even in the most extreme of cases, beyond a conventional sympathy for the victims, an attitude that must have been barely 'adequate' for the crime of Circeo.

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<sup>56</sup> Although already prosecuted for rape and robbery, they always enjoyed the protection guaranteed by their social position and were able to obtain extraordinary mitigations. See: Sciarelli, F. and Rinaldi, G., 2006. *Tre bravi ragazzi. Gli assassini del Circeo, i retroscena d'una inchiesta lunga 30 anni*. Milan: Rizzoli.

*La Stampa* gives evidence of the modification in the perception of this kind of crime, well expressed by its headlines and the actual treatment and tone of the articles. In the evening edition the case was announced on the front page by a misleading title, ‘Assassinio al droga-party’, partially echoed in the content of the text:

Quattro giovani della Roma-bene, dopo un *festino* iniziato domenica sera in una villa del Circeo (nel corso del quale pare sia stato fatto abbondante uso di droga) hanno orribilmente seviziato le due ragazze con le quali si erano accompagnati [emphasis added].<sup>57</sup>

The following day, the headlines read: ‘Tragica *orgia* in una villa nella località balneare di S. Felice Circeo. Due ragazze sono seviziate in un *festino* e chiuse nel baule dell’auto: una è morta’ [emphasis added].<sup>58</sup> Once again, not only are the erotic and transgressive character of the presumed party implied, but also is the consenting participation, the willingness, of the two girls. However, while going through the article, which occupies seven columns and displays five pictures, the reader is led towards the heart of a ‘sconvolgente storia che, confermata dalle indagini, appare ora come uno squarcio di pura violenza’.<sup>59</sup> The term *festino* is now trapped between inverted commas so as to underline that an entity - eroticism and transgression - has been omitted by the three men. Balance, respect and a restrained sense of horror guide the journalist, who describes the victims as ‘poco più che ragazzine, umiliate, minacciate e, una,

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<sup>57</sup> R.S., 1975. Assassinio al droga-party. *La Stampasera*, 1 October, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Mazzucco, S., 1975. Due ragazze sono seviziate in un festino e chiuse nel baule dell’auto: una è morta. *La Stampa*, 2 October, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

barbaramente uccisa'.<sup>60</sup> She bridges the gap opened by the inappropriate headline and tries to reconstruct a sense of truthfulness.

*L'Unità*, on the other hand, privileges an approach focused on the political and social entourage of criminals and victims: 'Tre squadristi gli assassini della ragazza nella villa al Circeo';<sup>61</sup> 'Per anni lasciati liberi di picchiare i Fascisti massacratori delle ragazze';<sup>62</sup> 'A mente fredda il feroce delitto dei tre giovani squadristi romani';<sup>63</sup> 'Dalle bravate Fasciste ai crimini coltivati nell'ozio';<sup>64</sup> 'Quando la periferia diventa ghetto'.<sup>65</sup> The three men are continuously described as 'Fascisti', 'picchiatori', 'squadristi', and 'pariolini' (from *Parioli*, one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Rome) and the violence suffered by the two girls becomes an instance of Fascist and class violence: nothing more, nothing less.

*L'Unità* struggles to go beyond its traditional reading of facts. Ten months later, though, despite the daily presence of feminists and UDI members in the court during the trial, it seems blind to any other perspective. While the prosecution was rightly perceived as 'un episodio emblematico della dura battaglia per l'affermazione dei diritti delle donne', the sentence was generically considered 'un atto di accusa per quegli

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Criscuoli, S., 1975. Tre squadristi gli assassini della ragazza nella villa al Circeo. *L'Unità*, 2 October, pp. 1, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Caprarica, A., 1975. Per anni lasciati liberi di picchiare i Fascisti massacratori delle ragazze. *L'Unità*, 4 October, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Criscuoli, S., 1975. A mente fredda il feroce delitto dei tre giovani squadristi romani. Volevano farle tacere per sempre. *L'Unità*, 3 October, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> C., A., 1975. Dalla bravate Fasciste ai crimini coltivati nell'ozio. *L'Unità*, 2 October, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Calderoni, M. R., 1975. Quando la periferia diventa ghetto. *L'Unità*, 3 October, p. 5.

ambienti sociali che hanno prodotto dei giovani come questi tre imputati'.<sup>66</sup> There is neither question, nor tension, but the unthinking attempt to avoid the real issue: the two girls disappear as women, covered by the blanket of the class question.

For its tragic particularity and the presence of the feminists who, for the first time, were recognized as plaintiffs in the criminal proceeding, the crime of Circeo played an important role in changing the public attitude towards rape. A different, less acquiescent or sensationalistic way to report on rape and conduct a trial for rape took place, although it was neither an easy nor a quick process. During the trial of Circeo, for instance, the weekly newsmagazine *L'Espresso* published an inquiry into rape publicized by a striking front cover. A half-naked woman in high-heeled shoes, her breasts and legs visible, stands trapped in a corner of what might be a garage where a male figure casts his shadow on the left wall. The headline, divided into two parts, frames the top and the bottom of the picture: 'Un problema sociale che diventa politico.' 'Le violentate. Ogni giorno, in Italia, centinaia di donne subiscono violenze carnali. Come? Perché?'.<sup>67</sup> The superfluous nudity of the female figure, however, diverts the attention and disturbs the full reception of the keyword, *le violentate*, needlessly printed in a larger font. In the meantime, it seems to create, and to locate in part, the category of raped women conveying a sense of forced separateness and unavoidability: they are women, so they have been raped.

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<sup>66</sup> Gambescia, P., 1976. Tre ergastoli decisi al termine di sette ore di camera di consiglio. *L'Unità*, 30 July, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> *L'Espresso*, 25 July 1976, front cover.

The article is, however, well researched, exploring the nature of rape through American and German statistics, interviews with feminists, a psychologist's evaluation, and the official statements released by the victims. We learn that no statistics can give a reliable picture of the actual phenomenon in Italy: 'è un reato minore', a police officer states, 'ecco perché non ci sono statistiche'. We learn that rape against prostitutes is more likely to be misrepresented and undervalued: 'I casi più noti riguardano l'ambiente della prostituzione, le donne picchiate dai clienti che vogliono prendere la loro merce senza pagare. E in questo caso, forse, più che di stupro si tratta di rapina'.<sup>68</sup>

The article also states that there are several kinds of rape, from the 'stupro legittimo' within marriage to the 'stupro di classe', from the political rape to the 'qualunquista' (or chauvinistic), the most common. Again, the crime of Circeo is recalled in words and images. Our memory and compassion may be reinforced with the image of the dead, naked body of the victim of Circeo, exposed to everybody's eyes on the ground in front of the car where she was found. It is similar to a deposition by Michelangelo, but there is no mother holding the body. Despite the attempt, the spirit of the article appears less inquisitive and challenging than it might first seem. Our reading may conclude with the impression that no one can actually be considered responsible for rape: the rapist is someone and somewhere else, while a raped woman can be everyone and everywhere, but not a prostitute. As are the clients of a prostitute, who disappear from the scene, the rapist is a faceless entity whom nobody really knows nor wants to know. A mechanism of estrangement is here at work, creating a defensive

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<sup>68</sup> Malaspina, T., 1976. Violentata. *L'Espresso*, 25 July, p. 22.



buffer zone for men far from the ‘others’: upper-class Fascists, *borgatari*, leftist comrades, or ‘pure’ chauvinists. A critical inner vision, a gaze from within, was still an inconceivable step, one that has only recently been taken thanks to the contribution of a fragile but committed network of male associations.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, although the crime of Circeo was a cultural turning point, it had a minimal effect on feminist’s perception of, and reaction to, violence against prostitutes. Even within the women’s movement the double standard still pertained, subtle and largely unquestioned.

## Conclusion

The Italian normative framework deeply affected the life of women, regardless of their condition, in both symbolic and actual terms. Control over women’s bodies and their sexual behaviour both magnified and concealed their powerless position. As will be shown in the next chapter, imposed and self-imposed blindness led women to inhabit a hostile world without fully perceiving its violence and the unjust conditions imposed upon them. Their lives seemed merely to run incessantly between two extremes, exemplified by being a prostitute or being a raped woman. Years before feminist consciousness-raising, there were no words to express their experiences; violence often remained an unnamed issue defined or denied only by law. The next chapter will thus explore how women and female prostitutes tried to tell their stories, to represent

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<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, the Associazione Nazionale Maschile Plurale, founded in Rome in 2007 or the *Gruppo uomini di Roma*. Information available at: <<http://maschileplurale.it>>.

themselves, and the violence suffered when feminist thinking and practice were still far from providing a new approach with which to interrogate women's experiences.

## Chapter 2

### ‘Lui mi prese e mi cosò’: Violence, Sexuality, and Prostitution in Women’s and Newspaper Narratives

Lui mi prese e *mi cosò* anche mentre io piangevo e dissi «ò paura ò paura».<sup>1</sup>

Dopo una violenta lotta [...] e cioè prima di ‘cedere’, *lui mi [ha] lasciato libera di scegliere*: o lui mi avrebbe amata come e più di prima, oppure mi lasciava definitivamente.<sup>2</sup>

Physical and psychological violence, desire and self-censorship, and pain and confusion run through these fragments of stories written between 1948 and 1959 by a female prostitute and a Sardinian girl. They epitomize the coercive atmosphere to which women could be exposed, confining them in what has been defined a ‘private prison’ (Dahl and Snare, 1978). The Italian legal system, as seen the previous chapter, played a key role in constructing and maintaining this atmosphere of coercion and violence against women. This chapter will explore how, and to what extent, violence informed and underlined the stories of women and female prostitutes as well as newspaper narratives. It will consider how language and rhetorical strategies were deployed to articulate or even deny violence, its ‘victims’ and its perpetrators, obscuring real human experience. Two texts written respectively by women and female prostitutes, *Le italiane si confessano* (1959) and *Lettere dalle case chiuse* (1955), will be analysed for their

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<sup>1</sup> *Cara senatrice Merlin...Lettere dalle case chiuse*. Turin, EGA, 2008 (First edition, Merlin, L. and Barberis, C., eds. 1955. *Lettere dalle case chiuse*. Milan-Rome: Edizioni Avanti!).

<sup>2</sup> Parca, G., ed. 1960. *Le italiane si confessano*. Florence: Parenti.

articulation of violence and coercion years before feminist consciousness-raising. A number of newspapers articles on a prostitute murder case, published in 1965, will be analysed and compared with these previous narratives. In its role of contributor to gendered discourses (Wykes, 2001:138-163; Faludi, 1992) and as a male-dominated domain, Italian journalism provides a privileged point of view on the representation of violence.

Although violence has never been a transient or episodic occurrence in women's (and men's) lives, it was first 'named' and recognized as an issue only in the 1970s (Brownmiller, 1975), since when it has been firmly inscribed on the feminist agenda. Feminism has contributed to reveal the reality of a phenomenon deeply rooted in both Western and Eastern cultures (French, Teays and Purdy, 1998; O'Toole, Shiffman and Kiter Edwards, 2007; Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008; Merry, 2009; Cuklanz and Moorti, 2009;) playing a prominent role in the recognition of violence against women as both a gender-based crime and a matter of public concern. The prevailing attitude, however, continues to deny – or at least resist – the full implication brought to light by feminism. There is still, for instance, 'a widespread belief that it is *natural for men to be violent*' (Connell, R.W., 2000:215), thus bracketing violence against women as a private matter, in police jargon a 'domestic', a regrettable but unavoidable event.

At the same time, culture and gender become convenient concepts for explaining violence perpetrated by 'native' or immigrant men. While the latter 'act against the backdrop of their culture of oppressing women', the former can be excused on the basis of medical or socio-biological theories, such as those on the 'testosterone', 'aggressive'

or 'sick' male (Lövkrona, 2002; Klause, 2002).<sup>3</sup> This tactical manoeuvre allows attention to be diverted to the 'Other' such as, in this case, the immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, while feminists' emphasis on patriarchal and gender inequality has helped to disclose and analyse the issue of violence against women, it obscures or fails to explain the violence perpetrated in other contexts and its multifaceted connotation. It is only fairly recently, for instance, that scholars have addressed violence in same-sex relationships (Renzetti and Miley, 1996; O'Toole and Shiffman, 1997, 2007). Even more recently, violence against female prostitutes has attracted some interest (Campbell and Kinnell, 2000; Kinnell, 2008; Canter, Ioannou and Youngs, 2009; Connell, J., 2009). Lyly Greenan (2004), among others (Price, 2001; Watt and Zimmerman, 2002), has underlined how, for instance, 'crime surveys tend to focus on a single aspect of violence against women and [...] are inclined not to [...] address the particular issues related to violence against women from marginalised groups, including [...] women working in prostitution'.<sup>5</sup> Rape and domestic violence now appear, in some ways, less *justifiable* than violence perpetrated against women working in prostitution.

The existing divergent views about prostitution and sexuality among feminists and prostitute activists contribute significantly to the generalization of this attitude that

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<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the former Home Minister Jack Straw mixed testosterone theory, cultural and gender issues when commenting on a sexual abuse case that involved young British Pakistani men and *vulnerable* white girls. See BBC News, 2011. Jack Straw: Some white girls are 'easy meat' for abuse. [online]. Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-12141603>> [Accessed 12 January 2011].

<sup>4</sup> A similar procedure is evident when considering, for instance, the "everyday" individual rape perpetrated in war zones. See Moorti, S., 2002. *Color of rape: gender and race in television's public spheres*. Albany, NY: Suny Press, pp. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Greenan, A. L., 2004. *Violence against Women - Literature Review*. [Online] 24 November. Available at: <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/11/20283>> [Accessed 14 June 2007].

the tragic case of Ipswich in 2006 once more brought to the fore. Radical feminists (Jeffreys, 1987; Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1993), in particular, assert that prostitution is ‘in and of itself violence against women [...] and that all clients are motivated by the desire to dominate, humiliate and hurt’ (Kinnell, 2008:27). The position assumed by radical feminism inevitably obscures values and meanings of the prostitutes’ experiences (including those of men and transsexual prostitutes), forgetting seriously to investigate male *and* female demand for paid sex. Above all, they ignore the fact that violence against prostitutes can be also qualitatively different, ranging from ‘immigration raids’ to ‘politicians’ statements and media exposés of sex workers’ (Kinnell, 2008:31). For this reason, discussing prostitution and its representation inevitably implies *also* discriminating and discussing violence *against* prostitutes *and* its representation.

The first section of this chapter will be devoted to the review of *Le italiane si confessano* (1959), a selection of the letters sent to two women’s magazines and then edited by the journalist Gabriella Parca. Addressing questions, anxieties and concerns to an advice columnist was a phenomenon particularly significant throughout the Fifties and Sixties: all women’s magazines hosted one or more columns in order to cover the increasing range of ‘feminine’ issues (Morris, 2007). The weekly *Amica*, for instance, first published in 1962, contained eight different such columns by 1968.<sup>6</sup> Compared to confession or psychoanalysis, in reality the ‘piccola posta’ preserved strong

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<sup>6</sup> Monsignor Ernesto Pisoni and Mila Contini replied respectively from ‘La posta dell’anima’ and ‘La posta del cuore’. Then followed: ‘La vita e la legge’; ‘Il sofà dello psicanalista’; ‘I problemi della scuola’; ‘La donna che lavora’; ‘L’assistente sociale’; ‘I vostri risparmi’.

conservative views: the ‘risposte-prediche settimanali [erano] ispirate alla stretta morale della verginità-fedeltà per ragazze e spose, del sacrificio e obbedienza per le donne in genere’ (Lilli, 1976:285).<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that some letters and questions addressed to the advice columns were actually ‘fabricated’ by the editorial staff of the magazines (Peregalli, 2001). Even so, they can be considered an important source of information on Italian society.

Penelope Morris (2006) has analyzed the genesis, reception, limits and issues of *Le italiane si confessano* whose interest derives precisely from its depiction of women’s lives and their concerns about sex and sexuality, as well as the structure of gender relationships in Italy in the 1950s. This section, however, intends to address specifically the perception and representation of violence as this was more or less unwittingly provided by the letter-writers. The collection, based on a relatively narrow socio-economic group of women, cannot be considered representative of all or a significant part of Italian female population. Moreover, the process of selection and editing to which the letters were subjected have created an irreversible distance between the letter-writers, their own experiences and the reader. Nevertheless, despite doubts expressed over time, no commentator ‘suggests that the book presents a false picture’ (Morris, 2006:120). *Le italiane si confessano* paradoxically appears a *reliable* echo of women’s intimate experience. While it displays the significant degree of coercion and violence

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<sup>7</sup> Their popularity is testified to also by the cinema: *Piccola posta* (1956) by Steno, for instance, is based precisely on the phenomenon of the advice columns. See also: Morris, P., 2007. A window on the private sphere: Advice columns, marriage, and the evolving family in 1950s Italy. *the italianist*, 27, pp. 304-332. For an interesting analysis of the American case see Gudelunas, D., 2008. *Confidential America. Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher.

inflicted and ‘accepted’, it describes – precisely through its circumvolutions – the concrete mechanisms that entrapped Italian women or, at least, some of them.

The following section will consider a second collection of letters sent by prostitutes to Lina Merlin, the Socialist senator who promoted the abolition of brothels. *Lettere dalle case chiuse* (1955) was published in order to win sympathy for, and reduce opposition to, Merlin’s draft bill. The text is ‘valuable as the only instance of prostitutes’ direct voices in the debate’ (Tambor, 2006:140), providing an insight into their lives from their own point of view. It also allows us to analyze the prostitutes’ self-representation, investigate precisely what they identified (if they ever did so) as violence, and how this violence contributed to restricting and marginalizing their lives. The prostitutes’ condition mirrored the broader yet more widely ‘acceptable’ regime to which women as a whole were submitted. A comparative reading with Parca’s collection will then attempt to highlight the diversities and continuities in the recognition and representation of violence. How the language differs between the two collections of letters, shifting from a mediated and conventional form to one more direct and less unambiguous, will be examined.

The last section will focus on the journalistic treatment of a brutal killing committed in Milan in 1965; this will be done in order to explore the role of newspapers in reporting prostitution and violence. The interest of this story, chosen from among others, emerges from the profile of the murdered woman, Margherita Grossi: she was not only a victim but also a wife, mother, daughter and a street prostitute. In other words, she embodied most of the roles women might happen to perform in their



lifetimes during the Sixties. Although the case never reached the front pages, the murder was covered by some of the most popular newspapers, such as *Corriere della sera*, *La Stampa*, *Mattino*, *Secolo XIX*, and *l'Unità*. Through a comparative reading of a number of articles the section will show how these texts, often closer to fictional narratives than to a journalistic account, contributed to the re-construction of the public (and individual) perception of prostitution and to the normalization of violence against prostitutes. Their evasive language revises some of the strategies used by Parca's letter-writers. However, while the latter tried to say without saying, the former were concealing, transforming and increasing distance and misrepresentation. Moreover, the death of a prostitute, opportunely fictionalized, worked as a warning for readers, especially for female readers; simultaneously, it helped to conceal the role played by the legal system in tolerating the deployment of violence.

## 2.1. The Words to Say it: *Le italiane si confessano* (1959)

When Gabriella Parca selected and edited the letters sent to the advice columns of a women's magazine and a *fotoromanzo*,<sup>8</sup> undoubtedly she did not foresee that she would cause such a stir (Morris, 2006:109-113). *Le italiane si confessano* suddenly exposed to the astonished public gaze the concerns and fears of women as regards their sexuality and relationships. It tore the veil of hypocrisy and ambiguity that covered, and helped to manage, the structured inequality of Italian authoritarian society. As has been emphasised (Morris, 2006:124), 'for all the criticism it received, none denied the existence of the problems these women complain[ed] of, but *the right to discuss them in public*' [emphasis added].

The focus, here, will be on the perceptions and representations of violence as revealed by the letter-writers. They were fully aware neither of the subtle atmosphere of violence in which they were enveloped, nor of the ambiguity and hypocrisy they contributed to perpetuate. The letters present themselves, rather, as having been written following a pre-existent narrative model in which men's and women's roles and rules have been already assigned and codified. The authors' worlds could not be more circumscribed, confined – as they were – to their families, their *fiancés*, and sometimes their friends. However, the need to cope with *that* world and the promptings of a

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriella Parca chose 280 letters from among the 8,000 sent to the weekly *Luna Park* (it also monthly published a *fotoromanzo*), and the *fotoromanzo Polvere di stelle*. For an analysis of the *fotoromanzo* see Schimming, U., 2002. *Fotoromane. Analyse eines Massenmediums*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang Verlag; Bravo, A. 2003. *Il fotoromanzo*. Bologna: il Mulino.

changing society forced them continuously to negotiate and renegotiate with both their own 'self-portraits' and the violence experienced.

Cesare Zavattini, in his preface to the third edition, describes the surprise of the reader on reading the text: 'siamo costretti a gridare di sorpresa' - he writes - '*come vedessimo*' the hypocrisies of the Italian cultural system: [...i] tanti matrimoni che partono male [...]; gli imbrogli di noi maschi che vogliamo «la prova d'amore»; [...] queste e altre menzogne quotidiane che [...] ammazzano nuvole di anime come zanzare' [emphasis on the text].<sup>9</sup> It is a system where 'si pratica una morale con la madre, una con l'amante, una con il deputato, una con il figlio, una con l'amico' (XIV): a sort of moral schizophrenia that produced and perpetuated inequalities and corruption. On the other hand, in his introduction to the same volume, Pier Paolo Pasolini does not conceal his initial amusement,<sup>10</sup> only then to recognise that sexuality is the real issue of the book, 'tacitato, rimosso, fossilizzato' by Italian women. Nevertheless, while he acknowledges the alienation of women's condition, he is reluctant to comment on the image of man that emerges from the letter-writers. Indeed, neither Zavattini's nor Pasolini's observations offer a more evident connection between the 'alienated' condition of women and men as a whole.

Gabriella Parca may have been 'unambiguous about her own views' (Morris, 2006:113); nevertheless, the eighteen sections of book, each preceded by Parca's introduction, might indicate a subtle unease in dealing with the most delicate issues.

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<sup>9</sup> Zavattini, C., 1960. Prefazione. In Parca, *Le italiane*, p. XIII.

<sup>10</sup> '[L]a più divertente lettura che io abbia fatto in questi ultimi anni', in Pasolini, P.P., 1960. Presentazione. In *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

One such case is that of ‘Giochi pericolosi’, the section dedicated to early sexual experiences in which Parca includes a number of letters ‘confessing’ sexual abuse. Children, she explains, are more likely to engage in ‘giochi [...] in pericoloso equilibrio tra il divertimento innocente e le prime manifestazioni dell’istinto sessuale’. However, sometimes it is ‘*una vera e propria violenza da parte di un adulto a provocare il trauma*’ and the girls reveal their secret ‘per la prima volta in *drammatiche confessioni* alla «piccola posta» [emphasis added] (47). The ‘buried’ phenomenon of child sexual abuse is highlighted by Parca’s comment in such a way that suggests the level of anxiety caused by what at the time was an inconceivable issue.

The same applied to marital rape, wife beating, and other issues such as psychological violence that remained unquestioned events. This emerges in the section dedicated to the relationship between fiancés, ‘Fidanzate infelici’, from where an eighteen-year-old girl asks for advice. She is unsuccessfully trying to break her official engagement to a young man whom she does not love. However, because of ‘what there has been between them’, he assures her that ‘*un altro uomo verrebbe solo per prendermi in giro*’ [emphasis added]. He beats her and swears that he will never let her go. The spectre of her lost virginity, by which she is haunted and entrapped, confirms his mastery over her life.

Virginity was a treasure to be protected at any cost: once lost, the life of a woman could become more precarious and uncertain. The boundaries between the ‘ragazza chiacchierata’ and the prostitute are thin, ambiguous, and pass through slight semantic differences, as ‘ragazza facile’, ‘donna *da* strada’, and ‘donna *di* strada’. While

the latter defines an irreversible condition, the former suggests a questionable behaviour. Changing a preposition or adding an adjective might destroy a reputation.

The fiancé, potential husband, or simply boy-friend has the right to believe or suspect, forgive or condemn: ‘Si capisce che per lui non è stato una cosa bella, *però mi ha perdonato*. In fin dei conti non è colpa mia’ [emphasis added] (54). He is her judge, the arbiter of her life. Paradoxically enough, he also has the right to ask for the ‘proof of love’, the proof of her purity and the proof of her unreserved trust in him, the proof of his oneness, masculinity, possession, and power. It is not a question of consent. Even in the absence of physical violence, a woman cannot give her voluntary agreement - no woman was expected to show interest in sexual matters – to the point of denying her own desire:

[I]l mio fidanzato mi dice che vuole lo *sfogo della vita* e che mi desidera [...] Io non cederò mai, perché voglio andare da lui di bianco, ma ho paura che lui mi pianti. [...] quando siamo soli lui mi dice che devo fare quello che dice lui: io gli dico di no e lui mi dà degli schiaffi forti nel viso, e io ho paura che [...] *qualche volta posso venir meno e lui si approfitta di me* [emphasis added] (23-24).

Although several significant episodes of explicit and implicit brutality are included in her collection, Gabriella Parca omits any comment. The role played by the adults, parents, and relatives remains apparently unquestioned but the atmosphere of unvoiced, accepted violence is palpable. There are no words to say it. Not yet.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Les mots pour le dire* by Marie Cardinal is quoted deliberately. The book, published in 1976 and widely translated, is considered the first and most important text about the personal experience of psychoanalysis. Both psychoanalysis and feminism have played a prominent role in verbalizing and providing sense.

For this reason the women of *Le italiane si confessano* ‘do not generally rebel against traditional morality, which they assume is fixed and timeless’ (Morris, 2006:115). Relatives, brothers, stepbrothers, fathers, stepfathers, as well as parents’ friends, exercise (and perform) their masculinities at the expense of children, adolescents, and women: ‘una volta, quando avevo otto anni, rimasi sola con [...] mio fratellastro che mi prese con la forza, mi buttò sul letto e *fui sua*’ [emphasis added] (52). Nevertheless, ‘none blame their aggressors and, indeed, there is practically no censure of men at all in this volume’ (Morris, 2006:117). It could not be otherwise. Those aggressors are not foreigners but indeed familiar inhabitants of the household boundaries. Telling their stories might be a way then to persuade themselves of their own innocence, unwillingness:

Ho ventidue anni [...]. Dodici anni fa al mio paese c’erano i soldati e tra questi c’era un graduato [...]: aveva con sé la moglie ed *eravamo molto amici, dato che era ospitato da una nostra vicina*. [...]. Un giorno però [...] quel bruto [...] mi prese, mi tappò la bocca e mi portò sul letto, *io lo battevo come meglio potevo, gli davo dei calci e dei pugni, ma poi le mie forze di bambina cedettero* e quando ripresi i sensi ero tutta sporca di sangue [emphasis added] (55)

The underlying issues of this set of letters emerge clearly, even if the editing has in part dissolved not only the narrative vein of the authors but also the potential complexity of their emotions. The narration proceeds sometimes as ‘flat’, or perhaps just paralysed, forced between metaphors, euphemisms, and conventional phrases. However, it might be also a strategy to speak the unspeakable, as in this case:

[Q]uando ero bambina *ho perso la purezza* per causa di mio fratello, che era abbastanza grande. Ora che ho compreso che cosa vuol dire non essere più *pura*, sono tormentata da due dubbi: e cioè se quando sarò fidanzata, dovrò dire quello che mi è successo e con chi; l'altro dubbio che vorrei tolto, è quello di sapere *se io ho avuto colpa* [emphasis added] (51)

The author of this letter, a Sicilian girl, seems to be more aware of the social consequences of the abuse than of the origin of her sense of guilt. '[R]eferences to violence, abuse (and indeed abortion) are almost understated, with a matter-of-fact assumption that they are part of life' (Morris, 2006:118). Forced and even 'consensual' sex are concealed behind a borrowed code: '*quello che c'è stato tra noi*', 'cedere', 'fui sua', 'perdere la purezza', 'distruggere l'onore', 'approfittarsi di me'. No one can name it, but everyone knows.

Some of these young women *perceive* the injustice of the deception or violence suffered, while they are unable better to articulate and deal with unfamiliar feelings: 'sono una ragazza ventenne e a me sembra di essere una donna già vecchia, per quanto ho sofferto e soffro tutt'ora'. Raped when she was twelve years old, she keeps her secret, it being impossible to rely on her mother's support: 'non sa niente altrimenti mi ucciderebbe senza pietà' (52). Women themselves police the boundaries of their own oppression and, conniving with their oppressors, take an active part in preserving a *status quo*, perpetuating violence.

As has been shown, the rhetoric of popular fiction, from *fotoromanzo* to film, helps the women of *Le italiane si confessano* to tell their stories without 'saying'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This narrative strategy was not limited to the aficionados of *fotoromanzi*, as the director of *Noi Donne*, Giuliana Dal Pozzo, reveals, inviting her readers to reject 'le drammatiche frasi insegnate dai fumetti':

They have words, but they use a ‘borrowed’ vocabulary that depersonalizes the subject and delegitimizes the emotions. Violence is built on ignorance, on emotional, psychological and social threat, and physical abuse. These women appear entrapped in the web of a second-hand set of feelings unable - as they are - to recognize both their own emotions and also the real source of their chronic vulnerability. Their own agency is continuously denied and displaced in a process of estrangement and infantilization thus opening the way to the unquestioned reiteration of violence.

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“Non sono degna del tuo amore, non potrò mai essere tua, devo rivelarti una cosa terribile, ero incosciente e quel satiro, quel dongiovanni se n’è approfittato”, in Del Pozzo, G., 1958. Parliamone insieme. *Noi Donne*, 8 October, np. Still, in 1968, just a few months before the explosion of student protests, a nineteen-year-old girl writes to *Amica*: ‘Ho commesso *l’irreparabile ma* non ne sono pentita. I miei genitori hanno scoperto tutto e vogliono mettermi in collegio. Sono disperata *decisa a perdermi per sempre*’ [emphasis added], in Pisoni, E., 1968. La posta dell’anima. *Amica*, 16 January, np.



## 2.2. Like the Others: Prostitutes speak about themselves

Published four years earlier, another, very different book echoes and emphasizes the words, feelings, and fears expressed in *Le italiane si confessano. Lettere dalle case chiuse*, released in 1955, is a powerful document on (and from) the ‘dark’ side of Italian society. Reading it confirms the continuum of cultural, social, and physical violence to which women were exposed, without however negating the distinctive quality of violence against prostitutes. It is a collection of 70 letters written by prostitutes to Lina Merlin, the Socialist senator who promoted the abolition of the ‘case di tolleranza’. Chosen by the senator and the journalist Carla Barberis, the missives provide an insight into prostitution from prostitutes’ own experience.

According to the *Nota redazionale alla prima edizione*, most of the letters are published with no editing, preserving the original corpus of words and thoughts.<sup>13</sup> They have been divided in four sections with the intent of constructing the story of the girls who worked in the brothels: how they started (*Incomincia così*); life in the brothels (*Duro viverci*); leaving prostitution (*Difficile uscirne*); the reactions to the Merlin’s project (*Pro e contro*). Nevertheless, rather than analyze the anthology section by section, the focus here will be on the linguistic features and strategies prostitutes used in building their identity and self-representation, and also in identifying violence, its

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<sup>13</sup> See the *Nota redazionale alla prima edizione*, in *Cara senatrice Merlin...Lettere dalle case chiuse*. Turin: EGA, 2008. The *Nota* also specifies that the veracity of the letters is guaranteed by the originals which are ‘depositati presso un notaio’.

sources and its consequences for their lives. It is possible to trace an immediate parallel between those letters sent to Lina Merlin between 1948 and 1955, closer to the post-WWII period, and the letters sent to the women's magazines closer to the Italian economic boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Different destinations, different needs, different backgrounds, yet the same constant presence of violence and ignorance are visible.

The book discloses a world far from the glamorous images later depicted by the brothels' nostalgic customers; far, too, from the atmosphere of lust and perversion surmised by moralists and Catholics. Rather, opaque interiors, daily routines and the tense relations with the *madams* emerge from the eloquent and lively accounts of the prostitutes. At first reading, the epistolary might also appear an over-rhetorical sequence of images of desperation and exploitation. Addressing the senator Merlin, the letter-writers introduce themselves mainly in conventional terms, as «povera disgraziata», «povera ragazza», «signorine», «donnine», «donnina allegra», «una di quelle», «donna perduta», and just occasionally as prostitutes. All of these euphemisms talk about an interdict, a banned issue, conveying at the same time a gendered moral denigration.

Nevertheless, one letter-writer warns: 'non vorrei che pensasse al solito piagnisteo che ciascuna prostituta racconta quando qualche cliente la interroga (sempre dopo esserci andato a letto): perché è arrivata lì' (114). Acutely aware of the stigma surrounding them, women working in the brothels rearrange the events of their life in order to 'represent' a standard identity to the occasional and careless 'judge', usually a client. The listener wants to be reassured by the refrain of what has become an

impersonal tale, while also preserving the unaltered the image of the ‘lost woman’. In this way it is possible to remove, or postpone, the questions posed by his face-to-face encounter with a prostitute.

The instrumental repetition of the same old stories contains, in reality, an explicit element of resistance to the depersonalization imposed by both law and clients, upon the overall experiences of prostitutes’ lives. In contrast, in addressing Lina Merlin, the letter-writers try to re-compose their original innocence and find a reason that can justify their condition before her and themselves at least. Consequently, every story deploys a narrative strategy not dissimilar from those adopted by Parca’s letter-writers. However, while *Le italiane si confessano* shows girls and women ‘per bene’ wavering between truth and lies, temptations and seduction, guilt and sin, *Lettere dalle case chiuse* tells us about the consequences, the road to ruin:

Avevo appena 19 anni, quando *ebbi con il mio fidanzato un bambino*; cacciata di casa, feci la cameriera per tanto tempo, sempre sperando che il mio fidanzato mi sposasse. Ma purtroppo attesi invano, finché un giorno *mi abbandonò dichiarando che era già da tempo sposato*. [...] *chiesi lavoro, aiuto, ma invano* ed un giorno....[emphasis added] (28)

Their fiancé might recall the ‘ragazzo anonimo e assoluto’, ever-present character in these stories, already remarked upon by Pasolini in *Le italiane si confessano* (Parca, 1960:XVI). Being a man, one among others, potentially unreliable, as every woman should know, he has no responsibility for the girl’s ‘fall’. Merlin’s women, however, appear less willing to take the weight of that ‘fatal mistake’ on their shoulders only; resentment runs through their words:

Ero una ragazza profondamente onesta. Purtroppo però ebbi un fidanzato mascalzone che sulla solia [sic] del matrimonio mi lasciò, ed inoltre ebbi da lui un figlio che porta il mio nome. [...] Cercavo ugualmente e disperatamente un lavoro, ma non lo trovai (21)

The truth of the prostitutes is located between the lines, concealed by the repeated assertion of what appears to be a 'received' story, which can hardly be altered but which prostitutes do not always passively adopt. '*È facile giudicare quelle donne* [...]': - one of them writes - le stesse cose le pensavo anch'io quando ero una ragazzina e facevo le magistrali nella mia città. Bisogna provare però a restare sole per poter dire «ha fatto bene» oppure «ha fatto male»' (50) [emphasis added];<sup>14</sup> whilst another summarizes: 'No Signora, non sono nata così né io né le altre [...] ci siamo diventate' (114). In other words, Merlin's women 'perform' 'within the compulsory frames [...] that police the social appearance of gender' (Butler, 1990:33): no other option seems to be left to them than a mute, intimate rebellion.

Unlike *Le italiane si confessano*, in *Lettere dalle case chiuse* the conventional narrative co-exists side by side with more unmediated expressions used to denounce violence or to convey emotions, thus producing an unexpected contrast:

Lui mi prese e *mi cosò* anche mentre io piangevo e dissi «ò paura ò paura». Poi non mi à sposato e mi à fatto fare il figliolo. Io sono prostituta perché i padroni non mi rivevano [...]. Ò paura di venire via per la fame e per *chiedere perdono* alla famiglia che sono onesti fratelli e sorelle. *Però a C. sarei felice, ci sono nata, c'è l'aria, gli olivi e la vendemmia e anche i contadini mi volevano bene* [emphasis added] (16-17).

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<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that being a single mother was an unbearable stigma, second only to being a prostitute. See Percovich, L., 2005. *La coscienza nel corpo: donne, salute e medicina negli anni Settanta*. Milan: Franco Angeli. See also Pheterson, G., 1993. The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness. *Social Text*, 37, Winter, pp. 36-64

Violence and fear - so clearly declared - clash with both the pastoral idyll/urban decay opposition and the topos of the 'sedotta e abbandonata'. The women writing from the *case chiuse* lack a borrowed vocabulary in which to express their feelings, pains, and disenchantments. They do not confess, but 'tell':

Il padrone fiuta da lontano la bella *ragazza che ha bisogno*, [...] chi non ha più nulla da impegnare ed *ha fame*, [...] chi è *ingenua e non ha più nessuno che la protegge* [...]. Per farla breve, [...] colei che nella sua giovane vita aveva sentito parlare di solidarietà umana, fu *violentata*, dico violentata, da un [...] avvocato che molti considerano «perbene» [emphasis added] (112).

In this example, violence is allied with the image of an ingenuous, unprotected, and needy young girl. Whatever the situation, these women make it clear that it was against their will:

[S]ono *una di quelle* ma non ero così e volevo crescere *onesta*, invece a 15 anni in una baracca *mio cognato mi prese per forza* e poi mi minacciò sempre di dirlo a mia sorella che ero stata io; appena mi accorsi di essere *grossa* scappai di casa e andai a fare la serva in una osteria...[emphasis added] (18)

These experiences cross all socio-economic class and geographical boundaries, as *Le italiane si confessano* and *Lettere dalle case chiuse* reveal. Both books clarify how often violence occurs in the life of women working in prostitution as well as of women living conventional lives – an indisputable and silenced truth. There is physical violence and there is symbolic/cultural and economic violence, as already testified in Parca's work.

Family is the privileged site where violence can begin, from where it is magnified and articulated by the juridical and economic system that restricts the opportunities available to women. Because of their situation, prostitutes are certainly

better able to visualize the mechanisms of violence and oppression. They can lucidly indicate their aggressors, oppressors and exploiters, such as madams, policemen, doctors, the law, and public hostility. While prostitutes still appear unable to free themselves and better 'name' this violence they seem, unlike Parca's correspondents, to exhibit a less blurred identity.

The customers' heedless behaviour becomes an additional, indirect form of abuse against prostitutes. Merlin's women usually do not express an opinion on their clients, preferring to describe the horrifying work conditions in terms of cleanliness, hours, routine, economic and physical exploitation. The client stays and remains in the shadow. Nevertheless, some prostitutes provide harsh and disenchanted details about their careless 'buyers' who 'vengono da noi come dal barbiere, per abitudine' (94):

30-35 uomini al giorno, i vecchi sporcaccioni, i giovani infoiati, e quelli ubriachi, e quelli che gridano, e quelli che vogliono sentir parlare. Quasi tutta questa gente, che paga per averci, come bestie al mercato (50)

The lack of rights and respect, as well as the impossibility of refusing a client and his requests, creates an inescapable and miserable condition in which prostitutes are still able to see the irony:

[U]na giornata speciale contai 120 clienti, 120 lavaggi, 2400 scalini saliti e scesi, e poi, come se non bastasse [...] alcuni clienti quando hanno finito ... *ci fanno la morale e ci esortano a cambiar vita ... dobbiamo salvare l'anima, ci dicono!!!* [emphasis added] (117)

A final, obvious difference between the two collections of letters emerges from this review. Unlike Parca's letter-writers, Merlin's women ask not for advice or reassurance, but for concrete help. They address their petitions, often including their full names and

addresses, seeking an ‘honest’ job and a better life. Above all, however, they demand to draw a veil over their past: ‘*vogliamo tornare ad essere donne come le altre*, e che ci assicurino un *lavoro onesto* e non una carità [emphasis added] (51). This dignified, modest request is almost a paradox, if one considers the condition of Italian women between the 1950s and 1960s in terms of rights, social consideration, and personal freedom. Being a prostitute, or an unmarried mother, or just a woman ‘per bene’ (who might happen to have more than one partner), was a complex and ambiguous matter. Marise Ferro reminds her readers of this incontrovertible truth replying to the complaint of a betrayed wife from the pages of *Marie Claire* in 1964:

Creda, gli uomini sono diversi da noi; le loro piccole avventure sono davvero un gesto, che essi subito dimenticano; anzi, se ricordano qualche cosa, è il disprezzo per le donne di poco conto che hanno detto di sì a una avventura senza domani ... che questa piccola nuvola non metta il buio nel suo bel matrimonio.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ferro, M., 1964. *Marie Claire*, 19 September, p. 3.

### **2.3. Brushed under the Carpet: Reporting on violence, prostitutes and prostitution**

On the morning of 9 March 1965, a young woman was found dead in the garage of a building in Milan. She had been brutally killed; it took sixteen hours to determine her identity, as her face had been battered beyond recognition by the killer. She was finally identified as Margherita Grossi, the married mother of three children and a streetwalker. Her husband, whose body was discovered the next day in the countryside forty kilometres outside Milan, had shot himself. His suicide was interpreted as a confession, as he was considered the main (if not the only) suspect: the case was closed.

This last section will focus on the journalistic treatment of Margherita Grossi's murder, exploring the role of newspapers in reporting on prostitution, prostitutes and violence. It will analyze a selection of articles, published between 10 and 13 March 1965 by *Corriere della sera*, *Stampa*, *Mattino*, *Secolo XIX* and *l'Unità*,<sup>16</sup> where at least two salient narratives may be identified. They run from an 'impersonal' approach to the dramatization and fictionalization of the events; protagonists disclosing a process of estrangement from prostitutes, and the violence pursued by those periodicals. Although

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<sup>16</sup> These newspapers have been selected on the grounds of their own characteristics and diffusion. Both the *Corriere della sera* and *La Stampa* were competitors on a national level, the former more conservative than the latter. *La Stampa*, owned by Fiat, also had an evening edition and was the first to introduce a women's page, 'Cronache per le donne', in 1963. The *Secolo XIX* and *Mattino* were regional and interregional periodicals published respectively in Genoa and Naples. While the Genoese newspaper was edited by the owner of the Ansaldo; *Mattino* was financed by the Bank of Naples and a society led by the Democratic Christian Party. In contrast, *l'Unità*, founded by Antonio Gramsci, was the only political newspaper with a presence in the whole of Italy.



it cannot be considered representative of a more general attitude, it nevertheless reveals some of the mechanisms contributing to the process of normalization of violence against a 'certain' kind of woman.

Fictionalizing 'real' facts not only transformed their 'materiality' and undermined their meaning; it also increased the distance between the readers (thus, the consumers of 'stories') and prostitutes. The narrative, proceeding through stereotypes, conventional expressions and fictional devices, builds an atmosphere of sin and melodrama that titillates (or 'educates') rather than challenges the reader. Even in the most sober, 'objective' accounts, such as those of *La Stampa* or *l'Unità*, the irresistible temptation to convey other meanings through omissions, shifts and images may be traced. A combination of more or less evident pedagogical intents, *pruderie*, moralism and entertainment led these newspapers away from a more balanced and investigative approach.

At the same time, this section will consider the process of examining and constructing the personality and life story of Margherita Grossi. While every newspaper provided its own portrait of the victim, emphasizing or downplaying her roles of wife, mother or prostitute, all indeed encouraged traditional readings and predictable public responses. Moreover, the figure of the client is tacitly eclipsed, disappearing behind the blossoming of words used to describe the victim and the despicable role of the pimp. In such kinds of journalistic accounts, the pimp, generally a man, was a useful element of the story as he allowed the emphasis of bourgeois masculinity as perceived through the positive values of work and reputation.

### 2.3.1. *The Case of Margherita Grossi: from reality to melodrama*

When the body of Margherita Grossi was discovered in the garage of a luxury building in Milan, the usual crowd of reporters converged on the scene of the crime in search of a story. '*Ancora un atroce crimine maturato nel mondo del vizio* - the *Corriere della sera* significantly titled on the inside page - «Lucia la francesina» assassinata in uno scantinato di Porta Genova'.<sup>17</sup> From this moment, the reader expected to be 'entertained' with a crime story and taken through this underground world of Milan: the victim came from a marginalized background, and the crime was perpetrated within a context of deviancy and probable criminality.

What is interesting here is the combination of the adverb 'ancora', the adjective 'atroce', and the euphemism 'mondo del vizio', which automatically underlines and reinforces the link between deviance and blood. In this case, deviance is obviously related with a practice of sexuality out of marriage, with the shameful usage of the body. The diminutive used in the headline - *Francesina* - immediately places the victim among the prostitutes, thus generating a peculiar sense of familiarity and disrespect. The summary provides a short sketch of the murdered woman and the crime scene:

La giovane donna (una *passeggiatrice* di 34 anni, di Lione, *madre* di tre figli) rinvenuta di prima mattina nell'autorimessa sotterranea di un moderno edificio di via Ausonio: aveva il *volto sfigurato* ed era priva di documenti. Dopo una giornata di febbrili indagini la polizia rintraccia nella notte un'amica e la *madre* della vittima. *Drammatico riconoscimento* all'obitorio: «è lei». Le indagini della squadra omicidi orientata *nell'ambiente dei protettori* sarebbero già sulla buona strada [emphasis added].

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<sup>17</sup> (Anon.), 1965. «Lucia la francesina» assassinata in uno scantinato di Porta Genova. *Corriere della sera*, 10 March, p. 8.

Most of the ingredients of a thrilling story are there: a French-born streetwalker, the modern urban landscape, the violence of the murder. The ‘exoticism’ of the victim soon evaporates with her biographical details: she is not only a young woman; she is also the mother of three children, a wife, and a daughter. She is *dramatically* recognized by *her* own mother. Nevertheless, she is and remains a streetwalker and, according to the police, her killer might be a pimp. The unknown journalist has already taken another path and repeats the headline in the caption to the article:

Un altro atroce delitto nel mondo del vizio e dello *sfruttamento*. Ne è rimasta vittima una giovane ‘passeggiatrice’ [...]. [A] riconoscerla su un *freddo marmo* dell’obitorio è stata dapprima un’‘amica’, [...], poi la madre [...], una *vecchia* donna che è rimasta *schiantata* dal dolore [inverted commas in the original; emphasis added]

The inverted commas evoke the same ambiguous and conventional emphasis of the vocal speech. In particular, the term ‘amica’ rather than referring to a (good) friendship, implies a reproachable side of the relationship with the victim. The account provides further details:

[L]a vittima giaceva a metà d[el] corridoio, *le gambe leggermente divaricate*. Aveva una certa *agghiacciante compostezza* con il cappotto abbottonato fino al collo *squarciato*. Una *scarpa*, *la sinistra*, *le si era sfilata*. [...] *il volto* della giovane donna *appariva maciullato*. Il medico rilevava la *frattura della mandibola e dei denti*, lo *sfondamento* del parietale e dell’orbitale sinistri, lo *sfondamento* dell’occipitale e lo *squarcio* alla gola. *L’assassino aveva selvaggiamente infierito* soltanto al capo. [...] La donna senza nome non aveva indosso i documenti: soltanto una fede al dito e un orologio da polso. In testa un toupet biondo. [...] Ennio Pistoia, il marito della vittima non è stato ancora rintracciato [inverted commas in the original; emphasis added].

The narrative lingers on superfluous details, banal or crude descriptions, with a profusion of adjectives attempting to provoke curiosity and dread in the reader.<sup>18</sup> A picture of the body lying on the floor completes the description. It is a dissection rather than a description. Attention is diverted from a dead woman to a dead prostitute, from a person to a body, from *the* violence to fragments of violence. It is a voyeuristic perspective. The words ‘prostitution’ or ‘prostitute’ are never mentioned throughout the article, substituted by euphemisms that better adapt to the contemporary ‘sensibility’, such as ‘passeggiatrice’ and ‘mondo del vizio e dello sfruttamento’. Through semantics, the author removes any chance of a critical approach, conveying instead an image of sin and obscurity.

Grossi’s murder is resolved within a few hours. Her husband and procurer, Ennio Pistoia, who used to ‘rapina[re] tassisti a martellate’, is already under investigation. According to the journalist, his wife wanted to give up prostitution and be back with her children. The suspicion becomes certainty when, the next day, his body is found in the countryside of Gallarate, forty kilometres outside Milan: he has shot himself. ‘Drammatici sviluppi del *fosco delitto* di Porta Genova’ - the newspaper titles on 11 March - ‘Si è ucciso in un prato di Gallarate il marito della *passeggiatrice assassinata*’ [emphasis added].<sup>19</sup> Curiously, the reporter omits mention of the suicide note in which Ennio Pistoia protests his innocence. The police believes him to be the

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<sup>18</sup> For the crucial relationship between fear and fascination, crime and media reportage, see Muncie, J., McLaughlin, E., 2001. *The Problem of Crime*. London: SAGE.

<sup>19</sup> (Anon.), 1965. Si è ucciso in un prato di Gallarate il marito della passeggiatrice assassinata. *Corriere della sera*, 11 March, p. 8. Once more, the adjective and euphemism link – this time forever – the tragic end of Margherita with her profession.

murderer: 'si è ucciso vinto dal rimorso per aver soppresso la consorte'. The case is closed.

The rapid conclusion of the murder arouses the perplexity of the journalist who, two days later, insists: 'mancano ancora prove obiettive capaci di dissipare del tutto le inevitabili superstite perplessità'.<sup>20</sup> However, the lack of further developments is immediately covered with a short editorial emphatically entitled: 'L'amaro viale dei passi perduti'.<sup>21</sup> Once more, the author lingers on crude details, drawing a murderous connection among the tragic deaths of thirteen prostitutes killed since the post-WWII period in Milan. Some were shot, others strangled. The last three were stabbed or, as was Margherita Grossi, beaten to death: 'Ollie la Rossa', uccisa nella notte del 26 novembre 1963 con venti pugnalate in una strada di Greco, e [...] 'Betty dei camionisti', trovata il 7 maggio dell'anno scorso [...] con il petto spaccato da una coltellata'.<sup>22</sup> The editorialist underscores how the killers preferred to murder these last 'donnine' with

[U]n'arma da sfregio, da offesa non solo fisica ma morale. La «francesina» pare sia stata massacrata con un attrezzo da 'macellaio'. Eppure non sembrava creatura da sollecitare 'tanto odio' [inverted commas in the original].

It is here implied that hatred is part of prostitutes' life and in some measure it may be one of the causes of their predictable, violent deaths. There is no surprise or concern; no questions, merely acquiescence, as the use of the diminishing term 'donnine' conveys. Step by step the features of the victim are then unfolded and built: 'una donna *buona* –

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<sup>20</sup> (Anon.), 1965. Il delitto di via Ausonio passa agli archivi. *Corriere della sera*, 13 March, p. 8

<sup>21</sup> - Si è ucciso in un prato di Gallarate, *quot.*

<sup>22</sup> - L'amaro viale, *quot.*

dicevano di lei – *troppo dolce per il mestiere amaro* che faceva’, married to a man who ‘l’aveva forse spinta sulla strada, [...] la maltrattava, le prendeva i soldi, *le aveva dato tre figli e il dolore di non poterli guardare in faccia*’ [emphasis added]. The image of a meek, harmless woman and affectionate mother, the ‘Francesina’, is here opposed to those of ‘Ollie la Rossa’ and ‘Betty dei camionisti’, whose nicknames recall other landscapes. The editorial goes even further, suggesting that

[A]l marito lei (che ogni notte entrava con due, tre, quattro sconosciuti in una stanza), era rimasta in fondo sempre fedele. Nessuno degli amici dell’ora essa aveva guardato, come lui, con amore.

At work here is a certain way of reading related with the consumption of fiction, from *fotoromanzi* to *feuilleton*, which might suggest a kind of dictatorship of form over reality. The general tone of this article is disturbing for a modern critical observer. The author affects knowledge of Grossi’s intimacy, beyond any possible limits, simply to stimulate easy pity for her and her companions. Grossi ceases to be a person, instead becoming the main character in a drama ruled by fate, as her profession leads inevitably to death or moral and physical decay. The reader can now ‘consume’ her story from a comfortable position allowing distance and a kind of pleasure:

*Margherita Lucia Grossi* [...] andava al lavoro proprio come se fosse la *piccola impiegata* che, in un primo tempo, si era creduto di ravvisare in quel *povero corpo* di donna *ricoperto da panni comuni*, [...] sempre affiancata da quel suo uomo sbagliato. A[i figli] *Margherita Lucia Grossi* pensava forse di più e per essi diceva ogni tanto ‘sono stanca, voglio smetterla’. *Come tutte*. Ma continuava, con il cuore sempre più fiacco: la manica destra del suo cappotto era logora, dove la cinghia della borsetta premeva costantemente nelle *interminabili camminate*. Come tante è morta prima di ritirarsi. *È la tredicesima croce che costella il lungo viale del vizio* [emphasis added].

The representation of a shy prostitute, mother, unfortunate wife and exploited woman, melodramatic and pitiful, is not rare among Italian journalists throughout the Sixties. Here, the repetition of the victim's full name functions as a particular form of evocation, as a reminder to female readers.

A precise scheme is at work, aiming to highlight another presence, the pimp, the man who lives off the earnings of a prostitute. As a consequence of the Merlin law the pimp, having previously had a marginal role, becomes a predominant figure of the sex trade. The pimp is depicted as an entrepreneur able to organize and to live off 'una «scuderia» di più ragazze' providing them with a form of protection. He might be violent, a murderer. He is the negative version of bourgeois masculinity, as he rejects the ethic of honest work, instead living off women's earnings and their emotional needs.<sup>23</sup> He is also a way to eclipse the client from the scene of crime. The 'mondo del vizio' excludes customers and their sexual requests; these usually remain unknown. The potentiality of violence perpetrated by the client remains thus unexplored. In Margherita Grossi's case, the emphasis laid on her husband's role of exploiter and abuser allows the reinforcement of her image of victim of her own female fragility and emotional dependence, wrong choices, and partner. It is a woman with no agency, a prostitute with no clients. The reader can then grant her a belated sigh of sympathy.

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<sup>23</sup> 'In fondo è facilissimo fare il protettore: basta essere un ladro di sentimenti', in Giuliani, A., 1965. Guadagnano milioni al mese i tremila califfi del vizio. *Corriere della sera*, 18 March, p. 8. According to Russell Campbell, 'within patriarchal ideology the pimp is the convenient scapegoat on to whom all male guilt for the existence of prostitution is displaced', Campbell, R., 2006. *Marked Women: prostitutes and prostitution in the cinema*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 344.

### 2.3.2. *From reality to fiction*

The brutal death of Margherita Grossi aroused the interest of those editors who could engage correspondents from Milan, such as Sandro Dini, who covered the case for the Genoese *Secolo XIX*. The headline chosen by this newspaper tells us a very different story: ‘*Massacrata una giovane ed elegante donna in un box di un lussuoso palazzo di Milano*’ [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup> It is a case in which luxury, wealth, glamour, and beauty mixed, it is hoped, with sex, passion, and eroticism is about to be launched. The journalist immediately sets about providing abundant and surprising details that transform the scene of the crime to a *haute couture* fashion stage:

Il corpo è disteso, le vesti scomposte, una scarpa s’è sfilata da un piede inguainato in una calza di seta fra il carnicino e il bianco – è la moda delle signore molto eleganti – il colore del cappotto è di visone bianco, al polso un orologio d’oro, all’anulare della mano un anellino d’oro con pietra. La sua eleganza non è ricercata, ma neppure volgare; le scarpe sono di marca, la biancheria nera, merlettata a fiorami. [...] le scarpe hanno però una linea che denuncia la mano di un ottimo artigiano. La punta della suola destra è consumata: si tratta evidentemente di una donna abituata a guidare l’automobile.

The accounts of the *Corriere della sera* and *Secolo XIX* could not be more different: it seems that there have been two different crimes, victims, and ‘locations’. Unfortunately, the promise of a new absorbing drama, so well proclaimed by the title, vanishes just before the press release, as the latest headline announces: ‘Forse identificata l’*assassinata*’. A vaguely careless tone seems to permeate this additional piece. Then, the revelation. ‘A tarda notte il cadavere della donna sarebbe stato riconosciuto da una

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<sup>24</sup> Dini, S., 1965. Massacrata una giovane ed elegante donna in un box di un lussuoso palazzo di Milano. *Secolo XIX*, 10 March, p.5.



ragazza che fa ‘l’entraineuse’ in un night-club. Si tratterebbe di una *giovane dalla facile vita*’ [emphasis added]. Once more, the euphemism and the insertion of foreign terms work as camouflage displaying not only a softer, and more musical appearance, but also ‘exotic’ atmospheres. Despite the disappointment, the reporter is reluctant to renounce definitively *his* story. Even after the suicide of Margherita Grossi’s husband, Sandro Dini tries to maintain his line:

*Margherita è risultata infatti una ‘ragazza di vita’, a volte clacson girl, a volte passeggiatrice conosciuta soprattutto negli ambienti danarosi della città: una donna dotata di molto ‘savoir faire’, sufficientemente riservata, per niente volgare.*

*Seppur traviata da un marito poco di buono che l’aveva indotta, proprio lui, alla vita dell’amore a pagamento, Rita era una donna mite, ricercata per una finezza di modi, raro in questo genere di donne* [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the previous reporter, Sandro Dini uses a more confidential tone, referring to the victim as ‘Margherita’, ‘Rita’ or *la* Grossi. His depiction portrays a woman who was allowed access to a rich élite, because of her manners, finesse, elegance, and discretion. According to Dini, these are rare virtues among ‘that’ kind of woman. Sandro Dini, through extolling her personality, automatically excludes the other prostitutes, for them conveying instead the usual negative representation. No mention is made of Grossi’s devotion to her children, or her fidelity to her husband. Grossi’s profession is never named; it is merely suggested by euphemisms or foreign terms. She seems almost unintentionally acknowledged as a person, yet neither compassion nor sympathy is claimed for her. She has ceased to be a victim.

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<sup>25</sup> Dini, S., 1965. Il marito della donna assassinata a Milano s’è ucciso con un colpo di pistola alla tempia. *Secolo XIX*, 11 March, p. 5.

### 2.3.3. *Between facts and hypothesis*

More prosaic is the report written by Paolo Palomba, correspondent for *il Mattino* of Naples: '*Misterioso ed efferato delitto - Il cadavere sfigurato d'una mondana scoperto in uno scantinato a Milano*' [emphasis added].<sup>26</sup> The plot and margins of the case are immediately defined. The victim is a 'mondana', a prostitute, as continuously noted in the following headlines: 'Il marito della *mondana* assassinata trovato ucciso da una revolverata alla tempia';<sup>27</sup> 'La '*mondana*' fu uccisa dal marito che si è poi tolto la vita a Gallarate';<sup>28</sup> 'Archiviato il caso dalla polizia. La *mondana* assassinata a Milano dava sempre meno soldi al marito'.<sup>29</sup> There is room for no fiction here, nor for melodrama; once more, though, the article describes the physical details of the victim, emphasizing her still-visible beauty and elegance: 'sebbene i suoi tratti fossero orribilmente sfigurati e un occhio le fosse uscito dall'orbita'. The reader could easily replace the image of 'unknown' dead prostitute with a fetish and its dangerous yet fascinating world.

A search through the police records provides further details on her life and material for the article. We learn that she started her 'triste attività' in 1955, when her husband was charged with robbery: 'Doveva mantenere se stessa, pagare le spese dell'avvocato per il marito, provvedere al mantenimento dei bambini'. The husband is described as a violent man: 'pare che avesse frequenti litigi con la moglie, anche se poi

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<sup>26</sup> Palomba, P., 1965. Misterioso ed efferato delitto. Il cadavere sfigurato d'una mondana scoperto in uno scantinato a Milano. *il Mattino*, 10 March, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> - Il marito della mondana assassinata trovato ucciso da una revolverata alla tempia, *ibid.*, 11 March, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> - La 'mondana' fu uccisa dal marito che si è poi tolto la vita a Gallarate. *ibid.*, 12 March, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> - Archiviato il caso dalla polizia. La mondana assassinata a Milano dava sempre meno soldi al marito. *ibid.*, 13 March, p. 11.

era pronto a rappacificarsi con lei' [emphasis added].<sup>30</sup> The tenor of the article is drier and less melodramatic, anchored to the 'facts', while it makes a moral and gendered distinction between the woman and her husband. He failed to provide for his family, he was charged with a crime; he was violent, and he exploited his wife. In other words, he loses dignity and authority. Public bias against the exploiter of women is common throughout the Sixties. Hostility should also be reserved for pimps, for men who do not perform their duty. Nevertheless, the systematic inclusion of the term 'mondana' in all the headlines displays the judgemental and denigrating attitude of the journalist towards this victim and prostitutes in general. The last paragraph of the latest article on the case is probably more enlightening:

Lucia la francesina si stava decisamente allontanando dal marito. Per scoraggiarlo gli dava meno soldi. Non si conoscono i motivi di questa decisione. *Forse* la donna voleva riprendere la *vita onesta*, con il suo lavoro da sarta, quell'occupazione che le aveva assicurato un po' di benessere quando era ancora una ragazza. O forse avrebbe voluto, molto semplicemente, *cambiare soltanto protettore* [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

A similar approach is chosen by *La Stampa*: 'Una «passeggiatrice» assassinata a colpi di martello nello scantinato d'un elegante palazzo a Milano',<sup>32</sup> 'È scomparso il marito della mondana assassinata',<sup>33</sup> 'S'è ucciso in un bosco il marito della mondana

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<sup>30</sup> Palomba, P., 1965. Il marito della mondana assassinata trovato ucciso da una revolverata alla tempia. *Mattino*, 11 March, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Palomba, P., 1965. Archiviato il caso dalla polizia. La mondana assassinata a Milano dava sempre meno soldi al marito. *Mattino*, 13 March, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> G. M., 1965. Una «passeggiatrice» assassinata a colpi di martello nello scantinato d'un elegante palazzo a Milano. *La Stampa*, 10 March, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> C. B., 1965. È scomparso il marito della mondana assassinata. *Stampasera*, 10 March, p. 5.

assassinata [...],<sup>34</sup> and so on. The refrain does not allow her condition to be forgotten. Unlike the previous examples, there are no attempts to build additional narratives, or to advance suggestions or interpretations that have very little to do with the victim's personality. On the contrary: the focus shifts immediately towards her husband, Ennio Pistoia. In a relatively balanced tone, the journalist reviews the husband's unsuccessful career as a robber, his conjugal relationship, his suicide, the notes he left behind in which he protested his innocence, and the (unsatisfactory) conclusions reached by the police. 'Il marito della mondana (secondo la polizia) ha assassinato la moglie e s'è tolto la vita',<sup>35</sup> and again 'Tre punti oscuri nell'uccisione della «passeggiatrice» di Milano',<sup>36</sup> *La Stampa* headlined on 12 and 13 March, expressing doubts about the police investigations.

One interesting aspect of this journalistic treatment is the use of the images.<sup>37</sup> Despite the space given to Ennio Pistoia, two remarkable pictures of Margherita Grossi - published in the evening and morning editions - replace the image of the dead body, re-stabilizing her centrality. The first is placed alongside those of her children and shows a slim, elegant woman in a sleeveless dress staring seriously at the camera: the caption identifies her as the 'mondana assassinata'. The innocent, puzzled gaze of the

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<sup>34</sup> G. M., 1965. S'è ucciso in un bosco il marito della mondana assassinata trovata in uno scantinato a Milano. *La Stampa*, 11 March, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> G. M., 1965. Il marito della mondana (secondo la polizia) ha assassinato la moglie e s'è tolto la vita. *La Stampa*, 12 March, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> G. M., 1965. Tre punti oscuri nell'uccisione della «passeggiatrice» di Milano. *La Stampa*, 13 March, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> See Jones, P. J. and Wardle, C., 2010. Hindley's ghost. The visual construction of Maxine Carr. In K. Hayward K. and Presdee, M., eds., 2010. *Framing Crime: Cultural criminology and the image*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 53-67. Ferrell, J., ed., 2004. *Cultural Criminology Unleashed*. London: GlassHouse Press.

children makes a curious contrast that might convey a negative attitude towards their mother. In the second photograph, a smiling, plump, younger Margherita (indicated now as the ‘*donna uccisa*’) stares happily at someone beyond the reader. In a separate box, at the extreme right of the article (9b), a smaller picture shows the odd-looking face of Ennio Pistoia. The quality, size and position of the pictures create a significant imbalance between the two images. The viewer may be both attracted by the radiant expression of the victim that springs from the centre of the article and disturbed by the image of her husband. The layout emphasises their striking diversity and seems to guide our sympathies or compassion towards her, dismissing him as a failed exploiter. Unlike the *Corriere della sera*, its direct competitor *La Stampa* takes a more balanced position; the choice of those images tells or suggests something other.

*L’Unità* stands out above all for its guarded approach. ‘Misterioso delitto in un lussuoso palazzo – Assassinata a colpi di scure una *donna* a Milano’ [emphasis added],<sup>38</sup> headlined the newspaper. The focus here is on the modalities of the homicide, the gender of the victim, and the location of the crime. There is no mention of her social condition, which is revealed only in the article. However, the allusion to the luxurious quality of the building where she has been found suggests specific upper-class scenarios. The piece is rich in detail of the moment of discovery, the police investigation, and the (unexplained) intervention of the *buon costume*. It also includes a precise and sober description of the woman and, in particular, of her clothes served - we learn – as evidence for her identification: ‘una passeggiatrice [...] nota tra le sue amiche

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<sup>38</sup> Palumbo, A., 1965. Assassinata a colpi di scure una donna a Milano. *L’Unità*, 10 March, p. 5.

e frequentatori come la *Francesina* [emphasis in the original].<sup>39</sup> Her husband, Ennio Pistoia, is shortly described as ‘attualmente disoccupato’ and has an unspecified criminal record.

There are no inverted commas; Margherita Grossi is more often indicated in terms such as ‘victim’, ‘woman’, than with her full name, nickname, or euphemisms. The journalist, Aldo Palumbo, tends rather to emphasize the ferocity of the attack ‘sei colpi, tutti mortali’, suggesting - as did *La Stampa* - two hypotheses: a ‘raptus passionale’, or the tragic result of blackmail.<sup>40</sup> However, the unexpected conclusion of the case does not allow Palumbo to speculate further on these theories: ‘Colpo di scena nel «giallo» - *l’Unità* edits the day after - ‘Si è sparato il marito della *donna* assassinata a Milano’ [emphasis added].<sup>41</sup> This time, the same pictures of the couple appear close each other at the same level, between the two headlines in the upper part of the page. A tiny caption informs us that they are ‘la donna assassinata e suo marito’. They stare in opposite directions; the layout and their closeness seem, however, to suggest not only the (forced) indissolubility of their union but also their equivalence. Apparently, the journalist takes no position, which might be a feature of the particular nature of *l’Unità*. As mouthpiece of the Italian Communist Party, the newspaper expressed the same conservative views on sexual mores and marriage (Bellassai, 2000; Peregalli, 2001), inducing a ‘natural’ auto-censorship in reporting the news. The role presumably played

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<sup>39</sup> Unlike *La Stampa* and *Secolo IX*, *l’Unità* does not include lingerie in the list of clothes.

<sup>40</sup> This last point seems to echo the idea – well expressed in particular by Cesare Lombroso – that a ‘prostitute works with her pimp to blackmail clients’, in Lombroso, C. and Ferrero, G., 2004. *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, p. 214.

<sup>41</sup> Palumbo, A., 1965. Si è sparato il marito della donna assassinata a Milano’. *l’Unità*, 11 March, p. 5.

by Ennio Pistoia in his wife's activity is never mentioned. Grossi is only once indicated as 'passeggiatrice' or 'la francesina', while her colleagues are just defined as 'donne'. Even the clients become in the prose simple 'frequentatori'. Anything related to prostitution, violence and prostitutes is said virtually: it needs only to be decoded.

## Conclusion

These five accounts, tracing from the last to the first, show clearly the increasing fictionalization of the case: from a journalistic-like style piece, with slight oscillations towards a potential 'thriller' to melodrama and edification; from a moralistic, bare factual article to a fiction in search of a *frisson*. All re-create and confirm the moral distance existing between the prostitutes and the reader, who seems to be considered as merely a consumer of stories. Violence is an element of the *mise en scène*, rather than a concern, while the dead woman is the pretext for a narration that does not seek truths. The graphic, morbid description of the body, the fatal wounds, and the clothes holds interest, preventing the reader from establishing different connections and achieving a personal view. It deploys the discursive apparatus that, in Butlerian terms, constitutes and 'domesticates' the prostitute's representation (Butler, 1993:53). Such a narrative participates in the normalization of violence against prostitutes, which is never called into question *per se*. In other words, the spectre of violence haunts the life of *this* kind of woman. It is just a matter of time: no one involved in prostitution, no matter whether forced or not, can realistically expect to escape. Once dead, the prostitute becomes an

eloquent, pedagogic example, finally fulfilling her destiny and role. Thus the reader ceases to 'see' and what can be also interpreted as the result of domestic violence can be brushed under the carpet.

Moreover, the elusive language adopted recalls the tactical euphemisms so frequent in the prose of *Le italiane si confessano*, obscuring the crucial eloquence of the 'protagonists' of *Lettere dalle case chiuse*. In so doing, additional violence towards prostitutes is thus produced, coming precisely from the words chosen to eclipse them as women or describe them as melodramatic or glamorous 'characters'. They cannot exist as individuals, only as representations.

The role played by the Italian newspapers in reinforcing the links between violence and prostitution and depriving prostitutes of their own individuality cannot be underestimated. Rooted in pre-existing medical, juridical discourses and Catholic morality, they contribute to preserve a cultural legacy that was to be difficult to overcome, as will be shown in Chapter Three. Paradoxically enough, the feminist struggles for female self-determination and bodily autonomy almost tacitly avoided confronting the questions raised by prostitution. Although engaged in the critique of pre-established sexist definitions of womanhood, second-wave feminists glossed over and failed to interrogate prefabricated representations of the prostitute. They created thus theoretical and practical gaps temporarily inhabited, for the first time, by the prostitutes themselves.



## Chapter 3

### **‘Son puttana e me ne vanto’: Feminism vs. Prostitution**

‘Hookers Unite, You Have Nothing to Lose But Cop Harassment’ and ‘Son puttana e me ne vanto’: these are only two examples of the numerous and colourful slogans that began to travel from the USA to Western Europe and were echoed in Italy from the early 1970s onwards. Coined and launched by prostitutes, the slogans announced the end of the long official silence imposed on their minority group. Proclaiming themselves a new political subject, prostitutes demanded civil rights, shattering the image of voiceless victim, or marginalized ‘whore’. Their presence provoked serious dilemmas among feminists, who felt trapped between ‘sympathy’ towards the requests of the newly visible prostitutes and the assumption that prostitution is a product of patriarchy and the capitalist system. The prostitutes also offered and disseminated a more complex approach to sexual issues, calling into question stereotypes of female and male sexuality and gender roles. Thus, prostitutes’ movements used their own narrative to confront age-old stories and the foregone conclusions embedded in them, thereby rejecting the traditional trivial meanings and signification of prostitution and women who work in the paid sex trade.

This chapter provides an account of the narratives produced both by, and in reaction to, the first prostitutes’ movements that emerged in the Western arena between the 1970s and the 1980s. The first section opens with an analysis of Kate Millett’s introduction to her *Prostitution Papers*, in which she provides an indication of the strong, contradictory feelings raised by *real* prostitutes invited to the first feminist

conference on prostitution, held in New York in 1971. Although circumscribed within the United States, Millett's account epitomizes the future trend of the wider relationships between the prostitutes' and feminists' movements. Published in Italy in 1975, *The Prostitution Papers* represents – together with *La moglie e la prostituta: due ruoli una condizione* (Apruzzi *et al.*, 1975) – one of the most important references for Italian feminists in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The first prostitutes' movement in the USA in 1973 will be explored briefly; this is followed by a discussion on the later French protest as reported by some Italian newspapers and the women's magazine *Noi Donne*. The section will analyze what can be described as the lukewarm reaction of both the Italian press and the PCI female association, *Unione Donne Italiane*, of which *Noi Donne* was the mouthpiece.

The second part of the chapter will explore the Italian feminists' approach and attempts to address issues of prostitution during the 1970s. Various sources, from Carla Lonzi's work to protest leaflets and conference publications produced by feminist collectives between 1973 and 1978, provide the basis of the discussion. Feminists' solidarity or fascination with the demands and the new image conveyed by French, American and, later, Italian prostitutes were short-lived, as they inevitably raised concerns and difficult questions. Later, however, migration, the trafficking phenomenon and child sexual exploitation led feminists to relocate prostitutes among victims and to conceptualize prostitution as a form of violence perpetrated by men. Feminists have

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<sup>1</sup> To this short bibliography can be added a third important text written by Belladonna, J., 1979. *Prostituzione: voci di donne sul corpo e sul denaro*. Rome: Savelli.

thus tended both to obscure or diminish the authoritativeness of the prostitutes' contribution and divert attention away from male, transsexual and homosexual prostitution. It could also be suggested that their perspectives are partially responsible for the acquiescent disinterest still surrounding the figure of the client (Corso and Landi, 1998; Tatafiore, 1994; Cutrufelli, 1981, 1996) and the cultural difficulties in dealing with sexual issues.<sup>2</sup>

The recent scandals involving transsexual and female prostitutes with prominent Italian politicians as their clients have suddenly exposed those aspects pertaining to prostitution and to sexuality that feminists have yet fully to explore:<sup>3</sup> the relationship between sex and (political) power and its representation; the client's body; the female internalization of male dominant models; the power of prostitutes, or the power of sexuality.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the third and last section of this chapter will investigate the attempt made by the Genoese *Coordinamento donne FLM* to address the issue of prostitution from another perspective. The *coordinamenti* may be considered the tangible presence and contribution of the movement to and within the Italian trade unions.<sup>5</sup> Begun as informal meetings for women in the mid-1970s, the *coordinamenti* spread throughout the major cities, leading to the organization of '150 ore delle donne'.

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<sup>2</sup> The first Italian official research into the demand for trafficked prostitution has been published only recently: Di Nicola *et al.*, eds., 2009. *Prostitution and Human Trafficking: Focus on clients*. New York: Springer.

<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Some attempts to re-address the issue have been made more recently. In 2009 Maria Luisa Boccia, Ida Dominijanni, Tamar Pitch, Bianca Pomeranzi and Grazia Zuffa promoted a debate on 'Sesso, potere, denaro' held at the Casa Internazionale delle Donne in Rome. In 2010, the *Associazione Nazionale Maschile Plurale* organized a conference on 'Desiderio maschile di prostituzione', Turin.

<sup>5</sup> See Varlese, L., 2009. Il Coordinamento nazionale FLM (1976-1984). In Cereseto, G., Frisone, A. and Varlese, A. *Non è un gioco da ragazze. Femminismo e sindacato: i Coordinamenti donne FLM*. Rome: Ediesse, pp. 21-178.

These courses were part of a wider project held within the so-called ‘150 Hours – Right to Study’, an important union conquest that ‘provided free and in factory time [...] courses in basic literacy and courses leading to elementary and secondary school diplomas’ (Bruno and Nadotti, 1988:96-107; Lovenduski, 1986:183-185; Ginsborg, 2003; Frisone, 2009). Women’s attendance grew rapidly, bringing ‘to the courses not only a personal history and female sensibility, but also ... the feminist practice of consciousness-raising, self-help, and *gruppi dell’inconscio*’ (Bruno and Nadotti, 1988:100).

The ‘150 Hours’, granting a formal qualification, were implemented with parallel courses focused on health, motherhood, the family, sexuality and other issues articulated from a female perspective and for this reason were known as the *150 ore delle donne*. Starting in Turin, these experiences spread to other parts of the country; some reached surprising conclusions, resulting in practical developments and activities (Bruno and Nadotti, 1988:101-107; Caldwell, 1983:71-83; Giorda, 2007). Taking the opportunity offered by ‘150 Hours’, the Genoese *Coordinamento donne FLM* raised the issue of prostitution and organized a well structured two-year course around it. Having to confront their own internalised representations of the prostitute within an historical framework, the students of the course and the members of the *Coordinamento donne* faced the collapse of the distance between themselves and the object of their interest. This experience represents the apex and, in some way, the end of a long process begun in the late Sixties, thus bridging and summarizing at least two decades of Italian women’s lives and feminist thinking.

### **3.1. At the Beginning of Prostitutes' Movements: The Euphoria of Power**

*The Prostitution Papers* by Kate Millett, one of the most influential American feminists, is a useful source in reconstructing the atmosphere and women's attitudes towards prostitution in the early 1970s. The book, an original project based on the narratives of four women, two prostitutes, a lawyer and the author herself, is a passionate defence of prostitutes' rights. Its originality consists precisely in the presence of prostitutes' voices, following an approach that was anything but easy, as Millett recalls: 'At first it was agonizing, because through them I began to *listen* [...]. At moments I felt I was drowning in it. [...] so profoundly did they affect me, shake me, haunt me, overcome me'. She had *de facto* begun to listen and discover 'the actual life experienced by women [which] has [...] been hidden from other women – inarticulate, unexpressed, foreign to the style and assumptions of our patriarchal culture' (Millett, 1975:11).

Millett's text appeared as a chapter in *Women in Sexist Society* (Gornick, 1971) only a few months before the first feminist conference on prostitution in December 1971, and was then re-edited in 1975 as a book. Briefly reviewed here is the introduction to the 1975 edition, in which the author recalls the explosive encounter between prostitutes and the feminists convened at the conference to which she had looked forward 'with absurd optimism' (Millett, 1975:14). Millett writes a vivid report about the events, the emotions running among audiences and speakers, and the sharp protests of those prostitutes who attended the New York conference: '[t]he first thing

they could tell us – the message coming through a burst of understandable indignation – was that we were judgemental, meddlesome, and ignorant’. However, as she soon points out, there was more beneath the surface:

The spectre of sexual freedom, the real issue, was palpable in the room. Who knows most about sex? Who gets more? What is most? Who is cool? Money is fun. What’s pride? What’s prudery?

The events exacerbated and precipitated the ongoing tensions underlining the fragile and composite assembly. The next day, the conference programme scheduled a discussion titled ‘Towards the Elimination of Prostitution’ to which prostitutes were not officially invited. Millett fails to explain the reasons for this exclusion. Even so, a small group of prostitutes was finally authorized to join the discussion. The situation exploded:

The accusation, so long buried in liberal goodwill or radical rhetoric – “you’re selling it, I could too but I won’t” – was finally heard. Said out loud at last. The rejection and disapproval which the prostitutes have sensed from the beginning, and with the unerring instinct of the unconscious have directed all their energy towards exposing, is now present before us, a palpable force in the air.

Millett realizes that ‘it was simply too early’ for significant strides to be made; she admits that her own report on the conference, published in the *Village Voice*, was ‘partial, often garbled’. ‘It was too early’ for both prostitutes and non-prostitutes, and for Millett herself. Four years later, she still remembered one of the women, who most persistently offered to represent prostitutes:

[A] formidable *actress* whose grandiose *neuroticism*, [...] took umbrage at everybody and everything. And took over. She ruled the occasion through an impressive *hysteria* [...] equally effective upon her own contingent – increasingly silent, increasingly easy to *manipulate* – as it upon her audience [...]. A *strange nervous* woman with *strange* hair dyed some unlikely colour of grey, *glamorous* in a series of necklaces, *ferocious* in accusation, a *Jesuit* in argument, she grew and blossomed upon the stage, crowding out all personalities in her euphoria of power. *Mystic*, an *avatar*, [...] she became The Prostitute, *papal* in her authority [emphasis added]

The magnificent picture, the flourishing style, offers some exemplary tropes connected with representation of the female: hysterical, neurotic, manipulating, nervous, strange, ferocious, euphoric, and mystic. Fascinated and revolted, Millett underlines several times the aggressiveness of this woman, whom she classifies as displaying the range of contradictory feelings that perhaps unsettled and subjugated those present. The audience was silenced not by the formidable personality of the prostitute but by an intense emotional response.

This brief yet significant text allows us to trace - through the passionate narrative of the prominent witness - the historical and cultural distance built and operating among women. It opens a window on what was probably the first appearance by a prostitute in a public, formal, and 'licit' arena. It displays and simultaneously conceals mystifications and real issues, the terrain upon which the prostitutes have successively dared to build their problematic, fragile relationship with feminists, and increased their self-awareness. It indicates the cultural and social background in and against which the first prostitutes' association, COYOTE, battled.

### 3.1.1. *From the Far West*

Although initially circumscribed within the USA context, the experience of COYOTE deserves to be mentioned as a first attempt to remove the representation of prostitution ‘from its historical roots with sin, crime, and illicit sex’ and relocating it ‘in the discourse of work, choice, and rights’ (Jenness, 1990:404; 1993). COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) was created in California in 1973 by a former prostitute, Margot St. James, in order to provide some services for women and prostitutes. Soon after, the organization focused its interests on a campaign calling for decriminalization of prostitution and challenging the abuses committed against prostitutes by police and the legal system (Jenness, 1993:43; Mathieu, 2001). The leader and her organization rapidly gained vast popularity and media attention, while local groups of COYOTE and other, similar, associations were created in United States over the years.

COYOTE’s campaign takes two specific directions: one was ‘about the right to privacy and freedom of expression, which was being disseminated by the gay and lesbian community as well as the women’s movement’ (Jenness, 1993:54); the other focused on the waste of taxpayers’ money in enforcing laws increasing the vulnerability and victimization of prostitutes. Rather than prosecute, label, and stigmatize prostitutes, money should be spent on preventing and reducing ‘real’ crimes. However, despite all



efforts, the issue of decriminalization is still an open battle in the US, where only a few counties in Nevada permit some form of legal prostitution.<sup>6</sup>

The failure of COYOTE's battles gives an insight into the conservative attitude towards sex-related issues in United States and the influence of the American feminist anti-pornography movement. According to its most influential exponents, such as Catharine MacKinnon (1989; 1993) and Andrea Dworkin (1981; 1987), pornography should be regarded as a violation of women's civil rights rather than as an issue of obscenity, and prostitution as violence against women.<sup>7</sup> Although their campaigns achieved no substantial results, they were able to gain wide popularity, competing with and obscuring those battles led by associations of women working in the sex trade.

### 3.1.2. *The French experience through the Italian lens*

While COYOTE might be considered the first organization to address the issue of prostitution, the 1975 demonstration of French prostitutes may arguably be regarded as the official and visible starting point of the European prostitutes' 'consciousness-raising' action. The occupation of two churches in Lyon in protest at police harassment not only gained media interest; it was also immediately emulated in Paris and other cities, such as Grenoble and Marseilles. Moreover, in spite of the lack of political response, the mobilization of prostitutes opened a new front in French women's debates

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<sup>6</sup> The last unfruitful campaign for decriminalization has taken place in San Francisco in 2008. See Weitzer, J.R., 2010a. *Sex for sale: prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry*. New York: Routledge, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> MacKinnon's and Dworkin's anti-porn campaign has been widely discussed (Chester and Dickey, 1988; Williams, L., 1989; Gruen and Panichas, 1997; Cornell, 2000).

and introduced the theme of civil rights in relation to prostitution (Mazur, 2004; Mathieu, 2001).

As Mazur notices, in France ‘the major frame of policy debates on prostitution was gender neutral’, while rescue organizations regarded prostitution as a ‘form of oppression and slavery not just against women by men but against all “human beings” by gender-neutral institutions’ (Mazur, 2004:127-128). Other French associations, in contrast, defined women as minors and directed their campaigns towards the abolition of the trafficking of women and children. Thanks to the *mise en scène* created by the French prostitutes, prostitution gained a very different place in both women’s and the national agenda. The prostitutes tried to break with the image of women as permanent minors, shaking off their stigma and marginal status, and projecting a positive element of fruitful diversity and social critique.

However, the interesting aspect is how the events in France were reported by certain Italian newspapers and *Noi Donne*. To begin with, the interest of the national press appears tepid, largely indifferent. On 6 June 1975, the sober headline on an inside page of *Corriere della sera* reads: ‘Lione: sindaco solidale con le prostitute’. The article briefly explains that sixty prostitutes occupied a Catholic church in Lyon ‘per protestare contro le «persecuzioni» [...] della polizia e della magistratura’ (Bocchi, 1975a). Three days later, a different headline on the front page catches the attention: ‘La *rivolta* delle *passeggiatrici* diventa in Francia un caso nazionale’ [emphasis added] (Bocchi, 1975b). The protest is now presented as a ‘conflitto sociale di nuovo genere’ and the reporter (Bocchi, 1975b), illustrates the prostitutes’ demands and their position in the French

legal system. However, his depiction of Ulla, the leader of the movement, betrays a certain degree of surprise and uneasiness: she is ‘una di «quelle», una vera *pasionaria*’ but ‘sa *parlare, battersi, mantenere i contatti con la stampa, organizzare la resistenza, trattare con le autorità*. E che conosce l’arte della pubblicità. *Assomiglia a Catherine Deneuve*’ [emphasis added].

He seeks to construct her image by drawing upon well-known political and cultural icons, such those of the Spanish revolutionary Dolores Ibárruri and the French protagonist of *Belle de jour*. Far from being a ‘normal’ prostitute, Ulla speaks, fights, organizes, and negotiates, inhabiting the public arena with a great deal of self-confidence. In other words, she resists representations of a powerless, ignorant prostitute. The dynamics at work become more evident when a dismissive and ironic tone emerges over the following days, soon after the ‘duro intervento della polizia’ and the withdrawal of the prostitutes from the churches:

[S]ono tornate sui marciapiedi, ma non hanno abbandonato la lotta [...]. La *bionda* Ulla, che ormai passa per la ‘mente’ del movimento e *sventola con soddisfazione la sua brava licenza di maturità* (è titolare di un bac in filosofia) ha annunciato [...] i primi stati generali delle prostitute. [...] È evidente la volontà delle organizzatrici di dare anche alla prostituzione una struttura e una dimensione internazionale, come se intendessero adattare alle ‘lavoratrici orizzontali’ la tradizionale esortazione rivoluzionaria: ‘lavoratori di tutto il mondo unitevi!’ [inverted commas in the original; emphasis added] (Bocchi, 1975c)

The inverted commas and choice of terms subvert the expectations set up in the texts in a deliberate attempt to discredit, and thus negate, the legitimacy of prostitutes’ demands for rights.

At the other end of the country, the newspapers pursue a similar strategy. The article of the Neapolitan *Mattino* switches from a serious to an amused style in which the juxtapositions of word combinations, euphemisms and specific terms make the real content easier to ignore. Thus prostitutes become ‘squillo’, ‘signorine’, ‘rivoluzionarie del marciapiede’, while their protest shifts from ‘sciopero’ to ‘sommossa’, ‘guerra’ and ‘invasione’ (Cavalletti, 1975a, 1975b). A more direct reference to Italian popular culture replaces Buñuel’s citation, adding a touch of colour:

[N]ella cappella di Saint Bernard c’è un’atmosfera felliniana: prostitute giovani e vecchie, belle e brutte, truccate vistosamente o con il viso pulito come un’educanda, tutte sostengono con veemenza le loro rivendicazioni: niente più multe, niente prigione, vita familiare (Cavalletti, 1975c).

Once again, ‘innocent’ evocations divert attention from the facts intruding into, and ultimately silencing, the voice of the prostitutes. The new subject in search of recognition and respect was systematically delegitimized.

A different approach is apparently adopted by *Noi Donne*, the mouthpiece of the female Communist association *Unione Donne Italiane*. On 22 June 1975 under the headline, ‘Il parroco e le belle di notte’, the magazine publishes its version of the events in a disengaged tone. The first four paragraphs proceed more as a fictional story than as a factual report:

Incominciò lunedì 2 giugno, nella chiesa di Saint Nizier, a Lione: centocinquanta [postitute] entrarono, si fecero il segno della croce, e con un po’ di rumore e disordine per il gran tramestio di sedie, si sistemarono nella navata centrale...

The author, Enzo Rava, refers *en passant* and without further explanation to the abuse suffered by the protesters. He then proceeds with *his* account and, opting for a conventional anti-clericalism, dwells on the helpless reaction of the parish priest - reminiscent of Don Abbondio or maybe Don Camillo.<sup>8</sup> As is known, the facts were quite otherwise. The occupation of the church was no spontaneous outburst; on the contrary, it was decided beforehand in a meeting that took place between the prostitutes and their supporters. Some were militants of the *Mouvement du Nid*, an organization inspired by Social Catholic ideals. Given permission to negotiate with the parish rector and the ecclesiastical hierarchies of Lyon, they explained the prostitutes' reasons and obtained their consent to the occupation (Mathieu, 2001).

The sudden materialization of the French prostitutes in a public arena subverted all conventions, breaking boundaries and conveying an uncomfortable sense of proximity. Thus, the fictional, comic narrative chosen by Rava re-figured the boundaries and distances to where the protesters were more easily dispossessed of their authoritative voice. Rava's article might be unexpected in the context of *this* journal; in reality, it reflects and discloses the inadequacy of the Italian Communist Party and the *Unione Donne Italiane* in dealing with this new challenge. The party anchored its approach to the Marxist view on the nature of prostitution, considered 'only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer' in the capitalist system.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Rava, E., 1975. Il parroco e le belle di notte. *Noi Donne*, 22 June, p. 43. The term 'prostituta' occurs only once throughout the text, replaced by a flourishing of synonyms and euphemisms, vile 'protesters' or 'occupiers' are dismissed in favour of 'bivaccatrici', which conveys disorder and precariousness.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, K., 1959. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, pp. 99 (footnote).

abolition of all forms of exploitation had to be postponed to the future, while the image of prostitution itself was thus removed from any historical, cultural, and anthropological context. This model, uncritically accepted, created a border behind which it was possible to conceal the anxiety raised by sexual issues. As has been underlined (Peregalli, 2001:22; Bellassai, 2000), '[l]a morale sessuale dei comunisti italiani era infatti alimentata da una forte carica sessuofobica' well rooted in the pre-existent Catholic popular culture.

Despite the constant defence of female issues, the *Unione donne italiane* was, by contrast, too close to the Communist guidelines on the 'women question', making it difficult to maintain an independent perspective (Pojmann, 2006:49-79; Michetti, Repetto and Viviani, 1984). As a consequence, confronted with the second-wave feminism, the UDI found itself struggling with disparate fronts and feelings. The sense of loyalty to the PCI clashed with the disappointment for the wavering commitment to women's issues, such as abortion and divorce, demonstrated by the party itself. Simultaneously, the composite world of Italian feminisms challenged dramatically the emancipation ideals expressed by the UDI (Bashevkin, 1985). As this chapter will later demonstrate, the ambiguous attitude towards prostitution adopted by the *Unione donne italiane* was not far from that of the most engaged feminist collectives.

The position of the UDI on the French events was indirectly expressed a few months later during the reporting of a case of illegal abortion and the trafficking of minors for sexual purpose, 'I fabbricanti di Lolite'. The article, a *J'accuse*-like text against the bourgeois clients and in defence of the young victims, 'perché di vittime si

tratta',<sup>10</sup> appears as an implicit response to the subverting solicitations of the French prostitutes. Rather than representing themselves as victims of bourgeois male desire, the women denounced the violence of the law and the social and cultural stigmatization. Instead of asking for help and redemption, they had asked for security and rights. They called into question something more than an abstract concept of freedom while offering a different image of the prostitute. The absence of direct comments from the following issues of *Noi Donne* is remarkable and highly significant. Protected under the Marxist umbrella, the women of the *Unione donne italiane* avoided dealing with, or responding to, any thorny issue.

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<sup>10</sup> Lapasini, G., 1975. I fabbricanti di Lolite. *Noi Donne*, 9 November, p. 40.

### **3.2. Italian feminists and prostitution**

This section reviews a number of Italian feminist texts produced over the 1970s in order to trace the ways in which prostitution (or the link between sex and money) has been understood and interpreted. The anxiety caused by the issue was a common response not only among the members of the UDI and their male *compagni*, but also among those who joined the feminist movement. Prostitution was and remains a minefield, provoking contradictory and irreconcilable responses that feminism found difficult to articulate.

The Seventies saw the emergence of a demanding and exuberant feminist movement characterized by the blossoming of different groups throughout Italy. Rivolta Femminile, founded by Carla Lonzi in Milan and Rome in 1970, was one of the most influential; it was preceded, accompanied and followed by many others, such as DEMAU, Movimento Femminista Romano and Alternativa Femminista in Turin (Del Bo Boffino, 1996; Ribero, 1999; Bertilotti and Scattigno, 2005).<sup>11</sup> These and other collectives gave voice and emphasis to the most urgent issues facing Italian women at that time. Salaries for housewives, divorce, contraception, and abortion became central points on their agenda, assertively brought to the attention of public opinion and political institutions. Prostitution was not their highest priority.

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<sup>11</sup> 'A characteristic feature of Italian feminism is its diffusion through a number of diverse groups, which operate in many cities', in Bono, P. and Kemp, S., eds., 1991. *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 4.



The visibility of feminism was magnified thanks to the proliferation of informal publications, such as leaflets, cyclostyles, and self-financed magazines (Codognotto and Moccagatta, 1997:13), and to the creation of feminist publishers. Carla Lonzi founded the first feminist publisher in Milan in 1973, *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*; that same year, in Rome, Adele Cambria, Vanna Vannucci and other feminists created *Effe*, one of the first feminist magazines. Published until 1982, *Effe* provided an account of the main debates on emancipation and liberation, focusing on the issue of body, sexuality and sexual identity (Codognotto and Moccagatta, 1997:37). The documents discussed here have been selected from among formal and informal publications, such as protest leaflets diffused by *Alternativa Femminista* in 1973, Carla Lonzi's works published between 1970 and 1977, and conference accounts published by *Effe* in 1978.

### 3.2.1. *The unspeakable issue*

Perhaps the most original Italian collective, *Rivolta Femminile*, marked its first public appearance in July 1970 by publishing its *Manifesto*, a critique of institutions and ideologies: 'La civiltà ci ha definite inferiori, la Chiesa ci ha chiamate sesso, la psicanalisi ci ha tradite, il marxismo ci ha vendute alla rivoluzione ipotetica' (Lonzi, 1974:18). Focused on the practice of *autocoscienza* and separatism,<sup>12</sup> *Rivolta*

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<sup>12</sup> For Maria Luisa Boccia, the most important achievement of the *autocoscienza* practice of *Rivolta Femminile* has been 'fare vuoto e rinominare. [...] Ripartendo dai gesti comuni, dalle abitudini, da legami inconsci che legano ogni donna alla civiltà patriarcale', in Boccia, M.L., 2009. L'io in rivolta. Sessualità e pensiero politico di Carla Lonzi. [pdf] *Etal.edizioni* Available at: <<http://www.etal-edizioni.it/userfiles/file/lonzi%20pisa%20Boccia%20Definitivo.pdf>> [Accessed 17 May 2010]

Femminile always avoided direct participation in the feminists' battles disseminating its thinking through its publishing house, *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*.

One year later, in two widely-read pamphlets, *Sputiamo su Hegel* and *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*, Carla Lonzi, leader of Rivolta Femminile, delineates the critical argument against both Hegelian philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis, denounced for their sexism (Lazzaro-Weis, 1993; Jagentowicz Mills, 1996; Hanafin, 2007). Hegel allocates women to an (a)historical and divine realm; Freud, in Lonzi's view, consigns them to an irresolvable absence: 'Facciamo atto d'incredulità verso il dogma psicoanalitico che attribuisce alla donna in tenera età il senso di partire in perdita per una angoscia metafisica della sua differenza' (Lonzi, 1974:45). Through their considering men as the unique and unreachable absolute, both Hegel and Freud are denounced as responsible for reinforcing and crystallizing women's subjection and rejection from history.

Carla Lonzi 'was the first who argue(d) against equality and for difference, and to state the need for separatism. In her view, the equality promised to women was [...] simply a way to colonize them even further [...], while the dominant discourse remained unchanged' (Parati and West, 2002:57). Women's liberation should be obtained by an act of self-consciousness, rather than by male consent: 'la donna così com'è è un individuo completo: la trasformazione non deve avvenire su di lei, ma su come lei si vede dentro l'universo e su come la vedono gli altri' (Lonzi, 1974:56). A woman's personal experience is the starting point for her freedom, and a legacy to be discovered and appraised. In other words, Lonzi 'seeks a social and symbolic revolution

in which woman puts herself in the position of subject, the position denied her by what we today call phallogocentrism' (Jagentowicz Mills, 1996:19). The search implies different strategies and requires the crossing and breaking of boundaries. This may entail the imperative erosion of marriage, family and the female mythology in and to which women have been entrapped and subjected (Bono and Kemp, 1991:36).

In contrast, Lonzi insists on the inclusion of pleasure and sexuality as crucial points in the struggle for women's freedom: 'accogliamo la libertà sessuale in tutte le sue forme, perché abbiamo smesso di considerare la frigidity un'alternativa onorevole' (Lonzi, 1974:15). The last, is an essential aspect expressed several times in the *Manifesto* as well as in other writings. Carla Lonzi and her followers strongly refuse any compromise that could obstruct and impede the full realization of the self (and sexuality): 'Continuare a regolamentare la vita fra i sessi è una necessità del potere; l'unica scelta soddisfacente è un rapporto libero' (Lonzi, 1974:16). Also rejected as unsustainable mystification is the idea of eroticism based on submission: 'Chi ha il potere afferma: «Fa parte dell'erotismo amare un essere inferiore». Mantenere lo status quo è dunque un atto d'amore' (Lonzi, 1974:15). However, as shown below, exploration of female sexuality and the female condition appears to stop before it questions the – to many –unpredictable reality of the act of prostitution and the prostitutes' bodies, their exposed intimacy and diversity. This short extract from *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (1971:102) is here particularly meaningful:

L'uomo non sa più chi è la donna quando esce dalla sua colonizzazione e dai ruoli attraverso i quali egli si preparava un'esperienza già *fatta e ripetuta nei millenni*: la madre, la vergine, la moglie, la figlia, la cognata, l'amica e la *prostituta*. La donna era un prodotto confezionato in modo che egli non avesse nulla da scoprire in quell'essere umano [emphasis added].

The quotation shows the critical analysis of the multiple roles imposed on women by patriarchal culture, yet the document demonstrates the same blind spot that characterizes feminist theory and practice on prostitution. Lonzi assumes the ahistoricity of prostitution as a given fact needing no investigation. She re-states rather than rejects the gendered and static image of prostitute (as well as mother, wife, virgin, etc.) elaborated since the nineteenth century. Curiously, in the narrative economy of this text, the term 'prostitute' occurs almost by chance, only once, as the last-named of a list in which 'mother' takes first place. It is a sort of hierarchical genealogy of values and judgements passively interiorized and never overtly questioned by Lonzi. The prostitute, so casually mentioned, seems here a remote echo, a caricature, vaguely alluding to a stigmatized figure as well as to a more generic, and less problematic, sexual promiscuity. A few pages later, Lonzi writes that:

[I]l bene della donna [...] sta nel rinnovare l'erotismo attraverso l'incontro con un diverso partner e non nel perseguire una perfettibilità mitologica della coppia – cosa che del resto l'uomo ha sempre praticato come un'esperienza di privilegio maschile (135).

In her search for authenticity, Lonzi queries heterosexuality and monogamy as constituting the only (and reasonable) sources of female pleasure. In her diary, she goes further, claiming the need to explore the eroticism provoked by men: 'e poi ci sono gli uomini che mi suscitano erotismo e né Simone [her partner] né le amiche mi conoscono

sotto questo aspetto' - she reveals, then explaining - '*L'erotismo al di fuori dell'affetto, della conoscenza, delle garanzie*' [emphasis added] (1978:819). The tale of romantic eroticism is here lucidly rejected in favour of the affirmation of a pleasure anchored to neither rational choices nor pre-scribed rules. At the same time, Lonzi expresses her doubts about the calls for a change from a passive to an active role in a sexual relationship. 'Taking the initiative' does not necessarily mean 'maintaining (or sharing) control' over intercourse: 'che significa per [la donna] *sollecitare un uomo al rapporto sessuale quando poi quello che si svolgerà fra loro sarà il rapporto sessuale condotto dall'uomo?*' [emphasis added] (1971:85).

Lonzi's tensions and ambivalences on sexuality and, ultimately, on prostitution as an issue might be located in these quotations. For Lonzi, women cannot realize their authentic sexuality in a male-dominated world. Soliciting sexual intercourse neither means nor implies emancipation – because men fail to recognize the fruitful, independent female otherness. Men will govern the sexual encounter.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, a woman who solicits sex will never have power over herself. Lonzi seems to embrace women prostitutes in her view by an act of tacit inclusion that, paradoxically, results in oblivion. The separatism and celebration of women's experiences and diversity advocated by Lonzi do not automatically make room for experiences apparently contradictory to her mother-centred female universe.

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<sup>13</sup> Lonzi's diary reveals what might be considered a contradiction or, at least, an irresolvable tension. In May 1973 she writes: 'mi sentivo un po' in colpa per aver abbandonato mio fratello al suo destino e aver risolto il mio *mediante l'apporto di altri uomini*. Però poi ho pensato che ho lavorato abbastanza senza essere pagata e ho fatto anche qualcosa per la mia comunità con il femminismo', in Lonzi, C. 1978. *Taci, anzi parla*. Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, p. 370.

In a later work, Lonzi summarizes her own approach to feminism, described as the way out of the impasse in which women seem inevitably to be caught: ‘Il femminismo mi si è presentato come lo sbocco possibile tra le *alternative simboliche* della condizione femminile, *la prostituzione* e la clausura: riuscire a vivere senza *vendere il proprio corpo* e *senza rinunciarvi*. *Senza perdersi* e *senza mettersi in salvo* [emphasis added] (Chinese, Lonzi, C, Lonzi, M. and Jaquinta, 1977:16). This quotation is particularly intriguing for its implications and resonances. The choice of words seems to allude both to an intimate judgment and to a philosophical assertion mediated through poetical inflection. Selling and renouncing her own body (as a wife, prostitute, or nun) evokes not only unambiguous betrayal of the self, but also sinful scenarios. Speaking about salvation and damnation (‘*mettersi in salvo*’, ‘*perdersi*’) may have biblical and moralistic echoes. In Lonzi’s writings, however, the theme of loss recurs as a poetical expedient and as a real threat to the authenticity and the integrity of the self, which must be protected against male cultural colonization.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this reason, her positions become a barrier to further development. Reducing all women’s experiences to the fruits of male cultural imposition, claiming a necessary process of rejection of male dominant culture (Lonzi, 1974:17), Lonzi’s/Rivolta Femminile’s thinking tends to belittle the genuineness of women’s own free choices over their bodies, and to acknowledge no value in such choices. Prostitution, as a possible site of experience and legitimate knowledge, can find no room in this view. Women who work as prostitutes within whatever scenario can be neither recognized nor understood in their individuality and agency.

### 3.2.2. *Donna che hai il mestiere più antico del mondo*

The campaign for the revision of the Merlin law launched by *La Stampa* in Turin in December 1972 created the opportunity for feminists to express their own opinion on prostitution. The initiative, which aimed to collect 50,000 signatures for the reform, was based on a proposal elaborated a few months before during a meeting promoted by *La Stampa*. Introducing the initiative, the newspaper explained how the project was drawn up by sociologists, jurists, doctors and an exponent of the Church who essentially did not mean to ignore the problem of prostitution but merely to prevent that ‘ad ogni angolo di strada ci sia «qualcuna» o «qualcuno» a ricordarglielo’.<sup>14</sup> The readers were thus asked to sign in favour of the proposal if they wanted to protect ‘le nostre donne’, ‘le nostre figlie’ and ‘i nostri ragazzi’ from harassment and ‘scene immonde’. ‘Non si tratta di colpire la libertà degli individui, *neppure delle prostitute*,’ the newspaper assured, ‘si cerca soltanto di tutelare la propria’.

The reiterated use of the possessive re-asserted a right of ownership about to be undermined by Family Code reforms in 1975. Concurrently, the stress placed on a freedom denied ‘even’ to prostitutes reflected the ambivalence of the campaigners. The project reform recommended detention and a fine for those who intentionally offered ‘prestazioni sessuali’ in public places; it reintroduced a sanitary examination of those

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<sup>14</sup> (Anon.), 1972. Domani in via Roma raccolta delle firme. *La Stampa*, 1 December, p. 4.

caught soliciting. Rather than constituting an improvement, the proposal contemplated a substantial change in the spirit of the Merlin law.<sup>15</sup>

The campaign rapidly became a crusade against male and female prostitution, criminality, physical and moral turpitude;<sup>16</sup> debates on the Turin initiative were broadcast on radio and television over December and January.<sup>17</sup> However, in spite of enthusiastic popular support, criticism and dissent were expressed in lay and Catholic *milieux* (Zumaglini, 1997:180) and by barely identified ‘estremisti’.<sup>18</sup> Urged on by this attack on women’s freedom and by the new sense of sisterhood, women and feminist collectives, in particular, the Turin group Alternativa Femminista (AF) and the Movimento Femminista Romano,<sup>19</sup> decided to react. AF women compiled and distributed a number of protest leaflets, while the Movimento Femminista Romano participated with a paper in a meeting on ‘Feminine prostitution in Italy’ in Rome in February 1973.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the campaign reached the front page of *La Stampa* - for the first time - on 8 December, a national religious festival dedicated to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

<sup>16</sup> (Anon.), 1972. Firmiamo la riforma Merlin perché Torino sia più pulita. *La Stampa*, 2 December, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> All guests invited were men. See (Anon.), 1972. Arginare la prostituzione è combattere la delinquenza che le prospera accanto. *La Stampa*, 3 December, p. 4; (Anon.), 1973. Dibattito sui problemi della prostituzione delle malattie infettive e della delinquenza. *La Stampa*, 23 January, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Villani, S., 1972. Come è partita la «crociata» per riformare la legge Merlin. *Corriere della sera*, 6 December, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Alternativa Femminista was founded in Turin in the early 1970s by women from the Collettivo delle Compagne. It rejected any activity that might recall the traditional nurturing role of women, asking for the intervention of the state in favour of legal abortion and prostitutes’ rights. See: Merrill, H., 2006. *An Alliance of Women: Immigration and the politics of race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 124-133; Zumaglini, P., 1996. *I femminismi a Torino*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

<sup>20</sup> Women from Rivolta Femminile, the Student movement, and others with no previous ideological commitment founded the Movimento Femminista Romano in 1971. Practising separatism, the Roman collective was engaged in political activism and interested in reinforcing relationships among women (Bono and Kemp, 1991:62).



Both the leaflets and the newspaper help to reveal other aspects of Italian feminist thinking on prostitution which include, in some way, the attitude and the wordless ‘inertia’, or detachment, expressed by Rivolta Femminile and its leader. The leaflet written by Alternativa Femminista (AF) was distributed without great success to the people gathered for the signature of the petition in favour of the reform of the Merlin law at *La Stampa*’s office premises.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it testifies to the energy and political passion that led the women of Alternativa Femminista into this battle.<sup>22</sup> The document is a sequence of terse, dry assertions that try to catch the attention of the reader: ‘la prostituzione esiste. Non bisogna nascondere le prostitute. Bisogna eliminare la prostituzione’. The text proceeded, revealing a certain degree of ambivalence:

Noi donne siamo contro una società dove un uomo può comprare una donna. *Noi donne non siamo mai state disturbate dalle prostitute*. Sono i loro clienti che in luogo pubblico ci adescano in modo *intenzionale, continuato e non equivoco* offrendoci le loro prestazioni sessuali e non lasciandoci camminare in pace per la strada [emphasis added].

While AF rails against male domination and the ‘commodification’ of women’s bodies, it inscribes prostitution in an exclusively female realm. *La Stampa*, on the other hand, was very clear about this matter, focusing its campaign both on female and male prostitution. Ambiguity runs throughout AF’s leaflet: (female) prostitutes are clearly perceived as different, but their otherness does not ‘disturb’ other women. Prostitutes do not represent a menace for non-prostitutes; on the contrary. The battle against male

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<sup>21</sup> As reported at the time, the police interfered with the initiative. See (Anon.), 1972. La polizia impedisce la distribuzione di un volantino tra la gente in coda davanti alla *Stampa* che chiede l’abolizione della legge Merlin. *il Manifesto*, 5 December, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> An unpublished letter to *La Stampa* preceded the drafting of the leaflet, whose contents were shared with the Movimento Femminista Romano (Zumaglino, 1996:180; Bono and Kemp, 1991:64).

exploitation is the common ground where good women and the 'others' can build some kind of rudimentary solidarity. This is as far as AF seems to go. Zumaglino (1996:184) states that, nevertheless, the Turin group perceived the limits of an exclusively political approach and failed to consider 'i temi legati alla sessualità, come la prostituzione, diversivi usati per distrarre l'opinione pubblica dai fatti «ben più importanti» dell'economia'. Rather, the leaflet ends by exhorting citizens to support a campaign for sex education in schools, free abortion for all women, and the creation of *consultori anticoncezionali* in all local districts.

The Movimento Femminista Romano made a different contribution. In its document drafted for the meeting on 'Feminine prostitution in Italy' held in Rome on February 1973, the group urges discussion both of the reforms proposed and of 'the problems of prostitution in general', recognizing that 'prostitutes do not enjoy the same rights as other citizens'. The document proceeds with an analysis of the Merlin law whose principles of liberality had 'drawn the fury of the counter-reforming crusaders of the Christian Democrats and the daily *La Stampa*' (quoted in Bono and Kemp, 1991:66). It considers the enterprise of the Socialist senator a positive 'attempt to overcome the patriarchal law which *deprives women of the possibility of managing their own bodies*' [emphasis added] (67). No difference is expressed between prostitutes and non-prostitutes: the ownership of the body is a right that encompasses all women, regardless of their status. While it might appear an incidental consideration, it is in reality a potential opening that could have reduced distances and thereby created the ground for dialogue and collaboration.

The women of the Movimento Femmista Romano appear to adopt the role of spokeswomen for the prostitutes who, as far as is known, did not take part at the meeting: ‘most women prostitutes *tell us they* cannot obtain a driving licence [...]. *They* cannot set up any business’ (68). This is the only tiny yet remarkable evidence of contact between feminists and prostitutes, who remained, unsurprisingly, in the shadows. As Millett had realized two years before, it was still too early for both prostitutes and feminists to ‘surrender’ to, and entrust, each other.

### 3.2.3. *Speaking on prostitution: another attempt*

Five years later, the feminist magazine *Effe* dedicated to prostitution the ten pages of the June issue of 1978 with the aim of provoking further thoughts and debates on the question: ‘fino ad oggi scarsamente trattato da tutto il movimento femminista.’<sup>23</sup> This initiative has a particular significance here as it allows us to trace and analyze how and with what degree of awareness Italian feminists addressed the issue of prostitution in the late 1970s. The magazine hosted several contributions such as, for instance, an interview with Margot St. James, leader of COYOTE, the account of a French educator of *Le Nid*, and a passionate protest written by an English student and prostitute activist of the Power of Women Collective.<sup>24</sup> From among them emerges a short document presented at the Convegno del Comitato per il salario al lavoro domestico held in Rome

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<sup>23</sup> (Anon.), 1978. Molti miti da distruggere. *Effe*, June, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> In the early 1970s, the English Feminist Power of Women Collective started a campaign for the wages for housework. See Edmond, W. and Fleming, S., eds., 1975. *All Work and No Pay: Women, Housework, and the Wages Due*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

on May 1978. Its unequivocal inception acknowledges the importance for the feminist movement of emphasizing the political role played by the

*[L]otte delle prostitute per determinare le condizioni del loro lavoro, riducendo i ritmi, la pericolosità, la rapina da parte degli uomini e delle istituzioni statali sui proventi del loro lavoro sessuale, e soprattutto la loro lotta per ricavare sempre più soldi da questo lavoro [emphasis added].*<sup>25</sup>

The document perceives a clear connection between the prostitutes' battle and the campaign for wages for housework. While 'il lavoro sessuale è [...] la mansione centrale del lavoro domestico come riproduzione della forza lavoro', prostitution finds its deepest roots 'nella famiglia dove tutte le donne sono costrette a vivere la loro sessualità in funzione dell'uomo in cambio della sussistenza'. The text, however, goes further by recognizing the presence of more women who consider 'il loro *lavoro sessuale come lavoro* e decidono di ricavare *soldi per sé* direttamente da esso' [emphasis added]. Thus, *owning their money*, they can determine the limits of this work and housework. In other words, they call into question the basis of women's exploitation, namely, 'il lavoro sessuale – *mettendone in discussione la gratuità e demistificandolo*'. This is a central point of the document, considering that '*il crimine peggiore per tutte le donne è quello di chiedere soldi* e di riappropriarsi del lavoro [...] estorto dallo Stato attraverso gli uomini con il ricatto sulle nostre vite' [emphasis added].

At least two important aspects may be underlined: firstly, the cognizance of prostitution as 'work', although that does not entail full legitimization or acceptance.

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<sup>25</sup> (Anon.), 1978. Il lavoro sessuale. *Effe*, June, p. 7.

Housework loses its sacred, gratuitous quality through acquiring a value, a cost that should be paid to all women by the State. A blasphemous liaison between money and (female) sexual work has taken place. The reiteration of terms such as ‘soldi’ and ‘lavoro sessuale’ acts as a continual metaphorical slap, clashing with the pure image of the industrious, devoted and loving ‘angelo del focolare’. Monetizing sexuality and care means to name them, spotlighting their value and power.<sup>26</sup> It also means discussing and renegotiating power relationships, roles and women’s position because:

[L]e prospettive di lotta che il riformismo e i «rivoluzionari» ci offrono, si fermano sempre sulla porta di casa e su quella delle camere da letto, proprio perché tutte le strategie maschili fanno i conti sul nostro lavoro gratuito per riprodurre gli uomini ad ogni livello.

This passionate text seems nevertheless to level all differences among women; in its critique of male dominated society, men and institutions are assumed as acting simultaneously with no distinctions, boundaries or history. While all women are included in the battle against sexual exploitation, a subtle moral judgment still emerges:

[L]’unica strategia [...] è quella del salario al lavoro domestico [...] per sfuggire al [...] primo sfruttamento e per determinare condizioni materiali di vita in grado di *offrire a tutte, la reale possibilità di non vendere i nostri corpi* e di usare della nostra vita per noi [emphasis added].

Here are posed the questions of ownership of the body and the irreducible tie between body and sexuality, body and identity, body and money. On such grounds prostitutes

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<sup>26</sup> One year later, in 1979, the Movimento Femminista Romano organized in Rome a meeting on ‘Sessualità e denaro’, an attempt to confront the difficulties in articulating this thorny issue. See, for instance, (Anon.), 1979. Sessualità e Denaro. *Differenze*, November, p. 21.

and feminists will find the most striking divergences. Margot St. James is, in her interview, very precise on this point:

[L]a prostituta non vende il proprio corpo, ma il proprio tempo. E ci hanno fatto sempre credere che il tempo di una donna non valesse niente.<sup>27</sup>

She changes the terms of the question thus shifting the focus from the materiality of body to the inconsistency of time that is equated with money. The body can then disappear as a commodity, magically disengaging women from the weight of their reproductive and sexual roles. On these grounds, though, any potential agreement between prostitutes and feminist is destined to fail.<sup>28</sup>

The initiative promoted by *Effe* had no substantial consequences. The Italian feminists' interests remained primarily focused on the battles over abortion and sexual violence, obscuring any other openings. For instance, the international prostitutes' struggles against violence found no space in the Italian context and were generally ignored rather than being seen as a positive challenge. The speech of the English activist read at the 'Convegno internazionale sulla violenza contro la donna' held in Rome a few months before and then published in the same *Effe* June issue was an unequivocal denunciation: 'Non c'è spazio per noi'.<sup>29</sup> All efforts failed to lead to further debate. *Effe* itself was not again to turn its attention to prostitution until 1981, when the banning of the film-documentary *AAA. Offresi – Veronique*, on the daily work of a prostitute, was to become a national talking point.

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<sup>27</sup> (Anon.), 1978. Urrlate con i coyote. *Effe*, June, pp. 3-6.

<sup>28</sup> See the Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> See (Anon.), 1978. Non c'è spazio per noi. *Effe*, June, p. 8. The 'II Convegno internazionale sulla violenza contro la donna' was organized by MLD and *Effe* in Rome in March 1978.

### 3.3. Discussing Prostitution: ‘...e lì ci siamo fermate’

The clamorous censorship of *AAA. Offresi*, a *film vérité* about a call girl's clients, caused a wave of interest around prostitution and was one of the leading reasons for promoting a particular initiative in Genoa in the winter of 1981. The Genoese Coordinamento donne FLM (Federazione lavoratori metalmeccanici), one of several women's groups created since 1975 within highly unionized industries, organized two-year courses on prostitution. The significance of this event derives not only from the topic, but also from the originality of the approach used; it combined history, criminology, law, cinema and personal experiences. It summarises Italian feminist thinking and practice; it also epitomized the genuine commitment to the aim and the profound need to move away from the trajectories of existing knowledge. Focusing on prostitution was an unavoidable choice for the women of the Coordinamento, who felt the need to challenge the structured schemes of imposed boundaries. For all of these reasons, the thesis will focus on a close reading of the experience in order to highlight the processes and limits of feminist practice.<sup>30</sup>

Like the ‘150 Hours for Women’, the Genoese Coordinamento donne FLM's courses were developed in order to ‘leggere ed analizzare, appunto «dalla parte delle donne» sia la cultura ufficiale, sia la propria esperienza finora «oggetto» dell'analisi

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<sup>30</sup> For details on the Genoese Coordinamento donne FLM see: Cereseto, G., 2009. Percorsi di giornalismo sindacale. Il Coordinamento donne FLM di Genova. In Cereseto, G., Frisone, A. and Varlese, A. *Non è un gioco da ragazze. Femminismo e sindacato: i Coordinamenti donne FLM*. Rome: Ediesse, pp. 329-411.

altrui'.<sup>31</sup> However, unlike the previous seminars,<sup>32</sup> the two-year courses on prostitution were structured within a new scheme combining the practice of '*partire da se*' with history, criminology, law, psychology and cinema. After a summer spent collecting documents and reading books, a group of ten women drafted the project, well aware that 'della prostituzione si dice sempre che è il mestiere più antico del mondo [...] ma non si dice mai che il ruolo della prostituta è mutato nel corso dei secoli'.<sup>33</sup>

It must be emphasised that in 1981 Rina Macrelli had just published *L'indegna schiavitù*, focusing on Anna Maria Mozzoni and reshaping the view on prostitution in Italy in the Nineteenth century. The book was included in the exhaustive bibliography assembled for the seminars, together with *Donne di vita, vita di donne* (Blumir and Sauvage, 1980), based on interviews with prostitutes, *La moglie e la prostituta: due ruoli, una condizione* (Apruzzi *et al.*, 1975) and *Lettere dalle case chiuse* (1955).<sup>34</sup>

The course was developed by three study groups convened in different areas of Genoa (Cornigliano, San Martino, and Genoa centre), including University faculties. It was divided into three distinct parts: 'Prostitution' (1981-1982), 'Female Deviancy: Prostitution and criminality' (1982-1983), and a film retrospective 'Cinema and Prostitution' (March-May 1983). The first part included group discussions on given texts, with seven guest-lecturers from medical, psychological and social disciplines, at

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<sup>31</sup> Centro ligure di storia sociale. *Archivio del Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 Ore delle donne*, c. 18, b. 22, Devianza femminile: prostituzione e criminalità, '*Seminario 150 ore delle donne*' (1982).

<sup>32</sup> The Genoese Coordinamento inaugurated the '150 Hours' in 1976 with the course 'Il territorio della donna'. Then followed 'Il nostro corpo', 'Mestruazione e Menopausa', 'Parto e rapporto madri figlie'; 'Nascere, far nascere' and 'Espressione corporea'.

<sup>33</sup> Clss, *Archivio del Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 Ore delle donne*, c. 18, b. 22, Devianza femminile: prostituzione e criminalità, '*Seminario 150 ore delle donne*' (1982).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 16, .b. 20, Prostituzione, *Bibliografia proposta, elenco dei libri consultati per la preparazione del seminario, elenco di articoli da periodici* (1981).



the Medical Department of the University. While the texts chosen provided a historical approach to prostitution, the lectures displayed the importance of medical discourses in shaping and controlling female sexuality. The second part explored the concept of female criminality through the lens of history, criminology and psychiatry: from infanticide to prostitution. Again, five lectures were organized with the consent of the University; prominent speakers such as Tamar Pitch and Eva Cantarella were invited to talk.

Finally, the ‘Coordinamento Provinciale delle 150 Ore’ organized the film retrospective on prostitution, in order better to articulate the debates and to involve a larger audience. This initiative, briefly analyzed below, hosted the screening of seven films, followed each time by a public discussion: *Klute* (Pakula, 1971), *La dérobade* (Duval, 1979), *La ragazza di via Millelire* (Serra, 1980), *Lola* (Fassbinder, 1981), *The Life of Oharu* (Mizoguchi, 1952), *Le occasioni di Rosa* (Piscicelli, 1981) and *Comizi d'amore* (Pasolini, 1965). According to the organizers, the films were chosen with the aim of showing ‘differenti immagini di prostitute e di contesti sociali e culturali che i singoli registi [avevano] proposto’.<sup>35</sup>

As far as is known, the initiative led by the Genoese Coordinamento donne FLM was unique; for this reason, too, it deserves a closer analysis. The documents to be reviewed here were produced for and during these seminars. They testify to the encounter among unionized feminists and women workers and their reactions to an issue never before addressed. The interviews with some of the organizers and

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 18, b. 22, Materiale 150 ore, *Depliant col programma della rassegna cinematografica*.

participants, recorded in Genoa in 2009, will recall some significant moments of the course.<sup>36</sup> The interest of this material consists in the manifest theoretical and personal process developed over the two years of the course. It shows clearly both the ‘separateness’ and the apparent ‘closeness’ built over time by and between non-prostitute women and women labelled or working as prostitutes. It also shows the limits that feminists and their less committed companions encountered yet were not able fully to recognize.

### 3.3.1. *Impact and results: Subversion and no answers*

There is no doubt that when the first seminar was introduced to the audience there were, to say the least, puzzled reactions that found some echo in the press. While the *Il Secolo XIX* headline read ‘L’identikit della prostituta in un seminario di donne’, *Il Lavoro* titillated the reader by referring to the protagonist of the censored film-*verité*, *AAA. Offresi*: ‘Centocinquanta ore con Veronique’. The *Unità* instead gave the news more drearily: ‘Riprendono giovedì a Medicina i corsi «150 ore» delle donne’, adding ‘Con 5 gruppi di studio su «prostituzione» e «espressione corporea»’.<sup>37</sup> Beneath the surface there was the need for knowledge as one woman from the promoting group explained to *Il Secolo XIX*’s reporter:

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<sup>36</sup> The interviews were conducted by the author in different locations in Genoa in March 2009.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 16, .b. 20, Prostituzione, copies of articles: D.A., 1981. L’identikit della prostituta in un seminario di donne. *Secolo XIX*, 11 Dec. np.; Bruzzone, N., 1981. Centocinquanta ore con Veronique. *Il Lavoro*, Dec. np.; (Anon.), 1981. Riprendono giovedì a Medicina i corsi «150 ore» delle donne. *L’Unità*, 8 December, np.

L'idea è nata quasi un anno fa [...] sulla scia del caso Veronique. Ci siamo accorte che la prostituzione non è solo un problema scabroso in generale, ma che le donne non ne hanno mai parlato, anche il movimento femminista lo ha sempre rimosso. E dopo lunghe discussioni abbiamo deciso di proporlo come tema delle 150 ore di quest'anno.<sup>38</sup>

Criticism of feminist thinking emerges from the words of the unknown interviewee. However, the main task was to verify 'come muta la nostra percezione della prostituzione, come si modifica, la nostra immagine della prostituta e dei comportamenti sessuali in generale'.<sup>39</sup> The coordinators of the three parallel courses recorded, in their notes, discomfort and a feeling of estrangement that emerged during the opening encounters. Numerous participants expressed their difficulty in dealing with a matter they considered alien to their experiences and daily lives:

[I]l punto di partenza, un po' per tutte le partecipanti, è stato la percezione [...] della diversità e 'alterità' della prostituta, il *peso assoluto che si attribuiva al suo regime sessuale di vita* nella determinazione non solo del suo ruolo sociale ma proprio del suo quotidiano e dei suoi rapporti umani: più di una donna, ricordando incontri nei negozi o conversazioni colte per strada, ricordava anche il proprio *stupore* nel constatare che anche le pr., avendo una famiglia, figli, parenti e amici, avevano una dimensione 'normale' dei problemi, dalle pagelle alle malattie infantili ai week-ends [emphasis added].<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, D.A., 1981. L'identikit della prostituta. *Il Secolo XIX*, 11 December, np.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 18, b. 22, Materiale 150 ore, Fondo Livia Botta, *Appunti 'Prostituzione'*, handwritten, (1981), p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 16, b. 20, Prostituzione, *Considerazioni di alcune conduttrici dei gruppi sul seminario (motivazioni delle partecipanti, modo in cui si è sviluppata la riflessione...)*, typescript (Anon.), (1982).

The estrangement was occasionally filled, or denied, with the melancholic and fleshy images of prostitutes depicted in the lyrics of Fabrizio De André,<sup>41</sup> and with their familiar daily presence in the areas close to the harbour, as Maria Teresa Tuccio recalls:

[L]a mia immagine della prostituzione allora era quella romantica di via del Campo, in teoria, come la canzone di Fabrizio e come frequentazione del centro storico di Genova, per cui le prostitute erano lì, passavi all'angolo e ... finché c'erano le prostitute passavi ed eri tranquilla perché uno scippo non poteva avvenire lì perché nessuno voleva che arrivasse la polizia.<sup>42</sup>

Some among the participants and tutors enjoyed a sense of challenge and freedom, allowing themselves to break a wall of silence and ignorance. Livia Botta (2009), for instance, recalls clearly the sense of freedom:

[D]i poter parlare di tutto ... ricordo proprio piacere, proprio il senso anche di sfida quando io andavo a fare le richieste all'università, o le richieste per il cineforum o al sindacato per il programma, no? cioè proprio il piacere di dire: «Quest'anno è sulla prostituzione»!<sup>43</sup>

Class and education could create zones of silence and resistance, as Gabriella Banti recalls (2009): 'questa verità, nell'ambiente delle persone per bene, non si discuteva, era

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<sup>41</sup> The Genoese singer/songwriter Fabrizio De André (1940-1999) gained lasting popularity for his political engagement and his lyrics dedicated to prostitutes, such as *La città vecchia* (1966); *Bocca di Rosa* (1967); *Via del Campo* (1967); *A Dumenega* (1984).

<sup>42</sup> Tuccio, M.T., 2009. Interviewed by Michela Turno. Genoa, piazza Alimonda (Carlo Giuliani), 18 March. The physicist Maria Teresa Tuccio was 35 years old at the time of the course and was working at the Department of Physics of the University of Genoa. She participated in the 1968 student movement. Between the 1970s and the 1980s, she was member of women's groups, such as Coordinamento donne FLM, Gruppo Comunicazione Visiva, Gruppo Donne e Ricerca Storica and Donne Lavoro Cultura. Since her retirement she has been working as a volunteer for Italian ONLUS (Non Lucrative Organization of Social Utility).

<sup>43</sup> Botta, L., 2009. *Group Interview*. Conducted by Michela Turno. Genoa, Livia Botta's residence, 18 March. In her early thirties at the time of the course, Livia Botta was working as a teacher of literature. She is now a psychotherapist.

una cosa che si lasciava come nel silenzio'.<sup>44</sup> Her Catholic education and bourgeois milieu had limited and shaped her personal experiences:

[I]o l'ho vissuto proprio come [...] un senso di libertà mia, perché la mia educazione [...] ha segnato dei limiti terribili nell'esperienza mia della vita. Quindi quando io sono riuscita a parlare da donna con altre donne di tutto quello che riguardava le donne, che non erano più altro da me ma che erano donne come me e che facevano le loro scelte [...] è stato proprio per me una grande apertura verso la libertà mia.

It was also the opportunity to avoid the obstacles posed by the established male channels of knowledge, as Gloria Viarengo, a researcher at the University, recalls:

[È] stata un'esperienza molto, molto forte per me [...] perché qua ovviamente c'era una scienza più neutra, no? [...] nella facoltà di giurisprudenza, [...] una facoltà molto maschile [...] temi riguardanti il diritto romano e le donne [...] erano visti come un pugno in un occhio [...]. E quindi per me là era una boccata di ossigeno perché si potevano invece [...] analizzare delle cose che avevano più a che fare con l'essere donna, senza [...] questa dicotomia spaventosa fra l'essere donna e l'oggetto che studi poi, no?<sup>45</sup>

The courses worked on multiple levels, in which subjectivity and personal experiences were the leading forces simultaneously to be explored. Considerations about the importance of female appearance and (sexual) behaviour for women's social and male esteem were raised and discussed: 'la nostra generazione veniva dalla dicotomia

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<sup>44</sup> Banti, G., 2009. *Group Interview*. Born in 1936, Gabriella Banti has been employed in the personnel department of the Italsider, a steel-producing group based in Genoa. In 1981 she was appointed union representative. She is now retired but she is still working for the Yacht Club in Genoa.

<sup>45</sup> Viarengo, G., 2009. Interviewed by Michela Turno. Law Department, University, Genoa, 19 March. Gloria Viarengo and Maria Teresa Tuccio were members of 'Donne e Ricerca Storica', a group created in 1975 by women working at the University. Viarengo recalls: 'abbiamo per caso cominciato a incontrarci sul tema «che cosa fanno le donne all'università e come se la cavano» [...] Era venuto fuori un lavoro un po' di racconto del disagio di essere donna nell'ambito delle strutture universitarie. Allora [...] la percezione interna di ognuna di noi era [...] di fare molta fatica a fare carriera, di far molta fatica ad autorizzarsi a fare carriera, di essere donne in un mondo di uomini'.

madonna e puttana [...] [Era] la generazione tailleurino e la borsa uguale alle scarpe [...] queste cose ... ti definiscono, no?’ (Tuccio, 2009). Wearing a miniskirt or trousers was perceived as a transgression or a ‘battaglia persa in partenza’ because of the resistance encountered within the family. Working in a factory had its negative side: ‘lavorare all’Ansaldo sarebbe – per le donne – sarebbe stato come essere prostitute. Per quello voleva mio padre che facessi ragioneria, per andare a fare l’impiegata’ (Debandi, 2009).

On the other hand, the image of the prostitute was revised and historically reframed:

[L]’itinerario complessivo è stato proprio [...] il passaggio dalla semplicità alla complessità, reso particolarmente faticoso dal fatto che, come il gruppetto organizzatore si era espresso fin dall’inizio, *non abbiamo una tranquillizzante utopia sul superamento della prostituzione* [emphasis added]<sup>46</sup>

This statement seems to convey not only a sceptical distance from the saving grace of Marxism, but also their uneasy ambiguity towards prostitution. The seminars followed the shifts in feelings and responses evoked by what was a revealing process: from pity to anger and refusal,<sup>47</sup> from estrangement to envy. While it was easy to empathize with the victims and the forced inhabitants of the *case chiuse*, the idea of a responsible choice induced discomfort, anxiety and doubts. The prostitutes, taking responsibility for themselves and acting as equals among equals, subverted crystallized stereotypes.

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<sup>46</sup> Clss, *Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 ore delle donne*, c. 16, b. 20, Prostituzione, *Considerazioni*.

<sup>47</sup> Luciana Brunod (2009. *Group Interview*) adumbrates that ‘il tema toccava una sofferenza e alcune con rabbia [...] toccava probabilmente esperienze personali di relazione con il partner’. Luciana Brunod was born in 1949. At the time of the course, she was employed at the Ansaldo. Since her retirement, she has been working as a physiotherapist.

Referring to the foundation of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute, Paola Pierantoni (2009) explains: ‘non è che non si simpatizzasse’, but ‘il comitato poneva [le prostitute] in una posizione di gestione, [...] di presa in mano della situazione, di identità e anche di un ruolo politico [...] che [...] era una grossa contraddizione rispetto alla immagine della prostituta’.<sup>48</sup>

The initial estrangement gradually decreased, disclosing ‘*coinvolgimenti reali o fantastici rispetto ad un’immagine che inizialmente tendevamo a distinguere senza equivoci*’ [emphasis added].<sup>49</sup> The image of a prostitute disintegrates, each reflecting or conveying different aspects and meanings of what used to be a monolithic truth. It is almost possible to perceive both a sense of relief and astonishment facing such a drastic change and the fear of ‘contamination’. For Gloria Viarengo (2009), for instance, this ‘contamination’ culminates in her dream of herself as a prostitute, leading her to interrogate her own world:

[M]i ero resa conto che in qualche modo potevo essere anch’io una prostituta, cioè nei mille modi in cui tu puoi rappresentare la prostituzione c’è anche quello interno, no? nel senso che uno può anche comportarsi come una prostituta rispetto al lavoro o rispetto al suo uomo.

The speakers felt compelled to call into question their own relationship with sexuality, men, money, and power and the concepts and values they had constructed upon them. All barriers between prostitutes and other women seemed to be removed or, at least,

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<sup>48</sup> Paola Pierantoni was 35 years old at the time of the course. After graduating in Physics and working as an analyst programmer at the Elsag – Elettronica San Giorgio in Genoa, she worked as a trade unionist until her retirement in 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Clss, *Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 ore delle donne*, c. 16, b. 20, Prostituzione, *Considerazioni*.

myths, mystifications, and fractures appear to be exposed, as is (even) clearer from the final considerations:

Il secondo punto lo definirei la *s drammatizzazione* del problema; *ci siamo accorte con stupore che*, ipotizzando una situazione banale, come un uomo che ci scambia per una prostituta o che dice: ‘in fondo è un mestiere come un altro’, mentre solo un anno fa avremmo reagito violentemente, almeno a livello emotivo, ora *ci prende una specie di serenità che non sappiamo descrivere bene e che non consideriamo del tutto positiva*, ma ... è così [emphasis added].<sup>50</sup>

Restoring humanity and a historical identity to women working as prostitutes revealed the deceptive connotation of the ‘separateness’ built between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women. Discussions and readings opened the eyes of the participants to some of the vicious mechanisms that entrapped (and still entrap) women into gender roles and forced choices.

The ambiguities and difficulties emerging during the courses were replicated in the debates that accompanied the screening of the films. From March to May 1983, the Cinema Diana hosted the retrospective ‘Cinema e Prostituzione’, seven auteur films, from USA, Japan, Italy, France and Germany. As Livia Botta writes, their intent was to deal with the images and:

[L]asciare che le immagini esterne a noi (quelle dei film in questo caso) sintonizzino o si scontrino con le immagini della prostituta che abbiamo dentro di noi, e poi provare a capire queste convergenze/differenze, provare a lavorarci sopra [underlining in the original].<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Clss, *Archivio del Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 Ore delle donne*, c. 18, b. 22, Materiale 150 ore, Fondo Livia Botta, *Qualche riflessione sulla storia della rassegna e un paio di riflessioni nel gruppo del martedì*, typewritten, (1983), p. 1.



Presenting seven films with seven different images and different conditions of prostitutes was intended to recall the paradox on which the two-year course was based: ‘quante situazioni diverse stanno dietro ad una etichetta, quella della prostituta, che pure è rigidissima (nel senso che non si hanno dubbi quando di una donna si pensa, o si dice, «è una puttana»)’ [underlining in the original].<sup>52</sup> However, what could not have been expected was a lack of critical reflection. ‘Abbiamo avuto un atteggiamento più passivo’, she observes, ‘raramente abbiamo percepito i film nel loro aspetto di «saggio», più spesso li abbiamo usati come se fossero «storie vere» [underlining in the original].<sup>53</sup>

Despite these difficulties, Botta calls attention to both their fascination with the dimension of autonomy and the irritation caused by so-called ‘rapporti leganti’ (confining relationships). ‘Forse perché ci tocca confrontarli con i nostri?’ she wonders, suggesting then an explanation:

[F]orse per questo ci è piaciuta di più la squillo di ‘Klute’, ci è sembrata un’immagine *più convincente*. Mentre la prostituta della ‘Dérobade’ ci ha infastidite, ci è sembrata a tratti una figura meno vera, comunque *troppo dipendente* perché la sua storia potesse avere molta credibilità [emphasis added].

While they were destroying the representations of prostitutes imposed by society, they were building their own image - a positive heroine - through which to address their desires for change.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> The popularity of Jane Fonda (Bree Daniel in *Klute*) certainly has something to do with what is a process of identification. For an interesting discussion on Pakula’s film, see Gledhill, C., 1978. *Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Film Criticism*, and *Klute 2: Feminism and Klute*. In E.A. Kaplan, ed. *Women in Film Noir*. London: BFI, pp. 20-34; 99-114.

### 3.3.2. *Looking back*

Almost thirty years later, an element previously overlooked before by the participants emerges retrospectively from the interviews conducted in 2009. The two-year course failed to illuminate the other actor of the sex trade: the client. As was admitted by one of the interviewees, ‘in realtà ... abbiamo messo l’uomo in quella posizione lì, e lì ... lo abbiamo lasciato dal primo momento all’ultimo [...] cioè non abbiamo proprio toccato quell’aspetto’ (Botta, 2009). The assumption that the person who pays a prostitute is a man and thus the real enemy was beyond discussion. Anna Cassol (2009) fervently states: ‘l’uomo che va a prostitute per me è [...], lo dico al presente, per me è una cosa che non accetto e che allora non accettavo ancor più’.<sup>55</sup> The strong, judgmental perspective, somehow comparable with the execration of prostitutes, flattens, simplifies and successfully obscures the figure of the buyer: ‘il maschio e il suo desiderio erano percepiti come sempre uguali a se stessi, e fondamentalmente «semplici», poco influenzati da fattori [...] di classe o di tempo’.<sup>56</sup>

At the core of this amnesia lay the uneasy acknowledgment of the relationship between money and sexuality, and that between the genders, both revolving around the concept of power. Fruitless attempts to explore these issues were occasionally advanced throughout the course, ‘in modo faticoso e disorganico’.<sup>57</sup> Luciana Brunod clearly

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<sup>55</sup> After her graduation, Anna Cassol worked as a system analyst at the Italsider for five years. She then worked in the educational sector of Genoa city council during the 1980s and as an independent consultant for public and private companies in the 1990s.

<sup>56</sup> Clss, *Coordinamento donne FLM, 150 ore delle donne*, c. 16, b. 20, Prostituzione, *Considerazioni*. [Quotation marks in the original]

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

explains (2009) how their own primal, vital imperative forced them to continuously turn the spotlight onto themselves:

[I]l corso delle 150 ore sulla prostituzione per me era un ... bisogno di capire la relazione tra il maschile e il femminile che però [...] invece poi in realtà l'abbiamo lasciato. Un po' perché abbiamo parlato più delle donne [...] *soprattutto era un bisogno di capire*, allora vivevo talmente - ma molte di noi - questa subalternità femminile nel mondo del lavoro, nella politica, nelle relazioni private, nel quartiere dove abitavo [...] per cui, insomma per me, questo tentare di avere delle risposte, delle spiegazioni era necessario [...]. *Poi alcune cose le abbiamo capite, altre son rimaste sospese*. [emphasis added].

Pina Debandi (2009) recognizes, conversely, that they could go no further in speculating and theorizing because the prostitute is 'la rappresentazione del conflitto sul potere tra uomo e donna [...] [È] la non madre, la non moglie. Per cui è lì che si gioca la concezione del potere, [...] è un modo per parlare del conflitto sul potere tra maschile e femminile, e lì siamo anche cadute'.<sup>58</sup> The uncertainty and uneasiness towards paid or even casual sex, especially if the client or performer is a woman, still echo in the comments of the women of the *Coordinamento*. As Botta (2009) notices, there is no established 'contenitore sociale' that allows women *openly* to experiment with different paths, play an active role and destabilize existing views. However, while having sex solely for pleasure might be considered liberating, sex for money immediately enters the minefield of power equally based on the client's money and prostitute's knowledge. The latter is a hidden power built on the knowledge of the client's sexuality and the ability to preserve distance and integrity. The former is exhibited and not infrequently

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<sup>58</sup> Pina Debandi was born in 1936. She had been working as a clerk at the Ansaldo for thirty years. She is now a psychoanalyst.

brandished as a weapon; it might be revoked at a refusal, which is always implied in the negotiation. Only through exercising coercion over the prostitute is it possible for the client to recover the loss of power, which is – for this very reason – a fake, temporary power. For the women of the *Coordinamento donne FLM*, discovering the contiguity, the closeness, the similarity with the prostitute and above all her own definition of power meant ‘il rivedere il rapporto con l’uomo, poi alla fine, e lì poi si entrava in crisi [...] bisognava andare a modificare la relazione con il maschio e su queste cose ci siamo fermate ... E lì ci siamo fermate’ (Brunod, 2009).

## Conclusion

As has been shown, the experience of the Genoese *Coordinamento donne FLM* reflects and summarizes the resistances encountered by the Italian second-wave feminists in dealing with their own ghosts. From oblivion to solidarity, from neglect to delay, feminists demonstrated that their own representation of prostitution was too deeply rooted in the patterns of an endless past. Moreover, their theoretical approach prevented them from exploring more challenging scenarios. Reducing women’s experiences to the fruits of male cultural imposition denied women’s agency, glossing over the plurality of their voices and practices, including prostitution. Thus, rather than seeking a dialogue between equals, feminists tended to act on behalf of the prostitutes, even when the latter begin to introduce themselves as autonomous subjects of rights.<sup>59</sup> The next chapter

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<sup>59</sup> The public protest led by a group of prostitutes in Bolzano in 1975, for instance, had no significant

shows these ghosts, the prostitutes, came onto the stage, shining a light not only on their own ambiguities and contradictions but also onto those of a significant proportion of Italian society.

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echoes either in the media or among feminist groups. *See*: Mognon, E., 1975. Le prostitute di Bolzano hanno scritto al Papa "Non diamo scandalo, vogliamo i diritti di tutti". *La Stampa*, 14 December, p. 12. *See also* Borgese, G., 1978. Le «belle di giorno» vogliono la mutua e l'asilo nido. *Corriere della sera*, 25 luglio, pp. 1-2.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Ghosts on Stage: 1) AAA. *Offresi* – *Véronique* (1981)**

### **2) ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ (1982)**

In retrospect, the 1980s were less turbulent than the previous ten years. Although the terrorist bombing of Bologna station marked the beginning of the new decade, Italy enjoyed a relatively peaceful period. However, little memory remains of two cases involving prostitution that provoked considerable public outcry at that time. The censorship of AAA. *Offresi* (1981), a TV *film vérité* on the clients of a call girl filmed by a collective of six feminist filmmakers, together with the surprising coming out of the Italian prostitutes, are nonetheless a significant part of Italian culture and history. The latter led to the ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ in 1982, which is still active, while the first remains a largely forgotten but dramatic icon of censorship. Both represent the attempt to challenge discourses surrounding the image of the prostitute and to reveal the ambiguities and extraordinary resistances lying beneath the surface of Italian civic and public life.

The decline of social and feminist protests paradoxically allowed Italian prostitutes to claim civil rights and a greater visibility yet, in some ways, left undefended those who tried to go in further depth into the controversial issue of paid sex. This was the case of the *Collettivo di Cinema Femminista*, a group of six filmmakers who gained extensive coverage with *Processo per stupro*, a televised rape trial, broadcast on RAI Channel 2 in April 1979. Their notoriety did not save them from what happened two years later. State television, despite its previous approval and

funding of their second project, *AAA. Offresi*, retreated under political pressure and the film was censored just one hour before being aired.<sup>1</sup> The entire collective, together with the former director of RAI 2, were charged with aiding and abetting prostitution and with violation of privacy. All were acquitted after a long, controversial trial: *AAA. Offresi* has been never broadcast.

It has been suggested (Heffernan, 2001:168) that ‘a mixture of political manipulation and patriarchal neuroses’ was beneath the censorship: ‘it is not unusual for right-wing economic agendas to be hidden electioneering bases on patriarchal crusades such as abortion’. Nevertheless, it neither fully explains the lasting censorship, nor ‘why *AAA. Offresi* and not another programme was chosen to be the sacrificial lamb’ (2001:166).<sup>2</sup>

Only one year elapsed between the television censorship and the coming out of the prostitutes in Pordenone; however, the public and political reactions to each event did not lead to similar consequences. The leaders of what became the ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ organized a press conference to denounce the hypocritical Italian attitude towards prostitution, and to promote their battle for rights and visibility. Rather than remain unknown, their identity and profession were disclosed to a larger

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<sup>1</sup> Heffernan, C., 2001. *Un processo per stupro and AAA. Offresi: A Multi-layered Analysis of Two Italian Feminist Documentaries*. Master. University of Auckland. I would like to thank Chloë Heffernan and her supervisor Bernadette Luciano, without whose generosity this section would never have been written. Chloë allowed me to read her rich and rigorous thesis. Her work explores many aspects related to the documentary film genre, the ethical problem raised, and the censorship and the attitude shown by press, politicians and feminists. It also carefully analysed meanings and issues brought to light by the feminist approach of the six filmmakers.

<sup>2</sup> Chloë Heffernan (2001:20) refers to how ‘some painted the “scandal” as a Machiavellian political conspiracy with little to do with the feminist nature of the documentary. Others saw it as mass Freudian-style repression of an uncomfortable reality by a patriarchal society’. For a full account of the different hypotheses made at the time, see Heffernan, pp. 163-169.

audience in order for the prostitutes to present themselves as a credible political subject and as pioneers of civil rights. They did not intend to discuss male sexual behaviour; rather, they wished to reduce the impact of unequal laws on their lives and work. The foundation of the Comitato has to be understood within this limited frame, clearly less disruptive than a prime-time TV show.

The film-that-cannot-be-shown and the coming out of the Committee's leaders might be considered the turning point in the uneasy, controversial process that is still ongoing. Destabilizing accepted 'knowledge' on prostitution, nurtured by pseudo-scientific discourses, and disempowering the fantasies that arts, literature and cinema have passionately cultivated, implies a revolutionary shift. The deregulated era of commercial television, followed by mass immigration, the emergence and emergency of the AIDS epidemic, the Internet and sophisticated technologies have successively complicated the general panorama.<sup>3</sup> These two events of the early 1980s might thus appear remote and, maybe, naïve. Even so, together with the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s, they should not be underestimated. Without doubt, some 'intruders', such as the American or French prostitutes' movements, had already begun to interfere with the consumption of filmic icons: from De Filippo's *Filumena* (1951) to Buñuel's *Severine* (1967), from Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962) to Pakula's *Bree* (1971), from Wilder's *Irma* (1963) to Malle's *Violet* (1978). Nevertheless, AAA. *Offresi* and the

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<sup>3</sup> See Bernstein, E., 2007. *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, authenticity, and the commerce of sex*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.



Comitato exposed the gap between these representations and the prostitutes' own truth, knowledge and bodies.

The first part of this chapter is devoted to the case of the 'ghost-film', or the film that-cannot-be-shown. It has remained excluded from view for the last thirty years; given the difficulties in tracing the original document,<sup>4</sup> *AAA. Offresi* has only occasionally been cited by scholars. The present chapter undertakes an analysis of a selection of articles and an interview with one of the filmmakers,<sup>5</sup> together with *AAA. Offresi* and its *paper* trace, *Véronique*.<sup>6</sup> It explores how sexuality and violence are articulated (and avoided) in and by the language and body language of both clients and prostitutes as recorded in *AAA. Offresi*. It argues that, despite or precisely because of the technical limitations and the editing of the filming process, *AAA. Offresi* reveals a further element that seemed to pass unnoticed at the time or was simply ignored. The documentary not only dismantles the myth of active, powerful male sexuality; it also undermines both the romantic tale of normal female sexuality and its *opposite*, the deviant sexuality of female prostitutes. Véronique, the French woman who agreed to 'perform' her working role before a hidden camera, seems indeed to reject any assumptions about women or female prostitutes. The last part of this section will thus explore and discuss what remains of the representation of the prostitute in *AAA. Offresi*.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Heffernan, *AAA. Offresi* was later sequestered by the court. In spite of several attempts, RAI, the actual owner of the film, has always failed to provide satisfactory information about this documentary. An inexplicable 'omertà' seems to surround the story of this ephemeral work.

<sup>5</sup> Rotondo, L., 2009. Interviewed by Michela Turno. [MP3] Rome, Rotondo's residence, 18 March.

<sup>6</sup> Belmonti, M.G. *et al.*, 1981. *Véronique: la vera storia di AAA. Offresi scritta dalle protagoniste ovvero come nasce uno scandalo nazionale*. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer.

#### 4.1. AAA. *Offresi* (1981): The-film-that-does-not-exist

Non si può dire che il film abbia concluso il suo *iter*. Perché si compia deve giungere al pubblico. Senza di esso, infatti, è come se non esistesse (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:70).

When Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Rony Daopoulo, Paola De Martiis, Annabella Miscuglio and Loredana Rotondo submitted their project to State television, they could not have predicted the consequences of such an act. *Véronique*, the book they wrote and published three months after the censorship of the film, describes in detail the frantic days of the planned broadcast and censorship of AAA. *Offresi*. The film stems from an idea: ‘nata dalle budella di Rony, dalla testa di Annabella e a cui ciascuna di noi andava aggiungendo adesioni e partecipazione’ (55). Rony Daopoulo and Annabella Miscuglio were two film directors and feminists who combined their skills and passion in the first *Collettivo Femminista di Cinema*, founded in Rome in 1971 (Bruno and Nadotti, 1988).<sup>7</sup> They aimed to use ‘il cinema come mezzo di lotta e di sensibilizzazione dell’opinione pubblica’.<sup>8</sup> Soon after, they directed what is considered the first Italian feminist documentary film, *L’aggettivo donna*. The introduction of videotape had enabled ‘low-cost production and more freedom in approach to the

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief overview on Italian women’s cinema: Maule, R., 2008. *Beyond auteurism: new directions in authorial film practices in France, Italy and Spain since the 1980s*. Bristol: Intellect Books, pp. 189-272. See also Ellis, C. J. and McLane, A.B., 2005. *A New History of documentary film*. New York – London: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

<sup>8</sup> Miscuglio, A., 1981. Vogliamo che ‘AAA Offresi’ sia visto da tutti. *Effe*, April, p. 11.

themes relevant to women' (Ferrero Regis, 2009:189), thus escaping the limits imposed by budget and labour organization:

L'avvento del videotape ci aveva detto che ... potevamo stare di più in un luogo, cercare di capire, cercare di creare una relazione, di non sostituire col nostro racconto [...] quello che invece ci poteva venire detto se avessimo avuto il tempo dell'ascolto. Questo ci ha ... dato una maniera proprio diversa di stare nella realtà ... nel cercare di 'farla parlare'. Si sa bene che la realtà non parla da sola, sei tu che la interroghi, che la tagli, la inquadri e quindi la profili e la fai a tua immagine. Però ... quando lo sguardo si applica a qualcosa che ha il tempo di manifestarsi, con i suoi tempi e con la sua realtà, allora è una interazione molto diversa. È da quello che nasce poi alla fine quello che si deposita sull'immagine (Rotondo, 2009).<sup>9</sup>

Together with the four other filmmakers, Daopulo and Miscuglio in 1978 joined the cooperative *Maestranze e Tecnici Cinema*, gaining great publicity in 1979 with *Un processo per stupro* broadcast on RAI 2. The film documentary, awarded the *Prix Italia*, a televised rape trial showing the transformation of victim into offender, provoked an outburst of national indignation, along with broader debates about rape and its criminal prosecution. According to Loredana Rotondo (2009):

in quel momento ... c'era una sperimentazione in corso con la rete due che si era costituita anche sul piano produttivo ... RAI 2 è partita forte, facevamo sperimentazione, innovazione di prodotto, cosa che la RAI non fa più da anni e anni ... Noi rappresentavamo un modo di pensare diverso che stava emergendo ... e devo dire che in quel momento la RAI ... fino ad un certo punto ce l'ha lasciato fare.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On the question of truth and reality raised by the documentary genre *see*, for instance: Chapman, J., 2009. *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*. Cambridge: Polity Press, in particular pp. 48-71.

<sup>10</sup> Massimo Fichera was appointed director of RAI-2 in 1975 and concluded his mandate in 1980. Under his direction, characterized by novelty and innovation, Dario Fo and Franca Rame returned to television after 15 years, while Roberto Benigni gained his first televised popularity.

This extraordinary moment, however, did not last long. The general political atmosphere was changing, although terrorism was still a threat, reaching the dramatic apex of events in August 1980 when a bomb exploded in the railway station in Bologna, killing 85 people and injuring 200. The date of the abortion referendum held in May 1981 was coming closer, provoking the resistance of the Christian Democratic Party and supported by the forceful intervention of the Pope. Moreover, as Rotondo tellingly recalls, ‘in quei giorni ... stava venendo fuori la questione della P2, quindi era più facile sbattere la prostituta in prima pagina che non ...’ (Rotondo, 2009).<sup>11</sup> Even so, she makes no effort to hide her surprise at the reactions of some journalists and politicians, most of whom had not seen *AAA. Offresi* and indeed never saw it: ‘non mi aspettavo che potesse venire una reazione così pesante, starei per dire isterica da parte dell’uomo’ (Rotondo, 2009).

It might seem difficult, thirty years later, to pinpoint the reasons behind such a furious response to the film. For the protagonists themselves it was difficult fully to grasp the causes and the meanings of the controversy in which they found themselves involved. Detractors dismissed the documentary film as obscene, while feminist supporters saw it as the ultimate demonstration of male power over women. Fewer than two days were needed to build the case of *Véronique*, raise the concerns of Christian Democratic parliamentarians and censor the film (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:89-142; Heffernan, 2001:37-43; 155-162). The Christian Democratic parliamentarians listed the

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<sup>11</sup> The scandal of the Masonic lodge P2 (Propaganda 2), a deviant lodge constituted of prominent politicians, military officers and businessmen, came to light in March 1981.

most incriminating points: *AAA. Offresi* 'è condannabile sia per il suo intrinseco squallore morale, sia per il metodo con il quale è stato attuato: cineprese nascoste...; sia per l'abiezione e la volgarità del suo contenuto: trattative, amplessi, deviazioni sessuali' (cited in Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:102).

*AAA. Offresi* was made, in fact, with the precise intent of illuminating the contract, the exchange of money, 'la domanda, il bisogno di prostituzione', choosing to film the prostitute's clients, unknown to them, with a hidden camera. The combination of the perspective, the media and the techniques chosen in the film-making played a considerable role in the sudden stopping of the final production. Six women had decided actively to observe, watch, listen, videotape, record and then expose the brief, intimate encounters of several male costumers. A drastic subversion of roles and gazes had taken place. Men (clients) were not expected to be the centre of such a (voyeurist) observation, as women have always been a 'privileged' object. Not fictional but real parts and aspects of male lives were going to be shown and watched through the powerful medium of television.

In other words, the 'obscenity' of *AAA. Offresi* lies in its success in dismembering the myths surrounding prostitution and male and female sexualities, and exposing a different perspective to the public view. It is no wonder that one of the main objections focused on the negotiation, the shameful exchange of money, which so clearly implicated the other actor of the 'game', the client. The passing of money from hand to hand highlights irrevocably the roles played by (at least) two parties and the unmistakable nature of their relation. A trade, a customer, a sales person and a product

on sale which was (is), according to different views, a body (Pateman, 1988) or a vagina (Rosta, cited in Pheterson, 1989:146), a paid sexual service or a paid sexual/psychological therapy (Richards, 1986), the prostitute's time (St. James, cited in *Effe*, 1978:3-6), '*l'idea di scopare con una battona*' (Anon., 1979), or the right to abuse (MacKinnon, 1983; Jeffreys, 1997). The prostitute loses her (his) centrality, while the client suddenly acquires a tangible humanity. By lifting the veil and dramatically exposing the presence of the client as customer/consumer, AAA. *Offresi*'s authors re-framed the issue of prostitution, providing a different interpretative scheme alongside pre-existing codes.

The debate moved quickly, however, into the defence of privacy and the use of media, shifting from the embarrassing image of suppliant men in underpants to graver issues. Five days later, 17 March 1981, the authors and some RAI executives received a '*comunicazione giudiziaria*', alleging violation of privacy, and aiding and abetting prostitution. Although all protagonists in this 'affair' were acquitted in 1985,<sup>12</sup> AAA. *Offresi* never reappeared.

#### 4.1.1. *The film and its protagonists*

The project of AAA. *Offresi* was decided in agreement with RAI; RAI not only financed it but, despite later claims in court, also knew all of the details related to the project

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<sup>12</sup> Massimo Fichera, Leonardo Valente (capo struttura RAI), Giuseppe Scauzzo (president of the cooperative *Maestranze e Tecnici del Cinema* who officially signed the agreement with RAI) had been charged with violation of privacy. The six filmmakers, together with Véronique Lacroix, had also been charged with aiding and abetting prostitution.

(Heffernan, 2001:32-34; Rotondo, 2009). Agnès Sauvage, feminist and co-author of a recently published work on prostitution (Blumir and Sauvage, 1980), was asked for her advice and help. According to the filmmakers, no Italian prostitute agreed to participate in the project so Sauvage introduced to them a French one: Véronique (Heffernan, 2001:34).<sup>13</sup> Legal experts were then consulted as concerns about offence to public morality and the protection of the identity of clients were raised by both the filmmakers and RAI executives. A few cuts to some images and soundtrack were made in post-production and the process of solarisation contributed to hiding the features of the men filmed (Heffernan, 2001:35-37). The documentary was set in a well-furnished and comfortable two-roomed flat at the Oppian Hill, a central area of Rome, where behind a one-way mirror were concealed a mixer, cameras and the six filmmakers.

Belmonti and De Martiis worked with the mixer, while Carini, Daopoulo, and Miscuglio used the cameras (videotape recorders). As Heffernan underlines (2001:34):

The filmmaking process was interesting because those who were following the figures with cameras had no sound feedback and those who were doing sound had no images. This division of perception meant there was a special need for inter-reliance on one another.

In addition, a monitor placed in a corner above them allowed the framing of the subject as the cameras had no viewfinder. They were thus obliged to look continuously at the screen in order to film the material, avoiding the faces of the clients or any other detail

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<sup>13</sup> Annabella Miscuglio describes their first encounter with Véronique: 'La incontriamo in una giornata di sole. Un paio di occhiali in verde fluorescente fanno spicco sulla sua pelle dorata. Il suo corpo appare morbido come panna. Che ne è subito affascinata, chi la guarda di tanto in tanto di sottocchi per non offenderla con uno sguardo scrutatore e persistente. È sorridente e spiritosa. Il nostro progetto le piace e la diverte'. In Belmonti *et al.*, 1981, pp. 43-44.

that could lead to the clients' being identified. The narrow space, cluttered with devices, the fear of being discovered, the technical limitations, the ethical issues and their own emotional responses transformed their work into a significant challenge (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:43-62).

The filming process took about three weeks, between 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., as scheduled by Véronique. She arranges her meetings by telephone for every 15-30 minutes; each encounter lasts no more than fifteen minutes. Several days of shooting were edited, and condensed into sixty minutes: eleven sequences, the coming and going of the clients, the transaction, the exchange of money, and the conversation between them and Véronique: 'in fase di ripresa abbiamo colto tutti i passaggi di denaro, l'aspetto da bottega, i codici fissi dello scambio che ritualizzano la fluttuazione del denaro e del sesso' (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:65). However, while Véronique was always framed, no face or part of the clients' bodies were recognizable; the voices were distorted, the consummation of the sexual act avoided by the camera. They filmed only fragmented images, focusing on details that 'riprendessero e riportassero dei comportamenti, attente a non inquadrare le facce o le figure intere ... per noi questi uomini erano già censurati, erano dei fantasmi' (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:60). Sounds and part of the dialogues filled the gaps left by this voluntary self-censorship.

The use of videotape and the directorial choices enhance the credibility of the events filmed, then edited without comments or voice-over (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:33-34). The cameras were positioned in order to cover only selected sections of the flat: the entrance hall, living room and bedroom. Each scene was filmed contemporaneously by



the cameras, which framed the action from different points of view, trying to follow the unpredictable movements of Véronique and her clients. The shot could then change direction abruptly or stop in long ‘piano sequence’, catching or emphasizing, almost incidentally, a specific expression of body language or body details, such as hands or torso. The editing rhythm generally reflects the real time of most of the meetings. In other sequences, in contrast, only two or three scenes encapsulate the encounters: ‘pagamento, consumazione, commiato’ (66). The simplicity of the shooting, the sequence of black and white – often blurred – frames, as well as the unclear quality of sounds and conversations, all recorded under difficult conditions, enhance rather than reduce the ‘authenticity’ of the scenes showed. The final result is a product that conveys no judgment: ‘the text manages to be political without becoming propaganda and manages to be both critical and at the same time not vilify those it criticises’ (Heffernan, 2001:66).

The meaning of this film cannot, however, be fully realised without taking into account the views of the authors themselves. Behind the mirror, on the other side of the camera, the six filmmakers found themselves facing the overturning of their expectations. They felt ‘la voglia di vedere per poter dire, per poter denunciare ... E dalla denuncia siamo passate in qualche modo alla ... presa d’atto di una cosa che ci riguardava, che ci attraversava’ (Rotondo, 2009). Loredana Rotondo describes her feelings at what she was witnessing:

Mi è sembrata una cosa molto ... banale ... Semplice ... Neanche squallida ... bussavano alla porta ... tre minuti ... na catena di montaggio, senza grandi variazioni ... persino un po' noiosa questa cosa, sì, con una uniformità, con dentro questi spunti, questi tentativi in certi momenti di allacciare una qualche forma di conversazione, di comunicazione che però venivano scoraggiati perché la prostituta doveva andare avanti ... una cosa un po' inutile, come una frittella che non cresce mai! Un po' insensata, ma teneramente insensata ... Mi è caduta proprio l'aggressività e l'aspettativa di queste immagini appunto felliniane, un po' mostruose, un po' gonfiate.

She echoes Annabella Miscuglio, who recalled how, 'in quei pochi giorni andavano cadendo, una per una tutte le mitologie che cinema e letteratura avevano edificato sul bordello' (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:47). Maria Grazia Belmonti confessed her 'sentimento di tenerezza ... per quegli uomini, per quella donna' and how she stopped fantasizing about prostitution (57).<sup>14</sup> It is Paola De Martiis, however, who seems to recognize a crucial point, pinpointing the similarity of the relationship between prostitute and client with that between man and woman:

È tutto racchiuso lì, in quei brevi incontri senza tempo né storia, è uno scambio, una compra-vendita, una Porta Portese del sesso. Mentre certi rapporti, cosiddetti normali, possono esserlo ugualmente, ma in forma diversa, non così netta e scoperta, ma più sottile, ambigua, legalizzata dalle istituzioni perciò alla luce del sole...' (58-59).

The subversion in the revelation of what they were witnessing found them totally unprepared. The following rapid development of events, from censorship to the trial, diverted their and the public's attention towards other issues. In other words, the radical analysis, barely begun, was brought to a swift and dramatic close.

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<sup>14</sup> On this point, *see* Chapter Three.

4.1.2. *Dismembering a myth/Revealing another truth*

Tu sei molto bella, vali molto di più ... siccome io non sapevo di trovare una così bella ragazza ... Ancora non ho preso lo stipendio [...] e tutti questi soldi non li ho.<sup>15</sup>

Là, dietro lo specchio, tuttavia... qualcosa mi ha sconcertata: i gesti e i modi della pratica sessuale non sono differenti dai gesti dell'amore (Belmonti *et al.*, 47)

AAA. *Offresi* plays simultaneously on multiple stories, those of Véronique and her clients, roughly drafted in only a handful of minutes or even seconds, enough to perceive the complexity of the whole 'game'. The opening episode immediately frames the context, leaving no space for fantasies: the first client engages in an exasperating negotiation about the price that takes more than ten minutes. Véronique gently but firmly refuses all proposals offered, specifying, as we later apprehend, the tariff for each service: 15,000 Lire *pour voir*, 20,000 Lire for a short session, 30,000 Lire for the standard length. She is obviously wasting her time – which is the actual point for her: time is money, and her time is a commodity. However, this first scene calls into question not only the commercial side of prostitution, but also male and female sexuality and the whole discursive apparatus that surrounds and nurtures our image of sex.

Sixty minutes are enough to throw light on this taboo side of male sexual desire. With her detached and even maternal presence, Véronique unmask their unimaginative

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<sup>15</sup> AAA. *Offresi*, 1981. [Documentary] Directed by. Belmonti *et al.* Italy, RAI.

and ordinary fantasies: ‘sembra demistificare tutto, con prudenza, con tatto’, as one commentator wrote.<sup>16</sup> Their pettiness and banality clash dramatically with the gentle attitude of Véronique, who never loses her control, recalling a nurse in charge of special care unit. Her physical and emotional participation has a ‘minimalist’ quality: she neither simulates desire or satisfaction, nor shows impatience or a lack of interest. Being asked by a client if she likes to make love in that way (whipping him), Véronique replies that she does it only because *he* likes it (‘mah...Se ti piace a te allora...’). She avoids a direct response, but her view is clear.

No judgment, no critique, no answers interrupt the flow of clients, who seem to epitomize the average man to emerge from some accounts by prostitutes. Many clients are married, it is learned, as the cameras frame male hands wearing wedding rings or showing pictures of children and wives to Véronique. None can be classified as ‘deviant’ (Heffernan, 2001:69). We see a man who likes to negotiate maybe, he guesses, because of his profession as a dealer in tractors. There is another who, irritated by conjugal routine, refers to his wife as a pair of ‘scarpe vecchie’ (old shoes), but feels the need to justify his disappointing sexual performance with the novelty of the situation. With ‘un’altra donna, un’altra persona’ - he explains – ‘è talmente l’emozione che ... è come se fosse la prima volta ... stare con una ragazza’. The Latin lover painfully melts like ice, allowing us not only to perceive his human fragility but also to glimpse what is behind the concept of male virility.

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<sup>16</sup> (Anon.), 1981. Specchio, specchio delle mie brame... *Stampasera*, 12 March, p. 25.

A third client refuses to pay before sex; he feels offended. Consequently, he is 'buono neanche a far l'amore'. Being 'cheated' by clients is not an unlikely event in prostitutes' working lives, thus Véronique prefers to be paid in advance as she 'non ne vuole parlare più dopo l'amore'. Money makes the difference as it asserts and maintains the equal position between the 'contracting parties'. Her firm refusal seems to catch him off guard and he apparently misinterprets her words: 'come non parliamo più? Ma dobbiamo parlare! Fare l'amore è parlare, no? Che, facciamo l'amore senza parlare!'. During the seven minutes of their verbal arm-wrestling he repeatedly tries to grab her, but she gently brushes him off. Taller and bigger than she is, he can easily take advantage, as the shot seems to suggest, framing his large torso, his short thick hands, his impatient gestures. He literally crams into the space, which therefore appears smaller. The confrontation ends in his disappointed retreat from the battlefield: after work, he declares, he will find another woman.

A fourth reveals his special tastes, wanting Véronique to whip him, making him moan 'sono il tuo schiavo!'. She is naked, partially backlit, her moving silhouette against the light from a window. A medium-close up shows her motionless expression, maybe slightly bored. Being asked afterwards the reason for his request, the client just replies: '*pour changer* [...] altrimenti è sempre uguale, no?'. This last frame is particularly interesting as it shows the man, who dresses facing the window, his back to Véronique and the hidden viewers. Despite his nonchalant explanation, his position seems to suggest a degree of unease in talking about his tastes.

The following client, on the other hand, asks Véronique to teach him the French art of sex, assuming it to be more sophisticated. He obviously cultivates a mythical idea of French superiority, which she immediately moves to dispel. The banality of the chat clashes curiously with the scene, which shows a hand lightly caressing Véronique's back. It is a surprisingly incongruous sequence of tenderness, a visual and emotional pause among perfunctory encounters, for a brief moment more like lovers than strangers. As will be seen (below), the list of clients includes a penniless student and a policeman who both try, with different results, to gain a free or cheaper 'service'. Given the nature of the documentary, the viewer merely observes what has been disclosed, but male demand for paid sex remains an unexplained terrain. Had the film not been censored, *AAA. Offresi* might indeed have perhaps opened the way for a wider debate on male sexuality and gender relationships (Heffernan, 2001:168).

Furthermore, Véronique's full control over her sexuality demystifies not only the romantic notion of female sexuality, but also the 'scientific' assumption about the deviant sexuality of prostitutes. The core of her sexuality, of women's sexuality, lies somewhere else and cannot be reduced to or by mere discourse. Her message goes well beyond her role of prostitute. Nevertheless, Letizia Paolozzi, like other commentators, failed to grasp the patent evidence left by Véronique, insisting rather on the postulation of women's and men's specificity: 'se fosse una donna a pagare per un uomo' - she writes in *l'Unità* - non lo farebbe per piacere fisico, ma perché alla ricerca di qualcuno da amare'. Paolozzi continues: 'la sua non sarebbe l'espressione di una superiorità

economica ma una domanda affettiva. Cosa che non si verifica quando un cliente va in cerca della sua Véronique'.<sup>17</sup>

Paolozzi rejects the idea of a female desire disenfranchised from emotions; she confines, on the other hand, male sexuality in a stereotyped realm. She refuses to recognize complexity and the role played by social and cultural structures. The truth revealed by Véronique passes unnoticed as both focus and perception were confined to and altered by the performances of the male protagonists. The filmmakers themselves were not fully aware of the complexity of what they were witnessing, including the nature and degree of the violence to which Véronique was exposed.

#### 4.1.3. *The banality of violence*

In the reports written by the restricted audience admitted to the press preview of *AAA. Offresi*, there is no mention of violence *per se*. No one seems to perceive it and the episode of the policeman does not raise particular concern.<sup>18</sup> There was neither time nor space nor resources: in only two days, attention was rapidly diverted from the surprising revelation of male intimacy to the issue of clients' privacy and the final censorship. Nevertheless, as the battle for the rape law was demonstrating, the perception and concept of violence itself was subject to cultural and individual influences. On this point, Letizia Paolozzi's article is revealing. She considers *AAA. Offresi* 'non tanto un

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<sup>17</sup> Paolozzi, L., 1981. Donna-merce e uomini acquirenti. *L'Unità*, 12 March, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The question was nonetheless raised in Parliament because of the nature of that client, apparently a member of the police force. Heffernan (2001:175) states that 'the violence of *Un processo per stupro* [the previous documentary made by the collective] remains in the realm of language, in *AAA. Offresi* we see it in the flesh'.

programma sul «difficile tema della sessualità», ma, come *Processo per stupro*, un programma sulla violenza quale trama dei rapporti umani'. Then she explains:

[L]a violenza vive nella monotonia dei gesti: rispondere al telefono; prendere appuntamento; aprire la porta; chiedere le trentamila anticipate; svestirsi, lavarsi, rivestirsi. Se ne sta, questa violenza, tutta arrotolata e nascosta: uno/una non si rende più conto che una parte di sé sfrutta l'altra parte. E la violenza è la guida alla degradazione. Guardate il ritmo oculato, saggio, domestico di Véronique, che perde la dignità a contrattare ma la riacquista quando usa il corpo nello scambio. Ma stiamo attenti: la degradazione si legge anche (soprattutto?) nei comportamenti maschili. «Ti prego, fammi contento ... almeno vedere ... sei cattiva...» [...]. (Paolozzi, 1981)

For Paolozzi, violence is the exploitation to which Véronique exposes herself and of which she is no longer aware. Moreover, in Paolozzi's words, the transition from violence to degradation, a logical consequence for both men and women, acquires a moralizing content, as the term 'degradation' implies, thus allowing violence to go unseen and unchallenged. Otherwise, there are those, like Ugo Buzzolan, who feel disappointed at the lack of violence: 'cortese la prostituta, cortesi i clienti, in *un'atmosfera mai di tensione, semmai [...] di noia terribile e di melanconia*' [emphasis added].<sup>19</sup> Buzzolan, a popular television critic,<sup>20</sup> does not even understand why Véronique bursts into tears. Everybody 'knows' that violence is a significant part of prostitutes' life: Buzzolan was probably waiting for some overt gesture, for an unforgettable *frisson*. Violence is clearly ever-present as a possibility, overlapping the very banality of the sexual transactions.

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<sup>19</sup> Buzzolan, U., 1981. TV-verità, stasera a casa d'una squillo. *La Stampa*, 12 March, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ugo Buzzolan is considered the father of television criticism. Despite his lack of attention during the press preview, he wrote a positive review of *AAA. Offresi* which he considered 'una trasmissione seria'. In Buzzolan, U., 1981. Grigiore non hard core. *La Stampa*, 13 March, p. 19.



Two moments in particular give us a clear hint of the quality of violence that Véronique experiences. The long, exhausting negotiation of the opening scene leaves no doubt. The camera frames the sequence, focusing on her expression and the hands of the client, who remains comfortably seated during the conversation. They are hands quietly resting on his knee, then miming masturbation and sexual acts ('chiavare' or 'scopare'), then begging, then holding a wallet and the money offered, the client repeatedly amending the amount. Never breaking eye contact, Véronique gently rejects his absurd requests yet shows him the door only when she appears confident.

The most disturbing episode, however, is when a policeman enters the scene. He does not wear a uniform although introduces himself as a 'poliziotto', repeating this as the only unequivocal reply to her cautious question about the reason for his being there. She nervously laughs at his final response, 'per fare l'amore', and she wonders what kind of 'present' he thinks to give her. He is very clear: 'di solito quando vado in queste case non pago ... per il fatto della questura io non pago ... perché qui ci vuole il permesso per stare, lo sai?'. At her scepticism he replies by repeating he is a policeman and unzipping his jacket to show something that only Véronique, her back to the camera, can see. We later learn (and see) that he is carrying a gun. Despite such frightening evidence, she tries to avoid, or at least to delay, as far as she is able, the next unavoidable steps. We hear and see her breathing deeply as if gathering her strength and accepting the inevitable. During the first five minutes of this 'negotiation', Véronique remains seated on the chair armrest before the man who stands, smoking, slightly leaning towards her. Both appear almost solidified, waiting for the next word, the next

gesture, until they move to the bedroom. The radio is playing a Mino Reitano love song, *Quelli che si amano*, which clashes ironically with what is about to happen. Afterwards, he puts the gun back in his belt. When the ‘session’ ends and she finally closes the door behind him, we hear Véronique switching off the radio and bursting into tears.

### *Conclusion*

According to Annabella Miscuglio, interviewed by Chloë Heffernan in 2001 (2001:191), the kind of prostitution they were exploring ‘non sembra più attuale’ and, for this reason, the six filmmakers did not ask for the restitution of the original reel. Their project focused, in fact, on the kind of prostitution that ‘«impiega» donne con una vita parallela «normale» [...] che, abbandonando alcune remore morali [...], cominciano ad usare disinvoltamente il loro corpo come capitale’ (Belmonti *et al.*, 1981:9-10). It is a prostitution chosen ‘senza vittimismo e sensi di colpa’, free of the supervision or exploitation of pimps. The phenomenon of trafficking has surely now outclassed, in terms of public and media concerns, any other kind of prostitution. Nevertheless, despite the thirty years since its filming, *AAA. Offresi* remains a unique and disturbing document. Not only did it break the silence surrounding the taboo issue of intimacy and the vaunted sexuality of Italian men: it also exposed what was at the core of relationships between men and women. Moreover, it demonstrated that it was possible and valid to view the whole matter from a more challenging perspective, as the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute did just a year later. The second part of this chapter will explore the very early moments of the Committee, from its first steps in

1982 to the ban on a meeting with high school students imposed in 1984, its impact on public discourse, and the way it had risen from a local protest to a national issue. Through newspapers, magazines, and interviews, the nature of the discourses produced both by ‘external’ observers and by prostitutes themselves will be analyzed. The section refers in particular to the documents collected by the Committee and preserved in its archive, which will constitute the main source of this section.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Beside the administrative documents, the Committee’s archive consists of two sections, the first dated approximately 1982-1990, and the second dating from 1991 to the present. A large number of projects, such as those for AIDS awareness, and campaigns have been launched over twenty-eight years. Moreover, it includes a list of books and video resources owned by the Committee. The most interesting documents are those produced in the earliest period, as specific periodicals, materials published by the Committee, address books, interviews, leaflets, posters, speeches for conferences and international Congresses. It preserves letters from admirers and prominent Italian personalities, as Roberta Tatafiore, Rossana Rossanda, and Paola Tabet, and a collection of newspaper articles. The records provide not only an account of the dominant intellectual and emotional attitude toward prostitution; they also reflect the prostitutes’ attitude towards their own entry into a different public arena.

## 4.2. ‘Non vogliamo la redenzione’: Italian prostitutes speak for themselves

### 4.2.1. *From a local issue to a national opportunity*

One year after the censorship of AAA. *Offresi*, the local and national press started to pay attention to a surprising phenomenon emerging in Pordenone, a small city of northeast Italy. A group of women working as prostitutes had begun to promote a number of initiatives with the clear intent of raising awareness of their specific condition. On 14 October 1982, the daily *Il Gazzettino* headline announced: ‘Documento alla base USAF. *Americani violenti*. Protesta a Pordenone delle «belle di notte»’. This was the official opening of the prostitutes’ campaign. With the support of local councillor Dora Pezzilli, the prostitutes sent a letter of protest to the military and police authorities of the NATO base in Aviano. The base, in existence since the 1950s, had employed thousands of Americans, who lived in apparent harmony with the community over the years. According to the protesters, however, the employees of the base had slipped into the habit of harassing ‘con *arroganza da invasori*’ [emphasis added] local prostitutes who were, after all, Italian citizens.<sup>22</sup> Rather than suffer passively, the women decided to

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<sup>22</sup> On the difficult relationships between local communities and American military forces *see*, for instance, Angst, L.I., 2009. The sacrifice of a school girl. The 1995 Rape Case, Discourses of Power, and Women’s lives in Okinawa. In L.M. Cuklanz, and S. Moorti, eds., 2009. *Local Violence, Global Media: feminist analyses of gendered representations*. New York: Peter Lang publishing. Ch. 7.

protest publicly in order to protect their own safety and the dignity of the American army.<sup>23</sup>

The prostitutes of Pordenone immediately gave a clue to the kind of strategy they intended to employ. By opposing the 'italianità' of the women with the 'foreignness' of the American military, the prostitutes subtly shifted attention from their profession to the behaviour of the American 'invaders'. The coarseness of the USA army was emphasised in order to accentuate the image of the civil tradition of the host country and ally. The national/ist sentiment traditionally directed against prostitutes was here inverted and reversed. Women and country needed to be protected. As Italians and as women, prostitutes were then legitimised openly to resist any offence or attempt to undermine their safety. At the time, this connection played in some way into a more or less open anti-American feeling that swept over the country. According to Geoffrey Pridham, anti-Americanism 'was present in the Communist movement, as an ideological rather than a nationalistic attitude', but had 'begun to appear at the public level in the 1980s' (Pridham, 1995:176; D'Attorre, 1991). The re-armament programme begun during the Carter presidency and dramatically increased under the Reagan administration between 1981 and 1984 played a significant part in the increase in the hostile Italian attitude.

The Americans' behaviour was part of the pretext for beginning the campaign. The key element of this first manoeuvre by the prostitutes lies in their refusal passively

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<sup>23</sup> (Anon.), 1982. Americani violenti. Protesta a Pordenone delle «belle di notte». *Il Gazzettino*, 14 October, np.

to accept any assault on their dignity and self-respect. It was a sort of declaration of war, rather than a simple declaration of intent. For the first time the prostitutes had presented themselves as independent political subjects, conducting their requests within a legal and ethical framework. Although it was in any case a serious threat to the prostitutes' safety, the Americans' arrogance was artfully co-opted in order to bypass possible objections and gain swifter public sympathy and media visibility for the prostitutes. The 'ragazzotti ubriachi e violenti', their disregard for prostitutes, had subtly become a metaphor that embodied (and concealed) the reality of social attitudes towards women working in prostitution. The protest moved thus immediately from a local to a national scale.

Four days later, the prostitutes of Pordenone called a press conference with the aim of better illustrating and articulating the reasons for their protest. Generally, though, the journalists were tempted to sensationalize or diminish the event. *La Stampa*, for example, chose a narrative style that attempted to re-balance the import of the headlines: 'La rivolta delle prostitute a Pordenone':

Non è facile essere «*belle di notte*» a Pordenone [...]. Qui, in questo limbo di Friuli che fu investito dal benessere, le prostitute richiamano ancora le immagini del gruppetto attorno al focherello sul limitare della strada, al margine di una campagna sonnolenta. E accade di frequente che siano bersaglio di frasi pesanti, che vengano «*bombardate*» dal disprezzo. Ma adesso si ribellano, conducono una battaglia per uscire da una specie di sacca sociale [emphasis in the original].<sup>24</sup>

The article went on to report, as an example, the defeated attempt made by two prostitutes to open a personal account at a bank, a usual practice of ordinary citizens.

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<sup>24</sup> Marchesini, G., 1982. La rivolta delle prostitute a Pordenone. *La Stampa*, 19 October, p. 9.

Their request was repeatedly rejected by several financial institutions because of the prostitutes' profession: that money, the prostitutes' money, could not be accepted. The journalist failed, however, to give the full story. Carla Corso, one of the prostitutes and later the leader credited with the protest, decided to adopt other tactics. She addressed her request to another bank, which was rumored to be involved in money laundering. There was no reason, it was argued, for the bank to accept money from all and sundry yet not from the prostitutes themselves. Through threatening to create a scandal, she swiftly obtained her own bank account.<sup>25</sup> The prostitutes raised once more an ethical question that implied the displacement and the subversion of the 'immoral' features of their profession.

The newspaper article provided further details about the aims of protesters, who focused on the reform of the Merlin law, the ending of the social ban, and the possibility of paying taxes. Curiously, rather than interview the real protagonists of the campaign, the reporter addressed his questions only to Dora Pezzilli. The local councillor, who was also the representative of the Partito Radicale in Pordenone, had become the prostitutes' spokeswoman, a role she held briefly. Although the journalist never mentioned another name, the presence of the prostitutes does not pass unnoticed – but for different reasons:

[C]hi si aspettava che le promotrici della protesta facessero roteare borsette e masticassero chewing-gum è rimasto stupito: un dibattito senza appariscenze, ma deciso e approfondito.

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<sup>25</sup> Corso, C., 2006. Informal conversation. Pordenone, 9 September.

He referred to them only as ‘belle di notte’, ‘donne’, or more poetically ‘ragazze che offrono compagnia in qualche angolo di Pordenone’. It is possible to perceive a kind of embarrassment: those prostitutes were not unruly characters, but discreet and competent women.

At the end of October, thanks to Pezzilli’s political connections, the prostitutes of Pordenone took the opportunity to gain a different and wider audience during the XXVII Congress of the Partito Radicale convened in Bologna. Although the meeting agenda included no official discussion, the prostitutes were allowed to put up their posters in the Congress hall, and also to explain their campaign in an interview broadcast by Radio Radicale.<sup>26</sup> The small delegation of Pordenone, consisting of Dora Pezzilli and Pia Covre, prostitute and co-founder of the Comitato, together with the journalist Gianluigi Melega, introduce what he considered a new issue for all political parties. The interview represents in itself a remarkable document, as it records both the first steps of a new political subject and how this was initially managed by the Partito Radicale.

Melega and Pezzilli judiciously included the campaign among the battles for freedom and civil rights traditionally led by their party, distancing themselves from any feminist/gender – specific agenda. The emphasis given to the civil rights issue helped to neutralize the tensions evoked by the unexpected initiative, through its advantage of being more readily acceptable to a wider audience. Pia Covre, on the other hand, went

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<sup>26</sup> Radio Radicale, 1982. *Le vicende delle prostitute di Pordenone* (28 October). Available at: <<http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/67332/67402-le-vicende-delle-prostitute-di-pordenone>> [Accessed 10 October 2010]



directly to the heart of her concerns and avoided political speculation. She suggested the reform of Merlin law in order to allow the opening of 'nuove case autogestite o in cooperativa' by illustrating the dangerous conditions in which street prostitution occurs. Her pragmatic view was closer to the trade union programme on safe working conditions, as well as to the problems of an ordinary entrepreneur. She referred to her profession as a 'job' and to her clients as 'consumers of services', re-framing the issue according to a very different view from that prevailing.

#### 4.2.2. *In search of autonomy*

While the first public appearances were organized under the aegis of Dora Pezzilli and with the support of the Radical Party, the subsequent demonstrations were increasingly held by the prostitutes themselves. Despite their political inexperience, the prostitutes of Pordenone realized that they should speak for themselves and take their own public responsibilities. They learned how to gain and maintain their own space, providing a point of reference in cooperating with political organizations.

Nevertheless, the extent of the prostitutes' protest should not be overestimated, nor should the originality, the significance, and the value of their actions be underestimated. The majority of prostitutes of Pordenone preferred to maintain their anonymity and stay in the shadows. Some, however, decided to offer their voices and faces to the protest. Pia Covre then Carla Corso, in particular, began to grant interviews about their private and working lives. For instance, in November 1982 Pia Covre granted interviews to different magazines with national and local circulation. *Il Punto*, a

fortnightly of the Friuli Venezia Giulia, published an interview with Covre under the title: 'Marciapiede selvaggio'.<sup>27</sup> An unequivocal statement by Covre starts the interview:

Mi sono fatta fotografare, ho dichiarato in pubblico che faccio la puttana. Accontentatevi di questo. Se sono uscita allo scoperto è per ragioni politiche, non per soddisfare le curiosità morbose dei lettori con dettagli piccanti sulle voglie del maschio medio!

At that time, it was very unusual for a woman to declare herself a prostitute, strongly affirming her independence of any traditional image of ('good'/'bad') womanhood. Her surname is never mentioned in the text; a photograph shows a smiling middle-class young woman wearing casual clothes, arranging flowers. She inspires feelings of homeliness and radiates a positive, enchanting aura of female serenity. The journalist, however, adds his ambiguous depiction of Pia: 'Zazzera bionda, volto illuminato da due occhi gelidi e decisi' [emphasis added]. He then explains the reasons behind her 'coming out' and warns the reader that she is no 'vampire' thirsty for notoriety and money. Rather, she defends her 'right to normality'.

The journalist himself was probably the most surprised at this unexpected normality, at her keen intelligence and seriousness; no additional comments were made. Certain biographical details of Covre's life appear: born in Milan into a *petit bourgeois* milieu, she is educated by nuns and early on gains her independence by choosing to work as prostitute as a means of escaping 'l'esistenza frustrante della fabbrica o

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<sup>27</sup> Santin, L., 1982. Marciapiede Selvaggio. *Il Punto: quindicinale del Friuli Venezia Giulia*, 15 November, p. 35.

dell'ufficio'. Her account rejects all socio-psychological explanations, from traumatic experiences to 'bad examples'. Nevertheless, the development of her political consciousness was a gradual process, as she explains: 'retate, maltrattamenti, minacce, ricatti, all'inizio *mi sembravano una cosa normale, intrinseca al mio lavoro*. Sono state l'esperienza femminista e la militanza radicale ad aprirmi gli occhi' [emphasis added].

Thus she realizes there is no immorality in her work and that 'Costituzione alla mano, non c'era nessun motivo per essere privata delle più elementari garanzie civili e sociali'. Above all, she refuses to be considered a common criminal: 'è una vecchia abitudine, quella di trattarci come criminali' - she states - 'ma se talvolta c'è intreccio tra criminalità e prostituzione è proprio perché non siamo tutelate. Ci ghettizzano, ci sbattono tra le braccia del racket, non ci proteggono'. Her words reveal at least two different aspects related to her work. The first is connected to the cultural and social representations surrounding prostitution and sexuality and in which both female and male prostitutes perceive and experience their own work and themselves. The second reflects the expressed and unexpressed gender rules imposed on, and replicated by, women, that underpin Italian society.

A month later, the campaign initiated by the prostitutes gained wider popularity. The Partito Radicale presented a project to Parliament with the intent of modifying various articles of the Merlin law: in particular, it advocated not only the removal of articles against soliciting, aiding and abetting, but also greater severity against the exploitation of prostitutes. According to Emma Bonino, radical deputy in the

Parliament, the Merlin law had represented a positive turning point – yet somehow the prostitutes were ghettoized, impeding their freedom of activity as ordinary citizens.<sup>28</sup>

The initial reaction of the media to the initiatives of the prostitutes and the Partito Radicale was generally moderate. In other words, headlines and contents were neither particularly misleading nor sensational, not aimed at gaining the approval of the person concerned.<sup>29</sup> For instance, on 16 December, *Il Messaggero* headline read: ‘«La legge Merlin è superata» così i radicali propongono di cambiarla’. The article was supported by an interview in which the two leaders presented their concerns and political programme:

Rivendichiamo il diritto ad usare e gestire il nostro corpo come più ci aggrada, in fabbrica come in strada, come donne, sorelle, mogli, madri, artiste, cittadine, comunque, della Repubblica italiana.<sup>30</sup>

A few days later, on 22 December 1982, *Il Mattino* reported the account of the joint press conference of the Partito Radicale and the ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ in Rome: ‘Non cerchiamo redenzione. Vogliamo lavorare in pace’.<sup>31</sup> On the same day, *Il Manifesto* headline read: ‘«Il sesso è un lavoro, cambiate la legge» dicono le prostitute’. A second reading of the articles, however, shows some questionable elements. Details of the appearance and demeanour of Covre and Corso are often provided, as if to ‘pay tribute’ to commercial imperatives. Thus, rather than focusing on

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<sup>28</sup> (Anon.), 1982. Vendono amore, non adescano. *Il Giorno*, 22 December, np.

<sup>29</sup> Giuliano Melega noted, in fact, that ‘la serietà ... con cui è stata accolta iniziativa’. Radio Radicale, 1982. *Le vicende delle prostitute di Pordenone* (28 October).

<sup>30</sup> Bertoloni Meli, N., 1982. «La legge Merlin è superata» così i radicali propongono di cambiarla. *Il Messaggero*, 16 December, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Bartoli, T., 1982. «Non cerchiamo redenzione. Vogliamo lavorare in pace». *Il Mattino*, 22 December, np.

the real topic, glamorous or titillating depictions intervened to offer an appealing image to the readers: Pia, a shy, blond ‘clacson-girl’, wears silk blouses and expensive leather trousers by Armani, while Carla, more extrovert and self-confident, wears a miniskirt ‘da capogiro’, and loves jewels and animals (Bertoloni Meli, 1982; Bartoli, 1982).

This particular attitude reveals, once again, the journalists’ difficulty in confronting prostitutes who, presenting themselves as ‘peers’, do not conform to their roles; rather, they resist stigma and marginalization. Their attitude simultaneously undermines and endorses both the prostitutes’ credibility and the subversive meanings of their ‘coming out’. Pia Covre and Carla Corso dismantled the boundaries between bad and good women, and also exposed the fragility and the concreteness of the ghettos in which women have always lived (and still live). For the first time, prostitutes’ own ‘narrative’ intrudes into and confronts those narratives established by dominant discourses; it imposes the subversive essence of their condition.

#### 4.2.3. *Time of autonomy: The First National Congress and ‘Lucciola’*

Five months later, in February 1983, both the Italian media and feminists were obliged to confront new and different challenges. The ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ organized the first national Congress, held in Pordenone between 19 and 20 February 1983 under the title: ‘Prostituzione anni ’80, marginalità o questione sociale?’, to which a number of English delegates were also invited. In July, the Comitato started the publication of *Lucciola*, the only Italian magazine edited both by prostitutes and the ‘others’ (the feminists) and entirely devoted to the themes raised by prostitution.

Initially edited by Roberta Tatafiore, feminist and contributor to *Noi Donne*, the periodical enjoyed mixed fortunes and closed in 1985.<sup>32</sup> In the present section of this thesis, a close reading of a small number of articles will provide an analysis of press reaction to two turning points in the brief life of the Comitato, which could no longer be considered a bizarre or exotic presence.

On 18 February 1983, *Manifesto* read: ‘Per due giorni nessuno si vergogna di frequentare prostitute’.<sup>33</sup> The (female) journalist Norma Rangeri welcomed the forthcoming Congress soberly, emphasizing its challenging contents. The headline plays on the double connotation of the phrase ‘frequentare prostitute’: a socialized practice for part of the Italian male population, ‘going with prostitutes’ was nonetheless clouded in disapproval and shame. According to Rangeri, the prostitutes of Pordenone were addressing a provocative message not only to men as consumers of paid sex, but also to themselves and the ‘others’:

Ci interessa [...] raccogliere le provocazioni che le donne di Pordenone rivolgono a se stesse (quando rivendicano la loro identità) e alle protagoniste della stagione ribelle del femminismo. [...] A se stesse dicono che vogliono liberarsi non dalla prostituzione ma dalla paura che l’avvolge [...]. Proprio perché non si riconoscono né come donne derelitte né come sfrontate venditrici di sesso.

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<sup>32</sup> The firefly (*lucciola*) is one of the numerous euphemisms for ‘prostitute’ regenerated by Pia and Carla as a positive symbol of the ‘Comitato’ and title of their magazine. The editorial co-operative ARCI of Rome was the publisher of *Lucciola*, which increased from eight to forty pages, changing size and presentation and enjoying the contributions of prominent personalities, such as journalist Norma Rangeri, writer Saverio Tutino and art critic Achille Bonito Oliva. The first issue presented the magazine as a means of emancipation for all. See (Anon.), 1983. Un giornale per informare. *Lucciola*, July, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Rangeri, N., 1983. Per due giorni nessuno si vergogna di frequentare prostitute. *Il manifesto*, 18 February, np.

Rangeri rightly noticed that the ‘others’, the feminists, have always kept their distance from the issue of prostitution. The prostitute, much earlier and more explicitly than anybody else, has accepted the rules of the market ‘esibendo il suo corpo come oggetto di scambio’. Although feminists have recognized this truth, they have avoided ‘le conseguenze e le troppe rischiose contaminazioni’.

A different approach was chosen by *Pagine Nord Est*, which dedicates seven pages to the Congress, including interviews with Covre and Corso, some politicians’ comments, and a ‘pezzo di colore’. The authors review the Congress, largely reporting the prostitutes’ claims and statements, noting politicians’ absences and presences, journalists’ invasiveness, feminists’ reactions, and general comments. The opening headline reads: ‘Non sparate sulle lucciole’, explaining that ‘Le prostitute escono allo scoperto in un convegno a Pordenone e rivendicano i diritti civili, ma devono fare i conti con la legge e i pregiudizi’.<sup>34</sup>

The article includes a sketch located under the headline, to the right of the column, covering more than half of the page. It represents part of a human figure (only a leg, with masculine features and wearing a high-heeled shoe, stocking and garter) standing on a podium in front of a microphone. It could be a person about to give a performance, a singer, a dancer; in fact, it is meant to represent a speaker. Helped by the title, the location, and by the most obvious *cliché*, the viewer is invited to identify this incomplete figure with a prostitute. The image reminds us of the Moulin Rouge, a cabaret, a burlesque show, rather than a national Congress. It is a curious choice, given

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<sup>34</sup> Forcolin, G. and Torrisi, A., 1983. Non sparate sulle lucciole. *Pagine Nord Est*, 3 March, pp. 24-30.

that two pictures of the Congress are juxtaposed at the tops of the fifth and sixth pages. The pose of the ‘burlesque’ leg suggests assertiveness, a certain level of exhibitionism; it may imply a parody of the ‘public woman’. In other words, prostitutes/women who speak for themselves, who reveal publicly their identity and dimension, may expect no proper representation, only a parody. Nevertheless, a parody acknowledges in some way both the subversive novelty of and unfamiliarity with the women prostitutes’ voice.

The second article headline reads: ‘Carla e Pia più donne che *gheishe*’. It is completed by the sub-headline that quotes: ‘«Tornare sul marciapiede è un trauma ogni sera». Due prostitute parlano della quotidianità della loro professione’ (26-27).<sup>35</sup> The incongruous reference to the *geisha* forces a parallel that has nothing to do either with the Japanese and Italian cultures or with the reality of prostitution shown at the Congress. However, it might also suggest the idle, but also cloistered, nature of some imagined prostitutes: rather than being lustful or obedient puppets, prostitutes are real women with real issues.

Smiling pictures of Carla and Pia, photographed with a Minister and a Deputy, accompanied the text. The first picture is imposingly located to the right of the headline. It shows Carla in the foreground, wearing sunglasses and smiling at the reader or at the camera. In the background a man is looking and smiling at her. The image emphasizes the physical and generational imbalance between the two characters. While she is a tall, strong woman in her late thirties, he is shorter, about sixty years old, yet appearing to be

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<sup>35</sup> According to the most popular Western culture geisha are portrayed as prostitutes. This is a misrepresentation, as true geisha do not engage in paid sex with clients.



her patron. The second and smaller picture is inserted within the text of the following page. It shows a couple of about thirty years old smiling at each other. The man on the left is holding a cigarette. Their smiles, gazes and the inclination of their heads so as to exclude the viewer suggest a kind of complicity. The caption informs: 'In alto il ministro Loris Fortuna con Carla; a destra l'onorevole Mimmo Pinto con Pia'. Only by going through the text does it become clear that Pia and Carla are two brilliant and charming women who are also prostitutes; indeed, the 'Presidente e la Segretaria del «Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute»'. The incomplete caption seems to echo the asymmetry in social and cultural terms as experienced by prostitutes. While the two men are identified with their full names and status, the two women are indicated merely as Pia and Carla.<sup>36</sup>

In September 1983, the Italian edition of the men's magazine *Penthouse* dedicated two pages to the 'Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute', which had just released the first issue of *Lucciola*. The article is divided into two sections, the opening page and the actual body of text emphasizing the novelty represented by the creation of the Comitato and the contacts made with politicians and political parties. It announces the presentation of three proposals for the reform of the Merlin law and, above all, the launch of *Lucciola*. According to the journalist, the prostitutes' magazine 'fa entrare nella cultura una realtà, [...], fino a ieri relegata a tutti i livelli tra le «brutte cose». Insomma, la prostituzione è avviatissima a trasformarsi da oggetto di sorrisini a

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<sup>36</sup> *Duepiù*, covering the Congress, included a similar but smaller picture of Carla Corso and Loris Fortuna. The caption more correctly states: 'Carla, del Comitato che ha organizzato il convegno, con l'on. Loris Fortuna del partito socialista'. See Verdelli, C., 1983. Convegno, e poi? *Duepiù*, March, pp. 112-113.

*soggetto sociale*' [emphasis added].<sup>37</sup> Again, Pia Covre, Carla Corso and Dora Pezzilli explain their battle. What is more interesting, however, is the opening page of this article where the headline reads: 'Con tanti e in contanti' ('With many and in cash'), a clear play on words partially explained by the sub-headline: '*Attenzione. Un comitato di prostitute di Pordenone sfida la vecchia legge Merlin: per ottenere la libertà di marciapiede sono disposte a pagare le tasse (Iva compresa)*' [emphasis added]. Any reader immediately infers that 'many' (tanti) means 'male clients', discerning also the subtle contempt and mockery implied in the title. For women having sex with *many* was (and still is) a practice socially and morally condemned. It defines an unstable condition, a failure to be wife and mother. In addition, the sub-headline distorts and diminishes the prostitutes' action, thus completely misleading the reader. Prostitutes do not ask for the 'freedom of the right of way'; they require dignity and civil rights.

A sketch completes the opening page. This image is very different from the previous one, more prominent, covering three quarters of the central space below the headline. It shows a male 'mezzo busto' in a pinstriped suit and striped tie. A written cheque and some floral patterns emerge from the collar, representing the head that does not exist. The figure, its size and location, seems to embody the general assumption about men, sexuality and money; it might represent the male client. However, the presence of the floral *motifs* clashes with the pinstriped suit, suggesting a further element that might be found in the text. One of the main questions discussed concerns the status of prostitution: is it a personal choice or a profession? The unexpected and

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<sup>37</sup> Razzoli, D., 1983. Con tanti e in contanti. *Penthouse*, September, pp. 77-78.

prolonged political action of the ‘Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute’ seems to indicate a changed perspective of, and perspective on, prostitution as a profession. Were this so, prostitution, as any other vocation or business, would require State regulation allowing prostitutes to become ordinary taxpayers and move towards ‘normalità’. That throws the accompanying image into a different light. The figure may represent the new generation of prostitutes who will be independent, proud, and able to manage their business and money – ‘as men do’.

## Conclusion

The lukewarm public and political support for the ‘Comitato’ showed its ambiguous nature a few months later, when the two leaders were invited for a talk in a secondary school of Castel Maggiore, a small town close to Bologna. The initiative, authorized by the Head, was reported by a regional newspaper in a half-serious tone and provoked the immediate reaction of seven Christian Democrat deputies.<sup>38</sup> As a direct consequence, the Minister for Education stopped the event; the students went on strike and the national newspapers profited from covering the story, mostly in a sarcastic or negative tone.<sup>39</sup> The ban imposed and the public responses testify to the fragility of the consent

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<sup>38</sup> Guidi, M., 1984. Il polverone. *Il Resto del Carlino*, February, np.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Raffaelli, F., 1984. Il ministro sospende l’incontro con «quelle». *Il Resto del Carlino*, February, np.; Gallo, G., 1984. Sesso e lucciole fuori di scuola. *Il Giorno*, 25 Febr. np.; Imperatori, G., 1984. Le «belle di notte» docenti di sessualità o fenomeni da fiera? *Mattino di Padova*, 4 February, np.; Borgese, G., 1984. Lucciole, arrivano i nuovi protettori? *Domenica del Corriere*, 25 Febr. p. 25. Zanfognini, G., 1984. La «lucciola» Carla non salirà in cattedra ma centinaia di ragazzine l’applaudono a Bologna. *Il Resto del Carlino*, 8 February, np.; Biagi, E., 1984. Si comincia con una lucciola, poi.... *Panorama*, 5 March, p. 65.

garnered by the prostitutes' cause, echoing the censorship suffered by AAA. *Offresi* only two years previously. Both the 'Comitato' and the *Collettivo di Cinema Femminista* were stopped precisely when they were trying to go beyond the surface, opposing another version of the truth to those pre-fabricated by 'others'. In other words, it might be interpreted as a strategy directed towards the displacement of violence, male desires and sexuality from public view.

Nevertheless, while AAA. *Offresi's* tactical censorship had a dramatic consequence for the filmmakers, who no longer worked together, an incidental ban failed to stop the 'Comitato' from carrying on its activity; rather, despite the manipulation of the media and the unavoidable tensions with feminists, the 'Comitato' adopted a relatively low profile saving it from quick 'extinction' and allowing the keeping of the 'ghost' on stage.

## Chapter 5

### **In Their Own Words: (Self) representations in Prostitutes' Narratives**

The formal and informal control over prostitution and prostitutes has successfully silenced Italian women engaged in the sex trade. This embarrassed silence was temporarily broken by *Lettere dalle case chiuse* (1955), a collection of letters addressed to Lina Merlin in order to support or challenge her bill for the abolition of state brothels. The letters, as discussed in Chapter Two, offered correspondents the opportunity to tell their own versions of their stories, introducing elements of the confessional and self-narrative. The writers tried to explain and justify their fall into 'sin', expressing too a sense of anger against the injustices suffered and the stigma attached to them. However, the anonymity requested for and granted to protect their privacy has consigned them to a nebulous and remote world. Rather than underlining their personal dignity, anonymity seems to legitimate the – misleading – impression of their non-existence within society.

There was a delay of more than twenty years before the publication of, as far as is known, the only examples of self-narrative by Italian female prostitutes: *Senza patente* (1976) and *Ritratto a tinte forti* (1991). The texts are the transcripts of interviews with Gavina C. and Carla Corso, two women who worked as street prostitutes between the late 1950s and the 1990s. Recorded and edited respectively by the journalist Ugo Paterno and the essayist and anthropologist Sandra Landi, the driving forces behind these biographical projects, the accounts are of considerable interest. The present chapter will thus analyze these two very distinctive voices in order to highlight

differences, common patterns, contiguities and divergences with the dominant and more widely accepted image of the prostitute.

The publication and reception of these two texts might themselves be seen as symptomatic of the historical and social changes that took place in the period between the publication of *Lettere dalle case chiuse* and the early 1990s. While *Senza patente* was not a commercial success, as the lack of further editions seems to demonstrate,<sup>1</sup> *Ritratto a tinte forti* enjoyed further editions up to 2005. *Senza patente* was published during the 1970s, when the Italian women's movement had dramatically increased its activity, the first strike of prostitutes had taken place in France, and the terrorist threat was reaching its apex. *Ritratto a tinte forti* appeared fifteen years later, after the foundation of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute, and when left- and right-wing terrorism had finally lost its appeal. Italian feminists, no longer directly engaged in battles for legal or civil rights, had now turned their interests to more theoretical fields. Ilona Staller, the porno diva better known as Cicciolina, was elected to Parliament in 1987, while the market for prostitution was slowly beginning to change its structure and ethnic composition. In other words, the whole of society was experiencing a 'new' trajectory delineated by the political dominion of the socialist Bettino Craxi (Ginsborg, 1990; 2003).

Gavina's and Carla's lives, running along different paths, echo and mirror these multiform aspects and historical moments of Italian society. They both challenge and

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<sup>1</sup> There was, on the other hand, a theatrical adaptation staged by the actress Rosa Di Lucia, who kept the piece in her repertoire until the 1990s. See, for instance, Perona, P., 1976. Gavina si vendeva ma senza rancore. *La Stampasera*, 19 November, p. 25; (Anon.), 1992. Al 'Parenti' l'amara storia di Gavina C. *Corriere della sera*, 4 December, p. 52.

confirm the silence(s) of Italian women. On the one hand, as self-narratives of women working in prostitution, they subvert the powerless silence and exile into which prostitutes were forced in Italy. As will be seen, they interrogate both the traditional image of the prostitute and that of female modesty, conveying a more nuanced representation. Gavina and Carla assert their existence not as mere prostitutes but as individuals, who happen to be women who happen or choose to work as prostitutes. On the other hand, the two texts prove the unfamiliarity of women, in particular of Italian women, with the autobiographical account as a genre (Smith, 1998).<sup>2</sup> It has been noticed that ‘how difficult and meandering women’s path towards self-awareness has been throughout history. It has been impossible historically for Italian women to expose themselves directly in writing and to think of their lives as important’ (Gallus, 2005:291). This last point probably explains the recent but discontinuous flourishing of ‘heterogeneous and transgeneric’ autobiographical texts that ‘through unconventional, oblique paths, [...] make autobiography a highly ambiguous genre’ (Gallus, 2005:290). In other words, these ‘oblique paths’ (successfully) undermine both the definition of the genre and the notion of the self, as Shari Bestock (1999:13) has rightly noted:

‘[S]elf’ escapes any prefabricated notions of itself imposed by cultural definitions – even those of gender, race, ethnicity, historical moment or social context. Autobiographical writing - whatever form it takes - questions notions of selfhood rather than taking self for granted. The coordinates of self cannot be graphed or plotted. Like autobiography, which slips in and out of genre definitions, self is *both* culturally constituted *and* composed of all that culture would erase - rather like a fishnet, composed both of string and empty spaces between the fibers’ [emphasis in the original].

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<sup>2</sup> For a critical approach to autobiography as genre *see also*, for instance, Brownley, M.W. and Kimmich, A.B., eds., 1999. *Women and Autobiography*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books.

Thus, *Senza patente* and *Ritratto a tinte forti* cannot be located within the autobiographical canonical literary genre; rather, they may be compared with what Caren Kaplan (1992:115) has defined as ‘out-law genres’, such as resistance and testimonial literature. The two texts originated as oral documents solicited by the interviewers’ interest, rather than by the autonomous initiative of the ‘storytellers’, and were not intended for (immediate) publication. Moreover, both interviewees belong to a marginalized group, as female prostitutes, generally not ‘authorized’ to speak. For these reasons, as will be shown later, the subsequent publication became a political act that pointed to the political connotation of the material recorded. From Gavina’s and Carla’s stories emerges a stringent critique of the discourses surrounding prostitution, calling into question preconceived ideas on prostitution and sexuality alike.

The truthfulness of the texts is undermined neither by the anonymity granted to one of the storytellers, nor by the presence, more or less overt, of the two interviewers, Ugo Paterno and Sandra Landi.<sup>3</sup> It is neither clear nor obvious to what extent they ‘directed’ the interview and how the interviews were structurally re-edited for publication. There is no doubt, however, that oral narrative is always a public act and ‘involves at least two subjectivities, that of the narrator and that of the interviewer’ (Gluck and Patai, 1991:2).<sup>4</sup> Unavoidable ‘interferences’ take place between storyteller and listener, both with ‘unique personality traits and interests at a particular time of life’

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<sup>3</sup> According to Philippe Lejeune (1975), an autobiographical account requires the respect of the pact tacitly agreed between reader and author attested by the identity between writer, protagonist and narrator.

<sup>4</sup> As Luisa Passerini explains: ‘l’intersoggettività [è] fondativa anche dell’interpretazione, oltre che della creazione dell’intervista, in quanto le narrazioni e il loro senso si generano in contesti di scambio’, Passerini, L., 2003. *Memoria e utopia: il primato dell’intersoggettività*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, p. 14.



(Shostak, 1989:406). It means that a personal story could 'be told differently in various periods of life' (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thompson, 1996:8) and produce different results due to different listeners and interpreters. As a consequence, authorship and interpretation become a very delicate issue and a potential minefield (Gluck and Patai, 1991), contributing to shaping and reshaping features, meanings, and interpretations which might be assigned to the stories – without, however, 'diluting' their truthfulness.

Thus far, the authorship and interpretation of *Senza patente* and *Ritratto a tinte forti* are not a matter of fact. Rather, the nature of the two texts and the two storytellers places them in a hybrid realm of narrative whence their 'truths' and subjectivities may emerge with considerable force. Gavina's and Carla's voices permit us to establish the extent to which the authors have internalized social schemes and moral taboos, and how their self-representation has been informed and/or modified in and by the post-1968 society. They also allow us to analyze whether, how and in what directions their stories express real resistance to pre-scribed (and apparently) fixed female identity and condition. Thus, the chapter will also discuss some of the themes common to the two narratives and that have emerged in the previous chapters, namely, violence, the body, sexuality and the representation of prostitution.

## 5.1. The Need to Cry Out: Gavina C., *Senza patente* (1976)

### 5.1.1. *From interview to publication*

Aside from Gavina herself, four men are behind the publication of *Senza patente*. The journalist Ugo Paterno was the actual driving force of the book; Sergio Zavoli, popular reporter, writer and future president of Rai in the 1980s, introduced Paterno to Cesare Zavattini. One of the fathers of *neorealismo* and prominent film director and script-writer, Zavattini, read the transcript, met Gavina and wrote the introduction to the book. The last was Oreste del Buono, well-known writer, journalist, translator and, at that time, director of the series *Tascabili* launched by the publisher Bompiani in 1976.<sup>5</sup> In other words, this small but powerful army of men was responsible for the voice of an obscure prostitute, guaranteeing the authenticity of her story before the readers.

Very little is known of Ugo Paterno. According to Zavattini, he was one of those journalists ready to offer his microphone as a resource for those who appeared ‘degni e bisognosi di raccontarsi anziché essere sempre raccontati’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Paterno was what now would be defined a journalist ‘impegnato nel sociale’, engaged with social issues:

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to observe that the name of Gavina C. figures among the more popular authors published in the *Tascabili Bompiani*, from Germaine Greer to Vitaliano Brancati, from Alberto Moravia to Bruno Bettelheim and Dacia Maraini.

<sup>6</sup> Zavattini, C., 1976. Introduzione. In Gavina C., 1976. *Senza patente. Una prostituta romana racconta il mondo*. Milan: Bompiani, p. v.

E un giorno, una prostituta sui quarant'anni, [...], dopo aver risposto alle domande di una delle sue inchieste ha esclamato: «*ora sto proprio meglio, mi sono sfogata*». Allora Paterno ha risposto: «*posso dartene ancora di questa medicina, finché vuoi*». Per questo i due si sono rivisti e la donna ha continuato a parlare [emphasis added].

The meeting and the long interview with Gavina, recorded over the course of a month in 1975, became not only the editorial project *Senza patente*,<sup>7</sup> but also the source of personal self-scrutiny for Paterno. In a letter addressed to Zavattini, Paterno recognized that ‘forse, noi non sappiamo trattare con coloro che consideriamo «emarginati». Non ne siamo preparati. Forse perché i veri emarginati siamo noi’.<sup>8</sup>

Paterno found in Zavattini an attentive interlocutor for whom prostitution was certainly not an alien issue. As a screenwriter, Zavattini was the author or co-author of films where prostitutes were the main or some of the main characters, such as *L'amore che si paga* (Lizzani) or *Donne Proibite* (Amato), both released in 1953, *Le italiane e l'amore* (Baldi, Ferreri *et al.*, 1961). Ten years later he wrote the script of *Mara*, the third episode of the popular comedy *Ieri, oggi, domani*. Zavattini had, nonetheless, been asked to write the introduction in the light of his well-known taste for diary writing: ‘e questo è un diario’, he declares (vi).

Zavattini himself, reporting the encounter between Gavina and Ugo Paterno, signals a key word: «*posso dartene ancora di questa medicina*». Perceiving Gavina's urgent need to be heard, Paterno offered and took the opportunity for a further and more

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<sup>7</sup> After thanking Zavattini for his ‘splendida e generosa prefazione che valorizza il nostro libro molto al di là dei suoi meriti’, Ugo Paterno announces that ‘Del Buono ‘ne farà un «tascabile» per il prossimo aprile’. See Archivio Zavattini (Arch. Za.), *Corrispondenza*, P 207, 18 March 1976.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 September 1976.

in-depth interview, which acquired autobiographical patterns. As an oral form of self-narrative, Gavina's account might be closer to a therapeutic process than to a journalistic or sociological interview, or a confessional narrative (Gluck, 1991; Gammel, 1999). Gavina, perhaps for the first time, tells her life to a willing listener, discovers, revisits and re-constructs her identity as a person, as a woman, as a prostitute. As will be demonstrated, the publication transformed her story into a different entity, as the publication itself was a political act aimed to bring to the fore social marginalization.

Ugo Paterno chose to conceal his presence as interviewer and editor and consigned the authorship of the text to Gavina: according to Zavattini, the material recorded was left 'raw' to the reader's interpretation. It is not clear, however, to what extent the journalist directed the interview, what kind of relationship took place with his narrator, and how the interview was re-structured for publication. Similarly, it is not known whether Gavina took part in decision-making concerning the narrative of her own story. The transcription was organized into sections of different lengths, introduced by titles alerting us to the themes being addressed. It is difficult to comprehend what prompted the editorial choice: it might have been irony, misinterpretation, negation or even condescension. The titles do not always match the content of the episodes, especially of the most dramatic sections, and this factor conveys an apparent sense of disengagement. Only the reading of the texts reveals the function of their titles, which may appear no more than captions yet, in fact, draw the reader into a deep and unexpected emotional panorama. Such is the case of *Capogiro*, the account of Gavina's

release from the prison and *Pillole*, a long powerful passage on her fall into depression and attempted suicide.

Other examples, on the other hand, seem to suggest that irony was mainly designated to bind all of the narrative fragments and leading the reader through the text. *Multe* (Fines), for instance, illustrates this manner of proceeding. The first is dedicated to the police officers who induce prostitutes to offer (or accept) sexual intercourse for no payment, in order for the prostitutes to avoid incurring penalties. At a casual reading, the title might appear an expedient employed to shift attention away from the abusive behaviour of the police. On the other hand, it seems bitterly to play with the real substance of the word *multa* (which is in fact declined as plural). Rather than being merely a penalty, such as that for driving without a licence, the term represents also the fine for selling sex and bodies. Having/imposing sex for no payment functions as a memento of the true location of power. However, further analysis displays the subversive role of the title, in a shocking flash revealing, rather than concealing, police brutality.

Despite the anonymity and the obscure points related to the transcription of the interview,<sup>9</sup> Gavina emerges as a real person (rather than a ‘character’) even before we start reading her story, thanks to Zavattini: ‘«*ancora piuttosto bella*, sui quarant’anni, un po’ stanca. [...] *Ha un figlio per il quale vive e lotta*’ [emphasis added]. We are invited to visualize Gavina’s physical existence and, simultaneously, confront the apparent

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<sup>9</sup> The brief correspondence between Paterno and Zavattini suggests that ‘Gavina C.’ might be a pseudonym. See Arch. Za., Corr. p. 207.

contradictions of her life as both mother and sexually available woman. Zavattini is ready to reconcile this sharp clash engendered by the pervasive Catholic culture and somehow ‘redeems’ Gavina, restoring her virgin innocence while placing her into the realm of motherhood. Her life is neither an act of pure egoism nor a ‘*vocazione*’, but a fight and sacrifice for and to her son who actually *is* her life. Thus the countless clients disappear:

Senza essere indovini, uno comprende che ancora oggi, se la tocca una persona amata in un qualunque punto, *vibra come una vergine* [emphasis added].(viii)

The reader finds neither a corrupted woman who chose ‘per vocazione’, nor a powerful epigone of Nell Kimball,<sup>10</sup> but a modest woman and a mother. In other words, Zavattini tries to (re-)direct our reading and interpretation of Gavina’s story, emphasising traditional female qualities rather than the most problematic aspects of being female. However, *Senza patente* can be read on very different levels: as a story of a migrant who tries to combine her original social and cultural background with foreign codes; as a prostitute’s voice that sometimes acquires a ‘choral’ quality; as a mother who was once a disenchanted daughter; as a woman entrapped in moral and sexual schemes. Our reading may shift from a sociological perspective to a political denunciation, from a class to a feminist analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> Kimball, N., 1975. *Memorie di una maitresse americana*. Milan: Adelphi.

### 5.1.2. *Gavina and her world*

Io ragiono che se uno può fare qualcosa per un altro e non lo fa è *un gran figlio di mignotta*' [emphasis added] (Gavina C., 1975:2)

It is remarkable that this quotation has been chosen, among others, to open the book and introduce Gavina and her world to such paradoxical effect. Her statement implies and incorporates a gendered and misogynist view about what women are and men have to be. It also tells the reader how she locates herself and the degree to which she might have internalized specific representations of woman and prostitute. The narration starts then almost abruptly and flows with no coherent chronology, proceeding in flashbacks intermingled with descriptions of her clients. Gavina discloses her story with pride, with irony, and sometimes in a defiant or self-defensive tone, with a sense of outraged justice that runs throughout the text.

In *Patente*, which opens the account explaining the title of the book, Gavina immediately urges the reader to confront her denunciation of discrimination and violence:

Per *noi*, se ce l'hai la patente e ti metti a fare quello che noi facciamo, te la tolgono; se la chiedi, dopo che ti sei messa a fare il mestiere, non te la danno; te la negano per via dell'articolo uno che sarebbe la diffida alla prostituzione e ti nega ogni diritto, licenza, patente; tutto [emphasis added] (3).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gavina refers to Article 1 of law 1423 (27 December 1956), Misure di prevenzione nei confronti delle persone pericolose per la sicurezza e per la pubblica moralità. The Article, together with its direct consequence, namely, the refusal, annulment or suspension of the driving licence, was rescinded in 1988.

In the revealing use of the plural first person ‘noi’, Gavina encapsulates the condition of all prostitutes, exposing those distortions of Italian society that allow gender-based violence and inequalities, repression and hypocrisy. The driving licence becomes a metonym for the condition of the women who work in prostitution: there is no licence whatever for a ‘normal’ life, for a full citizenship. Being a prostitute, being sexually available, automatically reduces the space for rights and respect. Gavina rejects this point, as it does not belong to her, to them:

[N]oi diamo agli uomini e alle donne che ci vengono a cercare quello che questi uomini e queste donne non trovano in altri modi. E allora, perché tutti ce l’hanno con *noi* e molti ci disprezzano? Perché la legge e la polizia non ci lascia *lavorare* in pace? [emphasis added] (73)

Bereft of the right to acquire her driving licence and feeling abused, Gavina rebels against what she considers an intolerable injustice. She engages in a duel with the police forces in order to make clear, at least to herself, that she is not subordinate to any iniquitous code of law. The bone of contention is not the driving licence itself, but Gavina’s right to conduct her life as normally as possible. She stubbornly defies the law at the cost of her own liberty, as she reminds us with a dash of humour:

Allora, come vedevo il carrettone (avevo una Giulietta spyder) li facevo sempre correre appresso, gli facevo i dispetti. [...] E giravo e giravo; e quelli sempre dietro. [...] mi hanno fatto l’articolo ottanta, cioè uso di macchina *senza patente*. Poi me ne hanno fatti tanti altri; [...] minimo sei mesi l’uno, *quanti anni di galera erano? Una catasta*. Tant’è vero che quando nel sessantasei è arrivata l’ultima amnistia (per fortuna) dovevo fare circa sette anni per questo articolo ottanta [emphasis added] (32)

With an acute sense of self-confidence and pride, Gavina never presents herself as a harmless victim; she is the unruly combatant. She is the one who participated in the



wave of prison revolts or in the illegal occupation of houses following an irrepressible instinct to fight. ‘Mi piace andare’, she declares, ‘purché ci sia la polizia che ti caccia via e tu fai casino, no? Io ho come l’istinto che devo lottare’ (70). She is also the one who openly declares and enjoys the pleasure of power as a form of self-assertiveness, once more challenging the images of both the rapacious prostitute and the victim of male sexual depravity. Feminist battles of the 1970s were perhaps not entirely foreign to Gavina. She seems in fact to revise her own experience in terms of agency and power, and to locate herself in a more positive light, as is seen in the long section, *Potere*:

Ho pensato subito al potere che avevo sugli uomini, perché dicevo (dentro di me): ma guardate, gli uomini che sono più forti (perché, oggi, si parla di tutte ‘ste femministe a destra e a sinistra: ma vent’anni fa, quindici anni fa non se ne parlava neppure, no? Per cui la donna era sempre sotto l’uomo); [...] ma io sapevo, sentivo che [...] il mio cervello era più forte dell’uomo che si trovava con me; [...] Sentivo che gli uomini erano completamente nelle mie mani. [...] Cioè mi sento forte riguardo alle persone (come donna) [...] e sono orgogliosa; mi piace; mi dà un certo senso di godimento, di soddisfazione intima (69-70).

Her power, however, protects her neither from violence nor from contempt and humiliation, as she learns swiftly enough. There is family violence perpetrated by her mother, accompanied by her father’s guilty silence and passivity; there are other forms of violence more directly connected with the condition of being a woman *and* a woman prostitute. There is the violence of the law: ‘un bel giorno mi vengono due guardie a casa [...] e dicono: *tu* devi venire con noi (perché ti danno subito del *tu*) *tu* devi venire con noi in questura’ [emphasis added] (27). The use of the singular second person ‘tu’ signifies that a boundary has already been breached and she deserves no respect. But that is not enough. Arbitrary arrests, fines, extortions and the mute imposition of sex for

free are not fortuitous events; they are a kind of tribute assumed by the policemen, who can thus measure and magnify their power. Gavina cannot always avoid them, as she recalls with repugnance:

*Quanti «militi» mi sono dovuta scopare io; [...]! A noi ci fermano; per esempio gli piace la ragazza e si vogliono fare una scopata [...] e ti fermano proprio col preciso scopo per modo che tu ti raccomandi; magari dici: ma dai, su lascia perdere; ci vediamo dopo. [...] Che schifo dover far l'amore così! [emphasis added] (3-4).*

An unwritten plot, well known to both prostitutes and policemen, is wearily performed every time. However, while the former might consider it an inescapable occurrence in their work, the latter seem to perform it as a 'ritualistic' confirmation of their own masculinity. The link between power and virility is stronger here and more manifest, thus raises unavoidable questions about male identity, sexuality and eroticism. The forced 'consent' of Gavina and her colleagues to the police's 'requests' for sex services simultaneously confirms and undermines the subversive role of prostitutes and the ownership of their own bodies. The 'consensual' submission, on the other hand, becomes an erotic tool for policemen, who seem to appreciate their position of power and the fear they can cause. Police violence includes also verbal abuse, as Gavina signals in *Puttana*:

*Mi son sentita dire puttana in faccia (per offendere) solo dai poliziotti. Gli altri non lo dicono mai (normalmente). I poliziotti o i ragazzi di borgata che passano coi motorini sul viale. [...] Ma i ragazzi borgatari non offendono [emphasis added] (69).*

Gavina, instead of pointing out the gender element of this verbal violence, identifies class as a factor that originates, separates and underlines good and bad intentions. ‘I ragazzi borgatari’, those who live on the poor outskirts of Rome, do not need to judge or insult. There is a kind of reciprocal respect and acknowledgment between prostitutes and ‘borgatari’.<sup>12</sup> Gavina shows openly her disgust and contempt for the ‘militi’, and also for those prostitutes who fail to refuse some kind of relationship with the police: ‘se una va a prendere un caffè con un «milite», la scartiamo; è guardata male; *perché tradisce noi*’ [emphasis added] (39). Once more, Gavina’s voice acquires a polyphonic connotation opposing a compact, moral ‘noi’ to those who are considered as traitors and oppressors. While she directs her hostility against the police as *the* source of oppression, she seems unable to recognize the gender-based violence to which she is exposed. In other words, she has apparently internalized those male normative views that are also part of the street culture.

This point seems to become more evident by considering one of the sections, *Violenza*, dedicated to a daylight attempt at rape which takes place during her Sardinian holiday: ‘*A quarant’anni! Quello mi voleva violentare! Proprio a me!*’ [emphasis added] (71). Gavina reports the episode in a light but detailed tone, trying to reshape her emotions: ‘Fa, lui: dobbiamo scopare! (Subito *mi veniva da ridere*, dentro di me; *ma la cosa*, subito, *non mi andava proprio*). Ho fatto: ahò, ma per chi mi prendi? [...] io non

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<sup>12</sup> Gavina’s statement might be linked in some ways to the famous verses written by Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1968: ‘Perché *i poliziotti sono figli di poveri. Vengono da periferie, contadine o urbane* che siano [...] separati, esclusi (*in una esclusione che non ha uguali*); umiliati dalla perdita della qualità di uomini per quella di poliziotti’ [emphasis added]. Being daily harassed by policemen, Gavina can neither reconstruct their lost humanity, finding thus a reason for her humiliation, nor indulge in a sophisticated analysis of institutions. Pasolini, P.P., 1968. Il PCI ai giovani! *L’Espresso*, 16 June.

ci sto, non voglio' [emphasis added] (72). According to the man, the violence would have been a kind of revenge or compensation for the rape suffered by his sister. Gavina realizes that there is no point in further discussion. She describes her ability to cope with the declared rapist, finding in the end a way to escape unharmed:

Io, allora (dentro di me) ho capito: a questo gli piace la prepotenza; più faccio la collutazione e lui più si eccita, no? Ho trovato! Ho fatto: va be', basta che ti sbrighi! (E ho aperto le gambe). [...] Dice: ah no, no, no; così mi hai proprio smontato; adesso neanche se me lo diresti tu lo farei, guarda! (72).

Rather than show her shock or anger at this experience, Gavina shifts attention to her age. In her forties, Gavina thinks she is no longer an attractive prey for men. In other words, she apparently takes for granted the general assumption that only young, attractive and 'provocatively dressed women are frequent targets of rape' (Ward, 1995:193). Later, she describes her potential rapist as a normal person, the owner of a small bar, married and about to become a father. The reader witnesses the trivialization of sex and rape: a woman is prey, sex might be a mere act of revenge, and the real or potential rapist can be any ordinary man, as claimed by feminists (first of all by Brownmiller, 1975).<sup>13</sup>

Harsh or violent sexuality hovers like a ghost over Gavina's story. She casually refers to the disturbing attitudes of some clients, or to the dangerous games preferred by others. She is deeply aware of the particular conditions of her encounters that may

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<sup>13</sup> There is also the unceasing menace of violence that pervades the world of prostitutes who are nudged by the law ever closer to crime and criminals. Gavina shows some reticence on this matter, alluding enigmatically to the killing of a prostitute as the consequence of something else: 'Io penso che [...] non si siano comportate bene a riguardo di qualche cosa'. Otherwise, it is simply a case of delinquency, as are many others, and unrelated to her situation (59).

rapidly turn into something else: ‘Perché è lì la paura; *quando sono molto eccitati; perché quel momento lì è pericoloso*’ [emphasis added]. She has no interest in going further into this matter: it is (still) generally believed that male sexuality is unquestioned and can be uncontrollable, urgent and even furious.<sup>14</sup> Women have to accept it and cope with it. Nonetheless, *Senza patente* ends with an emblematic section, *Preghiera* (Prayer), that actually appears as her only defence against the unknown:

*Quando capita uno [...] che non conosci, di sera, sali sulla macchina, ma non sai mai se ridiscendi. Dopo, quando ho finito e parto sulla mia macchina per casa, dico: be’, Gesucristo (nonostante che te lo dica una puttana) ti ringrazio, insomma, perché non mi hai fatto succedere niente* [emphasis added] (80).

At the mercy of a god or a man, Gavina and her colleagues seem to wait as sacrificial lambs for the deliverance of their fate.

#### 5.1.3. *Being, becoming or working as a prostitute*

Gavina rejects all stereotypes concerning the image of the prostitute one after another: neither exploited lovers, nor unplanned pregnancies have marked her life; she is neither an unruly woman nor a nymphomaniac. Speaking once more not only for herself, she rebels against all stereotypes, the distortion of a reality that nobody seems to be willing to undermine: ‘Nessuno pensa che è diverso’ (60). She firmly rejects also the connection drawn between prostitution and criminality: ‘Un conto è il mestiere e un conto è la delinquenza, no? Che cosa c’entriamo *noi* coi delinquenti?’ (60). Recalling the

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Two.

rumoured ‘associations’ between prominent personalities and criminals, she delineates the limits that should not be crossed: being involved with criminals is also a matter of choice.

Her indignant rebellion reaches its apex when she refers to other women (as her clients or acquaintances), those who from the other side of the line may successfully enact their respectability thanks to their social status. Solidarity is not to be expected. In their contemptuous gazes and silences, she is forced to see herself as a lustful and lost woman. It is not by chance that gender and class emerge as a key point from Gavina’s resentful words: ‘Io, da circa dieci anni a ‘sta parte, [...] *ho un odio personale contro le donne-bene, le donne di casa*, no?’ [emphasis added]. Forced daily to compare her own condition of working mother with the air of comfortable wellbeing disdainfully exhibited by ‘good women’, Gavina remains speechless:

(Avrei tante cose da dire, ma a chi le dico!) Allora questo silenzio che ho dentro di me diventa astio, astio verso quelle donne. [...] Queste donne non si sono mai posto questo problema, mai; però quando sanno che si tratta di una donna di vita, sembra che sentano puzza (53).

She displays a conservative view of gender roles; being the breadwinner of her family makes her feel uncomfortable and frustrated. Gavina is, and remains, a prostitute. Her female bourgeois clients become thus the target of her harsh condemnation. She transforms her resentment into a silent revenge that she inflicts ‘sweetly but with

violence' ('dolcemente però con violenza') on those women who judge '*noi, tutte noi*' [emphasis added].<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, she proudly places herself at the centre of her moral system, rejecting sharply, once again, the 'model' offered by the 'good/bourgeois women': she might be a 'dirty prostitute' but, at least, she is morally 'healthy'. (50). In the process of adaptation to a problematic life, Gavina literally displays and performs her integrity and obstinacy, rooted in her acute sense of belonging to a ghettoized group. Reproached by a police superintendent for once again having chosen the wrong lover, she sharply snaps back: 'Nel suo giro [...] *lei può scegliere; io no. Io faccio la puttana e prendo quello che c'è*' [emphasis added] (58-59).

Gavina seems to refute any connection between her deprived childhood in Sardinia and her involvement in prostitution. Coming from a large, poor family, she never attended school and started working as a servant at the age of eleven (9). Greedy for money, her mother encouraged the young Gavina to look for work in Rome, on her own. Her life there becomes more complicated when she marries a man who turns out to be a thief, spending most of his time in prison. She thus starts to work from time to time as a prostitute, managing to send some money home. She can barely contain her resentment against her mother, who never wonders at the origin of the money received: '*tu, madre, vuoi domandarti da dove tua figlia ha preso 'sti soldi?*' [emphasis added] (16). The birth of her son and the imprisonment of her husband persuade Gavina to

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<sup>15</sup> Gavina also expresses her irritation at those male bourgeois clients who too easily show their 'empathy' for her condition yet finally address a hypocritical sermon to her: 'Chi fa la predica, invece, sono di più i borghesi: [...]. Le prediche te le fanno più i borghesi che i preti' (39).

embrace her profession definitively: ‘voglio farlo ‘sto lavoro perché, tanto, *con mio marito un avvenire non ce l’ho* [...] *adesso non sono più vergine*’ [emphasis added] (20). Her decision is accelerated by the failing role of her husband as a proper breadwinner and guardian of her respectability. There is no way fully to perform the roles of honest wife and dutiful mother. Gavina makes the clear choice to go from a sporadic activity to full-time work.

Probably pressed by Paterno’s questions and by the meaning of her own words, Gavina reveals some degree of uncertainty. On the one hand, she appears to defend her choice: ‘Io [...] lo faccio adesso perché mi voglio assicurare un avvenire; perché, adesso, a quarant’anni [...] chi me lo dà, a me, da lavorare?’ (60). On the other hand, she reflects, trying to evaluate the weight of her past in her present life and recalling the *topos* of her unloving mother: ‘Rimane dentro di me qualcosa come di amaro. Forse perché non ho avuto l’affetto materno’. Or maybe it was just a question of fate ‘io, praticamente, *mi ci sono trovata dentro*’ [emphasis added] (76). However, she regains control over her story. Being the mother of a child provides her with the additional element she needs to support (and justify) her choice and build her image for herself and ‘Others’:

Quando c’è da dar da mangiare a un figlio e allevarlo bene, i modi non hanno importanza; [...] Poi, se un domani vieni giudicata da tuo figlio, questa è un’altra cosa (53)

In this light, Gavina declares that nobody has the right to blame her, to judge her choice, to set limits. She is right because she has ‘performed’ (and performs) her gender role, her motherhood, according to pre-established rules, which can include the extreme



sacrifice of her honour. The rhetoric of motherhood redeems the rhetoric of illegitimate sexuality.

#### 5.1.4. *Body and sexualities*

It is interesting to note that the text does not contain the word ‘clients’, but they are implicitly omnipresent. Some of the sections dedicated to them are introduced by general depictions as *Gente, Ragazzi, Letti, Amore, Prediche, Caffé, Conversazione*, while others are dedicated to specific characters and classes, *Timidi, Grevi, Scorbutico, Politico, Artista, Contessa, Vedovo, Chirurgo*: ‘un campionario di personaggi che sarebbe piaciuto a Buñuel’, one reviewer noted.<sup>16</sup> The reader is suddenly introduced to the interior of the clients’ world, where men and women can express and perform their most intimate desires. We learn how women ask for her sexual favours. Unlike men who usually cruise the streets, pick up Gavina and perform the act elsewhere, women go to Gavina’s work place, asking for a ‘home service’. They receive her in their own homes in their husband’s absence and ignorance. Gavina provides a fine, sometimes picturesque, gallery of portraits that questions about female and male sexualities. In particular, as shown above, male sexual desires could bring a degree of violence, the unknown and unpredictable element of both prostitutes’ work *and* women’s lives.

Gavina often refers to her clients as a kind of patient, needing special treatment, psychological acumen and care. Loneliness is the main element that links her male clients who ‘quasi tutti sembrano che cercano qualcosa oltre all’atto materiale’ (74).

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<sup>16</sup> C. G., 1976. L’aspro monologo di una prostituta. *La Stampa*, 20 November, p. 7.

Behind whatever sexual request they fantasize, seek and ask for, there is a background of silence, solitude and frustration. Despite her social marginalization, her practical and emotional problems, Gavina locates herself in the privileged position of attentive observer; sometimes disenchanted, sometimes alone, but rarely isolated. Here is a subversion of roles and images: from ‘patient’/sinner who needs to be redeemed to therapist (Bell, 1994:103). Her identity and self-representation seems to emerge by contrast with and in opposition to the problematic selves of her clients.

A firm self-confidence and a sense of equality, sometimes of superiority, emerge from her account. Gavina chooses her clients and the services she is inclined to offer or refuse on the basis of her own will, tastes, moral principles and interior ‘threshold’: ‘Non sono pochi i giovani d’oggi che vogliono qualche cosa di speciale: la frusta e questo e quello. Se io potessi studiare [...] vorrei vedere la ragione di *questa cosa qui che non è normale* [emphasis added] (5). She always tries to re-direct the encounters and bring the clients (whoever they may be) ‘a quella cosa in modo che a me non mi rimane, magari, la sgradevolezza di dover dire: ma guarda te che razza di gente c’è ancora in circolazione!’ (22). Her descriptions are pervaded by a subtle, corrosive irony, a tool helpful in erecting barriers and reinforcing her self-defence. Thus, she can preserve her lucidity and make her choices, led sometimes by curiosity and audacity from which she re-emerges with a sigh of relief: ‘Ho detto (dentro di me): adesso mi ammazza. [...] E invece no’ (49).

While clients’ sexuality and behavior are scrutinized under her acute gaze, Gavina’s most private feelings are under strict control. She marks the border between

her work relations and her own sexuality, letting her thoughts drift away during a session: ‘penso. [...] Ho fatto ottantamila, venti fanno cento [...] oppure: oddio! Ho dimenticato di pagare la bolletta del gas; [...] penso a tutte le altre cose meno che a quello che sto facendo’. She remarks on her professional practice, making, however, an essential distinction: ‘Io, diciamo, partecipo al massimo a letto, no? Cioè, io do il massimo a lui; ma *io, come persona, sono assente, sempre*’ [emphasis added] (12). Her sexuality is out of the question; it cannot be bought. Physical involvement and sexual pleasure, which some of her prostitute friends do not refuse, are thus resolutely excluded:

Io ho bisogno di altre cose per partecipare davvero, per essere presente. [...] se io, così a freddo, vedessi anche il più bel figo del mondo, diciamo, *a me non me ne frega niente, proprio niente*. [...] per me deve avere qualche cosa che m’interessa, che mi colpisce. Perché *io devo dare qualcosa, di mio, a uno, nonostante mi paghi, quando per me non è niente?* [emphasis added] (12)

Sexuality cannot be wasted; pleasure cannot be mechanically evoked. Gavina’s statement reveals reticence; maybe it is a form of auto-censorship on erotic grounds in order to convey a more acceptable sexual image and thus avoid arousing problematic questions. Her intimacy is preserved (or forcibly silenced) at the expense of her body and her more exterior image: ‘non mi vesto mai elegante – she states - non perché non mi piace, ma è troppo star lì, lì a ghinghingarte; ma a chi gli va di fare tutto ‘sto macello?!’ Her search for a casual simplicity could be read as a kind of unconscious self-judgment, a rejection of her body as it is: the site of her sin.

## 5.2. 'Persone vincenti': Carla Corso, *Ritratto a tinte forti* (1991)

In 1990, eight years after her 'coming out' as a *puttana* and the foundation of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute, Carla Corso agreed to relate her own life in an interview. The material recorded was then edited and published in the series dedicated to women by the publishing house Giunti in 1991. Dissimilarly to *Senza patente*, *Ritratto a tinte forti* is an all-women project. Sandra Landi, anthropologist, essayist and teacher, after meeting the co-founder of the Comitato, developed and proposed the project for the interview. The interest shown towards Carla Corso came both from Landi's commitment to feminist and women's issues and from the curiosity provoked by Carla's public persona. The interview was then submitted to Roberta Mazzanti, creator of *Astrea*, the series focusing exclusively on the 'mondo vissuto e narrato delle donne'.<sup>17</sup> A finishing touch was provided by Dacia Maraini, one of the most prominent of Italian writers and committed feminists, who wrote the preface to the book.

The whole project may be thus considered the result of a period of social changes in which feminism played an important role and to which all the women involved belong. While the responsibility of *Senza patente* is entirely entrusted to Gavina C. yet placed under the auspices of four men, it is Sandra Landi who lays claim

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<sup>17</sup> Sapegno S., Braidotti R., Tagliavini, R. and Mazzanti, R., 2003. *Baby Boomers: Vite parallele dagli anni Cinquanta ai cinquant'anni*. Florence: Giunti, p. 78. Having a space for women authors within a well-established non-feminist publishing house was a risky choice in commercial terms, but a conscious strategy for Mazzanti herself. She was in fact paying a 'tribute' to the first feminist publishers, such as the Italian Scritti di rivolta femminile (1970) and the British Virago Press (1973).

to and shares the authorship of *Ritratto a tinte forti* with her narrator. The anthropologist describes how their relationship develops, as the project proceeds, step by step, from curiosity to friendship:

Ci siamo conosciute casualmente, nel corso di un seminario sul lavoro delle donne; [...]. Quasi per scherzo ho avanzato la proposta di una storia di vita e Carla, vivace ed estroversa, si è subito dichiarata disposta a intraprendere insieme questa esperienza.<sup>18</sup>

Landi refers to the interview as a representation, ‘un sottile gioco a due mani’ (15), built on a work between peers,<sup>19</sup> revealing nonetheless her increasing involvement in, and responsibility for, Carla Corso’s story, and Landi’s own problematic approach. On the one hand, she realizes that prostitution is different from what everybody claims to know or imagine, or from what the mass-media report ‘troppo frettolosamente attratti dal folklorismo che fa notizia’ (21). She warns against the abuse of crystallized models referring to prostitutes because ‘si tratta di un gruppo sociale molto differenziato e difficilmente padroneggiabile sia dagli studiosi che dalla gente comune’ (17).

On the other hand, she constantly emphasises the uncommon personality of her interviewee: ‘prostituta non usuale’ ‘individualità che non vuole uniformarsi’, ‘tipologia esistenziale d’eccezione’ (15). She is attracted above all by her diversity: neither victim nor perverted, Carla resists all stereotypes (21). In other words, she would be the exception that proves the rule. ‘Seduced’ by Carla’s unconventional and destabilising

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<sup>18</sup> Landi, S., 1991. Introduzione. In: Corso, C. and Landi, S., 1991. *Ritratto a tinte forti*. Florence: Giunti, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> However, while she assures that her presence was always ‘molto discreta’, not a word is spent on Carla’s opinion. In a private conversation, while acknowledging Landi’s tact and understanding, Carla Corso has recalled a certain degree of uneasiness in dealing with her due to their different social status and cultural background. Corso, C., 2006. Informal conversation. Pordenone, 9 September.

personality, Landi seems to be forced to revise her own beliefs: ‘Carla ‘è scomoda anche perché non può essere compianta’ (21), she ultimately admits.

The publication of the interview, however, turned out to be problematic for both Carla and Sandra. While the latter was reflecting on her own stable roles of mother, wife, and researcher, the former was dealing with the fear of revealing herself to everybody. Finally, ‘è prevalsa la volontà di uscire allo scoperto. È stata Carla a decidersi [...], è stato un nuovo atto di protagonismo sociale e politico che l’ha vista ancora una volta attiva in prima persona’ (20). The passage from the oral document to the written text emphasises, nonetheless, the particular position existing between the narrator and the interviewer. Ugo Paterno remained in the shadows; in contrast, Sandra Landi assumes and declares her responsibility for the analysis and editorial transcript of the interview, as her aim was to stimulate debate. She underlines the difficulties confronting her work, trying to preserve and respect as much as possible the integrity of the oral document, divided into chapters and themes, gradually building Carla’s story.

As did Cesare Zavattini, Dacia Maraini has frequently treated prostitution in her work in at least three plays: *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* (1978), *Veronica, meretrice e scrittrice* (1992), *Passi affrettati* (2007). Nevertheless, unlike Zavattini, her approach to Carla’s narrative is more literary than social, more focused on the character and her adventures. Her preface starts by establishing a comparison between Carla Corso and certain popular literary characters, such as Moll Flanders, Lady Alexandra, or in the picaresque stories of Lazarillo de Tormes. According to Maraini, ‘Carla [...] ha saputo condurci per mano, con *allegria e levità*, lungo la strada

*dissestata della sua giovane vita*, con il senso del ritmo, la baldanza mai arresa di una consumata «cantastorie» [emphasis added].<sup>20</sup> Carla rapidly proceeds through the most significant passages of the narrative, focusing on different aspects: from the authoritarian father to the exploitative boss; from her first steps into prostitution to the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute. Literary comparison may appear as an expression of Maraini's detachment or could, perhaps, suggest a different interpretation. Rather than being a social or psychological issue, prostitution might just be (considered as) the aesthetic pretext for challenging all 'safer' assumptions and inflexible opinions.

#### 5.2.1. *In another world*

The transcript of Carla's interview has, like *Senza patente*, been divided into chapters; their titles provide, however, no direct clue about the content, let alone titillate the reader's expectations. Some refer to more specific issues, such as *L'AIDS*, *L'omosessualità*, *Prostituzione oggi*, or *La figura della prostituta*. Other titles are strictly related to Carla's life experiences, *La verginità*, *La famiglia*, *Pia*, *La maternità*, or *Il grande amore*, or to her political engagement. The narration appears more structured and chronologically less fluid than Gavina's account and, according to Landi, it is an example of 'lingua parlata da una persona medio-colta, dotata di un'abilità espositiva consolidata' (23). Carla displays a higher level of self-consciousness as compared with that of Gavina who is, nonetheless, able to engage the reader's attention.

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<sup>20</sup> Maraini, D., 1991. Prefazione. In: Corso, C. and Landi, S., 1991. *Ritratto a tinte forti*. Florence: Giunti, p. 5.

Both their stories provide not only two different accounts of Italian society, but also two different profiles and opposing self-representations as women and prostitutes.

Carla introduces herself and signs her story with her full name: her identity has been neither authenticated nor guaranteed by anyone else. She is a public figure, as a prostitute still ‘on the game’ and also as authoritative personality and referent well known among feminists, politicians, journalists and police. She started to work as a street prostitute in her late 20s, about the time of the publication of *Senza patente*. Gavina and Carla had similarly poverty-stricken origins; however, Carla’s life appears to have followed a very different path. Carla was born in Verona after World War II and has spent most of her life in the North-East Italy. She attended compulsory school; she had neither experienced traumatic emigration nor suffered imprisonment, and had no children to look after. She entered into prostitution after working as a shop assistant in Verona, an *entraîneuse* in Milan, a factory worker in Denmark, and a waitress in Aviano. After her coming out as prostitute, she became well known as the co-founder of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute.<sup>21</sup> The students’ demonstrations of May 1968 and the dramatic and lively 1970s, together with Carla’s exuberant personality, probably provided the context and critical ‘tools’ allowing her to deal with her life in a radically different way from Gavina’s experiences.

Carla’s account proceeds through different levels and ongoing discoveries: from the exploration and progressive construction of the self to the discovery of her own body as a site of pleasure, power, freedom and performance; from her entry into

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter Four.



prostitution to her introduction into the political arena and feminist thinking; from her network of friendships to the challenge to, and potential substitution of, ties of blood and family. Carla describes this process very well in spatial, cultural and social terms: 'Quando ho iniziato a vivere...? C'è stato un giorno che ho detto: no, da oggi si cambia. Punto e basta' (29). This statement opens the text and immediately tells us to what extent the narrator drives the action of her life. At the age of 21, she made a symbolic and practical farewell to her family life, a narrow and poor milieu dominated by her tyrannical and *macho* father. Carla deliberately decided to have sex for the first time, 'penso, sono rimasta vergine fino a ventuno anni!' (255), and demolish thus the myth of virginity which still retained much of its power in the 1960s. From this point onwards, Carla proceeded to the daily conquest of her life and the discovery of her 'self' through erratic attempts at the subversion of social boundaries.

All of her subsequent experiences, from work to love, from friendship to political engagement, nourish and construct her self-representation for herself and others. She recalls some of them not simply as instances, but as highly significant and charged moments for her life. Her 1968, for instance, is described as a period of confused freedom and voracious hunger for knowledge:

Tornai a Verona proprio nel fatidico Sessantotto [...]. Il 'vietato vietare' era come se lo avessi avuto dentro da sempre. Però non credo di aver vissuto il Sessantotto coscientemente. Arrivavo da una situazione di estrema povertà culturale e tutto per me era affascinante, [...]. Frequentavo l'ambiente universitario, pur non studiando, e gli amici di questo periodo sono stati molto importanti per me e per la mia formazione; [...G]li slogan erano affascinanti e soprattutto per me che avevo sete di libertà, di indipendenza [...] (75).

Her open and curious attitude to life leads her to meet people to whom she attributes a significant role in her personal formation: ‘del resto tutte le persone che frequenti sono importanti, se puoi stare con loro, parlare con loro, se c’è comunicazione, se c’è scambio effettivo’ (75). She is ready to listen, to learn, to select, to discard, to revise, and – above all – to challenge herself.

### 5.2.2. *Body and pleasure: Autonomy and knowledge*

In contrast to Gavina, who hardly makes any mention of her body or sexuality, Carla is markedly less reticent in sharing some intimate details. She is conscious of her right to pleasure and determines to wait for it: ‘fatto la prima volta, poi non ci ho pensato tanto, *ero in attesa di qualcuno che me lo facesse fare per bene*’ [emphasis added] (67). She then realizes that her body is the site of her own pleasure:

Avevo cominciato anche a scopare con piacere, vivaddio! Finalmente! Ho scoperto come era fatto il mio corpo, ho imparato, per esempio, che esiste la clitoride e che si può avere avere l’orgasmo anche attraverso quella parte lì [...]. Era davvero una cosa bellissima (103).

As do many contemporary Italian women, Carla tears away the veil of ignorance covering the female body and sexuality. Pleasure and knowledge become the key words for control and power over her life:

Ho scoperto che *gli uomini fino allora avevano usato il mio corpo* e basta. Quindi ho cominciato a decidere: non gli permetterò più di usarlo, a meno che non lo usino come piace a me, per ottenere un piacere reciproco [emphasis added] (102)

What might appear to be a contradiction is in reality a striking affirmation of awareness and self-determination: she draws the lines between pleasure and work, use and 'abuse'. While it would be simplistic to suggest that (her) 'sexual liberation' leads to actual enfranchisement, it would be equally simplistic to deny any connection. As will be shown below, agency and money make the difference. The discovery of her body goes along with the erratic, exciting and frantic period in which she also starts to supplement her waitress's income by working occasionally as a prostitute. As she immediately realizes, her eye-catching figure invites vigorous demand:

[A]nche a me, che sono sempre stata floridona e procace, avevo troppe cose al posto giusto – queste tette, questo culone, poi altissima, i capelli lunghi ... insomma ero molto vistosa – mi proponevano marchette tutte le sere (89).

Regardless of her friend Pia's criticism and invited by an old street prostitute, Carla finally decides to work on a regular basis on the street in broad daylight: it is less well-paid, but is easier for her because the clients have not been drinking and are in a rush, 'È una cosa velocissima' (129-130). It is at this point that the ownership and the use of her body become a central issue: 'al lavoro sulla strada ci arrivi quando sei proprio sicura di te, quando hai compiuto una vera e propria scelta' (105). She is obviously forced to discover and deal with other bodies, other desires and her own will. It is the moment in which anybody who works in prostitution faces her/his own contradictions in emotional, psychological and physical terms. Carla maps the body, the areas prescribed and proscribed, the acts forbidden and the requests refused, deciding the price - which has to be high - and the involvement with the client, which has to be

minimal: *‘credo proprio di essere una brava prostituta, perché do il meno possibile’* [emphasis added] (124).

It is on and through the body that clients and prostitutes seek both to articulate their battle for power and to re-compose the alienating ‘subject-object’ relationship. It is also on and through her body that Carla acknowledges her authority and rebuilds her views on men. She admits, in fact, that at the beginning of her career as prostitute she felt closer to men, whom she considered *‘dei poveretti, maltrattati dalle loro mogli’*. She then discovered the fragility of her own belief. That her clients have a lovely wife with whom they have a normal, decent relationship: *‘sono loro che sono delle bestie!’* (154). Gavina and Carla express two opposite views, two different ways of ‘being’, acting and working as prostitutes. The former is ready to take sides and ‘comprehend’ men’s needs and roles, directing all her contempt against (bourgeois) women, while the latter shows her distrust in men and a cautious, although more open, attitude towards women.

### 5.2.3. *The pleasure of the game*

The friendship and complicity with Pia Covre is the crucial means of dealing with and reinterpreting her experience as a prostitute in a personal way: at the beginning *‘facevamo il minimo indispensabile per vivere bene. Quindi potevamo uscire per questo una sera o due alla settimana, le altre erano consacrate al divertimento’* (101). Nevertheless Pia, who used to work indoors and was better paid, joins Carla on the street only after several years, when they decide to buy a camper van in which to carry out their trade. Exercising the same profession and working together allows them to

seek a dimension of play. As described by Carla, they are able to act out their own performances, aware of the potentially subversive nature of their choice:

*Ogni tanto io e Pia ci mettiamo a giocare, allora dico: 'Dai che mi vesto da puttana!' [...] All'inizio della carriera non l'avrei mai fatto, questo mi avrebbe imbarazzato moltissimo – ti pare, vestirmi da puttana! – però adesso mi diverte [...], mi metto un bustino nero tutto attillato che mi si vedano bene le poppe [...] prendo la gonna rossa, il sandalo col tacco alto [...] perché fa molto puttana, scelgo gli orecchini troppo grandi e troppo colorati ... così mi vesto da puttana e loro abboccano, come abboccano! La prostituta deve essere proprio così. Poi giochiamo anche al contrario [...] andiamo a lavorare col tailleur. [...] ma sai all'inizio quante volte si fermavano? [...] ferme sul bordo della strada con la macchina, allora inchiodavano per offrire aiuto. Si aspettano questo da te: la gonna rossa, il vestito scollato ... è questa l'immagine che hanno introiettato [emphasis added] (214).*

In what can be considered her parody of the prostitute, Carla Corso simultaneously repeats and reveals the discourses constituting the figure of the prostitute itself, opening a way to her own agency (Butler, 1990:138-148).<sup>22</sup> While she seems to reinforce pre-existing norms and stereotypes, she in fact unsettles them by highlighting their arbitrariness. *Giocare* (to play) is the key term that expresses the role played by Corso in this destabilising process.

Commenting on women's ambiguity towards prostitution, Carla acutely reveals what ultimately is their strategy of taking distance from their own ambiguous attitudes towards sex. The section *L'esperienza* might clarify this last point. Many women would like to experience sexual intercourse for money, Carla says, but 'non hanno il coraggio di ammetterlo, né tanto meno di farlo, di vivere a fondo una simile 'esperienza'. Forse

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<sup>22</sup> As Judith Butler affirms (1990:147), 'construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency'.

per molte sarebbe *liberatoria*, non ti pare?’ [emphasis added] (240). Once again, Carla’s statement pinpoints the subversive connotations contained within the act of female prostitution that she interprets as an assumption of responsibility and self-determination. In this frame, each encounter becomes an opportunity to call into question, dismantle and re-build our understanding of both female and male sexuality.

Carla rejects thus the image of victimized prostitute that seems to appeal not only to feminists *but* also to a wider, indiscriminate ‘audience’: ‘la gente vuole sentirti dire che ti sei sentita violata, violentata, che hai messo in vendita la tua anima’ (113). Rather, she claims agency and the authenticity of agency, even while she admits that the lack of rewarding jobs might have been behind her choice. Nevertheless, it remains her choice: ‘ti metti in vendita perché hai bisogno di denaro. [...] Nel mio caso però, [...] ciò che mi ha spinto a prostituirmi, non è stato solo il denaro, ma fondamentalmente il *rifiuto delle regole fisse* [emphasis added] (113-114).

Carla goes further, claiming that each prostitute, beneath the surface of her work, conceals degrees of curiosity and pleasure. ‘Uno dei piaceri è proprio ... il senso del rischio’, she declares, ‘mi dà eccitazione, è il piacere della transgressione, del potere’ (157). The negotiation can be the most exciting part of the game, ‘se stai bene, se sei tranquilla [...] perché tu sai che lui vuole darti il meno possibile, ma tu sai anche che comunque riuscirai a spuntare quello che chiedi’. Like Gavina, Carla enjoys great pleasure as she feels that the client depends on her although, she clarifies, ‘non è un desiderio di rivalsa, è proprio un gioco: il *gioco del commercio*’ (158).

Carla's attitude towards her 'game' does not conceal its toughness and risks. The contrary is the case. Her friendship with Pia Covre means having an ally and psychological support in a job that requires total attention. Gavina apparently seems to entrust her safety to a superior entity, while Carla develops all of her skills in order to protect herself. Keep herself safe and avoiding violent and sudden reactions depends on her approach, her ability to be on the wavelength of the client. Being raped and/or robbed by customers is in fact a common occurrence against which no protection can be found.<sup>23</sup> Policemen are included among those who humiliate, blackmail or rape prostitutes, in particular the most vulnerable, such as the drug-addicted (126). A dramatic experience with a serial killer, recalled in the long section *La violenza* (135), leaves lasting and indelible marks, leading her to increase her vigilance. Carla recognizes that physical and verbal violence are the worst side of her job. Both men and women often indulge in verbal abuse but, whilst remaining unsurprised by men's behaviour, which is somehow expected, Carla cannot find an explanation for the insulting attitude of women:

Vengono in auto accompagnate dagli uomini oppure solo tra donne: vanno pian pianino, si accostano, guardano [...] e sghignazzano, qualcuna grida: 'Puttana!' e poi se ne va. [...] Di fronte a un comportamento simile tenuto da una donna, *nessuna è disposta a passare sopra, è una cosa che offende molto, la senti proprio dentro* [emphasis added] (150-151).

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<sup>23</sup> According to Hilary Kinnell (2008:56, 61), a 'genuine' client should respect the 'conventions and fulfil the conditions of the client's contract': [...] he will pay for the service requested; will use condoms as required; will not force acts which have not been agreed to or paid for; will not rob the sex worker nor the premises on which she works; and will be non-violent. These expectations and conventions are rooted in the understanding that the sexual interaction is *business*' [emphasis in the original]. One who fails to follow these rules 'is a thief and a rapist, but not a client'. Kinnell, H., 2008. *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*. Cullompton; Portland, OR: Willan Publishing.

Neither Gavina nor Carla expresses an understanding or acceptance of the lack of empathy and solidarity displayed by other women, who appear unthinkingly and uncritically to mirror men's views and fears.

#### 5.2.4. *Feminists and prostitutes*

It is the experiences related to the Comitato per i diritti delle prostitute that give Carla the opportunity for a further, radical change. In particular, Carla considers a crucial turning point to be her encounter and friendship with Roberta Tatafiore, prominent and unconventional feminist: 'quando ... ho conosciuto Roberta Tatafiore e abbiamo avuto i primi incontri con le femministe, [...] ho riflettuto di più sul mio ruolo e sulla mia persona' (217). Moreover, Roberta fulfilled the role of interpreter between the prostitutes' language and that of the feminists (196). Carla becomes aware of her condition as prostitute, her diversity or otherness, thanks to this key moment:

*Ho avuto un'illuminazione [...]. Intanto mi sono resa conto che questo ruolo [...] incideva comunque sui rapporti con la gente, segnava profondamente le relazioni che avevo con i miei compagni, con gli uomini di cui mi innamoravo ... contava molto nei legami con gli amici. Che lo volessi ammettere o no, determinate persone mi evitavano in determinate circostanze, mentre in altre no – capisci? [emphasis added] (218-219).*

A parallel turning point is reached when Carla and Pia engage in promoting the Comitato throughout the country, leading them to meet other prostitutes. A very different landscape opens up to those who initially refused to be identified with 'quelle': scantily dressed elderly prostitutes, drunk vulgar women on a street corner, hopeless illiterates, 'la prostituta classica, secondo lo stereotipo corrente, con la borsetta e la



minigonna, la parte più deteriore della prostituzione'. Carla confesses her shame at feeling shame: 'certo, sapevo che esisteva, ma prima non mi coinvolgeva perché lo facevo in un altro modo [...] ero diversa perché avevo avuto più fortuna di loro' (190). The image of prostitute she had long carried was something different, certainly brighter:

Le prostitute per me erano persone capaci di conquistarsi un'indipendenza economica, le consideravo emancipate rispetto alle altre donne asfissiate dai loro *ménages* casalinghi. Non erano dall'altra parte della barricata, come le considerava la gente. Per me erano persone vincenti, né vittime né donne da esorcizzare (99)

Together with Carla the reader is forced to confront her independent, positive image and also that of the sad, entrapped figures who inhabit the lowest rung of prostitution. Gavina opens a space for polyphonic voices; Carla does not. Carla carefully takes distance not only from her more humiliated colleagues, and from those who choose not to choose, providing a critical portrait in which she does not recognize herself:

Quello che sogna una prostituta è sempre un matrimonio, la casetta, le tendine inamidate, poter stare a casa, cucinare per il marito ... Fin qui tutto bene, però vogliono aver duecentomila lire al giorno, perché quello è il minimo che guadagnano! Spesso riescono a realizzare questo sogno: escono, hanno una doppia vita, cioè fanno le prostitute a cento chilometri da casa [...] poi tornano [...] e sono perfettamente normali. [...] Sono molto conservatrici e molto cattoliche, quindi hanno dei valori fissi: la casa e la rispettabilità. È la facciata che conta, no? [...]. Vivono malissimo il loro lavoro [...] schiacciate dai sensi di colpa e dalla paura di venire scoperte (118-119).

Carla opposes her own 'Otherness' to what appears to her eyes the uncritical adoption of pre-packaged models of bourgeois female respectability. At the same time, however, she granted no concessions to feminists (or to the reader); she claims that there are also 'other' prostitutes, but this is easier to ignore than to acknowledge. Reflecting on her

own experience, after a decade of battles for prostitutes' civil rights, Carla declares that prostitutes have changed, 'si rendono coscienti del lavoro che hanno, lo vivono più o meno bene, però vivono, *non si fanno più vivere addosso*' [emphasis added] (219). She considers how difficult it is to demolish the stereotype of prostitute as a woman crushed by misfortune, victim of society, raped by her father or prostituted by her mother:

Il fatto che andavamo a dire: 'Lo faccio per scelta, non sono stata costretta da nessuno, mi piace, voglio poterlo fare ancora perché è un mestiere che mi va bene...' ha suscitato l'inferno (221).

Carla and Pia realize in their search for political alliances that no practical solidarity can be built with feminists, who seem to require 'una richiesta di redenzione' (220). People need 'la prostituta vittima da compiangere', Carla states, then concluding that 'se questo è un modo per riscattarmi, allora non voglio riscattarmi, perché non mi va di soffrire tutta la vita per avere la compassione della gente (220).

## Conclusion

In all their diversity, Gavina's and Carla Corso's paths through life echo the long journey made by Italian women of the same generation. Gavina appears a transitional figure, entrapped in pre-existing models and in a life experiences not particularly uncommon at the time, even for non-prostitutes. She might embody one of the most classic representations of the prostitute, an illiterate, unruly woman too close to criminality. Indeed, although attracted by unattainable models of bourgeois respectability, she resists these by building her own story and the moral codes to which

she adheres tenaciously. Fighting against, and resisting, her social marginalization and humiliation becomes the cipher of Gavina's interpretation of her life; the shadow of sin remains.

Carla, on the other hand, pushes to 'extreme' consequences the need for freedom and respect, breaking and dissolving social and moral boundaries. She not only provides disruptive solutions to her queries and needs, but also deploys a representation of the prostitute that undermines shared public narratives. Her text seems to suggest that the margins within which we tend to confine or locate her experience are ultimately the site for resistance, creativity and a full construction of the self. Moreover, Carla's writing seems to imply that the violence targeting street prostitutes is a means of both restoring (Gilgun, 1998) the power lost by men in the negotiation over sex and re-affirming their control over all women.

The narratives of Carla and Gavina represent an original, but substantially unheard, attempt to retell the story from the protagonists' point of view, namely, in their flesh-and-blood reality. The final chapter analyzes what remains of the female prostitute's 'reality' in the filmic narrative. In particular, it will discuss what kind of contribution cinema has provided in destabilizing or, conversely, crystallizing the most tenacious representations of women's sexual availability.

## Chapter 6

### **‘Ma che hai da perdonare!?’: Neither Punishment, nor Forgiveness**

Franco Ferrini started to work on *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto*, a film revolving around a serial killing of street prostitutes, in 1987. He deliberately decided not to draw on past examples such as, for instance, Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1962),<sup>1</sup> preferring a sociologically informed rather than artistically mediated and ideologically supported view of prostitution. The film, although occasionally open to the charge of ingenuity, is nonetheless a real – and solitary – attempt to go beyond those stereotypical representations of the prostitute to which cinema so often uncritically referred. The female prostitutes character have been widely represented, from the silent era to later productions for television (Campbell, 2006). Some of these ‘anti-heroines’, from within Italy and beyond, have become part of collective memory. Filomena Marturano,<sup>2</sup> *Casque d’Or* (1952), Adriana (*La Romana*, 1954), Cabiria (*Le notti di Cabiria*, 1957), Nadia (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, 1960), *Mamma Roma* (1962), Mara (*Ieri, oggi, domani*, 1964), Séverine (*Belle de jour*, 1967), Bree (*Klute*, 1971), and *Pretty Baby* (1978) are only a few of the most popular.

Given the indisputable male economic and managerial dominance over the cinema industry, it is perhaps unsurprising that this character has been, and remains, one

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrini, F., 2011. Telephone interview with Michela Turno, 20 May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> I am here referring to the most popular and divergent versions of this character played by Titina De Filippo (1951) and Sophia Loren (1964).

of the most common roles that all actresses are, sooner or later, asked to perform.<sup>3</sup> Cinema has been ‘seduced’ by the figure of the female prostitute, thus engaging in a long, intriguing and ‘exploitative’ relationship. It has been noted how ‘[s]everal of the highest-ranking Italian-made films at the box office’, from the end of the Second World War up to 1960, ‘featured prostitutes, not just in cameo roles, but as fully-fledged protagonists’ (Hipkins, 2008:231; 2007):

As the restrictions of Fascism lifted and the influence of a neorealist drive spread, cinema strove to narrate the visibility of prostitution in Allied-occupied Italy and the flipside of idealized Italian family life, and later began to revel in a limited new cinematic freedom regarding sexual mores. These factors made the prostitute a widespread presence in Italian cinema of the period 1946-1960.<sup>4</sup>

As Danielle Hipkins outlines (2006b:194-195), some features seem to recur frequently in those representations of the prostitute: the redemption/punishment motif that finds in the ‘whore with a heart of gold’ its central figure; the instrumental use of the prostitute as stereotype, both in cameo appearances or larger roles; the identification with the nation. Millicent Marcus (2000; 2004:70), describes this last point as ‘the feminized personification allegory so prevalent in the critical realist films of the post-war period in which highly sexualized female characters came to personify the Italian nation-state as a

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<sup>3</sup> In a number of articles written in the 1970s for *Noi Donne*, Patrizia Carrano and others denounced both the paucity of significant female characters and the misogynist orientation of Italian cinema. The flowering of *serie B* and *C* films, whose tasteless titles triumphantly announced their even more trivial plots, emphasized this lack of choice precisely when feminists were leading their battles for women’s empowerment.

<sup>4</sup> Hipkins, D., 2006b. ‘«I Don’t Want to Die»: Prostitution and Narrative Disruption in Visconti’s *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*’. In P. Morris, ed. *Women in Italy, 1945-1960: an interdisciplinary study*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. 194.

whole'.<sup>5</sup> Marcus's views are somehow encoded in what she considers the emblematic episode of Fred and Francesca in Roberto Rossellini's neorealist film *Paisà* (1946).<sup>6</sup>

The long debate that preceded the approbation of the Merlin law, the Italian reconstruction era, the consequent economic boom and, not least, the increasing visibility of prostitutes along the streets seemed to interfere with this interpretation. Films such as *Persiane chiuse* (Comencini, 1951), the episode *Amor che si paga* (Lizzani, 1953), *La spiaggia* (Lattuada, 1954) and *Adua e le compagne* (Pietrangeli, 1960),<sup>7</sup> cast another light on the issue of regulated prostitution and the prostitute appears more a victim of social factors than a sinner or a woman who is innately depraved (Bellassai, 2007:235-239). Yet, although differently articulated, the redemption/punishment theme continues to emerge alongside the denunciation of prejudices and injustices. At the same time, according to Mary P. Wood (2005:168),

[A] notable number of films feature[e] prostitutes (or sexually active unmarried women) as protagonists. In this, desire, and desire for prosperity is inscribed on the body of the female protagonists, prostitution being a metaphor for capitalist consumption and exploitation [...]. Prostitution narratives make plain the mechanism of the exploitation of women and provide a metaphor for women's marriage bargain.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Landy M., 2000. *Italian Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> For a different approach, see Hipkins, D., 2006a. 'Francesca's salvation or damnation?: Resisting recognition of the prostitute in Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946)'. *Studies in European Cinema*, 3, 2, pp. 153-168.

<sup>7</sup> I would add *Una di quelle* (1953) by Aldo Fabrizi. Playing the role of a well-off country man and potential client, a lustful Totò picks up a penniless war-widow mother of a child who is about to start a career as prostitute. He would eventually not have his one-night stand. Rather, persuaded by her honesty, he would open his heart to a very different commitment. The film describes, with evident moral intents, some of the steps that may lead to prostitution.

Comedies like *La parmigiana* (Pietrangeli, 1963), the episodes ‘Il povero soldato’ and ‘Vernissage’ (Risi, *I mostri*, 1963), ‘Eritrea’ (Comencini) and ‘Il frigorifero’ (Monicelli) respectively from, *La mia signora* (1964) and *Le coppie* (1970) are the best example that can here be provided. More than this, however, may be inferred. Female prostitution is also not uncommonly opposed to the more critical male prostitution, whatever is intended or practiced, thus enlightening faults and fragilities in the representation of masculinity. Other films, such as *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Visconti, 1960), *La ragazza in vetrina* (Emmer, 1960), *Accattone* (1961), the iconic *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini, 1962) and *La commare secca* (Bertolucci, 1962) articulate in a distinctive way this new sensitivity towards what female prostitution might be and what it might (help to) expose.<sup>8</sup>

At the dawn of the second feminist wave - in a decade that would be characterized by extreme social conflicts, left and right terrorism threat and the increasing expansion of television offerings (Wood, M.P., 2005:23) - the ambiguous ‘fortune’ of the prostitute character seems to decline. It remains, however, still cast as a secondary personage in low-budgeted productions, mostly sexy comedies or police films (*poliziottesco*) (Giordano, 2000; Uva and Picchi, 2006). With the exception of Carmela in *Bello, onesto, emigrato in Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* (1971), no memorable figures can be recorded. Rather, American cinema

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<sup>8</sup> Marcia Landy (2000:149) underlines how these and other filmmakers, such the Taviani brothers, Mario Monicelli and Ermanno Olmi, have begun to seek ‘forms of cinematic expression that, directly or obliquely, addressed the advent of the consumer society and re-examined the political role of culture’. They ‘were, in greater or lesser ways, influenced by Gramscian thinking’.

occupies this vacant space with three cult films: *Klute* (1971), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Pretty Baby* (1978).

Later on, in the 1980s, when this extremely tense atmosphere comes to an end and is replaced with the shining rampant power of the Socialist Party and the ‘connected ... the dramatic rise of Silvio Berlusconi’s empire’ (Testa, 2002:115), the prostitute character not only regains a measure of visibility but also acquires a degree of psychological complexity that seems to exceed the limits of the social role. A number of mid-quality movies, from comedy to thriller, featuring prostitutes in main or co-leading roles, achieve a certain popularity: *La Cicala* (Lattuada, 1980), *Le occasioni di Rosa* (Piscicelli, 1981), *(Nudo di donna*, Manfredi, 1981), *Mystere* (Vanzina, 1983), *Sensi* (Lavia, 1986), *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (Ferrini, 1987). At the same time, other and perhaps more significant foreign productions find a good reception in Italy: from *America Gigolò* (Shrader, 1980) to *Dance with a Stranger* (Newell, 1985), from *Mona Lisa* (Jordan, 1986) to *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990) and *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant, 1991).

The advent of AIDS, the change in the ethnic composition of street prostitution and the trafficking in children and women for sexual exploitation would provide further incentive for the cinema industry up to and beyond the new millennium. Films such as *Vesna va veloce* (Mazzacurati, 1996), *Terra di mezzo* (Garrone, 1997) and *Princesa* (Goldman, 2001) stage the issue of migrant prostitutes. Following this trend, even one of the most popular and long-lasting prime-time television soap operas, *Un posto al sole*, has adjusted its script. In 1998, for instance,



the authors introduced among the most important secondary characters a rescued Moroccan prostitute killed on her wedding day by women traffickers, followed in 2008 by the unhappy love affair between an HIV-positive prostitute and one of the main characters. More recently (2011), the soap opera has featured a serial killing of escorts.

There is no doubt that this extraordinary over-production would deserve a close analysis framed within feminist film theories and gender studies, as convincingly suggested in a recent review on Italian film studies. Danielle Hipkins (2008:213-221), exploring the ‘apparent reluctance to engage with feminist theory and gender studies in the mainstream of Italian film studies’,<sup>9</sup> deplores ‘the failure to interrogate’ other aspects, such as ‘the notion of heterosexual complementarity [...], and thereby little or no interest in or interrogation of masculinity’. By empowering feminist and gender approaches, it would thus encourage the investigation of ‘neglected films that do in fact present refreshing angles on the representation of women’ (2008:216). Her analysis of the discredited brother and sister prostitute pairings - protagonists of a number of post-WWII Italian films - in relation to the collective political guilt about Fascism and the ‘crisis in masculinity’, provides an interesting example that breaks with more generic reviews and perspectives (2007:90). Nevertheless, despite this and other encouraging suggestions from other

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<sup>9</sup> A field dominated by what Catherine O’Rawe defines an ‘obsessive interest in neorealist and auteur cinema’ (2008:173).

scholars (Wood, M.P, 2005, 2006; Günsberg, 2005; O’Leary and O’Rawe, 2011), the representation of the female prostitute still remains a neglected site for examination.

This final chapter will contribute to an understanding of what is a complex system able to produce and provoke multiple meanings and engage the spectator in a game of reaction, resistance, fascination, and identification that is both individual and collective. It will analyse the representation of the prostitute as it emerges in a group of films, released between 1960 and 1987, helping to (re-)read and develop issues that have emerged and have been discussed in the previous chapters in terms of gender relationships, violence and masculinity. As cultural texts, produced in specific historical and social contexts, films may bring to light, or cast another light on, that which other forms of documentation may have omitted, diverted attention from, or simply interpreted differently. On the other hand, it will investigate whether or not, how, and to what extent the representation of the prostitute diverges from past models and thereby interferes with the expectations of the audience.

This further reading of a new source privileges the genre over the authorial code, the aesthetic, the audience and even the commercial results of the cinematic product. The films have mainly been selected among the comedy genre (*La parmigiana*, 1963; *Bello onesto emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata*, 1971; *Nudo di donna*, 1981); yet include a thriller (*Caramelle da uno sconosciuto*, 1987). The comedy genre, and related *filoni* (Wood, M.P., 2005:43-52; Napolitano, 1986; Giacobelli, 1995; Brunetta, 2009), has had, and still has, great popularity and commercial success in Italy. Although its golden age is located between 1962 and

1969, it continues to play an important role as a vehicle for the critiquing of social customs, 'indicating contemporary preoccupations' (Wood, M.P., 2005:44) at the same time as providing reassuring comic relief.

Prostitution as a theme is more than an occasional presence in comedies. In those produced during the economic boom, they allowed the reinforcement of the critique of consumerism. Prostitutes are not depicted with contempt; rather, a certain degree of sympathy and jollity surrounds them. This might be related to the change of sexual customs considered an identifying factor of the 1960s. Nevertheless, as the previous chapters have shown, such a perception only partially coincides with the reality of Italian women, who were still far from what feminism later claimed: 'il corpo è mio e lo gestico io'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, what the comedy might convey by staging a different image of prostitution is neither crystalline nor immediate. It seems to simultaneously reveal and reject tensions and anxieties related to masculinity and gender relationships. Laughing or smiling at and with the prostitute character keeps real feelings, and real bodies, at a distance. Participation on an emotional level is thus prevented, removed to more 'appropriate' genres and codes, such as drama, thriller and melodrama, where it can be 're-composed', re-shaped and narrated.

In the films analyzed here, the prostitute character plays not marginal parts; she shares the screen on equal terms with her male counterparts. The co-leading role may allude to the simultaneous, contradictory dissolution of the stereotypical image

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<sup>10</sup> In her memoirs, Jenny Murray (2008:139) defines the limits of these changes: '[i]t has long been feminist ideology to claim the sexual revolution gave women permission to say yes, but it wasn't until the women's movement that we won the right to say no; the implication being that we were pushed and pressured into sexual intimacies we didn't want'.

of the prostitute as a repository of male anxiety towards female sexual emancipation. The prostitute loses the connotations of exceptionality and otherness and thereby conflates with all women. At the same time, female spectators seem, in terms of autonomy, to be invited to achieve a liberating and positive identification with the prostitute, freeing themselves from moral and role-bound chains. On the other hand, however, moving the prostitute character from (melo-)drama to comedy, where the male character does not conform to a model of a confident, aggressive masculinity, allows the male spectator to distance himself from his own fragility, or prevent him from examining his role as client or as potential perpetrator of violence.

The violence, both verbal and physical, is the great absentee from these comedies, although some scenes allude to while not directly addressing it. Nevertheless, while this omission safely estranges the audience from an element ever present in 'cronaca nera', it may help to free the prostitute's representation from that aura of predestined victim and catalyst of violence. A degree of agency is recovered and a balance is established within the cinematic prostitute and male partner pairings. It might allow the spectator to think differently and maintains her/his sympathy for the prostitute character. Seen from this point of view, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* and *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (would) represent the ideal framework in which the three comedies need to be located, thus rescuing and emphasising the missing element. Visconti's and Ferrini's films are not only the temporal starting and ending points of this investigation but also, and above all, two turning points. While in the former, the graphic violence results from the failure of conventional masculinity, in

the latter the cartoon-like representation of violence (and its perpetrators) seems to distance the audience from taking responsibility for such violence.<sup>11</sup>

Not all these elements can, however, be read as a progressive step towards a definitive change in attitudes, although echoes and resonances of wider social, political and cultural transformations and contradictions appear in these films. Re-framed in Butlerian terms, they may demonstrate a further level of complexity articulated through gender and *performance*. Performing genders is in fact the *Leitmotif* that runs through and links this group of films. All protagonists are in fact presented as ‘performing’ rather than ‘being’ a prostitute, shifting from one status to another by putting on wig, lipstick, a miniskirt, or merely miming a gesture, a gaze. As considered potentially inherent to feminine ‘nature’, the stylized repetition of the act of prostitution constitutes, and at the same time challenges, gender identity (Butler, 2004).

Through a comparative analysis of the novel and its filmic version, the first section of this chapter will discuss *La parmigiana*, a film by Antonio Pietrangeli that is significantly undervalued. Perhaps more than the other films here considered, *La parmigiana* successfully enacts a challenge to gender identity, placing the protagonist in self-imposed marginalization from which she can perform her act of prostitution. In so doing, she not only frees herself and exposes the *social temporality*

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<sup>11</sup> *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* will not, however, be discussed in this work. Other scholars, such as John Foot (1999) and Danielle Hipkins (2006) have investigated in depth Visconti’s masterpiece. Hipkins, in particular, has demonstrated how Visconti’s final choices on the character of Nadia break with stereotypical representations of the prostitute. Neither Foot, nor Hipkins, however, has sufficiently explored the meaning and representation of the violence to which Nadia is submitted.

of her own gender identity; she also proposes a personal and positive interpretation of her marginalization.

### 6.1. *La Parmigiana*: Book by Bruna Piatti (1962) and Film by Antonio Pietrangeli (1963)

Despite the positive reception of *La parmigiana* (The girl from Parma) among contemporary 1960s audiences, very little has been written about the novel by Bruna Piatti and the homonymous film comedy by Antonio Pietrangeli.<sup>12</sup> The image of a bright and sexually autonomous young woman, and the ‘silenced’ representations of traditional or failing masculinities, failed to meet the expectations of certain ‘high’ cultural environments, which consigned the two forms of narrative to hostility and oblivion.

*La parmigiana*, published in 1962 by the unknown Bruna Piatti,<sup>13</sup> became a best-seller, running into several editions throughout the 1960s. ‘La parmigiana’ is Angelica, a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, orphaned, well educated, and raised by her uncle, a mystical and handsome village priest. Machiavelli, the Latin and the Virgilian letters of the Jesuit Bettinelli are her reading matter as she passes into adolescence.

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<sup>12</sup> Only recently Pietrangeli’s *La parmigiana* has raised some interest. See, for instance, Fullwood, N., 2010. *Commedie al femminile: The Gendering of Space in Three Films by Antonio Pietrangeli*. *Italian Studies*, 65, 1, March, pp. 85-106; Van Ness, E., 2008. *The Prostitute in Italian Style-Comedy*. [draft only] Academia.edu [online], 12 December. Available at: <[http://ucla.academia.edu/EmmaVanNess/Papers/193351/The\\_Prostitute\\_in\\_Italian-Style\\_Comedy](http://ucla.academia.edu/EmmaVanNess/Papers/193351/The_Prostitute_in_Italian-Style_Comedy)> [Accessed 10 June 2011]. Morelli, G. et al., 1998. *Un’invisibile presenza. Il cinema di Antonio Pietrangeli*. Milan: il Castoro.

<sup>13</sup> Very little is known about her: Bruna Avanzini Piatti (Savona, 1910 - Fidenza, 1979) wrote short stories for national and local magazines, such as *Annabella*, *Marie Claire* or *Parma bell’arma*, while she ran an antique shop in Parma. Longanesi published her first novel *La parmigiana* in 1962 then the less successful *La Venere e il Begrippo* (1965). I would like to thank Francesca Avanzini, who provided information and a selection of Piatti’s short stories.

After a precocious clandestine sexual experience with Pilato, a seminarist, she runs away with him, who later abandons her. Her money gone, Angelica sets out on an erratic yet light-hearted series of sexual encounters, beginning with Teresio, a failed crook. He is arrested by the police, and Angelica returns to Parma as guest of her mother's friends, Amneris and Scipio. There, Michele Calabrò, a Sicilian policeman, courts her and, to Amneris' delight, immediately proposes marriage. Angelica's bored revelation that she is no longer a virgin is frightening yet simultaneously titillating. The astonished Michele, in search of a virgin Northern bride, renews his proposal, offering her the redemptive mirage of a new and moral life. In the meantime, Scipio, hearing rumours about the *parmigiana*, tries unsuccessfully to seduce Angelica. Soon after, a *coup de scène* reinforces Angelica's doubts as she contemplates a future with Michele in a tiny kitchen in a cramped flat on the outskirts of Parma. A Sicilian woman, Carmelina, introduces herself to Angelica. She has come to Parma in order to announce her pregnancy. Michele denies any responsibility, although he offers her money. His shabby treatment of the submissive Carmelina, his moral double standard, and the prospect of a conventional and miserable marriage prompt the *parmigiana* to make her escape. Leaving her fiancé in Carmelina's hands, Angelica walks along the streets of the old Parma to a silent garden where she happens upon Franco, a young art student. The novel ends two months later, showing Franco sleeping on her breast.

*La parmigiana* is written in a fresh, light style suffused with the humour and irony of its first-person narrator, a stylistic choice nonetheless frowned upon by critics:



Angelica ‘spiattella ogni avventura in primissima persona’, says one.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the novel is neither the moralizing story of a girl ‘sedotta e abbandonata’ nor the glamorous diary of a call girl; it resembles a sentimental education that works towards the conquest and the defence of identity and autonomy. This conquest takes the form of a self-imposed marginalization played continuously by Angelica not only in opposition to her male counterparts, but also against the most conventional assumptions about genders. She performs multiple ‘Otherness’, whether prostitute, virgin, rebel adolescent, unlucky orphan or the modest niece of a holy priest. Nonetheless, an essential self remains intact, whole, and autonomous: ‘ero riuscita [...] a rimanere me stessa, e non soltanto davanti allo specchio, non avevo mai avuto il timore di non ritrovarmi tutta, che qualcuno si fosse portato via qualcosa’.<sup>15</sup>

Her autonomy is underscored by the affirmation of *her* pleasure, *her* desire. Never constrained to conceal her sexuality, Angelica, following Rabelais and Fielding, modulates and elides erotic desire into a hearty sexualized appetite of excesses: ‘c’era da far sparire il prosciutto: arrotolai le fette e le gustai a bocca piena; il piccante del formaggio invitava a bere il lambrusco che traboccava la spuma dal bicchiere’ (14-15). The desire for food suggests she is more consumer than consumable object of desire. Her agency is not under discussion. Aware of social conventions, Angelica does not hesitate to define herself as ‘una donna pubblica, come il giardino, come il tassì che

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<sup>14</sup> E.F., 1962. Povere ragazze. *Il Tempo*, 9 April, p. 3. See also, Prosperi, C., 1962. Prima la Romana poi la Fiorentina adesso la Parmigiana. *Stampasera*, 3 April, p. 3; Cederna, C., 1962. La ragazza di Parma. *Espresso*, 15 April, p. 24; Chierici, M., 1962. Un romanzo di Bruna Piatti. *Gazzetta di Parma*, 13 April, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Piatti, B., 2003. *La parmigiana*. Parma: Mup, p. 61.

passava in quel momento sul viale dalla bordure di fiori rossi' (113). In the seemingly romantic ending, her words echo more disturbingly for the reader, who is unable ultimately to deflect the challenge posed by Angelica's attitude to conformism and social norms.

Angelica's unconventional autonomy confronts the male universe in which men, as puppets, seem obliged to perform obsolete and tired masculinities. Angelica turns her detached, amused and ironic gaze on fearfully conformist men in all their emotional and ontological fragility: 'tutti uguali, come oggetti di terracotta da poco prezzo o di cattiva porcellana di cui è sacrosanto disfarsi appena scheggiati' (74). 'Ci stava, sembrava morta quando la prendevo [...]. Io mi ci saziavo, ecco tutto!' (96), Michele proudly declares of his 'relationship' with Carolina, even while he dreams in conventional clichés:

Michele si era seduto vicino a me con un filo d'erba in bocca e lo sguardo di pecora sgozzata. Fissava il sano amore che aveva sempre sognato, pensava al futuro, alla moglie continentale, al paffuto bebè in carrozzella (38).

Angelica's ironic register, maintained in the film version, contributes to the continuous dissolution and (re-)definition of the myth of power and identity as male prerogatives. Antonio Pietrangeli's homonymous film comedy, starring Catherine Spaak, is the first of the triptych dedicated to women during the Italian economic boom, including *La visita* (1964) and *Io la conoscevo bene* (1965). The screenplay, written in collaboration with three of the most important contemporary film writers, Ruggero Maccari, Ettore Scola and Stefano Strucchi, broadly reflects the novel, although certain omissions, alterations and stylistic choices suggest a shift in the general approach. While Carmelina

and other minor personages disappear, Amneris, Scipio and Teresio (now Nino) acquire a more prominent role. Pietrangeli's filmic transposition adds complexity to the story, offering a representation of the young prostitute that goes well beyond contemporary and later images produced by Italian cinema, and prefigures the path that Carla Corso will choose for herself twenty years later. Six flashbacks and an enigmatic ending gradually build a 'persona' who both 'performs' and calls into question her gendered identity.

While Bruna Piatti seems to have played with a name that casts an ironic light on the gap between code and individual action,<sup>16</sup> Pietrangeli opts for something less evocative and more ordinary: Dora. Moreover, the screenplay declines to highlight Angelica's intellectual background so clearly indicated in the novel, choosing instead the subtle sagacity and irony displayed by Dora's visual and verbal expressions.<sup>17</sup> In Pietrangeli's hands, Dora is far from embodying *the* prostitute as the contemporary audience probably expected her to be. She is as close to Zampa's Adriana, Visconti's Nadia, or Pietrangeli's Adua as are Wilder's Irma or De Sica's Mara. Dora never refers openly to a 'social' condition that the viewer can only assume, composing a puzzle where each scene, gaze and flashback might allude or deny, obscure or disclose. She does not conceal; she never actually reveals. Dora merely changes dress, wig, makeup

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<sup>16</sup> There is a clear literary reference to Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, a popular cultural nod to the *Angelique* series of Anne and Serge Golon and, maybe more intriguingly, a highly cultured reference to Puccini's *Suor Angelica*.

<sup>17</sup> Her veiled criticism of the obtuse ideological blindness of Michele Pantanò is a case in point: 'Proprio ieri siamo andati a soffocare una manifestazione bracciantile', he boasts - 'E l'avete soffocata?', she archly replies. In this scene, Pietrangeli takes the opportunity to interpolate his personal point of view about police brutality (Morelli, 1998:106), here opposed to the new freedoms Dora represents.

and roles, never renouncing her autonomy and independence – which are non-negotiable. She is always in charge of herself, as the camera's movements confirm: it rarely indulges in close-ups of her body parts. Her objectification and consumption cannot thus be taken for granted.

Ambiguity and irony run through the film, making space for a cutting denunciation of both women's and men's respective conditions. Amneris (Didi Perego) embodies this heightened ambiguity where morality and desire conflate and clash. She is affected by a garrulous loquacity that can hardly conceal not only her ostensible ingenuity but also her desiring, and desirable, bodily presence. Protected (and/or induced) by her situation of long-term married woman, Amneris displays her florid maturity with pleasure, secret hope, and coquettish innuendo. The dance scene, where Amneris takes the opportunity to flirt with a younger admirer, becomes crucial in Petrangeli's film. Amneris accompanies Dora to the ball in order to find a 'good match' for her, as well as some kind of entertainment for herself. There, in fact, Dora will meet the Sicilian policeman, also in search of the ideal wife. The camera moves from the musicians further into the dance room crowded with people dancing, gossiping, watching, waiting and appraising in an atmosphere of high expectation. The scene recalls a marketplace, almost a brothel, where demand and supply for sex and/or marriage meet. Dora's detached actions, rooted in transient pleasure rather than in self-serving financial or social advantage, appear positively innocent by comparison.

Male characters seem to stumble around in the dark. The policeman, now named Michele Pantanò (Lando Buzzanca), becomes a ridiculous caricature of the Southern,

stolid man of institutions, who deploys women (and marriage) to assert his identity and complete his integration and assimilation into Northern society. Allured by the prospect of gaining free and exclusive access to Dora's sexual experience, he is willing to turn a blind eye on her past. In the same way as his literary twin, Michele fails to look at Dora as a person; rather, she is an erotic promise, a social tool, and a magic mirror to reflect his own ideology.

By comparison, Nino Meciotti (Teresio in the novel, acted by Nino Manfredi) is a penniless and somewhat inept advertising photographer who seeks fame (and food) in Rome, less macho but more genuinely affectionate than Michele. Nevertheless, his character marks the final scene of the film – which departs radically from the novel. Once Dora separates from Michele, she goes back to Rome looking for Nino, released from prison. She finds him, yet there has been a definitive change: Nino has purchased economic security by marrying the mature proprietress of a popular *rôtisserie* where he now works. Surprised and hurt, Dora leaves him to his destiny. She cries, sees her reflection in the window of a shop, refreshes her make-up and finally smiles to herself.

The majority of contemporary reviewers saw in this enigmatic ending only a clear indication of Dora's definitive fall into prostitution, a revised interpretation of the redemption/punishment motif. In other words, unable to conform to the role assigned by society to women, Dora is destined to a future of solitude and emotional uncertainty. The scene seems rather to suggest a subversion of roles (Detassis, 1987:48-49). Two men seek a 'buona sistemazione'. Nino accepts something that Dora has dismissed, his marriage implying the sacrifice of his freedom and identity. He has simultaneously, and

unintentionally, rejected an imposed model of masculinity that he was always unable to adopt; his renunciation may be seen as an acknowledgment of his failure in his masculine role.

Dora/Angelica, on the other hand, dismissing the marriage option in favour of self-imposed marginalization, protects her integrity as well as her sexual autonomy. Instead of representing the failure of identity, (gender) marginalization creates and preserves intimate spaces where it is possible, by the erosion of internal and external boundaries and the exercise of multiple 'Otherness', to declare a permanent state of dissent.

## **6.2. *Bello, onesto, emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* (1971): Space and Trans/formation**

Another comedy from 1971, *Bello, onesto, emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* by Luigi Zampa,<sup>18</sup> mingles originality and a marked bitterness. Despite lukewarm reviews and competition with *Klute* and *Diamonds Are Forever*, all released in the same year, it was a box-office success and remains one of the best examples in the 1970s' declining panorama of this genre. Constructed around and for Alberto Sordi, one of the stars of the genre and here as the unfortunate Amedeo, *Bello, onesto, emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* draws an interesting figure of a prostitute, acted by Claudia Cardinale.<sup>19</sup> The presence of a prostitute character, who shares equal screen space with male emigrants, cannot be evaluated without reference to the historical and social events: from the devastating effects of the economic boom to May 1968, the *autunno caldo* and the beginning of the second wave of feminism.

Although migration (and migrant alienation) represents the main issue of the film, the prostitution theme pervades the entire narrative, functioning apparently as a

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<sup>18</sup> Very little has been written on Luigi Zampa. See: Meccoli, D., 1956. *Luigi Zampa*. Rome: Edizioni 5 lune; Attolini, G., 2005. Il neorealismo e la Guerra. *Vivere in pace* di Luigi Zampa. *Athanor*, 9, pp. 331-336. In September 2009, the Rome International Film Festival has dedicated a retrospective on Zampa that has included *La romana* (1954), based on the homonymous novel by Alberto Moravia.

<sup>19</sup> Zampa's film would suggest a comparative reading with 1960 Visconti's melodrama, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. These two productions, in their diachronic and stylistic contraposition, might be considered emblematic of the changes occurring in an Italian society still pervaded by Catholic social and political ideology. It is no accident that both filmmakers chose a prostitute (Hipkins, 2006) over a woman 'per bene' as one of the leading roles.

mirror and an internal link. In so doing, it brings to light a perception different from the usual representations of prostitutes and that could be seen as a signal of the anxiety engendered by the new female visibility. Far from depicting a nostalgic view of female identity, Carmela appears to call into question the ownership and commodification of a prostitute's body that can be attempted only with deception or violence. Also, she reveals a transformative dimension of her figure that undermines her own representation and, simultaneously, the representation of other gendered identities. Dora's self-marginalization offers independence and integrity; Carmela's performance as prostitute, lover, fiancée and migrant signal, in contrast, a refusal 'to reduce herself to an Other' (Minh-ha, 1991, cited in McCabe, 2004:81). In this film, the twin trajectories of migration and prostitution are fundamental to the process of transformation and refusal.

This section will explore some of the most revealing scenes of *Bello onesto emigrato in Australia...*, supported by the reading of *Diario australiano*, the journal of the Australian work trip by Zampa's screenwriter, Rodolfo Sonogo. It will unfold and investigate connections between migration and prostitution as (trans-)formative processes calling into question cultural and gender differences. Migration and prostitution cross geographical, physical, cultural and psychological boundaries, thus suggesting the continuous loss then acquisition of new, more fluid, definitions and connotations. The representation of the prostitute is located between the space created by what viewers and filmmakers presume to know of prostitution (and migration), their filmic realization, its consumption, and a reality that cannot be 'fixed'.



The plot revolves around only two characters, Amedeo and Carmela. The former is a long-term Italian emigrant who works and lives in a remote part of Australia. Clumsy, neither attractive nor wealthy, Amedeo resolves to look for, by post, an Italian virgin wife, thanks to the mediation of a Catholic priest. The choice falls on the beautiful Carmela, who claims to be a virgin from Calabria, but actually works for an abusive pimp as a street prostitute in Rome. Aware of his unattractive appearance, Amedeo tempts Carmela by passing himself off as Giuseppe, his handsome friend, who is included in the picture sent to her. The entire story and plot is thus based on false identity. Carmela is enticed into leaving Rome for Australia where she finds Amedeo, who pretends to be merely a friend of her future husband, sent to collect her. After an extended journey through the vast Australian landscapes, including an attempt to abduct and abuse Carmela by force, she finally expects to find *her* Giuseppe. Reality, though, soon reveals itself. Giuseppe turns to be an exploiter of prostitutes; Amedeo introduces himself as the real middle-aged and ugly suitor for her hand. Her dream broken, she reveals her real status to a scandalized but hopelessly in love Amedeo, who has spent all his savings to win a virginal Italian wife. However, a rapid denouement shows their arrival in a minuscule village with fifteen inhabitants, lost in the Australian desert. She very reluctantly gets off the train; the final shot shows a glimpse of Carmela being carried across the threshold of Amedeo's house.

Zampa's intentions appear similar to those in Visconti's masterpiece *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*; however, Zampa includes the satirical element of Italian comedy. While the film focuses on the extreme conditions of Italian migrants in Australia, it opens a

window on the lasting myths of virginity and female submission. Curiously, contemporary reviewers failed fully to perceive this critical element, emphasized by the never-discussed presence of a prostitute. The instrumental or ‘decorative’ role played by Carmela in the comedy is thus taken for granted, although in reality she is, does and implies, even more. Carmela seems to go further the stereotypical representation of the prostitute. Her trajectory might appear ‘familiar’ to the viewer, from the mud of the street to the hope of a new life, but Carmela is not sacrificed to the restoration of social order or to remind us of her humanity. Her path from a dark outdoor space in the squalid streets of Rome to another and larger open space in Australia might suggest a shift in attitudes.

Space is one of the main traits that characterize *Bello, onesto ...*, introducing and supporting the theme of the prostitute as ‘outsider’ and (trans-)formative figure in a text where there are at work multiple representations of human, spatial and geographical marginalization.<sup>20</sup> The emigrant, (un-)willingly expelled from familiar territory, lives a marginalized condition in a peripheral, extraneous areas. In *Bello onesto...*, Carmela is projected from a nocturnal Rome into the interiors of aeroplane and airports, vast and intimidating open spaces, deep forests, and unfamiliar cities. She can lose herself, adrift in these alien environments. Zampa’s and Sonego’s direction, conversely, works towards building other and less obvious meanings.<sup>21</sup> *Diario australiano*, the record of

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<sup>20</sup> This aspect will not, however, be explored in detail. Rather, I prefer to suggest a possible direction for a further reading following the proposal of some scholars. See Pidduck, J., 2004. *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past*. London: BFI; Konstantarakos, M., ed., 2000. *Spaces in European Cinema*. Exeter: Intellect.

<sup>21</sup> In *Rocco*, the viewer’s eyes pass through peripheral working class building conglomerates,

the on-the-spot inspection conducted by Rodolfo Sonego in Australia, is an extraordinary journey through the different spaces that will become the locations for the film. Sonego, with exquisite ability, convey images and atmospheres: the cabin of the aeroplane, a room in a shabby hotel, a minuscule train station, the immeasurable Australian landscapes, the plain Italian club, a crowded bar, a nocturnal view on a desolate street. All of these spaces inform the viewer about Australia, about women, about emigrants, about different levels and kinds of marginalization, and about human microcosms found in the final realization of the film. Like all unknown territories where hope, conquest and searches for social improvement impose both estrangement and the (re-)definition of personal gender identities, the figure of the prostitute appears an unavoidable presence.

Apart from Amedeo and Carmela, all other characters appear occasionally in brief shots representing the variegated world of emigrants and autochthones as vividly described by Sonego in his *Diario*. He recalls his brief yet intense encounters with emigrants of all sorts, from ambiguous characters who live on gambling and prostitution to waiters, solitary miners and rich entrepreneurs. Most fail to achieve their ambitions, are exploited in their work, and experience desolation and estrangement. Most complain of the inadequate number of women and the rejection received from Australian women: ‘non ci vogliono. Non sappiamo parlare e non abbiamo la macchina’ (Sonego, 2007:27). Solitude drives many of them back to Italy to look for the girl-children left years before

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overcrowded domestic interiors, factories, and the desolate outskirts of Milan where Nadia might appear entrapped – and where she will end her life. Nevertheless, stylistic and technical choices, from lighting to camera movements, cast a different light on her figure, rape and violent death.

in their villages, or to arrange a marriage ‘per procura’. Sonego notes: ‘Ricordare che molti emigranti solitari sognano le bambine di vent’anni prima’. (47) Once in Australia, these girls have to face a reality that often fails to meet their expectations, and instead find more or less respectable options, including prostitution.

Italian emigrants are ready to spend their wage packets if they can have sex ‘parlando italiano’ (48) and a dark, pretty Italian girl ‘se è intelligente fa un sacco di quattrini’ (53). Sonego’s attitude does not appear judgmental, although his frequent return to this *Leitmotif* gestures towards his discomfiture.<sup>22</sup> He, too, identifies a link between female prostitution and the marginalization experienced by Italian emigrants, whose male identity appears nullified by Australian women’s ‘demanding’ behaviour. Paid sex with an Italian prostitute helps the migrants to (re-)establish their loss of balance and control over their lives as migrants. ‘Speaking Italian’ has here less to do with ‘patriotic feelings’ and more to do with the nostalgia of a ‘higher’ and more familiar gender status. Acquiring an Italian wife acts in two directions: the Italian male emigrant can thus hope to re-create a relationship in more recognizable although circumscribed terms, while the Italian woman who moves to Australia for marriage retraces a journey towards the traditional role of wife.

Thus, far from being merely decorative, Carmela emerges as an observer of male behaviour and the migrant condition. It is through her eyes, her attentive gaze, that the audience is invited to watch, decipher, and formulate an opinion. At the same time,

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<sup>22</sup> That probably explains the original title of the script, *Carmela*, then transformed by Alberto Sordi and Luigi Zampa in *Bello, onesto*....See Sanguineti, T., 2007. Nota. In Sonego, R., 2007. *Diario australiano*. Milan: Adelphi, p. 89.

Carmela represents herself, as a prostitute, as a woman, as an individual firmly rooted in, and forged by, her experiences, therefore ready to move and (trans-)form her own self as many times as she can and needs. The spaces in which she happens to move emphasise her (trans-)formative role as this strikingly emerges by its comparison with the nostalgic and fragile male behaviour. This is summoned up in the tragicomic, grotesque dance scene, shot in the Italian Club – Casa dell’Emigrante where four musicians play ‘canzoni italiane di trenta anni fa (Sonego, 2007:26), creating the framework for the introduction of Carmela. In a bare interior, a numerous and patient group of Italian men queues hoping to be selected by three not particularly attractive women all accompanied by their parents. The strong illumination pitilessly spotlights the modest and aged condition of the men who wait standing against the walls and watching their more fortunate companions. A subversion of roles and power has taken place as women can ‘pick up’ the youngest or the most presentable men and reject the others. The Italian Club becomes the space that produces and reproduces claustrophobic marginalization, rather than being a welcoming refuge for emigrants who suffer the collapse of their masculine role. Refused by Australian women, they do not represent a ‘good match’ *even* for the most ordinary of Italian women.

Carmela is introduced in flesh and blood as a street prostitute on a cold dark night while Amedeo’s voice-over intones his letter. The blonde wig, heavy make-up, short dress, tall boots, a cheeky, gloomy look and the pimp who guards her closely build the iconographic image of a prostitute in the early 1970s. However, the camera avoids tantalising close-ups on her body; rather it moves from a long to a medium close-up in

order to clarify Carmela's role and condition.<sup>23</sup> Thirteen years after the closure of the brothels, Carmela and her companions are showily dressed, painted and gaudy women, clearly visible in a kind of carnival-like disorder that encompasses a whirlwind of clients in their vehicles.

To complete the iconography of the prostitute, it is later understood that Carmela was actually an ingenuous, illiterate woman who, on leaving her family and losing her virginity, enters into prostitution. Zampa and Sonogo do not seem to question stereotypes, but their Carmela is far from being a fragile woman annihilated by hard experiences; on the contrary. As spectators, although privy to her secret past, the viewer cannot help but forget it. Carmela raises herself above herself, her apparent weakness and 'mistakes', her own personal limits and those of the men she meets. She moves backwards and forwards, she transforms and migrates from one state to another through narrow or larger spaces, trying to preserve her most genuine side, her dream. On board the aeroplane she removes her make-up, wig and dress. She literally 'dresses' herself in a new identity, moving from the past image to another more 'respectable' and acceptable, in synchrony with the aeroplane as it moves from one reality to another.

The aeroplane scene displays before Carmela's gaze a microcosm that simultaneously includes and excludes her. She literally rushes into a bright, comfortable first-class compartment where wealthy or business people from different countries chat in foreign languages, rest or read *Life* magazine. It happens in a matter of seconds, and a

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<sup>23</sup> Despite her appearance and beauty, she appears purposefully highly sexualized only when she meets Giuseppe. Assuming Giuseppe's point of view, the camera in fact goes from her toe up her long, tanned legs, to her torso magnified by her wedding-like white dress and her beautiful face illuminated by anxiety and expectation. With an expert gaze, he literally appraises her as he would a horse at a fair.

hostess ushers her to the noisy, animated second class where several newly-wed proxy-brides look forward to joining their unknown husbands. A position, a house, an American car, and the hope of escaping from poverty and assuming a higher status drive them beyond past boundaries.

The presence of Carmela in this narrow space full of hope is emblematic of women's condition. The unequal position of Italian women in the labour market and within the family system in the early 1970s make marriage the best option that society can still offer them. Romantic love, more or less secretly desired, may be only a remote possibility in this kind of contract, as Carmela soon learns. On the other side of the marriage exchange, male migrants appear, as migration destabilizes their identity, more fragile than women. In an extreme attempt at self-defence and self-preservation, they reinforce rather than dissolve the most conservative views on gender relationships. Australian women 'bevono, fumano, son quasi tutte laureate. [...] Noi emigranti vogliamo sposare una donna italiana perché è obbediente, è bella, buona, affettuosa e poi [...]... tu sei sicuro che è vergine' (at 44:06), Amedeo explains. Able neither to act as protagonists of their own (trans-)formation nor to deal with the anxiety engendered by women's demanding and objectifying expectations, they choose to seek refuge in nostalgic models and unquestioned masculinities.

Carmela's attempted abduction and abuse at the hands of three *terroni*, *incivili* and *assatanati*, can be read as a critique of both an irresistible male predatory sexual drive and the concept of honour. Fortuitously escaping unharmed and overwhelmed by rage, Carmela would seek immediate revenge with her flick knife, a relic of her

Southern rural origins. ‘Lasciami!’ – she shouts, as Amedeo drags her away – ‘gli devo dare *almeno* una coltellata!’ (at 01:15:54) [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup> Here, and in a later scene, Carmela makes explicit the distinction between paid sex and rape: without consent there is only deception and violence. This unexpected, frantic scene disrupts briefly but abruptly the overall comic rhythm of the film with a dramatic yet caustic, almost cynical, twist.

(Trans-)formation, rejected or acted, is thus the key word that Zampa’s and Sonego’s prostitute seems to interpret, framed and underlined in the journey through changing landscapes. Two more scenes may be read in this way. Having missed the train and Amedeo’s being in hospital following his convulsive fit, she is now alone and temporarily helpless. She does not speak English, she cannot read or write properly, and she has no money for a new train ticket costing thirty dollars: ‘Trenta dollari ... e dove li piglio?’ (at 01:19:07), Carmela asks herself. In the following scene, it is clear that a decision has been taken. Carmela walks slowly into a nocturnal crowded street, trying to attract the attention of a potential client. She wears a simple, short, greenish dress; no wig, make-up or high-heeled shoes. Posture and gaze change slightly in her casual stroll past a Salvation Army’s choir, through the red-light district and towards a client. ‘Sant’Orsolina non mi guardare. Ti giuro che questa è l’ultima volta che mi spoglio. Pure di notte voglio rimanere vestita!’ (at 01:20:55),<sup>25</sup> Carmela promises her patron saint, taking her clothes off in an anonymous hotel room, commenting simultaneously

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<sup>24</sup> An echo of Mario Monicelli’s *La ragazza con la pistola* (1968), of which Rodolfo Sonego wrote the story and the screenplay (Monicelli and Codelli, 1989:86-87).

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that although Carmela earlier pledged not to curse, drink and smoke again, she never swore not to prostitute herself.



on prostitution and marriage. The unsuspecting Amedeo, lying in the hospital, surrounded by bright lights, white walls and white nuns' habits, is innocent and naïve by comparison.

Finally, Carmela finds herself once again with Amedeo on the train back to his home, Bun Bun Ga. Carmela, still wearing the white wedding-like dress she wore when first presented to Giuseppe, reveals her dark 'past' to Amedeo with bitter sobs. The quiet restaurant carriage and its absorbed occupants suddenly becomes the theatre for an animated demonstration of frustrated rage. The couple noisily reproach each other for the betrayals each has suffered. Amedeo, however, is ready to *forgive* her: a dangerous move that provokes her sharp resentment. 'Ma che hai da perdonare?!' (at 01:42:36) she replies, slapping him hard. Nothing and nobody must dare to discuss her dignity and integrity. Her refusal to be labelled as 'Other' might reflect the uncritical internalization of the stigma attached to the prostitute, echoing the contradictions of Italian society. It is a step back from Dora's untameable freedom. More likely, in this scene Zampa and Sonego take the opportunity to distance themselves, thus the prostitute, from predictable representations: neither punishment, nor forgiveness is necessary. The very last glimpse of the unhappy couple from the slowly accelerating train suggests more about Zampa's representation. The vast open space in which Carmela seems to have become entrapped and the movement of the train allude to a notion of (trans-)formation as a never-ending process which simultaneously casts bitter doubt as to the real possibilities of lasting and substantial change.

### 6.3. Prostitute on Stage: From *Nudo di donna* (1981) to *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (1987)

Despite the so-called decline of Italian cinema, a number of significant films portraying prostitute characters were released in the 1980s – starting from when the *Collettivo di cinema femminista* began working on AAA. *Offresi* and faced censorship. From drama to thriller, these films provide very different representations of the prostitute, interpreted with greater or lesser complexity and varying degrees of reference to past models. In Lattuada's melodrama *La Cicala* (1980), for instance, the suicidal protagonist – a former prostitute betrayed by her own daughter and husband - becomes an obsolete manifesto from which escapes a silent, sarcastic comment on the anxiety of Italian society about female sexual emancipation. In the sexy comedy *Buona come il pane* (1982), on the other hand, the curvaceous golden-hearted/happy hooker appears to play an unforeseen role in helping to expose the unpredictable nature of male sexuality. Thus, in jeering at the clients' goofy sexuality, the film seems simultaneously to emasculate them and to soothe the audience's uncomfortable and prudish feelings towards sex, its practice and the body.

Nino Manfredi's comedy *Nudo di donna* (1981) presents more interesting challenges. The search for identity by a jealous middle-aged man, Sandro, revolves and collapses around the madonna/whore opposition. His wife Laura and the prostitute Riri - who happens, or appears, to be Laura's double - lead his confused journey towards himself. It is with Riri, the prostitute, or somebody in 'between' her and Laura, that

Sandro restores his declining sexual drive. Taking off her 'work' wig, in an interesting process of subtraction, Rirì ceases temporarily to *be* a prostitute, her resemblance to Laura more striking; however, she is still someone else, a *transitional* person. Her identities thus slide continuously into each other, becoming Sandro's alluring day-nightmare and enigma that he will never resolve. The real identity of Laura/Rirì is in fact secondary to the economy of the film: 'Ma è così importante?' (at 1:37:51), asks the double. Illusion, wife, or prostitute, Rirì/Laura rejects any simplistic representations of female and male roles; rather, she offers a workable re-negotiation for Sandro's shaky masculinity. While both Laura and Rirì can exist for themselves, even when ostensibly performing a pre-established gendered identity, Sandro can prove his existence only in relation or in contrast to 'them' or to the others. In other words, Laura through Rirì, and *vice versa*, invites him to resign his interest in the truth, to renounce ownership over his partner's (whoever it is) thoughts and body, and to accept the challenge of a different kind of relationship.

These and other productions, such as the dramatic *Le occasioni di Rosa* (Piscicelli, 1981), would surely deserve much more attention. This final section will, however, focus on a thriller - *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (1987) - one that might be considered emblematic of this intense 1980s cinematic production.

### 6.3.1. *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* (1987)

Although it received a harsh reception from Italian critics,<sup>26</sup> *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* represents a strange yet interesting example of the 1980s visual narrative on prostitution. The only work by Franco Ferrini, the film is in fact a tantalizing thriller, focusing exclusively on a group of prostitutes who are the heart, and at the heart, of the whole story. It is predominantly an all-female film, where incidental male characters hardly disturb the female protagonists, who are well-organized self-employed women and, above all, emotionally independent.

Returning to the 1960s leads the viewer to the rare exception of Antonio Pietrangeli's *Adua e le compagne*, the bitter account of four ex-prostitutes who try to make a life for themselves after the closure of the brothels. The resoluteness and autonomy of Adua, the main character, and her friends are continuously undermined by the male-dominated social context. Wishes and decisions depend on exhausting negotiations with men, who always act as 'protectors', exploiters or redeemers. In other words, no negotiation is possible as no concession can easily be granted in this unbalanced relationship. Twenty-seven years elapse between the two films; Ferrini's *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* seems to reconsider and develop Pietrangeli's view, and pays a form of homage to the less ideological and more 'glamorous' 1980s. Thus,

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<sup>26</sup> More recently, it has been included both in a blacklist of 1500 pictures to be avoided and in a list of cult films. See: Bertarelli, M., 2003. *1500 film da evitare*. Rome: Gremese, pp. 47-48; Giusti, M., 1999. *Dizionario dei film italiani stracult*. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer; Poppi, R., 2002. *I registi: dal 1930 ai giorni nostri*. Rome: Gremese, p. 175.

*Caramelle da uno sconosciuto*, despite its questionable aesthetic value, is a film that invites greater attention than has hitherto been devoted to it, for at least two reasons.

Ferrini's work is, firstly, a rich collection of stereotypes, ambiguities, and subversions. It represents an original attempt to traverse and undermine different genres, shifting from one to another, from slasher film to social documentary, from thriller to (erotic) comedy, from romance to drama. In so doing, the film takes unexpected directions, blurring into continuous micro-‘crises’ and internal quarrels that may expose the audience to its own prejudices. Such stylistic choice reflects the inadequacy of all publicly-established discourses in evoking and representing realistic scenarios of the condition of the prostitutes, and suggests the disruption of stereotypes.

Secondly, violence against prostitutes is the other leading theme of the story, although addressed obliquely. Ferrini seemingly considers violence against prostitutes inherent in their work; he does not, however, neglect to represent them as active fighters rather than as helpless or predestined victims. Therefore, under his direction, violence assumes an additional ridiculous connotation, one that the streaming of blood and tense atmospheres cannot completely cover. The fictional and cartoon-like features of certain images displace violence elsewhere, purposely delaying or actually preventing the empathic involvement of the audience. The spectator may then overlook her/his own detachment from the violence inflicted on the prostitute and absolve her/himself from any suspicion of responsibility.

This final section will thus investigate the cultural ‘short circuit’ implied in and caused by this 1980s representation of prostitutes. Choosing to reduce the space

assigned to male characters, for instance, might be the signal of a critical attitude towards certain practices of masculinity that characterize Italian society. On the other hand, the ending, assigning the role of killer to a female character, might reveal uncomfortable feelings and/or unvoiced conflicts around female sexual self-determination. It will also explore the meaning of the prostitutes' dominant position in the film, the representation of violence, and the connections with the contemporary public discourses produced around and by prostitutes themselves. Franco Ferrini's work could represent a rudimentary attempt to negotiate among new elements and issues brought to light in the early 1980s by the unexpected self-promotion of prostitutes.

Released in 1987, five years after the coming out of Carla Corso, *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* appears to recall some of the real sequence of murders from which she herself narrowly escaped. The story is simple: a number of prostitutes decide to react in order to stop a serial killer who is threatening their community. According to Ferrini (2011), he was inspired by Fritz Lang's masterpiece *M* (1931). While the initial idea was based on the comedy genre, it was decided to transform 'il materiale fino ad allora elaborato in un sano giallo all'italiana'.<sup>27</sup> Ferrini's lengthy collaboration with Dario Argento, *maestro* of the Italian thriller and horror film genre, confirms this final choice. Unlike other productions, however, *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* is a choral film, a choice that Ferrini considers functional to the plot (2007): there is no leading character; all of the main roles are played by women.

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<sup>27</sup> Ottini, D., 2007. *Franco Ferrini: parole di terrore ed il cinema di Dario Argento*. [online]. (Updated 20 April 2007) Available at: <[http://www.horror.it/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=241&Itemid=30&limit=1&limitstart=1](http://www.horror.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=241&Itemid=30&limit=1&limitstart=1)>[Accessed 30 April 2010]

Ferrini nevertheless makes some effort to re-define the prostitute character into an image more securely anchored in real life. His preliminary, accurate research on that matter included meetings with the founders of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute, who later attended the film preview (Ferrini, 2011). *Caramelle da uno sconosciuto* appears thus a real attempt to shake off the stereotypes and myths that contain public discourse on prostitution. Perhaps his intentions were misunderstood as sociological or political: recalling the furious reaction of Pia Covre as she stormed out of the film preview room, Franco Ferrini dispels any doubt: ‘non ero affatto interessato a manifesti politici; volevo solo raccontare una storia e basta’ (2011). Quotations from his many readings and interviews are disseminated throughout the text and recognizable in some of the prostitute characters. Ferrini attempts to go beyond the usual assortment of stereotypes; he outlines intimate or psychological features for each prostitute, who is introduced to the audience as an ordinary person. From the opening scene, and the first murder, the film deploys personal details of the prostitute characters, in a didactic sequence of brief shots. Lena, carefully concealing her activity, or Isa the brutal mother of Valentina, a problematic teenage child, are revealed. Bruna, the second victim, is depicted as unable to look after herself. Stella, on the other hand, deals successfully with her money, while Angela, a hairdresser assistant unjustly fired from her job, meets her first client as she attempts to help her husband’s moribund business. Nadine resembles a worldly-wise, mature woman. There is a lesbian couple, who work indoors with a ‘clientela rispettabile, tutta gente conosciuta, con la carta di credito’ (at 19:02).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ferrini here pays tribute to one of the most enduring erotic fantasies on the diffusion of lesbianism

None is connected with criminal organizations, none is a drug addict, and the majority appear comfortable with themselves. It is obviously a partial representation of the reality of prostitution, and the story requires women characters with a great deal of agency in shaping and leading their own lives and profession.

Ferrini seems to have learned a lesson, which he takes for granted, dispensing with further analysis or revision. The dialogues actually sound unnatural, closer to a social commentary and/or a political denunciation than to a proper thriller. Fragments of interviews with prostitutes reported in magazines and newspapers since the earlier ‘coming-out’ and protests of the Seventies are recognizable.<sup>29</sup> This aspect is more patent in the first group scene, a meeting in which the threatened women start to elaborate a self-defence strategy. The camera zooms back out to show a long table, at which they are seated smoking, drinking, and taking notes.<sup>30</sup> Ashtrays full of cigarette ends, coffee cups, and piles of newspapers clutter the table, completing the scene in its similarity to a business meeting. Over a murmur of protest and complaints, Nadine summarizes the situation:

Li abbiamo tutti contro; l’assassino ci uccide; i giornali ci sputtanano, la polizia invece di proteggerci ci dà addosso. La devono smettere di romperci le palle anche sul posto di lavoro. A me due sere fa m’hanno ritirato la patente (at 24:24)

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among prostitutes, which found pseudo-scientific support in the nineteenth century. *See*, for instance, Lombroso, C. and Ferrero, G., 2004. *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>29</sup> *See* Chapter Four.

<sup>30</sup> Most replicate the 1980s fashion heavily influenced by *Dynasty*, the popular American soap opera that had introduced the concept of executive dressing for women: padded square shoulders, big hair, and large gold earrings.



Then, in what looks like a question addressed to the viewer seated before the screen, she asks rhetorically: ‘ma lo sapete che se invece [the killer, ndr] ammazzasse le vigilesse, oppure, [...] le maestre elementari avrebbero già messo una taglia? Eppure è un servizio sociale anche il nostro. Se non è discriminazione questa! (at 24:24). Nadine is immediately echoed by other women. Once more, the camera moves from side to side, introducing new speakers more or less young, more or less glamorous, more or less pretty. A mother and her daughter lament the decline of business; a young African explains that clients too are afraid; a robust, mature woman demands capital punishment. Others express their fear, anxiety and sense of vulnerability. During the speeches, a tracking shot suddenly shows all women’s feet wearing high-heeled shoes or boots, a sexualized fetish-object not infrequently associated with prostitutes and ‘ragazze facili’. It might be an attempt to delegitimize prostitutes’ feelings or, more likely, to challenge urban mythology on sexual availability and redirect audience’s perception.<sup>31</sup> Appearance and being are here opposed and offered to the interpretation of the spectator.

Nadine, who emerges as a leader, takes then the floor once more and invites her colleagues to change their way of working and organize a collective self-defence. ‘Una per tutte tutte per una!’, she concludes (at 27:41). Her words are shortly followed by a drum-roll; a *Colonel Bogey*-like march accompanies the prostitutes’ organization of a surveillance service on the street, which includes an agreement with the Peeping Toms.

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<sup>31</sup> Ferrini claims (2011) that this specific shot was only a means of suddenly introducing the last upset speaker, a woman in great disagreement with her colleagues.

Usually dismissed as irritating presences, the professional voyeurs are now invited to peer at prostitutes' sexual encounters, in exchange for their help and surveillance. In a nocturnal, outdoor scene, the prostitutes convened seal the pact by exposing their nudity to their invisible spectators. Close-ups of women's body parts and garments, marked by an appropriate soundtrack adjustment, intersect with subjective shots that assume the points of view of the Peeping Toms hidden behind the bushes.

The scene may sound superfluous to the economy of the film, a bizarre and ridiculous insert that diverts the direction of the film itself and might confound the viewer. It might also be argued that the close-ups objectify women's bodies as a form of control over their sexual power (Mulvey, 1975). Nevertheless, the frame itself may be a synthesis of contradictory trends. Through adopting the Peeping Toms' point of view, Ferrini seems to multiply and resist the objectification that can ultimately not take place. The shift towards erotic comedy within a slasher genre,<sup>32</sup> in fact, partially frustrates this operation, calling into question the effectiveness of the male gaze. The prostitutes, willingly exposing their bodies to the greedy but guilty scrutiny of their peepers, highlight the fragile and farcical nature of the gaze of both the hidden observer and the cinematic spectator. At the same time, the women appear to increase their own power - one not based on the bodies *per se*, but on the knowledge and detached practices derived from their work experience.

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<sup>32</sup> Apart from the weapon's choice (a sharp metal object), the other key element of the *slasher* sub-genre of horror movie, is the insertion of gratuitous scenes of nudity. According to Adam Rockoff, it depends on the audience, composed of a prevalence of male adolescents. See Rockoff, A., 2002. *Going to Pieces: the Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, pp. 13-20; Clover, C.J., 1992. *Men, Women and Chain Saw. Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. British Film Institute, p. 23.

After the homicide of a third woman, an old, alcoholic and solitary street-walker – a relic from the past who therefore faces her death with a last defiant, puzzled expression – a new, more crowded, assembly takes place. The profile of the potential killer, a man, a client is then outlined: ‘un uomo con la vita sessuale carente, disgraziata. Magari è uno che ci cerca soltanto per parlare. O uno che si sente deriso, respinto e allora uccide’ (at 49:33). The scene slides into a dressing sequence where women put make-up on, wear lingerie, take the pill, and put condoms and irritating spray in their handbags. In other words, they array themselves for work, or, we can also suppose, just for a date. For almost two minutes, close-ups of women’s body parts occupy the visual space, intersected with nocturnal fires outdoors. This time, however, a melancholic song sweetly ‘wraps’ the images producing a curious contrast and warmly engaging viewers’ attention. In this way, the exposition of the female body, divested of the comedic tone, *partially* loses its objectified quality and its seductiveness. In reality, the manhunt is just started, overlapping the ineffectual actions of the police. An assemblage of frames shows odd, suspicious clients displaying their embarrassing sexual fragility: from men who want only to talk and show family photographs to those who prefer to watch their object of desire through a lens rather than with their own eyes.<sup>33</sup> The spectator is transformed from observer into voyeur, peeping over the shoulder or, more intriguingly,

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<sup>33</sup> Ferrini provides a pitiless representation of male sexuality right from the opening scene that precedes the first homicide. A kerb-crawler picks up a young prostitute and takes her to her place. Once there, waiting for his ‘session’ he sits down on a sofa in front of a television set and a camera arranged to record sexual meetings. He realizes that he can cheerfully admire himself playing ‘live’ as if with a model car and like a boy who has never grown up. The television replicates his gestures, his attentive gaze on himself, and his imitation of the rumble of a car – as all children do. He seems to indicate that having sex is just like driving a car, never mind whether real or small-scale.

through the 'key hole' of another camera, thus assuming the double role of voyeur and critical observer.

A quotation from Carla Corso's own account of her encounter with a serial killer offers the only moment in which violence loses any connotation with cartoon films. In the last frame of the nocturnal scene, set in the restricted interior of a car, the silhouette of a prostitute wildly hits the client with the sharp heel of her shoe. No soundtrack; only the muffled noise of the city's outskirts breaks the silence of the car's confined space. Other sounds thus emerge: the money exchanged, breathing, and the noise of the blows provide a realistic quality to the whole scene. The sudden violence exercised in self-defence by the woman appears, in fact, truer and more palpable than those previously represented in the film. Nevertheless, a mid-shot of her and her generous, naked breast interrupts and closes the dramatic narrative with a hint of the ridiculous. Again, Ferrini deploys her 'flesh' in such a way that seems to negate and call into question her own freedom and individuality.

The last thirty minutes of the film revolve around the hunting down of the killer thanks to the unusual collaboration between prostitutes and police – until the sudden appearance of Valentina revolutionizes the story. In a frantic scene, set in the big, empty toilet of a bar, Isa's distraught daughter appears, wearing an odd costume, her voice distorted by a mask. She holds a captive bolt pistol against her victim, prostitute and former baby sitter, who lies now almost unconscious on the floor. The frame is shot from above, a high point of view that blurs the proportions. Lena is saved by the police inspector and the identity of the criminal is finally revealed: Valentina and the killer are

one and the same person. We later apprehend that she had secretly been forced into prostitution by her mother who, once arrested, commits suicide, hanging herself in her cell. Although not completely unexpected, this *coup de théâtre* provokes a range of contradictory reactions in the viewer ranging from incredulity to laughter, as it subverts genres and gender beliefs.

Whether or not Ferrini has eluded the issue of violence against prostitutes depends on how the viewer prefers to interpret the ending. Assigning the role of the killer to a female character does not necessarily reveal Ferrini's (maybe, our own) anxiety regarding what a prostitute might or might not embody. Rather, it might merely be one of the possible, 'innocent' conclusions of a film that Ferrini made only to 'tell a story', nothing else. He twisted the plot towards the most unexpected finale (2011).<sup>34</sup> The female killer is a common figure in *film noir* (Kaplan, E.A., 1998), rape-revenge horror (Clover, 1992; Read, 2000) and deadly dolls films (Holmlund, 1994:127-151), yet Ferrini blends and surpasses these genres. A secondary character throughout the film, Valentina appears three times, only in order to accentuate the personalities of her mother and her pensive baby sitter. She is not a *femme fatale*, a Lolita, or a 'proper' avenger, only an abused adolescent.<sup>35</sup> Her profile seems more appropriate to the social

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<sup>34</sup> Violent crime and, in particular, serial murder, is still viewed as a male-dominated area. According to Candice Skrapec (1994:243), female offenders tend 'to be relegated to an "exception case" status that rest upon exceptional or untoward, compelling circumstance [...]. The notion so violates the idea of femaleness, tied to her traditional nurturing role, that a woman is denied her identity as a multiple murderer'.

<sup>35</sup> Adam Rockoff (2002:5-6) states that 'the killer is an ordinary person who has suffered terrible trauma - [...] - (humiliation, the death of a loved one, rape, psychological abuse). It is because of this past injustice that he (or in a few cases, she) seeks vengeance – the bloodier the better'.

documentary on the forms of psychological damage that prostitution might cause.<sup>36</sup> Pia Covre's irate reaction to the ending of the film is thus easily explained. Ferrini does not explore alternative directions; he apparently accepts the notion of the damaging nature of prostitution itself, precisely when Italian prostitutes were fighting for the acknowledgment of their rights.<sup>37</sup>

The screenplay and directorial style might justify the oblivion to which Ferrini's film has been consigned. The unavoidable process might have been accelerated by the unmediated representation of prostitutes and clients and the cartoon-like depiction of violence. This slightly didactic, over-documented picture results in a 'normalization' and 'de-romanticization' of the prostitute character. Paradoxically, deprived of their aura of titillating perversion, of shameful secrets or dramatic fate, Ferrini's prostitutes seem to lose their symbolic appeal through being transformed into business-like women. The film simultaneously discloses and dismisses some of the narrative tropes that construct and nurture the viewer's durable, morbid fascination with the prostitute character. At the same time, the reduced space allotted to male characters and the pitiless representation of male clients might be considered a criticism of Italian men's attitude towards women and also their own sexuality. From this point of view, Ferrini's film may be understood within the tradition of the most vitriolic Italian comedy.

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<sup>36</sup> Franco Ferrini (2011) refers to his visit to the Bambin Gesù Hospital in Rome where he found information on cases of personality disorders among children forced into prostitution.

<sup>37</sup> It is necessary to remember, once again, that Ferrini never intended to direct a *manifesto politico*.

## Conclusion

As has been shown, this analysis highlights some interesting aspects about these cinematic representations of prostitution and prostitutes. First of all, it brings into light man's roles, as client or as potential partner. His masculinity and his sexual desire are fully represented in their ambiguities and fragilities. No heroes inhabit these films; rather, all male characters appear trapped within an imposed model of masculinity to which they attempt to adhere with little or no success. Continuously confronted with their own failure and their female counterparts, these pitiless figures seem to redirect viewer's attention toward a critique of prefabricated social roles.

Secondly, it underlines the performative quality implied in the act of female prostitution – even before the coming out of the prostitutes – as all films more or less overtly reveal. Rather than being or becoming prostitutes, women performing their own prostitution resist prostitution *per se* while they try to re-enact and reinterpret prostitution as an autonomous gesture. Their 'performance' simultaneously confirms and challenges female gender identity, which indeed is unequivocally destabilized.

Furthermore, this 'performance' appears also to interrogate the idea of the 'Other' as part of the identity imposed on, and embodied by, women and female prostitutes. Each prostitute character, here chosen and analysed, seems to imply the refusal 'to reduce herself to an Other' (Minh-ha, 1991, cited in McCabe, 2004:81). More precisely, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words (2004:218),

She is [...] this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that affirming “I am like you” while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.

The Italian comedy genre plays no secondary role in what is an unsettling process: the enrolment of the prostitute character - freed of sin and free to laugh at herself - simultaneously resists and questions, rather than confirms, certain established cultural codes.



## Conclusion

When asking about this research over recent years, men have generally adopted a slightly jovial, distancing approach while women almost immediately expressed a certain degree of personal engagement. Two in particular, an American scholar and an Italian travel agent, have left a lasting impression. The scholar was extremely surprised at my statement that for *some* women as well as heterosexual men, homosexuals and transsexuals, prostitution can be a choice – and a positive one. She had assumed that all prostitutes are women; furthermore, that all are victims. There can be no doubt that trafficking in women for sexual exploitation has become an increasingly prominent issue in the last twenty years,<sup>1</sup> it is also true that this phenomenon co-exists with other forms of ‘self-entrepreneurial’ sex work as the cases of Andrew Rosetta,<sup>2</sup> Tracy Quan,<sup>3</sup> Brook Magnanti (*alias* Belle de Jour),<sup>4</sup> and Ovidie seem to demonstrate.<sup>5</sup>

More intriguing was the conversation with the travel agent who, after a calculated pause, asked why I had chosen ‘*precisely* the prostitute’ as subject of my

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on this issue is vast and covers very different approaches. *See, for instance, King, R. and Mai, N., 2008. Out of Albania: From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy. Berghahn Books; Agustin, L.M., 2007. Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry. London: Zed Books.* Nor should we forget the parallel phenomenon of those women who work as prostitutes to fund their drug addictions.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Rosetta, pseudonym of a male escort who has written a book about his career in London. He is also a member of the GMB Sex Workers' Union. *See Rosetta, A., 2009. Whatever She Wants. True Confessions of a Male Escort. Ebury Press.*

<sup>3</sup> Tracy Quan, writer and former call girl, is a member of PONY (Prostitutes of New York). She is the author of the popular Nancy Chan trilogy. *See Quan, T., 2003. Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl. New York: Three Rivers Press.*

<sup>4</sup> Brook Magnanti is a research scientist, blogger, writer and former call girl. *See De Jour, Belle, 2005. The intimate adventures of a London call girl. London: Phoenix.*

<sup>5</sup> Ovidie is a French pornographic actress, director and writer. *See Ovidie, 2002. Porno Manifesto. Paris: Flammarion.*

research. Her provocative emphasis triggered the revelation that certain regular customers of her agency are Romanian women whose occupation has never been named. Nonetheless, specific details dropped into their conversations have suggested the source of the incomes generally sent to their families. The travel agent felt it legitimate to ‘suspend’ her judgment of these particular women while, on the other hand, addressing her resentment towards all other prostitutes who prefer ‘doing nothing’ (literally ‘fare un cazzo’).<sup>6</sup>

These two casual encounters largely epitomize contemporary Western understanding of, and attitudes towards, prostitution: a constant and more or less explicit, simplistic moral condemnation. In other words, the prostitute *is* a female individual who might be victim or else a whore, a woman who engages in promiscuous sexual intercourse. In both cases her gender identity, her iconographic position as the ‘madonna/puttana’ are confirmed. No woman would willingly choose to engage in (casual) sexual intercourse without emotional involvement, unless she were a ‘whore’. The client, removed from this already empty landscape, is nonetheless well ‘known’ as a heterosexual male who might be victimiser or loser. Alternatively, he might be merely a purchaser of specific sexual services or fantasies. The act of prostitution is thus reduced to simple terms that preclude any contextual complexities, even despite the

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<sup>6</sup> According to a recent survey conducted by TAMPEP, most EU sex workers come from Romania. This does not mean, of course, that all women coming from Romania work as prostitutes. *See* Tampep, 2009. *Sex Work in Europe. A mapping of the prostitution scene in 25 European countries*. [online] Tampep. Available at: <<http://tampep.eu/documents/TAMPEP2009/European Mapping Report.pdf>> [Accessed 14 May 2011]

latest Italian sexual scandals,<sup>7</sup> the serial killing of prostitutes,<sup>8</sup> and the phenomenon of sex tourism, towards which Italian women as well as men seem increasingly inclined.<sup>9</sup>

The current research was prompted by a need to offer an alternative and ‘three-dimensional’ view of the issue of prostitution, highlighted by prostitutes themselves between the 1970s and 1980s. Although those prostitutes were only a small, unusually articulate group, their coming out was an undeniable challenge to well-established, and substantially monochrome, discourses on paid sex. The multi-disciplinary approach here adopted has allowed me to re-explore and investigate not only the complex nature of prostitution itself but also the social and cultural strategies put in place to ensure control over its representation. Prostitution needed first to be reframed within an historical and juridical context, in order to regain a diachronic perspective of the changes occurring in the paid sex trade and directly relevant to the prostitutes’ lives. From the enactment of the Merlin law and through the suggestions of the feminist movement, the study covers the period up to and including the foundation of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute in 1982 and the very early signs of immigration in the late 1980s. The analysis of different sources has, then, enriched this already complex picture with some aspects that tend generally to be undervalued or eclipsed.

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<sup>7</sup> Aside from the Rubygate trial involving the Italian Prime Minister and the case of the Lazio Governor, blackmailed for his relations with transsexual prostitutes, there is also an investigation into a case of corruption that ‘claimed up to 350 prostitutes were offered to senior officials in a bid to win key contracts’. See (Anon.), 2010. “Army of escorts” used to fuel corruption. *Adnkronos* [online], 11 March. Available at: <<http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Politics/?id=3.1.108173268>> [Accessed 10 December 2010]. Only the Lazio Governor has resigned.

<sup>8</sup> From the last ‘known’ case discovered in 2001 in Italy to the Ipswich serial murders in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See the *Introduction*, footnote 6, p. 12.

A number of significant issues re-emerge repeatedly throughout the study. The law, media and political representation constitute the male dominant and controlling narratives. Their pervasiveness is traceable in women's, feminists' and prostitutes' writing and speeches over time as, for instance, the case of the Genoese *Coordinamento donne FLM* has demonstrated. There is an interesting overlap with the unwillingness of feminist thinking to come to terms with the full implications of the challenge posed by the new articulation of the prostitutes' point of view. Feminism thus, inadvertently, partially colluded in the construction and oversimplification of the representation of prostitution within cultural discourse. Feminists' early silence on prostitution and their progressive estrangement from prostitutes' solicitations led to silence, discomfort and the partial preclusion of more autonomous relationships for each grouping.

The present study has also revealed the continuous displacement of violence, male desires and sexuality from public view. Distancing themselves, through silence, condemnation or irony, from their participation in the act of prostitution and positioning themselves as judges of female sexual behaviour, men have defended and ultimately prevented access to, or understanding of, their own sexuality. The banning of AAA. *Offresi* can be placed within this strategy of self-defence, firmly maintaining the position of control in the territory of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the meaning of violence against prostitutes, assumed an unavoidable consequence of their lifestyle, has been consistently underestimated as it is gender-based. This violence should, rather, be

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<sup>10</sup> Different strategies have been used to control the impact of the Comitato per i diritti civili delle prostitute. While the names of two porn stars, such as Ilona Staller (*alias* Cicciolina) or Moana Pozzi, are familiar in Italian popular culture, very few people can recall the existence of the Comitato.

interpreted as an additional strategy both to re-affirm control over all women and to re-balance the power lost by men in negotiations over sex.

Prostitutes, or at least those who are willing and find a way to express themselves, oppose their own narratives where these partially or largely clash with dominant representations. Far from being glamorous women, they nonetheless show a degree of agency and self-awareness that their marginalization and stigmatization cannot always negate. In *Lettere dalle case chiuse*, for instance, the exploited inhabitants of the brothels reveal an acute sense of offended dignity difficult to detect in the letters addressed by non-prostitute women to the columns of popular magazines. Furthermore, in later texts, such as *Ritratto a tinte forti*, the writings introduce a strong element of dissent that accentuates the cultural construction of ‘romanticized’ female sexuality.

It has, then, been of paramount importance to maintain a multi-disciplinary approach to prostitution as a way of avoiding the traps of its representation.<sup>11</sup> Media, self-writing, political agendas and film have all been considered in this context. Popular cinema, for example, has played an ambiguous role in hinting at something that cannot yet be said outright, apparently resisting dominant constructions while still subverting them (Breillat, 1999).<sup>12</sup> The representation in the comedy genre of hapless male

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<sup>11</sup> Ronald J. Weitzer (2010b:26) has called for a polymorphous paradigm as an alternative sociological perspective which ‘holds that a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations and worker experiences exists within the arena of paid sexual services and performances. This paradigm is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions resulting in the uneven distribution of agency and subordination’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Cinema is a mode of expression that allows you to express all the nuances of a thing while including its opposites. These are things that can’t be quantified mentally; yet they can exist and be juxtaposed.

characters when compared, for instance, with more resourceful women counterparts acting the role of prostitutes might appear a criticism of a model of masculinity to which men are expected to belong. Thus, while male members of an audience may laugh away their anxieties by identifying with the losers, they are simultaneously confirmed in their unassailable dominant social position.

These interpretive strands emerging from the study as a whole capture and highlight the contradictions and discontinuities of the so-called ‘modernization’ begun with the economic boom and towards which Italian society was expected to move. Women, as well as men, were victims of this problematic process; also – and above all – they become protagonists of their own transformation, thanks to the contributions of feminism. Feminism could not, though, embrace and support the consequences brought into being by the prostitutes’ political activism, and these relegated the prostitutes to the very margins of feminist thinking. To paraphrase Luisa Passerini (1996:145), neither legislation nor Italian feminists were always ‘synchronized’; nor were they prepared to deal with the changes occurring around them alongside the challenges that arose as new political subjects entered social debate.

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That may seem very contradictory. Cinema allows you to film these contradictions’, Catherine Breillat 1999, cited in Constable, Liz., 2004. ‘Unbecoming Sexual Desires for Women Becoming Sexual Subjects: Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Catherine Breillat (1999)’. *MLN*, 119(4), p. 672.

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