

**“LA RINCORSA È FINITA”: DESTRUCTIVE ANGER  
AND THE UPSIDE OF DEATH IN *BENZINA***

*Paolo Frascà*  
*University of Toronto*

*Con qualcuno bisogna pur prendersela, e il capitale, astutamente, si adopera per stornare da sé la rabbia della gente. L'omosessuale sopravvive solo e praticamente indifeso a dispetto di tutti e avversato da tutti: quando sopravvive...*

(Mario Mieli, 1977: 114)

**1. ANGER AND INDIGNATION**

Thinkers of all epochs have described the passion of anger or rage as one that is normally unproductive: a primordial impetus that can often lead to a violent, and therefore arguably unedifying, response. Aristotle points out that this emotion is often “directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one’s friends” (1984: 77) and Descartes describes the passion of anger as a vindictive one felt toward a person – a feeling that “borrows its strength from the Love of self” (1989: 313). Dante addresses this passion without hesitation and contemptuously casts the unrepentant wrathful and/or violent into the *Inferno*. David Hume recognizes grief and disappointment as the main causes of anger, which, in turn, will ignite an emotional cycle that involves envy and malice and that ends with grief (which is where it initially began) (1986: 149)<sup>1</sup>. Darwin describes anger (in all animals, including humans) as an innate response to threat with the intention to attack for defence, and as an instinct that is not controlled rationally (1965: 78-79)<sup>2</sup>. Reasonable anger, or righteous indignation,

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<sup>1</sup> “Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be completed” (Hume, Sec. IV).

<sup>2</sup> “But animals of all kinds, and their progenitors before them, when attacked or threatened by an enemy, have exerted their utmost powers in fighting and in defending themselves. Unless an animal does thus act, or has the intention, or at least the desire, to attack its enemy, it cannot properly be said to be enraged. An inherited habit of muscular exertion will thus have been gained in association with rage; and this will directly or indirectly affect various organs, in nearly the same manner as does great bodily suffering. The heart no doubt will likewise be affected in a direct manner; but it will also in all probability be affected through habit; and all the more so from not being under the control of the will. [...] The heart, as I have said, will be all the more readily affected through habitual associations, as it is not under the control of the will. A man when moderately angry, or even when enraged, may command the movements of his body, but he cannot prevent his heart from beating rapidly. His chest will perhaps give a few heaves, and his nostrils just quiver, for the movements of respiration are only in part voluntary. In like manner those muscles of the face which are least obedient to the will, will sometimes alone betray a slight and passing emotion. The glands again are wholly independent of the will, and a man suffering from grief may

on the other hand, is often described as a passion justified by a collective concern, and characterized by the engagement of willpower – fueled by temper, but driven by reason. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* describes indignation as a synonym of anger, but differentiates it from its cognate by stating that this specific emotion (indignation) “stresses a deep, intense, often righteous, anger aroused by that which one considers mean, shameful, or the like” (Thurman, 2005: 30). Indignation is often seen as productive or constructive because it indeed is morally justifiable and often pursued rationally. Modern psychology will argue that “self-control, especially self-control in the pursuit of emotional restraint, is a human choice, beyond the limitations of instinct” (Tavris, 1989: 36), therefore gathering that even the most primal of emotions can be tamed by individuals who experience them through the conscious engagement of psychological regulatory mechanisms. Without delving too deep into the issues that surround the notion of rationality, free will and the nature-nurture debate, one may comfortably assert that a righteous, rationally-driven type of anger exists, and that such a passion can, in certain cases, lead to useful outcomes. Righteous indignation, therefore, presents itself as a sort of idyllic hybrid of positive (the desire for justice) and negative (hatred, shame, ire) emotions, which, combined, may constitute a device for the improvement of the circumstances towards which one feels undignified or *enragée*.

## 2. DESPERATE MEASURES

Is righteous indignation enough? Can it always get the job done? And, most of all, can one *rationally* choose to employ the passion of righteous anger in a *violent* way? This paper will contend that, in extreme cases, one might be forced by circumstantial factors to consider resorting to a (self-)destructive, (self-)annihilating<sup>3</sup> type of anger (which may be righteous) in order for change to be brought about and in order to create new spaces where what could not once be may now be – *a mali estremi, estremi rimedi*. When marginalized individuals or groups have fought for decades, perhaps centuries, to be understood and accepted, there might be nothing left to do but to let an explosion of calamitous wrath take hold of the situation, break down the barriers of banishment, and

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command his features, but cannot always prevent the tears from coming into his eyes. A hungry man, if tempting food is placed before him, may not show his hunger by any outward gesture, but he cannot check the secretion of saliva” (Darwin, 1965: 78-79).

<sup>3</sup> The word *self* is placed within brackets because the rational type of violent anger referenced can be directed both towards the self as well as towards the other (the latter often being the object or individuals that are the cause of indignation and motive of violence).

obliterate everything in its way. Of course, this rather controversial statement is easier to make when referring to literature, cinema, or other forms of fictional reality. Art creates spaces in which actions can be imagined and emotions can be felt without real consequences other than those caused by the influence of the work of art itself on its audience. It must then be clarified that this paper is not an apologia in defense of the idea of justified violence, “holy war”, or any other type of harmful behaviour, especially since there is a fine conceptual border between righteous indignation and *self*-righteous indignation. Moreover, it is safe to state that the intention of the artists, in our case, is not to condone violent actions (even if in response to oppression and ostracism), but to identify the causes of such behaviours in order to acknowledge, react, put an end to, and perhaps even prevent the struggles of the subordinate individuals or groups represented by the characters of the works.

Through an analysis of the economy of passions (especially indignation and anger) in *Benzina*, a film by Monica Stambrini based on the eponymous novel by Elena Stancanelli, I will attempt to highlight and legitimize the need for a type of anger that is constructive because it is deconstructive. I treat the novel and the film as a representational continuum of the same circumstances and passions, though important distinctions between the two works are highlighted, when relevant to this analysis. In *Benzina*, the protagonists’ anger is able to irreversibly defy the axiological restraints which render the life of the main characters (Stella and Lenni, a lesbian couple) one characterized by inescapable ostracism. The creation of a space where the two protagonists may find a dignified way of being in the world is ultimately dependent upon their resorting to what we could define, in psychoanalytic terms, as the *death drive* (*Thanatos*) – the desire to “lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (Freud, 1950: 380). This desire, of course, is fueled by the righteous anger felt towards the circumstances of abjection, marginalization, and constant social persecution that taunt the characters and threaten their well-being. *Benzina* (gasoline) is, of course, the tropological device used to represent the very combustibility of the narrative at hand, and this shall be explored more in-depth. Stella and Lenni do not have a future, not in this world and not at this time, that is to say the material world and the social circumstances in which they exist cannot house their desire and grant them joy, approval or recognition –they do not belong in the here and now because they are too unconventional, unpredictable, volatile, and therefore dangerous. Moreover, as a homosexual couple, they do not fulfill a basic societal requirement, which is the ability

to produce what is the most incontestable symbol of futurity— a child. Stella and Lenni are considered inadequate, defective. In *Benzina*, society is symbolically represented by the mother (Giovanna), who proudly carries the crest of *bon ton*, of Florentine pre-eminence and of bourgeois *falso perbenismo* and by the triumvirate (in the novel) or threesome (in the movie). Giovanna’s voice is the condemnatory echo of society, and the threesome (three men in the novel, two men and a woman in the film) are an epitomized representation of rampant, male-controlled heterosexuality. The anger that the characters feel as a response to their being continuously shunned and misjudged by society takes many forms throughout the narrative, but the ultimate and most powerful expression of their passion results in violent (self-)destruction. As counterproductive as this may seem, it is an effective way for Stella and Lenni to create new possibilities for themselves, and for a strong sense of kinship to finally be born between the previously judgmental but posthumously benevolent mother and the two girls —a feminist, victorious intimacy between the three women, which would have never been possible in tangible reality. An analysis of the structure and content of both the novel and the film reveals a new type of anger or indignation to which we will refer as *queer anger*, and which, though disrespectful of conventional (biological) futurity, is able to create new spaces where queer subjects might eventually be able to live out a dignified narrative.

### 3. THE IGNITION

Both the novel and the film begin with a typically *noir* scene through which the audience learns that a crime has been committed, in this case, a murder, whose details will unfold with time, as the plot progresses. The initial scene in both works features Stella and Lenni, whose bodies are close to the ground and who are still processing the most recent turn of events, and Giovanna’s body, lifeless yet elegant and ostensibly composed. The first words that are uttered are “È morta!” (*Gasoline*, 2003) —she’s dead— the climax has occurred even before the narrative began. Or, has it? Within the first scene, the reader/viewer understands that a gruesome event has taken place. We are presented with a nauseating and repulsive situation, particularly characterized by a helpless state of inertia and shock<sup>4</sup> as well as an amalgam of substances: tears [Stella

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<sup>4</sup> “Stella mi sta guardando. [...] Con le mani aperte penso che sta passando del tempo, se il vomito cola non è vero che tutto si è fermato” (Stancanelli, 1998: 5); “Stavo lì, ferma, ma mi sentivo strana, come

“piange come una cascata” (Stancanelli, 1998: 5)], vomit [“rigagnoli verdi di questo liquido rancido, così familiare” (*ivi*)], blood [“Come sei bella, Stella, lì in ginocchio con tutto il sangue di mia madre addosso”(*ib.*, 7)], sugar [“Adesso, sul pavimento, lo zucchero sta diventando rosso” (*ib.*, 12)], with the substance *par excellence* being, of course, gasoline, flowing menacingly around and underneath the murder scene, and patiently waiting for its moment of glory on what happens to be one of the hottest days of the year, *Ferragosto*, the national holiday in celebration of the Assumption of Mary (a clear hint of parodical prefiguration). Through this theatrical initial scene, Stancanelli and Stambrini want the audience/readership to perceive the circumstances from a perspective that is both psychological and physical – anger (passion) and violence (response to the passion) have conquered the atmosphere and the material environment; they have penetrated the mind, taken hold of the bodies and literally flooded their immediate spaces. That of anger is a parasitic presence in all of *Benzina* as it surrounds the novel and permeates every situation –anger is inescapable.

“Lenni! Guardami! Apri gli occhi. Non mi lasciare sola. Che cazzo è successo? La chiave inglese. Era sul tavolo degli attrezzi. [...] Perché non hai gridato fermati, quando ho alzato il braccio?” (Stancanelli, 1998: 8). Lenni does not cry “Stop!” when she notices her lover is about to hit her mother. This is because, perhaps, whether rationally or not, she also wishes for her mother’s death. Later on, when speaking to her uncle Ottavio, who calls Giovanna in hopes of receiving good news in regards to the mother-daughter reconciliation attempt, Lenni will let him know, in a tone that is all but contrite, that “La mamma è morta, stecchita. L’abbiamo colpita con una chiave inglese sulla nuca. Ma è stato meglio così. [...] Non urlare, ti ho detto che è meglio così, mi devi credere” (Stancanelli, 1998: 118). The young woman had truly had enough of her mother’s homophobia and condescendence, of the constant psychological and physical abuse, and had lost all hope for improvement, to the point that she not only includes herself as a primary agent to the murder (“l’abbiamo colpita”) but she also admits that her death is for the better (“è meglio così”).

Amid their initial conversation, Giovanna slaps her daughter across the face<sup>5</sup> and snappishly shouts: “Che cosa credevi di fare? Di scandalizzarmi? *L’amichetta*, il

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quando c’è un incidente e tu vorresti correre a vedere, ma i poliziotti si tengono per mano per non farti passare. E pensi che forse quello in terra lo conosci, che ha bisogno di te” (*ib.*, 11).

<sup>5</sup> This is the first act of physical and emotional violence we actually witness in the movie. A slap from a mother to a daughter can be perceived as a minor manifestation of anger, but it signifies much more than that – it symbolizes both maternal and societal rejection; it breaks the peace of the *locus amoenus* (the gas

distributore, ma non ti rendi conto di quanto sei cretina? [...] E questi *occhiaietti da lesbica* che ti metti sul naso ti servono a qualcosa? Riesci a vedere lo schifo dove sei finita?” (*Gasoline*, 2003, italics mine). At this point, Lenni, who generally adopts a passive and laconic behaviour towards her mother, turns completely silent. She had already openly communicated with her mother in the letter she had sent her in hopes that the latter would finally accept her for who she is, and now that she realizes that things will never change, she adopts a fairly indifferent demeanour. Lenni is frightened, but she is, most of all, disappointed because she finally realizes that her mother will never be able to be part of her life and share in her happiness: Giovanna is a failed mother to Lenni and, by the same token, Lenni is a failed daughter to Giovanna. The mother-daughter bond is irretrievably destroyed. Judith Halberstam defines this rupture as a specific type of feminism, which is

grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence [and which] offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within. This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power (2011: 124).

The language Giovanna uses with her daughter is unforgivably homophobic; she undermines Lenni’s (sexual) maturity by referring to her partner in a belittling way (“amichetta”), and by defining her sexual orientation as a fleeting, rebellious act with its aesthetic props (“il distributore,” “gli occhiaietti da lesbica”). As she argues with Giovanna, or rather, as she listens to her mother reprimand her, Lenni grieves. She had hoped that Giovanna would finally accept her, and that, by coming to visit, she would attempt to build a more open and accepting relationship. A few years had passed, and Lenni had trusted that Giovanna would have, at long last, decided to prioritize her daughter’s peace of mind and well-being over the stifling and oppressive social mold into which she had always wanted her to fit. Unfortunately, Giovanna does not overcome her normative biases, not knowing that this will be her last chance to do so. The *distributore* is Lenni’s territory and, though isolated yet easily penetrable (the walls are made of tin), it is a safe space that she and Stella have fashioned as their home and

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station) and it is the beginning of hopelessness for Lenni –the last straw– as she finally becomes irreversibly aware of the fact that she will never be accepted by her mother. It is not a stand-alone occurrence; this slap carries with it the power of many other forms of abuse and is a prefiguration of many others to come, such as the insulting language Giovanna uses against Lenni straight afterwards.

love nest. Lenni will not allow her mother to, once again, condition her life – not here, where she has finally become independent. As Bodei notes,

Un tempo dell'attesa precede e accompagna le rivoluzioni moderne. All'aprirsi del ventaglio dei possibili corrisponde il confuso sentimento che la sopportazione ha colmato la misura. Occorre passare a ogni costo attraverso stretti varchi che potrebbero rapidamente richiudersi, un Mar Rosso che gli eventi hanno quasi miracolosamente aperto. [...] L'insostenibilità delle situazioni appare all'improvviso evidente, non appena si intravede la possibilità reale di una diminuzione delle diseguaglianze (1991: 371).

The walls collapse, the opportunity Giovanna had to redeem herself as a mother, as a friend, and as a compassionate human being has been forever lost. At once, she begins to forcefully attempt to remove her daughter from the plebeian environment where she has now become nothing but a “benzinaia lesbica” – “non piangere... adesso andiamo in un posto *pulito*, tu *ti lavi* e poi discutiamo *con calma*, hai capito?” (*Gasoline*, 2003, ital. mine) – in order to bring her to a place where she will be *cleansed* and *sterilized*. This is because Giovanna, while at the gas station, finds herself outside her aseptic, bourgeois comfort zone. Her sophistication and poise do not have a place in her daughter and her *amichetta*'s lesbian oasis. She knows this well, and resolves that she will be able to convince her daughter only if she is able to suck her back into her own reality, back inside the *Grande Raccordo Anulare*, where her maternal authority over Lenni is not put into question. Stella hears the struggle between mother and daughter and threateningly enters the bar, but not before lighting her gasoline-soaked shoe-bottom on fire (a glimpse of premeditation or of the anger she is perhaps trying to keep under control), which symbolizes the high combustibility of the situation and foreshadows an explosive ending. At this point, the two works diverge in a way that can profoundly affect the way Stella's character is judged – in Stancanelli's novel, Stella hits Giovanna with a wrench (there is a clear intention of killing or severely harming), whereas, in the film, Stella simply sucker-punches Giovanna to defend her partner, causing her to lose her balance, hit her head on the bar counter, and collapse to the floor. In her work, Stambrini attempts to further legitimize Stella's anger towards Giovanna by making the murder accidental and an appropriate, arguably proportionate and defensive response to the mother's abusive behaviour. Stella and Lenni are angry, and they have a right to be, especially because Giovanna's voice is not only her own, but that of society at large, of which she herself is also a victim. As Stefania Lucamante states, “hers is the kind of voice that belongs to the unheard, to the women who unwittingly go on with a restrictive normative life whose rules reveal to be unclear to them as to those -

daughters- they try to impose them upon” (2008: 117). Giovanna has been put out of her misery and has ascended to a place where she is given the opportunity to redeem herself as a mother to Lenni but also as a woman, through the sense of kinship that she finally develops towards the two young women; this of course, is accompanied by a deep sense of resentment towards her earthly self:

Avrei potuto rimanere qui anch'io. Mi sarei comprata una di quelle belle tute blu e il mio primo paio di scarponi da guerra. Avrei imparato a ritagliare le fette di pane in cassetta, a spalmarci sopra il burro senza romperle. Avrei anche potuto ricominciare a fumare, per accendermi una sigaretta la sera, dopo aver tirato giù il bandone del bar. Ecco che cosa avrei dovuto chiederti. Tienimi con te, permettimi di spendere qui tutti i giorni che mi restano, nel tuo distributore di benzina. Invece ho aperto la bocca e mi è uscito: <<vorrei un caffè>> (Stancanelli, 1998: 129).

In any realistic circumstance, the viewer/reader would never be able to sympathize with Giovanna, but in *Benzina*, we could go as far as stating that she finds redemption after death, not only in her daughter's mind, but also in the audience's view:

Through the killing of the mother figure, as well as through the ironic depictions of the bourgeois woman, Stancanelli underlines her rejection of the maternal. Yet the mother's death allows the rebirth of a woman who uncovers a sense of self previously unknown to herself. Thanks to the death of a body framed into a patriarchal structure, a new woman, closer to other women, emerges. The mother's death has the function of distancing class distinctions and the difficulties that separated the mother from her daughter (Sambuco, 2004: 135).

This is all, of course, thanks to the mystical power of art, which creates an imagined and alternative reality where utopian resolutions can be achieved, a reality that can transcend even death, grant another perspective (literally, as the mother hovers over and looks after her daughter and Stella) as well as the opportunity to compensate for one's wrongdoings. In the novel, Giovanna even saves her murderer by releasing the handbrake of a truck and preventing her from being kidnapped and raped: “un'azione grandiosa, un gesto eroico, la prima impresa di cui andare veramente orgogliosa da quando sono nata” (Stancanelli, 1998: 111).

#### 4. SHORT CIRCUIT

The gas station can be considered the modern *locus amoenus* of this narrative: there are no trees, grass or lakes as these are replaced by gas pumps, concrete and gasoline, but it is nonetheless a safe haven for the two protagonists. The station is the only space where Lenni and Stella can be who they are and even be appreciated by the few that get to know them. Though they can only exist on the limen of society, right on the edge of

the urban glory hole – the city of Rome – enclosed within the beltway (the *raccordo*), and though they do represent but an insignificant cog in the metropolitan economic machine (they provide fuel, and therefore capital, to a society that completely marginalizes them), they have been able to foster their love in this space, which they have successfully *conquered*. The gas station is undoubtedly a ghetto of sorts, a segregated space where Lenni and Stella can go about their business without being seen, without bothering anyone – they are not part of any community and, as long as they remain isolated, they are safe. Like every peaceful space, however, the gas station and its idyllic stability are also extremely vulnerable, and readily combustible.

As if Giovanna's (accidental) death were not enough, more trouble is in store for Stella and Lenni. A threesome begins to taunt the couple and sends them on circumnavigatory journey around the *raccordo*, a road that has no beginning and no end, an inescapable circuit:

E la notte il raccordo sembra quasi un'autostrada, con gli autogrill illuminati e le luci rosse del guard rail. *Peccato non si arrivi da nessuna parte*, nemmeno la notte, nemmeno se chiudi gli occhi e pesti più forte che puoi col piede sul pedale, il volante stretto tra le mani bianche dallo sforzo. Nemmeno se il piede sinistro lo togli per sempre dal freno, e lo poggi a terra, così (Stancanelli, 1998: 85; ital. mine).

There is no way out, not for Stella and Lenni – the *raccordo* becomes an endless one-way street. No matter how well they burrow in the pipelines of their *distributore*, no matter how hard they try to hide behind their tin walls, society will always find a way to remind them that they do not have the right to be (together).

This sense of inescapable stagnation permeates much of the novel: characters literally drive around in circles; Lenni and Stella are themselves finally unable to take an exit that leads away from the service station; the nightmare periphery clings to, encircles and effectively imprisons its inhabitants, preventing geographical movement just as social norms impede departures from accepted forms of subjectivity (Ross, 2004: 243).

The threesome is meant to symbolically epitomize patriarchal, heteronormative hypersexuality. Pippi (the female member) holds a camera with which she is able to capture life in its natural, uninterrupted flow. The rather pixelated, blurry, and unsteady images conveyed by Pippi's hand-held device are often blatantly voyeuristic as well as they provide a vivisection of reality: images run freely, focusing on a part of Pippi's body, of her friend's faces, on Stella holding the gas pump, all in a succession of stomach-turning, quick and unplanned shots. A *mise en abyme* of the bodies and places it captures, but also an instrument that grants psychological penetration. The three

young individuals do not lead happy lives, in fact, and Pippi's video-camera allows us to understand this: we learn that the three are also victims of a society that has swallowed them whole into a spiralling abyss of false promises of happiness. In Sara Ahmed's words, the notion of *happiness* (because it is not a tangible desire) can often be used to justify oppression, and "feminist critiques of the figure of 'the happy housewife', black critiques of the myth of 'the happy slave', and queer critiques of the sentimentalization of heterosexuality [...] have [actually] struggled *against* rather than *for* happiness" (2010: 2). Thanks to the added realist frame (Pippi's hand-held video recorder), we learn some useful information about her and her friends, who certainly represent a society that rejects Stella a Lenni, yet they seem to be even less "happy" or at peace with themselves than the *benzinaie* (and the same holds true for Giovanna); they may be more disturbed and scarred by their cultural formations than Stella and Lenni, who, at least, in their rejection of and by society, are able to create a space which can, even if only temporarily, house their eccentric (yet subjective) desires – institutionalized heterosexuality, in fact, must be theoretically be separated from actual desire and from the sexual tendencies of the single individual, at which point, then, desire might not constitute a limitation, but, instead, the triumph or subjectivity (de Lauretis, 1999: 9). Pippi speaks of a dream in which she is laying on a grass field (another apparent *locus amoenus*) and sees an enormous daisy; the dream turns into a nightmare when a foul smell pervades the scene and a steamroller enters the scene to crush the beautiful daisy (*Gasoline*, 2003). One of the boys also shares a shocking story from his childhood: his mother used to feed him psychotropic drugs in order to make him stop crying (*Gasoline*, 2003). Both these declarations grant psychological depth to these otherwise seemingly shallow characters – their personalities, too, have been oppressed by a social system which cannot allow for subjectivity or eccentricity of any kind as it demands that everything be kept in a predictable, artificial, engineered, pharmacological (if need be) equilibrium, an inescapable circuit of suffocating regulatory mechanisms and false "happiness" scripts:

If identity captures something about the relatively polished social persona we present to the world, then character -in my view- captures something about the wholly idiosyncratic and potentially rebellious energies that, every so often, break the facade of that persona. From this perspective, our character leaps forth whenever we do something "crazy," such as suddenly dissolving a committed relationship or leaving a promising career path. At such moments, what is fierce and unapologetic about us undermines our attempts to lead a "reasonable" life, causing us to follow an inner directive that may be as enigmatic as it is compelling. We may not know why we feel called to a new destiny, but we sense that not heeding that call will stifle what is most alive within us. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that finds such insurrections

threatening, not least because they make us less predictable and therefore harder to control. This is one reason we're constantly reminded of the importance of leading a happy, balanced life—the kind of life that “makes sense” from the viewpoint of the dominant social order (Ruti, 2014).

How can, therefore, this narrative have a happy ending? How can Stancanelli and Stambrini possibly find a way to grant these eccentric characters peace and protect their amorous bond? Most of all, what constitutes “happiness” for the queer subjects? As we have clearly seen, the impossibility of a dignified narrative for Lenni and Stella is unsurmountable. The queer subject cannot have a happy ending, because that would make homosexuality attractive; Stambrini and Stancanelli, however, beg to differ. In the film, there is a glimpse of solidarity and approval that the couple receives in celebration of their love and it comes from a priest, no less. The two women stumble upon him by pure chance, on the *raccordo*, and he asks for a lift (his scooter has broken down). A sense of solidarity is born among the three characters upon the recognition of their shared rejection of social standards. The priest half-heartedly admits: “Ho celebrato un matrimonio...guarda, una fatica incredibile. Soprattutto quando ho dovuto parlare sull'amore, guarda, dire tutte quelle stupidaggini, quelle falsità” (*Gasoline*, 2003); he seems to believe in Stella and Lenni's bond, however, and he performs a ceremony in honour of their relationship: he takes a necklace with a cloven heart-shaped pendant from his pocket, divides the heart and gives half to Lenni, and the other half to Stella, in an act which could be described as an unofficial yet spiritual recognition of their love. As the priest celebrates this off-the-record union, we come to understand that he is guided by the spirit of the mother, after whom he mechanically repeats: “metà per te e l'altra metà per lei” (*Gasoline*, 2003).

Stella and Lenni's journey ends where it began. They have reached their wits' end and are literally running out of gasoline (their vehicle is leaking) – after many attempts to get rid of Giovanna's body and to escape from the persecution of the threesome, they make the rational decision to transcend reality and escape it once and for all without being afraid – they decide to die together. As Bodei reminds us while discussing Seneca's suicide, one must not be afraid of death, “perché [essa] ci apre un facile accesso alla libertà, diventa il modo più eloquente di dimostrare che non si è disposti più alla servitù. [...] Chi ha imparato a morire ha disimparato a servire: è al di sopra e, in ogni caso, al di fuori, di ogni umana potenza” (1991: 219-220). Stella and Lenni must destroy everything, they must break the inexorable vicious cycle and cause a short circuit that will allow them to finally break free and take that highway exit to an

idealized land. “Pronta? Paura? – No – Allora andiamo” (*Gasoline*, 2003); their conscious decision to annihilate themselves constitutes a “cathartic death that positively redeems Lenni and Stella from the bourgeois world and from the sense of estrangement where the bourgeois habitus had confined them” (Lucamante, 2008: 124). Their act, an indisputable homage to *Thelma and Louise* (1991), from which the entire narrative certainly draws inspiration, allows them to not only escape the dire circumstances and reclaim their ultimate agency (like *Thelma and Louise*) but, more importantly, to create a new utopian space in which they and their love can exist without limitations. “Tutte e due ariete, segno di fuoco” (Stancanelli, 1998: 10), they set the place (and themselves) on fire and ascend to the heavens, where Giovanna awaits open-armed<sup>6</sup>, and “if we believe in the afterlife, Stambriani’s characters will conquer there what they were missing on Earth” (Lucamante, 2008: 116). The women’s afterlife is made tangible to us in Stancanelli’s novel. Stella, Lenni and Giovanna rejoice in an ironic laughter that is dismissive of the tragedies that have just taken place. In the film, the element of astral existence is not as explicit, though we are offered one last scene (after the suicide), in which Stella and Lenni converse at a bar and share a kiss, perhaps indicating that they might have even somehow survived the explosion. Though ambiguous, the ending of the film also indicates that the women’s (self-)destructive anger has created new possibilities for them. As the gas station blows up in a scene of colourful explosions, the women are finally at rest – as the debris falls, they can, piece by piece, let go of all the painful fragments of their terrestrial life: “Perché la rincorsa è finita, e non ci sono più denti per azzannarsi né tempi per crescere e invecchiare, e ora le possiamo ridere tutte le storie, e lasciarle dondolare una dietro l’altra, piano piano, fino a quando non toccano terra” (Stancanelli, 1998: 156). Death truly is a blessing in disguise for the women in *Benzina*, who express a new type of feminism, one that is “born of a dynamic intellectual struggle with the fact that some women may desire their own destruction for really good political reasons” (Halberstam, 2011: 128). We must thus agree that Stella and Lenni’s desire for death is driven by rational, righteous indignation, particularly because that of dying together is perhaps the most productive and emancipatory anger-fuelled decision the girls could have made. Thus, “their apparent act of straightforwardly negative self-destruction asks instead to be seen as a triumphant

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<sup>6</sup> “Per questo avrei dovuto volerti bene, per scavare un tunnel che passando sotto le nostre vite mi conducesse dritto a te. Come la morte. Una galleria silenziosa e privata, dove potersi abbracciare senza temere di sgualcirsi l’anima per l’imbarazzo” (Stancanelli, 1998: 114-115).

transcendence” (Ross, 2004: 246). Fulfillment is dislocated to another dimension, perhaps a less material one, and gasoline becomes their device for liberation, while it had so far symbolized their marginalized and segregated role in a capitalist economy. In *Benzina*, love escapes the boundaries of normativity and conquers new spaces, while the queer subjects, one way or another, have finally been given a happy ending.

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