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## “YOU’RE NOT GOING TO LET SOME SILLY OLD RULE STAND IN YOUR WAY!” ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF THE MODERN IN MID-CENTURY AMERICAN-WOMEN-IN-ITALY FILMS

Italy—both as an actual place and an imagined idea—has loomed large in the American mindset since at least the 19th century when significant numbers of US tourists began to travel to the peninsula.<sup>1</sup> US popular culture became especially fascinated during the post-World War II years. As travel to Europe increased after the War, Italy became the favorite overseas destination for Americans (Williams 1979, 552).<sup>2</sup> Moreover Italian-produced films became popular with US audiences: from the 1950s to 60s, the Italian film industry was the second most important in the world, producing half as many films as Hollywood (Gundle 2007, 157)—with one *Life* magazine article (August 1954) referring to Rome as “Hollywood on the Tiber.” Furthermore, as taxes made film-making in Italy economically viable for American producers, it is not surprising that post-War Hollywood turned its attention to stories about Americans visiting Italy.

Critic Ilaria Serra (2009) points out that post-War films frequently feature practical, competent American men aiding a primitive, if beautiful, defeated nation. Such narratives play off long-standing British and US images of Italy as a premodern, uncivilized culture: Robert Casillo and Robert Russo demonstrate that as early as the end of the Renaissance and Baroque periods Italy had been figured as a place in decline (2011, 4), representing “nature” far more than ‘civilization’ (65). In Jeremy Black’s words, in the 18th century Italy was “increasingly seen as a country slipping into the past” (2003, 164). And Nelson Moe (2006) traces representations of southern Italy, in particular, as a place that appears both disturbingly uncivilized and refreshingly picturesque.

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<sup>1</sup> Book-length studies on the influence of Italy on Americans have appeared since the early 20th century, focusing on American writers who spent time on the peninsula. One of the earliest studies is in Italian: Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Come gli americani scoprirono l’Italia*. Milano: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1933. The best-known post-War literary studies in English include Van Wyck Brooks, *The Dream of Arcadia: American Writers and Artists in Italy, 1760-1915*. New York: E. P Dutton, 1958; Paul R. Baker, *The Fortunate Pilgrims: Americans in Italy, 1800-1860*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964; and Nathalia Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965. More comprehensive studies about artists in Italy, including visual as well as literary artists, appeared later in the 20th century: for example, the two-volume book by William Vance, *America’s Rome*. New Haven: Yale, 1989, which included a wide array of artists and writers. Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr.’s large, heavily illustrated exhibition book, *The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience, 1760-1914*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1992, mainly focused on painters. More recent literary studies include: Leonardo Buonomo, *Backward Glances: Exploring Italy, Reinterpreting America: 1831-1866*. New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson, 1996; Robert K. Martin and Leland S. Person’s collection *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in 19th-Century Italy*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2002; and Jonah Siegel’s *Haunted Museum: Longing, Travel, and the Art-Romance Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2005. More recent scholarship has broadened from literary criticism to examine the wider significance of Italy, Italians, and Italian-Americans through a cultural studies lens. Robert Casillo’s book *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006, uses Staël’s iconic *Corinne; or Italy* as a paradigm for tracing historical stereotypes of the peninsula, especially focusing on the 18th century. Even more recently, Robert Casillo has joined John Paul Russo to trace cultural representations of (mostly male) Italians from the Renaissance through to *The Godfather* in their long volume, *The Italian in Modernity*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011. Similarly, Nelson Moe traces international representations of Southern Italy in *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and The Southern Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> In 1950 some 676,000 American tourists traveled abroad, spending around \$1 billion (Oakley 1990, 260). In 1958, some 813,000 US tourists traveled to Italy alone (Williams 1970, 566).



But, in addition to fitting into these historic myths, films in this period also support mid-century US economic policies—specifically aid to Italy during the years of the Marshall Plan. Think, for example, of *It Started in Naples* (Shavelson, 1960), where Philadelphia businessman Clark Gable visits Capri and ultimately takes charge of gorgeous, if disheveled, Sophia Loren and his loveable “street urchin” nephew. Yes, Gable is seduced by the beautiful, disorderly place, but in the end his manly American savvy gives both his nephew and Loren a better life: the nephew will attend school regularly and Loren will stop dancing in nightclubs. Here Gable is the symbol for the modern world of the 50s “Organization Man” (the term famously coined by William Whyte), who saves the day for poor old-world Italians in films like this.

However, stories like these are not the only popular narratives of Americans in Italy during the period: quite a few films feature women travelers.<sup>3</sup> Remember that image of Audrey Hepburn in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday*: streaking through the streets of the Imperial City on a Vespa, dancing on the banks of the Tiber, eluding a line of threatening men, falling for Gregory Peck, and becoming an independent woman in the process. For white middle-class American women in the post-War audience, Hepburn in Italy must have appeared as an ideal of physical freedom and romantic possibility (despite the fact that neither America’s sweetheart’ Hepburn nor her character were actually American). Scholars contend that this favorite vision of women finding freedom in Italy is also a historical one, rooted in conceptions of 19th-century American travelers (Martin and Person 2002, 2), inspired by books such as Madame de Staël’s popular 1807 novel (and travelogue) *Corinne, or Italy*.

But as I see it, while this image of Hepburn in Italy has historical roots, it is also a vision of the modern post-War world—one that contrasts with the modern US that Gable represents in *Naples*. Hepburn’s son described his mother during this period with these words: “With that film [*Roman Holiday*] my mother became almost a second Colosseum: an icon of the city, an icon of a different, free-and-easy Roman spirit that was symbolized by a girl who traveled the world on a Vespa” (Dotti 2013,153). In Italy, on the Vespa, Hepburn becomes an icon for the modern: a woman physically and conceptually above the rules of mid-century patriarchy, especially associated during the period with regulations, rigidity, and rationality. Based on the idea from Robert Graves and Alan Hodge that the “modern” is associated with “lively progress,” Fiona Anne Seaton Hackney has argued that women’s lives in the 20th century “became a visual shorthand for the excitement and novelty of modern life; an excellent means of selling newspapers and magazines, particularly those that carried photographs” (2010, 11). The women in Italy depicted in films like *Roman Holiday* become shorthand for “alternative modernity,” a term that Hackney also uses and that, rather than rigid and masculine, is free and feminine.

Despite the fact that Ann is not American, *Roman Holiday* can be understood as a precursor to the larger genre of films from the 1950s and 60s that I term “American-Women-in-Italy Films.” The genre also includes *Three Coins in the Fountain* (Negulesco, 1954), *Summertime* (Lean, 1955), *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (Quintero, 1961), *Rome Adventure* (Dayes, 1962), *The Light in the Piazza* (Green, 1962), and *Gidget Goes to Rome* (Wendkos,1963). In all the films, American women in Italy become an image for the modern world, one that resists rules, regulations, strictures. This alternative modernity demands that women cross boundaries—first, geographic boundaries by traveling to Italy. Robert Casillo argues that American writers

<sup>3</sup> All the women in the films discussed here are white. In fact, since the 19th century, most film and literary texts about US women in Italy feature Anglo white women. While Italy has certainly been experienced as a liberatory space for some women of color (e.g., the 19th-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis, a black and Native American woman, who was able to enjoy artistic freedom in Rome), it has mainly been represented as an imaginative free space for white women. Of course, in the 19th and early 20th century, few US women of color had the economic means to travel to Italy, partially explaining the historical reasons behind these representations. (Similar historical reasons can be given to explain the lack of representations of US immigrant women visiting Italy.) However, more recently, a few texts featuring middle-class black American women in Italy have appeared (e.g., the 2019 best-selling memoir *From Scratch* by Tembi Locke, about her life in Sicily; novels and stories by writer Andrea Lee, an African American living in northern Italy; a recent US television series on black women in Italy, *To Rome for Love*). However, these remain limited. Italian anti-black racism has been increasing in the nation in recent years (at least partly sparked by anti-immigrant sentiment) and keeps US black women from experiencing the same Italy as white women travelers. See for instance, Joanna Martin, *Involuntary Racism. Reflections of an African-American Woman*. Berkeley: University of California, 2016.



(inspired by Staël) created a “radical opposition” between the idea of premodern Italy and the United States—the latter “identified with utilitarian ‘progress’ and unstinting commercial pressures” (see Wright 1965, 271, n 47). However, the films discussed here undercut this binary opposition: the alternative version of mid-century modernity is, strictly speaking, neither American nor Italian, but rather a concept beyond borders—integrating both the ‘modern’ US and ‘premodern’ Italy: mid-century US women in these films are inspired to become fully free, independent, and ‘modern’ when situated in ancient, crumbling Italy. Such films therefore may be understood as part of what Vanessa Schwartz has termed the “cosmopolitan” cinema that emerged in the twenty years after World War II, which “underscored a transnational cultural experience and perspective rather than a discrete national experience of culture that contributed to separate national identities and rivalries” (2007, 5).

In addition to geographic boundaries, this idea of the modern demands that women cross more conceptual boundaries as well. Notably, the middle-class female travelers in these films connect with Italians across class divisions.<sup>4</sup> While surely such characters represent post-War American economic prosperity, their modern lives are frequently inspired through connections with poorer Italians: clerks (*Three Coins*), shopkeepers (*Summertime*), barbers (*Roman Holiday*). Further, numerous Italians in these films are as economically advantaged as the Americans: they are landlords (*Roman Holiday*), princes (*Three Coins*), businessmen (*Gidget*).

In almost all these films the white travelers’ deepest connections with Italians are rooted in female desire. Given that Italians in the United States have had a vexed relationship to ‘whiteness’ since the turn of the last century,<sup>5</sup> this story line becomes an emblem for pushing the boundaries of interracial desire—an especially loaded concept during the period of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision. Wini Breines has traced female desires for 1950s “bad boys,” outside mainstream white post-War America (think of James Dean in his *black leather*), to “dissatisfactions with domesticity and [...] white postwar America” (1994, 401). Given the historical racial ambiguity of Italians in the US mind, then, the acceptance of coupling with Italian men can be read as reflecting similar cultural dissatisfactions with white post-War America. Italians, not quite black nor white in the American imaginary, function as relatively ‘safe’ lovers, who allow white US women to explore relationships with (almost) nonwhite men. One review of *Three Coins* points to the racial significance of Italians in these films: “When Actress [Jean] Peters starts to run around with Actor [Rossano] Brazzi, who plays a lowly Italian translator, her boss and his wife react as if she were bound on miscegenation in the Deep South” (1954, 72). But whether these films are marked by interracial desire or not (in *Roman Holiday*,

<sup>4</sup> I am using the term “middle-class” very broadly here, indicating women with enough means to travel to Italy in these films. There is no indication that any of the women in these films has a particular ethnic background.

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have shown the ways Italians in the United States were coded as ‘black,’ helping Americans categorize themselves as ‘white.’ For example, John Paul Russo notes the ways William Dean Howells in *Suburban Sketches* (1871) connects Italians and blacks in Boston: their shared “summer in the blood,” wiliness and amiability, squalid housing conditions, and even fondness for oranges. See “From Italophilia to Italophobia: Representations of Italian Americans in the Early Gilded Age.” *Differentia* 5/7 (Spring/Autumn 1994): 44 and ff. In his study of Italian immigrants to the United States, Joseph Cosco has shown the central role racial attitudes played in “imagining Italians” as part of Americans’ own attempts to define themselves. See *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1800-1910*. Albany: SUNY, 2003.

Yet, despite associations between Italians and Africans, Italians do not actually fit neatly into Americans’ favorite black/white axis. Thomas Guglielmo has traced the evolving racial positions of Italians in Chicago in *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago 1800-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. John Higham and Robert Orsi have argued that 20th-century immigrants from southern Europe “experienced racialization at times as ‘inbetween peoples.’” (See David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.) Following Higham and Orsi’s lead, Roediger has shown that Italians were among the immigrants “working toward whiteness” as they tried to assimilate into US culture. Roediger points to other labels for southern European immigrants that underscore their racial complexity: “situationally white,” “not quite white,” off-white,” “semi-racialized,” and “conditionally white” (qtd. in Roediger 2005, 13).

Further complicating the situation is that northern Italians historically think of southern Italians as a race apart, associated with Africa and Asia. According to Roger Casillo, since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century southern Italy “came to be regarded [by northern Europeans] as the Orient of Italy or, in a most extreme formulation, as the equivalent of Africa” (2006, 182).



for example, except for Princess Ann's dance with an Italian barber along the banks of the Tiber, there is no hint of interethnic love), the middle-class white heroines in these films all begin to think as modern women—becoming less rule-bound and therefore freer, more powerful, and more sexual as they come face to face with Italy. The idea of 'Italy' in these films, then, allows audiences to see modern women's lives in new, expanded ways.

### **1. "There is nothing that cannot be measured": US masculine thinking in the 1950s**

The traveling US women in these films come from a nation that, in many ways, valued boundaries, borders, rules, and categories. William Whyte's classic 1956 book, *The Organization Man*, explores the conformity of suburban life and corporate culture, giving us a symbol for post-War middle-class American masculinity. Whyte turns a harsh gaze on the popularity of testing in corporate life and the "use of tests by organizations as a gauge of the 'normal' individual" (Whyte 1957, 202). The boundaries between right and wrong, normal and abnormal, are clearly demarcated, rooted in what Whyte terms the "gospel of scientism" (1957, 35). This emphasis on science during the period, especially the social sciences, leads to the belief that "there is nothing that cannot be measured" (1957, 31)—that it is possible to create "an exact science of man" (1957, 26).

This increasing interest in the "science of man" attempts to lay a rational framework over even the most emotional of human instincts: love and sex. In a 1958 article on Mary McCarthy, Robert E. Fitch writes about the significance of rational modes of thought to ideas of love and romance at this particular historical moment:

It is characteristic of the times that sex should be related, not to love but to science. What fascinates us is the interaction of the cerebral and the genital. Those intermediate affairs, the affections and the fighting guts, have disappeared from the picture. This is the season of the twilight of love, the season of Dr. Kinsey and the "biologic" approach. (1958, 18)

That most irrational of human qualities was finally being neatly categorized and measured. Alfred Kinsey's studies of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Female* were published in 1948 and 1953, respectively, cataloging the reported sexual practices of some 6,000 men and women, in an attempt to acquire objective data about human sexuality. Each Kinsey volume ran about 800 pages, filled with tables (179 of them in one volume alone), graphs, lists, and numbers. Readers would find, for example, lists of "petting techniques" correlated with educational levels and age, and orgasms tabulated according to parental occupation and marital status. While not surprisingly controversial, Kinsey's first book sold more than 200,000 copies in its first year, with the public eagerly awaiting the second, its publication covered by newspapers and magazines across the nation (Kinsey Institute website). *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* eventually even outsold Kinsey's first volume. This popular interest in measurement and categories led to rules of behavior through definitions of the "normal." Kinsey and his associates claimed the purpose of their work was partly to help people be happier—especially in marriages—and partly to help society establish distinctions between "normality and abnormality" as it categorizes sexual practices and customs (1953, 8). Such classifications of "normal" and "abnormal" were widely accepted (Oakley 1990, 294).

In a 1957 essay on "The Triumph of the Fact," Dwight Macdonald comments on the period's interest in scientific "fact" this way:

Our mass culture – and a good deal of our high, or serious culture as well, is dominated by an emphasis on data and a corresponding lack of interest in theory, by a frank admiration of the factual and an uneasy contempt for the imagination, sensibility and speculation. We are obsessed with technique, hagridden by Facts, in love with information. (Macdonald 1962, 393).

American culture, it appears, was "obsessed" with objective facts, rules, data, and clear categories.

### **2. "A great confusion": mid-century feminine Italy**

Historically, however, ways of thinking in Italy have long been perceived to be different from those in US culture. The home of Staël's artist Corinne, the peninsula has frequently been understood to exist outside of



"facts"—to be a place that, unlike 50s American culture, stimulates, in Macdonald's words, "imagination, sensibility, and speculation." The following is from one of Goethe's traveling companions describing the appeal of Italy: "Man must never think. Thinking makes you grow older. Man must have many things, a great confusion in his head" (qtd. in Barzini 1964, 57). Such ideas continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his famous 1964 book, *The Italians*, Luigi Barzini explains Italy's pleasures this way: "One must allow contradictory tendencies to proliferate, one must cultivate opposite ideals, one must follow reason alone, one must not fret over the imperfections of life on earth. One must carry on" (1964, 57). For Barzini, Italy's appeal lies in its "confusion," its cultivation of simultaneous opposites and imperfections. Even Barzini's phrase that one must follow "reason" alone is actually impossible if one also does as he avers and allows contradictions to "proliferate." Barzini's sentence contradicts itself. Such is the chaos that these ideas about Italy inspire.

To escape the rigidity of life in the modern US, American women in the films explored here embrace this "great confusion." Some theorists would describe these as specifically "feminine" modes of thinking and speaking. As Luce Irigaray puts it, paralleling feminine discourse with female sexuality: "She is indefinitely other in herself. This doubtless is why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious. [...] Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grid, with fully elaborated code in hand" (1985, 28-29). Post-War Italy becomes a site where women can reject the "ready-made grids" and "fully elaborated" codes of the American Organization Man, and be "whimsical," "incomprehensible," "somewhat mad." Italy—as imagined and experienced in these films—underscores the significance of an irrational, emotional—feminine—approach to the modern world. This is not to say that science in mid-century had nothing to offer women—the development of the birth control pill is an obvious example. But in the films explored in this essay, Italy allows white, middle-class US women to break from rules and categorical thinking to redefine modernity. Rather than be defined and limited by cultural regulations, modern women flout geographic and intellectual boundaries and, as a consequence, control their own lives.

It should not be surprising that 'Italy'—the place and the idea—engenders what Irigaray would call "feminine" modes of understanding the world. While Italy has long been associated with the feminine,<sup>6</sup> this became especially evident in the 1950s. Ilaria Serra (2009) has argued that numerous post-War US films (such as *It Started in Naples*)—as well as *Life* magazine—underscore the theme of Italy as a war bride—feminine, beautiful, disheveled, and impoverished—in an attempt to reassure American masculinity after the war about its superiority to the rest of the world. Post-War Italy is frequently associated with feminine beauty in more general terms, too—due to the international popularity of post-War Italian cinema, where images of strikingly beautiful women proliferated (Loren and Lollobrigida, of course, as well as actresses such as Silvana Mangano, featured in Italian neorealist films). Stephen Gundale asserts that in Italy after World War II, "[Italian] film actresses became one of the main bearers of national unity and identity in a way that did not occur to the same extent in any other European country" (2007, 263). Giovanna Grignaffini (1988) argues that this was because women were unlinked to the evils of Fascism and thus could represent rebirth in the Italian imagination. Other critics have noted specifically the "full figured" beauty of these Italian actors. Réka Buckley avers that the international popularity of the full-figured female physique frequently associated with Italy—the so-called "*maggiorate fisiche*"—"offered a sense of security in tradition and an escape from the

<sup>6</sup> A number of critics talk about the long history of the idea of a "feminine" Italy. In *Bellissima*, Stephen Gundale explores the significance of female beauty to Italian identity throughout Italian history:

"The beauty of women was one of the most striking and continuous themes in the formation of Italian national identity in the early and mid-19th century. Not only was Italy seen through its young women and their representations in the arts, but their beauty was deemed to be one of the most significant manifestations of a general Italian superiority in matters of aesthetics" (2007, 1).

Millicent Marcus in "The Italian Body Politic Is a Woman: Feminized National Identity in Postwar Italian Film" also traces representations of a feminized body politic throughout Italian history as a "Utopian figure" representing loss and nostalgia (in the volume *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Afterlife: Essays in Honor of Fred Freccero*. Ed. Dana E. Stewart and Alison Cornish. Burnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000, 332).



chaos and confusion aroused by the great economic and social upheaval of the country during the war and immediate post-war years" (2000, 530).

Buckley also argues that this "fascination with the female physique at this time negated the cerebral and emphasized the natural or primitive aspect of woman. It belittled women's capacity to progress in the public sphere, reducing them, there, merely to playthings and objects of male fetish and desire" (2000, 530). This feminization of Italy, then, suggests that the 50s feminine associations of the peninsula had a particular place in the larger cultural work of keeping white, middle-class women at home in support of mid-century patriarchy. But as I see it, the feminine aspects of Italy as represented within the larger post-War culture may help to explain why the peninsula could serve as an imaginative platform on which female characters could stretch beyond the rules of their lives at home. These American-women-in-Italy films use a feminized nation as a place that empowers white women, rather than men. The historical perception of Italy as a chaotic, pre-modern space is transformed in post-War culture, paradoxically, into a space that inspires US women to enter the modern post-War world, free from masculinist American modes of thought.

### **3. “The most beautiful things in life are those we do not understand:” challenging categorical thinking in 1950s American-women-in-Italy films**

Much like any mythological quest, the American Women-in-Italy films from the period all turn on a similar pattern:

1. A white American woman (or women) travel/s to Italy; she is independent and financially secure, reflecting US economic power during the period. However, from almost the very beginning of these films, we see women pushing against the rules, regulations, and categories of US patriarchy—found at home, in institutions, and even internalized within themselves. The modern United States of the Organization Man limits women.
2. The American woman escapes into a different type of modern life in Italy, her escape frequently marked by immersion in water, a metaphoric baptism into a new way of understanding the world and herself.
3. The American woman may be transformed into a modern woman by her trip to Italy, finding a new, less rigid, way of understanding the world, crossing conceptual and geographic boundaries, and ultimately gaining a new sense of autonomy and sexuality. The transformation is often marked by a relationship with an Italian—and a new hairdo! Or, as found in three films here, all post-1960, the transformation does not occur and the females remain essentially unchanged. The reasons for the differences are explored at the end of this essay.

#### **3.1 Struggling with the rules of patriarchy**

No matter the final outcome of the films, American-women-in-Italy films all open with female figures struggling against constraints of patriarchal power—exerted over family roles, female sexuality, and, more broadly, ways of thinking. At times the patriarchal constraints take effect in the domestic sphere (as in *Roman Holiday*, *Gidget Goes to Rome*, *Light in the Piazza*); at times in institutions (also found in *Roman Holiday* and *Light in the Piazza*, as well as *Three Coins in the Fountain*, *Rome Adventure*, and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*). At times the struggle is internalized within the female characters themselves (especially *Summertime* and *Three Coins*).

The prototype of these films is *Roman Holiday*. Nominated for ten Academy Awards and winner of three, *Roman Holiday* was the first American film since World War II to be shot entirely in Rome. The early scenes show Princess Ann struggling against the rules and regulations of her household. As noted above, Hepburn was not an American in the film nor in real life, but as ‘America’s sweetheart’ she can be read as a stand-in for American female audiences—representing an American woman as much as a European, showing how Schwartz’s “cosmopolitan cinema” blurs national boundaries. As a princess, Ann is, of course, wealthy, but this gives her no independence—she lives a life that is fully planned around a structured, rigid schedule. She is treated like a child: chastely put to sleep in a flannel nightgown, given crackers and milk at bedtime. A countess runs through the schedule of her next day’s activities, including the set speeches she is supposed to make. “Yes, thank you. No, thank you,” Ann repeats, making it clear that these are meaningless words to



her—demanded only by the protocol of her situation. When she complains, she is reprimanded: “Control yourself, Ann.” “I don’t want to,” she cries, looking longingly out the windows at the Italians below. Her protectors finally resort to drugs to calm her.

Ann’s regimented day prefigures that of the housewife in US patriarchy, described by Betty Friedan several years later in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan writes about the infantilized American housewife, whose days, like those of Ann, are under the control of others. Friedan quotes one woman: “It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there has always been somebody or something that will take care of your life. [...] Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to” (1963, 4). Ann in her flannel nightgown munching crackers at bedtime is surely an image of this “little girl.” Friedan goes on to describe the “fragmented” day of the modern post-War housewife “as she rushes from dishwasher to washing machine to telephone to dryer to station wagon to supermarket, and delivers Johnny to the Little League field, takes Janey to dancing class, gets the lawnmower fixed and meets the 6:45” (1963, 8-9). While Princess Ann is surely not doing the work of the housewife, her day is equally regimented and controlled, as her daily schedule attests. And like those of Friedan’s housewife, all of Ann’s activities are based on her roles and responsibilities, not on her own desires. Also like the post-War American housewife, Ann certainly lives in comfort, so there is no rational reason for her complaints with her life; it is a “problem that has no name,” in Friedan’s famous words. Unhappy for no apparent reason, the Princess is treated as if she has a sort of ‘neurosis’—with drugs; Friedan reminds us, “Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops” (1963, 9).

In this reading, then, *Roman Holiday* is about a young woman struggling at home against familial roles; and it is also about a young woman struggling specifically against familial sexual prohibitions. This becomes apparent early in the film when Ann complains about the flannel nightgown forced on her: “I’m not 200 years old!” she cries, before escaping into the Italian night, still a little drugged. Later, when she discovers she has spent the night sleeping off her tranquilizer at the apartment of an American, Joe (Gregory Peck), a slow smile crosses her face, as she enjoys the sexual suggestions of her evening. Ann becomes sexualized by her time in Italy (we all remember her kisses with Joe near the end) and such sexuality is only possible by escaping the attempts at control that surround her.

In later films such as *Gidget Goes to Rome* and *Light in the Piazza*, fathers actively attempt to control their daughters’ budding sexuality from the start. So at the opening, Gidget’s father resists her Roman holiday, and finally asks an old friend to watch over his girl to make sure she doesn’t get herself into any trouble on her travels. In *Light in the Piazza*, Clara Johnson’s father wants to institutionalize her after she impulsively kisses a delivery boy. A trip to Italy is the way for Clara and her mother to escape the father and his institutional threats.

Films of the genre also show women explicitly resisting institutions associated with patriarchy. These attempt to control female bodies, as well as women’s ways of thinking more generally. Ann’s daily domestic constraints, are, of course, also dictated by her position in the institution of the state, as the daughter of her father and heir to the throne. Attempts at institutional control also surround the opening of *Three Coins in the Fountain*, released a year after *Roman Holiday*. *Three Coins* focuses on the lives of three American secretaries in Rome. Lavishly filmed in Technicolor, opening with Frank Sinatra singing the title song against iconic shots of the Eternal City, the film features three economically independent females: “Secretaries live very well in Rome,” we are told, as we see their fabulous apartment, the Villa Eden. But from the beginning, we also see paternalistic institutional rules. The secretaries work for a US government office—run by a man, of course—that prohibits the Americans from dating local Romans.

Other films also open with institutions that attempt to control female sexuality: in 1962, Prudence (Suzanne Pleshette in her debut in *Rome Adventure*) fights the regulations against sexual reading material at the women’s college where she teaches. In *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* the aging actress Karen Stone (Vivien Leigh) struggles with institutional expectations of the New York theater world, which no longer considers a woman of a certain age to be a viable, sexual character.

But not all control in these films is exerted through attempted control over female bodies—some of it is exerted through the emphasis on so-called rational modes of thinking. So, for example, *Three Coins* goes beyond exploring institutional rules about relationships: two of the three romances in the film mock the hyper-rational American thinking of the period. The new secretary, Maria, fresh from the United States, takes the rational approach to love ‘à la Kinsey,’ showing that anyone, male or female, can buy into US 1950s



scientism. In her attempt to win over the Italian Prince Dessi (played by the French actor Louis Jourdan, again supporting Schwartz's ideas about the transnational nature of these films), Maria obsessively categorizes the Prince's tastes in food, wine, and music. "I went after you with a well-organized system," she eventually confesses. But in Italy the system fails; enraged at her methodical pursuit, Dessi leaves her. In the case of the third romance in *Three Coins*, the American expat writer Shadwell, called from the outset the "old master," is another representative of US patriarchy and its clear, categorical thinking. "My life, my career," he says, "has been about facing facts as I discover them." In complimenting Frances, his secretary of fifteen years, he comments on her rationality: "Your greatest asset has been your detachment, your freedom from sentimentality." But Frances is in love with him; in fact she does not want freedom from sentimentality. Thus, all three secretaries—the "coins" of the film's title—struggle with rule-bound thinking associated with American masculinity.

Constraints also surround Jane Hudson (Katharine Hepburn) in *Summertime*, on her first trip to Venice. But no families or institutions constrain her: Jane herself has internalized her culture's rules—especially about sexual propriety. When she is first approached by Renato (played by Rossano Brazzi), a married man in an 'open arrangement,' she gets angry at him for his attention: "I am not an Italian," she says, underscoring that American and Italian modes of thought may differ. As much as Jane desires Renato, her American ways of thinking get in the way.

And Jane has not only internalized her culture's sexual mores, but the sensible, scientific ways of the Organization Man more generally. She tries to make sense of everything—by reason and category. "I don't understand," she says when Renato first attempts to contact her. Renato challenges Jane's methods of thought, echoing Goethe's friend who saw Italy as evidence that man should "never think." "Why must you understand?" he asks Jane. "The most beautiful things in life are those we do not understand." For these middle-class women the 'scientific' categories and rule-bound thinking of the modern world are only used against them in an attempt to rein in their bodies and minds: the rules limit their choices, the categories limit their experiences. Unless they can escape such a world the chances for expansion are slim for these characters.

### 3.2 Escaping into Italy

As each of these films shows a woman struggling against the rigid modes of thinking associated with modern US life, the chaos of Italy and Italians becomes the means of escape. The only characters who actually encourage Ann's physical freedom in *Roman Holiday* are Italians. When feeling trapped by her life, she gazes at the heavy Victorian furnishings in her bedroom and is drawn to the dancing, singing Italians below. All non-Italians attempt to restrict her: her own countrymen follow her (in a visual embodiment of 'organization men,' a line of identically suited men marches through the city trying to apprehend her). And while audiences may think American Joe is Ann's means of escape from her own rigid culture, in fact, he is just as bad as her countrymen. While Joe seems to be encouraging Ann's freedom on her holiday, he—and his photographer friend, Irving—are actually just following her in an effort to write a lucrative newspaper story with pictures. ("It's always open season on princesses," Irving quips.) Yes, Joe takes her on that famous Vespa ride at first, but as soon as he gets off, Ann attempts to escape even his control by taking over the vehicle. Attempts at masculine supervision of women, the film suggests, are everywhere.

Everywhere, except in Italy. In important contrast, Italians don't care who Ann is—they interact with her as a person. As Joe follows her through the Roman streets we watch her buy sandals, get a haircut, eat a gelato. While Joe and Irving surreptitiously attempt to capture money-making photos, she dances with her Italian barber, who is clearly smitten with her without any idea of who she is. Eventually, to escape her countrymen, Ann jumps into the Tiber—a symbolic immersion in water, a metaphoric rebirth, that appears in a number of these films when women escape into Italy. If, as Freud maintains, all travel is an anti-domestic fantasy,<sup>7</sup> Ann enacts that fantasy for female audiences, prefiguring a desire to escape the "problem" that Friedan talks about, that appears irrational, that cannot be categorized, cannot even be put into words, that "has no name." Hepburn on the front of the Vespa has become a cultural image of this female freedom.

<sup>7</sup> In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud writes: "The voyage is an anti-domestic fantasy with its roots in the domestic. [...] A great part of the pleasure of travel [...] is rooted [...] in dissatisfaction with home and family" (1961, 16).



Later films echo the physical freedom signified by Hepburn in Italy. After fighting with her father and boyfriend, Gidget, too, goes out on her own for the evening with an older Italian man, Paolo, exercising her freedom by climbing into a fountain. For Prudence, having left her teaching job for a *Rome Adventure*, Italy is “*al di là*” (the title of the film’s hit theme song)—“beyond the beyond,” “far far away”—from the regulations of her college. Encouraged by her Italian friend, Roberto (another appearance by Rossano Brazzi), to ignore propriety (and the meaning of her name), she travels with her boyfriend throughout the peninsula. “This is Italy!” Roberto assures her.

While the ‘escapes’ into Italy by Ann, Gidget, and Prudence are actually more physical than sexual, other films explicitly explore the sexual freedoms that Italy allows for white, middle-class US women. When Mrs. Stone leaves behind the voices of the New York critics and her sexless marriage (we see the couple’s separate beds early in the film), she takes for her lover an Italian gigolo (played by a young Warren Beatty). Anita in *Three Coins* resists the rules of her boss and the American government and falls in love with her Roman coworker Giorgio (yes: Rossano Brazzi again). Her friend and coworker Maria encourages her: “You’re not going to let some silly old rule stand in your way, are you?” Later Anita encourages Giorgio to break any number of rules himself, even though it could cost him his chance at a law career. When he says, “Perhaps I shouldn’t be a lawyer if I can’t follow simple office rules,” she responds: “I’m free to do anything!” And then they do it all, falling into his bed. Anita rejects the categorical rules of her government job—and even the moral rules of 1950s American society.

In Italy, loving the Italian Renato, Jane Hudson from *Summertime* learns to bend her own sexual rules. Renato makes his plea for her to let go of her earlier codes of sexual behavior: “You say it [being with a married man] is wrong, it’s wicked, it’s this, it’s that. [...] You are like a hungry child given ravioli to eat” who prefers beefsteak. “You are hungry: eat the ravioli.” She does. Immersed in Italy, Jane’s newfound freedom—intellectual and sexual—is signified by an immersion in water: she falls into a canal in a famous scene. We guess how her night with Renato ends as we watch a long series of fireworks reflecting around a single lovely shoe abandoned on the terrace.<sup>8</sup>

In other films, the freedom of Italy is found in new ways of thinking rather than acting. When Margaret Johnson in *The Light in the Piazza* comes “face to face with Italy,” she rejects logical thought and action and “drift[s] along with days.” “I don’t know anymore, what’s possible and what isn’t,” she says. Similarly, while at first *Three Coins* seems to be all about sexual freedom for women through Anita’s romance with Giorgio, it also features an American female who balks at rigid modes of modern thought, in themselves. When Frances discovers her beloved boss, Shadwell, is ill, she can no longer maintain her detached (American?) way of thinking, which he had so admired. She gets drunk, climbs into a fountain, and tells a little Italian boy with a boat not to be like her, not to “hug the shore,” but to “be reckless.” Such are the lessons learned by the American woman in Italy. In the end, reckless Frances wins Shadwell’s love.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 Transforming

Many of the films—especially those of the 1950s—end with a transformation for the American female characters. Having resisted the rules and strictures of US patriarchy, these women have fundamentally changed by immersing themselves in Italy. By the end, the American women often have Italian boyfriends and new (usually short) hairdos: in Italy they become icons for a modernity that breaks rules and defies boundaries, rooted, ironically, in an ancient (Irigaray might say, “feminine”) place. Whereas American modernity limits US women with its categories and rules, the modernity created when US women experience Italy allows them to gain authority by expanding conceptually and physically.

So, for instance, while we may be used to thinking of *Roman Holiday* as a simple love story—and it is true that Ann finds romance with Joe—it is crucial to remember that her triumph actually comes when she is away

<sup>8</sup> Censors were troubled by this film, sympathetically portraying an extramarital affair. They demanded the producers shorten the romantic foreplay scene; the result appears to be an exceptionally long series of fireworks reflected in a shoe.

<sup>9</sup> But in a nod to American scientific skills and an acknowledgment of the significance of American rational thought, Shadwell and Frances will return to the United States, so that the seriously ill writer can visit American doctors. Rome may be good for romance and women’s modern lives, but when it comes to science, it’s the United States all the way.



from him at the end of the film and strong enough to resist the rigid structures of royal life on her own. Changed physically by her day among Italians, with her new modern short haircut, Ann returns to her palazzo “completely aware” of domestic and institutional duties to “family and country”—but she refuses to tell where she has been, nor will she return to her usual routines of milk and crackers. She finally appears in control of her surroundings, coolly dismissing her bossy attendants, fielding questions at a press conference. Ann has had a taste of physical freedom in her holiday in Rome that leaves her newly powerful. (Watching her encounter with Italy, Joe and Irving change, too, giving up the pragmatic idea of making money from the newspaper story). Italy may seem impoverished and crumbling and ancient: but here it is possible to take on the role of an independent, modern woman.

Transformations also occur at the end of *Three Coins*. Though she doesn’t get a haircut, Frances does buy a new dress, a sign that she will no longer be Shadwell’s obedient, subservient secretary. She too gains her power: “I’m not too old to do anything I want to do,” she says. Transformations for the other two female characters in the film explicitly involve the assertion of their sexual desires across borders—the sexual mixing of Italians and Americans, in defiance of office and cultural rules. Two of the three couples, Anita and Giorgio, and Maria and Prince Densi, will remain in Italy.

Like *Three Coins*, *Summertime* and *Light in the Piazza* find a new power for their heroines via romance with Italians. While Jane leaves Renato at the end of *Summertime*, we know that her ways of thinking have forever changed: not only has she discovered her sexuality, she is no longer tied to the rights and wrongs of her culture. She has made her own choice to be with a married man. With a new dress and hairstyle, Jane has left behind American mores so thoroughly, the housekeeper calls her a “vera italiana.” The premodern world of watery Venice allows the rise of the modern, independent, sexualized woman. In a similar way, at the conclusion of *Light in the Piazza*, Clara Johnson is also transformed by her love for a young Florentine. She looks so different that her mother barely recognizes her on the street: once a childlike girl, she has become a beautiful young woman with new clothing and hair, speaking fluent Italian, blending perfectly into life on the peninsula. At the end of the film, Clara’s mother, Margaret, exercises her own authority: she resists her husband’s wishes, accepts her daughter’s sexuality, and marries Clara off into the Florentine family. Surely, then, these films suggest that in 50s Italy, US women can become modern: free to think and act for themselves. The idea of ‘Italy’—chaotic, uncivilized, and feminine—becomes integral to the idea of the modern American woman.

#### 4. “La dolce vita:” American-women-in-Italy films, 1960s

With female characters discovering their sexuality and power during their time in Italy, the films discussed above suggest that travel can indeed be transformative. Thus these films mirror the possibilities of travel outlined in William Stowe’s 1994 book *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth Century American Culture*. Building on the works of anthropologists Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, Stowe writes about travel as a form of ritual: at times a “liminoid experience, an experience for real change” (1994, 22).

However, Stowe also notes that “Some travelers experience the ritual as a tribal rite of passage in van Gennep’s sense: for them the central phase is merely liminal, and the reintegration into an unchanged society an inevitable, foregone conclusion” (1994, 22). And I must note that the conclusions for three of the post-1960 films of this genre seem less transformative than those in the earlier films: in the later films, despite new hairstyles, the travelers remain essentially unchanged—no icons of modernity last here. Karen Stone’s exploration into sexuality in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* fails as she lures a threatening-looking young man up to her apartment in the closing scenes of the film. Some critics have read this as a suicidal gesture; but even if not read this way precisely, the sight of the seedy young man coming to Mrs. Stone’s bedroom is disturbing at the very least and suggests no good changes have come to Mrs. Stone while in Rome. At the end of *Gidget* and *Rome Adventure* both protagonists happily return to their American lives and white American boyfriends unchanged by their immersions in Italy.

Why this difference between these films and the 1950s American-women-in-Italy films? We may speculate that by 1961 Italy had lost some of its imaginative status as a free, albeit primitive, place that could help redefine the modern world for Americans. In fact, after the release of Fellini’s epochal *La Dolce Vita* in 1960, Italy appears not as a place apart from the United States, but as an extension of modern American culture. As Stephen Gundel puts it in his essay on the historical significance of the film, “Directed by Federico Fellini at the height of his creative powers, [La Dolce Vita] offers an extraordinary panorama of Roman life at the



very moment when Italy was shedding its rural past to become a turbulent industrial society" (2000, 29). Against a background of modern, sterile Rome, Fellini's film criticizes the emptiness of the nation's post-War economic growth, the 'Italian miracle.' This Italy is the modern world, offering Americans no escape from their culture—no platform on which to create an alternative modern female self. As Italy itself becomes modern, its significance to women in these films diminishes. These films thus suggest that the modern women created in the earlier films rely heavily on the Anglo myths of 'premodern' Italy: American filmmakers, it would appear, have little room in their imaginations for the possibilities of actual Italian modernity.

*The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, *Gidget Goes to Rome*, and *Rome Adventure* are situated in Fellini's Rome. *Roman Spring* and *Gidget* make specific references to *La Dolce Vita*, underscoring the impact of the film in the United States, where it grossed over 19.5 million dollars. Mrs. Stone's corrupt friends frequent nightclubs set amidst Roman ruins—an homage to the famous party scene in *La Dolce Vita*, where the American actress (Anita Ekberg) dances scandalously at a club similarly set among the ruins—signifying the corruption of ancient civilizations. For Mrs. Stone Italy offers no durable escape from the sterile modern world: it is the sterile modern world. *Gidget*, too, makes a number of references to Fellini's film. At one point, her Paolo takes her to a party with the "international set." "Did you see *La Dolce Vita*?" one party goer asks another. The party scene is reminiscent of the decadence of Fellini's Rome: "It's all part of my education," Gidget says, gamely. But again, at the end, she happily returns to the United States. Rome is corrupt; it's just as well she comes home.<sup>10</sup>

While there are no direct references to Fellini, when Prudence leaves Italian Roberto for her American boyfriend Troy Donahue at the end of *Rome Adventure*, she also chooses the innocence of the United States over the depravities of Rome. In Italy Prudence had faced romantic competition from Lyda (Angie Dickinson)—the height of sophistication, with her hair always up in a French twist, dressed in elegant clothing, hosting an evening at home in satin pants and a long satin dinner coat. Travel in Italy has ruined her: she uses men for money and sex and cares about no one but herself. When Prudence decides to return to the United States, she makes a point of changing from Lyda-inspired clothing back into 'herself.' There is no transformation into the free modern woman for Prudence. In fact, in his final speech, Roberto explains that women are not even meant to be free: "I think all women made a big mistake, long ago... demanding to be free like a man. Women's most important function in life is to turn men from free wild hunters into the responsible civilized creators of society they can be."

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, while attitudes shift after Fellini's film, mid-century American films employ images of white middle-class US women traveling in Italy as icons of an alternative modernity, a transnational vision that allows women to expand beyond the orderly world of the American Organization Man. This iconography suggests that as imagined by Americans, Italy, so often understood as a feminine place, served as a textual site that offered freedom and power to American post-War women. While mid-century women are often thought of as surrounded by stereotypes of *Ozzie and Harriet* domesticity, these American-women-in-Italy films shift our sense of how American women's lives and desires were figured during the period, complicating historical domestic stereotypes and reminding us, in Joanne Meyrowitz's words, "that during this [post-War] era, most American women lived, in one way or more, outside the boundaries of the middle-class suburban home" (1994, 3). In these films Italy becomes the imagined place that inspires women to expand "outside the boundaries of the middle-class suburban home."

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<sup>10</sup> The heroines of the post-1960s films are reminiscent of some interpretations of that famous American girl in Italy, Henry James's Daisy Miller. For instance, in 1965, Nathalia Wright read Daisy as emblematic of the "Young American in the Italian Life School"—an innocent female figure who "represent[s] the consciousness of the youthful nation as it seeks both to take its place among the mature nations of the world and to maintain an individuality of its own" (1965, 253).



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