

## ITALIAN IDENTITIES

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### The ‘*Velina*’ in Contemporary Italy within a context of Postfeminism and Neoliberal Western Society

This essay will discuss the Italian television show girl figure of the ‘*velina*’ and the postfeminist<sup>1</sup> ideals that she embodies in conjunction with the neoliberal political economy of western and Italian media. Firstly, discussion will involve a brief historical overview of the performing show girl and Italian television as a cultural medium. Following this, analysis will centre on explaining complex postfeminist notions themselves and their intrinsic correlation to the representation of the *velina* which will involve examining women’s subjective adoption of hyper-femininity. The Italian show girl will then be considered in relation to the ‘beauty myth’, her muteness, and pornography that these roles on programmes such as *Striscia la notizia* require.

Taking a structural approach through the work of Rosalind Gill, throughout I will discuss the *velina* and postfeminist ideals in relation to western neoliberalism and the Italian media to show how she may be regressive due to exploitative aspects that the *velina* reinforces and which exacerbate gender inequality.<sup>2</sup> Central to the argument for the *velina* as an unhelpful figure for liberation is the debate between ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ ascribed to postfeminism within a contemporary Italian neoliberal context. Gender equality is still necessary societal change to strive for, given that Italy has the lowest percentage of women working outside the home in Europe, is ranked 71st in the world for parity of wages and 97th for equality of opportunity and participation (The Global Gender Gap Report 2013:11, 17, 18). Despite analysing the *velina* from a structuralist approach that focuses on the systemic cultural and political

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<sup>1</sup> Also called ‘third-wave feminist’.

<sup>2</sup> Gender inequality defined in terms of gender diversity and liberation from dominant hegemonic patriarchy that benefits society as a whole.

factors that underpin her, the increased agency of women in modern, globalised societies such as Italy will be taken into account as part of the *velina*'s role. Moreover, I aim not to analyse the role of the *velina* based on a notion of women as a monolithic category, but instead to focus on the idea of certain ideals exemplified by the role that may be unhelpful for societal liberation more widely.

Although Berlusconi is no longer *Presidente*, the culture he created over an extended period of time still prevails in Italian media today, of which the *velina* and the general proliferation of objectified women's bodies are products (Zanardo 2010: 105-13). This essay will aim to explain why these representations may be problematic, and perpetuate gender inequality in an Italian context where the undemocratically State controls many of the national television stations with their capital and corporate interest (Ardizzoni & Ferrari 2010: 11-19). Transnational companies have been shown to have strong ideological links with postfeminist consumerism (Lazar 2013:43-49; Gill 2007: 25-27), and within a European context, in Italy these links seem to be particularly exaggerated since the start of the marketing and television presence of Italian 'beauties' in the 1950s at the beginning of the 'Golden Age' of capitalism (Gundle 2007: vii; Hipkins 2011: 414-422).

Since World War II, Italy has had a preoccupation with female television performers, *veline*, which have always been associated with prostitution. This association has been perpetuated by their presence in Berlusconi's entourage and various sex scandals (Morvillo 2003 in Hipkins 2011: 414-422; Hipkins & Plain 2007: 81-103). Recently, *veline* have become synonymous with 'cultural decay' and the pervasive television culture Berlusconi created, and have been victimised irrationally and unfairly as the political and cultural scapegoats for Italy's shortcomings. This has been aggravated by cases in which *veline* have been given access to political power by Berlusconi, which has been termed '*velinocrazia*' or '*mignottocrazia*', 'whore-ocracy'; the semantic interchangeability of these two terms is clear evidence of a prevailing association of *veline* with prostitution that signifies a lack of respect (Hipkins 2011: 414). These opinions are kept constantly in the press and in the collective opinion of the Italian population due

to the frequency and abundance of performers on Italian television and their increased involvement in politics<sup>3</sup> (Hipkins 2011: 417,419). Generally, disrespectful patriarchal judgements of *veline* have been adopted by many writers and journalists in Italy as part of a damaging moralising rhetoric associating beauty with stupidity and sexual incontinence. (Hipkins 2011: 419-421) Feminist criticism of the *velina* has also proved divisive amongst women due to the tendency of academics and journalists to critique the embodiment of their concerns, the *velina* herself, rather than the systemic causes (Hipkins 2011: 419-421; Zanardo 2010; Concita De Gregorio 2010)<sup>4</sup>. Diffused negative opinions alone of *veline* are evidence of a lack of critical understanding and such discriminatory attitudes towards certain types of women in Italy threatens societal equality.

Danielle Hipkins argues that the polemical debate in Italy which focuses solely on the objectification of the figure as being oppressed is reductive and denies the *velina* any kind of agency. The suggestion she makes is that Italian criticism of the *velina* would benefit from acknowledging postfeminist *subjective* aspects that are afforded to women performing these roles such as the pleasure and success derived from sexual power, as opposed to viewing them patronisingly as being in need of re-education (Hipkins 2011: 427). This subjective agency is a defining characteristic of postfeminist thinking whereby aspects of second wave feminism such as independence and gender equality are reconciled with normative notions of femininity and presented as empowered, self-instigated choices, often through consumption (Lazar 2013: 37; Gill 2007; Hipkins 2011: 416). It is inevitably essential to consider how women actively use their bodies and sexuality in increasingly hyper-sexualised western societies, where legislative gender equality has been attained, and there is no doubt that the voices of the *veline* themselves and their audiences are lacking amidst the debate that concerns them (Hipkins 2011: 431). However, certain contradictions and inconsistencies are flagged up by the reconciliation of traditional feminine and second

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<sup>3</sup> *Veline* have increased involvement in politics despite Berlusconi no longer being in government. See *Corriere della sera*, 10/04/14, [http://www.corriere.it/politica/14\\_aprile\\_10/grillo-contro-renzi-le-capolista-donne-4-veline-gabibbo-5b565a24-c09d-11e3-95f0-42ace2f7a60f.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/politica/14_aprile_10/grillo-contro-renzi-le-capolista-donne-4-veline-gabibbo-5b565a24-c09d-11e3-95f0-42ace2f7a60f.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> Article cited by Hipkins, (2011), from *L'Unità* website: <http://concita.blog.unita.it/le-altre-donne-1.266857>

wave feminist ideals, that the *veline* roles are examples of. These postfeminist notions are evident in an Italian context demonstrated by the fact that many women resist feminism despite actually professing feminist ideals, a combination recognised as part of a feminist ‘backlash’ (Manuela Galetto et al. 2009: 194). Consistent with postfeminist notions, many *veline* wish to use the role as an intermediary step to further career choices<sup>5</sup> (Hipkins 2011: 425). However, there are negative and potentially exploitative costs involved in the use of hyper-feminine sexual power for personal career gain, therefore academics have questioned the effectiveness of postfeminist ‘sensibilities’ as behaviours that address gender parity, even if individuals achieve societally endorsed ‘success’ measures that *veline* may enjoy such as wealth, power and fame (Gill 2007: 9-11; Budgeon, 2013: 289, 290).

Western postfeminist media culture now presents femininity in a plethora of different ways. Above all, there is an intense focus on women’s bodies and the maintenance, preservation and presentation of those bodies (Gill 2007:147-166). As in the case of the *velina*, as part of the subjective experience of femininity, women in the media present their bodies as property to have ownership over, to monitor, self-invigilate and maintain through fashion, health, beauty etcetera. Italian television, magazines and publications intended for mass public female audience actively encourage this (Zanardo 2010: 58-67). In contrast with the media of the past in which women were portrayed mainly as sex objects, postfeminist media predominantly portrays particularly beautiful women as desiring, sexual beings actively and freely choosing to enact a hyper-feminine, performance because it matches their emancipated interests in terms of agency in the workplace, sexual pleasure and autonomy, (Goldman 1992 in Gill 2007: 9-11). This is the case with the *velina* who is beautiful, highly sexual, earns a large salary, and who uses this power to her advantage in career choices, (Morvillo 2003:7 in Hipkins, 2011:414). *Veline*, although not economically exploited, as evident from the benefits that individuals gain from these roles, the media and

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<sup>5</sup> This page gives brief descriptions of the most *veline* from *Striscia la notizia*, along with details of their career intentions <http://www.sorrisi.com/2013/10/14/le-nuove-veline-di-striscia-la-notizia-sono-ludovica-frasca-e-irene-cioni/>

neoliberal capitalism may combine to reveal other structural forms of exploitation at play that make these postfeminist ideals problematic.

Importantly, it has been argued that the abundance of messages targeting cisgendered women<sup>6</sup> promoting self-regulating behaviours of grooming, maintaining and presenting oneself as sexual presents a change from an externally expecting voyeuristic male gaze to a vain self-regulating one (Gill 2007: 10). This represents a ‘deeper form of exploitation than objectification’, signifying an *internalisation* of the ‘objectifying male gaze’ to form new self-enforced behaviours not imposed externally, but instinctively deployed in women’s behaviour, (Gill 2007: 9-10 ). This kind of behaviour employed by the *velina* has been termed ‘a new form of sexism’, (Hipkins, 2011, 2012) Bearing this in mind, if, as Hipkins states, postfeminism is ‘deeply enmeshed with the demands of a neoliberal society’ which apparently offers ‘choice’ and if the only options to make up this choice are hyper-feminine and sexual, then this presents an exploitative function fulfilled by the neoliberal industries that profit from the hyper-feminine performance that many women, including the *veline* buy into. Resonating with the theory of Antonio Gramsci, Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, argued how damaging neoliberal capitalism’s promotion of feminine beauty and youth would become in future years as a way to control women’s increasing power and influence (Wolf 1990: 12-19). Central to the success of capitalistic organisations is the wilful adoption of behaviours and rituals on that keep large numbers of women autonomously reliant on consumer products aligned with traditional femininity within postfeminist ideals. Constant maintenance of the ‘self and sexualisation of the body is encouraged through the media and industries, evident in the representation of the *velina* and more widely an increasingly transnational deregulated media industry, (Hipkins 2012:155)

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<sup>6</sup> Gill specifically emphasises the abundance of messages targeting women to perform these behaviours in comparison with fewer similar messages for men.

Moreover, the problematic nature of this showgirl figure is heightened when she is examined in the Italian context where ‘the beauty myth’ has been used to socially restrict women in society: beautiful women being viewed as stupid and sexually incontinent (Hipkins 2011: 419; Gundle 2007: xix). *Veline* are clear examples of neoliberal aspects of postfeminism, evident in the way they present themselves and the behaviours they display which include; glamorous, beautified appearances, hairless, tanned skin, ‘*gli stacchetti*’ (dances), and sexual facial expressions. The appearance and behaviour of the *veline* have everything in common with the internalised heterosexual male gaze and are arguably agents of neoliberal marketing strategies that encourage bodily maintenance rituals and overtly sexual behaviour, whilst simultaneously presenting these behaviours as individualised ‘empowered’ choices.

Within western society, it is now gender normative for women to ‘choose’ to conform to the ideals of beauty that include maintaining hairless body, a slim figure etcetera, ideals that *veline* also comply with and which inherently rely upon capitalist consumption. However, if postfeminist attitudes mean that women freely ‘choose’ certain lifestyle choices autonomously then this poses the question of why the normative desired ‘look’ is so similar to the demands of capitalism (Gill 2007: 13). Lazar crucially observes in relation to marketing strategies that ‘the option not offered to women is the one *not* to consume and, in turn, the freedom not to comply with the commercialized beauty rituals and ideals entailed by the consumption of those products.’ (Lazar, 2013: 45) As a consequence, if choices that are made do not conform to such promoted ideals and are deemed socially inappropriate then the rhetoric of ‘freedom to choose’ regarding consumer lifestyle choices is compromised- it is presented as freedom but only within narrow socially acceptable beauty ideals, (Lazar, 2013:40) ‘Choice feminism’ as coined by Hirschmann, marks a shift from social and political choices made by women to individualistic personal choices concerning for example, the workplace, sexuality, parenting and grooming that neoliberal businesses rely on (Cohen 2006 in Lazar, 2013: 47). This is perhaps worrying, particularly in Italy given that we live ‘in a world where women are in real danger of losing the original choice granted’ to them, which highlights the continued threat of rights being revoked, (Lazar 2013: 47).

Within the political economy of the Italian media, one's ability to make postfeminist 'autonomous choices' is perhaps more compromised than in any other European country, (Ardizzoni & Ferrari 2010: 11-15). In the 1920s Gramsci theorised the idea that 'hegemonic ideologies' were reproduced and reinforced by the mass media and that oppressed groups such as women were maintained under 'indirect control' by sexual politics (Landy 1986:63 in Malagrecia 2006: 77). Ardizzoni & Ferrari (2010) observe that televised mass media 'since the foundation of RAI in 1944...television in Italy has been characterised and shaped by close governmental control' (13). This then, has provided an opportunity for 'hegemonic ideologies' to be expressed structurally through Italian television which has favoured the excessive display and obsession with women's bodies (Zanardo 2010: 105-13). This bias excess has resulted from the competition between companies following the deregulation of Italian television by the government that has close corporate ties. In the midst of the profiteering neoliberal media climate of private and state television, the rhetoric of choice inherent in a woman choosing the role of the *velina* is questioned when it is these roles that appear most abundant and available to large numbers of young Italian women watching television, (ranging from 92.7% and 90.6% of young women aged 15-24, ISTAT, 2013).

Berlusconi's financial media interests are demonstrated by his personal and familial enterprises: the Mediaset group is still the largest commercial broadcaster in the country and his family investment company Fininvest dominates it with a 41.3% stake (Mediaset Group, 2013). Over the years, the level of control of his media empire has meant that the Italian public sphere has been 'mediatized' and heavily subjected to the pulls of corporatisation, (Ardizzoni & Ferrari 2010: 16). Given the government's neoliberal, free-trade attitudes to the media that have increased the abundance of performing women, it therefore appears that those who seek to gain roles as *veline* or of a similar ilk, may be involved in careers that exploit them for capitalistic gain, and more widely, a global capitalism that is nurtured by the postfeminist 'choice' principles.

*Veline* also pose representational problems as only a certain type of woman can be successful in this role: they must always be white, beautiful, slim, tanned and tall. The favouring and selection of a limited typology of woman already widely glorified throughout the fashion industry and the media in western society may serve to perpetuate the reliance on neoliberal industries on behalf of a population who are encouraged to strive to for this culturally revered image of beauty (Gill 2007: 11-13). This then may perpetuate polarised notions of gender that serve to reinforce historical societal inequalities and limit other diverse representations of femininity and gender. Within an Italian context where 92.3 out of every 100 people watch television, (ISTAT 2013) and the viewing ratings for the final of the competitive show '*Veline*' were higher than that of 'Miss Italy', (Morvillo, 2003 in Hipkins, 2011: 414), the reinforcement of such representations that reach large numbers of spectators are hugely influential.

Following the point regarding the adoption of a default internal male gaze, Gill suggests that women gain agency on the condition that it is used to present themselves as subjects similar to women found in heterosexual male pornography (Gill 2007: 9-10). The views of girls at an Italian youth centre resonate with this idea and illustrate the notion of the body as a sexual instrument for negotiation, '...il proprio corpo è la moneta vivente con cui <<si paga la tassa>> per essere socialmente accettate. Intanto, magazine, femminili o maschili che siano- descrivono nei minimi dettagli come ottenere il massimo dalla prestazione sessuale.' (Cirant 2005: 95) The sexualised appearance and behaviour of the *velina* is strikingly similar to that of women in pornography; they have a tendency to open their mouths in sexually provocative ways, appear sexually available and are voyeuristically filmed by television cameras (Zanardo 2010:105-13). Whilst there is much debate about how anti-feminist pornography may be in itself, the cross-over of similar behaviours and representations that represents women as having insatiable sexual appetites in mainstream culture poses definitive problems (Turner, 2005: 2 in Gill 2007).



Therefore, in Italy, where violence against women is rife<sup>7</sup>, sexual ‘pornified’ representations of women such as the *velina* that reinforce hyper-gendered notions are problematic.

The silence of the *velina* is a particularly regressive aspect of her role. Historically, women who make their voices heard publically have been subject to restrictions, laws and social stigma in a significant way (Beard 2014). The muteness of the role implies that her principal function is to be looked at as an accessory to the main feature or presenters. This then presents another exploitative element to the argument in relation to the neoliberal Italian media which implicitly suggests that the only valuable contribution these women can make involves using their bodies rather than any ideas or opinions. As examined, she *simultaneously* adopts normative notions of femininity through ‘empowered’ postfeminist behaviour whereby her agency lies in the large sums of money she earns and for potential career opportunities, but at the expense of appearing mute, decorative and sexual in an internal self-objectifying manner. No such male roles exist on Italian television; recently there was the introduction of two male *velini* on *Striscia la notizia*, but their presence did not last long due to poor viewing numbers.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, complicated notions of modern femininity in conjunction with consumer culture underlie the *velina*. In her work, Gill has explored the contradictions and inconsistencies in postfeminism and its striking compatibility with neoliberal economics. Postfeminist notions of femininity present on the one hand an ‘empowered’ example of femininity but on the other, forcefully re-inscribed women as sexual objects. At the same time they are ‘subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent.’ (Gill 2007: 26). These culturally conditioned notions then encourage reliance on various industries, i.e. fashion and beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> A study by EU agency EURES reported that 2,200 women were murdered between 2000 and 2012. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heather-mcrobie/unsafe-house-of-italy-violence-against-women-does-not-break-for-summer>

<sup>8</sup> See this article: <http://www.today.it/media/striscia-la-notizia-velini-veline.html>

These contradictions are prevalent in the hyper-feminine role of the *velina* which, for the reasons explained in this essay, is an implicitly sexist role that fulfils the demands of a deregulated, neoliberal Italian mediated society. Although the *veline* roles possess a sense of entitlement and confidence that gains them career opportunities and earns them large salaries for any Italian, the behaviours that the role requires are encouraged through a pervasive exploitative neoliberal media industry that reinforces and encourages this same hyper-femininity that threatens gender equality generally. The sexualised behaviours reminiscent of those in pornography caused by the adoption of a default self-objectifying male heterosexual gaze is *amplified* in conjunction with the muteness of the *velina*. Bearing in mind the increasingly sexualised and the already over-bearing and pervasive beautified representations of women promoted by western global media, beauty and fashion industries, such behaviours benefit neoliberal capitalism; often the women who perform *perceive* to have freely chosen lifestyle choices that in fact have been constructed to calibrate with the prerogatives of free industry. When this analysis is considered, it problematises the role of the *velina*. At a representational level, the role provides another example of a stereotypically ‘beautiful’ woman who reinforces already dominant media stereotypes for the Italian population, glamourising a limited type of mute, sexualised, beautiful woman which limits diversity of representation of femininity and gender on Italian television and perpetuates inequalities.

At a structural level, the *velina* role serves as an agent of the prevailing corporate media culture created by Berlusconi. The role is an example of the exploitative internal male gaze that causes women to behave and dress in sexually provocative ways and view their own bodies as entities to be maintained and surveyed, which often involves consumerism specifically marketed to them for these purposes. These preferences are reasoned as being autonomous through postfeminist ‘empowered’ choices, but they actually fit perfectly with the demands of neoliberal profiteers, a form of exploitation or societal control especially since the ‘ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism’ appears to be feminine (Gill 2007: 24-27; Lazar 2013:49).

The postfeminist ideals that *veline* roles can be aligned with are not simply responses to feminism but are at least partly established through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ethos. Postfeminist individual empowerment has been criticised as not being sufficient for addressing societal inequalities since ‘a sense of entitlement is not enough to transform a culture where that entitlement is not yet fully recognized’, (Orr 1997:33 in Budgeon 2013:290) Therefore problematically, the Italian television role of the *velina* offered to young, beautiful women, watched by a large proportion of the population, leaves traditional gender norms unchallenged and reinforces the exploitative subjective male gaze of a false neoliberal construct of ‘choice’.

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