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Confirmations that were not meant to be: religion, violence and the female body in *Un poison violent* (2010), *Corpo celeste* (2011) and *Kreuzweg* (2014)

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the representation of the adolescent female body and the relevance of corporeality in Catholicism in three Western European films, which have at their centre the religious confirmation. These are: *Un poison violent* (*Love Like Poison*, 2010, Katell Quilléveré), *Corpo celeste* (*Heavenly Body*, 2011, Alice Rohrwacher), and *Kreuzweg* (*Stations of the Cross*, 2014, Dietrich Brüggemann). The sacrament of confirmation as portrayed in the three films becomes the axis around which the dynamics of adolescence (i.e., changing body, blossoming sexuality, family conflicts) unfold, opening up a space for the analysis of the interplay between female subjectivities and Catholicism's regulatory role. We look at the often-subtle violence exerted by Catholicism in an attempt to tame the female body and the ways female adolescents (re)negotiate their identity against the backdrop of religious authority. Our contention is that, in the films, the female protagonists' subtraction from the confirmation becomes a way to distance themselves from the Catholic obedient body and reaffirm their individual, embodied subjectivity. To this end, we engage with the complex relationship between Catholicism, women, and women's bodies, exploring the dichotomy between the Catholic ideal, unchangeable body and the continually-changing, desiring female bodies.

KEYWORDS

Corpo celeste; *un poison violent*; *kreuzweg*; catholicism; female body; fainting

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)

All day long, all night long, every day and every night, the bodies of women and girls are turned into battlefields. (Thistlethwaite, 2015, p. 1)

Introduction

Judith Franco (2018) observes that there was an increase, during the previous decade, in the number of Western European debut feature films directed and (co-)scripted by women, featuring young teenage girls engaged in a complex process of identity-

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formation. Within this prolific group, a more niche sub-category seems to be that of the ‘confirmation film’. This would include, among others, the French *Un poison violent* (*Love Like Poison*, 2010, Katell Quilléveré), the Italian *Corpo celeste* (*Heavenly Body*, 2011, Alice Rohrwacher), and the German *Kreuzweg* (*Stations of the Cross*, 2014, Dietrich Brüggemann), which can be considered examples of ‘a subgenre of modern filmmaking that explores (often sensitively and with psychological finesse) the way that the feelings of adolescents may be hijacked by the demands of family church circles’ (Le Fanu 2019, p. 7, note 1). The journey of the three films’ young protagonists – *Un poison violent*’s Anna (Clara Augarde), *Corpo celeste*’s Marta (Yle Vianello), and *Kreuzweg*’s Maria (Lea van Acken) – in the world of organised religion is at least momentarily, if not definitively interrupted, as all three fail to confirm. While both Anna and Maria faint at the altar right before receiving the sacrament, Marta runs away on the day of the ceremony. It then becomes clear that, while certainly different both in tones and intentions, these three films share not only a focus on the religious confirmation as a rite of passage for teenage girls, but also showcase their protagonists’ resistance to the sacrament.

This article considers the often-subtle violence exerted by Catholicism – understood as the institution of Catholic Church as well as the system of thought that sustains it – in an attempt to tame the female body. Our contention is that, in the films, the female protagonists’ subtraction from the confirmation¹ becomes a way to distance themselves from the Catholic obedient body and reaffirm their subjectivity. The main argument develops around the complex relationship between Catholicism, women, and women’s bodies. We first consider how these notions are presented in the three films and how these challenge the Catholic regimentation of the female body. We then engage with the notion of obedience as preached by the Church as well as the inherent military quality that characterises the confirmation. Finally, we discuss the three protagonists’ failure to complete their confirmation, understanding it as a self-affirmative act during the delicate passage from childhood to womanhood. Throughout, we maintain a focus on the continually-changing female body and the relevance of corporeality in Catholic religion, underlining the protagonists’ confused feelings about their own bodies and desires. While also a characteristic of puberty, such conflicting self-perceptions are, in the films, directly linked to and heightened by Catholic religion. As a patriarchal ideology, Catholicism is imbued with a certain violence which becomes apparent in the regimentation of the believers’ bodies – and in particular that of women. The sacrament of confirmation becomes the centre around which the dynamics of adolescence (i.e., changing body, blossoming sexuality, family conflicts) unfold, opening up a space for the analysis of the interplay between female subjectivities and Catholicism’s regulatory role.

All three coming-of-age films have rather straightforward plots. *Un poison violent* tells the story of Anna, a girl of 14. As she comes home from boarding school for the summer holidays, she discovers that her father (Thierry Neuvic) has left, leaving her heartbroken mother Jeanne (Lio) to take care of his elderly, sickly father, Jean (Michel Galabru). In addition to the growing tensions at home, Anna is also experiencing her sexual awakening as she develops an attraction for choirboy Pierre (Youen Leboulanger-Gourvil) – something that leads her to experience feelings of guilt and confusion also about her upcoming confirmation. The only words of comfort amidst all of this come from the young, sensitive, and handsome local priest, Père François (Stefano Cassetti), who assures

her that crises of faith are perfectly normal. However, overwhelmed by the clash between exploring her sexuality and adhering to Catholic norms of conduct, she faints before completing her confirmation.

Corpo celeste's Marta is a shy 13-year-old who has just moved back to her birth town in Southern Italy after ten years spent in Switzerland. Under her relatives' advice, Marta begins to attend catechism classes in preparation for the confirmation. The small parish is a rather peculiar world, where the priest, don Mario (Salvatore Cantalupo), is more preoccupied with advancing his career than any spiritual endeavours, while the catechism teacher, Santa (Pasqualina Scuncia), draws inspiration for her classes from quiz shows. Misunderstood and struggling to fit in, Marta ends up running away on the day of her confirmation.

Finally, *Kreuzweg* focuses on 14-year-old Maria. The eldest of four children in a conservative Catholic family,² Maria is responsible and level-headed. Struck by the words of the community priest, Vater Weber (Florian Stetter), she begins performing small acts of self-sacrifice. She hopes that, in turn, God will grant a miracle and heal her youngest sibling, Johannes, who is mute. Her health increasingly deteriorated, Maria loses consciousness when the bishop is about to complete the rite of confirmation. Refusing treatment at the hospital, she dies a martyr while choking on a holy wafer.

Coming-of-age stories traditionally focus on moments of transition and growth, which mark the protagonists' passage into adulthood (Hentges, 2006; Hardcastle, Morosini, and Tarte 2009; Fox 2017). In particular, Catherine Driscoll (2011) identifies a number of characteristics, which are at the centre of what she calls 'the teen' film, namely:

the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover. (p. 2)

The three works examined in this article all present these traits: they have a clear focus on complexified relationships – both within and outside the family –, the visible changes of the female body, and the regulatory role of Catholic religion. Furthermore, in all three films, the confirmation constitutes a rite of passage for the protagonists in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it marks their transition from childhood to adulthood; on the other hand, it reiterates the confirmees' commitment to Catholicism (CCC 1285). Franco (2018), making reference to two of the films selected for this article, writes, 'a more formal coming-of-age ritual is the confirmation ceremony allowing for a dramatization of the girl's struggle between sexuality and spirituality (*Love Like Poison*) or between compliance and resistance to religious orthodoxy/patriarchal authority (*Corpo Celeste*)' (p. 19).

Love Like Poison, *Corpo Celeste* and *Kreuzweg* are part of the recent growth of films centred on adolescent female subjectivities and growing pains, which has been paralleled by an increase in girlhood studies in cinema. Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Innocence* (2004), Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2004), Delphine and Muriel Coulin's *17 Girls* (*17 filles*, 2011), Leonie Krippendorff's *Cocoon* (2004), as well as the oeuvre of Céline Sciamma, Alice Rohrwacher and Mia Hansen-Løve, among others, are examples of European

cinema's burgeoning attention to coming-of-age narratives focused on female experiences of desire, corporeality and disorientation. Girlhood studies in cinema are proliferating to accompany such a filmic production, providing a platform to elaborate on the sensuous rendering of female youth and contemporary feminist perspectives (Handyside and Taylor-Jones 2016; Ince 2017; Chareyron and Viennot 2019). The films we discuss, like others belonging to the genre, are a locus of tensions and ambiguities, where traditional gender and cultural expectations clash with the protagonists' desire for self-discovery and self-determination.

In addition to their concern for religious confirmation, the three films also share another number of characteristics which recur in coming-of-age narratives. In the first instance, fathers are either absent (*Corpo Celeste*) or relegated to marginal roles (*Un poison violent* and *Kreuzweg*). In all three cases the role of father is filled, to an extent, by other 'fathers', namely the three priests: don Mario, Père François, and Vater Weber. Accompanying the partial or complete absence of fathers is the protagonists' rather complex relationships with their mothers: Jeanne, Anna's mother, is bitterly jealous of her daughter's youth; Rita (Anita Caprioli), Marta's mother, is tenderly sweet and yet incapable of providing emotional safety for her daughter; Maria's mother (Franziska Weisz) is fanatically religious and disturbingly cold, strict, unyielding. If not physically, decidedly emotionally abandoned, Anna, Marta and Maria are left making sense for themselves of Catholic teachings while experiencing their bodily transformation from 'harmless' children into women.

This transformation, perhaps the most apparent in one's life given the magnitude of physical changes occurring in a relatively short time, is conducive to the films' focus on the body – a narrative, ideological and aesthetic knot, which provides a fil rouge for many of the films' themes: that of mother-daughter relationship, women-Church relationship, and sexuality. Indeed, on the protagonists' bodies we can see at play the acute tension between physical changes and the Church's attempt to control them. As Aline H. Kalbian (2005) argues,

The link between sexual morality and church authority is strong, and it is fortified by Catholic attitudes about order and gender. [...] In recent decades, especially since the Second Vatican Council, sex, gender, and church authority have been among the most controversial issues in Catholicism. Disagreements about contraception, abortion, women in the priesthood, assisted reproductive technologies, and homosexuality all reveal the centrality of Catholicism's understanding of the natural order and its view of authority and obedience. (p. 2)

Catholicism's patriarchal, authoritative, and domineering perspective is thus imbued with a certain degree of violence, which can take subtle forms (as in *Un poison violent*) as well as explicitly destructive ones (as in *Kreuzweg*). Against the backdrop of their upcoming confirmation, Anna, Marta and Maria challenge the Catholic subjugation of the female body in multiple ways – from Anna's and Maria's seemingly passive reaction through fainting to Marta's clearly active subtraction. In all three cases, by physically rejecting the sacrament, the protagonists affirm their female subjectivities and distance themselves from the Catholic ideal of the unchangeable and untouchable body.

(Non-)Celestial Bodies

There is a sequence in *Corpo celeste*, about 35 minutes in, which portrays a catechism meeting. The young son of one of the teachers is running around and playing with his toy sword and causing quite the ruckus, which pushes Ignazio (Carmelo Giordano), the janitor, to complain loudly, 'He needs a good beating. Young people must obey!' However, the mother is quick to jump to her son's defense. She takes the boy in her arms and shouts back, 'Obey in the name of what?' This is one of the very few instances where authority is challenged, rather than readily accepted in *Corpo celeste*. Parishioners do not protest when don Mario shows up at their door telling them whom to vote for in the next election. Neither the pupils nor their parents question Santa's teaching methods. No one protests the ridiculous and sexualised dance routine young girls have prepared for the confirmation Sunday.

Such sequences well exemplify the obedience to authority so heavily embedded in Catholic tradition. The Scriptures repeatedly prescribe submission to God's will as expressed in his Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy. 5:4–21) as well as in Jesus' sayings. Furthermore, disobedience is unequivocally connoted as sin and the reason for the Fall of Humanity (Genesis 3: 1–24). The Scriptures also prescribe obedience to God's representatives on earth, be them governing authorities, parents or masters (Romans 13:1–7; Ephesian 6:1–5). Obedience is required particularly of children (Ephesian 6:1–5; Proverbs 1:8–9; Colossians 3:20) and women. Moreover, women are also invited to remain quiet, be reverent and exercise self-control (1 Timothy 2:11–11; Titus, 2: 3–5; 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; Colossians 3: 18; Ephesians 5:22–23). Such obedience and self-control passes also and especially through the mortification of the flesh (among others, Galatians 5:24; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 9:27), thereby establishing an inextricable link between the impurity of the (in particular female) body and the damnation of the soul, which allows the Church to exert power not only on the eternal, invisible part of human beings, but more importantly on their mortal bodies.

Christianity can, indeed, be understood as an embodied religion in which 'the decisive motion is not intellectual, but physical' (Miles 2008, 12). While preaching on the soul, Christian religion is concerned with losing control over the body. Margaret R. Miles (2008) aptly observes, 'there is [...] a certain irony and contradiction in this preoccupation with souls in Christianity, the religion of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh' (p. 11). Similarly, Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart (1998) point out the Christian obsession with the carnal: 'Christian theology has always been an embodied theology rooted in creation, incarnation and resurrection, and sacrament. Christian theology has always applied both the analogia entis (analogy of being) and the analogia fidei (analogy of faith) to the body. The body is both the site and recipient of revelation' (p. 11). And it is precisely around Christ's heavenly body that the Christian idea(l) of body has more or less crystallised. Contra the body 'as a vehicle of pleasure' in consumer society (Featherstone as quoted in Turner 2008, 147), Christianity has maintained the essential link between body and purity, undermining physical pleasure and going so far as to endorse pain and sickness as a way to atone for one's sins (Turner 2008, pp. 62–63). In films focused on female adolescent protagonists and their failure to complete the confirmation, the question of the body thus acquires particular significance.

Such a tension between the ideal (and idealised) Christian body and the actual human body can be seen in all three films, even more clearly as we are dealing with the continuously changing teenage female body. The Christian body, and the female one in particular, is profoundly regulated by the Church and is both symbolically and concretely constructed through restraint: sexual abstinence before marriage (CCC 2350) – and even after the focus is on reproduction rather than pleasure as detailed once again by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2366)-, moderation in eating (with the occasional fasting, CCC 1999), modesty in dress (CCC 2052 and CCC 2053), and an overall humiliation of the flesh. While many restraints also involve the male counterpart, it is nonetheless the female body that has historically been more forcefully regimented by the Church in its crusade to maintain its power by taming women (Isherwood and Stuart 1998). Hence, the female body according to Catholic precepts is a virginal, pure body; an untouched body whose ideal model is Christ's heavenly, uber-human body. The confirmation is one of the sacraments reaffirming one's belonging to the Church and therefore it also confirms one's conforming to its ideal of body.

But how can a human body become like or aspire to a divine body? In all three films under discussion, we see different ways through which the protagonists' bodies increasingly steer away from the unchanged and unchangeable body of Christ. Marta, Anna and Maria are adolescents, their bodies continually transforming in their slow abandonment of childhood (and thus of a tamed, non-dangerous sexuality). Franco (2018) delineates how recent films focusing on female teenagers share

an emphasis on negative affect/bad feeling to draw attention to the implicit violence of the female adolescent rite of passage. This focus is highlighted in painful moments of humiliation and shame experienced by the girl or via her mother (abandonment or rejection, sexual objectification or abuse, menstruation in public) and/or as a more diffuse state of melancholy/emotional distress that highlights the girls' awareness of inequality and disempowerment in terms of gender (and class). (p. 17)

From Marta's observing of her breast grow and having her first period to Anna's discovery of sexuality, both *Corpo celeste* and *Un poison violent* show the impossibility for the real body to conform to the ideal one, thereby configuring the adolescent female body as an ever-changing, desiring body. *Kreuzweg*, too, exhibits such impossibility, but it does so via the protagonist's efforts to negate the real – and hence desiring of the other – body. In her unwearying attempt to become like a celestial body, Maria ends up dying because of a non-secularised form of holy anorexia. This inability of the body to become celestial is accompanied in all three films by the physical subtraction from the confirmation.

Throughout *Corpo celeste*, Marta struggles with her self-image: smaller than her classmates, she stands out for her delicate features, fair hair and blue eyes. She is also rather quiet compared to other characters, who are often loud and overbearing. Marta's sensibility and growth is visually conveyed through blurred images, out-of-focus shots and backlit scenes in which the camera frequently stays so close to her body that there's no air in the shot, thus making the protagonist's emotionally claustrophobic state almost palpable. The most intense scenes coil around the crucifix and Marta's forced trip to fetch the new one. On the very same trip, the girl experiences her figurative crucifixion: she gets her first period and thus the physical pain and the mental confusion that accompany it.

After a brief clash with don Mario over lunch – – Marta does not want to eat fish, nor does she obey his command to nonetheless remain seated – – the priest notices her stained jeans. He reproachfully asks her, ‘Marta, how did you get dirty?’, as she hangs her head in shame and runs to the bathroom. The priest’s use of the word ‘dirty’ (‘sporcata’) is certainly significant here, as it suggests a condition of impurity in line with the Biblical understanding of menstruating women as bodily—and spiritually—degraded (hence the precept of seven-day self-isolation and the ban on being touched [Leviticus 15:19, 20:15]). In this condition, Marta is arguably more distant from the celestial body, ‘spiritually “dirtied” by menstruation’ (Kishore 2005, 50). The uncleanness associated with menstruation in Christianity brings, as a consequence, a growing sense of shame in the subject (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1988, 40).

Shame is a recurring feeling in the film: for instance, in an earlier sequence, Marta’s older sister Rosa (Maria Luisa De Crescenzo) berates her for having borrowed her bra without permission. Such confrontation takes place in front of the girls’ relatives, leaving Marta understandably mortified. In yet another scene, after being verbally and physically chastised by Santa in front of her classmates, Marta cuts her hair and gifts it to her younger cousin Debby (Maria Trunfio). As Roberta Milliken (2012) points out, long hair is ‘a natural emblem of femininity’ (p. 39). Marta’s cutting of her hair then takes on a variety of symbolic meanings, which range from a form of protest against the hyper-religious context she is currently immersed in, to rejection of traditional femininity (well exemplified by the other female characters in the film, especially her over-sexualised young cousin), to self-punishment (the practice of shaving a woman’s head for punishment is after all well documented in Western tradition [Derrett 1973]).

It is arguably in a later scene, however, that the duality between carnality and spirituality emerges at its clearest. Marta is attracted to the physicality of the new crucifix, donated by an old, ill-tempered and yet sympathetic priest, don Lorenzo (Renato Carpentieri). While in an earlier scene Santa had told the children that the body of Christ is different from ours, ‘It’s spiritual, a heavenly, saintly body!’, Marta now experiences the carnality of the body of Christ. She delicately traces Christ’s crucified body with her own hand, in an image clearly portraying the Catholic paradox of a religion that preaches to the souls and yet is obsessed with mimetic images and the visibility (Christ) of the invisible God. In an interview, the director Alice Rohrwacher observes,

Everyone talks to Marta about the handsome, smiling, good Jesus, but there’s nothing tangible. Instead for Marta there is this moment when she’s touching Christ’s body. The figurative crucifix but a real body in a way. It’s a body with hands, feet, ribs. She starts touching all these parts. It’s also her first time touching a male body. That was the scene that most disturbed the Catholic Church. (in Ratner 2011, 44)

While Marta’s body is still developing, the body of a child slowly turning into a woman’s, *Un poison violent*’s Anna is physically mature. Hence, there is even greater attention on the protagonist’s body, which becomes the object of the look for many characters in the film. Similarly to what Emma Wilson (2017) notes in relation to director Céline Sciamma’s work on young female characters negotiating their identity, ‘[the] focus on the body as lived, sensed, felt’ (p. 10) is paramount for the portrayal of female subjectivities and their transition from childhood into adulthood. Like *Corpo celeste*, *Un poison violent* illustrates the challenges of puberty through the protagonist’s bodily

transformations in contrast to the purity required by the Church. It is certainly significant that the film begins by portraying mass, and more specifically, the Eucharist. Except for the initial chant, the first words spoken (first off-screen and then on-screen) are ‘the body of Christ.’ As Anna queues for communion, she looks at the Church’s ceiling. Her gaze rests on a wooden ship model and then on a figurative crucifix above the altar. As she reaches Père François and he offers her the communion wafer, uttering the words ‘the body of Christ,’ Anna hesitates and closes her mouth. She then throws a quick glance in the direction of choirboy Pierre, who shyly smiles at her. At this point the screen fades to black, and the title appears. From its opening, then, the film places emphasis on the intricate question of corporeality in Catholicism, the religion which allows for the physical receiving of God the Son through the ingestion of the holy wafer,³ as well as the tension between spirituality and sexuality.

The film’s focus on the body and carnality has to do with its importance during puberty, in which the body undergoes a most overwhelming transformation, as well as its centrality for Catholic themes such as the incarnation. Accordingly, *Un poison violent* portrays both the positive fascination with the body as ‘a condition to access the world and a vector of pleasure’, and the shame deriving from the Catholic understanding of the body as a means for spiritual corruption (Fradet 2011, p. 57: our translation). Anna’s discovery of her changing body is thus filled with contrasting feelings and is never safe from an overall sense of shame, often initiated by her mother as well as by her own sexual attraction for Pierre. Entangled with the incarnation and its inconsistencies, the body in the film – at once God’s Catholic taking of a body of flesh and our means of accessing the world – becomes the site for (re)negotiating one’s identity. Anna’s bodily self-perception is therefore caught between two incompatible understandings of carnality: Christ’s celestial body, the God made Man, and her desiring, sensuous body. Desire, curiosity, and blossoming sexuality will prove to be stronger than Catholic ideas of purity.

Just after being shamed by her mother for her sensuous body, Anna goes for a walk in the woods with Pierre. In this Eden-like setting, the two visually explore each other’s body before kissing. However, unlike the biblical blame placed on almost exclusively Eve, the director puts Anna and Pierre on the same level of curiosity and desire, delicately filming their adolescent bodies and tender glances. Jean-François Hamel (2011) observes apropos of this scene, ‘when the bodies, unsure and hesitant, get closer, the camera films them in a respectful manner, without ever lingering unnecessarily. [...] Katell Quillévére offers a sobre and yet never cold *mise en scène*’ (p. 60: our translation). Anna’s body, in particular, is the most visible body throughout the film, in a move to mark visibility as a way to account for a fast-changing female subjectivity. The camera follows Anna in her fascination and fear about her growing body, showing not only her reaction but also that of other characters to her body. It is neither *Corpo celeste*’s extreme proximity to the body nor *Kreuzweg*’s rigid distance; *Un poison violent*’s *mise en scène* alternates between intense close-ups and more placid long shots, showing Anna’s body as one with her ambiguous emotions and desires: ‘at the same time being and having, the body is also source of passion, producer of voyeurism and quest for sensory feelings, and this is why Quillévére’s oeuvre care so much about *monstration*’ (Fradet 2011, p. 57: our translation).

Anna’s body is coveted by a number of characters, for very different reasons: not only choirboy Pierre, her peer, but also her mother Jeanne and her grandfather Jean. Jeanne’s relationship with Anna is tinged with more than a hint of rivalry and initiates a reflection

on changing female bodies -whilst Anna is becoming a young woman, hence sensuous and desirable, Jeanne is approaching menopause. In a candid conversation with Père François, Jeanne confesses to him to be jealous of her daughter's youth: 'I see her growing up, becoming beautiful, with so much time ahead of her ...'. In another scene (just before the sequence in the woods), we see Jeanne entering the bathroom while a topless Anna is changing; the girl, initially mortified, turns toward her mother and defiantly asks her, 'So, do you like me?'. On this note, director Katell Quilléveré has observed how

Mother/daughter relationships are very fraught during adolescence; often the mother is approaching menopause just as the daughter is starting to menstruate, so there's this mirroring and at the same time this conflict. It's a taboo subject, but I can't imagine there's a mother anywhere who hasn't at one time looked slightly askance at her daughter's changing body. It brings with it feelings of jealousy and at the same time love and concern. It was that ambivalence I wanted to put across. (as quoted in Bell 2011, 2)

Ambivalence also characterises Anna's relationship with her paternal grandfather Jean, whose body further dramatises the gap between celestial and human bodies. There is an unmistakably earthy quality to him: he is old, crass and libidinous, frequently farts, has an erection when Anna washes his body, and affirms that his greatest desire before dying would be to 'see the place where he came from.' Therefore, the film portrays the slow but inexorable growing distance between Christ's ideal body and the human, mortal body, linking it to the Eucharist and incarnation. The Creator's assuming a body of flesh allows for humanity's redemption, in contrast to the creatures' corruptible bodies, vehicles of carnal sins. As Isherwood and Stuart (1998) effectively argue,

Christianity tells us that it took the incarnation of God, the divine becoming flesh, to overcome the great devastation wrought by Eve. It was the body of Christ that took away the sins of the world. It is the body of Christ that brings redemption to the world and to the individual believer. The same body that many of the faithful consider themselves consuming in the Eucharist. This is a very earthy, fleshy, physical way to connect with one's God and should set the pattern for a positive approach to the body. (p. 16)

In addition to the significance of the body of Christ, there is also a polarisation – -- within as well as without Catholicism⁴ – of female sexuality, which unfolds as a binary between the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene or Eve, i.e. the mother and the whore (Chesler 2005; Bareket et al. 2018). Indeed, there appears to be a stark divide in how women are represented within Catholic culture: woman is either pure, deprived of sexuality in her reduction to maternal function, or fallen, marked by a too active, promiscuous sexuality. In both cases, however, women are reduced to their sexual organs (the dogmatic, intact virginity of the mother versus the broken hymen of the whore). As Leah M. Wyman observes, 'the virgin/whore dichotomy is destructive to women not only because it polarizes, and thus limits their sexual identities, but because neither category is particularly flattering. The virgin/whore dichotomy stifles the social power of women because both the virgin and the whore are in powerless positions' (as quoted in Karam 2008, p. 324).

What is more, such a dichotomy cannot but lead to the, at least partial, disavowal of one's own female identity and reality. As Jeana DelRosso (2005) puts it, 'a woman, then, can only survive and be accepted in patriarchal culture through self-divisiveness, through splitting her personality into multiple selves, and through denying those aspects of her

sexuality that offer pleasure and prowess while affirming those that lead to maternity' (p. 47). In *Love Like Poison*, *Corpo Celeste* and *Kreuzweg*, the self-divisiveness proper to puberty is further enhanced by the impending confirmation which serves to thematise the corporeal opposition between the actual adolescent body and the Catholic virginal body. The abandoning of childhood which adolescence initiates, and which both Marta and Anna begin to bodily experience, introduces the prospect of a sexually active life reminiscent of that of Mary Magdalene before the conversion, or of Eve after the expulsion from Eden. However, it is primarily the celestial body of Christ which the films employ as a way to elaborate on the regimentation of female corporeality by means of the Catholic confirmation.

Indeed, the sacred body of Christ, which is at the core of all three films, becomes the absolute term of comparison for Maria's body in *Kreuzweg*. While Marta and Anna are, respectively slowly and rapidly, changing into women, Maria forces herself within the limits of an harmless corporeality. Her body is, in fact, constructed via abstinence and small acts of atonement—from fasting to wearing light clothes in winter, renouncing to music and dances, and rejecting her feelings for a classmate. She makes herself sick, weakening her body to the point of being hospitalised. However, given her complete lack of agency in her family, the control over her body becomes her only way for self-affirmation—albeit in a negative manner—by deciding whether to eat or wear adequate winter clothes. Here, like in *Corpo celeste* and *Un poison violent*, the politics of Catholic religion are played out on the female body. In this sense, Maria's body becomes the battlefield where a series of opposites (obedience to authority and self-determination; sacrifice and self-preservation; desire and shame) play out. She becomes the actual embodiment of pain and suffering. As noted by Hannah McGill (2014), Maria's sacrifice 'is also a dare to God to drop the inscrutability and provide a clear sign; an experiment to shift her religious knowledge from the theoretical to the visceral' (p. 90). In *Kreuzweg*, Catholicism literally becomes a carnal religion and it is certainly significant that Maria dies while choking on a holy wafer—a sequence that poetically dramatises her ultimate rejection of her family and community's system of values and beliefs.

The regimentation of Maria's body chimes with the rigidity of the film form. Composed almost exclusively of still tableaux, one for each station of the cross, the film deprives spectators of the most common cinematic movement – that of the camera—⁵ while also reducing the other stylistic elements in favour of a sober, minimalist aesthetics. And indeed, there is almost no music, very few editing cuts, no emotionally charged camera movements, or extreme close-ups. Thus, when all of a sudden the movement within the frame augments in the gym sequence at school and the diegetic music makes its first appearance, the scene as a whole acquires a vivaciously dynamic yet slightly sinister value. The film privileges long and medium shots and, in any case, it is far from the camera's proximity to the body in *Corpo celeste*. Maria's only facial close-up occurs during the confessional scene; however, the subdued lighting considerably attenuates the visibility of her face. It is as if the camera itself were following Catholic dictates, keeping at a safe distance from the bodies. According to Catherine Wheatley (2016), 'the film emphasises its construction, putting the tight framing to double work as it also provides a visual echo of the film's theme of fundamentalism and oppression' (p. 63).

As a film centred on sacrifice—that of Christ during the *via Crucis* as well as that of Maria – it involves the body as actual, carnal and therefore perishable. The film's title itself

references the Calvary, during which Christ's too-human body is physically attacked and disfigured in many painful manners. From Christ's Passion to Maria's self-inflicted martyrdom, making sacrifices for God signifies renouncing something that has to do with the body. It is in particular via abstinences related to the spectrum of the pleasures of the flesh that the Catholic body is constructed. Invisible impositions such as virginity and purity of thoughts are manifestations of a more generalised, subtle violence characteristic of Catholicism. *Kreuzweg's* first tableau makes explicit the interconnection between Catholic religion, violence, and corporeality: Vater Weber clarifies to the confirmees that the confirmation will mark their becoming soldiers and their battle will take place within their bodies—they will have to fight any form of vanity and self-expression via the body, and even indulging in eating a small biscuit becomes a symbol of sins of the flesh. Everything in this scene is austere and strictly regulated: from the lack of camera movement to the minimal sound (there is no music and only one voice at the time is heard), to the immobility of characters sitting tightly, and the priest's speech on the literal regimentation of the body.

A military quality thus characterises Catholic confirmation itself. The gestures involved in the ritual often include the anointing on the forehead and the gentle tap on the confirnee's cheek. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'By this anointing the confirnee receives the "mark", the seal of the Holy Spirit. A seal is a symbol of a person, a sign of personal authority, or ownership of an object. Hence soldiers were marked with their leader's seal and slaves with their master's' (CCC 1295). In *Corpo celeste*, the catechist chides the children during rehearsals for their lack of passion by reminding them that 'Confirmation is your spiritual battle, you are now soldiers of Christ'. Similarly, in *Kreuzweg*, Vater Weber reminds his young students of the children who took part in the Cristero War, a series of struggles occurred between the Mexican Government and Catholic partisans between the late 1910s and the late 1920s (Young 2015). The priest observes how '[These children had] received the grace of Confirmation and the Holy Spirit gave them courage to fight next to their parents and die for their faith', before concluding that 'They were warriors for Christ and that's what you'll become at Confirmation: warriors for Christ'.

Corpo celeste's director Alice Rohrwacher echoes this association between the confirmation and war. In an interview, she defines the sacrament as 'the 8 September of religion' (Giraldo and Prevedello 2013, 25). She refers here to the Italian armistice of Cassibile between the Kingdom of Italy—which up to that point had been an ally of Nazi Germany—and the Allies of WWII. It was signed on 3 September 1943 and made indeed public on the 8 of the same month (Ginsborg 1990). Rohrwacher further clarifies the analogy by stating that, much like happened during September 1943, in the case of the Catholic sacrament 'you have to pick a side; you need to confirm the choice that was made by your parents [with your baptism]' (Giraldo and Prevedello 2013, 25).

Therefore, renouncing the confirmation comes to signify one's rejection of the Church's violent body. Whether through mobility (Marta) or immobility (Anna and Maria), the films' protagonists refuse the sacrament by way of physical subtraction, thereby affirming their subjectivity in opposition to that imposed onto themselves by religion. It is via the body that *Un poison violent*, *Corpo celeste*, and *Kreuzweg* unfold the conflictory relationship between the Church and corporeality, and the refusal of the body of Christ during the confirmation becomes the protagonists' paradoxical way of affirming the primacy of their body with its needs and desires over Catholic abstract thought.

The (non)Confirmations

In light of this, it is worth spending a little time considering the three girls' different reactions to the confirmation. While Marta runs away, both Anna and Maria faint at the altar. Reflecting upon the significance of the teenage girls' fainting epidemic in Carol Morley's *The Falling* (2014), Naomi Booth (2015) observes that 'swooning has long been used by writers to dramatised moments of crisis, ecstasy and confusion, and the failure of language to express these extremes'. This can certainly be applied to both Anna and Maria. The two girls find themselves under a great deal of stress caused by a number of different factors, including their impending confirmation, the strongly ambivalent feelings experienced over their sexual awakening, and a strained relationship with their overbearing mothers and nearly absent fathers. Their fainting can also be understood as signifying a heightened religious sensitivity, much like in the case of saints and mystics. Teresa of Ávila, for instance, famously suffered from convulsions and fainting spells, which she described as 'tortures' sent to her by God (Bache 1985, 300). After all, Anna had also fainted earlier in the film, during a funeral, and Maria had been engaging in small acts of self-sacrifice, including depriving herself of food and warm clothes, with the hope that God would perform a miracle and heal her little brother Johannes.

However, while acknowledging these elements as possible physiological and psychological explanations for the fainting, we argue that the girls' collapse should be read as a response to the demands of obedience and compliance impressed upon them by their religious communities and family. Booth (2015), again in relation to *The Falling*, comments that 'a swoon might be an act of resistance, a dramatic rejection of a culture's language'. Read in this light, Anna and Maria's fainting becomes the ultimate act of defiance, which signals a violent interruption of the ability, and desire, to communicate and engage with institutionalised religious power.

It is then perhaps worth noting that the German for fainting is '*Ohnmächtig werden*', which translates literally to 'to become powerless'. Counterintuitively, Maria's physically becoming powerless during her confirmation comes to signify an, albeit involuntary, attempt to subtract herself from the grip of religious fundamentalism. Christiane Zschirnt (1999) points out that fainting is inherently paradoxical: 'the fainting fit of sensibility operated as a communicative device describing a paradoxical state of unconscious consciousness' (p. 48). In spite of the physical fragility and emotional vulnerability that the act suggests, fainting becomes yet another way to short circuit the logic of power. In a paradoxical move, Maria and Anna have to become powerless in order to affirm their subjectivity, and fainting becomes an affirmation of female agency vis-a-vis patriarchal violence.

Pasquale Busso (2016) invites to 'think of fainting as the interruption of a pattern, as a discontinuity' (p. 154: our translation). Unable to consciously create a breach into the unforgivingly repressive logic of religious power, both Anna and Maria faint at the altar, thus removing themselves from its sphere of influence, at least temporarily. Fainting grants them a little distance, it allows them to briefly reclaim a small area of autonomy – even opening up space for interrogation, where the behaviours and attitudes of the adults around them can be called into question.

While ultimately reaching the same outcome as Anna and Maria, Marta's decision constitutes a stronger display of agency, as running away becomes an act of

empowerment and self-affirmation (Cf. Angeli 2020). Rohrwacher highlights this element by suffusing the film's last sequences with a pronounced symbolism. For instance, we see Marta, dressed in an immaculate bridal gown, cross a flooded underpass – something she had been unable (or unwilling) to do earlier in the film. The scene alludes quite clearly to the girl's (spiritual) rebirth. Furthermore, upon finally reaching the beach, she is greeted by a small group of boys, whom she had been following from afar during the course of the film, but never dared to approach. One of them shows her what he refers to as 'a miracle', namely a lizard's tail he is holding in his hands, which is still moving after having been cut off. It is possible to read in this brief exchange another reference to Marta's predicament: the girl, despite having cut herself off from the body of the Church, is very much still spiritually alive. Having now understood that 'the Celestial body, the world above is already where we are' (Rohrwacher, 2011, p. 6), Marta chooses immanence over transcendence, a liberated and liberating version of religion, instead of an oppressive one.

Conclusion

The religious confirmation as portrayed in the three films allows for a dramatisation of the conflict between the carnal and the spiritual during the extremely challenging time of female adolescence. *Un poison violent*, *Corpo celeste*, and *Kreuzweg* portray familial and individual tensions triggered by Catholic religion when the protagonists enter puberty, thereby abandoning the tamed carnality of childhood. Through their focus on female changing bodies, the films explore the wide range of emotions in their adolescent protagonists, including needs for independence and self-affirmation, budding sexual desire, and feelings of shame and guilt. By means of a sober yet aestheticised mise en scène, the protagonists' bodies become the centre of the conflicts. The stillness – of bodies, camera, and sound – in *Kreuzweg* well renders the rigid and stifling atmosphere, which characterises Maria's uber-religious environment. *Corpo celeste* privileges, instead, blurred images to express Marta's tender rebellion, keeping the camera at close distance from her body to record the impact of the changes and the confusion brought by them. *Un poison violent* plays with proximity and distance, alternating between close and long shots to illustrate Anna's attempts to articulate the confused, obscure feelings which characterise adolescence.

Albeit different in tones and style, the three films all interrogate the problematic relationship between female adolescents and Catholic religion. In particular, the regimentation of the body prescribed by Catholic precepts comes into conflict with the protagonists' desiring bodies, unfolding the ideal/real dichotomy concerning corporeality. While Anna, Marta, and Maria experience this very conflict in slightly different ways, their refusal or inability to confirm signals a reversal of the primacy of the ideal over their actual bodily feelings. The protagonists' non-confirmations thus become a means to re-negotiate their identity and call into question the hierarchical relation between the spiritual and the carnal. Ultimately, for the three heroines the only viable option is subtraction, becoming absent, whether from consciousness, by fainting, or physically, by literally running away.

Notes

1. While we are aware that the use of the term ‘subtraction’ as ‘withdrawal, removal’ is obsolete, we employ it here as it captures particularly well the film heroines’ sensuous renouncing to the confirmation.
2. The film’s fictitious Priestly Society of Saint Paul is based on the Society of Saint Pius X, created by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1970. Its declared aim is ‘to preserve the Catholic Faith in its fullness and purity, to teach its truths, and to diffuse its virtues, especially through the Roman Catholic priesthood’ (2020). The fraternity rejects many of the principles and reforms introduced and promoted by the Second Vatican Council, such as religious ecumenism and mass in vernacular.
3. While from a Catholic perspective the ingestion of the holy wafer corresponds to spiritually receiving God himself (allowed by transubstantiation; see Grumett 2016), from a secularised perspective the Eucharist consists in a physical receiving of God.
4. Sigmund Freud (1905; 1912) originally theorised the Madonna-Whore complex to explain heterosexual men’s perception of love (for the nurturing woman) and desire (for the sexually active woman) as mutually exclusive. In a cinema ambit, for instance, Molly Haskell (1987) was one of the first film scholars to investigate such dichotomy as a way to comment on filmic representation of women within patriarchy.
5. There are four camera movements in total. Specifically, in the fourth station, the camera is positioned within a moving car; in the ninth station, the camera slowly follows the group of confirmees; in the twelfth station, the camera moves during Maria’s death; in the fourteenth station, the camera rises to the sky.

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