

# Socio-economic critique, cognitive engagement and gender roles in Carlo Lizzani's *La Celestina P.. R..*<sup>1</sup>

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Carlo Lizzani (1922-2013) was one of Italy's most prolific film directors but he has rarely attracted the degree of critical attention that has been afforded to his contemporaries. However, Lizzani's films are fascinating visual documents of the stylistic influences absorbed by Italian cinema in the post-war period, and they contain unorthodox and sometimes controversial social critiques which merit greater critical attention as various recent publications on the diverse cinematic oeuvre of the director demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> Most notably, Lizzani's films provide a range of portrayals of the evolving criminal scene in the post-war period, depictions which are closely connected to different manifestations of Italian cinematic genres or *filoni*.<sup>3</sup> In particular, his comedies including *Il carabiniere a cavallo* (1961), *La vita agra* (1964), *La Celestina P.. R..* (1964) and *L'autostrada del sole*, Lizzani's episode in *Thrilling* (1965), reflect Italian style comedy's capacity to draw attention to topical subjects and to the most recent social transformations by exploring the implications of emerging forms of criminality and gendered tensions in the early-mid 1960s and by engaging viewers from an emotional and intellectual perspective.<sup>4</sup>

This article discusses the director's capacity to exploit the potential of comedy at the peak of the 1960s to elaborate a detailed portrayal of contemporary Italy and, at the same time, to highlight the contradictions and deleterious effects of the changing nature of society as a consequence of the economic miracle. Therefore, by focusing on the representation of criminality and on women's role both in terms of cinema's aesthetics and productive practices in Italian style comedies and by analysing *La Celestina P.. R..* in these contexts, Lizzani's film will be seen to have greater cinematic significance than has hitherto been ascribed to it. Lizzani emphasises the ambivalence of comedy by contrasting the form of the film and the implications of its content with particular consideration of

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<sup>2</sup> G. De Santi, *Carlo Lizzani*, Rome, Gremese, 2001; G. De Santi and B. Valli, *Carlo Lizzani: cinema, storia e storia del cinema*, Naples, Liguori, 2007; C. Lizzani, *Il mio lungo viaggio nel secolo breve*, Turin, Einaudi, 2007; V. Giacci, *Carlo Lizzani*, Milan, Il Castoro, 2009. The 2010 Pesaro film festival also featured a Lizzani retrospective and an academic workshop (with names like Vito Zagarrio and Millicent Marcus) devoted to the director, which resulted in the publication of *Carlo Lizzani. Un lungo viaggio nel cinema*, Venice, Marsilio, 2010 edited by V. Zagarrio. See also C. Lizzani and V. Innocenti, *Carlo Lizzani. Italia anno zero*, Rome, Bordeaux, 2013 and E. Imarisio, *La parabola del neorealismo nelle «Cronache di poveri amanti» di Lizzani*, Rome, Carocci, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For more details about Lizzani's films and the ways they portray the evolving criminal scene in the post-war period see M. Paoli, 'Carlo Lizzani's *Il gobbo* (1960): A cinematic exploration of socially 'engaged' post-war criminality', in: *The Italianist Film Issue*, 32.2 (2013), pp. 214-237 and M. Paoli, 'Metropolitan Neo-gangsterism and the Lure of Capitalism in Carlo Lizzani's *Bandits in Milan*', in: *Studies in European Cinema*, 8.1 (2011), pp. 43-55.

<sup>4</sup> Besides *La Celestina P.. R..*, the main focus of this article, Lizzani's most successful comedy in terms of critics and spectators, *La vita agra* (1964), describes the slow integration into Italian consumer society of Luciano Bianchi, an anarchist played by Ugo Tognazzi. For a brief but careful analysis of Lizzani's *La vita agra* from a gender and space theory perspective see N. Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space: Italian Style Comedy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 109-114 and 139-142. Please also note that, although some academics use alternative terms to refer to Italian comedies released from 1958 to the early 1970s, for the sake of consistency, I have decided to use Italian style comedy (with no capital letters), except when quoting texts by other authors. For a useful discussion on the evolution of film comedy in the postwar period and the importance of the economic miracle in this context see A. Bini, *Male anxiety and psychopathology in film: comedy Italian style*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

the main character, Celestina – played by Assia Noris (1912-1998) – an impudent figure inspired by Celestina, Fernando Rojas' popular character,<sup>5</sup> and defined by Lizzani as 'una sorta di ruffiana di alto bordo del Seicento che Assia Noris voleva resuscitare nel pieno del boom economico, dove anche il sesso era oggetto di consumo e quindi anche strumento di potere'.<sup>6</sup> These issues, together with other elements such as modes of viewer engagement, the film's relevance to Assia Noris's managerial role and her screen representation through a gender perspective, form the basis of the following analysis of *La Celestina P.. R..*

### **A socio-economic critique and a challenge to unequal gender roles**

Italian style comedy had a key observational role, providing a medium where it was possible to analyse the contemporary Italian character through techniques such as satire, irony, grotesque situations and comedy gags. However, while being capable of highlighting certain societal traits of the past, the main strength of film comedy is its firm hold on and vivid articulation of the period it describes. As far as the economic miracle is concerned, contemporary comic films constitute an eloquent record of the most rapid increase ever in Italy's standard of living by highlighting the way the perspectives of Italians were becoming increasingly characterized by cynicism and by a lack of morality, attitudes adopted in order to improve their social standing and living standards. Essentially, during the three decades after World War Two, Italian style comedy managed to contextualize events and situations within a stylistic approach – comedy – which, while recognizing the benefits of Italy's socioeconomic transformation, was inexorably and repeatedly drawn to the negative side of this metamorphosis.<sup>7</sup>

Generally speaking, comedies are enjoyable because they question authority and rules in a subversive and humorous way. However, a new style of dark, cynical films such as *Il sorpasso* (1962), *I mostri* (1963), *Il boom* (1963), *La Vita agra* and *La Celestina P.. R..*, were produced from the early 1960s onwards and aimed at subverting and recasting the generic expectations of the public. The new trend excluded the conspicuous morality that ran through the films of Neorealism. This change from morality to ambivalence and often immorality played a fundamental role in enabling Italian cinema to describe crime and in particular the link between sex and consumption in a clearer and more explicit way even if these new portrayals were delineated through the filter of comedy. In this context, *La Celestina P.. R..* is particularly interesting because of its original attempt to provide a telling socio-economic critique of the negative consequences of the capitalist system and to challenge unequal gender relations which were typically represented in Italian style comedies of the period from a male perspective.<sup>8</sup>

In *La Celestina P.. R..*, the protagonist, Celestina, is a hyperactive businesswoman who has a career in public relations in Milan during the 1960s. However, in reality, her job involves many other illicit activities, mainly consisting of finding young lovers for her clients/victims, who are rich, corrupt industrialists, bankers, and politicians who pay well in order to fulfil their sexual desires, and who are invariably blackmailed into returning some sort of favour. Eventually Celestina pushes her illegal activities too far and risks being at the heart of a newspaper scandal which is only covered up thanks to the intervention of a powerful and mysterious politician, known only as Sua Eccellenza, who had recourse to Celestina's ability in finding a young, compliant lover for him, in this case Celestina's personal assistant Luisella (Beba Lončar).

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<sup>5</sup> Fernando de Rojas (1465-1541), a Castilian author, is known for writing *La Celestina*, originally titled *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* in 1499. The name Celestina has become synonymous with procuress, especially an old woman, dedicated to promoting the illegal engagement of couples.

<sup>6</sup> Lizzani, *Il mio lungo viaggio*, cit., p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of Italian style comedy see, among others, M. D'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana: il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*, Milan, Mondadori, 1985; E. Giacobelli, *Non ci resta che ridere: una storia del cinema comico italiano*, Turin, Lindau, 1999, R. F. Lanzoni, *Comedy Italian Style: The Golden Age of Film Comedies*, New York-London, Continuum, 2008 and A. Bini, *Male anxiety and psychopathology in film: comedy Italian style*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of Italian style comedy from a gender perspective see M. Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2005, pp. 60-96, and Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, cit.

From a narrative perspective, *La Celestina P. R.* reveals the circuits of bribery and corruption within contemporary Italy by openly foregrounding them and exposing them to viewers. Criminal figures now emerge from so-called high society; corrupt entrepreneurs, bankers and politicians, as for example the rich industrialists Rinaldi (Nino Crisman), the wealthy banker Moretti (Piero Mazzarella) and the construction entrepreneur Contardi (Elio Crovetto). These characters become victims of Celestina's illicit strategies of blackmail and corruption; however, those who play into Celestina's hands and compromise themselves react to their situation with good-humoured pragmatism, a response which compounds their deviousness since they accept and view as natural Celestina's illegal activities.

There are many examples illustrating the growing lack of morality brought about by the consumer society of the age of the economic miracle in Lizzani's comedy. For instance, the banker Moretti, who is desperate for a young and preferably virgin lover, gives Celestina a detailed explanation of his strong desire for *debuttanti*; and when Celestina shows the industrialist Rinaldi a film shot in Rome during which he is seen kissing his company partner's fiancée in a car and Rinaldi proudly laughs at it. In the abovementioned examples, although Celestina does not ask for money she bribes and services Moretti and Rinaldi obtaining favours and personal advantages at the expense of the community; Moretti is forced to approve a 'loan' for the entrepreneur Contardi who, in exchange for the favour, will have to cede one of his villas to Celestina, while Rinaldi opens a private club for her in exchange for the negatives of the compromising film clip. As for Rinaldi, Moretti, and Contardi, they not only approve of Celestina's idiosyncratic public relations role but they also respect her social function as a kind of fixer, able to help people obtain things that they could not get legally such as mistresses, loans, and other perks. These are only some examples showing the ironic contrast between the respectable outward appearance of the contemporary Italian bourgeoisie and the profound lack of morality and civic sense which, in reality, characterized their professional and personal lives.

This deeply amoral value system also forms a stark contrast with the cinematic genre used by the director to showcase these concepts to viewers. On the one hand the viewer is exposed to the intellectual, conceptual implications of what is taking place, while on the other the film's stylistic and affective qualities are characteristic of comedy and confer a degree of innocuousness on the proceedings. This contrast between the film's content and form – its intellectual implications and its comic apparatus – is, as we shall see, the cornerstone of the viewer's engagement with the main characters.

In particular, the film sets up an intriguing attraction-repulsion dynamic with regard to the main protagonist, Celestina. Her beauty and savoir-faire are desirable characteristics and fit her PR career perfectly even though they contrast with the moral emptiness of her illegal activities. It is important to remember that, in *La Celestina P. R.*, Assia Noris was playing the role of an independent woman which in itself was a novelty, and arguably attractive to sections of the audience. Apart from the star vehicles for actresses such as Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida in the 1950s<sup>9</sup>, whose force though does not carry through into the later period of Italian style comedy, women were seldom given the leading role in Italian cinema, and in particular in comedies of the period where the main parts were usually given to young actors such as Alberto Sordi, Ugo Tognazzi, Vittorio Gassman or Nino Manfredi.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, women's mode of representation was generally limited to restricted kinds of role; either the mother embedded within the traditional framework of family life or *femmes fatales*/prostitute who personified temptation and betrayal of these values. Although Celestina is not interested in getting involved in any kind of sexual liaison, her appearance reflects the image of the *femme*

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<sup>9</sup> See for example how the early comedies of Sofia Loren make her a powerful comic lead as Pauline Small shows in her *Sophia Loren: Moulding the Star*, Bristol-Chicago, Intellect, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> For a useful discussion regarding the key function of the *divi* in the Italian style comedy see A. O'Leary, "'In pieno fumetto': Bertolucci, Terrorism and the commedia all'italiana", in: R. Glynn, G. Lombardi and A. O'Leary (eds.), *Terrorism Italian Style: Representations of Political Violence in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, London, Igrs Books, 2012, pp. 45-62.

*fatale* as she is always well dressed, immaculately groomed with flawless make-up, while her language and her demeanour are also those of a woman of class. Qualities such as savoir-faire and good looks were essential for a successful career as PR manager, a brand new career for 1960s individuals and a profession whose activities are difficult to evaluate morally. The character of Celestina is thus a more sophisticated evolution of the female roles of the time, representing a different form of femininity indicative of Italy's changing economic circumstances; while the character retains vestiges of the *femme fatale*'s ruthlessness, she is divested of all carnal impulses which are replaced by an ethic of profit accumulation, personal empire building, and flagrant dishonesty. As Enrico Giacobelli explains:

per restare a galla nel mondo dei maschi rapaci a queste ragazze e donne degli anni '60 occorrerà la menzogna, unico modo per sopravvivere. Ad esempio le donne protagoniste dei film diretti da Antonio Pietrangeli [*Adua e le compagne* (1960), *Io la conoscevo bene* (1965)] sono troppo sincere e naufragano nel boom. Le nuove donne [come Celestina appunto] impareranno dagli uomini l'arte della menzogna e del doppio gioco ed è proprio con l'inganno che procederanno alla conquista della società.<sup>11</sup>

A similar female character can be found in 'Una donna d'affari', one of the episodes directed by Renato Castellani in *Controsesso* (1964). However, it can be argued that the business woman (Dolores Wettach) is to a large extent downplayed by the male protagonist (Nino Manfredi) around which Castellani's episode is predominantly structured. Furthermore, as Fullwood notes 'The episode's interest in the working life of the woman is minimal; it functions mainly as a joke on the irony of female emancipation, as professional success gets in the way of enjoying the fruits of sexual liberation'.<sup>12</sup> Another parallel could be drawn with Franca Valeri, especially in her role as highly successful business woman in Dino Risi's *Il vedovo*. However, as Fullwood explains 'We never see her [Franca Valeri] at work in her own office and her business acumen is more a foil for the ineptitude of her husband [played by Alberto Sordi] than a narrative interest in its own right'.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, both 'Una donna d'affari' and *Il vedovo* seem to be structured on the star performance of the key male comedian, respectively Manfredi and Sordi, fundamentally leaving the female protagonists in a secondary role.<sup>14</sup> By contrast Assia Noris is undoubtedly the central star of the film and her constant presence in every scene for the entire duration of the film ensures that the female character's business acumen and her embodiment of Italians' obsession with career advancement and success are clearly recognized by the viewers. In Celestina's *modus operandi* nothing is left to chance, and everything that she does is governed by ulterior motives and by financial considerations on which her social position and image depend.<sup>15</sup>

In the discussion of the viewers' perception of the film protagonist, it is also important to remember that Assia Noris was well known for playing honest and pure female roles in pre-war films including *Darò un milione* (1935), *Il signor Max* (1937), *Grandi magazzini* (1938), and *Centomila dollari* (1940).<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, in 1965, the

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<sup>11</sup> Giacobelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, Rome, Gremese, 1990, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, cit., p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Günsberg has highlighted the presence of successful career women whose work we never see, such as Gassman's wife in *Il successo/The Success* (1963) or his estranged wife in *Il sorpasso* or Walter Chiari's live-in girlfriend in *Il giovedì/The Thursday* (1963). All of these female characters are only represented in terms of their relationship with the male protagonist. As Günsberg notes, these women 'provide, albeit from the margins, a serious foil to the comic desperation of male characters at the centre of the film'. Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>15</sup> For further details about older business women in Italian style comedy of this period, see D. Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 327-335.

<sup>16</sup> For further details regarding Assia Noris' career see, among others, M. Scaglione, *Le dive del ventennio*, Turin, Lindau, 2003; S. Gundle, *Mussolini's dream factory: film stardom in fascist Italy*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2013, pp. 166-183; M. Landy, *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986; J. Reich and P. Garofalo (eds), *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. For a more recent account of Assia Noris' alleged exploitative cinematic role during the fascist period see R. Festorazzi, 'Assia Noris, una diva alla corte di

incongruence between the actress's back catalogue of film roles and her part as Celestina after a long absence from Italian cinema was considerable. Furthermore, Assia Noris did not reflect the typical male central comic star, which was an essential element of successful Italian style comedies of the period, as we shall discuss in greater detail later. These contradictions of the viewing public's expectations may partly explain the film's lack of financial success<sup>17</sup> and the lukewarm reaction of many film critics. Although the critics praised Noris for her screen presence and Lizzani for his ability as film director, they disagreed on the film's conceptual remit and the way it had been articulated by emphasising the way the film failed to conform to the sort of cinematic star vehicles in which femininity was being showcased.<sup>18</sup> In other words, contemporary critics did not consider the film to be an accurate description and reflection of the social changes in the 1960s or an opportunity to innovate and renew women's role in the contemporary Italian film industry; however, when analysed today, with hindsight now possible, it seems extremely perceptive. While Lizzani has acknowledged the difficulty of working with an individual like Noris on a film project that was radically different from her pre-war work, he maintains that *La Celestina P.. R..* was relevant to the times in which it was made.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, cinematographer Oberdan Troiani explains how crucial Assia Noris' role was in the various stages of the making of the film:

durante la lavorazione [di *La Celestina P.. R..*] la Noris non mi ha mollato mai, perché aveva una grande esperienza di cinema, e allora interveniva su tutto, dalle luci al montaggio [...] Fece stampare una copia, contro il mio parere, tirando su la luce, facendola molto brillante, e dovemmo convenire che tutto sommato poteva avere ragione lei, dato il carattere del film. Poi voleva fare un altro film con Coletti, *Lo sbarco di Anzio*, ma voleva intervenire sulla sceneggiatura, allargare la sua parte [...] e Coletti non volle, anche se lei avrebbe potuto aiutare economicamente il film, perché aveva sposato un [petroliere] egiziano [Tony Habib], era ricchissima.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, Assia Noris' leading role and performance as an independent woman and, above all, her influential role in the filmmaking of *La Celestina P.. R..* – Assia Noris was not only the main protagonist but she also produced and co-scripted the film – encourage reflection on her prominent managerial position in the contemporary Italian film industry context and on her attempt to challenge unequal gender relations which were typically represented from a masculine point of view.

As Monica Dall'Asta explains, the male-dominated nature of the Italian film industry, both in terms of cinema's aesthetics and productive practices, can be attributed to a series of complex social, economic, and cultural aspects. Dall'Asta also claims that traditional film historiography has done little to highlight women's contribution to the cinema in both creative and managerial roles.<sup>21</sup> In particular, in the post-war period, female directors and scriptwriters in Italian cinema tended to be marginalized and only few women emerged including Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Iaia Fiastri, Lianella Carell, Lina Wertmuller, Liliana Cavani, Sofia Scandurra, Giovanna Gagliardo and Dacia Maraini.<sup>22</sup> From

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Goebbels', *Avvenire*, <http://www.avvenire.it/Cultura/Pagine/Noris-alla-corte-di-goebbels.aspx> (2 August 2014) and A. Grasso, 'Assia Noris, la dive dei telefoni bianchi alla corte di Hitler', *Fare Film*, <https://farefilm.it/top-blog/annalina-grasso/assia-noris-la-diva-dei-telefoni-bianchi-alla-corte-di-hitler> (10 August 2016).

<sup>17</sup> The takings of *La Celestina P.. R..* in fact reached only 34,941,000 lira as opposed to *Matrimonio all'italiana* (1965) which took 939,522,000 lira. R. Napolitano (ed.), *Commedia all'italiana. Angolazioni e controcampi*, Rome, Gangemi, 1986, pp. 202-203.

<sup>18</sup> See in particular the review of the film by Tullio Kezich in his *Il cinema degli anni sessanta, 1962-1966*, Milan, Edizioni Il Formichiere, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Lizzani, *Il mio lungo viaggio*, cit., p.185.

<sup>20</sup> F. Faldini and G. Fofi (eds.), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1981, p. 374. It might worth noting that Assia Noris had five husbands: Count Gaetano Assia, film directors Mario Camerini and Roberto Rossellini, British official Jacob Pelster and Egyptian oil tycoon Tony Habib.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Dall'Asta, 'Women Film Pioneers in Early Twentieth-Century Italy', in: K. Mitchell and H. Sanson (eds.), *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 175-194.

<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of how women have represented themselves and how they have been represented, and how

the 1950s Vittorio De Sica, Age (Agenore Incrocci) and Furio Scarpelli, Steno (Stefano Vanzina), Dino Risi, Luciano Salce, Nanni Loy, Alberto Lattuada, Ettore Scola, Luigi Zampa, Mario Moricelli and many others directed and provided stories for highly successful socially engaged Italian style comedies. Similarly, the male domination was visible in the choice of the main protagonists of these comedies (Gassman, Sordi etc.) and in production where the most powerful names were Dino De Laurentiis, Carlo Ponti and Franco Cristaldi. Therefore, Assia Noris' prominent managerial role as a producer in *La Celestina P.. R..* represents a distinctive example in the Italian film industry of the time.<sup>23</sup> This, together with the fact that by the early 1960s Noris was a highly experienced actress, demonstrates that women could obviously have a prominent managerial and creative role in the filmmaking process, if they were given the possibility of having such prominent roles.

This comes through in the film itself, if we consider that by playing the role of an innovative female character Assia Noris arguably challenged typical modes of women's representation of the time. For instance, although Lizzani openly exploits the image of Celestina's personal assistant Luisella (Beba Lončar) by visually emphasizing her body in the scene when Celestina tries to teach her how to walk gracefully, or when Luisella gives Carlo (Venantino Venantini), Celestina's naïve business partner, an aspirin, the film also emphasizes the contrast between woman as 'object' (Luisella) and 'subject' (Celestina). The female protagonist as 'subject' emerges in particular in the professional context where the protagonist's past involvement in illegal activities is strongly implied. Celestina seems to be very conversant with the dynamics of the relationship between pimps and prostitutes and such an open and central inclusion of a female pimp was in itself a novelty if not a first for Italian cinema; for example, when Celestina visits Carlo and finds him in bed with a lover, she makes a wry observation about the girl's coat: 'Però... la sartoria è di classe. Comunque potrebbe sempre essere un regalo della padrona, no?' Celestina's relationship with Luisella also exemplifies her manipulative skills with regard to her 'personal assistant', Celestina easily persuading her to commodify herself and her body in the interests of Celestina's business. By putting the emphasis on the female character as an independent 'subject' the contrast between Luisella/object and Celestina/subject arguably represents a locus where the dominant male discourse in the genre seems to lose control. However, this dual treatment of the female characters also emphasises that the powerful position of Celestina as female subject is mainly based upon her exploitation of other characters including female characters such as Luisella. In other words, Celestina is an unconventional character who might offer the potential for an escape route from the impasse of a world in which to be 'woman' means ultimately to be a sexual object. Yet, Celestina's dominance and, more generally, the gender norms in the film rest on the foundations of a biological binary where the perspective of heterosexual male sexuality rules supreme. This emerges more explicitly in the final stages of the film when Celestina spends the night with Carlo. With this image of Celestina in a black bustier, the film finally succumbs to the sexualized representation of Assia Noris's body, which her character's status as female PR had kept at bay for so long. Her character has eventually moved from an unconventional screen femininity with power to the more conventional sex object.

However, it could also be argued that Celestina emerges as an original female character if we consider how gender is represented and shaped through the use of space in the genre. Fullwood explores how cinema and in particular Italian style comedy constructs gender through its use of space, and vice versa focusing on the analysis of recurrent spaces that take on particular gendered inflections across the genre: 'While the

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they deal with the cinematic apparatus see G. Bruno and M. Nadotti (eds.), *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy*, London-New York, Routledge, 1988. For a short history of Italian Female screenwriters see J. Nelmes and J. Selbo (eds.), *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 433-487.

<sup>23</sup> *La Celestina P.. R..* was produced by Aston Film; the film production company founded by Assia Noris and her wealthy husband Tony Habib. Apart from Elvira Notari and her pivotal managerial and creative role in the film industry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a couple of major contemporary female producers such as Tilde Corsi and Rita Rusić (Rita Cecchi Gori), Italian female producers including Ida Di Benedetto, Raffaella De Laurentiis, Elda Ferri and Giulia Marletta have been slowly emerging only recently.

leisure spaces of beaches and nightclubs and the domestic space of the kitchen are particularly associated with femininity, the spaces of the office and the car are the primary sites that the genre uses in its construction of masculinity'.<sup>24</sup> In *La Celestina P.. R..* the main character's sexed identity as 'woman' does not reflect the conventional stylistic and narrative technique in the specific context of space that underpins the vast majority of representation of women in the genre. For example, social spaces such as beaches, nightclubs and the kitchen do not feature in the film. By contrast, the office and the car, which are typically the primary spaces that the genre uses in its construction of masculinity, are the main sites in which Celestina's action takes place. Fullwood explains that 'Women's work is present in Comedy, Italian Style, but, like the work of women in official statistics, it is marginalized, denied visibility, and pushed to the background and the edges of the frame. The issue becomes not whether or not working women are represented in the comedies – they are – but rather, what type of work is represented, and how much space this work is allotted within the films' narratives and imagery'.<sup>25</sup> Even if *La Celestina P.. R..* mainly focuses on the protagonist's working life in an economic sense, it also deals, albeit briefly, with the work environment of the office. For instance, Celestina moves around confidently and takes a central position, albeit as a visitor, in Rinaldi's sumptuous office. Furthermore, Celestina's executive office in her home reflects what, according to Fullwood, typically is 'the essence of masculine success in Comedy, Italian Style [that is] precisely to arrive at an executive office [as opposed to the less glamorous open space office]'.<sup>26</sup> Rather than any stereotypically feminine pronouncement – maternal, domestic or sexual – as one might expect from a woman singled out by the camera in this way in the vast majority of Italian style comedies, Celestina instead establishes herself as a proficient female manager who means business, however illegal and immoral her activities may be. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Celestina's identity as an independent and modern female 'subject' emerges even more clearly and explicitly because the main character is constantly contrasted with conventional cinematic depictions of femininity through, for example, the figure of Luisella, the typical background secretary figure. In other words, rather than showing a femininity tempered by love or marriage, the protagonist projects a much more cynical image of femininity that seeks to get ahead at all costs, and which equates the idea of success with the size of her private executive office or of her car. Indeed, while the car typically functions in the genre as a symbol of male status, Celestina is not only the owner of a big car, as opposed to the more common *utilitaria*, but she also drives competently and these elements help form an association between women's identity and mobility rights. However, although Celestina's economic independence is marked by her ownership and driving of cars, a limited attention is given to her relationship to the car where no female attitudes and experiences related to driving are represented. This is a clear contrast if we consider films such as *Il sorpasso*, where the relationship between the male protagonist and the car is central to the narrative of the film and to the construction of the main character's masculinity. We can conclude then that, as Fullwood claims 'in Italian Style Comedy, if women are not marginal or background figures, it is rare that they are characterized in terms other than those of the body, sex, and sexual availability'.<sup>27</sup> Only in very rare exceptions such as Lizzani's *La Celestina P.. R..* does a woman wield power and, in Celestina's case, her unorthodox feminine pronouncement is also defined by the spaces in which she acts.

### **The ambiguous effect of Italian style comedy and viewers' cognitive engagement**

Let's now turn our attention to the spectator's cognitive engagement with comedies, which will help structure our discussion of Lizzani's film. In this context, it is important to note that, from the end of the 1950s, Italian comedy started to deal with the reality of contemporary society with a dark humour that diverged from traditional notions of

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<sup>24</sup> Fullwood, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 197.

comedy: 'racconta, infatti, storie che si potrebbero trattare anche tragicamente'.<sup>28</sup> This is the case, for example, with Pietro Germi's *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961) which, at first, was not planned as a comedy. It became one while the script was being written, a transformation giving the director two clear benefits; firstly, the genre change ensured a much larger audience, and secondly, it offered an increased likelihood of avoiding censorship, this being more tolerant of themes such as divorce and 'crimes of honour' in comic contexts. Indeed, in terms of the viewer's engagement with such films, typical comic mechanisms such as misunderstandings, cases of mistaken identity or simply apparently innocuous daily situations have an ambiguous effect. Take the following example from Giacobelli's *La commedia all'italiana*:

Immaginate un uomo che passeggia in una via del centro. A un certo punto inciampa e cade esclamando 'a momenti cadevo'. La gente quasi lo calpesta tanto è presa dalla propria fretta, dalla propria indifferenza. L'uomo magari si rialza, traballante e un po' pesto, e borbotta tra sé o rivolto alla macchina da presa: 'Bella società: qui, se cadi, ti calpestano subito'. Poi si allontana zoppicando in mezzo alla folla impassibile. Come reagisce lo spettatore? Sulle prime lo spettatore ride di gusto ma poi il riso gli si blocca in gola. Egli infatti sa di essere chiamato in causa, di essere allo stesso tempo l'uomo calpestato e la gente che lo ha calpestato: sa di aver visto una verità messa in commedia. Si tratta quindi di una scena comica ma anche drammatica: è una scena da commedia all'italiana.<sup>29</sup>

At an immediate level, comic mechanisms may be amusing and apparently innocuous but a cognitive awareness on the viewer's part of the implications of the situation for a character, possibly combined with an empathic acknowledgement of the character's reaction, ensures that a more serious side of comedy is often recognized, as in the example quoted above. Even if there is an upbeat ending to a film, the comic misadventures that may befall characters can be laced with an ambiguity which ultimately brings the viewer back towards a pessimistic outlook on human destiny.

From a cognitive perspective, the contrast between the film's content and form represents a crucial element in the way viewers engage with the main characters. In order to explain this ambiguous dual effect, its impact on the spectators and its relevance to *La Celestina P.. R..*, a brief analysis of Murray Smith's work on the viewer's affective and cognitive engagement with fictional characters is required; Smith replaces blanket terms such as 'empathy' and 'identification' with a system based on two distinct levels of engagement with fictional characters: *alignment* and *allegiance*. Smith defines *alignment* as the term describing the process by which readers relate to characters by being given access to their actions, desires, thoughts and feelings. In contrast, *allegiance* pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator.<sup>30</sup> These two concepts will help us to understand the forms of viewer engagement elicited in Lizzani's *La Celestina P.. R..* and its representation of human deviousness in Italian society at the height of the economic miracle through the lens of comedy, while recognizing that the process of viewer engagement with fictional characters is, to a large extent, subconscious.

Lizzani uses many devices for this purpose. For example, the soundtrack emphasizes the clash between the simplicity of the scenes and the dialogue and the dramatic resonances of the subject matter approached by Lizzani, that is to say a portrayal of a society where corruption, bribery and crime have become banalized and institutionalized. Most of the scenes are accompanied by relaxing background music or light-hearted pop songs. As a result, the viewer is initially likely to assimilate the meaning of the action and the dialogue in a nonchalant way. Moreover, the viewer may be influenced by the reaction, or lack of reaction, of the characters who are being blackmailed by Celestina. This is exemplified in one of the aforementioned scenes, when Celestina meets the industrialist Rinaldi in his office in order to blackmail him with a film negative. The

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<sup>28</sup> Masolino D'Amico quoted by Giacobelli, *Non ci resta che ridere*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Enrico Giacobelli, *La commedia all'italiana*, cit., pp. 7-9.

<sup>30</sup> M. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 83-84. For a detailed analysis of the viewer's cognitive and affective reactions and the functions of smiling and laughter in the spectator's identification process see T. Grodal, *Moving Pictures*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 185-188.



implications of the scene are played down by the light-hearted background music, by a visual gag centring on the film negative when Celestina teasingly holds out and withdraws the negative several times, and also through the calm way the blackmailer and her victim act. These features do not give any indication that something reprehensible is happening; by contrast they elicit a form of comic reaction. In terms of the viewer's reaction, the comic effect is only triggered if viewers curb their cognitive and empathic identification with the characters, and temporarily reduce their evaluation of the desirability of the characters' goals and morality. However, the growing incongruence between form and content eventually creates a degree of dissonance in the viewing experience, forcing the viewer back to the true meaning of what is being shown on screen – the increasingly widespread phenomenon of corruption and bribery as a result of the characters' lack of morality. In other words, the viewer's engagement with the film and with Celestina in particular is rendered problematic by the immediate and deceptive effect brought about by the light-hearted soundtrack and by the high level of access given to her actions, feelings, thoughts and desires, since Celestina is on screen for almost all the film and she is always the key character in each scene. Consequently, spectators have full access to Celestina's subjectivity through a seemingly relaxed and convivial atmosphere and are able to reach a high level of *alignment* with her and fully understand her value system and working practices. Yet, the viewer's emotional response to the character is likely to be negative, because in order to feel what Smith terms as *allegiance* to a character, spectators must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable set of traits in relation to the other characters within the film. Here it is unlikely that the viewer will adopt an attitude of sympathy towards either Celestina or any other character because of the immorality of their actions, and, in Celestina's case, this creates the possibility of perceptual and cognitive 'empathy' towards her being combined with emotional 'alienation'.<sup>31</sup> This effect is reflected, for instance, in the scene when Celestina talks to Carlo about the fact that Anna, one of her friends, is breaking up with her lover, Osvaldo. Celestina complains: 'Senti Carletto, bisogna rimetterli insieme, Anna e Osvaldo. Ma scusa, io formo una coppia e poi si lasciano così dopo una settimana, un mese. Ma io sono una persona seria, ho un orgoglio, no?' In this case, the spectator recognizes that Celestina's reaction is legitimate in the context of her personal and professional value system, and by comprehending her reaction, a fleeting sympathetic *alignment* may form towards her. Such responses are sufficient to maintain a nominal attachment towards the character and prevent viewers from becoming entirely distanced from the ensuing action. However, the viewer is unlikely to experience any *allegiance* with Celestina because the character's feelings of frustration and pride are linked with her immoral values that characterize her actions, in this case, convincing husbands and wives to have extra-marital affairs in order to blackmail them. Lizzani, therefore, allows viewers considerable access to the actions, thoughts and desires of Celestina without inviting emotional attachments that might overshadow the intellectual implications of her quick-witted improvisation and opportunism.

In this respect, an interesting reflection on the comedy's satirical proximity to the object portrayed and the importance of actors in the audience's identification process can also help understand the viewer's lack of engagement with the character played by Assia Noris. As Alan O'Leary argues, Italian style comedy's satirical proximity to the object portrayed allows recognition of the complexity of the social conditions and "the *commedia all'italiana* relied on the construction of a 'typical' (male) Italian identified with a set of iconic faces, including Sordi, Tognazzi *et al.* [...] The fondness created for these heroes of the comedy of manners incarnated in the guise of the *divi all'italiana*, might be described as another form of complicity with the object of satire [...] the identification with the actor, the sense of fond complicity with a figure as familiar as say, Alberto Sordi, was the most effective means of involving the audience in the critique of its own behavior [...]"<sup>32</sup> As previously argued, in *La Celestina P. R.* there is little (if not at all) sense of fond complicity with Assia Noris and consequently the typical satirical proximity of Italian style

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Engaging Characters*, cit., p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> A. O'Leary, "'In pieno fumetto': Bertolucci, Terrorism and the *commedia all'italiana*", cit., pp. 57-58.

comedy, as defined by O'Leary, seems to disappear. This leaves viewers a certain degree of critical detachment from the object of satire which, however, is not encouraged by the identification with the actor, as in the case of the *divi all'italiana*. In other words, Noris did not emerge as an 'everywoman', a familiar loveable (female) rogue capable of being, to use O'Leary's terms, 'the most effective means of involving the audience in the critique of its own behavior'. As previously claimed, this may be partly due to Noris' back catalogue of film roles during the fascist period and her part as Celestina after a long absence from Italian cinema. Indeed, such as an independent, unusual and modern female 'subject' as representative of extreme capitalism is likely to produce a more damning vision of the era. However, this may also explain why Italian viewers of this period were not yet ready to take in such a high degree of immoral behaviour, especially if portrayed without resorting to the typical Italian style comedy blueprint, which relied on the audience's familiarity and complicity with popular male stars. Or, to put it another way, the viewer is likely to experience a higher degree of *allegiance* with the 'typical' male protagonist of Italian style comedy played by Sordi or Tognazzi than with Celestina. This illustrates the extent to which Italian style comedy had an impact on gender construction in Italy's post-war period.

Apart from the contrast between the film's comic apparatus and the conceptual significance of what is taking place, and the viewer's lack of engagement with the female protagonist, many other devices are used by the director in order to periodically draw the viewer away from the screen events or the characters and elicit reflection on the socio-economic importance of what is occurring in Italy. In terms of space, for instance, at the end of the second scene of the film, when Celestina is seen to the door after she blackmails Rinaldi in his office, there are significant panoramic shots of Milan as Celestina talks Rinaldi into involving himself in PR activities by opening a private club. The shots show huge buildings and streets seen from the skyscraper where Rinaldi's office is. The images are obscured by the fog which is a stereotypical feature of Milan and which can also be found in most of the film's exterior shots. Even if the shots last just for several seconds and are accompanied by a light-hearted relaxing music, they form an aesthetic contrast with the predominant comedy style of the film and its well-groomed characters, and consequently the bleakness of the images serves as another reminder of the transformation that Milan was undergoing during this period. Lizzani introduces these shots to portray Milan as a new metropolis whose socio-economic and cultural values are in a state of flux, a transformation leading to the ambiguous morality of 'legitimate' capitalist entrepreneurs featured in the film and also to the evolution of different forms of criminality and degradation, a phenomenon emerging as a consequence of the transformation of the urban space.

Another unexpected shot during Celestina's telephone conversation with Contardi is effective in drawing viewers beyond the film's comic genre towards its socio-economic context. The conversation starts with a shot of Celestina's sumptuous office which contrasts with the subsequent shot of Contardi on the telephone and construction work going on in the background; the two perspectives hint at the opulence and wealth in circulation, and draw attention to the cityscape as an extended building site during this period. In this context, with a similar economy of style, a dialogue between Celestina and Moretti also emphasizes the extent to which Milan is changing:

Celestina : «Lei conosce Contardi ?»

Moretti : «Quello delle demolizioni ?»

Celestina : «Prima. Adesso è nelle costruzioni»

In fact, many industrialists, such as Contardi, swapped from *demolizioni* to *costruzioni*, showing how quickly the process of urbanisation was developing in Italy, especially in the big northern cities. Therefore, it is unsurprising that towering buildings are often the natural background of Italian style comedies including *La vita agra*, *Il magnifico cornuto* (1964), *Il boom* and many others. Commodities such as cars only reflected sections of consumer society because not everyone could afford to buy one. By contrast, new buildings were used in different ways by all members of the community as shown in a film

like Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960). Just as department stores were the emblem of economic development during the Fascist regime,<sup>33</sup> high-rise buildings and skyscrapers were symbols of the 1960s economic miracle and of a society that was in the process of depersonalizing its inhabitants by removing their individuality as indicated in Lizzani's *La vita agra*. The giant buildings that were now housing individuals in both their professional and personal lives paradoxically concentrated people together in increasingly restricted spaces while also eroding any sense of community solidarity.

In stylistic terms the contrast between the interior and exterior shots in *La Celestina P.. R..* is increased through a series of stark, unembellished neorealist shots of the urban environment deployed by Lizzani at key moments in the narrative, and this is typified by point of view shot from Celestina's car as she picks up a young prostitute (played by Raffaella Carrà) for Moretti. This stylistic juxtaposition is accentuated as the bleak visuals of the scene are immediately followed by the warm opulence of the setting for the high society ball. In the space of a second, this conspicuous juxtaposition brings about a total and sudden change of ambience, while simultaneously highlighting the fact that these two seemingly irreconcilable spheres of existence were still closely linked. The passage from neorealism to comedy is inverted after the ball as Lizzani uses another bleak shot to depict Celestina dropping the young prostitute off. During this journey, there is a sudden exterior shot of Celestina's car enveloped in the fog and as she stops the car the only thing that is visible through the window is fog. Finally, the prostitute gets out of the car and disappears, fading into the fog. These examples suggest that the film's exterior shots are central to establishing its conceptual foundation, namely the nature of the society that is evolving and being shaped by the economic miracle; the interior sequences are more firmly rooted within the traditions of film comedy, although as each scene is a 'comedy of manners', they are equally revealing about the attitudes of contemporary Italians.

## Conclusion

The shifting rapport between the individual and society lies at the heart of *La Celestina P.. R..* and several other Italian style comedies of the period. The pressure to embrace the materialist values of society was considerable, and the conformity of consumer society leads to moments of intense loneliness for those who are reluctant to absorb these values, such as the protagonist of *La vita agra*. The society portrayed by Fellini in *La dolce vita* (1960) is one whose rules are accepted by its protagonist, Marcello Rubini, who frequents high society parties in order to make contacts and further his career, a form of networking taken further by Celestina who embodies and also perpetuates the values of the period by drawing an increasing number of clients/victims into her sphere of influence. Her value system is also an extreme form of the materialism of the era, according to which people were increasingly judged on the basis of the commodities they owned; for example, a negative opinion can be inferred from Celestina's reaction when she finds out that one of her admirers' car has neither a radio nor tip-up seats. Similarly, in *La vita agra*, the protagonist is taken to a police station and accused of vagrancy because 'gironzolava senza meta, camminava lentamente, non aveva un'automobile'. In some ways, Celestina is an atypical Italian style comedy protagonist, a female protagonist who is also a narrative 'subject', actively shaping the society around her rather than being shaped or absorbed by it. Consumer society, in fact, does not absorb or victimize Celestina because she takes its cynicism, euphoria and moral indifference to extremes. However, the film's denouement – Celestina's rapid departure to Paris after one of her plans misfires – suggests that her future is as ephemeral as that of many budding entrepreneurs in a crowded marketplace, and ultimately that of economic miracle itself.

More than sixty years after its release *La Celestina P.. R..* deserves a degree of critical re-evaluation as an unorthodox example of the *commedia all'italiana*, as it provides not only a caustic representation of Italian society at the height of the 1960s but also a reflection on women's role in the Italian film industry from both an aesthetic and

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<sup>33</sup> For more details see J. Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*, Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 99-131.

managerial perspective. The film's originality is reflected in its focus on illegal activities at the modern heart from the unusual point of view of the unconventional female protagonist rather than relying on the construction of a 'typical' (male) Italian identified with familiar actors such as Sordi or Manfredi. *La Celestina P.. R..* shows that social issues such as bribery, corruption and prostitution could be explored through the means of comedy without diluting their significance; indeed, the genre of comedy, together with other visual and aural techniques used by the director, often emphasizes the contrast between the aesthetics and form of the film, and the implications of its content. Significantly, unlike in most other films of the period that feature male protagonists, little empathic identification is likely to occur between the viewer and the character of Celestina, thereby ensuring that the significance of her actions and of the value system that she represents, remains undiminished. Furthermore, the film's female foregrounding and its unusual approach to gender relations and characterization through space re-evaluate Assia Noris' leading role and performance as an independent female character, and her prominent managerial role in the filmmaking of *La Celestina P.. R..*, which represent a fascinating example of women's contribution to Italian cinema.

### Keywords

Italian style comedy, cognitive theory, gender, Carlo Lizzani, Assia Noris,

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### RIASSUNTO

#### ***La Celestina P.. R..* di Carlo Lizzani: un approccio cognitivo e una riflessione sui ruoli di genere**

Attraverso un'approfondita analisi di *La Celestina P.. R..* diretto da Carlo Lizzani, lo scopo di questo articolo è mettere in risalto come lo sviluppo della commedia all'italiana degli anni '60 riesce a tracciare un ritratto cinico ed eloquente dei cambiamenti socio-economici contraddittori e spesso negativi dovuti al miracolo economico. In questo contesto, il prominente ruolo di Assia Noris come protagonista, sceneggiatrice e produttrice del film sarà lo spunto per una riflessione sul ruolo della donna nel cinema italiano da un punto di vista creativo e manageriale. Inoltre, verrà preso in esame il processo di identificazione dello spettatore con la protagonista per dimostrare come il film in questione esca dagli schemi proponendo una formula alternativa alla costruzione del tipico italiano medio rappresentato dalle classiche icone maschili della *commedia all'italiana* come Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi o Ugo Tognazzi.