**Laughter and the Popular in Lina Wertmüller’s *The Seduction of Mimì***

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When her first feature-film, *The Lizards/I basilischi* (1963), was released in Italy, critics almost unanimously welcomed Lina Wertmüller as one of the *enfants terribles* of 1960s Italian cinema.[[1]](#endnote-1) That same year, Wertmüller had worked as assistant director for Federico Fellini on *8½/* (1963). In acknowledging the debt that her first film paid to neorealism and to Fellini himself, critics were celebrating the rise of a young director whose work seemed to be entirely within the great Italian tradition of auteur cinema (Micciché, 1975: 156; Brunetta, 1993: 291). After *The Lizards*, Wertmüller did some work for the Italian state television company RAI. She directed the first edition of the show *Canzonissima* and then went on to make the first *musicarello* (music-comedy) ever broadcast on Italian TV, *Il giornalino di Gianburrasca* (1964-1965)*.* In the 1970s, Wertmüller returned to the attention of film critics and achieved her first major international success on the big screen, *The Seduction of Mimì/Mimì* *metallurgico ferito nell’onore* (1972)*.* This was a very different film from *The Lizards*. It was full of gags, crass humour and had a virtuoso visual style that was far from the restrained realist aesthetic of her first film*.* Wertmüller went on to make some of the most commercially successful Italian films of the 1970s. On the year of its release, *The Seduction of Mimì* took 820,725,000 lire in Italy and had the seventh highest box office receipts, while *Swept away/Travolti da un insolito destino nell’azzurro mare d’agosto* had the fifth highest in 1975 (Colombo, 2001: 81). In the same period, Wertmüller’s films became a sensation in the US where she was nominated for an Oscar for best director.

In an interview, Wertmüller explains that this commercial success was partly the result of a shift in her attitude to filmmaking:

[M]y first film won 14 international awards, but it followed the conventional road of the cinema today; it was for the intellectuals. Considering the problem, I changed my politics; I changed my approach, searching for a popular cinema while trying not to reject anything which might enable me to communicate with *the people*.[[2]](#endnote-2) (McIsaac and Blumenfeld, 1974: 7)

Wertmüller’s search for a ‘popular cinema’ revolved around a desire to establish a new relation with a different kind of audience. This search proved successful to the extent that many spectators ended up watching her films. One could wonder whether these were ‘the people’ that Wertmuller had in mind when she talked about her ambition to make popular cinema. Christopher Wagstaff reminds us that ‘in the idealist perspective that is often prevalent in Italy, the people, rather than an empirical entity, are prevalently seen as a hypothesis on the basis of a moral impulse’;[[3]](#endnote-3) they are indeed a model for a progressive hypothesis about society, often identified with the working class and other subaltern groups (see Asor Rosa, 1965; Spinazzola, 1975). This hypothesis is arguably evoked in Wertmüller’s films of the 1970s. Very much in the Italian film tradition of post-war populism going back to Luigi Zampa and Giuseppe De Santis, Wertmüller’s films aim to raise the consciousness of vast masses of ordinary spectators around particular social and political issues. This objective is often pursued in her films through the use of the conventions of popular genre cinema; the genre that Wertmüller chose in her most commercially successful films of the 1970s was that of comedy.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Her aspiration ‘to communicate with the people’ also highlights the authorial agency underlying this pursuit. Wertmüller is a director who has maintained throughout her career a certain control over the conditions of production of her films and their aesthetic and narrative formats. When Warner Brothers offered Wertmüller a contract to make her first Hollywood-produced film, she came up with *Night Full of Rain* (1978), arguably one of the most difficult arty films of her career. With its oneiric narrative structure and its visual references to Giorgio De Chirico’s paintings, it was a film that defied the expectations of the American producers who wanted her to make an accessible popular film targeted at a mass audience. Wertmüller’s authorial voice is particularly evident in the stylistic signature of her 1970s films (e.g. their baroque mise-en-scène and their grotesque imagery). In *Popular Cinemas of Europe*, Dimitri Eleftheriotis has rightly discussed the opportunities that Wertmüller gives us to consider the question of authorship and popular cinema as two intersecting issues, rather than as opposing modes of cinematic practice (2001: 137).

Inevitably, Wertmüller’s films bring into critical focus the limitations of the categories normally invoked in the study of popular and art cinemas whilst complicating the often taken-for-granted assumption about the spontaneity and the lack of artistry of popular cinema. They question the very oppositionality on which the popular/art dyad relies and the distinct audiences these two modes of filmmaking tend to be associated with. This blurring is perhaps most noticeable in the contradictory critical responses that Wertmüller’s films of the 1970s encountered. In the US, her films were adoringly received by a number of critics; for John Simon, for example, *Pasqualino Seven Beauties/Pasqualino Settebellezze* (1975) was ‘an upward leap in seven-league boots that propels her into the highest region of cinematic art, into the company of the major directors’ (quoted in Blumenfeld, 1976: 3). By contrast, in Italy her films were thought to be the reserve of unsophisticated mass audiences and associated with the most vulgar kind of popular cinema.

A well-known example taken from popular Italian film culture of the period is very revealing.[[5]](#endnote-5) In *I’m Self Sufficient/Sono un autarchico* (1976), a young man tells his friend Michele (played by Nanni Moretti) about Lina Wertmüller’s critical success in the US. The friend reports that she has been recently offered a Chair in film studies at the University of Berkeley; Michele appears upset and starts spitting a spleen-like liquid to convey his fury for this seemingly unexplainable fact. This scene has become almost proverbial for how Italian critics generally responded to her films, their popularity and the critical recognition that the films received abroad. In a review of *The Seduction of Mimì*, Lino Micciché dismisses it as a film that reveals Wertmüller’s desire to titillate mass audiences with vulgar jokes, cheap gags and the exploitation of the most debased stereotypes about Italian society (1980: 156-7).

Such critical responses appear to treat Wertmüller’s aesthetic choices as opportunistic.[[6]](#endnote-6) At times, the accusations highlight the shameful waste of talent on the part of a director who had demonstrated unequivocal qualities with her debut film (Fotia, 1972: 290; Brunetta, 1993: 293). A major target of these critiques is the unquestionable stylistic refinement of her art that Wertmüller seems to have inappropriately deployed on a popular cinema of comic excesses and loutish humour. These critical responses also point to the irreconcilable contradiction between what would seem to be the serious ideological preoccupations of her films and the formal procedures that she uses to raise them. The mixing of these presumed ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ levels appears to these critics clearly contradictory, if not intolerable.

This chapter will argue that the originality of Wertmüller’s engagement with popular cinema is dependent precisely on these inferences of contamination and degradation. The distinctiveness of this engagement does not simply lie in the inappropriate mixing together of formal categories and thematic concerns that should be kept separate. It stems instead from Wertmüller’s re-inventive use of familiar codes normally associated with popular genre cinema (mainly comedy) and particularly her use of laughter. This use relies on a drive towards the ‘accessible’ and the ‘familiar’ which both teases and undoes those very expectations and pleasures for which her films are generally dismissed. This chapter focuses mainly on Wertmüller’s first box office hit *The Seduction of Mimì*. The first section identifies some of the strategies used by the film to target a mass audience and the kind of relation that it aims to establish with this audience. The second section explores the possibilities that an engagement with the questionof gendered laughter provide for thinking about Wertmüller’s relation to popular cinema.

**Strategies of popular engagement**

*The Seduction of Mimì* follows the story of a Sicilian miner (Mimì) who loses his job after refusing to vote for a Mafia-backed candidate at the local elections and then moves to Turin in search of better work opportunities. Having left his wife behind in Sicily, Mimì quickly finds a new job as a metalworker, a political passion (communism) and a woman he loves (Fiore). After a series of unfortunate circumstances he is forced to return to Sicily. Here, Mimì starts leading a double life with Fiore on the one hand and his wife on the other. He gradually repudiates his communist ideals and turns away from the struggles of his co-workers.

*The Seduction of Mimì* does not develop a classic comedic structure – i.e. a narrative tending towards a happy ending – but features a number of gags and wisecracks based on the motif of incongruity.[[7]](#endnote-7) The protagonist Mimì is presented as a classic comic figure in the Platonic sense of someone who is ignorant of himself. Mimì often misreads his own talents. He thinks he is more clever than he really is; he reckons that his actions will achieve a certain effect but he is usually proved wrong: hence, our laughter at him.

Whilst presenting Mimì as a laughable caricature, *The Seduction of Mimì* also establishes a space for the audience to enjoy feelings of empathy and identification with him. In the first section of the film, Mimì’s outspoken dislike for the Mafia-backed candidate and his decision to vote for the Communist Party (despite intimidation) place him in opposition to an oppressive and corrupt social order. After he is fired and he decides to migrate to Turin in the hope of a better life, the sense of injustice felt by Mimì is presumably shared also by the audience. As we follow his migration from Sicily to Turin (and thus his development into a politicised factory worker), his journey is presented as an easily identifiable experience for Italian and American audiences affected, in one way or another, by the experience of migration. In developing a sequential narrative structure based on causality, the film follows one of the main rules of classical narration. The cause-effect developments are left dangling at the end of a sequence and are generally picked up in the following one: e.g. decision not to vote for the Mafia-backed candidate (cause) → he is fired (effect of the previous cause, and cause of further developments) → decision to move to Turin (effect).

Consistently with its popular mode of address, *The Seduction of Mimì* conforms to another rule of the classical narrative film, namely the fact that at least one of the plot lines of the film should involve a heterosexual romance. In the first Sicilian section of the film, Mimì’s marital predicament is introduced: we see him in bed with his sexually inhibited wife who covers her face and prays whilst her husband attempts to make love to her. Frustrated, Mimì gives up. Intertwined with the moral and political dilemma (the conflict between political ideology and personal interest) that Mimì faces in the story, this plot line of frustrated sexual desire, left dangling in the first section, is then picked up in the section of the film set in Turin when Mimì finally meets Fiore. If life in Sicily denies to Mimì both the possibilities of resisting corruption and Mafia power and the material conditions for experiencing romantic love (see the wife’s discouragingly prudish attitude to sex), Mimì’s arrival in Turin coincides with the excitement of new romance with Fiore and the exhilarating opportunities of anti-capitalist struggle. The romantic theme, then, is a crucial component in the narrative progression of the film, one that moves from lack to fulfilment, a fulfilment that is both a political and a romantic one.

On one level, *The Seduction of Mimì* deploys a narrative of romantic wish-fulfilment that gives a prominent role to the emotions and passion in the actions of the protagonists, especially Mimì and Fiore. On the other, it plays with the very idea that this kind of narrative will necessarily reduce the complexity of the ‘serious’ political issues raised. As Katleen Rowe (1995a) has suggested, classical Hollywood comedies whose narratives involve the formation of the couple between and man and woman belonging to different social classes frequently dilute the problem of class difference under the romantic imperative of the happy ending. Coinciding with the flourishing of the romance between Fiore and Mimì, *The Seduction of Mimì* ends up performing precisely the depoliticising function that the ‘ideology of love’ is generally blamed for in popular genre cinema. Yet, this turn in the plot, rather than an inevitable consequence of the romance, is a self-conscious narrative gimmick which is set up in order to shed light on the problematic relation between political ideology and the individual responsibilities of the subject. It is an issue that becomes suddenly central in the film and that reveals the distance between the sincere nature of Fiore’s political commitment and Mimì’s more opportunistic relation to leftist politics. This is clear as soon as Fiore and Mimì set up a household together in Turin. Whilst Fiore has politics constantly in mind, Mimì quickly dismisses any notion of solidarity with other workers and discourages her from joining the public protest organised by the building workers. A further withdrawal from politics is evident in the scene in which Fiore lies, pregnant, on the bed and asks Mimì to inform her about the political ferment of the factories and the ongoing protests. The noise of the workers’ protests that reaches their loft from outside and Mimì’s unwillingness to tell her anything about their strikes highlight his sudden retreat from politics into his strictly private world. Mimì ends up absorbing traditional family values by directing all his thoughts and concerns towards his heir-to-be and Fiore. At this point, Mimì not only betrays his communist ideals but also reveals the gap between his initial political convictions and his actual self-interest.

Wertmüller’s popular cinema, I am arguing, is based on this trajectory: it moves from a moment of familiarisation to a subsequent state of discomfort appearing when the terms of a political and/or moral dilemma are revealed. It is a trajectory that becomes clear in a number of scenes in which a collective eye pauses on the protagonist. This is signalled by the camera dwelling on the faces of characters who silently condemn Mimì’s deplorable conduct (see for example his brother, Peppino, and Fiore herself in the final sequence). During these moments, the film enacts a kind of suspension; marked by the lack of verbal interaction, these are moments that generally imply a relief from the prevailingly comic development of the story and which draw attention to the eyes as silent intra-diegetic propellants for the audience’s evaluation of the issues raised by the film. Ironically, it is a relief that mimics the kind of suspension – ‘the absence of feelings’ as Henri Bergson puts it – that is required for laughter to work. Bergson reminds us that laughter, in order to be effective, needs a disinterested spectator who looks at a comic situation with ‘something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart’ (1935: 3). Bergson does not say that one could not possibly laugh at a person who inspires pity or affection. But the very act of laughing must impose a momentary silence upon these emotions. In the *Seduction of Mimi*, the former type of suspension works towards an emotional relief which is needed for us to experience laughter. The latter retrieves those emotions in order for the spectator to connect with and ‘feel’ the politics explored by the film. They are two seemingly opposite thrusts which appear entangled especially in the second section of the film. It is the very nature of this two-fold movement, I would suggest, that makes Wertmüller’s films of the 1970s especially vulnerable to the contradictory, often opposite critical responses that have accompanied their commercial success.

**Laughter, exaggeration and playful re-enactments**

‘I always proceed with a great faith in the power of laughter’, Wertmüller declares in an interview (McIsaac and Blumenfeld: 7). Underlining laughter as a privileged method for connecting with a mass audience, this is a pronouncement that is supported by the depiction of figures such as the corpulent Nazi commander in *Pasqualino Seven Beauties* and the bombastic fascist Spatoletti in *Love and Anarchy/Film d’amore e d’anarchia, ovvero ’stamattina alle 10 in via dei Fiori nella nota casa di tolleranza…’* (1973)*.* In both cases, the oppressiveness of the power that these characters represent is not shown in its frightening aspect, but under a humorous light that reveals the vulnerability of this power to derision. In *The Seduction of Mimi*, ridicule and trivialisation are constantly used to portray the shortcomings of the protagonist. Mimì appears as a buffoonish Latin lover in the comic fashion of *commedia all’italiana*. Throughout the film, we are invited to laugh at the grandiose way in which he introduces himself to Fiore, his ogling as he tries to woo her and his obsessive jealousy.

Wertmüller is a director whose use of laughter – often reliant on vulgar jokes and obscenities – has been often targeted, especially in Italy, by accusations of degradation and debasement. In commenting on her popular films of the 1970s, Lino Micciché asserts: ‘We give credit to Lina Wertmüller for her consistency: her cinema is degrading more and more, from film to film, with a constant progression which, if it weren’t deplorable, would certainly be admirable.’[[8]](#endnote-8) (1980: 212) This is a comment that reverberates with the widely shared impression among Italian critics that her films, because of their vulgarity and cheap humour, are so *degrading* for their audience that they deserve nothing but condemnation.

I want to pause, here, to consider briefly the question of degradation in popular comedy. In his essay on the mechanisms of slapstick, Tom Gunning notes that film forms dedicated to provoking laughter such as jokes and gags are often antithetical to logic and reason. Glossing Immanuel Kant’s reflections on the topic, he refers to laughter as a response in which both the mind and the body operate like a machine breaking down; for Gunning, gags and jokes may be best described as the ‘undermining of an apparent purpose, a detouring, if not derailing, of a rational system of discourse or action’ (2010: 139). The breaking down speaks of the departure from reason that laughter is meant to provoke in response to a comic situation or a joke. It is an image that evokes a kind of bodily debasement, a downward movement from the mind – depositary of reason, good sense and logic – towards the lower parts of the body.

The kind of bodily debasement that is suggested by Gunning’s essay seems to have little in common with the chuckle normally produced by witty, self-conscious humour. It is more closely associated, instead, with that loud, roaring laughter that is triggered by toilet humour and gross-out comedy. The image of the ‘machine breaking down’ fittingly evokes the spectre of an uncontrollable, mob-like audience splitting their sides in the darkness of the movie theatre in the face of ribald jokes and obscene catchphrases. The image resonates with the threating promise of a degraded mass taste and an audience that loses control over their intellectual and critical faculties.

One may not be entirely surprised, then, if the laughter most closely associated with the conventions and forms of popular cinema is often considered to be politically conservative, if not reactionary. One of the starting points of Kathleen Rowe’s work on the genres of laughter (1995b) is the acknowledgement of how often popular culture represents women as objects rather than subjects of laughter. Similarly, in their analysis of popular comedies in contemporary Italian cinema (the ‘cinepanettoni’), Christian Uva and Michele Picchi (2006) condemn the cruel gags and jokes of these films. For Uva and Picchi, these films provoke a kind of regressive laughter in the audience by targeting what the authors describe as typically ‘weak categories’ (‘categorie deboli’) (169) such as women and homosexuals.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most recurring criticisms of Wertmuller’s films concern the presumed dishonesty of her sexual politics and her much advertised feminist beliefs.[[9]](#endnote-9) These are allegations that often point to the impossible reconciliation between the feminist premises of Wertmuller’s films and the limitations of the stereotypes and exploitative comic situations on which her popular cinematic practice is based.

The second part of *The Seduction of Mimì* develops an increasingly important plot-line that shows Mimì taking his revenge against a man who has made his wife pregnant. The seduction of Amalia (the man’s wife), a middle-aged and overweight mother of five, is played for laughs. The scene in which Amalia finally surrenders to Mimì’s courtship and engages in a striptease constitutes the comic peak of the film. It is a moment when even the most enthusiastic defenders of Wertmüller’s work appreciate that the gratuitous visual indulgence on Amalia’s fat body should be criticised. Joan Mellen, for example, sentenced that ‘whatever his faults, which included caving in to the Mafia, the hero Mimì was never caricatured for his rolls of flab. Mimì’s faults revealed spiritual weakness; the woman was gross and Wertmüller seemed to be delighting in this grossness for its own sake.’ (1980: 99) By looking closely at this moment in the film, my objective is not to endorse or refute these criticisms. Rather it is to show the distinctiveness as well as the productiveness of Wertmüller’s engagement with popular cinematic forms: namely a kind of film practice based on the use of the most vulgar and sometimes offensive comic situations taken to such an exaggerated level of parody and grotesque humour that produces the undoing of their expected effect.

There are two major comic motifs in Mimì’s seduction of Amalia. The first has to do with Mimì’s absurd position in not desiring Amalia but having to have sex with her in order to accomplish his plan of revenge. The second is Amalia’s abundant body, which is here presented as an object of laughter for the audience. These two comic motifs are, however, interconnected, since the latter is a device to achieve the former. Cross-cutting between Amalia getting undressed and Mimì’s increasingly distressed face, this scene exploits for comic purposes certain culturally shared attitudes and feelings about female bodies. What makes Amalia’s body laughable is not only its chubbiness but how her erotic performance in the striptease clashes with dominant ideas of what constitutes proper sexualised femininity. By replaying the moment in which Amalia uncovers her bottom three times and repeatedly cross-cutting it with a sequence of pulsating shots zooming in on Mimì’s increasing panic (Fig. 7.1), the film only intensifies the feelings of amusement that such a spectacle is meant to provide to the spectator. We are encouraged to laugh at Mimì’s shift from victimiser to victim as he comes to terms with Amalia’s chubbiness; but the protagonist is only a vector for a laugh that originates and ends on Amalia’s body.



*Fig. 7.1 Mimì (Giancarlo Giannini) worringly looking at Amalia’s body during the striptease.*

This is a quintessential Wertmüller moment, one in which women make a spectacle of themselves by violating the conventions regulating their social visibility, thus exposing themselves to laughter. One such moment occurs for example in *Pasqualino Seven Beauties* when Pasqualino’s sister, Concettina – played by Elena Fiore, the same actress who plays Amalia in *The Seduction of* *Mimì* – performs a sexy routine in a vaudeville in front of a men-only audience. Confronted with such a spectacle, the men start abusing her verbally and laugh at her ugliness and fatness. The sequence is remarkable for how Concettina defiantly continues to sing while proudly showing her half-naked body, dancing sexily and hurling insults back at the men in the audience.

This type of defiant performance, empowered by a sense of ironic detachment from the oppressive cultural codes of gender visibility that make Concettina’s fat, aged body hardly fit for such a performance, is also present in Amalia’s striptease. Amalia’s performance is imbued with the sexist stereotypes that make her body laughable to the audience, as promptly signalled by the editing pattern binding Mimì’s distressed gaze to the view of Amalia’s body. Yet, such a performance also reveals an unquestionable extent of posing and teasing. As she undresses, Amalia deploys a coquettish smile and gazes back to the camera with self-assurance (Fig. 7.2). Her playful gaze makes a mockery of the proper performance of the ideal sexualised female body. Wertmüller signals the unseriousness of this moment with a sudden shift to warm light that invites us to reconsider our initial realistic engagement with this erotic spectacle.



*Fig 7.2: Amalia’s gaze at Mimì*

This scene evokes a distinctly feminine imagery of grotesque excess that seems to appear frequently in Wertmüller’s films. *Love and Anarchy*, for example, shows the gargantuan depiction of a banquet in which a group of prostitutes gulp down food and wine whilst laughing loudly and shouting insults at each other. The women wear exaggerated make-up, very revealing dresses and speak with larger-than-life regional accents. This is a scene that exemplifies the wider intent of the film to celebrate the joyous licentiousness of these women by configuring their bodies as sites of desirous excess against the deathly oppressiveness of bourgeois society and Fascism.

Mary Russo’s discussion of the female grotesque helps us to understand this kind of imagery. In her reading of the terracotta figurines of the laughing hags in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* [1965] (1984), Russo considers the disruptive potential of feminine hyperbolic performances. The bodies of the hags described by Bakhtin are deformed and decaying; yet they are laughing. The image of the pregnant laughing hags is of course laden with all the connotations of loathing and discomfort that are associated with the biological processes of reproduction, fattening and ageing. Described within the context of Bakhtin’s discussion on Carnival – the expression of popular culture that contests power through mockery – the bodies of the laughing hags constitute a collective grotesque female body that is ‘open, protruding, extended, secreting, [...] the body of becoming, process, change.’ (1986: 219) Russo’s analysis is useful because it shows a female subject unravelling her exploitation by male discourse by making visible, through an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible (i.e. the boundaries that woman is not supposed to cross).

Amalia’s performance in *The Seduction of* *Mimì* makes explicit the affirmative and celebratory potential of women’s bodily exposure and hyperbolic exaggeration raised by Russo’s study and subsequently expanded and complicated by Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman* (1995). By unashamedly flaunting a number of excesses that violate codes of proper femininity, Amalia appears in the film as much more than a passive object of scorn. Amalia’s body makes a spectacle of itself not simply for what it is but due to the way in which the camera indulges with repeated close-ups on her protruding wart and the massive size of her breasts and her bottom during the striptease. Its parodic intent is clear as we are confronted with the image of her enormous bottom climbing over the bed. The use of a wide-angle lens exaggerates the depth of the shot by distorting the visual spectacle so as to render Amalia’s prosthetic bottom like an animate mountain of flesh about to submerge Mimì, who appears comparatively much smaller on the opposite side of the bed. In its distortion, this appears as a hardly believable female body. It is a spectacle that engages with a masculinistic logic, lends itself to its stifling comic mechanisms in order to distance itself from it and expose the terms of this logic to mockery and derision.

Together with the use of the wide-angle lens, the modulation of specific camera angles in this scene makes explicit the self-empowering implications of this ‘masquerade’ (Doane, 1992). By exaggerating the difference in size between Amalia’s body and Mimì’s, this scene visually anticipates the overturning of the power relation between these two characters in the story. Wertmüller makes sure that we understand clearly that the roles of subject and object of the joke are about to be reversed. This is signalled through a sequence of shots that takes Mimì’s point of view as he lies on the bed and Amalia’s visual perspective as she kneels over him. For the former point of view, the camera takes a low angle position which exacerbates the gigantic size of Amalia’s body about to submerge Mimì, whereas for the latter a high-angle position increases his smallness. Such a use of the camera angles and its expressive meaning are very much consistent with how the film makes use of asymmetries in point of view to convey the relations of power and submission between characters. Every time Mimì recognises a member of the Tricarico family (the mafiosi) and bows to them, the camera signals such power relation through his recognition of the distinctive three moles on their faces and by showing the asymmetric visual relation between the powerful and the submissive. This is done either through dramatically high or dramatically low camera angles or by placing the character that exerts power on a higher plane such as a terrace, a balcony or a flyover.

The power reversal is made even more explicit as Mimì’s vengeful plan (to restore his honour) backfires on him when Amalia leads him back to the cabin where their first sexual encounter occurred. By treating him with disdain and impatience, Amalia now bosses Mimì around, hastening him to impregnate her. It is now Amalia who has taken control of the situation and decides to have her own revenge over her husband for having been cheated on with Mimì’s wife. This turn in the story coincides with the entrance in the realm of *beffa*, a comic trope by which female characters have been traditionally able to get around the authority of men through wit, deception and unruliness. Comedy is, of course, the domain of play *par excellence*, a site of disruption where unruly women have been able to undermine dominant patriarchal attitudes. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1999) argue, film comedy is also a game played with transgression and familiarity, where transgressions are cushioned and eventually disarmed by a resetting of boundaries. Much of the pleasure of such transgressions, particularly in the comedy of the sexes, has to do precisely with re-familiarisation within these boundaries after an ‘eccentric’ female character has enabled an extent of deviation from the norm (149-155).

In *The Seduction of* *Mimì* such a male-oriented resetting is strikingly absent. On the contrary, Amalia’s complicity with Mimì in making her husband a cuckold allows her to publicly humiliate both her husband and Mimì in front of her fellow citizens. This public humiliation takes place in the square in which Mimì has planned to stage his personal show to restore his honour by informing Amalia’s husband that he has impregnated his wife. In the face of her husband’s shocked reaction, Amalia takes here the opportunity to highlight, in her usual over-the-top fashion, not only the success of her own plan of vengeance against her husband but also her revulsion at the two men whom she rebukes as ‘good-for-nothing fathers’. The sequence, showing Mimì’s stratagem collapse after he is wrongly accused of having shot Amalia’s husband, is once again played for laughter only on one level. On another, Wertmüller punctuates the comic staging of Mimì’s revenge with close-ups of the disapproving gazes of Peppino and Mimì’s little brother who realise how far Mimì is ready to go to defend his honour. Such gazes do not allow the comic detachment that this paradoxical resolution would initially require – particularly after Mimì’s plan backfires again and the Mafia emissary kills Amalia’s husband in his place – but impinges upon our direct serious involvement in Mimì’s moral shortcomings. The close-up on the little brother, in particular, is striking because it painfully evokes the betrayal of Mimì’s earlier promise of mentorship to him at the beginning of the film. Moreover, it implies the shattering of the mutual feelings of complicity and affection shared by the brothers before Mimì’s departure to Turin.

*The Seduction of Mimì* seduces its audiences only to subsequently confront them with a betrayal of their expectations and a reversal of the ‘conservative’ re-ordering conventionally characterising the comic mode. The film lays out some of the politically ‘regressive’ pleasures associated with laughter only to create distance from such pleasures and reject them. Under these terms, then, the film seems to be involved in a self-conscious analysis of its own structure, one that concerns also the kind of oppressive masculinity epitomised by Mimì with which we are first invited to sympathise and then to experience unease.

Wertmüller’s films are detested and rejected by some critics as manipulative and exploitative commercial operations for the way they seem to bring together a set of binaries that should be kept separate: serious/comic; political commitment/entertainment; the director’s presumed allegiance to feminism/sexist jokes. The apparently impossible synthesis between these dichotomies generates the well-known accusations of hypocrisy addressed to Wertmüller and the assumption that the message of her films is muddled and chaotic, or even inherently contradictory. Wertmüller’s cinema, as *The Seduction of Mimì* shows, does not transcend the restrictions (and the hierarchies) that are implicit in the sometimes conservative workings of the ‘popular’, but productively shows some of the possibilities for disengagement from such restrictions.

Having focused in this essay only on Lina Wertmüller’s work, I acknowledge the risk of toying with the too familiar project of singling out certain individual directors, by showing the sophistication and complexity of their films, in order to assert how great they are despite their being popular.[[10]](#endnote-10) This is an approach whose ultimate aim, it seems to me, is to establish another hierarchy between ‘good’ popular cinema and ‘bad’ popular cinema. It is an approach which I want to take distance from. I want to do so by suggesting that in a film like *The Seduction of Mimì* there is something essentially popular which resists recuperation and re-articulation within the art canon. This ‘something’ consists of a downward movement towards pleasures which are intrinsically degrading because of their intimate connection to body-related humour and gross-out comedy. Wertmüller’s comedies of the 1970s are essentially and productively popular for the way they move towards some of the possibilities for contesting power and hierarchies envisaged by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*. Like the laughter of the people during Carnival, the laughter that I have discussed in *The Seduction of Mimi* uses the logic of the ‘inside-out’. It is a kind of laughter that upsets the rigid marking between object of the mocking and the enunciating subject of laughter. This is a laughter that is a genuinely popular cultural practice in the Bakhtinian sense, in which the subject from below enters a utopian realm of freedom and equality. Here, opportunities for movement, transformation and renewal are clearly visible. If it is true what Stuart Hall says when he argues that the active re-working of traditions and activities should be at the heart of the study of popular culture (1981: 228), then it is precisely the presence of these opportunities, I conclude, which makes Wertmüller’s popular films of the 1970s such an interesting cultural, aesthetic and political arena.

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1. **Endnotes**

   This was a period which saw the rise of a number of critically acclaimed young directors, the most famous of which included Bernardo Bertolucci and Marco Bellocchio. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. My emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Paper delivered at the *Popular Italian Cinema* conference entitled ‘Italian Cinema, Popular?’, King’s College, London, May 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a wider discussion of Wertmüller’s most popular films of the 1970s see Russo Bullaro, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. By this, I don’t mean that this example is taken from a ‘popular’ film. The episode has been so often quoted and referred to by critics and other commentators that it has become part of a popular cultural discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lucy Quacinella, for example, argues that ‘[t]he glitter of a well-wrapped package can draw attention from what’s actually inside. [...] A closer look, however, reveals the politics of these films to be shrewd manipulation of popular, “in” notions about how cinema could or should be socially concerned, politically committed.’ (1976: 17) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The absence of a happy ending is indeed not unusual in the Italian comedies of the economic miracle (1950s and 1960s) and throughout the 1970s. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Riconosciamo a Lina Wertmüller il merito della coerenza: il suo cinema si degrada sempre di più, di film in film con una costante progressione che, se non fosse deplorevole, sarebbe di certo ammirevole.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Elle Willis claims that Wertmüller ‘is not only a woman hater […] but a woman hater who pretends to be a feminist’ (quoted in Ferlita and May, 1977: 26). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This operation has already been performed for directors such as Hitchcock, Sirk and Ford. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)