

## **Sexual dissidence and the mainstream: The queer triangle in Ferzan Ozpetek's *Le fate ignoranti*\***

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Hailed as the cinematic manifesto of the Italian LGBT community for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Le fate ignoranti* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2001) was the first queer-themed Italian film to achieve mainstream success in Italy.<sup>2</sup> Shot in Rome in the summer of 2000, it was released only a few months after the Rome World Pride.<sup>3</sup> The 2000 World Pride was organized with the specific purpose of altering public perceptions of sexual minorities in Italy and was intentionally made to coincide with the Catholic Church's jubilee. This event caused considerable controversy and prompted attacks from the Vatican and several Italian politicians.<sup>4</sup> The 2000 World Pride was nonetheless an enormous success. Numerous actors, politicians and TV stars attended the week-long flurry of parties and meetings, whilst the opening ceremony was broadcast live on Italian news. In commenting on the legacy of the World Pride, one of the organizers, Massimo Mazzotta, recognized that the greatest achievement proved to be the fact that 'gays and lesbians everywhere were seen expressing affection in ways they had never done before in public'.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of the World Pride, *Le fate ignoranti* constituted a further contribution to a wider debate on the role of the LGBT community in Italy. Its commercial success in Italy, where it became the fourth most popular domestically made film of 2001, added to the interest shown by critics and cultural commentators.<sup>6</sup> Such success paved the way for a sudden surge in the domestic output of films focussing on gay and lesbian lives including *Benzina* (Monica Stambrini, 2001), *Giorni* (Laura Muscardin, 2001), *Il più bel giorno della mia vita* (Cristina Comencini, 2002), *Il vento, di sera* (Andrea Adriatico, 2003) and *La finestra di fronte* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2003). But what is most significant about the film is the way it has illuminated shifting cultural attitudes towards sexuality and sexual identities in Italy. *Le fate ignoranti* captured a moment in which it became suddenly easier for gays and lesbians to talk publicly about their sexuality, a moment that was marked for example by the coming out of celebrities such as actor Leo Gullotta and designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana.<sup>7</sup> Empowered by the commercial success of *Le fate ignoranti*, the director Ferzan Ozpetek has since joined this

group of queer icons by publicly declaring his homosexuality and becoming one of the most outspoken advocates for the rights of sexual minorities in Italy.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its significance as a popular cinematic artefact celebrating the new visibility of the Italian LGBT community, *Le fate ignoranti* was promoted as a film with a wider appeal for mainstream audiences. In interviews, Ozpetek was rather keen to point out that this was not simply a film about gay people but one about families, love and intimacy.<sup>9</sup> There is nothing especially new or unique in this strategic downplaying of queer content. Films focussing on gays and lesbians which seek popularity among mainstream audiences may require this sort of compromise. The phrase ‘it is not just another gay film’ was for example one of the most common responses with which critics welcomed *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) as one of the must-see films of 2005. The comment helped to build consensus around the film. Critics highlighted Ang Lee’s pictorial mastery whilst simultaneously downplaying the topic (homosexuality) that still proved divisive among (especially) American audiences.<sup>10</sup> By stressing the ‘universal’ aesthetic value of *Brokeback Mountain*, critics were implicitly suggesting the limited significance for a wider audience of any film which is first and foremost about queer lives. It seems reasonable to argue that behind the effacement of the queer content in the promotion of *Le fate ignoranti* lay also an awareness of the difficulties that the film had faced in the early stages of its production. As producers Tilde Corsi and Gianni Romoli point out, securing funding for this project was an especially complicated affair. Corsi and Romoli recall that the most common response given by potential funders – usually after reading the script – was that it was funny and interesting but was ultimately only a film for ‘queers’.<sup>11</sup> At this stage, Corsi and Romoli were often forced to argue that the film and its characters reflected some universal concerns that a mainstream audience would have found easy to identify with.<sup>12</sup> The project was eventually backed by a Franco-Italian co-production involving R&C (Corsi’s and Romoli’s production company) and Les Films Balenciaga. This brief account of the financial difficulties faced by the producers shows how the film was since the very beginning tainted by the pressure of having to demonstrate its mainstream appeal. Such an appeal was almost inevitably also the yardstick by which its success was assessed afterwards. According to Ozpetek, so many people liked *Le fate ignoranti* because it broke cultural barriers by showing the true face of a country in which many married men have secret lives with other men: ‘Italian women saw for the first time what their husbands’ “hypothetical” lover looked like. [...] I gave a face and a body to all those secret love affairs’.<sup>13</sup> This comment features an important leitmotif in Ozpetek’s self-fashioning as a popular director: a distinctive gendering of the average spectator that allegedly liked the film and contributed most to its popular success. Often compared to Antonio Pietrangeli and Pedro Almodovar, Ozpetek has ever after been considered a quintessential woman’s director. His reputation

as a popular filmmaker has been linked to his ability to create dense melodramas which are very often centred upon women's dilemmas. According to Gabriele Marcello, 'figure particolari, armoniosamente disarmoniche nel loro insieme e nelle loro scelte, sono le donne, vere protagoniste dei film di Ozpetek'.<sup>14</sup> As I will discuss in the rest of this article, women such as Antonia, the protagonist of *Le fate ignoranti*, are also crucial figures through which Ozpetek attempts to find a compromise between queer politics and his ambition to be a popular director.

*Le fate ignoranti* recounts the death of Antonia's husband, Massimo, her subsequent discovery that he had had a lover, and that this lover was a man, Michele. The meeting between Antonia and Michele constitutes the fulcrum of the narrative, leading to Antonia's increasing involvement with him and his extended queer 'family'. Much of the plot revolves around her new life with this group of friends and her shifting perspective on life, which leads to her final separation from them. The story establishes a stark contrast between Antonia's upper-middle-class world and the more socially and sexually eccentric reality of Michele's family. Indeed, the stumbling of the film's bourgeois straight female protagonist upon a marginalised queer family and a main gay character has been seen by some critics as an unwarranted and contaminating intrusion. Luca Prono, for example, criticizes the film for concentrating too narrowly on her point of view and on her titillating exploration of the queer microcosm of Michele's family. For Prono, this exploration is 'politically' disappointing because it prevents a more direct engagement with the queer theme and allows Antonia to cross the boundaries of sexual orientations without any ultimate renunciation of her bourgeois morals.<sup>15</sup> On a similar note, Paul Julian Smith compares *Le fate ignoranti* to an Italian version of the American situation comedy *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006), where the intense emotional relationship between a gay protagonist and a straight woman functions to present a more acceptable and less radical image of sexual dissidence.<sup>16</sup> In highlighting the obfuscatory role of the female protagonist in relation to the queer content of the film, these readings dismiss *Le fate ignoranti* as an all too typical example of gay cinema selling out its potentially radical message to the mainstream.

*Le fate ignoranti* has as its main conceit the triangular relationship between two men and a woman, a conventional narrative strategy in cinematic romance that has historically obscured homoerotic bonds. By focussing on the figure of the queer 'triangle', this article will illustrate that the function of the female 'apex' within the story is neither obfuscatory nor assimilationist but extremely productive, showing how queer cinema may be 'popular' without disavowing a radical vision of sexual dissidence. I will suggest that the film, even in its ultimate heteronormative reordering of life, creates space for a specifically queer narrative of ambivalence and openness which has direct political ramifications, fuelling a commitment to subcultural activism deemed so vital in twenty-first century Italy.

### The gaze and the fragmentation of knowledge

Defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as the figure by which ‘the commonsense of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations’,<sup>17</sup> the triangle is a fictional model structured around intersecting dynamics of identification, alliance and desire involving two rivals (usually two men) and their object of desire (usually a woman). In his influential investigation of triangular desire in some of the major works of European fiction, René Girard clarifies two important points which are particularly useful for my discussion: firstly, that the choice of the beloved is frequently determined by the beloved being already the choice of the rival; and, secondly, that the bond between the two rivals often tends to be stronger than the one between either of them and the beloved.<sup>18</sup> Girard makes hardly any mention of homosexuality in his study. Yet, when applied to the conventional triangle involving two men and a woman, his work constitutes an important basis for approaching critically the relation between homoerotic desire and male homosociality. In *Between Men* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick builds on Girard’s study by examining the historically contingent nature of the link between homosociality and same-sex desire in literature, its opacity in times of intense homophobia and the particular role played by women in this triangular structure. In arguing that the triangle is organized asymmetrically, Sedgwick suggests that the woman is often used in this schematization as a conduit for a relationship in which the two true partners are the two men. Sedgwick’s most important point is to suggest that the suppression of the homosexual component in these male relationships is a product of the same symbolic system whose rules and relations oppress women. Within the structural context of triangular desire as popularized by the European literary canon, heterosexuality therefore regulates the assignment of separate roles for women and men, but it is indeed homosociality/homosexuality that determines the consolidation of patriarchal power in the socio-cultural order.<sup>19</sup>

For the purpose of this essay, the triangle as theorized by Girard and Sedgwick seems to be a particularly useful figure for thinking critically about films that portray ambiguous homoerotic relationships between men – e.g. *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962), *Flesh and the Devil* (Clarence Brown, 1926), *Les Valseuses* (Bertrand Blier, 1974), *The Dreamers* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 2003).<sup>20</sup> In these films, the triangle serves the purpose of teasing the underlying homosexual attraction between the two male protagonists whilst simultaneously disavowing the very possibility of that attraction by means of the position of the female character as the central object of desire. The role of the woman is to prove that the two men who are suspiciously intimate with each other are indeed only friends, rivals, or sometimes both. Under these terms, the presence of the woman is the condition through which a sexually dissident

narrative is re-appropriated by, and made acceptable within, the heterocentric sexual economy of the text.<sup>21</sup>

*Le fate ignoranti* provides a particular articulation of the triangle, where the question of dissident sexuality is not dealt with in conventional obfuscatory terms but is conducive to the expansion of normative sexual knowledge towards a more diverse and multifaceted system of interaction. In the film, the queer triangle is constructed upon the conjunctural position of Massimo as Antonia's husband and as Michele's lover. Following his premature death, it is not homosociality and heterosexuality that structure the triangular schematization of erotic relations but the heterosocial bond between Michele and Antonia. To discuss *Le fate ignoranti* in terms of its handling of triangular desire enables us to assess the extent to which, in an age of greater cinematic visibility for same-sex desire, the triangle may turn into a potentially productive figure for avowing resistance to normative codes of gender and sexual expression. *Le fate ignoranti* is a film that clearly flirts with both queer and heteronormative spectatorships. The triangle, I would argue, enables both these kinds of spectatorships to find pleasure and moments of identification in the film. Most importantly, it provides an especially interesting model of analysis for investigating further the role of the female protagonist and her relation to the discursive practices that may render opaque the articulation of queer desire.

In the first sequence of the film, a woman (Antonia) walks around a museum and looks at some statues. A man (Massimo) follows her and attempts to pick her up. After telling him that she is waiting for her husband, the woman makes it clear that she is not interested. We soon realize that this encounter between two strangers is only a game played by husband and wife. Laughing about their mischievous role-playing, they leave together arm in arm. The sequence introduces some of the main motifs of the film: a) a woman caught by the camera in the act of looking (Antonia), b) a missing lover (the presumed husband) and c) the opportunity that this absence creates for further erotic possibilities (the man's pass at the woman). The triangular schematization involving a woman, a missing male lover and another man is then set up from the very beginning as the central erotic theme of the story.

Far from constituting an attempt to obfuscate the homosexual theme, the straight woman functions in this triangle as the figure by which queerness is turned into the narrative focal point. Antonia's arrival at Michele's apartment allows the spectator to discover and get to know the queer microcosm inhabited by Michele and his friends. Furthermore, it marks the beginning of a series of findings by Antonia that are meant to undermine her certainties and the stability of her world. Ozpetek brings about this destabilization mainly by playing with Antonia's expectations and with the spectator who is relying on her point of view and her restricted access to knowledge. After the discovery of a message behind a painting given to her husband, Antonia finds out that Massimo had been having

a love affair for seven years. The feminine gender of the signature behind the painting ‘la tua fata ignorante’ and the belief that Massimo was heterosexual are the two justifications for the assumption that his lover was a woman. After asking Massimo’s secretary for a receipt of the painting that had been delivered to her husband’s office, Antonia discovers the address of the sender. When she turns up at this address, Serra, a woman who introduces herself as the manager of the condominium, announces that the tenant of that flat is asleep and that Mariani usually works at night at the fruit and vegetable market. Amused by Antonia’s suggestion that this person may be a woman, Serra accepts that her name is Signorina Mariani. Our reliance on Antonia’s point of view and the extent to which Ozpetek is playing with our expectations are reinforced in the scene where Antonia turns up at the market in search of her husband’s secret lover. Here, a long-distance shot shows us Antonia asking a man for directions. She then walks amongst the stalls whilst the camera follows her search by tracking backwards. The following dolly shot from right to left ends on a close-up of Antonia’s face gazing at something. A reverse shot showing a neon sign reading *Ditta Mariani M.* – note the ungendered initial M. – is then followed by a point-of-view sequence alternating close-ups of Antonia with three increasingly closer shots showing a young blonde woman working in the stall under the sign. This cutting, registering Antonia’s increasingly distressed expression and the view of this woman, sutures us into the belief that this is Signorina Mariani. This scene works as a paradigm of the way the film establishes a subject position for the spectator coinciding with Antonia’s point of view and her heteronormative standpoint.<sup>22</sup> This initial suture is justified by the film’s apparent intention to challenge our access to knowledge, our reliance on appearances and our heteronormative assumptions. Antonia’s POV is by no means the only subject position which is available to the spectator. Ozpetek punctuates these initial sequences with a number of clues which suggest the potential queerness of the world that Antonia has entered: Serra’s blue hair and eccentric apron, Mara’s unconventional gender appearance, the jokes exchanged between Michele and his friends after Antonia has left and Riccardo’s camp feminization in addressing Michele when he first arrives (‘Ma che stai a fa’ la stronza!’). The more astute spectator who has already realized what is going on inside Michele’s flat is here invited to feel superior to the slow-witted Antonia who takes such a long time to get it.

The film clearly aims at ‘queering’ the heteronormative assumptions that Antonia represents. Judith Roof describes queer identities as categories which can potentially subvert our relation to truth. For Roof, the political emergence of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ in contemporary Western cultures takes place within the attempt to resist the Enlightenment belief in an orderable knowledge. Their emergence represents ‘a shift from singular to plural, from controllable meaning to multiple, entangled, diverse, but perhaps inseparable possibilities, from the possibility of

truth to the emergence of truths'.<sup>23</sup> *Le fate ignoranti* harnesses the potential of 'queer' to enlarge and complicate meanings beyond their normative boundaries. The first part of the film starkly contrasts Antonia's restricted hold on truth with the knowingness of Michele and his friends. This asymmetry between knowledge and ignorance is a structuring element of the narrative which serves to mark Antonia as the subject seeking a coherent perception of the world. From the security of her middle-class world, Antonia has ignored the complexities of the reality around her until Massimo's death. Her mother accuses her of never being very curious about life. Michele ridicules her for being blind even when the truth about Massimo's past lies so blatantly in front of her eyes when she visits him for the first time. It is this blindness as well as Antonia's presumption that reality allows a coherent and perfectly explicable truth which constitutes the primary target of Ozpetek's critique in the first part of the film. When Antonia visits Michele for the second time at the market she asserts that she wants to know all the truth only to receive from Michele a stern response which ironically suggests that the truth that she is looking for does not exist: 'ma quale verità?'

The main challenge for the female protagonist – and the world view that she represents – is to question her ability and will to learn about other people's lives outside the boundaries of her privileged world. During her first Sunday lunch at Michele's apartment, Antonia is drawn into a discussion concerning the extent to which one should always be truthful with other people and whether at times it may be acceptable to deceive our loved ones for their own sake. Clearly haunted by Massimo's absence, the sequence is a re-enactment of the many lunches that Antonia's husband used to have at this flat. In taking his usual place at the end of the table, hence identifying with his subject position, Antonia seeks to access the mysteries of her husband's secret life. The sequence makes explicit the dynamics of identification, desire and misrecognition that bring the two protagonists close to each other. As Michele's friends talk to Antonia, Ozpetek opens the cinematic gaze to welcome this eccentric queer community by means of a particular montage technique. The camera moves back and forth along the table showing each member of Michele's extended family contributing to the discussion. The sweeping camera movement and the frequent cuts from one character to another do not simply have the purpose of catching up with their chaotic vocal interventions. Moving along the table, the camera often fails to capture within the frame the character that is speaking at that moment. Through this montage technique, Ozpetek seems to invite us to consider the complex and multilayered nature of the queer world that Antonia has entered. As the camera cannot quite contain the queer voices which demand our attention, the object of the cinematic gaze appears as fragmented and not entirely graspable. This technique introduces us to the expansive and yet patchy knowledge that Antonia is now accessing. At the centre of the discussion is Mara's decision to go back to her native village in Calabria for her brother's wedding.

Mara is a male-to-female transsexual and nobody from her family has seen her since her recent sex change. What is obliquely suggested is that Mara's story is not that different from Massimo's. Rather like Massimo, Mara had to contemplate the decision of hiding a painful truth from her family. Drawn into the discussion by Michele's friends, Antonia's opinion is that one should always tell the truth. As Michele shares with her and his friends some of the 'truths' that Massimo had kept hidden from Antonia, the female protagonist has to appreciate that her personal investment in honesty does not protect her from some of its inevitably painful implications. Although she is the one who has to question herself and her own values most, Antonia also poses a challenge to the assumptions of the members of Michele's queer family. Antonia believes that offering your real self constitutes the act of true love. By contrast, Michele's queer family articulates a fear of rejection as an inevitable political experience. Their stand is that truth can be a dangerous choice, one that is often better avoided. Although the two sides are still antithetical to each other at this point of the story, Antonia's commitment to truth and the queer family's scepticism towards honesty are mutually challenging.

The differences between these two worlds are gradually drawn into a more complex network of social relations which reveal their contradictions. Ozpetek challenges the divide that separates Antonia from Michele – and therefore the gap between the heteronormative and the queer by encouraging further confrontation. If the film works towards a destabilization of Antonia's assumptions, Michele is not impervious to challenges either. At the end of the first Sunday lunch with Antonia, he defiantly toasts Massimo by announcing to his wife that he was one of their kind. Michele clearly thinks that he is the one who truly knew who Massimo was. After their last meeting at the market, however, Antonia returns to visit Michele at his flat in the attempt to understand more. In the kitchen, she asks him whether there were any other male lovers in Massimo's past. Michele confidently asserts that he was the first; actually, the only one, he points out. It was Massimo who had told him so. At this point, Antonia challenges him by asking: 'E a te non ha mentito mai?' Michele suddenly looks shocked. His dismay could be interpreted as ironic because of his presumptuous conviction that Antonia knows very little about life, and particularly about her husband Massimo. Antonia is here scoring points over Michele by shattering his belief that his relationship with Massimo was somehow truer. Michele has to appreciate that his understanding is perhaps as flawed as Antonia's. The reason for this is that his knowledge is similarly based on the limits and the opacities of a disclosure, Massimo's word. The film confirms an attitude of distrust towards the consistency of a revelation and the truth that it bears. Judith Butler points out some of the weaknesses of the disclosing practice and its claim to coherence with regard to the act of coming out publicly. Supposedly, disclosing one's sexual identity as gay is thought to determine more clearly what or who the subject is. Yet, Butler suggests how 'coming out' is not such a definite

gesture as we would like to think but only produces a new and different closet: ‘If I claim to be a lesbian, I “come out” only to produce a new and different “closet”. The “you” to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. Indeed, the locus of opacity has simply shifted: before, you did not know whether “I am” but now you do not know what that means, which is to say that the copula is empty, that it cannot be substituted for with a set of descriptions’.<sup>24</sup> In *Le fate ignoranti*, Ozpetek tries to bridge the gap that seemingly separates Antonia from Michele and his friends by forcing them to confront each other on common ground, that is, precisely on the impossible consistency of a disclosure. Michele is not simply challenged in his presumptions, but is undermined in his secure position of knowingness.

The revelation about the circumstances of the first meetings between Michele and Massimo establishes a turning point in the story. Massimo had bumped into Michele in a bookshop where both of them were looking for the same rare book of poems by the Turkish poet Hikmet. Michele clearly gives special significance to this encounter. He tells Antonia that he had never met anyone who loved his favourite poet as much as he did. What is suggested by Michele is that it was his common passion with Massimo for Hikmet that had marked the beginning of their love affair. Michele idealizes this episode as proof that his attachment to Massimo was substantiated by much stronger and more meaningful commonalities, such as their allegedly mutual love for poetry, than the ones granted by a middle-class marriage contract. Michele insists on pointing out that he was not Antonia’s rival, but that his relationship with Massimo belonged to a wholly different scheme of emotional parameters. But it soon becomes clear that Massimo has been lying to Michele. The former did not even know who Hikmet was. Antonia reveals that the book was in fact a present for her. When the flaws of Michele’s presumption are unveiled, however, it is Michele who has to re-consider what he really knew about Massimo. Michele’s hold on knowledge crumbles. Thus the film embraces queerness as a position of ambivalence and epistemological incoherence by which the sexual dissident may challenge the sense of security and consistency of the heteronormative but also some of his presumptions.

Structured around the figure of the triangle, this sequence is filmed outside on the terrace of Michele’s flat. Antonia and Michele are positioned next to a wall. For this sequence, Ozpetek utilises mainly two shots. The first one is a middle-distance shot from behind, focussing on Michele. We see his right-hand profile and the back of Antonia’s head (out of focus) on the right edge of the frame. The second one is a frontal middle-distance shot on Antonia’s face. Michele’s left-hand profile is in the foreground on the right edge of the frame and out of focus. The former shot has the purpose of drawing attention to Michele’s nostalgic expression and intermittent excitement as he recalls his first accidental meeting with Massimo. The latter, instead, registers Antonia’s increasing discomfort as she hears the details of

this story. It is a kind of de-centred reverse-shot sequence. Rather than insisting on the exchange of looks between the two interlocutors – as it would normally happen in a conventional reverse-shot sequence – this particular technique serves the purpose of re-directing their gazes towards an imaginary third point in space. Such an effect is also reinforced by the way both Michele and Antonia hardly ever look at each other. The third point in space is clearly Massimo. It is a triangular schematization of the gaze that finds substantiation in the diegetic development of the sequence. The triangle is here invoked as a figure that complicates the characters' knowledge and the fixity of their desires. Michele initially suggests that he was first drawn to Massimo because of their common interest in Hikmet. But when he finds out that it was Antonia who wanted his collection of poems, the privileged nature of this homosocial bond becomes suddenly questionable. The book, which up to this point is the link between Michele and Massimo, becomes instead the new privileged channel connecting Michele and Antonia. The film makes use of this narrative prop to insinuate gradually the possibility of romantic feelings between them. The revelation concerning the book also creates a sense of ambivalence about the kinds of desires and forms of identifications circulating within this triangle. Whilst Michele never stops expressing his erotic interest in men throughout the film, the possibility that he and Antonia may be destined to love each other becomes also plausible.

If the film encourages a reassessment of the characters' expectations and their blind reliance on their socially received values, it is another female character, Luisella, who has the task of challenging another assumption. Raising her placard which reads 'A chi la do stasera?', Luisella ironically asks whether her message will be judged as sufficiently political at the Pride parade. Luisella, who is straight, has embraced the dissident sexual politics of her friends. With the seemingly a-political placard that she willingly holds aloft, she is making a strong political gesture. Firstly, she is asserting her right to sexual pleasure against cultural dominant norms which make it inappropriate for a woman to claim control over her body. Secondly, she is embracing the idea that a political gesture can be voiced in ways other than the conventional political rhetoric. Standing next to another placard which reads 'Non ci avrete mai come volete voi', Luisella is applauded by everybody. Ozpetek is probably addressing one of the main sources of criticism surrounding LGBT political activism and more specifically the organization of Pride parades in Italy: the seemingly light-hearted character of these parades, the spectacularization of nakedness, the drag and the atmosphere of transgressive celebration. Through the character of Luisella, the ambivalence of a seemingly apolitical gesture is rehabilitated as a message of openness and tolerance. Derek Duncan rightly suggests that Ozpetek's social vision in the film is constructed upon openness and is concerned with developing the perception that life could in fact be otherwise.<sup>25</sup> This is not a question concerning exclusively dissident sexual

and gender identities, but a point which reaches the core of what queerness should be about: the disruption of monolithic regimes of knowledge, an insistence on the non-fixity of identities, and an opening of the epistemological spectrum in which categories and meanings are negotiated and re-deployed.

### **Subcultural positions and the mainstream**

*Le fate ignoranti* is a queer-themed film conceived for mainstream audiences. With the accessibility of its aesthetic, the typically melodramatic elements of the plot and the casting of Italian stars such as Margherita Buy and Stefano Accorsi, it is a film that aims at being popular by using clearly recognizable categories of identification for mainstream spectators. Ozpetek cast Accorsi less than two months after his huge success as lead in *L'ultimo bacio* (Gabriele Muccino, 2001) which was the most seen Italian film of the year. Accorsi's star persona as a new Italian sex symbol at the time of the release of *Le fate ignoranti* surely gave the film further mainstream appeal.

In line with its mainstream appeal, rather than telling the story from the point of view of the queer characters, *Le fate ignoranti* gives a privileged point of view to the female protagonist and to her heteronormative position. The articulation of the triangle within the story is inevitably affected by the conditions in which the film works to satisfy a wider audience. For this reason, the second part of the film concentrates on the increasing emotional involvement between Antonia and Michele. This heterocentric twist reaches its climax in the scene of the kiss between the two protagonists, which seems to be a manoeuvre by which mainstream audiences are allowed to re-enter a comfortable position of heteronormative safety. In this hypothesis, the film would be asserting a kind of epistemological coherence in which the triangle and the position of the straight woman normalize queerness by replacing it with a typical straight romance. However, despite its explicit mainstream thrust, *Le fate ignoranti* does not reject a parallel tendency to de-centre knowledge and to accommodate queer spectatorship. In the scene of the kiss, this decentring is mainly done through the manipulation of the shot leading to a reconstitution of the 'latent' queer triangle. Such a reconstitution takes place through the intrusion in the sequence of intermittent images of Massimo's face, replacing alternatively the faces of the two protagonists by means of very narrow close-ups. The effect is that we realize that Antonia and Michele are not truly attracted to each other, but to their lost object of love, Massimo. Both Michele and Antonia melancholically project their own desire for him onto each other. Such a sequence shows a way in which queerness does not get dispersed within the allegedly straight romantic scene, but re-emerges between the sutures of the sequence.

The most instructive example through which the film contrasts a radical position of queer dissidence against heteronormative knowledge appears in the sequence of the party, where Antonia catches sight of Michele kissing and fondling two other men. By means of a number of subjective point of view shots, the camera reveals Antonia's moral condemnation and increasing irritation. Her condemning gaze seemingly establishes a position for the viewer through which Michele's behaviour may be stigmatized. Indeed, it could be argued that her disapproving subject position seems to invite if not mirror the moralistic judgement of the average middle-class viewer who looks with disdain at this scene of homosexual promiscuity. Luca Prono has suggested that Antonia's point of view is a structuring element enabling the film to pander to the tastes of middle-class audiences ignorant of gay and lesbian life in order to reassure them of their 'difference' from queers.<sup>26</sup> In identifying Antonia as the major point of view of the story dictating the way in which audiences may relate to the queer theme, Prono seems to ignore the more complex structuring of the party sequence.

Ozpetek complicates this scene by showing Michele fully aware of Antonia's judgemental look. In feeling no shame for a type of sexual practice which may be considered as immoral by Antonia, but which does not appear condemnable to him, Michele defies Antonia's disapproving gaze by continuing to kiss the two men. By empowering Michele with a look which defiantly responds to Antonia's mesmerized expression at the party, Ozpetek does not seem to privilege her moralistic point of view, but opposes it to Michele's jouissance, his endorsement of alternative sexual morals and his different way of experiencing relationships and sex. Michele's erotic dissidence is shown here to be co-extensive with the surrounding atmosphere of cheerful enjoyment and liberating togetherness. Paradoxically, it is Antonia's moralistic response that is out of place in this context as suggested by her stiff dancing moves, her being overdressed for the occasion and her inability to enjoy herself.

The challenge to the bourgeois moralism embodied by Antonia is most strikingly articulated by the dissident triangle involving Michele with these two men which works as an alternative libidinal figure to the traditional triangle of queer obfuscation. A few sequences later, Ozpetek cuts to the three men having sex on Michele's bed in a scene that seems to suggest no shame, no embarrassment and no apology in such an erotic spectacle. Even the most serious attempt to make Michele feel guilty for his sexual adventures and for his betrayal of Massimo's memory, the book which he finds during the threesome, is doomed to fail. This book, a collection of Hikmet poems which had been left by Antonia before the party, seems to have a twofold function: firstly reminding Michele of his love for Massimo and secondly suggesting Antonia's emotional attachment to Michele. The book symbolically marks the contrast between the latent queer triangle involving Massimo, Michele and Antonia, with its potential for obfuscating queerness,

and a queerer triangle celebrating the libidinal openness and the pleasures of promiscuous gay sex. In leaving the book on the table and going back to bed with the other two men, Michele seems to shut the door on Antonia's bourgeois morals. It is in instances such as this, as Derek Duncan has aptly noted, that *Le fate ignoranti* seems to celebrate 'modes of socialization that break through patterns of behaviour based on the impenetrable dyad of the heterosexual couple and the family'.<sup>27</sup>

Retroactively, in the scene of the party, one may also notice that Antonia's moralistic standpoint together with the kind of bourgeois heterosexist spectatorship it accommodates is contrasted with a second example of queer defiance, the triangle between Riccardo, Luciano and a third man. Once again, Ozpetek gives the initial impression of enacting a typically mainstream moralistic handling of queer content. The focus on Luciano's uneasiness as his boyfriend flirts with another man prompts us to dwell on a number of assumptions about gay men's promiscuity and their inability to 'commit'. The initial handling of this scene suggests that queer life-styles can perhaps be sexually liberating but are not free of self-induced suffering. This scenario echoes with the words of Antonia who later says that Michele and his gay friends do not truly know what love is. A closer analysis of the scene shows however a particular kind of queer sensibility. Ozpetek cuts again on Luciano as his eyes gradually drift away from the corner where his boyfriend is situated. Still in a pensive mood, his expression gradually changes. He begins to smile as his eyes meet his boyfriend's. Riccardo looks at him with an intense expression which is loaded with a sense of complicity as well as cheekiness. The camera cuts back to Luciano who is now smiling more relaxingly as he shakes his head and looks back at Riccardo. The scene ultimately emphasizes the sense of playfulness surrounding the relationship between Riccardo and Luciano and their mutual trust. In the unvoiced ambivalence of these smiles, queerness is redeployed as an incoherent manifestation of pleasure and defiance against normative codes of behaviour. This particular kind of queerness implies a shift in our relation to knowledge through a narrative that does not legitimate only familial love and heteronormative monogamy, but removes such barriers to enable the emergence of alternative positions.

In freeing both the spectator and the queer characters from the constraints of unitary truth, the film concludes by reasserting ambivalence as a privileged narrative trope to foreground how different realities and perceptions of these realities may coexist and interpenetrate. At the end, we find out that Antonia is pregnant with Massimo's child. Yet, the film never makes clear why she leaves without disclosing her pregnancy, why she decides to leave alone rather than with Emir and ultimately what is the exact nature of her relation with Michele.<sup>28</sup> The very notion of ambivalence implies the possibility that knowledge may be co-opted by dominant epistemologies for the legitimization of their own narratives.

At the same time, ambivalence always contains the possibility that in fact ‘it’ could be otherwise, as *Le fate ignoranti* seems to show. Here, I am not arguing that there is something inherently queer about the notion of ambivalence, but that in this film, through ambivalence, queerness tends to appear as a mobilizing, disruptive force that complicates sexual knowledge and the spectators’ engagement with their own lives.

In the last sequence, Michele, alone, after his friends have left, drops a glass which does not break upon hitting the floor. Earlier on in the story, Serra, one of the members of Michele’s family, had declared that a broken glass is an incontrovertible sign of the final separation from the person that one loves. Antonia has left. Is this a sign that Antonia was not the love of Michele’s life and that she has left Michele for good? Perhaps the unbroken glass signifies that Antonia has not left for good and that she is Michele’s soul mate. It is equally possible that Antonia will come back but Michele does not really love her. Or maybe Serra’s knowledge is from the very start flawed. Different interpretations are plausible. This sense of openness requires an audience who may want to interpret the volatile meaning and the tenuous connections of certain events. The film ends on the image of the unbroken glass, Michele’s defiant smile and the uncertain future that awaits him. The ambivalence of this final shot is particularly meaningful in relation to what follows. In stretching the narrative beyond the conventional ending, the credit shots portraying the actors marching at the 2000 World Pride parade, give us a sense of the alternative possibilities that may lie ahead for Michele and, by extension, the queer subject. Full of pleasure and defiance, the jubilant scenes involving the actors at the march tell us of a different order in which networks of solidarity and social interaction flourish outside the boundaries of what is considered appropriate or legitimate, and the fantasy of a future of heteronormative happiness. The queer ending eventually disrupts the coherence of the world that Antonia is allowed to enter at the end of the story, suitably symbolized by the future birth of her child. Antonia presents an image of hope for the future, where family bonds are re-constituted. In one of the last scenes, we see Antonia finding in her handbag a necklace, a gift from her mother. Earlier on in the story, Antonia’s mother had refused to lend it to her daughter because, she said, it was a symbol of her own independence. Such refusal also symbolized the distance and the inability to communicate between mother and daughter. At the end of the film, this gift epitomizes their reunification. With her soon-to-be-born child and her mother, Antonia can re-enter her heterocentric family world. The queer ending opposes exactly this fantasy of futurity with the outrageous celebration of alternative spaces and modes of socialization. The final credit scenes are in this sense a blatant celebration of these alternative possibilities. As the melodrama turns into documentary footage of the World Pride parade, the

actors come out of the narrative to enter reality and push metaphorically the queer subject towards direct political action.

## Conclusion

I have argued that in *Le fate ignoranti* Massimo only exists as a heavy absence. Massimo is the missing apex that turns the heterosocial relation between the two rivals (Michele and Antonia) into the truly emotionally charged bond of the film. Paradoxically, however, this absence also enables the avowal of the queer world that Michele inhabits and the questioning of the normative regimes of knowledge that Antonia is made to stand for. Heterosociality and homosexual desire are here mutually intersecting whilst also being the conditions by which the film accommodates both (heterocentric) mainstream and queer spectatorships.

It is a compromise that, however, carries certain limitations. In *Between Men*, Sedgwick argues that, when involving two men and a woman, the erotic triangle reveals an undeniable power asymmetry between the genders. It is usually women who are treated as marginalized subsets rather than as equal alternatives to men and exist as exchangeable property to consolidate channels of male homosocial alliance.<sup>29</sup> This is an asymmetry that is ambivalently present in *Le fate ignoranti*, where the female protagonist violates the heterosexual economy to which she has been confined by using her dead husband as a channel to enter the world of unrestrained sexual pleasures enjoyed by Massimo and Michele.<sup>30</sup> In Ozpetek's films, women tend to have a central role in freeing hidden queer knowledges and it is the act of looking that is most closely associated with this function. In Ozpetek's first film *Il Bagno turco* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 1997), the protagonist's aunt, Madame, furtively spies on men's private erotic games in the *hamam*, a 'pleasure' that is later shared by the protagonist's wife as she catches sight of her husband and another young man making love in the same bathhouse. In *La finestra di fronte* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2003), it is Giovanna's insistent and repeated look towards a facing window that metonymically stands for her uncovering of a repressed story of homosexual love between two Jewish lovers at the end of WW2. In *Le fate ignoranti* it is by looking behind a painting that Antonia discovers the hidden message that will lead to Michele. Even though at the beginning of the film Ozpetek exploits her mode of vision to dramatize a particularly heteronormative world view, later on in the story, it is precisely her gaze that is especially conducive to the visualization of queer desire (e.g. when she catches sight of Michele cruising another man at the supermarket or in the sequence of the night club which I have analyzed above).

The downside of this is that despite the expanding erotic and cognitive possibilities that her meeting with Michele unearths, what Antonia is ever allowed to experience is simply the pleasure of looking. Antonia's position remains

external to the sexual and emotional openness that is celebrated by the film. In *Le fate ignoranti*, women, clearly, do not get as much fun as the men. This is a point that seems partly confirmed by the way Luisella and Serra distance themselves from the unrestrained sexual activity of their male friends when they proclaim their firm belief in true romantic love. It is the romantic heterosexual love that, we are often encouraged to think, could flourish between Michele and Antonia. It should be clear by now that a kind of queer jouissance runs against these mainstream romantic pleasures throughout the whole film and it is precisely the structural ambivalence of the erotic triangle that allows these pleasures to co-exist. Although mutually intersecting, queer and heteronormative positions are in the film rigidly gendered. The difference of power between men and women occurs most strikingly in the form of a different access to sexual pleasure. It is a problem that seems to characterize much of recent Italian cinema made by male directors such as Ozpetek. As new cinematic subjects and previously marginalized issues become increasingly visible, one of the challenges awaiting scholarship on contemporary Italian cinema may be how to assess and problematise the limits and absences of this inclusiveness.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> LGBT is an abbreviation that is commonly used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. In this article, I will be using 'queer' as an umbrella term encompassing all these identities and as a broad conceptual category to define forms of resistance against normative gender and sexual codes. I should also clarify my use of the expression 'mainstream success': for the purposes of this article I mean by this the attaining of a position in top-ten films at the box office.

<sup>2</sup> This was the inaugural World Pride and was organized to promote queer issues on a world-wide scale. National and local Pride parades have existed around the world since the late 1960s. During the last forty years, they have been important platforms for promoting affirmative queer politics.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Luongo, 'Rome's World Pride: Making the Eternal City an International Gay Tourism Destination', *GLQ*, 8 (2002), 167-81 (p. 168).

<sup>4</sup> Luongo, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> [Anonymous], 'Il giornale dello spettacolo', *Borsa Film*, 21 (2001), 1-81 (p. 70).

<sup>6</sup> Derek Duncan appears particularly pessimistic about the impact of Dolce and Gabbana's coming out on the LGBT community in Italy. See Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-15.

<sup>7</sup> Ozpetek has been particularly vocal in the public debate about the legalization of civil partnerships since 2007. See for example Alberto Dentice, 'Harem Ozpetek: colloquio con Ferzan Ozpetek', *L'Espresso*, 9 February 2007, pp. 15-20 (p. 18).

<sup>8</sup> Interviewed by *Gay.it*, Ozpetek asserted: 'non ho voluto comunque fare un film sui gay - in *Le fate ignoranti* c'è anche uno spezzone girato al Gay pride di Roma - ma solo sul mio mondo, sulla mia realtà di oggi'. [Anonymous], 'Accorsi gay e la borghese Buy per l'ultimo film di Ozpetek', *Gay.it*, 3 August 2000 <<http://gaynews.it/view.php?ID=855>> [accessed 3 January 2008].

<sup>9</sup> See for example D.A. Miller, 'On the Universality of Brokeback', *Film Quarterly*, 60: 3 (2006), 50-60.

<sup>10</sup> With the use of the inverted commas, I intend to refer to the derogatory meaning of 'queer'.

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the production context see Gabriele Marcello, *Ferzan Ozpetek* (Genoa: Le Mani, 2009), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Gary Kramer, *Independent Queer Cinema: Review and Interviews* (London: Southern Tiber Editions, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Marcello, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Luca Prono, 'Le fate ignoranti', *Bright Lights Film Online Journal*, 34 (2001) <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/34/ignorantfairies.html> > [accessed 22 May 2005].

<sup>15</sup> Paul Julian Smith, 'Le fate ignoranti', *Sight and Sound*, 13: 6 (2003), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pp. 1-66.

<sup>19</sup> A useful scholarly contribution to approach the queer triangle in films is Greg Forster, 'Going straight with *Gilda*', *Qui Parle*, 4: 2 (1991), 8-22. The theoretical model of the triangle has been productively used also by William Van Watson in his analysis of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943). Van Watson highlights the displacement of the illicit homosexual love between the protagonist Gino and Io Spagnolo into the more acceptable adulterous relationship between Gino and the female protagonist Giovanna: William Van Watson, 'Luchino Visconti's (Homosexual) *Ossessione*', in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema 1922-1943*, ed. by Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 172-93.

<sup>20</sup> By 'heterocentric', I mean an attitude that presumes homosexual sexual practice to be exceptional and heterosexuality to be standard sexual behaviour.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'heteronormativity' was first coined by Michael Warner. Warner uses it with regard to the totalizing view that sees heterosexuality as 'the norm' and the basic principle of social union. Michael Warner, 'Introduction', in *Fear of Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), pp. vii-xxxi.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Roof, 'Postmodernism', in *Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. by Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 176-85 (p. 178).

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale and David Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307-20 (p. 310).

<sup>24</sup> Derek Duncan, 'Stairways to Heaven: Ferzan Ozpetek and the revision of Italy', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 3: 2 (2005), 101-13 (p. 111).

<sup>25</sup> Prono, 'Le fate ignoranti'.

<sup>26</sup> Duncan, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> Emir is Serra's brother. Throughout the film, he shows clear erotic interest in Antonia. Near the end, we learn that he has invited her to go with him on a road trip to Amsterdam.

<sup>28</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, pp. 22-27.

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of the relation between female gaze and bisexuality in Ozpetek's films see Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 'Bisexual games and emotional sustainability in Ferzan Ozpetek's queer films', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 2: 3 (2004), 163-74 (pp.169-70).

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