

## 4. UNDOING GENRE, UNDOING MASCULINITY

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*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (*Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*: 1970) follows a police detective who, after killing a woman named Augusta during sexual intercourse, leaves a number of clues that may lead to his being identified. The detective – the character who should be mentally lucid, restore order and be on the side of the law – is a psychopath, who uses his power to pervert the course of justice and re-assert his position of authority in the face of evidence that proves his culpability. As a representative of the authoritarian state, the detective presents himself like the ideal father figure of the patriarchal family. During a speech in front of his colleagues at the police headquarters, he argues for the need to treat the masses like children. For him, common citizens should be protected by means of repression from their dangerous quest for freedom. As a study of how the authoritarian mentality operates, *Investigation* uses a typically Reichian model. According to this model, the state functions as a macro-structure of the patriarchal family, in which the leader acts as an ideal father figure and the masses are encouraged to submit to his authority like his children. Prompted to trust him completely, the people sustain his absolute power and confer on him the duty to protect them. Dispossessed of any agency that might allow them to question the ‘father’s’ actions, the ‘children’ learn to feel unconditional respect for him and to fear his authority.<sup>1</sup>

In the model described by Wilhelm Reich, the authoritarian type experiences a strong identification with the father, the basis for future identification with any authority. Even though Reich did not openly address the question of

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gender, the film makes it explicit that this is a quintessentially male experience. By using the Oedipal model of the patriarchal family to describe the structuring of the authoritarian state, *Investigation* follows the detective's plan to conceal any manifestation of weakness and vulnerability behind a bullish semblance of strength and self-assurance. The film illustrates the distinctive patriarchal connotations of the institutional power upon which the detective's authority rests. It shows the police headquarters as an entirely male space, whilst also highlighting the strong homosocial bonds and relentless macho attitudes of the chief detective and his colleagues. It is in this public space, characterised by order and austerity, that the authority of the detective seems most visible and effective.

The film sheds light on the mismatch between this public performance of masculine omnipotence and the utterly infantile private identity that the detective hides. This mismatching is an effect of the psychosexual conflict that the protagonist experiences between his inner desires and the self-induced repression of such impulses. 'You are like a child,' Augusta ridicules him.<sup>2</sup> Augusta is here alluding to the detective's puerile investment in the murderous sexual fantasies that they both share and play with. The detective's infantilism is significantly reiterated at the end of the film, when the police chief reproaches him for the murder he has committed, like a child who is being punished by his parents for mischievous behaviour. What the film seems to suggest is that under the oppressive workings of this patriarchal structure, the subject will inevitably fail to develop an autonomous code of moral conduct. Paradoxically, it is the very exertion of power that keeps the detective forever stuck in this child-like condition. Dependent on a law that always confronts him, the detective is a child unable to question the rightness of the law that he is so keen to serve. This paradigm is also inevitably gendered and calls into question the untenable consistency of an exacerbated expression of male authority under patriarchy so deeply embedded in notions of power, control and aggressiveness.

Informed by the social tensions and political unrest of 1970s Italy, *Investigation* should be aligned with a tradition of leftist *engagement* that, in the highly politicised context of the 1970s, operates as a vehicle of social criticism. In a period in which State-authorized repression of the social movements became increasingly harsher and when a disquieting picture of the close contacts between members of the secret services, the police and extreme right-wing groups began to be revealed, *Investigation* emerged as a timely polemical statement against the dangers of a return to an authoritarian regime.<sup>3</sup> Such political ambitions rely, however, on a distinctive cinematic practice. In interviews, Elio Petri repeatedly expressed his intention to make political films that could be commercially viable and would appeal to mass audiences.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, *Investigation* was the sixth most watched film of 1970, bringing in 690,191,000 lire.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, the film also won the Oscar for best

foreign film. In *Investigation*, Petri's ambition to make popular cinema dictates a style that is easily recognisable: fast-paced editing, a bouncy and suspense-enhancing soundtrack composed by Ennio Morricone, and a caricatured acting style epitomised by the highly mannered performance of Gian Maria Volontè as the detective. This style is conducive to the creation of those effects of *spettacolarità* that critics such as Bondanella have recognised as being instrumental to the film's popular appeal.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst clearly drawing on the crime film, *Investigation* ends up disassembling the traditionally conservative connotations of this genre. In her analysis of *Investigation*, Millicent Marcus points out how, despite its relation to the crime genre, the film militates against the conventional ideological function of this genre. Quoting Thomas Schatz's study of Hollywood genres, Marcus reminds us that the crime film generally serves to express and resolve the conflicts that threaten the stability of the social order. By contrast, *Investigation* seems to work against this conservative thrust by inserting a progressive message of social protest against the authoritarian state.<sup>7</sup> Rather than constructing a story that progresses from disorder to order, the film goes in the opposite direction. In disrupting the genre convention regarding who is the hero and who is the villain, *Investigation* also turns the detective's masculinity into an object of interrogation, further complicating one of the distinctive features of the genre. The crime film is traditionally a genre structured around a testing of the hero's prowess; when the hero is the detective, the genre encourages spectators to measure the standards of competence of the detective through his ability to resolve the crime. According to Frank Krutnik, the detective operates as 'an idealised figure of narcissistic identification that will ultimately unite authority, achievement and masculine-male sexuality. Such fantastically glamourised hero-figures [. . .] promote an "ideology" of masculine omnipotence and invulnerability.'<sup>8</sup> *Investigation* self-consciously plays with the semblance of male omnipotence described by Krutnik. The film contrasts the detective's public performance of male authority during the investigation with a series of flashbacks revealing details about his private life. These show the development of his affair with the victim, Augusta, and their erotic games based on the staging of murder scenarios. In these flashbacks, Augusta's fascination with the power that the detective symbolises gradually gives way to her discovery of the protagonist's arrested sexual development and erotic inadequacy. Near the end of the film, it becomes clear that the murder was committed by the detective precisely to punish her for having exposed his sexual shortcomings and having ridiculed his authority.

The film epitomises the possibility of adopting the conventions of specific genres in order to reconfigure the gender inscriptions with which such genres have typically functioned. Popular genre forms, as has been extensively noted, play an essential role in constructing clearly differentiated gender images.<sup>9</sup>

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In offering systemised variants on its modes of meaning and pleasure, genre cinema constantly participates in an on-going process of construction of sexual difference. This is a process that is often concerned with the definition of rather clear-cut roles, values and expectations of men and women. Given such premises, it is not surprising that Maggie Günsberg's *Italian Cinema: Genre and Gender* – one of the first book-length studies of gender and genre relating to Italian cinema – should strongly emphasise the shaping of gender representations operated by mainstream genres in conjunction with patriarchal ideology. For Günsberg, one element that is crucial to the marketability of genre films is the kind of spectatorial expectations that are mobilised and how such expectations are strongly gendered.<sup>10</sup> *Investigation* shows the potential vulnerability to disruption of the conventions that are used to construct these gendered images. Being the result of a codified process of plot construction intertwined with the assembly of equally manufactured (and codified) ideas about what masculinity is, these conventions may sometimes be re-assembled in a way that contradicts our expectations. As a result, masculinity makes visible its own status as a construction, one that can be modified, re-assembled and endowed with new meanings. This chapter discusses several films from the 1970s that playfully appropriate and dismantle a set of generic conventions and popular forms of address with the effect of disrupting their typical constitutive relation to a set of normative assumptions about masculinity.<sup>11</sup>

#### GENDERED LAUGHTER IN *THE SEDUCTION OF MIMÌ*

*The Seduction of Mimì* follows the story of a Sicilian miner (Mimì), who loses his job after refusing to vote for a Mafia-backed candidate at the local elections and then moves to Turin in search of better work opportunities. Having left his wife behind in Sicily, Mimì quickly finds a new job as a metalworker, a political passion (communism) and a woman he loves (Fiore). After a series of unfortunate events, he is forced to return to Sicily. Here, Mimì starts leading a double life with both Fiore and his wife. He gradually repudiates his communist ideals and turns away from the struggles of his co-workers. *The Seduction of Mimì* does not develop a classic comedic structure – that is, a narrative tending towards a happy ending – but features a number of gags and wisecracks based on the motif of incongruity. The protagonist Mimì is presented as a classic comic figure in the Platonic sense of someone who is ignorant of himself. Mimì often misreads his own talents. He thinks he is more clever than he really is and reckons that his actions will achieve a certain effect but is usually proved wrong: hence, our laughing at him.

Whilst presenting Mimì as a laughable caricature, *The Seduction of Mimì* also establishes a space for the audience to enjoy feelings of empathy and identification with him. In the first section of the film, Mimì's outspoken dislike for

the Mafia-backed candidate and his decision to vote for the Communist Party (despite intimidation) place him in opposition to an oppressive and corrupt social order. After he is fired and he decides to migrate to Turin in the hope of a better life, the sense of injustice felt by Mimì is presumably also shared by the audience. As we follow his migration from Sicily to Turin (and thus his development into a politicised factory worker), his journey is presented as an easily identifiable experience for Italian and American audiences affected, in one way or another, by the experience of migration. In developing a sequential narrative structure based on causality, the film follows one of the main rules of classical narration. The cause–effect developments are left dangling at the end of a sequence and are generally picked up in the following one: for example, the decision not to vote for the Mafia-backed candidate (cause) → he is fired (effect of the previous cause, and cause of further developments) → the decision to move to Turin (effect).

Consistently with its popular mode of address, *The Seduction of Mimì* conforms to another rule of the classical narrative film: namely, the fact that at least one of the plot lines should involve a heterosexual romance. In the first Sicilian section of the film, Mimì's marital predicament is introduced: we see him in bed with his sexually inhibited wife, who covers her face and prays whilst her husband attempts to make love to her. Frustrated, Mimì gives up. Intertwined with the moral and political dilemma (the conflict between political ideology and personal interest) that Mimì faces in the story, this plot line of frustrated sexual desire, left dangling in the first section, is then picked up in the section of the film set in Turin, when Mimì finally meets Fiore. If life in Sicily denies to Mimì both the possibilities of resisting corruption and Mafia power, and the material conditions for experiencing romantic love (witness the wife's discouragingly prudish attitude to sex), Mimì's arrival in Turin coincides with the excitement of a new romance with Fiore and the exhilarating opportunities of anti-capitalist struggle. The romantic theme, then, is a crucial component in the narrative progression of the film, one that moves from lack to fulfilment, a fulfilment that is both a political and a romantic one.

On one level, *The Seduction of Mimì* deploys a narrative of romantic wish-fulfilment that gives a prominent role to the emotions and passion in the actions of the protagonists, especially Mimì and Fiore. On the other, it plays with the very idea that this kind of narrative will necessarily reduce the complexity of the 'serious' political issues raised. Kathleen Rowe has suggested that classical Hollywood comedies whose narratives involve the formation of the couple between a man and a woman belonging to different social classes frequently dilute the problem of class difference under the romantic imperative of the happy ending.<sup>12</sup> Coinciding with the flourishing of the romance between Fiore and Mimì, *The Seduction of Mimì* ends up performing precisely the depoliticising function that the 'ideology of love' is generally blamed for in

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popular genre cinema. Yet, this turn in the plot, rather than being an inevitable consequence of the romance, is a self-conscious narrative gimmick; its function is to shed light on the problematic relation between political ideology and the individual responsibilities of the subject. It is an issue that becomes suddenly central in the film and reveals the distance between the sincere nature of Fiore's political commitment and Mimì's more opportunistic relation to leftist politics. This becomes clear as soon as Fiore and Mimì set up house together in Turin. Whilst Fiore has politics constantly in mind, Mimì quickly dismisses any notion of solidarity with other workers and discourages her from joining the public protest organised by the building workers. A further withdrawal from politics is evident in the scene in which Fiore lies on the bed, pregnant, and asks Mimì to inform her about the political ferment in the factories and the on-going protests. The noise of the workers' protests that reaches their loft from outside and Mimì's unwillingness to tell her anything about the strikes highlight his sudden retreat from politics into his strictly private world. Mimì ends up absorbing traditional family values by directing all his thoughts and concerns towards his heir-to-be and Fiore. At this point, Mimì not only betrays his communist ideals but also reveals the gap between his initial political convictions and his actual self-interest.

Wertmüller's popular cinema is typically based on this trajectory; it moves from a moment of familiarisation to a subsequent state of discomfort that arises when the terms of a political and/or moral dilemma are revealed. It is a trajectory that becomes clear in a number of scenes in which a collective eye pauses on the protagonist. This is signalled by the camera dwelling on the faces of characters who silently condemn Mimì's deplorable conduct (for example, his brother, Peppino, and Fiore herself in the final sequence). During these moments, the film enacts a kind of suspension; marked by the lack of verbal interaction, these are moments that generally imply a relief from the prevailingly comic development of the story and which draw attention to the eyes as silent intra-diegetic propellants for the audience's evaluation of the issues raised by the film. Ironically, it is a relief that mimics the kind of suspension – 'the absence of feelings', as Henri Bergson puts it – that is required for laughter to work. Bergson reminds us that laughter, in order to be effective, needs a disinterested spectator who looks at a comic situation with 'something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart'.<sup>13</sup> Bergson does not say that one could not possibly laugh at a person who inspires pity or affection, but the very act of laughing must impose a momentary silence upon these emotions. In the *Seduction of Mimi*, the former type of suspension works towards an emotional relief that is needed for us to experience laughter. The latter retrieves those emotions in order for the spectator to connect with and 'feel' the politics explored by the film. They are two seemingly opposite thrusts that appear entangled, especially in the second section of the film. It is the very nature of

this two-fold movement, I would suggest, that makes Wertmüller's films of the 1970s especially vulnerable to the contradictory, and often opposite, critical responses that have accompanied their commercial success.

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In the first half of the film, Mimì's masculinity constitutes a central target of humour. His uptight behaviour as he tries to perform his Latin-lover tricks with Fiore plays out some of the mythologies of Sicilian masculinity popularised by Pietro Germi's *Seduced and Abandoned* (*Sedotta e abbandonata*: 1964) and *Divorce Italian-Style* (*Divorzio all'italiana*: 1961). It is a gender performance that is exposed as ludicrous, one that is repeatedly mocked by Fiore, who laughs at the grandiose way in which Mimì introduces himself, his ogling as he tries to woo her, and his obsessive jealousy. The final section of the film, set in Sicily, maintains such a humorous take but tends to expose much more painstakingly the absurd logic of Mimì's sexual behaviour.

This part of the film satirises Mimì's response as he discovers that his promise to remain faithful to Fiore and not to have sex with his wife has elicited rumours among the townsfolk about his sexuality. Mimì's reaction, when he realises that many people in his hometown suspect him of being sexually inept – and implicitly homosexual – is one of panic, a response that is laden with comic potential as the protagonist hysterically bawls at a group of men to defend his reputation. He subsequently leads these men to meet Fiore and to learn the details of his double life. But it is Mimì's reaction in discovering that his neglected wife has fallen into the arms of another man and has become pregnant that sheds light on the real double standard he maintains between his own sexual freedom and the fidelity he expects from his wife.

The motif of the jealous Sicilian husband wishing to defend his honour at any cost should be seen primarily as a comic trope that enables the film to satirise the behaviour of a man ready to sacrifice his principles to assert his manhood publicly. 'I always proceed with a great faith in the power of laughter,' Wertmüller declares in an interview.<sup>14</sup> Underlining laughter as a privileged method for connecting with vast popular audiences, this is a pronouncement that is supported by the depiction of figures such as the corpulent Nazi commander in *Pasqualino Seven Beauties* and the bombastic fascist Spatoletti in *Love and Anarchy* (*Film d'amore e d'anarchia, ovvero 'stamattina alle 10 in via dei Fiori nella nota casa di tolleranza . . .'*: 1973). In both cases, the oppressiveness of the power that these characters represent is not shown in its frightening aspect, but rather in a humorous light that reveals the vulnerability of this power to derision. Wertmüller is a director whose use of laughter – often reliant on vulgar jokes and obscenities – has been often targeted, especially in Italy, by accusations of degradation and debasement. In commenting on her popular films of the 1970s, Lino Micciché asserts: 'We give credit to Lina

Wertmüller for her consistency: her cinema is degrading more and more, from film to film, with a constant progression which, if it weren't deplorable, would certainly be admirable.<sup>15</sup> This is a comment that reverberates with the widely shared impression among Italian critics that her films, because of their vulgarity and cheap humour, are so degrading for their audience that they deserve nothing but condemnation.

I want to pause, here, to consider briefly the question of degradation in popular comedy. In his essay on the mechanisms of slapstick, Tom Gunning notes that film forms dedicated to provoking laughter, such as jokes and gags, are often antithetical to logic and reason. Glossing Immanuel Kant's reflections on the topic, he refers to laughter as a response in which both the mind and the body operate like a machine breaking down; for Gunning, gags and jokes may be best described as the 'undermining of an apparent purpose, a detouring, if not derailing, of a rational system of discourse or action'.<sup>16</sup> The breaking down speaks of the departure from reason that laughter is meant to provoke in response to a comic situation or a joke. It is an image that evokes a kind of bodily debasement, a downward movement from the mind – depositary of reason, good sense and logic – towards the lower parts of the body.

The kind of bodily debasement that is suggested by Gunning's essay seems to have little in common with the chuckle normally produced by witty, self-conscious humour. It is more closely associated, instead, with that loud, roaring laughter that is triggered by toilet humour and gross-out comedy. The image of the 'machine breaking down' fittingly evokes the spectre of an uncontrollable, mob-like audience splitting their sides in the darkness of the cinema in the face of ribald jokes and obscene catchphrases. The image resonates with the threat of a degraded mass taste and an audience that loses control over its intellectual and critical faculties.

One may not be entirely surprised, then, if the laughter most closely associated with the conventions and forms of popular cinema is often considered to be politically conservative, if not reactionary. One of the starting points of Kathleen Rowe's work on the genres of laughter is the acknowledgement of how often popular culture represents women as objects rather than subjects of laughter.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in their analysis of popular comedies in contemporary Italian cinema (the 'cinepanettoni'), Christian Uva and Michele Picchi condemn the cruel gags and jokes in these films. For Uva and Picchi, the films provoke a kind of regressive laughter in the audience by targeting what the authors describe as typically 'weak categories' ('categorie deboli'), such as women and homosexuals.<sup>18</sup>

Unsurprisingly, some of the most recurrent criticisms of Wertmüller's films concern the presumed dishonesty of her sexual politics and her much-advertised feminist beliefs. Elle Willis, for example, asserts that 'Wertmüller is not only a woman hater [. . .] but a woman who pretends to be a feminist'.<sup>19</sup>



These are allegations that often point to the impossible reconciliation between the feminist premises of Wertmüller's films and the limitations of the stereotypes and exploitative comic situations on which her popular cinematic practice is based.

The second part of *The Seduction of Mimì* develops an increasingly important plot line that shows Mimì taking his revenge against a man who has made his wife pregnant. The seduction of Amalia (the man's wife), a middle-aged and overweight mother of five, is played for laughs. The scene in which Amalia finally surrenders to Mimì's courtship and engages in a striptease constitutes the comic peak of the film. It is a moment when even the most enthusiastic defenders of Wertmüller's work appreciate that the gratuitous visual indulgence relating to Amalia's fat body should be criticised. Joan Mellen, for example, condemned it thus:

[W]hatever his faults, which included caving in to the Mafia, the hero Mimì was never caricatured for his rolls of flab. Mimì's faults revealed spiritual weakness; the woman was gross and Wertmüller seemed to be delighting in this grossness for its own sake.<sup>20</sup>

By looking closely at this moment in the film, my objective is not to endorse or refute these criticisms. Rather it is to show the distinctiveness, as well as the productiveness, of Wertmüller's engagement with popular cinematic forms: namely, a kind of film practice based on the use of the most vulgar and sometimes offensive comic situations taken to such an exaggerated level of parody and grotesque humour as to produce the undoing of their expected effect.

The accusations of misogyny addressed to Wertmüller's work strike similar chords to the allegation according to which her cinema, despite its alleged politically progressive premises, may be fundamentally conservative. These allegations often point to the impossible reconciliation between such premises and the limitations of the stereotypes and exploitative comic situations on which her popular cinematic practice is based. This kind of criticism seems to suggest that, by showing some of the coarsest stereotypes relating to women who are abused and humiliated by the male characters, the film actually validates these misogynistic scenarios by encouraging its female spectators to nurture their traditional instincts of subordination and submission to men. To take issue with this criticism means to test the extent to which the film's satire on masculinity remains entrapped or not in an overarching textual framework that is still profoundly patriarchal. In focusing on Amalia's seduction and the regressive stereotypes about women that come to be mobilised in the film, I do not intend to drift away from what should be the real focus of this book – masculinity. Masculinity is not an autonomous object of study but is, instead, a configuration that functions relationally within a wider gender order.<sup>21</sup> In

*The Seduction of Mimi*, the satirical take on the protagonist's masculinity must be measured up, then, against the comic register that is used to represent women such as Amalia.

There are two major comic motifs in Mimi's seduction of Amalia. The first has to do with Mimi's absurd position in not desiring Amalia but having to have sex with her in order to accomplish his plan of revenge. The second is Amalia's abundant body, which is here presented as an object of laughter for the audience. These two comic motifs are, however, interconnected, since the latter is a device to achieve the former. Cross-cutting between Amalia undressing and Mimi's increasingly distressed face, this scene exploits for comic purposes certain culturally shared attitudes and feelings about female bodies. What makes Amalia's body laughable is not only its chubbiness but also the way in which her erotic performance in the striptease clashes with dominant ideas of what constitutes proper sexualised femininity. By replaying the moment in which Amalia uncovers her bottom three times and repeatedly cross-cutting it with a sequence of pulsating shots zooming in on Mimi's increasing panic (Fig. 4.1), the film only intensifies the feelings of amusement that such a spectacle is meant to provide for the spectator. We are encouraged to laugh at Mimi's shift from victimiser to victim as he comes to terms with Amalia's chubbiness; but the protagonist is only a vector for a laugh that originates and ends with Amalia's body.

This is a quintessential Wertmüller moment, one in which women make a spectacle of themselves by violating the conventions that regulate their social visibility, thus exposing themselves to laughter. One such moment occurs, for example, in *Pasqualino Seven Beauties*, when Pasqualino's sister, Concettina – played by Elena Fiore, the same actress who plays Amalia in *The Seduction of Mimi* – performs a sexy routine in a vaudeville in front of a men-only audience. Confronted with such a spectacle, the men start abusing her verbally and laugh at her ugliness and fatness. The sequence is remarkable for how Concettina defiantly continues to sing while proudly showing her half-naked body, dancing sexily and hurling insults back at the men in the audience.



Figure 4.1 *The Seduction of Mimi*, Mimi worriedly looking at Amalia's body during the striptease.

This type of defiant performance, empowered by a sense of ironic detachment from the oppressive cultural codes of gender visibility that make Concettina's fat, aged body hardly fit for such a performance, is also present in Amalia's striptease. Amalia's performance is imbued with the sexist stereotypes that make her body laughable to the audience, as promptly signalled by the editing pattern linking Mimi's distressed gaze to the sight of Amalia's body. Yet, such a performance also reveals a distinctive element of posing and teasing. As she undresses, Amalia deploys a coquettish smile and gazes back to the camera with self-assurance (Fig. 4.2). Her playful gaze makes a mockery of the proper performance of the ideal sexualised female body. Wertmüller signals the lack of seriousness in this moment with a sudden shift to warm light that invites us to reconsider our initial realistic engagement with this erotic spectacle.

This scene evokes a distinctly feminine imagery of grotesque excess that seems to appear frequently in Wertmüller's films. *Love and Anarchy*, for example, shows the gargantuan depiction of a banquet in which a group of prostitutes gulp down food and wine whilst laughing loudly and shouting insults at each other. The women wear exaggerated make-up and very revealing dresses, and speak with larger-than-life regional accents. This is a scene that exemplifies the wider intent of the film to celebrate the joyous licentiousness of these women by configuring their bodies as sites of desirous excess against the deathly oppressiveness of bourgeois society and fascism.

Mary Russo's discussion of the female grotesque helps us to understand this kind of imagery. In her reading of the terracotta figurines of the laughing hags in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, Russo considers the disruptive potential of feminine hyperbolic performances. The bodies of the hags



Figure 4.2 *The Seduction of Mimi*, Amalia's gaze at Mimi.

described by Bakhtin are deformed and decaying, yet the women are laughing. The image of the pregnant laughing hags is, of course, laden with all the connotations of loathing and discomfort that are associated with the biological processes of reproduction, fattening and ageing. Described within the context of Bakhtin's discussion on Carnival – the expression of popular culture that contests power through mockery – the bodies of the laughing hags constitute a collective grotesque female body that is 'open, protruding, extended, secreting, [. . .] the body of becoming, process, change'.<sup>22</sup> Russo's analysis is useful because it shows a female subject unravelling her exploitation by male discourse by making visible, through an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible (that is, the boundaries that woman is not supposed to cross).

Amalia's performance in *The Seduction of Mimì* makes explicit the affirmative and celebratory potential of women's bodily exposure and hyperbolic exaggeration raised by Russo's study and subsequently expanded and complicated by Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman*. By unashamedly flaunting a number of excesses that violate codes of proper femininity, Amalia appears in the film as much more than a passive object of scorn. Amalia's body makes a spectacle of itself not simply for what it is but due to the way in which the camera provides repeated close-ups on her protruding wart and the massive size of her breasts and her bottom during the striptease. Its parodic intent is clear as we are confronted with the image of her enormous bottom climbing over the bed. The use of a wide-angle lens exaggerates the depth of the shot by distorting the visual spectacle so as to turn Amalia's prosthetic bottom into an animate mountain of flesh about to submerge Mimì, who appears comparatively much smaller on the opposite side of the bed. In its distortion, this female body is barely believable. It is a spectacle that engages with a masculinistic logic, lending itself to its stifling comic mechanisms in order to distance itself from it and expose the terms of this logic to mockery and derision.

Together with the use of the wide-angle lens, the modulation of specific camera angles in this scene makes explicit the self-empowering implications of this 'masquerade'.<sup>23</sup> By exaggerating the difference in size between Amalia's body and Mimì's, this scene visually anticipates the overturning of the power relation between these two characters in the story. Wertmüller makes sure that we understand clearly that the roles of subject and object of the joke are about to be reversed. This is signalled through a sequence of shots that takes Mimì's point of view as he lies on the bed and Amalia's visual perspective as she kneels over him. For the former point of view, the camera takes a low-angle position that exacerbates the gigantic size of Amalia's body, which is about to engulf Mimì; for the latter, however, a high-angle position increases his smallness. Such a use of the camera angles and its expressive meaning are very much consistent with how the film makes use of asymmetries in point of view to convey

the relations of power and submission between characters. Every time Mimi recognises a member of the Tricarico family (the *mafiosi*) and bows to them, the camera signals the power relation through his recognition of the distinctive three moles on their faces and by showing the asymmetric visual relation between the powerful and the submissive. This is done either through dramatically high or dramatically low camera angles, or by placing the character that exerts power on a higher plane such as a terrace, a balcony or a flyover.

The power reversal is made even more explicit as Mimi's vengeful plan (to restore his honour) backfires on him when Amalia leads him back to the cabin where their first sexual encounter occurred. By treating him with disdain and impatience, Amalia now bosses Mimi around, urging him to impregnate her. It is now Amalia who has seized control of the situation and who decides to take her own revenge on her husband for cheating on her with Mimi's wife. This turn in the story coincides with the film's entrance into the realm of *beffa* – as we have seen, a comic trope by which female characters have traditionally been able to circumvent the authority of men through wit, deception and unruliness. Comedy is, of course, the domain of play *par excellence*, a site of disruption where unruly women have been able to undermine dominant patriarchal attitudes. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue, film comedy is also a game played with transgression and familiarity, where transgressions are cushioned and eventually disarmed by a resetting of boundaries. Much of the pleasure of such transgressions, particularly in the comedy of the sexes, has to do precisely with refamiliarisation within these boundaries after an 'eccentric' female character has enabled some extent of deviation from the norm.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Seduction of Mimi*, such a male-oriented resetting is strikingly absent. On the contrary, Amalia's complicity with Mimi in making her husband a cuckold allows her to humiliate both her husband and Mimi publicly in front of her fellow citizens. This public humiliation takes place in the square in which Mimi has planned to stage a personal bid to restore his honour by informing Amalia's husband that he has impregnated his wife. In the face of her husband's shocked reaction, Amalia here takes the opportunity to highlight, in her usual over-the-top fashion, not only the success of her own plan of vengeance against her husband but also her revulsion at the two men, whom she rebukes as 'good-for-nothing fathers'. The sequence, showing Mimi's stratagem collapse after he is wrongly accused of having shot Amalia's husband, is once again played for laughs but only on one level. On another, Wertmüller punctuates the comic staging of Mimi's revenge with close-ups of the disapproving gazes of Peppino and Mimi's little brother, who realise how far Mimi is ready to go to defend his honour. Such gazes do not allow the comic detachment that this paradoxical resolution would initially require – particularly after Mimi's plan backfires again and the Mafia emissary kills Amalia's husband in his place – but rather impinge upon our direct and serious involvement in Mimi's

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moral shortcomings. The close-up on the little brother, in particular, is striking because it painfully evokes the betrayal of Mimi's earlier promise of mentorship to him at the beginning of the film. Moreover, it implies the shattering of the mutual feelings of complicity and affection shared by the brothers before Mimi's departure to Turin.

*The Seduction of Mimi* seduces its audiences only to confront them subsequently with a betrayal of their expectations and a reversal of the 'conservative' re-ordering that conventionally characterises the comic mode. The film lays out some of the politically 'regressive' pleasures associated with laughter, only to create a distance from these pleasures and to reject them. On these terms, then, the film seems to be involved in a self-conscious analysis of its own structure, one that also concerns the kind of oppressive masculinity epitomised by Mimi, with which we are first invited to sympathise and then made to experience unease.

Wertmüller's films are detested and rejected by some critics as manipulative and exploitative commercial operations for the way they seem to bring together a set of binaries that should be kept separate: serious/comic; political commitment/entertainment; the director's presumed allegiance to feminism/sexist jokes. The apparently impossible synthesis between these dichotomies generates the well-known accusations of hypocrisy addressed to Wertmüller and the assumption that the message of her films is muddled and chaotic, or even inherently contradictory. Wertmüller's cinema, as *The Seduction of Mimi* shows, does not transcend the restrictions (and the hierarchies) that are implicit in the sometimes conservative workings of the 'popular', but productively shows some of the possibilities for disengagement from such restrictions. The film seems to deploy some of the possibilities for contesting power and hierarchies envisaged by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*. Like the laughter of the people during Carnival, the production of laughter in *The Seduction of Mimi* uses the logic of the 'inside-out'. It is a kind of laughter that upsets the rigid marking between the object of the mocking and the enunciating subject of laughter. This is a laughter that is a genuinely popular cultural practice in the Bakhtinian sense, in which the subject from below enters a utopian realm of freedom and equality. Here, opportunities for movement, transformation and renewal are clearly visible.

#### GAY COMEDY AND THE REFLECTING MIRROR OF MASCULINITY:

##### *LA PATATA BOLLENTE*

Structured upon a conflict between eccentricity and conformity, comedy constitutes an ideal arena for representing unconventional models of masculinity. The conflict is generally based on an awareness of the norm and a departure from such a norm on which laughter is usually predicated. Unsurprisingly,

images of male transvestism and effeminacy have been far from scarce in film comedies, as documented by Vito Russo in *The Celluloid Closet*.<sup>25</sup> Such images may suggest how, in a given society, we define ourselves, see others and laugh at them – the three often being related. More broadly, they say something about the privileged function of comedy in giving visibility to things that are perceived to be out of place, mixed up or not quite right. Cross-dressers and effeminate homosexuals score highly in the Italian comedy of the post-war period. In films such as *Totòtruffa '62* (1961), *Figaro qua . . . Figaro là* (1950), *Totò contro i 4* (1963) and *Totò a colori* (1952), the Neapolitan comedian Totò famously impersonates a number of transvestites and effeminate dandies. He typically invests in demands for the easy laughter of the screwball comedy by exploiting common feelings about men not fitting a normative male role and the humorous reaction that emerges from the encounter with their presence. Comedy indeed requires stereotypes that must be based on clearly visible and recognisable diversions from a norm; male effeminacy – as a form of divergence from how ‘normal’ men are supposed to be – meets these criteria. Male homosexuality and effeminacy feature also prominently in *commedia all’italiana*, such as *The Easy Life (Il sorpasso: 1962)*, in which a marginal character called Occhio fino (his name being an inversion of the homophobic slur ‘finocchio’) plays the role of an effeminate servant. Occhio fino’s appearance is linked to certain assumptions about homosexual men, here epitomised by his mincing walk, his effete voice and his ambiguous affection for the pretty young protagonist, Roberto. Such a characterisation inevitably turns him into the butt of the jokes of the other protagonist, Bruno. Occhio fino appears for no more than three scenes and within the purposes of the narrative plays a very marginal role; in symbolic terms, however, his presence is considerable. He shows how ‘normal’ men are not supposed to be, hence functioning as a yardstick to re-assert normative ideas about masculinity.

At stake in these stereotypical representations of male homosexuality and effeminacy, however, is not only the perpetuation of normative ideas about masculinity. In *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, Orin Klapp notes that there is a fundamental distinction between fictional social types and stereotypes. Social types reflect the lifestyle, mentality and morality of the majority. They are inside the social order and the confines of normality. By contrast, stereotypes are outside this world and tend to be dysfunctional. Such a distinction may be made by marking the subjects outside the boundaries of normality with a set of morally deplorable characteristics that clash against the sense of rightness that the dominant moral order instead reflects.<sup>26</sup> Klapp’s distinction between social types and stereotypes shows remarkable similarities with the treatment of the gay characters in *La dolce vita* (1960), for example. What is most striking about them in Fellini’s film is not their effeminacy or flamboyance but their sense of belonging to the decadent world that the film portrays. Their sporadic

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appearance is consistently linked with moral shallowness. Throughout the film, the only function that they seem to perform is gossiping. On one occasion, the film even suggests their sadistic pleasure in such a task. In the episode of the fight on via Veneto, for example, Pierone – the homosexual character who appears most frequently – responds to Marcello’s request for information regarding the fight by saying that he does not know (what is going on), but it has been beautiful to watch. Appearing on the screen only to deliver shallow comments, these homosexual characters seem to constitute as dysfunctional a presence as the exploitative flashes of the paparazzi. Klapp’s model may be also applied to well-known Neorealist films such as *Rome Open City*, where the homosexuality of the Nazi commander Bergmann is associated with sadism, perversity and evil. This association is also strongly gendered. The actor playing Bergmann, Harry Feist, was chosen specifically because he was homosexual. In the film, the effeminacy of this character is typically charged with moral meaning to signify his inhumanity. His deviance is also constructed out of a binary opposition: namely, in relation to the male standard that looms large in the film, exemplified by the principles of manly martyrdom, Christian solidarity, humanism and, most importantly, heterosexuality.

Whereas for much of the post-war period the disavowal of male homosexuality has been instrumental in the demarcation of a distinct boundary between an ‘acceptable’ masculinity and an ‘abject’ one, the 1970s constitute a clear turning point. As Vincenzo Patanè has shown in his short history of Italian gay-themed films, after 1968 Italian cinema, despite its persistent use of caricatured images of effeminate gay men, shows a new engagement with the liberationist rhetoric of the Italian gay movement and a commitment to promote the social integration of homosexuals.<sup>27</sup> This new tendency is linked to the interrogation of the normative boundaries defining the terms of a socially acceptable male identity. *Scusi, lei è normale?* (1979) is an instructive example. It follows the misadventures of a gay couple and a woman who works as a model for soft-porn magazines. The film is noteworthy not only for the centrality of the homosexual characters in the plot but also for the way in which it turns moral bigotry and homophobia into the real objects of scorn and condemnation. Exemplified by an over-zealous magistrate, who embarks on a moral campaign to prevent the spread of explicit erotic material in Italian society, and a couple of clumsy homophobic police detectives, these conservative moral attitudes are cast in the film as out of date and unacceptable in the increasingly liberal Italy of the 1970s. *Scusi, lei è normale?* revisits the comic figure of the moral crusader already popularised by Fellini’s *Le tentazioni del Dottor Antonio* (Boccaccio ’70: 1962) and by *Il moralista* (1959). The title of the film acts out its central political and moral statement. Halfway through the story, the female protagonist makes an unappreciative remark about the gay couple. In response, one of the gay men polemically alludes to her similar ‘abnormality’



in relation to the conservative moral standards that she has just used to criticise them. As a sexually emancipated woman, like the gay couple, the female protagonist is repeatedly scorned by the repressive public authorities and prosecuted for moral indecency. One of the gay characters thus provocatively asks her: 'Excuse-me, are *you* normal?'<sup>28</sup> It is a rhetorical question that, in also addressing the audience, points to the way they may have thus far enjoyed the new sexual freedoms and the numerous occasions for erotic titillation provided by the Italian film industry in these years without entirely questioning the true extent of their supposed liberalism. The film, perhaps simplistically, seems to tell us that we are all slightly abnormal after all. In striking a non-judgemental attitude towards gay people and validating homosexuality as a viable lifestyle, *Scusi, lei è normale?* appears to have been greatly influenced by the enormous advances of the gay movement in this period. The film also crucially disrupts the heterocentric binary logic traditionally regulating the cultural production and consumption of gendered images in cinema by showing one of the homosexual male protagonists as impeccably masculine and untainted by any implications of moral perversity.

But it was another popular comedy, *La patata bollente*, that, on its release, surprised a number of critics for the sympathetic way in which it approached the story of a homosexual. Morando Morandini, for example, praised it as 'an honest film that faces the theme of homosexuality head-on'.<sup>29</sup> Dismissed by canonical film criticism for its crass humour, *La patata bollente* has recently attained the status of 'cult film' for the Italian gay community, with the main tune from the film's soundtrack – *Un tango diverso* – being chosen as the official song of the 2008 Italian Gay Pride event in Bologna.<sup>30</sup> *La patata bollente* revolves around the accidental meeting between a communist factory worker (Gandhi) and a homosexual bookshop assistant (Claudio). The encounter takes place when Claudio, attacked by a gang of skinheads, is rescued by Gandhi and taken to his place to recover. Their meeting is an occasion for Gandhi to interrogate some of his misconceptions about homosexuals. In meeting Claudio and becoming his friend, Gandhi confronts the contradictions between his communist principles (for example, his claim to be on the side of the oppressed) and his homophobic attitudes. He comes to understand the everyday humiliations suffered by many homosexuals and becomes a champion of their rights in front of his fellow factory workers.

The film was conceived, as scriptwriter Enrico Vanzina points out, as a satire on the historical unease with which the Italian Left had handled questions pertaining to sexual politics.<sup>31</sup> For much of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had generally ignored the issue of homosexual oppression. The conventional argument with which the party had opposed the call for 'interclass' collaboration on the part of the gay movement was the idea that sexual liberation and the struggle against homophobia could not be

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priorities.<sup>32</sup> Such a call was also often dismissed with rigid moralising arguments supported by the commonplace that equated homosexuality with bourgeois degeneracy.<sup>33</sup> Released in 1979, *La patata bollente* was a film grounded in a changing political climate that revealed a considerable shift of attitudes within the Italian Left, with the Communist Party finally showing a willingness to engage in a dialogue with homosexual activist groups. Significantly, in 1979, the first two openly homosexual candidates were included on the electoral lists of the PCI for the Italian parliament. In the same year, the mayors of Rome and Turin (both members of the PCI) officially met a number of gay activists for the first time and spoke up about the need for a more visible role for homosexuals in society. Moreover, from the late 1970s, the official newspaper of the PCI, *L'Unità*, started publishing articles touching upon the question of homosexuality in contemporary Italy whilst also inviting its readers to send in letters about this topic.

The characterisation of the two protagonists in *La patata bollente* is very much consistent with the intent of the film to include references to some of these political developments and make a comment upon them. The film strives to present Gandhi as the ideal factory worker celebrated by orthodox leftist rhetoric: politically committed, hard-working, trustworthy, virile, highly respected by his colleagues and, of course, heterosexual. By contrast, Claudio is seen as the new kind of empowered homosexual subject produced by gay liberation: unashamedly confident about his sexual orientation, willing to embrace his 'difference' as positive, and committed to making his homosexuality a political issue.

Most of the reviews written about the film soon after its release highlight how *La patata bollente* followed in the footsteps of *La Cage aux folles* (1978).<sup>34</sup> *La Cage aux folles*, a French–Italian co-production starring Ugo Tognazzi and Michel Serrault, was one of the greatest commercial hits of the late 1970s. It centred on the story of a middle-aged gay couple and their drag nightclub in St Tropez. Much of the popular appeal of *La Cage aux folles*, which in Italy attracted 1.4 million viewers and became the second most popular film of the 1978–9 season, stemmed from the glamorisation of the camp lifestyle of the gay couple and the comic contrast with an ultra-conservative family that arrives in their household. *La patata bollente* noticeably borrows from *La Cage aux folles* the comic possibilities stemming from the encounter between a normative heterosexual world and a gay one: on the one hand, Gandhi's austere lifestyle in the factory and, on the other hand, the theatrically gay subculture of which Claudio is part. Like *La Cage aux folles*, the prime target of *La patata bollente* was clearly a mainstream audience. A crucial strategy for addressing this audience was the casting of Milanese comedian Renato Pozzetto and the emerging French starlet of the concurrently flourishing genre of the Italian sex comedy, Edwige Fenech. Playing the role of Gandhi's

girlfriend, Fenech's presence was fundamental to asserting the mainstream heterosexual address of the film. The title of the film revolves around a pun. It alludes to the troubling issue of homosexuality that the protagonist Gandhi has to deal with through his encounter with Claudio ('patata bollente' means hot potato). But it also plays on the colloquial use of *patata* to mean 'pussy' in the Italian language, which in this case clearly referred to Fenech's presence in the film. The poster of *La patata bollente* significantly shows a sultry Fenech posing next to the title with Pozzetto and Ranieri behind, thus appealing to a straight male audience whilst also invoking, through the presence of Pozzetto, the 'safety' of the comedy genre (Fig. 4.3).

With the objective of meeting a mainstream audience's expectations of entertainment and creating opportunities for laughter, the film underscores the effete mannerisms of a number of marginal homosexual characters. Virtually all of Claudio's homosexual friends in the film perform limp-wristed gestures, mincing walks and suggestive pouting. Constructed in opposition to the outrageous effeminacy of the other gay characters, Claudio's homosexuality initially appears inconspicuous. It is, in fact, Claudio's 'invisibility' as a homosexual in the eyes of Gandhi that constitutes the major element of surprise and humour in the first part of the film, especially after the audience (but not Gandhi) discovers that Claudio has a boyfriend. The gap between what the audience knows and what Gandhi ignores is the basis for a number of gags and jokes about gay men during their first night together. Whilst inevitably reiterating a set of clichés about homosexuals, the jokes end up turning the straight protagonist into the true object of laughter for the audience. Comic misjudgements



Figure 4.3 *La patata bollente*, promotion poster.

proliferate throughout the film. Revolving around a tension between how things appear and how they really are, such misjudgements primarily concern the straight protagonist Gandhi and a number of incidents raising doubts about the possibility that he might be homosexual himself. On one occasion, for example, as he is trying to re-animate Claudio after an alleged suicide attempt, the porter sees him and thinks he is passionately kissing another man. On another occasion, whilst helping Claudio to move into his flat, he slips on a banana and, falling, reveals to the astonished porter the compromising contents of a suitcase that include jewellery, feather boas and gay-themed books.

In *La patata bollente*, the encounter between a heterosexual man and a homosexual one is the occasion for a number of comic situations revolving around the conflict between conformity and eccentricity, between how we expect things to be and how surprisingly odd they turn out to be. This encounter opens up a space where the heterosexual protagonist has to question the terms by which he understands and defines his identity as a man. Confronted with a homosexual identity that he has so far seen as abject and extraneous to his sense of masculinity, Gandhi is forced to embrace this ‘otherness’ and redefine his identity accordingly. The result of this encounter is the creation of a reflective space within which masculinity, without its traditional definitional boundaries, has to question and reinvent itself.

Much of Gandhi’s shock on learning that Claudio is gay after taking him to his flat has to do with the fact that, according to Gandhi’s standards, Claudio’s masculinity is somehow beyond suspicion. Such a discovery destabilises Gandhi’s misconceptions about what constitutes a real man. As a factory worker, a Marxist and an ex-boxer – which the film presents as markers of unquestionable manhood – Gandhi makes clear that he is someone who is unlikely to get mixed up with homosexuals. The film makes explicit the conventional function of homosexuality as a yardstick used to define what is and what is not masculine whilst at the same time questioning precisely this function. By suggesting, through the character of Claudio, that not all gay men are effeminate, the film suddenly becomes a locus of tensions around conflicting notions of what constitutes masculinity and the definitional divide that separates heterosexual men (understood as real men) from homosexual ones (understood as women-like men).<sup>35</sup>

In targeting a vast mainstream audience, the film is inevitably cautious in not turning Claudio’s homosexuality into the major concern of the story but concentrates instead on the point of view of the straight protagonist. This privileged point of view is established, for example, with the persistent use of Gandhi’s voiceover throughout the film. The centrality of Gandhi to the plot has the effect of casting the stability of his masculinity as the central dilemma that the film will attempt to resolve. Since the very first scenes, Gandhi is presented as a factory charge hand beyond reproach, whose sense of respon-

sibility and courage gain him the respect and the admiration of his colleagues. When the porter expresses her doubts about Gandhi's sexuality (she poses the question in relation to his being a 'real man' or not), her husband's reaction is to dismiss them as silly talk. For him, Gandhi's reputation as a great boxer, his factory worker status and the fact that he has a stunning girlfriend like Maria are already unequivocal demonstrations of his manliness. The establishing of Gandhi's heterosexuality is of fundamental importance in relation to how the film strives to present him as a quintessential example of working-class manhood. His relationship with Maria, the character played by Edwige Fenech, is in this sense instrumental.

Yet, it is the very fragility of this constructed model of masculinity that creates most of the comic opportunities throughout the film. Laughter emerges here in the very gap between this idealised model and a reality that constantly seems to tarnish that model. On one occasion, as Maria performs a striptease in an attempt to seduce him after his return from Moscow, we are confronted with the comic spectacle of Gandhi falling asleep. In an earlier scene, Gandhi takes Maria to a restaurant, lest she find out about Claudio, who is temporarily staying at his apartment. He then promises her that he will book a room in the adjacent hotel in order to make love together all afternoon. After overhearing another customer talking about the suicide of a homosexual man, Gandhi panics, thinking that Claudio may have done the same. He looks at Maria, sitting sexily with her legs totally exposed to the camera, and decides to make up an excuse in order to get rid of her. In both instances, laughter stems from the contrast between the sexy spectacle of Edwige Fenech's body – with the erotic promise it gives to the straight male gaze – and Gandhi's inability to act on the heterosexual desire that is mobilised in such scenes.

The handling of the inconsistencies underlying the protagonist's masculinity may indeed be considered as unsurprising for a film that seems to borrow so much from the gags and wisecracks that are typical of the 'comedian comedy'. As Frank Krutnik notes in his study of the classical Hollywood comedian comedy, it is not unusual for the central character to violate familiar conventions of film heroism, unified sexuality and mature manhood. This kind of eccentricity is, however, temporary. In the end, 'the fictional impetus is to subjugate deviance and disruption to the demands of stability and coherence.'<sup>36</sup> In *La patata bollente*, such an impetus is partly present in the second half of the film. Consistent with the logic of a re-ordering, near the end, the film shows the wedding between Gandhi and Maria. It is an ending that is supposed to establish incontrovertibly the protagonist's heterosexuality by presenting the marital union between man and woman as an ideal happy ending. This resolution requires the disappearance of Claudio from Gandhi's world and his move to Amsterdam. It is a final re-ordering that, in its rather schematic development, clearly reveals its connectedness with the ideological and economic

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demands of the system in relation to which the film mainly works: the mainstream film industry.

*La patata bollente* operates this re-ordering by executing a set of unconvincing narrative turns, such as Gandhi's sudden desire to make love to Maria only to prove his straightness. This turn in the story is clearly an occasion for exhibiting Fenech's body and therefore satisfying the predominantly male heterosexual addressee of the film. But this re-ordering ends up undoing the very process through which the normative heterosexual male address of the film has been constructed. After their wedding, Gandhi and Maria arrive in Amsterdam for their honeymoon and turn up at the restaurant where Claudio now works. Once he has congratulated them on their recent marriage, Claudio reveals that he is now married too. Gandhi and Maria appear happy and relieved at this news, believing that he has married a woman. Claudio points to a person with long blond hair sitting at the counter and indicates that this is his spouse. The film teases our expectations by showing Gandhi eager to kiss and congratulate the bride. As he is about to approach 'her', the camera reveals that it is a man. Followed by stills showing the two couples surrounded by waiters in drag, this ending plays with the heterocentric assumptions of both the straight couple and those members of the audience who have fallen victim to the same misunderstanding. This is an ending that revolves around the use of surprise as a quintessential comic device. It is a comic ending that retroactively conjures up Gandhi's initial misunderstandings with Claudio and the lesson he should have learnt about never trusting one's first impressions. Based on the interplay between illusion (expressed in terms of coherence) and reality (expressed in terms of messiness), this ending prompts us to re-assess the strategies of re-ordering used by the film to give consistency and uniformity to Gandhi's masculinity.

Misrecognition, equivocation, mistaken identity and surprise are among the fundamental procedures of comedy. Depending on an action that, in being directed towards a goal, leads to the opposite of the goal that is striven for, comedies use these procedures to destabilise an order. Such a destabilisation is usually temporary and is followed by a subsequent reinstatement of the norms that have been disrupted. In providing a conventional resolution and a re-ordering of the gender and sexual messiness raised by the film, *La patata bollente* is symptomatic of the institutionalisation of heterosexual desire pervading much of mainstream cinema. Yet, the film also points to the artificial and often unconvincing mechanisms by which the normativisation of heterosexual desire is constructed, together with the structuring of a coherent male identity. It sheds light on the ineffectiveness of the signifying practices that inform the naturalisation of gender roles in comedies, hence revealing the strategies and conventions needed to preserve a clear distinction between normative masculinity and those male images that threaten its alleged coherence. *La*

*patata bollente* ultimately demonstrates how it may be possible to disrupt some of the limits and constraints imposed by the economic and ideological system in which films have been produced. The film resists its final thrust towards a re-ordering by interrogating the genre and gender conventions that regulate its popular form of address. Further, it shows how, in the context of the 1970s, even popular comedies participated actively in a distinctive shift in social attitudes towards masculinity whilst simultaneously undermining the stability of age-old restrictive conventions for representing men. The film is punctuated by political statements in support of the right of homosexuals to integration and acceptance. Such statements constitute moments in which the comic action is temporarily suspended. This suspension occurs, for example, when Claudio confronts Gandhi about the homophobic jokes that he has been making up to that point and when he informs him about the reality of the social exclusion experienced by many homosexuals like him. Such moments seek to recuperate feelings of empathy and emotional involvement on the part of the audience. The strategy that is used here is one that disturbs that 'absence of feelings' on which laughter is generally predicated. This strategy encourages the audience to reconsider the emotional indifference that has characterised their enjoyment of the comic situations exploiting common feelings about homosexuals throughout the film. But the political statement made by the film also follows more spectacular modalities, as, for example, in the final tango performed by Gandhi and Claudio in front of the other factory workers. This is a moment of camp excess and joyful resistance to the homophobic attitudes that the film has thus unveiled; Gandhi unashamedly comes out as a friend of Claudio's in defiance of his colleagues' hostility. This is arguably the most memorable sequence of the film, which stands out as its most powerful political proclamation.

#### FILM ROMANCE AND THE ODD COUPLE: *A SPECIAL DAY*

Set on 3 May 1938, during Hitler's visit to Rome, *A Special Day* follows the accidental encounter between Antonietta, a housewife, and Gabriele, a homosexual radio announcer.<sup>37</sup> The two characters are presented as archetypal victims of the gender mythologies of the fascist regime. Antonietta, raised to think that her role as a good housewife and mother constitutes the measure of her loyalty to the nation, struggles to cope with the tasks she is expected to perform for her family and the frustrations of marriage to a man who treats her merely as a servant. As a homosexual, Gabriele not only is a poor fit for the ideal of manhood celebrated by fascism but also is denounced as a public enemy of the nation. For this reason, he has lost his job as a radio announcer and expects to be deported to Sardinia.

*A Special Day* was initially conceived as a contemporary story focusing on the experiences of social marginalisation and stigmatisation of homosexuals

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in 1970s Italy. The subsequent decision to modify the historical setting of the film had been a rather pragmatic one. A historical climate such as fascist Italy, which had intensified homophobic and sexist attitudes amongst Italians, appeared to provide more dramatic potential and a sharper political message.<sup>38</sup> *A Special Day*, Scola recalls, was also loosely inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini's experience of persecution for his homosexuality since his expulsion from the Italian Communist Party.<sup>39</sup> Pasolini himself had been invited to contribute a three-minute documentary focusing on the increasing number of homophobic killings in Italy in the 1960s and the 1970s that should have accompanied the film. Ironically, it was Pasolini's murder in 1975 that prevented this collaboration from reaching the screen.<sup>40</sup>

*A Special Day* was purposefully promoted as a romantic film starring two actors, Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren, who had already become successful partners in a number of highly acclaimed Italian comedies, including *Marriage Italian-Style* (*Matrimonio all'italiana*: 1964), *How Lucky to Be a Woman* (*La fortuna di essere donna*: 1956) and *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (*Ieri, oggi e domani*: 1963).<sup>41</sup> During the promotion of the film, extra-cinematic expectations about Mastroianni and Loren were used to let the audience assume that the two characters would be, once again, involved in a heterosexual romance. Ettore Scola recalls that the sex scene between Loren and Mastroianni had been a contentious issue while shooting the film, with the producer, Carlo Ponti, insisting that a romantic epilogue was needed in order to ensure the film's financial success. Ponti was convinced that the character of Gabriele, after his encounter with Antonietta, had to grow out of his homosexuality to fulfil the romantic potential of the story and, ultimately, satisfy the expectations of the audience.<sup>42</sup> Ponti clearly thought that a conventional romantic resolution would have provided an audience-friendly representation of homosexuality, one linked to the idea that all deviances and conflicts can be resolved by the genuine love between a man and a woman.

The theme of the romantic encounter between Mastroianni and Loren has significantly allowed a number of commentators to argue that the main motif of *A Special Day* is the love between two outcasts. Jacqueline Reich, for example, asserts that the bond between Gabriele and Antonietta seems to follow a classic romantic paradigm in which 'the heterosexual coupling/union constitutes the natural form of closure to the text as it resolves the gender conflicts raised in the film's narrative'.<sup>43</sup> Another critic notes that the film is really a love story between a man and a woman who are both different.<sup>44</sup> Arguably, these comments make explicit the role of heterosexual romantic resolutions in establishing a seemingly natural causal progression in classical narratives. As David Bordwell has noted, the importance of the plot line involving heterosexual romance is structurally decisive in establishing a kind of closure effect.<sup>45</sup> But *A Special Day* resists and complicates the conventional romantic resolu-



tion discussed by Bordwell. The final section of this chapter will show how the film handles its 'popularising' impetus to address a large mainstream audience whilst attempting to deal with Gabriele's homosexuality as a paradigm of the diversified range of male experiences generally excluded under an oppressive gender and sexual ideology.

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*A Special Day* reveals a meticulous work of research into the language, myths and iconography of the fascist regime. The film shows, for example, a copy of the famous comic book for children, *Nel regno dei pigmei*, whilst making use of recordings of the fascist song *Giovinezza* and of the original voice of the radio presenter Guido Notari, commenting on Adolf Hitler's 1938 visit to Rome. In typical Neorealist fashion, the insertion of documentary footage showing Hitler's visit as a prologue at the beginning of the film is consistent with the objective of presenting a realistic depiction of this historical moment. The ideal 'haunting' protagonist of the film is then the fascist virile body itself: the condensation of discourses, attitudes and ideals concerned with the celebration of the cult of virility during the fascist period.<sup>46</sup> The fascist virile body is first conjured up in the initial documentary footage of Hitler's visit through the appearance of Mussolini welcoming his ally. The epitome of the idealised fascist virile body, Mussolini walks with martial contempt and repeatedly stiffens his body to deploy the fascist salute in front of the crowd. The virile body of fascism is then reconstituted and inserted in the fictional plot through the presence of Antonietta's husband, Emanuele. Played by Canadian actor John Vernon, Emanuele appears to be a rough-mannered patriarch exerting absolute authority over his family. He is the quintessential embodiment of the cult of virility promoted by the regime, engaging in physical exercise every morning and expressing his disdain for foreign words and unmanly behaviours (Fig. 4.4). The film makes sure that we understand Emanuele's masculinity in the context of the gender ideology actively promoted by fascism. When Antonietta first meets Gabriele a reference to the taxation of celibacy, as introduced by the regime, offers a first way of understanding the patriarchal polarisation of gender roles in fascist Italy that the film illustrates: the normativisation of woman's role as mother and wife, on the one hand, and the assertion of man's virility through his ability to find a wife, reproduce and be the head of a family, on the other.

The film emphasises the importance of the virile ideal embodied by Emanuele as a distinctive public performance. The on-going radio commentary makes repeated allusions to the martial virility of the army during the parade, thus implicitly 'virilising' the public body of the nation. Having established Emanuele's masculinity within the dominant gender norms of fascist ideology, the film introduces Gabriele by underscoring his exclusion from this public



Figure 4.4 *A Special Day*, Antonietta's husband, Emanuele, gets ready for the parade.

sphere (Fig. 4.5). Together with Antonietta and the porter, he is the only tenant in the block who has not gone to the parade. When he first appears, sitting at his desk, his despair and frustration are starkly in contrast with the excitement, fervour and agitation of the other people leaving their homes to join the parade. His marginalisation from the public body of the nation is further illustrated as we discover that Gabriele has been fired from the State radio station because of his homosexuality. Gabriele explains this dismissal not in relation to his sexuality, but by referring to his alleged inability to conform to the virile ideal of fascism. Significantly, he tells Antonietta that he has lost his job because his voice 'was not in accordance with the EIAR regulations: solemn, martial and conveying Roman pride'.<sup>47</sup>

Before he comes out to Antonietta, Gabriele's homosexuality appears to



Figure 4.5 *A Special Day*, Gabriele pays a visit to Antonietta.

be somewhat ambivalent. Gabriele is certainly noticeable for his polished manners, soft-spoken voice, refined clothing and sharp humour. But such traits are not heavily marked enough to suggest his homosexuality clearly. If they do seem meaningful, it is only for the way they signal Gabriele's distance from the virile performance of masculinity on the part of Antonietta's husband. Gabriele's characterisation in the film is then important to render visible the oppressive logic of the gender mythology that makes Emanuele's masculinity not only desirable but also a norm in fascist Italy. If the male norm corresponds to the ideal of hyper-virility and martial rigour embodied by Emanuele, Gabriele's function in the film is to highlight the costs of such a norm for the lives of those subjects who are not willing or capable of conforming to it.

*A Special Day* makes use of the 'dual-focus' narrative that is typical of romantic comedies.<sup>48</sup> When Gabriele and Antonietta do not appear in the same scene – in most of the scenes they do – alternation of point of view and patterns of similarity, parallelism and contrast establish the mutually dependent narrative positions of the two protagonists. *A Special Day* draws in particular on the formula of the odd-couple plot that is typical of some romantic comedies. This formula generally brings together a man and a woman who apparently have very little in common, only to push them gradually closer to each other up to the final fulfilment of their romance.<sup>49</sup> At the beginning of the film, Gabriele and Antonietta are separated by a number of obstacles. Antonietta is an uneducated woman who has been brought up to think that her role as a housewife and mother reflects her loyalty to the nation (Fig. 4.6). By contrast, Gabriele is a cultured anti-fascist with a subtle sense of humour and fierce dislike for Mussolini. Their first accidental meeting introduces the distance that separates them. As Antonietta, yearning to speak to someone in order to break the tedious routine of her days, prolongs her petty talk about her six children,



Figure 4.6 *A Special Day*, Antonietta opens the door to Gabriele.

Gabriele does not even listen, still contemplating the chance to kill himself. This initial distance is eventually drawn into a system of solidarity as the story develops. The narrative trajectory is far from smooth; when Antonietta learns from the porter that her guest is an anti-fascist, she cruelly confronts him and asks him to leave. In bringing the protagonists closer, the film punctuates the story with incidents that hamper the increasing proximity between the two protagonists. Gabriele's coming out to Antonietta constitutes, in this sense, a crucial moment of crisis in the development of the story. Set on the roof of the building where the protagonists live, this scene establishes a blockage between Gabriele and Antonietta, between what he knows about himself (his homosexuality) and what she ignores. The windswept rows of sheets waving between the two protagonists constitute a striking visual reminder of the veiled knowledge that Antonietta is harbouring before Gabriele comes out. The female protagonist's enraged response to this coming out is only the first step towards rethinking her own identity. By acknowledging Gabriele's homosexuality and his painful experience of social stigmatisation, Antonietta has to face up to the terms of her own oppression as a frustrated mother and wife.

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If a man is 'a man' only on condition that he is father, husband and soldier – as Antonietta's album reads – Gabriele is clearly not a man at all. By showing Gabriele as an attractive man capable of stirring a woman's sexual interest and upsetting her stable view of the world, the film invites us to question the limits of this logic and the varied range of male experiences that such a logic tends to leave out. Understanding how the film underscores the legitimacy of Gabriele's masculinity, despite his 'dissidence' from fascist gender roles, is especially important in relation to how the film frames the final erotic encounter between the two protagonists. This scene is potentially problematic because it runs the risk of undermining the significance of Gabriele's coming out to Antonietta as a homosexual man. To the extent that his self-disclosure establishes the specificity of his identity in contrast to a dominant model that prescribes compulsory heterosexuality to men, the erotic scene may make us wonder whether Gabriele will give up his 'deviant' sexual identity for the love of a woman. The problem that the erotic scene introduces is whether Antonietta's desire for him – and, by extension, heterosexual desire as whole – can rescue the man who has gone astray.

This scene is presented as a post-climactic moment of reunion following Gabriele's furious revelation of his homosexuality on the roof. It also follows Antonietta's coming to terms with her subjugation to her husband and to the gender myths of the fascist ideology that she has been instructed to revere. The love-making is a rather gentle, almost ritualistic moment of physical reconciliation. It starts with a medium shot of Gabriele, who holds Antonietta close

to him in an attempt to console her. Antonietta has just admitted that her husband is not faithful and that her life is a misery. Their embrace slowly shifts into a more erotically charged contact. Gabriele gently strokes her breast and Antonietta swiftly responds with a kiss. It is at this point that Antonietta says that she does not care about Gabriele's homosexuality. This is a key moment: Antonietta is potentially disavowing Gabriele's coming-out and, by the same token, his homosexuality as a concrete obstacle to their love. At stake is the significance of Gabriele's homosexuality – his difference as a man – within the film and Antonietta's role in this respect. By the same token, Antonietta is potentially about to re-inscribe Gabriele's specificity as a homosexual man in terms of a negotiable lack that can be redeemed with the right kind of woman. What seems to be suggested, here, is that Antonietta, like Carlo Ponti, truly thinks that he 'can go straight'.

Antonietta's words freeze Gabriele. He stops holding her and withdraws towards the bed with an expression of deep gravity. There is a very unstable balance at play here. On the one hand, it is clear that Gabriele and Antonietta share something more than mutual compassion. Their 'special day' has intensified the level of emotional tension in their relationship. On the other, there is the risk of transforming the two protagonists into ill-fated lovers. Gabriele makes clear that their emotional and physical closeness will not change him. Antonietta acknowledges that this moment of intimacy is more about herself and her need to feel close to another man who respects her. Slowly, Antonietta clings on to Gabriele, touching his face and kissing him. Her desperate expression seems revelatory of her need for him, as much as Gabriele's mixed expression of pain and pleasure is indicative of his confusion here. Gabriele gradually gives up any resistance and submits to her desire. As a wife and a mother of six, Antonietta has been instructed to deny her sexual desires and be content with her role as child-carer and housewife. Through her encounter with Gabriele, Antonietta reasserts her right to a pleasurable use of her body. Her position on top in the love-making and her role as initiator of the sexual act indicate the recovery of a part of that sexual agency that she had to give up to fulfil her role of fascist mother and wife. The erotic encounter between the two protagonists provides an occasion for two equally oppressed subjects to find consolation and emotional strength in each other. The encounter ends up overturning the heterocentric expectations of the traditional film romance formula, as it does not transform the two protagonists into romantic lovers. Similarly, it does not turn Gabriele into a 'real heterosexual man'. His passive posture below Antonietta's body complies with his commitment to enable Antonietta's pleasure. Antonietta does not 'save' Gabriele by putting him back on track, but it is the homosexual man who accompanies the woman in the rediscovery of her body and of the terms of her oppression. As he makes clear to Antonietta after their love-making, this adventure has not changed who he is. Despite Carlo

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Ponti's insistence on accommodating male homosexuality within a traditional heterosexual romantic resolution, the final sex scene actually works against this accommodation by means of a paradigm of sexual liberation that is typical of the 1970s: the alliance between two oppressed sexual subjects.<sup>50</sup> *A Special Day* dismantles one of the topoi of the classic romantic comedy – the meeting between an unhappy woman and an attractive man who will save her. In so doing, the film reworks in a productive manner a traditional cinematic mode of representation that has made homosexuality traditionally invisible.<sup>51</sup> The male–female relationship is emptied of its conventionally romantic implications and redefined within a liberating sexual imagery.

*A Special Day* proves how male homosexuality may be dealt with openly and productively, even within those plot twists and financial pressures that are meant to obfuscate it partially. As the final sex scene shows, the emotional tension binding the two protagonists is not just unproblematically translated into heterosexual erotic attraction. Desire becomes an instrument of liberation within a narrative framework that had already carefully defined the common oppression of the two characters. Like *La patata bollente*, *A Special Day* exemplifies a distinctive tendency in 1970s Italian cinema towards the representation of a wider range of experiences and identities traditionally excluded from normative constructions of masculinity. The value of these films stems not only from their progressive concern with the liberationist rhetoric of the gay movement but also from the way in which they resist pressures towards a heterocentric re-ordering of their own narratives.