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Innocent Desire: Female Desire and Bodily Autonomy in L'arte Della Gioia

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Abstract. This essay takes the 2025 miniseries L'arte della gioia (The Art of Joy) as its object of study, examining how it reconstructs the representation of female desire and bodily autonomy through narrative strategies, visual aesthetics, and symbolic imagery. The series, adapted from Goliarda Sapienza's once—banned radical novel, follows the coming—of—age and resistance of its protagonist Modesta, while challenging the gendered power structures rooted in the "male gaze" of traditional cinema and television. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze," Teresa de Lauretis's concept of "gender as technology," and Anneke Smelik's discussions of feminist film aesthetics, this paper analyzes how the series employs cinematic language, spatial narration, and bodily imagery to liberate female desire from the frameworks of guilt and punishment, and to reconfigure it as an active, self—determined form of "innocent desire." Through its reciprocal depictions of intimate relationships, its ethical handling of scenes of sexual violence, and its recurring use of symbolic elements such as the corset, the sea, and the image of Saint Agatha, the series constructs a trajectory of female development that moves from repression to liberation. This study argues that The Art of Joy is not only a historical drama but also a feminist visual practice, which, by rejecting the objectification and eroticization of the female body, endows desire with political significance and subjectivity, thereby opening new possibilities for female narratives on the contemporary screen.

Keywords: Female desire, bodily autonomy, male gaze, feminist film theory

1. Introduction

The portrayal of female desires and bodily autonomy in films and television has long been a controversial area. Traditionally, female sexual desires were often placed within the framework of sin, shame, or punishment — especially in the patriarchal and Catholic cultural context that shaped Italian film culture. Against this backdrop, the 2025 miniseries The Art of Joy (adapted from the radical and once—banned novel by Giora Alda Sapientza) breaks new ground in reimagining the visual presentation of female desires. The core of the story is Modesta — a protagonist who unabashedly pursues sexual pleasure, emotional intimacy, and social power, yet never submits to the moralistic frameworks that usually constrain female characters. As director Valeria Golinno emphasizes, Modesta is not a woman who must atone for her passions, but rather a person who lives "without regret, without shame".

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This article contends that The Art of Joy reimagines female desires as agency rather than crossing boundaries, and transforms sexuality into a form of self—determination. By drawing on Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, Teresa de Lauretis's concept of "gender as technology", and feminist film academic achievements on the reproduction of female pleasure, the theoretical framework of this study consists of three interrelated dimensions [1,2]. Firstly, Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory provides a critical baseline for understanding how film pleasure historically constructs around women as visual objects [1]. Secondly, Teresa de Lauretis's concept of gender as "gender as technology" expands this analysis, emphasizing how the film itself participates in the production of gender subjectivity — both imposing limitations and offering possibilities for subversion [2]. Thirdly, based on Anik Smelik's discussion on feminist film aesthetics, this article explores how "The Art of Happiness" experiments with new reproduction models, presenting female desires as active, self—directed, and mutually constitutive existences, rather than objects objectified [3].

This paper analyzes how the series reconfigures the dynamic relationship between spectatorship, desire, and power. Through its treatment of space—from the convent to aristocratic palaces to political salons—and its depiction of both heterosexual and queer relationships, the series positions Modesta's body as an autonomous site rather than a controlled object. By situating the series within debates on Italian cultural traditions and contemporary feminist screen practices, this paper elucidates how The Art of Joy enacts the politics of "innocent desire," as I define it: a stance that refuses to anchor female sexuality in shame, punishment, or sacrifice. This study employs a qualitative research approach, based on a close textual and visual analysis of the episodes of The Art of Joy. Rather than treating the series merely as a straightforward literary adaptation, this study approaches it as both a visual and cultural text. The analysis examines how Sapienza's radical ideas are rearticulated through the specific affordances of the television medium—namely, composition, editing, staging, and the orchestration of gaze and gesture. Particular attention is given to intimate encounters, to spaces of confinement and circulation (ranging from the convent to aristocratic palaces), and to the recurrent aesthetic strategies through which visibility, agency, and power are negotiated. In dialogue with this framework, scholarship on Sapienza's novel further illuminates central themes, including bodily autonomy, the multiplicity of selves, and what critics have described as "fractured desire." As Stefania Boccelli notes, Sapienza's writing consistently positions the body as a site of identity and power, while Charlotte Rose emphasizes the novel's resistance to normative gender and sexual roles [4,5]. These insights provide a literary foundation for evaluating the visual strategies of the adaptation. Taken together, this theoretical framework enables an interpretation of The Art of Joy as a feminist reconfiguration of desire—what I describe as the politics of "innocent desire." Within this paradigm, pleasure is understood not as an act of transgression but as a mode of liberation.

2. Analysis

2.1. Background

The story begins in 1900 in Sicily, Modesta, the main character, has a poor family background. Her father is dissolute and irresponsible, while her mother shows preferential treatment toward her older sister Tina, who has Down syndrome. At the age of eight, while left alone at home, Modesta is sexually assaulted by her father. Her mother confronts the father about this, leading to a violent argument, after which she is locked in the storage room by him. That night, Modesta carries a kerosene lamp to check on her mother but accidentally knocks it over, starting a fire. She flees, leaving her mother and sister behind. Modesta is taken in by Mother Leonora, the abbess of a

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convent, and becomes a novice nun. She is quickly drawn to the gentle, beautiful, and erudite Leonora, who also shows her particular favour, making Modesta her protégée. One rainy night, Leonora invites Modesta to stay in her quarters. In the middle of the night, Modesta hears Leonora moaning while masturbating. Gathering her courage, Modesta confesses her feelings, only to be met with shock and rejection. When she learns that Leonora plans to send her to an orphanage, Modesta, in a fit of rage, pushes Leonora from the tower. However, the so—called "orphanage" turns out to be the castle of Leonora's noble family. There, Modesta discovers that Leonora came from an aristocratic background but was sent to the convent by her father after becoming pregnant out of wedlock with a tenant farmer. The household includes Leonora's mother, Princess Gaia; Leonora's daughter, Beatrice; and Leonora's brother, who has been confined to the attic due to a congenital deformity. Modesta and Beatrice fall in love, and through a series of meticulously calculated actions, Modesta seizes control of the family's power. Yet, upon reaching the pinnacle of authority, she realizes that what she truly yearns for is the long—dreamed—of sea.

2.2. Representation of female desire and bodily autonomy

One of the most striking features of the series is its bold portrayal of female desire. In most traditional cinematic narratives, the female body is often constructed as an object of visual pleasure rather than as an agent of action. As Laura Mulvey pointed out in her seminal essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, mainstream Hollywood cinema is structured around the “male gaze”: the interplay of camera, narrative, and spectator positions transforms female characters into objects to be looked at and desired, serving the fantasies and desires of male viewers [1]. Within this framework, women’s presence is often reduced to a foil for male characters and the projection of male desire, with their value simplified to the visibility and eroticization of their bodies.

This phenomenon has been further elaborated in subsequent feminist film scholarship. For example, Teresa de Lauretis introduced the concept of “technology of gender,” emphasizing that cinema not only represents gender roles but also actively shapes gendered subjectivity through its visual language, thereby continually reinforcing women’s passive positioning [2]. Anneke Smelik further observes that traditional cinematic aesthetics-such as the gaze, close-ups, and slow motion-tend to fragment and eroticize the female body, turning it into an object of visual consumption rather than allowing it to function as a narrative driver or a site of active desire [3].

Therefore, it can be argued that the representation of women in most films perpetuates a cultural logic of gender inequality: women are not drivers of the narrative but rather symbols to be gazed at and desired. This mechanism of visual representation not only objectifies the female body but also erases their possibility of expressing their own desires and autonomous choices.

Unlike mainstream cinema’s traditional tendency to symbolise and objectify the female body, The Art of Joy actively challenges the logic of the “male gaze” through its narrative and visual strategies. The protagonist, Modesta, is not constructed as a passive object of desire but is portrayed with clear agency in expressing and pursuing her own desires. The cinematography is particularly significant in this regard: when Modesta explores her body or engages in intimate relationships, the director avoids conventional eroticising and fragmenting techniques, opting instead for eye-level, fluid camerawork that emphasises her autonomy and the legitimacy of her desires. This visual approach aligns with Anneke Smelik’s concept of a “feminist film aesthetics”, which proposes a reconfiguration of the relationship between the camera, narrative, and the gaze—enabling female characters to be not merely objects of spectacle, but subjects of desire and drivers of the narrative [3].

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Meanwhile, Modesta's body in the series functions not only as a visual sign but also as a bearer of political and social meanings. As emphasized by Charlotte Ross, the original novel by Goliarda Sapienza had already disrupted conventional frameworks of gender and sexuality at the textual level, highlighting how "disrupted desires" serve as a crucial source of female subjectivity [4]. The television adaptation further visualizes this narrative, allowing female desire to be portrayed "without sin," thereby opening a new political space for the representation of the female body in audiovisual media.

In The Art of Joy, director Valeria Golino almost entirely abandons the conventional perspective of the "male gaze", instead employing a cinematographic approach akin to anthropological observation to restore female desire to its authentic state. In the series, the body ceases to function as an object of spectatorship and consumption, becoming instead a site for female subjectivity, self-knowledge, and the articulation of desire [1,3]. The camera repeatedly focuses on Modesta's bodily awakening throughout her development: in childhood, she curiously requests permission from Tazu to touch herself, marking her first conscious exploration of bodily pleasure; Leonora, the abbess, touches herself late at night, revealing the tension between sexual desire as a human instinct and the strictures of religious asceticism; after being rejected by Leonora, Modesta opens her legs under the window in the rain, confronting and embracing her desire for the first time.

As the narrative progresses, the most groundbreaking sequence depicts the intimate relationship between Modesta and Beatrice. Here, the camera presents their nude bodies without reservation, shifting the emphasis away from eroticized visual pleasure toward the assertion of female bodily autonomy and the right to actively explore erotic intimacy. This visual strategy exemplifies a deliberate reclamation of female desire as agentive, self—directed, and central to narrative development, rather than a spectacle for voyeuristic consumption.

The recurring image of the corset belt further reinforces this theme. Mother Leonora tied the corset belt for Modesta by her own hands, symbolizing that desires were bound and suppressed by religion and patriarchal order [5]; while when Modesta and Beatrice first kissed, Beatrice unfastened the corset belt for her, marking the liberation of desires and the return of the self. The contrast between restraint and liberation visually represents the battleground where the body confronts discipline and resistance.

What is particularly worth noting is the relationship between Modesta and her former lover Carmine, Leonora's old flame. This plot has sparked controversy: some criticized it as an unnecessary plot design, seemingly suggesting that Modesta was exchanging her body for power. However, when Modesta loudly shouted "I do whatever I want!" at the door of Carmine's room, this scene can be more appropriately interpreted as a powerful declaration of sexual autonomy. When Modesta was young, she had been sexually abused by her father, and was in an absolute passive and oppressed state; yet at this moment, she chose to take the initiative and have a relationship with a man of the same age as her father, even being deliberately designed by the director to have similar clothing and appearance. This active choice contrasts sharply with the forced experiences she endured in her childhood, symbolizing her challenge and transcendence of the patriarchal order, and also indicating that she has psychologically completed the process of "patricide" [4]. She is no longer a passive victim but takes control of her body and decides the object and manner of her desires. This transformation is highly disruptive in the context of the 19th century, as it directly rejects the social norm of "chastity" as a measure of a woman's value.

The director Valeria Golino and the lead actress, Tecla Insolia, further emphasized the central role of the body in the drama during the interview. Insolia pointed out that, compared to the "body" itself, what is more crucial is "body consciousness": Modesta is well aware of how to obtain pleasure and

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strength through her body, and uses this as a strategy and tool for identity construction [6]. Her body serves as both a medium of cognition and power, and also as a field of love and being loved, manipulation and being manipulated. Director Golino stated that in the original work of Goliarda Sapienza, pleasure first stems from the experience of the body, rather than the abstract spiritual level [7]. Therefore, the various bodies that appear in the play-Modesta's beautiful body, Leonora's repressed body, and the body of Princess Gaia in its transformation-all symbolize the diversity and complexity of desire. Golino emphasized that her goal is not to use the body as a provocative or slogan-like political stance, but to allow it to naturally integrate into the narrative and become an organic part of the story and character development.

Thus, through its visual language and symbolic strategies, The Art of Joy reconfigures the female body from an “object of the gaze” into a “subject of desire.” In this transformation, the series not only contests the entrenched tradition of eroticized female representation in mainstream film and television but also invests the body with layered meanings-as a locus of desire, a vehicle of knowledge, and a site of political agency.

2.3. Oppression and resistance

The miniseries The Art of Joy profoundly reveals the oppression and tragic fate of women under the religious and patriarchal order. Modesta suffered sexual assault from her biological father in her childhood. Saint Leonora was forced to enter a convent due to her pregnancy before marriage, and her daughter was confined to a castle for life due to her physical disability. These narrative scenes not only reflect the vulnerable situation of medieval women in their families, religions and social structures, but also highlight how patriarchal culture constrains women's bodies and desires through discipline, punishment and humiliation.

As the central figure of the series, however, Modesta emerges as a rebel against her era. She refuses to conform to conventional social discipline, openly embraces her desires for physical pleasure, power, and status, and consistently employs strategic action to break through the constraints of patriarchy and religion. While some interpretations reduce her to a “femme fatale,” a “strong female lead,” or even simplify her narrative as a “revenge fantasy,” the miniseries more accurately traces a trajectory of female becoming-illustrating how she forges her subjectivity within the tension between desire and oppression. As Elizabeth Grosz contends, the female body serves not only as a site of cultural inscription and discipline but also as a ground for desire, agency, and resistance [6]. Modesta’s development embodies this “politics of the body”: through continuously acknowledging and mastering her own desires, she gradually sheds the taboos and shame imposed upon women by religious and patriarchal structures.

In mainstream film and television narratives, the representation of desire and sexuality is often dominated by men, while women are portrayed as passive recipients. Since ancient times, society has regarded the chastity and reputation of women as more valuable than life, while being particularly lenient towards men: men flaunt their multiple mistresses, while women are accused of being depraved due to their instinctive desires. This gender double standard not only reveals the inequality of sexuality, but also reflects the inequality of power [8]. Over a long period of narrative accumulation, women's desires have been continuously stigmatized, and the general public has even gradually regarded this inequality as a matter of course.

At this point, The Art of Joy demonstrates a unique breakthrough. It dares to break away from the traditional narrative framework, presenting the exploitation of the body and desires by patriarchy from a female perspective, and focusing on how women respond to this oppression through resistance and subjectivity. This narrative strategy echoes the "disrupted desire" analyzed by

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Charlotte Ross [4], that is, by re-writing and visualizing desires, the female subject not only challenges social norms but also reconstructs her own happiness and freedom. Thus, this series is not only about the personal growth story of Modesta, but also a female liberation fable written in the form of images.

2.4. Cinematic expression

The series demonstrates remarkable innovation in its visual language. A particularly representative example is its handling of Modesta's sexual assault scene: rather than adhering to the conventional "victim gaze" prevalent in mainstream media—which often exploits female suffering as visual spectacle—the director deliberately focuses the camera on the perpetrator's distorted face. This approach forces the audience to confront the brutality of the aggressor directly, avoiding visual re—victimization. Such a technique aligns with Carol J. Clover's critique of the "victim perspective" in horror film studies, reflecting the director's conscious reconsideration of gendered narrative conventions in visual storytelling [9].

Furthermore, the extensive use of natural lighting in depicting the female body lends the imagery a texture reminiscent of classical oil paintings. This aesthetic strategy not only emphasizes the naturalness and authenticity of the body but also effectively resists commercialized erotic gazing, restoring the female body to its essence as a site of life and desire.

The motif of the sea permeates the entire series, serving as an internal thread reflecting Modesta's spiritual and emotional desires. As a child, she repeatedly asks her friend Tuzzu, "What is the sea like?" and gazes into his blue eyes, saying, "It's like seeing the sea." Later, each person she loves—Mother Leonora, Beatrice, and Carmine—without exception, has blue eyes. Here, the blue gaze becomes a substitute for the sea, embodying her ongoing pursuit of freedom and subjectivity.

Even after attaining power and arriving in Catania with Beatrice amidst a glamorous high society, she does not indulge in material or political allure. Instead, she runs through the city until she finally reaches the sea. The story ends abruptly at this moment: gazing at the water, she smiles with a sense of release. Clearly, the sea carries profound symbolic meaning—representing freedom, the self, and boundless possibility. As Gaston Bachelard explores in Water and Dreams, water and the ocean often embody liberating imagery for the human psyche [10]. In Modesta's journey, the sea functions as a metaphor for her subjectivity and a symbol of her true mastery over her body and destiny. By reaching the sea, she not only fulfills a childhood dream but also completes her transformation—from desire and power to self—realization.

Another striking motif is the recurring image of Saint Agatha, which forms a significant metaphorical thread throughout The Art of Joy. In Catholic tradition, Agatha—venerated as a model of "holy femininity" centered on chastity and suffering—was tortured by having her breasts severed after refusing to submit to male desire. As Caroline Walker Bynum has illustrated, medieval hagiographies often constructed female sanctity through physical anguish, framing the body as a site of control and sacrifice [11].

In the series, Modesta's early gaze upon the painting of Saint Agatha upon entering the convent symbolizes her entry into this system of religious discipline. Later, when she is punished for confessing her desire, she hallucinates the Virgin morphing into Agatha offering her breasts on a plate—a powerful visualization of how religion and patriarchy jointly police female sexuality through punishment and symbolic violence.

However, as the narrative progresses, the image of Agatha is deliberately recoded by the director. If traditional narratives cast Agatha as a passive martyr, in Modesta's journey she becomes a

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reference point for resistance. Rather than replicating the saint's logic of sacrifice, Modesta employs her body as a medium of power and desire, transforming pleasure into an act of subjectivity.

This shift can be understood through Judith Butler's framework of "the reproduction of and resistance to norms through the body" by actively embracing her desire, Modesta rebels against and transcends the "Agatha model of martyrdom [12]." The reappearance of the saint's image in Catania —Agatha's historical place of martyrdom—in the final episodes underscores this reversal of historical narrative. No longer a potential martyr, Modesta emerges as a female subject who wields her body as a weapon and her desire as a source of agency.

3. Discussion

The adaptation process of The Art of Joy can itself be regarded as a feminist allegory. When Goliarda Sapienza's novel was first written, it was rejected by over 40 publishers for its radical portrayal of female desire, sexual autonomy, and resistance to patriarchy—themes considered unacceptable at the time. Today, however, it has been rediscovered and celebrated as a classic. This shift is not merely a coincidence in literary history but reflects broader transformations in social attitudes. In her adaptation, director Valeria Golino has inherited and intensified this feminist stance, making the visual language of the series itself an act of resistance against traditional narratives.

Among the most representative visual strategies is the handling of the sexual violence scene. During the sequence depicting Modesta's assault by her father, the camera avoids focusing on the victim's bodily suffering, and instead directs attention to the perpetrator's contorted face. This approach subverts the conventional "victim gaze" prevalent in mainstream media, refusing to commodify the victim's pain and forcing the audience to confront the visceral brutality of the aggressor. This technique resonates with Carol J. Clover's critique of the "victim perspective" in horror film theory, demonstrating the director's conscious reflection on gendered narrative conventions and her commitment to ethical storytelling [9].

On an aesthetic level, the director extensively employs natural lighting to film the female body, giving the imagery a texture reminiscent of oil paintings. This approach highlights the body's naturalness and authenticity while avoiding commercialized eroticization, presenting the body as a vessel of vitality and desire rather than an object for consumption. As Anneke Smelik argues, feminist film aesthetics involve creating a new visual language that allows the female body to appear as an active subject rather than a passive object of the gaze [3]. In The Art of Joy, the body becomes a site of self—awareness and liberation: in Modesta's intimate relationship with Beatrice, the unbinding of the corset symbolizes the release of desire and the return to the self. Conversely, Leonora's repression and self—denial illustrate the profound disciplinary impact of religious discourse on the body.

The series further employs symbolic imagery to deepen its exploration of oppression and liberation. The recurring image of Saint Agatha—whose legend of having her breasts severed after defying patriarchal authority serves as a metaphor for the violent control of the female body—resonates throughout the narrative. In Modesta's hallucinations, the overlapping figures of the Virgin Mary and Agatha subtly reveal the connection between religion, martyrdom, and the repression of desire. Meanwhile, the motif of the sea forms another narrative thread: from Modesta's childhood gaze into Tuzzu's blue eyes, to the blue—eyed lovers of her adulthood, and finally to her arrival at the seashore in Catania, the sea consistently functions as a reflection of her inner world. In the series, the sea represents not only desire and escape but also subjectivity and self—realization. When Modesta finally faces the sea, she completes her transformation from a victim of oppression to a woman in full command of her own identity and destiny.

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4. Conclusion

This article explores how The Art of Joy presents female desires and bodily autonomy through narrative strategies, visual aesthetics, and symbolic imagery. Unlike the common mainstream film and television traditions, this drama does not objectify women or bind the audience's gaze to the male perspective. Instead, it highlights a clear female perspective. By refusing to present the suffering of women in a voyeuristic manner, depicting intimate relationships as mutual rather than exploitative, and repositioning the female body as a field of pleasure, power, and knowledge, the drama effectively subverts the traditional visual and desire hierarchy system.

The analysis shows that The Art of Joy is not only a historical drama, but also a feminist reinterpretation of desires, challenging religious, patriarchal and cultural constraints. Symbols such as the symbolism of tightening and loosening corsets, the repeated appearance of Saint Agatha, and the final encounter with the sea, together depict a narrative trajectory from repression to liberation. Therefore, this play not only successfully adapted Sapientza's radical novel, but also transformed its core message into contemporary visual language, resisting the tendencies of commercialization and voyeurism.

Beyond its textual analysis, the cultural significance of The Art of Joy resides in its refusal to either demonize or commodify female desire. Instead, it articulates a narrative model in which pleasure is framed as a legitimate mode of self—realization rather than reduced to sin or spectacle. Within a media landscape still saturated by patriarchal narratives, the series intervenes by inviting audiences to reflect upon—and to imagine—alternative configurations of desire, ones that affirm female agency, dignity, and autonomy.

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