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Individuals with no biographies. A journey through Italian trans cinema

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Abstract • Since the 1950s the emergence of a trans wave in Italian cinema consisted in a gradual elaboration of peculiar discursive strategies, that is thematic recurrences and specific stylistic features that have flourished in the space where the game of every trans story is played: the representation of the body. A body which is at the same time individual, social, and symbolic. The attempts to conceptualize the experiences of trans people always produced an "ontological crisis that is experienced both in sexuality and in language" (Butler, 1999, p. XI), challenging all together the heteronormative logos, binarism, reproductive obsession and familistic mythology on which Italian bourgeois culture is based. This essay (re)constructs the history of Italian trans cinema by combining historical coordinates and film analysis, rediscovering forgotten or deleted movies, experiences and authors, and focusing on the movies where gender identity is represented as a space of intersection, experimentation, dispersion.

Keywords • Trans Identity; Trans Studies; Trans Literature; Trans Cinema; Italian Cinema

Abstract • A partire dagli anni Cinquanta l'emersione di un filone trans nel cinema italiano ha assunto la forma di una graduale elaborazione di strategie discorsive peculiari: tematiche ricorrenti e stilemi specifici che si sono sviluppati nello spazio in cui si consuma il gioco di ogni storia trans, la rappresentazione del corpo. Un corpo che è allo stesso tempo individuale, sociale e simbolico. I tentativi di concettualizzare le esperienze delle persone trans producono sempre una "crisi ontologica sperimentata sia nella sessualità che nel linguaggio" (Butler, 1999, p. XI), mettendo in crisi il logos eteronormativo, il binarismo, l'ossessione riproduttiva e la mitologia familistica su cui si basa la cultura borghese italiana. Il saggio (ri)costruisce la storia del cinema trans italiano combinando coordinate storiche e analisi cinematografiche, riscoprendo concetti, film, esperienze o autori dimenticati o cancellati, e concentrandosi sui film in cui l'identità di genere viene rappresentata come spazio di intersezione, sperimentazione, dispersione.

Parole chiave • Identità trans; Studi trans; Letteratura trans; Cinema trans; Cinema italiano

Ledizioni

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Introduction

The (re)construction of the history of Italian trans cinema often implies a search for forgotten experiences, movies and authors that wait to be reintegrated into the official history of cinema from which they have been erased to validate a cis and heteronormalized version of history itself. Since they question gender binarism by representing trans people, those experiences, movies and authors also become a valuable tomographic tool to analyze the strategies for the "production of truth" (Foucault, 1978, p. 58) about sexuality and gender identity enacted by the culture that produced them.

Since the 1950s, the progressive surfacing and development of a trans wave in Italian cinema consisted in a discontinuous series of attempts to conceptualize and narrativize the experiences of trans people and the "crisis of ontology" they were producing "at the level of both sexuality and language" (Butler, 1999, p. XI) within the "true discourses concerning sex" (Foucault, 1978, p. 67) elaborated during the early decades of 20th century, when the Italian culture was deeply imbued by intertwined fascist and catholic elements.

Trans stories, which during the first half of 20th century were mostly conveyed by medical essays and crime news and only later by novels and movies, slowly penetrated Italian culture silently challenging the stability of bourgeois and capitalist society, which protected its foundational heteronormative procreational obsession and familistic mythology by condemning non-conforming identities to the state of "abjection", that is a condition of "non-existence and hallucination", a level of reality that, if acknowledged, could "annihilate" the readers or spectators (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).

The attempts to narrate trans stories have been fragmentary, isolated and deeply heteronormalized until the end of 20th century. Only from the beginning of 21st century did they become increasingly numerous, hefty, free and able to establish a substancial "transgender gaze", that is "a set of strategies (each with different consequences) for representing transgender bodies, capturing transgender looks, and theorizing transgender legibility" (Halberstam 2005, 78-79) in a perspective where trans people are not only "bearer of meaning", but also "maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 2014, p. 360).

Only a few recent trans movies, such as *C'è un soffio di vita soltanto* (2021) by Matteo Botrugno and Daniele Coluccini, *Le favolose* (2022) by Roberta Torre and *L'immensità* (2022) by Emanuele Crialese, have proven to "acknowledge the existence of queer and/or trans viewers": rather "than thinking about how cisgender audiences might experience a prosthetic transgender gaze", they were invested "in exploring how trans subjects [them]selves might interact with popular media texts to build" transgender "phenomenologies of the self" (Keegan, 2016, p. 29).

1. The prehistory

Between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, in Italy trans stories were exclusively conveyed by:

1) essays published on journals of medicine, psychiatry and criminology, such as *Archivio delle psicopatie sexuali* (1896), *L'Anomalo. Rivista di antropologia criminale e loro applicazioni forensi, giuridiche e sociali* (1897) or *Rassegna di studi sessuali* (1921): one can mention the stories of trans people such as Giuseppe Marzo, Faustina Mauro, P. C., Luigia, Virginia Mauri (aka Zefthe Akaira), Alfredo/Belfiore M., O. B. (aka Francesca Bertini), etc. (see Vittorini, 2024a, pp. 44-46);

2) crime news or gossip columns on newspapers, such as *Il Messaggero*, *La Stampa*, *Il Corriere della sera*: one can mention the stories of trans people such as Giuseppe Bragaglia (nicknamed 'Manfrodito', malapropism of 'Hermaphrodite'), Giuseppe C. (nicknamed 'Peppe 'a Signora,' that is 'Peppe the Lady'), Carlo (aka Apollonia), Vitulio (aka Vitulia) Di Lorenzi, Soccorsa Cassone, Cecilia B., Maria etc. (see Vittorini, 2024a, pp. 43-44).

Between 1870 and 1920 a "progressive affirmation of a scientific gaze on sexual and genital ambiguities" and transvestism and a strong "medicalization of hermaphroditism" (Schettini, 2012, pp. 20-23) culminated in 1902 with the publication of the treatises *Ermafroditismo e agenosoma* by the pathologist Cesare Taruffi and *Le più recenti scoperte ed applicazioni della psichiatria e dell'antropologia criminale* by the physician and anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Taruffi described hermaphroditism (the old word for 'intersexuality') from a taxonomic and clinical perspective as an example of teratology, a "monstrous duplicity" circumscribed to "the generative system" with repercussions on the "psycho-sexual" sphere (1902, p. 3). Lombroso intersected the concepts of the newborn sexology, criminal anthropology and forensic medicine and promoted a "re-orientation of social representations" of non-conforming anatomies and sexualities by inscribing them "within the medical-scientific knowledge": their perception was purged of "ethical-religious prejudices", but at the same time it was loaded with "the stigma and prejudice related to mental illness" and social dangerousness (Vitelli, Giusti, 2012, p. 18). In *Usi e costumi dei camorristi* (1897) the anthropologist and criminologist Abele De Blasio dedicated a chapter to "*O spusarizio masculine* [The marriage between men]", which described the "professional passive pederasts – "nicknamed *femminelle*, *ricchioni* or *vasetti* [sissies, faggots, poofs] by the underworld and called delinquents born semi-feminine by [the pathologist Paul] Brouardel" – as yearning to marry "l'*ommo 'e mmerda* [crook] (active pederast)", a member of Camorra for whom they lured men to steal from (p. 153).

Between the 1920s and the 1040s, Lombroso's positivism, Croce's idealism, Catholic doctrine and their Fascist contradictory ideologization pushed Italian psychiatrists and intellectuals to resist the metapsychological approach of the newborn psychoanalysis (Davis 1966, pp. 3-141), against Fascist press invited to "think biologically" (Proteus, 1921, p. 179) and Pope Pius XI exhorted to direct sexuality "to its natural procreative virtue" in order to avoid any violation of the "law of God and Nature" (Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, 1930). Fascist propaganda focused mainly on the myths of Duce and "*Uomo Nuovo* [New Man]" (Beltramelli, 1923), both based on a sort of "militarization of masculinity" (Mosse, 1996, p. 44). The rhetorics of the regime depicted men as vitalistic, combative, and moralizing masters of history, and women as quiet supporters of men's vitality and combativeness, docile objects of male moralization and minor cogs in history. With the complicity of Catholic doctrine, "love" was described as "women's destiny and motherhood as their duty" (Sighele, 1913, p. 18), while nuclear family was prescribed as the cornerstone of social stability trough a "combination of disciplinary and excitatory practices aimed at each and every body" that produced "the somaticization by individuals of the bodily norms and ideals that regulate[d] the entire population" (Striker, 2014, p. 38).

The Ministry of Press and Propaganda attempted to preserve the rigid Fascist gender stereotypes by prohibiting the publication and distribution of news, novels and movies representing masculine women or feminine men, which could give the impression that Italian society was not under the control of the regime. Any gender non-conformity had to be condemned to the state of social abjection since it could cause "a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2) by presenting itself as something that resisted recognition and threatened people with annihilation through the absence of any familiar meaning. Nevertheless, the existence of trans people surfaced in Italian mass media, escaping the net of Fascist censorship and indirectly mocking its propaganda.

In 1929 Mario Soldati's *Salmace* was published by *La libra*, a magazine made by antifascist intellectuals. Non only the six short stories explicitly mentioned prostitution, consensual adultery and homosexuality, but the eponymous third one (the title is name of the nymph who in classical mythology merged with the beloved Hermaphrodite, turning him into a twofold being) also represented a transition from male to female in a realistic way:

> *Il fatto che questa metamorfosi si è verificata più di una volta in una razza di animali che si riproducono per coito basta a provare che questo fenomeno si può ripetere benissimo in qualunque altra specie* [The fact that this metamorphosis has occurred more than once in a species of animals that reproduce by coitus is enough to prove that the same phenomenon can be repeated in any other species] (Soldati, 2009, p. 66).

A few short stories and novels featuring androgynous or gender non-conforming characters were translated into Italian, such as *Sarrasine* (1830; it. 1921) and *Séraphîta* (1834; it. 1927) by Honoré de Balzac, *The Well of Loneliness* by Marguerite Radclyffe Hall (1928; it. 1930) and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf (1928; it. 1933). A few comically ambiguous movies criticizing gender stereotypes through crossdressing were distributed in Italian movie theaters, such as Reinhold Schünzel's *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933) and George Cukor's *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935). A couple of short articles published by the newspaper *La Stampa* recounted the story of Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe – later protagonist of David Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl* (2000; it. 2001) and its cinematic adaptation (2015) by Tom Hooper – as a case of "spontaneous metamorphosis" from male to female accelerated by a "series of surgical interventions" (G. S., 1932, p. 5). All these unconventional narratives started to give Italian readers and viewers a first glimpse into what the world could look like beyond the fanatic cissexist and heteronormalizing propaganda of the regime by indirectly disrupting "the privileged family narratives" that favored "sexual identity labels… over gender categories" (Stryker, 2004, p. 212).

2. The history begins: the 1950s

In the post-war period, although the principles of Catholic-Fascist morality remained well rooted in Italian society even after the fall of the regime, the media coverage on trans people steadily grew. Many newspapers and magazines articles reported on the international cases of Roberta Cowell, Christine Jorgensen and Coccinelle, as well as the domestic cases of Vittoria Chiavarola, Mario Bertolotti and Carola Casciotti, the latter being the first Italian trans woman to undertake a sex reassignment surgery in 1954 and change her name and gender markers in official documents in 1971. After the first Italian translations of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948; it. 1950) and Sigmund Freud's *Krankengeschichten* (1924; it. 1952) were published, both analyzing human sexuality in relation to education and social norms, Pope Pius XII condemned "thinkers and scientists"

such as Kinsey and Freud since they were convinced that "the sexual instinct" was "the most important inclination of the human organism" and that men "cannot repress such an instinct for life without serious danger for their organism" (Pius, 1954, p. XII).

In the same period, the first two Italian long narratives starring literally or metaphorically trans characters appeared, both very conservative. The novel *La pelle* (1949) by Curzio Malaparte grotesquely and homo-transphobically depicted the traditions of Neapolitan *femminielli* as a part and a cause of the general state of moral and material decadence that afflicted post-war Italy (he wrote of an "*Internazionale degli invertiti* [International of inverted people]" Malaparte, 1963, p. 123). The movie *Papà diventa mamma* (1952) by Aldo Fabrizi, not unlike the French movie *Adam est...Ève* (1954) by René Gaveau, was a screwball comedy based on deeply rooted gender stereotypes. The *commedia dell'arte*'s *topos* of the bickering wife and husband was reinforced by a long series of gags inspired by Roman dialect theater, *avanspettacolo*, and Laurel-and-Hardy-style slapstick comedies. While attending the show of a hypnotist magician, the quarrelsome Peppe and Maria end up exchanging roles: he mysteriously starts feeling "strange sensations" and behaving like a woman, she starts behaving like a man. When the magician makes them "normal" again by a counterspell, they admit that life is hard for both and find a new complicity. While portraying gender swap as an involuntary, hilarious and temporary disorder designed to reaffirm the previous social order, the movie implied that male and female roles had to be clearly separated since they were necessary to the existence of the bourgeois family and society.

3. The explosion: the 1960s and the 1970s

In October 1960 Hitchcock's *Psycho* was released in Italian movie theaters and reached the eleventh place in the chart of 1960-1961 highest-grossing movies by box office revenue, after blockbusters such as Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, William Wyler's *Ben Hur*, Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e I suoi fratelli* and Vittorio De Sica's *La ciociara*. *Psycho*'s protagonist Norman (his name was a pun on his mother's name Norma and the adjective Normal) was the progenitor of a long genealogy of trans characters whose uncanny identity was represented under a psychopathological perspective that was only partially reassuring: their 'abnormally' permeable minds where a repressed other suddenly emerge revealed the permeabilities of any 'normal' body's sexed and gendered traits (Vittorini, 2024a, pp. 177-185).

Three months before *Psycho*, Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* was released in Italian movie theaters and topped the chart of 1959-1960 highest-grossing movies by box office revenue, beating international blockbusters such as *Some like it hot* by Billy Wilder and *North by Northwest* by Hitchcock, both released in 1959. *La dolce vita* sarcastically depicted the recklessness of Cinecittà demi-monde as a mirror "of the bulimic consumerism of a country in the midst of its economic boom" (Ponzio, 2020, p. 6), which commodified everything, including sex. That same recklessness was offered as a social antibody: the Italian bourgeois culture, which forcibly reconciled Catholicism and Capitalism in a patriarchal perspective, could pretend to stay untouched by relegating the evil to the show business and its excesses. In the final "orgy" scene, which was harshly condemned by the Catholic and right-wing press, Mariuccio, a young man "*truccato in volto come una donna* [made up like a woman]" and "*mostruosamente invertito* [monstrously inverted]", enters a living room with a friend (Fellini, 1969, p. 272). After the orgy, Mariuccio addresses to the protagonist the last significant lines of the movie:

> *Stamattina stavo bene, tutto truccato! […]. Ma tanto a me, non me interessa più niente! Io ormai voglio fare vita privata, mi voglio ritirà […]. Mi sento attratto verso la chiesa, ecco perché! Mi so' sentito che faccio troppi peccati, e voglio scontare un pochettino, voglio fa' penitenza. […] Però me sa che più si ritirano, più ne vengheno fuori, che ne so! […] Nel sessantacinque sarà tutto 'na depravazione completa, peggio che n'Apocalisse* [This morning I felt fine all made up!... Anyway, I don't care about anything anymore! I want a private life. I want to retire… I feel drawn to the Church, that's why! I think I commit too many sins, and I want to pay, I want to do penance… But the more they retire, the more they come out, I don't know […]. In 1965 it will be a complete depravity, worse than in the Apocalypse] (Fellini, 1969, pp. 274-276).

Far from the proud demands for rights screamed by the gay liberation movements (the English and American GLF, the French FHAR, the Italian FUORI) during the 1970s, Fellini's gender non-conforming character gave voice to their internalized homo- and transphobia as a tool for survival, since they were forced to look at themselves through the gaze of the same others from whom they needed to be accepted and/or protected.

The enormous increase of the number of movie theaters spectators during Italian economic boom in the 1960s and 1970s implied "a growth of movies topics to the point of making them coincide with the anthropological and social landscape of the masses" (Grande, 2003, p. 124), also thanks to the directors' struggle against censorship. In 1962 the Italian government passed a law against the "offense to public decency" which concerned movies "containing vulgar jokes or gestures, amoral behaviors, erotic scenes or violence" (Segni, 1963). Many years later the director Luciano Salce recalled that the relationship "between censors and directors" at that time was "humiliating, as the incompetence and narrow-mindedness of censors forced us to resort to petty means such as cutting the dangerous meters of film that we would reinsert into the movie once the *nihil obstat* was obtained" (Pintus, 1985, p. 153). Mario Monicelli recalled that the "directors did not censor themselves and were ready to fight even with producers and distributors who feared penalties and cuts. We won by remaining firm and avoiding any self-censorship" (p. 169). Anyway, while the main battlefield between authors and censors was the anachronistic "public decency", Cinecittà rode on the curiosity for sexual "deviances" hinted by *La dolce vita* and triggered by sexual revolution investing on two new cinematic genres, which gave an unprecedented space to trans characters: the *mondo* movie and the *commedia all'italiana*.

Like the American fiction movies *Glen or Glenda* (1953) by Edward D. Wood Jr., *She-Man. A Story of Fixation* (1967) by Bob Clark and the docudrama *I Was a Man* (1967) by Barry Mahon, Italian *mondo* movies enclosed fictitious scenes as case studies in a (pseudo)factual psychiatric frame. They merged the languages of documentary and sexploitation into the shockumentary, a "deviant" narration pestering the audience with sex, violence and death images, which were passed off as 'real' under the pretext of making a journalistic reportage. Among the internationally distributed *mondo* movies one can mention *Il mondo di notte* (1960) by Luigi Vanzi, *Mondo nudo* (1963) by Francesco De Feo, *Il pelo nel mondo* (1964) by Antonio Margheriti and Marco Vicario (featuring Coccinelle), *Nel labirinto del sesso* (1969) by Alfonso Brescia (showing a sex reassignment surgery performed on an intersex person), *Rivelazioni di uno psichiatra sul mondo perverso del sesso* (1973) by Renato Polselli (whose opening credits scroll on the images of real covers and crime news dedicated to trans people by Italian tabloid magazines such as *Cronaca Vera* and *Stop*). This genre was soon imitated by authors from all over the world, like Russ Meyer (*Mondo Topless*, 1966), Lee Frost (*Mondo Freudo*, 1966), Robert Carl Cohen (*Mondo Hollywood*, 1967) and John Waters (*Mondo Trasho*, 1969).

The *commedia all'italiana* mixed the centuries-old features of the *commedia dell'arte*, which were retrieved from the ashes of the recent Italian romantic neorealism, spiced up with a biting depiction of the national habits. By opening up to an increasingly explicit representation of sexuality, the *commedia all'italiana* begot the subgenre of the *commedia sexy*, marked out by frequent scurrilous sketches and gratuitous female nudes. For two decades cinemas were flooded by a wave of movies which "x-rayed and blew up the vileness and hereditary evil of the average Italian and painted a grandiose fresco [...] of their running towards the culture of consumption and machines, and their optimist and reckless embracing the future" (Brunetta, 2000, p. 291). Several anthology movies were released, which represented the confusion and/or transition between sexes and genders with the concision of the aphorism, avoiding any in-depth study of trans characters: one can mention *I Don Giovanni della Costa Azzurra* (1962) by Vittorio Sala (starring Coccinelle), *Bianco, rosso, giallo, rosa* (1964) by Massimo Mida, *Frenesia dell'estate* (1964) by Luigi Zampa, *I nostri mariti* (1966) by Luigi Filippo D'Amico, Dino Risi and Zampa.

Since at the time transsexuality was highly invisible and socially perceived as an extreme manifestation of homosexuality, the *commedia all'italiana* used the terms *travestito* (cross-dresser) and *transessuale* (transsexual) as synonyms and frequently overlapped characters belonging to the two categories, not unlike other European cinematic traditions. *Vedo nudo* (1969) and *Sessomatto* (1973) by Risi starred two typical Italian middle class and proletarian heterosexual men who end up accepting their love for a trans woman (portrayed as a *travestito*) without questioning either her gender identity or their own sexual orientation: the cross-dressing worked as a mask or a pass that protected the heterosexual man from the homosexuality embodied by the *travestito*. On the one side these movies staged transness as a form of masquerade virtually defying the presumed reality and fixity of sexes and genders and complicating the boundaries between body and self, interior and exterior, real and fake. On the other hand, they used trans characters (played by famous cisgender and heterosexual actors: Nino Manfredi and Alberto Lionello) to produce comic relief, titillating and reinforcing the heteronormalized voyeurism of the audience. By representing transness as something that could be temporarily adopted using gendered signifiers, as an identity created through costume and performance, they erased the lived experiences of trans people.

The first two fiction movies starring a gender non-conforming character were *Splendori e miserie di Madame Royale* (1970) by Vittorio Caprioli and *La Cage aux folles* (aka *Il vizietto*, 1978) by Édouard Molinaro. In *Splendori e miserie di Madame Royale* Alessio, a dull employee looking after his deceased lover's daughter, plays the role of Madame Royale during the parties *en travesti* he throws for his friends from the Roman homosexual and trans community. In a plot that gradually veers towards a crime story, Alessio become a police informant and is killed by the underworld. Although there was nothing overly scabrous in terms of language or images, the serious portrait of a gender non-conforming character was enough to push the censor to prohibit the movie to minors under 18 years of age. The director defended the movie by explaining that it was "a story of love and loneliness. A pure and authentic love of a man for a little girl. Except that the dedication he has for her is maternal, and in the end all he wants is to be called mother" (Madeo, 1970, p. 7). But the movie realistically represented both the world of outdoor prostitution and indoor cross-dressing as consequences of the clandestinity to which Italian homosexual and trans people were condemned. It reflected a paradox of the Italian culture at the time: for gender non-conforming identities freedom laid in confinement (where they could express themselves), expression was reached through invisibility (which guaranteed their safety), happiness consisted in parties (which were fictitious and temporary simulations of a real and permanent

happy life). While reviewing the movie, the militants of the newborn Italian gay liberation movement (FUORI) denounced its "comic distortion, just as dangerous as the tragic one", since it induced the spectator to have an "ironic gaze" on "a condition preluding isolation and self-destruction" (Casazza, 1978, p. 24).

La Cage aux folles was the first adaptation of the play of the same name by Jean Poiret (1973), followed by the musical of the same name (1983) and the movie *The Birdcage* (1996) by Mike Nichols. Renato and Albin, a middle-aged couple, run a drag queen club in Saint-Tropez, where Albin himself performs under the stage name of Zaza Napoli. While strongly criticized by some gay militants, according to others Renato and Albin represented "a certain kind of 'queers' lost in sequins and divas follies, but they were also aware of the importance of their relationship, even if it was structured in the typical terms of a bourgeois couple" (Tarallo, 1978, p. 18). The movie was so successful that two sequels were made. On the one side the whole trilogy used sexual orientation as a powerful narrative and comic multiplier: men usually dressing as women dressed as men, homosexuals tried to convert into heterosexuals, heterosexuals allowed themselves to dress as women or to be tempted by homosexuals, generating countless gags. On the other side the gender non-conforming identity of Albin (a man who feels like a woman and lives as such) was simply and serenely shown as a fact.

Both *Splendori e miserie di Madame Royale* and *La Cage aux folles* represented the cross-dresser as a "true gender outlaw", the first in a tragic perspective and the latter in a comic one. Of all "the members of the transgender community, broadly understood as those who defy the identity of birth-designated sex with lived gender", the crossdressers Alessio/Madame Royale and Albin/Zaza Napoli were revolutionary since the society stigmatized them as guilty of refusing one gender and moving back and forth at will, "thereby demonstrating the constructed and essentially artificial nature of the bi-gender dichotomy" (Gilbert, 2014, p. 67).

Dove vai se il vizietto non ce l'hai? by Marino Girolami and *Scusi lei è normale?* by Umberto Lenzi, both released in 1979, brazenly tried to imitate the formula for success of *La Cage aux folles* and in the end they disastrously trivialized it. After featuring in *Scusi lei è normale?*, the actor Vinicio Diamanti, who was already known for his show numbers *en travesti* in Roman nightclubs, starred as Herod (a man usually dressing as a woman who played the role of a man) in *Gay Salomé* (1980) by Michele Massimo Tarantini. Halfway between an avant-garde performance and a drag show (all female roles were played by men), the famous biblical story was staged during an actual soirée in the Roman queer club Alibi (one of the first in Italy), packed with elderly effeminate homosexuals, crossdressers, trans women, young straight-acting homosexual and heterosexual escorts, who embodied all the shades of queer performativity, moking the "set of acts" necessary to the "gendered stylization of the body" (Butler, 1999, p. XV).

In the end of 1970s, fiction movies started to incorporate the explicit trans sex scenes initiated by the *mondo* movies. *Caligola* (*Caligula*, 1979) by Tinto Brass, from a screenplay by Gore Vidal, author of *Myra Breckinridge* (1968; it. 1969: the first global extensive and experimental trans novel), was distributed in a version with softcore and hardcore inserts (added by Giancarlo Lui and Bob Guccione, editor of the erotic magazine *Penthouse*), among which an orgy with a "hermaphrodite". In Antonio D'Agostino's *La cerimonia dei sensi* (1979), inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), a stunt-man dreams of being the Messiah and finds himself in an orgy where he attends the performance of Eva (the trans actress Eva Robin's, credited as "the only true hermaphrodite"), who in the next scene has sex with a woman. In *Eva Man - Due sessi in uno* (1980), also by D'Agostino and starring Robin's (credited as Eva Coatti), a "hermaphrodite" with

extraordinary sexual powers is chased by the underworld and escapes with the help of a friend (the trans actress Ajita Wilson, known for her porn films). Both movies were distributed for the international market with hardcore inserts, anticipating the explosion of a trans wave in the global pornography started by *She-Male Encounters* (1981) by trans director Kim Christy. Among the first examples of Italian trans porn movies, one can mention *La chiave del piacere* (aka *Wendee*, 1984) by Luca Damiano, which featured an uncredited trans actress for the role of a sexually uncertain boy who consults a physician to cure his doubts.

4. From horror to reality: the 1980s

Drawing on the success of *Psycho*'s imitations such as William Castle's *Homicidal* (1961), William A. Fraker's *A Reflection of Fear* (1972) and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), at the beginning of the 1980s thriller/horror movies continued to star trans people as psychopathic monsters and murderers. They represented transness as a pathology of the body presupposing a pathology of the mind (often a dissociative identity disorder), which inevitably ended with an unstoppable (self)destructive drive that had to be fought, cured or removed. In the metafictional slasher *La casa con la scala nel buio* (1983) by Lamberto Bava, Bruno, while composing the music for a horror film in a villa, witnesses some murders of women and discovers that the murderer, Linda, is actually Tony, the owner of the villa, through a typical "reveal scene" where the "true" sex of the character is uncovered (Seid, 2014, p. 176). The irresistible urge to dress as a woman, the inability to accept it and an unspecified trauma suffered as a boy drove Tony crazy, pushing him to kill the women he dealt with. Like *Dressed to Kill* (1980) by Brian De Palma, Bava's movie portrayed trans psychology as unstable by representing gender confusion as responsible for the fragmentation of the self and the homicidal impulse, and by using "the monster trope" to draw on "ideas of physical monstrosity to uphold their naturalization of binary sex and gender" (Koch-Rein, 2014, p. 134).

Trying to revive the clichés of the *commedia all'italiana*, Pasquale Festa Campanile ventured three times in representing transness, which he framed within the phenomena originated by the sexual freedom (or consumerism) reached during the economic boom, without any ambition to deeply analyze or criticize them. In *Nessuno è perfetto* (1981) a man discovers that his beautiful wife (played by the sex symbol Ornella Muti), before undergoing a sex reassignment surgery, was a paratrooper in the German army (the imagery referred to the actual case of Jorgensen); after a moment of bewilderment and estrangement and despite the rumors, the two decide to stay together. In *Culo e camicia* (1981), partially inspired by *La Cage aux folles*, and in *Più bello di così si muore* (1982), an adaptation of the novel of the same name (1979) by Antonio Amurri, the trans protagonists were played by male stars (Renato Pozzetto and Enrico Montesano) and old heteronormalized gender stereotypes were used more as gag detonators and exorcisms of unaddressed collective fears rather than being reviewed with any critical intention.

In 1982 the Italian Senate passed the law 164, which was proposed by the Radical Party at the urging of the Movimento Italiano Transessuali (MIT, founded in 1979). It acknowledged the existence of trans people, their right to undertake sex reassignment surgeries (previously classified as felonies) and change their names and gender markers in official documents. After that, a growing wave of trans narratives appeared, combining (auto)biography, reportage and political militancy in order to contravene the social exclusion once explained by Jurij Lotman: "Not all individuals living in a given society have the right to a biography. Every kind of culture elaborates its models of 'individuals with no biography'

[…], it's like individuals with no biography did not exist" (Lotman, 1985, pp. 181-182). Among the categories which until the 1970s Italian culture deprived of any possible biographical narration (except for medical and criminological treatises, crime news and gossip) there were trans people, whose right to finally have a name and a (hi)story was one of the most evident results of the struggles of MIT. Among the first trans (auto)biographies one can mention: *Donna come donna (storie di amori e lotte dei transessuali italiani)* (1981) by Pina Bonanno and Paola Astuni (founders of MIT), *Secondo natura. Da donna a uomo: storia del primo caso di rettificazione di sesso avvenuto in Italia con l'autorizzazione della magistratura* (1987) by Laura Paoloni, *Vita da trans. 15.000 transessuali in Italia. Storie e confessioni di un'esistenza difficile* (1995) by Cecilia Gatto Trocchi.

One of the first Italian cinematic trans biographies was contained in *Mery per sempre* (1989) by Marco Risi, aesthetically inspired by Héctor Babenco's *Pixote, Lei do Mais Fraco* (1981) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (1975). The movie adapted the collection of short stories of the same name by Aurelio Grimaldi (1987), who reported the confessions made to him by a group of teenagers detained in the juvenile prison of Palermo. In the finale the trans girl Mery (played by the trans actress Alessandra Di Sanzo) dramatically describes the separation between the world inside and the world outside the prison, which is not only the separation between prisoners and free people, but also between proletarians and bourgeois, poor and rich, trans and cis people. No complete or partial transition from one world to another, from one gender to another can guarantee the complete pacification between irreconcilable identity structures:

> *'Sta barba lunga, 'sto petto spianato, 'sta campana stonata in miezzo a 'e cosce. A volte vorrei tornare indietro, a quando ero picciridda.* […] *Non è che sono una vera donna che posso dire: "Fare dei figli"... e neanche un uomo e dire: "Domani mi sposo". Io non sugn' né carne né pesce. Io sono Mery, Mery per sempre.* [This long beard, this flattened chest, this bell out of tune between my thighs. Sometimes I would like to go back to when I was little. I didn't understand many things and maybe it was better this way. […] It's not like I'm a real woman who can say: 'I'll have children'... and not even a man who can say: 'Tomorrow I'm getting married'. I am neither meat nor fish. I am Mery, forever Mery].

Mery per sempre was so successful that Grimaldi and Risi shot a sequel, *Ragazzi fuori* (1990), that shows Mery naked (revealing that she hasn't completed her transition). In 1994 Grimaldi adapted his second collection of short stories, *Le buttane* (1989): among many prostitutes, Kim (Di Sanzo) undresses for a client, revealing the writer-director's stereotyped gaze, which reduces the representation of (the actress') trans identity to the sensationalist reveal of the now completed surgical sex reassignment.

5. Memory and history: the 1990s and the 2000s

Between the 1990s and the 2000s neoliberal and postmodernist pop culture triggered the gentrification of the queer imagery, later reinforced in a lobbying and consumerist perspective by the cultural processes related to the globalization and Internet. While trans studies started to conquer stable positions within American academia, transness slowly began to be recoded, owing also to an increasing number of trans identities being represented in mainstream movies (Vittorini 2024b, pp. 171-190). One can mention *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) by Neil Jordan, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) by Stephan Elliott, *Ma vie en rose* (1997) by Alain Berliner, *Hedwig*

and the Angry Inch (2001) by John Cameron Mitchell, *Transamerica* (2005) by Duncan Tucker, *Zerophilia* (2005) by Martin Curland.

In the meantime, Italian cinema kept filtering the representation of trans people through a watered-down version of the same gender stereotypes used by catholic and fascist culture to protect Italian society from any chance of questioning cisgender men's (hetero)sexual orientation, the very totem of Italian culture. Only a few modest or mediocre movies were released, such as: the bittersweet *Belle al bar* (1994) by Alessandro Benvenuti, where the usual Eva Robin's is a beautiful trans prostitute; the very provincial *Come mi vuoi* (1996) by Carmine Amoroso; the realistic and pseudo-Fassbinderian *Princesa* (2001) by Henrique Goldman, inspired by the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name (1994) by the trans woman Fernanda Farias De Albuquerque and Maurizio Jannelli; the pseudo-historical *Viola di mare* (*Purple Sea*, 2009) by Donatella Maiorca, the first movie about a trans boy inspired by the novel *Minchia di re* (2004) by Giacomo Pilati; the Almodovar-style *Mater natura* (2005) by Massimo Andrei, about Neapolitan *femminielli*; and the Wenders-style *Anime veloci* (1996) by Pasquale Marrazzo.

During the same period several documentaries were released, animated by an authentic intention to show how trans people conceptualized their life-histories and the relationship between trans history and contemporary trans lives. Even if "the generic conventions of written autobiography might all be thought of as authorizing transsexual subjects by implanting normative narratives of sexed development, continuity, and coherence" (Amin, 2014, p. 220), these documentaries challenged cis understandings of what counts as trans, disputing that history can be practiced through either an allegedly 'objective' cis lens or as a 'subversive' trans lens. Among these documentaries on can mention: *La persona De Leo N.* (2005) by Alberto Vendemmiati, about the trans woman president of MIT from 2016 to 2022; *Giorgio/Giorgia: storia di una voce* (2006) by Gianfranco Mingozzi, about the trans soubrette and opera singer Giorgia O'Brien; *L'eletta* (2006) by Camilla Paternò, about the showgirl Vladimir Luxuria, the first trans woman elected in the Italian Parliament; *La bocca del lupo* (2007) by Pietro Marcello, mixing fiction (the live-filmed story of the protagonists: a man and a trans woman who felt in love in prison), documentary (the interviews of the couple and the readings from their letters) and reportage (professional and amateur archival video materials on Genoa and its history during the 20th century). Even if the autobiographical device could look like an extension of the way social acceptance for trans people was conditional on respectability, in these cinematic memoirs the trans gaze finally disrupted cis voyeurism on trans people and the traditional linear, chrono-normative structure from "wrong-body" to "happy ending" via surgery, by focusing on trans people's non-sexual life goals and accomplishments (Pellegrini, 2023, p. 492).

6. Counter-discourses and self-display: from the 2010s to the present

Since the 2010s the trans showgirl Luxuria tirelessly tried to legitimize trans identity by frequently participating in many reality and talk shows produced by Italian private and public TV networks, riskily mixing gossip, controversy, trash and rainbow washing: *Grande fratello* (2014, pundit), *L'isola di Adamo ed Eva* (2015, host), *Tale e quale show* (2018, contestant), *Domenica Live* (2017-2021, pundit), *Pomeriggio Cinque* (2017-2023, pundit), *L'isola dei famosi* (2008, contestant and winner; 2011, 2017, 2022 and 2023, pundit; 2024, host).

In the meantime, several documentaries setting trans stories in well-defined social and/or historical contexts were released in Italian movie theaters. On the transfeminine side one can mention: Alessandra Celesia's *Anatomia del miracolo* (2017), on identity and

religion; Pasquale Formicola and Elisabetta Rasicci's *Nata Femmena* (2018), about the first time the Italian state authorized the change of gender markers in official documents with no sex reassignment surgery; Silvia Luzi's *Io sono Sofia* (2019), a trans girl's coming of age; Roberto Cannavò's *Porpora* (2021), a road doc about the youth of Porpora Marcasciano, president of MIT between 2010 and 2016. On the transmasculine side one can mention: Ilaria Ciabattini and Elsi Perino's *Un uomo deve essere forte* (2019), the diary of a transition; Elena Comoglio and Mick De Paola's *Good Times for a Change* (2019), about the election of the first Italian trans mayor; Nicolò Bassetti's *Nel mio nome* (2022), about the coming of age of four trans boys.

Halfway between the transfeminine and transmasculine side, as well as between the languages of documentary and fiction, performance and cinema, one can mention two movies: Yanira Yariv's *Amori e metamorfosi* (2014), where the woods of Mount Circeo are the backdrop of the mythological transformations told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (Jupiter becoming Diana, the nymph Salmacis merging with her beloved Hermaphrodite) and the real ones of a trans woman and a trans boy; Roberta Torre's *Le favolose* (2022), about five trans women (including De Leo and Marcasciano) reuniting to give a proper burial to a dead trans friend.

The 2010s are marked by various attempts to document the (hi)story of the trans woman Lucy Salani (1924-2023), who, after surviving the Nazi concentration camps, in 1982 underwent a sex reassignment surgery in London and never tried to change her name and gender markers in official documents. After Gabriella Romano's *Essere Lucy* (2011) and Gianni Amelio's *Felice chi è diverso* (2014), Matteo Botrugno and Daniele Coluccini's *C'è un soffio di vita soltanto* (2021) stands out for its delicate and complex gaze at such a meaningful and unknown piece of (hi)story.

During the same period four fiction movies starring trans characters were released in Italian movie theaters. Three of them strived to find original ideas and stylistic features to tell trans stories by seeking a mediation between some recent foreign suggestions and the most entrenched Italian gender stereotypes. In Carlo Lavagna's *Arianna* (2015), inspired by Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *Middlesex* (2002), a girl finds out she is intersexual and explores her sexuality trying to get rid of any preconceptions:

> *Io sono uno più uno, che però è uguale a tre. Quindi o accetto di essere un errore, oppure devo trovare una matematica mia. Adesso sto lavorando* […] *riuscire a capire chi sono io*. [I am one plus one, which equals three. So either I accept that I am a mistake, or I find my own mathematics. Now I am working […] to be able to understand who I am].

Sebastiano Mauri's *Favola* (2017) is inspired by Todd Haynes' remediation of Douglas Sirk's melodrama: between irony, camp and intertextual references (such as the one to Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* [2010]), the movie tells the story of Miss Fairytale, a man who feels like a woman and, both in their psychotic fantasies and in reality, ends up falling in love with (and making love to) a woman, eventually defining themselves as a homosexual trans woman. Inspired by a true story, Pierluigi Di Lallo's *Nati 2 volte* (2019) depicts the return of a trans woman to the village where she was born by using gender stereotypes and caricatural drifts which would like to be cunning but turn out to be inexorably banal.

Emanuele Crialese's *L'immensità* (2022) is inspired by Almodóvar's remediation of Sirk's melodramas, Gus Van Sant's comings of age, and Pasolini's anti-bourgeois criticism. It enacts a trans gaze defying heteronormative, cissexist and medical gaze, by telling the story of the little girl Adri(ana), who calls herself Andrea since she feels like a boy and falls in love with the little girl Sara. While Adri is hypnotized by her mother Clara's beauty, a mirror where she confusedly sees her nascent desire for the female sex and her male

identity, Clara feeds a playful complicity with her daughter to save herself from the depression caused by an unhappy marriage. Both try to survive a reality where they feel out of place by fleeing to the magic place of the escapist entertainment offered during the 1970s by Italian television, where the showgirl Raffaella Carrà tried to reconcile a deep-rooted Christian Democrat puritanism with the effects of the sexual revolution (Adri dreams of being Carrà's male partners).

Favola and *L'immensità*, together with the contemporary Italian tv series *We Are Who We Are* (2020) by Luca Guadagnino and *Prisma* (2022-2024 by Alice Urciuolo and Ludovico Bessegato, are the first authentic and promising Italian attempts to elaborate a trans aesthetic "counterdiscourse" capable of avoiding the psychopathological rhetoric of the birth in a "wrong body" and the catholic-fascist gender stereotypes of the *commedia all'italiana*, placing trans identity "outside the boundaries of gender" and allowing it to "to read [it]self aloud – and by this troubling and productive reading" – to write itself "into the discourses" by which in the past it "has been written" (Stone, 1991, pp. 295, 299). These four narratives allow their trans protagonists to access their agency to self-display and to show themselves to others instead of being violently revealed by the cis gaze as in the past, also defying the dominant liberal humanist perception of the individual subject as a unified rational mind with a body as a possession of the subject rather than a part of it, exposing the porousness of the mind and the plasticity of the body and so destabilizing the matrices of liberal humanism.

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