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Mapping Italian Women's Filmmaking: Urban Space In The Cinema Of The New Millennium

Laura Di Bianco
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MAPPING ITALIAN WOMEN’S FILMMAKING:
URBAN SPACE IN THE CINEMA OF THE NEW MILLENIUM

by

LAURA DI BIANCO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2014
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LAURA DI BIANCO
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

MAPPING ITALIAN WOMEN’S FILMMAKING: URBAN SPACE IN THE CINEMA OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

by

Laura Di Bianco

Advisor: Professor Giancarlo Lombardi

My dissertation lies at the intersection of Italian studies, film studies, women’s studies, and urban studies. Applying gender studies and feminist theoretical perspectives, I trace a thematic map of contemporary Italian women’s cinema (2000–2012) that investigates female subjectivity in urban contexts. Examining the works of the filmmakers Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Wilma Labate, Roberta Torre, and Alice Rohrwacher, I identify a common tendency to treat locations like characters, apply similar modalities of incorporating city-views into the narration, and recurrently construct parallels between physical journeys through cities and inner journeys of the self. As a prism through which to look at contemporary Italian society, the city articulates themes such as women’s alienation and social invisibility, the challenge of reconciling motherhood and paid work, the debasement of the female body, and the role of institutions such as the Church and the family. The most prominent visual leitmotif in this cinematic production is that of the wandering woman contemplating the cityscape. What does walking signify in these works? During the women’s liberation movement of the late sixties and seventies, the appropriation of public space was a form of resistance to patriarchal confinement of women to domestic spaces. The act of female ‘streetwalking,’ typically associated with prostitution, was re-
configured as an act of self-liberation. Through a close reading of the films, I argue that female *flânerie*, in all the articulations it takes in each film, represents an act of emancipation, an act of introspection, and a search for position in society. Furthermore, the image of the woman contemplating the city signifies, for filmmakers who struggle to appropriate the medium of film and carve a space in a male-dominated industry, an assertion of authorship. By identifying these female authorial voices and a common aesthetic project, my dissertation aims to address the knowledge gap about women’s artistic expression while leading to a more complex understanding of Italian contemporary cinema.
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I thank all the filmmakers: Francesca Comencini, Wilma Labate, Paola Randi, Alice Rohrwacher, Marina Spada, and Roberta Torre for the interviews they granted, permission to use stills from their films, and for providing non-commercial copies of their works with English subtitles, which enabled me to show their films to my students at Hunter College.

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A mio padre

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INTRODUCTION

Mapping Italian Women’s Filmmaking: The Issue of Invisibility

To put a film together, in the sense of finding the money, is an adventure for any director, a test of patience and self-confidence. For a woman filmmaker the search for finance is fraught with such horrifying experiences that only a lively sense of humor can save her from being destroyed by it.

Annabella Miscuglio, filmmaker

Perhaps we should be happier in our cities were we to respond to them as to nature or dreams: as objects of exploration and interpretation, setting for voyages of discovery.

Elizabeth Wilson, The Sphinx in the City (1991)

Cinema directed by women filmmakers in Italy suffers from a dual problem: on the one hand, critics scarcely write about it, on the other, the directors, who very often self-produce their films, struggle to gain visibility in the film industry through regular distribution channels in movie theaters. From the sixties to the eighties, only two female directors gained the attention and recognition of film critics and audiences: Lina Wertmuller and Liliana Cavani. Both debuted during the sixties, have built up extensive filmographies, became internationally renowned through work outside the Italian film industry, and several studies have been published on their work.
Today, the scene is more complex than it was during the Wertmuller-Cavani ‘duopoly era.’ Since then, numerous women filmmakers have established spaces of their own within the male dominated film industry, and film history is being rewritten, with a few film scholars re-inscribing women filmmakers’ central place within it. Nevertheless, academics, especially those outside of Italy, have limited access to works by Italian women, especially if they are not distributed in home video. This dilemma is worsened by the fact that most of these films are rarely distributed outside of Italy, and, then, screenings are often limited to festivals, making them essentially unavailable to the general public. Moreover, since their audiences are small they are less likely to be ‘cited’ in the subsequent work of other filmmakers, and thus become engaged in audiovisual dialogue and intertextuality. As a result, women’s works have little impact on the ongoing evolution of the Italian cinematic imagery, and scholars struggle to identify the different female authorial voices and compose an overall view on women’s production.

The scholarship on Italian women’s filmmaking, which started blossoming only, is limited. One of the first attempts to map this cinematic production was undertaken by Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti with their book *Off Screen* (1988), a volume born from a seminar held in New York in 1984 on women’s film theory and practice, bringing together Italian and North American film scholars. This study, while combining a discourse on women’s representation with an analysis of films directed by women, also provides a historical overview of women’s cinema by filmmaker and critic Annabella Miscuglio, who traces for the first time a much-needed genealogy.

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1 Annabella Miscuglio is one of the founders of the feminist association of filmmakers active during the late seventies, “Collettivo femminista di cinema.” She is known for her documentary film *Processo per stupro* (1978), the first film to document a trial for rape in Italy. The
Miscuglio highlights the temporal discontinuity of women’s cinematic production. She starts from Elvira Notari—the first and most prolific Italian woman director—who worked in Naples between 1900 and 1930, to whom Bruno later devotes the groundbreaking study *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*. Then she jumps to the sixties, with Lina Wertmuller, who was harshly criticized by feminists for the misogyny concealed in her representation of women. Ignoring the work of Liliana Cavani, she looks at film productions born within the feminist movement like Elda Tattoli and Giovanna Gagliardo’s *Pianeta Venere* (1977) and Sofia Scandurra’s *Io sono mia* (1978), adapted from Dacia Maraini’s novel *Donna in guerra*, as examples of militant cinema. Despite the call for a study of women’s accomplishments during those years in which filmmaking was part of the emancipation project, Miscuglio criticizes feminist cinema for privileging crude political messages over aesthetics, irritating spectators by gratuitous provocation. As a matter of fact, in the filmography included in this volume there are approximately forty filmmakers, among which only Wertmuller, Cavani, Cinzia Th Torrini (now mainly a television director), and Francesca Archibugi continued their artistic careers. While other, more complex factors may have influenced many women directors to discontinue their careers as filmmakers, Miscuglio’s assessment of their aesthetic qualities was clearly insightful.

Documentary was censored and members of the *Collettivo* involved in the project sued. Miscuglio also directed *AA offresi* (1978), a documentary on prostitution shot with hidden cameras. See Tiziana Ferro Regis, *Recent Italian Cinema: Spaces, Contexts, Experiences*. (Leicester, England: Troubador Publishing, 2009), 189.

1 Kaja Silverman in her book *The Acoustic Mirror*, writes that Cavani’s films have been largely neglected by feminist critics, perhaps because her films do not address the topic of sexual oppression. For an extensive analysis of Cavani’s opus see Gaetana Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

2 In this study I provide the film titles in Italian, and in parenthesis, the title in English, only when the film was distributed in United States under an English name.

3 At the time of *Off Screen*’s publication, Francesca Archibugi was about to release her first film *Mignon è partita* (1988).
In the introduction to this volume Bruno and Nadotti write: “In confronting the problem of documenting women’s cinema in Italy, we found zones of repression and suppressed knowledge,” which compelled them to undertake research on Elvira Notari “to initiate a reassessment of her role in the history of Italian cinema and the spectrum of women’s production” (152). In 1993, Bruno published Streetwalking on a Ruined Map, which represents a fundamental contribution to the discourse on cinematic flânerie, as well as to a film analysis that focuses on the construction of space. As mentioned above, this seminal study brings to light the work of the first Italian woman director and producer, Elvira Notari, who was ignored by film historians despite shooting sixty feature films and over one hundred documentaries. Bruno’s approach to the filmic text sets a paradigm for my study, as it conceives Notari’s melodramas as “city-films,” created and shaped by the city in which they were set, Naples.

Even though only three of Notari’s works have survived, Bruno is able to reconstruct the cultural context in which her work was produced and received, by putting the films in relation to women’s popular literature, using film journals and advertising material to re-trace a critical discourse around the filmmaker. Since Notari’s films were all shot on location, with non-professional actors and inter-titles for a Neapolitan dialect not easily intelligible to speakers of standard Italian, Notari appears as precursor of Italian Neorealism. Responding to Patrice Petro’s call for making “the invisible visible,” this book represents a milestone in the feminist project for re-inscribing women in film history. It thus serves as a primary source for the present study.

5 Of Notari’s impressive opus, only three films have survived: A Santanotte (1922), È piccerella (1922), and Fantasia ’e surdate (1927).
In Italy, where no monographs have been published on the topic of women’s filmmaking, one of the most recent attempts to map this cinematic production is Cristina Paternò’s essay “Un cinema al femminile” (A Female Filmmaking), which focuses on films released between 2000 and 2006. As evidence of women’s achievements in filmmaking, Paternò mentions Cristina Comencini’s nomination for an Academy Award for La bestia nel cuore (Don’t Tell, 2006), and states that, according to the data provided by the National Convention of Women in Arts, held in Rome in 2001, 30% of filmmakers in Italy are women. The author herself insinuates doubt surrounding the credibility of this statistic by saying “le donne sono o potrebbero essere il 30% tra i registi” (Women are or might be the 30% of filmmakers) (135). Given that so many Italian films do not find proper distribution and suffer from invisibility in the market, the validity of any poll is questionable. What are the criteria for determining who is a filmmaker? Is it someone who has directed at least one feature film? Or, is it someone who has developed her own poetics through a certain number of films? These, if not many other questions, seriously circumscribe the value of such studies.

Nevertheless, to confirm the lack of critical attention given to women’s cinema, in the same volume that includes Paternò’s contribution (and states uncritically that women comprise 30% of filmmakers), none of the films included in the women’s filmography, with the exception of Alina Marazzi’s documentary films, are examined in the study. Like Paternò, Barbara Maio and Fabiola Proietti undertake the challenge of tracing a map of women’s cinema, which is

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7 The only monograph on women filmmakers published in Italy is L’altra metà dello sguardo by Anita Trivelli, (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1998). This study does not focus on Italian cinema, however, it includes Elvira Notari.

8 Lina Wertmuller was the first woman filmmaker to be nominated for an academy award with Pasqualino Settebellezze (Seven Beauties, 1975).
identified as “nuova tendenza del nostro cinema” (a new trend in our filmmaking, Maio, 98). Lamenting the lack of a common aesthetic project in female filmmaking, Maio highlights the phenomenon of the “autrici interrotte” (Interrupted auteurs). In fact, a conspicuous number of filmmakers in Italy, after struggling to debut, do not go beyond their opera prima, or take many years before securing funds to produce a second film. For example, after Autunno (1999) and Inverno (2002), Nina Di Majo had to wait eight years to make Matrimonio e altri disastri. And, nearly a decade passed before Anna Negri’s first film, In principio erano le mutande (1999), and her second, Riprendimi (2008).

In an interview I conducted in June 2012 (included in the Appendix “Female Authorial Voices”), filmmaker Paola Randi challenges the figures cited by Paternò noting that research conducted by the cultural association Maude (Italian Women in Filmmaking and Media Industry), which monitored Italian films released from 2006 to 2012, shows that women represent only 7% of filmmakers. To confirm Proietti’s account, it also reports that several female directors have had to wait as long as ten years after the release of their first film to find funding for the second. One explanation for these conflicting statistics is the difficulty of surveying artists struggling to find their own space, and therefore suffering from invisibility in the film industry.

Studies discussing a rebirth of contemporary Italian cinema dismiss “il fenomeno della donna regista” (the phenomenon of the woman filmmaker) in a few lines. The expression “il fenomeno della donna regista” itself reveals a certain disbelief around the idea of a woman with

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a camera, almost as if it was an aberration. Despite critical awareness of this “phenomenon,” limited space is allotted to women’s films in the numerous books published on contemporary Italian cinema. To cite one prominent example, in his article “Una certa tendenza del cinema italiano,” (A certain trend of Italian cinema) Alain Bichon lists around fifteen filmmakers on which Italian cinema could rely for a cinematic renaissance and relegates all women filmmakers debuting after 2000 to a footnote. The presence of several voices—even though isolated—of female film critics urging for critical attention to women’s cinema, confirms Danielle Hipkins’ statement: “Italian film studies needs a second take on gender.”

In her article, Hipkins points out that because feminism in Italy worked mainly outside of academia, feminist film theory and gender studies never really connected with film studies, leading to “an impoverished understanding of Italian film history and potentially negative consequences for the Italian film industry” (213). The lack of a feminist approach to film history is reflected both in the atheoretical, descriptive criticisms of “images of women” and by the scarcity of systematic studies on women’s cinema in the new millennium, to which my dissertation is devoted.

While in Italy film criticism continues to neglect women’s ample cinematic production (in so far as directors’ gender is not adopted as a parameter of study), in the United States and England, two studies have been published in the last year. Both volumes, to different extents, contribute to uncover what Bruno and Nadotti call “zones of repression and suppressed knowledge.” The collection of essays titled *Italian Women Filmmakers and the Gendered Screen*, edited by Maristella Cantini, reevaluates known filmmakers such as Elvira Notari, Lina Wertmuller and Liliana Cavani and adds case studies of emergent and less known directors like Alina Marazzi, Marina Spada and Ilaria Borelli. Luciano and Scarparo’s *Reframing Italy* is a
Thematically based analysis that includes a wider number of filmmakers and depicts a detailed picture of the contemporary Italian women’s filmmaking scene. Significantly, the volume considers how Italian cinematic tradition (in particular neorealism) has been reframed in women’s films. 11

Confirming the growing interest in this topic, a film on the subject of Italian women filmmakers titled *Registe, dialogando su una lametta*, directed by Diana Dell’Erba, was just released (March 2014) in the movie theaters of major Italian cities. Mixing fiction and documentary film, Dell’Erba reconstructs the life of Elvira Notari, played by Maria De Medeiros. Fictional inserts in which the character of Notari addresses the camera and narrates her experience as a pioneer woman filmmaker are combined with interviews with film critics and over twenty women directors from different generations. Cecilia Mangini, Francesca Archibugi, Francesca Comencini, Anna Negri, Mariasole Tognazzi, Nina Di Majo, and many others discuss their struggle to conquer a space within a male-dominated industry, and their artistic motivations for embarking on such a profession. Last, but not least, they speak about the absence of a gender studies approach in film criticism that would create possibilities for female directors to discuss responses to their works. The numerous voices (alternated with backstage videos showing women behind the camera) create a dialogue among women artists that, Comencini laments, does not really exist. Rightly, Comencini, one of the few to declare herself a “feminist filmmaker,” argues for the necessity of a “noi collettivo” (a collective us) to overcome the problem of invisibility.

11 Filmmakers included in Luciano and Scarparo’s study are Francesca Comencini, Cristina Comencini, Laura Muscardin, Wilma Labate, Costanza Quatrighio, Francesca Pirani, Alina Marazzi, Antonietta De Lillo, Paola Randi, Paola Sangiovanni, Marina Spada, Anna Negri, Susanna Nicchiarelli, Katia Bernardi, and Flavia Pasquini.
One the most interesting voices in this film is that of Cecilia Mangini. Engaged in documentary filmmaking since the forties, and a collaborator of Pier Paolo Pasolini, she is known for one of the first investigations on the transforming role of women in 1960s Italy — *Essere donna* (1963). Commenting on women’s contribution to the arts she says: “Credo che le donne abbiano da smaltire un senso di esclusione da tanti lavori importanti, un’esclusione che è stata stratificata dentro di noi per millenni.” However, when asked to define women’s cinema she concludes: “Il cinema non è maschile né femminile. Il cinema è cinema e basta.”

Such a lapidary but simplistic statement, one that presumes a gender-neutral stance on filmmaking, raises the long-standing question of the specificity of the female gaze. Teresa De Lauretis, in her seminal work *Technologies of Gender*, questions the legitimacy of the issue because it implies a consideration of women as different *tout court*. As she puts it: “To ask whether there is a feminine or female aesthetic, or a specific language of women’s cinema, is to remain caught in the master’s house” (131). Consequently, what De Lauretis questions is the reason for studying women’s cinema in so far as it is produced by women, and therefore supposedly characterized by a feminine aesthetic. De Lauretis reformulates the question around the female gaze and inquires if it addresses the spectator as female, and what it shows about women. While agreeing with De Lauretis on the impossibility of generalizations that say: “This is the look and sound of women’s cinema, this is its language” (131), I adopt the critical approach of Kaja Silverman and E. Ann Kaplan, who argue that the sexual identity does make a critical difference and sustain the importance of examining women’s cinema investigating female subjectivity.

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12 “I believe that women have to overcome a sense of exclusion from many important professions, an exclusion which is stratified into us for millennia.” (My translation)
13 “Cinema is not female nor male, cinema is cinema, and that’s enough!” (My translation)
My dissertation does not aim to draw an exhaustive map of women’s filmmaking but rather a thematic one, supported by case studies. Observing a substantial body of films directed by women, I identify a recurrent tendency to place female subjectivity in urban contexts. I select a group of ten films produced in the new millennium (between 2000 and 2012), directed by filmmakers Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Wilma Labate, Roberta Torre, and Alice Rohrwacher. In these films, where the cities of Milan, Rome, Naples and Reggio Calabria play a central role in the narration, I observe that the most prominent visual leitmotif is that of the woman (or female adolescent) wandering throughout the city. This figure, reminiscent of female characters from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La notte* (1961) and Federico Fellini’s *Le notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*, 1957), is heir to the *flâneur* (the stroller) introduced by Charles Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life,” published in 1863. Women, who in Baudelaire’s days were not allowed by societal convention to walk unaccompanied, are now portrayed in these contemporary films as modern *flâneuses*, perpetually crossing and observing the city, as solitary strollers of deserted cities in search of their identity.

During the second wave of feminism, the appropriation of public space was a form of resistance to women’s confinement to domestic space as imposed by a patriarchal society. The act of female streetwalking, inherently associated with prostitution, was reconfigured as an act of female self-liberation. What does the act of walking signify in these recent works? I argue that this image, in the different delineations it takes in each film, signifies a female act of liberation as well as an act of introspection and alienation from society. I assert further, that the image of the woman captured in the act of looking at the landscape, or exercising a mobile gaze while walking, is self-referential, insofar as it replicates the act of filmmaking and therefore symbolizes an affirmation of female authorship. Given that these filmmakers have different artistic concerns,
as well as different degrees of involvement with contemporary feminism, do they share a common aesthetic project? Examining this recent cinematic production, I investigate the relationship between gender and space, while establishing women’s contribution to Italian cinema.

Chapter 1—“The Rise of Cinematic Flâneuses: Mobile Gazes over the City” — consists of a critical premise to support the case studies included in the successive chapters. I begin by isolating key shots from the different films, and I formulate a hypothesis on the manner in which different urban landscapes signify in relation to female subjectivity. After this preamble, I examine the spatial practice of flânerie and its conceptualization in literary criticism, in order to verify its applicability as a cinematic narrative strategy. After analyzing the literary type of the flâneur and that of the prostitute as his female counterpart, as described by Baudelaire and later by Walter Benjamin in the context of nineteenth-century Paris, I reconstruct the feminist debate on flânerie by scholars such as Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, Elizabeth Wilson, Anne Friedberg, and Giuliana Bruno. The issues raised by this debate are the fundamental premises for investigating the relation between gender and space in the selected films in the chapters that follow. In response to Wolff’s denial of the possibility for female flânerie within her configuration of the city as a male space, I argue that the female filmmakers are the ultimate incarnation of the flâneuses.

Chapter 2—“Women in the Deserted City”—focuses on the work of Marina Spada, whose cinema originates from a compelling aesthetic experimentation on the city of Milan. I examine four of her films Forza cani (2001), Come l’ombra (2006), Poesia che mi guardi (2009) and Il mio domani (2011) that—with the exception of her debut film Forza cani, which has a male protagonist—portray female characters in urban contexts and systematically employ the
aesthetic trope of flânerie to construct the cinematic space and unfold the narration. In *Forza cani* the protagonist is an urban poet, who lives at the margins of the city, and wanders at night posting verses on Milan’s walls. Like the filmmaker, his work makes poetry visible in the city, subtracting it from its own anonymity for the alienated inhabitants. Sharing with *Forza cani* the subject of poetry, *Poesia che mi guardi* is a portrait of the Milanese poet Antonia Pozzi, whose work was only recently rediscovered. A hybrid between fiction and documentary film, *Poesia* features a woman (Spada’s fictional alter ego) retracing the itineraries of the poet in her native city, while introducing a group of young urban poets to her work. In this film, the spatial practice of walking not only signifies an inner journey of the self, but it is also a path to other women’s art. Moreover, it becomes a sort of journey through time, bearing witness to the city’s transformation over the years.

In *Come l’ombra* and *Il mio domani*, films profoundly indebted to Antonioni’s cinema, the city appears static and deserted, epitomizing the inner void and immobility of the contemporary female subject. While attempting to overcome their existential crisis, female characters are shown strolling throughout the city and observing it from above, like “voyeur gods,” as Michel de Certeau would call them. Through a close reading of the mise-en-scène and observing the shooting journals, which reveal the creative process that precedes the shooting, I analyze the different articulations that female flânerie takes in Spada’s cinema.

Chapter 3—“Women Outside the Polis”—is devoted to Francesca Comencini, who, like Spada, consistently employs urban settings in her documentary films as much as in her fictional ones. From her considerable body of films I selected *Mi piace lavorare —Mobbing* (2004), *A casa nostra (Our Country, 2006)*, *Lo spazio bianco (White Space, 2009)*, and *Un giorno speciale* (2012), which all engage in a discourse on the female body, inscribing it into the urban
landscape. More specifically, *Mi piace lavorare* and *Lo spazio bianco*, set respectively in Rome and Naples, deal with the challenge of motherhood outside the structure of the traditional family. In the first film, the city, by being off-screen for a consistent part of the film, functions as a signifier of the impeded mobility of a woman who struggles to reconcile motherhood and paid work. In *Lo spazio bianco*, where the city is extensively incorporated into the narration, a deserted Naples (treated similarly to Spada’s Milan) serves to underscore the existential immobility of the main character and the social isolation mothers often experience in a still largely patriarchal society. *A casa nostra* and *Un giorno speciale*, set in respectively in Milan and Rome, focus primarily on debasement of women’s bodies. These films depict different forms of sex work, including those to which women voluntarily subjugate themselves in order to achieve perceived success in the realm of popular media. In all of these films the image of the city and the relationship between characters and urban landscape serve to exemplify the subordinate social and political condition under which women continue to suffer.

Chapter 4—“Urban Coming of Age Stories—is dedicated to the study of a group of films representing the city from the perspective of female adolescents: Wilma Labate’s *Domenica* (2000), set in Naples; Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati* (2010), set in Librino (at the periphery of Catania); and Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste* (2011), set in Reggio Calabria. A comparative analysis of these three films is motivated by the peculiar themes they share and by their similar narrative structure. In parallel with the protagonists’ *bildungsroman*, the filmmakers represent the dissolution of the family in contemporary Italian society and, each to a different extent, examines the role of Catholic church. For Labate, the Church plays a positive role, insofar as it carries out social work neglected by the State; Torre, on the contrary, using comic tones, represents a Church (embodied by the character of the priest) committed to the “business of
miracles.” Similarly, in Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste*, a local parish in Reggio Calabria adheres to models of entertainment dictated by television rather than being concerned with spiritual matters. In parallel, the adolescent protagonists (or pre-adolescent in the case of *Domenica*), like the women portrayed in the previous chapters, actively engage with the urban landscape while absorbed in loneliness.

In *Domenica*, in which a female street-urchin traverses the belly of Naples, Labate likens the body of the city to the body of her protagonist, who has been raped, associating the urban landscape with the violence she endured. In *I baci mai dati* and *Corpo celeste*—set in places with no identity—the anonymity of the landscape enhances the sense of disorientation adolescents experience during the stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, or in the specific case of the female protagonists of these films, from girlhood to womanhood. In *I baci mai dati*, Manuela travels around town on her scooter, observing the degraded landscape of Librino which enhances her sense of disorientation and aversion for her family. In *Corpo celeste*, Marta, whose family has just returned to Italy after migrating to Switzerland, stands atop the building in which she lives, staring at the sprawling city while coping with an unarticulated sense of loss. Through a close reading of the mise-en-scène and of the narrative structure of these three films, I examine further declinations of cinematic flânerie, while identifying in these films images that symbolically enunciate the authors’ [female] gazes.

In the conclusion, I speculate further on the significance of the female city-walker and her relationship to the Italian urban landscape. Drawing from Alison Butler’s study on women’s experimental cinema, in which she observes modalities of “performances of authorship” or “authorial self-inscriptions” in the filmic texts, I assert that the visual trope of the flâneuse is also
used by Italian women filmmakers to “put themselves in the scene” as “bearers of the look,” while addressing female spectators.

Subsequently, I formulate hypotheses on how to expand the map of Italian women’s filmmaking, including other female directors debuting in recent years (2000-2014) with other female-centered urban narratives. Covering a larger span of time, this map could also include women’s cinematic production from the seventies and the eighties, when the relation between gender and space was highly politicized. A comparative analysis of the two production eras would allow me to verify the extent to which contemporary women’s cinema is informed by feminists ideals, despite artists’ reluctance to be labeled as feminist filmmakers.

Finally, I return to the issue of invisibility of women’s cinema, which motivated my research project. Reflecting on Claire Johnston’s notion of “female counter-cinema,” I affirm that collective projects like “Le ragazze del porno” show how women artists in Italy are finding alternative modes of production to conquer spaces in the male-dominated film industry. At the same time, they renew cinematic language, expanding it beyond a predominantly patriarchal lens and making it more representative of Italian society in toto.

As part of my research on women’s cinema, I engaged in dialogue with almost all of the filmmakers included in my dissertation. Even though films are the result of a collective effort, I believe that discussing films with their directors gives scholars the opportunity to better understand their artistic vision and enrich film analysis with details of the films’ production.

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14“Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look” is the title of a section from Laura Mulvey’s famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey identifies in the film narrative structure a binary opposition between a male, active gaze (producer of meaning) and a female, passive recipient of the male gaze. The female character, therefore, is pure image, an icon, a dependent entity. This structure is complicated further by a third male pole, which is the gaze of the male spectator for which the image of the woman is supposedly constructed.
history. The appendix “Female Authorial Voices” collects interviews (in abbreviated version) with Spada, Comencini, Labate, Rohrwacher and Randi. The latter, although not included in the case studies, as one of the founders of the cultural association Maude, provides important insights on women’s cinematic production. In these conversations directors discuss the challenges of “daring” to undertake a profession still perceived as male, and the struggle to raise funds to finance their films (especially their first ones). The latter struggle is one that all artists face, but one that for women is aggravated by a deep-rooted reluctance (even from female producers) to entrust them with projects that require conspicuous budgets.

As confirmed by Dell’Erba’s film, they all attest to a lack of an intellectual dialogue among women filmmakers and collective projects that would contribute to overcoming their invisibility. By identifying these female authorial voices and examining the relationship between female subjectivity and urban space constructed in their films, my dissertation aims to fill some of the knowledge gap about women’s artistic expression while leading to a more complex understanding of Italian contemporary cinema.
CHAPTER 1

THE RISE OF CINEMATIC FLÂNEUSES.

MOBILE GAZES OVER THE CITY
1.1 Drawing a Thematic Map: Urban Narratives by Italian Women Filmmakers

During the last two decades in Italy, a new generation of women filmmakers has established its own space in the male-dominated Italian film industry. This burgeoning group represents and positions women’s subjectivity in new and complex ways, specifically in urban contexts. Filmmakers such as Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Roberta Torre, Wilma Labate, and Alice Rohrwacher have taken Italian cities like Milan, Rome, Naples, and Reggio Calabria, and transformed them into subjects that serve to direct the narration of their films.

Since its origins, cinema has been bound with the city as it is the only artistic medium truly able to capture movement and flow of urban life. In The Redemption of Physical Reality, Sigfried Kracauer considers the city, its streets, and its crowds as the inherently cinematic subject of film, the fulfillment of photography:

The hunting ground of the motion picture camera is in principle unlimited; it is the external world expanding in all directions. Yet there are certain subjects within that world which may be termed cinematic because they exert a peculiar attraction on the medium. It is if the medium were predestinated (and eager) to exhibit them.

(41)

As most of Lumière’s films show (Milan, Place du Dôme, 1896, among many), or Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1926), Walter Ruttman’s Berlin: Symphony of a City (1927), and King Vidor’s The Crowd (1928), the city has been the privileged subject of many of the formative works that established the foundation and history of cinema. Over the twentieth and twenty-first century, the city and film have been exercising a mutual influence whereby the modern city has
shaped the form of film as much as film has shaped the image and the aura of the city (cf. Clarke, 1997).

In Italian cinema, as in global film history, the urban narrative has been dominant in various epochs, genres, and film trends. Reviewing two of the golden periods such as neorealism and the auteur cinema of the Sixties (which is often taken as a model for many women filmmakers, especially Spada), it is readily apparent how the urban film location shapes the plot (often appearing in the title) as well as the mise-en-scène of countless works. For instance, in post-war classics like Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (1945), Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) and *Miracolo a Milano* (1951), the city serves to narrate the devastation of the war as well as the process of the reconstruction of the country. Subsequently, in the late fifties and sixties, during the so called “Italian Miracle,” filmmakers articulated a discourse on Italy’s transition to modernity through the representation of the city. The films of Federico Fellini (see *Le notti di Cabiria* or *La dolce vita*), Michelangelo Antonioni (*La notte*, *L’eclisse*, *Il deserto rosso*), and Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Mamma Roma*, *Accattone*, *Uccellacci e uccellini*) show the new urban landscapes and wild development created by the economic boom. Today, Italian cities continue to play a central role in film. The recurrence of different urban landscapes in recent Italian films (not only those directed by women) refers not only to the artistic choices of filmmakers and scriptwriters, but also to the demands of film production. Since the late nineties, numerous city and regional film commissions have been established in Italy to facilitate shooting logistics, support local businesses, and promote their particular territory through films. As Tiziana Ferrero Regis points out in her book *Recent Italian Cinema. Spaces, Contexts, Experiences*: “Local film commissions are clearly set up to take advantage of specific natural and urban environments. Each commission has specific aims linked directly to the culture of a place”
(14). As a consequence, directors are encouraged (if not required) by producers to incorporate urban and natural landscapes as a tribute to the territory that hosted the film production.

Nevertheless, the significant role of locations in the films considered in this study goes far beyond the possible imposition of production demands. Rather, a study of women directed films who portray female characters in the city, shows a deliberate, common tendency to treat locations as characters themselves. The directors apply similar modalities for incorporating locations into filmic texts, and construct parallels between journeys traversing the city and inner journeys of the self taken by their female protagonists. The obligation to display a city on the screen does not necessarily imply a gratifying or positive representation of the city in question. On the contrary the filmmakers under consideration photograph their cities as deserted, deprived of the crowds that typify post-modern cities, and conveying a sense of anxiety, alienation, loneliness and immobility. At the same time, urban landscapes are often framed by a mobile camera through long tracking shots, depicting women’s mobility in the public space, and articulating journeys of self-discovery.

The figure of the woman exploring the city and contemplating the urban landscape is the most evident visual leitmotif of women’s cinema. It is an image that warrants investigation, questioning the gaze as a male privilege and the urban space as a male domain. In her essay “Looking at Landscape: the Uneasy Pleasure of Power,” Gillian Rose argues (relying on social geographers such as Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove) that a landscape is not merely that which falls into the visual field of the observer; it is a partial world view (like that of the filmmaker), a form of representation. It also implies, therefore, a “visual ideology,” a way of looking that implicates issues of gender and sexuality. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau describes the experience of looking at the city from above as an experience of
power and pleasure, “the all-seeing power” that enables us to “see the whole.” In de Certeau’s words, the observer is an Icarus, a voyeur, a solar eye, a god. Moreover, de Certeau defines the spatial practice of walking in the city as a “pedestrian speech act,” which means that walks are not only mute ambulatory acts but also forms of discourse, the statements of the city walker.

Female characters from these films are shown perpetually crossing and observing their urban space, solitary strollers of deserted cities in search of their identity. Correspondingly, cities are shown through bird’s-eye shots (which in some cases coincide with women’s point of view shots), a visual strategy that reinforces a semantic link between women’s identity and the places represented. What statements do these filmmakers make through their female city dwellers? As I shall demonstrate through the comparative analysis of the films, this image signifies not only an act of female visual appropriation of urban space, but also an assertion of authorship by female filmmakers struggling to conquer the their own space in a male dominated film industry.

In all of Marina Spada’s films, Forza cani (2000), Come l’ombra (2006), Poesia che mi guardi (2009) and Il mio domani (2011), characters continuously roam the deserted streets of Milan, or observe the urban landscape from above. In “La mia città,” an autobiographical essay wherein she describes her relationship with the city, Spada writes: “Nei pomeriggi liberi passo e ripasso negli stessi luoghi della città per non sentirmi estranea, per marcare il territorio come i cani, per rivedere quel paesaggio post-industriale struggente come un quadro di Mario Sironi.”

The image of the woman strolling throughout the city is also recurrent in Francesca Comencini’s filmmaking. In Lo spazio bianco (2009), the protagonist, who is anxiously awaiting news of her

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15 “On free afternoons I roam and roam again through the same places of the city so as not to feel any estrangement, and to mark the territory as dogs do, to view and review that post-industrial landscape, which is as touching as a painting of Mario Sironi.” See Il mio domani, Un film di Marina Spada. Fotografie di Gabriele Basilico + Toni Thorimbert. Giovanna Calvenzi ed. (Milan: Kairos; Costrasto, 2011), p. 81.
premature baby struggling for life, is repeatedly shown while standing on a roof terrace, or
framed while walking along the streets of Naples, which, uncommonly, is represented as quiet
and desolated. Similarly, the protagonist of her latest film *Un giorno speciale* (2012) undertakes
a journey through the city of Rome, from the periphery to the historical center.

In Wilma Labate’s *Domenica*, a young Neapolitan girl crosses the empty belly of the city.
Similarly, children in other films move through urban space while coping with loneliness caused
by the absence of adults, like Marta, from Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste* (2011), and
Manuela, the adolescent protagonist of Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati* (2009), who provides
from her scooter mobile perspectives of the inanimate buildings of the peripheries of Catania.

The image of the female city-walker has a recurrent tradition in Italian cinema. It is
reminiscent of famous female cinematic characters, from aforementioned films such as Fellini’s
*Le notti di Cabiria* (1957), Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1961), and Antonioni’s *La notte* (1961) The
latter is repeatedly quoted by Spada in her films. As said in my introduction, those characters are
contemporary *flâneuses*, the female version of the *flâneur*, the literary figure from the nineteenth
century, introduced by Baudelaire in 1863 with his essay “The Painter of Modern Life.”

The *flâneur*, stroller, is male by definition. Women, who in Baudelaire’s days were not
allowed by societal convention to walk unaccompanied, are seen in public spaces as part of the
city spectacle enjoyed by the *flâneur*. Since women did not occupy public space autonomously,
the act of female streetwalking, unless made legitimate by the presence of a husband, is
inherently associated with prostitution. Significantly, the female cinematic city-walkers
mentioned above—Fellini’s Cabiria and Pasolini’s Mamma Roma—are prostitutes. However, as
the feminist scholars such as Griselda Pollock, Elizabeth Wilson, Anne Friedberg, and Giuliana
Bruno note in their work, common social and artistic practices like traveling, shopping, movie
going, painting, writing, and ultimately filmmaking, have permitted women to engage in \textit{flânerie} without the presumption of streetwalking.

Figure 1.1. Anita Kravos in \textit{Come l’ombra}, 2006. Courtesy of Marina Spada

Figure 1.2. Claudia Gerini in \textit{Il mio domani}, 2011. Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 1.3. Margherita Buy in *Lo spazio bianco*, 2009. Courtesy of Francesca Comencini

Figure 1.4. Yle Vianelle in *Corpo celeste*; 2011. Courtesy of Alice Rohrwacher
1.2 Baudelaire’s flânerie: the poet and the ridiculous streetwalker

After identifying the visual leitmotif of the flâneuse in films directed by women, I examine the spatial practice of flânerie, and its conceptualization in literary criticism, in order to verify its applicability as an aesthetic trope to a corpus of films that share urban settings and place female characters in the center of their work. I analyze the literary figure of the flâneur and that of the prostitute as his female counterpart, as described by Baudelaire and later by Walter Benjamin in the context of nineteenth-century Paris. This will serve as a starting point to reconstruct the feminist debate on flânerie by scholars such as Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, Elizabeth Wilson Anne Friedberg, and Giuliana Bruno. The issues raised by this debate are the fundamental premises for investigating, in the following chapters, the relation between gender and space in the films that are the object of this study.

An investigation around the figure of the flâneur and its gender implications has to start from “The Painter of Modern Life”, the essay published in Le Figaro in 1863 by Baudelaire. This essay represents a fundamental reference point for every later definition and reinterpretation of the flâneur, both as a historical figure and critical metaphor, and the contemporary feminist debate on the possibility of a female flânerie.

Although the theme of the city stroller was already enunciated in Les Fleurs du Mal (1861) and the prose poems of Le spleen de Paris (1862), it is in “The Painter of Modern Life” that Baudelaire sketches the portrait of the painter Constantine Guys (1802-1892), defining him as a philosopher, an artist, a poet, and a flâneur who roams the streets of Paris so as to enjoy the spectacle of the modern city. The flâneur is commonly discussed in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and critics consider Baudelaire to have introduced this literary figure. However, Elizabeth Wilson reports on an anonymous French pamphlet dated 1806, which
describes a day in the life of M. Bonhomme, who is also defined as a typical flâneur, a city-stroller. Baudelaire expands upon this figure and transforms this loafer into the hero of modern times, makes him into a figure Benjamin would see as representative of modernity.

M. Bonhomme is depicted as a loiterer who roams the streets of Paris, passing “the hours by shopping or window shopping, looking at books, new fashions, hats, combs, jewelry and novelties of all kinds” (Wilson, 5). Similarly, Monsieur G, Baudelaire’s artist, spends his days strolling throughout Paris; however, he is “more than a mere flâneur”, in so far as his peregrinations are not aimless, like those of the flâneur. Baudelaire’s city-walker is an artist who engages in flânerie to absorb “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” of modernity and translate it into his art.

Making a reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Man of the Crowd”, Baudelaire indicates the immersion in the multitude that inhabits the modern city as the condition sine qua non for the experience of flânerie:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and the flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself

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16 See Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible flâneur.” The Contradictions of Culture (London: Sage, 2001). “The origins of the word flâneur are uncertain: the nineteenth-century Encyclopedia Larousse suggests that the term may be derived from an Irish word for ‘libertine’. The writers of this edition of Larousse devoted a long article to the flâneur, whom they defined as a loiterer, a fritterer away of time. They associate him with the new urban pastime of shopping and crowd watching. The flâneur, Larousse pointed out, could exist only in the great city, the metropolis, since provincial towns would afford a too restricted stage for his strolling and a too narrow field for his observations. Larousse also commented that although the majority of flâneur were idlers, there were among them artists, and that the multifarious sights of the astonishing new urban spectacle constituted their raw material” (76).
everywhere at home, to see the world, to be at the center of the word, and yet to remain hidden from the world. (9)

While the flâneur leaves the intimacy of his house so as to escape from loneliness, he simultaneously sustains his isolation amongst the urban multitude of the metropolis, which he infiltrates only in order to find nourishment for his art. In these terms, first and foremost, flânerie signifies a spatial practice involving a shift from the private sphere to the public one, two spheres that since the beginning of the eighteenth century were undergoing an increasing separation due to industrial development.

Thus, the activity of the flâneur consists primarily in a complete immersion in the anonymity of the crowd, which populates the modern metropolis, following its perpetual movement and absorbing its “immense reservoir of electrical energy” (Baudelaire, 9). As we shall see in the following chapters with the comparative analysis of several films, the contemporary cinematic flâneuses stroll in deserted cities. The absence of the crowd, a central element in Baudelaire’s description of the modern city, the essence of the modern experience itself, radically changes the urban landscape and consequentially the intrinsic meaning of the practice of flânerie, as conceived by the French poet.

In addition to the definition noted above, Baudelaire further defines his artist as “a passionate spectator,” evoking the figure of the future modern spectator of the movie theater (which comes to light twenty years after the publication of his essay), who receives pleasure from seeing images in movement while being incognito. I will return to the flânerie’s relation to the act of film viewing later in this chapter while concentrating on the definition of the flâneur as conceived in the context of the mid-nineteenth century during the rise of the modern city, and on
the gender implications of flânerie as an urban spatial practice requiring the occupation of public space.

To return to the portrait of the painter of modern life, after describing this artist as a stroller of the streets of Paris, Baudelaire depicts him as sitting at the window of a café, again rejoicing while gazing at the crowd. Monsieur G, “the flâneur,” “the poet,” “the philosopher,” is now compared to a “convalescent” who, returning to life after the experience of illness, has gained the capacity of seeing things as if for the first time, with the amazement of a child. The flâneur, both present but absent, involved but removed, engaged but detached, is in Baudelaire’s words “an artist who is always, spiritually, in the condition of that convalescent,” for whom the modern city is a phantasmagoria.

Among the commodities “projected” by the magic lantern of the modern city, Baudelaire includes technological innovations like carriages and lights, which become part of the new cityscape and the end of the eighteenth century, but also, women, enumerated as part of the spectacle enjoyed by the flâneur. Baudelaire devotes two paragraphs to them: the first, titled “Woman,” and the second, “Women and Prostitutes.” With explicit misogynist tones he does not describe women, but rather his own abstract idea of “Woman” as an “enigmatic being,” (thus the Other par excellence) “sometimes just a word,” in essence a sign. Women are also addressed as “graceful animals,” “the object of keenest admiration,” “blond and brainless,” “a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching” (35). In this essay, he classifies them on the basis of the social class to which they belong, and their degree of respectability, although limiting the social map of Parisian women strictly to “the most fashionable society,” neglecting working class women.
The women Baudelaire describes are seen in public spaces like theaters, auditoriums, or public gardens, displaying their femininity, “solemn and stagey as the play or opera that they are pretending to follow” (35), or “leaning calmly on the arms of their husbands” (35). In other words, according to Baudelaire, women’s experience of city cultural life is restricted by their limited intellectual capacities while their occupation of the public space needs to be legitimated, or mediated, by the male presence. When describing the presence of women in the city, Baudelaire creates a binary opposition between respectable/non-respectable female types, in which working-class women, frequently employed in factories, or as maids in bourgeois families at that time, are not considered. In fact, as he continues to depict the “vast picture-gallery which is life in London or Paris” (37), the counterpart of the respectable woman from high Parisian society is not the respectable woman of the working class, but the prostitute.

As a matter of fact, the prostitute, commonly called “streetwalker,” seems to be the unfortunate female version of the city-walker or flâneur. Contrary to what the expression streetwalker suggests, Baudelaire depicts the prostitute as sitting in a café, which creates in the text a parallel to the activities of the male flâneur. Although the streetwalker was commonly identified as a woman alone in the street, and vice versa, the unaccompanied woman could be accused of being a prostitute, Baudelaire presents the figure of the prostitute as one sitting next to a man, presumably her client. Hence, similarly to the respectable woman who strolls in the public garden holding on to the husband’s arm, the prostitute’s occupation of public space is also regulated by a male presence. Although she engages in activity similar to that of the flâneur, who sits by the window of a café to observe the passing crowd, she is more an object of observation for the passerby than an observer, namely the flâneur. The prostitute and her chaperon, indeed, in so far as they are not artists, seem to lack the ability of seeing at large: “Is it even certain that
they can see? Unless, like Narcissuses of imbecility, they are gazing at the crowd as at the river which reflects their own image. In truth they exist very much for the pleasure of the observer than for their own” (35).

As the opposite pole to the ideal womanhood previously described, the prostitute is a manifestation of a “fallen womanhood.” According to the ridiculous image offered to the reader — “She has an enormous cigar, entirely filling the aperture of her tiny mouth” — Baudelaire seems to be both fascinated and repelled at the same time by what he calls the “femina simplex.” While the Woman was the “object of keen admiration,” the prostitute is the object of a grotesque spectacle, “a creature of show” (37), not an agent of the gaze. She is also said to be a “woman in revolt against society,” which hints at the idea of femininity as a threat to society, and particularly to the patriarchal order.

The urban prostitute, a recurrent theme in Baudelaire’s poetry, was also a central figure in the discourse on modernity as the embodiment of a collective anxiety and fear. As Mary Gibson observes in her study *Prostitution and the State in Italy* (1999):

> The increasing visibility of these independent women on city streets reinforced general anxieties about female emancipation. It is not surprising that an era that uneasily witnessed changes in the status of women should be preoccupied with female deviance. Thus in the nineteenth-century iconography of the dangerous classes, a female figure, the prostitute, claimed a prominent place.

(4)

Several factors connoted the figure of the prostitute as threatening: as a woman, she does not fulfill the role of mother nor that of wife, she has an unruly sexual body, which is a potentially infected body spreading venereal diseases in the healthy society’s body. Interestingly, in relation
to the discussion on *flânerie*, is the definition of “classi pericolose” —the dangerous classes, of which the prostitute is a representative— provided by Giovani Bolis, Italian magistrate and writer, in Gibson’s study: “The dangerous classes of society were formed from all those individuals who, being destitute of the necessary means of subsistence, live in *idleness* and *vagabondage* at the expense of other citizens” (Gibson 16–17). It is readily apparent how in Bolis’s definition, *idleness* and *vagabondage*, prerequisites of the male practice of *flânerie* both romanticized by Baudelaire, are read as signals of mischievous social behavior when applied to women. As Gibson informs us, in the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, if seen unaccompanied in the street at night, women from a lower class could be arrested simply with the accusation of prostitution. As a confirmation, Gibson cites a police arrest report for prostitution dated 1886, in which the motivation was “because she is an idle vagabond without means of subsistence, identification, or a home, and she is a clandestine prostitute” (Gibson 1). Thus, the male *flâneur*’s idleness and vagabondage (or *flânerie*) is positive and constructive, for it leads toward a creative end, whereas female vagabondage is equated to prostitution, and needs to be tamed, regulated, or prohibited.

1.3 Benjamin: The *Flâneur* Consumer and The Prostitute “Seller and Sold in One”

Drawing from Baudelaire’s essay and poetry, Walter Benjamin wrote extensively about the city and particularly about *flânerie*, developing and redefining it as a concept, using it to demystify the myth of modernity. Benjamin had a controversial or ambivalent vision of the city: although deeply fascinated by it, he also considered it as the locus of commodity society, the embodiment of capitalism with its brutalizing effects on human experience. As Graeme Gilloch
writes in his study on Benjamin, *Myths and the Metropolis*: “For Benjamin, the great cities of modern European culture were both beautiful and bestial, a source of exhilaration and hope on the one hand and of revulsion and despair on the other” (1). For Benjamin, the *flâneur* is a fading figure. When he writes about it, approximately fifty years after the publication of *The Painter of Modern Life*, the urban landscape described by Baudelaire — whom he considers the *flâneur* par excellence — had changed, as so the romanticized idea of the modern city as the place where “harmony of life is so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom” (Baudelaire, 11). As Benjamin points out in “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” the *passage* (the arcade) is the ideal habitat of the *flâneur*. Forerunners of contemporary malls, the arcades were intersectional places between public and private spaces, where all the commodities and luxury items of modernity were exposed, thus spaces of transit and consumption functioning, in Benjamin’s words, as “world in miniature” (31).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the arcades were demolished as a result of the radical remodeling of Paris commissioned by Napoleon III to Baron Haussmann. This rebuilding of the city, which disemboweled mediaeval Paris to open up wide boulevards, was meant to rationalize the urban space and consequentially urban time, too. As Keith Teister writes, “Rationalization challenged *flânerie* through the establishment of time discipline. *Flânerie* is more or less independent of the clock” (15).

The abandonment in the anonymous crowd, which was nourishing for the Baudelairean *flâneur*’s imagination, now enhances the alienation of urban life. While Baudelaire was comparing the amazement of the *flâneur* to that of a convalescent regaining health after illness, the sociologist George Simmel (to whom Benjamin refers in his work) describes in his famous essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1922) the consequences on the human mind of intense
sensory stimulation, to which city dwellers are continuously exposed, as the blasé attitude: “If one remains in the same milieu the nerves have no time to gather new strength. An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy” (23). Elaborating further, Simmel outlines the pursuit of pleasure as a precedent to decadence:

A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all. [...] Things are experienced as insubstantial, no object deserves preference over any other (23).

Hence, the city becomes a place of boredom rather than excitement. The amazement is turned into the blasé attitude, a form of defense of the nervous system from the bombardment of stimuli provided by the spectacle of modernity, which is indeed the spectacle of commercial goods. As Benjamin puts it “the intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity immersed in a surging stream of customers.”17 Benjamin’s association of flânerie with consumption, which anticipates the contemporary phenomenon of “window shopping,” does not involve women, even though historically shopping was supposedly the first form of flânerie allowed to them.

The convoluted and elusive reflection on flânerie, which was obviously effected by Benjamin’s vision of the city as heaven and hell, is recurrent throughout his critical writings and particularly in his unfinished Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk). The Arcades Project consists of a massive collection of notes and quotations, collected between 1927 and 1940, on Paris of the nineteenth century, which Benjamin considered the cradle of modernity. Composed

of images and historical fragments apparently not linked to each other, it requires the reader to work toward the completion of meaning. Therefore, in its fragmentary structure and lack of coherence, it resembles, in both the modality of production by the author and the experience by the reader, a form of flânerie. As Susan Buck-Morss observes, Benjamin isolates many types of urban nomads in the Arcades Project, marginal figures produced by the industrial economy, which are all engaged, for different purposes, in the activity of urban flânerie. In fact, to different extents, the “sandwich man,” the “rag-picker,” and the “prostitute,” are all different incarnations of the flâneur in so far as they stroll throughout the city to collect things, or to advertise them, or to sell pleasure, as in the case of the prostitute, who is in Benjamin famous words “seller and sold in one.”

Like numerous feminist scholars, Buck-Morss reiterates the idea of prostitution as the female version of flânerie: “the flâneur was simply the name of a man who loitered; but all women who loitered risked being seen as whores, as the term ‘street-walker’ or tramp, applied to women makes clear” (119); further, she concludes that, “certainly, prostitutes, ‘women of the streets’, never inhabited the streets on the same terms as men” (120).

Benjamin, who certainly was not using a feminist analytic framework, does not refer to gender issues when writing about the different incarnations of the flâneur in commodity society. Interestingly, Buck-Morss reports that in the Paris of the thirties, when the practice of employing human billboards came into use, the so called “sandwich men” were women, casual laborers recruited among clochards. This practice was soon prohibited in so far as this profession was not

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considered appropriate to the female gender, a fact that further confirms a politics of loitering privileging male access to public space.

1.4 Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock: The Feminist Debate on Flânerie

In the late 80s, Janet Wolff’s cutting-edge essay “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and Literature of Modernity,” generated a critical and theoretical debate around the idea of female flânerie. The motivation for such an academic interest in women’s relationship with the public sphere at the dawn of modernity was motivated by present socio-historical conditions. During the Reagan-era, despite the fact that women’s social roles had radically changed since the beginning of the twentieth century and women were a large part of the workforce in the United States, female cultural representations reiterated and reinforced the idealized model of the housewife and the mother. As put by Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough in The Invisible Flâneuse?: “The city was again coded as a site of (white, masculine) pleasure, and hence as a potential threat to bourgeois femininity” (2).

In her essay, Wolff radically denies the possibility of female flânerie by analyzing the social conditions and norms preventing women from engaging in such activity in the urban context of the mid-nineteenth century: “There is no question of inventing the flâneuse: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century” (47). Nevertheless, as the title of the essay suggests, despite declaring the impossibility of the flâneuse, Wolff is essentially denouncing her social invisibility rather than her total non-existence.
Starting with art historian Griselda Pollock’s with the essay “Modernity and the Space of Femininity,” numerous feminist scholars such as Wilson, Rachel Bowlby, Anne Friedberg, Bruno, D’Souza and McDonough, challenged Wolff’s radical statement. Reading Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life,” which unequivocally affirms the flâneur’s male gender, Wolff defines flânerie as the quintessential experience of modernity in the public realm. The increasing separation between the private and public sphere created by the development of factories and offices at the beginning of the nineteenth century, lead to the affirmation of the ideology of home as (respectable) women’s place. As a consequence of being restricted to the private sphere, women — excluded from area of activities like politics, law, medicine, and academic occupations — were deprived of the possibility of experiencing modernity.

Both literary criticism and sociology, the latter a new discipline at the time, were concerned with defining the experience of modernity. Examining the work of Baudelaire and Simmel, Wolff concluded that this literature “describes the experience of men” in so far as it “ignores the private sphere” (45). Hence women, not participating in the public world of city life, are absent from its narrative. As demonstrated above, while the flâneur is depicted as the hero of modernity, women appear in the urban scene as objects of observation rather than as observers themselves. They are presented either as male accessory presences or as prostitutes, simultaneously objects of admiration and disgust. In both cases, as Wolff remarks: “None of these women meet the poet as his equal” (42).

In “Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel analyzes the psychology of the “metropolitan man”, an expression obsessively repeated throughout his article to define the urban type. The German sociologist, who incidentally wrote about the women’s movement, completely excludes women from this analysis of the metropolis as “the seat of the money economy” (27). Not
surprisingly women, traditionally considered irrational creatures, are not considered by Simmel, who identifies rationality as the distinctive trait of urban mentality, a characteristic necessary to the preservation of the individual in the city.

For Simmel, as well as for Baudelaire, the city is the “locale of freedom” and flânerie is the ultimate expression of this freedom, which is in the first place a freedom of spatial mobility but also a matter of social visibility. To illustrate, Wolff recalls the case of the French writer George Sand, who dressed as a man in order to stroll the streets of Paris and have access to its artistic circles: “The disguise made the life of the flâneur available to her; as she knew very well, she could not adopt the non-existent role of a flâneuse” (41).

Despite her drastic affirmation, Wolff clarifies that in the second half of the nineteenth century, women were not simply confined to the domestic space, and the access to public life did not depend exclusively on gender, but also by many other factors like the degree of industrialization of the different geographical areas (working class women were largely employed in factories), and above all by the social class to which women belonged.

Similarly to Wolff, in “Modernity and the Space of Femininity,” Pollock argues that the issue of gender interlaces with class to determine the “historical asymmetry” women experience in the Paris of the late nineteenth century:

I am thinking of innumerable brothel scenes through to Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon or that other form, the artist’s couch. The encounters pictured and imagined are those between men who have the freedom to take their pleasures in many urban spaces and women from a class subject to them who have to work in those spaces often selling their bodies to clients, or to artists. (247)
The experience of modernity emerging from the Parisian avant-garde (and from the narrative of art historian T.J Clark, who Pollock criticizes) is that of leisure and consumption. Women, occupying a subordinated social and economic position, are objects of that consumption. Once again the figure of the prostitute as defined by Benjamin — “seller and sold in one” — reemerges as the female counterpart of the male artist. Pollock addresses the issue of modernism as the account of male artists for male consumers of art, and asserts the need of deconstructing the masculinist myth of modernity rooted in art history to create a counter narration. As in film, there is a double issue at stake: on the level of production and representation. On the one hand, “All those canonized as the initiators of modern art are men” (245), and on the other, women’s bodies as a commercial exchange are a recurrent theme in the paintings.

Laura Mulvey’s theory, elaborated in the seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (I shall return to this in the close readings of the films), resonates in Pollock’s discourse. Women are not bearers of the look, nor the makers of meaning, but the passive recipients of the look, objects of voyeuristic pleasure. This binary opposition between the male look, incarnated by the flâneur, is complicated by the third pole of the male spectator for which supposedly the image of the woman is constructed. In this regard, Pollock refers to Marianne Doane’s analysis of Robert Doisneau’s “playful” photograph from 1948, titled “An Oblique look,” in which the dirty joke is made at the expenses of the women framed, and of the female spectator. As Pollock writes citing Doane: “We women must assume a masculine position or masochistically enjoy the sight of woman’s humiliation” (262).

19 In the photograph, a couple is standing in front of a shop window. The camera is placed behind the window. The wife is looking at a painting exposed in the window while the gaze of her husband is directed toward another picture hanging on the wall, framing a naked woman showing her buttocks. As Pollock writes: “The joke, as all dirty jokes, is at woman’s expense” (262).
To challenge this politics of looking and simultaneously respond to Wolff’s call “to fill the gaps in the classic accounts” (46), Pollock studies the work of the painters Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. Despite male predominance in the Parisian artistic scene, these two women artists were actively involved in the impressionist movement in the decade 1870s–1880s. Pollock analyzes their works in spatial terms, underscoring that, differently from contemporary male impressionist painters, they do not represent bars, cafés, and backstage spaces to which they did not have free access, but dining rooms, drawing rooms, bedrooms, balconies and private gardens, making visible the private dimension of modernity, representing both the space of female bourgeois leisure time, that of child care, as well as that of working-class women’s domestic work.

Like Wolff, Pollock uses Baudelaire to reaffirm the unequivocal male gender of the flâneur as the incarnation of the male gaze, and consequentially flânerie as a male urban experience. For both Wolff and Pollock, this is an essential premise from which to articulate a feminist critique of Modernism. However, as the work of Morisot and Cassatt demonstrates, female flânerie, signifying both female access to public space and therefore the possibility of a female gaze over the modern city, is rendered difficult by socio-economic and historical conditions, but not impossible.

1.5 Imaginary Flânerie: Female Shoppers, Moviegoers, and Movie-viewers

Wolff and Pollock generated debates that continued throughout the nineties and instigated rich scholarship on flânerie. In her essay “The invisible Flâneur”, Elizabeth Wilson questions the actual existence of the flâneur while conceiving of the figure more as a social construct that “might be seen as a mythological or allegorical figure who represented what was
perhaps the most characteristic response of all to the wholly new forms of life that seemed to be developing: ambivalence” (4). She also invites us to rethink the rigid division public/private space — public/private life and, contesting Wolff, asserts that, although “the ideology of women’s place in the domestic realm permeated the whole of society” (8), the private space was also regulated by male authority. Moreover, being that the house was the workplace of working class women, it could not be considered a purely private space.

Nevertheless, Wilson refers to studies on the London of the mid-nineteenth century that prove that the organization of urban space did, as a matter of fact, take women into account. With the increasing presence of women in the work force, there were necessary places of refreshment reserved exclusively for women (yet a fact that confirms that women needed to protect their ‘respectability’ in public space). Guidebooks of the time listed places where women could eat “unattended by gentlemen” and women were employed as waitresses in restaurants.

The volume *The Invisible Flâneuse?* (2010) represents the most recent and remarkable study on this subject. The contributions examine women’s spatial practices and representations of modernity from different disciplines that offer alternative perspectives to Wolff’s statement on women’s invisibility. For instance, Greg Thomas analyzes Parisian parks as urban spaces where women could exercise the freedom of strolling and looking. Tom Gretton analyzes a corpus of illustrated magazines to demonstrate that the position of the *flâneur* could be occupied beyond the restrictions of gender and class. Ruth Iskin examines advertising posters to see how, at the end of the century, with the rise of the department store, “an ideology of [female] confinement was replaced by an ideology of consumption” (D’Souza and McDonough, 13). With the essay “Gender and the Haunting of Cities”, Wolff responded (about twenty years later) restating her point and objecting that shopping was far from being the purposeless strolling aimed at artistic
creation, as conceived by Baudelaire, and that “the literature of modernity was not concerned with shopping” (21). Quite puzzlingly though, in her conclusion, she refers to Virginia Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting. A London Adventure” (1922), where one can find striking evidence of the connection between shopping and female flânerie:

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse to walking half across London between tea and dinner. As the fox-hunter hunts in order to preserve the breed of foxes, and the golfer plays in order that open spaces may be preserved from the builders, so when desire corners upon us to go street ramblings the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say: “Really I must buy a pencil”, as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter — rambling the streets of London. (155)

In this passage Woolf describes what Bruno, relying on the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola, defines as transito, a movement triggered and informed by desire, certainly not that of a pencil, which is, obviously, a mere pretext. As Wolff writes, “With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (160). This transito is precisely about the powerful experience of city-viewing, of appropriating the public space joining the “vast republican army of anonymous trampers” (155), the experience of seeing, supposedly without being seen, which so clearly recalls that of the cinema spectator.

From Woolf’s passage, the link between shopping and city-strolling is readily apparent. In this sense, the department store, as hybrid between private and public urban space, created a legitimate space for women to wander, given that their wandering was devoted to consumption.
To quote Anne Friedberg in her book *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993), “The department store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the *flâneur*’s last coup, but it was the *flâneuse*’s first” (37).

In *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, Bruno highlights that the arcade, embracing the logic of consumption and leisure, was also the location of the cinema theater; this spatial organization enabled a double form of *flânerie* for women: that of shoppers, but also that of cinema-goers and city-viewers. Nevertheless, the arcade was still the locus of streetwalking rather than female *flânerie*. As she writes when depicting Galleria Umberto Primo in Naples: “the most significant female figure inhabiting the arcade is the whore” (50). And for what concerns the cinema as a chance of escape from patriarchal control by leaving the house and going into a public place, it is doubtful that, at that time, women could be undisturbed movie viewers if unaccompanied (cf. Wolff, “Streets Haunting”).

The figure of the *flâneuse* is the result of a long process of female struggle, still ongoing, to conquer the freedom to occupy public spaces and become the subject of the gaze as opposed to the object of the gaze. As Bruno again observes: “It is not by chance that one of the first acts of Italian feminism was for women to ‘streetwalk’ together through the city at night” (50), a gesture that aligns female emancipation with spatial appropriation of the city.

It is certain that cinema, as it shares with *flânerie* “the montage of images, the spatio-temporal juxtaposition” (Bruno, 48), elicits a virtual form of *flânerie*, i.e., a spatio-temporal mobility, and an activation of the female gaze as female spectator. But then again, the *flâneuse* spectator receives a pre-ordained view of reality: “it is not a direct perception of reality but a received perception mediated through representation” (Friedberg, 2) in which women can be caught again in the mechanism of being the object of the gaze. To what extent then, is the
activation of the female gaze possible? If women once had to conceal themselves in private places of refreshment as Wilson revealed, were they truly free and capable of being gazing observers? Whether or not activation of the gaze is within the realm of possibility for most women, it appears that the female director may be the ultimate incarnation of the *flâneuse*. 
CHAPTER 2

WOMEN IN THE DESERTED CITY:
URBAN SPACE IN MARINA SPADA’S CINEMA
2.1 Marina Spada: Milan, Women and Poetry

Ho sempre voluto fare il cinema, affermare la vita dentro la finzione. Giro i film per darmi un senso nel mondo, per capire il presente. Li giro a Milano perché da qui non me ne voglio andare per continuare a raccontare “la città che sale.”  

Marina Spada

Among the filmmakers analyzed in this study, Marina Spada and Francesca Comencini are two directors who, throughout their entire filmography, consistently adopt the city as the context to situate women’s subjectivity. The aesthetic trope of *flânerie*, whose origins and significance have been traced and questioned in the first chapter, is repeatedly employed as a visual narrative strategy to construct the characters’ portraits and narrate their evolutions. Since these two filmmakers occupy a prominent position in the genealogy of Italian women’s filmmaking, it is necessary to devote separate case studies (chapter 2 and chapter 3) to their oeuvres.

This chapter focuses on the work of Marina Spada, whose four films, *Forza Cani* (2001), *Come l’ombra* (2006), *Poesia che mi guardi* (2009), and *Il mio domani* (2011), are about women in Milan. The city, far from being merely a film location, has a specific narrative function, with the city itself also shaping that very narrative. In all of these films female characters are shown perpetually crossing and observing the city from above. Like Lidia from Antonioni’s *La notte*, these modern *flanêuses* are certainly not women “of the crowd,” like the Parisian *flâneur*

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20 “I was born in Milan and have always lived in the same suburban neighborhood and I too, like Alda Merini, would only leave Milan for heaven. […] I’ve always wanted to make movies, affirming life within fiction against the ravages of time. I shoot films to gain a sense of the world, to better understand the present.” Calvenzi ed., op. cit., 9.
described by Baudelaire, but solitary strollers of deserted cities, which epitomize the inner void and immobility of the contemporary female subject. Reflecting on Spada’s mise-en-scène and her shooting journals, which reveal her numerous cultural references, I will analyze the different forms of female flânerie as a critical trope and visual strategy for constructing cinematic space.

Spada’s treatment of place is reminiscent of Antonioni’s, a cinematic model Spada quotes extensively in her films. Analyzing the function of locations in *L’avventura* (1960), *L’eclisse* (1962), and *Il deserto rosso* (1964), David Forgacs writes: “Antonioni’s way of dealing with physical locations was essentially to expand their importance relative to the role they had in conventional narrative films and even in some cases to reverse the priority operating in those films whereby people were assumed to be more important than places” (103). Similarly, in Spada’s cinema, buildings, empty streets, and piazzas do not need to contain characters to be framed by the camera.

Early in her autobiographical essay “La mia città” (“My city”), Spada introduces herself by saying: “Sono nata a Milano, vivo da sempre nello stesso quartiere di periferia e anch’io come Alda Merini, lascerei Milano solo per il paradiso.”22 Hence, before defining herself as a filmmaker, Spada states her sense of belonging, not just to the city, but to its outskirts, and reveals the main recurrent themes of her films: Milan, women, and poetry.

2.2 *Forza cani* and *Poesia che mi guardi*: Poems on the City’s Walls

_**I poeti lavorano di notte**_

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22 “I was born in Milan and have always lived in the same suburban neighborhood and I too, like Alda Merini, would only leave Milan for heaven.” Calvenzi ed., op. cit., 9.
I poeti lavorano di notte
quando il tempo non urge su di loro,
quando tace il rumore della folla
e termina il linciaggio delle ore.
I poeti lavorano nel buio
come falchi notturni od usignoli
dal dolcissimo canto
e temono di offendere Iddio.
Ma i poeti, nel loro silenzio
fanno ben più rumore
di una dorata cupola di stelle.

Alda Merini "Destinati a morire" \cite{Merini2010}

After directing many documentary and short films, Spada struggled to produce what Italian critics call the *opera prima*, that is, her first feature film. Spada’s “debut,” *Forza cani*, came after over fifteen years of filmmaking experience and numerous works. Denied funding from the Italian government, which is the primary financial source of film production in Italy, Spada fundraised 60 million *lire* on her own through the Internet. Thanks to fifty people who offered financial support to the project and participated in the different stages of the production, *Forza cani* was the first independent digital film in the country. As a collective work, it distances itself from the mainstream Italian production and distribution system, mainly located in Rome, and

\footnote{“Poets work at night/ when time does not press on them/ when the crowd’s noise is hushed/ and the hour’s lynching is over. Poets work in the dark/ like night hawks or nightingales/ whose song is so sweet/ and fear they are offending God. But poets, in their silence/ make a higher noise/ than a golden dome of stars.” *The Second Hump*, Vol. I (May 2010-April 2011). See: <http://thesecondhump.blogspot.com/2011/05/poems-by-aldamerini.html>. Last accessed on March 31, 2013.}
represents, in Spada’s words, “Un passo importante verso la democratizzazione del cinema in Italia.”

Poetry is a fundamental source for Spada’s work and figures in it in different ways. *Forza cani*, is the title of a poem by Nanni Balestrini. Spada’s other film titles are also taken from poems: from Anna Akhmatova’s poem “To the Many” she took “Come l’ombra” while “Il mio domani” hails from Antonia Pozzi’s poem “Domani.” In Spada’s first feature film, Balestrini’s verse functions not only as a source of inspiration but also as part of the very set design, graffiti in this case: in the final shot of the film, “Forza cani” is written on a wall by the character Nico.

By opening and closing the narration with the act of writing and reading poems, Spada creates a circular structure in the film. This strategy serves to herald the central theme of the film and re-state it in the finale: filmmaking makes poetry visible. In the opening scenes, in fact, verses are written on a wall by the central character, the urban poet Nebbia: “Il giorno ringhia nero/E vuoto soltanto vuoto/Niente si fa suono nella notte soltanto buio.” The words “nero – ringhia – vuoto” herald a sense of rage, oppression, and desolation that the film conveys while the story slowly unfolds. In this, the form and content of the film are inextricably fused.

Nebbia lives in an abandoned factory at the margins of the city, to which he has just arrived. While working for a cleaning company with immigrants from North Africa, he posts verses, his own and those of other poets, throughout the city. In the hangar, Nebbia meets Nico and Tetra, who are looking for a place to host a rave party, and Franco, who is involved in some illegal business with Albanian immigrants, has been injured in a fight. At work, Nebbia meets Monica, a troubled, single mother, who cannot manage to keep a stable job to support her own son.

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24 “An important step toward the democratization of film in Italy” (My translation)
25 “The day rumbles / Empty, just empty / Nothing resounds / In the night only darkness.” (My translation). The verses were composed by the scriptwriters.
The encounters Nebbia has in the new town interrupt his solitude and trigger a series of reactions from this group of outsiders. Tetra falls in love with Nebbia and Nico abandons his rave project and attempts to reconnect with his family. Franco recovers from his injury and tries to establish a friendship with the rest of the group, while continuing his illicit trafficking. When Monica’s son is about to be sent into foster care, Nebbia decides to help her. He steals a large amount of money from Franco to allow Monica to escape Milan and go to Germany where she can start a new life with her child. When Franco finds out about the theft, he confronts Nebbia and they both accidentally get involved in a car chase with the police, during which the poet is shot dead.

As in all of Spada’s scripts, the death of one character becomes a necessary sacrifice that opens a series of possibilities for those immobilized in an existential condition of waiting. In *Come l’ombra*, Olga’s death liberates Claudia; in *Il mio domani*, Monica starts a new life after her father’s death. The viewer suspects changes in the lives of characters following the death of Nebbia in *Forza cani*, though the film ends before resolution or closure is achieved.

Contrary to *Come l’ombra* and *Il mio domani*, both of which are set in dazzling light and sweltering summer, *Forza cani* is a very dark film, shot mostly at night, in a cold, rainy city photographed in reddish tones. In Spada’s works, Milan is not immediately recognizable: *Poesia che mi guardi* is the sole exception. Rather, it represents, in Spada’s words, the “topos of the western city,”26 and is deprived of any distinctive trait. Indeed, in *Forza cani*, Milan does not appear much on screen. Rather, it is verbally described or otherwise evoked by the characters. For instance, before the viewer can understand where the story is set, Franco says: “La conosco

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26 In a Q&A that followed the screening of *Il mio domani* at Lincoln Center in June 2012, Spada also declared: “There is a lot of talk about globalization, but there’s also a kind of globalization of architecture, a dialogue that is taking place among solids to the extent that some cities could be anywhere in the world.” (My translation)
bene io Milano, meglio di chi ci è nato. Si credono chi sa chi. Sta diventando una città di merda. La nebbia mi piace quando c’è, ma il freddo no.”

Franco describes a hostile city according to the stereotype of the cold, foggy northern city, populated by unfriendly people. With his southern accent, Franco is representative of the internal wave of immigration Milan has witnessed since the 1960s, and he is now the spokesman of Italians who feel threatened by foreign immigration. This monologue and the presence of various minor immigrant characters in *Forza cani* become the seed for Spada’s subsequent film, *Come l’ombra*, where the filmmaker reflects on the issue of immigration in Italy.

While Franco is representative of a negative idea of the city, through the character of Tetra, who repeatedly stresses the beauty of the city, Spada offers a positive portrait of Milan. While the camera shows Tetra in close-up, denying the spectator a view of the city, Tetra says to Nebbia, “È bella Milano dall’alto!” (How beautiful Milan is from above!). Throughout the film there are inserts in which Tetra, looking into the camera, talks about Nebbia from a roof terrace. Serving as the filmmaker’s alter ego, Tetra, like many of Spada’s female protagonists, contemplates the city from this aerial perspective.

As mentioned in chapter 1, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that the observation of a city from above allows one “to see the whole,” which is impossible through the common practice of walking, the typical way of experiencing a city accessible to most people. Contemplating the city in its entirety, according to de Certeau “allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (92). In other words, the contemplation of the city-

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27 “I know Milan well, better than the people born here. Who do they think they are? It is becoming a crappy city. I like when it’s foggy, I don’t like when it’s cold though.” (My translation)
panorama is a powerful experience that brings pleasure to the “voyeur god” who is moved by the
desire to understand the city’s complexity as if it were a text to be read, as well as a desire to
distance oneself from it. Likewise, de Certeau points out that the panoramic view shows the city
as immobile, in so much as its intrinsic mobility is hidden from the observer by distance. From
this perspective, the aerial view of Spada’s characters, as will be discussed later with Come
l’ombra, is related to their own immobility and signifies the filmmaker’s desire to appropriate
urban space through its representation. In Forza cani, however, the Milanese urban landscape
remains off-screen; thus, the viewer is denied the experience of the total god-like view, and so
the pleasure of “seeing the whole.” Moreover, as the city in this film is persistently shot at night,
in dark streets, or in scarcely illuminated places, it remains an unknown space to the viewer.

In Forza cani, one can identify in nuce many of the leitmotifs that Spada develops in her
later filmography: for instance, the aesthetic trope of flânerie, which will be applied to female
characters to represent their relationship with urban space. Nebbia, being an urban poet, is in a
way a flâneur, an invisible presence in the city, living at its margins, strolling the streets during
the night to post verses around Milan as if its walls were pages to write on. Similarly to the
filmmaker, his work makes poetry visible in the city, subtracting it from its own anonymity for
the alienated inhabitants. The verses leave a trace in the city landscape and force the passers-by
to interrupt their preordered and repetitive paths and interrogate themselves. Hence, with Forza
cani, Spada begins a discourse on the necessity of poetry and the role of the artist, which she
develops fully in Poesia che mi guardi, a documentary film devoted to the poet Antonia Pozzi.

Given that poetry is a recurrent theme in all of Spada’s works, Forza cani and Poesia,
shot almost ten years apart, engage in an intense dialogue with each other. They share the
characters of the urban poets who, incognito, write on the city walls: in Forza cani, Nebbia, and
in *Poesia*, the group H5N1. In addition, both employ, in different ways, the visual strategy of *flânerie* as a form of self-expression through the medium of poetry, and both films insist on the idea of making “the invisible visible,” a principle attribute of filmmaking.

Antonia Pozzi, a poet whose work has been neglected for decades, is made visible by Spada’s film *Poesia che mi guardi*. Born in 1912 into an upper-class Milanese family, Pozzi grew up during fascism and began writing poetry and practicing photography at a young age, although her family, which was well connected to the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), always impeded her artistic activity. At the beginning of the 1930s, she became part of a group of intellectuals who gathered around the philosopher Antonio Banfi. With the introduction of the fascist racial laws in 1938, many of Pozzi’s friends were forced to leave Italy, and she reportedly fell into a condition of isolation that eventually compelled her to commit suicide in 1938. Pozzi’s poetry was ignored for years and published only after her death, in severely truncated and censored versions supervised by her father, mainly after World War II. It was not until recently that the poet began to receive critical attention, mostly thanks to the work of the scholar Graziella Barnabò, author of Pozzi’s biography, *Per troppa vita che ho nel sangue.* The Pozzi film project was born out of the initiatives for the symposium intended to highlight the importance of Pozzi’s work, which took place at the University of Milan in 2008 on the fiftieth anniversary of her death.

Spada structures *Poesia che mi guardi* using a combination of family film footage and Pozzi’s black and white photographs, documenting both her life and work. Viewers hear many of Pozzi’s poems in voiceover, though they are never illustrated by explanatory pictures. To the

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contrary, she translates the meaning of Pozzi’s poetry through the places that inspired it. For instance, when we hear in voiceover the “Cantico della mia nudità” (“Song of my nakedness”) describing the poet’s body, the camera pans across a group of empty school desks at which Pozzi supposedly sat. At the same time, Spada creates a parallel fictional structure to represent her own research on Pozzi, and on the city of Milan. In so doing, she creates a contemporary frame in which to reenact Pozzi’s life and avoids making simply a film about a dead poet, or, as Spada puts it, “un film sulla morte” (A film about death).

Pozzi’s story is told in voiceover by Maria, Spada’s fictional alter ego. From the beginning of the film, Maria undertakes a peregrination throughout the city, walking or driving, in search of the places where the poet lived and found her inspiration. Along this journey, Maria meets the H5N1, a group of young street poets from Pavia, to whom she introduces Pozzi’s work. Together they start exploring Milan and retracing Pozzi’s itineraries in the city while discussing the value of Pozzi’s poetry. “Antonia non abita più qui da settanta anni.” (Antonia has not lived here for seventy years) is heard in voiceover while the screen shows the elegant Liberty building in which Pozzi lived with her family. By opening with such a statement, Spada establishes the city as the primary source of her discourse.

Therefore, Pozzi’s story is articulated through the places that she visited or lived, creating, in effect, a portrait of Milan in an arc of time spanning from the Thirties to today. Similar to Claudia and Olga from Come l’ombra and Monica from Il mio domani, Maria engages in a form of flânerie; as we shall see later in this chapter, for these female characters, walking not only signifies an inner journey of the self, but also a path to connect with other women’s art, and, at the same time, a journey into the city to observe its transformation over time.
Contrary to *Come l’ombra* and *Il mio domani*, where Milan is either characterized by super-modern architecture or by the gray anonymity of a periphery deprived of any recognizable traits, in *Poesia*, Milan regains its historical dimension and the distinctiveness of an Italian city. As one can observe from Spada’s shooting journals (see figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3), which reveal in fascinating ways the genesis of each of her films, the filmmaking process requires Spada to retrace a photographic map of the city from Piazzale del Duomo with Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II (though the cathedral is left off screen), to Piazza Scala with the theater, then Via Pomposa and Via Mompiani. As the narration unfolds, it creates a trajectory from the center to the peripheral Piazzale Corvetto, where the poet spent much time and is now buried.

Thus, *Poesia* is not merely a portrait of Pozzi, but also an autobiographical film in which the filmmaker reflects on her love for poetry, on the meaning of her own art, and on her role as an artist. In the final scene of *Poesia*, Pozzi’s face, with her verses written next to it, appears on the walls of a streetcar moving throughout Milan. It is a reparative finale for all the years that her work was neglected, and a statement on the intent of the film. The very fact of making a documentary film on a modern poet not consecrated in the canon of Italian literature is inherently an act of “making the invisible visible” and even more so if we consider *Poesia* to be part of the feminist project of re-inscribing women in art history as well as in film history.
Figure 2.1. *Poesia che mi guardi*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2009. Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.2. *Poesia che mi guardi*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2009. Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.3. *Poesia che mi guardi*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2009. Courtesy of Marina Spada.
2.2 *Come l’ombra* and *Il mio domani*: Women in the Landscape

**Domani**

Se chiudo gli occhi a pensare quale sarà il mio domani, vedo una larga strada che sale dal cuore di una città sconosciuta verso alberi alti d’un antico giardino.29

Antonia Pozzi, 1931

With *Come l’ombra* Spada continues an aesthetic discourse on the city of Milan and an investigation of female subjectivity in the urban context. Differently from other Italian female filmmakers, “autrici interrotte” (interrupted women auteurs),30 who are prevented by film production mechanisms from developing their own poetics, Spada exercises her own authorial gaze through emancipating herself from the mainstream film industry. Like *Forza cani*, *Come l’ombra* is also shot outside the Italian film industry, using a digital format on a very low budget. After being included in the “Giornata degli autori” (The Day of the Auteurs) at the International Venice Film Festival in 2006, *Come l’ombra* was welcomed by Italian critics, who recognized Spada as one of the most interesting filmmakers to emerge in recent years. Significantly, she was the only Italian female filmmaker included in this competition.

29 “If I close my eyes to think of how my tomorrow will be, I see a long road that rises from the hearth of an unknown city toward the tall trees of an ancient garden.” (Translation in the DVD of the film by Kairos Film, 2011).
30 As mentioned in chapter 1, (1.1 “Mapping Italian Women’s Filmmaking: the Issue of Invisibility), the definition “autrici interrotte” was employed by Barbara Maio in *Gli Invisibili. Esordi Italiani del Nuovo Millennio*. Vito Zagarrio ed. (Turin: Kaplan, 2009).
Set in a desert-like summer in Milan, the film narrates an encounter between Claudia and Olga, a young Ukrainian woman who has recently arrived in Italy. Claudia is a single, independent young woman living a repetitive life. She works in a travel agency and attends a Russian language school, where she becomes attracted to her professor, Boris. When they are about to begin a relationship, Boris asks her to host his “cousin” from the Ukraine while he is on a business trip. Reluctantly, Claudia accepts under the condition that it will be for just one week. Despite Claudia’s initial diffidence, the two women become friends. One night, just as they are starting to feel close, Olga fails to return home. To find her, Claudia journeys throughout Milan, only to be interrupted by a call from the police announcing Olga’s death.

Looking again at the shooting journals (figures 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8), it is apparent that Spada’s cinematic vision has many cultural references: from global auteur filmmaking, to photography, painting, and poetry. As one can see from the excerpt included in this chapter, next to images of paintings and photographs, are annotated shot numbers. Every take is constructed through an artistic filter, a pre-existing image, coming out of an iconographic study of specific artistic models. Spada’s filmmaking is inspired by Jean-Luc Godard as well as by painters such as Mark Rothko, Mario Sironi, and the contemporary Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico. As previously mentioned, Spada’s imagery is heavily indebted to Antonioni, not only for its attention to women’s subjectivity as interpreters of modern alienation, but also in terms of frame composition and camera movements.

The opening scene of Come l’ombra establishes the formal characteristics of a substantial part of the film. It is a direct quotation of Antonioni’s La notte, a film Spada also quotes in Il mio domani. In La notte, Antonioni shows the Milan of the sixties, when abusive urban speculation was taking place as a result of the country’s economic growth. While the camera accompanies an
elevator’s downward movement, it shows the image of the city reflected in the windows of the Torre Branca. In La Notte, as in Italian cinema in general, Milan is the symbol of the “economic miracle” and, thus, the elected place to represent upper class alienation. In Come l’ombra, where Antonioni’s elevator returns, Claudia, the protagonist, looks at the city from inside the tower; the landscape seems to be the same, and, as shown later in the movie, Milan is still the place of alienation for the female protagonists.

The image of the woman appropriating urban space by contemplating the city from above, or by strolling its streets, represents Spada’s poetic matrix and the major visual leitmotif of all of her films. The images of women caught in the act of looking through a window, or exercising a mobile gaze, are clearly self-referential, in so far as they replicate the act of auteur filmmaking. To use de Certeau’s figure, Claudia, as Spada’s alter ego, represents “the voyeur-god” experiencing the “all-seeing power,” like the filmmaker who engages in a discourse on the city, and thus states, at the beginning of her film, her authorship.
While in *Forza cani* the aerial view of the city was left off-screen, the urban landscape in *Come l’ombra*—which is Claudia’s POV shot—is framed by the window in an extreme long shot. It follows her over the shoulders, close-up, à là Antonioni. Immediately after, as the camera pans in a circle, a series of aerial pictures of the city are shown, heralding the meaningful presence of the landscape in the film. In *Come l’ombra*, as in *Il mio domani*, the image of Milan reflects the stamp of Basilico, who, for many years has engaged in an artistic dialogue with the filmmaker, thus representing a major reference point for her *mise-en-scène.*

Basilico, a contemporary (and recently deceased) Italian photographer, is known for his portraits of cities, such as those of Beirut and Moscow. He began a photographic investigation of Milan between 1978 and 1980, which documented the so-called “architettura media” (middle architecture) of the “ugly” city’s periphery, the privileged location of Spada’s films. In one of Basilico’s first and most better-known works, *Milano ritratti di fabbriche* (Milan, Factory Portraits), a series of industrial landscapes are assembled in which Milan is portrayed as pure architecture, as static space deprived of human presence, cars, and other elements that might evoke the idea of movement intrinsic to a modern city. In his *Architettura, città, visioni* (*Architecture, Cities, Visions*), Basilico provides a poetical account of one of his first experiences photographing Milan:

La città era semideserta e un vento straordinariamente energico aveva ripulito l’orizzonte: era una giornata di luminosità eccezionale, uno di quei rari giorni che stupiscono i milanesi perché “si vedono così bene le montagne che sembra di poterle toccare con una mano.” Il vento, quasi assecondando una tradizione letteraria, sollevava la polvere, metteva agitazione nelle strade, puliva gli spazi

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31 Among the twelve video portraits of artists Spada directed, see *Gabriele Basilico* (2004).
fermi, ridonando plasticità agli edifici, rendendo le prospettive delle strade in una sorta di maquillage atmosferico che permetteva alla luce di proiettare con vigore e nettezza le ombre degli edifici. (24)

Interestingly, while the original script of *Come l’ombra*, written by Daniele Maggioni, required only “Immagini della città,” Spada filters the generic city view through Basilico’s representations of Milan. In fact, the account given here, which describes a “spazio fermo” (immobile space), perfectly applies to one of Spada’s shots of Milan. The two artists share the same imagery of the city as described earlier: deserted, empty, still, quiet, uneventful, and anonymous—all characteristics that enhance the loss of identity experienced by the characters. Truly, a dialectic relationship is established between the characters and the space they inhabit: the deserted city seems an extension of their inner void, and vice versa the inner void is determined by the external space.

In order to understand how the landscape creates meaning in the narration, one can observe how it is treated in the editing process. In *Come l’ombra*, the urban landscape is often interjected in the different sequences, creating a pattern in the structure of the film. Pier Paolo Pasolini used a similar technique in *Mamma Roma* (1961), abruptly inserting the image of the Basilica of Saint Giovanni Bosco in several sequences, creating an association of meaning between the protagonist’s death and the city of Rome. Similarly, in *Come l’ombra*, a metaphysical landscape, sometimes disconnected from the *diegesis*, persistently interrupts the flow of the narration. The

32 “The city was semi-deserted and an extraordinary energetic wind had cleaned the horizon. It was an exceptionally bright day, one of those rare days in which the Milanese people are surprised ‘they can see the mountains so well that it seems as if they can touch them with their hands’. The wind, going along with some literary tradition, stirred up the dust, shook the streets, cleaned the still spaces, conveying plasticity to the buildings. It restored the streets’ perspective with a sort of atmospheric *maquillage* that allowed light to clearly and sharply project the buildings’ shadows.” (My translation)
repetitive appearance of the immobile landscape highlights the female protagonists’ inability to
act, their solitude, and the impossibility of their being visible in the city. At the same time, it
creates a distance in terms of spatial relationships between them and the city itself.

To underscore Claudia’s existential immobility, the camera shows her repeatedly
observing the town from which she is distant, but also while she is alone in her apartment, or
enclosed in other indoor spaces, “under glass,” so to speak. For instance, she is shown behind a
streetcar’s or café’s window. In addition, the camera is always kept at a distance and frames the
subject through another element, creating an obstacle to direct vision of the pro-filmic. This
framing strategy creates a sense of entrapment while impeding full identification with the
protagonist.

While Claudia is frequently seen entrapped in closed spaces, Olga, in opposition, is
mostly framed outside the house, thus placed in the landscape while exploring and appropriating
the urban space. As Susanna Scarparo and Bernardette Luciano write in their essay, “Gendering
Mobility and Migration”,33 “Olga invades the landscape, map in hand, and seems determined to
negotiate it.” Given that Olga engages in the activity of strolling and observing the streets of
Milan as a flâneuse would do, Scarparo and Luciano define her as “a modern legitimized
‘streetwalker’ ” (171). Spada’s Olga, thus, is not a prostitute walking the streets to sell her body,
nor part of the spectacle enjoyed by the male passersby, but an active subject who “wanders
through the city window-shopping, purchasing cheap imitation commodities, thus buying rather

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33 In the last two decades, a significant number of Italian films dealt with themes like the struggle
for integration, intolerance, racism, violence, and prostitution, but also themes of transnational
love stories and friendship. According to the film databank compiled by Oxford University, built
from the research project “Destination Italy”, which is devoted to the representation of immigrants
in Italian media, over 100 films in which immigrants are main or minor characters were produced
between 1990 and 2010.
than selling pleasure” (171), in other words a female version of the flâneur-consumer, according to Benjamin’s interpretation of the Baudelairean figure.

As a female immigrant from Eastern Europe, Olga’s cinematic character is, surprisingly, not connoted as a prostitute on a plot level, as very often happens in Italian cinema. Nevertheless, prostitution seems to be an extra-diegetic, unavoidable label for Olga. First, as we can observe in the set journal (see figures 2.6 and 2.7), on a level of mise-en-scène, Olga’s character is shaped after Jean-Luc Godard’s Nana, the Parisian prostitute of Vivre sa vie (1962); second, Olga is labeled as a prostitute by her own immigrant community. When Claudia starts her journey throughout the city to look for Olga after her disappearance, she spreads around flyers showing a close up of Olga’s face. Under her face, Claudia writes in Russian “Kto eë videl?” (Who saw her?), a question that, again, raises the issue of invisibility. When Claudia returns to the corner where she put up the flyer, she discovers that someone has written “kurva” over Olga’s face, a Russian insult meaning whore. Since the word is written in Olga’s language, it is significant that her own community does not authorize her to exit the stereotype of the migrant prostitute. In defiance of such framing, Claudia rips down the flyer and continues her search for Olga.

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Figure 2.5. *Come l’ombra*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2006. Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.6. *Come l’ombra*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2006.

Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.7. *Come l’ombra*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2006.
Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.8. *Come l’ombra*. Marina Spada’s set journal, 2006. Courtesy of Marina Spada
After only twenty minutes from the beginning of the film, Olga disappears from the landscape. As the set journal shows, the character of Olga, framed as Godard’s Nana, enters “un campo vuoto” (an empty scene), looks around, and turns her gaze toward the camera. In that moment, the narration is suspended and the absence of sound creates a disquieting atmosphere. Louis Althusser would describe this moment as the interpellation, the moment in which the film’s ideological message is conveyed to the audience as its subject. Olga’s gaze is finally active and directed toward the viewers to whom she exposes herself. In Spada’s words, she is addressing them by saying: “E adesso mi devi vedere per forza” (“And now you must look at me”). It is one of the most intense moments of the film, announcing an abrupt end to Olga’s story.Pressing the point, Olga’s gaze into the camera is followed by the recurrent empty landscape, inevitably associated with the woman’s death.

Figure 2.9. Karolina Porcari in Come l’ombra, 2006. Courtesy of Marina Spada

As Aine O’Healy noted in her essay, “Border Traffic,” in many films of migration, such as Carlo Mazzacurati’s Vesna va veloce (1996) and Giuseppe Tornatore’s La sconosciuta (2006),
violence functions as a sort of mandatory transition for the female immigrant. It seems that the beauty of the woman’s body ought to be disfigured and exposed to the view of the spectator, who is addressed as a “compassionate witness to her abuse.” Differently from the films cited earlier, in *Come l’ombra*, the female immigrant is not saved by a man, but is presumably murdered. Nevertheless, in Spada’s film, the bleeding woman’s body is not represented but only evoked. When Claudia is called by the police to identify Olga’s dead body, the camera remains outside the morgue, almost as if her death might be obscene, and hence, cannot be represented. Adopting a narrative strategy that harkens back to the original notion of drama and Greek tragedy, where violence is never depicted, Spada leaves the terrifying event off-screen, frustrating the spectators’ expectations of directly witnessing what happened to Olga, thereby forcing them to question those who are responsible.

Olga’s death propels Claudia on a journey through the city that forces the viewer to reflect on the relationship between women’s bodies and the urban landscape. In *Come l’ombra*, the city is deprived of human presence to the extent that, when Olga, and later Claudia, enter it they seem almost extraneous. This is the case with two different shots, both depicting the protagonists in the landscape in the act of looking. During her peregrinations, Claudia walks across a desolate street. As in Antonioni’s films, the camera arrives before the character, and leaves after. Thus, at first, it shows a billboard truck in the middle of the street advertising some exotic vacation by exposing a semi-naked woman. Since such a stratagem should be used to seduce hypothetical clients, the very presence of the truck in the middle of such a deserted street seems absurd. In the following shot, Claudia enters the frame, stands and stares at the billboard

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with her arms on her hips. Even though the camera does not show her face, her pose suggests that she is quite bothered by the advertisement.

![Figure 2.10. Anita Kravos in *Come l’ombra*, 2006. Courtesy of Marina Spada](image)

There are other shots in the film showing similar billboards. In two other moments in the film, Claudia is shown at a window observing the landscape. As counter shots return the images of the empty town, giant posters of women in “tempting” poses appear on buildings at least twice. Spada seems to suggest the idea that women as erotic objects are a consistent part of any urban landscape, and while criticizing female objectification, proposes a re-codification of the female body by re-inscribing it into the landscape.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{36}\) As other Italian female intellectuals, Spada supports Lorella Zanardo’s protest of the erasure of women’s identity from the television screen. As Zanardo says in her documentary film *Il corpo delle donne* (*Women’s Bodies*, 2004): “Le donne, le donne vere, stanno scomparendo dalla tv e sono state sostituite da una rappresentazione grottesca, volgare e umiliante.” (“Women—real women—are an endangered species on television and they have been replaced by a grotesque, vulgar, and humiliating representation.”)
On the other hand, Claudia, who at the beginning of the film stood immobile while observing the city, at the end of the film is leaving it. Having finally overcome her stasis, she undertakes, with Olga’s suitcase, the reverse journey toward the Ukraine, presumably to return Olga’s belongings to her family. Most importantly, through the bus window, she is now observing a mobile barren landscape that, accompanying Claudia’s gaze, scrolls on the screen.

With *Come l’ombra*, Spada shows an authorial female gaze that, while investigating female subjectivity, attempts to re-codify the female body, which is usually seen in mainstream cinema (i.e., male cinema) as either an erotic object or as a victim of male violence. Although it might be argued that by exercising a dominant look on the *Other* Spada does not escape the objectification of the female body embedded in filmmaking, by keeping her camera always at a distance, which denies the view of the woman’s violated body, she makes visible not only the migrant’s body but the Italian woman’s body as well, inscribing both into the urban landscape.

With *Il mio domani* (2011), Spada continues her aesthetic explorations of her home city while continuing to use *flânerie* to articulate female subjectivity in the urban space. As with *Come l’ombra*, her fourth film is also—to use Roland Barthes words—“a tissue of citations.”37

In fact, the father-daughter relationship at the center of the film is reminiscent of Antonioni’s *Il Grido* (1957), which is also set in the Po Valley (see figures 2.11 and 2.12).

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Figure 2.11. Il mio domani. Marina Spada’s set journal.
Courtesy of Marina Spada
Figure 2.12. *Il mio domani.* Marina Spada’s set journal. Courtesy of Marina Spada.
Figure 2.13. *Il mio domani*. Marina Spada’s set journal. Courtesy of Marina Spada
Monica’s strolls in the city recall again those of Lidia from La notte, and the Milanese location of the Fidia building is a direct quotation of Cronaca di un amore (Story of a Love Affair, 1950). Thus, Antonioni’s cinema, beyond being a mere reference point for the mise-en-scène, merges into the fictional matter, underpinning the narration.

The main protagonist of the film is Monica, an intelligent and attractive woman who works as a human resources manager in a consultancy firm. Despite her success, Monica is a tormented person who leads a solitary life in Milan. She entertains a relationship with her married boss and regularly visits her elderly and sick father in the countryside. When he dies, the story reveals that Monica has a profound resentment toward her mother, who, when Monica was a child, abandoned her family for an amorous adventure in Greece. A few years later, when the relationship ended, she returned to her home village with another daughter. Neither Monica nor her father were able to forgive her. After his death, Monica enters a profound state of crisis that eventually leads to a transformation of her life. The relationship with her stepsister, long conflicted, falls apart, impeding Monica’s contact with her nephew, a fragile adolescent who Monica loves dearly. Her lover Vittorio leaves her to go to Paris, and she realizes that the firm she works for is manipulating her. She perceives her job as dishonest after realizing that the motivational speeches she gives employees are deceptively intended to make them accept the fact they are being fired. In reaction, she decides to start her life anew. Parallel to these events, Monica attends a photography class where she is learning to compose her self-portrait. Symbolically, in the end, she places herself in a new picture by starting a new life elsewhere, repeating her mother’s journey to Greece.
As in *Come l’ombra*, in *Il mio domani*, the death of someone is also a necessary sacrifice that mobilizes the central character, forcing her to exit from a condition of stasis. In both films, the path of reshaping the self leads the protagonist away from the city in so far as displacement and relocation in a new landscape become essential conditions for the regeneration of the self. While in *Come l’ombra* the barren landscape seen along the road in the final scene replaces the alienating urban cityscape that occupies the screen for almost the entire film, *Il mio domani* is structured on a continuous alternation of two different landscapes, that of Milan, where Monica lives, and that of the country where she goes to visit her father.

In *Il mio domani*, female subjectivity is articulated through the country/city dichotomy; however, neither of these two poles is connoted as positive or negative. In her book *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), the feminist geographer Doreen Massey explores the idea that spaces and places are defined in terms of social relationships, and therefore, are not only gendered, but constitute the construction of gender itself. Discussing the equation nature/woman as well as home/woman, Massey argues: “Woman stands as metaphor for nature […], for what has been lost (left behind), and that place called home is frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as those assigned to, Woman/Mother/Lover” (10). Massey rejects the common idea, codified by patriarchal society, that women are more at ease in nature (as opposed to the city), as well as in domestic space, conceived as ‘the’ female space where they can fulfill the social role of mothers and wives.

None of this conceptualization of places can be applied to Spada’s film in which the country, far from being an idyllic and safe place, epitomizes Monica’s grief as much as the city. As confirmation, the country is photographed with static shots, slow camera movements on somber skies over the usual inanimate landscapes. The silence, the melancholic music, and the
sparse dialogue Monica entertains with her father, contribute to creating a sense of anxiety. In addition, the house, which is supposedly Monica’s childhood home, far from being a welcoming space, appears squalid and empty, mirroring Monica’s inner void. It can be argued that the domestic space here (the father’s house as well as Monica’s house in the city), in contradiction to the common view, speaks to the lack of the mother, and that the country is indeed a place “to be left behind,” without nostalgia. Ultimately, the country signifies her problematic childhood, while Milan represents, beyond her unresolved conflict, a possibility of liberation from the past.

As Wilson states in *The Sphinx in the City* (1992), “The city might be a place of liberation for women, it offers women freedom” (7). Wilson argues that, thanks to its large dimensions, the city is less likely to exert the patriarchal control on women that a community in a smaller place often does. Hence, the ability of women to lose themselves in the anonymous urban crowd represents a chance of emancipation and social mobility, which is what Milan at first offers to Monica.

Although the character of the mother is absent from the filmic text, she is depicted by Monica during a conversation with an occasional lover. This dialogue indirectly serves to suggest a reflection on women’s changing condition, and to introduce in the narration a different type of woman to counter Monica’s. The mother left her family to follow a lover and open an ice-cream store with him in Greece. When both the business and the romance end, she returns to her home village with another child, one born outside of her marriage. But, as Monica said, “nobody helped her.” It is implied in Monica’s account of her mother’s life that she suffered the consequences of stepping outside her social role, with poverty, isolation, and immobility. In this perspective, Monica’s life is quite different from her mother’s. Through living in the city, she
obtains the possibility of living an independent life, outside codified feminine roles; however, she still needs to forgive her mother in order to start a new life.

Monica’s crisis is articulated in the film through two stories that create different levels of narration in the plot. The first is the series of lectures that Monica gives as a human resource manager; the second is her peregrinations throughout Milan. In one of the first scenes of the film, Monica speaks to a small audience about the positive value of emptiness. As she tells her students, in ancient China, emptiness was written with an ideogram called MU. This ideogram represented the concept of emptiness not as the threatening non-existent space, but, on the contrary, as a real space that can be inhabited. In several sequences, while Monica struggles to create that empty space in order to embrace that change, she continues discussing the importance of conceiving emptiness as an opportunity to change.

However, empty space is not positively represented in the film; conversely, it generates a sense of anxiety and profound loneliness. In moments of crisis, as Lidia from La notte, and all of Spada’s female protagonists, Monica wanders throughout empty streets and piazzas. The character is shot in long takes from high angles, showing the all-glass buildings, which emphasizes the modernity of Milan’s architecture, though also depicting a city deprived of the confusion, of the crowd, of the urban life that one would expect. The phantasmagoria, the spectacle of the modern city that was the object of observation of the flâneur of the nineteenth century, is completely lost.

However, in Il mio domani, Spada establishes a correspondence between the construction of a city and the formation of a woman’s identity. During her peregrinations, Monica lingers to observe several construction sites, which, in real life, are destined for the Expo that will take place in 2015. Despite the absence of human life as would be seen outdoors, the city seems to be
undergoing a major process of remodeling and development. Hence, Spada continues a work of documentation of the city’s transformations begun in *Poesia che mi guardi*, as well as an investigation on female subjectivity, suggesting that female *flânerie* is an act of introspection and identity formation.

Nevertheless, upon a closer analysis of the film script, and when considering in which moments the character strolls the city, *flânerie* can be interpreted as act of rebellion too. In “The Woman in the Street,” Rachel Bowlby, contributing to the feminist debate on *flânerie*, observes that “the woman in the street is somehow out of place, at least out of her place” (9). Bowlby interprets female walking as an act of breaking gender roles that require women to be confined to the private space. In Spada’s film, walking can also be considered a crossing of borders. Monica’s walking, in fact, is “about motions for change” (2). It is about quitting places she needs to leave behind in order to reposition herself in a new landscape.

As seen through this analysis of her opus, Spada’s stories are born from places rather than characters whose lives, in fact, originate and are shaped by the different places that figure in her films. The figure of the *flâneuse*, as that of the woman contemplating the urban landscape from the city heights, is, therefore, Spada’s poetical matrix. All of these films portray female protagonists in a similar psychological position, one of searching, questioning, crisis, and immobility. As mentioned in the beginning of chapter 1, this recurrent image has an autobiographical origin. Walking throughout the city helps the filmmaker to feel a sense of belonging to Milan, inscribing herself into the landscape and finding the building blocks of her cinematic work, as she explains in “La mia città” (My City):

Mi piace fare film e soprattutto prepararli: giro per giorni a piedi in tutte le stagioni a caccia di un odore, un suono, un racconto, un punto da dove poter fare una ripresa. A volte da sola, a volte con altri che mi portano in luoghi appena mutati
Spada, after struggling to establish herself in the film industry, found alternative ways of production and distribution and her work is receiving increasing critical attention due to her efforts. She is now emerging as one of the most compelling Italian contemporary directors along with numerous other women directors, who are also developing aesthetic projects focused on women’s subjectivity in an urban context.

38 I like to make films, but most of all to prepare them: for days, and in all seasons, I roam around on foot hunting for a scent, a sound, a story, a place from which to start filming. Sometimes on my own, sometimes with others who take me to places that have just risen, or have just changed or been deeply transformed. […] I like to film Milan even from above, continuously seeking new windows, new balconies, new points of view whence to look at her, search out the empty spaces and fathom her deep and mysterious life. Calvenzi ed., op. cit., 83.
CHAPTER 3

WOMEN OUTSIDE THE POLIS:
FRANCESCA COMENCINI’S CINEMA
3.1 Francesca Comencini: Urban Filmmaker

Since the mid-eighties, Francesca Comencini has alternated between fiction and documentary films that focus on social and political matters central to contemporary Italian society. As one of the founders of *Se non ora quando* (When, If Not Now), the feminist protest movement that fights against and seeks to redress the degradation of women’s bodies in the media, Comencini engaged in cultural events and debates on the “questione femminile” (the female issue). In 2012, with the feminist association *Di nuovo* (Again), a name that invokes a new wave of the women’s liberation movement, she directed and promoted the play *Libere* (written by her sister Cristina), a dialogue between two women from different generations on the significance of freedom in post-feminist Italian society.

In many ways, Comencini’s work can be inscribed into a contemporary trend of Italian political filmmaking that absorbs and re-elaborates the neorealist model. This filmmaking, which—to borrow Cesare Zavattini’s expression — seeks to “excavate reality to give it power,” unites a documentarian aesthetic with the denunciation of social oppression. Some of Comencini’s documentary films are explicitly political in a newsworthy sense. *Carlo Giuliani, ragazzo* (2002) is a reconstruction of the last living moments of the victim of a police crackdown on protestors of the G8 Summit held in Genoa in 2001. *Firenze il nostro domani* (2003) — a collective film directed with masters of Italian cinema such as Gillo Pontecorvo and Mario Monicelli — documents the four-day European social forum held in Florence in 2002. *Dopo la guerra* (2005) depicts the consequences of the war in Bosnia. Comencini’s feature films are concerned with the politics of quotidian existence, particularly from a feminist standpoint. From

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Mi piace lavorare — Mobbing to Un giorno speciale, all of Comencini’s films are centered upon complex female characters dealing with male power. In them, Comencini articulates a discourse on the condition of women in twenty-first century Italy: their struggle to reconcile motherhood and paid work, the challenges of motherhood outside the family structure, and the objectification of women’s bodies, all themes that have also been at the center of the feminist political agenda since the seventies.

As mentioned in the beginning of chapter 2, Comencini, along with Spada, is a director who more consistently adopts urban settings throughout her filmography, particularly in relation to female subjectivity. The role of the city is central to Comencini’s fictional films as much as in her documentaries. For instance, in Carlo Giuliani, Genoa is obsessively mapped through the memories of Carlo’s mother and through the videos shot by protestors featured in the film. Many other documentaries, such as Shakespeare a Palermo, Firenze il nostro domani, and Le donne di San Gregorio, reveal from their titles alone that the city is the subject of the narration. In an interview I conducted with the director, Comencini elaborated on the centrality of the city to her directorial efforts:

In maniera consapevole da Shakespeare a Palermo fino a Un giorno Speciale, ogni mio film è un film sulla città. […] Fa parte del mio modo di fare film, mettere in relazione una vicenda estremamente intima con il dispositivo sociale e politico che c’è intorno al personaggio e che ne determina i comportamenti e le emozioni.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ “Consciously, from Shakespeare a Palermo to Un giorno speciale, each of my films is a film on the city. That’s my way of making films, putting in relation the intimate story of a character and the social and political apparatus that determinates those emotions.” (My translation)
This statement elucidates and supports Comencini’s artistic choice of placing her characters, especially female ones, in an urban context while creating a correspondence between their subjectivity and the space they inhabit.

In this chapter, through a close reading of the filmic texts, I shall examine the significance of this correspondence in all its complex facets. I shall concentrate on four of Comencini’s feature films: *Mi piace lavorare* — *Mobbing* (2004), *A casa nostra* (*Our Country*, 2006), *Lo spazio bianco* (*White Space*, 2009), and *Un giorno speciale* (2012). I argue that in all of these films women live outside the *polis*, meaning the political entity (classically the “city-state”) ruled by a body of citizens. The image of the city, in all of the different articulations that it takes in each of Comencini’s films, serves to exemplify this subordinate social and political condition under which women continue to suffer. In *Mi piace lavorare*, where aesthetic experimentation on urban space is still *in nuce*, Rome plays an important role in relation to the mother-daughter bond and to women’s difficulty in reconciling child-care and paid work. While for the protagonist Anna the city is experienced as a non-place, for her daughter Morgana it substitutes for a dysfunctional family. In *Lo spazio bianco*, another film that examines the experience of motherhood, Naples is uncommonly represented as a quiet and deserted place that serves to underscore the existential immobility of the main character and the social isolation a mother often experiences in a still largely patriarchal society. In *A casa nostra* and *Un giorno speciale*, Milan and Rome are signifiers of the debasement of women’s bodies and of the moral decay of a society devoted to consumption.
3.2 Mothers in the City: Mi piace lavorare — Mobbing and Lo spazio bianco

With Mi piace lavorare — Mobbing and Lo spazio bianco, Comencini reflects on motherhood in contemporary Italian society, where the role of women and the family structure have deeply changed along with the socio-political and economic structures that influence them. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, motherhood and the mother-daughter bond have been prime staples of women’s literary production and feminist critical thinking as tools for investigating women’s subjectivity.\(^{41}\)

Similarly, women filmmakers also deal with the mother-daughter relationship, and with the quest for the mother as a form of female investigation of the self.\(^ {42}\) In the films selected in this study, female characters are very often defined by their lack of children or by unresolved conflicts with their mothers. For instance, as seen in chapter 2, Monica, the protagonist in Spada’s Il mio domani, is haunted by her lost mother; in Nina Di Majo’s Inverno, the repressed desire of motherhood causes a melancholia from which both female characters suffer. In other films dealing with lonely children in a city, the mother is either dead (Domenica), exhausted from long work shifts (Rohrwacher’s Corpo celeste), or completely absorbed by her own frustrations (Torre’s I baci mai dati). The recurrence of portraits of destructive, absent, or problematic mothers in these films suggests that, after questioning the well-rooted belief that

\(^{41}\) Beginning with Sibilla Aleramo’s Una donna (1906), Alba De Cespedes’s Dalla parte di lei (1949), and continuing with more recent examples such as Elena Ferrante’s L’amore molesto (1996) and La figlia oscura (2008), the mother-daughter relationship has been at the center of numerous literary works.

\(^{42}\) Besides the films in question, a handful of works, such as Anne Riita Ciccone L’amore di Marja (2002), Cristina Comencini’s Il più bel giorno della mia vita (2002) and Quando la notte (2011), Alina Marazzi Un’ora sola ti vorrei (2002) and Tutto parla di te (2012), Fabrizia Sergentini’s Di madre in figlia (2004), and Susanna Nicchiarelli’s Il terzo occhio (2003) all deal with the subject of motherhood and with the mother-daughter bond.
women are naturally inclined to motherhood, women filmmakers are investigating their own experiences as women in new ways. Most especially, they probe how they experience motherhood in contemporary society, thereby creating more realistic portraits than those that depict the self-sacrificing mother.

Mi piace lavorare, in addition to situating the mother-daughter relationship at the center of the narration, deals with the challenge faced by women in reconciling their roles as mothers and members of the workforce. Along with Silvia Ferreri’s documentary Uno virgola due (2010), Comencini’s work is the only Italian film that treats the issue of “mobbing” (emotional abuse in the workplace commonly known as bullying or harassment) and its specific gender implications. Mobbing is a ruthless strategy of psychological violence adopted by companies that, due to corporate restructuring or merging with other companies, need to reduce the number of their employees. Workers considered “in excess” are deliberately humiliated, isolated, and attacked until they are forced to resign.43 The phenomenon of mobbing, although still difficult to identify and prevent, came to the attention of the media at the end of the nineties. Law 30, introduced by the Berlusconi government in 2003 to render the workplace more ‘flexible’ while creating job opportunities for young people, facilitated an increase of this phenomenon.44 As Manuela Galetto observes, flexibility translated into “precariousness.” Often forced to choose between childcare and paid employment, women are only apparently protected by the law; as a matter of fact, as workers they are more fragile subjects, and more exposed to the risk of being ‘mobbed.’

Social services called “sportello mobbing” (mobbing help desk) appeared throughout the country in the first decade of the new millennium. Comencini’s interest in this form of social exploitation was welcomed by the CGIL (Confederazione Italiana Generale del Lavoro), the union which actively took part in the realization of the film project, granting the filmmakers access to documentation, providing locations, collaborating on scripts, and even allowing its members to be cast in secondary roles. In preparation for the film, Comencini shot a series of video portraits of a number of actual victims of mobbing, whose stories formed the basis of her script. To demonstrate how gender issues aggravate the effects of mobbing, Comencini decided to convey all of the stories of her film through a central female character.

Anna, a single mother living in Rome. While her young daughter Morgana explores the city’s streets alone, Anna’s life is limited to office and home, to which she arrives exhausted every night after traversing the “non-place” separating them. When her company merges with a larger one, Anna — who in addition to being a single mother is burdened with caring for her sick, elderly father — is considered “inflexible” by her manager, and, therefore, “in excess.” To elude the laws protecting women workers, her company adopts the strategy of mobbing to force her to resign. Despite continuous vexations that weaken her psychologically and thereby affect her relationship with her daughter, Anna finds the strength to oppose her oppressors and seek justice by suing her company.

Mi piace lavorare adopts the stylistic modalities and ethical intents of neorealist cinema. Produced on a low-budget, mostly with non-professional actors (with the exception of Nicoletta Braschi, who plays the lead role) in real locations, with a small crew and documentary filming style, it denounces social injustice perpetrated by a society that places profit above all. As Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo rightly observe, “Comencini’s Mi piace lavorare
shares with *Ladri di biciclette* a critique of social and economic conditions that impinge on human relationships, and in particular on the parent-child relationship in an urban Roman landscape that is a fundamental player in the narrative” (28). *Mi piace lavorare* does in fact re-interpret the central themes of De Sica’s masterpiece: its interest in ‘ordinary’ people with their quotidian struggles and fear of economic deprivation that threaten their ability to sustain their families. In addition, similarly to *Ladri di biciclette*, children in Comencini’s film are forced to adopt a parental role and actively engage with the urban space.

In *Mi piace lavorare*, the narrative strategy of treating the city as a character is not developed as thoroughly as it will be in Comencini’s later films. The story takes place mostly indoors and Rome (as a prototypical city) is left off-screen for most of the narration. But, despite its general invisibility, Rome, and particularly the neighborhood of Piazza Vittorio, plays a significant role in the film, especially in regard to Anna’s relationship to it. The visual absence of the city and its external spaces conveys the sensation that Anna is trapped between enclosed spaces —the office where she works and her house — and that her mobility (essentially, her freedom) is somehow impeded. Ultimately, for both mother and daughter, the city is a place to be left behind. At the end of the film, after Anna and Morgana’s reconciliation and Anna’s victory in her lawsuit against the company, they are seen leaving the city, suitcases in hand.

45 Before *Mobbing — Mi piace lavorare*, Comencini shot *Le parole di mio padre* (2001) in Rome. The latter film (directed after her return to Italy from France) is loosely based on Italo Svevo’s masterpiece *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno’s Conscience*). On that occasion, the filmmaker, for obvious budgetary reasons, needed to avoid the reconstruction of a 20th-century Trieste as described by Svevo in his novel, and therefore re-located the story from Trieste to Rome. As she has done several times with her films (especially with *Lo spazio bianco*), she re-configured the city through Luca Bigazzi’s cinematography, ‘freeing’ it of recognizable monuments and piazzas and transforming the Eternal City into an anonymous place of the soul.
As mentioned, Anna’s mobility in the city is restricted to pre-ordered and repetitive daily itineraries between her house and the office where she works. She sends her daughter to school, walks under the portico, and descends underground toward the subway. The piazza is briefly shown, merely as a space of transition. With the exception of one scene where Anna is shown dining with colleagues in a pizzeria, she entertains no social relationships in any public space.

After her daily subway ride, Anna is depicted walking through a white tunnel that leads to her office. The tunnel is photographed with dazzling light and in high contrast, a visual device that Comencini will largely employ again in Lo spazio bianco, both to distort the location through abstraction, and to imbue the daily events of Anna’s life with a sense of unreality. Although the city can be glimpsed though her office windows, the white tunnel suggests that the character is entering a microcosm separate from the rest of Rome, regulated by its own time and logic. At the beginning of the film, after clocking in, Anna is shown while walking through the tunnel with other workers. As the story unfolds and Anna is progressively isolated by management and colleagues, she walks alone through the tunnel, or sits by a photocopy machine, her pale face disappearing among the white walls.

By showing Anna’s physical transformation, Comencini highlights not only the psychological consequences of mobbing but also its effects on Anna’s body and, thereby, on the bodies of women in toto. A particularly poignant scene illustrates the incompatibility between female bodies and the logic of profit, while calling for solidarity among women. After discovering she has been excluded from a work meeting, Anna retreats into the restroom where she meets her only sympathetic colleague, who is also seeking refuge from the hostile work environment. Prevented from going home to breastfeed her child during her office shift, her clothes are spotted with milk. In a later scene, we see the same woman hastily pumping milk from her breast and
then dumping it into the sink in order to continue to work. In both scenes, this woman shows a sense of despair and shame, as if her nourishing maternal liquid was a dysfunction of her unruly body, and thus superfluous material to be discarded as waste. Anna, who understands her sense of shame, gives her colleague her own shirt so that she can cover her breast.

*Mi piace lavorare* is entirely set in claustrophobic spaces that suggest a sense of entrapment for the protagonist: the office, its restrooms, its corridors, and more recurrently Anna’s apartment. The domestic space, traditionally connoted as the female space according to an ideology of women’s confinement to the private sphere, has a double narrative function: it is the place where the protagonist is safe from the continuous humiliation she suffers in the office, but it is also the place where conflicts with her neglected daughter emerge. Although shot with warmer tones, in contrast to the white lights of the office, the house is imbued with Anna’s despair and with her daughter Morgana’s sense of solitude.

As I shall show in chapter 4, many films directed by women, such as Wilma Labate’s *Domenica* (2000), Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati* (2010), and Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste* (2011), depict children surviving alone in a city and coping with loneliness in the absence of adults. This recurrent theme indicates women filmmakers’ concern with the condition of childhood in relation to the lack of social support for mothers, especially for those parenting outside the traditional heterosexual family.

In *Mi piace lavorare*, to compensate for Anna’s absence, Morgana becomes a child *flâneuse*. While Anna does not engage in social relationship outside of her office, showing in several episodes a certain diffidence toward non-Italians, Morgana, to escape her solitude, actively explores the city. She is shown strolling, talking to street musicians, or interacting with the
children of immigrant families, suggesting that the multiethnic neighborhood of Piazza Vittorio offers her relationships outside the domestic space and substitutes for her dysfunctional family. The city is also represented as a threatening place. During a climactic mobbing scene toward the end of the film, Anna is asked to sign her “voluntary” resignation. Surprisingly, she finds the strength to confront her manager and refuses to sign. But then she realizes that, having been kept in the office beyond her work hours, she has missed an appointment with her daughter. Through parallel editing, Comencini depicts Morgana dressed in her ballet costume wandering around the city in search of her mother, while Anna simultaneously searches for her. The hectic movement of the hand-held camera (depicted from what would be the low angle of Morgana’s line of sight), her figure glimpsed among cars in streets scarcely illuminated, and the menacing soundtrack foreshadow a tragic ending for the unprotected child. However, the scene ends positively when Anna finds Morgana safe in the house of an immigrant family.

A last glimpse of the colonnade of Piazza Vittorio in daylight is shown at the end of the film, when mother and daughter are seen joyfully walking with their suitcases, about to leave the city. As Luciano and Scarparo noticed in their analysis of Mi piace lavorare, the final scene, with the child taking the parent by the hand while walking away, is reminiscent of Ladri di biciclette. However, contrary to the inconclusive nature of neorealist films that — as Zavattini writes — “do not offer solutions,” in Comencini’s film, Anna goes on vacation with an

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46 In 2006, (after the release of Comencini’s Mi piace lavorare) Piazza Vittorio became a cinematic and literary topos thanks the success of Agostino Ferrante’s documentary film L’orchestra di Piazza Vittorio and Amara Lakhous’ novel Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio. The latter was adapted into a 2010 film of the same title, directed by Isotta Toso. In all these works the narration is set in the multiethnic neighborhood of Esquilino (where Piazza Vittorio is located) in the heart of Rome, whose urban landscape has been profoundly transformed over the last couple of decades by the waves of migrants.
indemnity check in her pocket and a new job awaiting her. It is an optimistic ending that appears necessary to the social intent of the film that urges women to fight against this form of social oppression.

The theme of motherhood outside the traditional family structure, set in an urban context, is also articulated in *Lo spazio bianco*, adapted from Valeria Parrella’s eponymous autobiographical novel (2008). With this film, in which the representation of the city dominates the narration, Comencini creates a peculiar portrait of Naples, depicting it as a quiet and deserted place.

Similar to Spada’s films, in *Lo spazio bianco*, the city functions as an extension of social isolation and the existential immobility of the character, who is waiting for an event: the birth of her child.

In Parrella’s *Lo spazio bianco* events from the protagonist’s past and present life are dispersed throughout a fragmentary, first person narration. Numerous temporal ellipses force the reader to engage in the attentive work of reconstruction. Similarly, instead of presenting a fluid visual and narrative continuity, Comencini translates Parrella’s literary technique through numerous jump cuts and flashbacks, all of which require viewers to reconstruct the chronological order of the events, and to rely on the dialogue to make sense of them.

Maria, a single woman in her forties, teaches Italian to adult students while enjoying an active social life in Naples. Unexpectedly, she becomes pregnant after a brief relationship and realizes that she will be a single mother. The pregnancy (thus the transformation of her body) is represented neither verbally nor visually. Rather, it is announced abruptly when the baby is born prematurely. The film takes place mostly in the hospital during the fifty days in which the baby is kept in an incubator.
The filmic narration is dispersed amongst three spaces: the hospital, the city, and Maria’s house. Similarly to the office in *Mi piace lavorare*, the hospital is a microcosm disconnected from the rest of Naples, a heterotopia, to use Foucault’s term, ‘out of sync’ with the city’s pace. The city, therefore, is configured as everything that exists outside the hospital, a place where the protagonist yearns to escape the claustrophobic space of illness. The hospital, with its white walls and curtains, appears as an abstract white space, shared by a group of mothers living in limbo, waiting for their babies, who are “morendo-nascendo” (dying/being born). Maria’s house, in contrast to the hospital that is illuminated by dazzling light, is often shot in darkness and shown as an unwelcoming domestic space invaded by ants. As said above, the representation of each of these spaces is affected by the protagonist’s experience of waiting for her child to live or to die, thus by her perception of time as still.

The idea that the representation of time effects the construction of cinematic space relates to Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope,” which he defines as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” 47 Similarly, in cinema, “space becomes charged and responsive to the moments of time, plot, and history” (84). Like Bakhtin, in her book *Space, Gender, Place* (1992), the feminist geographer Daureen Massey also defines space as a unity with time. To render the suspension of time — perceived by whomever is waiting — Comencini’s camera repeatedly adopts an elevated point of view, which creates an effect of flattening the inherently three dimensional cinematic space.

To depict the anxiety of waiting, Comencini includes motionless aerial views from Maria’s point of view, often included in a frame showing the nape of her neck, in a manner

reminiscent of Antonioni’s framing of female characters. To underscore the correspondence between the city and Maria’s emotional state of anguish and confusion, many sequences are shot with a hand-held camera, while Luca Bigazzi’s cinematography captures the mauve tone of the sky over Naples seen at a distance.

More than other Italian cities, Naples is characterized by extreme contrasts between the Baroque architecture of the so-called “ventre” (“the belly”) and the urban blight of the hinterland. This dual aspect of the city is articulated in the film through the story of the itinerant school, a secondary narrative thread that Comencini and her scriptwriter Federica Pontremoli build to enrich the portrait of the city. The courses taught by Maria are not given a set location by the city administration. They take place periodically in different buildings; at first, in one with windows facing the sea; then in a baroque palace; and finally in a suburban slaughterhouse. This secondary narrative thread allows the protagonist — as well as the spectator — to undergo a voyage into the city (another form of flânerie) that highlights a series of dichotomies: beauty versus ugliness, center versus periphery, mobility versus immobility, and known versus unknown spaces.

In one episode the protagonist ventures to an unknown peripheral part of the city (presumably Ponticelli) to visit her student Luisa, who dropped out of her studies. The periphery, as we shall observe later in this chapter with the analysis of Un giorno speciale, is nameless, desolate, and immobile, even though in continuous construction. These urban filaments born from the city (often filled by damp areas as shown in Alice Rohrwacher’s Corpo celeste) are made of long series of immobile plots disconnected from the center. Interestingly, the desolate city-view offered in this scene is the only one in the film that includes a glimpse of Mount Vesuvius, seen against the backdrop of factories and interrupted constructions. Comencini and
Bigazzi construct an unusual portrait of the city, distinct from most other artistic representations of Naples.

As Giuliana Bruno points out in Streetwalking on a Ruined Map, the city view of Neaples is rooted in an ancient tradition, the pictorial practice of vedutismo. This genre of painting became, in the 1920s, a cinematic practice meant to offer “a mobile post card of city life” (210) from Posillipo, the highest point of the city from where one can enjoy the vista of the Bay with Mount Vesuvius still in the background. Although many sequences in the film indulge in showing the beauty of Naples (see the protagonist crossing Piazza Plebiscito, or the vista from the balcony with Chiesa del Carmine and the bell tower in the background), as mentioned above, the classic landmark of Mount Vesuvius is used in a manner divested of its iconic value. Far from composing the delightful postcard “Pino su golfo,” in the sequence dedicated to Ponticelli, Comencini shows the volcano as part of a barren industrial urban landscape.

A further analysis of Comencini’s depiction of Naples would benefit from its contrast with Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis’ famous fragment Naples, in which the writers describe Naples as a carnival place, where violence, poverty, and excesses of every sort occur in its streets. In addition, as the city is carved in tuff, they confer upon it the quality of ‘porosity.’ As they write: “The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts it ‘thus and not otherwise’” (166). In other words, they extend the precariousness of life to the structure of the city itself, which generates a spatial malleability.

Comencini does not represent the “rich barbarism” or the precariousness of life that Benjamin and Lacis see in Naples. On the contrary, the city, deprived of its inhabitants, is shown as the immutable theater of Maria’s existence. Addressing this point, in her essay “Motherhood revisited,” Claudia Karagoz criticizes Lo spazio bianco for its “sanitized portrait of the city”
According to Karagoz, Maria maintains a separation from the city so as “to ward off contamination” (109). To her, “Both Naples and Irene are perceived as agents of disruption from which Maria distances herself in order to preserve her solipsistic existence” (109). Although it is true that Naples is not represented in Comencini’s film as a social space but rather as a monumental city, and that Lo spazio bianco could have been set in any other urban context, I contend that this emptying of the city symbolizes the social isolation in which Maria experiences motherhood. Moreover, the image of the city is charged with Maria’s desperate sense of hope for her daughter’s survival.

Figure 3.1. Margherita Buy in Lo spazio bianco (2009). Courtesy of Francesa Comencini

Truly, with Lo spazio bianco, Comencini contributes to this de-folklorization and reconfiguration of Naples. As Roberta Tabanelli argues in her book I pori di Napoli (2011), in the 1990s filmmakers such as Mario Martone, Antonio Capuano, and Pappi Corsicato initiated an anti-folkloric renovation of Naples’ image. Their aim was to deconstruct the stereotyped
image of “Napoli pino-sul-golfo” (Naples, the Pine-on-the-Bay), or that of the “mangia maccheroni” (macaroni eaters), by framing the Baroque city in novel ways while also introducing the Neapolitan hinterland to the screen. Like the filmmakers of the Neapolitan school, Comencini does not adhere to the common, iconic image of the sunny city. On the contrary, she eliminates the sun: “il lato tranquillizzante e turistico di Napoli” (Tabanelli, 11). Nevertheless, differently from Martone, who in L’amore molesto (1995) depicts Naples as a crowded and thunderous place with suffocating alleys, Comencini shows an uncommonly quiet city, with deserted streets covered by a leaden sky.

Upon closer examination, this image of Naples conveyed by Lo spazio bianco in some way returns to Benjamin and Lacis’ fragment. After exploring the city from the street level, the authors observe it from above: “Seen from a height not reached from the cries below, from the Castel San Martino, it lies deserted in the dusk, grown into the rock. Only a strip of shore runs level” (165). In the same way, Comencini provides city-views by framing the urban landscape from high angles (including a subtle view of the sea at the horizon), a visual strategy that inscribes the film in a larger artistic tradition.

In Lo spazio bianco, the beauty of the city is loaded with Maria’s anxiety, and its immobility is related to her own experience of waiting, shared by other mothers at the hospital, as well as by other women in the city, as if waiting was a female condition par excellence. While Maria looks through the windows of the streetcar that takes her to the hospital, a series of subjective pan shots framing women at the window are shown (a sequence that Comencini will quote in her subsequent film, Un giorno speciale). As the itinerary is repeated many times in the

48 “She eliminates the sun, the tranquilizing and touristic aspect of Naples.” (My translation)
film, Maria’s mobile gaze reveals the traces of an ancient female ritual of waiting and solitude. As Massey puts it: “Home is where the heart is (if you happen to have the spatial mobility to have left) and where the woman (mother-lover-to-whom-you-will-one-day-return) is also” (180). As spatial control constitutes a form of social control of female identity, the idea of home as a woman’s place has been (and continues to be) used to limit women’s mobility. In this perspective, Comencini’s visual leitmotif of the woman at the window also symbolizes the exclusion of women from the city’s public life and the persistence of traditional models of femininity and gender roles.

In the film, the house is far from being a place that tames femininity; it is a space of voluntary solitude and emancipation. Significantly, this new domestic space is placed in the city, which is a larger, ideal space for female independence. As Wilson argues in The Sphinx and the City, in a large and variegated urban setting, populated by an undistinguished crowd, patriarchal control is loosened, allowing women to find spaces for freedom as well as possibilities for sexual liberation.

However, in Comencini’s film, the house, despite being a ‘liberated’ space, is not connoted positively as an adequate space for motherhood. From the moment of the premature birth, the house is always shot in darkness, which does not permit the spectator to accurately visualize and confer meaning to its space. In one of the sequences set in the house, Maria walks throughout a dark room; only her silhouette is illuminated by candlelight against a black backdrop, which creates an effect of flattening space. Occasionally, Maria is framed from outside the windows, behind the glass, which suggests her entrapment. In the dialogue, several references are made to the lack of space or to the need to make space for the child. Moreover, the
The darkness of the house contrasts strongly with sequences set in the hospital, where an extensive part of the narration takes place. A white screen shot announces the beginning of Maria’s experience in the hospital. The lack of an establishing shot at the beginning of the sequence prevents the viewer from noticing the change of location. A close-up from behind shows Maria washing her hands, then wearing a green gown. The absence of sound generates suspense if not dislocation. It follows a pan shot showing women in close-up sitting next to incubators. The dazzling white neon-like light eliminates the depth of field and creates a white space where the mothers, wearing green hospital gowns, look like splotches of color. The flattening of the cinematic space created through the camera in tilt shot is one of Comencini’s main visual traits, a visual motif employed since her first feature film, *Pianoforte* (1986). In that film, Comencini used high-angle framing to communicate the desperation of the two main characters, both of whom are prey to heroin addiction and are repeatedly framed while lying in hospital beds. In *Lo spazio bianco*, this visual strategy is used to convey the idea of the suspension of time and the protagonist’s inability to cope with the present. The intensive care unit, shot from above in a studio without a ceiling, is shown as a two-dimensional rectangle crossed by lines, dividing the area in other rectangles, each occupied by an incubator. Afterwards, Maria’s figure is fragmented with the blurred details of her face pressed against the glass, which do not seem to belong to a whole body with a realistic spatial collocation. This shot communicates to the viewer a certain sense of disorientation, supposedly the same state of mind Maria experiences. In the same way, the child’s body seems shapeless behind the glass and
among the tubes. Only in the last sequence, when she is “definitely born,” does her entire face emerge clearly within a white screen shot.

To convey the idea of suspended time, *Lo spazio bianco* is mainly characterized by a static camera, close-up shots, and by a lack of depth-of-field. However, in the end, when a narrative resolution is achieved, the filmic “chronotope” suddenly changes. After waiting fifty days, Maria’s daughter is considered out of danger. Waiting is finally interrupted, and the spatio-temporal dimension therefore regains movement. In the finale, the camera frames the protagonist walking in the city; the scene is edited connecting Maria’s steps, alternating between her present walking, her pace fast and liberating, and flashbacks to the period of her pregnancy. Maria’s walking, in fact, reactivates the memory of her slow pace three months earlier when on the same path she developed labor pains. Buildings are then shown from a low, distorting angle: they are perceived from Maria’s point-of-view, from the ground up. Through parallel editing, the scene returns to the present, which is when she finally regains her mobility. The camera continues to pan upward in an expansive crane shot, progressively showing a larger and larger part of the city, which again is unrealistically empty. It is not a realistic locale but a place created by Maria’s consciousness.

The anxiety brought about by the suspension of time, inherently in motion, is applied by the character’s subjectivity to the city, the place Maria observes and inhabits. Unusually, Naples is described by Comencini as a quiet and immobile, abstract place, an effect reached by framing the pro-filmic from high angles and often excluding the street level. With *Lo spazio bianco*, Comencini situates her films in a long artistic and cinematic tradition set in Naples and thereby contributes to a reconfiguration of the Italian urban landscape and how it is perceived and experienced.
3.3 Traffic of Women: *A casa nostra* and *Un giorno speciale*

Soon after *Mi piace lavorare*, Francesca Comencini shot *A casa nostra* (2006), further developing a discourse on contemporary capitalist society, which pursues profit regardless of the human cost. Alluding through its title to the expression “*cosa nostra,*** Comencini’s film denounces the oligarchy of ruthless businessmen and politicians, while addressing the issue of women’s social positions and the commodification of their bodies. Appropriate for a film about money and its circulation, Comencini chooses the location of Milan, the city of the stock market,

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49 *A casa nostra* was distributed in North America with the title *Our Home.*
of finance, and the center of Italian industry. Comencini defines Milan as “La città dei soldi, la città emblema del fallimento della borghesia italiana, la capitale morale e culturale d’Italia, che ha fallito completamente in questa sua missione ed è diventata la città che ha prodotto Berlusconi.”\(^{50}\) As I shall show by examining Comencini’s use of the urban landscape, the image of the city signifies national moral decay: it is the symbol of a rotten Italy, an association that aroused the indignation of Milan’s mayor at the time, Letizia Moratti.\(^{51}\)

In A casa nostra, several stories rotate around a central narration, intersecting randomly. A reckless banker, Ugo (Luca Zingaretti), conducts an illicit high finance operation with a group of Milanese businessmen and the support of a corrupt magistrate. Rita (Valeria Golino), the head of finance police, investigates him, wiretapping conversations to prove his guilt. In parallel, Ugo, whose wife suffers the loss of a child, is having an affair with a neurotic model, Elodie (Laura Chiatti). Gerry (Luca Argentero), a supermarket stock boy, becomes a figurehead in Ugo’s illegal business. Bianca (Cristina Suciu), a prostitute from Eastern Europe, tries to escape from the abuse of her pimp with the help of Otello (Giuseppe Battiston), an ex-convict who falls for her. As the story unfolds, Bianca is discovered to be pregnant, when she is found in a coma on the street after being brutally beaten. While continuing his illegal financial activities, Ugo attempts ‘to buy’ what is missing in his life: a child. When Bianca’s pregnancy comes to term, Ugo, using Gerry’s identity, claims to be the father of her child. But Rita exposes his plan, and Ugo fails to take the baby. In an ending with no narrative closure, the different characters cross the same piazza without actually meeting.

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\(^{50}\) “The city of money, the city symbol of the failure of Italian bourgeoisie, the moral and cultural capital of Italy, which completely failed in its mission, and became the city that produced Berlusconi.” (My translation)

As seen in *Mi piace lavorare*, and more explicitly in *Lo spazio bianco*, Comencini establishes a correspondence between the characters and the social apparatus that contains and determines their lives. The urban landscape is frequently framed and symbolically inserted throughout the film, as a connector among sequences, in a fashion recurrent in urban cinematic narratives. Immediately following the opening sequence, for instance, when the group of financiers appears in a luxurious restaurant, a series of pan shots of Milan under a grey sky are shown, creating a semantic link between the city and their illegal trading.

While in Spada’s films Milan is treated as a *topos* of a western city stripped of landmarks, *A casa nostra*’s reiterated use of specific city views renders the city recognizable. For instance, the *Duomo*, with its characteristic gothic pinnacles, repeatedly shown from different points of view, locates events in the historical center of Milan. Another recurrent city view is that of Torre Velasca. This latter building, built in an area devastated by the American bombing during WWII in the late fifties, is a signifier of the national economic rebirth that took place in Milan, and is now — despite its questionable beauty — a landmark of its urban landscape.

The plot develops through continuous movements and displacements of the characters around the city, particularly from the center to the periphery, where Comencini symbolically places characters from different social strata and degrees of social mobility. As the story progresses, from the deluxe restaurants and prestigious buildings of wealthy Milan seen in the beginning, there is a significant shift to the margins of the city. To escape the police investigation that has become more pressing, Ugo and his business partners are forced to leave their elegant houses to meet in outdoor, peripheral areas where their conversations will not be overheard. In one suggestive scene, Ugo discusses with his partner, Bottini (Bebo Storti) the obstructions created by the finance police. The camera frames both characters in a very long take, as they are
walking among the ruins of a factory, the abandoned steel factories of Sesto San Giovanni.

While Ugo barks about his self-alleged embrace of free enterprise, his distracted interlocutor recalls: “Da queste parti lavorava mio padre.” (My father used to work around here.) Poignantly, a discussion about illegally earned money is staged in a place where people worked to rebuild the Italian economy after the war. While the industrial ruins hold the memories of Sesto San Giovanni’s factories, they also represent the ruins of a work ethic. Their desolation reflects the characters’ moral squalor.\(^{52}\)

Another form of trade is visible on the margins of the city, one at the expense of women: prostitution. As Italy became a land of immigration in the last few decades, the figure of the foreign prostitute has become a recurrent figure in Italian cinema. Through the character of Bianca, Comencini depicts the phenomenon of female sex traffic while referring to an alarming number of episodes of violence against women. In a few scenes in *A casa nostra*, Comencini depicts the brutality of this modern form of slavery by showing prostitutes’ everyday routine.

At night a group of young women descend from a car. They are left on the edge of a gelid street by a pimp (also from Eastern Europe) and given ten condoms each, which are all to be used in one night. Before starting work, one of them has to pay for being driven to their ‘workplace’ with a sexual performance. Bianca is selected from the group. After framing her silhouette leaning against a tree, a close up depicts her numbed facial expression. In just a few shots, she is seen shivering in the street, performing oral sex, being paid thirty euros, and then finally returning home at dawn.

\(^{52}\) A similar use of urban space can be found in Paola Randi’s *Into Paradiso*, in which the mobster Don ‘Fefe’ and his henchmen live in an abandoned supermarket, at the margin of Naples.
Bianca’s story would have ended “happily,” (she would have been rescued by an Italian man) after she discovered she is pregnant. Instead, she is found one night on the edge of a street, after being brutally beaten into a coma. While the different narrative threads develop, Bianca’s body is artificially sustained through a life-support system in order to complete her pregnancy. Meanwhile, other characters’ obsessions with money, their desire for ever more material possessions come to naught; their plans fail. Eventually, all of the stories symbolically converge around Bianca’s inanimate body in the hospital. In the end, the birth of Bianca’s child offers a sense of hope for a better future, and therefore foresees the possibility of regeneration for the country. But, despite this seemingly positive message, one that Comencini always includes in her open endings, the viewer is left with an unsettling image: that of a child born from the womb of a dead woman, and that of Bianca’s corpse carried through the morgue’s corridors. Bianca’s existential path, her journey to Italy, her coercion into prostitution and even her death, characterize a lack of agency. The possibility, not realized, that Bianca’s child could have been sold, reinforces Comencini’s indignation for how women’s bodies are reduced to commodities.

This discourse on women’s bodies is further articulated through the character of Elodie, a model and aspiring actress who, thanks to her relationship with Ugo, has access to wealth. Elodie, who is presented as a high class escort, embodies another widespread and debated form of economic transaction, that of the show girl who offers sexual favors in exchange of wealth, success and social visibility. By articulating the stories of Bianca and Elodie in parallel, Comencini suggests that, like Bianca, Elodie practices a form of prostitution.

One particularly poignant scene shows the power dynamic between Elodie and Ugo. In what will be their last meeting, Elodie prepares herself for a fashion show when Ugo suddenly arrives. Taken to some backstage area, she is seen lying prone on a table, in an antiseptic room,
while Ugo brutally penetrates her. Immediately thereafter, she walks elegantly on the runway, albeit with a numbed expression on her face. The harshness of the sex scene and the somber soundtrack strips the fashion show of its usual sense of glamour and suggests Elodie’s profound misery. Subsequently, when Ugo stops paying her expenses at the luxury hotel where she lives, she is shown walking with her suitcase against the backdrop of the Duomo, a symbolic expulsion from the center of the city and from its wealth.

Figure 3.3. Laura Chiatti in A casa nostra (2006) 
Courtesy of Francesca Comencini

Figure 3.4. A casa nostra (2006) 
Courtesy of Francesca Comencini
The penultimate image of the film is that of a billboard (recurrently shown throughout the film) featuring Elodie’s face advertising a luxury jewelry brand. Symbolically, Elodie’s image is being covered with another face, that of a politician advertising his candidacy in a local election. The image of the young beautiful woman and the politician eloquently evokes the famous “bunga bunga,” the licentious parties that took place at former prime minister Berlusconi’s villas and the attendant scandals that rocked the center of Italian national life. Ultimately, the film closes with a nocturnal, aerial view of Milan, an ending that reiterates the erasure of women’s subjectivity from the urban landscape.

The young woman and the politician return in Comencini’s most recent film, Un giorno speciale (shot after Lo spazio bianco). Gina (Giulia Valentini), a 19 year-old girl, lives in the Roman working class suburb of Nuova Ponte di Nona. She aspires to a career as a television showgirl, and seeks the patronage of a congressman, a distant family relative. The day Gina meets the congressman, presumably in the governmental building of Palazzo Chigi, she is picked up by a congressional staff car driven by Marco (Filippo Scicchitano), a young man on his first day of work. While en route to the city, Marco receives a call saying the meeting will be delayed. To kill time, Gina and Marco explore the city, and, as the day develops, they become attracted to one another. Gina, anxious about her meeting, seems no longer willing to “make sacrifices” for her career. However, when she arrives at Palazzo Chigi, the ultimate symbol of power, she submits to the congressman’s tacit demands for oral sex. Marco, however, does nothing to stop her. To the melancholic notes of Handel’s aria Lascia che io pianga (heard as extra-diegetic music), Marco drives Gina back to the suburbs, and the story seems to come to a hopeless conclusion. The narration reopens to conclude as a post-modern social fairy tale: while Gina numbly contemplates her dream in front of the TV screen, Marco cries her name from outside.
the window, a semi-consolatory happy ending that foresees chances of salvation for both characters.

With *Un giorno speciale*, Comencini further developed her aesthetic exploration of the city of Rome that began with *Le parole di mio padre* and continued with *Mi piace lavorare*. In the opening sequence, the camera frames in a long take a group of strangely colorful buildings around an empty piazza. As Comencini revealed, it is Nuova Ponte di Nona: “un quartiere romano simbolo di una bellezza fatua con tutte quelle case colorate in mezzo al nulla, senza servizi: un quartiere piazzato lì, ma con grande cura estetica”

![Image](image-url)

Figure 3.5. A scene from *Un giorno speciale* (2012)
Courtesy of Francesca Comencini

The camera pans across a series of windows along the building’s facades. Behind the windows, female figures are delineated, a direct reference to *Lo spazio bianco*, in which the

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“A Roman neighborhood, symbol of a fatuous beauty, with all those colorful houses in the middle of nowhere, without any service. A neighborhood placed there, with a great aesthetic care.” (My translation)
image of the woman at the window symbolizes female social exclusion. When the camera enters one of the apartments, the domestic space is framed in Comencini’s usual style of the tilt shot. As seen in *Lo spazio bianco*, this particular type of high angle shot flattens the cinematic space, and communicates a sense of oppression and anxiety. In this sequence, after a cozy middle-class house is depicted, the camera lingers in extreme close-up on Gina lying in bed. The slow pace of the camera and its invasive proximity to her thin (teen-aged) body, heralds a story of corporal violation and at the same time echoes a patriarchal cinematic and television tradition dominated by a voyeuristic modality of framing and exposing women’s bodies.

In the following scene, a white dress hanging against a door suggests that Gina is about to be married. In extreme close-up, mother and daughter are shown while lying in bed together, caressing one another’s bodies. Despite the intimacy and the tenderness of the gestures, the mother’s attitude reveals a morbid attention to the daughter’s body. Unlike *Mi piace lavorare*, where the mother-daughter relationship is redeeming for both characters, in *Un giorno speciale*, it is destructive. Giulia’s mother, an extreme version of Maddalena Cecconi from Luchino Visconti’s *Bellissima* (1952), encourages her daughter to go into a show-business career that is implicitly associated with prostitution.\(^{54}\)

Danielle Hipkins, in both her articles “Whore-cracy” and “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?”,\(^{55}\) analyzes the debates around the phenomenon of the “velinismo” and

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\(^{54}\) The representation of the show business industry as a corrupting world in which women “lose their innocence” or are victims of sexual exploitation, can be identified, as mentioned, in Visconti’s *Bellissima*, as well as in films like Antonio Pietrageli’s *Io la conoscevo bene* (1961) and Ettore Scola’s *C’eravamo tanto amati* (1975).

\(^{55}\) “Whore-ocracy”: Show girls, the beauty trade-off, and mainstream oppositional discourse in contemporary Italy.” *Italian Studies*, vol. 66, no. 3, Maney, 2011, 413-430; and “Who Wants to Be a TV Showgirl?: Auditions, talent and taste in contemporary popular Italian cinema.” *The Italianist*, vol. 2012, no. 32, 154-190.
“velinocrazia” - the all too common aspiration among young women to become “veline,” showgirls, in order to obtain wealth, social recognition, and, for some, eventual access to political power. Hipkins argues that these debates, as articulated by left-wing Berlusconi’s opponents and feminists critics, although raising consciousness about pervasive sexism on Italian television and society, perpetrate what she calls the “beauty trade-off” (the equivalence beauty = stupidity = sexual incontinence). In other words the persistent association of show girls with prostitutes ends up reinforcing patriarchal categories of good women versus whores (the others), while “displacing preoccupation with the real problem: widespread accusation of political corruption relating to Italy’s Prime Minister” (420).

Comencini’s film also participates in the discourse on ‘velinismo,’ on the terms criticized by Hipkins: focusing on the female character of Giulia, the aspiring velina, while granting very limited narrative space to the character of the congressman, as representative of political power. Truly, the first part of Comencini’s Un giorno speciale, (before the beginning of the journey in the city) announces the transformation of an “innocent girl” (aspiring velina) into a whore. In preparation for the meeting Gina’s mother dresses her daughter and puts a thick coat of makeup on her face so that Gina no longer resembles the beautiful young woman presented in the opening scene, but rather, a vulgar bride. After this transformation, the mother accompanies Gina to the congressman’s car. While crossing the main piazza of their neighborhood, the mother, pleased by the neighbor’s gazes, exhibits her daughter as precious merchandise. Gina walks in her revealing dress and absurdly high heels, inevitably evoking the image of the so-called passeggiatrice (streetwalker), “seller and sold” to use Benjamin’s words.

Once the mother leaves the scene, Giulia is entrusted to Marco, who is charged with transporting her to Palazzo Chigi. Giulia seems completely passive. However, after receiving the
news that her appointment has been postponed, Gina asks Marco to change their route. They end up in a deserted area, in the middle of nowhere, in a place that not even the GPS can localize. This scene shows a city in perpetual urban development (buildings that seem to be interrupted by constructions shown in the background), depicting it as a “non-place,” an “urban filament” not inhabited and not even mapped. The scene continues to the rural-urban fringe, where flocks of sheep invade the streets. Like the Rome described by Fellini in *Le notti di Cabiria* and *La dolce vita* at the dawn of Italy’s economic boom, the city in urban expansion still holds traces of an archaic world. The Roman ruins mix with modern architecture, suggesting that decay is almost rooted *per se* in tradition.

As Comencini stated in an interview I conducted with her, that *Un giorno speciale*, like *A casa nostra*, is a film about the circulation of money and consumption, even of people who do not have money, or merely have what they need to subsist. In this light, a significant moment during the protagonists’ journey throughout the city is their stop at a shopping mall, a non-place of hypermodernity par-excellence. Benjamin observes in his *Arcades Project*, that the arcade, predecessor of the contemporary shopping mall, is a space of exhibition and consumption, where the activity of walking is structured by the desire of consumption itself. In this sequence, Gina goes from being the exposed object to becoming an active subject, observing merchandise and visually consuming it. Nevertheless, this transformation is only temporary, one that will be reversed with the eventual arrival at Palazzo Chigi and with a subsequent return to the periphery.

As Marco and Gina move from the anonymous mall on Rome’s outskirts toward the city center, they travel along the railway that surrounds the city, viewing the illegal constructions of the working-class neighborhood Prenestino-Centocelle that are seen through Gina’s mobile perspective. Eventually, Gina and Marco arrive at the central Piazza Augusto Imperatore, from
which they stroll toward and around the Pantheon. In the following scene, when the two protagonists illicitly enter the Roman Forum, Gina recounts that her family used to live in Trastevere, but was forced to move to the periphery. From this perspective, Gina and Marco’s stroll along the Roman alleys symbolizes a renegotiation of urban space and an attempt at social mobility.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 3.6. Filippo Scicchitano and Giulia Valentini in Un giorno speciale (2012). Courtesy of Francesca Comencini

Nevertheless, the historical center of Rome, populated only by tourists, and crossed by all means of transportation, appears like an open-air shopping mall, a place of transit and consumption. Gina and Marco’s subsequent flânerie along Via Frattina represents at the same time a tentative appropriation of the city and a form of window-shopping, given the inaccessible luxury items exhibited in the store windows. Gina, who rejects her displacement to the periphery and denied access to those items, decides to illegally appropriate them. She enters a shop and steals a dress, only to discard it in the street. In a spectacular tracking-shot, Marco and Gina run along Via del Corso to the top of Trinità de Monti from which they can observe the city from above, and thus take visual possession of it.
The Rome of *Un giorno speciale* contains both the non-places of the periphery, immobile, deserted, and those of the center, which are places impregnated by memory and history. Even so, the historical center is also reduced to a non-place by being saturated by the brands of contemporary, international consumer culture. Marco and Gina’s journey from the periphery to the center, and then inevitably back to the suburbs, constitutes the metaphor of an
impossible social mobility for both characters. In addition, for Gina, it is the tale of the commodification of her body that parallels that of the city.

Gina, with her passive acceptance of prostitution as a rite of initiation into show business, internalizes not only the objectification of female body, but also a model of femininity imposed by the media, or, in Comencini’s words, that of “corpi che devono essere per forza giovani, corpi ai quali è vietato essere attraversati dal tempo.” Comencini here joins the protest of other Italian female intellectuals, articulated most powerfully by Lorella Zanardo’s documentary Il corpo delle donne (Women’s Body, 2004). In her film, Zanardo, commenting on aberrant images taken from public television programs showing endless series of breasts, thighs, and asses, says in voice-over: “le donne, le donne vere, stanno scomparendo dalla TV e sono state sostituite da una rappresentazione grottesca, volgare e umiliante.”

With a similar sense of bitterness and strong indignation, Comencini comments on images of women’s bodies that obsessively occupy the screen:

La funzione di quelle immagini è politica: negare alle donne la cittadinanza. Dietro la vicenda dei corpi delle donne si annida una questione che è molto al di là di una questione morale o di decoro, è la questione della cittadinanza delle donne. I muri delle nostre città sono tappezzate di immagini di donne che sono le espressioni ipermoderne di un ordine iperarcaico e che sancisce la chiusura della polis alle donne. Le donne sono rappresentate come creature al di qua del logos, incapaci di avere un loro linguaggio, la caretteristica prima per essere nella polis.

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56 Bodies that ought to be young, bodies to which the crossing of time is forbidden. (My translation)
57 Among the films analyzed in this study, the discourse on the woman’s body is addressed in particular by Marina Spada in Come L’ombra (Chapter 2), but also by Roberta Torre in I baci mai dati (Chapter 4).
58 “Women, real women, are an endangered species on television, and they have been replaced by grotesque, vulgar, and humiliating representations.” (My translation) See <http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/>
Da qui derivano certe percentuali: le donne registe sono il 7%, appena il 10% le ministre; questo è un disegno molto chiaro: lasciare le donne ai margini della citta.”

This statement elucidates and supports Comencini’s artistic choice, along with other women filmmakers, of using the city as a privileged setting in which to investigate women’s subjectivity. In line with Comencini, who defines the question of the female body as “la questione politica più urgente” (the most urgent political question), many feminist scholars examine the way women’s bodies have been conceptualized in a patriarchal society and how this relates to the exclusion of women from political participation. In a word: expulsion from the polis.

In her book *Imaginary Bodies*, Moira Gatens observes that, since time immemorial, at the base of women’s exclusion from the political sphere is an association of women with irrationality. For the same reason, women, whose bodies are unruly, “intrinsically anarchic or disordered,” are associated with nature, while culture, a human construction, remains a predominantly male domain. The dualism nature/culture is reproduced in the separation between public and private spaces, where women’s bodies can be regulated through the roles of wives/mothers and daughters. While agreeing with the fundamental feminist critique that women are not biologically unsuitable to political activity, but rather “political participation has been structured and defined in such a way that it excluded women’s bodies” (50), Gatens strives go beyond the sex/gender dichotomy, in which the body is conceptualized as a matter of mere nature, while

59 “The function of those images is political: to deny women citizenship. Behind the story of women's bodies lurks an issue that is far beyond an issue of morality or decency, it is the issue of women’s citizenship. The walls of our cities are covered with hyper-modern images of women that are the expressions of a hyper-archaic order that establishes and ratifies the closing of the polis to women. Women are represented as creatures lacking the logos, unable to have their own language, a prerogative to be in the polis. From this are derived certain percentages: 7% of all filmmakers are women, only 10% of ministers. This is a very clear plan: to leave women on the margins of the city.” (My translation)
gender is intended as a cultural construction. Drawing from Michel Foucault, she points out that “sociopolitical structures construct particular kinds of bodies, with particular needs and desires” (52), therefore, bodies cannot be regarded as ahiistorical phenomena, outside time.

To reduce women to pure images or objects of consumption, or to impede their participation in the public sphere, means to essentially erase their subjectivity, excluding them from body politics, therefore, reaffirming their restriction to the private sphere, a sphere devoid of political power and agency. This idea is central to Comencini’s cinema, and the relationship between urban space and the female character is the vehicle for articulating the different aspects of the urgent “questione femminile” in contemporary Italian society. In Mi piace lavorare, Rome, even if only glimpsed, signifies the incompatibility between motherhood and work (the latter being structured and organized without considering women’s bodies). In Lo spazio bianco, a deserted Naples, contemplated from a distance, symbolizes the female condition of waiting as a form of social exclusion. In A casa nostra and Un giorno speciale, Milan and Rome are signifiers of women’s commodification. Ultimately, in the context of women’s filmmaking, what emerges from Comencini’s work is that, forty years after the start of second-wave feminism, for which the appropriation of public space was a crucial political concern, the city is still a gendered space in which women remain paradoxically contained while simultaneously being excluded: within yet separate, that is — objectified and depoliticized.
CHAPTER 4

URBAN COMING OF AGE STORIES:

DOMENICA, I BACI MAI DATI, AND CORPO CELESTE
4.1 Children’s Gaze on the City

Embracing the legacy of neorealism, contemporary Italian filmmakers recurrently place children or adolescents at the center of their narration. In films like *I bambini ci guardano* (1944), *Sciuscià* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), Rossellini’s *Roma città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germania anno zero* (1948), children are “witnesses of adult weakness or ineptitude, [...] observers of a society that is out of control” (O’Healy: 1999, 121). Or, they are “figura Christi” (Giovanna De Luca, 61), symbols of the hope for a national rebirth after the devastations of the war. Even though children’s gazes are now directed toward a post-modern society, they continue to reveal adults inadequacy, as well as the incapacity of institutions like the family and the church to take up guiding roles.

This chapter is devoted to three female coming of age stories: Wilma Labate’s *Domenica* (2000), set in Naples, Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati* (2010), set in Librino (at the periphery of Catania), and Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste* (2011), set in Reggio Calabria. In these films, like in those analyzed in the previous chapters, the narration is constructed upon female protagonists, in this case adolescents or pre-adolescents, who actively engage with the urban

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61 Different from the neorealist films I am citing here, De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano* is strongly influenced by fascist ideology. In this film, the mother, by pursuing her own desires breaks the unity of the family. The child’s final judging gaze on his mother who abandoned the marital house (driving his father to suicide) is used to reinforce traditional gender roles and women’s image as self-sacrificing mothers and wives, relegated to the domestic space.
landscape along their journeys of self-discovery. Although directed by filmmakers from different generations with different approaches to filmmaking, these works share an intense dialogue with each other, and present again the leitmotiv of the flâneuse who takes visual possession of the urban space, a metaphor of female authorship.

All these films depict female adolescents from troubled or non-existent families coping with loneliness in the city. While representing the dissolution of the family, Labate, Torre and Rohrwacher also reflect on another institution, the Roman Catholic Church, which has influenced considerably the formation of Italian national identity and continues to have a crucial role in Italian society. The representation of the church assumes different tones in each of these films. For Labate, it plays the positive role of a charitable institution struggling to support unwanted children like Domenica. In Torre’s I baci mai dati, which employs a comic and grotesque register, the priest, concerned with “matters of image,” participates in the collective desire to be part of the media spectacle. Similarly in Rohrwacher’s Corpo celeste, the preparation for a religious ceremony involves a series of rituals and games that seem to be modeled more on television entertainment than anything spiritual.

The discourse about the dissolution of the family and the role of the church, which occupies a different narrative space in each of these films, goes in parallel with the characters’ bildungsroman. The sense of disorientation typical of the problematic moment of transition from childhood to adulthood is conveyed through the characters’ dynamic relationship with the surroundings and through a symbolic use of the city view. In Domenica, the camera follows the protagonist — orphan in an “orphan city,” as the filmmaker said — while walking through the alleyways of Naples. By doing so, Labate establishes a complete identification between the character and the city, associating the aggressive sensuality of the latter with the violence the
protagonist endured. In *I baci mai dati*, Manuela, travels around town on her scooter, observing the degraded landscape of Librino which enhances her sense of disorientation and her aversion for her family. And finally in *Corpo celeste*, Marta, who has been relocated from Switzerland, where her family lived for ten years, meanders through a city strewn with garbage and walks precariously along a highway while coping with her sense of loss. Through a close reading of the mise-en-scène and of the narrative structure of these three films, I shall examine the dialectic relationship between the characters and the different Italian landscapes.

### 4.2 Wilma Labate’s *Domenica*: The Female Street Urchin

Wilma Labate started her filmmaking career in the mid-eighties and directed her first feature film, *Ambrogio*, in 1992. *Ambrogio* is the story of a woman, who, in the late fifties, seeks a career as a sea captain, but cannot find a shipboard job after graduating from the nautical institute. “That was my story as a woman filmmaker,” said Labate in an interview I conducted with her. “A male profession that was and still is hard for a woman.” Labate struggled to obtain funds to produce her films from the start, but the endeavor was especially difficult when she started her second film project, on the topic of terrorism in Italy. As a woman filmmaker, she was offered to direct several comedies, but she was discouraged from pursuing such a “political” project.\(^{62}\) While it might be said that Labate was accepted by the Italian film industry, this acceptance was conditioned upon abandoning the political in her films. To be sure, the furious

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\(^{62}\) See “A Conversation with Wilma Labate”, 190-197.
debates around the *Indulto* (legal pardon) for crimes of terrorism might have made funding any film on the subject, difficult.\(^{63}\)

Nevertheless, she succeeded in directing *La mia generazione* (1996), for which she earned significant critical visibility and popular success.\(^ {64}\) After *Domenica* (2001), Labate engaged in several collective documentary film projects on international political matters such as *Un altro mondo è possibile* (2002), on the no-global movement of protestors at the G8 Summit held in Genoa in 2001, and *Lettere dalla Palestina* (2003), on the condition of Palestinians in the Israeli occupied territories. Her latest film, *Signorina Effe* (2007), is a love story set in Turin against the backdrop of a 35-day strike that involved Fiat workers in 1980.

*Domenica*, is set in Naples, a city that many critics agree, suffers from overrepresentation.\(^ {65}\) As Bruno writes (referring to Naples and New York), “Shot over and over again, these cities have become themselves an image, imagery, a picture postcard” (47). Labate’s work adds to the countless films set in Naples, though it eschews stereotypical representations of it. On the very first day of shooting, Labate playfully announced to the crew that any framing of the sea or of the pine trees was strictly forbidden. According to Labate, “It is common belief that

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\(^ {63}\) While it might be said that Labate was accepted by the Italian film industry, this acceptance was conditioned upon abandoning the political in her films. To be sure, the furious debates around the *Indulto* (legal pardon) for crimes of terrorism might have made funding any film on the subject, difficult. On the other hand, interest in the topic could have encouraged investors to support such a topic. See Giancarlo Lombardi. “Virgil, Dante, *Blade Runner*, and Italian Terrorism. The concept of Pietas in *La seconda volta* and *La mia generazione*”. *Romance Languages Annual* 1999. Volume XI. Ruth Glynn, *Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture*. (New York, N.Y: Palgrave, 2013), 10.

\(^ {64}\) *La mia generazione* won the *Grolla d’oro* and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1997.

only Neapolitans are able to represent Naples,“⁶⁶ a manifestation of Italian *campanilismo* that she challenged by recoding the urban landscape. Labate treats Naples as a “city-text,”⁶⁷ which means looking at the city in the context of the Italian cinematic tradition, avoiding any “touristic approach.” In fact, Alex Marlow-Mann, in his study *The New Neapolitan Cinema*, includes Rome-based Labate in that group of non-Neapolitan filmmakers that contributed to Naples’ cultural renaissance and to the de-folklorization of its image.⁶⁸

In *Domenica*, the city is far from being the sunny and joyful place of De Sica’s *L’oro di Napoli* (1957). On the contrary, as in Mario Martone’s *L’amore molesto* (1995), Naples is seen as a city of disorder and chaos, but also a deserted city with empty piazzas — a modality adopted by Francesca Comencini in *Lo spazio bianco*. Labate’s Naples is loaded with a form of melancholia that she calls “orfanite” (orphanhood), a word that she coined to name a sense of loneliness and abandonment incarnated not only by the protagonist, but by Naples itself, city-orphan of the *mezzogiorno*.

Inscribed into a long and variegated cinematic tradition, *Domenica* has several intertexts. First, it is loosely adapted from the Spanish novel by Juan Marsè, *La ronda del Guinardò* (1984), set in Barcelona during the Franco’s dictatorship. While maintaining the same plot elements, Labate eliminates the specific historical-political dimension and relocates the story to contemporary Naples. Second, it is inspired by Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967), in which the

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⁶⁷ This definition is used by Abele Longo in her essay “Palermo in the Films of Cipri and Maresco” in *Italian Cityscapes. Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy*. Ed. By Robert Lumley and John Foot (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 187.
protagonist, like Domenica, has been raped. But, while Bresson’s protagonist commits suicide, “Labate transforms [her protagonist] into a survivor” (Luciano and Scarparo, 39). A third level of inter-textuality is created with internal references to Labate’s previous film, *La mia generazione*. *Domenica* features the same actor, Claudio Amendola, (who plays a terrorist in the previous film; in *Domenica* he plays a policeman). Moreover, both films adopt the narrative strategy of the journey: a journey throughout the country in *La mia generazione*, a journey in the city of Naples in *Domenica*.

Domenica (played by Domenica Giuliano), a 12-year-old girl, lives in an orphanage. One day, Sciarra (Claudio Amendola), a police detective, visits her to have her identify a corpse. Later, through a series of flashbacks, it will be revealed that the body might belong to Domenica’s attacker, the man who has raped her. According to the police, the alleged rapist threw himself from the headquarters’ windows during an interrogation.69 Domenica’s identification is necessary in order to close the case. Reluctantly, Domenica agrees to go with Sciarra. But, terrified at the idea of seeing a dead body, she deviates from their route to delay their arrival at the morgue. Yet, Sciarra — who is affected by kidney cancer, and on his last day of work before leaving Naples that night — cannot postpone the identification.

The intent of recoding the Neapolitan urban landscape is confirmed by the opening image: a foggy, fixed aerial cityscape showing the harbor district, a disregarded (not touristic) part of the city, impregnated with the memories of centuries of history that holds for Labate a tragic beauty. Contrary to the traditional function of the harbor as a point of transit, Labate’s

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69 The accident of the man falling from a window during a police interrogation is possibly a reference to the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli’s alleged suicide in 1969. This tragic episode was investigated by Elio Petri in the documentary film *Documenti sulla morte di Giuseppe Pinelli* (1970) and also represented in Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Romanzo di una strage* (*Piazza Fontana: The Italian Conspiracy*, 2012).
opening cityscape immediately suggests a sense of immobility. The camera is still; the traffic, shot at distance, moves imperceptibly. Over a melancholic musical theme, the opening credits start and the film title appears on the screen. The protagonist’s name is inscribed in the urban landscape, and therefore the child’s subjectivity is semantically linked with the city-body. Ultimately, since the name is written with a child’s script, the opening image announces an urban narrative from a child’s point of view.

Figure 4.1. The opening sequence of Wilma Labate’s Domenica, 2001. Courtesy of Wilma Labate

After the somber city-view, the camera cuts to a morgue and pans over a corpse covered with a white sheet. Sciarra is shown standing next to it (contemplating his own death), and then leaving. The juxtaposition of the city-view and the corpse creates a powerful association between the city and death, one that will permeate the entire film. Similar to Marina Spada, who in Come l’ombra never displays the disfigured body of the protagonist, Labate adopts a narrative strategy that harkens back to the original notion of drama and Greek tragedy, in which violence is never
depicted in the scene. In *Domenica*, the child’s rape is the obscene/non-representable event that precedes the beginning of the film. The face of the rapist is not shown, which transmits to the spectator Domenica’s fear and anxiety of seeing. As Kaja Silverman writes, drawing from Stephen Heath’s speculation on what is off-screen: “The narrative moves forward and acts upon the viewer only through the constant intimation of something which has not yet been fully seen, understood, revealed; in short, it relies upon the inscription of lack” (213). Similarly, the viewer in *Domenica* is sutured in the narration by the corpse that remains off-screen for the duration of the film, only to be uncovered at the end by the victim.

While proposing a dramatic cinematic representation of Naples, Labate draws from Neapolitan popular culture by locating at the center of the narration the so-called *scugnizzo*, the street urchin. Bruno rightly points out that the Neapolitan street-child (traditionally an illegitimate child from the lower class) was recurrent in popular literary genres such as the *feuilleton* and the popular novel, and later became the hero of a sub-genre of Elvira Notari’s silent melodramas—“the Gennariello films.” The figure of the street-urchin will later be re-elaborated by Pasolini in his early novels, such as *Ragazzi di vita* (1956) and *Una vita violenta* (1959), as well as in his early films, e.g., *Accattone* (1960) and *Mamma Roma* (1961), in which the Roman *scugnizzo* represents the last guardian of an ‘uncorrupted’ sub-proletariat.

In his study of the Neapolitan School, Marlow-Mann observes that “the *scugnizzo* is portrayed in equivocally positive terms as someone who has suffered but who maintains the joy of life stereotypically associated with Neapolitans” (93). Labate proposes an uncommon female version of the *scugnizzo*, who maintains the vitality of the typical street-urchin despite having
suffered the most atrocious of violence that can be inflicted on a child, that of sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{70}

The character of Domenica, as an orphan, or even worse, as a child abandoned by a mother who is “somewhere in the city,” also exemplifies the idea of the dissolution of the family that is reiterated throughout the film by means of the recurrent presence of other lonely children, both in the orphanage, and spread throughout in the city.

In parallel to the dissolution of the family, Labate highlights the role of two other primary institutions: the Catholic Church and the State. Unlike \textit{I baci mai dati} and \textit{Corpo celeste}, where the Church is harshly criticized or even mocked, in \textit{Domenica} it is represented positively. As Labate ironically said: “Tutto quello che ha lasciato scoperto la sinistra l’ha coperto la chiesa. Il lavoro sul sociale è stato abbandonato dalla politica e la Chiesa copre in parte questa mancanza.”\textsuperscript{71} Nonetheless, the church, depicted as a physical space in the city more than a religious institution, becomes a shelter for unwanted children, as well as a theater where children like Domenica can recuperate their natural playfulness (see the scene in which Domenica takes part in a play, performing as Santa Olivia).

Conversely, the State, embodied by the character of Sciarra, is represented as a dying father, sick with cancer, the ultimate metaphor of body corruption and decay. This sense of inadequacy is exemplified through Sciarra’s relationship with the city and with his impeded mobility in it. In respect to the Italian regional cultural identity, Sciarra, being from Rome, is

\textsuperscript{70} Among the films directed by women, it is worth mentioning two other films treating the topic of women’s bodies in relation to Naples. Liliana Cavani’s \textit{La pelle} (1981) and Lina Wertmuller’s \textit{Un complicato intrigo di donne, vicoli e delitti} (1985). \textit{La pelle} (adapted from Curzio Malaparte’s novel, 1949), is set in Naples during the American occupation, when the entire city was on sale for American soldiers. In Wertmuller’s film, which concerns women’s empowerment over and against the mafia, the gender division is articulated through the city space.

\textsuperscript{71} “All that the left wing did not take care of was covered by the Church.” (My translation)
considered a stranger in Naples, an outsider who does not even speak the language (the Neapolitan dialect) and is unfamiliar with the city terrain. Despite Sciarra’s paternal role, he is unable to lead or protect Domenica, who, despite her fragile position as a female child, is instead granted agency and thus leads the tour in the city. She is often framed from a low angle, which gives her authority, while Sciarra walks behind her (dragging himself), or is even left off-screen.

The film is structured on the shift between Domenica and Sciarra’s point of view; accordingly, the city assumes different connotations. In his limited mobility, Sciarra perceives the city as dangerous and warns Domenica of possible risks, while the girl is completely at ease in the city space. Whereas Sciarra is an outsider (about to leave Naples), Domenica is completely integrated in the urban fabric as she interacts with its inhabitants from different social classes (including immigrants), and even takes part in its economy by raising funds for her orphanage. Ultimately, as shown in the various stops along the path to the morgue (as seen in Comencini’s Mobbing), the city becomes for Domenica a substitute for her nonexistent family.

The city-stroll also serves to show the peculiar social geography of Naples. As many geographers and space theorists have argued, the urban spatial configuration center-periphery reproduces the social division between upper and lower class. Although this division might hold for any if not most European cities, it does not apply to Naples, where popular districts such as Rione Sanitá, Quartieri Spagnoli, and L’Avvocata are located in the center, and palaces are surrounded by lower-income housing. In Domenica, this spatial proximity becomes evident when the protagonist goes to a countess’s wake and later visits an autistic child from a poor

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See Cesare De Seta, Napoli (Rome: Laterza, 1981). In Paola Randi’s Into Paradiso (2009), immigrants, who are generally located at the margins of the city, live in L’avvocata, a neighborhood in the center of Naples. Moreover, the urban space is articulated through horizontal layers. Whereas the roofs belong to the immigrants, the street level remains controlled by the mobsters.
family who lives on the same street. Incidentally, at the wake, Domenica refuses to look at the countess’s body, which may make the viewer recall the corpse left off-screen at the beginning of the film.

As mentioned above, Labate constructs a correspondence between the violence perpetrated on the girl’s body and the city. Along the characters’ city stroll, memories resurface. A brief flashback, for instance, shows Sciarra the night he found Domenica after the rape, in a scene finally revealing the link between the corpse of the opening sequence and the little girl. The theme of the violated body is also conveyed through the self-reflexivity of the medium in moments when the camera intentionally replicates an aggressive male gaze on the female body.

When the character of Domenica is introduced to the audience at the beginning of the film, her body is framed in a way that alludes to her rape. The child is shown at her awakening in the orphanage, preparing herself for her daily exploration of the city. After framing her in close-up while washing her face, the camera pans down on her legs, lingering on her childish body, and particularly on her lower abdomen. This latter image, which Labate insists on sustaining uncomfortably, is both moving and disturbing. On the one hand, it shows the fragility of the child’s body, unprotected and exposed to the risks of the city; on the other, it is unsettling in so far as it forces the viewer to assume the position of the child’s molester.

Another sequence replicates and at the same time parodies what Mulvey defined as the “pleasurable structure of looking in the conventional cinematic situation” (39). Free of Sciarra’s control, Domenica meets with a group of children for some “business.” Upon payment, she sits in front of them and while leafing through a magazine she lets them take a glimpse of her panties. The camera alternates between the audience’s supposed point of view and the children’s one. It zooms in on Domenica’s skinny legs, then frames (in close-up) the children masturbating.
This scene, directed with great playfulness by Labate, offers multiple levels of reading. First of all, it describes what Freud identified as children’s innate scopophilia, (the pleasure of looking). Second, it shows Domenica exercising what Mulvey famously defined as *to-be-looked-at-ness*, a female attribute that she seems to learn from the fashion magazine she has been reading during the scene. Ultimately, the scene reproduces the cinematic situation in which women function as erotic spectacles for male pleasure. Moreover, by demanding from her playmates a payment for her exhibition, she is making her body the object of an economic transition, a position women too often occupy in contemporary society.

As Luciano and Scarparo point out, “Domenica’s relationship with Naples offers a multitude of feminine encounters with the city in both public and private spaces. Her character is a composite of images of a number of conflicting feminine positions, ranging from maternal, nurturing roles to self-centered exhibitionist displays” (38). This female street urchin, in fact, takes care of other children, dreams of getting married while attending a wedding, and, as described above, even practices a mild form of prostitution, controlling, regulating and exploiting the gaze of male children. In other words, as a pre-adolescent, Domenica is in search of models of femininity that she contemplates or enacts during her journey throughout the city.

In *Domenica*, the search through the body of the city offers no solution and its very meaning remains in the search itself. The circular narrative structure of the film comes to a close when, at the end of their city journey, the characters arrive at the morgue. The corpse is finally uncovered, but it is discovered not to be Domenica’s rapist. So, although the face of the rapist is now shown, the viewer’s expectations are only partially satisfied since the case is not solved (and the rape remains unpunished). Subsequently, Sciarra lives on a boat while Domenica, whose life seems to be unaltered from the beginning of the film, is left on the dock at the harbor.
While participating in a rich and long artistic tradition that chooses Naples as the very object of its narration, Labate constructs a multifaceted portrait of the city that offers several levels of significations. By establishing an identification between the female character and the place she inhabits, and more specifically creating an association between the violence she endured and the city itself, Labate inscribes the female body in the urban landscape and shows it as a dynamic component. In fact, like Spada and Comencini, Labate participates in the discourse on the female body, and more generally, on female subjectivity in urban contexts, adopting the narrative strategy of the female city stroller as a tool to construct (if not also reconstruct) the cinematic space. By granting Domenica symbolic possession of the city denied to Sciarra, Labate reverses a traditional codification of the city as male space. Finally, as the protagonist of Labate’s film is a pre-adolescent in search of female models, and one who eventually recovers from a trauma, the journey thorough out the city represents a coming of age story, in which the character, engaging in a dialectic relationship with the urban landscape, shapes her female identity.

4.3 Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati*: Manuela in The New Town

The opening sequence of Roberta Torre’s *I baci mai dati* is an explicit metaphor of the female gaze on the city, a sequence that condenses the central idea of all of the films analyzed in this study. While the opening credits appear on a black screen, deep breathing is heard in the background, which leads the viewer to perceive the presence of an off-screen character who is sleeping, and therefore interpret the images as his/her dream. Like *Sud side stori*—Torre’s second film, which begins with the city-view of a desolate and silent piazza of Palermo, *I baci
*mai dati* also opens with a blurred image of a piazza seen from a high angle, presumably the point of view of someone looking through a curtain (a veil in front of the camera’s lens impedes a clear vision of the pro-filmic). As the veil is removed, it shows a crowd gathered around a statue of the Madonna that has just been uncovered. A priest is astonished at the sight of the statue, and so is the rest of the crowd. No sound is heard except for someone’s breathing. The camera pans to include an adolescent girl sitting on a scooter, Manuela, and zooms in to a close-up of her looking straight into the camera with an incredulous expression. Similar to Labate’s *Domenica*, in which the protagonist’s name is written in a child’s hand on the Neapolitan cityscape to herald an urban narrative from a child’s point of view, this prologue serves a similar function. Given that Manuela’s counter-shot would logically show the piazza (with the crowd gathered around the statue), her gaze into the camera is simultaneously directed toward her community and metaphorically toward the audience, which reiterates the idea of the female gaze on the city.

As Torre explained, *I baci mai dati* is “una storia tra giganti: l’individuo, la Madonna, il miracolo, o il desiderio di miracolo.”73 Manuela (Carla Marchese) is a fourteen-year old girl living in Librino, a deprived lower-class residential area on the outskirts of Catania. She works in a hair salon and spends her free time travelling around the urban blight on her scooter. In uneventful Librino, a statue of the Madonna has been placed recently in the central *piazza*, but just a few days after the inauguration, it is found decapitated. Manuela, who knows where the Madonna’s head is hidden, declares that the Madonna herself has told her. When the Madonna’s head is recovered following Manuela’s directions, Librino’s community announces it as a

73 “A story of giants: the individual, the Madonna, the miracle or the desire for a miracle.” (My translation)
miracle. Manuela’s mother (Donatella Finocchiaro), who is frustrated with her husband’s (Beppe Fiorello) financial shortcoming, jumps on the lucrative business of miracles. Transformed into a saint by her mother Rita, with the help of Don Livio (the local priest), Manuela is asked to perform many other miracles.

*I baci mai dati* is Torre’s fifth feature film. A Milanese who adopted Palermo as her city, she set nearly all her films in Sicily, a place she describe as “Il paese delle meraviglie [...] serbatoio inesauribile di volti, volti antichi straordinari, attori naturali, fisicità in consort,” thus revealing her exotic conception of the south. Torre’s cinema, defined by several critics as “baroque” (Francesca Conti and Giorgio Fonio, 77) or as a “post-modern pastiche” (Millicent Marcus, 234), is mainly characterized by visual excess, *kitsch* settings and costumes, as well as technical and stylistic hybridity. She debuted with a critically acclaimed musical on the mafia, *Tano da morire* (1997), and later directed another musical, *Sud side stori* (2000), a reinterpretation of Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. Later, suspending her aesthetic and technical experimentation, with a more canonical narrative style, she shot *Angela* (2002), a melodramatic love story that highlights women’s relationships to male power, specifically in organized crime. In 2006, she directed *Mare nero*, a detective story set in Rome, in the underground world of swingers and red light bars.

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As O’Healy rightly observes in her essay “Anthropological Anxieties: Roberta Torre’s Critique of Mafia”: “Torre’s statements about her experience in Sicily are often tinged with romantic invocations of exoticism and exceptional vitality.” (87)
All Torre’s films have an urban setting, including her documentaries and short films, such as *Angelesse* (1991), *Palermo bandita* (1996), *Il Tiburtino terzo* (2009), and *La notte quando morì Pasolini* (2009). Asked about her approach to storytelling Torre answers:

La città contemporanea è sempre il contenitore delle mie storie, e credo siano storie per lo più positive perché leggo la città in modo weberiano, come un non-luogo dove l’uomo può emergere liberato dai legami di provenienza, di classe, di comunità. […] Io riscatto storie agghiaccianti e scenari urbani di degrado con l’avventura umana, che non finisce di stupire e di avere una sua poesia.⁷⁵

(Conti, Fonio, 28–29)

Torre’s aesthetic research on the Italian urban landscape is compelling and original; however, her statement denotes a romantic conception of her art. It might appear naïve, in fact, to confer on cinema the noble social intent of redeeming “degraded urban landscapes,” and even worse to conceive the city as a space where individuals can become free of class bonds. However, it is true that filmmaking can make the invisible visible, and by setting her films in the margins of the city while rendering the stories of ordinary people extraordinary, Torre is embracing, in her own unique way, the legacy of the neorealist tradition, a cinema that harmonizes ethics with aesthetics.

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⁷⁵ “The contemporary city is always the container of my stories, and I think my stories are mostly positive because I read the city in a Weberian way, as a non-place where one can emerge, freed from the bonds of origin, class, community. […] I redeem dreadful stories and landscapes of urban decay with the human adventure, which never ceases to amaze and reveal its poetry.” (My translation)
As mentioned, *I baci mai datì* is set in Librino, a town “nata da una grande utopia e diventata un ghetto” (Conti, Fonio, 28). It was planned in the seventies by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, and originally thought of as a “new town”—the so called “città giardino” (city garden). The initial project included large areas of green and infrastructures that would have rendered it a model satellite city. Tange’s original project was never carried out and Librino became a dehumanizing periphery now sadly famous for drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

In *I baci mai datì*, the desolation of the urban landscape enhances the sense of disorientation, united with the desire of exploration and self-discovery typical of the life stage of adolescence. In contrast to the sense of immobility suggested by the landscape, Torre frames Manuela in long camera cars to follow her scooter rides, a post-modern version of *flânerie*. Long series of blocks of flats, shown from Manuela’s mobile and distorted perspective, scroll on the screen, while fragments of her life are interjected in a long pan shot: a man (her father) sits at a slot machine, a woman with a provocative outfit (her mother) irons nervously. Those are human presences that appear abruptly and which do not seem to belong to the landscape. Moreover, background music with radio interferences of an Arab chant evokes a Sicilian past of which there are no traces in the present landscape.

Abele Longo, discussing the image of Palermo in the films of Ciprì and Maresco, notices how the city appears “unfurnished and dilapidated.” As he puts it: “It is precisely the absence of any distinguishable signs which leaves Palermo lost in time and space” (189). Drawing from

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76 “Librino was born from a great utopia and became a ghetto.” (My translation)
John Foot’s analysis of Silvio Soldini’s representation of Milan, Longo points out that the lack of distinctiveness of an urban landscape deprived of landmarks is a recurrent characteristic in contemporary Italian cinema, along with the leitmotiv of the loss of identity. Torre, whose vision of Sicily is less pessimistic than Cipri and Maresco, adds to the anonymous cityscape — that she defines as “scenario agghiacciante” (dreadful panorama) — human elements that, although looking out of place in the picture, render that landscape unique. For instance, as shown in figure 4.2, fishermen stand in a deserted piazza holding a net against the backdrop of apartment blocks, place where the proximity of the sea seems improbable.

Figure 4.2. A scene from I baci mai dati, 2010. Courtesy of Roberta Torre

For the same reason, Torre integrates into Librino a place that Foucault would define as a heterotopia, a counter-site incorporated into the city but at the same time disconnected from it, in this case, the hair salon where Manuela works. In Foucault’s words: “heterotopias are sites that
have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. […] their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”

This change of location from the outdoor to the indoor, creates a stylistic shift in the film, one that recalls the pastiche aesthetic of Torre’s first films.

In contrast to the bleak land of cement shown along Manuela’s scooter ride, the hair salon, a location strikingly reminiscent to that of *Tano da morire*, is imbued with a surreal atmosphere. In this place, orchestrated by Viola (Piera Degli Esposti) — an extravagant hair stylist and optimistic fortune-teller — the women of the neighborhood are transformed into corpulent grotesque creatures (of “inconsueta fìsicità”—as Torre describes them), wearing pop art outfits and ostentatious hairstyles.

Figure 4.3. A scene from *I baci mai dati*, 2010. Courtesy of Roberta Torre

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In Torre’s aesthetic of exaggeration, especially in relation to the representation of women, one can perceive the legacy of Fellini, whose films were populated by “maggiorate fisiche” (physically developed) women who had the function of pure performativity. As Paolo Bertetto argues about female characters in Fellini’s cinema:

La logica della sua rappresentazione è l’eccesso. La donna felliniana non è mai semplicemente descritta o narrata, è sempre messa in scena. I meccanismi del trucco, dei costumi, della recitazione, dell’iscrizione diegetica evidenziano intenzionalmente il carattere di messa in scena. Non c’è nulla nella donna di Fellini che si ponga sul piano del reale. Tutto è pensato e realizzato sul piano della costruzione di un effetto scenico e cinematografico. (119–120)

The same modality of women’s representation Bertetto describes applies to all of the female characters in I baci mai dati, with the exception of Manuela, who is the only one granted a real subjectivity. The women of the neighborhood act and speak in chorus and are, therefore, more a symbolic presence than real women. By surrounding Manuela with this women-spectacle, Torre takes part in the women filmmakers’ critique of the contemporary idea of the female body that is dictated and/or reinforced by the media. This discourse is conveyed through the female characters of the hair salon, but also by the repeated insertion of animation sequences showing

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79 “The logic of his representation is excess. The woman in Fellini is never simply described or narrated, she is always staged. The mechanisms of the makeup, costumes, the acting, of the diegetic inscription, intentionally highlight the character of mise-en-scène. There is nothing in Fellini’s woman that can be placed on the level of reality. Everything is thought and designed and built to reach a scenic and cinematic effect.” (My translation).
collages of women’s faces, made of fragments of different female bodies assembled together asymmetrically.

Figure 4.4 Final shot from *I baci mai dati*, 2010.
Courtesy of Roberta Torre

In her essay “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body”, MaryAnn Doane argues:

Contemporary filmmaking addresses itself to the activity of uncoding, de-coding, deconstructing the given images. It is a project of de-familiarization whose aim is not necessarily that of seeing the female body differently, but of exposing the habitual meaning/values attached to femininity as cultural construction.

(87)

Making these collages floating on the screen, Torre reaches the effect described by Doane of questioning beauty standards while emphasizing the grotesque character of some female images proposed by the media. A similar function is played by Manuela’s visions and dreams, which recurrently suspend the narration. Asleep on the beach (another place where she escapes
the urban decay of Librino), Manuela envisions corpulent women crocheting (Figure 4.4). With their huge hair, they are reminiscent of the Medusa’s head, the Greek gorgon symbol of castration that Torre already employed in *Tano da morire*. But with their calm expressions, holding their crochet work, they seem a benign domestic version of the terrifying mythological figure.

![Figure 4.5. A scene from *I baci mai dati*, 2010. Courtesy of Roberta Torre](image)

These female creatures embody a model of femininity to which Manuela feels both repelled and attracted at the same time, a model also embodied by her mother, Rita. As Ann E.

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Kaplan writes in her essay “The Case of the Missing Mother,” in popular culture, mothers are represented through codified types: “the good mother,” “the bad mother/witch,” “the heroic mother,” and “the silly/weak/vain mother.” “Found most often in comedies, [the latter] is ridiculed by husband and children alike, and generally scorned and disparaged” (Kaplan: 1983, 468). Rita represents this latter type. Brilliantly and theatrically played by Angela Finocchiaro, this character, with her revealing outfits and hyper-femininity, contributes to Torre’s mockery of women who adhere to contemporary beauty standards proposed by the media, but is also a derisive critique (which does not conceal some misogynistic tones) of the working class housewife who is frustrated by her role as the “angel of the house” but does not embark on a path for emancipation.

Like Labate, but using comic and grotesque tones, Torre also critiques the institution of the family, showing how it has lost its guiding role. Whereas in Labate’s film the church functions as a substitute for the family, in I baci mai dati, as in Rohrwacher’s Corpo celeste, it is too inadequate to take up this role, depleted of any sense of spirituality. Torre uses the church, embodied by the character of Don Livio, to deride the contemporary obsession with body image and with the desire to be part of a media spectacle. This obsession even figures in the church. In one scene, the priest is seen running on a treadmill placed in his sacristy — an ecclesiastical substitute for the salon — addressing a Madonna statue and praying: “Non lo faccio per vanità, voglio essere un atleta di Dio.”81 The priest, as an alleged esthete who wants to bring “art” to Librino, is also in charge of refashioning Manuela into a saint and orchestrates, with Rita, the business of miracles.

81 “I don’t do it for vanity, I want to be God’s athlete.” (My translation)
While sardonically representing the commercial speculations that so often arise from so-called “supernatural manifestations” (which indeed exploit people’s desperation for the miraculous), Torre shows, through Manuela’s gaze, “a society out of control” (O’Healy: 1999, 121). As noted previously, when it is announced on TV that a girl from Librino talks to the Madonna, the entire town shows up at her door asking for a miracle. In a series of shot-counter-shots, Manuela is framed sitting at a desk receiving her neighbors’ visits. The characters follow one another, asking for divine intervention to fulfill their desires and aspirations. Mixing comic and dramatic tones, these cameos serve to depict a society afflicted both by economic recession and seduced by the myth of show business as a way to escape social invisibility. One supplicant wants to leave Librino for Rome (which is identified with Cinecittà), where he can be part of cast of The Big Brother reality show, the ultimate way of being “visible.” For another, the miracle is more banal, simply finding a job in a supermarket or in a factory.

In the structure of the film, this sequence represents a self-reflexive moment in which Torre pays homage to the fathers of Italian cinema and to its neorealist tradition, depicting what Giuseppe De Santis — referring to the world described by Giovanni Verga — would call “l’umanità che soffre e spera” (a humanity that suffers and hopes). To illustrate, among the “believers” is a young man who appears at the start of the film, standing in a piazza, holding a net with a small group of people (Figure 4.3). These fishermen, a peculiar presence in an urban context, seem a contemporary version of the inhabitants of Acitrezza, portrayed by Visconti in La terra trema (1948). In I baci mai dati, one of the fishermen asks for the Madonna’s help to retrieve his stolen net, without which he cannot work. The episode itself recalls one in De Sica’s

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Ladri di biciclette where Antonio Ricci and his son ask a fortune teller for help in recovering his stolen bicycle.

Refusing to take further part in the swindle organized by her mother, Manuela confesses the truth that she never spoke to the Madonna. But at the moment she is about to quit her career as a saint, a miracle actually occurs. A blind girl from the north of Italy who repeatedly visited Manuela, regains her sight. The miracle is attributed to Manuela, and explicit reference is made to the tale of Jesus and the man of Bethsaida mentioned in the Gospels. In addition, in one of the encounters with Manuela, the blind girl reveals that she had lost her sight when, as a child, she assisted her father in a murder.

This finale, although to some extent oversentimental and lacking the comic verve of the rest of the film, reiterates, once again, the idea presented in the opening scene, that of the female appropriation of the gaze. As Linda Williams observes in her essay “When the Woman Looks”, the figure of the blind heroine is very popular in melodrama and classic narrative cinema: “Blindness in this context signifies a perfect absence of desire, allowing the look of the male protagonist to regard the woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to voyeur’s pleasure with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desire of her own” (562). In other words, for Williams (who draws from Metz and Mulvey’s speculation about cinema as a form of voyeurism), the lack of vision signifies the ultimate lack of agency. Even though Williams here is more concerned with issues of female spectatorship than female authorship, her discourse on the significance of female failure of vision relates well to Torre’s finale. Thus, the miracle of the blind girl (a woman restoring the sight of another woman) in this consolatory and not very sophisticated finale in which the community of Librino rejoices, can be read as a moment of female empowerment and an affirmation of female authorship.
4.4 Alice Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste*: Marta in the Dump-city

Eravamo quel sovramondo.
Quando ho compreso questo,
Non subito, a poco a poco,
nel continuo terremoto del crescere,
nell’amarezza di scoperte inattese
(della infelicità, del passare delle cose),
Sono stata presa da un senso di meraviglia,
di emozione indescrivibile.


Of all the young filmmakers to debut in Italy in the first decade of the new millennium, Alice Rohrwacher is one of the most sophisticated and interesting *auteurs* to come to the attention of film critics and audiences. Her first feature film, *Corpo celeste*, which shares the title of Anna Maria Ortese’s memoir, reconfirms a trend in contemporary Italian filmmaking, and particularly Italian women’s filmmaking, of constructing place-centered narrations. Reggio Calabria, a rarely represented southern city that suffers from heavy economic and cultural underdevelopment is brought to the screen in *Corpo celeste*.

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83 We were that ‘overworld.’ When I realized that, not immediately, little by little, in the continuous earthquake of growing up, in the bitterness of unexpected discoveries (of the unhappiness, of the passing of things), I was taken by a sense of wonder, of indescribable emotion. (My translation)

84 After earning her degree in philosophy and practicing painting and photography, Rohrwacher began directing documentary films. Thanks to the support of the newly born film production company Tempesta, she wrote and directed her first feature. (See “A Conversation with Alice Rohrwacher” in the Appendix).

85 *Corpo celeste* was presented at Cannes, the Sundance Film Festival, and “Open Roads” at Lincoln Center in New York City, in addition to many other international film festivals. It won the “Nastro d’argento” as the best *opera prima* and was nominated for the David of Donatello.
the young producer Carlo Cresto-Dina’s, Rohrwacher states: “Volevamo esprimere l’urgenza di parlare senza mezzi termini del genocidio culturale di una comunità. Volevo raccontare una storia attraverso la lente di un luogo, un luogo che fosse in qualche modo astratto.”

86 (My interview)

*Corpo celeste*, in fact, can be added to the numerous Italian films that depict the periphery of a world, rather than a specific Italian city. In this way, while rooted in a concrete place, Rohrwacher’s film is less local and more universal. Similarly to Spada and other contemporary filmmakers who strip the Italian landscape of commonly identified landmarks, Rohrwacher excludes the seafront, known as “il km più bello d’Italia” (the most beautiful km of Italy), from her representation of Reggio Calabria. She also leaves off-screen the Liberty buildings of the city-center as well as the archeological sites from the Greco-Roman epoch, therefore depriving the city of its historical-geographical dimension. About her approach to the place she comments:

Ottocento metri di lungomare non sono sufficienti per fare una bella città. Tutti usano quei pochi km di mare per mostrare che Reggio Calabria è una bella città (probabilmente bella non è la parola giusta). Il lato curato della città è diventato un modo per non vedere tutto il resto. La mia idea era quella di produrre una narrazione della città che includesse i suoi difetti, fare un “film difettoso”, per così dire, senza rappresentare niente di noto, o

86 “We expressed the urgency to speak in no uncertain terms about the cultural genocide of a community. I wanted to tell a story through the lens of a place, a place that could also be abstract in a way.” (My translation)
Rohrwacher and her French cinematographer Hélène Louvart depict the city through their outsider perspective, replicating their gaze through that of Marta, a 13-year-old girl (played by Yile Vianelo) who moves back to Reggio Calabria from Switzerland, where her family lived for ten years. To help her integrate into the new community, Marta’s mother (Anita Caprioli) signs her up for catechism lessons to prepare for her confirmation. Thus, Marta starts attending the local church, which is populated by bored adolescents and other tragic characters, such as Santa (Pasqualina Scuncia), a fanatical catechism teacher, and Don Mario (Salvatore Cantalupo), a priest who is hoping to begin a to advance his clerical career thanks to his local political connections. Feeling completely disoriented and struggling to understand her religion, while also suffering from the absence of a single mother who strives to support her family, Marta stands on the roof of the unfinished building where she lives, contemplating a sprawling city in which the sea extends far into the horizon, out of reach.

87“Eight hundred meters of seafront are not enough to make a beautiful city. Everyone uses those few kilometers of sea to show that Reggio Calabria is a beautiful city. (Probably beautiful is not even the right word). The neat side of the city has become a cop-out to avoid seeing the rest. My idea was to produce a narrative about the city that could include its defects, to shoot a ‘flawed film,’ so to speak, without representing something that is already known, or something that would satisfy our preconceived notions of the south.” (My translation)
In *Corpo celeste*, Reggio Calabria is represented as a rubbish tip. Accumulation of trash is shown everywhere: under the highway overpass seen in the opening scene where a religious procession takes place; in the streets along which Marta continuously walks; and in the river bed — which Rohrwacher calls “una cicatrice nel ventre della città” (a scar in the belly of the city). Garbage is an integral part of that devastated landscape that Marta observes, as well as of the set design of the film. As Robert Stam writes in “Palimpsestic Aesthetics,” garbage has a highly symbolic value, has its own “hidden transcripts.” As he writes: “Garbage defines and illuminates the world; the trash can, to recycle Leon Trotsky’s aphorism, is history. Garbage offers a database of material culture off of which one can read social costumes or values” (76). In Rohrwacher’s film, garbage is the evident signal of local urban decay. It speaks of an ecological disaster that goes beyond the borders of the city — perpetrated by industries and individuals. As one can observe
in figure 4.7 — a quotation of Béla Tarr’s *Satantango* (1994) — where Marta walks down a street after a market took place, waste is the inevitable remains of human commercial activities. Ultimately garbage is the nadir of a consumerist society and the dump-city becomes a metaphor of Italy itself, thereby extending Rohrwacher’s film beyond the geographical confines of Reggio Calabria. Even human bodies are garbage, as implied by Marta’s aunt, who only buys fish from the Atlantic Ocean and not from the Mediterranean, because those fish eat the corpses of drowned migrants.

Garbage functions then as a ‘scenic’ element. It appears in the very opening sequence, which begins with incomprehensible nocturnal shots, noises of traffic, and voices singing religious chants in the background. As the scene slowly lights up (at sunrise), the camera shows a group of people gathered around a Madonna statue (a situation similar to that of *I baci mai dati*) in a desolate area under a highway overpass. A blond, fair-skinned young girl — Marta — looks around bewildered and curious (her nape or profile is often included on the frame’s border). A
priest addresses the crowd, announcing that, exceptionally, the bishop will participate in the procession, and they will welcome him “con il calore e la letizia di cui è capace la loro comunità.”

Ironically, the countershot frames a group of males that resemble Ciprì and Maresco’s characters from the TV program Cinico TV, immobile like wax figures, expressionless and mute. To add to the atmosphere of absurdity, when the marching band breaks the silence, two giant papier-mâché puppets start dancing. Simultaneously a voice from a billboard-covered truck advertises the candidacy of a local politician, promising an (improbable) bright future for this community.

As Cristina Piccino writes, “Quel microcosmo racconta il nostro tempo, parla di noi, del presente, è l’Italia in cui viviamo, fatta di TV e indifferenza.”

In accord with Piccino, many other Italian film critics saw in the dreadful scenario presented by Rohrwacher a portrait of the actual stagnant situation of a country afflicted by decades of severe economic crisis and political malpractice (when not inaction) that produced a culture of indifference and resignation. While focusing on Marta’s conflict and sense of alienation from this community, Rohrwacher uses this provincial parish to highlight many aspects of contemporary Italian society: cultural backwardness, ignorance, racism, the corruption of the church and its proverbial interferences.

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88 “With the warmth and joy of which our community is capable” (My translation).
89 The mâché puppets represent the “Giganti,” a folkloric tradition of Calabria and part of Sicily. Their dance is usually accompanied by drums.
90 “That microcosm narrates our epoch, talks about us, about our present. It is the Italy in which we live, made of TV and indifference.” Cristina Piccino, “Marta ragazzina arrabbiata in cerca d’indipendenza” in Il Manifesto, May 18 2011.
into the State’s political matters, those that Machiavelli in the *Discorsi* (1519) called the “esempi rei,” the “ill examples” that made Italians lose every sense of devotion and religion.\(^{92}\)

Despite the central role the Church plays in *Corpo celeste*, Rohrwacher repeatedly stated that she did not intend to make an anticlerical film but “un romanzo di formazione narrato attraverso la lente di ingrandimento della chiesa. La chiesa è una delle poche istituzioni rimaste che si schiera a favore della comunità ma manca di vere domande, di un vero interrogarsi. Sa solo dare risposte, una cerimonia senza un rito.”\(^{93}\) As a matter of fact, a critique of the Church as an inadequate guiding institution for a depressed place like Reggio Calabria does emerge in the film. The priest, Don Mario (as well as other ecclesiastics who appear in the film), is only concerned with the number of votes he will provide to a local politician. The preparation for a religious ceremony — one that Don Mario wants to be a big event — involves a series of games, quizzes, and songs that seem to be modeled more on television entertainment than anything spiritual.

Like the protagonists of the other two films analyzed in this chapter, Marta embarks on urban peregrinations, which assumes different meanings from those seen in Labate’s and Torre’s film. Whereas in Labate’s *Domenica* the act of walking was permeated by the protagonist’s fear of arriving at the morgue (she was only apparently walking to run errands), and in Torre’s *I baci mai dati* Manuela rides around her scooter out of boredom, Marta’s *flânerie* is sometimes imbued with nostalgia, at other times with rage. To a certain extent, her act of walking harks back to the original meaning of *flânerie*, as a spatial practice developed at the dawn of the


\(^{93}\) “A coming of age novel, narrated through the magnifying glass of the Church. The Church is one of those few institutions still standing for the community; it lacks real questions, any real wondering. It is always about giving answers, a ceremony that lacks a rite.” (My translation)
modern city. In *Cinematic City*, David Clarke argues that, “Insofar as the turbulent space of the modern city was experienced as labyrinthine and disorientating, the *flâneur’s* existence was marked by melancholic nostalgia for a lost (or impossible) world, and by a sense of impotence at the interminable deferral of any sense of arrival at a final destination” (5). Marta’s peregrinations in Reggio, although not always aimless, are also imbued with a sense of nostalgia and disorientation typical of someone who is being displaced. Returning to Italy after migrating with her family to Switzerland, she is a “migrante di ritorno” (returning migrant), albeit one who is too young to have memories of her native country and feel any sense of belonging to it. She is rather a “fleeting stranger” (another incarnation of the *flâneur*), a female migrant who is negotiating her social space.\(^{94}\)

Marta occupies a marginal position in the city, a status determined by her gender, by her working class social background, but also by her age. As Nicoletta Marini-Maiol writes, drawing from Victor Turner’s theory of liminality, adolescence is “a liminal state between dependence and autonomy” and therefore “[adolescents] as individuals experiencing transition have no place in society” (45). Marta, who is experiencing puberty, engages in narcissistic observations of her own body in front of the mirror and appears alienated from her family (especially from her hostile older sister), as well as from the bored adolescents she encounters in the church. With the exception of her mother (who is caring, although worn out by an exhausting job), she does not communicate with anyone and experiences extreme solitude magnified by her desire for introspection.

\(^{94}\) In the contemporary trend of Italian cinema of migration, over one hundred films have been released in the last two decades (see databank compiled by Oxford University). On the specific subject of female migration (with a focus on urban space) several films have been directed by women filmmakers, such as Francesca Pirani’s *L’appartamento* (1997), Roberta Torre’s *Sud side stori* (2000), and Marina Spada’s *Come l’ombra* (2006).
Marta’s displacements in the city are also acts of rebellion, of abandonment. In one scene she walks away from the Church, where she has been reprimanded (and slapped) by her teacher. As she walks with a quickened pace along the street, the camera frames her from behind while the wind blows the trash after her (figure 4.7). Once reaching home, as she repeatedly does in the film, Marta climbs to the roof terrace. With a panorama of the city just before her, she unexpectedly grabs a pair of scissors and cuts her long blond hair. In *The Rites of Passage*, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep writes that to cut one’s hair (like all rites involving the act of cutting) is a rite of separation:

> In the shorn hair resides a portion of the personality. […] The rite of cutting the hair or of a tonsure is used in many different situations: a child’s head is shaved to indicate that he is entering into another stage, that of life; a girl’s head is shaved at the moment of marriage to indicate a change from one group to another. […] in its form, color, length, and arrangement hair is a characteristic distinguishing an individual as much as a group, and it is easily recognized. (167)

On the verge of biological womanhood, she cuts her long hair, a symbol of her femininity, or more generally, a symbol of her otherness. The shearing of her hair could be seen as a rejection of her womanhood, and reflective or her wish to remain an adolescent. But also, in regard to the Church, the act might be viewed as a neutering of her gender, a gesture of desexualizing herself in the service of God, just like nuns. As the story unfolds however, Marta shows a gradual estrangement that leads her to walk out of her confirmation ceremony. Rather
than symbolizing devotion to God, her actions signify a separation from her supposed “religious community.”

In one of her furious walks, Marta ends up on the highway. Don Mario, who is driving to his native village, sees her walking precariously on the edge of the street, pulls over and convinces her to get on board to go on a “special mission.” He is heading to Roghudi, an unpopulated village at the foot of the mountain Aspromonte. Here, in an abandoned church, he intends to remove an old, classic crucifix that will replace the overly modern neon crucifix that the members of his Reggio Calabria parish do not like. The old crucifix could be seen as an attempt to reestablish connection with the sacred, however, the substitution of the crucifix, along with songs and dances inspired by television trash culture, seems more a way to turn the confirmation into a spectacle and to achieve “higher ratings among viewers” so to speak.

The journey to Roghudi — which represents a turning point in the narration — marks for Marta the beginning of womanhood as well as her first encounter with a spiritual figure, a blind priest (Renato Carpentieri), who lives in the abandoned village. Along the way, Don Mario stops in sparse restaurants and community centers in the province of Reggio Calabria to collect signatures for the upcoming political election. Sitting with Marta in a restaurant, he notices with apparent embarrassment that Marta’s trousers are spotted with menstrual blood and scolds her for being “dirty.” Don Mario’s reaction arouses a sense of shame in Marta, who flees in panic. This fundamental episode in a woman’s life (central to a female coming of age story) — is depicted quietly, with a few rapid, silent but intense shots. The camera shows Marta in close up, hiding in the bathroom while a woman (the restaurant’s owner) behind the door tells her — in an

95 The village of Roghudi, near Reggio Calabria, was declared inhabitable in the seventies after two violent floods, and its inhabitants were transferred to Roghudi nuovo, on the Ionian coast.
unconvincing tone — that “it is a beautiful thing, even if it doesn’t look like it.” The language used by this woman, calling menstruation “the thing” – as if it was a mysterious, unnamable phenomenon, signals how women internalize the concept of menstrual blood as impure, something that caused Don Mario’s sense of repulsion.

While experiencing the passage to womanhood, during the journey to Roghudi (yet another deserted city seen in the body of films analyzed in this study) Marta continues to question her religion and investigate the figure of Jesus. After her arrival in the ghost town Marta encounters in its abandoned church the old priest of the village, and asks him the significance of the words the catechist teacher wants her to memorize: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani?” The priest answers that it is Jesus’s cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Unlike the stories told by the naïve catechism teacher (who was clueless about the meaning of Jesus’ last words on the cross), the old priest describes Jesus not as the blond, blue-eyed angelic figure of Catholic iconography, or as a divine body, but rather, as a lonely mad man. While reflecting on the priest’s words, which might be incomprehensible for a thirteen year old girl, Marta touches the dust-covered crucifix of the abandoned church. The camera lingers on her hands on the body of Jesus, producing an unsettling moment. Asked about her intent in shooting this scene Rohrwacher answers:

> Questa scena è il motivo per cui il film si chiama *Corpo celeste*, il corpo celeste di cui tutti parlano, lontano, irraggiungibile, perfetto, come lo descrive la catechista. Ma al contrario noi possiamo toccarlo. L’idea è che questo corpo celeste è il pianeta. Volevo girare una scena in cui finalmente Marta tocca qualcosa, un corpo. La sensualità si è creata mentre giravo. Dopo tutto quando un

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96 Matthew 27:47 and Mark 15:34.
After returning from Roghudi, Marta prepares for the confirmation ceremony, one that would have supposedly integrated her into the Catholic Church and into the local community. But while everyone is sitting in the church, she walks away, abandoning the ceremony and ritual, therefore remaining an outsider. In a parallel editing that breaks every logic of spatio-temporal continuity, Marta is suddenly seen entering a dark, water filled tunnel and slowly walking through it. While the scene recalls the tragic finale of Bresson’s *Mouchette* (used by Labate as an intertext), in which the protagonist allows herself to drown in a lake, Marta, instead, through this dark tunnel, (perhaps an image too symbolically charged), finds her way to the sea, which was repeatedly mentioned in the film as being far away, impossible to reach without a car.

Once on the beach, Marta (as well as the viewer) finally understands what those children, occasionally seen throughout the film, were doing with the garbage they were collecting from the river bed. Those children — a variation of the rag pickers, urban nomads that Benjamin saw as the last incarnation of the *flâneur* — collected garbage from dump-city, and revealed the discharged objects on the beach, transforming them into objects of decoration.

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97 “That scene is the reason the film’s title is *Corpo celeste*, the heavenly body that everyone talks about, the one that is always far away, unreachable. When the catechism teacher reads the texts, she always says: ‘You have to think that the body of Jesus is not like yours; it is instead a heavenly body, perfect, distant.’ It is quite the opposite; we can touch it. The idea is that the heavenly body is the planet. I wanted to shoot a scene in which Marta finally touches something, a body. Because by the end, Marta never touches anything. I wanted it to be a sensual scene, let’s say. That sensuality came out a little as I was shooting. After all, when a body touches another body, it’s always sensual in that it engages the senses, not that it’s erotic.” (My translation)
Like the puppets Otello and Iago from Pasolini’s *Che cosa sono le nuvole* (1968), who, while lying on a pile of garbage admire the clouds, Marta looks through those objects with amazement, discovering what Pasolini called “La straziante meravigliosa bellezza del creato”⁹⁸ (The heartbreaking wonder of creation). In this open finale, Marta shows a “spaesamento,” (literally meaning “to be without land”) combined with the marvel of one who realizes the miracle of the earth suspended in the universe, along with the other planets. This sentiment is described by Anna Maria Ortese’s memoir *Corpo celeste*, after which the film is named, despite not being an adaptation of the book. According to Rohrwacher, the film itself was inspired by the “visual emotion” generated by Ortese’s page:

> Le leggende e i testi scolastici parlavano di quello spazio azzurro e di quei corpi celesti quasi come di un sovramondo. Agli abitanti

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⁹⁸ “Straziante meravigliosa bellezza del creato” is the last line pronounced by the character of Iago (played by Totò) in the finale of Pasolini’s *Che cosa sono le nuvole.*
della Terra essi aprivano tacitamente le grandi mappe dei sogni, svegliavano un confuso senso di consapevolezza. Mai avremmo conosciuto da vicino un *corpo celeste*! Non eravamo degni! Invece, su un corpo celeste, su un oggetto azzurro collocato nello spazio, proveniente da lontano, o immobile in quel punto (così’ sembrava) da epoche immemorabili, vivevamo anche noi: corpo celeste, o oggetto del sovramondo, era anche la Terra, una volta sollevato delicatamente quel cartellino col nome di *pianeta Terra*. Eravamo quel sovramondo. Quando ho compreso questo, non subito, a poco a poco, nel continuo terremoto del crescere, nell’amarezza di scoperte inattese (della infelicità’, del passare delle cose), sono stata presa da un senso di meraviglia, di emozione indicibile. (2)\(^99\)

By leaving the church and continuing her peregrinations in the city, Marta decides, even if unconsciously, to direct her gaze toward the world more rather than any “overworld” described by Ortese in the quote immediately above.

*Corpo celeste* is one of the few Italian films (at least among those directed by women) that transcend the confines of the Italian cinema scene and gain international visibility without placating viewers with the visual pleasure of spectacular views of the so called *Bel paese*. Far from being portrayed as a sunny southern town, Reggio appears as a squalid, desolate urban

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\(^{99}\) Legends and textbooks spoke of that space blue and those celestial bodies almost as an overworld. To the inhabitants of the Earth, they silently opened the large maps of dreams, woke up a confused sense of awareness. We would never have known from near a celestial body! We were not worthy! Instead, on a celestial body, placed on a blue object in space, coming from afar, or property at that point (so ‘it seemed) from time immemorial, we lived: celestial body, or object of the overworld, it was also the Earth, once gently lifted the card with the name of the planet Earth. We were the overworld. When I realized this, not right away, little by little, in the continuous growth of the earthquake, in the bitterness of unexpected discoveries (of unhappiness’, the passing of things), I was taken by a sense of wonder, an indescribable excitement. (My translation)
periphery that signifies Marta’s sense of loneliness and alienation. Deprived of any distinctive trait, Reggio is characterized by an anonymous urban landscape reminiscent of the Librino shown by Torre in in *I baci mai dati*, or the Milan of Spada’s films. These are landscapes that could belong to any periphery of the world. The desolation is amplified by Reggio Calabria’s portrayal as a dump-city. The visual leitmotiv of garbage, in fact, is an integral part of a devastated urban landscape as well as a scenic element that assumes different significations, ultimately that of the “cultural genocide” — as Rohrwacher calls it. Asked about her pessimistic portrait of the south (and Italy in general) Rohrwacher answers: “Mostro solo quello che spero cambi” (I show only what I hope is going to change). To confirm that point, the landscape shown in the final scene is a new one that children scavengers had redesigned, one that reincorporates nature in the city, and the city’s waste into nature. As in the neorealist films in which children were symbols of the hope for national rebirth, in Rohrwacher’s film wishes for what Elsa Morante calls “il mondo salvato dai ragazzini” (a world saved by children).

*Doménica, I baci mai dati* and *Corpo celeste*, along with the films directed by Spada and Comencini analyzed in the previous chapters, confirm a trend in women’s filmmaking to choose the city as a privileged setting to narrate contemporary Italian society and more specifically to place and investigate female subjectivity in the urban context. The complex and multifaceted relationship between perambulate characters and shifting landscapes, as depicted in these films, has to be investigated within the map of women’s filmmaking that this study traces, as well as in relation to Italian cinematic tradition.

By placing at the center of their narration children or adolescents, and adopting the narrative strategy of the journey in the city, Labate, Torre, and Rohrwacher continue and expand a national cinematic tradition — that of neorealism as well as of auteurs’ cinema from the
Sixties. In the three films the symbolic use of the city-view along with the act of pre-adults strolling through the city, assumes multiple significations of their own, yet also analogous to those examined in films featuring adult females.

Labate, who like Comencini and other members of the Neapolitan school aims to recodify the iconic city of Naples, likens the body of the city to the body of Domenica, the innocent who has been raped. But even associating the city with the violence the young protagonist endured, therefore coding the city as an unsafe space for a woman, Labate grants the protagonist agency through her possession of the urban space. In Torre and Rohrwacher’s films, in which the bildungsroman is more developed, the characters’ misplacements are motivated not by direct violence against them, but by their sense of alienation from established structures of family, the state, and the Church. They are in conflict with the places they live in — desolated, anonymous peripheries or dump-cities. Yet, despite their disorientation, they assert their agency through their desire for self-exploration and discovery.

Ultimately, the characters’ meanders in the city are activated by their lack of place in society, a condition that Turner (drawing from Van Gennep) defines as a “liminal state,” a state of transition from childhood to adulthood, or — in the case of the female adolescents of these films — from girlhood to womanhood. This liminal state, a condition characterized by an identity in formation, as demonstrated in the analysis of Spada’s and Comencini’s films, applies not only to female adolescents but more generally to the figure of the woman in the street, who — as Bowlby put it — is “out of place, at least out of her place.” Thus, walking in the city signifies “motion for change, movements that disturb” (Bowlby, 4) is a transformative experience to overcome a crisis and to acquire self-awareness.
CONCLUSIONS

*Mapping Italian Women’s Filmmaking* participates in the feminist project of inscribing women into film history, i.e. making the invisible visible. While writing a new chapter in Italian film history, this study examines a contemporary cinematic production that, as advocated by Teresa De Lauretis, addresses female spectators, or in Laura Mulvey’s terms, is a cinema in which women are not mere images, but “bearers of the look.”

My analysis of works directed in the new millennium by women filmmakers of different generations, and different approaches to cinematic narration, demonstrates that contemporary Italian women filmmakers share a common aesthetic project: the representation of women in the city. Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Wilma Labate, Roberta Torre and Alice Rohrwacher—along with other directors that will be included in a larger map of women’s cinema—establish in their films a semantic link between Italian cities and female identities, thereby articulating a discourse on the conditions that characterize women’s lives in contemporary Italian society.

In the present study, I identify in contemporary women’s filmmaking the recurrent visual trope of the female city-walker—the *flâneuse*—a woman who embarks on journeys throughout the city and observes its landscape. This narrative strategy, in all the delineations and significations that it takes in each film, becomes a distinctive trait of the mise-en-scène. The camera frequently follows in tracking shots the characters’ peregrinations along the streets. City-views are shown through bird’s eye shots, presented as subjective camera works, or through long
takes that frame, at the shot’s edge, female characters in the act of looking at the landscape, images that enunciate the filmmakers’ interest in women’s gazes over the city.

*Flânerie,* as originally conceived by Charles Baudelaire and later by Walter Benjamin, consists in a shift from the private to the public sphere that requires immersion into a crowd in perpetual movement. The masses (a central element in the early cinematic descriptions of the modern city) embodied the flow of urban life and provided the *flâneur* with an “immense reservoir of electrical energy” (Baudelaire, 9).

In the films analyzed in this study, however, the city appears almost always depopulated and static. In Spada’s films female characters stroll through a deserted Milan; so does the protagonist of Comencini’s *Lo spazio bianco.* Labate’s representation of Naples alternates between a chaotic, crowded city and desolate piazzas. Some long takes from *A casa nostra* frame characters in empty areas on the margins of Milan. Similarly the protagonist in Torre’s *I baci mai dati* is shown riding her scooter in the bleak outskirts of Catania. And finally, the central character of *Corpo celeste* walks in the streets of Reggio Calabria, empty, yet full of garbage. The absence of the crowd radically changes the intrinsic meaning of the practice of *flânerie* as conceived by the French poet. The act of wandering no longer aims to observe “the spectacle of modernity” to nurture creativity or stimulation, as observed by George Simmel. Rather, it is an act of introspection and alienation from society.

There are practical reasons for this contrived manner of photographing otherwise bustling cities in contemporary Italian films. Despite incentives and support that Italian film productions often receive from city and regional film commissions, streets are often cleared of traffic and crowds to ease the process of shooting, especially for low budget films. But it is also true, as Comencini explains (showing a crowded Rome in *Un giorno speciale*), that the increased use
today of high definition digital cameras affords directors a more documentary-like approach to fictional film, essentially allowing them to “steal” images of the cities.

Nevertheless, beyond the practical reasons that might influence such artistic choices, this recurrent modality of representing Italian cities emptied of their inhabitants (not only by female filmmakers), epitomizes a way cities are experienced by individuals, and particularly by women, disconnected from a community. Empty piazzas and streets deprived of the crowds that typify post-modern cities, convey a sense of anxiety, alienation, immobility, and above all, loneliness. Women’s solitude and social isolation constitute another recurrent theme in this cinema, one which suggests that women, after stepping outside roles defined by patriarchal society, live in a state of “liminality.” Like adolescents in transition between girlhood and womanhood, they are [still] negotiating a social space in contemporary Italian society.

The deserted city is often represented as a “non-place,” defined by Marc Augé as “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (78). Cities are stripped of their historical and geographical specificity and are experienced by the female characters portrayed in these films as spaces of mere transition. The anonymity of the urban landscapes speaks of a loss of identity. Truly, a dialectic relationship is established between the characters and the space they inhabit: the deserted city becomes an extension of their inner void, and vice versa, the inner void is determined by external space.

Whereas all these filmmakers are concerned with female identity, and in all their films the exploration of the urban space parallels the exploration of the self, I argue that the image of the flâneuse represents what Alison Butler, in reference to the experimental cinema of artists like Maya Deren and Chantal Akerman, calls “performance or authorship” or “authorial self-inscription.” Drawing from Judith Mayne, Butler writes: “Within alternative cinema, women filmmakers have addressed ‘the difficulty of saying I’ by appearing in their own films, performing as themselves and others, using their voices on the soundtrack and working with autobiographical content” (61). Although Italian filmmakers considered in this study adhere to conventional narrative cinema and rarely physically appear in their own films, I observe similar degrees of self-reflexivity in their works. Italian women filmmakers “put themselves in the scene” by formulating explicit statements of concern with the female gaze over the city, therefore affirming their appropriation of the cinematic medium.

Spada, who more consistently shows in her films an “anxiety of authorship,” (by which I mean her need to symbolically state, “I am the author of this work”) writes in her essay “La mia città” that walking through the city helps her to feel a sense of belonging to Milan, and to find the building blocks of her cinematic work. This autobiographical statement suggests that the image of the flâneuse not only symbolizes the female gaze on the city, but describes the creative process of conceiving a film within an aesthetic investigation on Italian urban landscape.

As Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo rightly observe in Reframing Italy: “It is no coincidence that women filmmakers often make films about characters who are constructed as others, as outsiders, mirroring the predicament of women directors who are often marginal to the industry and to a history of aesthetics that pre-dates the advent of cinema” (194). Thus, the figure of the female city-walker can be read not only as a metaphor of women’s unsteady position in
contemporary Italian society, but it also represents the women filmmakers’ search for a place in the Italian film industry and culture.

Notes Toward a Wider Map of Women’s Filmmaking

While the present study focuses on the works of Spada, Comencini, Torre, Labate and Rohrwacher, numerous other films released in the last ten years confirm a trend in contemporary women’s cinema to construct female-centered urban narratives. Nina Di Majo, one of the “autrici interrotte” (interrupted female authors), might be included on this map. Both her first film Autunno (1999) and L’inverno (2002), the first set in Naples, the second in an unrecognizable urban countryside of Rome, portray female neurosis, as well as the lack of communication within a couple. Like Spada, Di Majo absorbs Antonioni’s cinema, whose influence is reflected in both the themes treated, as well as in the modalities of constructing cinematic space.

Similarly Elisa Fuksas, whose debut film Nina (2012), set entirely in the Roman district of EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma), strikingly recalls Antonioni’s L’eclisse (1962). In line with Spada—particularly with Come l’ombra—Nina features a young woman suspended in existential stasis, afflicted by the incapacity to find any direction to her life. Interestingly, a film that is so defined by its location, explores the feeling of not belonging to any place.

Emma Dante, an established theater director and writer, is another artist to be considered. Her film Via Castellana Bandiera (2013), adapted from her eponymous novel) and defined by film critics as “a Sicilian western,” is set in the streets of Palermo and narrates a peculiar traffic jam involving only two cars, both driven by women. One of the rare Italian films to depict a lesbian couple, it deals with “otherness.” But, like other films examined in this study, it also
handles the idea of existential impasse, something that can be interpreted as a metaphor for Italy’s inertia.

Another informative case study is the work of Costanza Quatriglio, a prolific documentary filmmaker known for her debut film L’isola (2003) that was acclaimed at the Quinzaine de réalisateurs in Cannes. L’isola, a coming of age story set on the Mediterranean island of Favignana, offers an interesting contrast to urban-based films like Labate’s Domenica, Torre’s I baci mai dati and Rohrwacher’s Corpo celeste. Her documentaries Il mondo addosso (2006), Comandare. Una storia zen. (2004) and Ècosaimale? (2000) focusing on childhood in degraded urban areas, explore different dimensions from that of the present study. Enriching the discourse, Quatriglio also deals with urban space in her latest documentary, Triangle (2014), in which the city, once seen as a place of progress brought by modernity, becomes a place of death for female workers. The film shows parallels between New York’s tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911,101 and the collapse of a knitwear factory in the town of Barletta, Italy a century later (2011).

In order to widen the map of women’s filmmaking while maintaining a focus on the relationship between gender and space, it would be necessary to enlarge the time frame and investigate not only films produced in the past decade and a half, but also look at the cinematic production developed during the seventies and eighties by artists directly involved in the Italian women’s liberation movement.102 A rich study could be made of Sofia Scandurra’s Io sono mia

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101 The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire happened in New York on March 25, 1911. One hundred forty-three people died, among whom 123 were women, mostly Italian and immigrants from Eastern Europe. The tragedy was a catalyst for sweeping worker safety regulations in the United States.
102 In 1969 two feminist movements were founded in Italy, the “Fronte Italiano di liberazione femminile” (FILF, Italian Front for Women’s Liberation) and "Il movimento Italiano per la liberazione della donna" (MLD, Women’s Liberation Movement).
a film made by a collective of women, adapted from Dacia Maraini’s novel *Donna in guerra*. Other filmmakers such as Cecilia Mangini, Rosalia Polizzi, Annabella Miscuglio, and Dacia Maraini have made documentary and feature films in which the city is a space of protest against the oppressive patriarchal power and a place for investigating the condition of women. Comparing films directed by women during two different socio-historical periods of Italian society would allow me to verify whether it is possible to highlight a trajectory between these two cinematic eras.

Returning to feminist practices employed in the seventies, female artists in Italy today are engaging in collective projects, a strategy prescribed in the mid-seventies by Claire Johnston to overcome the persistent problem of invisibility. As she writes in her famous essay “Women’s Cinema as a Counter-Cinema”:

> The development of collective work is obviously a major step forward; as a means of acquiring and sharing skills it constitutes a formidable challenge to male privilege in the film industry: as an expression of sisterhood, it suggests a viable alternative to the rigid hierarchical structures of male-dominated cinema and offers opportunities for a dialogue about the nature of women’s cinema within it (217).

This sort of collaboration is the strategy adopted by a group of women artists called “Le ragazze del porno.” Following the example of Swedish director Mia Engberg’s film *Dirty Diaries* (2009), the French television series *X Femmes* (2009), and Lars Von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* (2013), they have started the film project *My sex*, a collection of porn shorts. Journalist and writer Tiziana Lo Porto, along with directors such as Monica Strambini, Anna Negri, Roberta Torre and

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103 The title of Scandurra’s film, *Io sono mia*, is the famous motto of Italian feminists.
others, have announced a “post-pornografia femminista, proposta politica ancora prima che estetetica.” Resorting to alternative systems of fundraising like the online crowdfunding or auctioning of works by artists who support the project, the film (part of a series of cultural initiatives like film screenings, art performances, photo exhibitions) wants to re-appropriate, renew and elevate the porn genre, that is normally associated to a degraded representation of sexuality and with the objectification of women’s bodies for male pleasure. Ultimately, My sex intends to address female spectators by placing female desire at the center of the narration and by questioning contemporary beauty standards imposed by the media. As the directors themselves declare in the video produced for the crowdfunding appeal, My sex “Ha l’assurda ambizione di realizzare un prodotto che sia allo stesso tempo pop, godibile e consapevolmente politico.” In other words, as suggested by Johnston, it proposes a “counter-cinema” that integrates entertainment and a political cinema.

Contemporary women’s cinema, whether it heralds its political intentions or not, arises within a cultural scene animated by a debate on the ‘new’ “questione femminile,” in which female intellectual and artists are engaging in response to the contemporary attack on women’s rights acquired during the seventies, the alarming number of cases of violence on women registered in the last few years, and to the limited access for women to politics. As Manuela Galetto, et al. document in their study Feminist Activism and Practice, over thirty Italian associations for women’s rights participated in the meeting of the international network “World March of Women”.

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104 “A post-porn feminist proposition privileging politics before aesthetics” (My translation). Artists participating in this project include: Mara Chiaretti, Tiziana Lo Porto, Anna Negri, Regina Orioli, Titta Cosetta Raccagni, Lidia Ravviso, Emanuela Rossi, Slavina, Monica Strambini, Roberta Torre, Erika Z. Galli, and Martina Ruggeri.
105 “My Sex has the outrageous ambition to make a film that can be pop, enjoyable and politically aware, all at the same time.” (My translation)
that took place in Genoa in occasion of the G8 summit (2001), thus marking the beginning of a new program of feminist activism. *Se non ora quando* (2011), the protest movement that fights against and seeks to redress the degradation of the female body in the media, is part of this new wave of feminism. Interestingly, the video directed by Francesca Comencini to advertise the protests, at which over a million of people in different Italian cities participated, put the question in terms of cinematic representation of women. Making a reference to the Italian cinema of the “maggiorate fisiche” (physically developed) from the fifties, she asks: “Uomini, per favore potete dire che non volete vivere in un mondo che sembra un brutto film degli anni 50?”

As stated by Comencini, the question of the degraded image of the woman conveyed by media, an image that new generations are internalizing as a model of femininity, goes far beyond an issue of decency. To represent women as mere sexual objects, “come creature al di qua del logos,” as she puts it, represents a political strategy to reinforce patriarchal power by erasing female identity, and leaving women at the margins of the city.

Contemporary women’s cinema, while embracing the heritage of neorealist cinema or of *auteurs* cinema from the sixties, breaks with a patriarchal cinematic tradition that represented women through rigid schemes of the mother/Madonna/whore. Despite still working from the margins of film industry, and representing as few as 7% of the filmmakers in Italy, women filmmakers are conquering and creating new spaces in the Italian cinematic and cultural landscape. And, through complex and nuanced representations of women, they are renovating cinematic language. Even though several women filmmakers in interviews and fora on women’s cinema still

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106 “Men, don’t tell us you want to live in a world that resembles a bad movie from the 50s” (My translation). Comencini here joins the protest originated by Lorella Zanardo’s documentary film *Il corpo delle donne* (*Women’s Body*, 2004) and eponymous book (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010).

107 “Creatures lacking the logos.” See chapter 3, 116.
take a gender neutral stance and refuse the label of “feminist filmmaker” or even that of “women filmmaker,” their films can be placed within a heritage of feminist ideals.

APPENDIX

FEMALE AUTHORIAL VOICES
CONVERSATIONS WITH ITALIAN WOMEN FILMMAKERS

Laura: You had been working in the film industry for fifteen years before directing your first feature film, Forza cani. What was your professional path to becoming a director?

Marina: I’ve always lived in Milan. The film industry is in Rome, as you know. I never wanted to deal with it. The only time I did was when I worked as an assistant director to Benigni and Troisi’s film Non ci resta che piangere. It was not such an exciting experience. The crew worked as though they were at the post office. It was not what I dreamed of, according to my romantic idea of cinema. I began my career working for RAI Television in Milan. Then they sent me to Rome, and to many of their other branches in Italy. Back then, in Milan, advertising production was still developing. There was a lot to do and a lot to learn. American and British directors were arriving in Italy, and I worked as an assistant to many of them. There were the first remote-control cameras, the first digital special effects. I directed a few commercials, but it was really hard because I’m a woman, and in Italy you can count the women directing commercials on one hand. I was one of those lucky ones for a short time, but my father was a street car driver so I did not belong to their high caste.

At some point I entered a crisis. I was about your age. I was offered a professorship at the film school that I refused for two years because I did not feel good enough. Then in the third year, when I was called again, I accepted and it was the industrial revolution of my life, so to speak. If I had not gone there, I would not have become a director. First of all, because I would not have met my students. Second, because I met my colleagues at the Film school, among whom were Daniele Maggioni, who was the dean for over ten years. At that time, he had just finished his experience as Soldini’s producer, with Bread and Tulips. A few years after we met, he asked me
to direct a film for him. In the meantime, I spent ten years in psychotherapy. You know, women do not authorize themselves to be directors. You wonder: “What do I have to say? Why is it necessary to spend all this money to let me say what I want to say? So the journey of analysis and Daniele’s thrust were fundamental. Daniele himself wrote *Come l’ombra*.

*L.*: Before discussing *Come l’ombra*, let’s talk about your first feature film, *Forza cani*.

*M.*: I wrote *Forza cani* with Maria Grazia Perria, who collaborated on my last film, *Il mio domani*, as well. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs refused the request for funding because they considered it a typical film about troubled youth. But we decided to do it anyhow and we fought for the democratization of cinema. It was the first independent production in Italy. Everything happened thanks to Daniele. He said, "Let’s go on the internet, let’s share this project and raise the money." And we raised 60 million lire, all contributions of people who believed in this film. People would give 100,000 lire in a single donation, or 1,000,000 lire.

*L.*: If I’m not wrong, when you shot *Forza cani*, the film project *Poesia che mi guardi* didn’t yet exist. However it seems to me that those two films engage in a dialogue with each other. Both films have this recurrent theme of poems appearing on the city walls.

*M.*: Well, all of my films are in a dialogue with each other about the subject of the city.

It’s true that I’d shot *Forza cani* in 2000, and I began elaborating the *Poesia* project in 2005, after shooting *Come l’ombra*. But now that you make me think about it, in *Come l’ombra* there is this act of posting flyers on the walls of the city. The protagonist of *Forza cani*, Nebbia, is an urban poet. He posts verses around the city. When I was working on the script to *Poesia*, I was looking for a contemporary context in which to frame Antonia Pozzi’s history. In Pavia, I found these anonymous poets, university students, one from the medical school, another two from the faculty of philosophy and literature.
L.: *How did your interest in Pozzi begin?*

M.: During *Come l’ombra*’s success, I found myself touring around the world with the film while I was still teaching at the Film school. When I stopped, I immediately wanted to shoot another film, and it had to be a low-budget project, therefore it had to be shot in Milan. I discovered Pozzi’s work through my therapist. As I mentioned, I’ve been in psychotherapy for ten years to work on my female identity, because like many other women, I grew up thinking that all the heroes are male, so I identified women as passive. At some point, my therapist began to give me cultural references. She introduced me to Maria Zambrano, a philosopher, and other intellectuals including Pozzi. I went around the world to promote *Come l’ombra*, bringing Pozzi’s poems with me. In December 2005, I went to the Women’s Library in Milan and I got all her books. Then I was contacted by her official biographer, Graziella Barnabo, who wrote a wonderful book on Pozzi. She asked me if I wanted to make a documentary, because in 2008 there was an important conference for the seventieth anniversary of her death.

L.: *You directed many portraits of artists, such as Arnaldo Pomodoro, Gabriele Basilico, and Mimmo Jodice, all of whom are photographers. How did you conceive Pozzi’s portrait, since her work as an artist deals with words rather than images?*

M.: Pozzi’s portrait came after a series of video portraits I'd done, the first of which was Fernanda Pivano in 1994. I shot *Poesia* in 2008 and edited it in 2009. It was the first portrait of a non-living artist. Actually, I made a film about Pietro Lingeri, who was an architect; in that case, I just showed his work. With Pozzi, I did not want to make a film about death, but a film about the necessity of poetry. It was very hard, three years of delirium, because I did not have a reference point. The other problem was how to “frame” the poems, how to show them on the screen. I chose to work on the poems’ subtext. For example, think about the scene where the
voiceover says, "This is my fake baby." What images could I show in that case? Children
maybe? Pozzi did photograph many children, but it would have been the most trivial solution.
Then I asked myself: “What could this verse have meant to her?” She talks often in her poetry
about growing flowers. I think that, truly, she is opposing nature’s generative power with her
own inability to give birth. So I thought of showing the X-ray plate of a woman's pelvis, to
signify a woman’s empty womb.

*L.* In this documentary film, like in all of your films, the city functions as a real character in the
narration. What is Milan’s role in Pozzi’s story?

*M.* I showed the city’s changes over time. The locations you see in Poesia are the same as those
in Il mio domani. At the beginning of Poesia, we hear Maria, my alter ego, saying, "Antonia
hasn’t lived here for 70 years." I wanted to show the transformation of the city, so I contrasted
the current city with that of the 1930s. All buildings from the 1930s are framed from a low angle
to exclude the road surface and the traces of modernity. Then there is a discourse on the gaze in
the film. My eyes were seeking her gaze. Anyway, all the buildings I shot were already there in
Pozzi’s time, in every city district she used to visit.

*L.* Let’s talk about Come l’ombra now, which was very well received by critics. It was selected
by Fabio Ferzetti at the Venice Film Festival, under “Giornate degli autori.” (The Auteurs’
Days) As you said, it was the only Italian film, and more importantly, the only one directed by a
woman in this category. How did the project start? You mentioned that Daniele wrote the script
and then asked you to direct it.

*M.* It was my birthday, in 2003. Daniele was working on his first script. Before the shooting, I
spent one year with Ukrainian women and six months in school learning Russian. I worked on
the dialogue. I included Gabriele Basilico’s representations of the city wherever the script simply said: “Images of the city.”

*L.*: *How does the collaboration with Basilico work?*

*M.*: I’m glad you’re asking me this question so I can clarify something. Basilico did not work on my film as cinematographer. He worked with me to elaborate the imagery of the city. Gabriele, like me, turned his gaze to the city. He became an internationally known photographer by doing city portraits; he did Moscow, Sao Paulo. Now when a city wants to have its official portrait made, it calls Basilico. Milan was like a gym for my gaze, as it had been for his. We share the same urban imagery. For *Come l’ombra*, we discussed which parts of the city we were going to shoot. We did the location scouting together; we decided the camera angles together. And we did the same for *Il mio domani*. I took some pictures of the places I intended to shoot, and I discussed with him if what I was showing was representative of the city. And then he did the reverse: for the book on *Il mio domani*, he went and photographed all the places I shot.

*L.*: *The way you compose the shots, your way of shooting a scene before the characters have entered the frame, and then remaining on the scene even after the characters have left, reminds me of Antonioni’s method. Including framing women from over the shoulder...*

*M.*: Well, at the beginning of *Come l’ombra*, when Claudia gets off the Tower Branca, there is a direct citation. That scene quotes the opening sequence of Antonioni’s *La Notte* from a reverse point of view. And I tried as much as possible to use the sequence shot, as opposed to editing. Instead of the shot-counter-shot sequence, and then the two characters together, I made only eight cuts. I used this method in my new film too.

*L.*: *Would you say you’re influenced by Antonio Pietrangeli’s work?*
M.: I don’t know. He is certainly an author that I admire, but I wouldn’t say I absorbed him as I absorbed Antonioni. Why do you ask?

L.: Well, there is a moment when Olga is moving around in the apartment wearing a white nightgown, and she leans on the window. It reminded me of a scene from Io la conoscevo bene.

M.: I can tell you the reference points that I’m aware of. They are Antonioni’s La Notte, a Chinese film titled Millennium Mambo, and Godard. I keep very detailed shooting journals, so you can actually see how I compose my shots.

L.: Your camera always stays at a certain distance, and very often viewers see the characters behind a glass.

M.: That is a specific feature of Come l’ombra. We wanted to make a film of observation; it was like observing insects under a microscope.

L.: I’d like to discuss that scene when Olga and Claudia are having dinner. Olga talks about Italy as the land of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Armani. That dialogue is particularly interesting concerning discourse on immigration in Italy.

M.: During the preparation of Come l’ombra I met many Ukrainian women, and someone told me where they went to church on Sunday. One of them introduced me to their group, and each Sunday I went to the mess with them, and we had lunch together, each bringing her own food. I spent a lot of time chatting with them.

The women I met, they would have gone to Germany, or France, but they really wanted to come to Italy, because they believed Italy was the sunny country, where people are kind, where people enjoy life, eat good food… all the clichés! Hence what Claudia says, “Do not fool yourself”—that is what Italians think. “It’s hard here, it’s very hard for us!” That’s why many of us ask
immigrants, “Why did you come here?” The question does not imply, “I don’t want you,” but rather, “I think you’re crazy to come here. Look at this awful country!” However, Olga answers, “It’s better than in Kiev.”

L.: As a matter of fact, that scene is shot in such a way that the viewer has to sympathize with Olga; we see her bright face, while Claudia is sitting with her back to the camera. We can’t help but hear only Olga’s point of view.

M.: But Claudia’s point of view is not racist; it’s not what the middle-class Italian would say: “Go back to your country.” Claudia’s point is much more civilized. The question is, “Why here, where it is so difficult?”

L.: It’s not a welcoming attitude.

M.: Oh, absolutely not. This movie was originally called The Invisible Ones. Claudia is as invisible as Olga. Truly, groups of immigrants like the Ukrainians, Chinese, and Filipinos rarely deal with Italians. Maybe we don’t care what kind of life they live, and vice versa.

L.: So, are there parallel worlds in the city, in your opinion?

M.: When Claudia starts searching for Olga, she explores worlds that she never imagined brushing against. The women by the station, those are real life situations. Anita Kravos, the actress who plays Claudia, spoke Russian so she could interact with them. So could Karolina Porcari, who played Olga.

L.: Those are the only scenes where we can see any crowd in the city; the rest of the movie is quite desolate. Milan is a sort of metaphysical place.
M.: It’s August. I also wondered, Why is the city so empty? Did they all run away? Is there a plague? Or are they all behind the windows, and they don’t want to interact with other human beings?

L.: What is the role of the landscape in your film?

M.: I think it is the main role. It’s not by chance that I worked with Gabriele Basilico. The city I represent is not that of the historical center, it’s that of the so-called “middle architecture,” where common people live.

L.: Thus Claudia’s loneliness is the same loneliness that many women experience in the city.

M.: To promote the film I traveled a lot, from South America to Hamburg. The cities’ outskirts are all similar. It's like cities communicate with each other through solids. So certain types of landscapes are familiar to everyone. In many countries many women have come to thank me, saying: “This film is about me, but I did not know I was living a life like this.” I imagined Claudia as one of the thousands of girls who every day spew out from the subway, carrying their bags of organic food and yogurt, going to work thinking that their lives will change tomorrow, that something is going to happen and life will change.

L.: At the end, Claudia leaves for the Ukraine with Olga’s suitcase, and in a way it’s like she appropriates Olga’s identity. It’s quite an open ending for Claudia. I’m thinking of Olga’s final shot, which is a very intense moment in the film.

M.: I wanted Olga to look into the camera, to address the viewers. It’s as if she’s saying: “Look at me! You cannot pretend not to see me anymore. Now you must seem me, now something awful is going to happen to me. And probably you have had many people like me around, but never even noticed them.” The woman who introduced me to the Ukrainian community
disappeared. I looked for her to tell her that the film was being presented in Venice, but she was
gone, and I’ve never found her.

L.: What about Anna Akhmatova’s verses? Poetry seems to play an important role in your films.

M.: Poetry is part of my imagery. I was 13 when my brother’s friend gave me Allen Ginsberg’s
Hydrogen Jukebox. I love Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, Antonia Pozzi. Forza Cani is the title of a
poem by Nanni Balestrini, as we said. Come l’ombra is taken from a triplet in Akhmatova’s
poem To the Many. I have always been fascinated by the the idea that Akhmatova and Pasternak
were the only writers to debut before the revolution, and they chose to stay in Russia, to continue
describing what was happening, when they could have chosen to emigrate safely to Paris. So the
presence of Akhmatova in my film relates to the Eastern world. I belong to that generation that
looked at Communist Russia as a model, and then suffered when Stalin’s misdeeds were
uncovered, just like it was painful to discover Mao Tse-tung’s crimes.

L.: Let’s talk about your lastest film. How did Il mio domani begin?

M.: Francesco Panphili—the producer of Kairos Films—and I decided to make another movie
together. Il mio domani is a film about modernity. I try to make films about the present, and so
far—after all we do not know whether I will make other films—women have been the
protagonists, the spokespersons of the crisis of modernity, or even better, post-modernity.

L.: Can you tell me something about the character of Monica? How does her character evolve in
the story?

M.: Monica is a modern character. I wanted to represent the crisis through a woman. Monica,
unlike the other Monica from Forza cani, who had a humble job, is a vocational counselor, a
common figure in Europe now. She is a woman who has to work through her anger toward her
mother, who abandoned her. And somehow this theme belongs to everyone. Monica has an identity problem, and for that reason she goes to Greece, to experience what her mother did. That’s why there is that speech about Athena, the goddess born from her father’s head, who knows she is not invincible—quite the contrary: she accepts her limitations.

*L.*: Like in *Come l’ombra*, in *Il mio domani* women are represented within the city as lonely, and the city itself is deserted. Is that how you see Milan? Is that really Milan, or merely a place of the soul?

*M.*: Yes, it is a place of the soul above all; indeed the protagonists see it that way. It is always the protagonist’s gaze describing the city. Monica strolls around the city to contain her emotions, to understand what to do. For instance, in that scene in which she drops everything, she starts by walking, then she goes to the office and finds out her lover is leaving her to go to Paris without telling her.

*L.*: *Il mio domani* is articulated through the opposition between the city and the country. What do these places represent for Monica?

*M.*: It is not a real opposition. They are only different landscapes, but they are both Monica’s soul-places. The countryside is certainly not a joyful place. Monica is able to abandon it only when she begins to make peace with her mother.

*L.*: Returning to the topic of the city, I think the poetic core of your work is this image of the woman wandering through the city, an image that reminds us of Lydia in Antonioni’s *La Notte*, which you quoted in *Come l’ombra*. Incidentally, it’s also a recurring image in many films directed by women, as a kind of leitmotif of female filmmaking.
M.: That image comes from my relationship with the city. I walk around the city a lot. I try to keep my territory under control, because it’s the depository of my identity. I walk through the same places over and over again so as not to feel alienated. I try to understand how the city evolves. I compose my shots in places where I’ve already positioned myself, where I’ve actually found myself. More than simply wandering, these women attempt to find themselves.

L.: You mentioned before that Georgette, the producer, said she could tell Come l’ombra was a movie shot by a woman. Do you think there is a feminine way of using the camera?

M.: In my opinion, there is a specific way for each of us; the gaze deals with your imagination. When Georgette told me that I had a female look, I did not get offended. A few years before I would have been. Because femininity in this country is identified with something passive, and something diminishing, but after psychotherapy, I did not take it in the wrong way. I know my gaze is different from yours because we experience life differently. Obviously this has to do with the fact that I am a woman!

L.: Do you think there is a kind of ostracism against women in the creative departments of filmmaking? Do we expect women to do a certain type of film?

M.: Of course! How many women have tried to jump and failed to do so? My case is a miracle because I’m an outsider, I live in Milan, not in Rome, I come from another story. I had to self-produce my first movies. There is definitely a form of ostracism against debuting filmmakers in this country. Not that it would be easier in other countries. And then, surely women are expected to direct comedies, comedies about women. For my part, I do not know if I’ll continue to make other films given the situation in this country. And if I do get the chance, I don’t know if my next
film will be about woman, or about the lack of a woman. In any case, women are expected to do films about women.

Laura: Does a feminist cinema exist in Italy?

Francesca: I am a feminist. I wish it existed, but it doesn’t.

L.: You’re the first Italian woman filmmaker I talked with to make such a statement. Generally many women filmmakers are reluctant to be considered as “women filmmakers” and they explicitly affirm not to be feminists. Is there a dialogue among women filmmakers?

F.: No, although there are very few of them. They make up 7% of the filmmakers. We don’t talk, we do not meet up, we do engage in collective projects. Of course I collaborate with my sister Cristina, but I don’t know other women filmmakers. However, there is some sort of underground dialogue around our films. An involuntary dialogue, an unacknowledged and unaccepted one. Watching films directed by other women, I recognized my own themes and thought that I’ve been a pioneer in regard to certain topics, whether that filmmaker had seen my films or not. As a matter of fact, women tend not to declare themselves feminists.

L.: And why is that? What image do women in Italy have today of a feminist?

F.: Feminism, by which I mean the political movement from the Seventies, represented one of the greatest changes our country went through; one that brought radical change in people’s lives in the second half of the twentieth century. Many women who today do not declare themselves feminists owe everything to feminism without even knowing it. And this proves that feminism has succeeded. I always thought that the child who grew up ungrateful toward his parents proves that the parents did a good job. I made this premise because I get angry with those who say that feminism has failed — it has not failed but at some point, has run aground. Again I am referring to the movement of the 70s. Today “Feminist 2.0” is growing. This is a huge topic. To simplify let’s say that all political movements from the 70s led to the Statute of workers, which did not
exist before. The “hot autumn” of 69 made the working class the absolute protagonist. This is to say that feminism is not the only thing that happened. Feminism, though, has profoundly changed the country. But then there was a terrible backlash because these movements in the 70s have also led to some very tragic events in Italy. It’s like the movements themselves were scared of what they had triggered and there was a kind of removal. Actually, this is a country that proceeds by removal. At some point it was like feminism was part of this huge wave of politics and it had been sucked into a reflex that led to the denial of everything. But it's not only this; there is also a reason internal to feminism. At one point, feminism itself drove aground on the reflection of what a woman is, on motherhood. It got caught in its own specificity, but on the way it lost the rest of the women who did not recognize themselves in certain aspects.

L.: Do you mean feminism was disconnected from the reality of certain women?

F.: That's right! Trapped in closed circles, libraries, graves ... It did not take into account what was happening outside. Something fundamental to a political movement is the “here and now”, you cannot ignore the “here and now”, neither art nor politics. On February 13, two years ago, we organized the event Se non ora quando. It was a revelation ... the proof that the feminist issues are rising again. The feminism in which today many women don’t identify, that feminism has lost its ability to scratch the social fabric; on its way it lost women because it was more interested in feminism itself than in women. Feminists have been seen as women who refused femininity, radical women, who did not take into account the issue of maternity, no matter whether they chose to be mothers or not. The possibility of generating is inscribed into all women’s bodies and is therefore a symbol of women’s difference. So to answer your question, I consider myself a feminist. A feminist cinema does exist but it is unconsciously feminist.
L.: You mentioned that only 7% of directors in the film industry are women, a figure also mentioned by Paola Randi, who refers to a survey led by Maude during the first decade of 2000. Why do you think so few women have access to the film industry?

This 7% is not only about women in film, but also women in politics, women in business in general. In the film industry, where there is a strong competition, women are a minority. This 7% is consistent with what happens in the country in other activities.

L.: And how was your path? Since you come from a family of artists, was your access to the world of cinema facilitated by somehow eased?

Well, at first it was eased, but actually my father never wanted and never accepted that I was a filmmaker. He completely rejected my first film *Pianoforte*. For many years he didn’t even want to watch it, because he thought it was an autobiographical film, and cinema for him was something else. For sure it was easier for me because I chewed cinema all my life; for me it was a familiar medium. Moreover, I was living in France at that time, and the film was produced by Gaumand. I was married then to French producer Daniel Toscan du Plantier made my first film against my father; it was a film of rebellion. In this sense it has placed me right from the start in a logic of discontinuity with my origins, so on the one hand I was helped, on the other hand, hindered. I did my first film to “to survive”. I needed to tell this story that was very traumatic, a history of drug addiction, and death. So, the beginning for me was not about “making films”, it was about telling a story. This is something that happened in all of my films: I actually decide to make a film only when I feel it is really necessary. This was my path; I didn’t have to start from the ground floor but I was very young, without sufficient preparation, and I started in a very instinctive and desperate way. Clearly I had some knowledge of filmmaking because I was always on my father’s sets, and that was of tremendous help, but after this first film—which was
like a pregnancy. The film was presented in Venice, in a competition named Venice-De Sica, and I won the prize, so this film had an important beginning. But then I started from the ground floor, which I had not done initially, and I started looking for myself. At that time I was in France and I was trying to understand if I really wanted to do this job. Then I made my first documentary film on Elsa Morante for French television and I realized that I really wanted to do something innovative, between documentary and fiction, which means for me to have a very intense relationship with reality. Thanks to Elsa Morante I met Carlo Cecchi and I decided to make a documentary about his work in Palermo. He is a very difficult artist who has never opened his doors to any filmmaker. He agreed to let me film his work in theater only on the condition that I go alone with my camera, not even with a sound man. This forced me to study and take possession of the medium. Later I made the documentary on Carlo Giuliani, and Mobbing, a film I made thanks to my experience as a documentary filmmaker.

L.: I would like to discuss the role of the city in your films. When does the work on the city start? While you’re writing the script, or it is developed during the shooting, therefore when you’re working with Luca Bigazzi, your cinematographer?

F.: Consciously, from Shakespeare a Palermo to Un giorno speciale, each of my films is a film on the city. For this reason I find your research project extremely interesting. You know, my father, with who I had a strong relationship, a formative one, he was an architect. Annabelle Partagée, which I consider a film of transition, is a film on Paris. That’s my way of making films: (from the writing stage) putting in relation the intimate story of a character and the social and political apparatus that determinates his or her emotions. The city is the more visible apparatus for a character in a film. Indeed the city determines your emotions; it is what determines the geography of your love, your loneliness, your maternity. I had to change city very
soon due to dramatic events that I experienced in Rome. For many years, I could return to Rome, that’s why I lived 18 years in Paris.

Anyhow, the streets of a city, the geography of a city, are something that shape the story I’m narrating, and this begins with the process of writing and then continues with the filming process. And the relationship with Luca Bigazzi is essential. Beyond his artistic merits, we share a common political vision; we have the same intent of correlating human beings with sites; we share the same political geography.

*L.* Can we discuss the representation of Milan in *A casa nostra* and that of Rome in *Un giorno Speciale*? And what is the relationship between the city and the female body in these films?

*A casa nostra* was born as a film about Milan, incidentally my father’s city as well as and Luca Bigazzi’s. I was always fascinated by Milan because it is the city of our discontent, of our disappointment and our failure. It was for many years the moral and cultural capital of Italy. In 1951, along with Alberto Lattuada, my father founded the Milan Film Archive. Milan was the city of the Piccolo Teatro. It was extremely important from a cultural standpoint and completely failed in its mission and became the city that produced Berlusconi.

Milan is the Italian city that went through the greatest metamorphosis and the greatest damnation. It is the city of money. And the symbolic city of the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie.

Along with Turin, Milan is the city of work, of factories. Milan was supposed to be the moral city of Italy because it had to be the city of competence, but it wasn’t able to fulfill this mission; it is completely corrupt and this has plunged the country into the tragedy of *Berlusconismo*, which I believe to be a tragedy.
This theme is very present in A casa nostra as well as in Un giorno speciale. The latter narrates a journey from the margins to the center of the city. The city center is almost unbearably beauty, but rotten. It is a shopping mall. Rarely has Rome’s historical center been filmed in this way; we stole images. We did not even ask permission because shooting in the center of Rome costs a fortune. With Luca we walked around with a small camera… in some of the scenes we told the police that we were shooting a wedding video (she was dressed in white); that’s how we were able to film the daily bazaar. The center of Rome has been completely sold to tourists. So we were able to film this huge open-air shopping center.

L.: So the circulation of money is the theme that A casa nostra and Un giorno special share?

F.: While A casa nostra shows the money of those who have it, Un giorno speciale shows the consumption of those who do not have it. The congressman sits in this wonderful palace, unworthy of being there, because someone put him there, while the girl has nothing. I had huge problems with the mayor of Milan, Letizia Moratti, when A casa nostra was released. Moratti cast anathema on the film without even seeing it. The film was booed at the festival in Rome. It was a film that bothered the city of Milan.

L.: Returning to the topic of the female body, which is clearly your concern in both films...

F.: I treat the city like the body. In Un giorno speciale, there is a total correspondence between the body of this girl [the main protagonist (?)] and the city of Rome. When I step on the streets it is like stepping on the arteries of a body. I filmed those long walks thinking of the city as a living organism. As a woman, as a citizen, as a feminist director, the reflection on the female body is essential for me. In A casa nostra, that scene in which the actress Laura Chiatti stands naked in
front of the camera while singing, is for me one the most beautiful scenes I ever shot. *A casa nostra* in some way announced all of Berlusconi’s scandals.

*L.: I was thinking about what you said about an underground dialogue between women’s films and Marina Spada’s *Come l’ombra*, in which Milan’s walls are covered with seductive images of women, and the female protagonists looks at those images...*

*F.: The function of those images is political: to deny women citizenship. Behind the story of women’s bodies lurks an issue that is far beyond an issue of morality or decency: it is the issue of women’s citizenship. The walls of our cities are covered with hyper-modern images of women that are the expressions of a hyper-archaic order that establishes and ratifies the closing of the polis to women. Women are represented as creatures lacking *logos*, unable to have their own language, a prerogative to exist in the polis. From this derives certain percentages: women are 7% of all the filmmakers, only 10% of the ministers, and this is a very clear plan: to leave women at the margins of the city. The idea of what a woman is stopped in the 50s. Feminism happened, women have entered the workforce en masse, relationships between men and women have changed dramatically, women are affirming their sexuality, but that imagery continues to nail us down, out of our time. Those bodies shown on TV cannot be crossed by time; they have to be out of time in a historical and biological sense. But there is no life outside of time and language; so to show women out of time is to place them out of history. The issue of the female body is the most important political question at the moment; everything else is secondary.*

L.: How did you start your career in filmmaking, and to what extent has being a woman affected your career as a director?

W.: It still affects it. Shortly before completing my degree in Philosophy I was asked to do some research on linguistics for a documentary film. I already had a great passion for cinema. But I did not even dare to think that I could be a filmmaker and it was not even clear to me that I wanted to be a filmmaker. So, I was asked to collaborate on this strange film called Glossolalia. I remember going, with my notes and my books, to the production house, where everyone seemed extremely happy and was having much more fun than I was, working alone in a dark library. They were satisfied with my work, so in return I asked for a little reward: to participate in the shooting. It was the 70's. The shooting for me was a dazzling experience.

L.: What was the documentary about?

The documentary showed a psychiatrist’s experiment taking patients on an excursion from a psychiatric hospital in Rome, called Santa Maria della Pietà. Those patients were going out for the first time in 25 years. They were taking a trip by bus to a place called Zoo Safari, and then to a filthy beach in Fiumicino (near Rome). I did not have a specific role, except to help the director and accompany the patients. I was very young and saw psychiatric patients for the first time, and I confess that I was a bit scared. There were about thirty patients; some of them told me they were around thirty-five years old, but to me they looked 70. The trip was tense and exciting at the same time. They “went crazy” for joy and curiosity. But, the most moving part of the trip for me was the stop at the beach, which was absolutely ugly, it was winter… Many of these patients were seeing the sea for the first time; they undressed and threw themselves into the water. I was
absolutely amazed and decided then, with complete conviction and a hint of madness, that I wanted be a filmmaker.

L.: Antonioni tells in an interview that he started directing when attempting to make a documentary film about a psychiatric hospital. But after the first take, as soon as the camera began rolling, the patients started screaming all at once. He got so scared that he stopped the shooting and thought that he would never become a filmmaker. He never shot that film....

W.: The first time is always exciting. It is when you contract that virus that makes you think: “I will do it at all costs!” To go back to your initial question, for a woman in the 80s, it was difficult, and it is still hard. We are very few women and we work too little, myself included. I will never forget something I was told...this is an anecdote that I don’t tell very often.

I was trying to set up the production for La mia generazione (1996). A very important and powerful woman producer then told me something that I have repeated over the years with other words. But I am going to tell you exactly what she said: “I am not going to produce this film for you because I believe that to make a film like this, one needs a ‘handle’, not a woman.”

L.: That’s horrible and even more horrible to hear such a sexist comment from a woman to another woman. No wonder women struggle to conquer their own space in film industry. And what did you do?

W.: I took my script and I went away. She offered me a three-film contract, but three comedies. I refused and walked away, but I realized what the real problem was.

L.: Do you mean a woman dealing with a political film?

W.: That was a difficult film, one that producers didn’t want to make. They didn’t want to entrust it to a woman. She said that in a very direct way.
**L.: And what happened then? How did you succeed in having the film produced?**

**W.:** I met a young producer, hell-bent, determined to do it. I made him understand that I deeply ‘felt’ that story and that I could do it. When the film came out there were a lot of controversies. I had figured out a little trick to defend myself. They asked me every sort of question: if I knew the world of terrorists, if I was close to them…very provocative questions. Then, during the program tour for the film in the movie theaters, which was long and interesting and took me to many Italian cities, I defended myself from critics saying: “This is not a political film. It is a western, the journey of a stagecoach along Italy, a sheriff and a bandit who eventually confront themselves in a duel in which, as often happens in western movies, nobody wins.”

**L.: And did the label of the western tranquilize them?**

**W.:** Yes! I was repeatedly asked, “Why?” Why was a woman narrating stories about men?

**L.: Beyond the labels of genre, what was your intent?**

**W.:** I wanted to talk about the humanity of that historical moment. I wanted to investigate suppressed emotions. The thing that mostly fascinated me was the different identities: the prisoner and the policeman, forced into a narrow space, but a traveling space. So these two hypothetical enemies, stuck in a tiny space, and then forced to communicate.

**L.: Let’s discuss Domenica. I would like to know how the project started and how you chose to represent Naples.**

**W.:** What I wanted to narrate is something that I call, with a word I invented, *orfanite*, the sentiment of being or feeling oneself an orphan. Domenica is an orphan and lives in an orphan city. Naples is an extraordinary city, which has been denied so many things. I was supposed to
shoot this film in Palermo, but I chose to shoot in Naples. Naples is considered a city that only Neapolitans can represent. Therefore, not being Neapolitan, my choice raised the stakes, but I felt I had no choice: Naples was the most orphan of all Italian cities. And, I think you're right comparing *Domenica* with Torre’s *I baci mai dati* and Rohrwacher’s *Corpo celeste*. These three films share a feeling of melancholy, what I call *orfanite*.

*L.*: *This melancholy is announced with the opening foggy city view of Naples.*

*W.*: Of course, I wanted to represent the city outside any touristic scheme. I remember the first day of shooting I put up a sign: "It is forbidden to film pine trees and the Vesuvius." No, there is not such view of Naples in *Domenica*. There is an abandoned harbor, for me such a magical place.

*L.*: *I consider Domenica’s character a tragic female version of the “scugnizzo.” Can we discuss the scene in which Domencia let the kids masturbate while looking at her, and she pretends not to see them? To some extent, that scene is very self-reflexive. I mean, it seems to replicate a common cinematic situation in which women are object of erotic spectacle for a male audience. But, it is done in a very playful manner.*

*W.*: That scene represents a game among children; there is no sense of aggression. There is a sense of discovery. It represents an encounter between genders; there is no sense of violence. I do not know if I was capable of representing what I wanted to. However, a film critic bashed me for that scene. I do not remember his reasons, but I remember that severe critique made me suffer.

*L.*: *What about the first scene in which Domenica appears? The camera lingers on her legs and creates a disturbing sensation for the viewer.*
Well, in that case I wanted to show the fragility of the character. She is alone in the city, exposed to all sorts of risks, and one of the risks is being raped.

L.: Contrary to many Italian films in which there is a severe critique of the Church, in your film it plays a positive social role, it is essentially a substitute for the family.

W.: I agree. The role of the Church is very positive. Often it is said that everything that the left wing ignored was addressed by the Church. Social work has been abandoned by politicians and the Church tries to compensate for this fault.

L.: The city in Domenica plays a central role, as if it was a character. Is this a narrative strategy that you adopted specifically in this film or is it a recurrent way of constructing your stories?

W.: I already adopted this strategy in my first film, Ambrogio (1992). It’s the story of a 17 year old girl who, in the late 50's, decides she wants to become a sea captain. It was a way to tell my story as a woman filmmaker in an almost completely male environment. The protagonist is also an orphan, like Domenica she also lost her mother, although she lives with her father and her brother. Therefore her encounter with the male world is not mediated by the salvific, protective maternal figure. I remember that the fact that I created a female leading character without a mother, created a problem with my own mother. She asked me: “Why did you make me die? You erased me in your first film.” For me it was hard to explain why it was important that Anna Ambrogi, whom all the male school classmates called Ambrogio, was an orphan.

There are two cities in my film, Ambrogio: Rome, where she attends the nautical school, this male environment where everyone had the myth of the sea Capitan, obviously as a male figure; and Lisbon, where she goes to look for a shipboard job. But she is rejected because she is a woman! Lisbon is such a melancholic city. So beautiful and profoundly melancholic, just like
Naples, overlooking the sea. Somehow even Lisbon is an orphan city: northern European although economically depressed.

*L.: Can we talk about your documentary projects, those you consider more important in your cinematic production*

*W.: Lavorare stanca* (1998), that pays homage to Cesare Pavese’s collection of poems with the same title. I am very fond of this project. I couldn’t shoot my own film, I only had beautiful film footage to edit and build a story. I wanted to tell how tiring working is; it is not always true that work ennobles men. Sometimes it kills them, destroys their identity. Sometimes, it starves them. I had Friz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) as a model, and I tried, with a sense of profound respect, to trace the history of Italian labor following its narration. Documentary filmmaking gives you this kind of freedom, the freedom of building a language. For this reason I believe it is important that last year, at the Venice Film Festival, Gianfranco Rosi’s *Sacro GRA* (2013) was awarded the Golden Lion. It is not that true that documentary filmmaking, the so called cinema of the real, is a picture of reality. Documentary films are also fiction, and the director is certainly freer to experiment with different languages. I have just finished editing another documentary film. It is the story of the encounter between a group of people aged 20 to 50 years, men and women in a very beautiful place, on the hills of Emilia Romagna, with a professional sex worker - not a velina (show girl), a 46 year old woman, who has been doing this job for 11 years, without a protector. I realized that the questions this woman asked to this group of aspiring writers worked as a corkscrew, to make them talk about themselves.

*L.: Can you tell me about the collective film projects you participated to?*

*W.: Lettere dalla Palestina* (Letters from Palestine, 2003). This project was generated within the experience of Genoa, where I went to document the protests around the G8 summit with a group
of filmmakers, some of them were well-known and experienced, some other less experienced. In this group there were people like me, who took part to many rallies in the 70’s, and people like Ettore Scola who didn’t, and so would breathe the tear gas! And we said to him: no, you can’t do that! It makes you sick! Mario Monicelli was pissed because, as the oldest, he was sent to follow a group of nuns while we were in the middle of the riot. But then, even the nuns were beaten! So, eleven filmmakers from this group went to Tel Aviv and from there to the occupied territories. When we were on the plane I asked a provocative question: what are we going to do there? Are we going to “document” or we are going to do our work, meaning make fiction? Everyone responded that they wanted to document the state of things, and I said that I preferred fiction. But then everyone did it too; they all staged small fictions, some more brilliant than others. Another documentary of which I am very fond is called Maledetta mia (2003). It’s about the so called “black bloc,” also made after the experience of Genoa. I made this film because I did not understand who they were, and I felt that newspapers too easily defined them as criminals or destroyers of the city. I had no intention of defending them, but simply hoped to understand who they were. Documentary filmmaking is very important at the moment and should be practiced by great directors who have access to big budget films, and therefore can afford experimenting.

L.: One last question. One that I already asked to the other women filmmakers I am writing about: Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Paola Randi, Alice Rohrwacher. What does characterize a female gaze? And does a dialogue among women filmmakers in Italy exist?

W.: Today it is still hard for women to make films. There is still a feeling of suspicion. And there is no solidarity among women directors; there is no communication because to pursue such a difficult career there is a long period of transvestitism, of women like men. My latest experience of a work done with women is a short film about March 8th in 2011. That was the year of the
protest movement Se non ora quando, founded by the Comencini sisters and I didn’t identify with that group. So I gathered a group of filmmakers, we hopped on the street car number 8 in Rome, with four young actresses who played four monologues, the reports of the survivors from the 1911 New York fire at the textile factory, the Triangle, where 150 workers died. These monologues aroused much curiosity among the passengers. We got on and off the street car repeating the performance, and at some point we realized that there was a group of people who were following us. I think this short film inspired Constance Quatriglio to make a documentary on the Triangle. This was one of my experiences but, generally, women don’t seem to feel the need to work together. I believe a female gaze is a more direct gaze, a less abstract one. What I mean is, men have been historically recognized for their ability at abstraction, something that has been denied women. Women, therefore, have developed a more direct, honest, less intellectual gaze. And this is also the reason why some male critics get annoyed by women's artistic expressions, because they do not perceive the honesty of their work. I believe women are also more “equipped,” than men – so to speak. Maybe someone is beginning to realize that… and this causes male frustration and aggressiveness. Women’s gaze is a different gaze, as it is the difference of their gaze on life.

Paola Randi is an emerging filmmaker; she was born in Milan and lives in Rome. After experimenting with art forms such as painting, theater and music, she started her career in filmmaking, self-producing numerous short films. In 2011, her first feature, *Into Paradiso*, was shown in many international film festivals throughout Europe and North and South America, including the Venice Film Festival, where it was presented in the category “Controcampo Italiano.” *Into Paradiso* has been praised by critics and audiences alike, and its many accolades include being one of Nanni Moretti’s “Bimbi belli” (an honor Moretti created for debut filmmakers), as well as receiving four nominations for the David of Donatello prize.

*Into Paradiso* is an exhilarating comedy, or, as the filmmaker herself describes it, a “metropolitan Western.” The story begins with Alfonso, a scientist, losing his job. In need of an inside favor, he visits an old acquaintance, Vincenzo Cacace, who is running for public office. Vincenzo, in turn, is asked for a “kindness” (delivering a weapon) by Don Fefé a Risa, of the Camorra, and Vincenzo decides to use Alfonso as the unwitting courier. The scientist, completely unaware of what he is involved in, ends up witnessing an execution in a Neapolitan alleyway. Hiding from a gang of criminals, he takes refuge in the Sri Lankan district, which is called Paradiso. Meanwhile, Gayan, a former cricket world champion, arrives in Paradiso expecting it to be a land of opportunity. Disappointed, he begins working as a caretaker to pay for his journey back to Sri Lanka. Through a series of paradoxical and comical events, Gayan and Alfonso meet and become allies on a roof terrace in Paradiso, tying the corrupt politician Vincenzo to a chair and hiding from the Camorra’s henchmen that guard the building.

Parallel to her work as filmmaker, Randi collaborated with the cultural association *Maude* (which takes its name from the character in Hal Ashby’s *Harold and Maude*), founded by
a group of women filmmakers. The association is engaged in several collective film projects and conducts research on women in film and media in Italy.

*L.: Paola, can you tell me about your professional experience before filmmaking?*

**P.:** I started with drawing, when I was five years old. I come from a very traditional family, in that filmmaking was not considered a reliable profession, nor was any other art form. So, I studied law, and then I spent ten years working with my mother, who was the president of a non-profit association providing financial support and training to women in developing countries, as well as in Italy. At the same time, at the age of nineteen, I worked in theater as an actress. Some friends of mine and I collaborated with the University of Milan to start a journal dedicated to experimental theater, hoping to introduce students to theater. We brought theater to places it had never been before. We produced shows in some hangers on the outskirts of Milan, where artists had their ateliers. It was an amazing experience; we invited artists like Peter Brook. Meanwhile, I continued painting and singing. And suddenly, in 2000, everything happened; it was my “tsunami year.” I was thirty at that time, and my mother died; the funding for the theater festival was cut by the new administration, so I decided to move to Rome to look for a job. And I found it with a public relations company. After about a year, though, I was quite depressed. But then one day a friend of my boss came along saying that he wrote a short film, and I said, “I’m going to direct it!” So, I rewrote some scenes and I made a short movie, and I fell in love with filmmaking because I realized that it could bring together everything I was experimenting with up to that point and everything I was passionate about: my interest in social issues, which I had developed working with my mother, and painting, music, and theater, of course. But the problem was my age. I was too old for the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, and I couldn’t afford going to New York City to attend one of those super film schools. So, I enrolled in a school
where Silvano Agosti was the dean, and he truly had an ability to communicate important things. He showed us spectacular movies, like Marco Bellocchio’s _I pugni in tasca_ or Godard’s _À bout de souffle_, which were both their first movies, and then he told us: “Guys, these filmmakers were like you, in the same position, with no money, many good ideas, and ambition. Now it’s your turn!” This helped me overcome the awe I felt for the great maestros, and it made me believe that I could make it, despite being an autodidact.

Agosti asked us to shoot a self-portrait without moving the camera, without any editing, and with just the lights we had at home. It was one of the most interesting things I’ve ever done. Then I made another short movie, with Valerio Mastrandrea, who was already quite popular, and it was presented at the Turin Film festival. So I would say at that point I’d found the courage to engage in a filmmaking career.

_L._: So, for a few years you continued doing short films. How did you succeed in having your first feature film produced?

_P._: It happened quite soon. Doing short films was a way to experiment, and I also did a lot of animation.

_L._: What about documentary films?

_P._: I did my first documentary film on commission, as part of “Il giorno della memoria” (“The Day of Memory”). It involved editing about fifteen hours of material shot by young students on a school trip to Auschwitz. Watching the material, I realized that the footage itself retraced the students’ emotional journey. They left with the spirit of someone going on vacation, and little by little they absorbed the memories of those places. I tried to recreate this transformation in the editing. I’m not even Jewish, and for me it was like putting my finger on a fresh wound. I tried to do it in the most respectful way. I didn’t do any other significant work in documentary
filmmaking. I was also involved in a very interesting project that never found a way to be financed. It was a documentary about working women and maternity, which is a big issue in Italy. We did a lot of research, and found a number of stories, but the subject is probably still taboo in our country.

*L.*: Many women filmmakers, instead, arrive at their fictional films first through documentary filmmaking.

P.: No, not me. I did a lot of research before doing *Into Paradiso*, which helped me in the writing process as well as in promoting the project.

*L.*: The encounter between Alfonso and Gayan is really interesting. Indeed, the Italians in this film do not portray themselves positively in comparison with the Sri Lankan community. Even though Alfonso is a positive character with whom the viewer can identify, the other Italians are either mafiosi or racists—I’m thinking about the character of Vincenzo, or the Signora who hires Gayan as caretaker.

P.: Yes, my film is about an encounter between an immigrant and an Italian who becomes a stranger in the heart of his own city because he comes out of his shell—he leaves the graveyard where he had lived, so safe and so far from the world of his dead mother. And eventually he is welcomed into a community that carved out its own space in society, and he becomes part of its connective tissue. Not all Italians are racists or mafiosi, of course. Alfonso, the main character is not. Those criminals, as I portrayed them—they’re so sad. The politician is a typical product of Berlusconi’s twenty-year term, which was characterized by a distorted idea of politics and power, very far from what politics should be for the common good.
L.: What can you tell me about the character of Don Fefé, who is reminiscent of a character in Cipri’s and Maresco’s films? He has such a shrill laugh; he really is not macho or charming the way mob bosses are so often depicted. And even his henchmen are not that scary: they fall asleep all the time, they celebrate their criminal identity—were you playing with the mafia-movie genre?

P.: I have fun playing with the medium and with different genres. I would say that my film is more a metropolitan Western. I was interested in deconstructing the myth of the malavita. My mafosi are relegated to a former NATO base and an abandoned supermarket, which is a symbol of their own devastation and how much they’ve been seduced by the myth of consumerism. The two henchmen keep debating whether to kill people with a gun or with a knife, which is typical mafia rhetoric, but they spend their life sitting in an alley, in the L’Avvocata district.

L.: Is there also a reflection on representation in general in Into Paradiso? I’m thinking of that sequence in which Alfonso is trying to reconstruct and understand the events, and so he re-enacts them.

P.: I’m glad you’re asking me this question! I love reflecting on memory and particularly on emotional memory. Filmmaking for me is an intrinsically nostalgic art, different from theater, which happens here and now. It changes at every show, it’s unique and unrepeatable, and like us, it’s transitory, mortal. Film, instead, captures an emotion, one made of images and sounds, happening at a certain moment but which can be re-experienced again and again, always. I like this idea: it sounds like eternity and at the same time it’s so nostalgic. Alfonso becomes the director of his emotional memory. The scene of the police on the roof terrace is a daydream. In that sequence I was doing a sort of raid on his imagination. Alfonso has many of these daydreams, as we all do before a date, or a meeting at work; we rehearse, we modify dialogue,
costumes, scenes. We create a narrative. That’s why daydreams are much more interesting than
night dreams! Those are involuntary outbursts of our unconscious; daydreams, instead, are the
product of a series of choices.

L.: *In your film there are many levels of narration. What about the soap opera* Palpitazioni
d’amore?

P.: The idea came from my desire to mock the West’s paternalistic attitude that characterizes
many tales of immigration. I don’t think we need to teach anything to anyone. I believe, instead,
there is a chance for reciprocal enrichment from the encounter with the “Other.” The exchange
contains intrinsic respect and valorization of differences, thus there is no superior culture. At the
end, what does Alfonso teach Gayan? *Palpitazioni d’amore*, only a soap opera! Anyway, it was
fun to shoot; we couldn’t stop laughing.

L.: Paola, can we talk about the role of the city? *In your film there is a very peculiar
representation of the urban space that departs from the codified representation of Naples. What
was your approach to a city that has been shown on the screen so much?*

P.: First of all, I want to say that I adore the city. I was born and raised in Milan. I like factories, I
like buildings—for me, Naples is a super-city. It’s the city-est city in the world. It’s incredibly
cosmopolitan, in continuous motion, and it’s the most vibrant city I ever been in. It’s a living
organism with muscles, veins; it has its own body. It has strong contradictions, as do all civilized
urban spaces. In Naples, people are extremely welcoming, probably because they’ve always
received injections from different cultures over the centuries. It has a very ancient history and an
extremely interesting structure. First of all, the popular districts are in the center, in the heart of
the city—I’m referring to neighborhoods like Rione Sanitá, Quartieri Spagnoli, L’Avvocata
(called Paradiso in the movie). Or Monte di Dio. Milan is structured differently. It has concentric circles: the center belongs to rich people, and the lower classes live outside. This is quite significant! A city like Naples keeps people in its heart. And something else extremely interesting is that the urban landscape changes at every kilometer. For example, if you take a cable car along Via Roma, the central street along the Spanish district, you’ll get to the kind of neighborhood you’d find in Milan. And then there’s Posillipo, with those extraordinary buildings. It’s like being in another world, with those villas and those gardens. Naples is carved out into tuff; in fact, it has an underground system of tunnels, where Garrone shot Gomorrah. It’s constructed on many different layers. In the building where I shot Paradiso, you would get to the third floor, open a door, and find a street! It was like being in an Escher painting. Naples is a source of constant surprises. During the location scouting I thought that this characteristic of the city would be perfect for what I was trying to represent—the cultural mix, a story of common people. I wanted them to become heroes, the good part of our society. I discovered the roofs when I was doing research. A friend was hosting me in a room that used to be a washhouse on the roof terrace. It was in the district of Monte di Dio, another popular neighborhood near the sea, behind Piazza Plebiscito.

This washhouse had a view of the roofs of Naples, and I saw that they were all linked. Up there, the loud noises of the city were just a buzz, and I thought, “Life makes so much noise!” You know, many years ago I went to Guatemala to visit the Mayan Pyramids in the jungle, where George Lucas shot Star Wars. I climbed the pyramids, and I realized that underneath there was such chaos! Monkeys, toucans, and all kinds of animals were screaming. The only way to get some peace was to shut your ears. In Naples, on that roof, it was the same. In the part of the city where we shot the movie, it was like being in a Moroccan city, with that sort of beehive of little
illegal houses, one glued to another. But from the outside, you can’t see all that life; you have to
get inside, or climb on a roof.

*L.*: Paola, can you tell me about Maude, the cultural association of women working in the film
and media industry in Italy, of which you’re one of the founders?

P.: I dealt with what in Italian is called the questione femminile (the Woman Question). There is
a huge problem for women in the film industry. Since I dealt with women entrepreneurs for so
long, parallel to the movement “Se non ora quando” (If Not Now When?), which is a great
movement, but not specific to women working in film, a number of female directors,
screenwriters, DPs, costume designers, editors and I created Maude. We started with a blog on
Facebook. And we try to understand what the main problems we are dealing with are, in order to
plan concrete action. In 2010, I was invited to give a lecture on women in Italian cinema. To
prepare myself, I start searching for data, and I couldn’t find any. I felt it was urgent to do
something about it. I soon found out how difficult it was to get started, just to collect records. We
started by analyzing the movies released in Italy in the past three years, and then we compared
that data with films released twenty years ago. We learned that of all the directors doing features,
only 7% are women. That means that of every hundred movies produced, ninety-three are
directed by men and only seven are by women! And there has been no improvement in the past
twenty years. In 1990 the situation was the same. I was sadly surprised by that, thinking that the
film industry is considered quite progressive compared to other industries. In the world of
business, supposedly more conservative, the main problem is access to loans. When I worked
with my mother, during the eighties, her organization supported a law for female
entrepreneurship to solve this problem. Nobody did such a thing for women in film. It’s incredible that everybody trusts women to raise children, but nobody trusts them when it comes to business. In film, the situation for women cinematographers is even worst than for women directors. However, there are women enrolled in photography courses at the Centro Sperimentale, and I wonder what they do after they leave school. The answer is that rarely they get jobs—some of them can only get work on other women’s projects, which rarely get as much of a budget and as much visibility as the ones directed by men. There is real discrimination in the budgets women can obtain. Generally speaking, the budget for a woman director is lower than the budget given to a man. I don’t think any woman director in Italy, except for Comencini perhaps, ever got a budget like Paolo Sorrentino’s. Women tend to work with other women, making movies that ultimately won’t get distribution. So, if you are a DP and you really want to start a career in filmmaking, you’d better make a man’s movie. Talking with other women directors, I realized that many of them get tired of waiting for answers that never come from producers and institutions in the business, and so they self-produce and start making documentary films. Some of them have a real documentarian vocation, but some of them had no choice but to start that way. Another issue is that those women directors who do succeed in making their first feature film have a very hard time making their second movie, or they don’t make it at all. On top of that, there’s the issue of the kind of mindset one has adopt to work on the set. I heard some women say things like, “You must be like a man to work on the set.” And that’s nonsense! The real issue is that there is no organization, no specific place a woman can go if she is harassed or discriminated against. The sexist mentality is so deeply rooted that the border between a joke and sexual harassment is very blurred. Leaving Italy, even for a short time, you understand how women’s expectations for gender equality are very low here.
**L.** I agree. It’s outrageous what women get used to in Italy, but you only realize it once you live in another country where the level of attention to gender equality is higher, or where some attitudes toward women are considered offensive, disrespectful. But it’s also true that Italy has made many steps forward in this regard. In many cities now there are centers where women can receive legal and psychological assistance. In Rome there are anti-violence centers, and the law against stalking was approved.

**P.** Yes, it’s true, but the situation is different in film, in my opinion. There’s no a mechanism for protection, so women think: “If I speak up I won’t work anymore.” It’s basically the same situation we had when there were no unions, and workers didn’t denounce abuses because there was nobody to protect them. Today there are a number of abuses that are not even acknowledged, the level of self-awareness is so low. Moreover, when there is a collaborative project, say with seven filmmakers, someone decides that at least one of them has to be a woman, mostly to be politically correct, just to satisfy that demand. And this creates a terrible side effect: not only is that one woman in competition with six other men, but she’s also in competition with all her female colleagues, because there’s only one spot for them out of seven! So, this system reinforces the competition among women and that’s surreal! But there are also women who love cooperation, like Antonietta De Lillo, for example. She’s now working on a great collective project, and I’m collaborating on it.

**L.:** Is there a common aesthetic, or any common denominator, among women directors? How would you describe the female gaze?

**P.:** Well, first of all, we need to consider that women in film all have some common experience, which is the struggle for equality; this should be translated into new ideas far from male stereotypes.
L.: Are you referring to the representation of women? Can you make an example?

P.: Let’s take commercials, which I have never dealt with. If a woman directs a Coca-Cola commercial, maybe she’ll propose a new model of femininity, as well as of masculinity. Perhaps there’ll be an opening for a new aesthetic paradigm.

L.: And that was the feminist goal, to deconstruct certain cliches, images of women built by the male gaze for the male viewer.

P.: I think we can extend this discourse to models of masculinity too. In Into Paradiso, I tried to depict both women and men outside certain stereotypes.

L.: Yes, and I like the character of Giacinta very much, a single mother...

P.: I was asked many times about such a “dramatic” choice. I think it’s dramatic if we conform to the traditional Catholic idea of motherhood. I tried to portray a mother who is still the object of desire, not a Madonna, which is so often what mothers must become, according to the traditional stereotype. On the other hand, Alfonso and Gayan are not superheroes, nor macho guys, although they are very charming.

L.: You were talking about the difficulty of doing the second film, when anyone’s lucky just to make a first one. What was your experience?

P.: Well, I must say that seeing how things are going now, finger crossed, it seems like something is happening. I think some women are doing very brave projects. For example, Alice Rohrwacher, who made an extraordinary film—which is not a critique of Catholicism, but a movie about a community that found its own sense within the parish church. Everything is seen from the point of view of a little girl coming from the North. It’s one of the most beautiful films
I’ve seen in the last few years. She is really what’s called an auteur. She uses a new language; she doesn’t conform to any cliché. I know that she is now working on her second movie, and I am looking forward to watching it. But many of my colleagues couldn’t do a second movie. We need producers, perhaps women producers, who are willing to take risks, and I understand that during such a financial crisis, it’s really difficult. But we should reflect on the fact that countries in crisis usually invest in research—but not our country, of course! Maybe Germany would be a better example. It should be the same in film. I think crisis can also be an opportunity for revolution.
Laura: As you know, I am conducting a research on films directed by women in Italy. It is only in the last ten years that women filmmakers have established their own place in Italian cinema. While watching films directed by Marina Spada, Francesca Comencini, Roberta Torre, Wilma Labate, Paola Randi, Nina Di Majo, et al., I came to observe how these women directors represent the city, an urban space that has always been entitled to men. The leitmotif of women’s identity is intertwined with the city’s identity. This subject matter is also central in your film.

Let’s start with your career in filmmaking. You mentioned that you received a BA, and your cultural reference points are literature and painting. Can you tell me a little about that, and the circumstances that brought you to create your first work?

Alice: I created my first work in a roundabout way, not expecting that I would do this. When I was a kid, I always dealt with images, photography, painting. Cinema, as a place and as a technology, was never part of my experience, of my family. There was never a video camera at my house; there wasn’t even a movie theater to go to where I grew up. In spite of that, I started by shooting a documentary about a river, the same exact river you see in my film Corpo celeste. Thanks to that, I met the producer Carlo Cresto-Dina. The documentary later became part of a collective film titled Che cosa manca.

It took me four years to shoot Corpo celeste. I always thought it was the right amount of time. I was under a lucky star when I met Carlo Cresto-Dina, who was, like me, making his first feature film. He was very brave, like all those that supported me, since I didn’t have much experience in filmmaking. All of them were nuts! Before then, I had only shot my own “home-made” documentaries. My first time on a film set was actually the beginning of Corpo celeste.
L.: How did you decide to set your story in Reggio Calabria? What relationship do you have with this city?

A.: I arrived in Reggio Calabria for personal reasons. It’s a city that I know very well, having lived there on and off. It’s a city that accompanied me, marked me not only in a positive way, but also in a negative one. I met the producer to talk about this place, which is where I was living at that time. We expressed the urgency to speak in no uncertain terms about the cultural genocide of a community. I wanted to tell a story through the lens of a place, a place that could also be abstract in a way. What I can tell you about space is that I believe that the landscape a person looks at while growing up is extremely important. I don’t think beautiful or ugly landscapes exist, as they are all interesting in some way. In this moment of my life, I believe that every experience is precious. The landscape is like a gauge that, when it changes, allows you to see things better. It was a big change for me to move from the Umbrian countryside, which is very well ordered, to Reggio Calabria. When I arrived in such a wild place, I felt like I was looking with “naked eyes,” so to speak. It is also for this reason that shooting this film with Hélène Louvart, the French cinematographer, was extremely important. I truly wanted to tell my story through foreign eyes. I wanted somebody else, besides me, to be in this place for the first time, behind the camera.

L.: What relation does Marta have with the city?

A.: Marta enters and walks across a city that is unknown to her. Her body, her presence, scrapes the image of the city. When she walks she leaves a sign, gentle and clear at the same time. For this reason, Marta resembles Yle Vianelle, the young actress playing her role, who moved to Reggio Calabria for the shooting. Just by walking, Yle was able to show us a place, defining it through her astonishment.
L.: What about the role of the Church in your film? What portrait of the Church comes out of it?

A.: I wanted to make a “coming of age” novel, and narrate it through the magnifying glass of the Church. I didn’t want to confine my story to the Church, but I wanted to open it by starting from a constricted place. Earlier I used the term ‘cultural genocide,’ a cultural emptying. Although the Church is one of those few institutions still standing for the community, it lacks real questions, any real wondering. It is always about giving answers, a ceremony that lacks a rite.

L.: Therefore your starting point was the city and the Catholic community with its rituals, especially the way it teaches religion to children, which ends up being grotesque in many ways. First of all, how did you get in touch with that reality? To what extent have you simply documented the facts, and to what extent have you reinvented that reality? Here I am referring to those funny scenes in which the kids take the tests on the Gospel, or when they sing songs like “Mi Sintonizzo su Dio” (“I Tune Myself to God”).

A.: My starting point was the community that lives in the south of Italy. From there I came to discuss the Church. I began to attend catechism lessons. Believe or not, it’s all true. I mean, through my eyes, it’s all true. During catechism lessons children actually do quizzes on the Gospel. Yes! The quiz exists; you can download it from the Internet. There is much more, but I didn’t want to get deeper into it, because reality is often too unbelievable. At one point the teacher asked a question, “Who constitutes the Church?” The choices were: “the Pope, the priests, the immigrants, God’s people, or plants.” While I was shooting that scene, I said: “No one is ever going to believe it! Everyone will think that it is pure invention…”

L.: Your film has the same title as Anna Maria Ortese’s novel. What is the relation between your film and the literary text?
A.: I picked this title for its totemic value. In fact, I am a huge admirer of Ortese’s work and her *Corpo celeste* in particular was a fundamental reference point for me. I liked the idea that it was a good omen for the film. At the beginning of her work, Anna Maria Ortese narrates her discovery of how the earth is suspended in space, as rightfully as the stars and all the other planets that we admire from afar. There is no need to go very far away, because we can feel the same amazement by looking at our own planet. We are used to this planet; we have been delivered to this planet. That’s it! That was the good wish I wanted to dedicate to Marta: that the heavenly world is already here!

*L.*: Tell me about the scene in which Maria is in the abandoned church and caresses the crucifix, indulging in observing it and removing the dust. That scene is quite intense, and uncomfortable in its own way. What is its function in the film?

A.: That scene is the reason the film’s title is *Corpo celeste*, the heavenly body that everyone talks about, the one that is always far away, unreachable. When the catechism teacher reads the texts, she always says: “You have to think that the body of Jesus is not like yours; it is instead a heavenly body, perfect, distant.” It is quite the opposite; we can touch it. The idea is that the heavenly body is the planet. I wanted to shoot a scene in which Marta finally touches something, a body. Because by the end, Marta never touches anything. I wanted it to be a sensual scene, let’s say. That sensuality came out a little as I was shooting. After all, when a body touches another body, it’s always sensual in that it engages the senses, not that it’s erotic.

*L.*: Now here’s a question that lies outside your work, concerning more generally women’s cinematic production in Italian cinema. In your opinion, do women directors continue to be ostracized? Are women still expected to shoot certain kinds of films?
A: In my opinion, the problem is on both sides, men and women. On one side, there is a tendency to take shelter behind the idea of being a woman, and the idea that as long as I’m a woman I’m persecuted. There is also a “womanish” interpretation of cinema; there is a willingness to combine in one film every possible feminine aspect for the sake of categorizing it under the label “woman.” I’ll give you an example in translation, rather than cinema, though translation is still part of this discourse, in my opinion. I was lucky enough to be able to work with Pier Paolo Giarolo for a documentary on translators. I clearly remember an interview with Virginia Woolf’s translator, Nadia Fusini. A huge part of her extraordinary work was restoring Woolf’s original words, because many of the translations have been deformed by the lens of ‘womanliness.’ For example, whenever Woolf wrote “she called her sons,” it was always translated as “she called her little ones.” Her harsh words were not appropriate for women’s collective imagination; therefore, those words were sweetened by terms of endearment. So, I believe that when it comes to films directed by women, something similar happens.

L.: What can you tell me about the fact that so very few women have been able to take up careers as directors? According to research by Paola Randi, only 6% of Italian filmmakers who have directed movies in the last decade are women.

A.: For a woman it is quite difficult to start, and to win the trust of a crew. Then, when you finally do, there is a very strong connection. Anyhow, compared to Germany, where I live right now, it is undeniable that Italy is different—like whenever someone says, “Oh, that film by a woman director,” as if it were a rare event. This idea of the woman filmmaker as something extraordinary comes easily to us even if it’s hard to admit that and say it out loud. That’s why we are reluctant to have many women do this work. It is probably caused by fear of losing the privilege of being a minority.
L.: Well, there is actually a small group of women directors in Italy now. Does a dialogue among Italian women filmmakers exist?

A.: I don’t know because I moved to Berlin right after I finished shooting my film. I won a scholarship, and consequently I cut myself off from the possibility of having that dialogue. I got along very well with the ones I did meet though, such as Paola Randi, Anna Negri, Costanza Quatriglio, Irene Dionisio. In short, what I mean is that to be a woman doesn’t have to be a shelter, but a point of strength. Sometimes you have to build with sand as if it were stone.

L.: In your opinion, is there a way to see and represent women, a specific language, or a way to represent female subjectivity in Italian cinema, that is different from the one so far offered by their male counterparts? If your answer is yes, how is the female gaze characterized?

A.: The female gaze does exist; it is multi-faceted and highly variegated. The female gaze doesn’t belong only to women, just as the male gaze doesn’t belong only to men. However, I think that the women’s gaze on places is particular. Women have a different perception of places, houses, horizons. If I think of films directed by women, I can see that space itself is always an important character that determines the development of the story. In my case, the city was the first character. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to work in that city, with the people I met there.

L.: You represented an aspect of Reggio that it is not very well known on the screen: the less attractive side of the city, the dumping grounds.

A.: I represented it in a certain way. I believe that it is worse to represent a stereotype of the south than it is to represent a contradiction of that. Also, the urban space outside the city is extremely important. The water—Reggio is a city rich with flowing water. I wanted to represent
the city I came to know, the city I was living in. Also, I was a little motivated by rage, because I think those same 800 meters of seafront are not enough to make a beautiful city. Everyone uses those few kilometers of sea to show that Reggio Calabria is a beautiful city. Beautiful is probably not even the right word. The neat side of the city has become a cop-out to avoid seeing the rest. My idea was to produce a narrative about the city that could include its defects, to shoot a “flawed film,” so to speak, without representing something that is already known, or something that would satisfy our preconceived notions of the south. I arrived in Reggio when I was in my twenties. I know many of the marvelous things of the city and the region. Because I love these beautiful things, and I respect them, I don’t want to show them. I show only what I hope can be changed; I show what I hope people can see, anything that can open a debate. There was a lot of talking around the representation of the Church. Even that dispute, in my opinion, was positive because many people realized that *Corpo celeste* also represented a hope for change. To me, it is very important to work on what is considered “inappropriate,” to shoot movies that raise questions. By showing that side of Reggio Calabria, I wanted to push toward changing things, not just showing things. *Corpo celeste* was born in Reggio Calabria, originated by watching a space. Above all, I wanted to offer a narrative about a body in a space.
Filmography

Marina Spada

Anna dai capelli rock (short, 1981)

Un giorno dopo l’altro (short, 1989)

Fernanda Pivano, c’era una volta l’America (documentary, 1994)

Pietro Lingeri, architetto a Milano (documentary, 1994)

Arnaldo Pomodoro, ritratto dell’artista (documentary, 1995)

L’astice (short, 1996)

Francesco Leonetti, lo scrittore a sette code (documentary, 1998)

Dadamaino, l’arte va sempre fatta con le mani (documentary, 1998)

Dove si guarda c’è quello che siamo (short, 1998)

Forza cani (2001)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Gian Paolo Barbieri (documentary, 2002)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Guido Harari (documentary, 2004)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Gabriele Basilico (documentary, 2004)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Mario De Biasi (documentary, 2005)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Mimmo Jodice (documentary, 2005)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Mario Cresci (documentary, 2005)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Fulvio Roiter (documentary, 2005)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Mauro Galligani (documentary, 2006)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Mario Tursi (documentary, 2006)

Grandi fotografi italiani: Francesco Radino (documentary, 2006)
Grandi fotografi italiani: Vincenzo Castella (documentary, 2006)

Come l’ombra (2006)

Cono d’ombra (Segment of All Human Rights for All, 2008)

Poesia che mi guardi (2009)

Il mio domani (2011)

Milano 55,1. Cronaca di una settimana di passioni (Documentary, 2011)

Francesca Comencini

Pianoforte (1984)

La lumièr du lac (1988)

Annabelle Partagée (1991)

Elsa Morante (documentary, 1997)

Shakespeare a Palermo (documentary, 1997)

Le parole di mio padre (2001)

Carlo Giuliani, ragazzo (documentary, 2001)

Un altro mondo è possibile (documentary, 2001)

Mi piace lavorare—Mobbing (2003)

Firenze, il nostro domani (documentary, 2003)

Anna vive a Marghera (short, segment of “Vision of Europe”, 2004)

Dopo la guerra (documentary, 2005)

A casa nostra (Our Country, 2006)\(^{110}\)

\(^{110}\) In this filmography I provide the film titles in Italian, and in parenthesis, the title in English, only when the film was distributed in United States under an English name.
In fabbrica (documentary, 2007)

Lo spazio bianco (White Space, 2009)

Le donne di San Gregorio, segment of L’Aquila (short, 2009)

Un giorno speciale (2012)

Gomorrah (Episode 5 and 7, TV Series, 2013)

Wilma Labate

Ciro il piccolo (short, 1990)

Ambrogio (1992)

La mia generazione (1996)

Lavorare stanca (documentary, 1998)

Domenica (2001)

Genova. Per noi (documentary, 2001)


Maledetta mia (short, 2003)

Lettere dalla Palestina (short, 2003)

Signorina Effe (2007)

La versione di Mario (Documentary, 2012)

Tram mob (short, 2012)

Roberta Torre

Angelesse (short film, 1991)

Angeli con la faccia storta (short, 1992)
*Il teatro è una bestia nera* (short, 1993)

*Le anime corte* (short, 1994)

*Senti amor mio?* (short, 1994)

*Appunti per un film su Tano* (documentary, 1995)

*La vita a volo d’angelo* (documentary, 1995)

*Spioni* (documentary, 1995)

*Palermo bandita* (short, 1996)

*Verginella* (short, 1996)

*Tano da morire* (*Die for Tano*, 1997)

*Sud side stori* (1998)

*Angela* (2002)

*Mare nero* (*The Dark Sea*, 2006)

*La fabrica* (Segment of *All human rights for all*, 2008)

*Itiburtinoterzo* (short, 2009)

*La notte quando morì Pasolini* (documentary, 2009)

*I baci mai dati* (*Lost Kisses*, 2010)


**Alice Rorhwacher**

*Che cosa manca* (documentary, 2006)

*Corpo celeste*, (2011)

*Le meraviglie* (2014)
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