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Postfeminist (Dis)Entanglements: Transgression and Conformism in Contemporary Italian Teen Movies

Paola Bonifazio

This essay will examine the articulation of discourses of gender and sexuality in three films based on Federico Moccia's novels, which represent Italian teenagers and their love troubles: *Tre metri sopra il cielo*, its sequel *Ho voglia di te*, and *Amore 14* (from now on, also referred to as "the Moccia films").¹ Sexuality and the sexualization of both male and female bodies are central to the films' narratives and visual strategies, and inform a configuration of the gender/sex system whose features have been widely discussed by scholars in British and American cultural and film studies under the label of "postfeminism."² More specifically, I will consider *3msc*, *hvd*, and *a14* as case studies in order to address the conflict between female sexual agency and gender normativity in film narratives, an aspect that is common to many contemporary romantic comedies and dramas both in Italy and abroad. At the core of the teen films under study in this essay lie the tropes of freedom and choice, as well as the concepts of agency and individualization, i.e., ideas that are fundamental to the construction of the neo-liberal subject. In other words, these national productions engage with questions that are not only specific to Italian society, but to Western democracies at large. In this light, I will explore the transformation of Italian film culture in a globalized film industry through the lens of these texts.

Although the Moccia films cast young—rather than mature—women and men as protagonists, the discourses of gender and sexuality that they enact have several elements in common with postfeminist discourse. Critics such as Angela McRobbie and Diane Negra attribute the postfeminist label to "chick-flicks" such as the American TV series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and the British romantic comedy *Bridget Jones's Diary*—narratives dealing with

¹ *Tre metri sopra il cielo*, directed by Luca Lucini (2004; Rome, Italy: Warner Home Video Italia, 2004), DVD; *Ho voglia di te*, directed by Luis Prieto (2007; Rome, Italy: Warner Home Video Italia, 2007), DVD; *Amore 14*, directed by Federico Moccia (2009; Rome, Italy: Medusa Video, 2012), DVD. The films are based on the following Moccia novels: *Tre metri sopra il cielo* (Milan: Feltrinelli 2004), *Ho voglia di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), and *Amore 14* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008). Federico Moccia is also co-screenwriter (with Teresa Ciabatti) of the films *Tre metri sopra il cielo* and *Ho voglia di te*; he is both director and co-screenwriter of *Amore 14* (with Luca Infascelli and Chiara Barzini). In all cases, the film release followed the publication of the book. This essay will focus on these films in terms of their engagement with postfeminist culture and discourse. For a different approach, which examines the question of masculinity and male stardom, see Catherine O'Rawe, "Mad about the Boy: Teen Stars and Serious Actors," in *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). For an overview of Italian teen films, see Davide Boero, *Chitarre e lucchetti: Il cinema adolescente da Morandi a Moccia* (Recco: Le Mani, 2009) and Mario Dal Bello, *Inquieti: I giovani nel cinema italiano del Duemila* (Turin: Effatà Editrice, 2009). From now on, I will use the following abbreviations: *Tre metri sopra il cielo* (*3msc*), *Ho voglia di te* (*hvd*), and *Amore 14* (*a14*).

² The postfeminist bibliography is quite vast within the Anglo-American/Anglophone context. Among the many titles, see Stéphanie Genz, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) for an ample introduction that highlights the various critical and theoretical viewpoints.

love and romance, and therefore ostensibly meant to appeal to a female audience.³ Far from considering “chick-flicks” to be naturally female products or as capable of appealing exclusively to a female audience (given the box office numbers, it is fair to argue that both male and female spectators enjoyed these films), I intend to analyze the politics of labeling as being dependent on specific constructions of the woman-subject (white, middle-class, heterosexual) for commercial and political purposes.⁴ McRobbie identifies three elements that are relevant in this context: continuities between postfeminism and the attitudes and behaviors that belong to the postwar modernization processes of the past; a controversial relation between postfeminist culture and the radical feminist thought of the 1970s; and the co-existence of liberated sexual behaviors and conservative gender roles in postfeminist film narratives. As McRobbie writes, discourses of gender in today’s Western popular culture are based on the same principles of individualism and freedom that have defined the liberal subject since the establishment of welfare systems and parliamentary democracies in the aftermath of War World II. Postfeminism is embedded in a culture of consumerism, accessible only to white and middle-class women, and based on the assumption that equality (brought about by modern societies, rather than by feminist gains) is the only necessary means to overcome patriarchy.⁵ In this context, modernization represents “a substitute for feminism, a kind of faux feminism.”⁶ Secondly, postfeminist discourse implicitly both draws from and rejects the past radical movements and their gains. On one hand, feminism is absorbed as a kind of Gramscian common sense; on the other, it is rejected or even hated. In particular, female characters’ achievements are predicated not on feminism, but on “female individualism.” In this framework, young women are called upon to invent their “selves” through self-monitoring practices. Finally, film narratives expose the contradictions between awareness and complicity in the treatment of sexual relationships and love—between an ironic knowingness (cognizant of a sexism present within sexual innuendo) and a seemingly sincere presentation of ideas of true love (invested in conventional modes of femininity).⁷

In her essays, Danielle Hipkins has pointed out the relevance of “the debates about the ‘sexualization of culture’ and postfeminism in the Anglophone context” to contemporary Italian media culture, especially when one considers Italian cultural phenomena such as the public outrage about the figure of the *velina*, or showgirl, as well as representations of sexualized young female characters in Italian popular cinema.⁸ In particular, she argues, popular cinema mobilizes

³ *Sex and the City: The Complete Collection*. New York: HBO Home Video, 2014, DVD. *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, directed by Sharon Maguire (2001; Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2011), DVD. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴ According to Anica (Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Audiovisive), *hvd* was among the top twenty films at the box office in 2007, earning €18,805,996.30: “Il cinema italiano in numeri: Anno solare 2007,” *Anica*, accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.anica.it/online/attachments/007_Dati%20cinema%202007.pdf

⁵ See Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, “Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁶ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 24.

⁷ Yvonne Tasker, “Enchanted (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony and the New Romantic Comedy,” in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringler (London: Routledge, 2011), 68.

⁸ Danielle Hipkins, “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl? Auditions, Talent and Taste in Contemporary Italian Popular Cinema,” *The Italianist* 32 (2012): 154. See also Hipkins, “Figlie di Papà? Adolescent Girls between the ‘Incest Motif’ and Female Friendship in Contemporary Italian Film Comedy,” *The Italianist* 35, no. 2 (2015): 1–25; ead.,

a contradictory set of messages about the female body and female agency that can only be understood when framed within the international context of postfeminism, therefore complicating the Manichean oppositional discourse that would take the *velina* herself as a scapegoat, “the abject signifier of the cultural poverty of the Italian masses.”⁹ In this essay, I will discuss how the Moccia films explore the contradictions of postfeminist culture, particularly the “double entanglement” of sexual empowerment and gender normativity. I argue that cinematic interventions in the culture of postfeminism are not only represented in the use of the *velina*, but also through that of the “average girl” (still heterosexual, white, and middle-class), whose enjoyment of sexual freedom is ultimately normalized.¹⁰

Furthermore, while Dana Renga argues that teen films such as those based on Moccia’s novels tend “to uphold the dominant ideology,”¹¹ I aim to understand both the conservative aspects and the subversive potential of their narratives. Moving away from an analysis of ideological underpinnings in film texts, I focus on the models of sexual behavior and gender conduct that narratives convey to viewers. I am not interested in revealing how films may mystify reality for the sake of extra-diegetic imperatives, but I wish, rather, to examine the ways in which the moving images may function as an educational tool for young (or not so young) viewers. In this sense, I see contemporary teen films as being in line with the traditional politics of the cultural industries in Italy. As cultural sociologist Fausto Colombo highlights, these industries (including both literary and film productions) apply two contradictory strategies that have been a constant throughout the twentieth century: a pedagogical impulse to educate the masses, and the prioritization of entertainment in order to maintain successful business outcomes.¹² Similarly, commercial cinema today continues to entertain, while also educating, viewers. At the same time, education does not happen through instruction or discipline, but as a practice of “government”: “by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs.”¹³ Such aspirations and desires are then channeled via “models of selfhood and conduct that participate in the production of neo-liberal subjects.”¹⁴ Through the experience of film-viewing, spectators may enjoy transgression while learning how to conform to the consumerist society of the free-market: films function as symbolic spaces for the articulation of ideas about conduct, and as conduits for self-monitoring practices through which teenagers negotiate their roles within the social sphere.

In the enactment of a “double entanglement,” the sexualized female body is ultimately integrated into traditional gender hierarchies. While Hipkins argues that the *velina* “incarnates

“The Showgirl Effect: Adolescent Girls and (Precarious) ‘Technologies of Sexiness’ in Contemporary Italian Cinema,” in *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*, ed. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and ead., “‘Whore-ocracy’: Showgirls, the Beauty Trade-Off, and Mainstream Oppositional Discourse in Contemporary Italy,” *The Italianist* 66, no. 3 (2011): 413–30.
⁹ Hipkins, “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?,” 155.

¹⁰ Hipkins engages with this idea in “Figlie di papà?” However, she focuses on the juxtaposition between the teenage female character and the adult generation, as she embodies a male perspective.

¹¹ Dana Renga, “Italian Teen Film and the Female Auteur,” in *New Visions of the Child in Italian Cinema*, ed. Danielle Hipkins and Roger Pitt (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2014), 311.

¹² Fausto Colombo, *La cultura sottile: Media e industria culturale in Italia dall’Ottocento agli anni Novanta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990).

¹³ Mitchell M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999), 11.

¹⁴ Lee Grieveson, “On Governmentality and Screens,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 187.

this ideal(ized) neo-liberal subject, taking advantage of a new interest in the body, sexuality and celebrity as forms of power,”¹⁵ I would add that the same subject ultimately goes through a process of self-policing by which she *chooses* to embrace a traditional female role. This transition is particularly evident in the films based on the successful novels by Moccia. These films, I argue, through female characters that engage in the double entanglement of postfeminism, continue in the tradition of popular culture in Italy, which aims at educating as well as entertaining. Without chastising the sexualization of young girls, these films instead sustain their enjoyment of sexual liberties while suggesting, at the same time, that complete fulfillment (happiness) can only come from true love and stable heterosexual companionship. Moccia himself has claimed that his success is due to his ability to talk about adolescence to adolescents.¹⁶ I would suggest that his success relies precisely on the traditional formula of pink literature, that is, the satisfaction of the psychological need for a meaningful existence in this world, as expressed through love fantasies, which readers/viewers attempt to fulfill through the texts.¹⁷ Like successful pulp fiction, the Moccia films entertain viewers with stories of troubled relationships that contain all of the successful ploys of pink literature, and that adapt the old model to the contemporary postfeminist context, thus updating stories of true and troubled love with the experience of sex, not just imagined, but also visually shown.

For example, in online reviews and blogs, teenage viewers declared that they repeatedly watched *3msc* because it represented real experiences.¹⁸ Based on Federico Moccia’s successful novel, which was first published in 1992 by *Il ventaglio* at the author’s expense, the film is actually set in the 1990s. (Later, copies of the book—which went out of print—were circulated in Roman high schools, where Moccia’s novel gained such enormous success that Feltrinelli decided to publish a shortened version in 2004.) Therefore, the passionate fans do not use the term “real” so much to mean historical accuracy as to describe the emotional experiences with which young viewers claim to identify. Identification does not function in this context exclusively in the subjective relation to the object of viewing. Rather, the viewer/film system of interactions described in these blogs is based on continuity with the everyday life of fans that wish to actively and physically engage with film characters/stars and their stories. For example, in a web page entirely dedicated to *a14*, Federico Moccia asks readers not only to express their opinions of the novel/film, but also to compare their experiences, likes, and desires to those of the characters: “Caro, Massi e gli altri protagonisti di *Amore 14* hanno gusti, sentimenti, passioni simili alle tue... o forse no. Confrontati con gli altri mocciosi” [“My dear, Massi and the other protagonists in *Amore 14* have similar tastes, feelings, passions to yours...or maybe not. Share your opinions with other ‘mocciosi’”].¹⁹ Here, the neologism “mocciosi” (i.e.: fan of Moccia’s novels) indicates that young reader-spectators belong to a self-determined and collectively

¹⁵ Hipkins, “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?,” 156.

¹⁶ Hipkins, “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?,” 173.

¹⁷ See, for example, Vittorio Spinazzola, *Il successo letterario* (Milan: Unicopli, 1985), and Umberto Eco, *Il superuomo di massa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1978).

¹⁸ See, for example, reviews published on *MyMovies*, accessed February 24, 2016

<http://www.mymovies.it/film/2004/tremetrisoprailecielo/pubblico/>.

¹⁹ Federico Moccia, “Amore 14,” *Feltrinelli*, accessed February 24, 2016,

[http://typo.feltrinelli.it/index.php?id=244&tx_jkpoll_pi1\[uid\]=2](http://typo.feltrinelli.it/index.php?id=244&tx_jkpoll_pi1[uid]=2). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

shared world in which both they and the characters live. Continuity between the spaces of literature/film and that of readers' everyday lives is also enacted through other forms of participatory practices. For example, fans began attaching padlocks to a chain on the Ponte Milvio in Rome in imitation of the protagonists in *hvd*, in a symbolic gesture of eternal love. The practice became so popular that the Mayor had to issue an ordinance to remove them from public spaces.²⁰ Rather than considering these examples to be fearful testimonies of the dangerous effects of cinema on the everyday life of Italian youth, I wish to exploit such dynamics in order to analyze these fictions as tools of governance.

Faux Feminism and Double Entanglement

To refer back to the three aspects of postfeminist discourse as described by McRobbie, the Moccia films make the idea of “faux feminism” explicit in the pairing of sexual freedom with consumerism. In *a14*, as in other teen movies such as Volfrango Di Blasio's *Come tu mi vuoi*,²¹ shopping, just as much as sex, is a means through which young women affirm their independence. As McRobbie points out, the origins of this notion of femininity, which equates emancipation with consumption, can be traced back (in Western Europe) to the immediate postwar period. In Italy, although society remained patriarchal, the right to work—established as the founding principle of the 1948 Constitution—provided a perception of individual empowerment for both male and female citizens. Postwar modernization processes brought both freedom and repression for women, who were encouraged to enjoy the changes and simultaneously chastised when they actually did so. Furthermore, going to the cinema gained definite acceptance as a group activity for women unaccompanied by men, legitimizing the previously denied possibility of “public pleasure in leisure time” for the female subject.²² While the number of female spectators increased, and the arrival of modern methods of production and consumption fostered changes in the traditional hierarchy of genders, melodramas and romantic comedies grew in number and in popularity. Representations of women and prosperity in these films, as Mary Wood has explained, were filled with the contradictions brought on by the co-existence of progressive and conservative forces.²³ Thus, the success of film melodramas, such as those directed by Raffaello Matarazzo, can also be understood in direct correlation to the expansion of female audiences and the social demand for a return to order. Casting Italian women in the role of innocent victims, eventually rewarded for their self-abnegation and re-integrated in the family and society, Matarazzo's weepies policed female sexual behaviors in a fast-changing modernizing Italian society, in which female emancipation was both necessary to increase film revenues and a source of anxiety for the male-dominated traditional social order. Comparing postwar melodramas to the contemporary teen movies analyzed in this essay, the

²⁰ After a long debate between the Roman mayor and the neighborhood administration, the locks were finally removed in 2012. See “Ponte Milvio, addio ai lucchetti,” *La Repubblica*, September 10, 2012, http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/09/10/news/ponte_milvio_addio_ai_lucchetti_al_via_la_rimozione-42257541/?refresh_ce (accessed November 18, 2006).

²¹ *Come tu mi vuoi*, directed by Volfrango De Biasi (2007; Rome, Italy: Medusa Video, 2013), DVD.

²² Giuliana Bruno, “Streetwalking around Plato's Cave,” *October* 60 (Spring, 1992): 126.

²³ Mary P. Wood, “From Bust to Boom: Women and Representations of Prosperity in Italian Cinema of the Late '40s and '50s,” in *Women in Italy, 1945–1960*, ed. Penelope Morris (London: Palgrave, 2007), 60–61.

now sexually liberated female subjects continue to perform traditional gender roles and express desires for true love. In the Moccia films, both male and female protagonists may in some ways transgress the boundaries of the conservative society in which they live, in the tradition of fiction films such as *Les Tricheurs* and *Rebel Without a Cause*,²⁴ at the same time, by working through sexual desires and aspirations of social adaptability in a conservative manner, the same films appear to educate young viewers on how to “fit” into society.

By comparatively studying contemporary and 1950s popular genres, I do not aim to construct a grand narrative of Italian cinema. Rather, I take historical analyses of the past as tools to frame and understand similar dynamics in the present. The similarities between female-oriented film cycles produced in the United States or Great Britain, and the Italian teen productions, speak to the continuities between gender models before—and in the aftermath of—radical feminism, but also to the past and present links between gender discourses and target audiences.²⁵ Writing about 1940s American “woman’s film,” Mary Ann Doane clarifies how the spread of a popular genre relates to changes in movie-going practices and social dynamics. According to Doane, the boom of woman’s films occurred in a moment of “redefinition of sexual roles and reorganization of the family,” but was also the outcome of Hollywood’s analysis of its own market: American film producers assumed that cinema audiences would be predominantly female.²⁶ By “woman’s film,” scholars refer to productions that feature female protagonists, target women as viewers, and, in some cases, build ideas of female spectatorship in their narratives. These films are most frequently melodramas, and, for that reason, the genre itself has been traditionally labeled as “female.”²⁷ While melodramas, along with romantic comedies, were also popular in Italy in the 1950s, critics have argued that the Italian film industry never produced woman’s films, because women were rarely protagonists and instead always cast as partners in a more or less troubled relationship (the most popular model was that of the family melodrama, both during Fascism and in the postwar period).²⁸

While the Italian film industry was perhaps not producing woman’s films in the 1950s, today it is impossible to find Italian productions that are comparable to chick-flicks such as *Sex and the City*, which are instead imported from the American market.²⁹ The fact that American movies might replace national productions in a given slice of the market should not be seen as an exception to the history of film distribution in Italy. According to David Forgacs, there are two

²⁴ *Les Tricheurs*, directed by Marcel Carné (1958; Bolougne-Billancourt, France: StudioCanal Video, 2002), DVD; *Rebel Without a Cause*, directed by Nicholas Rey (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.

²⁵ Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flick: The Return of the Woman’s Film* (New York: Palgrave, 2007). Garrett analyzes the return of female-oriented cycles in reference to postmodernist aesthetics (eroding conceptual divisions between low-budget modernist experimental art-house filmic practice and popular realist, genre-based cinema) and as “nostalgia films” (ironic citations of woman’s films).

²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

²⁷ On the issues relating to the practice of gendering genres, see Janet Staiger, “*Film Noir* as Male Melodrama: The Politics of Film Genre Labeling,” in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 71–91.

²⁸ See Maggie Günsberg, “Domestic Bliss: Desire and the Family in Melodrama,” in *Gender and Genre in Italian Cinema*, ed. Maggie Günsberg (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 19–46.

²⁹ Films such as *Due partite*, directed by Enzo Monteleone (2008; Rome, Italy: 01 Distribution, 2009), DVD, do not have the same emphasis on consumerism; extremely focused on traditional feminist issues such as maternity, *Due partite* speaks to different discourses of gender and sexuality.

important features that characterize the Italian nation as a “cultural space” since the early 20th century: the relatively low consumption of books and newsprint, and the high proportions of imported materials, especially in cinema.³⁰ I do not have the space here to study the motives behind this scarcity and what function these American movies may have in shaping national audiences. Rather, my intention is to highlight how the Moccia films fill an historical gap in the Italian film industry, *substituting* for those films that feature older women as protagonists: engaging with similar topics (love, sexuality) and possibly targeting a wider range of viewers.³¹ Indeed, from the point of view of target audiences, American “girly” films are also not defined by viewers’ ages. In her discussion of “neo-feminist cinema,” Hillary Radner maintains that hit movies for “femmes” are designed for two distinct audiences: women under twenty-five and women over twenty-five. Girly films, including both teen movies and chick-flicks, are produced by “risk adverse,” “conglomerate-owned indie divisions” that target an ethnically and racially homogenous (white and middle-class) audience, “whose tastes could easily be predicted.”³² They are adaptations of popular novels, and use established and glamorous stars. In the Italian context, similar strategies apply to films representing teenagers involved in love stories (both comedies and dramas). For example, we can compare Mark Waters’ *Mean Girls*,³³ a joint venture of SNL Studios and Paramount Pictures, to the joint venture of Ideacinema and Medusa Film, producers of Volfango Di Blasio’s *Come tu mi vuoi*. Both films are centered on the relationship between an outsider girl and an exclusive clique of teenagers, and just as *Mean Girls* casts Lindsey Lohan and Tina Fey (the screenwriter of the film and a long-term cast member and writer of *SNL*), *Come tu mi vuoi* stars Nicola Vaporidis and Cristiana Capotondi, previously protagonists of the extremely successful *Notte prima degli esami*.³⁴ Produced by Giannandrea Pecorelli and its small production company Aurora Film, in collaboration with RAI Cinema and distributed by 01, *Notte prima degli esami* earned more than €14,000,000, thanks to unconventional marketing strategies such as free previews and commercial trailers on MTV and AllMusic TV channels, which targeted young viewers (between eighteen and twenty-five) but eventually were also proven effective among older audiences (between twenty-five and thirty-five), “sfruttando l’effetto nostalgia” [“exploiting the nostalgia effect”].³⁵

In sum, Italian teen movies may be seen fulfilling similar demands as the American “hit movies for ‘femmes’,” and thus functioning, with respect to Italian film audiences, in analogous ways. In addition, like 1950s family melodramas, contemporary Italian teen movies address the lack of “woman’s films” in the Italian film industry by most frequently featuring female characters in secondary roles or as passive recipients of male power, vis-à-vis the love

³⁰ David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 26.

³¹ The appearance of teen movies in the 1960s is connected to the national spread of youth culture from the United States and Great Britain. See Boero, *Chitarre e lucchetti*.

³² Hillary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 117.

³³ *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters (2004; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.

³⁴ *Notte prima degli esami*, directed by Fausto Brizzi (2006; Rome, Italy: 01 Distribution, 2006), DVD.

³⁵ See Giacomo Gistri, *Product Placement Cinematografico: Una forma di comunicazione tra impresa e cultura* (Milan: Egea, 2008), www.egeaonline.it (accessed November 18, 2016). According to Gistri, it was initially difficult to find a director and actors for this film, which was labeled as “too commercial.” It was eventually directed by one of the script’s authors (Brizzi) and featured mostly unknown actors (only Capotondi had already acted in a few films before).

relationships around which film narratives are centered. In other words, while successful films like *3msc* or *Notte prima degli esami* correspond to the model of the American “girly” films, by addressing a wider slice of gendered target audiences (both under and above twenty-five), a “feminization” of the target audience is not possible with respect to identification between female spectators and leading female characters.³⁶ Rather, Italian teen movies could only be seen as “girly” through a traditional gendering of romantic and/or melodramatic plots as “female.” Finally, Italian teen movies that do feature female leads, like *a14* and other romantic comedies such as Di Blasio’s *Come tu mi vuoi* and Giancarlo Scarchilli’s *Scrivilo sui muri*³⁷—whose main characters show similar behaviors and aspirations to those of Carolina, the protagonist of Moccia’s film—present models of girlhood and femininity that are coherent with those featured in contemporary American and British films, which according to film scholar Roberta Garrett represent the “return of the woman’s film,” after a long period of absence (between the 1960s and 1990s).³⁸ As I previously mentioned, and as I will further explain in this essay, these leading female characters embody postfeminist gender models that are transnational, rather than national, and yet predominant in the wider context of Italian media culture.

My goal here is to engage critically with the articulations of postfeminist discourse so as to understand how “girly” films fit within the broader context of the Italian cultural industry. I agree with Justine Ashby when she argues against a false impression of a “globalized postfeminism,” and points out that “the diversity of postfeminism in all its ephemeral forms means that there can be no ‘one-size-fits-all’ framework for thinking through its cultural and political currency.”³⁹ For example, Radner highlights important differences between the British “Bridget Jones” model and the case of other girly films, particularly from the United States, such as the above-mentioned *Sex and the City*.⁴⁰ Radner—who rejects the term postfeminism altogether and uses “neo-feminism” in order to highlight continuities, rather than a break, with the past—holds that American chick-flicks present workaholic, success-driven women who lack the self-deprecating attitude that characterizes Bridget Jones, while girly films starring Latino actresses such as Jennifer Lopez introduce the issue of race, albeit conservatively. In Italy, on the other hand, Lorella Zanardo’s documentary, *Il corpo delle donne*,⁴¹ exemplifies a “mainstream oppositional discourse,” which would highlight and challenge representations of women in Italian media, especially on television. In light of this documentary, which denounces constant and pervasive objectification of the female body and self-objectification of female subjects on Italian public and private television, the postfeminist idea that Italian women today are no longer “sex objects” but “desiring sexual subjects” can only be perceived as a mystification.⁴² At the same time, the case of Zanardo is particularly important, not only because *Il corpo delle donne* appears to attack the postfeminist discourse of sexual empowerment, but also because the film

³⁶ See for example O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, in which the author analyzes the pivotal role played by Riccardo Scamarcio in the success of *3msc* and *hvd*.

³⁷ *Scrivilo sui muri*, directed by Giancarlo Scarchilli (2007; Milan, Italy: Eagle Pictures, 2008), DVD.

³⁸ *A14* earned only €3,173,000.

³⁹ Justine Ashby, “Postfeminism in the British Frame,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 128.

⁴⁰ Radner, “Post-feminism and Neo-Feminism,” in *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 190–97.

⁴¹ *Il corpo delle donne*, directed by Lorella Zanardo (2006), <http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/documentario/>

⁴² Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 258; quoted in Hipkins, “Whore-ocracy,” 427.

builds its critique of female exploitation on the basis of the same binary that supports and nurtures its perpetuation. As Hipkins explains, the showgirls who are embracing exploitation on Italian TV represent the scapegoat within Zanardo's documentary, the "other" woman, whose faulty decisions are at the root of a corrupted system, and whose beauty is seen as a sign of stupidity and a lack of moral values.⁴³ In this context, understanding the attractiveness inherent to the discourse of femininity in films that cast potential *veline* as protagonists allows for a greater understanding of the dynamic construction of female subjectivity—as well as the performance/masquerade of femininity—in contemporary Italian society. Only by approaching these power-dynamics from the transnational perspective of postfeminism, is it possible to understand their relevance without falling into the moralistic reproach or dismissal that characterizes "the mainstream oppositional discourse" represented by Zanardo's documentary—"a form of critique that focuses on the embodiment of female oppression rather than its causes."⁴⁴

In my view, such reproach is also present in a few films that cast young female protagonists, and which have received critical acclaim or have been sponsored for their cultural value by the Italian Ministry of Culture (*Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali*). Films like Matteo Rovere's *Un gioco da ragazze*, produced by Rai Cinema and presented at the Rome International Film Festival, Luca Guadagnino's *Melissa P.*, an Italian-Spanish co-production produced by Francesca Neri (among others), and Stefano Salvati's *Albakiara* (2008), written by Salvati with the famous author Carlo Lucarelli, represent the sexual liberties and desires of their female protagonists as symptoms of social or psychological crisis.⁴⁵ The young girls' sexual liberation springs from their deviant and incurably sick personalities (*Un gioco da ragazze*), or from equally deviant but curable cases of malaise (*Melissa P.*). In other cases, for example, in Carlo Virzi's *L'estate del mio primo bacio*,⁴⁶ female sexual desire is ridiculed or, it can be argued, exploited in order to tell another story, that of the crisis of the left embodied in the failed attempt of a nerdy middle-class girl to seduce an attractive young working-class man (this film, like *Un gioco da ragazze*, was also produced by Rai Cinema together with Cattleya, producer of Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (2008), and was written by both Carlo and Paolo Virzi). In all cases, the absence of the father is seen as the origin of the girls' lack of moral rectitude, while reconnecting with the mother is a means to rehabilitation from social deviance. In *Melissa P.*, the young protagonist eventually saves herself from dangerous (and possibly fatal) sexual encounters once she finally recognizes her middle-class and conformist mother as an authoritative figure. By comparison, the Moccia films, popular but critically despised, do not chastise young female characters for their sexual experiences (they are not "in the framework of moral panic"⁴⁷), but rather, as I will demonstrate in the following analyses, enthusiastically embrace postfeminist culture, Italian style.

⁴³ Hipkins, "Whore-ocracy," 419.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 427.

⁴⁵ *Albakiara*, directed by Stefano Salvati (2008; Rome, Italy: Dolmen Home Video, 2008), DVD. *Un gioco da ragazze*, directed by Matteo Rovere (2008; Rome, Italy: 01 Distribution, 2009), DVD; *Melissa P.*, directed by Luca Guadagnino (2005; Rome, Italy: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD;

⁴⁶ *Gomorra*, directed by Matteo Garrone (2008; New York, NY: Criterion Collection, 2009), DVD. *L'estate del mio primo bacio*, directed by Carlo Virzi (2006; Rome, Italy: 01 Distribution, 2006), DVD.

⁴⁷ Hipkins, "Figlie di papà," 259.

The Case of Moccia

The postfeminist structure of “double entanglement” is particularly evident in the first two successful films based on the Moccia novels, *3mcs* and *hvdt*. Both *3msc* and *hvdt* play with traditional representations of masculinity and femininity in their narratives, but any transgression of clichés is eventually brought back to order at the end of the film. In *3msc*, the process of sexual liberation of the female protagonist, Babi, develops through the girl’s tumultuous relationship with the anti-conformist Step, played by the attractive Riccardo Scamarcio. Both Babi and Step are from wealthy bourgeois families, but, while she conforms to the rules of patriarchy and to the etiquette of a well-to-do family, he has moved out of his parents’ house and lives with his older brother, who is incapable of controlling Step’s erratic behavior. Even though they essentially come from the same background, Babi and Step’s love story develops throughout the film as a case of opposites that attract. Babi attends a private school, she is dressed in uniform in most scenes, she does not wear makeup, and she does not seem interested in any of her suitors. Step does not go to school, and engages in illegal motorcycle races that take place at a former slaughterhouse in Rome. The two of them meet at one of these races, in which male riders carry female passengers, who ride with their backs against the driver, to whom they are tied with a belt. Babi and Step fall in love and have sex; she rebels against her parents, and he unveils a violent past in which he brutally attacked her mother’s lover. At the end of the film, Babi ultimately decides to leave Step after his best friend dies in one of the races, and she settles for a more conservative guy, whom she will marry in the film’s sequel, *hvdt*. Step, on the other hand, will leave the country to travel to the United States on a “regenerating” trip, after which he will come back to Rome (in the sequel) and get a job as a television producer (perhaps not as tame as an office job, but definitely conforming to a neo-liberal capitalist society).

Both characters, then, appear to live through a temporary moment of rebellion from their social upbringing that allows them to transgress traditional gender roles: Step indulges in tenderness and caring, while Babi acknowledges and satisfies her sexual desires. In the end, they both conform to the same social environment and reconcile with their parents. Babi’s individualism, and the freedom she exercises in order to obtain what she wants, eventually leads her to a self-policing process where the death of a young man serves to set the limits of liberty. Sexual liberation is not the end point of this process, but a moment of passage that leads the female character to a voluntary acceptance of conservative behaviors. Similarly in *hvdt*, the leading female character (Gin) shows extensive sexual liberties while expressing, at the same time, the conservative desire to build a traditional relationship with the leading male character (Step). Gin explicitly demonstrates her sexual attraction toward Step, and takes the initiative in the sexual intercourse shown at length in the film (to the extent that the actress received harsh criticism for exposing too much of her body on the screen). On the other hand, at the end of the film, viewers discover that Gin’s encounter with Step was not serendipitous. Rather, Gin had been following Step since the time of *3msc*, and she had always been in love with him from afar (she kept recorded videos of him at the motorcycle races).

After the enormous success of *3msc* and *hvdt*, Federico Moccia debuted as director with the romantic comedy *a14*. Starring a female protagonist, *a14* revolves around Carolina’s decision to have sex for the first time with the young man she believes to be her first love (Massimo). By means of first person voice-over narration, Carolina explains to viewers that, despite her young

age (she is fourteen), this is her decision.⁴⁸ Lightheartedly and spontaneously, Carolina claims awareness of her sexual desires, of her entitlement to pleasure, and of the plans she has to satisfy her goal. Her determinacy, an indication of sexual liberation, is entangled with the underlying understanding that sex is made for love. The characteristics of Carolina's first encounter with Massimo are also classic in this sense: the two meet at a music store, where she is listening to a song that will then become "their" song; he buys the CD for her, and they then spend the afternoon walking and talking until the evening. Framing, montage, and soundtrack build the romance in the most classical terms, leading viewers to believe that what they are seeing is love at first sight, that it is unique and, thus, something for which it is worth losing one's virginity.

Despite the young age of the protagonist, the narrative never hints at the possibility that this could be a story of statutory rape (not even by law in Italy, since fourteen is the minimum age for consensual sex).⁴⁹ The young female protagonist is always in control of the film narrative of her life. Carolina's voice-over narration throughout the film is the most evident self-reflexive device, used to convey the protagonist's agency vis-à-vis her life-plan and her body. In fact, Carolina not only tells her own story in voice-over, but she also engages in a conversation with the camera, mockingly so at times, indicating the apparatus' inability to frame her. In particular, this happens in the opening scene, which takes place in a street market where Carolina is shopping. Her voice guides the camera through the stands, as it challenges and laughs at the camera's attempts to find her. In this playful mode, Carolina demonstrates that she has control over the device meant to objectify her persona. This dynamic is not only relevant in terms of conveying the character's individualism, but also because it provides a context for the rest of the film—that is, a context in which to mock the debates about the objectification of the female body by the "cine-eye." Visually literate, young male and female viewers will look at Carolina's body as observed through the gaze of the camera with ironic distance. For example, in one scene, she changes her clothes in an elevator, so that her parents will not know that she is going to a party, hoping to show up looking as sexy as possible. In a close-up, the camera pans up and down the stomach, buttocks and legs of a girl who, "out of choice" and for "her own enjoyment," engages in a striptease in front of its (and the viewers') gaze. McRobbie's comments on the Wonderbra advertisement that shows Eva Herzigova looking down at her cleavage apply to this scene: "Thank goodness, the image seems to suggest, it is permissible once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women."⁵⁰

More evidently than any other teen movie, *a14* is built on the many self-policing processes that Carolina carefully notes in her diary, along with notes on what she likes and dislikes. Once again, a filmic device visualizes this aspect of her subjectivity: animated images of her diary are used to mark what are presented as important steps in the narrative of sexual emancipation. Carolina's voice prompts the images of objects or individuals, which then appear on screen. Throughout the film, we see Carolina purposefully making choices that will allow her to arrive at what she calls "the most important day of my life." These include sampling some possible replacements of Massimo for the ultimate goal of sexual intercourse; discussing with girlfriends the details of sex; and engaging in activities that are the most satisfying alternatives to sex, that

⁴⁸ The use of the female protagonist's voice-over commentary is also noticeable in *Come tu mi vuoi*.

⁴⁹ I thank my colleague in the Film Studies Group at the University of Texas at Austin, who pointed out this element in our conversation on the present article.

⁵⁰ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 16.

is, shopping and texting. “Choices” in this film are the evident link between consumerism, sexuality, and self-image: Carolina indiscriminately chooses between partners, friends, clothes, and identities. Far from a natural state of being, the subject of freedom as a “choosing subject” is a social construction that defines the female character in relation to the neoliberal politics and the market economy of the film’s context.

Carolina’s “individualism” has features that “undo” feminism: she takes her independence for granted; she does not have any female figure of authority (Carolina’s mother is rarely present, and her older sister is a rather antagonistic figure); and feminist gains and practices are cited ironically, as if in a tongue-in-cheek guide to feminist clichés. For example, considering different ways by which to learn about the practices of sex, Carolina eventually ends up at a bookstore and picks up the book *Sei vaginale o clitoridea* [*Are you vaginal or clitoridian*], which here both popularizes and mocks Carla Lonzi’s seminal work of Italian feminism.⁵¹ In another scene, the girls gather to discuss sex in a meeting that ironically recalls the feminist practice of *autocoscienza*. There is no self-discovery through collective gathering in this meeting, as it instead exhibits a pseudo-scientific approach to sex, which is discussed by quoting lines from teen magazines. In addition, the (single) mother of the girl who hosts the meeting is used as a comic device to ridicule progressive parenting. When the woman knocks on the door to let the girls know that she is there for support and available to answer any questions, she is immediately rejected by her daughter. The woman’s curves, make-up, manners, and the tone of her voice are meant to suggest that her wish to have an open and honest relationship with her daughter regarding sex is a result of her libertine behaviors and shallowness. In other words, while it is ok for teenagers to talk about sex, it is against the socially and culturally accepted model of motherhood to show interest in the daughter’s sexual education.

To conclude, there are three critical issues in *a14* that are also present in other teen movies: the absence of sisterhood, the re-articulation of patriarchy, and the universal subject of Woman. The film builds an image of (young) women as univocal, without any differences of race, class, or sexual orientation. As opposed to many American examples (such as Ken Kwapis’ *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*),⁵² Carolina does not have a female community with which to undergo a process of self-discovery. There is no sense of sisterhood among the girlfriends with whom Carolina shares her time and questions. In fact, one of her friends will betray her by spending the night with Massimo, precisely the night before Carolina’s “most important day.” As our protagonist approaches Massimo’s front door, she sees the two of them exiting and kissing. In this last moment, once again the double-entanglement of liberated sexuality and conservative gender construction resurfaces. The three characters play the stereotypical roles of a love triangle in the moment when Carolina has finally acted across the boundaries of her gender: like a Man, she has just bought flowers for Massimo, and, like a Woman, she is betrayed by the man she loves and by her girlfriend.

Despite the sexual liberation professed by the protagonist, the sequel to this encounter and the end of the film are also telling in terms of the underlying structure of the sex/gender system.

⁵¹ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel: La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milan: Rivolta femminile, 1974). In these essays, Lonzi reacts against the male patriarchal culture that naturalized women’s inferiority and builds a theoretical and political response to its founding principles.

⁵² *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, directed by Ken Kwapis (2005; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.

As she leaves the scene, Carolina meets her older brother Gianni, the rebel child in the family who left home to become a writer, rather than a doctor, as his father had wished. Gianni picks Carolina up in his convertible and takes her to the beach, where she will clear her head and forget about Massimo. The brother figure is representative not only of the narrative's conservative underpinnings in terms of gender, but also of the reconfiguration of patriarchy in a postfeminist context. Carolina's father is a clichéd authoritarian figure whose strict educational methods are represented ironically, in a sort of masquerade of patriarchal masculinity (as much as the make-up, the outfits, or the flirting are part of that masquerade called femininity, as enacted, for example, by Carolina's older sister). Even though Carolina changes her clothes in the elevator when she goes to a party, because she does not want her parents to know that she wants to look attractive, there is no fear of paternal punishment for her act. In other instances, the father's behavior and his benevolent disciplinary gestures suggest that, even if she were to be caught in the act, he would not punish her harshly. In this seemingly post-patriarchal society, Carolina surprisingly appoints her brother to be her surrogate father, most evidently in the closing scene. In fact, this surrogation is not surprising, for, at this point, Carolina has learned from her mistake. She is then willingly ready to entrust a man with her life, a man who has acted as champion of her morality throughout the film narrative: on various occasions, Gianni supervises his sister and keeps an eye on her whereabouts. In other words, re-fashioned via a self-disciplined subject, "patriarchy" gets its foot back in the door.

Conclusions: The Perks of Being Carolina

In conclusion, the Moccia films cast young women who strive for independence, are not ashamed of their desires, and are unafraid to cross boundaries in order to get what they want. While generally starring female protagonists that are white and middle class, the same girls are attracted to rebellious boys, but yet also care for and share the same desire for true love and companionship. Consumerism is shown as a form of empowerment, the girls' ultimate desire is to be in a relationship with a boy, and their experiences of self-discovery turn them into self-disciplined subjects who fit in easily in their society. Values of sisterhood or collective engagement are absent, and second wave feminism is sometimes taken into direct consideration, only to be mocked and/or dismissed as a threat to an essential femininity grounded in the cult of physical beauty. Appearing to have lost any power over their daughters, fathers are absent or reduced to clichéd figures of patriarchy. At the same time, authoritative female figures are also missing, and female characters may entrust other male characters with guidance. In sum, the films under study are far from conveying radical feminist messages. Postfeminist culture celebrates the passage from "sexual objectification to sexual subjectification" (i.e. sexualization as a form of empowerment), to quote Rosalind Gill; however, as Hipkins points out, it could also "validate a new form of sexism."⁵³ Showing no attempt to provide a "view from elsewhere," as Teresa De Lauretis defines an ideal feminist cinema, these "girly" movies are nonetheless more than just "escapist" products without any cultural relevance;⁵⁴ rather, they embody the ultimate

⁵³ Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: the Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 100-106. Hipkins, "Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?" 156.

⁵⁴ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987) 26.

conformism of contemporary neo-liberal culture, especially with regard to gender. At the same time, they are also freed from the moralist point of view that characterizes “quality” films representing teenagers, in particular, and the mainstream oppositional discourse of Italian leftist critics, in general. In *a14*, for girls like Carolina, sex is one of the perks of being white and middle-class in a consumerist society; in *Un gioco da ragazze* or *Melissa P.*, it is still a sickness, perhaps even a sin.

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