

## Silence

### 2.1 WHO'S AFRAID OF SPAGNOLO?

In the only May that Turin spent under the Italian Social Republic, Marco Ramperti, a writer now forgotten but then appreciated by colleagues such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Ezra Pound, wrote one of those emphatic pieces of journalism that Italians were used to reading during Fascism:

the most infected waters of eroticism concurred to feed that dirty rivulet, in which no drop of clear national spring flowed. Indeed, its director is known to everyone to be meritorious both in the personal and in the political habit, promoter of anti-fascist subscriptions on that beastly 25 July that offered bounties to all perverts, whether of fact or of thought. (Ramperti 1944)

The man reproached for being a 'pervert', both in fact and in thought, was Luchino Visconti, a cultivated aristocratic horse breeder who, a few years before, had the idea of giving up horses to direct movies, embrace communism and 'come out of the closet', more or less all in one (Rondolino 2003: 62–63). The 'dirty rivulet' was his first achievement, *Ossessione* (1943), which had a chance to be re-released a few months after the fall of Fascism on 25 July 1943.

The story has Visconti influenced by Jean Renoir's realist aesthetic and leftist ideology, then coming back to Italy to work on a scenario

based on Giovanni Verga's *L'amante di Gramigna* in total harmony with his communist comrades from the magazine *Cinema*. The project was then abandoned because of censorship in favor of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The result was *Ossessione*, 'a precocious, maligned, and yet marvelous flower of the still inexistent neorealist movement' (Nowell-Smith 2003: 15), whose hero, Gino (Massimo Girotti), not only seduces a married woman, Giovanna (Clara Calamai), and helps her murder her husband, but also befriends a man (Elio Marcuzzo) who seems to have returned from the Spanish civil war (as hinted at by his nickname, Spagnolo) and implies a refusal of the fascist order by being a tramp. Spagnolo 'more or less picks him up by an offer to pay the penniless Gino his fare' (2003: 23) and tries to convince him to abandon Giovanna to stay with him. When they share a bed in a cheap hotel for one night, he even lights a match and stares at Gino's body. In other words, Spagnolo is depicted as a homosexual as clearly as possible in a still fascist Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Forgacs raises a critical issue with this interpretation:

The problem with this positing of a gay storyline in *Ossessione*, as with other films of this period, is that it remains so well closeted that it is at best a submerged 'subtext' which can only be made to emerge by a knowing, 'productive' reading of looks, gestures, and innuendoes. (2002: 165)

These cautions raise a problem too: although consubstantial with good scholarship, they can be misleading in a way that falls into line (if involuntarily) with the reconstruction of a biased history whose roots are culturally and politically specific (we will trace them throughout the chapter). In truth, making general assumptions about what a particular audience was or was not able to do is as risky as overinterpreting texts. Audiences, in other words, have to be put in their context as much as

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<sup>1</sup>Nowell-Smith sees a problem in this interpretation, because Spagnolo betrays Gino (2003: 23–24): others have thought the same (see for example Micciché 1990: 169; Rondolino 2003: 132), because of the disquieting shadows we see through the glass of the door which prevents the audience from hearing Spagnolo's interrogation by the police. However, not only does he refuse to collaborate in all the screenplays (IG unit 10, files 1, 3–4, 6–8 and MNC sub-series *Soggetti e sceneggiature*, 11–12), also in the film he rejects any help from the policeman. It is made clear that he is forced to go to the police, and the interrogation does not influence the events: afterward, the policeman still surveils Gino and the inquiry is resolved only by the testimony of two drivers.

films. For this reason, throughout the book I shall draw attention to evidence of what audiences were actually able (or at least expected) to grasp, sometimes on the basis of clues that nowadays seem cryptic.

In the case of *Ossessione*, when we examine the documentation available, we start to see how these cautions are debatable.

First of all, the widespread story about the film that I have summarized is inaccurate and unsatisfactory. An analysis of all the unrealized projects surrounding *Ossessione*, instead of just the ones based on Verga's works, proves that Visconti was more interested in melodrama than in realism, and that both sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular were already a main concern of his (Giori 2011b: 21–42). This is not to say that Visconti faked an interest in politics, nor that we should replace his traditional image with that of an anachronistically proto-gay director, but simply that ideology and sexuality (as a means to provoke the audience and to produce resistant meanings) were deeply intertwined in his poetics from the very beginning. Contrary to the official tenets of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) of those years, Visconti linked the realm of the private with ideology, using the first to express his political ideas in a way that was to be typical of most of his works. If we cannot understand properly his achievements (both in the cinema and on the stage) without considering his political faith, neither can we if we remove his homosexuality from his critical assessment, as reviewers and scholars have done (and often still do), sanctioning a habit originated by precise political agendas.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if Spagnolo was an original contribution to the story by the group of leftist writers and militants involved in the script, his homosexuality was forced into the text by Visconti himself *against* his comrades' wishes. It is not by chance that communist leader Mario Alicata, after receiving the first pictures from the set, wrote assistant director Giuseppe De Santis: 'How is the Corporal turning out? [...] I entrust you the Corporal who is the character that even on the set *you must* treasure most.'<sup>3</sup> He appreciated the "documentarian" atmosphere of the pictures, but mistrusted Visconti's intentions toward the Corporal (later renamed Spagnolo) to the point of asking De Santis to keep an eye on

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<sup>2</sup>Landy (2008: 191–197), for example, still ignores homosexuality when analyzing Visconti's image, differently from what she does with Pasolini.

<sup>3</sup>Letter dated 30 June 1942, MNC, sub-series Corrispondenza, 13, 2 (my emphasis).

him. Alicata learned to his cost that Visconti could not be controlled and eventually repudiated Spagnolo as ‘very equivocal, while he should have been the critical conscience of the film’ and ‘the positive character’ (in Tinazzi 1966: 186). Pietro Ingrao, a less inflexible PCI leader, did the same, complaining that ‘in the film it was not clear if [Spagnolo] was an anti-fascist or a homosexual’ (in Vitti 2006: 424). It is worth noting that in both cases being a homosexual and having an anti-fascist conscience (or just being positive) are conceived as oppositional and irreconcilable, as if Visconti himself had not proved the contrary.

Visconti’s comrades did not share his perspective on the political aspect of private life, which only thirty years later would become a commonality within the Italian left. They could understand even less how in his view homosexuality was consistent with the creation of a resistant character, not different from militancy in Spain. In other words, Visconti used homosexuality, to borrow Mosse’s formulation, as a ‘countertype’ (1996: 6) to the ideal of manliness cherished by Fascism.

Once we have clarified that the subtext was there, and was also something more than a simple subtext, we should address the second doubt: Were the productive readings necessary to locate it so abstruse as to be beyond the audience’s competence? *Si gira* inventoried ‘the bed where two men sleep’ among the film’s obscenities (Anonymous 1943). The editor in chief of *Film* ironically wondered: ‘What does Elio Marcuzzo do? Does he pay the train ticket of every passenger caught without it by the collector, or are his attentions particular to Massimo Girotti?’ (Doletti 1943: 2). More interesting is the review by Adriano Baracco: ‘Then Girotti got out from the truck, showed his chest, crossed the road, showed his chest, went inside the inn, always showing square kilometers of chest’, and again, ‘rods and rods of chest, shoulders, back and whatever a man can decently expose’ (1943: 5). A certain disappointment is finally shown in how Calamai (then rated among the most alluring actresses of the Italian star system) ‘is kept in the background by a direction feasting with exaggerated complacency on Girotti’s muscles’ (1943: 5). The fact that the description of the beginning is wrong makes it even more meaningful: Gino shows only his back and is fully dressed, but Baracco was so impressed by the novelty of Visconti’s work on Girotti’s half-naked body as to associate it with the film as a whole.

Besides the link between Gino and Spagnolo, Baracco’s notes imply a homosexual sensibility at work in the direction, and if we can fully understand how *Ossessione* was revolutionary in its realism compared to

the trend of so-called *telefoni bianchi* comedies, we can also understand how groundbreaking it was in depicting the male body in comparison with other of Girotti's works, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Un pilota ritorna* (1942) or Alessandro Blasetti's *La corona di ferro* (1941). The first is a fascist propaganda film about a bunch of idealized aviators ('All great guys', one of them maintains) whose male bonding is perfectly aligned with that promoted by the regime, thus is without any ambiguity (not to mention they are always fully clothed). The second provided Girotti with the first important role in his career, a Tarzan-style hero often half-naked but involved in asexually infantile adventures and always kept at a safe distance by the camera, which prefers to emphasize the female body, to the point of daringly showing a bound woman with naked breasts.

It seems that grasping the undercurrent in the relationship between Gino and Spagnolo was simpler than we might think nowadays, also because Visconti hit his target: fascist masculinity was offended, both by the movie and by the director's private life (as proven by Ramperti's reaction). We should wonder instead why homosexuality, if it was so perspicuous, was not considered by critics as widely as murder or adultery. I argue that the answer lies in the anomalous release, since the film circulated patchily and in different versions of which we know almost nothing, so that it is not possible to ascertain what exactly each critic saw and how much Spagnolo's part was affected by the cuts in the various prints.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we should remember that the topic was not one that could be addressed easily in the press. This point requires detailed discussion, also because it brings us back to the roots of the subsequent critical under-valuation and academic cautions that we are considering.

## 2.2 BURIED IN THE DARKNESS

Since the promulgation of the Zanardelli Code in 1889, homosexuality has never been outlawed in Italy. However, what could seem unusually fair legal treatment has been a strategy to remove homosexuality from public debates (Dall'Orto 1988), as happened in other Western countries

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<sup>4</sup>For example, Rondi (1998: 43) remembers that the scene of the match 'had vanished into thin air' and was later recovered by Visconti, which proves also that its meaning was clear to whoever cut it. I have discussed these issues and *Ossessione* at greater length in Giori (2011a: 43–82).

since the late eighteenth century and then following the Napoleon Code (Dall’Orto 2015: 424–425, 433–439). This was firstly for ‘national honor’: a law would imply that the crime was so widespread as to make it necessary; and secondly for discretion: it was better for the public to ignore the very existence of this ‘crime’ and to leave it—in the words of a jurist of the time—‘buried in the darkness’.<sup>5</sup>

For the same reasons, during Fascism a norm intended to outlaw homosexuality, although largely appreciated, was considered counter-productive and in 1930 the Rocco Code maintained the same strategy (Benadusi 2012: 95–110). So did the Republic: proceedings were instituted only when the defendant was charged with public indecency, solicitation of prostitution or violence. Otherwise, it was considered just a matter of private conscience to be handled by priests. In this way, homosexual acts could be taken to court without criminalizing them in order not to speak their name.

The result was a ‘repressive tolerance’; that is, a ‘tacit social pact’ according to which only infractions of the silence were prosecuted, while homosexuals were ‘discouraged from developing a conscience of an oppressed minority and from gathering in lobbies’ (Dall’Orto 2015: 438). Like under Fascism, control varied from indifference to repression, depending on who was involved, and homosexuality was often used as a weapon to throw discredit on an adversary.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Republic inherited from Fascism the factual hypocrisy which had permitted powerful bureaucrats to live their homosexuality undisturbed, so long as public pretenses were maintained.<sup>7</sup> This choice was perfectly consistent with the general continuity between Fascism and the Republic (Pavone 1995), which involved cinema as well. Film censorship in particular was administered on the basis of the 1923 fascist regulation until the new law was passed in 1962, and indeed even later by bureaucrats renowned for their collaboration with the regime, most notably Nicola De Pirro, General Director of Entertainment until 1963. Even

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<sup>5</sup>P. Tuozi, quoted in Dall’Orto (1988).

<sup>6</sup>If publicly exposed, homosexuality could end a political career, as happened to monarchist Vincenzo Cicerone, prosecuted in 1951 for threatening his former lover, after he had decided to leave him and marry. The case was widely covered by the newspapers.

<sup>7</sup>This was most notably the case for Leopoldo Zurlo and Carmine Senise, chief of theatre censorship and of police, respectively, who managed to live *more uxorio* with Mussolini’s approval (Benadusi 2012: 276–279).

the neofascist *Meridiano d'Italia* admitted that it was a bad law (Bolzoni 1958), but Catholics defended it as well as all the laws which facilitated their control of morality, their first purpose being 'to safeguard and hold the positions already attained during Fascism' (Miccoli 1994: 552).

Although only 1% of Italians, according to a 1947 survey, considered the repression of immorality an urgent issue to be addressed by the government (Luzzatto Fegiz 1956: 555), it was at the center of the political agenda in the ten years of the so-called *centrismo*, when the Christian Democracy party (DC) ruled the country after the 1949 election, sticking to the directions coming from the Church in the form of recommendations, pressure, memos, petitions, demonstrations, press campaigns, more or less official cooperation with government bills and the administration of the media (Barbanti 1991: 162–164). Nonetheless, as a consequence of its 'dual structure, both clerical and lay, visible and invisible' (Allum 1995: 121), the DC maintained a margin of pragmatic autonomy that grew over the years.

Pius XII was particularly keen on exercising temporal power (for example steering votes and excommunicating communists) through 'fundamentalist and intolerant pressure' (Miccoli 1994: 581) with two main purposes: to foil the spread of communism and to establish a Catholic civilization as the unique and sufficient answer to every issue put out by society. A primary task was to fight back against the challenges to traditional mores that were surfacing, from sexual education to divorce, artificial insemination and homosexuality, in a general effort to restore a gender imbalance sanctioned by the law, with procreation as the only accepted alternative to abstinence, and silence around sex. Besides normative regulation of family life, sex was a topic to be discussed only within the inner circle of educated experts (preferably male), otherwise it was automatically labeled obscene and pornographic.

In spite of acknowledging minor concessions (such as the admissibility of pleasure in marital sex), in 1950 Pius XII called a holy year and canonized Maria Goretti, murdered in 1902 for defending her virginity. He then ensured the consistency of the moralization process already undertaken during Fascism, with the placet of the regime (Wanrooij 1990: 97–131), by his predecessor Pius XI, who had started Goretti's beatification procedure in 1935, established the doctrine around the family with encyclical *Casti Connubii* in 1930, and inaugurated Catholic Action (AC) in 1922. Along with other minor organizations, AC was intended to 'combine efforts with the Christian party on the social ground, with

a work meant to be of collaboration, that was in fact of direction and control' (Miccoli 1994: 558). Since the war AC had spared no effort to organize 'moral decontamination',<sup>8</sup> publishing a plethora of booklets, handbooks and novels to shape the minds of youngsters according to the values of modesty and chastity, and warning against increased opportunities for leisure in the form of dance, sport, holidays at the seaside and of course entertainment (Tonelli 2003: 20–114). Its General Secretariat for Morality (founded in 1923) produced fortnightly reports about the activity of surveillance of every indecency all over the country, putting pressure on institutions through a flux of complaints and petitions. Following closely the evolution of the law, it monitored a wide range of topics, from prostitution to swimsuits, the spread of erotica and of clandestine pornography, and everything related to homosexuality. Major concerns were represented by *varietà*, *rivista* and *avanspettacolo*,<sup>9</sup> more or less scientific magazines on sexuality, and the exploitation of cinema for sexual purposes by a plethora of magazines, accused also of spreading letter columns with sentimental content. Thus, while evaluation of the moral and aesthetic content of films—that is, censorship for parish cinemas, which in 1954 were already one-third of the market—pertained to the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico (CCC), AC was more concerned with complementary surveillance of paratexts (magazines, posters, trailers, lobby cards and even picture cards of actresses produced by a chocolate company) and of practical aspects of spectatorship, such as the frequency with which the prohibition on minors was disregarded by cinema owners.<sup>10</sup>

The agenda of the PCI—the majority of the lay opposition—was as conservative on the matter of family and the private sphere, excluded from the political arena but controlled by the party's hierarchy, typically in accordance with a dual morality: the leaders simply did not follow the strict rules they imposed on the lower members. The main preoccupation was to avoid any scandal and to give an impression of strict morality for propaganda purposes, at the cost of restraining its laicism and

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<sup>8</sup>General Secretariat for Morality, report of 30 September 1946, ISACEM box 16.

<sup>9</sup>Allusions to sex were a regular part of the recipe of these Italian versions of the variety show and the revue (the *avanspettacolo* was instead a shorter type of revue typically preceding the projection of a movie).

<sup>10</sup>An effort defined as 'enormous' in the report of 31 January 1953 (ISACEM box 17).

reformism to win the votes of the moderates (Bellassai 2000a; Tonelli 2003: 117–245). In fact, the ‘two churches’, as the DC and the PCI were commonly defined, used to make the same allegations of immorality against each other: the DC ascribed homosexuality to the general amorality leading communists to free love (as often implied by Cold War propaganda); the PCI considered it a bourgeois vice proper to capitalism. Not even the divergent minority opinions that emerged after the crisis of 1956 were capable of affecting the chauvinist and homophobic framework of the party until the 1970s (Giovannini 1980; Casalini 2010). Homophobia served instead as ‘an important purpose of identity’ (Bellassai 2000b: 269), since the ideal workman had to be as masculine as the soldier idealized by extreme right-wing ideologies.

As for the relics of this patriarchal ideal, based on bourgeois nationalism and respectability, and imposed by Fascism after a two-centuries-long elaboration (Mosse 1985), they were inherited by the extreme right wing, fragmented in different branches but capable of finding immediate visibility after the war thanks to dozens of periodicals (Bozzi Sentieri 2007) and the guidance of the neofascist Italian Social Movement (MSI). The celebration of a revised memory of the regime and the opposition to modernism, communism and the Republic were certainly the main recognizable features of their imagery (Germinario 2005), but a deep nostalgia for the nationalist ideal of masculinity (thus of traditional family and gender roles) and homophobia should be added to the list too.

On the whole, despite the ‘growing discrepancy’ between the ‘repressive model’ of ‘legal families’ and real ones, the traditional family remained a ‘central symbolic reference point’ (Caldwell 1995: 150–151). Thus, even if other parts of lay culture (as we will see) militated against it and the international pressures of the Cold War permitted American culture (including cinema) to spread alternative models, as far as homosexuality was concerned the strategy of silence proved to be successful in the years of *centrismo*.

The removal was first of all a matter of knowledge: it was meant to prevent a large audience from knowing the very existence of homosexuality. Any mention was conceived as a form of sanction. However, the preference accorded to silence over denunciation betrays also an anxiety about unmentionable pleasures surfacing from the connection between knowledge and temptation, imitation and arousal, especially in the case of cinematic images. The Church had already learned how images might

elude control, having produced over the centuries an enormous repertoire of nudes whose sublimation has constantly been at risk of receding, exposing ‘the first fear, that of the body itself, because it attaches to one of the most fundamental fears of all images (namely, that they appeal to the senses)’ (Freedberg 1989: 344).<sup>11</sup>

This potentially ungovernable ‘power of images’ explains why cinema was classified among what moral theology defines as ‘proximate occasions of sin’; that is, those conditions which imply an almost certain stimulus to sin, resistance to which would require an uncommon amount of will (this is why the Church used to forbid priests to go to the cinema). If sexuality was a matter of controlling instincts through rationality, after the two had been separated as a result of original sin (Pelaja and Scaraffia 2008), the first duty of a believer was to avoid temptation, for example restraining from going too often to the cinema—once a week was ‘already too much’, according to the popular weekly *Famiglia Cristiana* (Anonymous 1960)—and never seeing films judged unsuitable by the CCC. The same magazine resorted to a bloodcurdling example to discourage readers from transgressing, that of a poor child taken by her mother to see a forbidden movie, who as a result found herself covered in blood after a tubercular viewer behind her got a coughing fit. This was said to be a sign from God to make the mother see how the child’s soul was being contaminated in front of the moving images (Atanasio 1956: 3).

If such images appeal to the senses, no one is safe in front of them because, according to the confessional framework fixed by the Counter-Reformation, desires and fantasies (for example, those elicited by images) are enough to sin.<sup>12</sup> The bishop of Vittorio Veneto (future pope John Paul I) explained these concepts through a vivid metaphor:

Because of original sin, we are, all of us, people who have to walk having a piggy on a leash. [...] we pass along a ditch and the piggy throws itself into it, grunting happily [...] In the case of cinema: it is necessary to make sacrifices and to stay at home when it is a ‘ditch’, from where one comes back with the soul splattered with mud.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>See also the case of Christ’s nudity investigated by Steinberg (1997).

<sup>12</sup>See Della Maggiore and Subini (2017) on the consequences of these premises on the relationship between Catholics and cinema.

<sup>13</sup>Published in 1961 in *Informazioni* 4 (1): 6.

The problem was that silence could only be maintained at enormous cost within a culture that is extremely outspoken about sex and has tried to regulate and control it through a ‘veritable discursive explosion’, as Foucault famously argued, ‘speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as *the secret*’ (1990: 17 and 35). In other words, society was going in exactly the opposite direction. Nonetheless, until the late 1950s the strategy of silence allowed only a circumscribed number of discourses about homosexuality. The Catholic press addressed homosexuality only in magazines at a high level,<sup>14</sup> while the communist press considered it as taboo if involving a comrade: even the news of Pasolini’s expulsion from the party in 1949 for having harassed two adolescents was somehow censored (Tonelli 2015: 78–80), and Visconti’s proclivities were never mentioned. As for the ultraconservative press, when Julius Evola wrote for the MSI weekly *Meridiano d’Italia* the first series of articles on sexuality, between June and September 1952, it was just to claim the necessity of reasserting traditional gender roles: homosexuality was still outside the scope. Analogously, the foundation of the French homophile magazine *Arcadie* was reported by *Il Borghese* without any anxiety, as a curiosity doomed to failure, and by a female journalist claiming to be in rapport with many homosexuals (Grigioni 1954).

Broadly speaking, newspapers mentioned homosexuality only in relation to illustrious people and historical events, literature and news from abroad, or to defend a party from their opponents’ accusations. However, the large majority of articles were of a completely different kind.

### 2.3 CRIME NARRATIVE

On 15 December 1945, in the studio of a Roman sculptor, the corpse of Adriano Micheletto, a set designer in his thirties who had graduated two years earlier from Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, was found in a pool of blood, half naked, his hands tied. ‘Easily ascertaining the sexual anomaly of the victim’ (Anonymous 1946b), the police soon found the murderers, despite many of those who knew something refusing

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<sup>14</sup>As in the case of *Famiglia e civiltà*, the journal of AC’s Fronte della Famiglia. See for example Flarer (1951) and the reviews published against Kinsey’s reports, considered ‘a sad and bulky mountain of indecencies’ equal to pornography and an ‘expression of individuals obviously abnormal’ (Ajassa 1952: 37).

to collaborate (1946a). The killers were two Turinese adolescents who had moved to Rome ‘to take advantage of inverts’ (1946b). Micheletto was penniless, but had a place where the two could stay in exchange for some ‘ignoble performance’ (1946a). When they decided to go back to Turin, they robbed him of the few things he had (a pair of shoes and a double-breasted jacket). One of them pretended to start intercourse to distract the victim so that the other could hit him with a wooden statuette: ‘The blood sprinkled from the ears and from the nose, the skull was flashy as a rubber ball’ (1946b). Then Micheletto was tied, ‘thrown to the ground and finished off, his head repeatedly beaten on the flooring’ (G. R. 1945).

These chronicles about a set designer denied the chance to make a career at Cinecittà by two hustlers perfectly illustrate the first cultural narrative about homosexuality to have emerged and circulated broadly after the war. Such articles drew on knowledge established in the previous decades, mostly through the alliance between law and medicine,<sup>15</sup> but their number, length and detailed accounts were a novelty for Italian readers (as was the fashion for crime magazines), because Fascism had kept crime news under strict control and severe censorship (Cesari 1978: 32–33).

Crime narrative’s main features can be summarized under three points.

The first is *pederasty*, which established four fixed types. Homosexual adults related almost invariably to youths who did not recognize themselves as homosexuals, resorting instead to a paradigm according to which ‘whoever has an active role in a homosexual act is in reality a “male,” while whoever takes the passive role is *in reality* a kind of woman’ (Dall’Orto 1990: 796–797). This paradigm of engagement and denial separating sexual acts and sexual identities (regardless of the fluidity of actual private practices) was common to many professional hustlers and casual trades<sup>16</sup>; that is, unemployed members of the underclass in need of an income, or conscripts, of whom in the postwar period there

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<sup>15</sup>This is not to claim that homosexuality was invented in the nineteenth century, a notion widely debated by historians, but simply that ‘the medicalization of the sexually peculiar’ (Foucault 1990: 44) was a crucial root of the narrative under scrutiny.

<sup>16</sup>I borrow for simplicity the anglophone jargon of the time (see Friedman 2003). Reay (2010) has shown how the American hustling scene was then organized around a very similar paradigm. In Italian the most common terms were *battoni* for hustlers, *ragazzi di vita* (after the title of Pasolini’s first published novel) for trades and *mantenuti* for kept boys.

was no shortage. Trades were available for occasional intercourse or even a longer relationship as kept boys in exchange for food, cigarettes or a room, or just for sexual relief, since the trades could not afford to pay prostitutes while girlfriends were ‘carefully supervised and chaperoned until marriage’ (1990: 797). To complicate the picture further, homosexuals understood this paradigm in accordance with the historical-literary model of pederasty going back to the ancient Greeks and already a major homosexual fantasy in the past two centuries (Aldrich 1993), while their opposers chose competing knowledge, spanning from religion to criminology, medicine and psychoanalysis (often mixing them to different degrees).<sup>17</sup>

The second point is *violence*, both physical (always emphasized by the news with the most gruesome details) and psychological, since romance between men was portrayed as always unhealthy to legitimate the idea that homosexuality was a threat to family and society. Charging Micheletto’s story with melodramatic overtones, a magazine’s description of the crime scene lingered over the statue ‘of a satyr embracing a nymph. The sensuality emanating from the statue was in some way unhealthy, as if the vices of the author had permeated the marble’ (G. R. 1945).

The third is *freemasonry*. Since a relationship between two ‘real’ homosexuals based on mutual affection was almost inconceivable,<sup>18</sup> the only bond that they were meant to establish was a subversive form of lobbying or pimping (to organize private orgiastic parties or even clandestine brothels). Cinema, as we will see in the next chapter, was understood as a major part of this organization. Thus, inquiries were customarily restricted to the homosexual milieu, dangerous in itself (in the news it was always coupled with adjectives such as fishy, filthy,

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<sup>17</sup>When Pasolini was prosecuted in 1949, he quoted Gide to explain his behavior to the police officers, who could understand it only as the corruption of minors. Similarly, when the most outspoken sustainer of pederasty, Ettore Mariotti (an above-suspicion fascist theoretician of racism, now professor at the University of Naples), published *La neofilia* (1952), opposing it to homosexuality (which he despised), he was sentenced for obscenity (Armano 2014: 101–114).

<sup>18</sup>Arbasino’s *L’Anonimo Lombardo* (1959) is the exception that proves the rule with its love story between two college students which openly disqualifies the pederastic model: ‘Tenderness for the little kid of *Death in Venice* did not prevail, and even less that for Gide’s little Arabs: come back after military service and a little bit of sport, kids’ (2009: 470).

sordid or squalid), and were often said to have been obstructed by an oath of *omertà* specific to this freemasonry.

These elements and types were combined in a limited range of variations to produce formulaic plots, whose mainstay was a certain degree of culpability of the homosexual adult: even when he was the victim, he always played an ominous role in the event for having led a 'normal' boy to deviate. Despite Micheletto's savage execution, what shocked the communist newspaper *l'Unità* was that the boys 'had slept with the worst kind of perverts, for money' (Anonymous 1946a), and when giving notice of the sentence, it wrote that the two killers 'were pushed to murder by the corrupted milieu they lived in' (Anonymous 1947).

In plots revolving around prostitution, it was a matter of seducing a minor (to the extreme of pedophilia, since it was always mixed up with homosexuality) or of subjugating him if involved in a longer relationship, even when it was the boy who approached the client. Blackmail and robbery plots were ascribed to compulsory seduction: homosexuals were described as incapable of restraining from hunting an enormous number of prey, even if they knew that in so doing they were exposing themselves to criminals. An almost mandatory object in these news reports was the victim's notebook, filled with hundreds of names: it served to stress both the insatiability of homosexual lust and the fearful spread of male prostitution.

Murder was simply the worst possible outcome of these plots. Hustlers could fall victim to occupational hazards such as unstable clients, attempted rape or (if kept boys) weariness: *Nuovo Meridiano* warned that 'when the pleasure ends [...] the invert reacts in two ways, either ending the relationship or even physically suppressing his prey' (Catania 1961: 12). Otherwise, they were killed for having tried to free themselves, whether because they found a better arrangement or because they wanted to marry (of all plots, this is the one that more directly points to the conflict between homosexuality and family discourse). Indeed, homosexuals were thought to be tremendously jealous: 'extremely dangerous are those who fall in love with their lovers', wrote a policeman in his memoirs in 1958 (Camilleri 1958: 38). If homosexuals were the victims, they were beaten or killed due to lack of agreement on the payment or a blackmail or robbery gone badly. At trial it was customarily a 'chicken and egg' situation: the defense claimed that the youths had been corrupted by their clients (or that they were defending themselves from rape), while the prosecution argued that they were

already so corrupted as to be regular hustlers, even clever enough to make their partner keep them.

On the whole, crime narrative was established as the most influential discourse on homosexuality of the postwar period through a repetitiveness which since the early 1950s had generated an impression of consistency and a vicious circle (to the point of being used itself as proof of the criminal tendencies allegedly innate in homosexual people) and reinforced a distorted profile that heavily influenced politics and other media representations.

It was indeed in the aftermath of the murder of a well-known physician in Rome by two hustlers during a robbery, in September 1952, that one of the most popular film magazines, *Hollywood*, published the first survey of cinematic representations of homosexuality (Castellano 1952). This was part of the unprecedented attention generated on the issue: the press debated the scabrousness of such news, from the Catholic *Il Quotidiano* (organ of AC) and *L'Osservatore Romano* to the socialist *La Giustizia*; on October 25 the chief of police issued a circular to intensify controls and roundups; and DC senator Vincenzo Menghi proposed the opening of penal work settlements for homosexuals, or, at least, to revive fascist internment.<sup>19</sup> For the first time a high-profile literary magazine, *Ulisse*, devoted an entire issue to homosexuality, lamenting the lack of reliable data and the need to collect statistics to overcome prejudices and subjective impressions (Somogyi 1953: 632). Yet the scholars contributing to the issue gave a large number of examples of such biased perspectives and of the range of knowledge involved when dealing with homosexuality: being a matter of sickness, abnormality, crime or immorality, it was always within the scope of medicine, psychoanalysis, law and religion.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Atti parlamentari*, Senato della Repubblica, 19 November 1952, pp. 37101–37103. Art. 181 of Regio Decreto 18 June 1931, n. 773, remained in force unchanged until 1956. This peak was also the consequence of both Interpol's directives and Cold War pressures, which resulted in the continuation of the practice of keeping files on homosexuals until the 1980s (see Petrosino 2017). Moreover, to extend police powers was the most common strategy developed by the 'clerical regime' to bypass political and juridical restrictions of the clerical influence (Barbanti 1992).

<sup>20</sup> A physician compared homosexuality to an epidemic (Dreyfus 1953: 641); a canon law scholar explained that it was a sin against the sixth commandment and a crime against decency, both of particular gravity because 'the act is perpetrated subverting the order of nature designed by God' (d'Avack 1953: 681); a jurist claimed it was always a source of

This consonance between crime news and scholarship gives an exact idea of the consistency of the discourse which, through differences of age, class, wealth, roles and orientations proper to the pederastic model, introduced a fundamental imbalance into homosexual relationships. On the one hand, it favored normalization, mimicking the gender asymmetry proper to heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, it associated homosexuality and instability, clearing the way for condemnation on the ground of social danger: establishing a distinction between pubertal experimentation, occasional homosexuality (attributed to factors as diverse as lack of women, economic interest, snobbism, fashion and social climbing) and ‘true’ homosexuality, the primary concern was with internal mobility between the first two categories and the third, since ‘normal’ youths were thought to be at risk of becoming ‘real’ homosexuals by virtue of habit (Dreyfuss 1953: 641), because ‘it is fatal that the trade gradually adapts to the invert’s mentality’ (Catania 1961: 12). This was consistent with the persuasion that homosexuality was some sort of sickness, then contagious. However, it was also an implicit recognition that same-sex pleasures and desires could interest, attract and be performed by self-defining heterosexuals, menacing the rigid distinctions that the bourgeois culture felt the need to establish.

In fact, even before the master discourse on homosexuality fragmented, it was contrasted not only by minority competing narratives (such as those of some literary works published in the 1950s), but also by factual behaviors. After all, Italy had been set for decades in the imaginary as a favored destination of homosexual tourism (Aldrich 1993). In his *Memoirs*, Tennessee Williams (2007: 141–143) recollects enthusiastically the Rome of the late 1940s as a sort of open-air brothel, and if the Italian translations of Kinsey’s reports were received as portraits of a decadent society incompatible with the national character (Morris

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criminality and damage, both individual (because it ‘psychically degrades the one who is affected by it’) and social (since it ‘harms procreation’ and then ‘damages the race’), making a plea for criminalization (Messina 1953: 676); a communist lawyer, Giuseppe Sotgiu, although against criminalization, defined homosexuality as ‘pathological’ and ‘immoral’ (1953: 678); one year later he was toppled by a scandal involving a boy who used to have sex with Sotgiu’s wife in front of him and—according to his own testimony, quoted by several newspapers—with Sotgiu himself.

2013), when Kinsey himself traveled to Europe in 1955, accompanied by a young Kenneth Anger, to observe the homosexual underworld, he got the impression that Italy was remarkably freer than the USA (Jones 1997: 755–758).

The consistency of the official discourse notwithstanding, movies were capable of reflecting the reality underneath them and were more the result of all these conflicting perspectives than of just the dominant one.

## 2.4 UNDER THE LAW OF SILENCE

Crime narrative deeply influenced movies and their audience, as in the case of the housewife quoted in Chap. 1. Not immediately though, because Catholics opposed it too as an infraction of silence, equating its sensational overtones to pornography. Besides, silence was imposed on the movies too, mostly through the censorship reorganized by Giulio Andreotti as soon as he was appointed Undersecretary of State and delegated to oversee cinema and theater, in 1947. The new procedure was complicated enough to allow the widest intervention on the basis of all sorts of issues, despite cinema having been within the scope of art. 21 of the Constitution adopted on 22 December 1947, which forbade only works ‘offensive to public morality’.

Two different levels of censorship were in fact established. The first was the *revisione preventiva*; that is, a preventive judgment of the screenplay (or at least of a treatment), mandatory for the producers to have access to public funds. At this stage, they were ‘advised’ (usually off the record, even if clues of these verbal negotiations remain in the written documents) on what to skip or change (to the extreme of totally discouraging production) in order to avoid problems with the second (and actual) form of censorship, which could refuse a film the certificate required to be released, or forbid admission to minors (under 16 until 1962, under 14 or 18 from then on). The producer could appeal and have a second judgment by a different committee, but the ministry could also withdraw an already approved and released film and change the certificate, especially after a complaint from either an organization or a private citizen.

This system guaranteed government intervention, but also produced a certain amount of confusion, often managed backstage through what

Andreotti called ‘preventive contacts’,<sup>21</sup> mostly phone calls to producers and directors to suggest changes that they should submit ‘spontaneously’ to the committee. It also allowed the intervention of third parties not provided for by law: a representative of the Church was often unofficially adjunct to the committee (Argentieri 1974: 92),<sup>22</sup> priests themselves were not a rarity on the set (Fallaci 1958: 36) and the judgments of CCC were treated with respect. On this basis, the boundaries of what was considered acceptable on the screen ended up being stricter than the law should have permitted.

In a 1952 circular on the ‘pornographic and immoral press’, Minister of Internal Affairs Mario Scelba pointed out that the ideal goal should be the ‘assiduous work of control and repression intended to put a definitive stop to such an abhorrent phenomenon’,<sup>23</sup> which did not involve just cinema but a wide range of topics, from bikinis to decals on motor scooters and calendars, Salvador Dali’s 1949 drawings for Dante’s *Commedia*, magazines and television.<sup>24</sup> This utopia of total control also shaped film censorship, which tried to include under its influence not only the movies, but also a wide range of paratexts (posters, magazines, free booklets, lobby cards) which had the inconvenience of making the images cut from films available for everyone to see. With these premises, it is easy to understand how the strategy of silence perfectly suited this agenda. This is why it was immediately endorsed by the first DC undersecretaries, Paolo Cappa and Andreotti, who since 1947 had prohibited several plays with homosexual content.<sup>25</sup> In 1949 Andreotti even

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<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Argentieri (1974: 76).

<sup>22</sup>For example, the release of the Italian version of Elia Kazan’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) was delayed for years because of the bad reputation of Williams’ play. In order to decide what to do, censor Giovanni De Tomasi organized a private projection for Monsignor Albino Galletto, director of the Ente dello Spettacolo (responsible for the CCC), taking the print to him by cab, as he himself wrote Andreotti on 25 February 1954 (in ASILS box 1072), only to discover that the movie was more decent than expected, simply because Kazan had already compromised with the Hays Code, also removing homosexuality from the story (see Jeff and Simmons 1990: 172–184).

<sup>23</sup>Prot. n. 10.17358/12985.

<sup>24</sup>See ACS/PCM 2.3.6./32227. Two subfolders relate to the prohibition on importing the French magazine *Paris-Hollywood* (which since 1947 was exploiting American actresses and dozens of anonymous models as cover pin-ups) and on clandestine projections of porn movies.

<sup>25</sup>See ACS/MTT 971.

revoked the certificate already granted to Edouard Bourdet's play *La Fleur des pois* (translated into Italian as *Fior di pisello*), writing his right-hand man, Nicola De Pirro:

The inclination towards a rational 'liberalism', which should always guide censorship committees, cannot lead to a certificate for such works of unnatural, tasteless and repulsive morbidity. This clan of pale and chubby inverts [...] cannot say anything but a word of crude amorality to the Italian audience, who, in my judgment, do not need it. [...] For these reasons I ask to revoke without any hesitation the certificate to *Fior di pisello* and this decision [...] should serve as an indication and a warning for the future, to us and to the companies.<sup>26</sup>

Judging from the work of his successor, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, Andreotti's management of censorship, as far as sex was concerned, might actually be considered to be characterized by a certain 'liberalism'; after all, he was replaced because he was considered too mild, as he himself wrote in his diaries (Andreotti 2007: 137–138 and 161). However, in this note he set the boundaries of his vague open-mindedness, trying to interdict 'without any hesitation' *every* representation of homosexuality. The taboo was meant to be strict and without exception: neither comic nor contemptuous renditions were to be allowed. In 1952, the Secretariat for Morality noted with satisfaction that 'the theatrical censorship is uncompromising' on this theme.<sup>27</sup> It objected instead to the *varietà*, often based on improvisation and difficult (not to mention expensive) to control, and to cinema, asking police enforcers 'to repress severely any reference or allusion to the filthy vice' on *varietà* stages and accusing film censorship of being ineffective because it was ruled according to concepts of 'indecenty' and 'immorality' different from the Catholic ones.<sup>28</sup>

Although this was a severe accusation to Andreotti, the rules he dictated for theater were meant to be applied to the cinema as well, with some result if *Hollywood* appreciated censorship's endorsement of silence about homosexuality:

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<sup>26</sup>Hand-written note dated 25 July 1949, ACS/MTT 716.

<sup>27</sup>Report of 30 June 1952, ISACEM box 17.

<sup>28</sup>Report of 15 February 1953, ISACEM box 17.



Fig. 2.1 *L'ebreo errante* (1948, Goffredo Alessandrini)

Cinema, for its character of wide and uncontrollable circulation, can't address, openly and scientifically, this difficult and repellent topic. Moral reasons or simply natural decency impose the surrounding with silence of this world of sick and vicious people, who can't be terminated either by medicine or by criminology. [...] Thus censorship is inflexible on this matter. A film centered on the figure of an abnormal would be unthinkable, and would certainly be doomed to be isolated. (Castellano 1952: 3)

Already in *Notte di nebbia* (1946) Giovanni Vernuccio had to cut 'every hint at the dancer's homosexuality',<sup>29</sup> while *L'ebreo errante* (1948, Goffredo Alessandrini) was given a certificate only 'on condition to cut the scene of the arrival of the deportees at the concentration camp, in which a guardian orders a deportee to sleep in his barrack, being obvious that he is a sexual invert'.<sup>30</sup> No doubt the scene was audacious: the guardian (who is particularly sordid since he is a prisoner too who harasses the others) bothers the newcomer with suggestive remarks on his beauty and glances at his bare chest; at the end he touches his chin (Fig. 2.1) and murmurs: 'Do you understand me?'<sup>31</sup> In *Amor non ho! Però... però...* (1951, Giorgio Bianchi), the 'young invert' passing by

<sup>29</sup>MIBAC 932.

<sup>30</sup>MIBAC 3676.

<sup>31</sup>Without this scene it was impossible to understand the implication of a subsequent sequence in which the guardian offers the same prisoner a bottle of water, which he refuses despite made thirsty by the hard labour (fig. 2.1).

when the hero saves a suicidal woman was removed,<sup>32</sup> leaving a rough scar in the montage. The one in the episode *Amore 1954* of *Cento anni d'amore* (1953, Lionello De Felice) did not even arrive at the shooting: the reviser of the script asked 'to correct the character of Pierino, whose sexual ambiguities are too explicit', thus this man 'fat and soppy, of dubious sex' disappeared.<sup>33</sup>

However, the bureaucracy regulating censorship was too involuted to insure results strict and consistent enough to erase a problematic subject totally, even when supervised by the highest authorities, as in the case of homosexuality. Besides, there was probably also a strategy behind this, one that could be defined by borrowing Barthes's concept of 'inoculation',

which consists in admitting the accidental evil [...]. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion. [...] the bourgeoisie no longer hesitates to acknowledge some localized subversions [...]. (2012: 264)

In its appreciation of Italian censorship, *Hollywood* realistically observed: 'However, we couldn't say that the issue doesn't come out here and there, in *limited and tolerable* forms, in movies about other topics' (Castellano 1952: 3).<sup>34</sup> The battle against *varietà* sustained by the most conservative Catholics was a lost one, hence the move to turn it to good use as a 'localized subversion' conceded within movies (more or less like the female legs famously allowed by Andreotti within rosy neo-realism),<sup>35</sup> despite *cine-varietà* having already been a major concern in previous years (Mosconi 2006: 44–49).

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<sup>32</sup>MIBAC 11012.

<sup>33</sup>ACS/MTC 1754. Pierino was replaced by a slightly effeminate character who can be seen for just a moment together with two women.

<sup>34</sup>My italics.

<sup>35</sup>Revealing also is the friction between Andreotti and AC when the former replied to the umpteenth lamentation about the inefficiency of censorship against *varietà* by returning the accusation to the sender, since 'the incriminated works were represented in several cities without anyone protesting or deploring them', a 'bad symptom', according to Andreotti, of the failure of AC's 'subsidiary surveillance' (report dated 31 October 1951, ISACEM box 17).

Inoculations recurred throughout the 1950s in marginal and stereotyped (but not necessarily bigoted) characters inspired by the *varietà* or connected to its world, who paved the way for a legion of others in all popular genres. Even if these characters were open to recognition, if not identification, on the part of a homosexual audience lacking alternatives, they were obviously meant to be anxiolytic in disposing of the Other, controlling its threat to the established order by means of a mixture of real-life experience and myth (Gilman 1985: 15–35). In Italy, as in many Western societies, this task was accomplished through a simple gender binary, in accordance with the remains of the theory of the third sex (a label still commonly used by the press in the years considered in this study), often superimposed on the also gender-based inversion model (the ‘true’ homosexual being a female soul in a male body or the other way around). Stereotyped characters were thus conceived according to a repertoire of feminine idiosyncrasies, sensitiveness, fragility and frivolousness already widely established in popular imagery (even in the press, words such as ‘sensitive’ and ‘delicate’ were common euphemisms for homosexual). As remarkably summarized by Kinsey:

It is commonly believed, for instance, that homosexual males are rarely robust physically, are uncoordinated or delicate in their movements, or perhaps graceful enough but not strong and vigorous in their physical expression. Fine skins, high-pitched voices, obvious hand movements, a feminine carriage of the hips, and peculiarities of walking gaits are supposed accompaniments of a preference for a male as a sexual partner. It is commonly believed that the homosexual male is artistically sensitive, emotionally unbalanced, temperamental to the point of being unpredictable, difficult to get along with, and undependable in meeting specific obligations. [...] The homosexual male is supposed to be less interested in athletics, more often interested in music and the arts, more often engaged in such occupations as bookkeeping, dress design, window display, hairdressing, acting, radio work, nursing, religious service, and social work. (Kinsey et al. 1948: 637)

Marking the difference from hegemonic masculinity, such stereotypes had the advantage of making ‘visible the invisible’ through ‘a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness’, and of dispensing ‘with the need to establish a character’s sexuality through dialogue and narrative by establishing it literally at first glance’ (Dyer 2000: 19 and 22). This was a great benefit for the

sake not only of comedic time, but also of a still reticent cinema, which was beginning to show what it still preferred not to name. In *I pompieri di Viggiù* (1949, Mario Mattoli), a ‘harsh hint at homosexuality’ had to be cut from a typical *varietà* sketch casting Carlo Dapporto in the role of an ancient Roman aesthete,<sup>36</sup> but the character’s effeminacy was clear enough in itself, and one year later censors did not pay any attention to a much more daring joke involving an effete dancer in a *rivista* in *Vita da cani* (1950, Mario Monicelli and Steno), when a hotel keeper asks him and his boss if they want a double room, showing a certain repulsion but neither scandal nor surprise. Also a brief sketch like that of Walter Chiari in *Vendetta... sarda* (1952, Mario Mattoli), when he pretends for a moment to be unmanly to avoid being executed ‘like a man’ (‘How can we determine we’re men? In such uncertain times...’), is nothing more than a gag recycled from *varietà*, in which he had built a successful career after the war.

In order not to be derogatory of Italian chauvinism, these characters were often represented as connected to France, the birthplace of these types of spectacles but also the vanguard of sexual freedom, where homosexuals were said to be already liberated and tolerated (Frank 1955).

In *Ci troviamo in galleria* (1953, Mauro Bolognini), a young professor of French is effeminate enough to be understood as homosexual even before Dapporto calls him ‘amphibian’ (a term alluding to gender in-betweenism). The same can be said of Mr. Chéri, a choreographer and teacher of style—a ‘strange guy’, as noted in the revision of the screenplay<sup>37</sup>—who has an uncommonly long part in *Le vacanze del sor Clemente* (1955, Camillo Mastrocinque). Popular comedian Totò, in *Totò a colori* (1952, Steno), when he is talked into pretending to be an artist supposedly from Paris within the jet set of Capri, interprets him as overtly foppish and with abundant double entendres, even if he has to seduce a woman. Another famous sketch played by Totò in the *rivista* was that of the employee of a farcical French hairdresser that can be seen in *Il più comico spettacolo del mondo* (1953, Mario Mattoli), about which the screenplay revision noted ‘some jokes and situations typical of *varietà*’, but claimed that ‘Totò’s presence makes them acceptable’,

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<sup>36</sup>MIBAC 5403.

<sup>37</sup>ACS/MTC 2017.

on condition that ‘the director will care to control the visual measure of some scenes to avoid the intervention of censorship’.<sup>38</sup> In other words, already familiar theatrical sketches by renowned comedians might be inoculated, if restrained within the forms already known; and indeed in Totò’s movies scenes in drag, minor homosexual roles and jokes about them were frequent.

A similar argument could be sustained about other popular comedians, such as Aldo Fabrizi (already cast in *Vita da cani*), whose repertoire of ‘rolling his eyes, gesturing menacingly, puffing up his chest’ (Spinazzola 1985: 96) invariably ended in a strong inclination toward a quiet life.

According to the story submitted for the revision, during the tour of the Parisian night life in *Parigi è sempre Parigi* (1951, Luciano Emmer), Fabrizi was supposed to find himself in a *tabarin* (nightclub) crowded with traditional *apaches* (hooligans) and *gigolettes* (loose women).<sup>39</sup> Emmer then replaced this with what is most probably the first homosexual venue ever seen in an Italian movie. The sequence is introduced by a trivial joke: Fabrizi gets suspicious when he misreads the name of the street as ‘rue frosciòn’, which is the Roman augmentative of *frocio*. This permits the scene to be shrunk, because once inside he (as well as the alerted audience) immediately understands the situation and leaves, but the scene was challenging enough and just survived for a combination of other factors (the French setting, the comedic style, Fabrizi’s popularity as an actor of *varietà*). In fact, ten years later a similar sequence in *La ragazza in vetrina* (1961), another Emmer movie but this time a drama, would be entirely excised by the censors.

Fabrizi’s role in *Papà diventa mamma* (1952, Aldo Fabrizi)—the final episode of a fortunate trilogy on the adventures of the Passaguais—is even odder in a different way and pushes another typical sketch of the *rivista*, the man in drag, to bold consequences. The basic intent is to ape gender stereotypes: hypnotized by a magician, Pepe believes he is a woman and behaves as such, keeping house and sending his wife Margherita to work. He perceives his female behavior (for example wearing his wife’s clothes) as natural, but this does not interfere with his love for Margherita and

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<sup>38</sup>ACS/MTC 1680.

<sup>39</sup>ACS/MTC 1062.



Fig. 2.2 *Papà diventa mamma* (1952, Aldo Fabrizi)

with other everyday habits, including sleeping with his wife (Fig. 2.2). When at the end Margherita is hypnotized too and ‘becomes’ a man, the apex of paroxysm is reached, actually exposing the mobility of gender conventions and their being unrelated to sexual orientation.

Gender is on the contrary deeply related to biochemistry in *La via del successo... con le donne (Io piaccio)* (1955, Mario Bianchi), a film about a scientist (Maldi) paid by a businessman (Tassinetti)—played by Chiari and Fabrizi, respectively—to experiment with hormones. The *varietà* remains in the background (Tassinetti’s lover is a soubrette), but the film resorts to a repertoire of sketches unimaginable outside that or a light comedy. When Maldi tests on himself a formula that gives men fool-proof sex appeal, he ends up in awkward situations like giving Tassinetti a kiss on the mouth or kissing his hand (‘You insatiable lecherous man!’ the businessman answers back), before Fabrizi once again temporarily ‘becomes’ a woman because of the wrong hormone.

Thus, inoculation might be a tricky strategy and paved the way for more daring representations. Even Totò was censored when employed in more radical comedies (Anile 2005: 21). Mario Monicelli’s *Totò e Carolina* (1954) was refused a certificate and then heavily cut, including a comment made by a priest (‘What a world!’) which might be understood as an infraction of the secret of the confessional: he has just confessed a man who a few minutes later comes back and replies ‘New

stuff!<sup>40</sup> to the priest's surprise. All together, this brief exchange, the man's slight effeminacy and Totò's exclamation in the role of a police officer ('I'd arrest him!') should hint at the nature of the sin.

In other cases inoculation ended up contributing to undermining the strategy of silence. The opposition of the magistrate taking part in the committee was not enough to impose a cut on the old actor who tries to seduce Leopoldo in Federico Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953).<sup>41</sup> The expressionist lights, the greasy traits of the character and the failure of the approach were probably considered judgmental enough to compensate for a representation which was in any case already different from the standard inoculation. It was only a short step from theater to cinema: in *Tempi nostri* (1954, Alessandro Blasetti), a foppish Cinecittà costume designer is not shown as a character at whom the viewer is supposed to laugh, but as a recognized professional of the cinema world—that is, as part of reality, and reality was then a serious matter, at the center of the cultural battle over cinema between Catholics and communists.

*Donne senza nome* (1950) is a good case in point. Among the women resident in an Apulian displaced persons camp, Hungarian director Géza von Radványi included, as noted by the reviser of the script, 'clear and declared intimate relationships between a Czechoslovak "man-nish woman" and Giulietta'.<sup>42</sup> The first even assaults another woman who—playing Romeo during a rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet*—kisses her beloved. The director was asked to tone down the 'exasperated realism' of the script, equated to morbidity by Catholics who (to be euphemistic) were trying to discourage neorealism. On the other hand, as in the case of *Ossessione*, communists would never admit to including homosexuality among the social issues and Italians' actual life experiences to be depicted on the screen, so that *l'Unità* accused Radványi of having sacrificed 'any realistic and human content' for the sake of sensation (Ed. ma. 1950). Thus homosexuality was part of the reality or its contrary, depending where morbidity was located.

In truth, if *Ossessione* was a forerunner of neorealism, Visconti's lesson was not acknowledged with regard to sex, as proved by Bergmann and Ingrid, the homosexual Nazis of *Roma città aperta* (1945), used

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<sup>40</sup>Censors requested that this line be changed into 'I'd like to speak to you' (MIBAC 16044).

<sup>41</sup>MIBAC 15005.

<sup>42</sup>ACS/MTC 853.

by Rossellini to convey conventional Manichaeic values, so that ‘Good (hetero)sexuality lines up in the film with good (anti-Fascist) politics and bad (homo)sexuality with bad (Fascist) politics’ (Forgacs 2000: 48), and this opposition is so crucial to the plot that as a result ‘nazism is structured as a sexually perverse rather than historically material phenomenon’ (Ginsberg 1990: 248). In contrast to Visconti, Rossellini prefers to resort to clichés of reversed gender roles: Bergmann is affected and so sensitive as to be annoyed by the prisoners’ screams, while Ingrid is calculating and mannish. Both are overtly narcissistic. Cinematic conventions are also at stake, as aptly noted by Landy, even if her suggestion that this was meant ‘to reveal the powerful clichés endemic to Fascist discourse’ (2004: 98) is an unconvincing attempt to redeem the representation. Instead, Landy is right in describing the lesbian relationship as ‘emptied of thought and feeling’ (2004: 99): Ingrid is resourceful in seducing Marina (she caresses and fondles her, even after she screams ‘I don’t want anymore’, which means she already has given herself to her) and sex is all that remains to a homosexuality conventionally deprived of any kind of affection (again, in contrast to *Ossessione*). This is confirmed by Ingrid’s coldness at the end, when she takes the fur coat away from Marina after she has fainted, meaning that she is ready to dispose of her, guilty of having repented of both her betrayal and her sexual availability to her, besides being no longer useful as an informer.

As for Visconti himself, he was impeded from carrying on his effort of challenging the silence of the establishment (and of his own party), as he had done when filming *Ossessione* or staging Achard’s *Adamo* in 1945, when even a platitude such as his declaration ‘Homosexuality exists, we should not shut our eyes and pretend not to notice it’ (in Anonymous 1945: 52) sounded provocative. In 1949, the director failed to produce his film adaptation of Vasco Pratolini’s novel *Cronache di poveri amanti*,<sup>43</sup> and after 1952 all his projects to stage Tennessee Williams’ plays were impeded by the censors: the two versions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that he had staged in 1949 and 1951, heavily toned down in their

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<sup>43</sup>Reviewing the screenplay of the version directed by Carlo Lizzani in 1954, the reviser noticed with satisfaction that, ‘from a moral point of view’, ‘the scenes incriminated in Visconti’s text have disappeared’ (ACS/MTC 1168). This clearly included the reduction of the part of the Signora and the disappearance of her lesbianism, central to Pratolini’s plot and hinted at by Visconti (whose screenplay is in IG unit 15).

language but still bold,<sup>44</sup> were together considered too scandalous. In 1954 *The Rose Tattoo* was not approved because the censors were suspicious that Visconti had submitted an exaggeratedly softened script,<sup>45</sup> nor was *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* approved in 1955, because even if the ‘pederast’ was almost acceptable since he was ‘suffering [...] to the point that his life is ruined’, Visconti’s intentions were not trusted; the certificate was refused on the consideration that ‘direction could greatly influence the drama’.<sup>46</sup>

Both homophobia and anticommunism—in the mid-1950s so harsh that the possibility of delegitimizing the PCI was considered (Crainz 2005: 6)—played a part in this diffidence toward Visconti. All communist cultural activities were confidentially inspected, from the importation of film stock from the Soviet Union to the release of Soviet movies, the exploitation of filmstrips for propaganda and the organization of cineclubs and theater companies.<sup>47</sup> In a confidential report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in January 1953, Visconti was pointed out as the recruiter of party sympathizers such as Blasetti, Cesare Zavattini, Vittorio De Sica and Riccardo Freda<sup>48</sup>; one month later, in another classified report about a communist theatrical organization, the chief of police considered it pertinent to note that Visconti ‘is notoriously sick with homosexuality’.<sup>49</sup> Anti-communist *lo Specchio* even generalized, claiming that ‘all *capovolti* in the film industry are Marxist’ (Astolfo 1961: 21).<sup>50</sup>

If hushing up audacious representations (especially when coming from the opposition) was the obvious intent of the strategy of silence, less obvious was the fact that it affected as much discourses in line with the social proscription of homosexuality. Even such ominous pedophiles as

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<sup>44</sup>See ACS/MTT 3594.

<sup>45</sup>See ACS/MTT 11435.

<sup>46</sup>See ACS/MTT 14179. For a closer analysis of the collaboration between Visconti and Williams, see Giori (2011a: 123–188) and Clericuzio (2016).

<sup>47</sup>See the documents in ACS/MIPS, Divisione affari riservati, 1948–1950, box 9, folder z123; 1951–1953, box 115 and box 112, folder z84; 1954–1956, box 89, folder z1.

<sup>48</sup>ACS/MIPS, Divisione affari riservati, 1951–1953, box 112, folder z84.

<sup>49</sup>As noted also in a paper from March, perhaps to rectify a previous report dated 9 January in which Visconti was said to have taken part in a congress in Wien with his wife (both the documents are *ibid.*).

<sup>50</sup>The same was claimed also by Preda 1960a.

the ones in Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (1948) and De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) were discouraged. In the article already quoted, *Hollywood* wrote that 'Italian censorship understood the sorrowful and not at all complacent nature of both of them, approving them without hesitation', and considered '*Ladri di biciclette* even a useful cautionary tale' (Castellano 1952: 3), but in truth the censors had hesitated, to say the least. The revisers of the screenplays expressed 'reservations about the reference to a homosexual relationship between the character of the "Teacher" and that of Alfred' (Edmund in the movie) in the case of Rossellini,<sup>51</sup> while called the national honor into question (like during Fascism) about De Sica's 'representation of the old pervert', comparing *Ladri di biciclette* to *Germania anno zero*:

The subject has been recently addressed also by Rossellini in *Germania anno zero*, with polemic spirit, that is to illustrate the moral collapse of the German people. In this case, this representation, mostly descriptive, seems inappropriate, even if restrained within discrete terms, with a tendency to generalize, especially in front of foreigners (the movie is set in Rome), a sore which luckily in Italy is just exceptional.<sup>52</sup>

In both cases, De Pirro wrote at the foot by hand that he had consulted the directors in private, getting from Rossellini the assurance that his film would contain 'no trace of homosexuality' and from De Sica an agreement about 'the necessity of handling the scene of the old pervert with a light touch'. Predictably, De Sica proved more reliable: *Ladri di biciclette* was approved, *Germania anno zero* rejected because the story remained 'based on an impressive crime (parricide) and a suicide committed by an adolescent influenced and exalted by the friendship of a nazi pervert' (in whom all the morally depreciable traits of the plot were then rooted).<sup>53</sup>

This orientation was maintained throughout the 1950s, as proven by *Anders als du und ich – §175* (1957), directed by Veit Harlan, notorious for his Nazi propaganda films. Despite a claim in favor of tolerance toward certain types of homosexuals (the ones who resist their allegedly violent nature), the bourgeois parents are conceived to attract the

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<sup>51</sup>ACS/MTC 443.

<sup>52</sup>ACS/MTC 718.

<sup>53</sup>MIBAC 4155.

sympathies of the viewer. Instead, homosexuals are depicted in a dark light, metaphorically as well as literally: the crucial scene at the house of the seducer is shot with expressionistic light and shadow, oblique camera angles and distorting movements—which are not to be found elsewhere in the movie—to express morbidity. The man and all the boys acquainted with him are mischievous, misogynist, traitorous, egotistic, possessive and inclined toward violence, with the exception of the hero, due to be saved thanks to a providential girl. An Italian distributor tried to import the movie for the first time in December 1959, with the title *Terzo sesso*, but the censors refused to pass it. When the distributor appealed, General Inspector Annibale Scicluna Sorge—a survivor of the fascist regime—wrote undersecretary of state Domenico Magrì that despite ‘the presence of didactic elements intended to teach parents’ how to prevent their sons from being harassed, the movie ‘suits better a Germanic and northern mentality, more open and unbiased on this topic’, but it is ‘totally inadvisable for our audience because of its unduly open language and its cold and documented representation of murky and unhealthy circles’.<sup>54</sup> Thus, even if the movie was understood as unapologetic and instructive effects were envisaged, it was still considered a better strategy not to run the risk at all and to avoid the topic.

However, by then not everyone was in accord on this. The most popular neofascist periodical, *Il Borghese*, appraised the movie for being ‘a means of defense’ against homosexuals and attacked both censors and leftist critics, the first because they were still convinced that it was better ‘not to disturb the dreams of the national public with issues ignored by the large majority’ (Quarantotto 1961: 275–276), the second for not having defended the movie against the prohibition because it was not relevant to their agenda.

The review exemplifies how the ultraconservative press tried to occupy the ground left empty by their political opponents, breaking the silence, that it considered ineffective and hypocritical. It was time for a different strategy: speaking, and speaking aloud, emphasizing the menace as much as possible. An anti-communism even harsher than that of the DC, not to mention ruder, played a major part in this section of the

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<sup>54</sup>MIBAC 30847. A different version of the film was eventually granted a certificate two years later, with the new title *Processo a porte chiuse*.

press, and could be epitomized by the notorious joke of the founder of *Il Borghese*, Leo Longanesi, that ‘the ass beats on the left’,<sup>55</sup> often quoted over the years by the magazine, which anyway was as much averse to the DC (accused of being too moderate, corrupt and to have repudiated its own fascist past).

Although we must be careful in using as reliable testimonies such biased reports, they involuntarily mirror better than any other the growth of the homosexual subculture far before it organized itself politically, and even provided homosexuals with a space of discussion forbidden everywhere else. This is why these magazines are particularly important for anyone researching Italian homosexuality, although around 1960 they represented only 6% of the total press, while 76% was pro-governmental and 14% leftist (Weiss 1961: 156–157). They also show unpredictable affinities to homosexuals’ own discourses and practices, as we will see in the next chapter.

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<sup>55</sup>Based on the double meaning of the verb *battere* (‘to beat’ but also ‘to prostitute oneself’).

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