

Le traviate: Suffering heroines and the Italian state between the 19th and 21st centuries

Danielle Hipkins and Katharine Mitchell

Introduction

In this chapter we will consider the relationship between what was considered the most successful operatic melodrama in the newly emerging nation state of nineteenth-century Italy, Verdi's *La traviata*, first performed in 1853, and a 2012 film addressing the theme of the suffering female and the doomed romantic relationship in the context of prostitution, *Un giorno speciale* (Francesca Comencini). The reason we want to draw these two distant texts together lies in a recycling of the trope of the 'traviata', or Magdalene figure, a typically melodramatic hystericized body like that described by Peter Brooks: 'a victimized woman's body, on which desire has inscribed an impossible history, a story of desire in an impasse'.¹ For Brooks, that melodramatic aesthetic of embodiment emerged in response to the French Revolution and its requirement to make the body of the individual accountable, which then converged with a later psychoanalytical emphasis on that body as female victim. Italian eighteenth and nineteenth-century borrowing from French culture met with earlier Italian literary associations dating as far back as Dante and giving rise to a particularly intense symbolic entanglement of the female prostitute body with the state and the notion of the body politic. This entanglement has resurfaced in recent debates about the infamous sex scandals surrounding Berlusconi. The following quote gives an example of the way in which this symbolic figure has been used to interpret such events, and of the way in which interpretation of her value becomes a way of defining one's political position:

If prostitution has changed politics, then politics has also changed prostitution. The figure of the Magdalene has lost the moral density that was a strength of our civilization; she has become a pale imitation copy in the girl shaped by the plastic surgeon and taught by her procuress-mother to lay out for a price.²

Merlo's quote perpetuates a problematic longstanding association between the body politic and the prostituted female body, stretching as far back as Dante's descriptions of Italy as brothel, which Millicent Marcus argues has informed Italian cinema:

Implicit in every appearance of the feminized body politic is thus a temporality, and a master (or more appropriately, mistress) narrative which traces a fall from primal innocence and wholeness into sexuality, multiplicity, and historical change.³

Whilst Marcus's rooting of female 'doubleness' in this rhetorical tradition is invaluable, its consequences for the construction of gendered identity in Italy can be further unpacked. In particular here Russell Campbell's work on the prostitute 'Martyr' figure and its legitimization of female prostitution is useful:

Whether in its development in the cinema the Martyr characterization is overtly religious or not, it is consistent in suggesting that the prostitute's suffering is not in vain. In this regard it performs the ideologically valuable function of assuaging the guilt that accrues when men's sexual pleasures are purchased at the expense of a class of women who are degraded and oppressed in the process.⁴

Its pernicious effects are clearly seen in the unselfconscious manner in which Merlo valorizes a Catholic model of female sacrifice with the term 'Maddalena', completely ignoring the emergence of the terms 'sex work' and 'escort' that present a different notion of agency to that of 'prostitute'.⁵ Merlo's quotation indicates a blanket, unthinking nostalgia for the concept of the transgressive female 'other' as sacrificial building block of the nation. Comencini's recent transformation of the story of *la traviata*, or the Magdalene, from one of sacrifice into one of survival, one of victimhood into precarious agency, speaks to and challenges this difficulty for the Italian cultural imagination of envisaging the body politic as anything other than a suffering, defeated passivity, in which young women are its primary victim, and possibly a necessary sacrifice. In the first section of this chapter we will examine the extent to which this trope gained significance through operatic melodrama and discourses surrounding prostitution in the late nineteenth-century, and what its possible effects were. Then we will look at the way in which recent discourse about prostitution is mediated through the trope of the suffering (girl) heroine in *Un giorno speciale*, a film addressing the recent events in Italy. We will show how postfeminist discourse about female agency, and a dramatically different legal conception of prostitution, do not actually succeed in diminishing the hold that this figure has on our imagination. Indeed, we will suggest that re-reading both these texts together enables us to see beyond the suffering prostitute heroine's apparent reduction to cypher, and towards her potential to open up questions about structural inequalities within the body politic. We argue that Comencini's self-conscious recycling of

the trope is typical of a new engagement with the girl figure as a ‘suffering actor’, identified by Anita Harris and Amy Shields Dobson as a trope for overcoming the dichotomy between agency and victimhood in the post-girlpower period.⁶ In this respect Comencini is able to draw upon a long history of ambivalence in Italian filmic representations of fallen women, described by Christian Viviani as ‘madone[s] aux deux visages’, which he suggests originated in the operatic tradition with works such as, precisely, *La traviata*.⁷ For Viviani, such (ireconcilable) duality was based upon the heroine’s tendency to embody simultaneously the desire for sex and the desire for virtue. Our chapter will begin by returning to the origins of the ambivalent suffering heroine in Italian tragic opera, before considering how those origins are re-mapped in the contemporary period as the expression of the female voice within clearly signalled constraints.

I: The rise of the Magdalene paradigm in tragic opera: Verdi’s *La traviata* (1853)

In 1855 the prime minister of Piedmont-Sardinia instituted a series of regulations of prostitution to address the growing number of cases of venereal disease in the army and to safeguard the health of the moralizing and increasingly complex middle classes. This legislation was formally adopted by the new kingdom of Italy in 1860 (Cavour’s first act as prime minister). The 1855 decree was introduced in the wake of the premier of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (La Fenice, Venice, 1851), which features a mezzo-soprano minor character named Maddalena, who is a prostitute for the Duke (her name in Victor Hugo’s original play on which the opera is based - *Le Roi s’amuse* - is Maguelonne). In the opera in Act III, Maddalena asserts that she loves the duke, and he tells her he loves her back. Thus Verdi and his librettist, Francesco Piave, attribute *sentiment* to Maddalena, undercutting the aspect of commerce that otherwise might lie behind her relationship with the handsome nobleman.⁸ It was the first performance of Verdi’s domestic opera *La traviata* two years later, which also premiered at La Fenice with Fanny Salvini-Donatelli (1815-1891) in the title role, that marked the arrival of the erotic and sexually self-aware woman on the Italian stage.⁹ The heroine, Violetta Valery, a high-class courtesan, represents the first in a long line of young and beautiful, sexually desirous and assertive, yet sympathetic, tragic opera heroines whose feelings of sexual desire for the hero threaten to usurp the dominant hegemony (she reappears in later Italian tragic operas; for example in Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* in the figure of Santuzza, and in Puccini’s eponymous *Tosca*, and had her origins in the *bel canto* tragic

operas of Bellini and Donizetti, for example *Norma* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*).

Paradoxically, one year prior to the aforementioned regulations on prostitution, in December 1854, Pope Pius IX had formally pronounced Mary's 'immaculate conception', whence the 'cult of the Madonna', and an increased emphasis on women's purity and chastity at a time when family and the state were taking on greater importance in the lead-up to Unification.¹⁰

The nomenclature *prima donna* was frequently used as a synonym for 'prostitute' during the nineteenth century, and in Italy the terms *virtuosa* and *prostituta* were almost interchangeable.¹¹ Our reading of the figure of *la traviata* draws on recent work on the sexual potency of the female voice by scholars in musicology such as Carolyn Abbate, who views opera as the locus of women's victory, a realm beyond narrative plot in which women exist as sonority and sheer physical volume, asserting themselves outside spectacle and escaping murderous fates. Abbate coined the term 'envoicing' in 1993. Through a reading of Patrick Conrad's film *Mascara* (1978), Abbate suggested that 'opera, far from being a revenge tragedy that Catherine Clément calls "the undoing of women," is a genre that so displaces the authorial musical voice onto female characters and female singers that it largely reverses a conventional opposition of male (speaking) subject and female (observed) object'.¹² Later, in feminist philosophy Adriana Cavarero put forward the case that at the heart of opera lies the triumph of the female voice, of the vocal over the semantic, the feminine over the masculine (the *logos*).¹³ As Simonetta Chiappini has recently argued in relation to women in opera during the *Risorgimento* – the period from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the Unification of Italy in 1861-70, 'woman's voice arrived (and arrives) at the heart of the spectator with a potency that the rigid system of nineteenth-century patriarchal legitimacy believed unimaginable. Perhaps the responsibility lies with music, or rather, song [...]'.¹⁴ Thus, the potency of song, or voice, functioned as a liberating force for female performers and their listeners; any contradiction that the suffering Italian opera heroine signified in performance through simultaneously for embodying the desire for sex and virtue - regardless of any prowess her acting ability displayed - was surpassed by the sheer sonority of her voice due to her wider *tessitura* (vocal range) and her ability to 'outing' her male counterpart.¹⁵

La traviata is based on and adapted from the French novel (1848) and play (1852) *La dame aux Camélias*, both by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. The narrative is purportedly autobiographical, for it is said to be based on Dumas *fils*'s love affair with the courtesan Marie Duplessis, who had died of consumption in 1847. The play is one of the first dramas to

take contemporary life as a theme, and one of the first to show a modern (as opposed to historical) courtesan in a sympathetic light. Verdi had written to his friend Cesare De Sanctis in 1853 saying it was the ‘subject of the times’.¹⁶ He and his librettist Francesco Piave wanted to retain the contemporary setting, but the Austro-Hungarian censors at *La Fenice* in Venice insisted that it should be set in the past, circa 1700 (it was not until the battle for Unification had been won that contemporary productions were staged from the 1880s onwards), by which time, as Susan Rutherford has argued, the opera had become an anachronistic (and romanticized) depiction of the prostitute’s life.¹⁷ Where Bellini, Donizetti, and their librettists had sacrificed their heroines for love alone, Verdi sought redemption and social acceptance for his: though the court jester’s daughter Gilda loses her virginity to the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Gilda is still regarded as *sympathetic*, and is looked upon with pity in her suffering by virtue of her willingness to die for the man she loves. Violetta is another example of an ‘heroic’ and sexually ‘corrupt’ woman (according to the social mores of the day) who succumbs to the oppressions of masculine bourgeois dogma, which was at odds with the *demi-mondaine* world. Violetta’s propensity to experience feelings of romantic love for Alfredo, to make the ‘noble’ sacrifice requested of her by Alfredo’s father to accept that her life is (apparently) worth far less to the society compared with Alfredo’s sister’s, puts Violetta in a sympathetic light - in spite of her social standing - in the eyes of *Ottocento* audiences. Accordingly, they are moved to pity Violetta in Act II when she agrees, in tears, to leave Alfredo at the request of his father who wishes to protect his family’s honour, as well as when Violetta is dying of consumption throughout the entire last act. The audience (and Germont) feels pity not only because we have witnessed the integrity of Violetta’s love for Alfredo from the outset, but more importantly, because the men, Alfredo and Germont, forgive her for her past life at the very last moment, thus enabling her to redeem herself. Verdi’s sympathy for Violetta, which, as we shall now see, is apparent from a close-reading of his choices of musical utterances to represent her in the drama, may have had something to do with his relationship with the renowned *bel canto* opera singer Giuseppina Strepponi (1815-1897): Strepponi had given birth to three children out of wedlock with two different men before living with Verdi for ten years prior to their marriage, which lasted until their deaths in old age.¹⁸

Musical description

Susan McClary, the first musicologist to draw operatic music into feminist

interpretation, sought to uncover music's social meanings by focusing on how musical representations of gender can tell us much about a particular composer's attitude towards a given character, as well as how the characters will be read in a given geo-social and historical context.¹⁹ Examples of Violetta's demonstrations of noble love and desire for Alfredo occur in Act II when Alfredo's father pays her a visit to request that she leave his son to protect the family's 'good' reputation. Violetta tells Germont, 'or amo Alfredo ('I now love Alfredo')', and asks him, 'Non sapete quale affetto vivo, immenso m'arda in petto?' ('You cannot know the kind of alive and overwhelming passion that burns in my heart') - , against a musical backdrop of *tremolo* strings played softly and alternating between a major and minor key to create dramatic tension. The key turns resolutely major as wind instruments are introduced over loud, long-held notes sung in a high register as she tells Germont she would rather die than leave Alfredo

Ch'io mi separi da Alfredo?...

Ah, il supplizio è sì sipeato

che morir preferirò !

That I should separate from Alfredo?...

My suffering would be so unbearable that I would rather die!

Following Germont's departure, Alfredo returns to find Violetta anxious and distracted, and in a grandiose build-up involving instruments from all sections of the orchestra, she begs Alfredo in a cathartic plea, '*con passione e forza*': 'Amami, Alfredo, quant'io t'amo' 'Love me, Alfredo, oh how I love you'.

In the second half of Act II, Germont returns to plead with his son to abandon Violetta for the sake of their family's reputation. The scene changes to a party at Violetta's friend's richly-furnished Parisian apartment, where Alfredo meets Violetta who has returned to the Baron. He throws his winnings at her in a fit of fury to pay her back for selling off her possessions while they were living together, and is then asked to leave.

In the third and final Act, Violetta is reunited with Alfredo and Alfredo's father embraces Violetta as his daughter. The opera lasts for approximately 127 minutes (depending on the performance), of which Violetta spends roughly 58 minutes suffering in grief compared with Alfredo, whose musical and stage suffering lasts in comparison for around 11

minutes. Violetta's death scene lasts for a good 31 minutes, yet the last word she utters, 'gioia', is held for eight beats on a top B flat, 'envoicing' her before her demise.

Cavour's regulation of prostitution, which required women to register with the police, undergo intrusive medical examinations and pay a tax to work in the *case chiuse* (the state-owned brothels), was challenged by the Abolitionists (so-called because they viewed prostitution as white slavery). Under the Crispi law in 1888, ten years following the publication of Emilia Viola-Ferretti's novel, purportedly based on fact, *Una fra tante*, about a young woman who is forced into prostitution and raped, the Cavour law was repealed; the Crispi law abolished the registration of prostitutes and the mandatory medical visits (though lists of *case chiuse* and of prostitutes continued to exist even though they were now kept secret). The Nicotera law, passed in 1891, restored the regulation of prostitution almost completely. Though police were now required to help women to abandon their life as prostitutes, in reality, police never developed a strategy to assist prostitutes.²⁰ In the previous year, another 'Magdalene figure' had captured the hearts and minds of the Italian theatre-going public in Pietro Mascagni's opera rendition of Verga's *novella* 'Cavalleria Rusticana' (1880), which he turned into a play for a national audience in 1884. The dishonoured woman, 'Santa' (as she is known in the short story), becomes the disrespected 'Santuzza' in the play. In the opera version, Mascagni and his librettists G. Menasci and G. Targioni-Tozzetti depict Santuzza similarly dishonoured and disrespected, but she is more sympathetic than in the play (though less so than in the *novella*) – Turiddù, when saying goodbye to his mother to fight a duel, having been involved in a sexual relationship with the married Lola, asks his mother to take care of Santuzza and to treat her as her own daughter ('s'io...non tornassi...voi dovrete fare / da madre a Santa, ch'io le avea giurato / di condurla all'altare' 'If I... don't come back...you must be / a mother to Santa (Santuzza) whom I have sworn / to lead to the altar'), and Santuzza is portrayed sympathetically in the music; she is also 'envoiced' as the central character and a *mezzo-soprano* (like Maddalena in *Rigoletto*). Later on, in 1900, Puccini's *Tosca* is another sexually desiring and active woman who is portrayed as a Magdalene borderline figure in both the music and the libretto. In writing by women of this period, Neera's short story 'Falena' (1893) also depicts the figure of the prostitute with great sympathy; the word 'Falena' in Italian is a common noun used for various types of nocturnal butterflies. Neera uses the butterfly as a metaphor to describe Falena's delicate body frame, her outward attractiveness and her fleetingness and unattainability, for she, like Violetta, is also dying of consumption. Whilst not all female authors of this period were

emancipationists,²¹ and not all emancipationists were sympathetic to prostitution, cultural representations of the young, sympathetic, suffering female prostitute ‘with a heart of gold’ had entered into the Italian collective consciousness. If she can be used to justify the sacrifice of women to the state, she can also be used, sometimes within the very same text, to generate a more profound understanding of the position of women within Italian society. As we shall see, such duality continues to haunt the Italian imagination across the differences generated by feminism and its aftermath.

II: The Magdalene paradigm in the post-girlpower world: *Un giorno speciale* (Comencini, 2012)

If it is possible retrospectively to read a positive, proto-feminist potential into the sympathy generated for and by Verdi’s, Puccini’s, and Mascagni’s heroines, and Neera’s female protagonist, for Violetta *la traviata* in particular, the question of representing women as suffering victims in a postfeminist context is fraught with difficulty. The butterfly metaphor employed by Neera becomes a more ambivalent symbol as a tattoo adorning the ankle of a 19 year-old aspiring actress in the film *Un giorno speciale*. It encapsulates powerfully the two discourses that shape Comencini’s film into a productive commentary on a post-girlpower world. On the one hand, there remains the discourse of the fragile prostitute-victim unable to overcome political forces beyond her control, but on the other the tattoo itself represents a level of agency in relation to her own body that complicates the heroine’s relationship to the question of sex work. Made directly in reference to the scandals generated by the then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, such as his association with an underage Noemi Letizia, it is impossible to ignore the references of the butterfly to exploitation by an older male (girls attending Berlusconi’s infamous parties were reputedly given jewellery in the shape of butterflies, a symbol for Berlusconi of the female genitalia). Gina’s love of tattoos, as we shall see, is a narrative strand of the film, but her employment of this particular symbol alludes not only to her fragility, but also to a process of self-branding strongly associated with postfeminist cultural consumption, which also manifests itself, for example, in her preference for a pair of Converse All-Stars over the high heels her mother persuades her to wear.²²

By bringing the contemporary, postfeminist discourse of ‘girlpower’ into dialogue with the Magdalene paradigm, Comencini challenges both discourses and reveals their shortcomings. The term ‘girlpower’, although coined in the US by punk movement Riot Grrrl

in the 1990s and introduced into a largely Anglophone context by the Spice Girls, has had a widespread effect in the Western world. 'Girlpower', according to Aapola, Gonick and Harris, positions 'young women as feisty, ambitious, motivated and independent',²³ and is typically associated with an emphasis on choice, empowerment and voice that masks structural inequalities. Its critics also point out that girl power is a discourse with huge commercial drive and that its tendency is also to 'reflect the ideologies of white middle-class individualism and personal responsibility over collective responses to social problems'.²⁴ Aapola et al. highlight the emergence, alongside girlpower, of a parallel discourse emphasizing the vulnerability of girls, a discourse they label the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse, after Mary Pipher's 1994 US bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, in which girls are represented as 'at risk' in the face of increasing sexualization and commercialisation. It is clear that 'girlpower' is on the wane as a discursive model, as the rhetoric of choice and voice strains under increasing economic instability, whilst the 'Reviving Ophelia' discourse lends itself better to a post-recession world. This argument is further developed by R. Danielle Egan, who has more recently argued that the growing anti-sexualization literature in the West uses the figure of the middle-class white girl 'gone skanky' as a form of 'metaphorical displacement'; for Egan excessive hyperbole about the girl at risk in fact 'represents middle-class impotence and the erosion of security in an increasingly insidious and predatory capitalist culture'.²⁵ In many ways the extreme case of prostitution and the young figure of the Magdalene represent an area of particularly recurrent overlap with this discourse of the endangered girl.²⁶ Gina (Giulia Valentini) comes from a socially disadvantaged background in the Roman periphery. Her mother encourages her to 'visit' an influential male politician in the hope of getting her into show business. She is collected by a young driver Marco (Filippo Schicchitano) on his first day on the job, which he has obtained thanks to the good word put in for him by his local priest. The appointment at the centre of Rome is repeatedly delayed, causing the young couple to become closer over the course of a day spent driving round Rome. It is suggested that Gina's appointment with the politician will be her first experience of sex work. The film ends, nonetheless, with Gina fulfilling her engagement, and returning home devastated. The close up of Gina in the shower, water mingling with tears, make-up streaming down her face, raises the question of how a director can represent a suffering female without indexing that rhetorical trope of 'doubleness', described by Millicent Marcus, without reactivating that purity/fallen narrative arc, without reducing female agency to passivity. As Hipkins has argued elsewhere,²⁷ the failure to read the specificity of female experience in contemporary Italy has led to the

problematic reinforcement of a notion of women as at best, victims, and at worst, as scapegoats: the two ends of this spectrum are illustrated above in the *ragazzotta/ mamma-maîtresse* pairing of Merlo's quotation. This misreading, she suggests, extends to the large-scale Italian feminist response to the perceived crisis, 'Se non ora quando', a movement of which the female director whose work is discussed here is a leader.²⁸

The movement's anxiety about the aspiration towards fame, particularly in the figure of the showgirl, belongs to that wider transnational moral panic about the malleability of the youthful female subject in the face of capitalism's hard-sell, interpreted by Egan as a form of metaphorical displacement. Francesca Comencini articulates such ideas about girls and beauty:

In today's society, a beautiful girl is not only good looking, but she becomes the entrepreneur for her own beauty and exercises control over this and her own body. As if beauty were some kind of commodity and her body and her beauty were not actually her. As if her body was separated from the girl, something that she can control and use as she wills. However, this is only a parody of freedom and a way of using her freedom to the opposite effect.²⁹

In some ways Comencini's politicized promotion and framing of the film limit the possibilities for its interpretation. However, it is also important to underline that this has much to do with the specificity of the Italian context. Reflecting upon high unemployment rates and the precarity associated with work for the younger generation, Francesca Comencini is clear that contemporary Italian society has failed to protect young people in Italy, girls in particular, and there is no doubt that she is forcefully supported by statistics.³⁰ Comencini herself testifies in particular to the influence of the story of Noemi Letizia, the underage Neapolitan girl so controversially befriended by Berlusconi, possibly in the hope of finding work in his vast television network, with the support of her parents.³¹ What we want to examine, however, are not only the risks that her film runs in attempting to reinstate the powerful narrative of the suffering heroine, but also the benefits it enjoys. As Laura Di Bianco suggests in her reading of Comencini's oeuvre her films use 'the city as a privileged setting in which to investigate women's subjectivity,' and she argues that *Un giorno speciale* complicates the potentially 'simplistic narrative by the journey through the city and by a discourse on women's position in a society of consumption'.³² Furthermore, although

Comencini's comments about the film imply a one-sided reading of the postfeminist context, ultimately it echoes the 'envoicing' of the female protagonist of nineteenth-century Italian tragic opera, as the suffering female figure finds moments of escape within the film narrative and its porous boundaries. In drawing on the popular memory of American 'girlpower', as well as the made-in-Italy model of the suffering heroine, Comencini attempts not so much to shake off the discursive polarities that surround the figure of the sexualized girl, as to trouble some of their assumptions. In particular, her film juxtaposes a narrative of melodramatic suffering with a narrative of female agency, which does not indulge in the 'agency pendulum' described by Rosalind Gill, in which young women either have agency or do not. Instead it attempts both to situate Gina's 'experiences of pain and suffering [...] as at least partially structurally determined', whilst also trying to imagine her 'resistant agency less as an inherent criticality joined up to a grand narrative, and rather as an intra-active social production forged within relations of force'.³³ Drawing here on Harris and Dobson's notion of the 'suffering actor' to interpret Comencini's film re-establishes its strong link with Verdi's prostitute heroines and their 'envoicing' within a hostile world.

Panic attacks: the modern consumption?

From the moment we first see Gina in the film, her body is subject to a visually grotesque intervention upon her body to improve it: she is wearing a wire retainer for her teeth, which spans around the back of her skull. This visual emphasis chimes with Rosalind Gill's take on contemporary postfeminist culture and its emphasis on self-surveillance: indeed many of the key self-disciplinary forms of 'subjectification', which she sees enacted in the ideal neoliberal subject that is the girl are shown in the following scene, from dieting to depilation.³⁴ Echoing Angela McRobbie's definition of young women's physical suffering in postfeminist culture (anorexia, self harm) as a form of 'illegible rage',³⁵ the film emphasizes a somatic expression of Gina's discomfort and insecurity, after an attempt at its verbal articulation meets with an awkward silence from her mother. In this respect the film betrays its embrace of the melodramatic heroine. As Brooks writes of melodrama and the hysterical body (typically a woman's body): 'a body becomes the place for the inscription of highly emotional messages that cannot be written elsewhere, and cannot be articulated verbally'.³⁶ Twice in the film we see Gina suffering from an unexplained panic attack because she dare not tell Marco where she is going, nor can she find a voice to express her desire not to. At one

point early in the film Gina requests, without explanation, to be taken to the swimming baths. Here she watches a performance of synchronised swimming, and suddenly falls ill. The scene cuts with an increasing pace between Gina's point of view on two scenes. One is the audience in the gallery behind her, watching Gina critically, whose dress, absurd in the sports centre context marks her out as different, and quite possibly an escort. The other is the synchronized dancers whose performance, diving and rising from the water to a dramatic musical crescendo, seems to point with equal venom towards Gina, and seems to imply another drama within Gina's own head. The scene is a comment on the disciplinary control of femininity in Italian culture, and its use of water connects us to Gina's second and third panic attacks, which immediately precede and follow the encounter with the politician. We move from her reaction to a polished performance in the pool, to a moment of breakdown in the rain as Marco finally drives her to the politician, to the melt-down in close-up in the shower on her return home.

What occasions these panic attacks - the physical encounter with the politician - does not take place entirely off camera. *Un giorno speciale* situates the encounter between Gina and the politician as the disturbing climax of the film, deliberately echoing the many stories circulating in the media about young women being summoned to Berlusconi's Villa. The budding romance between Gina and her driver Marco is shown to be hindered by the shadow of this political corruption, around which both of them struggle to find a path towards financial success. For Gina this entails performing fellatio for the politician. In the softly-lit study, where the encounter takes place, Comencini does not draw back from showing this scene in all its subtle brutality. At first the tired politician dismisses Gina with his promise of a 'raccomandazione' (a word in someone's ear) and we feel her relief, only to repent when he examines her as she leaves the room, and calls her back. Comencini stresses that this moment was important in order to unnerve her character: 'just when she thinks she has avoided the danger, she finds herself caught in a tricky situation. This was because I wanted her character to be unsettled.'³⁷ This is the moment that marks the limits of girlpower and a can-do attitude, in which the concept of prostitution clearly trumps the idea of sex work. This moment emphasizes the use of the young woman for the sake of it as a form of *droit du seigneur*, which his own role as politician affords him. He does not really feel like it, but hates to miss the opportunity. Sitting on his knee, we watch as Gina recoils from his touch, and suddenly kneels down and undoes his belt, in an obvious attempt to expedite the proceedings. Gina's reaction, submission and withdrawal from the space of her encounter,

from others, and into herself, differs dramatically from the trajectory offered to the female protagonist of the novel upon which Comencini based the film. Claudio Bigagli's novel *Il cielo con un dito* (Garzanti, 2010) provides a dramatic and supremely filmic ending in which the female protagonist, disgusted by her sexual humiliation, murders the politician and escapes with her driver in a doomed, but generically powerful romantic final encounter with the police. Comencini's decision to offer a much more muted trajectory for her female protagonist, in which she emerges from her sexual encounter, humiliated, her heel snapped, and her clothing dishevelled, suggests a reluctance to engage with this popular cultural storyline of the crime fiction. Instead she creates a melodrama, which serves, again in Brooks' words, 'only to increase and justify an aesthetics of hysteria, since there can be no discharge of the overwhelming affect'.³⁸ In some ways we might align the reintroduction of the suffering female body with Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters' recognition of the revival of the Gothic heroine in contemporary popular culture such as the *Twilight* series: 'Suffering frequent bouts of dizziness and fainting fits, Bella is the direct descendent of the eighteenth-century Gothic heroine, whose delicacy is implicitly naturalized through its twenty-first-century recapitulation'.³⁹ Nonetheless, if Comencini preserves the suffering female body, Gina's panic attacks are not fatal; they are precisely not a form of consumption which will conveniently remove her from the nation space, like so much debris; if Gina's suffering does not provoke the catharsis of a violent ending, instead it is used to galvanize a response, which is left in its audience's hands, pending.

Envoicing Girls as 'suffering actors'

If Gina is denied the opportunity to seek cathartic release in murder, less dramatic moments of 'envoicing' do exist within the narrative. It is in these moments that we can read Comencini's work as being in tune with a post-girlpower moment described by Harris and Dobson, in which they draw upon the term 'suffering actor' to 'capture both injury and action', insisting that 'within post-girlpower conditions we perhaps need to be able to describe experiences of pain, oppression and suffering outside the terms of 'victimhood' and within a framework that acknowledges capacity for agency'.⁴⁰ That Comencini sees the film as a vehicle for the literal 'envoicing' of younger people is vividly illustrated by her decision to feature a young man she met in a hairdresser's who sings opera, whom she features in a particularly surreal scene as Gina's hairdresser singing Handel's aria 'Lascia ch'io pianga',

an intimation of suffering that will return on the soundtrack as Marco drives Gina home in silence after the meeting with the politician.

At another point, Gina insists that she and Marco visit a lone white horse, tethered in a field of the Roman periphery, recalling Andrea Arnold's use of the same symbol in the Essex wastelands of *Fishtank* (2009) to convey the existence of a non-communicative female protagonist's interior world through haptic experience. The film-making practice employed here is also similar to that of Arnold, in that Comencini used the debut girl actor in scenes of improvisation, allowing the young female actor to have a determining influence in the performance. This more innovative side to Comencini's film-making emerges in one of the most powerful scenes in the film, and creates space for a fantasy of working-class femininity outside of the paradigms of exploitation and suffering, of compulsive consumption, outside the sorry paradigm of the broken heel which closes the film. Gazing through the windows of Via Condotti, the two protagonists appear to conform to all the clichés of the passive consumer subject of Neoliberal design. As Hipkins has suggested before, however,⁴¹ Gina's playful entry into Alberta Ferretti, where she tricks the shop assistants and steals a dress, only to cast it aside in a chase down Via Condotti gives rise to a possible comparison with Jessica Ringrose's theorization of the existence, within working-class girl culture, of 'lines of flight', which interpret 'the meanings of girls' utopic but also violent or aggressive fantasies' [...] 'as energetic lines of flight outside of normative, oppressive boundaries of (working- class) femininity'.⁴² In this moment *Un giorno speciale* takes clichés about working-class feminine desires and girlhood and leaves them behind, staring in disbelief like those passers-by on Via Condotti. This scene, significantly, is followed by a further instance of 'envoicing' within the narrative which is also worth noting. Having run away in her Converse All-Stars, and reached the top of the Spanish Steps after their flight down Via Condotti, Gina is complimented by Marco on her acting skills. Right there, before her audience of one, Gina decides to perform what is clearly her real audition piece (as opposed to the 'performance' she will later provide for the politician). She performs Scarlett O'Hara's final monologue from *Gone with the Wind*, referencing a popular model of (non-Italian) female independence, and at the same time challenging the cliché that the girls involved in the Berlusconi scandals have no talents. Narrative cinema provides a space within which this simplistic discourse can be challenged. By giving Gina a voice, a powerful acting voice, Comencini attempts to compensate for the silencing of young women that is demonstrated later in her own film, when Gina returns to her state of 'illegible rage'. Indeed, at the end of her monologue, she opens her eyes, with the

bathetic comic effect of a point-of-view shot, to find herself looking at a security guard from Alberta Ferretti who has caught up with the duo. Although she manages to wriggle out of that particular punishment, Gina is clearly ‘acting’ within a very carefully proscribed space, embodying Harris and Dobson’s notion of the ‘suffering actor’ of the post-girlpower period.

Conclusion

It is also worth noting that in *Un giorno speciale* the Magdalene paradigm is transformed by the attention that Comencini pays to her male protagonist. In *La traviata*, a dying Violetta gives her lover Alfredo her portrait, as a macabre gift for his future wife. This image of the fetishized dead woman which will seal the legitimate union recalls the Magdalene paradigm of sacrifice to create the building block of the nation: the family. However, it also reminds us that the dynamic of the suffering prostitute not only genders the victim; her victimhood is dependent upon generational fracture: between an oppressive patriarch (Alfredo’s father, who forbids the union), and a disenfranchised young man. The inability of the younger man to rescue the fallen woman is part and parcel of a patriarchal society in which an older generation of men impose the law. That same dynamic is reactivated in Comencini’s depiction of contemporary Italy, arguably a society still characterized by such generational fracture and hierarchy: Marco follows Gina to the politician’s office, where he hesitates on the door, before deferring to the older, more powerful man. This ‘handover’ of the girl dressed in white, from younger man to older man represents a reversal of the wedding tradition. However, attentive to the fatal nature of this pattern of patriarchal dominance, Comencini allows her male protagonist a chance to redeem himself (if not the female protagonist), and the film itself calls upon both young men and women to resist exploitation and reclaim the body politic. Significantly, Marco’s outraged response to Gina’s suffering, keying the car he has been proudly driving all day, echo the traces or residues of feminist narratives that have percolated into everyday life, identified by Jessica Ringrose (2008, 54) as “traces” or “residues” of feminist, anti-oppressive discourses, which jar against the regulative rhythm of normative discourses [. . .] such disjunctures open up spaces of criticality and insight [. . .] small moments of rupture’.

The film ends with a vision of the enamoured young driver clutching Gina’s mended sandal outside her apartment block, a lost Prince Charming to her soiled Cinderella. At this point Gina cannot, or will not, hear him because of the loud television she watches vacantly,

or possibly because of her shame, but we are left wondering whether she might. The degradation of Italian culture is signified once again through the usual channels:⁴³ the dominance of television and the descent of women. Returning to the beginning of this chapter, it is easy to see that the body in question here, Gina's broken body, symbolized by her shoe,⁴⁴ is the body politic, returning us to that use of the female body to index the damaged and exploited Italian masses, as in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it echoes Egan's observations about the function of the sexualized girl more broadly to address both conservative and feminist nostalgias. As Di Bianco writes, the film appears to emphasize how 'to reduce women to pure images or objects of consumption, or to impede their participation in the public sphere, means to essentially erase their subjectivity, excluding them from the body politic'.⁴⁵

Yet our uncertainty over Gina's reaction suggests something more. In this melodramatic moment of possibly missed connection, Comencini simultaneously thwarts and offers the narrative of heterosexual romantic rescue and containment as idealized solution. The film has already shown that both Gina and Marco can read dominant narratives about female sexuality and consumption afresh: our hope is that they might continue to do so. For all its retrieval of the tropes of Italian operatic melodrama, *Un giorno speciale* recycles them in a manner that implies that Italian youth is not all about passivity, but more about survival. If the director grazes uncomfortably close in discourse surrounding the film to a moralizing stance on prostitution, the film does succeed in making a space for youthful agency, of showing at least the potential for the suffering heroine to find a voice as 'suffering actor'. The unresolved trajectory of the 'fallen' girl is a compelling one that may yet be used to make a point about Italian women and their role in the nation state.

¹ Peter Brooks, 'Melodrama, Body, Revolution' in Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds), *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, pp. 11-24, 22.

² Francesco Merlo, 'se la prostituzione ha cambiato la politica, anche la politica ha cambiato la prostituzione. La Maddalena ha perso la densità morale che fu una forza della nostra

civiltà, è diventata la scialba ragazzotta rifatta dal chirurgo ed educata dalla mamma-maitresse a darla via a tariffa', 'Quei pozzi avvelenati dalla giustizia alla Rai', *La Repubblica*, written the day after Berlusconi's parliamentary defeat, 17th November 2011.

³ Millicent Marcus, 'The Italian Body Politic is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Post-war Italian Film' in D. E. Stewart and A. Cornish (eds.), *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife – Essays in Honour of John Freccero* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 329–347.

⁴ Russell Campbell, *Marked Women* (2006), pp. 126-127.

⁵ In 'Prostituzione: La fabbrica del sesso' Giulia Garofalo underlines that the use of the word escort in Italian in fact has little to do with issues relating to prostitution (in *Femministe a parole: Grovigli da districare*, ed. by Sabrina Marchetti et al, Rome: Ediesse, 2012), pp. 224-228. Whilst we would not argue that the two exist on a continuum, it is particularly important to differentiate between the terms' differing implications in relation to agency, and to examine the stigma and subtext that may be attached to either in various contexts.

⁶ Anita Harris & Amy Shields Dobson (2015) 'Theorizing agency in postgirlpower times', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 29:2, 145-156

⁷ Viviani, Christian 'Madone aux deux visages: Lyrisme et double dans le mélo populaire italien', *Positif*, 436 (June 1997), 86-91

⁸ See Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women* (CUP: 2013), p. 118. For a discussion on prostitution in Verdi's operas, see pp. 129-138.

⁹ Discussing Verdi's *oeuvre*, Rutherford draws attention to Violetta's 'paean to the pleasures of sexual liberty and independence' in Act I of *La traviata* that constituted 'a provocation to the period's conservative ideas about women'. See Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, p. 111: 'Gioire, / Di volutta' nei vortici perire. / Sempre libera degg'io / Folleggiar di gioia a gioia'.

¹⁰ On the 'cult of the Madonna', see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

¹¹ See Benedetto Croce, *I teatri di Napoli: dal Rinascimento alla fine del secolo decimottavo*, ed. by Giuseppe Galasso (Milan: Adelphi, 1992), [see Naples, 1891, p. 437 version].

¹² See Caroline Abbate, 'Opera, or the Envoicing of Women', in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. by R. A. Solie (Berkeley, 1993), 225-58 (228-229).

¹³ See Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), 145.

¹⁴ Simonetta Chiappini, 'La voce della martire. Dagli <<evirati cantori>> all'eroina romantica', in *Storia d'Italia*, Annali 22: Il Risorgimento, a cura di Alberto Mario Banti e Paul Ginsborg (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), 289-328 (314): '[A]ssai più che in letteratura la voce della donna arrivava (e arriva) al cuore dello spettatore con una potenza che il chiuso sistema della legittimazione patriarcale ottocentesca avrebbe potuto far credere impensabile. Forse la responsabilità è della musica, o meglio del canto [...]']

¹⁵ On the voice as a 'positive symbol of liberation and artistic fulfilment, which was quintessentially the voice of freedom', see Susan Rutherford, "The Voice of Freedom: Images of the Prima Donna," in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and the Theater, 1850-1914*, ed. by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 95-113 (95).

¹⁶ Roger Parker, 'La traviata', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Stanley Sadie (Oxford: Grove, c. 1997), 799-802.

¹⁷ Rutherford, *Verdi, Women, Opera*, 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, & Sexuality*. 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) (first edition 1991).

²⁰ Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 147. For a more recent analysis of contemporary ideas of prostitution in late nineteenth-century Italy, see Rutherford, *Verdi, Women, Opera*, pp. 133-138.

²¹ Somewhat surprisingly, the first feminist author in the new Italy, Sibilla Aleramo, writing in her controversial autobiography published in 1906, described the figure of the prostitute as 'un essere mostruoso, contro natura, creato da un bestiale egoismo maschile' ['a monstrous being, against nature, created by a bestial masculine selfishness']. Not all emancipationists were sympathetic to prostitutes, nor were they all part of the movement to abolish regulation. See Sibilla Aleramo, *Una donna* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), 156.

²² Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: NY University Press, 2012).

²³ Sinnika Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininities: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁵ R. Danielle Egan, *Becoming Sexual: A Critical Appraisal of the Sexualization of Girls*, p. 102

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷ Danielle Hipkins, 'Whore-ocracy': Showgirls, the beauty trade-off, and mainstream oppositional discourse in contemporary Italy', *Italian Studies*, Vol. 66: 3, 2011.

²⁸ This movement began in 2011 with a call from a group of intellectuals and journalists for large-scale demonstrations against Berlusconi's treatment of women, both in the media, and within Italian society. It generated a series of popular feminist protests across Italy and has remained active, despite criticism from some feminist quarters.

²⁹ 'Nella società attuale, una ragazza bella non è soltanto di bell'aspetto, ma lei stessa diventa imprenditrice della propria bellezza ed esercita su questa e sul proprio corpo un controllo. Come se la bellezza fosse qualcosa di utilizzabile e come se il corpo e la bellezza non fossero lei stessa. Come se il corpo fosse scisso dalla ragazza, una cosa che lei può controllare e utilizzare a suo piacimento in una sorta di libero arbitrio. Invece, è solo una parodia di libertà ed è un modo di utilizzare la libertà con effetto contrario.' "Un giorno speciale", Intervista a Francesca Comencini, 4 October 2012, <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/%E2%80%9CUn-giorno-speciale%E2%80%9D-intervista-a-francesca-comencini/>, accessed 25 August 2016.

³⁰ According to ISTAT, in 2015 the youth unemployment rate (aged 15-24) was 43.1%, <http://www.istat.it/en/archive/158601>, accessed 20 October 2016.

³¹ "Un giorno speciale", Intervista a Francesca Comencini, 4 October 2012, <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/%E2%80%9CUn-giorno-speciale%E2%80%9D-intervista-a-francesca-comencini/>, accessed 25th August 2016.

³² Laura di Bianco, 'Francesca Comencini: Women Outside the Polis' in Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva, eds, *Italian Political Cinema. Public Life, Imaginary and Identity in Contemporary Italian Film* (Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 172-82, p. 180.

³³ Harris and Dobson, *Theorizing agency in postgirlpower times*, pp. 152-3.

³⁴ Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility' in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10 (2), 2007, 147-166.

³⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009)

³⁶ Peter Brooks, *Melodrama, Body, Revolution*, p. 22.

³⁷ ‘proprio quando pensa di aver scampato il pericolo si ritrova invischiata in una situazione difficile. Questo perché volevo che fosse il personaggio a essere spiazzato.’

http://www.movieplayer.it/film/articoli/a-veneziam-per-francesca-comencini-e-un-giorno-speciale_9852/, accessed 25th August 2016

³⁸ Brooks, *Melodrama, Body, Revolution*, p. 22.

³⁹ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), p. ?.

⁴⁰ Harris and Dobson, *Theorizing agency in postgirlpower times*, p. 153.

⁴¹ Danielle Hipkins, ‘The Showgirl Effect: Adolescent girls and (precarious) ‘technologies of sexiness’ in contemporary Italian cinema’ in *Global Girlhoods*, ed. by Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 21-33; ‘Of postfeminist girls and fireflies: Consuming Rome in *Un giorno speciale*’, *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, 16

⁴² Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold, ‘Teen girls, working-class femininity and resistance: retheorising fantasy and desire in educational contexts of heterosexualised violence’ in *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 2012, 16:4, 461-477

⁴³ See Andrea Minuz, <http://www.nuoviargomenti.net/%E2%80%A8breve-storia-del-degrado-morale/>, accessed 30 November, 2014.

⁴⁴ Maureen Turim writes: ‘The fetishistic elements of the shoe in film are shown in many close-ups, and perhaps any mise-en-scène, such as the Cinderella tableau, that offers the shoe as focal point of the composition. Yet the fetishistic elements of shoe representation are often less apparent than the metonymic aspects of such close-ups, which stand in for the movement of the body as a whole’, Maureen Turim, ‘High Angles on Shoes: Cinema, gender, and footwear’ in *Footnotes: On Shoes*, ed. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris (Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 63.

⁴⁵ Di Bianco, p. 182.