Italian Cinema
Gender and Genre

Maggie Günsberg
Professor of Italian
University of Manchester
Commodifying Passions: Gender and Consumerism in Commedia all'italiana

Introduction

Comedy as a genre has long been linked to sex and materialism. This can be traced back to Aristotle's ascription to comedy of everyday concerns in lower social groups, going on to find expression in Italian commedia dell'arte and Renaissance theatre's earthy focus on goods, sexuality and the business of marriage in an era of nascent capitalism. On a continuing trajectory through Goldoni's eighteenth-century bourgeois comedies of socio-sexual manners, fashion as sex and status symbol, and marriage brokerage, to the adoption of comedy by cinema from its beginnings, sexual and material desires have inevitably been twinned.

The apotheosis of this link can be found in the golden era of commedia all'italiana (1958–64), produced in the context of Italy's economic miracle following postwar reconstruction, which culminated in the boom of 1958–63. As the economy rapidly urbanized and industrialized, the sizeable rural base of 42 per cent of the population working in agriculture in 1951 fell to 29 per cent by 1961. Taking over from heavy wartime industry for national use, light industry with a focus on export (especially white goods, office furniture and textiles) and the service sector (such as office work) prospered. The national income doubled in the decade 1952–62, and personal expenditure increased as consumption beyond mere subsistence became a reality (Gundle 1986, pp. 570–1, Ginsborg 1990, pp. 210–53). The transformation of mere consumption into the beginnings of a consumer culture in the 1930s and 1940s now blossomed into the cult of consumerism, spurred on by advertising and the prevalence of television from the late 1950s (Forgacs 1996). Television advertising in Italy was initially contained by Catholic concerns about consumerism, and, unlike American or other European formats, did not punctuate films and other communications, but in the beginning was limited to brief programmes devoted to advertising, such as Carosello, launched in 1957 (Gundle 1986, pp. 584–5).

However, for many, the ability to participate in the pervasive culture of goods lagged behind a growing desire to do so, a gap seized upon to great comic and satirical effect by commedia all'italiana. In effect, unemployment was high, with considerable migration to the cities of the North for work, and wages remained the lowest in Western Europe (Giacovelli 1995, p. 43). This meant that while all classes may have aspired to consumerism, the lower classes often remained excluded, their bungled attempts to join in explored in films like Monicelli's I soliti ignoti (1958) and Loy's Audace colpo dei soliti ignoti (1959). Even the middle classes experienced problems, begging the question of who precisely benefited from the boom, as in De Sica's Il boom (1963), and casting doubts on its salutiness, a major theme in Risi's Il successo (1963), both films made towards the end of the period as the economy was beginning to falter.

The films are themselves, of course, luxury products consumed by the ticket-buying spectator, with cinema from its beginnings already preparing Italians for consumerism in the purchase of tickets as non-essential goods (Gundle 1990, p. 203). The melodramas, which kick-started genre production, had increasingly showcased cars, haute couture and a middle-class lifestyle, with Cottafavi's Una donna libera, at the end of the golden era of the genre in 1955, featuring a female interior designer. There is a longstanding link between the screen and the shop window, enhanced by press-books and posters, with the construction of the spectating self mirroring the appearance and lifestyle of the stars in materialist terms of buying clothes, cosmetics, cars and furnishings. This runs alongside the more unconscious, psychical identifications of spectatorship, identifications made possible once the distancing theatrical gesturing of early silent cinema had given way to the more subtle, realistic acting style required by the cinematic close-up (Matthews 2000, pp. 74–82). The socioeconomic context of the boom resulted in a sharp focus in commedia all'italiana on the relationship between people and goods, and also, in particular, on the way goods mediate in relations of gender and class.

In this context of intensified commodification of social relations, the subversive possibilities inherent in the comic genre, and the social progressiveness encouraged by the spread of the globalized medium of
television, rub against the status quo of patriarchal ideology, which continues to construct femininity as arena for relations between men, with the commodification of female sexuality as the basis of these relations. Subversive tendencies and comic focus find themselves as a rule subsumed by the male-dominated nature of commedia all’italiana in terms of actors, directors and plot trajectories. This results in a general marginalization of femininity and a closing down, with few exceptions, of the possibilities for anything other than the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and relations. However, it is in these exceptions, as we shall see, that a new, contemporary femininity can be observed quietly emerging at the margins to deconstruct patriarchal norms and unbalance traditional gender expectations with a newfound economic independence through well-paid careers (Risi’s Il sorpasso, 1962, Il successo, 1963, Il giovedì, 1963). This contrasts with melodramatic working femininity, for whom work is scarce, poorly paid, at times filled with danger and given up on marriage.

Anarchic, carnivalesque transgression, in the form of the reversal or taking to extremes of social norms, is usually the domain of male protagonists in a comic genre that can be characterized as (male) comic comedy. Commedia all’italiana continues the tradition of Italian cinematic comedy centring on particular star comedians, a dynamic already at work in sixteenth-century commedia dell’arte theatre, with its plays improvised around characters famous comic actors had made their own. While Isabella Andreini is one celebrated actress synonymous with commedia dell’arte, it is more difficult to identify a dominant comic actress in boom-time commedia all’italiana four centuries later. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of cinematic stardom originated in Italian opera with female, rather than male, stars, the history of Italian comic cinema is a role-call of male actors: in silent cinema, Leopoldo Fregoli from 1898 to the early 1900s and Cretinetti from the 1910s to the mid-1930s; after the coming of sound, Macario from the 1930s to the 1940s, and Totò from the 1940s to the 1960s. Key to the golden era of commedia all’italiana are Vittorio Gassman, Nino Manfredi, Alberto Sordi and Ugo Tognazzi, with the ubiquitous Marcello Mastroianni including comedy in his range of acting roles during this period.

While these actors are perceived as embodying an Everyman-type Italianness of undoubted humour and often hilarity, their various ostensibly ungendered Everyman images do not include ‘woman’. On the contrary, they serve to ensure that masculinity and its interests dominate the screen, to the exclusion of the feminine point of view.

Of the 65 actors listed by Giacovelli in his history of Italian comic cinema, only 20 are female, while the difference in the category of director and scriptwriter is even more extreme: 58 men and one woman, Lina Wertmüller (Giacovelli 1995, p. 288). The career trajectory of Monica Vitti as, according to Giacovelli, Italy’s only comic actress in the cinema, typifies the patriarchal emphasis on how women look, rather than on what they do, as well as male dominance in cinematic production. A successful stage actress, Vitti was initially excluded from the screen because of her unconventionally long nose and unfashionable body shape. Her first involvement in cinema was behind the scenes, in dubbing, after which a few minor comic roles led to her career launch as a dramatic film actress at the hands of her future partner, the director Antonioni. Another male director, Blasetti, opened the door to comedy in 1963 (in other words, only at the end of classic commedia all’italiana period), giving her a central role in Le quattro verità (Giacovelli 1995, p. 273). As Risi, one of the foremost directors of commedia all’italiana, observed in an interview, his work was centred primarily on ‘a cinema of actors’ and on ‘masculine cinema’:

I’ve spoken of actors because I’ve usually always made masculine cinema, a cinema of actors. Of course, I’ve also directed actresses and developed a good rapport with some of them. The female roles in my films, the films that I’ve made, it’s true, have always been a little ‘on the side’... I had these four actors whom I worked a lot with, Sordi, Gassman, Tognazzi, Manfredi and also Mastroianni, these five actors. The first four appeared in almost all my films and so the stories centered around male characters. They were the heroes. Women were always slightly in the background. (Gilli 1998, pp. 87, 89)

The 1958–64 period of commedia all’italiana was generally characterized by films whose plots centre on the concerns and predicaments of Italian masculinity, with a predominance of male characters, whether in groups (I soliti ignoti), pairs (Il sorpasso) or on their own (Il boem). Even when their predicaments involve relations with femininity, it is the masculine viewpoint that prevails. For example, in Germi’s Divorzio all’italiana it is Mastroianni’s scheming to rid himself of his wife which, however ridiculous and unsympathetically portrayed, is the central focus because of his ever-present, fantasizing voice-over, while the spectator is never privy to her inner thoughts. Similarly, even
though in De Sica's *Matrimonio all'italiana* Sofia Loren and Mastroianni both have a flashback, Loren’s is considerably shorter. It is also through his eyes that we are acquainted with the twenty years of antefact to the film’s narrative opening. Giacovelli notes that the most popular comedies figured central male roles, with the somewhat exceptional corpus of *commedie al femminile* by Pietrangeli (*Nata di marzo, Adria e le compagnie, La parmigiana, La visita, Io la conoscevo bene*) and the occasional such film by Salce (*La caccagna*), Puccini (*L’attico*) and Comencini (*La bugiarda*), which not only are less comic, but also invariably show unconventional female protagonists coming to a bad end (Giacovelli 1995, pp. 88–9).

This ‘feminine’ corpus is one of several strands into which *commedia all’italiana* can be divided. Comedy as a generic category is extremely broad, with comic elements also to be found running through and refreshing other genres through parody, often when the genre in question appears to have run its course commercially. In addition to the strand of *commedie al femminile*, Giacovelli identifies *commedie giallorosate* (the thieving comedies, including *I soliti ignoti, Audace colpo dei soliti ignoti, Il mattatore*), historical comedies set in various periods (*I compagni, La grande guerra, Tutti a casa*) and *commedie antimatrilineali* (the most famous being *Divorzio all’italiana, Matrimonio all’italiana* and *Sedotta e abbandonata*). The *commedie antimatrilineali* and the *commedie al femminile* are in turn two gender-specific strands of a broader subset which he calls *commedie di costume*, or comedies of manners. A further division exists between comedies specifically about the boom and those simply made during the boom. However, considerations of gender, while most apparent in the *commedie antimatrilineali*, cut across all the strands.1

The term *commedia all’italiana* itself is open to different interpretations. In this chapter it refers to the 1958–64 corpus regarded as encapsulating its heyday, but it is also taken by some to indicate a longer period, 1958–80, or even to indicate all Italian comic cinema. For some the term is derogatory, while for others it is merely a way of distinguishing Italian comedy from other national, and particularly Hollywood, comedies. Like Hollywood, Italian comic cinema began with physical slapstick inherited from music halls and clowning at fairs (much like American vaudeville and burlesque), popular cultural activities that continued alongside cinema until the 1940s in the form of the *avanspettacolo*, short variety acts performed on stage preceding the film. This transition to the new, but initially also popular cultural medium of cinema was followed by the move from theatre to cinema of more dialogue and narrative-based, and so ‘higher’ cultural, forms of comedy. In Italy, as in Hollywood, comedy developed throughout the 1920s to blossom in the 1930s and 1940s, with Camerini a major director of the era. Wagstaff identifies two main strands of comedies produced during and in consonance with the Fascist regime, namely *commedia brillante* and *commedia sentimentale* (featuring the Cinderella motif and the reform of the ‘shrew’, respectively) (Wagstaff 1996, pp. 225–6). Direct antecedents to boom-time *commedia all’italiana*, via *neorealismo rosa* (a more light-hearted form of neorealism from the late 1940s and 1950s, with films like Zampa’s *L’onorevole Angelina*, 1949, and Castellani’s *Due soldi di speranza*, 1951), were the rustic comedies (such as Comencini’s *Pane, amore e fantasia*, 1953, and Risi’s *Poveri ma belli*, 1956), which gave way to the urban settings and values characteristic of *commedia all’italiana*.

With the mid-1950s the highpoint of Italian cinema audience figures, and the 1960s seeing domestic production rise to an all-time high (300 films per annum by the late 1960s), *commedia all’italiana* was centrally placed, alongside money-spinning peplum co-productions, in terms of the economic success of the Italian cinema industry, which by the mid-1960s was in profit for the first time since the war (Wagstaff 1995, p. 97). Italian audiences increasingly opted to see Italian films in the 1950s and 1960s, and of the rise to 700 million lire per annum in ticket sales, more than half came from Italian films – albeit often made with US investment (Wagstaff 1995, p. 108, 1996, p. 228). The *italianità* of *commedia all’italiana*, with its all-Italian cast and plots firmly rooted in an Italian historical and socioeconomic context, meant that, like melodrama, and unlike the peplum, the comedies did not export well. However, some of the comedies achieved international critical acclaim, especially *Il sorpasso*, and with *I soliti ignoti* and *La grande guerra* nominated for an Oscar.

Domestic cinema audience figures, however, remained high (675 million in 1965), despite the spread of television into the home after the mid-1950s (Monaco 1966, table 1). Comedies continued to flourish, particularly in *seconda* and *terza visione* cinemas in rural and peripheral urban areas. While major *commedia all’italiana* directors such as Risi, Monicelli, Comencini and Germi dominated in a *prima visione* context with their *serie A* productions of occasional international renown (and with Risi’s *Il sorpasso* the top earner in 1962), a new set of custom-made *serie B* and *serie C* comedies fed 1960s demand, alongside peplum films, outside urban, primarily middle-class centres. Directors like Bruno Corbucci, Marino Girolami and Lucio Fulci (later
renowned for slasher-horror films), and actors like Franco Franchi and Cicco Ingrassia, made comedies specifically for the peasant and proletarian market. These audiences continued to frequent the cinema and generated huge profits for the cinema industry: films cost on average 100–120 million lire to produce, but could net more than 1 billion lire at the box office (Giacovelli 1999, pp. 104–9).

A focus on serie A commedia all’italiana from the perspective of class difference in audience reception shows a combination of the visual gags conventionally, if rather stereotypically, considered to appeal to lower-class, popular tastes, in a society where illiteracy was still prevalent. Comic dialogue and narrative complexity, on the other hand, have been ascribed more to the middle classes, while the play on dialect in films like I soliti ignoti and Audace colpo dei soliti ignoti would presumably have had cross-class appeal. From the point of view of gender and sexuality the position is more complicated, especially in terms of gender as performance. As a result, the current model of the spectator not embodying a fixed identity, but moving unconsciously, during the masquerading, transvestite processes of spectatorship, between the poles of femininity and masculinity, and along the axis of sexualities, implies spectatorial identities and subjectivities in a certain amount of flux. In this sense the comedies, and indeed any genre that tends to marginalize femininity and non-heterosexuality as these comedies do, might be considered to offer a means of identification for the female spectator at the level of her masculinity, while temporarily inhabiting the traditional position of male desire whatever her sexuality.

However, the question still remains: what is there for the female spectator of this genre of traditional comedy oriented primarily towards masculine, homosocial identities and concerns? After all, for the female spectator to put her femininity aside in order to masculine-identify would be to perform an act of spectatorial transvestism only too consonant with patriarchal imperatives to put masculinity first, with femininity as the subordinate other. In particular, such transvestism would accord with patriarchy’s masculinizing of subjectivity, the ‘I’, and, in a cinematic context, the camera eye and voice-over. In terms of comedy, this transvestism reinforces the misogynist gender fit between the cinematic apparatus and the structure of the joke (as explained by Freud), whereby the feminine is situated both as the object of the camera eye/spectator gaze, and as the butt of the joke shared by at least two men (the originator and the laugh). (Rowe 1995, pp. 6, 68–9). The path to transvestism of the female spectator of
their own social action takes the form of the action rule the producers instead of being ruled by them' (74, l, ch. 1, iv, p. 79).

ich commodity fetishism contributes to, rules or even conditions in this way in *commedia all’italiana* determines an or more serious satirical approach to the portrayal of the films. Fetishism itself is indeed a matter of degree. If sexual fetishism, Freud argues that ‘a certain degree’ of degree of fetishism is habitually present in normal social relations, and are stages of it in which the normal sexual aim or its fulfilment prevented’. However, fetishism taken in its pathological form, only becomes pathological when the longing for the sexual object and actually takes the place of the normal sexual object and the sexual affection for the sexual object becomes the sole sexual object. (Freud, 84, pp. 66-7)

Exemplifying the commodity in *commedia all’italiana* is the car, produced in a growing variety of makes and sizes during this period, each connoting relatively greater or lesser degrees of arrisismo and virility, and constituting a primarily masculine fetish object. Many commodities feature in the films, from food, drink, clothing and jewellery to white goods (washing machines, refrigerators) and electric goods (televisions, tape recorders, portable radios), apartments and land, and private transport (cars, motorboats). Of all these, the car is perhaps the most versatile and amenable to the filmic process, in both visual and narrative terms. In particular, it figures as a key iconic indicator of the commodification of social relations achieved through various means in the films, where it is omnipresent. The car was already potent as a signifier of wealthy masculinity in early 1950s melodrama, such as Matarazzo’s *Chi è senza peccato* (1953), with the cabriolet bringing Nazzari back as a rich man from the New World to his impoverished wife at the end of the film. It functions similarly in Don Domenico’s flashback showing off his new cabriolet to his prostitute girlfriend in De Sica’s *Matrimonio all’italiana* (1964). Mass-production in 1955 of the first economy car, the Fiat 600, followed by the 500 in 1957, made four-wheel private transport accessible to the less wealthy, leading to a massive rise in car ownership from 342,000 vehicles in 1950 to 4.67 million in 1964 (Ginsborg 1990, p. 239). At the same time, this smallest and cheapest of all cars spoke volumes about the financial and social status of its driver, and it is in this context, rather than in that of its utility, that the car signifies in its central role in the commodification of social relations in the comedies. Specifically, the car as status symbol becomes a standard means of commodifying the self and others in the reification of social relations.
Utility is sacrificed to status in Risi’s *Il giorvedì* (1963), with an unemployed father turning down the hire of an economical Fiat 600 in favour of a large, petrol-swilling American cabriolet, in order to impress his estranged son on their day out (the ‘Thursday’ of the title). His choice of an American car adds kudos, and is one of many indications in the films of the Americanization of consumerism in Italy. To cite just a few examples: American music in Risi’s *Una vita difficile* (1961), cigarettes and Coca Cola in Loy’s *Il marito* (1958), whisky and, more pointedly, the contents of the American fridge in Risi’s *Il successo* (1963). The latter, according to Gassman’s character, always contains chicken legs, information doubtless gleaned from American films, while his offers only a shrivelled lemon. There is also the matter of the long history of imported American films themselves. *Il giorvedì* contains a pointed allusion to the deleterious effects of the growing dominance of the Italian 1960s ‘sexy’ film on family cinema outings, compared with the American westerns as longstanding, wholesome family entertainment. Father and son go to the cinema together to see Ford’s western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, only to find it has been replaced by an Italian sex film, which they cannot watch together.

As far as the desire of the father to impress his son in *Il giorvedì* is concerned, the intricacies of the American car hood unfortunately prove to be beyond him. The car also repeatedly runs out of petrol, having to be pushed to the petrol station and finally abandoned as he has no money to run it. Along with the car, he is gradually forced to abandon his façade, which his son has already seen through, in the manner of the perceptive child so commonly portrayed in Italian cinema, and which works, conversely, to endear him more to his father. In reality, the father’s only money comes from handouts from women – his mother, herself poor, and his live-in girlfriend, who, unlike him, is content to drive a Fiat 500 on her salary of 180,000 lire a month. This girlfriend, a minor character in terms of screen time, is one example of the empowered career woman who inhabits the margins of some of these films. She offers a quiet critique of comic male convolutions and discomfort in the face of a new consumerist era, with its growing opportunities for women and pressures on traditional, bread-winning masculinity.

Having rejected the job she has found for him, which pays one-third of what she earns, the end of the film sees him agreeing, albeit unconvincingly, to take it. The comedy of his consumerist fantasies and pretensions, epitomized by his choice of the cabriolet to symbolize his value, together with the ensuing mishaps on the road, is darkened by the pathos of estranged family relationships which his consumerist fantasies attempt to rectify. The father-son relationship is highly emotive and restricted by limited access, which the father tries to enhance with a day out in a big, foreign car, a symbol of potent masculinity shared. His relationship with his impoverished mother, whom he rarely sees, is distant, and made more poignant by his insistence on relating to her solely through what he perceives as her feminine consumer desires (for a television, a fridge and a washing machine), items which he promises, unrealistically, to buy for her. The fact that he does not even have the taxi fare home serves to underline further his failure to acquire status, even vicariously and temporarily through hire, rather than ownership, of a powerful car for a day. Her provision of his fare home and his girlfriend’s subsidy of the day out, together with the obvious affluence of the all-female environment to which he returns his son at the end of the day (his estranged wealthy wife and a Swiss nanny in a classy hotel), show the potency of masculinity severely undermined by femininity from a materialist angle.

The film’s satire exposes commodity fetishism taken to the point where social, and in particular family, relations are reduced to communication through objects by an impaired masculinity, with the car as central visual motif of masculine commodity fetishism. Sordi’s drunken, penniless journalist in Risi’s *Una vita difficile* (1961) spits and kicks at cars as they pass by in his defiant stand against consumerism. This follows a scene where he meets his separated wife, whom he was unable to support and for whose desire for ‘cars, flats and fur coats’ he was unwilling to compromise his journalistic principles. She is accompanied by a wealthy man with a white Mercedes, who has set her up in a fashion shop and escorts her to parties. The scene cuts from Sordi spitting and kicking at cars, to him ostentatiously driving up in a convertible at the funeral of her mother, but it might as well be the funeral of his principles (Figure 3). He now works as personal assistant for the newspaper owner who he had previously rejected and dresses his wife in furs. At the end of the film Sordi reverts to his original, defiant stance against consumerism, represented by his rejection of its icon, the car.

At the other extreme, Gassman’s land speculator in Risi’s *Il successo* (1963) ruthlessly sacrifices all his relationships to success, defined in consumer society by status measured in commodities. His attitude is typified by his embarrassment at driving a mere Fiat 1100. Later, at a party, he is mortified when he overhears derisory comments about his car, which is presumed to belong to one of the servants. Talk
revolves around ownership of motorboats, mountain chalets, islands and racehorses. This is the lifestyle for Gassman, and to acquire it he commodifies his relationships. He does so by relating to friends, in-laws, father and wife, primarily in terms of how much he can, quite literally, capitalize on them as sources of investment for land and property speculation, which was rife during this era. In the first place, he commodifies his professional relationship with his employer in a construction firm by using information gained at work to buy land in Sardinia, on the basis that it will rapidly increase in value. Determined to raise the necessary 10 million lire, he plies his closest friend (Trintignant) with women (sampling them himself along the way) in an attempt to borrow money from him. When this fails, he approaches long-forgotten friends, including one now making a fortune in white goods, with hypocritical charm, and tries to cajole money from his brother-in-law, even trying to convince him that the money is owed him because of his persuasive powers in getting his sister to marry him.

As Gassman’s desperation increases, so does his commodification of those closest to him. In an tragi-comic episode, his father, a farmer, keeps chickens on the shelf in the small urban bedroom where his son has accommodated him after selling his farm from under his feet for 5 million lire. The father, a natural countryman, is clearly ill-at-ease in a city flat, but Gassman is relentless. His final feat is to use his wife to ask a wealthy admirer for money, knowing that this places her in a position where she may have to provide sexual services in exchange. With the deal assured, a key scene takes place in the street between Gassman and, on his own admission, his only friend, Trintignant, the latter remarking that all Gassman talks about is business. Gassman replies that money is everything, and releases the brakes of his 1100 to send it crashing into a wall, while boasting to Trintignant about his new car. When he turns around, Trintignant has vanished, the end of their friendship coinciding with the demise of the old 1100. The next scene shows Gassman with everything he has aspired to, as he comes home in a Jaguar to a large house and swimming pool. He also has a new woman (his wife has left him) and the place is full of people partying. But he knows none of them and his girlfriend is more involved with her visitors than with him. He is surrounded by people, but does not relate to any of them. His commodity fetishism is not simply ‘a necessary condition attached to’ the material object, in Freud’s words, but has taken ‘the place of the normal aim’ of social relations.

The partying which concludes Il successo is a regular pastime in consumerist commodità all’italiana, the shallowness often masked by this social leisure activity acutely observed in Fellini’s La dolce vita (1960). The protagonist-observer (Mastroianni) in this art film is stunned by the suicide of his mentor and successful party host, who also kills his children to spare them the emptiness and lack of meaning behind the façade. If nothing else, hosting parties is a means of displaying commodities and a luxurious lifestyle. Importantly, the status acquired and internalized in commodity fetishism only gains meaning in a public context where it can be assessed and compared. One vital aspect of the work of consumption, then, is to perform it conspicuously (a feature of consumerism already apparent to Veblen in his The Theory of the Leisure Class of 1899). At the end of Il successo Gassman does not need to meet his guests. It is enough that they appreciate the conspicuous presentation of his new, high-status lifestyle, and he communicates with them only through his things in this sharp portrayal of the perfect reification of social relations that constitutes his long-awaited arrisvisino. In the films much of the work of consumption is carried out publicly in leisure activities (partying, going for a drive, relaxing on the beach, dining and dancing, and even going to the cinema, although unsuccessfully in Il successo, and for ulterior motives in Divorzo all’italiana). Leisure activities fulfil the double function of advertising status in terms of having time and money to indulge in non-productive activities, as well as showcasing a variety of commodities.
Risi's *Il sorpasso* (1962) depicts many of these leisure pursuits and is set not in work time, but during a bank holiday weekend. It features Gassman driving around aimlessly in his Aurelia Sport, a car which by this time had become a rather decrepit status symbol often favoured by an older masculinity attempting to appear younger (Giacovelli 1995, p. 151). His aggressive overtaking (‘sorpasso’) of other vehicles, his finger forever on his horn, is a brutish assertion of superior power, the utility of the car as a mode of transport taking second place to its function as a status symbol, and signalling the overtaking in social terms by the Aurelia owner of people who can afford only smaller cars. The episode ‘La strada è di tutti’ (‘The Road Belongs to Everyone’) in Risi’s *I mostri* (1963) satirizes the transformation of a pedestrian who tries to cross a busy road and rails at the drivers who refuse to stop, only to get into his own car and promptly almost mow down a mother and child at a pedestrian crossing. In *Il sorpasso* the car is also used as a projectile (Baudrillard 1996), but this time with fatal results.

Gassman’s significant failure to meet with friends at the beginning of the film leads him to team up with a stranger, a reluctant young law student (Trintignant), whose thoughtful inner monologue voice-over throws into relief the brashness and thoughtlessness of Gassman’s character. Gassman is the ultimate consumer, eating up the miles, eating out, dancing and excelling at beach activities. Much of the action in this prototype male road-movie takes place in the Aurelia Sport, as Gassman takes Trintignant for a drive, at each stop trying to consume more than just food and drink. The comedy of his repeated and excruciating attempts to have sex, such as his propositioning of the waitress after the meal, and his following of two German girls in a car on to private property in the hope of an assignation, is put into context by a timid Trintignant, who is focused on one woman, the girl next door, Gassman, a man of his time, scoffs at the younger man’s commitment as a thing of the past (‘Who’d tie themselves down to one girl? We’re hardly in the Middle Ages’). For him, sex is simply another consumer disposable. The words of the contemporary pop song accompanying his flirtatious dance with a married woman say it all: ‘Per un attimo solo ti vorrei’ (‘I want you just for a moment’). Unlike his young companion, Gassman is instantly at ease with strangers, engaging with them like a long-lost friend. He develops a better rapport with Trintignant’s relatives, on whom they call, than Trintignant himself, only to depart immediately afterwards. He is a flâneur, a tourist in other people’s lives, relating to them superficially and briefly. As his estranged wife remarks, ‘You can get to know him in a day.’

Trintignant, ill-at-ease with the new consumerist lifestyle, and unable even to take off his clothes on the beach, finally succumbs to Gassman’s way of thinking. He urges him to drive faster, at which point, significantly, the car crashes on a bend. Gassman, as ever moving with the times, jumps free, but Trintignant is carried over the cliff in the car, now his coffin. His death is symbolic of the demise of traditional ways of relating, of pre-consumerist social relations, including committed relations between the genders. Gassman will go on to buy another car and find another ‘friend’ with whom to relate, not as an individual, an idealized identity ostensibly self-created by consumer choice, but as an atomized commodity fetishist alienated from his own self and from others. Along with the individual relating in unalienated manner with other individuals, community is lost as social relations are reified in consumption. Even the all-male group acting as a criminal team for mutual benefit in *I soliti ignoti* is not really a community. Their comic camaraderie conceals the fact that its members are together temporarily and only for self-interest. As they go their own way at the end of the film, the old Capannelle’s innocent question about when they will meet again is met with a brusque ‘never’ from Mastroianni. This bears out Hartsock’s account of community modelled on market relations:

In a society modeled both in fact and in theory on the exchange of commodities, the attainment of a complex and deep-going series of relations with others is indeed difficult. Community itself is only a by-product of activities directed at other ends, and thus the social synthesis that results from exchange is one in which persons are in opposition to each other and associate with each other only indirectly, by means of the exchange of things passed back and forth on the basis of self-interest. (Hartsock 1985, p. 103)

As regards gender relations in the context of the reification of social relations under accelerated consumerism in *commedia all’italiana*, the key factor is that of alienation. Dominant patriarchal gender norms already alienate both masculinity and femininity from themselves, namely from the many possibilities denied each sex by inflexible, normative definitions. This is taken to parodic excess in the films as they represent masculinity in the grip of a commodity fetishism used to display and reproduce masculine stereotypes. The alienation of the sexes from each other under patriarchy is exacerbated by the galloping consumerism and changing work patterns portrayed in the films.
In this context, the traditional patriarchal commodification of the female body in its sexuality, compounded by the filmic dynamics of this male-dominated culture industry, is augmented as new sexual ‘freedoms’ transform female bodies into just more consumer disposables. *Commedica all’italiana* would appear, then, to bear witness to the emergence of a new historical, and specifically consumerist, form of patriarchy. At the same time, however, a new and independent feminine voice can be heard from the sidelines of these male-centred comedies. These issues can be explored through the lens of marriage as portrayed in the films, particularly in view of changing values and expectations in a period leading to the Divorce Bill, finally passed in 1970 and fully ratified by referendum in 1974.

**The price of marriage**

The stability of the institution of marriage, already undermined by the upheavals of wartime, and so providing a major goal for protagonists of postwar melodrama, was further shaken by the rapid social changes forced by the economic miracle. With the consumerist ethos of the boom creating expectations not always matched by income, the position of the husband as sole breadwinner could be problematic (as in *Una vita difficile*, *Il boom*, *Poveri milionari*, *Il marito*). Moreover, the entry of women into well-paid jobs during the boom, far from serving to augment the family income and happiness, seems, rather, to have had the effect ofemasculating husbands by diminishing their social status, goading them into making money by dubious means (*Il successo*) or into assuming the façade of a high-powered consumerist lifestyle (*Il sorpasso*, *Il giovedì*). For the bourgeois husband, a key indicator of social and gender status remained, as in the melodramas of the early 1950s, a leisured wife who, if she had ever worked, would cease to do so on marriage. Sordi’s temporary ability to satisfy this criterion in *Una vita difficile* is epitomized by his wife wearing a fur coat, a luxury item of outdoor clothing almost the equivalent of the car as icon of masculine *arrivismo*, and a visible sign of leisured bourgeois feminine status.

In great part due to Church influence, traditional, pre-capitalist ideals of marriage still predominated, with femininity exclusively as a reproductive, rather than a productive, force (Caldwell 1978, pp. 74–6). Under advancing capitalism the materialist side of the marital relationship became structured around relations of production and consumption. The wife performed the work of consumption in the home, while functioning as use value for the husband in her reproduction of the family's consumption in the home. The woman was the key as much as she was the sex.