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**Surviving the ‘showgirl effect’?: Tween girls and performance in *Le meraviglie*/The Wonders (Alice Rohrwacher 2014) and *Bellas mariposas* (Salvatore Mereu 2012)**

The Italian DVD cover for the film *Le meraviglie/*The Wonders (Rohrwacher 2014) is promoted by a powerful painted image: a partial view of the poised, smooth face of a young girl, in three-quarter profile against a duck-egg blue background reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture, but for the four bees crawling out of her mouth and up her left cheek.[[1]](#footnote-1) The choice of a painting, as opposed to a photographic reproduction of the girl, draws attention to the film’s self-conscious reflection on the *performance* of girlhood, a preoccupation that extends to several recent Italian films. Furthermore the uncanny quality of the image, in which the girl’s face appears calm in the face of potential danger speaks in a new way to preoccupations with female performance that pervade Italian culture. In this chapter I interrogate this thematization of performance from several angles, thinking in particular about the tween girl, moving from childhood proper into her teens, through two films: *Le meraviglie* and *Bellas mariposas* (Mereu 2012). These films use less familiar spaces to connote the affective experience of girlhood on the margins of society, from a rural commune in Umbria to the housing estates of Cagliari, thereby expanding the relatively limited repertoire of representations of girlhood. I consider how performance in thematised within the films as a public spectacle, or the promise of future public spectacle, but also more broadly how girlhood itself is performed, and what the films’ self-conscious relationships with the non-professional girl performer can tell us about the cultural work of cinema in relation to girlhood.

Whilst Italian cinema more generally is still dominated by an interest in masculinity that largely subjugates the girl to a more peripheral role in popular cinema, Dana Renga identifies an emergent auteur cinema in which girlhood is the focus, including works such as *L’isola* (Quatriglio 2003), *Cosmonauta* (Nicchiarelli 2009) and, indeed Alice Rohrwacher’s earlier *Corpo celeste* (2011). For Renga, “these films write the young female subject into Italian cinema, and offer exciting opportunities for discussions of a new cinematic history that need not position the female experience as inherently masochistic” (329). Whilst, as Renga correctly asserts, this shift is associated with a largely female-authored cinema, it is also possible to trace this growing preoccupation with the girl in some male-authored cinema, as *Bellas mariposas* will suggest. In one way we can read this as part of a transnational celebration of the girl, Neoliberal subject par excellence, caught between the polarities of “girlpower” and “girl at risk”, subject to the potential for entrepreneurial self-realization and also vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation. In *Spectacular Girls* Sarah Projansky suggests that the anxious dichotomies between “adoration and denigration” structure contemporary interpretations of girlhood, in which the girl can easily move between the polarities and transform from “fabulous” into “scandal” (35). In particular in the Italian case economic crisis appears to have been channelled through anxiety about the propriety of female performance, namely the now rapidly disappearing television showgirl culture associated with Silvio Berlusconi’s regime. In this context the performance of Italian femininity, understood as the display of the youthful female body in a public space, has become saturated with connotations of sex work, and also evokes a troubling incest motif that haunts Italian popular culture.

Feminist theorists, such as Valerie Walkerdine and Projansky, have long suggested that there is more to the young girl’s performance of “adult” singing or dancing styles than a dangerous eroticization, that cinema can also convey the pleasures of girlish affect in the process of consuming and producing such performances. In particular here I would like to think about how the coming-of-age genre presents such a pleasure as a potential strategy for what Vicky Lebeau terms “surviving the sexual”, girls’ passage into puberty, but in the Italian context. I have already explored the way in which narrative cinema can challenge media representations of endangered girlhood in the context of performance, what I have termed the “showgirl effect”. Thinking about this further, I'd like to consider how the girl passing from “tween-age” to “teenage”, i.e. of twelve or thirteen, is used powerfully to challenge the girl’s typical representation. I will show how *Bellas mariposas* and *Le meraviglie* explore what Christine Griffen terms “the unsettling aspects of the young consuming female subject” (35), and speak to the tween-teen girl as a figure of alternative femininities through tropes of performance and play involving other girls, engagement with nature, visions of mediatized adult femininity, and dynamics of rescue in relation to the boy rather than a focus on victimhood in relation to inadequate fathers.

Finally, I draw upon recent work by Mariapaola Pierini regarding the coaching of child performers to ask what ideologies of film-making subtend this framing of the girl “at play” and how deeply the creation, promotion and reception of the film is still imbricated in certain preoccupations about the child performer. Reflection upon the girl performer, and the foregrounding of the theme of performance, I argue, using the work of Karen Lury, is ultimately also about addressing the “risk” of involving girls in the world of cinema itself (*The Child,* 146). The status of the girl performer within these two films provides, I conclude, a useful heuristic for thinking about and beyond the apparently “impossible” position of the girl caught between polarities within Italian Neoliberal culture (Griffen 42).

SPECTACULAR GIRLS? SPECULAR GIRLS?

Both films under discussion feature girls who do not normally fall within the enchanted realms of “postfeminist luminosities” described by Angela McRobbie as the preserve of mainstream popular culture. Although both white, they are not middle-class nor obviously upwardly mobile, but the issue of performance allows the girls to project themselves towards a possible, undetermined future beyond their particular constraints. In each case, these circumstances could be described as both marginal and extreme. *Bellas mariposas* tells the story of 12 year-old Cate (played by 13 year-old Sara Podda), who lives in Sant’Elia, a working-class concrete jungle of Cagliari, in a cramped flat with her large family amid violence, drug use and sexual abuse. The film tells the story of her day, in which she learns of her older brother’s plan to shoot dead her girlhood crush, local boy Gigi. A picaresque journey through her daily life, the film concludes with the intervention of a passing white witch, and the rescue of Gigi. At the same time, Cate finally has confirmation that her best friend, Luna, is indeed her half-sister due to their father’s philandering. Their father leaves Cate’s family, and Luna moves in, effectively swapping places. *Le meraviglie*, by contrast, takes place in a rural context, on the borders of Umbria and Tuscany, on a commune created by the international remnants of an unspecified left-wing radical group, now a nuclear family of six and a female helper, Coco. At thirteen, Gelsomina (Alexandra Maria Lungu) is the oldest of four sisters, and the apple of her father Wolfgang’s eye, so much so that she has been trained to help him with their struggling business of bee-keeping, and put in charge of her siblings. The film charts the breakdown of the family’s equilibrium as financial pressure increases and Gelsomina begins to rebel against her role. Two factors contribute to this breakdown: Gelsomina’s secret decision to enter the family for a competition (*Il paese delle meraviglie*) run by a local tv station and the arrival of Martin, a child from Germany on a re-deployment scheme after committing petty crime, whom Wolfgang takes on as a farm worker.

Under the influence of mainstream media, the girls in both films engage in various forms of private “spectacle”. An important feature of these spectacles is the girls’ choice of audience for their performance: other girls who sometimes join in the performance. This specular relationship of the girls temporarily eases anxiety about “sexualization”, as girls take pleasure (or not) in one another’s performance. Each film features a scene in which the girl performs with her sister. Cate’s performance comes early in the film; as her younger sister takes a bath, and Cate cleans her teeth, Cate starts to sing along to “Mambo italiano” into the mirror, badly and defiantly, articulating her desire to be a singer when she grows up. This is no uninterrupted, idealized performance space. Whilst singing, she resists her father’s injunction that she should work to earn money, throws him out of the bathroom and play-fights with her little sister, Luisella. Cate’s ambition to be a singer is not trivialized, but shown to be a crucial survival strategy in the seemingly impossible world of her cramped flat. The viewer is implicated in her performance as Cate’s direct address to camera also draws us in. Throughout the film, often in close-up, she talks direct to camera, as if to an invisible interlocutor; she tells the viewer that she plans to be a singer, her defiant monologue challenging him/her to make sense of her ambition in this context: “Non dovevo cantare?”. Luisella’s comment of “Guarda che non si canta così” provides a far from sentimental or celebratory source of feedback. The centrality of popular song and its nuanced role in girls’ lives is equally powerfully woven through *Le meraviglie*. In a rare break from their father’s demands Gelsomina and Marinella (Agnese Graziani) play in the barn, Gelsomina taking on her bossy role here too as she compels a willing Marinella ritualistically to “drink” the ray of sunlight coming into the barn, before they perform a little routine, singing the Ambra Angiolini song “T’appartengo” (1994), shyly, but affectionately from opposite sides of the barn. The song also plays over the credit sequence, reinforcing the girls’ perspective on the story.

The decision to feature girls at play is in itself important, since, as Carol Gilligan suggested, the relational play of girls is often “covered over” and disavowed in later adulthood (19). In postfeminist culture this is taken one stage further as various forms of feminine labour are then re-packaged as “play”, from shopping to self-care. Indeed often, Kristina Gottschall observes, girls on film are featured as being engaged in “work on the self” (577). This could be how we read Cate’s “play” in *Bellas mariposas*: as preparation for her escape route as a singer. However, its contextualization as fantasy, as a stand-in for some kind of exit is very explicit, and even Cate acknowledges it as a fantasy strategy, as she play fights Luisella with the hairdryer, asking “Who’s singing badly now?”. The ambition of being a singer is a fantasy structure on which she hangs her other decisions, such as that of remaining a virgin, and thereby avoiding the single motherhood and prostitution that is the destiny of her older sister and seems the inevitable consequence of sex in Cate’s world.

In *Le meraviglie* the girls also carve out spaces for play in worlds already demanding that they work, constructing the girl as a model of resilient subjecthood that performs acts of creative and surprising bricolage in relation to the adult world and the patterns of expectation it imposes upon them. Conceptualizing the girl at play, indeed as only playing at “adult” performance, rather than as learning to perform femininity, helps to transform ideas about easy parallels between girlhood and womanhood and releases tension and anxiety around the issues of “spectacularization”. The issue of play and performance also raises subtle questions about the relations and differences between girls. In *Bellas mariposas*, Cate’s playmate is most often Luna, her same-aged friend, and the film foregrounds Cate’s own, sometimes frustrated desire for them to be “uguali”. The film does not hesitate to show momentary ruptures in their interaction, challenging the gloss of “pretty butterflies”, the cultural desire to see young girls as homogenous, and the foundations of a girl’s relational identity formation in sameness, rather than difference. It will emerge that the subterranean reasons for Cate’s insistence on sameness perhaps lie in her inkling that Luna is actually her half-sister, to whom she lays claim at the end of the film. There is no idealized specular relationship with the sister in *Le meraviglie* either. Marinella is a very sweet, affectionate younger sister, trying to penetrate her older sister’s incipient adolescent guard. Even on this first occasion “their song” is already tied to the new boy Martin; they sing it after an awkward exchange about him. Marinella has picked up on Gelsomina’s attraction to Martin; “è bello”, she whispers; Gelsomina replies with a shrug, and they sing. The song and its performance are eventually interrupted by Gelsomina’s attraction to Martin: later in the film Marinella tries to initiate another performance of the song, but Gelsomina gruffly rebuffs her and carelessly (deliberately?) traps her sister’s hand in the honey-making machine, causing a nasty, bleeding wound. The viscous sweet honey that subsequently pours onto the workroom floor in the wake of the accident sticks to Gelsomina’s legs as she tries desperately to mop it up; a lake of honey reflects the unleashing of sticky adolescent emotions that the song and its performance can no longer contain. This uncomfortable break with her sister is typical of the film’s sophisticated negotiation of traditional tropes of girlhood. The next performance that Gelsomina engages in, she does alone, although Marinella acts as go-between, calling upon Martin to observe her older sister’s skill. In silence Gelsomina covers her face with her hands, only to reveal, slowly, her face, with bees crawling out of her mouth and across it. Eventually this is the performance that Gelsomina will take onto the television show, now executed with Martin, whose whistle (his only form of oral communication throughout the film) summons forth the bees. I will return later to the nature of this performance, as a reflection upon the performance of girlhood, one that turns personal experience (Gelsomina’s expertise with the bees) into a moment of self-expression without the sting of exploitation.

NATURAL GIRLS?

What is striking, however, is how Gelsomina’s bee trick mobilizes a new relationship between girlhood and performance, displacing ideas about what femininity might look like, whilst still engaging with one of its most powerful clichés: nature. Fiona Handyside has written recently of how the girls of the French film *17 filles* (Delphine and Muriel Coulin, 2011) are: “aligned with the ladybirds, as beautiful, unusual, quirky little creatures, a fairly common art-house trope where the strangeness and unknowability of girlhood is communicated through comparing girls to animals or insects”. Here, in Gelsomina’s strange performance, the bees also steer us towards this unknowability, as we do not see what we expect to see in the girl. The bees constitute a very apposite symbol for the dangers and appeal of feminine performance, as a revelation of what is secret, whilst summoning up the usually repressed phantom of labour that lies behind it. By bringing what is inside to the outside, the bees remind us that Gelsomina is a trained bee-keeper, not so obviously designed “to be looked at”. In fact, she does not win the competition with this performance. The TV host’s faltering words - she stumbles over the word “meraviglioso”, as if reminded of its true meaning for a moment - indicate that the television is not the space for such difficult performances. This is compounded by Gelsomina’s father’s failure to articulate his political project: “il mondo sta per finire”, he stammers, before the microphone is rapidly removed. In fact, the prize for the best rural enterprise goes to their neighbour, whose charming elderly womenfolk have sung a traditional song much more in keeping with what television expects of rural femininity. Indeed as Kate Cairns observes in her work on rural children and their sense of a future, a certain confusion defines the rural girl, “as a result of entrenched associations between masculinity, locality and work”, thanks to which rural girls have to leave their community of origin in order to evade the gender order (483). Gelsomina’s problems in the film stem in part from this systemic failure to accommodate her; her father has hitherto treated her as both his princess and second-in-command, but he brings in a boy to help around the farm, undermining her own expertise and bristling with jealousy over her attraction to Martin. Gelsomina also begins to wonder whether life is elsewhere and gestures towards a possible escape, not only through the television entry, but also with the suggestion that she might one day head to Milan. Gelsomina’s performance is layered with this symbolic tension between work and the expectations about what girls “naturally” do, that is move to the city, making the film resonate with “the contradictory location that these girls are negotiating – between place-based identities and mobility-oriented futures” (Cairns 487).

The girl’s interaction with nature also determines Cate’s performances in *Bellas mariposas*. In many respects the whole film can be read as Cate’s performance of her self for the viewer, and it becomes particularly acute in moments of solitude. It is in the sea that Cate feels most herself: “dovevo nascere pesce”, she states. Although she underlines that no-one from her “quartiere” can swim well, it is where she feels complete. In her work on girls on the social margins and their futures, G.M. Ivinson and Emma Renold write about how place can influence girls’ body-movement repertoires, noting the popularity of swimming and dance because “the swimmer or dancer becomes what she can do”, thus moving her away from the pressures on girl’s appearance (712). The completion experienced by Cate in this underwater world becomes a form of mirroring, as she swims underwater with another girl, no longer Luna, but another similar girl wearing the same swimming costume as Cate, suggesting a doubling of potential within this space. The theme of nature and its potential mirroring returns in the film’s conclusion, as Cate and Luna share a playful kiss, describing their lips and themselves as “bellas mariposas”. I shall discuss later in more detail how the presentation of this kiss undercuts its own cliché, but juxtaposed with Rohrwacher’s more troubling bee motif, the butterflies certainly appear a more predictable metaphor for the tween-teen performance, beautiful in their transient fragility. Nonetheless the girl’s intense desire for mirroring and doubling, however fleeting or frustrated, also opens out towards a space beyond the individualism of the lone girl, postfeminist entrepreneur of the self. Images of nature do much more in these films than suggest a “natural” state of girlhood.

SPARKLE AND MEDIA ROLE MODELS

Both films clearly have recourse to a fabular quality in their coming-of-age narratives. This comes to the fore with particular force in the transfiguration of an older female figure in the film, playful allusions to the Cinderella narrative. There is a sympathetic mother each film, but she is also harried and fraught through constant conflict with a difficult father. The films effect a glimpse into another feminine world through the introduction of glamorous femininity, significantly represented by the most well-known star of each film. In *Bellas mariposas* this is the figure of the “coga”, “maga” or white witch played by Micaela Ramazzotti, and in *Le meraviglie*, the figure of Milly Catena, the television host, played by Monica Bellucci. Mary Celeste Kearney’s work on sparkle is useful in approaching the significance of these figures. Kearney describes: “the sparklefication of late modern life in the United States” as “overwhelmingly raced, classed, gendered and aged, with white middle-class female youth its primary targets and proponents […] girlhood’s visual landscape, presented in far more subdued ways just 10 years ago, is now dominated by sparkly brilliance” (1). However, Kearney also cannily reads the appeal of sparkle as a potential for girls to engage with media, and to create their own media, which is telling because it is the engagement with television, through Milly’s “sparkle”, that leads Gelsomina to perform her own self-defining take on femininity. Kearney identifies three types of sparkle: magic sparkle, environmental sparkle and accessorized sparkle. Initially it is environmental sparkle that touches Gelsomina’s world, in the sparkling waters of Lake Bolsena to which the family have recourse in rare moments of leisure. However, in the nearby waters of the natural spring she also comes across the dazzle of Milly in white and gold, recording an advert for the competition. Milly kindly gives her a sparkly hair slide, reaching out across their cultural divide. The artificial, accessorized sparkle is alien to Gelsomina’s rundown alternative world, marking her great distance from popular culture; she can only reach out longingly towards the sequinned dress of her friend who is to appear in the chorus of the television programme, and touch tenderly from time to time the tiny sparkle slide given to her by Milly. Whilst television is an object of parody for Rohrwacher and Mereu, as they recycle some tired clichés of contemporary Italian culture, the casting of Bellucci in this role is subtle. In press conferences Rohrwacher speaks of casting Bellucci on the basis of her capacity for “autoironia”, and in this she echoes Kearney’s emphasis on the “pronounced superficiality, theatricality and ironic knowingness of postfeminist glamour” (8). Milly is also “negotiating the contradictory messages of postfeminist culture”, and whilst she cannot award Gelsomina the prize, after the television show she does call her over, remove her wig, and hand her a plain hairgrip (no sparkle), as if to comment upon the underside of traditional feminine performance. Ramazzotti’s white witch in *Bellas mariposas* also carries such irony, in her layering of feminine models, not least of all, in the similar juxtaposition of such glittery stardom with non-professional actors. With her silver bangles, and more glittery hair slides, she is summoned up as Cate prays to the Virgin Mother for assistance, as if to incarnate some kind of powerful female force field, that draws upon every cliché about femininity (she is both beautiful and uncanny in her insight), but that also shatters any religious or realist reading of her as potential role model. These figures act as triggers for re-negotiation and forwards momentum, but not as role models.

RECONFIGURING MASCULINITY

Cate and Gelsomina’s renegotiation of femininity is also articulated is through their relationship with masculinity. In both fables the father figure looms heavily, although in *Bellas mariposas* the big bad wolves of patriarchal and masculine power haunt the plot more obviously. Cate’s father is a seedy, sex-obsessed paedophile who masturbates in the family bathroom, rubs up against women on the bus, and demands fellatio of Cate’s contemporaries. This negative impression of the adult male recurs when a young man follows Cate and Luna from the beach, and accosts them as they eat ice creams on a bench in the town centre. When he asks them to perform fellatio upon him, the girls appear to agree, only for Luna to bite his penis. They run off with thirty euros to spend on more ice cream. The tween-teen girls’ play on and performance of the apparent availability of women in the public sphere is particularly significant here; Luna insists on the man taking out his penis in the main town square, suggesting how pleased he would be to have it done in front of the “palazzo della giustizia”. What Griffin has to say about the power of the tween girl’s consumption, unsettling because it is “constituted as for themselves and their female friends”, is particularly significant here (35).

Thus Luna and Cate survive the threat of sex work, through playful performance, and spend the money on ice cream. Nonetheless the improbable, fabular manner in which they respond to the threat reminds us quite how tough they would have to be to maintain their autonomy in the face of male sexual pressure. The paternal threats are subtler in *Le meraviglie* and moderated by a gruff paternal intensity that sees Wolfgang sacrifice the family’s last savings to buy Gelsomina the absurd camel she dreamt of as a young girl (but no longer wants). Other grown men channel incestuous desire, such as Wolfgang’s old political buddy, on a brief visit to the farm, who comments lecherously that Gelsomina has become a “woman”, reminding her of her childhood attachment to her “babbo” and stirring up trouble by eliciting her desire to go to Milan. In both films male financial inadequacy is narrativized, meaning that it does not need to be displaced onto anxiety about the girl and her premature sexualisation. It is precisely because we see Wolfgang’s mismanagement of the family finances, and Cate’s father’s false claim of invalid benefit to avoid work, that the girls are able to “survive the sexual”.

The boy, by contrast, emerges as a vulnerable figure to be protected from the world by the girls, reversing the Oedipal narrative typically casting boys as the heroes of Italian cinema. If sexuality makes older male figures threatening, it renders boys vulnerable. In *Le meraviglie* Martin is frightened away by the older woman, Coco’s predatory advances when she tries to force him and Gelsomina into a performance of adult sexuality. A beautiful, silent boy, much smaller and shorter than Gelsomina, he is wooed by Gelsomina’s action. It is she who heroically returns to the island with Martin’s belongings, paddling herself alone across the lake on a surfboard, in order to comfort and to say goodbye to him before he escapes his social worker’s surveillance. In the cave Martin and Gelsomina are shown alternately sleeping curled up together, and at play laughing with their shadows, evoking Platonic references that here gather new meaning in relation to the secret and impenetrable world of children. Gelsomina returns to the family fold and reconciliation with her father, able to perform a new skill: Martin’s whistle, suggesting that her performance repertoire will continue to expand in this personal and idiosyncratic manner. Cate’s chubby, bespectacled Gigi, an unconventional love object, offers her a more ambiguous opportunity for heroism. Twice, out of jealousy, she decides against warning him of her brother’s intent to kill him. Gigi has chosen the more sexually available Samantha Corduleris over Cate’s virginal ambition and she spits on the couple in revenge. Nonetheless, Cate softens and begs for divine intervention, which unleashes a series of peculiar events that prevent Toni from shooting Gigi.

GIRL PERFORMERS AND GIRL FUTURES

The kinds of performance that Rohrwacher and Mereu elicit from their female leads could not be more different. Cate’s performance is constructed by Mereu as an energetic address to camera, a performance that causes us to reflect uncertainly upon Podda’s status as non-professional performer, selected from this same area of Cagliari. She is brilliant and talkative in her self-presentation, often in frontal close up, her expressive facial range shifting rapidly from girlish giggles to hardened defiance as she confronts the challenges presented by her environment. By contrast Rohrwacher contains Alexandra Maria Lungu’s performance of Gelsomina within a completely different register, one that references the “opaque-interest focus”, an expression which Lury borrows from Susan Honeyman, to suggest that some cinema helps us to see how impossible it would be to understand the world from a child’s point of view (Lury, *A High Wind*, 452). Lungu says and emotes little, constructed within the film as what Annette Kuhn describes as “blankly eloquent” (McMahon 473). The camera dwells instead on her beautiful and at times androgynous facial profile as she quietly observes the world around her. What is the relationship between these performances, their presentation within the film and the status of the girl performer herself? Where does this leave our conception of the girl performer and her labour? Lury describes the risks of child actors, who “balance precariously on the divide between seeming and being, and [...] continually undermine the belief that while performing as an actor (playing a character) this performance is held – not necessarily securely but importantly – as distinct from the actor’s individual, everyday, off-screen performance of self” (Lury *The Child*, 151). For John David Rhodes this distinction is less of a problem than the question of “an uncertainty regarding their agency in having chosen to perform. We worry over the role ‘played’ here (performative metaphors seem inescapable) by “stage mums” or other pushy parental types” (Rhodes 455). In both these concerns we can see clear parallels with anxieties about girlhood – is it natural or acquired, is girl culture imposed or assumed? In examining questions of girl performance, these films allow us to develop an idea of girlhood itself as a creative performance in which there is some agency.

In recent commentary on non-professional actors, Pierini cites both these films in celebrating a new turn in Italian use of the child non-professional in which much time is invested in finding “una terza via tra non attorialità e professionismo”. Usefully Pierini explores the casting and coaching strategies for the children of the films in some detail. However in the case of *Bellas mariposas* she takes Mereu’s claim that by dint of spending a long time with the protagonists there was “un rapporto di “osmosi” tra la sceneggiatura e le interpreti” at face value (15). In fact when we compare the film with its source text, Sergio Atzeni’s *Bellas mariposas* (Sellerio 1996), it is difficult to understand how the children’s input has altered the monologue, although it might well have impacted upon the performance. The supplementary material accompanying the DVD would support my hypothesis. The short film “Falena” disjointedly recounts the making of the film, and initially seems at pains to align the character of Sara Podda with that of Cate. As it opens, she is boldly climbing a tall metal frame singing “Mambo italiano”, while adults try to persuade her to get to work. The short is named after the image of a moth attracted to the lights of Podda’s star dressing table. We watch Podda also as the film closes, as she watches the moth in the lights. “Falena” explores, self-consciously, the risky status of the child performer that *Bellas mariposas* itself has also struggled to resolve. Mereu spent a year teaching in the area in preparation for the film, and is clearly profoundly aware of the relationship between the film-making and the girls’ futures. Yet in one scene we see Mereu teaching Cate how to smoke, insisting that she make it look natural, and raising the question of how much else Sara Podda and other girl protagonists have learnt during the making of the film; *Bellas mariposas* contains moments of a painfully explicit nature, such as when the girl playing Samantha Corduleris wipes semen off her shoulder after Cate’s father has abused her, or when Cate and Luna evade the demand for sex work. Elsewhere in “Falena” we hear Mereu talking to Sara (Cate) and Maya (Luna), warning them that they are going to have to kiss. The girls reject this as a display of lesbianism, betraying Mereu’s discourse of “osmosi” and revealing instead the imposition of a particular viewpoint on their performance. This undermines Cate’s apparently independent address to camera and Mereu’s insistence that “questi palazzi erano e restano inviolati dal cinema” (an interesting choice of vocabulary that inadvertently positions the location as a subject traditionally gendered female and the camera lens as male). If we return to the feature film for a moment, it is interesting to note how Mereu has tried to incorporate this awareness of risk into *Bellas mariposas* itself, if not entirely successfully. Mereu himself saw Cate’s self-conscious narration as the key to his adaptation of Atzeni’s story, but one that is also fraught with risk (Stellino). At one point, he has Cate grow angry with her silent interlocutors, whom we imagine to be the director and viewer, when she perceives an impatience on our part with her baroque story-telling. She tells us to leave the bathroom. The camera appears to exit and we hear her voice emerging from behind the bathroom door. However, we then cut to an image of her back in the bathroom, telling us we can come back in, but before a cut to an image from outside the door of her opening the door permitting re-entry. The sequence is a clear commentary over the top of the performer that Cate does not have the power she thinks she has over the editing of her performance, reminding us that this *is* a performance, and it is one in which Sara Podda is also being strategically deployed. Returning to the controversial kiss that closes the film, after Cate and Luna kiss, the two girls look directly to camera and burst into embarrassed laughter, which seems intended to remind us this performance is imposed, one that the performers themselves see through and question for its romantic framing of their girlhood (an interpretation supported by “Falena”). But is it enough? Like the moth, or the butterfly, this film too hovers on the brink of that question, folding its impropriety back into its symbolic fabric.

In the case of *Le meraviglie*, the DVD extras and material on the website cultivate even more carefully a discourse around girlhood and performance. The rhetoric describing the training of the child actors conveyed by Pierini is similar to that of Mereu’s:

Il lavoro di preparazione è durato circa quattro mesi, di cui due in location, durante il quali la coach ha trascorso il maggior tempo possibile con le ragazzine, per conoscerle, osservarle, comprendere le loro caratteristiche e abitudini, il loro modo di parlare, e far sì che la sceneggiatura arrivasse a plasmarsi su di loro. (16)

In interview Rohrwacher is clear that the script was not open to improvisation, so that expression “che la sceneggiatura arrivasse a plasmarsi su di loro” is an intriguing one. The girls are taught to occupy the world of the script, which might be an adventure, or even something more. There is a sense in this material that the risks at stake in taking children out of their everyday lives and training them this intensively, whilst not necessarily making actors of them, must be balanced and justified. On the DVD extra labelled “I postal notebooks moleskin disegnate dalle protagoniste”, evidence of this process is carefully displayed in the form of a diary/scrapbook by the younger child actor, Agnese Graziani, who plays Marinella. It is directed to the film production company, Tempesta, as a big thank you for the excitement of this adventure and shows happy photographs of her with the cast and director, and a child’s drawings and comments celebrating the experience and underlining her lack of ambition: “Non avrei mai pensato di fare un film. Grazie!” In press conferences, the focus is instead on protagonist Alexandra Maria Lungu. In Cannes and Venice, Rohrwacher recounts the anecdote about how preparation for the film involved training Lungu as a beekeeper. The girl’s mother apparently said that at least if the film didn’t work out, her daughter would have a job: being able to work with bees.[[2]](#footnote-2) This anecdote is telling in its address of both girl futures - the consequences of economic crisis - and the unspoken of child performance – how much is she paid? Who gets the money? Some of these anxieties are written into the film’s own preoccupation with the problem of “child labour” that subtends the plot (all the girls are working underage). A further reflection on risk and performance occurs in the detail that opened this chapter: the bees crawling out of Gelsomina’s mouth. At the Cannes press conference we are told that they carefully selected the male bees that have no sting for the performance. Here too then, a central metaphor of the film works to vindicate the risk and impropriety that surrounds the child performer.

There is certainly a heightened sensitivity to the child performer that not only marks the background to the making of these two films, and their promotion, but is also folded into the films themselves. Re-visiting this textual reading, these films thematize, self-reflexively, their own impact on the girls’ lives: in their encounter with the two female stars that grace the films, in their reflection upon child labour, in *Bellas mariposas* the self-consciously intrusive nature of the camera, in *Le meraviglie* in the metaphor of the bees without a sting. In both films the girls bypass difficult judgments about the corrupting power of popular media to proffer their own unique interpretations of what happens to them as a result of these encounters, emerging changed, but not damaged. As Gottschall writes of rural girl films, in some ways these films are morality tales, as the girls’ interventions resolve family tensions and the crisis of adolescence, albeit in unconventional ways. This is a resolution the film-makers clearly hope reflects the child performers’ own experience of film-making. Performance as a trope for girlhood in these films is inevitably self-exonerating, but it is also genuinely inquisitive about how it might be used to re-consider a girl’s agency beyond the usual dichotomies of risk and power.

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1. I would like to thank the editors and Dana Renga for useful comments on previous versions of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wJHqMm-9C8, accessed 22/11/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)