

removal of sex from society, but rather on the contrary, its proliferation, the will to talk and make it a discourse, to base it as "secret truth" within which to find any explanation on our individuality. For this reason, sex becomes a main concern in the seventeenth century, and a tool of control of the population—not something removed from everyday life.

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## II

## Ilaria Borrelli

### Cinema and Postfeminism

Maristella Cantini

The way for women to be liberated is not by "becoming a man" or by envying what men have and their objects, but by female subjects once again valorizing the expression of their own sex and gender.

—Luce Irigaray

### Introduction

Ilaria Borrelli was born in Naples, Italy, in 1968. She is a writer, actress, scriptwriter, director, and producer. She has performed in movies, plays, and in French and Italian TV series. Between 1999 and 2007, Borrelli published four novels, *Scosse*, *Luccattmì*, *Domani si Gira*, and *Tanto Rumore per Tullia*, for which she received critical acclaim and several prestigious literary prizes. After discovering Borrelli's novels, I became interested in her movies.

In this chapter, I will focus on Borrelli's three feature films: *Mariti in Affitto* (2004), *Come le Formiche* (2007), and *Talking to the Trees* (2012). I will seek to argue that this director's body of work is innovative and is representative of the postfeminist paradigm in Italy.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I will examine this paradigm and attempt to contextualize it in terms of social and cultural responses and explore how, or if, this paradigm differs from Anglo-American parameters.

### Novels

The narrative in Borrelli's novels and cinema contains common features and themes. These include young women or adolescent girls who either narrate the story (in her novels) or act as protagonists (in her movies); unusual and puerile male characters, who turn out to be unreliable or violent; and a social background that is portrayed either as suffocating or unsettling. Borrelli directs her films just as she narrates stories: stretching irony to extreme limits, and creating caricatures of her characters, both female and male, to emphasize the paradoxical pressure of social roles and gender oppression. Her tone is both humorous and bitter.

In her novels, Borrelli's critique is openly directed toward male-controlled culture and social norms that still hold women back from pursuing artistic and intellectual ambitions. Furthermore, in her books, a fierce invective is aimed at mediocre male directors, playwrights, scriptwriters, theater directors, and crewmembers whose arrogance and vulgarity determine women's approach to media and limit their access to the professions within the industry of show business. The filmmaker analyzes the dynamics of male control and violence toward employees, family members, and partners. Borrelli also describes the conditions faced by young women struggling to obtain a role in Italian show business, and the way they are selected, lured, and used by cinema's self-proclaimed masters. In my view, rather than simply being written, her novels are "yelled," and the words leap from the page in an exasperated, loud scream against men's prerogative, against their lack of professionalism, and their predatory techniques, practiced on a wide range of women with the clear intent to sexually exploit them.

In *Scosse* (1999), Borrelli's first novel, the story is recounted by Sandra, a twelve year-old girl who ponders over her family situation. The interlacing of the narrative has a direct, yet disconcerted, tone. The young girl's opinions on adults' immaturity and men's rapacity are all sugared with irony and hilarious comments. Sandra's story spans from her experience in Naples, her native city heavily hit by the earthquake of the 1980s, to her moving to Rome. She describes her life in those years, portraying a composite picture of dysfunctional family relationships, political confusion, and ideological crossroads. Domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual harassment of women in the workplace are only some of Borrelli's concerns. Growing up during the years of dynamic feminist protests, Sandra observes the gap between her mother's theories and her way of living, and her father's militant left-wing reputation. He professes emancipated principles on equality and peace, while at home he acts as a violent patriarch.

In the novels *Luccatmi* (2002) and *Domani si Gira* (2003), the respective protagonists, Simona and Giovanna, struggle to enter the closed

world of cinema as an actress, in the first book, and as a director, in the second. With merciless humorous efficacy, Borrelli denounces the maze of rules women have to negotiate if they intend to enter the temple of acting or directing. Borrelli also describes amusingly what happens to young women who refuse to perform humiliating nude roles, or reconcile their career advancement with the expected sexual favors to cameraman, crewmembers, and directors. Old, physically repulsive and "self-proclaimed" filmmakers are described, in Borrelli's novels, as being constantly on the lookout for an opportunity to entrap any young, naïve girl lining up for hours or days to get an audition. The way delusional male self-confidence is described is hilarious and "visual": The writer depicts with a few brush strokes, vivid and incisive typologies of Italian men. The filmmaker, on the other hand, seems to be refocusing on the very process of directing a movie. She observes the kind of acting roles she is offered, she watches how movies are edited and directed (many do not even provide actresses with a complete script), and finally considers to whom many scripts are addressed. As a matter of fact, many of the roles she is offered are for men's entertainment only. She realizes that how prepared an actress can be is not a preliminary qualification as in that context professionalism is not a key requirement. To be able to advance in such a career is determinant to know how to be sexually available and choose the right men to please. When she describes how the popular director Porcopagni deals with fifteen-year-old girls, or the intellectual director Demetrio Gallina deals with performers, we, as female readers, sympathize with her genuine rage.

*Tanto Rumore per Tullia* (2005), Borrelli's last novel, brings into focus women's friendship and complicity. The male characters are strategically placed in the background of the narrative, almost as a tapestry of passport-like pictures. This narrative device allows the writer to situate women's issues rather than give men any active role in the story. One key example of this is found in the character of Luca, Tullia's husband, who falls in a rock climbing accident, and remains in a coma for the entire novel after a brief appearance at the very beginning of the story. Luca would have liked to have a baby with Tullia and he was trying to persuade her to agree. For Tullia, on the other hand, being a mother is not her primary aspiration. Instead, her main preoccupation is to keep her job as a photographer, which is constantly under threat from male competition in an industry that openly privileges men. Tullia deals every day with coworkers' sexism, which fetters her professional growth and limits her career advancement. After the accident, Luca only really appears in the story through Tullia's voice, and other male figures in the novel are indirectly given a presence through the stories of the female characters. Men never really "act" in Borrelli's books. Action is overtly reserved for women: Tullia, Dida, and

Mila, the three protagonists in the story, move in a context dominated by men, and their actions are often a consequence of men's abuse. Yet their personal achievements and the solutions they find in attempting to reclaim their sense of identity are central to the novel.

Borrelli's movies use comedy and humor to denounce Italian misogynist culture. She emphasizes, through the form of *commedia brillante*,<sup>2</sup> the importance for women of being together, supporting each other, and refusing to be controlled and manipulated by men. The filmmaker also uses *drama* to reinforce these same concepts and leaves an open, happy ending signaling the prospect of a spiritual and physical rebirth of her characters. Borrelli's cinematic style weaves together comedy and activism, reflecting the ambivalent idea of the postfeminist—or new-feminist—paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

### Postfeminism

Borrelli's work is representative of an "Italian-style" postfeminist paradigm. Postfeminism is a term that is more broadly associated, in Anglo-American media criticism, with third-wave feminism. It implies a complex interface of consumerism, economic freedom, and female empowerment through professional success and financial independence. Postfeminism, as a cultural paradigm, has also been defined as neofeminism and it can only be tangentially applied to Italy for several reasons: the economic situation has reached one of the lowest levels ever registered in the country, and women's unemployment, according to studies by Chiara Valentini and Francesca Zajczyk, is exacerbated by working conditions that not only penalize women's careers, motherhood, and individual development, but also tend to marginalize female workers, especially when coming to terms with power and authority (Zajczyk 2007: 102–119). In her article "Televised Bodies: Berlusconi and the Body of Italian Women," Stefania Benini (2013: 88) discusses "the way Italian media obscures women's problems as well as their accomplishments." Furthermore, Benini explains the need for a rebirth of a women's movement in terms of postfeminist sensibility. The Italian media is focused on a representation of women and beauty through male hegemonic culture, and very little space is left to enable women's full professional growth, with huge economic repercussions and the consequent stagnation of social and cultural issues. As a writer, director, and producer, Ilaria Borrelli personifies the postfeminist sensibility<sup>4</sup> in Italy and Europe in a very innovative way. Her critique against the pandemic male-centered order is corrosive, and her work can be seen as an open revolt against

a system that resists women's enfranchisement. For Borrelli, the only way to trigger a change in a country where sexual harassment in the workplace and gender discrimination obstruct women's advancement is to commit to achieving power and success. Women need to occupy positions of responsibility and leadership. They need to access the restricted area of power and control that, in Italy, is still the prerogative of men. Borrelli is convinced that we need to promote more women to occupy key positions: in cinema it is crucial to have more female producers, more female directors represented at festivals and appointed to juries. It is also imperative to adopt different distribution politics on low-budget and independent works.<sup>5</sup>

Borrelli's cinema is a dynamic effort to construct, through various genres, multiple female subjectivities and set them at the center of her narrative.<sup>6</sup> In her films Borrelli, does not highlight one single protagonist, but generally focuses on several women and their relationships. Her heroine is never one woman alone, detached from other women. Both as a filmmaker and as a writer, she devotes her attention to women, not as objects of representation, but as individuals engaged in a daily form of resistance against male privilege and power. Her female characters act across genres, move in a space free from classification, where comedy intersects drama or, as in her last movie, *Talking to the Trees*, drama converges to a happy ending in the form of women's empowerment. Her female characters are ultimately able to reaffirm their agency and their presence as individuals. In unfolding the cinematic narrative, the director engages in a fundamental postfeminist feature, formally gendering the screen while imposing a devictimizing perspective over the ultimate victims: abused children and in particular little girls.

Postfeminism, in terms of cultural trend, tends to polarize concepts such as feminism versus postfeminism, conventional high-brow culture versus popular culture, femininity versus consumerism, and women's emancipation versus women's traditional roles. According to Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009a), postfeminism is a kaleidoscopic concept reflecting different theoretic nuances with no parallel in the past:

Postfeminism is a concept fraught with contradictions. Loathed by some and celebrated by others, it emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural, academic and political contexts, from popular journalism and media to feminist analyses, postmodern theories and neoliberal rhetoric. Critics have claimed and appropriated the term for a variety of definitions, ranging from a conservative backlash, Girl Power, third-wave feminism, and postmodern/poststructuralist feminism. In popular



culture, it has often been associated with female characters like the Spice Girls and Helen Fielding's chick heroine Bridget Jones, who has been embraced/criticized as the poster child of postfeminism. In academic writings, it sits alongside other "post" discourses—including postmodernism and postcolonialism—[. . .] Likewise, in social and political investigations, postfeminism has been read as indicative of a "post-traditional" era characterized by dramatic changes in basic social relationships, role stereotyping and conceptions of agency. (3)

Genz and Brabon acknowledge the controversial plurality of interpretations around this topic, and convey that postfeminism needs to be inscribed in a specific contextualization and has no comparable phenomenon from the past. Shelley Budgeon (2011), moreover, states that third-wave feminism is characterized by fragmentation and diversity in a series of challenges that affect its very meaning. She also claims that the main idea is to advance a politics based upon self-definition and the need for women to define their own relationship to feminism in ways that make sense to them as individuals and is oriented on female success (281–283).

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in *Interrogating Feminism* (2007) reflect on feminism and how it interacts or diverges from popular culture and postfeminism, in the attempt to discern essential features and the different challenges they face:

Feminism challenges us to critique relations of power, to imagine the world as other than it is, to conceive of different pattern of work, life and leisure. Postfeminist culture enacts fantasies of regenerations and transformations that also speak to a desire of change. Clearly, however, it is unhelpful to mistake one for the other. The challenges facing feminist media critics of an earlier era centered on the need to make women visible, to denaturalize the construction of women's culture as inherently trivial or banal. The contemporary challenges that postfeminist culture poses for feminist media studies are rather different. Postfeminism displaces older forms of trivializations, generating a sense of newness, yet it also refreshes long familiar themes of gendered representation, demonstrating the ongoing urgency of speaking feminist critique. (22)

I argue that postfeminism is deeply linked—despite its strong alignment with consumerism and its lack of street activism—to the main ideas of second-wave feminism, which was also a very complex movement and was intrinsically highly fragmented.<sup>7</sup> I believe that second-wave feminism produced—and didn't fail<sup>8</sup>—the most important achievements ever accomplished in women's history, due to the broad spectrum of consequences that radiated from it, forcing social, political, and cultural

change. I also believe that postfeminism is operating through different practices and textual strategies to fulfill what feminism left unresolved.

Nevertheless, I do not construct my argument in terms of polarization between the two concepts, feminism and postfeminism, but in terms of continuity. Postfeminism here is advanced as a form of cultural beacon, which acts as a new form of resistance against the rigid commandments imposed by second-wave feminism itself. It is an active response to the feminist legacy oriented to empower women and to use irony and self-critical humor, which demonstrates ownership of one's own limits in order to overcome them. It is an aggressive attack on the patriarchal manipulation of women's sense of inadequacy and their lack of confidence spanning generations. Bridget Jones, a character highly criticized by a defined area of media studies as a symbol of postfeminism, in the end gets everything she wants, the way she wants it. Her innumerable hilarious comments directed toward herself are not expressed for the purpose of indulging in self-deprecating complaints, but to show how restrictive the framework of possibilities for women can be, in order to be socially acceptable, in terms of her professionalism, fashion, sexual attractiveness, and all the expectations her boss or other male figures nurture with regards to her and to women in general.

The postfeminist framework may be idealistically questionable, spiritually challenging, maybe even culturally reprehensible, but it may have a key role, if properly assessed, in emancipating women, in contributing to minimize or eradicate male violence, and in creating a cultural base to reinforce women's individuality, authority, and self-affirmation. Annette Kuhn explains that "new women's films may thus position the spectator not only as herself as potential 'winner,' but also consequently offer the female spectator a degree of affirmation" (Brundson 1986: 126).

Studies on postfeminism focus primarily on media studies, cinema, and women's literature and are associated with the massive success of movies and books such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, which have reduced the distance—and increased the concern expressed by many feminist film scholars—between the extremities of culture and popular culture. Stephanie Harzewski explores the dynamics behind "Chick Lit" as a genre that has generated a strong polemic among well-established women writers (from George Eliot to Doris Lessing, just to give an idea of the time-range). They, legitimately, feared the generalization and marginalization of their roles as artists and intellectuals, which they perceived threatened, if not endangered, by products of popular culture. Harzewski (2011: 2) also points out the increasing proximity between Chick Lit and cinema, explaining that the "Chick Lit genre is best exemplified by HBO's series *Sex and the City*."<sup>9</sup> The extraordinary number of film studies

publications invigorating the academic discussion since the late 1970s and 1980s demonstrates, in my opinion, that feminism's legacy is operating on multiple cultural levels, inducing scholars to investigate popular culture as a significant field of inquiry. Therefore books, magazines, TV shows and series, movies, blogs, and websites have been closely monitored by feminist media critics in order to assess their impact on contemporary culture. Reading between the lines of pink-covered bestsellers or glossy magazines may result in a plurality of messages, often old fashioned and conservative, aiming to restore women's role to being confined to areas of minimum control, such as the domestic and private arena. I do believe that Chick Lit, and therefore many "Chick Flicks," can contain subversive narratives that corrode and perhaps even redefine social order.

In the attempt to delineate the blurred edges between women's film and films for women, and to distinguish categories of movies that actually rejected women's emancipation versus those that opened possibilities for new roles and a more progressive inscription of women in cinema and society, many scholars focused their research on the wide open category of women's 6films.<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Brundson wrote *Films for Women* (1986). B. Ruby Rich entitled her book *Chick Flicks. Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (1998), using the term "Chick Flicks" to discuss cinefeminism, and directed her analysis to classic Hollywood and European movies. About ten years later, Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young wrote about Chick Flicks, referring to women's films and films for women. There is a chronological continuity from the studies circulating in the 1980s to contemporary Chick Flick studies. They all engage in a discussion with feminism and its legacy in contemporary cinema. *Chick Flicks* points to the revival of a genre that was, initially, diminishing and discriminating against "girliness," and considers the reappropriation of "pink" as a reaction to the limiting, antifeminine statements of second-wave feminism. Chick Flicks as a cinematic genre has been identified with movies such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, or the HBO TV series *Sex and the City*, but some critics even link the genre of Chick Flicks to contemporary hits such as *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, or European movies such as the French *Amelie*, or the German-Italian coproduction *Bella Martha* (Ferris and Young 2008: 139). Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young include in this wide, fluid genre those movies written, directed, and starring women, and that are addressed primarily, but not exclusively, to women. Chick Flicks<sup>11</sup> is a genre directly connected to postfeminism, as a form of reaction and resistance to the bias of the male-centered cinematic narrative, and it is in this context that the cinema of Ilaria Borrelli is included. I believe that the artist's work is innovative and intentionally engaged in a strong social and cultural

critique not limited to the Italian context. Borrelli reacts to patriarchal oppression in whichever form it manifests. She uses comedy and drama in order to push the boundaries of Italian cinema, to redirect attention toward women's conditions and ambitions. Both genres, therefore, are the vehicles she employs in her work, using the Chick Flick formula, and embracing the postfeminist paradigm, following the patterns of female friendship films. The scholar Karen Hollinger (1988: 2), in discussing this typology of movies, states that it is a relatively new subgenre of the women's film genre, with a long cinematic history. Two important concepts here are worth highlighting: (a) that "Chick Flick" is not a deprecating term, since it indicates, as Deborah Barker (2007, 93) simplifies, movies that feature women and their concerns as the focus of the film; (b) the specifics of Italian postfeminism are, by definition, more restricted in comparison to Anglo-American ones. Contrary to what is commonly attributed to the general stereotype of Italian women, female filmmakers do not indulge in particular highly fashionable standards. In dressing their characters, they do not use lingerie, shoes, or any special sexually appealing clothes. Women portrayed in movies by Italian women filmmakers, or in some cases, how Italian female directors reflect themselves in their movies, do not have special or elaborate hairstyles, such as those in typically defined Chick Flicks—*Sex and the City* or *In Her Shoes*, to name the most successful and those that promoted a closer examination of the genre—or elaborate heels, makeup, or costly accessories. Their attractiveness comes from other sources, and forms part of their "ordinary style." The representation of Italian cinema icon, identified with stars such as Sophia Loren, Anna Magnani, and Gina Lollobrigida, instructed to play characters that used feminine wiles and seduction to control their men, is replaced by women who try to manage a career, family obligations, and/or men's mediocrity. Furthermore, from a literary perspective, in Italy there is almost no Chick Lit production or distribution. The only novel that could have resembled a Chick Lit story with a working woman at its center is out of print, according to Rachel Donadio (2006).<sup>12</sup> For Italian women, there may be the sex, but not the city, since, as I have already mentioned, the occupational situation and the widespread male chauvinism in the workplace contribute to a discouraging environment for women. As a consequence, they tend to accept underpaid positions, and often withdraw from the idea of pursuing success and power with heavy repercussions in terms of personal independence and the possibility of motherhood. Contextualization is extremely important in the case of Italy where, in fact, "chick flicks" are directed uniquely by male directors. These "male chick flicks"<sup>13</sup> are comedies directed and written by men for a female audience (who by extension will bring

a male audience too) and it is possible to find an incredible number of movies that are stylistically different from those authored by women. For instance, if we consider recent movies such as Fausto Brizzi's *Pazze di Me* (2013) or an older hit such as Gabriele Muccino's *L'Ultimo Bacio* (2001), it is interesting to note that a huge cast of professional women actresses are involved. While the respective plots position a weak, spoiled male character at the core of the narrative, with the unconvincing intent to criticize the average Italian man, the final message of the movie is that no matter how mediocre you are, if you marry a beautiful, sexy woman you are totally condoned. And maybe you are not that wimp after all. There is no interest in women's development or growth or accomplishment if it is not connected and focused on the male protagonist, and intended to enhance his character. The typologies of women portrayed in these kinds of pejorative (for women) "male chick flicks" reinforce the idea that women are unstable, demanding, overwhelming, and invasive of male personal space. They need to be well-dressed, fit, and good looking in order to attract the attention of the male character that is unmistakably central and sustains the leading role.

#### Ilaria Borrelli's Movies

The parallels with Borrelli's work in terms of postfeminist specifics are more evidently related to her first two comedies. Nevertheless, I include her last film as well, for the use she makes of drama and because it, consistently with the other two films, features women and their tragedies as the main concern of the narrative. In my analysis, the Italian filmmaker is able to realize what Hilary Radner (2009: 6) attributes to Jane Campion's cinematic style: "[she] slowly moves the arena of domestic melodrama or romantic comedy into other genres."

The setting of Borrelli's first feature film, *Mariti in Affitto* (2004), moves from Procida, a small Italian island near Naples, to New York. The opening scene is a high shot of the deep blue Mediterranean Sea as viewed by tourists approaching the island by boat. The powerful movements of the waves, the brilliant colors of the coast, and the close-up of the port are images associated with the natural beauty of the Italian landscape. The sunny profile of the island sets the expectations for picturesque exotic images. Nevertheless, a low-angle shot of the boat from the small pier evokes its remoteness and claustrophobic atmosphere, while the limiting human interactions are figuratively reinforced by an overview of the stacked housing distribution, so typical and so unmistakably vexing. The outside world is represented by a boat full of American tourists visiting

the island for the day while the "inside" world is represented by Maria Scocozza (Maria Grazia Cucinotta), a lonely woman who works on the port as a shoemaker. She has two young children and is in desperate financial need; her work doesn't provide enough income for her family. Her husband, Vincenzo (Pierfrancesco Favino), went to America to sell his sculptures and never returned. The reproachful behavior of Procida's women, who, in a chorus of gossip, blame Maria for her husband disappearing, and the pressure from "Don Peppino," the caricature of the local Mafioso, put all the stereotypes in place: the provincialism of Italian life, and the restrictive traditional limitations on women's options and expectations.

The mise-en-scène resembles the stage of *commedia dell'arte*, which exhibits fixed typologies of characters, and where the roles for women were often those of triggering the action rather than dynamically taking action. Don Peppino's insistence with his repugnant proposals causes Maria to flee, with her children, to New York in search of her husband. The shift of setting is spatial, visual, and auditory, moving from warm and sunny pastel colors to metallic blue and gray, to vertical buildings and from human voices to extreme noise, quite different from Procida's cone-shaped microcosm. If the small island looked like a "moving canvas"<sup>14</sup> with its sunny colors and perfect Mediterranean lighting, the American metropolis is a big urban maze where stereotypes, violence, and human interactions are no less complicated than in the little world of the island. In both places, Maria struggles to affirm her own identity. In Procida, the oppressive social rules are determined by the male-managed economy; in New York, Maria meets poverty, displacement, and a total absence of social connections. Maria's sense of personal pride and of social acceptability is entirely uprooted. The Italian American family running the restaurant where Vincenzo is supposed to be working shows the other side of Italians, albeit a stereotypical view. The separation from a strong cultural framework opens the door to limitless possibilities of how to live, but in doing so diminishes any sense of values and integrity. Borrelli repeatedly mocks stereotypes such as the arrogant, immigrated Italian, his "mam-mone" son, who is inept and spoiled, neglectful of Italians but also unable to identify with Americans. The restaurant owner's wife, furthermore, is shown as insensitive and unable to contain her husband's hubris, denying Maria's family water and food. The proverbial generosity of Italians is debunked. Their cultural identity lost. In New York, Maria immediately perceives that everything she had learned in life may not find a corresponding social meaning in the new country. Gender oppression and lack of financial resources back in Procida find their match in the "Big Apple" where everything is bigger, including poverty and discrimination. Maria



will be able to change her life only when she changes her perspective toward Vincenzo and the male universe. She will be able to accomplish a radical change with the contribution of another woman, Charlene Taylor (Brooke Shields), the American wife of her husband, who is also pregnant with his baby. While the comedy unfolds with hilarious and sometimes grotesque sequences, the story develops a double heroine. Charlene is Maria's alter ego, who symbolically complements and develops her persona. The two stars, Maria Grazia Cucinotta and Brooke Shields, represent, respectively, Italian and American icons. Both women have similar physical frames and similar features: their long curly hair and similar height are details that make the protagonist's double quite plain to the viewer. In addition, they will end up completing each other. The flexibility of Charlene's work, made possible by Maria's skills, will make a profitable joint venture for both women. When the two women first meet they are fierce antagonists, until they realize that fighting for a man is not worthwhile. Maria's skills as a shoemaker and Charlene's integration in the job market as a TV-sales agent could be combined and, if it is not possible to pursue the American dream, maybe it is possible to compromise with a more modest Italian American dream. In fact, Charlene and Maria decide to "prioritize themselves," put Vincenzo aside, and raise their children together. Charlene loses interest in Vincenzo and entertains herself with Raul (Diego Serrano), a sweet, handsome, and generous man, reliable with children and sexy, while Maria opts for "renting" Vincenzo, who is now working for the agency Rent-a-Husband, only when she needs help around the house or, eventually, sex.

The postfeminist paradigm here is clearly in motion: the subaltern male characters, female friendship, and the collaborative effort of the two women to gain independence and control of their lives.

Borrelli's second feature film, *Come le Formiche* (2007), is the story of two sisters living together in the family's Umbrian winery. Again the surrounding picturesque space, apparently endless, gives an immediate and subtle impression of a restricted environment. The "moving canvas" imagery resurfaces in the scene where Ruggero (Fred Murray Abraham), the patriarch, paints a typical Italian country landscape outside the beautiful country house, fringed with cypresses and blue hills displayed right in front of his eyes. The mediocrity of the painting that we see from a close-up behind Ruggero hints at the male character. Childish and self-centered, he has transformed beauty and richness into something banal, just like painting a masterpiece with no artistic sensibility. Stereotypes are in play. The perfect Italian setting, with supposedly genuine family bonds, is immediately undermined by the male characters' mediocrity and their subtle attempts to manipulate women

for their own benefit. The leading character, Sveva (played by Galatea Ranzi), is dealing with conflicting familial relationships: a hostile connection with her sister, her hard-to-please father, and her inept French husband Nicolas (Philippe Caroit), who tries to manipulate the entire family to induce them to sell the winery. Like in the previous movie, we glimpse Sveva's double in her sister Desideria (Patrizia Pellegrino) who, at first sight, appears to be the complete opposite to her sister in terms of her characteristics. Sveva is strong-willed and hardworking. Her dream is to produce a great wine and save the property, which is at risk due to its debts. She has purpose and determination. Desideria, unlike her sister, relies on her physical appearance to secure men's approval, and is frustrated for she easily gives up on her dreams and she finally admits her desire to have a baby. Adina, Sveva's eleven-year-old daughter, plays a mirroring role for the adults in general, and for the two sisters in particular. Adina is smart and sensitive. Curiously, she has the habit of observing ant life<sup>15</sup> and she is fascinated by the similarity of those insects' interactions with human behavior. Adina uses a small digital camera to film the ants' busy crawling. Adults in her family have a very busy life too, and like the ants, they can be mean to each other and move fast and chaotically. So she films them too: they tell lies, they fight, they work frenetically, and they engage in extramarital relations. The male characters, in particular Nicolas, Fabrizio, Desideria's husband (Enrico Lo Verso), and Ruggero, their father, don't really have any positive impact on the business or on their family's economic situation. Nicolas is pathetically naïve and a clear burden to his wife. Fabrizio is in love with Sveva, while Nicolas tries to seduce Desideria and convince her to sign over the family homestead. A momentary swapping of husbands gives the two sisters a reason to talk about themselves and finally collaborate to save the winery. Their reciprocal love and friendship are more important than the men in their lives. The two sisters' reconciliation brings new opportunities and new perspectives.

Meanwhile, Adina operates as spectator, commentator, and director of the family movie. Adina's candid approach to life enables her to film reality using the ants' incessant work as an analogy for human life; when she acquires familiarity with their routine, she is also able to notice inexplicable idiosyncrasies, even ferocity, resembling human behaviors. As Adina's film begins, secret, illegitimate kisses, brutal fights, confusing confessions, and pathetic lies are clearly unwound, and the entire family is exposed to the plain truth. As in Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairytale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, only when the little boy cries aloud that the emperor is parading naked is the excited crowd able to finally see reality and the absurdity of it.

In her movie *Il più bel Giorno della mia Vita* (2002), Cristina Comencini used this same cinematic device. Comencini's story revolves around a young girl, Chiara, who is going to celebrate her first communion. The film covers the events preceding the actual celebration, during which Chiara needs to attend Sunday school and learn about the gospel and the Bible. Observing her relatives' lives, Chiara is puzzled by the contradictions she notes observing adults' behavior. In her family, nothing actually follows the religious codes they pretend to ascribe to: lies, adultery, gay sex and other debunked commandments. The day of her communion, Chiara receives a digital camera, and she starts to film her family reunion in an attempt to capture and then process what she sees. The idea of the young girl operating the camera in Comencini's and Borrelli's films seems to have a similar purpose: to grasp the plain truth from another angle. A camera in a young girl's hands implies a representation of reality free from manipulation.<sup>16</sup>

*Mariti in affitto* and *Come le Formiche* contain all the basic features of postfeminist Chick Flicks, the women's films that Karen Hollinger (1988) defines as female friendship movies and explains that

female friendship films not only dramatize their female characters' shaping or reshaping of their sense of self, but [...] they reach out to their audience to implicate them in the female quest for self-development. As such, they set out to form not only the self-images of their female characters but also the sense of identity of their female viewers as well. (244)

The emphasis for the Italian director is clearly on women's friendship, self-fulfillment and personal improvement. The happy ending is a way to empower women, fueling their motivation to reinstate values that are important to them, and to reaffirm female subjectivity as central. Establishing a new way to interact with each other, Sveva, Desideria, and Alina are able to hold the family together but with new, clear rules. Nicolas is arrested after committing a major fraud, Fabrizio takes responsibility for his marriage, and finally, Ruggero admits his mistakes as a father and goes along with his daughters' decision.

*Talking to the Trees* is Borrelli's most recent work, set in Cambodia (2012). The film opens in an intense, green forest where a young girl, Srey (Setha Moniroth), one of the protagonists of the story, is binding a tree with a silky red scarf. The girl is talking to the tree, reassuring it about some open cuts in its trunk. A pounding sound progressively takes over. A young boy runs toward Srey, screaming to warn her about the bulldozers. A Westerner timber trader is leading a devastating operation in order to log *padouk* trees. Huts and shacks are demolished and an old woman, their grandmother, is hurt and abandoned. Children are

dispersed. The scene changes to present Mia (Ilaria Borrelli herself) as a well-known photographer in Paris, dealing with the monotony of daily life, and admitting to be quite frustrated by her life. The cold urban setting is blue-tinged, sterile, and almost vitreous, suggesting stability and even atrophy, antithetical to the deep green and intense yellow of the Cambodian jungle. Mia decides to visit her husband who often travels to Cambodia for work. When she arrives at the Koh Kong Luxury hotel, she is unable to check in because she can't find her documents. At the front desk she asks repeatedly for her husband, and spots him casually leaving on a rickshaw, toward the outskirts. She follows him, but something starts to alarm her. The concierge's look at the hotel and the hesitant responses of the rickshaw drivers on the street when she asks to follow the Western man strike her as premonitory. She follows Xavier (Philippe Caroit) to a remote area covered in garbage, with decrepit huts and shacks leaning on a putrid riverside. Mia notices only Western men around and children running on the mud. Mia is now frightened and puzzled. She keeps following Xavier from afar until he disappears into the slums. When she finally is able to see him from behind the curtains of a window, he is unmistakably having sex with a little girl, none other than Srey who first appears in the opening to the film. She has been kidnapped and forced to work in a brothel. Mia's repulsion is overwhelming and she faints. When she wakes up, she is surrounded by other children trying to comfort her. From this point on, the movie is a sequence of fast-paced actions: Mia is surprised in the brothel by Sanan, the brothel's pimp, when she decides to set Srey free and organizes to take her home. Srey hides two other girls, Daa and Malin, on the back of the truck that Mia has provided to escape. Then Sanan, in complicity with the police, and Xavier (unaware of what Mia has learnt about him) hunt her and the little girls down, across forests, rivers, and dusty roads.

In this movie Borrelli changes genre and setting. Cambodia, as one of the world's capitals of child prostitution, represents the archetypal degeneration of the patriarchal mindset. Mia's attempt to save the girls is contrasted by huge cultural barriers. In addition, Mia's kidnapping has a symbolic resonance in the movie's narrative. The mother she wanted to be is now enacted by the urgency of removing these children from violence and death. Secondarily, Srey and Mia share an intimate and repulsive connection in the form of Xavier. While hiding, suffering from the symptoms of withdrawal from cocaine addiction, and overwhelmed by panic and frustration, Mia accuses Srey of having stolen her husband and having enchanted him with her sexual tricks. Srey reassures Mia, detailing her life in the brothel and describing disturbing details of men's sexual perversions. The roles here are clearly crossed and overlapped: Mia's childish and insensitive behavior is diverted by a wise Srey, who



is maternal and mature. Like in the previous movie, the child is weaving the plot. The girl's deep connection with nature, her love for her brother and her friends, and her deep human compassion situate her character at the center of the narrative. Like Adina does with her camera in *Come le Formiche*, Srey is able to show Mia her real self and, therefore, her way out of an empty existence spent between addiction and numbness. Mia, on the other hand, decides to risk her own life for the rebirth of a child, as only a mother could do. The catharsis and the empowerment for these two women can be seen on two levels: the mother/daughter relationship is expanded to a women's supportive friendship. The end of the movie is the start of a new life for the protagonists: Xavier is stabbed to death by Daa's little sister, who was also in the brothel. The girls are freed after Sanan, the violent procurer, is shot to death by a police officer who, in the end, decided to support Mia's venture, and Srey and her little brother are reunited with their father.

As mentioned previously, Borrelli stretches the margins of the Chick Flick genre, filming stories of solidarity and liberation. The contextualization of the genre in Italy and in Europe more widely is crucial, especially if we intend "women's film" to be those movies written, directed, or produced (or all three) by women with the intent and purpose of empowering the female character, indicating a possible path to self-affirmation and independence that, by extension, is transmitted to the female spectator.

Borrelli's postfeminist cinema does not portray women as pink-clad super-shoppers with big plans and a Chihuahua in their handbag—no woman director in Italy does. The yappy, smart, young Harvard graduate portrayed in *Legally Blonde*, the early representative movie of the Chick Flicks genre, is not a figure who is socially recognizable in Italy, where women graduate late, are often underemployed even with excellent qualifications, and need to work hard to occupy key positions from which they can easily be marginalized or even dismissed through age-related discrimination, or for family choices (Valentini, Zazjick, Davi). It is rare and always very hard for many women with no special privileges to have the opportunity to find a job that pays enough to allow them to be independent and secure. Ilaria Borrelli knows the scenario all too well. Her work is centered on women who can fight back through winning visibility, voice, and power.

### Director's Biography

Ilaria Borrelli studied piano at the Conservatory of Santa Cecilia in Rome and graduated in 1987. After a long acting career, she decided to move to New York to attend the New School where she gained a certificate

in film production in 1998 and continued to study acting and screen writing at NYU. In Paris she studied at Corinne Blue Actor's Studio Method in 1996.

Her feature films include: *Mariti in Affitto* (2004), *Come le Formiche* (2007), and *Talking to the Trees* (2012), which received five nominations at the Festival of Montreal in 2013.

### Notes

1. The first writer and critic to talk about Borrelli's comedy as "postfeminist" was Patrizia Carrano. See *Sette* (October 2003). <http://www.mymovies.it/dizionario/critica.asp?id=12339> (last accessed on February 26, 2013).
2. The "commedia brillante" is a form of comedy also known as "commedia all'italiana," quite popular in Italy during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Here, tragic elements are essential to the comical outcome of the text.
3. The term is used with or without a hyphen. In my use of the term there are no significant implications and the hyphen is a mere graphic sign. Some scholars specify this detail, noting that the hyphen is a distinctive mark to highlight the temporary idea of a time shift indicated in the prefix "post." Genz asserts that the prefix was the actual focus of critical examination.  
Please note that in this study, I also use the term "postfeminism" as a synonym of "neo-feminism." Hilary Radner (2011: 2) writes about this convertible definition: "I will argue that this other unnamed movement, which I will dub, for want of a better term 'neo-feminism,' has been the primary influence in developing what is now casually referred as 'post-feminist' culture."
4. Rosalind Gill uses the term "sensibility" referring to postfeminism, avoiding the term "movement," which she considers more suitable for second-wave feminism, and not appropriate for postfeminism, in her article "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Media Cultural Studies* 10 (2007): 147–166.
5. Skype interview with the filmmaker, recorded on Audacity and tape, June 5, 2012.
6. This expression is inspired by the study on *Jane Campion, Cinema, Nation, Identity*, edited by Hilary Radner, Alistair Fox, and Irène Bessière (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 6.
7. I allude to the endless different trends in second-wave feminism. Kellie Bean lists them quite exhaustively in her study: from radical feminism, Marxist feminism, lesbian-feminism to ecofeminism, prolife feminism, cyber-feminism, and many more. She also states that prefix feminisms are markers of "private" not "social" ambitions (*Post-Backlash Feminism. Women and the Media since Reagan-Bush*. Jefferson, NC; London: McFarland & Co., 2007], 4–5; 178). I find this observation to be another point of contact between postfeminism and second-wave feminism. See also Shelley Bugdeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New'

- Femininities," in Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 279–292.
8. I refer to Angela McRobbie's seminal work *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), where she expresses concern toward the disarticulation of feminism and the idea of "feminism undone." While I sympathize and agree with those concerns, I acknowledge the possibility of a rereading of the *Aftermath* in a noncelebrative and noncondemning way, but as a subtle change and a spurious form of reaction to unsustainable polarizations imposed by second-wave feminism. Postfeminism may be judged to be continuing what feminism started, only in a different context and with different and even synchronized practices. Feminism too followed dissimilar trajectories.
  9. I would like to point out the closeness and even the overlapping of the concept of Chick Lit(erature) and cinema in this scholar's work.
  10. Feminist film scholars have debated this topic for over three decades. A major issue has been to find some sort of common definition.
  11. Chick Flicks, for me, are movies authored and/or written by women. However many critics do not make a clear distinction. As a matter of fact, Hilary Radner includes *Pretty Woman*, *Maid in Manhattan*, and other commonly defined Chick Flicks in the category; Ferris and Young include the French *Amélie*. I consider *Chick Flicks* authored by women to be the most indicative of the postfeminist idea.
  12. I refer to Camilla Vittorini's novel *Qualcosa Bolle in Città* (Milano: Mondadori, Red Dress Ink, 2007). For an overview of international Chick Lit, see the article by Rachel Donadio "The Chick-Lit Pandemic" (March 19, 2006).
  13. There is no specific academic criticism about the topic of male-directed "chick flicks" at this time.
  14. This expression was coined by Gavin Smith in an interview with Kathryn Bigelow. See "Give Article Title," in Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, eds., *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow. Hollywood Transgressor* (London; New York: Wallflower Press 2003), 20.
  15. The Italian title could be translated into English as "Just like ants." Instead, the English title is *Wine and Kisses*.
  16. Chus Gutiérrez (born in Granada in 1962), a well-known female director in Spain, makes some interesting comments about the concept of realism in cinema: "How can one talk about realism in a medium where absolutely everything is manipulated? Reality and cinema have everything and nothing in common. On the one hand, the great majority of, if not all, the stories that are told, are born from reality . . . On the other, the manipulation is so great, so global, that an hour and half of celluloid has nothing to do with an hour and a half of the life of the person who pays for the ticket and sits in a seat" (Isabel Santaolalla, *The Cinema of Iciar Bollain* [Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2012], 14). I believe the quest for a way to reproduce reality free from manipulation is a pressing issue for many contemporary European, and other, filmmakers.

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## Part II