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Representing Women's Displacement from the Margins in Liberal Italy: Vittorio Corcos's *Annunciazione* (1904) and *Sogni* (1896)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the intersections between recently politically emancipated Jewish painter Corcos and his representations of women in Liberal Italy in the paintings *Annunciazione* (1904) and *Sogni* (1896). In their subalternity, both Corcos and women inhabited a space of 'in-betweenness'. Corcos lived and worked 'in-between' Catholicism and Judaism, as the painting *Annunciazione* demonstrates. Women in Liberal Italy lived 'in-between' the centre of the nation, as mothers of its children, and at the margins of it as individuals without political agency. Thus, the article highlights how Corcos's diasporic identity is not dissimilar from that of women's political condition as exiles in their own nation, as theorised by Friedrich Hegel. However, by transgressing patriarchal social

conventions, tending to discipline women's bodies in the public space, the painting *Sogni* points to a possible political agency that women might claim for themselves, precisely through the 'impropriety' of the woman's bodily posture.

Keywords

Intersectionality; Jews' emancipation; cultural transgression; 'New Woman' diasporic identity; 'third space'

Introduction

This article focuses on modernist painter Vittorio Matteo Corcos whose portraits of fascinating women gained him the reputation and the sobriquet of 'peintre des jolies femmes [painter of pretty women]'. [1] The Palazzo Zabarella exhibit (2014) catalogue, 'Corcos: Sogni della Belle Epoque', rightly links Corcos's art to the Belle Epoque. The Belle Epoque was a period of great tensions between the promise of progress and Liberalism's conservative and intolerant tendencies. [2] Women and Jews were among the victims of Liberal Europe's conservatism. Antisemitism was on the rise in Russia, Eastern Europe, Germany, Austria, and France, as the Dreyfus affair reminds us. [3] Women had little liberty outside of their homes and, even inside their homes, they were often watched, guarded, mistrusted, and deprived of free choice. They were constantly subjected to a vile oppression that questioned their status as rational beings. [4] Tired of their subordinate political and social position, women started organising in social movements – like the 'New Woman' – to condemn Liberalism's sexual double standard, demanding women's right to education, employment, and full citizenship. Hence Modernity and its fast-changing world gave women the audacity to dream bigger both in the political and economic arenas: [5]

Representing '*I sogni della Belle Epoque*,' Corcos certainly acquired considerable fame. He painted beautiful and elegant women 'dallo sguardo fisso, senza alcuna partecipazione emotiva, e con l'esternazione di un'imperturbabile femminilità [...] universale.' [6] In a 1906 article, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* introduces Corcos as 'L'artista che unisce il fascino italiano all'eleganza parigina [...] Le sue belle fanciulle, le sue fulgide dame, le sue donne ridenti sono ormai tante che possono popolare un olimpo.' [7] Besides fame, his portraits brought him wealth, as he painted for the prominent art merchant Adolphe Goupil, producing up to twelve paintings a year. [8]

Despite his fame and wealth, Corcos lamented the superficiality of his art that 'per un artista vero di cuore non può soddisfare l'animo'. [9] He even wrote to his friend and art merchant Theo Van Gogh about his uneasiness about being 'un pauvre poacher condamné a faire un art contraire à mes sentiments, un art fardé et poudré que je n'aime pas, et que je devrai faire Dieu sait pour combien de temps encore ! [a poor poacher condemned to make art contrary to my beliefs, a painted and powdered art that I do not like, and that I will have to make for God knows how much longer]'. [10] In this article, I want to analyse two of Corcos's artworks to present an interpretation that goes beyond the boundaries of his artistic role as the 'peintre des jolies femmes'. [11] To do so, I intend to analyse Corcos's *Annunciazione* (1904) [12] and *Sogni* (1896). [13]

Theoretical Frame

Because of the unconventionality of the women's poses, these two paintings are the most representative of my discourse on Corcos's art. By interpreting *Annunciazione*, I want to highlight Corcos's 'in-between' position as a recent-politically emancipated Jewish painter who converted to Catholicism, working mostly in a Catholic environment. With *Sogni*, I will focus on the woman's pose representing the 'in-between' position of women in Liberal Italy: at the nation's margins as women and at the centre as mothers of the nation's citizens. To highlight the 'in-between' position of the Jews and women in Giolitti's Italy, I will make use of the lens of intersectionality.

Intersectionality as a theoretical frame is based on the notion that each individual is marked by different social structures; thus, it is a useful concept to describe the interaction between two systems of oppression.[14] More generally, intersectionality is a form of relationship between social structures, specifically one in which social structures combine to create social categories to which certain experiences and forms of oppression are unique. As a concept, intersectionality is opposed to monism, the idea that each category of social relations (gender, race, class) can be adequately analysed or understood separately from each other.[15]

Although Laurel Veldon refers specifically to the axes of gender, race, and class, I want to expand her theoretical frame to explore the gendered axis of a male artist and his representation of his female models. I am particularly interested in analysing the intersectional relationship between Corcos as a Jewish painter and his presentation of women in light of Michel Foucault's argument that states that where there is power there is always resistance, which is never outside of power but rather works within it. Moreover, Foucault denies that there is 'one single locus or Great Refusal'.[16] Rather, resistance, like power, works through a multiplicity of points creating a plurality of resistances, producing divisions and cleavages not only within a society but also even in individuals themselves. The latter are then re-moulded and re-created into new agents. Therefore, not only is hegemony never monolithic, but the individual's agency and resistance to oppression are also always shifting, adapting, and resisting.[17]

Jews' Emancipation in Italy

To better analyse Corcos's images as they fracture, creating shifting meanings that adapt and resist normative discourses, we need to contextualise his art within the Italian Jews' emancipation movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Corcos was born in Livorno in 1859, the year The Grand Duke of Tuscany ceded his state to the Savoy King Vittorio Emanuel II.[18] His father and former king, Carlo Alberto, had signed the Edict of Emancipation extending civil rights to the Jews in 1848.[19] Hence Corcos belongs to the first generation of Italian emancipated Jews. Jewish emancipation came into existence both as a consequence and a condition of Italy's *Risorgimento* that was ultimately premised on a national unification through regeneration of its citizens for the creation of a new society.[20]

Massimo D'Azeglio's publication *Dell'emancipazione civile degli israeliti* (1847) was instrumental in creating a national awareness about the social injustices perpetrated against the Italian Jews throughout the centuries as well as the necessity to incorporate them within the nation. In his essay, D'Azeglio expressly calls on Pius IX to be the Pope 'che consacra il principio atto più d'ogni altro a

mantenere la concordia e la pace tra gli uomini, e condurre al trionfo della verità: il principio della tolleranza'.[21] At the same time, he expects his compatriots to live up to their duty of Christian charity, 'Ognuno di noi, dunque, tenda la mano ai nostri fratelli israeliti: li ristori de' dolori, dei danni, dei danni degli ingiusti scherni che fecero lor soffrire non dirò i cristiani (chè un tal nome non si conviene a chi rinnega o falsa il sommo tra precetti di Cristo, la Carità), ma coloro che avevano, e, pel fatto delle riferite persecuzioni, non meritavano il titolo di Cristiani.[22]

Furthermore, D'Azeglio links Italians' regeneration with that of the Jews: 'Ma se negheremo agli altri quella giustizia che per noi stessi invochiamo, questa potenza verrà indebolita, quel santo grido di rigenerazione non suonerà verità, giustizia per tutti; ma privilegio, egoismo e privato interesse'.[23] The idea of 'giustizia per tutti' became the *trait d'union* between the two peoples fighting together for their right to possess a fatherland. Ultimately, though, the emancipation of the Jews was understood and recognised on the notion that eventually Jews would assimilate into Italian culture and convert to Christianity.[24]

As for the Italian Jews, the *Risorgimento* represented a historical moment when Italians' efforts to create their nation overlapped with their own, as they both were a people without a land. Italian Jews participated in several of the *Risorgimento* battles hoping to establish a liberal state that would recognise the division between state and religion.[25] However, the Jews' civil emancipation resulted in their cultural assimilation into Italy's mainstream society. This new cultural phenomenon created tensions within the Jewish communities that searched for an equilibrium between cultural integration in public national life and Jewish idiosyncrasies in private religious life. Ultimately, cultural assimilation led some Jews to convert to Catholicism, as Italian Gentiles had predicted.[26]

Corcos's Sacred Art: *Annunciazione* (1904)

Corcos embodies the Italian–Jewish tensions of the post-emancipation period, when Jews received universal civil rights.[27] Like many Jews of his time, he was named after the first Italian King Vittorio Emanuele II, and in 1887 he was baptised following his marriage to Emma Ciabatti.[28] After his conversion, he wanted to engage artistically with sacred art subjects alongside his production of elegant portraits, as the intense exchange of letters between Corcos's wife Emma and the poet Giovanni Pascoli testifies.[29] The tension between these two different artistic endeavours is present in the painting *Annunciazione* (1904) (Figure 1). In the painting, a young woman is leaning against a porch wall. The halo on her head marks her as the Virgin Mary; yet she is wearing white clothes, not a colour conventionally associated with her. Although white is the colour of purity and innocence, the Virgin Mary is traditionally dressed in blue and scarlet because of their symbolic significance.



Figure 1. Vittorio Corcos, *Annunciazione*, 1904. Fiesole, Convento di San Francesco.

The colour blue has deep biblical roots in the Old Testament, acquiring many doctrinal meanings. In the Numbers 15. 38–39, the colour *tekheleth* (blue-violet) represents the people of Israel alongside its priestly role, 'Speak to the people of Israel and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue'.^[30] Thus, the Virgin Mary wearing blue signifies both continuity with the Jewish tradition and her priestly role within that tradition, as she delivered the Messiah. More important for my discussion is the use of the colour *tekheleth* and scarlet regarding the tent housing the ark of the covenant between God and Israel, as reported in Numbers 4. 6–8: 'In breaking camp, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain and cover the ark of the commandments with it. Over these, they shall put a cover of tahash skin, and on top of these spread a blue cloth [...] Over these, they shall spread a scarlet cloth'. Similarly, blue and scarlet clothes are spread over Mary's womb hosting Jesus, the ark of the new covenant between God and His people, hence the symbolic importance of these two colours in depicting the Virgin.

Corcos's *Annunciazione*, however, disavows this pictorial tradition and its symbolism, which started in the early Middle Ages, as his Madonna is dressed all in white. Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood founder, Gabriel Dante Rossetti painted a Virgin Mary in white in 1850 in *Ecce Ancilla domini*.^[31] However, Rossetti places a blue cloth behind her. In contrast, there is no blue in Corcos's painting. In Corcos's *Il fantasma e il fiore*, Ilariad Taddei points to Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret's *La Vierge à la treille*^[32] (Figure 2) as a 'modello al quale [Corcos] si richiama nel proprio dipinto',^[33] as she too is dressed completely in white.^[34] However, Taddei underlines the significant difference between the two paintings that only apparently portray Mary in a similar way, 'molto simile è dunque l'ambientazione, diverso però il sentimento'.^[35] Ultimately, even Taddei highlights Corcos's Mary's modernity as 'il sentimento diverso', as she comments on her posing, 'in modo disinvolto [...] e questo atteggiamento insieme con l'abito, che le modella il corpo, [la] rendono moderna e sensuale'.^[36] Her

modern pose contrasts with that of Dagnan-Bouveret's *La Vierge à la treille* who, on the contrary, Corcos described as 'Candidamente serena e così modesta in una soave espressione di maternità infantile'.[37]

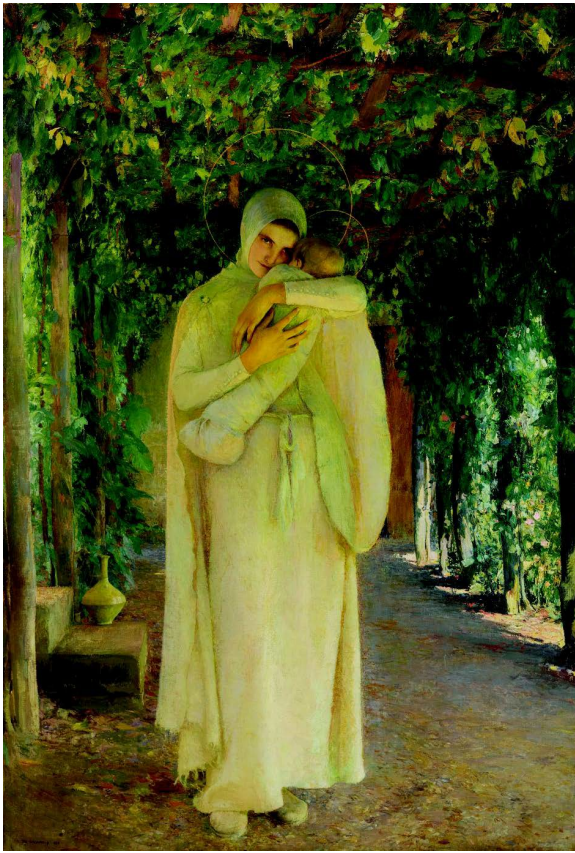


Figure 2. Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, *La Vierge à la treille*, 1888. Private collection.

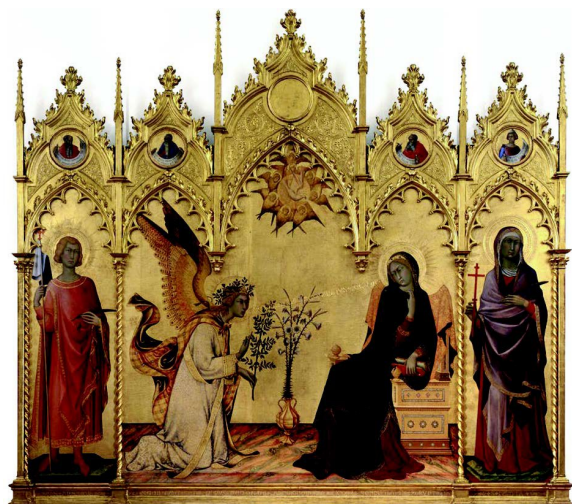


Figure 3. Simone Martini, *Annunciazione con Santa Margherita e Sant'Ansano*, 1333. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

As Taddei notices, Corcos's Mary's clothes are not just completely white, but they are also tight around her body designing a slender silhouette. Her figure is more reminiscent of women's fashion at the turn

of the twentieth century than of the Virgin's traditional image, which lacks any corporality. At the turn of the twentieth century, as the 'New Women' were demanding better education and job opportunities, it became necessary for them to wear simpler and more streamlined clothing,[38] and white was their favourite colour.[39]

Mary's clothing undoubtedly frames her as the 'New Woman', fighting for her liberation in the social and professional realms. Significantly, Corcos painted *Annunciazione* in 1904. This is the year when socialist and feminist activists Emilia Mariani, Linda Malnati, and Carlotta Clerici assured a decisive victory in one of the most arduous and long fought battles: equality of pay for elementary school teachers. This victory was particularly significant for two reasons. Firstly, elementary teaching was one of the very few professions accessible to women, as it did not require a university degree.[40] Secondly, a low salary was a guarantee against women's independence as their main roles were still those of wives and mothers. Being the only breadwinners allowed men to exercise total power over their wives and children to the benefit of Liberal Italy's patriarchy.[41] Moreover, in 1904, Parliament member Roberto Mirabelli proposed to extend the right to vote to women. Although the proposal did not pass, it gave a new impetus to the Italian suffragette movement that continued in the following years. In other words, 1904 was a year fraught with significant women's social demands as they were asking for a more equal participation in national life.[42]

Corcos's representation of the 'New Woman' should not surprise us as already eight years before, in his painting *Sogni* (1896), he had represented what art critics and historians have hailed as the 'modern woman'. I analyse the painting in detail below; here it suffices to establish that 'modern' is characterised by change, as Charles Baudelaire reminds us.[43] However, change requires the individual's agency, which is the main characteristic of modernity. The individual's agency in the field of economics led to the industrial revolution and capitalism, and in that of politics, led to the end of monarchs' absolute power. With the establishment of the liberal states, the nation's hegemonic groups acquired political agency.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, although women did not yet enjoy political agency, they inhabited 'a world in which the obstacles to self-realization are far less clearly demarcated, in which women appear to enjoy greater freedom of choice at every level – economic, social, sexual'.[44] My argument is that in the *Annunciazione* Mary's modernity reflects the changes that were taking place in the 'western' world. Slowly but surely, these changes were also affecting women, and Corcos had already captured this modern climate in his painting *Sogni* in 1896.

The image of the 'New Woman' is underlined not only by the Virgin's clothing but also by her posture in the traditional *portico* that breaks away from pictorial conventions. Like in many Renaissance and Medieval Annunciations, Corcos's Virgin is framed within the arch of a *portico*. In Christian iconography, Mary's immaculate conception is represented by the passage of the Holy Spirit through an arch acting as a stand-in for its entrance into Mary herself.[45] In the Gospel of Luke 1. 35, the Angel Gabriel proclaims precisely that 'entrance': 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'. Unlike other *Annunciazioni*, though, two cement blocks positioned one in front of the other seem to obstruct the *portico*'s arch and, thus, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, while Mary is traditionally positioned inside the *portico*, Corcos's Virgin is on the *portico*'s threshold, resting one knee on one of the cement blocks. Ilaria Taddei has already

underlined the peculiarity of the Virgin's posture, 'mollemente appoggiata in modo disinvolto sul muricciolo è una vergine che suscita meditazioni spirituali con qualche imbarazzo'.[46] What is noteworthy is not just Mary's sensuality but also her body's outward position within the portico's arch, projecting her more towards the outside public space than the private one. Here, it is important to underline that public space is where power resides.

While Mary is resting her right knee on the right block, she is staring down at the other block on top of which there is an amphora. An amphora is present in many Annunciations like, for instance, those by Leonardo da Vinci, Simone Martini (Figure 3), and Filippo Lippi,[47] to cite a few.



Figure 4. Vittorio Corcos, *Sogni*, 1896. Rome, Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna.

I contend that the symbolic meaning of the amphora in the Annunciation scene resides in Job 32. 19, where Elihu rebukes Job's three friends, 'For I am full of matters to utter; the spirit within me compels me. Like a new wineskin with wine under pressure, my bosom is ready to burst'. In the image, the Spirit compels Elihu to utter words that will burst out of his bosom like wine under pressure bursts out of a wineskin. Contrary to Palestine, where wine was usually preserved in wineskins, in the Italian Peninsula amphoras were used. Hence, symbolically, the amphora in the Annunciation paintings represents the Spirit's words bursting out to 'come upon' the Virgin Mary underlining God's inscrutable plans, like in Job's case.

Whereas traditionally the amphora is positioned near Mary, in Corcos's painting there is a spatial hiatus between Mary and the amphora. Since the amphora is a receptacle of the Holy Spirit's word incarnating in Mary, the hiatus becomes also temporal as words travel through space and time, thus disavowing the immediacy of God's proclamation. The image of the angel still moving towards the Virgin further disrupts *Kairos*, God's appointed time, as it indicates that the annunciation of the Messiah's birth has still to come. The spatial and temporal hiatus between Mary and the angel is even wider than the one between Mary and the amphora.

The tension in this painting is quite palpable. On the one hand, the painting's title and subject matter refer to sacred art: The Virgin Mary is easily recognised as such by the halo over her head and the presence of the angel. On the other hand, though, a close reading of the pictorial text questions the orthodoxy of the sacred images, even allowing a reading that unveils the social and professional struggles of 'The New Women' in Liberal Italy. As Taddei observes, in Corcos's art 'il sacro e il profano si confondono [...] Dunque termini, immagini legati alla sfera del sacro, attribuiti, trasferiti a situazioni completamente profane'.[48]

Corcos's Christian sacred art, which creates points of resistance along with the ethnicity/race and gender axes of oppression, speaks to Foucault's notion that any hegemonic discourse generates resistance within itself. Normative discourse and resistance to it work together in Corcos's art, fracturing the orthodoxy of the images' sacredness. His *Annunciazione* occupies the in-between space of the two poles: Judaism and Christianity during the Jews' post-emancipation period in Italy. The in-between space is what Homi Bhabha defines as 'the third space'. This is a site where two distinctive cultures come together, creating a hybrid one with its own structure and authority that denies any original essentialism. It is within 'the third space' that new cultural and political initiatives can arise and be negotiated, giving way to new meaning and representations of reality that cannot be understood through already-existing paradigms.[49]

Moreover, Bhabha refers to the 'translational transnational' as the process and condition of non-Western people's migrancy into Western national structures, which they displace, and by which they are displaced.[50] Corcos's Jewish diasporic identity was displaced by Italy's hegemonic Catholic culture which, then, his art displaces. Living in 'the third space' and in a 'translational transnational' condition, Corcos's position is similar to that of women living within Liberal Italy's patriarchy. Women too were displaced to the margins of the nation, which is precisely the site where Corcos painted *Sogni*.

Representing the Modern Woman: *Sogni* (1896)

Before analysing how *Sogni* displaces Liberal Italy's patriarchy – by laying bare the play between the painter's diasporic identity and his representation of women as exiled subjects – we need to examine women's status as exiles within modern civil society and state.

According to G. W. F. Hegel – one of the first modern philosophers to theorise on the state, its institutions, and civil society – women 'are incapable to be incorporated into the state'[51] due to their natural lack of those attributes and capacities deemed essential to constitute subjectivity. Consequently, Hegel construed women as natural social and political exiles, as they 'are the everlasting irony in the life of the community',[52] that is of the nation. As social and political exiles, women's position within the nation was highly ambiguous. On the one hand, lacking political subjectivity, they were relegated to 'the margins of the polity'. On the other hand, though, as 'mothers of the nation', they were central to the very idea of it, and their presence was reaffirmed 'in nationalist rhetoric where the nation itself [was] represented as a woman to be protected'.[53]

Women, just like Italian Jews, occupied the in-between space of the nation: the heart of the nation, as mothers, and the margins of the nation, as political subjects. Corcos's *Sogni* (Figure 4) precisely portrays women's in-betweenness: between the centre of the nation as a woman/mother and the

margins of the nation as a political subject. In this third-space, meaning must be negotiated because meaning itself is constructed through and within the tension of the two poles. In the painting *Sogni*, Taddei heralds the woman sitting on the bench as the modern woman 'consapevole della propria bellezza, irrequieta e volitiva, libera nelle proprie scelte a volte anche spregiudicate, arguta fino a diventare canzonatoria. Una femminilità di prorompente vitalità che richiedeva di vivere appieno le proprie travolgenti passioni'.[54] Fernando Mazzocca also stresses her modernity: 'questo dipinto modernissimo rimane tra le immagini più emblematiche della donna emancipata e tormentata, protagonista della *Belle Époque*'.[55]



Figure 5. James Tissot, *Jeune femme en bateau*, 1870. Private collection.

Both Taddei's and Mazzocca's descriptions of the liberated woman are based on her physical, sensual, and emotional attributes. She is aware of her beauty which she does not hesitate to use to get what she wants, even if it may not be 'proper,' leading her to live out her overwhelming and disorderly passions. At the turn of the twentieth century, these attributes created and fuelled the myth of the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*, which tickled men's erotic fantasies.[56] Many scholars rightly argue that the myth of the *femme fatale* represented a form of resistance to patriarchy as 'women displayed a self-transforming power surging beneath apparent victimization'.[57] However, this kind of women's liberation, based on their erotic appeal and their calculated use of it, was still inscribed only within their ability to arouse sexual desires for their own profit. More to the point, sensual, sexual, and physical characteristics and desires are not deemed as attributes that create political subjectivity. Thus, this liberation was not threatening to men.

Political Subjectivity

How is political subjectivity acquired, though? To answer this question, I propose to look at Hegel's notion of subjectivity. This is an essential part of his philosophy of right that defines, among other things, the relation between the individual and the polity and, thus, his political subjectivity. According to Hegel, political subjectivity is the quintessence of the modern self who thinks of himself as having certain rights and a conscience with which he relates to society and the polity. In other words, political subjectivity characterises the type of being who acts freely and in conformity with ethical norms and, at the same time, has the power to undermine the authority of such ethical norms.[58]

The modern self who lives in a civil society is equipped with both subjective freedom and will. The subjective will is what allows the individual to have insights into what is held to be good or true, as

Hegel recognises the need to have an insight into the rationality of the laws and institutions of modern ethical life. Both subjective freedom and subjective will rely on subjective reflection involving both oneself and one's social order and it is made possible by the subjectivity of the self-certain 'I' = 'I'. This means that the 'I' is conscious of being that which unifies all such determinate features within itself so that the 'I' can conceive itself in abstraction and independence from its determinations.[59] For Hegel, a reflective attitude is at the heart of any philosophical thought that critically examines the claim to the validity of what is conceived to be ethically right or wrong according to those customs and traditions that make up the social order.[60]

Ultimately, political subjectivity is determined by the ability to reflect on the structure of the social order that has been given to us through customs, traditions, laws, and institutions to judge its ethical claims. The ability to reflect, though, is an intellectual ability, and intellectuality was thought of as a masculine prerogative.[61] By supposedly lacking intellectuality, women lacked the ability to judge the ethical claims of the structure of the social order they inhabited. Hence, they lacked political subjectivity.

Disrupting Liberal Italy's Normative Discourse

However, *Sogni* disrupts the social order of the patriarchal structure that confines women while denying them political subjectivity. As a matter of fact, the woman's pose was so indecorous for that time that it created a scandal at the 1896 Florence exhibit.[62] The woman is sitting on a bench in a public space, with her hair unrestrained by any hat. On the bench, we see her straw hat, her three piled-up Flammarion novels, a dying rose, whose petals are falling on the ground, and a closed parasol. She sits with her legs crossed, boldly staring back at her viewer, while her fist firmly supports her head.

Traditionally in portraits of women with heads resting on their hands, the head rests either on the wrist or on the hand, giving the woman a certain softly coquettish air, as we can see in James Tissot's *Jeune femme en bateau* (1870) (Figure 5)[63] and William Bouguereau's *Chanson de Printemps* (1889) (Figure 6).[64] In contrast, in *Sogni* the woman is resting her head on her fist disavowing any flirtatious intent.



Figure 6. William Bouguereau, *Chanson de Printemps*, 1889. Private collection.

Moreover, the woman's head is perfectly aligned with her fist and crossed leg which is the site of the transgression of patriarchy's norms. As reported in *The Ladies' Handbook of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (1860), women's posture in public was highly regulated: 'When seated, she ought neither to cross her legs nor take a vulgar attitude [...] what is to be avoided [...] is an unquieted, bold and imperious air [...] Her face should breathe hope, gentleness, and satisfaction [...] the timid, retreating step, the downcast eye'.^[65] *Sogni* seems to challenge that structure imposed on women by nineteenth-century notions of etiquette and politeness. Not only are the woman's legs crossed, but there is nothing timid in her facial expression which is quite bold and imperious. Her boldness and haughtiness are framed in her gaze and her eyes that refuse to be downcast.

Emily Braun commented on the daring gaze of the model of the painting, Elena Vecchi, with the following words: '*Sogni* belongs to a long line of impressionist images of women reading, but the model is not interrupted with a book in hand or disturbed in a moment of reverie [...] Vecchi gazes provocatively at the viewer'.^[66] Braun's quotation is quite dense in its multiple meanings and, thus, interpretations. I will unpack it by first writing about the painting title and then, about Vecchi's gaze. Although Braun rightly writes that 'the model is not interrupted [...] in a moment of reverie', the painting's title is precisely *Sogni*, that is reverie. Nineteenth-century paintings often represent women in the state of reverie, suspending any physical and mental activity to pay attention to their subconscious solicitations. Reverie, thus, implies a certain degree of laziness; hence women were portrayed in that pose much more frequently than men. Men's subjectivity was premised, on the

contrary, on the rational, self-aware mind and active body to be able to produce wealth for themselves, their family, and their nation.

However, Vecchi is not daydreaming. In a state of reverie, the gaze is lost and becomes a simple stare. As Taddei observes, Corcos's women's gazes are 'sguardi intensi a far intuire una vita interiore ricca, complessa e appassionata'. [67] Vecchi looks back at her viewers intensely, which is not something that is done in a state of reverie. Thus, her dreams are of a different kind. Her dreams are to be understood according to the Treccani's definition as 'Immaginazione vana, fantastica, cose irrealizzabili, con il significato di ideale non realizzato o non realizzabile, talora determinato storicamente'. [68] As Mazzocca rightly reports, *Sogni* represents 'I sogni e le sconfitte delle donne moderne'. [69] Hence, Vecchi might be dreaming of an ideal that has not yet come to fruition because of historical reasons. In this interpretation, Vecchi's dreams are hopes for the realisation of a fantastic endeavour that will break away from history's confining limits for women.

Hence, *Sogni* is already carrying out that kind of fantastic endeavour by creating a stark contrast between the representation of Vecchi's gaze and that of other women portrayed in impressionist paintings. When depicted alone in public spaces, these women are often reading a book, which is a necessary *escamotage* since their gaze needs restraining. Women portrayed gazing back at the viewer have not been common in the history of western art. Gazing has been men's prerogative, as they have had the power to control the world around them, women included. Writing about the male gaze, John Berger argues, 'To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space'. [70] According to Berger, men's tutelage meant that women were always under men's gaze and learned to behave accordingly, 'A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself [...] Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at'. [71] Men imposed their gaze on women to better control them and the space they live in. This form of control becomes the paradigm by which both women value themselves and men seem themselves empowered and aggrandised.

Thus, books in women's hands in public spaces work as a screen to prevent them from possessing what belongs to men. By applying Berger's lens, I argue that women reading books in public spaces remain 'under men's tutelage [...] and behave accordingly'. In the painting, however, Vecchi breaks away from the man's gaze as she is the one gazing, thus 'refusing to be in the keeping of men'. Her books are stacked at her side as a reminder that knowledge is power. Taddei underlines that the books indicate Corcos's cultural *milieu* and his literary intent in creating such a painting. [72] His literary intention is translated into the painting of a woman who fully participates in the cultural discourse of her time by engaging in reading. Here it is important to notice that the novels that Camile Flammarion wrote and published were often science-based stories. Hence the need for fiction to mediate women's understanding and knowledge of science in Liberal Italy since they were not allowed in university science classes.

The importance of reading as a source of knowledge and power is also stressed by the vicinity of one single rose that is losing its petals. The rose's symbolic meaning is that of beauty, youth, and virtuous love. [73] Vecchi's rose is dying, though, pointing to the ephemerality of those attributes, which is contrasted with the books' solidity. In a time when women's primary ambition was supposed to be that

of getting married to find love and security and to enter the prestigious circle of the *maritate*,[74] Vecchi's pose seems to offer women another path to self-realisation that does not necessarily entail marriage.

Painter and Model Relationship

It is worth remembering that Vecchi was not a wife; rather she was Corcos's muse, model, and his mistress, at least according to scholar Emily Braun.[75] Vecchi was the youngest daughter of a naval officer, author of popular adventure stories that she published under the name of Jack La Bolina. She was one of Corcos's most popular models whom he represented in many of his paintings like *La figlia di Jack la Bolina* (1888), *Maddalena* (1896), and *Les deux colombes* (1897).[76] Corcos's and Vecchi's professional and love relationship was not uncommon. In nineteenth-century Paris, the male painter/female model artistic and erotic rapport was premised on Raffaello Sanzio and his mistress-model, known as La Fornarina.[77] At a pragmatic level, the myth of La Fornarina propelled the creation of the professional model who became vital to French impressionist artists like Renoir, Degas, and Manet, just to quote a few.[78] After finishing his studies in Naples, Corcos moved to Paris where he worked from 1880 to 1885. There, he actively participated in the Parisian artistic *milieu*, befriending impressionist painters who introduced him to the world of professional models.[79]

At the level of the artists' collective imagination, the myth of La Fornarina worked at two different yet connected levels. On the one hand, La Fornarina was constructed as an essential instrument for Raffaello's artistic inspiration and creations. Giorgio Vasari, in his *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori* reports Raffaello's insatiable sexual appetite, implying that the artist could work only if his mistress's body was available to him at all times.[80] Thus, La Fornarina became the archetypical life-giving and death-provoking *femme fatale*, where life and death are meant both physically and artistically. On the other hand, La Fornarina is 'the model of models, at least until the *fin de siècle*, represented within her body the multiple characteristics (the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class) of the model: she is *italienne, juive*, [Italian, Jewish,] and working-class'.[81]

Just like La Fornarina, in *Sogni*, Vecchi represents within her body the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class. She is an Italian woman who, unlike the painter, is Catholic. She is a woman who, again unlike the painter, has no political subjectivity yet. Unlike many models who were from the lower class – often prostitutes – she is from Corcos's same cultural and social *milieu*. Several art historians like Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, just to quote a few, argue that the model actively participates in artistic production, as she is an individualised social construction and social actor. This is true especially in nineteenth-century France, where the model's significance and role were problematised and forever changed and her body became the site of intersection between modernity and artistic practices.[82] In Corcos's painting, Vecchi's body becomes precisely that site. Her modernity transgresses the normative discourse of Liberal Italy's patriarchy, aiming to confine women's position within society by controlling and disciplining their bodies. *Sogni*'s unconventional and 'modern' pose of Vecchi's body created a scandal at the 1896 Florence exhibit.

Writing about transgression, Christina Foust argues that 'Transgression deconstructs the natural and the normative, at the same time it enacts alternatives to a social order; it does so by immediately undermining the common sense that helps build social order'.[83] Unlike resistance that turns to the

same tools of the dominant power, transgression aims at both undermining the dominant power's common sense and creating alternatives to it.[84] As I wrote above, according to Hegel, political subjectivity is established by the individual ability to reflect on the structure of the social order to judge its ethical claim. Vecchi's pose goes beyond reflecting, as it transgresses Liberal Italy's patriarchal common sense that created an oppressive social order. Furthermore, it points to alternatives to male intellect-based political subjectivity. Its transgression goes through Vecchi's body and its posture: her fist holding her head, her gaze, and her crossed legs. It is through the impropriety of the representation of her body and its positioning in space that the painting constructs its transgression.

Creating a Female Epistemology and Metaphysics Based on the Body

Luce Irigaray posits women as the excluded impropriety from the discourse of metaphysics, as 'a woman neither is nor has an essence'; thus, she can only improperly belong to that discourse.[85] Similarly, Vecchi's body's positioning can only be improperly represented in a public space since women are excluded from that space and body positioning. By applying Judith Butler's famous essay title *Bodies that Matter* to my discussion, I argue that Vecchi's body matters as

matter is clearly defined by a certain power of creation and rationality [...] for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what 'matters' about that body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where 'to matter' means at once 'to materialize' and 'to mean.'[86]

In other words, the intelligibility of any body of knowledge must necessarily come through the physical body, the sexed body, as knowledge is never neutral. Vecchi's sexed body prevented her from entering most professions and their bodies of knowledge, for instance. Butler is, thus, creating an epistemology based on the body as that which is both the matter and the perceiver of knowledge, ultimately explaining why this kind of knowledge matters.

Since the 1970s, several feminist scholars have been arguing for the necessity to create an epistemology and metaphysics centred on the body as a site of knowledge that comprises the physical and metaphysical realms. For instance, expanding on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's intent to overcome the mind and body dualism, Elizabeth Grosz asserts 'The body and the modes of sensual perception which takes place through it are not mere physical/physiological phenomena; nor are they simply psychological results of physical causes. Rather, they affirm the necessary connectedness of consciousness as it is incarnated; mind [...] is always embodied, always based on the corporal and sensory relations'.[87] Not only is the body the centre of all sensory perceptions that connect us to the outside world, but also our consciousness of it. As a woman, Vecchi's embodied mind creates her political subjectivity through her body's position in a public space, transgressing Liberal Italy's social norms centred on patriarchy.

In both paintings, the women's poses articulate a counter-discourse to the national one, which is highlighted also by their dresses. Unlike Mary in *Annunciazione*, Vecchi wears dreary grey gloves and a dress that creates a weak contrast with the light-yellow wall behind her. Her plain and inconspicuous dress deflects the viewer's eyes away from it to focus on her pose. Her gaze, fist, and crossed leg are all on the same vertical line, underscoring strength and power. Corcos had a deep love and understanding

of fashion and its place within the modernist project.[88] Modernist artists, though, tended to deem fashion frivolous and, thus, relegated it to the world of women and their bodies. In contrast, art was deemed intellectual and thus masculine.[89] These two paintings reverse the paradigm. At the metalinguistic level, the paintings, representing female corporality and fashion, use images to articulate that which could not yet be expressed through words. By allowing for multiple interpretations, art's highly symbolic code is a safer medium to express resistance and transgression to Liberal Italy's normative discourses.

Conclusion

The lens of intersectionality has proved to be effective in analysing Corcos's positioning within Liberal Italy's national normative discourse as it lays bare the different axes of oppression and how differently and/or similarly affect both the artist and the women he represents. As an Italian Jew, he was required to live in-between Judaism and Catholicism, just like women were required to live in-between the margins, as subjects, and the centre of the nation, as mothers. It is precisely in the 'third space' that marginalised people can create new alliances to resist and transgress the oppression of national hegemonic discourses.

Disclosure Statement

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Correction Statement

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Footnotes

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