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# From made in Italy to *ethno-chic*: Some thoughts on costume design in contemporary Italian cinema (class, gender and national identity)

## ABSTRACT

*This article outlines an overview of the relationship between costume and film in contemporary Italian cinema, with particular reference to class, gender and ideological discourse. Considering Italian film production in the last fifteen to twenty years, from popular film to auteur cinema, the article lays out the challenge of cultural stereotypes about 'Made in Italy' and its meanings in a global age. The significance of costume will be explored in terms of plot and character development, mise-en-scène and visuality, negotiating cinematic technique, film analysis and cultural interpretation. More specifically, and with particular reference to the work of Stephen Gundle, we investigate how costume design of male and female characters embodies national discourses such as nostalgia, male anxiety and the ideals of feminine beauty.*

## KEYWORDS

costume design  
Italian contemporary  
film  
masculinity  
women's film  
nostalgia  
class distinction  
taste cultures

## 1. INTRODUCTION

'If there is one film we wish would guide the direction of men's style it is *La Grande Bellezza*' (Agovino 2013). With this sentence, at the end of 2013, the magazine *Esquire* introduced its readers to the film by Paolo Sorrentino. The race for the Academy Awards was just beginning, but for *Esquire*, *The Great Beauty* (Sorrentino, 2013) had already won the title of the 'most elegant film of 2013'. The following year, the costume designer Milena Canonero won the fourth Oscar in her career for the film by Wes Anderson, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (after having won the award for the costumes of *Barry Lindon*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Marie Antoinette*). In 2015, her creations, together with those of the most important costume designers of Italian cinema, were on display in a large exhibition held in Rome at Palazzo Braschi. Produced by Fondazione Cineteca of Bologna, *The Clothing of Dreams: The Italian School of Costume Designer for Film* traces the history of Italian efforts in the field of costume design from 1950 to the present. The exhibition was a great success, and as noted in a review: 'While emphasizing the genius of a select few designers, it also highlights the connections between the generations while linking cinematic costume to Italy's grand sartorial tradition as represented over the centuries in painting and sculpture' (Ivinski 2015). In June 2016, the exhibition *Costumes for Cinema from Tirelli Atelier* opened at the Museum of Moving Image in New York, dedicated to the famous atelier in Rome, established in 1964, a cornerstone in the history of performing arts in Italy.

If on the one hand there is strong attention being paid to Italian costume design, on the other hand in the academic world there are few systematic works and studies on the relations between cinema and fashion, in particular for contemporary cinema. Apart from events where the great tradition of costume designing is celebrated, as in the case of the Academy Awards, or exhibitions, scholars do not seem to be interested in an interpretation of the reference models of costume design in contemporary Italian cinema, which is mostly confined to the framework of professional work. This is the case, for example, of the *Journal of A.S.C.*, the association of set, costume and interior designers, promoting specific attention to be paid to these professions, giving voice to those creating sets and costumes for Italian cinema, people who are almost always left out, not considered by media, cinema critique, the press and academia. However, the relations between cinema and fashion have never developed along multiple direction lines as much as today, thus requiring the attention of scholars from different fields. Dolce & Gabbana has focused its recent advertising campaigns on a take on the imagery of Italian Neo-Realism; Fondazione Prada has drawn a lot from cinema and prestigious collaborations, like the one with Wes Anderson, creating a full symbiosis with the idea of style promoted by the brand. In addition, several Italian filmmakers have made fashion films: Paolo Sorrentino (Bulgari), Luca Gudagnino (Ferragamo), Edoardo Winspeare (Louis Vuitton). This is therefore a field of study where scholars might be called upon to take into consideration costume design at the crossroads of a series of different research fields, from visual studies to economic analyses (on product placement and target positioning), by looking at the relationship between clothing and film as a starting point for an overall interpretation of the function of fashion in the construction and dissemination of the imagery of contemporary Italian cinema.

Speaking in general terms,

fashion as a focus has evolved prodigiously in the last ten years but film fashion, or what is actually costume design, has not. It is marginalized, if not ignored, in the way that fashion, as Bruzzi and Church Gibson defined its dismissal, was written off not long ago. Costume design is not only a phenomenal element of the filmic process, it is a phenomenon that has changed international economies.

(Stutesman 2011: 18)

In this article we consider costume design as an essential aspect of film and not only of characters' identities. Costume design and the interconnection between fashion and film is the starting point for investigating some cultural aspects of contemporary Italian cinema, such as nostalgia, the gender issue and the forms of engagement with political issues. In the latter case, I have not considered the analysis of costume design in films, but rather the way fashion enters the political discourse of the so-called committed cinema, through the interface of the auteur's image and look.

These are three aspects representing only possible directions on which to work in order to link the analysis of costume with wider-scope cultural discourses that do not stop at the analysis of the *mise-en-scène* models, but, rather, attempt to question the complex relationship between fashion cultures, social representations and the culture of taste.

## 2. MASCULINITY AND NOSTALGIA AS A LOSS OF ELEGANCE

When Paolo Sorrentino talked about the film that was to become *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) he referred not only to Fellini's masterpiece *La dolce vita* but mainly to the work of photographer Umberto Pizzi. Pizzi has a great deal of experience as a photo reporter; he is what you could call a modern-day Rome-based paparazzo. In his shots, which he sells to gossipy newspapers, Pizzi tells a story in visual images that is the postmodern version of Rome's decadence, politics, art, culture and high society of the Eternal City. His work is an extraordinary anthropological study of the present day. In 2009 there were rumours of a film Sorrentino was thinking of making, based on *Cafonal*, a book of photography by Umberto Pizzi (D'Agostino and Pizzi 2008). '*Cafonal* is the *Dolce Vita* today in its utmost degeneration', Sorrentino said in various interviews. '*Cafonal*' is a difficult term to translate: in Italian imagery it indicates the senseless and tasteless garishness of a host of events in public, political, artistic and cultural life, above all in Rome. Umberto Pizzi's photographs show the monstrous, grotesque and deformed, which, in *La dolce vita*, are hidden behind the glamour of a stylized beauty and elegance. After the release of *La grande bellezza*, probably wisely, Sorrentino played down the comparison with Fellini's *La dolce vita* and distanced himself from Pizzi's photography – not only to defend his own artistic vision, as is only right and proper, but probably also to avoid legal wrangles with Umberto Pizzi. And in point of fact, in *La grande bellezza* the ferocious images of Pizzi become something else; they take on something of the glossy magazine. However, what remains is the idea of looking at the decadence of Rome as the archetype of all decadence and making Rome the stage for the whole of Italy. More than Pizzi's photographs, the reference to *La dolce vita* serves the purpose of a discourse about *nostalgia*, as a main topic in Italian contemporary debate (here the nostalgia for a golden age of Italian cinema and culture). So the film evokes in the audience (especially Italian ones) a nostalgia combined with a thoughtful, critical attitude to



Figure 1: The Great Beauty (Sorrentino, 2013).

the present. In *The Great Beauty* this discourse is expressed through clothes. Talking about her work on the film, costume designer Daniela Ciancio said:

Jep Gambardella is an old-fashioned man, alive today who is surrounded by a world that has lost a certain elegance. The whole film is pervaded by *horror vacui*. Horror vacui, the fear of empty space that teaches you to fill things up with everything and more. Jep is a bit estranged from all this. The world around him has lost that elegance; he's the only one who still has this elegance in the film.

(Galen 2014)

Jep Gambardella's wardrobe is exquisitely sartorial, from the white linen suit to the blue evening suit, with jackets in brilliant colours, and white trousers – a look that Daniela Ciancio's work has conceived as an assembly of materials ranging from Neapolitan tailors to brands like Armani, Luxottica, Tod's and Hogan (Figure 1). The roots are, however, in the great sartorial tradition of the Neapolitan jacket (Paolo Sorrentino is also from Naples) and the vintage glamour of Capri's international jet set, especially referred to through the use of brilliant colours. The result is a character, seemingly a crossbreed of an American dandy on vacation (vaguely hinting at Tom Wolfe) and a Neapolitan aristocrat. Jep Gambardella's suits and shirts come from the bespoke tailor shop Attolini, a historical brand of Neapolitan fashion. When leafing through the tailor's record books, one can read the names of many celebrities who patronized the company for their bespoke suits: Totò, Vittorio De Sica, Marcello Mastroianni and Clark Gable, King Vittorio Emanuele III and the Duke of Windsor, to name a few. Film director Paolo Sorrentino has stressed the importance of this choice:

Neapolitans are great fashion connoisseurs, especially those of an older generation. There is for example a very strong tie between Naples and London. Many who could afford it used to send their shirts to be ironed



Figure 2: Jep Gambardella/Toni Servillo nella sartoria Cesare Attolini di Napoli.

in London, because it was said that nowhere else could shirts be ironed so perfectly.

(Belardelli 2014)

The costume design of Jep Gambardella becomes the meeting point of diverse trait variations of being Italian (elegance, cult of the beauty, artistic sensitivity) that cut across a series of discourses on masculinity.

One of the reasons for studying the relationship between fashion and cinema in the Italian context may be the presence of masculine models that question some of the tenets of costume design. As Stella Bruzzi stated:

The most repent assumption about men's clothes held by fashion historians and writers such as Flügel, Quentin Bell or Laver is that men worthy of the name are not interested in fashion, and that the non expressive uniformity which has by and large characterized male dress codes since the early 1800s is the result of a belief that 'overt interest in clothing and appearance implied a tendency towards unmanliness and effeminacy'.

(1991: 171)

However, the ambivalence of some masculine models offered by cinema – as, for example, the gangster's figure, analysed by Bruzzi – contradicts this idea. The gangster is of course a man of action, but also a man spending a lot of his time caring for his image, a vain man, often finding one of the symbols of his climbing to power in sartorial clothes. The examples of Bruzzi's analysis come mostly from the imagery of Italian-American gangster movies (*The Untouchables*, *Goodfellas*). In effect, Italian manliness has always been linked to effeminacy, extreme care for one's body, vanity, and could be a good basis to develop this ambivalence and keep together affirmation and erosion of manliness, as – to remain within cinema – Hansen's analyses on the American reception of Rodolfo Valentino have shown, together with those by Jacqueline Reich (1997) on the myth of the Latin lover de-constructed by Marcello Mastroianni (O'Rawe 2014). Jep Gambardella's look summarizes all of these

discourses by offering a model of typically Italian manliness updating the mythologies of the metropolitan dandy, the older Latin lover, the Neapolitan viveur and the Italo-American gangster with a passion for expensive clothes. As *Esquire* wrote in presenting the film to its readers, ‘the movie is about Rome, but Sorrentino and Servillo, and his character Jep Gambardella, are from Naples, that cursed and blessed city that produces gangsters from hell and tailors – and footballers and pizzaioli – from heaven’.

In *La grande bellezza*, elegance becomes the backdrop for an analysis of the forms of loss (the loss of youth, the loss of beauty, of purity) and the forms of nostalgia (nostalgia for an unrepeatable season of Italian cinema and culture, embodied by *La dolce vita*); at the same time, again through costume design, the film strengthens the stereotypes of the Italian character (Jep Gambardella’s model of manliness) and the cult of Made in Italy in the world. This explains in part the centrality of the notion of nostalgia in contemporary Italian cinema: nostalgia is instrumental in conveying regret for the past good days of the country, while at the same time in continuing to sell one’s past to the international circuit – a nostalgia that in the world of *La grande bellezza* is defined as a loss of that elegance and style that marked the economic and cultural rebirth of Italy in the post-war period.

The relationship between nostalgia and elegance is one of the decisive themes in Luca Guadagnino’s work as well, one of the most interesting and original authors in the use of costumes. See in particular the suits made by Antonella Cannarozzi for *Io sono l’amore* (2009). Antonella Cannarozzi is a young but already established Italian costume designer, who graduated from the Academy of Brera. She has had numerous collaborations and she received an Oscar nomination for Guadagnino’s film. Antonella Cannarozzi’s costumes for *Io sono l’amore* (2009), which won an Oscar nomination, if representing quite well a certain idea of Milan elegance (the location of the film) on the one hand, refer explicitly to a certain nostalgia for the glamour of 1950s’ cinema on the other. Antonella Cannarozzi and Raf Simons re-interpreted the story of the film by transposing it outside contemporaneity to place it in a rarefied elegant timeless atmosphere (in fact, Antonella Cannarozzi said that she had thought *Io sono l’amore* to be a costume film). The tribute to 1950s and 1960s fashion is thus intertwined with cinema (Tilda Swinton’s bun recalling Kim Novak’s hairdo in *Vertigo*, the film dialogue recalling works very distant from each other, like *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* by Luchino Visconti and *In the Mood for Love* by Wong Kar-Wai). Fashion and clothes for *Io sono l’amore* become the vehicle for a discourse on the forms of nostalgia and melancholy linking together the memory of cinema and the representation of Milan’s bourgeoisie, offering themselves as the counterpart of the discourse on the elegance and the Roman decadence found in *La grande bellezza* (Figure 3). With his next film *The Bigger Splash* (2015), Luca Guadagnino has continued his personal reflection on the dark sides of elegance in a film that is an explicit homage to the dark glamour of *La piscine* by Jacques Deray (1969), and at the same time recalls the looks designed by Raf Simons, Ingrid Bergman’s wardrobe in *Viaggio in Italia* (Rossellini, 1964). With respect to Guadagnino’s work, the forms of nostalgia defining *La grande bellezza* develop in a more openly political key, as a reflection on the condition of the country and its contemporary decadence. Only in this way can we come to understand the many controversies the film did raise in Italy. Stephen Gundle, who has produced a substantial cultural history around the idea of Italian beauty, recalls that beauty is a decisive, diffused and rooted feature of the Italian national character – a constantly evolving ground



Figure 3: *Io sono l'amore* (Guadagnino, 2009).

of conflict, where identity and ideological issues, stereotyping processes, gender conflicts, utopias and allegories of the national feelings are at play. It is here – said Gundle – that ‘the nostalgia for an already lost organic meaning of culture would find several ways of expressing itself’ (2007: xxxi). The fact that in *La grande bellezza* the reference to Made in Italy is used for a deeply pessimist discourse does not represent a contradiction. This ‘upside-down patriotism’, looking at being Italian as a sum of defects and missed occasions, typical of Italian culture, is not in any way in contrast with the celebration of Italian elegance. On the other hand, as remarked by Nicola White in his study *Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry* (2000), America has played a decisive role in the construction and development of Made in Italy in the world; in the twenty years after the war not only was it a fertile ground at the receiving hand, but it also implemented a series of coordinated actions for the development of the Italian fashion and design industry, both in terms of financial support and in terms of cultural reverberation. The success on the international market of *La grande bellezza* is emblematic, in this sense, of the close relationship linking the Italian identity and the Made in Italy label, also understood as an American cultural construction – namely, a fragile identity, built for tourist purposes, but also clinging to an innate feeling of aesthetic superiority that the foreign gaze grants to it.

### 3. WOMEN’S FILM – ITALIAN STYLE

In comparison with the vast amount of attention paid to Jep Gambardella’s style and clothes, the female characters in *La grande bellezza* are clearly placed

only in the background. For this reason as well, several critics have highlighted a certain misogynist undercurrent in the film – regarding the stereotypes embodied by them (the bored wealthy woman, the empty artist, the frustrated intellectual writer), like in the article published by *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, where the character played by actress Sabina Ferilli was defined as a ‘semi illiterate strip-teaser, dressed like a gutter prostitute’ (Origgi 2013). An icon of popular cinema and Italian TV, the presence of Sabrina Ferilli is one of the clearest signs of the middlebrow construction of *La grande bellezza* that can merge together both the audience appreciating the reference to Flaubert and those following Sabrina Ferilli in gossip magazines. The actress was at the centre of a controversy with director Paolo Sorrentino, which seems interesting to mention as it had something to do with the film’s costumes. In several interviews Sabrina Ferilli said that the dress she had worn in *La grande bellezza* – a body-hugging suit, in nude colour see-through tulle, and embroidered with crystal beads – had not been picked by the costume designer, but was hers and had been hidden in her wardrobe for years because she had never had the courage to wear it (with this in mind, critics’ interpretation of the character’s prostitute dress becomes harder to accept). By underlining the personal contribution to the visual impact of her character, the actress also outlined a sort of detachment from Sorrentino’s artistic project – a detachment that came to the fore especially during the controversies for the Oscar celebrations. Newspapers reported widely her resentment at not being invited to Los Angeles with the film team (the director Paolo Sorrentino, producers Nicola Giuliano and Francesca Cima, and the protagonist Toni Servillo):

I’m disappointed that I wasn’t there, that I could not walk on the red carpet. And I’m not saying it just for myself, but also because the image that everyone remembers of the Oscar night is the photo of the actresses with beautiful dresses on the red carpet. I had an *extraordinary dress, and the jewels as well*.

(Ferilli 2013, emphasis added)

Besides more or less personal complaints, the story stresses in any case the scarce attention paid to the capitalization of the success of *La grande bellezza* through the red carpet, the glamour and the reference to the values of women’s beauty and fashion, thus strengthening the perception of a film finding in masculinity the backdrop on which considerations on lost beauty and Italian identity are woven. Stephen Gundle (2007) has instead shown how Italian female beauty, well known in the world through post-war cinema, was defined in open opposition to the ideal of artificial beauty built around Hollywood stardom. Italian beauty was depicted as a sort of natural gift linked to Italy’s history and cultural heritage – a discourse further highlighted, for example, in the strong correlation that post-war Italian cinema put forward between female stardom and the beauty of the landscape, by placing this theme deep in earthly values, those of family, natural things, and purity (as stated by Cindy Crawford in a recent commercial for a well-known brand of Italian mineral water, ‘here in Italy I’ve known a new kind of beauty, a pure one, which does not change with time, and I perceive inside me and outside’). In collective imagery, the female icons of Italian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s (Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Claudia Cardinale) are seen wearing simple, not ostentatious clothes. Often the characters they play live or



come from the countryside, very rarely from the city. For this reason as well, except for costume films and some iconic images of Italian cinema, as Claudia Cardinale in the ball of *Gattopardo*, very rarely do female characters come into our mind who were made famous for their stage dresses. This is even truer for the Italian cinema of recent years.

The discourse of female costume design in contemporary Italian cinema cannot be analysed separately from a discourse on the gender stereotypes of Italian culture. At the start of her book, *Woman, Desire and Power in Italian Cinema*, a historical study on Italian cinema adopting a gender perspective (not so frequent in Italian scholars, at least until a few years ago), Marga Cottino-Jones recalls how

the roles in which women are usually cast in Italian films are as wives and mothers [...] others Italian films construct women as inferior to man and very dependent on them in accordance to the traditional patriarchal system that has dominated Italian culture and society for several centuries.

(2010: 3–4)

The author uses as quotation a famous interview of actress Monica Vitti (one of the most brilliant actresses of Italian cinema in the 1960s and 1970s):

It is incredible how very few Italian directors and scriptwriters are seriously interested in what a woman thinks or by what a woman is moved [...] How many times a scriptwriter told me, 'My dear Monica, how can I write cinema stories for you? You are a woman and what does a woman do? She does not go to war; she has no profession [...] What can I have you do? Only a love story can I make you do; that you have children, suffer, he leaves you, you are desperate'.

(Vitti 1972: 54)

Similar statements by Italian actresses are still common today, and from that point of view the situation does not seem so different. Actress Lucia Maglietta said recently:

Only 12% of films have a female main character. It may also be remarked that the male character is always adventurous, brave, heroic, while the female character is a looser, frustrated and the same is true for the stage! The percentage of women going to the theatre, cinema, book presentations is much higher than men's, so I'm asking, in which role do female audiences see themselves? In men's? In the frustrated woman?

(Camaldo 2014)

Lucia Maglietta, an actress working mostly in theatre, was the protagonist of one of the most successful all-female-cast films in contemporary Italian cinema, *Pane e tulipani*, directed by Silvio Soldini in 1999. Here the actress played Rosalba, a middle-aged homemaker from Pescara, who during a tourist excursion with her husband was left behind by her travel companions for a petty accident. Instead of going back home Rosalba hitches a ride with an unknown woman and heads to Venice with the idea of visiting the city. But what was supposed to be a simple day of freedom turned into a 'short vacation', bringing her to see through her life as wife, mother and housewife. *Pane*

1. <http://www.iodonna.it/personaggi/interviste-gallery/2015/04/26/margherita-buy/>.

*e Tulipani* is in fact a female escape movie following *Thelma and Louise's* example (the title is a variation of the famous rallying cry 'bread and roses'), but the changing of the character, her search for freedom, would not be much mirrored in the work of costume design. For the entire film, Rosalba wears plain jumpers or very shabby flower-print dresses, as if not even with her escape would she be able to truly discard her role of housewife depending on her husband. Even if the overall visual style of the film appears kitsch and unusually pop for Italian authorship cinema, the search for freedom by the character is not displayed in her clothes. In any case, the success of *Pane e Tulipani* may be considered one of the factors that brought Italian cinema to produce an increasing number of films built around female characters having to deal with the limits of their roles.

One of the best known and more representative actresses of contemporary Italian cinema, in terms of made films and prizes received from Italian critics, is undoubtedly actress Margherita Buy. Decidedly not a Mediterranean beauty, but rather sober, almost demure, focusing more on her work than on the management of her image, Margherita Buy is the paradigm of the left-leaning middle-class woman and icon of an authorship cinema, often constructed in the forms of intimate melodrama, but also with forays into sophisticated comedy. 'Demure', 'ethereal', 'calm', 'inclined to drama' are some of the adjectives and definitions used by critics. 'Women being told with the face and soul of Margherita Buy' can be read in a portrait of the actress in a women's magazine; 'these are the women that are liked by other women. Often anxious, complicated, but always showing authentic feelings and dignity'.<sup>1</sup>

Such features have been quite enhanced by her screen wardrobe – for example, the monochromatic dresses she wears in the film *La fate ignoranti* (Ozpetek, 2001), one of her most famous films, where she plays the role of an upper-middle-class woman discovering that her dead husband was homosexual. Alongside this minimalist line, mostly linked to her drama films, her comedies highlight instead the typical femininity of the 'woman that women like'. In *Maledetto il giorno che ti ho incontrato* (Verdone, 1992), the film that launched her revealing her comic talent, Margherita Buy plays the role of a sort of Annie Hall – Italian style. Her look takes on the style made famous by Diane Keaton (hats, large jackets, trousers), although there is no reference to feminism or the *coolness* typical of women living in Soho, and the clothes are instrumental in making her character funny, insecure and clumsy.

In recent years, Margherita Buy has been one of the actresses mostly called by Italian cinema to play in stories with and about women, in many cases also directed by women. In *Viaggio sola*, by Maria Sole Tognazzi (2013), a film exploring the theme of women's independence and friendship, Margherita Buy is a 40-year-old single woman, with no children, working as an inspector of luxury hotels for the Leading Hotels of the World, and travelling all the time from one hotel to the other. In Italian cinema, this model represents the counterpoint of women fully immersed in their love stories or in their children's lives. The woman devoted to her work, moving outside the sphere of the family, is always set in the plot of the story in dramatic opposition to her counterpart, who has children and a husband. This paradigm of modernity is further stressed by the work of Antonella Cannarozzi. Margherita Buy is depicted in her natural sobriety, wearing the usual monochromatic clothes, wide trousers, neutral colour, and few accessories. The theme of female friendship shifts into a love story in *Io e lei* (2015), again by director Maria



Figure 4: *Io e lei* (Tognazzi, 2015).

Sole Tognazzi, where Margherita Buy and Sabrina Ferilli play in one of the very few Italian films dealing openly with the theme of lesbian love within a comedy format. In this case as well, costumes were designed by Antonella Cannarozzi. The two characters are very different in terms of their background (Margherita Buy, wealthy and sophisticated, Sabrina Ferilli more working class). Margherita Buy wears pearly or dove grey shirts, and at night in bed with her lover we see her in white-bordered azure pyjamas. Here again, there are no brilliant colours, and her look does not differ from the other 'straight' characters she played before. Another recurrent element in her characters is linked to her portrayal of a left-leaning, upper-middle-class woman, attuned to environmental themes, with a passion for eastern cultures, reading books about Tibet, loving ethnic food and auteur cinema (Figure 4).

Regarding the film *Nemiche per la pelle* (Lucini, 2016), another comedy on female friendship, Margherita Buy described her character in this way:

Lucia is all linen, comfort, subtle hues, shapeless clothes. More than an attempt to hide herself, it is simply because she feels well in her own skin, as she is not looking for reassurance from outside. She doesn't even need clothes to make her stand out: she knows who she is and what she wants. As simple as that. The most difficult thing was to find the right balance for her style: it did not have to be too masculine nor too feminine. She lives in her world, her way of being, her wardrobe.

(Catena 2016)

This is a dress code matching with almost all characters, making Margherita Buy stand out as an icon of Italian femininity, embodying the values of a specific social class: snobbish, left-leaning, bourgeoisie consuming middle-brow cultural products, obsessed by the need to distinguish themselves from the more popular classes, shaped by television aesthetic. On the other hand, as shown by several market research studies, that is precisely the main target of Italian cinema. Because of that, except for some rare instances, like the films by Roberta Torre, the glossy images of Paolo Sorrentino and Luca Guadagnino, and few others like *Happy Family* by Gabriele Salvatores (2010), the prevailing



Figure 5: *Nemiche per la pelle* (Lucini, 2016).

aesthetic in the costume design of Italian cinema is characterized mostly by subdued tones that rarely turn on the imagination of the spectator, as if cinema did not want to be contaminated by the aesthetics of commercial television.

What follows is a conflicting relationship for contemporary Italian cinema with fashion, luxury, glamour and the denial of exuberant and aggressive forms of femininity typical of television imagery. This type of conflict is well embodied in the characters played by Margherita Buy, finding one of their values of reference in the diverse forms of the *ethno-chic* (Reinach 2006).

#### 4. ETHNO-CHIC (DRESS, POLITICS AND THE NEW ITALIAN DOCUMENTARY)

The *ethno-chic* clothes of many of the bourgeois characters played by Margherita Buy seem to refer to the social class and taste of the main target audience of Italian cinema (a left-leaning bourgeoisie, mainly urban, with a medium–high-school capital). She represents an idea of authentic beauty and femininity, namely in contrast with the artifice of television glamour, as well as to a delusional dimension of local, instead of industrial and global, authenticity of fashion.

As already remarked by American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, clothes make reference to multiple cultural categories and their different mutual relations, thus forming a sort of map of universal categories. In the globalized world, the notion of *ethnic dress* may be offered as a remediation horizon of the possible cultural universes of the subject, suggesting a pluralistic, open stance, ready to encounter other cultures.

On the one hand, the *ethno-chic* may be placed on the wider horizon of Orientalism, a phenomenon deeply rooted in western culture, and which, starting from the famous work by Edward Said, has dominated the debate on cultural and postcolonial studies; but on the other hand, it expresses a precise elitist trend of fashion in the global era, offering a solution capable of negotiating between the fair-trade spirit, global sensitivity and glamour.

The *ethno-chic* look is quite suitable therefore to the narrative of the left-leaning bourgeoisie to which the majority of characters and reference targets of Italian cinema belong, and in some instances it may become the specific

elements of 'commitment'. A discourse that is not just about the costume, but can also define the public image of some *engagé* authors.

This is the case, for example, of the variety of ethnic scarves and pashminas exhibited by director and documentarist Gianfranco Rosi, embodiment of the *engagé* author of contemporary Italian cinema. His two latest documentaries, *Sacro Gra* (2014), on the life in the suburban areas around Rome, and *Fuocoammare* (2015), dedicated to the island of Lampedusa, the first landing place of many migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, have won prestigious awards, such as the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and the Golden Bear at the Berlin Festival. Born in Asmara, in Eritrea, a former colony of fascist Italy, which he left when he was twelve, Gianfranco Rosi studied in the United States and made films all over the world, from the banks of the Ganges to the Californian desert. Protagonist of the so-called 'cinema of the real' and symbol of the new Italian documentary, Rosi represents cinema in its ethic, anti-spectacular and poetic dimension. His look appears extremely well thought through: he always wears jackets with frayed buttonholes, glasses with impossible frames and mostly ethnic scarves and pashminas. At every public event (award ceremonies, interviews, conferences) the filmmaker always wears them, often draped over a crew-neck sweater. Journalists have asked him directly the reasons why: 'I started wearing the scarf in the desert. The sun was burning me and I had to protect myself. As for the rest of my look, acting like you are somebody else would be pointless and dishonest' (Pagani 2016). In his famous article on the end of dandyism, Roland Barthes stressed the importance of the details in clothing after the uniformity and the social levelling promoted by the French Revolution:

If the fundamental type of the male dress cannot any longer be changed without undermining the principle of democracy and toiling, it is the detail now performing the distinctive function of costume: the knot of a tie, the fabric of a shirt, the buttons of a waistcoat, the buckle of the shoes would suffice to indicate the subtlest social differences.

(2006: 71)

If the style of political commitment, public spiritedness, a penchant for social commentary works are, as we know, some of the dominating themes in Italian cinema culture, there are very few authors who have been able to relaunch them in terms of global sensitivity, bringing them outside national borders. In a recent book dedicated to this production, Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva wrote:

In recent times, Italian cinema has continued incessantly to engage with politics, both in its most strict definition, and in a wider context that includes reflection upon public life, memory, and national identity. On one hand, a certain type of auteur cinema, from that of Marco Bellocchio and Nanni Moretti to that of Mario Martone and Paolo Sorrentino, continues to posit personal interpretations of the most crucial aspects of the life of the nation. On the other – while we are witnessing a noteworthy revival of the *poliziesco* and noir film – comedy, in its many instantiations has become the genre most inclined to offer a real-time portrayal of the tumultuous events of the Second Republic.

(2016: 6)

Gianfranco Rosi's case appears interesting because he is one of the few Italian authors capable of re-interpreting the political tradition of Italian cinema

to relaunch it at a global level. In this case, however, the discourse mainly concerns the complex relationship between fashion and engaged cinema – a discourse that cannot be exhausted in the analysis of the characters' suits (even less in the case of documentaries) but it can concern more broadly the management of the public image of the director, applying the tools of star studies to the figure of the author (see Kapsis 1992).

I think, in conclusion, that the interpretation of costume design in contemporary Italian cinema should be developed not only by taking into account the creative demands of the film, or the construction of images, and the work on the characters, but also by looking at the reference target, in a discourse capable of combining social class, gender and taste cultures.

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