Female Agency in the Films of the 1990s

Italian Cinema in the 1990s

Chapter 8 has provided the essential historical information on Italy in the 1990s, so here we are addressing exclusively the Italian cinema of that time.

In the 1990s, Italian male and female directors presented several films that attempt an innovative type of representation of women and of male-female relationships. The trend toward “decentering the masculinity,” and consequently toward activating a new potential for “female agency,”1 that we have noticed especially in the previous two decades seems to continue in the films of the 1990s, thanks especially to strategies that aim at ridiculing men and highlighting women’s self-awareness.

Some of the best contemporary comic male actors/directors of Italian cinema, such as Benigni, Troisi, and Nichetti, become recognized as important filmmakers in this very decade, together with some very promising female directors, such as Francesca Archibugi and Cristina Comencini.

Roberto Benigni’s Johnny Stecchino and Il mostro

Roberto Benigni’s2 international recognition started with Johnny Stecchino (1991), a film that offers a very unusual portrayal of women with the character of Maria, the female protagonist, whose intelligent and enterprising ways of controlling her life and the lives of the men involved with her reveal a new type of woman. No longer afraid or unable to take control of her life or of the lives of the people around her, Maria, even in a very traditional Sicilian environment, cleverly undermines the deeply rooted patriarchal rules of male authoritarianism.

In this context, the film also provides a formidable satire of the Italian mafioso male type with his arrogance and sexual neuroses. The main source of comedy in the film discourse is the disruption provoked by the astonishing physical resemblance between the Sicilian mafioso Johnny Stecchino and Mario, the naïve Tuscan social worker who drives a school bus for handicapped children. When Maria
meets Mario in Florence, she immediately recognizes this resemblance and decides to exploit it, supposedly in favor of her mafioso boyfriend. Taking advantage of Mario’s infatuation with her, Maria invites the naïve young man to visit her in Sicily with the intention to show him off in Sicilian society as the real Johnny Stecchino, who had been obliged to stay hidden for years in the basement of his luxurious villa near Palermo in order to avoid being murdered by his enemies. The plan that Maria proposes to her mafioso boyfriend and his lawyer, obviously in order to gain their approval, is that as soon as his double is killed in his place, the real Johnny Stecchino would be able to escape abroad and start a new life with Maria.

Maria, however, at the end, does not follow her own plan, but delivers the real Johnny Stecchino to his enemies who promptly execute him. In this way, she spares his double’s life, and Mario, for his part, is completely unaware of all the intrigues in which he is actually involved, thus increasing the comic effect of the story.

The woman is here the controller and mover of the narrative action. Moreover, she also assumes an ethical mission, as she has the power to punish the evil and reward the innocent. Thus, Maria has a very important narrative function, as she keeps the film’s suspense up to the very end by never revealing her intentions or feelings to any character on the screen or to the audience. This film, thus, moves away from the traditional representation of woman as a creature totally controlled by man and moved exclusively by emotion and irrationality and replaces it with what may seem a more masculine image of a woman in control and ruled, like most men, by rationality and, possibly, by ambition and greed. Indeed, the betrayal of her mafioso boyfriend earns Maria a substantial sum of money, which establishes her as a well-to-do and respected woman in her community.

We may, therefore, consider Johnny Stecchino one of those films whose purpose, according to Robin Wood, is to suggest that the only alternative for a woman who is not a “good” wife or mother is to be “duplicitous and fashionably desensitized” or endowed with masculine characteristics.

It seems to me, however, that the discourse of this film rescues this female character from falling into Wood’s category. This film discourse in fact constantly undermines, through light satire, the mafioso male character by ridiculing his sexual inhibitions and by underlining the arrogance and the violence that he shows and perpetrates even against those who protect and take care of him, his own lawyer and Maria included. The film discourse aims also at emphasizing, on the other hand, Mario’s different type of masculinity, endowed by an endearing naïveté and especially by a kindness and sensitivity displayed not only toward his handicapped friend but also toward Maria as a woman. She, in turn, is able to learn how to appreciate him as a man, especially when compared to her mafioso boyfriend’s cruel and violent temper.

Thus, even if Maria financially gains from the real Johnny Stecchino’s death, her choice is constructed as a search for a better type of life and relationship, which may also imply an ethical imperative that rescues her duplicity and recourse to violence from purely self-serving, money-oriented intentions. In constructing the character of Maria, the film discourse avoids providing her with any type of moralistic or sentimental commentaries, thus creating an objective view of this female character who never voices her own intentions, feelings, or beliefs. Thus, she must