

Paola Cortellesi: Fragmenting the Latin Lover in Italian Romantic Comedy Danielle Hipkins

Examining the popular comic star, Paola Cortellesi, and her recent appearances in high-grossing romantic comedies, I will show how her comic performance and roles challenge and undo the construction of the latin lover. I argue that the tension between being object of desire and comic agent has enabled her to develop a star persona that lends itself strongly to romantic comedy, marking a promising turn for women in the overwhelmingly male domination of Italian film comedy and challenging the configuration of the latin lover. Her roles point towards both the desire for and difficulty in imagining an adequate male counterpart.

Keywords: Paola Cortellesi, Romantic Comedy, Female Comedy, Postfeminism, Latin Lover

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Captions

Fig. 1 e 2 *Scusate se esisto!* The “meet-cute” parody.

Introduction

Does the latin lover exist in a Narcissistic hall of mirrors? The word «lover» implies the existence of a passive recipient of his attentions at least, even if the one he «loves» represents little more than an opportunity to test and reflect back his prowess. In this article I will ask what happens to the latin lover when his female co-star is permitted to be more than that mirror. Examining the popular comic star Paola Cortellesi, and a series of her recent appearances in high-grossing romantic comedies, I will show how her comic performance and roles challenge and undo the construction of the latin lover. The first woman to appear in a series of Sky Cinema 1 interviews with Italian film stars, Cortellesi’s encounter with interviewer Gianni Canova encapsulates the unique nature of her stardom in Italy¹. Canova comments with surprise on how many good-looking male leads she has played alongside, from Luca Argentero to Raoul Bova. By implication, it is unusual to have a female star who carries more responsibility for comedy than physical appeal in the depiction of a heterosexual partnership.

The long-established tradition of comic male leads of indifferent physical appeal accompanied by an attractive much younger female star is well known, and not only in Italy, if perhaps more markedly so there. Furthermore, the association of female stars with beauty is so deeply engrained that the question of Cortellesi’s beauty still has to be addressed later in the Sky Cinema 1 interview, in a montage of (mainly male) stars and directors who reassure us that she is beautiful – and here beauty and femininity become conflated – even if that is not her primary talent or concern. Hovering between comic agent and object of desire, Cortellesi’s emergence as a film star is a good illustration of how much more difficult it is for women to carve out comic roles in cinema than it is in television, where she is a well-established comic talent. Nonetheless her ascendancy is typical of a tendency identified by Marco Cucco and Massimo Scaglioni for high-grossing film comedies in Italy to be dominated by stars originat-

¹ The episode (which originally aired on 29 December 2013) is available online: Drave D., «A Lezione Da : Paola Cortellesi (2013) - Episodio Completo», *YouTube*, 26 October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8H7jWCqIC8>, accessed 24 June 2017.

ing in television². I will argue here that it is precisely the tension between being object of desire and comic agent that has enabled her to develop a star persona that lends itself strongly to romantic comedy, marking a promising turn for women in the overwhelmingly male domination of Italian film comedy, and challenging the configuration of the «latin lover».

Background: Romantic Comedy and the «Pretty/Funny Binary»

Since, as Tamar Jeffers McDonald argues, «the narratives of romantic comedy films themselves demonstrate that both men and women have to change and adapt to deserve love» (2007, 17), the romantic comedy can foreground changes in gender codes. In this respect, Cortellesi reminds us of a much earlier moment in the tradition of Italian romantic comedy. As both Pauline Small (2009) and Jacqueline Reich (2004) have amply demonstrated, the unique comedy partnership of Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni of the 1950s and 1960s – from films like *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (A. Blasetti, 1954) to the better-known *Matrimonio all'italiana* (V. De Sica, 1964) – permitted a number of fault-lines in gender relations to emerge. Loren's feisty incarnation of unruly femininity and deployment of the *beffa* or trick overtly undermined Mastroianni's performance of the suave latin lover. She revealed the lurking *inetto* or incompetent male that constitutes the flipside of the latin lover as a problem for women and not just men³. Channelling the slow emancipation of women in postwar Italy, Loren provides a strong female counterweight to the potential for masculine self-indulgence in Mastroianni's performance across this latin lover/*inetto* binary, more typical of his lone anti-hero roles in which he is not permitted that unique female counterpart, such as *La dolce vita* (F. Fellini, 1960) or *8½* (F. Fellini, 1963). In *Matrimonio all'italiana*, to cite the most striking example, we witness the real and moving consequences of Domenico Soriano's latin lover lifestyle for his mistress, finally turned wife, and it is on her tears that the film movingly ends. While Loren's performances were enacted within the constraints of gender identities of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the heavy emphasis on her physical beauty and her body, she nonetheless constitutes an important forerunner for Cortellesi's attempts to usurp a male-dominated narrative.

Critical literature on contemporary comedy in the postfeminist frame suggests that today any changes in gender roles proposed by romantic comedy are ultimately re-absorbed into a more conservative narrative. In the US, argues Amy Burns, such changes appear superficial, hinging mainly on a greater visibility of the male body and its new subjection to a female gaze. In her analysis of the «new hero» of the *chick flick* genre, focussing on popular hits like *The Holiday* (N. Meyers, 2006) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (S. Maguire, 2001), Burns suggests that the hero's standard qualities – which she identifies as attractiveness, success, some domestic competence, and devotion to the heroine – are off-set by the inevitable requirement for him to rescue her, thereby ensuring «the representation of feminine subordination» (Burns 2013, 132). For Benjamin Brabon, the figure he defines as the Postfeminist Male Singleton in US male-focussed romantic comedies – such as *Failure to Launch* (T. Dey, 2006) – may imply liberation from the restrictive expectations and constraints of hegemonic forms of gender identity (such as marriage and children); but this «emancipation», far from offering a pioneering alternative, is limited by its belonging exclusively to a particular class and race. He argues

² They point out that «nel primo decennio del 2000, la classifica dei film che hanno registrato i migliori incassi nelle sale nazionali è interamente dominata da commedie che vedono la presenza determinante – come protagonisti, o co-protagonisti di storie per lo più corali – di comici di origine televisiva» (Cucco and Scaglioni 2013, 30).

³ «The Italian male is “good at being a man” precisely because he masks the *inetto* through the performance of hypermasculinity: protection of honour, procreation and sexual segregation» (Reich 2004, 9-10).

that the male singleton's «assertion of non-hegemonic masculinity is disabled from wider social reform by his complacency and reliance on the taken for granted privileges that hegemonic manhood affords white middle-class men» (Brabon 2013, 128).

As Catherine O'Rawe has argued, Italian comedies' slight interest in the romantic comedy form and a greater focus on male stars make such subordination of women much more overt. Here the films even resist changes in gender identity, by keeping the focus on white, middle-class men as victims of economic crisis or emotional abandonment. Indeed, O'Rawe argues that films' very narratives of crisis, often occasioned by challenges to gender identity, «serve to remind us that crisis itself is the privilege of the white middle-class male, and that by deploying the familiar trope of the family as synecdoche of the nation the films reassuringly reconstitute Italian masculinity as central» (2014, 45). Ultimately, she argues, the films work to keep the «threat of feminization» and any change in traditional gender roles at bay (O'Rawe 2014, 52).

My reading of Cortellesi does not remove its gaze from that white, middle-class male, but represents a significant exception to all three interpretations of contemporary comedy as a gender-conservative form, in keeping with a broader sense that it is perhaps individual star trajectories that most often offer subversive takes on gender and genre⁴. There is no doubt that Cortellesi belongs to a group of recent successes, «whose sex appeal is intrinsic to their commercial appeal as comics» (Mizejewski 2014, 3), linking her back to Loren's legacy in this respect. However, as the discourse of the Sky Cinema 1 interview confirmed, she is also rooted in «the historic binary of “pretty” versus “funny”», since the interview finds it necessary to disavow that very binary insisting: «she *is* pretty although she's funny». For Linda Mizejewski, this binary actually permits comic women «to engage in a transgressive comedy grounded in the female body [...] and its relationships to ideal versions of femininity», in which «“pretty” is the topic and target, the ideal that is exposed as funny» (Mizejewski 2014, 5).

An earlier example of this kind of comic female performer firmly on one side of this binary in Italian cinema would be Franca Valeri, whose performances in comedies of the 1950s and 1960s mobilized precisely her own distance from ideal femininity, on one occasion incarnated by Loren herself in *Il segno di Venere* (D. Risi, 1955). Valeri's absolute distance from ideal femininity, often rendered in a tragi-comic key, also distanced her from the sexier comic tradition of Loren, and accounts for her tendency to be relegated to minor roles, and excluded from those of romantic comedy heroine. If Mizejewski (2014) dismisses romantic comedy heroines as less interesting women who cross the «pretty/funny» binary, because they simply act out roles written for them, then Cortellesi challenges this definition. In fact, as we consider recent directions in her career, it becomes clear that she has been able to take a role in the scripts for the films she participates in, strengthened by her experience of comic improvisation for television. In this respect we will see her using film to challenge idealized femininity, and also, like the comedians Mizejewski (2014) discusses, such as Tina Fey or Ellen DeGeneres, to address feminist concerns.

One of Cortellesi's earliest cinematic roles encapsulated some of the tensions she has had to mediate in order to carve out this unique position in Italian cinema. In *A cavallo della tigre* (C. Mazzacurati, 2002) opposite Fabrizio Bentivoglio, she first appears as the idealized woman, dressed as a fairy, turning out to be show girl, calendar girl, TV presenter, and willing partner in crime in a heist. After a minor blip in her record (finding a new partner while Bentivoglio pays time for their crime), Antonella triggers a dramatic fantasy ending, in which

⁴ See, for example, Janet McCabe's reading of Bill Murray's representation of masculinity in US independent cinema (McCabe 2009).

the two criminals escape their police pursuers by jumping off a cliff to improbable safety. By marking this ending in a fantasy modality, Mazzacurati comments on Bentivoglio's construction of Cortellesi's character as fantasy woman (on television and calendars), in which his heroism is mirrored in and dependent upon her compliance, and even her initiative.

This ambiguity about the feminine as performance on and off-screen, and as supporting structure for masculinity itself, pervades her later roles. At the same time, many of her earlier roles seem characterized by a reassuring girl-next-door-wholesomeness that has not entirely disappeared; indeed, she *is* the girl next door in both *Maschi contro femmine* (F. Brizzi, 2010) and *Sotto una buona stella* (C. Verdone, 2010), a domesticity which sometimes tips into an uptight neurotic role, as in *Un boss in salotto* (L. Miniero, 2014) or *Qualcosa di nuovo* (C. Comencini, 2016). On the other hand, more radical discourses often circulate around her star persona: she is a remarkably child-free or child-resistant women in many films, from *Tu la conosci Claudia?* (M. Venier, 2004) to the recent *Mamma o papà?* (R. Milani, 2017). Her roles also address, repeatedly, questions of precarity in *Il posto dell'anima* (R. Milani, 2003), *C'è chi dice no* (G. Avellino, 2011), *Scusate se esisto!* (R. Milani, 2014) and *Gli ultimi saranno gli ultimi* (M. Bruno, 2015), in keeping with her past record of left-wing, satirical television, and she has created a strong association with a number of unusual working women roles, as I shall discuss.

In her previously mentioned work on male stardom and Italian cinema, O'Rawe reports that major players in the Italian film industry produce «episodic or choral films rather than boy-meets-girl rom-coms because of the absence of big national stars who will appeal to everyone» (O'Rawe 2014, 176). This offers a bleak, but fair assessment of the absence of romantic comedy in Italian cinema, although I would suggest that Cortellesi's recent films imply a possible pending shift. Starring in her first proper romantic comedy storyline in just such a choral film – *Maschi contro femmine* –, Cortellesi's break-through role as romantic comedy heroine came in the screwball mode. Playing Chiara, an ecological activist nurse opposite Alessandro Preziosi's Diego, she meets her ideal antagonist in this playboy neighbour, who wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the words «Italian Stallion» and keeps trophies (thongs) from every conquest, labelling them with their owner's nation of origin. The film has Diego convert to whale-watching to woo Chiara, and the emasculating qualities of engagement with a woman on this profoundly personal and political level see him seeking help for erectile dysfunction. I shall return to this episode, which triggers – possibly uniquely in Italian cinema – a series of boy-meets-girl rom-com roles, albeit unconventional ones, that often depend on a two-star package.

Cortellesi's unique stardom, allied with her occasional say over the direction of the script, calls for an increasing elasticity of the latin lover co-star as she reflects back to him a playful image of himself, undermining our sense of who is reflecting whom in the male-female dynamic typically associated with the representation of heterosexuality in Italian cinema. The most recent films have also seen her comic (and in some instances radical) side gain more traction within the script, thanks in no small part to her own input. In this way, the mirror she presents has become more challenging, ultimately demanding a complete re-invention or even erasure of the latin lover. In this respect she offers what Kathleen Rowe maintains about the presence of women in comedy:

Making fun of and out of inflated and self-deluded notions of heroic masculinity, romantic comedy is often structured by gender inversion, a disruption of the social hierarchy of male over female through what might be called the topos of the unruly woman or the «woman on top». When romantic comedy most fully realizes the potential of this topos, it dramatizes a resistance

to the law of Oedipus, a carnivalizing of sexual identities and gender hierarchies that posits a new and more inclusive basis for community than the social order it takes as its point of reference (Rowe 1995, 41-42).

I shall return later to the manner in which Cortellesi's carnivalizing of sexual identities in particular offers an antidote to the dominant male comedian-led films that endorse the triumph of the «rebellious son» figure, constituted by the likes of Checco Zalone. As we saw, this kind of performance of femininity as unruly and disruptive is not without precedent in Italian cinema, since if we look back to the 1950s and 1960s we can find the examples of both Loren and Valeri, who challenged the dominance of male comics across a significant number of films, although it is very clear that each was firmly located either side of the pretty/funny binary respectively.

Comic Agent: Romantic Comedy and the Working Woman

Touching on six of Cortellesi's films and her co-stars – *Maschi contro femmine* with Alessandro Preziosi; *Nessuno mi può giudicare* (M. Bruno, 2011) with Raoul Bova; *Sotto una buona stella* with Carlo Verdone; *Scusate se esisto!* with Raoul Bova; *Qualcosa di nuovo* (C. Comencini, 2016) with Eduardo Gattolisi (all of which fall under the romantic comedy heading); and *Mamma o papà?* with Antonio Albanese (which is instead a “comedy of remarriage”) –, I will consider elements of commonality in these romantic comedy roles and their impact on her male co-stars. In particular I will demonstrate how Cortellesi's incarnation of “working women” roles in the context of the romantic comedy genre allows for a form of adaptation to emerge, which suggests that the films are working through, rather than resisting, changing gender roles in Italy. What emerges here is a small number of films, but with considerable box office pull, that do more than simply work to preserve masculine privilege at the centre of the narrative, as contemporary Italian films so often do (cf. O'Rawe 2014).

As Rowe claims, «romantic comedy demands a place for women, in the narrative and in its vision of a social order that is not only renewed but also, ideally, transformed» (1995, 44). Whilst critics of romantic comedy as an Anglophone genre may express concern about the ideologically conservative focus of the genre on the heterosexual couple (McDonald 2007, 76), in the Italian context we can see how this model does allow for a stronger female lead than is usual in Italian contemporary cinema. In this scenario Cortellesi's ability to effect social change is limited, but her roles nonetheless speak to a recognition of changes associated with contemporary gender relations. Indeed in some respects these films belong to what Michelle Schreiber has described as the «postfeminist romance cycle», in which there is «pleasure from observing the changing nature of contemporary women's everyday lives along with the intoxicating allure of the traditional “happily ever after” resolution» (Schreiber 2014, 4).

In a recent interview about her latest release, *Mamma o papà?*, Cortellesi comments on how she likes to play unusual working roles for women: «mestieri meno frequentati dalle donne, ma che esistono, eccome» (Caprara 2017). Diane Negra has observed that postfeminist film tends to feature women in working roles that reinscribe traditionally feminine associations with menial labour, such as waitresses, air hostesses and sex workers (Negra 2009, 88). Over the course of the six films under discussion here, Cortellesi's roles have certainly evolved from those associated with the classically «postfeminist» roles of nurse and escort into roles that we might describe as more overtly feminist, although even her nurse was also a political activist. In *Sotto una buona stella* – still with a nod to her «star» history as an escort – she is a consultant brought in to downsize firms by firing people, whilst in *Qualcosa di*

nuovo she plays a jazz singer. It is perhaps telling that in two of the comedy films directed by her husband – *Scusate se esisto!* and *Mamma o papà?* –, that have also credited Cortellesi as co-scriptwriter, she plays an architect and an engineer in charge of a large site respectively. Most significantly, however, these latter two portrayals of female professionals completely avoid «one of the most regular postfeminist archetypes of the female professional» identified by Negra: «the abject, deeply vulnerable woman exhibiting a dawning sense of regret about the dissatisfactions and sacrifices that accompany her success» (Negra 2009, 97).

Sotto una buona stella does offer a variant of this «drama of “miswanting” in which the heroine comes to realize that her professional ambitions are misplaced». We see her crying when she has to fire someone, and then spending her evenings desperately trying to find those she has sacked another job (Negra 2009, 95). The role is juxtaposed with the story of recently unemployed Francesco (Verdone), who – in more than a nod to the financial crisis and the melodrama of the beleaguered white male that dominates responses to the recession – loses his well-paid work as an investor thanks to his company president’s fraudulent practices (Negra and Tasker 2013, 16). Tellingly, the relationship between Verdone and Cortellesi’s characters reaches its own crisis point when he attacks her for her professional activity of firing people, thereby flagging up the struggle with changing roles in the workplace as belonging to an older generation of men. In fact the film does not see Lucia change her profession, nor does it link her single status directly to her professional life. So, the film attempts to carve out sympathetic ground for those on all sides of the crisis.

The masquerade plot characterizes most of these different performances for Cortellesi (significantly it is only in her first foray into rom-com that it belongs to the man – in *Maschi contro femmine* –, when Diego initially feigns an interest in political activism to seduce her). In taking control of the deception narrative, Cortellesi asserts ownership over a prerogative often assumed by the male⁵. Most importantly, however, her performance range in *Sotto una buona stella* is particularly reflective of a fundamental instability in the role assigned to femininity within the cinematic space. It is telling that it is in Verdone’s film that this happens. Regarded as he is as «national treasure and elder statesman of comedy» (O’Rawe 2014, 52), Cortellesi proudly says of Verdone: «Non mi ha proposto di fare la donna del suo film, lui voleva un duetto» (Caprara 2017, 32). As her own words imply, Verdone is not particularly accustomed to having to perform against a comic female equal, although the results of his doing so are significant. First of all, her character stuns him by pretending to be a Romanian plumber and mending his dishwasher (his move from domestic incompetence to competence is a defining feature of his process of «adaptation»), only for him to then imagine that the phone calls he hears her making at night are those of someone working as an escort. When she makes a romantic overture towards him, he tells her she looks like a Romanian «badante» or carer; to which her response is to pretend to take on the role as they walk down the street together. Reflecting a typical and problematic disavowal of the immigrant Other from the Italian comedy format, the move does, however, also consistently undermine Verdone’s attempts to place her in stereotypically feminine roles. As we shall see, he eventually has to accept her on her own terms.

Cortellesi’s more typical association with victims, rather than perpetrators of precarity comes to the fore particularly in the masquerade plot of *Scusate se esisto!*. This is a film that stretches the rom-com to its limits, since her co-star Bova’s character, Francesco, turns out to be gay, and the film’s main masquerade narrative is not dedicated to romance at all, but about Serena pretending to be a secretary to her fictional male architect boss (in fact herself) in or-

⁵ McDonald says «it is usually the man who is conning the woman» (2017, 17).

der to get a contract as an architect in her own right. Her main antagonist in this is not her love interest – as we might normally expect of a rom-com –, but her sexist boss. Her would-be lovers (the man she desires and the man who desires her) are both very supportive of her. Pietro (Corrado Fortuna), a minor character with whom she eventually ends up, even encourages her as a supposedly downtrodden secretary to stand up to her boss. The potential rescue narrative alluded to here is radically undermined by our knowledge that she is not a downtrodden secretary at all.

What are the consequences of Paola Cortellesi's working roles for her male co-stars? How do men respond to these changes? How do they have to change? As I have discussed elsewhere in the context of *Nessuno mi può giudicare*, one of the most striking aspects of Cortellesi's working women roles is the way that traditional female economic dependency on men is challenged (cf. Hipkins 2015a). The hero of *Nessuno mi può giudicare* has to take money from a woman to save his failing business, a bitter pill that is sweetened by the romantic ending. In *Sotto una buona stella*, Cortellesi's conciliatory feminine presence enables Verdone to find his way into domesticity with his estranged adult children, making his blaming of her when those same children leave all the more unjust. Fatherhood is also the lesson for the homosexual Francesco in *Scusate se esisto!*. Once again Cortellesi's presence in his house helps him to see his role as a father. This would suggest that her role is in some ways also a maternal one, and indeed what we see here is an assumption – as Nicole Matthews underlines with reference to Hollywood “family comedies” of the 1980s and 1990s – that it is only ever men who have problems with parenthood, and not women.⁶ This is, however, an assumption that Cortellesi delights in destroying with her most recent film, *Mamma o papà?*.

Most remarkable, perhaps, in terms of the way men respond to Cortellesi's working women are the ways in which *Mamma o papà?* voices a sexist critique of women in the workplace through the obnoxious male superior inspecting the industrial site. Despite constant references to her fertility, her youth, and the threat motherhood poses to her professional performance, he does in fact promote her to a new job in Sweden and then later invites her out to dinner. In many respects, what this dynamic reveals is the reason for the marital breakdown at the heart of the film. During one of their spectacular rows she does fire at her husband – «I was too successful for you», she says –, and observes that being asked him to go to the supermarket twice in thirteen years was not really grounds for marital infidelity (he has started an affair with a much younger nurse at the hospital where he is an obstetrician). Mornings see her completing a plethora of domestic tasks, while firing instructions at him before slamming the door. Albanese announces in melancholic fashion that he feels like a post-it note. Over the course of the film this bitter parental stand-off degenerates into a carnivalesque and anarchic destruction of one of the shibboleths of Italian cultural value: parental love⁷. Valeria and Nicola engage in a brutal competition to persuade their troublesome offspring to choose to live with the other parent after the divorce. Cortellesi's character works to erase any vestiges of stereotypically nurturing maternal qualities: fearful that she has been too nice to her teenage daughter, she gets wildly drunk and dances sexily at her adolescent party. There she also flirts with her teen male friends, who define her as a MILF, taking us back once again to Cortellesi's comic negotiation of new female roles through her sex appeal. On another occasion, she fakes a concern about her teenage son's diet, telling him that with his dad he will only eat «schifezze» from McDonald's. Knowing that he will be tempted to his father's side by this

⁶ «Conception and motherhood is an easy biological option for women, these films seem to say, while fatherhood is a non-biological matter, laden with difficulty and responsibility» (Matthews 2000, 106).

⁷ This movie is in fact a remake of the French one *Papa ou maman* (M. Bourboulon, 2015).

thought, she adopts the masquerade plot, here of concerned motherhood, only to radically undermine it. The film's feminization of the father's role as «post-it note» obstetrician is only recovered hastily at the last minute by her fourth pregnancy, revealed in the film's closure. This fact implies her submission, however temporary, to the domestic and to his medical control as he delivers their baby.

Object and Subject of Desire

Schreiber writes that «the postfeminist romance film struggles to maintain a balance between depicting women as demure girls and sexual coquettes» (Schreiber 2014, 22). This comment offers an opportunity to reflect on Cortellesi's own ability to manage the threat of female sexuality that is closely intertwined with her working roles. We might compare her girl-next-door physical appeal, for instance, to that of Meg Ryan. As Schreiber writes, «Peter William Evans quite aptly contends that Ryan “epitomizes the genre's safe sex alternative” and that she is the “very essence of loyalty, trustworthiness, and all things natural, she is the approachable safe harbor for all those negotiating the Scylla and Charybdis of modern sexuality”» (Schreiber 2014, 116). Like Ryan, Cortellesi is both playfully sexual and safe. When re-appearing in her post-makeover mode for her neighbour Raoul Bova in *Nessuno mi può giudicare*, for example, she trips over her high heels, undermining her performance of hyperfeminine sexuality. There is also certainly more than a nod to Ryan's infamous orgasm scene in the closing bravura performance of Verdone and Cortellesi in *Sotto una buona stella*, when, in response to her neighbour's pretence of a seduction, she also fakes an orgasm on the other side of the wall in order to match him, and to win him back. Her ability to challenge male sexuality through her comic talk and performance – which her feminine appeal renders both coyly flirtatious as well funny – explains why she is strongest in these rom-com roles, and how they slyly challenge machismo. Tellingly, in her first rom-com performance, her effect upon Preziosi's character Diego – who once he falls for her is unable to maintain an erection with any other woman – shows comically quite how castrating Cortellesi's expression of desire can be.

Femininity is not all about the romance in the romantic comedy, it is about sexual desire too. For Rowe, in the romantic comedy «female characters are obstacles to desire, objects of desire, and subjects of desire often initiating and controlling the movement of the plot» (1995, 49). The staging of Cortellesi's subjective desire is at its most comic, and also perhaps its most controversial, in the hilarious parody of a “meet-cute” that takes place partway into *Scusate se esisto!* (Fig. 1-2). Wanting to return to Italy, but unable to find work as an architect there, Serena seeks work in a restaurant. Asking to hand her CV over to its owner, the film's pace moves to slow motion as an exquisitely groomed Bova descends the stairs to the soundtrack of a cover of Nina Simone's *Feeling Good* (1965), and a stupefied Cortellesi smears icing sugar over her face in her lustful distraction.

The moment appears to bring the film in line with Burns's definition of the *chick flick* in which, she claims, «the men are clearly there to be looked at by women, creating a notable representation of the female gaze in contemporary popular culture» (Burns 2013, 132). However, Bova's Francesco turns out to be gay, and we could suggest here that when the woman finally gets to look in Italian cinema, the object is no longer available. However, in the context of Cortellesi's broader oeuvre, I read this rather as an obstacle that renders Cortellesi's comic performance of smitten femininity all the more powerful. In the context of the plot's concern with improving her employment prospects, her misreading of Francesco (for the Italian spectator Bova's uncustomary moustache on first appearance is a stereotypical gay signifier) – who turns out to be a loyal friend not lover – ultimately serves to underline how the pursuit of the ideal partner is a delightful but misleading female fantasy. As in the perfor-

mance of Romanian identity in *Sotto una buona stella*, in this «homosexual-lite» take on marginalized identities (Duncan 2013), Cortellesi is, however, complicit with broader mechanisms of erasure of minority identities (sexual and ethnic) in Italian comedy in order to make her own point about female identity, and to stake her comic claim.

In *Qualcosa di nuovo*, the only female-directed film discussed here, the attention switches even further towards the female gaze and sexual needs, making the relationship between two women the unusual subject of the film, as Cortellesi and Micaela Ramazzotti both (initially unwittingly) share a sexual relationship with the same schoolboy. The «juvenation» of the Latin Lover at play here reflects back on the male domination of the «incest motif» in Italian comedy, offering «qualcosa di nuovo» indeed (Hipkins 2015b). Unfortunately the film struggles to endow the schoolboy with any particular charm, making the establishment of a new social order, in which the women tacitly agree to share him, less than convincing. They themselves nervously reflect upon the fact that they only resort to him in the absence of «uomini validi» and feel pessimistic about how he will change when older; the film's own nostalgia for a worthy contemporary male counterpart undermines the film's potential radicalism – in a post-Macron era their solution might not be such an improbable scenario after all. The boy himself seems to think that his own father left because his mother did not show any need for a husband, and Lucia and Maria do not seem sure why they need one for anything other than sex, and remain uneasy about expressing their other needs. This is also one of Cortellesi's least interesting comic roles, because in its splitting of Cortellesi and Ramazzotti into the extremes of prude and nymphomaniac it comes close to a recurrent postfeminist cliché about the working woman, namely the incarnation of the uptight single woman. According to Schreiber (2014, 44), this type always has a problem that she needs to overcome: she is always «too» something, in this case too uptight. Comencini does not, however, fall into one of Negra's «adjusted ambition» (2009, 88) narratives, in which Lucia comes to privilege heterosexuality over her career, rather she blames her resistance to sex on her past experience of men rather than her work and ends the film still singing.

Conclusion: Sexual Knowledge and Carnival Performance

The problem of the weak or non-existent hero posed and reflected on *Qualcosa di nuovo* actually provides us with an interesting opportunity to consider its difference from Cortellesi's other roles with regard to her «Latin Lover» counterpart. In the model of adaptation, to which I referred earlier, it is usual for both partners to shift in some way over the course of the comedy, and the romantic male lead plays a key role here:

He must be a fantasy and offer the heroine what she lacks [...]. In many romantic comedies the hero is a catalyst for the heroine, propelling her into a journey involving difficult lessons and emotional growth [...]. Commonly the hero is the adversary for the heroine, challenging her values and even her lifestyle, yet the conflict is inevitably founded on a mutual attraction (Mortimer 2010, 45).

In the films discussed here, it is obvious what the male partners have to learn from Cortellesi's characters – traits associated with more feminine modes: domesticity, fatherhood, but also accepting and co-existing with working women. It is less clear how Cortellesi's female characters learn from their men – they learn about their social environment, about working class lives, about the workplace, about homosexual identities, but rarely from their heterosexual male protagonists. I would suggest that the key to this imbalance turns upon what the Latin Lover used to offer: sexual expertise in the face of female sexual ignorance. In those in-

stances when the woman did have sexual knowledge, as a prostitute, it was socially contained by the stigma attached to it, as Loren's character finds in *Matrimonio all'italiana*. In the radically changed landscape of postfeminist femininity such lessons in sex or shame are no longer required, and as the orgasm scenes of *When Harry Met Sally...* (R. Reiner, 1989) and *Sotto una buona stella* illustrate men and women need to meet on different ground. The «technologies of sexiness» that Cortellesi's character acquires so performatively in her transformation into an escort in *Nessuno mi può giudicare* render redundant the requirement for the Latin Lover's intervention. His moral disapproval is shown to be absurdly old-school in the face of her entrepreneurial capital. We might note that the schoolboy in *Qualcosa di nuovo* certainly cannot offer sexual knowledge either (he can barely undo a bra), but instead the vigour and energy the divorced and jaded Cortellesi needs, a model familiar from male «incest motif» relationship models. Diego's panoply of foreign lovers has not provided him with the knowledge required to deal with emotional intimacy and he appears terrified by his own bodily functions.

Cortellesi's characters consistently like to talk about male genitals and problems with sexual performance, no holds barred. When war is declared against her husband in *Mamma o papà?*, she wastes no time in telling his new lover about his prostrate problem. Cortellesi's language about male performance often carries castrating potential, and not only for Diego; however, comedy permits its transformation from something potentially murderous back into sex. On the one hand, this obsession might be read as symptom of a continued preoccupation with the phallus in Italian cinema, but it is at least articulated in a carnivalesque spirit of revelation, an outing of the struggle for control manifest around it. In this respect, it is perhaps no surprise to see that in her latest successful comic role as an outspoken woman of the Roman proletariat, Monica (*Come un gatto in tangenziale* [R. Milani, 2017]), this struggle for control assumes class dimensions, as she becomes earthy romantic antagonist to Albanese's middle-class intellectual. This displacement of her «senza peli sulla lingua» overtly sexual persona into a working-class context perpetuates a common and problematic association of sexual and class abjection in Italian cinema. It also reiterates her links to Loren, whose overt sexiness was permitted by her *popolana* status, although it is striking that while Loren's working-class identity excused her sexiness it did not make it abject.

In *Sotto una buona stella*, Verdone's older character typically attempts to wrestle back this kind of knowledge and power. After Cortellesi's character has spilled the beans about her ex-partner, referring to Venanzio's problems in the bedroom («ce l'ha piccolo come una penna»), Verdone counters Venanzio's criticism of his age by assuming an identity as urologist and advising him on his sexual issues. Still, even his fake sex is outdone by Cortellesi's performance of an orgasm. Celestino Deleyto has called for the recognition of an element of the carnivalesque within romantic comedy, and this is certainly an element not limited to the *cinapanettone*, where Alan O'Leary (2013) has identified it with an unruly disruption of bodily control⁸. Indeed the scene of faked sex is heavily reminiscent of a similar scene in *Christmas in Love* (N. Parenti, 2004). Rather than making her into the «phallic woman», who takes control of the phallus, Cortellesi's performance undermines its dominance, but in doing so, it is very clear that the comedy is still male performance-facing. For all this «penis talk», female genitalia remain a taboo. In fact, in her re-engagement with her sexuality in *Qualcosa di nuovo* Cortellesi undergoes a form of «girlification» as the film credits see her and Michela

⁸ «Whilst romantic love as a historically specific formation has been the only ideological discourse to be recognized in the genre, the privileging of sex and the body in carnivalesque comedy has remained outside the boundaries of romantic comedy, but once we admit the presence of a multiplicity of discourses about sex within the genre, the links between the two theoretical formations become more visible» (Deleyto 2009, 33).

Ramazzotti singing *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* and dissolving into giggles. In an uncharacteristically postfeminist move, Comencini implies that her new vision of active female sexuality is a girlishly pleasing one.

Across the films discussed here there is a fairly constant re-invention of Cortellesi's Latin Lover co-protagonist, stretching his valency (not to mention his potency) to accommodate new modes of femininity, sometimes to the point of his erasure, most notably in the case of Bova's role in *Scusate se esisto!*. At the same time, her particular performances as agent of comedy and object of desire point towards both the desire for and difficulty in imagining an adequate male counterpart, who can offer any adaptation model for heterosexual adult femininity. If Schreiber writes that «the postfeminist romance cycle films mirror the balancing act at the heart of the contemporary female experience» (2014, 21), it would appear that the experience these Italian films address is one in which women work through their problems, despite rather than thanks to a man, whilst maintaining the performance of a desire for one. Bova is perhaps the most extreme example of the failure of the Latin Lover to hold his own against Cortellesi's romantic comedy heroine, who, when he remains heterosexual, seems only to offer good looks, but at least offers a more playful friendship when he is no longer sexually available. This is no doubt connected to the threat of feminization connected particularly to his own *star persona*, as discussed by Giovanna Summerfield in this volume, a passivity that fails to sustain the difference that the romantic comedy is structured upon. However, if we re-examine what it is that other male protagonists are able to offer in response to Cortellesi's strong persona, we find that the energy and passion of youth (nonetheless connoted as transient in Eduardo Valdamini), the tenderness of older age (in Carlo Verdone), and the cheeky chutzpah of Alessandro Preziosi's underwater renunciation of his «Italian Stallion» identity are as good as it gets. All three figures confirm that the romantic comedy of equals cannot so much contain the Latin Lover as break him down into more desirable fragments.

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