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Hipkins, Danielle. *Italy's Other Women. Gender and Prostitution in Italian Cinema, 1940-1965*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2016. Pp. 448. ISBN 978-3-0343-1934-9 (paperback). \$67.95.

Among a proliferation of books on the canonical directors of neo-realism and post-neo-realism, Danielle Hipkins' well-researched study is a refreshing take on films other than the "usual suspects" made in the years that followed World War II and during the so-called "economic boom" in Italy. The material is seen through the lens of a seldom critically discussed category: the prostitute. At times destabilizing elements of society, at times reassuring, prostitutes in films from 1940 to 1965 highlight socio-political anxieties about gender relations, economic power, and identity. Hipkins indicates as the touchstone of the changing Italian mindset not just sex workers, but all attitudes that deviate from the norm imposed by the strict moral and Catholic code endorsed by the patriarchal society. According to the author, as more women joined the urban workforce in the post-war years, their visibility, growing economic independence, and apparent freedom made them suspect, potentially equating walking the streets with streetwalking. From being a theater of war to a destroyed country trying to rebuild its identity, to a booming new economy in a fast-changing world, Italy had to radically change its attitude towards women's role in society in the twenty-five years examined by Hipkins. Cinema, with its growing capacity for influencing public opinion, reflects the inherent ambivalence in accepting change either by condemning it, by denouncing its pitfalls through drama, or by ridiculing the inadequate efforts to adapt through comedy. By also analyzing the effects of women's new roles on men, the author identifies the prostitute in film as "a catalyst for 'borderline identities' and 'gendering effects'."

The study is divided in three parts: the first looks at how the fallen woman during the war may have needed to prostitute herself, much like Italy had to in order to survive as a country, but the price to pay for her loss of morals was still very high (alienation from "decent" society, self-sacrifice, or death). Either through melodrama or comedy, what clearly emerges from war and immediate post-war films is that any gain made by compromising one's identity is destined to be lost. The nineteenth-century positivist assumption that women are by nature inclined to promiscuity persists well into the twentieth century, equating prostitution with criminality and backwardness, especially in the Italian south, where, in the last year and a half of war, the presence of allied troops ready to pay for sexual favors with much coveted black-market items and food persuaded half the population to sell itself out of desperation. Whether blame for the loss of morals is attributed to women or not, what Hipkins thinks is certain is that female desire is negated and any attempt to improve one's condition beyond mere survival is condemned as morally corrupt. Clothes, in particular, reveal women's intentions to take what is perceived as a shortcut out of poverty that clearly identifies them as deviant. As virtue is traded for fine clothes, Hipkins argues, women's desire to wear impractical finery is seen as both an indicator of their limited intelligence and a willingness to sacrifice moral standards for dubious gain that exonerates men's co-responsibility. Films that depict prostitution also look at another anxiety-generating aspect of foreign occupation during and after the war: the proliferation of illegitimate children, even more so of mixed race. While women who slept with Nazis are blameworthy for other reasons, those who undiscerningly frequented soldiers in the still segregated American army ran the risk of having their shame exposed by their offspring. The body of the prostitute becomes a metaphor for the nation, torn between honesty and need-based corruption.

The second part analyses the films of the Fifties that reflect the debate over the law to close state-run brothels, proposed by the first woman to be elected to the Italian Senate, Lina Merlin. After a ten-year debate, Italy finally stopped taking a cut of women's gains for an activity that was deemed immoral but, somehow, was state sanctioned until 1958. State-run brothels constituted a minuscule percentage of prostitution activity, but the debate apparently generated a plethora of "brothel films" that invited people to reassess their positions vis-à-vis prostitution and its need to exist. According to Hipkins, people's perception was still that women freely

chose the profession as a “career” and that closing the *case di tolleranza* only engendered amateur workers who were much more destabilizing because they were neither as easily screened nor registered as sex workers by the police. However, films that depict prostitutes in this decade also illustrate a nation-wide anxiety over women’s desire to work and gain money independently from fathers or husbands. The push for independence is seen as suspect, since women in the workplace are chosen for their looks and the potential to be molested by their male bosses. Evading poverty does not seem to be the motivator for seeking employment, when the easier and “normal” path would be to find a husband and keep confined to a safer domestic sphere. As films of this period try to reflect women’s perspectives as well, their desires and aspirations are still filtered through male perceptions, which, even when sympathetic, still underscore women’s inherently lower intelligence, weakness, vanity, and unreasonable expectations. Women’s willingness to subject themselves to wanted or unwanted male attention begins to create a confusion in gender roles that is further analyzed in the third part of the study, which talks about the “queering effect” prostitution has on male identity (an interesting, albeit not entirely convincingly argued concept). Not surprisingly, critical attitudes come from comedy, which develops a female voice much more effectively than drama.

The third part of the study analyses the effects of the Merlin law, which brought on feelings of regret and nostalgia for a time when gender roles were better defined: there were respectable women one would marry and prostitutes who would provide first sexual encounters and education, as well as outlets for behaviors that should remain outside the domestic sphere. Yet, as Hipkins notes, surveys showed that most women were unhappy in their marriages, which implies that, perhaps, the *madonna/whore* dichotomy did not work all that well in real life. With notable exceptions, the films of the economic boom dealing with sexual mores tend to be comedies, since the genre allows for more freedom to express criticism and dissent. According to Hipkins, women’s empowerment and the blurring of boundaries between prostitution and sexual and economic independence cause a crisis of masculinity that, among other things, leads men to fantasies of being “kept.” Heteronormative sexuality is no longer a clear-cut option, and, while clients still retain the power to determine what a prostitute is, a different perception of women’s empowerment begins to make its way from the marginalized, outlawed position of prostitutes.

Hipkins analyses an impressive number of films, both famous and lesser known, discussing, among other things, the development of an Italian star system, Hollywood’s influence, and changing trends and anxieties in the perception of women in the workplace enhanced by the presence of the liminal, aberrant figure of the prostitute. At times, her study suffers from a kind of analysis too keen on applying a post-feminist reading, not taking into account recent studies on masculinity or historical facts in their entirety. Some ideas are problematic at best, such as the assertion that seventeen months of fighting to survive in a war-torn, bombed, and raped country should be discounted as part of an “international” attempt to create “the myth of the ‘good Italian’ [...] nobly resisting the Nazis,” while neglecting to assume responsibilities for causing suffering to other people under the Fascist regime. While some of her conclusions are debatable (it isn’t entirely clear how Amedeo Nazzari’s characters in pre-war films point to a crisis of masculinity), overall, Hipkins’ book is an informative analysis of a less-studied aspect of Italian film productions in the twenty years following World War II that will be very helpful to scholars looking to explore the development of Italy as a capitalist country.

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