

ARTICLE

Whose Comatose Girlfriend? Figures of Crisis in Neoliberal Italy

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The Italian body politic has a long history of being “feminized”: Italy has long been imagined through the metaphor of the nation as a woman both within and beyond national borders. The documentary *Girlfriend in a coma* is a recent example of this strategy: the film is based on the metaphor of Italy as a woman who has been beaten into a coma by a crass and criminal ruling class. In the film, Bill Emmott, who narrates, presents himself as Italy’s disillusioned lover, who wishes to rescue her from the dramatic situation she is in. Implicitly, by arguing that Italy is a woman, Emmott stresses Italy’s fragility and dependence on stronger cultures to save it. An apparent contradiction structures the film: on the one hand ‘gender inequality’ is one of the themes that the film foregrounds amongst the problems that Italy has to solve to get out of its ‘coma’, on the other, the film relies on a series of problematic cultural associations with woman as state of victimhood in order to make its case. The article will argue that the gendered metaphor in the film is instrumental in creating a cultural, social and economic programme, the goal of which is for Italy to move on from the economic crisis. Ultimately, by interrogating closely the apparent contradiction outlined above, it seeks to unpick the concept of ‘gender equality’ in this particular phase of capitalist progress and cast some light on what is intended exactly when the question of gender equality is invoked in contemporary debates on Italy’s political and economic decline.

Girlfriend in a Coma – the widely circulated documentary written by Annalisa Piras and Bill Emmott – was released in 2012 after the end of the fourth and last Berlusconi ministry. In the film’s opening scene, Emmott, the former editor-in-chief of the magazine *The Economist*, is sat in a café in Piazza Santa Croce in Florence, intently sipping an espresso and reading *Financial Times*. When the camera abruptly zooms in on the pages of the newspaper, we discover that the journalist is reading about the sex scandals that Silvio Berlusconi was involved in from 2009 until 2011, when he resigned as prime minister. The camera lingers on the page and closes in on a picture of Patrizia D’Addario, the sex worker and ‘whistle blower’ who first leaked the sex scandals story to the media. As the camera draws the viewer’s attention away from the iconic fourteenth-century square and towards D’Addario blowing a kiss to the audience, one idea of Italy momentarily recedes whilst another emerges: Crisis Italy, a country forever mired in countless problems, replaces Destination Italy, ‘a place fixed into the realm of the ruin and the picturesque’ (Hom 215). The most frequently cited issues of national significance today are a ‘weak sense of nationhood, a high degree of politicization of social life, a

multitude of quarrelsome political parties, unstable or unproductive government coalitions, constant inequalities between regions, the dramatic presence of powerful crime organizations [and] widespread corruption in public life' (Mammone and Veltri 1). Altogether, these 'Italian problems' make up the puzzle that Bill Emmott sets out to solve in *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

The opening scene encapsulates the profound entanglement between the *topos* of 'the land of beauty' and the rhetoric of the Italian national project as belated, fragmented and perennially in crisis – in the film's terminology, 'in a coma'. In fact, in the scene described above, D'Addario – at once beautiful, corrupt and treacherous – embodies both Destination Italy and Crisis Italy. Thus, the film explicitly draws from a vast archive of representations of the Italian nation as a woman (Marcus; Luzzi; Hipkins); but how exactly and to what end do the multiple gendered metaphors of Italy as a comatose girlfriend and a dangerous femme fatale that the film employs work to hold Destination Italy and Crisis Italy together? Whilst similar allegorical constructions have regularly resurfaced at times of perceived national crisis, I show here that *Girlfriend in a Coma* allows us to catch a glimpse of a contemporary, specifically neoliberal use of the woman metaphor. In what follows, my main goal is to address the powerful suturing of the national to the transnational operated by the woman metaphor in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in order to open new avenues for research on neoliberal versions of the feminised national allegory drawing on discourse about gender, nation and crisis.

To this end, I analyse two seemingly distinct archives of representation that appear in the film alongside one another: the domestic debate about the Italian national project and its supposed crisis, and the 'foreign' idea of Italy as tourist destination *par excellence*. Following the scene described above, Emmott explains that the film is informed by his own personal project of making sense of Italy's current crisis. In fact, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is an adaptation of Emmott's non-fiction book *Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer its Demons to Face the Future*, a concise and accessible economic, political and cultural history of post-war Italy. Like the book, the film is divided into two sections: in the first section, titled 'Bad Italy', Emmott considers the various plights that afflict contemporary Italy, from corruption to limited press freedom, from organised crime to the stagnating economy. The second part of the documentary is dedicated to 'Good Italy', which, to quote the book's back-cover blurb, is 'the home of enthusiastic entrepreneurs, truth-seeking journalists, and countless citizens determined to end mafia domination for good'. To piece together its analysis of the last sixty years of Italian history, *Girlfriend in a Coma* utilises extracts from other visual texts (i.e. popular political films, like *Gomorra* by Matteo Garrone and *Il Divo* by Paolo Sorrentino, and acclaimed documentaries, like *Videocracy* and *Citizen Berlusconi*); interviews with both Italian public figures (the journalist and author Roberto Saviano and Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini amongst others) and foreign experts (for example, the political scientist Alexander Stille); and archival images of landmark moments in recent Italian history (e.g. the murder of anti-mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino).

As an archive of cultural products that cuts across forms and genres, *Girlfriend in a Coma* makes for a remarkably suitable starting point for developing an analysis of contemporary texts representing Italy as a problem to solve for experts and cultural producers alike. In this article, I suggest that more scholarly attention needs to be paid to the way in which the representation of 'Italy as a problem' reappears in contemporary cultural products in a highly ambiguous, new feminist guise. After covering familiar topics such as the mafia and 'Catholic mentality' and themes such as belatedness and fragmentation, the documentary asks the viewer to consider a less discussed symptom of Italy's supposed malaise: sexism and the place of women in society. Framing Italy as a sexist nation may be seen as part of a larger contemporary discourse (promoted by Western states and supra-national organisations) that recast sexism as a 'national problem' affecting some countries and not others, and creates rankings and numerical indices to measure equality between men and women in a

given society. Postcolonial critics have suggested that in relation to the Global South, such discourse reinforces colonial stereotypes of non-Western nations as 'backward' and problematically reframes feminism as a developmental and civilizational project (Mohanty). In this article, I interrogate the uses of the 'woman metaphor' in cultural products about 'Italy as problem' at a moment in history when 'gender equality' is refigured – systematically and on a global scale – as a marker of modernity and progress. As Forlenza and Thomassen (4) suggest, when we describe Italy as an anomalous modern nation 'running behind modernity, we are, wittingly or not, matching Italy against a prototype model' and therefore bolstering an idealised account of other Western European countries as model democracies. By the same token, presenting Italy as 'anomalously sexist' requires an ideological investment in Europe as the rightful home of emancipation, equal opportunities, symmetrical gender relations and liberal feminism.

My analysis of the film is indebted to the vast body of literature on the representation of Italy as a woman, and especially the essay 'Whore-ocracy: Showgirls, the beauty trade-off and mainstream oppositional discourse in contemporary Italy' by Danielle Hipkins. Hipkins explains how the growing cultural obsession with the television showgirl – a figure that also appeared routinely in the reporting of Berlusconi's sex scandal – transformed her into an icon standing in for the whole national community. Her argument builds on the seminal essay 'The Italian Body Politic is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Postwar Italian Film' by Millicent Marcus (2000), which traces the history of Italia – the feminised national symbol represented by the Renaissance iconographer Cesare Ripa – to draw attention to its reappearance in the work of twentieth-century filmmakers. According to Hipkins, as the latest embodiment of Italy, the showgirl functions today as 'a shorthand for moral corruption and cultural decay' (414). Hipkins also makes an important contribution by suggesting that hyper-sexualised representations of women in Italian television cannot be described as a specifically Italian problem, since they reflect the global emergence of neoliberal discourses that celebrate autonomy, individuality, freedom and choice.

However, although she acknowledges that the representation of Italy as a sexist country resonates globally, Hipkins does not discuss the role that foreign commentators (much like Bill Emmott) play in the making of these national images. For this reason, whilst her essay provides a lucid account of how neoliberalism represents female subjectivity, it neglects the place of global images of nations as 'feminist' or 'anti-feminist' (i.e. 'progressive' or 'backward') in the current neoliberal world order. The interplay between Crisis Italy and Destination Italy – that is, the twofold use of national narratives (i.e. internal political crisis and incapacity for self-governance) and transnational discourses (i.e. tourism and the 'foreign' idea of Italy as the European land of beauty) – in *Girlfriend in a Coma* generates an ambiguous call for girlfriend Italy to be rescued by global forces, which requires further critical attention and new methodological tools. In what follows, I seek to 'transnationalise' debates about the retrieval of the woman metaphor in contemporary cultural production, by complicating the representational paradigm that has framed discussions about Italia as a national icon up to this point.

To supplement both Marcus's and Hipkins's theoretical approaches, then, my analysis draws on discussions in studies of neoliberalism of 'figures' and 'figuration' that have interrogated contemporary tropic representations as diverse as 'the transnational adoptee' (Castaneda), 'the Islamic terrorist' (Kunstman) and the 'lesbian bride' (Tyler). Figuration theory encourages us to rethink these and other figures as highly abstract entities and argues for an epistemological shift away from analysing images as 'representations of particular people or objects' (Kunstman). As a method, figuration theory allows us to read crystallised tropes such as the feminised Crisis Italy and Destination Italy by casting light on 'the process by which a concept or entity is given particular form in ways that speak to the making of worlds' (Castaneda 2). The argument that I develop through my discussion of *Girlfriend in a Coma* is twofold. Firstly,

when the problem of gender equality in contemporary Italy is evoked, as is the case in the documentary, a social group referred to as 'women' is not in fact what is being discussed. By suggesting that discussions about women are not actually about women, I do not mean that women are 'used' to make a larger argument about the national project or community. In fact, my second point is precisely that images of Italy may also not be about Italy at all. 'Figuration' enables us to describe the process through which Italy's feminised body politic becomes an 'embodied ground for a particular claim' (Castaneda 2), stretching well beyond Italy's borders and the very idea of representation.

Italy as problem, Italy as girlfriend

The film title *Girlfriend in a Coma* evokes Crisis Italy and the related trope of 'Italy as problem' through the metaphor of a terminally ill young woman. The 'sick girlfriend Italy' can be read as part of a strategy of feminisation of the national body politic that a diverse set of nation-builders have employed throughout Italian history. Going back to the film's opening scene, after zooming in on the picture of Patrizia D'Addario, the camera follows Emmott inside Santa Croce. In the church, the journalist visits the cenotaph of the nation's poet, Dante Alighieri. The scene closes with a voice-over reciting an extract of the *Divine Comedy*, namely Dante's digression to his wretched homeland – 'a ship without a pilot' – that famously forges 'a female political allegory of Italy's incapacity for self-governance' and makes an argument for the need for a strong master for the feminised nation (Luzzi 2008). The Dantesque metaphor, which imagines Italy as a brothel, endows the earlier visual reference to D'Addario with further allegorical significance.

However, Emmott explains himself why exactly he chose to represent Italy as a 'girlfriend' in a voice-over towards the beginning of the film:

Italy started to seduce me when I was a, well, fairly innocent teen ager. I got there on my first ever trip abroad on our version of the magic bus. Here I am in Venice with my mates and a rather dodgy haircut. But while we were awestruck by Venice's beauty, our van was emptied out by thieves. Buona Italia, mala Italia. It taught me a lot about girlfriends.

In the same scene, we see Emmott in an urban landscape visually juxtaposed to the one with which the film opens. He is now in London, marching decisively towards the viewer on the futuristic-looking Millennium Bridge. As we follow him into the headquarters of *The Economist* in the City of London, the viewer begins to understand the ideological function of the 'girlfriend in a coma' metaphor, as Emmott explains that he 'set out to make sense' of contemporary Italy and to uncover who 'the men who have beaten [... his] girlfriend into a coma' are. Presenting Italy as a contemporary puzzle that intellectuals and artists have at once a personal and political responsibility to grapple with echoes a framing commonly used by Italian commentators to introduce both popular and critical discussions of the Berlusconi years. Here, however, the move back and forth between Italy and London, as well as Emmott's global fame as economic pundit, demand that we adopt a transnational approach to the representation of 'Italy as problem'. Italy may be barely alive at this point in her history, but she is nonetheless attractive in the eyes of her self-appointed boyfriend, the Northern European traveller/expert now embarking on a journey to understand who beat the woman/nation into a coma/crisis.

Through casting himself as the deceived tourist and boyfriend, Emmott repurposes the metaphor of Italy as 'the femme fatale of all European countries' employed in the history of the production of Destination Italy from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to today's

organised tourism (Gundle). In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, as in much European travel writing, fiction and poetry about Italy, Destination Italy and Crisis Italy are mutually constitutive insofar as the ambivalence of the traveller's desire for the travel destination holds them together. In fact, picturing a travel destination as an alluring *and* deceitful femme fatale is typical of many national stereotypes and much tourist discourse. In Italy's case, the metaphor developed over time into a coherent narrative of a country forever caught up in a fatal clash of 'aesthetic beauty and immorality' (Beller 197) – a story that seems still to resonate powerfully in both popular and high-brow cultural production. The citation in *Girlfriend in a Coma* of domestic archives of national representation on the one hand and of foreign ideas reflecting the place of Italy in the European imagination on the other reveals that the film's basic premise – a weak (female) nation needs a strong (male) expert to lovingly understand her and ultimately save her from herself – is itself starkly gendered. But what, if anything, is new about these entrenched metaphors and rhetorical devices? What role do they play in the argument discussed in the introduction, that for Italy to stop lagging behind other Western European countries the problem of sexism should be urgently tackled?

Italy as problem, women as problem

In 'Bad Italy' (the part of the film explicitly dedicated to 'Italy as problem'), *Girlfriend in a Coma* explicitly confronts the problem of Italian sexism in a segment titled 'Queen of Bordellos'. 'Queen of Bordellos' begins with a spate of indices and statistics. Firstly, the film reminds us that the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report places Italy at seventy-fourth place in the world – after Peru and just before Brunei. Secondly, it points out that 'in 2010 more than 217 women were murdered by men, more than the total number of mafia killings', since 'most manifestations of violence in Italy are under-reported in the context of a family-oriented and patriarchal society where domestic violence is not always perceived as a crime'. The final statistic presented in the segment measures female employment: with the 47% of women in work, Italy comes after the UK, the USA, Germany, France and Spain, where at least 50% of women are in work. The film weaves three issues together: the objectification of women in the media, violence against women and the low rate of female participation in the job market. Out of the three topics, *Girlfriend in a Coma* emphasises in particular the objectification of the female body on TV. To discuss sexist and objectifying media images, the documentary chiefly relies on visual citations from the web-film *Il Corpo delle Donne* and on an interview with the film director Lorella Zanardo. Like *Il Corpo delle Donne* then, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is dominated by a 'montage of objectifying images of women' on a sombre soundtrack, which recycles 'the same system of signification' it purports to critique (Hipkins 425).

The visual economy of 'Queen of Bordellos' is in line with what Hipkins identifies as a stable feature of Italian mainstream oppositional discourse during and in the aftermath of the Berlusconi years: the use of the Italian showgirl as an embodiment of what I named Crisis Italy. The film echoes a common argument made about the Berlusconi sex scandals by Italian liberal feminists such as Concita De Gregorio and Michela Marzano. Their argument posits that the showgirl's willingness to not only sell her image to TV audiences, but even sell sex to the prime minister, revealed that a sizeable portion of the female population had finally fully internalised the misogyny of Italian society. Hipkins critiques this liberal feminist analysis in three important ways. Firstly and most importantly, Hipkins suggests that the apparently stereotypical femininity that showgirls and their followers fashion for themselves reflects hegemonic cultural models of self-realisation and self-entrepreneurship that have little to do with the straightforward internalisation of misogyny. More specifically, the way that women are represented in the Italian mainstream media has 'evolved in tandem with the growing forces of neoliberalism, and deserves analysis as a particular form of "new sexism"' (430).

Secondly, representing women who perform an explicitly sexualised femininity as symbols of sexism leads to blaming individual women for a systemic problem. Finally, this liberal feminist critique is remarkably divisive: it naturalises classed (and often 'raced') divisions between supposedly honest, respectable, hardworking 'real women' and the manipulative, artificial and potentially criminal 'other women'. In fact, the juxtaposition of 'real women' with 'real jobs' to the showgirls and escorts that have become symbols of Berlusconi's Italy is underpinned by a moralising conflation between the female performer and the sex worker. Thus, the embodiment of Italy's crisis through the television showgirl seems to mobilise the moral panic historically organised around the figure of the sex worker – a signpost for a set of lingering Italian postwar anxieties around women's increasing participation in the public sphere (418).

The point that a certain representational mode divides women by placing them in a hierarchy according to how 'moral' their behaviour is especially useful in analysing 'Queen of Bordellos'. In the segment, Bill Emmott interviews Emma Marcegaglia, the former head of Confindustria. In the interview, Marcegaglia argues that if Italy had the same rate of female employment as other Western European countries, its GDP would increase by eleven points, and that standing in the way of economic growth is what the businesswoman calls 'a problem of culture'. In their own interviews with Bill Emmott in the same segment, Emma Bonino and Susanna Camusso explain that Italian women feel compelled to stick to the traditional roles of wife, mother and lover, rather than leave the house and join the workforce. Thus, the Italian showgirls that the film cites as the embodiment of Italian sexism, and the wives, mothers and lovers that refuse to join the productive workforce, become negative role models by comparison with the idealised 'working woman' – by contrast, a respectable member of the national community. When analysing the documentary *Il Corpo delle Donne*, Hipkins asks why the showgirl and other supposedly 'backward' and unproductive female national stereotypes seem to matter so much at this juncture in history. Whilst I agree that this is, in fact, the most important question for us to ask in relation to the objectification of women on Italian media, I distance myself from Hipkins' study insofar as, by locating the moral panic focused around the figure of the showgirl in specifically Italian recurrent postwar anxieties, it explains it chiefly through a national prism.

I suggest instead that these Italian female performers and sex workers are being transformed into symbols of crisis and decay at the same time as, globally, similar (gendered, classed and racialised) subjects become increasingly 'hypervisible' (Amar 307) and repeatedly find themselves the object of the other's objectifying disgust and outrage. For example, Imogen Tyler's study of contemporary popular culture asks what the British media's recent cultural obsession with 'benefits mums' (underclass mothers represented as 'cheating the welfare system' to pursue their self-interest) and her male counterpart, 'the chav' (young underclass men represented as aggressive, 'parasitic' and dangerous) may mean. Tyler argues that to procure public consent for neoliberal policies, Western nation-states fabricate and repeatedly invoke a set of 'national abjects', which in recent years have included 'the illegal immigrant', the 'anti-social' racialised teenager and the 'home-grown terrorist'. National abjects are invented demographics made to be, *at once*, highly stigmatised and hypervisible, and an undifferentiated, anonymous mass. In other words, stereotyping and 'stigmatization operate as a form of governance which legitimizes the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices' (8). Importantly, the social process by which some subjects and bodies are made abject and utilised as scapegoats requires the use of metaphors. To make these demographics disposable, they are pictured metaphorically as 'garbage-can populations' (Khanna 193) and, crucially for our discussion, as a disease harboured in the national body politic. Whilst the way that national abjects are represented may respond to different cultural anxieties at play

in each national context, they are best viewed as transnational formations insofar as they operate as 'ideological conductors mobilized to do the work of neoliberal governmentality' (Tyler 9).

Rather than approaching these ubiquitous stereotypical representations as icons or symbols, Tyler describes them as 'figures'. Here, 'figuration' is a mechanism that does not represent but makes reality, and radically disconnects the 'real people' that are purportedly being represented from 'figurative scapegoats' like the British 'benefits mum' and, in our case, the Italian showgirl. *Girlfriend in a Coma* lets us observe the transformation of the television showgirl into a 'figurative scapegoat' as it unfolds. As Ruth Glynn suggests, in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Bill Emmott is the objective, impartial observer that looks at the symptoms of a diseased national body, provides a diagnosis and recommends a cure, much like the nineteenth-century commentators on the national unification process. Building on Glynn's precious insight, I suggest that as symbols of a declining, sexist society, 'objectified women' are presented in the film as a diseased national body and, as such, as Italy's 'national abject'. As we have seen above, by presenting three staple feminist issues as interrelated, 'Queen of Bordellos' implicitly suggests that there is a causal connection between a certain mode of representation of women, women's supposed limited contribution to the productive economy and gendered violence. Moreover, in adherence with the journey/diagnosis structure of the documentary, the film encourages the viewer to understand sexist media representations, domestic violence and the low percentage of women in work as symptoms, rather than simply as social phenomena. In this sense, the sexist images that dominate Italian TV at present appear to be the external, skin-deep manifestation of a deep-rooted, and perhaps pathological, condition, whilst, as a symptom of the same condition, the violence that hides away within the domestic sphere can be construed instead as located intimately within the national body. As a theoretical tool, figuration allows us to interrogate the feminised body politic not simply to understand what it stands for but what claims are being made and what worlds are being created through turning a particular group of women into a national abject. What is imagined as the opposite of national abjection? What other worlds are intimated through figuring Italy as an objectified oppressed woman?

'Italy's most underused resource': National images, neoliberal figures

As the section on 'Bad Italy' comes to an end, Emmott sums up recent events in Italian political and social life as follows: 'a precious capitalism was destroying something even more precious: democracy'. To distance himself from the commonly held position that this erosion of democracy makes Italy exceptional, he explains: 'in the West, we have also allowed our own mafias to abuse our collective interest', since 'we all have our bad capitalists; in my own London, especially bad bankers'. The trope of Italy as undecipherable puzzle and mysterious disease, turns, at this point in the film, into the theory that Crisis Italy is, in fact, a warning sign; the symptom of a larger Western sickness. In 2001, after Berlusconi won his second election and a scholarly debate on 'the Berlusconi years' began to form, the historian Perry Anderson entered the discussion by refusing the widespread call for Italy to become 'a normal country'. Anderson's critique highlights – as I have argued earlier in this discussion – that imaging Italy as an 'anomaly' relies on an idealised view of other Western countries as efficient, fair and genuinely democratic. Anderson suggests that, rather than an exception, Italy might well be a concentrate of the contradictions intrinsic to the modern liberal State. The historian, thus, turned the idea of 'cultural belatedness' on its head: 'rather than lagging behind, could not Italy be leading the march towards a common future?' Although helpful in complicating the narrative of Italy as a late-comer to modernity, Anderson's and Emmott's arguments that Italy's present may be the future of the West as a whole, do not depart from

the metaphor that figures Italy as a problem. In this section, I show that the figuration of 'Italy as future' – a particular approach to 'Italy as problem' – is key to understanding *Girlfriend in a Coma* and, crucially, its particular articulation of the woman metaphor.

As the last subsection of 'Bad Italy', 'Queen of Bordellos' connects the 'Good Italy' and the 'Bad Italy' sections of the film. Having left the dark dystopia of 'Bad Italy' and its sexism behind, Emmott is ready to travel onwards to 'Good Italy', a place made up of socially responsible entrepreneurs and a thriving civil society on which Italy's hopes for the future appear to rest. In this sense, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is not just a tale of two countries – one bad and one good – but also of a past to move beyond and a future to enthusiastically embrace. As I will show, in 'Good Italy' the question of female employment and citizenship remains central, but this time it forms part of the larger argument that today's Italy may offer a glimpse of the future of the Western world at large. As a result, here 'the place of women in society' is no longer addressed as a 'difficult issue' that needs untangling but as an opportunity for the future. In 'Good Italy', Emmott visits an anti-mafia organisation that provides a home for people with disabilities and he interviews one of its female activists. Whilst 'Bad Italy' features the dehumanising spaces of the factory and empty cities torn apart by 'corporate greed', 'Good Italy' begins with an idealised image of civil society reconstituting the social fabric torn apart by organised crime and with a feminised image of harmonious communal living.

As the film moves onto the next location, the voice-over comments: 'if they can fight back with such love and community spirit, thousands of other small battalions can also rescue Italy, led by her own most underused resource: women'. The voice-over leads us into an interview with the owner of a Fair Trade clothing company based in Calabria, whose employees are mostly women. In the interview, the businessman lays out his vision for an ethical business that centres on women's work and on traditional crafts to rescue the Southern Italian economy from its crisis. The argument that women are, at present, an 'underused resource' and that businesses can and should profit from traditional female labour and skills (such as sawing and braiding) echoes Emma Marcegaglia's point in 'Queen of Bordellos' that neglecting social problems such as sexism can cost several points of GDP. Whilst in 'Bad Italy' showgirls – women who do not resist their objectified condition but exploit it for their own interest – are presented as Italy's 'national abject', in 'Good Italy' the film uses the example of anti-mafia activism and Fair Trade businesses to show what women can offer to the national community to turn Crisis Italy into an altogether different project. To summarise, in *Girlfriend in a Coma* women seem iconically to represent both Bad and Good Italy. But whilst in Bad Italy the liberal feminist critique of the objectification of women's bodies in the media leads to presenting women negatively as 'objects', in Good Italy they are positively recast as 'resources'. Whilst their hypersexualised gender performance and femininity makes the women of Bad Italy 'bad women', a different kind of femininity – one that is as caring and nurturing as it is resourceful, useful and productive – makes those of Good Italy 'good women'. The difference between 'women as objects' and 'women as resources', then, seems to depend on the use they make of their supposedly specifically feminine qualities. The question of *how* to use their own 'feminised' resources is one that gets at the heart of neoliberal discourse on gender, the nation and solutions to the economic crisis. In fact, the way that the film encourages an idealised, specifically female contribution to civil society and the economy, is reminiscent of what feminist theorists of neoliberalism have described as 'affective labor' or 'emotional labor' (Hochschild; Hondagneu-Sotelo).

As 'objects', women 'sell their bodies' and use their femininity for their own self-interest, whilst as 'resources' their feminised labour contributes to the formal economy and to society. Thus, 'bad' and 'good' women alike are marked by their labour, but what makes the first group morally inferior to the second is the fact that their affective labour may take place

in the criminalised informal economies, and thus it cannot be properly incorporated into neoliberal logic. Ultimately, only the affective labour of 'good women' performs the work of neoliberal governance successfully. Going back to the argument that Marcus makes in 'The Italian Body Politic is a Woman', the feminised national trope keeps resurfacing throughout Italian history because, as the author helpfully explains, 'by synthesizing a series of binary oppositions (virgin and mother, warrior and nurturer, urban and rural, heaven and earth), this figure subsumes contradictions and stands as a Utopian answer to the tensions that normally destabilize the body politic from within and from without' (332). Here, too, a morally inflected binary opposition emerges between 'women as objects' and 'women as resources' – or between 'productive women' and 'unproductive women' – that risks destabilising the body politic, but, as my analysis shows, this latest ambivalent articulation of the female icon can only be understood as part and parcel of the cultural politics of capitalism, and specifically as the product of an emerging neoliberal logic that configures femininity as labour.

My analysis of *Girlfriend in a Coma* relates the logics of neoliberalism to the workings of the woman metaphor and makes the case for understanding the latter as more radically disconnected from both the 'real people' (Italian women) and the 'real place' (Italy) it purports to represent than in the interpretation of both Marcus and Hipkins. Throughout the film, 'Italian women' cannot be understood as representing, however symbolically, either a particular population, or simply personifications of the nation-state. The sign 'women' functions rather as a 'figure' – a 'category of existence' to be understood vis-à-vis the logics of neoliberal governmentality. By extracting value from women, neoliberalism also creates feminised labour as a kind of affective labour, as a strategy for extracting value not necessarily exclusively from female bodies. This is most evident in the way that the gendering of space operates in the film to materialise a feminised, utopian vision for the alternative national project that Emmott is arguing for. Alongside the Southern Italian anti-mafia housing project and the clothing company cited above, Emmott visits a Ferrero factory in Northern Italy, which he celebrates as a model business and workplace. During his visit, he interviews the CEO, Giovanni Ferrero, who presents the company's most popular product, Nutella, as 'a recipe that comes from the "local community"', and the multinational company as a family business driven by ethical values. As Emmott and the interviewees repeatedly make reference to the key themes of community, mutual care and social responsibility, the anti-mafia centre, the clothing company and the chocolate factory are collectively gendered as spaces imbued with 'feminine' qualities. As such, they function as the Italy of the future in embryonic form.

This utopian investment in the Ferrero factory as a metonymy for the national project is in turn tied to a neoliberal story about capitalism as an emancipatory project. If capitalism has incorporated anti-capitalist critiques within its own rhetoric since the 1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello), since the 1990s a coherent discourse began to form that reframes capitalism as a conscious, sustainable, socially responsible collective project (Povinelli; Ashcroft). In each of the cities and towns featured in 'Good Italy', the journalist finds groups of people, places of historical significance or elements of the natural environment that have been undervalued or neglected up to this point and that, once recovered, may – the argument goes – become pivotal in resolving Italy's twofold economic and moral crisis. The groups of people he meets are not always women, but it is 'women' as figures who provide the key to decode Emmott's approach to his Good Italy. In turn, presenting Italy as a feminised figure – a comatose girlfriend and a country whose women are its most underused resource – paves the way for an understanding of the country as a whole as an underused resource that can and should be tapped further. According to the celebrity entrepreneurs associated with the Made in Italy brand that Emmott interviews in his film, the capitalist economy simply needs to get back to basics. Italy is the ideal site for this gesture of turning back, and the Italian economy becomes

simultaneously the epitome of a capitalism in crisis and a resource for economic rebirth. In this way, 'Italy' turns into a 'figure' – an empty vessel filled up with claims about capitalism. Thanks to its reputation as the European 'land of beauty', Italy can be reimagined as a figure that turns 'the feminine' into a national attribute and allows both domestic and foreign commentators to imagine a new 'feminised capitalism'.

Conclusion

Throughout *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a black and white image of a group of women pushing prams in what seems to be a protest for state-funded childcare is the only mention of the 1970s Women's Movement. Other than this implicit reference, which portrays feminist demands only in relation to women's identity as mothers, the film seems to have written the second-wave Women's Movement out of history. This omission is hardly inconsequential: in most accounts of the twentieth-century Italian cultural trajectory, the second-wave feminist movement and its complex nationwide map of groups and collectives, with their specific elaborations of feminism, is posited as a pivotal collective moment in the history of Italian women. The movement that mobilised in the mid-1970s to defend the divorce law and later to push for an abortion law was unique in Europe for its ability to transform two important civil rights questions into a wide-ranging discussion on women's position in society and mobilise a variety of women from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds. The omission appears at odds with the film's declared concern for the position of women in Italian society.

What is the political significance of bringing up the question of gender equality with no reference to the very movement that brought such a question into the mainstream debate? As I have attempted to demonstrate through my analysis, the outrage around the degrading representation of women in the media and the place of women in society that *Girlfriend in a Coma* discusses as an urgent problem has, in fact, little to do with women themselves. The problem of Italian sexism is only one of the countless problems in which Crisis Italy is mired. In discussing Italian sexism, the film seems to offer viewers a dystopian vision of a 'sexual liberation in the West' that has both gone too far and not far enough when it comes to joining the workforce and offering a respectable version of emancipation. This particular way of denouncing sexism retrieves long-standing anxieties around Italy's patchy modernisation and displaces them onto Italian women as a section of society that visibly and frighteningly struggles to keep up. In this sense, the film retrieves and reworks the Grand Tour theme of Italy as 'sexually primitive', and updates it as 'anti-feminist'. What is more, the arguments the film makes about women as both standing for Italy's crisis and its rebirth can only be fully understood in relation to the logics of neoliberal governmentality in relation to nation, labour, gender and crisis.

I began this article by asking how the gendered metaphors of Italy as a comatose girlfriend and a dangerous femme fatale work to hold Destination Italy and Crisis Italy together in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Because of their availability for critiquing presents and imagining futures, Destination Italy and Crisis Italy are best cast as 'figures', rather than images, icons or representations. I chose this particular documentary film as a point of departure to discuss recent neoliberal versions of Italy's feminised national allegory because the film's arguments are frequently repeated in cultural products and public discourse about Italy as problem. For example, in his article 'Berlusconi in Tehran', the public intellectual Slavoj Žižek argues that Berlusconi is 'a significant figure' and 'Italy an experimental laboratory where our future is being worked out'. The piece offers a series of reflections on the then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom we ought to understand as 'a kind of Iranian Berlusconi'

because of the 'mixture of clownish posturing and ruthless power politics'. As in Žižek's narrative, *Girlfriend in a Coma* figures Italy in multiple ways as a problem and as a fragment of the future. Typically, Northern European travellers, writers and commentators have constructed Italy as the depository of the past, particularly in the context of a reflection on modernising processes. In fact, the position that Italy functions as an 'experimental laboratory where our future is being worked out' may rely on a particular account of the past, according to which Italy set a precedent for what is now a widespread status quo. The visual juxtaposition of Florence as 'the past' and London as 'the present' in the first sequences of the documentary introduces the positioning of Italy throughout the film as a landmark moment in an imagined, coherent 'history of the West'. Emmott's voice-over relates the past to the present as follows: 'Italy pioneered capitalism 500 years ago and used it brilliantly fifty years ago, but now it just cripples big business, good or bad'. Later in the film, an animation with a rapid timeline of Italian history reveals that this statement is a reference to the Medici banking system. Within the discourse of the film, casting Renaissance Italy as the 'origin of capitalism' enables a particular interpretation of Destination Italy, the 'land of beauty', as the future of capitalism. In fact, in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Italy's feminised figure does not represent a place, a people or a national project but functions as a battleground between ideas about what capitalism is, and what it may transform into in the future.

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