

liberation from the hated Turks in 1911, and indeed to *Faccetta Nera*, when even Fascists sung about liberating a ‘little black face’ from African slavery, the ‘civilising mission’ surely remained at the heart of propaganda and empire, for Italy and, I suspect, everybody else. Yet Bruner has also shown that at least for some it became viable to openly cast aside conventional morality in the quest for Italian expansion. The concept being hesitantly reached for even by so urbane and likeable a liberal as Martini was ‘genocide’. Replacing ‘race with race’ became sayable; it rose to the surface and came clearly into view, a life raft for Italian colonialism when all around the flotsam from Mancini’s shipwrecked but more humane vision bumped uselessly and aimlessly about. The tens if not hundreds of thousands of African dead Italy was to leave behind over the half century following the Livraghi scandal are hardly explained by Bruner’s short book but it has certainly pointed enquiry in the right direction.

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Italy’s Other Women: Gender and Prostitution in Italian Cinema, 1940–1965, by Danielle Hipkins, Oxford, Peter Lang, viii + 448 pp., £45.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-0343-1934-8

Every now and then at my fairly liberal university in the US, one of my students will ask why so many prostitute figures feature in the Italian films that we watch in class. These films normally include *La dolce vita*, *Mamma Roma* and *Paisan*, but many others could be added to the list. So far, my answer has been a flippant one: why not? Danielle Hipkins’ latest book, *Italy’s Other Women*, finally provides the comprehensive answer that I have struggled to give to my students.

Scholarship has so far dismissed the female prostitute as nothing more than a passing cliché within the Italian auteurist canon. Hipkins convincingly demonstrates that she is a much more pervasive and complex figure, one that sheds light on a number of ideological contradictions and anxieties within post-war Italian cinema and society. Between 1940 and 1965, the figure of the prostitute featured in at least ten per cent of all Italian-made films. But, as Hipkins suggests, ‘she cast her shadow on many more’. During this period, several ‘other’ female figures such as the female collaborator or the actress were shaped by the dominant discourses of the time about prostitution. Hipkins’ central argument is that the female prostitute functions in Italian cinema as a ‘borderline identity’, used to police feminine virtue and respectability. But Hipkins notes that, partly escaping the original intent for her to act as a marker of opposite territories of feminine virtue and sin, this figure ends up blurring ‘those very boundaries she was supposed to support’ by means of her proximity with other non-normative identities (pimps, sexually active women etc.) and sexual behaviours (such as adultery). In the chapter on the *filone bordellistico* (‘brothel series’) of the 1950s, for example, Hipkins shows that these films also reveal surprising narratives of female resistance and mutual solidarity between women.

Italy’s Other Women is an impressive book for many reasons. It is a rigorous, carefully researched book. It is also an extremely accessible, deftly argued one that productively draws on a compelling body of feminist and queer theory. It offers a rich historical contextualisation of the reasons why the figure of the prostitute drew so much interest between the 1940s and the 1960s.

Challenging the widely-held opinion that the figure of the prostitute emerges only in post-war cinema, Hipkins points out that the question of female prostitution has been at the forefront of public discourse throughout the nation's history and that an increased depiction of this figure appears strikingly visible in films made in the early 1940s. To contextualise this phenomenon, Hipkins discusses the rise in street prostitution during the Nazi occupation and during the liberation led by the Allies, pointing out that in the Italian films of this period the female prostitute became a cipher for the expression of fears about female mobility, the presence of working women in public spaces and changing sexual behaviours. But the two key events discussed by Hipkins are the Second World War and the debates which led to the passing of the Merlin Law in 1958. During the post-war period, the figure of the prostitute was a central target of moral panic, functioning in many ways as an embodied 'border' between Italians and the occupier and as a scapegoat onto which to project repressed national guilt and anxieties about racial contamination. Hipkins identifies melodrama as one of the primary modes through which Italian cinema of the 1950s conveyed anxieties about women entering the workplace, and by the same token, prostitution. Similar anxieties appear in the 1950s and 1960s comedies through the theme of misrecognition. The closure of brothels following the Merlin Law happened at the same time as the economic miracle. These comedies were striving to find optimistic solutions to a widespread sense of confusion about changing gender roles and the end of an era in which male sexual desire had been served by the state-run brothel system. Despite their apparent conservative generic investments, these comedies reveal significant subversive potential in undoing the very rigid gender categories (and binaries) they were expected to congeal. In reading this book, one gets a clear sense that the figure of the prostitute is much more than an Other at the margins of gender representation. As Hipkins poignantly states, this figure 'haunts' gender. As the final section of the book demonstrates, this figure also matters to masculinity. By focusing on the figures of the male client and of the pimp, Hipkins shows that into the 1960s the prostitute was a conductor for expressing male feelings of shame and suffering and for queering masculinity.

One final remark. Hipkins points out that neorealism has been the main point of reference in Italian film scholarship, one that, in privileging questions of *impegno* and realism, has failed to identify the complexities of female experience. Hipkins proposes to make the woman's film a new, additional point of reference for scholarship. I welcome Hipkins' proposal to expand the critical lens over this crucial period, as I welcome her commendable attention to a plethora of popular genre films – mainly comedies and melodramas – which have been so far vastly ignored by scholarship. I wonder, though, whether we should also rethink what seems to me a new master critical narrative, one that seems to suggest that 'the failure to identify a public space for women' is intrinsic to the corpus of films traditionally associated with neorealism, rather than being an outcome of the way in which scholars have mainly looked at them.

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