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RESHAPING THE FRAME: WOMEN, BODY AND IDENTITY DISCOURSES
IN ITALIAN AND EUROPEAN FILM

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My project applies different theoretical approaches in the field of identity theory to the study of four female characters from two Italian and two European films, which all experience, in different and idiosyncratic ways, a process of identity reshaping. The representation of identity and that of the individual have been often simplified and even trivialized in film. Moreover, the two often come to overlap rather conveniently and become one and the same. Current scholarships in gender studies, psychology and philosophy have widely embraced theories of identity as agency and performance, while I argue that the study of film gives an insight into a critical distinction between performance and identity as two separate, oftentimes conflicting notions, altogether reframing the critical discourse on the subject matter.

I start by tracing the theme of female identity in Italian film culture from the '60s to the present day; I briefly look at different representations in which the notion of personal identity has been framed and contextualized. I also outline the inevitable

boundaries of the cinematic medium vis-à-vis the filmic representation of identity. I then move onto describing two main instances of identity reshaping that are used to analyze the characters.

In the second and third chapters, I discuss two characters whose process of reshaping features or is characterized by an outstanding physical manifestation, causing one's body to be altered in ways that might seem bizarre or extreme or even ego-dystonic: Sonia in Matteo Garrone's Primo Amore (2004), based on Marco Mariolini's autobiography Il Cacciatore di Anoressiche (1997), and Agrado in Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother (1999).

In the fourth and fifth chapters, I look at two characters whose journey of reshaping does not necessarily have an immediate physical manifestation, but is rather actuated internally and concerns chiefly the character's mind and emotional realm. At stake in this chapter is the study of the dynamics that are triggered when one's self-understanding is denied by external circumstances or by internal mechanisms. The characters I analyze are Irena in Giuseppe Tornatore's La Sconosciuta (2006), and Dr. Jenny Isaksson in Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face (1976).

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Part 1

The Lack of a Tradition within the Tradition

*We know what we are
but know not what we may be.*
- William Shakespeare, Hamlet

*How we are to make sense of the relations
between identity and individuality – between the what
and the who – is, as I say, the subject of a
conversation half as old as time.*
- Kwame Anthony Appiah, The Ethics of Identity

Introduction

The theme of identity has been a popular source of inspiration for cinema throughout the decades, and one that countless movies have probed in a number of interesting variations. Because of its suggestiveness and versatility, this theme has lent itself successfully to many different genres and has been examined anthropologically, culturally and psychologically, and used to confound, entertain, scare and elicit discussion. Stories about secret identity, mistaken identity, multiple identity, and geographical identity all have animated the works of numerous directors and created the premise for a number of memorable titles – from Hitchcock to Tarkovsky to Buñuel, to titles such as Vertigo (1958) or Le Retour de Martin Guerre (1982) or Persona (1966), among countless others. It is not hard to imagine why film would want to mine this subject in all of these different incarnations, nor why audiences would find such stories attractive and involving: growing up, we play pretend and imagine who and what we will

become. As adults, we may have certain visions of how our careers, relationships or physical traits define us as individuals, and we make adjustments accordingly.¹

Film characters do, as well. “My dream, more than anything, was to become anyone other than who I was,” reflects Sydney (Amy Adams), one of the main characters in David O. Russell’s American Hustle (2013), as she explains how her life hasn’t lived up not only to the expectations that she had set for it, but also implicitly to those she had set when imagining herself as an adult. In the film, Sydney is a con artist who tricks people into convoluted money loaning scams with the aid of her lover, introducing herself to everybody as Lady Edith Greensly, a fictitious British aristocrat whose identity she made up and embodies to give her fraudulent activities a more dignified and refined sheen, but also in order to get to interpret the life of a perfected or utopian version of herself – one that is European, rich, stylish and above all, happy – by sustaining this persona even when she is not busy conning people out of their life savings.

In Pappi Corsicato’s Il volto di un’altra (2011), protagonist Bella (Laura Chiatti), the young, beautiful and fashionable host of a once popular primetime show in which ordinary people undergo extensive cosmetic plastic surgery in order to “diventare la persona che avete sempre sognato di essere,”² is unceremoniously fired by her producers who, when asked for an explanation, bluntly point out to her that “la tua faccia ha stancato,”³ and that it is time to hire someone fresher and younger. Following a car accident that leaves her bruised but not seriously injured, Bella and her husband – a famous plastic surgeon co-starring on her show – devise a scheme to take advantage of

¹ This notion is generally accepted as one of the core principles which ground identity theory. See Identity Theory (Burke and Stets), Exploring Identity: Concepts and Methods (Pullen, Beech and Sims) and Early Childhood Identity: Construction, Culture, & the Self (Chen).

² “...to become the person you have always dreamed of being.” My translation.

³ “people have gotten tired of your face.” My translation.

their insurance company and reboot the woman's career, announcing that Bella's crash left her permanently disfigured and that she has subsequently decided to undergo complete facial reconstructive surgery on live television – a risky operation supposed to give her a brand new, even more attractive face and boost the lagging ratings of her TV program.

While both films ultimately attempt to engage a larger narrative compass, offering two different diegetic trajectories in the enterprise to redeem both Sydney and Bella, such characters and their reinventions introduce a number of questions related to the portrayal of identity in film that are worth considering more attentively. How easily is one's identity really negotiated? Can one ever become someone else, and if so, how? What differentiates the roles that constellate the ways in which we represent ourselves – and in which film represents us – and the ways in which we are perceived socially from who and what we think we are? For this purpose, I have selected four female characters from two Italian and two European films, released over the course of four decades, who all experience in their own personal ways a process of identity reshaping, some through avenues that may be more immediately manifest, others in a less conspicuous but equally affecting fashion: anorexia and plastic surgery on one end, and the experience of motherhood and mourning on the other.

In the second and third chapters, I will look at the interplay between extreme and at times apparently ego-dystonic – that is, inconsistent with one's personality or beliefs – practices of body modification and matters of agency in film characters who reshape their appearance either because they want to/need to/must be other, or because they want to stop perceiving themselves as such. In the fourth and fifth chapters, having by then

established a new workable definition of identity as presented in my selection of films, I will discuss the circumstances of two characters whose identity has been compromised by different experiences of trauma and mourning (the loss of one's child, and the loss of one's childhood) and the ways according to which both, willingly or unwillingly, come to reshape themselves to regain a sense of who they are, in order to show that one's self-understanding, unlike one's agency, cannot be mediated.

Having provided this broad background as the springboard for my investigation, the introductory chapter aims to offer a pointed overview on the treatment of personal female identity in modern and contemporary Italian film and culture, in order to map out a clear and approachable historical and thematic context for the discussion that will take place in the following chapters. As I furthered above, film has embraced the dramatization of identity in various and inventive ways – some certainly more popular than others. Interestingly enough, the question of national and geographical identity and its implications has successfully and richly established itself within the realm of Italian film and within that of film studies more in general, reflecting a world where borders and frontiers are becoming more and more blurred as well as our personal ideas of (dis)placement and belonging within or away from them, while matters of personal identity, agency and self-identification have not been nearly as popular, especially within the confines of Italian film culture, with perhaps a couple of exceptions that will be noted and referenced as isolated, peculiar cases. While I do not directly attempt an explanation or a theorization as to why that is so, it is my intention to establish here a few points of divergence within what I am going to characterize as a well-established and unified

thematic tradition,⁴ in the form of three films, released in Italy chiefly during the '60s and the '70s, which mobilized a more introspective look at identity through the portrayal of female characters variously at odds with themselves, foregrounding some of the concerns I will analyze in the following chapters. In the last section of this part, I finally move to delineate and motivate my treatment of the topic together with my methodology and theoretical framework: I will explain that the choice to examine four female characters is not a casual one, I will adopt a Metzian approach in connection to his theories about cinema and the impression of reality to defend my choice of the filmic medium over any other to discuss such matters of identity, and I shall finally chart the scholarship informing my research, which draws from notions of identity theory (Burke, Stetts, Ricœur) to gender studies (Butler, Blum, De Marneffe), to cosmetic surgery and/or body modification theories (Wegenstein, Jordan, Blum) structural semiology (Baudrillard), to trauma theory (Butler, Freud, Leys) among others. In addition to that, I will discuss my intention to also broaden and strengthen the scope of this section by referencing and discussing two works of two European directors who conversed with similar themes in the portrayal of some of their characters in ways that are significant within the merits of my query.

⁴ While I begin my overview from the '60s and move onward from there, it is worth noting that matters of national, geographical, social and cultural identity were popular sources of inspiration for Italian film in earlier decades, as well: also see *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914), *Rotaie* (Blasetti, 1929), *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni* (Camerini, 1932), *Ossessione* (Visconti, 1943), the birth and success of Neorealismo from 1943 well into the '50s, and *Il sorpasso* (Risi, 1962) among others. Furthermore, *Schermi di regime. Cinema italiano degli anni trenta: la produzione e i generi* (Faccioli) and *Viva l'Italia. Storia, cinema e identità nazionale (1932-1962)* (Cavallo) both offer a very comprehensive and thorough overview of the treatment of national, geographical and cultural identity in Italian film during and after the war-time period.

Chapter 1: Identity in Contemporary Italian Film Culture

In looking at the way Italian film has engaged matters of identity over the course of the last five or six decades, two main and adjacent trends appear to have taken root in the popularization of this subject matter: on the one hand, one can find a multiplicity of films with strong political underpinnings in which the overarching narrative rests on the depiction of a broad character (or a number of characters) whose diegetic nature and purpose is that to embody a social, geographical and/or cultural allegory or commentary; on the other hand, these characters – perhaps unsurprisingly – are always male. Granted, some of these films are rightfully considered milestones in the history of Italian cinema, having enjoyed immense critical and audience acclaim. The fact however remains that, however layered in its angle or approach, Italian film's interest in identity has moved to create a tradition that is as illustrious as it is monolithic. It is worth looking more closely at a number of such offerings to detail exactly just how crystallized this tradition in fact is.

Il gattopardo, Luchino Visconti's 1963 masterpiece based on Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's homonymous novel, is a Risorgimento epic which portrays the shifting dynamics of Italy's classes in light of the creation of the new Regno d'Italia in the second half of the nineteenth century: while the Prince of Salina comes to the bitter realization that he represents a dying breed undone by its own unwillingness and incapability to adapt to the changing times, his nephew Tancredi employs much more ambiguous and opportunistic survival tactics in order to thrive, bridging the gap between his status and his ambitions by marrying Angelica Sedara, the rich daughter of Donnafugata's new mayor – a union which also symbolizes the problematic junction of the old aristocracy to

the new rising bourgeoisie. In Tre fratelli (Francesco Rosi, 1981), the three titular brothers are summoned back to the farmhouse in Southern Italy where they grew up to attend their mother's funeral. The oldest brother, Raffaele, is a judge living in Rome who is currently overseeing a hotly contested terrorism case for which he has received multiple assassination threats. The middle brother, Nicola, moved to Turin where he is employed in a factory, and he finds himself involved in labor union activities and disputes as his marriage falls apart. The youngest brother, Rocco, is a religious worker helping troubled and at risk teenagers in a correctional facility in Naples. Through the varied dynamics that arise between the characters as they come together to mourn the passing of their mother, the film organizes a very neatly structured and suggestive critique of the current political and social vicissitudes of the country, with the three brothers offering three exact snapshots of respectively the *nord*, *centro* and *sud* Italy. In both films, characters and their interweaving relationships are freely employed to further a broader discussion about Italy's social and national identity, and while more immediately personal circumstances are engaged by the narrative, they ultimately coalesce into an expansive diegetic enterprise which forgoes their specificity: the troubled birth of Italy as a unified kingdom and, decades later, the portrayal of a nation that, for all intents and purposes, still isn't one.

Even more character-driven titles such as Un borghese piccolo piccolo (Mario Monicelli, 1977) and Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto (Elio Petri, 1970) ultimately rest on a broad substructure of social critique: in the former, Giovanni, a modest public office employee approaching retirement, is abruptly forced to reevaluate himself and his life when his son is accidentally killed by a stray bullet during a robbery,

resolving to become a vigilante in order to exact revenge on the people responsible for the murder. In the latter, a high-rank police inspector kills his mistress and then litters the murder scene and the following investigation with clues and red herrings as to his involvement, seemingly in an attempt to prove he can get away with the crime because he is in fact beyond suspicion, until his actions make it increasingly apparent that he wants to be caught because he genuinely believes he deserves to be punished. As compelling as the two characters' personal narrative trajectories in fact are – one is forced to radically reinvent himself and go to extremes in light of a senseless tragedy that completely changes his life, the other attempts to disengage himself from the suffocating trappings of the authoritarian structure he represents – the two films mainly stand as meditations on the powerlessness and marginality of the white collar bourgeoisie represented by Giovanni, and on the deep-seated corruption of the same criminal justice system that allows Volonté's character to continually evade arrest in spite of all the compelling evidence against him.⁵ Significantly enough, none of these films feature any major female characters, and the minor ones are either dead (the mistress, the three brothers' mother) or dying (Giovanni's wife) or passive and subdued figurines (Don Fabrizio's wife and daughters). Even a film such as Sedotta e abbandonata (Pietro Germi, 1964), in which Agnese Ascalone (Stefania Sandrelli) is imagined as a central character to discuss honor laws and satirize antiquated Sicilian customs – the protagonist is seduced by her sister's fiancé, and family drama ensues – ultimately has socio-political concerns at its

⁵ Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto in particular had a major cultural impact upon release. The film opened shortly after the infamous Piazza Fontana bombing in December 1969, and the turbulent political climate in Italy deeply affected its critical and popular reception at the time. Critics praised the film's audacity and the ambiguity of the central character, while the Milan police headquarters threatened to seize the film and ban theaters from showing it. Regardless, the film was a major box office hit, and it went on to win the Academy Award for best foreign film.

core. Matters of personal identity could not quite sustain any narrative effort in and of themselves in '60s and '70s Italian film culture, the only exception being a few titles in Michelangelo Antonioni's filmography: a number of his films, L'avventura (1960) and L'eclisse (1962) in particular, did place stories about women coming to terms with themselves – with their desires, frustrations, unhappiness – in the context of a sentimental and/or sexual relation with a man. Regardless, this brief survey does highlight the fact that the female point of view and experience in general were eminently absent when discussing matters of identity altogether, be it national, political or cultural. This last point is even more egregious when considering the fact that in that same timeframe, Feminist Film Theory was being born out of the practice of applying the tenets of second wave feminism to the analysis of film.⁶

In the '70s, with second wave feminism activity already making strides in addressing a wide range of crucial issues, from reproductive rights to sexuality to workplace and legal inequality among others,⁷ a new way to look at and to talk about film was also theorized, a re-vision that quite literally focused on the notion of a new vision and on the idea of looking at film in a different way. On a more practical level, feminist film theory spurred a shift towards the rediscovery of the works of female directors, producers, screenwriters, and actresses, in order to redefine the very concept of female

⁶ American feminist film theory, drawing from sociological theory at large, began in the '70s as an investigation of film stereotypes as a mode of representation of society's view on womanhood. In Europe, the same movement focused on film as text and on the mechanics of film production via a Marxist and psychoanalytic perspective to assess the portrayal of women in film as fundamentally sexist. As a reference, see Feminisms in the Cinema (Pietropaolo and Testaferri) which has informed the historical and theoretical discussion about feminist film theory featured in this section.

⁷ Feminist film theory is understood as a product of second-wave feminism. First-wave feminism (late 19th and early 20th century) focused mainly on legal challenges (suffrage and voting rights among others), while third-wave feminism ('90s to present) was born to address what was perceived as a fundamentally essentialist and narrow concept of womanhood as a product of second-wave feminist activity.

movie stardom. This rediscovery was politically geared to the achievement of equality not just on screen but within the film industry as well – it specifically advocated for a more thorough investigation not only of the depiction of women on film but also of their involvement in the making of film – in order to develop an ideology (or even better a theory) of who made film and for whom film was being made. However, the problem of on-screen female representation remained very much at the forefront, with a strong and generalized reaction against the typology of womanhood and the ideas of femininity that were being presented to the audience. At stake was the notion that women had no way to identify with the characters they saw and the situations they experienced on screen, and that escapism was only being offered through the partaking into stereotypes that had nothing to do with real life. In a sense, film was completely alienating its own audience from itself and from reality by extension.

To this point, it is worth noting that feminist film theory has historically framed politics and pleasure in eminently dichotomic terms, thriving on the investigation and on the analysis of the ways in which these two terms may be reconciled: on the one hand, film and its status as a political medium, one that could be used to trigger social change and ideological advancement, together with the level of responsibility (or lack thereof) implicated in engaging such an intellectually charged vehicle of representation and communication; on the other hand, film merely as visual pleasure and as a form of entertainment, whose aesthetic qualities and appeal were chiefly meant to amuse and indulge the audience. Issues of spectatorship concerning the role and the status of the male viewer – as I will discuss more thoroughly in the next section as part of the analysis of the first character I have selected – would often be raised when imagining possible

ways to bridge this divide, positing the notion that as long as film was made to entertain and appease the male gaze by offering it a standardized, passive representation of female objectification for mindless consumption or for a more subliminally-geared reinforcement of patriarchal stereotypes, no social change or ideological advancement could/would ever be effected. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as I will show in the second chapter, the treatment of the female body (and that of female individuality as an extension) in contemporary Italian culture – not just filmic culture, that is – still leaves so much to be desired that a stark and uncompromising portrayal of female anorexia on film may come across as culturally undesirable if not altogether counterintuitive, and generate lackluster press and poor box office numbers.

Why isn't it surprising, though? In the '80s, a decade that is generally regarded as a transitional and problematic time in the history of Italian film,⁸ the so-called *ragazze fast food* in Antonio Ricci's TV phenomenon Drive In (1983-88) rapidly became a wildly popular media representation of femininity in Italy, one that was portrayed as curvaceous and overly sexualized as it was intensely slow-witted and ultimately peripheral within the mechanics of the show. Such was the success of this model of representation that more followed suit in the same vein: the *ragazze coccodè* in Indietro Tutta! (1987-88) were a group of young and attractive girls donning skimpy hen-inspired costumes who served no practical hosting purpose other than for the singing of a jingle that went, "siamo come

⁸ In A New Guide to Italian Cinema, Celli and Cottino-Jones portray the 1980s as a time of record levels of public debt and of a generalized decline of the Italian theater system, in which younger directors and small films struggled to find any domestic distribution. The creation of Berlusconi's Fininvest (Rete 4, Canale 5, Italia 1) further established television as the medium of choice over cinema. The '80s also housed the birth of the cine-panettone genre in 1983 which, while incredibly successful at the box office, consistently featured poor production values, pedestrian acting, and repetitive plots.

gallinelle...siamo belle e stupide;”⁹ soon after came the *littorine* in *Odiens* (1988-89), and then the *schedine*, *veline*, *papere*, *letterine*, *meteorine* and so on at the apex of Berlusconi’s hegemonic stranglehold on ‘90s Italian media culture.¹⁰

As I will point out later, many of the same questions and issues raised by feminist film theory which I have considered above did not become part of a larger cultural discourse in Italy until the end of the first decade of the new century, and they mostly focused on matters of female representation in TV rather than on film. That is because, tying into the observation I had furthered previously, in Italy visibility for women, no matter how skewed and degrading it might be, is still much more obtainable in the former medium than in the latter.¹¹ Italian films about women and/or made by women are still a novelty, if one can even call it that. The experience of Francesca Comencini would serve as the other exception within this trend, and it is certainly worth mentioning, although her interest as a mainstream director and storyteller resides more precisely in the depiction of female identity in connection to broader and rather idiosyncratic cultural and social circumstances.¹² In this sense, the practice of framing a cultural and national discourse about Italian identity in film did move to encompass a number of female characters in the ‘00s, but their personal experience – if at all engaged – was and still is always invariably linked to a romantic storyline/subplot with a male on-screen partner, as to suggest their inherent deficiency as standalone narrative objects within themselves.

⁹ “We’re a bunch of tiny hens...we are pretty and dumb.” My translation.

¹⁰ The common diminutive –ina is very much to be read in derogatory and belittling terms.

¹¹ This point is made all the more compelling by the use of Lorella Zanardo’s *Il corpo delle donne* in my second chapter; her study is entirely situated within the portrayal of womanhood and the female body in Italian television culture, with no comparable examples in Italian film culture (with the exception of a number of cine-panettoni, which she herself does not engage).

¹² See, for example, *Mi piace lavorare* (Mobbing) (2003), *A casa nostra* (2006), *Lo spazio bianco* (2009), and *Un giorno speciale* (2012).

Examples of this trend cover the most diverse thematic concerns, from the Italian-American experience, to immigration, to Italy's damaged and ever-changing political landscape: in Emanuele Crialese's Nuovomondo (2006) the poor Mancuso family leaves Sicily at the turn of the 20th century and heads to America in hopes of building a new and better life there. The long transatlantic voyage proves to be arduous and trying, but Vincenzo, who is a widower, unexpectedly meets and bonds with Lucy, a mysterious British aristocrat on her second attempt to relocate to America after being originally turned down for not being married. Lucy's own presence in the diegesis is supposed to bridge the cultural gap between the Mancusos and the New World: not only does she speak the foreign language, but she also appears as a cultured, emancipated woman very much ahead of her time (Lucy is a pointed name choice for a character that is, in a sense, enlightened). Vincenzo and Lucy agree to stage a marriage of convenience which is supposed to serve a two-fold purpose: to allow her into the country upon arrival, and to facilitate the bureaucratic process for him and his family. Two very different worlds collide when their marriage certificate is signed, but the film ultimately posits this very union as emblematic of the United States representing a melting pot of sorts, where different cultures, past experiences and perspectives meet and absorb each other – as well as the idea that this is the very reason why theirs is a marriage that will last after all.

A comparable narrative grounds Andrea Segre's Io sono Li (2011), in which a Chinese immigrant to Italy is employed in a textile factory to pay off her debts and afford the documents to bring over her young son. When she is relocated to Chioggia to work in a bar, Li befriends Bepi, a fisherman of Yugoslavian origin who charms her with his poetry. Their friendship in time turns into a simple romance which, much like Vincenzo

and Lucy's, is also imagined as a nod to the changing ethnic and cultural landscape of a country that is becoming more multiracial and diversified. However, both the Chinese and Chioggia communities react to the relationship with bias and circumspection, ultimately causing the two characters to break up. Li's own experience of as a foreigner is anchored to her bureaucratic struggle to be reunited with her child and to her personal struggle with feelings of misplacement, configuring a broader meditation on the dynamics of cultural identity. More specifically, both Lucy and Li allow their respective films to further a study on what an individual may be willing to forsake in order to feel as though she belongs in a family, a group, a community or a country.

The last example I wish to highlight within this trend is Paolo Virzi's Caterina va in città (2003), in which the protagonist's vicissitudes are woven together to mirror Italy's own political turmoil and unrest. Caterina moves with her family from a small town in the Viterbo province to Rome; she is a smart and musically-inclined girl, but she soon realizes she doesn't quite fit in. Her new high school class is split into two cliques that are constantly at odds: a leftist group run by Margherita, the daughter of a famous and snobbish writer, and a right-leaning counterpart headed by Daniela, the daughter of an Alleanza Nazionale minister with neo-fascist leanings. As ideologically opposed as these two factions appear to be, they ultimately prove to have very much in common: Margherita and Daniela are really two sides of the same coin, and both are hypocritical, dysfunctional, self-serving and only interested in Caterina insofar as they can take advantage of her. It is not hard to recognize Caterina as Italy itself in the film's allegorically charged narrative, as a country being pulled in different directions by a number of corrupt political parties that are only about furthering their own interests and

agendas. The film's (admittedly rather transparent) political critique even includes a foreign perspective in the shape of Caterina's Australian neighbor, a teenager who oversees the events as they unfold with a mix of genuine curiosity and bewilderment, while also serving as a romantic interest for the protagonist. Caterina ultimately comes of age by acting upon her feelings for her foreign crush, rejecting any ideological categorization and pursuing her dream at a music conservatory, as the film's apologetic nature calls for a nation disengaged from petty politics in order to realize its own hidden potential. Much like in Lucy's and Li's own narratives, Caterina's experience in grappling with her own identity is a stand-in for a more extensive cultural discourse: her journey towards self-realization is inevitably linked to the transformative power of a sentimental relationship with a man, and its diegetic merit within the economy of the film's political metaphor is ultimately undermined, if not altogether de-legitimized.

It is immediately outside of this tradition, which I have characterized as rather univocal and problematic, that I would now like to locate a few female characters in Italian films which have offered portrayals of women grappling with issues related to their own identity as the primary concern within the thematic spectrum of the diegesis: Giulietta in Federico Fellini's Giulietta degli spiriti (1965), Lucia in Liliana Cavani's Il portiere di notte (1974), and Antonietta in Ettore Scola's Una giornata particolare (1977). I must clarify right away that I could not possibly – nor do I want to – argue that these three characters are imagined and mobilized as entirely disengaged from larger concerns or ideologies: doing so would undoubtedly undercut the aim and the ambition of these films as well as the breadth of their inspiration and of the cultural milieu that, as I will point out, surrounded and nurtured them. More precisely, my claim is that these films

narrativize the characters' own trajectories along with the process of negotiating their own roles and identities in ways that are primarily concerned with their female individuality and with larger matters of self-identification, rather than packaging their experiences into a filmic vehicle that, as we have seen, ultimately ignores, bypasses or flattens them. This is in and of itself also the very reason which subtends and justifies my choice to discuss various dynamics of identity reshaping in pointed connection to the female experience in this dissertation: it is after all women who, culturally and historically, have been continuously asked to adapt, change, reinvent and reshape themselves after men, in accordance to religious, political and social guidelines which determined them as accessory, if not altogether superfluous.

As Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum points out, "contemporary Italian feminists emerged in the new left explosion of 1968,"¹³ as a result of ongoing battles centered on matters such as abortion rights and divorce. The scope of this movement was soon broadened to redefine woman as a social construct altogether: in 1970's Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, one of the most significant and crucial documents of the Italian feminist movement, one of the tenets clearly spelled out, "la donna non va definita in rapporto all'uomo,"¹⁴ adding that,

liberarsi, per la donna, non vuole dire accettare la stessa vita dell'uomo perché è invivibile, ma esprimere il suo senso dell'esistenza. La donna come soggetto non rifiuta l'uomo come soggetto, ma lo rifiuta come ruolo assoluto. Nella vita sociale lo rifiuta come ruolo autoritario.¹⁵

¹³ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Liberazione della donna. Feminism in Italy (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1986) 79.

¹⁴ Carla Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti (Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974) 13. "Woman must not be defined in relation to man." My translation.

¹⁵ Lonzi 13. "Achieving freedom, for women, does not mean to accept the same life as men for it is unlivable, but rather to express their own sense of existence. Woman as subject does not reject man as

The feminist movement specifically addressed and redefined female rights as rights in and of themselves, calling for a social and cultural shift that would free women as autonomous, fulfilled individuals within themselves. The '70s, to be sure, were a time of transition and significant reform – new laws were ratified protecting women's rights on the workplace, redefining their roles within their marriages, families, and as caregivers for their children. In 1979, Nilde Iotti became the first female President of the Chamber of Deputies in Italy, three years after Tina Anselmi had become the first Italian minister. Advancements were met with resistance: "Italian feminists proposed from the beginning to work for a revolution that was both cultural and political. [...] Feminist issues, particularly divorce and abortion, collided directly with doctrinal catholicism (sic) and upset the strategic priorities of the left,"¹⁶ explains Chiavola Birnbaum, adding that "[f]eminists achieved legislative and other victories by adopting cultural as well as political tactics and strategies."¹⁷ During the '80s and the '90s in which, as I have already pointed out, the representation of females in Italian television devolved into an over-sexualized and de-intellectualized mockery of womanhood that inevitably permeated a larger cultural discourse, the feminist movement countered this mode of representation with the creation of publishing houses, bookstores, community and leisure centers that catered specifically to women in order to keep the focus on their needs, their rights and their individuality: "[a] significant aspect of the feminist cultural revolution was adoption

subject, but she rejects him as an absolute role. Within the context of social life, she rejects him as an authority figure." My translation.

¹⁶ Chiavola Birnbaum 88.

¹⁷ Chiavola Birnbaum 88.

(sic) of the metaphor of other and the theme of differences, a metaphor and a theme that reached many women and that changed feminists themselves.”¹⁸

The very idea of a liberated, self-sufficient woman who strives and is able to establish herself as other from man was ushered in Fellini’s *Giulietta degli spiriti* in 1965, three full years before the feminist movement started taking root in Italy. The film, in an almost disquieting feat of prescience, managed to anticipate a number of ideas that went on to become central concerns in the core ideology of feminism, particularly in relation to the notion of wifehood and to the reassessment of gender norms at large: the protagonist has in fact disappeared underneath the weight of a role socially imposed onto her which has effectively erased who she is or who she might want to be. When we first meet Giulietta, as she is hurrying to get ready for a party, we do not even see her. The camera appears to either struggle to capture her elusive face, or as though it actually is not concerned with her all that much, almost implying that she isn’t overly interesting or worth being shown. When we finally do see her, the reveal is completely anti-climactic. We come to quickly realize that everything about her is, in fact, unremarkable: her looks, her demeanor, her social dynamics, and the very idea she holds of herself. Giulietta doesn’t have a job. She’s not unsightly, but she has adopted a rather plain look. She’s not unpleasant, but she isn’t overly likable. She isn’t dull, but she isn’t particularly alert either. The film introduces the audience to a character that, for all intents and purposes, just isn’t: Giulietta cannot seemingly even commit to her mediocrity because she has completely lost sight of herself.

The character, in the face of her utter lack of self-awareness, appears content to be defined merely by her role as a wife, to the extent that her entire identity has in fact

¹⁸ Chiavola Birnbaum 88-89.

morphed itself around that role. Inevitably, once she realizes that her husband Giorgio has been cheating on her, her whole existence comes to a crashing halt. Faced with the initial fear that she has failed at being a wife, she slowly comes to realize that perhaps being a wife has failed her instead. As this realization begins to empower her, the protagonist starts to drift away from reality towards an alternate universe made up of esoteric suggestions and childhood memories, in which she is finally allowed to explore her desires and her frustrations. As a proto-feminist narrative, the film stands both as a critique of the patriarchal dynamics that regulated gender structures and gender politics in Italy up and well into the '70s – as noted by film critic Tullio Kezich, the protagonist is “imbrigliata come essere umano in schemi educativi avviliti”¹⁹ – and as an apologue which foregrounds many of the central issues that, a few years later, would be appropriated by feminists in the redefinition of the idea of womanhood itself, as independent and other from man. According to Fellini,

L'intento del film [...] è comunque di restituire alla donna una sua indipendenza vera, una sua indiscutibile ed inalienabile dignità. L'uomo libero, voglio dire, non può fare a meno di una donna libera. La moglie non deve essere la Madonna e nemmeno uno strumento di piacere: e meno che mai una serva. Se considereremo la moglie, anche per un attimo, sotto uno di questi tre aspetti, ci ritroveremo sempre a parlare di un'altra cosa, non del matrimonio: e a svantaggio nostro.²⁰

In light of this rather venturesome ideology, the film's ending sequence is to be read metaphorically: Giulietta bids adieu to her friends – real and imaginary – and finally takes her first steps out of the white, pristine picket fence that kept her imprisoned inside

¹⁹ Tullio Kezich, *Giulietta degli Spiriti di Federico Fellini* (Bologna, Cappelli, 1965) 31. “Tangled, as a human being, in demeaning and didactic patterns.” My translation.

²⁰ Kezich 70. “The film's intention is to give women their true independence back, along with their indisputable and inalienable dignity. A free man, I mean, cannot do without a free woman. A wife should not be a Madonna or an instrument of pleasure, and under no circumstances ever a slave. If we're to consider wives, even just for one moment, as one of these three incarnations, we will be inevitably caught talking about something else, not about marriage, to our own detriment.” My translation.

of her mansion, her old married life and her socially sanctioned role, heading towards and into the inviting woods that surround her villa, at once renewed and determined within herself. Fellini wanted this ending to clearly convey the idea that a liberated woman isn't a woman who altogether rejects man, but rather a woman who is able to find herself outside of his shadow:

Giulietta sola, alla fine del film, vorrebbe avere il significato della scoperta di un'individualità. L'avvenimento che più temeva, la partenza del marito, si rivela un regalo della provvidenza. Giulietta non dipenderà più dalla figura paterna di Giorgio che ha comunque arricchito la sua vita; e anche verso di lui, come verso tutti e tutto, la donna ha un sentimento di riconoscenza perché tutti, anche coloro che le apparivano ferocemente nemici, hanno collaborato alla sua liberazione. Insomma la vera vita di Giulietta comincia quando esce dall'ombra di Giorgio.²¹

The other two films I wish to briefly discuss in this section as outliers to the dominant tradition were both released a few years apart in the '70s, and they complicate Fellini's vision of an emancipated, self-redeeming female by offering portraits of two women who, living rather dissimilar lives (at least on the surface) twenty years apart from each other, appear still very much trapped both socially and psychologically. Both characters' physical appearance is symbolically charged – Antonietta (in Una giornata particolare) is the portrait of a homely, domesticated defeat, while Lucia (in Il portiere di notte) is an affected and fashionable incarnation of post-traumatic stress disorder – and both struggle to advance a successful attempt at self-identification because it is either ideologically unacceptable or hampered by past trauma. Even though neither can be

²¹ Kezich 72. "Giulietta alone, at the end of the film, wishes to find the meaning of the discovery of one's individuality. The event she feared the most, her husband leaving, turns out to be a present from above. No longer will Giulietta depend on Giorgio as a paternal figure, a figure which enriched her life nonetheless; toward him, everything and everybody, the woman harbors a feeling of gratitude because everybody, including those who stood fiercely against her, played a role in her liberation. Giulietta's real life does indeed begin when she steps out of Giorgio's shadow." My translation.

properly saved by the narrative, the two characters at least succeed in coming to develop a sense of who they are, as unrealized as they both might be.

Years after her detention in a concentration camp, Lucia, the Holocaust survivor in *Il portiere di notte*, checks into a luxurious Viennese hotel with her wealthy fiancée. Her striking and refined beauty, her perfectly coiffed hair and her effortless elegance do not suggest any of the tragic events and the horrors in her past; in fact, they almost appear as though they want to altogether conceal it. There she meets Maximilian, a seemingly modest and quiet porter who works the hotel's night shift. Her reaction is of utter shock, his of muted bewilderment. We learn through flashbacks that the two had originally met in the concentration camp years before, and that Max used to be a Nazi officer employed there. During Lucia's confinement in the camp, she and Max developed an ambiguous rapport that was sadomasochistic in nature, with each character playing a number of distinct but often overlapping roles: torturer and victim, protector and protégée, seducer and seduced, master and slave. A confrontation between the two brings to light their compulsive need to resume their relationship and reenact those same dynamics: her superficial effort to build a new appearance and a new identity to conceal her past is easily thwarted. Lucia comes to the conflicted realization that she can only find herself within the boundaries of that self-destructive liaison, in which playing a certain role allows her to fully be.

The film establishes a number of highly problematic points regarding the character's identity: her narrative of sexual liberation is placed within a broader Holocaust narrative in which her torturous past as a victim is itself sexualized, and her relationship with Max is used to instantiate that men are continuously driven by the

compulsive need to reenact their past, rendering history a cyclical, pointless loop.

However, there is an argument to be made in favor of Lucia's own self-identification:

according to Kriss Ravetto,

Lucia is empowered both as a seductress (inducing Max's obsession) and an impending threat (to Max and his former-nazi friends); as Klaus (the former-nazi lawyer) puts it, "even if [a document says someone was responsible for the death of] one thousand or ten thousand persons, it still makes less impression than one witness in flesh and blood staring at you, that is why they are so dangerous, my task is to find them wherever they are and see that they are filed away."²²

Indeed, Lucia comes to gain ownership of her desire and her identity by a reversal, not of the roles that had previously defined the relationship between the two characters, but rather of the codes associated to those roles: within that same torturer-victim dynamic she is now responsible for Max's safety, not dependent on him for her own, and in charge of his desire instead of subjugated to it. In this sense, the film also offers an implicit reading of the influence of feminism in the unmaking of gendered and inveterate dynamics, positing Lucia's self-identification not as a complete and absolute rejection of a set of roles, but as a reinterpretation – or better yet, a recalibration – of those same roles, an act which in turn allows for a woman to fully pursue and nurture her own selfhood instead.

Antonietta, the protagonist of Una giornata particolare, is in many regards tangled in the same master-slave relationship which I abstracted above. The film takes place over the course of one day on May 6, 1938, the day of Hitler's visit to Rome and of his meeting with Mussolini, which solidified a political liaison that a few years later would have catastrophic social, political and economic repercussions. The film imagines another meeting happening that same day, one that brings together two beleaguered minorities: a fascist housewife and a homosexual intellectual, Gabriele, who happens to live in front of

²² Kriss Ravetto, The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 151.

her building and helps her track down the family pet bird that had escaped. Antonietta is married to a *camicia nera* and is invested with no emotional or affective purpose within her own family unit: she is an indefatigable caregiver to her six children and a baby-making machine to her husband, who has no interest in her other than as a means to establish and evidence his own virility: “Pure io tante volte mi sento umiliata, considerata meno di zero. Mio marito con me non parla...ordina, di giorno e di notte,”²³ she meekly reflects. As their conversation unfolds, Antonietta becomes increasingly aware that Gabriele is, much like herself, a victim of oppression: he lost his job as a radio announcer because of his inclinations – sexual and political – and he has been sentenced off to confinement. The characters are imagined as narrative vessels to discuss “the repudiation of homosexuality and the reduction of the role of women to a biological function”²⁴ according to Fascist ideology. The chance meeting interrupts his suicide attempt, and he is left waiting to be picked up and sent away later in the evening. After some initial wariness, the two become friendly, and their frustrated ambitions and unresolved lives soon become the central topic of discussion. Both find solace in sharing an honest and disenchanted attitude; as they grow closer, Antonietta and Gabriele share an intimate moment which seals their unbiased acceptance of each other. Later that evening, Antonietta witnesses as Gabriele is picked up and escorted away by two men from the window in her kitchen, where she had retreated after rebuking her husband’s advances to read a novel with which Gabriele had gifted her earlier in the morning. Once Gabriele is gone, Antonietta methodically retreats to her bedroom and turns off the light, signaling that her old life is to be resumed in the morning.

²³ “I, too, often feel humiliated, like I’m worth less than zero. My husband doesn’t talk to me...he barks orders, day and night”. My translation.

²⁴ Ravetto 87.

The film's scathing political critique is rendered final by this uncompromising ending, but also by the fact that Antonietta, through the course of the day, has come to acquire a certain self-awareness that makes the reality of her present situation even more paralyzing and inescapable. As a matter of fact, is it the very trajectory that the character completes – moving from a passive self-indoctrination of Fascist ideology to the development of an awareness of her condition as an outcast as prescribed by that very ideology she had been imparting to herself – that shapes the diegesis as a narrative of self-identification: according to Millicent Marcus,

Antonietta's scrapbook devoted to Mussolini reveals not only the dictator's status as a media icon, as celebrity worthy of the kind of fandom that a teenager would accord to a movie idol or today to a rock star, but it also shows the woman's desire to encounter official history through her own personal textualizing process. Because she is excluded from the historical course of events, the scrapbook becomes a compensatory activity, a way of vicariously experiencing the public sphere.²⁵

Antonietta's appropriation of history doesn't merely serve an archival purpose, but it also invites the character to realize that she is not and will not be part of the archive herself; her acquaintance of Gabriele, another extra-archival figure who is about to be expunged by literal means of forced removal, very much intensifies her blossoming self-awareness. Marcus continues,

Antonietta's personal itinerary [...] is also marked by a progression in ways of looking. Her journey is bracketed by glances from her kitchen window to Gabriele's apartment across the courtyard but the differences in the information accessed from the beginning to the end of the film is (sic) a measure of the conversion that she has undergone. [...] In Antonietta's final act of window-gazing from her own kitchen, she now sees Gabriele for who he is, and can project herself into that radically revised scenario.²⁶

²⁵ Millicent Marcus, *Un'ora e mezzo particolare. Teaching fascism with Ettore Scola in Italica*, (Mississauga, University of Toronto, March 22, 2006). Retrieved from thefreelibrary.com.

²⁶ Marcus, *ibidem*.

Antonietta's act of looking is ultimately a reflexive enterprise: by looking at Gabriele as he is being removed from the building and from civilian life as an extension, she understands how civilian life has no room to locate her in return; by looking at history, she realizes that history is not looking back at her. Her final act of defiance – turning down her husband's sexual advances to carve out some reading time with her novel – is not meant to suggest a shift within her marriage's strongly essentialist structure, but a move towards the ownership and the organization of her own personal space outside of history instead. As I move to further my discussion of identity reshaping in connection with issues of agency and identity in my selection of films, it is with the knowledge that these characters' incongruent vicissitudes have jumpstarted that discussion for me.

Reshaping Identity: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The films I have selected for my investigation are Matteo Garrone's Primo amore (2004), Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999) Giuseppe Tornatore's La sconosciuta (2006) and Ingmar Bergman's Face To Face (Ansikte mot ansikte, 1976). I utilize the two Italian films to first establish a new definition of identity relying on identity theory as context for my analysis, and then to look at the ways in which the distinction between agency and identity articulates a process of identity reshaping. I use the two foreign films – one from Spain, the other from Sweden – to show how this same discussion has been also appropriated and complicated outside the cinematic borders of Italy, and that it does not exist as merely peculiar to one specific film tradition. While I also offer pertinent analysis of the four works from a diegetic, structural, and visual standpoint, the bulk of my discussion focuses specifically on the four female protagonists of the films: Sonia (Garrone), Agrado (Almodóvar), Irena (Tornatore) and Jenny (Bergman).

In deciding how to organize my discussion of these characters, I considered the fact that there are two main and essential categories of reshaping at play in their respective narratives – one that revolves specifically around the outward, as in one's appearance and physicality, and one that concerns chiefly the inward, as in one's emotional domain and psyche. Belonging to my first categorization, Sonia is forced to practice anorexia and lose a dramatic amount of weight in order to appease her boyfriend's idiosyncratic fetish for thinness, while Agrado, a transsexual prostitute, is able to rework the long list of plastic surgeries she has undergone into an impromptu stand-up act in which, paradoxically, she professes her authenticity via her artificiality.

Because the circumstances of both these characters entail what could be superficially labeled a performance of sorts – one of an eating disorder, one of gender – I open by examining notions of identity performance as delineated in the theory of Judith Butler and Paul Ricœur. Butler, in a number of works (I will specifically focus on Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter and Undoing Gender to explain the author's ideas in regards to performativity), mapped out gender performance as a form of implicit acquiescence to larger societal structures which are strongly normative (as in binary). Ricœur (in Oneself as Another) popularized the idea of the narrative self, the individual being but an agent in a much broader narrative in which the former does not create or inform the latter, but the latter constructs the former instead. These admittedly fascinating theorizations, into which I will delve more accurately in the following chapters, were crucial in informing the milieu that houses the roots of identity theory, which has gone to adopt a rhetoric about agency and identity as two terms which are employed to express the same concept (I will specifically rely on Burke and Stets here). From here, my investigation sets out to converse with a scholarship that has seemingly left the notion of the self somewhat stranded, to contend that in Primo amore and All About My Mother ideas of performance, agency²⁷ and identity are not as interchangeable as one might be led to believe, but they are instead rather idiosyncratic constructs that, while possibly interweaving at times, should not be readily understood as synonymous.

In discussing Sonia, I rely on Mulvey, Lacan, Zanardo, Motz, and Deutsch, and look at the way in which her starving, tortured body is not only filmically portrayed to foster a political undoing of the male gaze, but even more specifically to convey the idea

²⁷ Agency, within the context of identity theory, should be understood here as the roles that one is called to sustain in a social context. As I will show later, identity theory maintains that all these roles (agents) are identities in and of themselves.

that her performance of girlfriendhood, as intensely and dramatically committed as it is, never actually comes to blend with her identity which, for all intents and purposes, actually rejects Sonia's agency as girlfriend and as anorectic at the end of the film. Sonia is in fact only girlfriend insofar as her performance of anorexia is sustained. Almost conversely, I look at Agrado's re-gendered, surgically altered body both as a metaphor of social reconciliation and re-identification in a post-Francoist Spain (relying on Acevedo-Muñoz), and as a catalyst for actual reconciliation of the rich and chaotic filmic diegesis, which the character seems to observe from an external vantage point. In discussing Agrado's circumstances, I first briefly engage theories of cosmetic surgery (Wegenstein), and then I consider body modification – albeit non transsexual – practices (Jordan, Blum) to contrast these with a Baudrillardian reconsideration of the re-gendered body as authentic within his discussion of the interplay between symbols and reality. I look at studies on the character's supposed performance of authenticity (Garlinger, Sofair) to argue that Agrado's reinvention does not realize a desire to be other because she is not performing someone else, but rather re-appropriating her authentic self. I conclude this section by proposing a requalification of the relationship between agency and identity as portrayed in the films I have discussed, where I develop a new definition of identity as the core self-understanding that one formulates and maintains about oneself, distinct from agency, whose definition I accept as it is hypothesized in the context of identity theory studies.

From then, in the third and fourth chapters, I apply my theorization of self-understanding to the study of the dynamics that ensue when one's self-understanding is compromised by external circumstances (Irena in La sconosciuta) or internal mechanisms

(Jenny in Face to Face), according to my second categorization as outlined above. The unifying diegetic theme that ties the two characters together is the problematic relationship with their past, which both internalize as a time of unresolved trauma. The past is also a filmic space which the two films engage in radically different ways: Irena, through a series of seemingly random flashbacks, appears unable to forget; Jenny, in the throes of a mental breakdown characterized by terrifying nightmares and hallucinations, is haunted by what she has forcibly forgotten. In both films, the past also situates issues related to motherhood which shall serve as the entry point in my character analysis. In a sense, both Irena and Jenny are mothers at a loss – Irena (a former prostitute from Ukraine) has in fact lost numerous children who were relinquished to an adoption black market upon birth by her pimp, last but not least an infant girl whom she sets out to track down at the beginning of the film; Jenny (a noted psychiatrist) replicates in her strained and – for all intents and purposes – almost non-existent relationship with her own daughter the problematic rapport with both her grandmother, a domineering and abusive figure with whom Jenny shares an unresolved affective bond, and with her late parents, who had always rejected her emotionally and then passed away during her childhood. In this idea of loss, I rely on Butler to read as intrinsic also a process of mourning, which in a way originates from the struggle both characters face in dealing with their losses, only to frame more exactly the rationalization of the loss of their own self-understanding as a result of those losses. This is in fact the springboard for my discussion of identity reshaping in this chapter, as in the reconfiguration of one's understanding of herself as informed anew by the act of mourning itself.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both films engage ideas of motherhood via its pointed denial: Irena through the forced relinquishment of her children, Jenny through the notion that she cannot be mother because she is herself an incomplete daughter. While at first I move to outline a scholarly tradition on motherhood studies that, since the publication of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, has seen ups (the '80s and the '90s) and downs (the last decade – Kawash and Seelhooff), I then engage De Marneffe as the one scholar to reinforce the legitimacy of motherhood in the realm of contemporary scholarly discourse by claiming that one understands herself as mother not via an act of conformation to pre-existing social diktats, but rather via a deeply personal experience of self-actualization in which she plays an eminently active role – a reading that appears supported by both films in their portrayals of Irena and Jenny. Both characters, as I will show, further complicate these tenets by presenting themselves as highly controversial and problematic mother figures.

Irena is in fact a destabilizing figure not only because of her ambiguous role in reconfiguring notions of *italianità* (a reading I further by relying on Faleschini-Lerner) as an immigrant mother, but because she overturns the stereotypical portrayal of the doting/nurturing mother in much Italian film tradition, especially when pitted against the other mother in the film, Valeria Adacher (who, according to Irena's investigation, is the adoptive mother of her daughter). On a superficial level, the film asks of the audience to decide who is really a mother between the two – one who isn't a mother bureaucratically but intimately understands herself as one, or one who doesn't ultimately understand herself as a mother in spite of having legally adopted a child. While I offer a Deleuzian reading of La sconosciuta's treatment of time and space to map out the ways in which the

film loses Irena only to then jumpstart her reshaping, I also look at matters of cognitive spectatorship (Oakley via Thagard) to investigate how this process is broken apart and slowly teased out for the audience in ways that – as I will show – make the filmic reconstitution of the diegesis akin to the reconstitution of Irena’s own self-understanding (I will also engage notions of kin-time as laid out by Burton and Stack to further reinforce this point). Ultimately, I employ the unorthodox relationship between Irena and her presumed daughter Tea to claim that, in her attempt to reshape the child’s future, Irena is implicitly trying to amend and reshape her own past (and her own self-understanding as a byproduct), by relying on the same Baudrillardian theoretical paradigm that I employed in my discussion of *Agrado*, and to further conclude that agency (embodied in the film by Valeria as nothing more than a performance) and self-understanding (embodied by Irena’s own reshaping through her experience of self-mourning) cannot possibly be understood as one and the same when discussing matters of identity.

My discussion of Jenny in Face to Face engages similar concerns from a diametrically opposed perspective: if Irena is fundamentally the victim of external circumstances, Jenny is at once the victim and the perpetrator. In order to metabolize her traumatic and stunted childhood, the character has devised a refined performance of her own self as someone who is reasonably happy and fulfilled that has in time come to replace who she, in fact, altogether is. While a number of critics have (rightfully) noted how the film offers, as its core, a scathing criticism of psychiatry (Kauffman, although this reading was also furthered by Bergman himself) by crafting, in the guise of a horror film (Carroll, Doane), the character of a psychiatrist who is essentially coming apart at the seams herself, my interest in Jenny resides in the process of self-reshaping that is

violently triggered by this repression, overriding her attempts at sustaining any agency. The film maps out the character's nervous breakdown by mobilizing a number of techniques that, while perhaps not as radical as the ones employed in Persona, nonetheless cause the audience to gradually lose a sense of the filmic reality as Jenny herself is transported in a space of (as Bergman called it) extended reality, a place coded as the threshold between the waking world and an oneiric one, in which awareness is not suspended but somehow heightened. Interestingly enough, it is in this space of fictive representation that Jenny ultimately comes to realize her own fictiveness. My discussion of trauma as portrayed in Face to Face rests on Freud and Leys, specifically in the way the latter has revised the criticism on the former's theory of seduction: I argue that the film supports the model of Freudian sexual trauma theory, but also complicates it by assigning a traumatic value to past events that did not necessarily entail sexual abuse (in Jenny's case, the death of her parents and her grandmother's authoritarian stronghold and past abuse). In this sense, the film also formulates a theory regarding Freud's period of latency not as a stagnant one, but rather as the gap of time which functions as the stage of Jenny's own reshaping: while the character may have been at first unable to assign a traumatic value to those childhood events, she nonetheless voided her own self-understanding as an inherent defense mechanism. In this light, the character's final cleansing act of burying her childhood self and setting fire to her own casket is highly symbolic of Jenny's own self-understanding moving to reclaim itself.

In a realm that seems to so heavily rely on ideas of performance and performativity, film is the logical entry point for my analysis. Jacques Lacan famously theorized the mirror stage as a pivotal event in one's process of self-identification: a child

identifies with the image he sees in a mirror to resolve the tension between the wholeness of that image and the fragmentation of his own body, thus creating the Ego.²⁸ Now, let us replace that mirror with a movie screen, and that child with the spectator. In an extension of Lacan's own theory, various theories of spectatorship have established the notion that the movie screen is itself a mirror²⁹ in that it operates very much like one. I claim that in this movie screen/mirror, it is not only possible for the spectator to confront a process of self-identification, but it is moreover possible for him to contemplate and assess himself – and the human condition at large – from a favored, external vantage point. This idea is further substantiated by the use of mirrors and mirroring images in Primo amore and La sconosciuta: in the former, mirrors are aesthetically and diegetically coded as places that foster a privileged form of self-understanding, places in which the characters are able to locate and inspect themselves, as well as places where characters become differently aware of their agency; in the latter, Irena and the adopted girl are configured as specular images that further a complex discussion about the protagonist's past and her future.

This theoretical paradigm fails when applied to theater, which additionally legitimizes film as my medium of choice. In discussing film's stronger impression of reality³⁰ over other mediums (theater, but also photography and literature), Christian Metz argues that in the realm of theater,

The actor's bodily presence contradicts the temptation one always experiences during the show to perceive him as a protagonist in a fictional universe, and the theater can only be a freely accepted game played among accomplices. Because

²⁸ Lacan's Mirror Stage theorization was first detailed in Some Reflections on the Ego, in Écrits (1966).

²⁹ This idea is also supported by Christian Metz, who himself discussed Jacques Lacan in connection to film, arguing that film, as an art form, is able to foray into the spectator's unconscious dream state, and that it offers an imperfect reflection of reality. See Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema (1976).

³⁰ In Film Language, Metz also discusses the idea of "realism" in film from a cognitive standpoint, arguing that the reproduction of movement is the key feature that allows the viewer to accept the sequence of still photographs strung together on screen as realistic.

the theater is too real, theatrical fictions only yield a weak impression of realism.³¹

Film, according to Metz (who is himself indebted to Jean Leirens's own theorizations about spectatorship as laid out in Le cinéma et le temps in 1954), offers a higher degree of realism, hence identification, because,

The impression of reality we get from a film does not depend at all on the strong presence of an actor but, rather, on the low degree of existence possessed by those ghostly creatures moving on the screen, and they are, therefore, unable to resist our constant impulse to invest them with the "reality" of fiction [...], a reality that comes only from within us, from the projections and identifications that are mixed in with our perception of the film.³²

The more we, as an audience, commit ourselves to helping those ghostly creatures come to life, the deeper and more dynamic our interaction with, understanding of and self-projection within the diegetic realm that is housed on the screen becomes. I shall hold Metz's claims as support to the analysis of my medium of choice, and I argue that they also bolster my appropriation of Lacan's theories about self-identification as applied to film, and the act of spectatorship itself.

³¹ Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 10.

³² Metz 11.

Part 2

Identity Reshaping and the Body

Se non ci sei, Sonia...non ci sono neanche io.
-Vittorio, Primo amore

It costs a lot to be authentic.
-Agrado, All About My Mother

Introduction

In this section, I propose to discuss two characters whose process of reshaping features or is characterized by an outstanding physical manifestation, which causes their bodies to be altered in ways that might seem bizarre, extreme, or even ego-dystonic: Sonia in Matteo Garrone's Primo amore (2004), based on Marco Mariolini's autobiography Il cacciatore di anoressiche (1997), and Agrado in Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999). Both movies are concerned with diegetic issues related to or dependent on appearance, physicality, metamorphosis and transmutation, and the ways in which they are represented – technical and diegetic tools such as the use of color, saturation, extreme close-ups, uneven narrative rhythm, and symbolism – shall be pointed out and analyzed accordingly. With the study of Primo amore, I propose to look at a radical representation of anorexia³³ to assess its nature and its role as an instrument of body and identity reshaping, calling into question the very notion of agency as the film suggests that identity cannot be performed, even if a radical change in appearance is enacted in support of that performance. By considering Agrado, one of the main characters in All About My Mother, I look at gender in connection to

³³ It should be noted that this representation is understood as a male representation of anorexia as visualized by director Matteo Garrone. Similarly, transsexualism in All About My Mother is filtered through the male point of view of director Pedro Almodóvar.

identity and gender performance and move to examine body modifications and plastic surgery to evaluate the psychological motivations and processes that subtend them, along with the ways in which they are cinematically portrayed and evaluated, to argue that fake may very well be a pathway to real.

Notions of identity as performance, and theories about narrative self have gained widespread traction in contemporary cultural studies, philosophy and psychology scholarship, partially thanks to their suggestiveness, partially because of the argumentative power of scholars like Judith Butler and Paul Ricœur, among others. In works such as Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies That Matter (1993), and Undoing Gender (2004), Butler discusses identity in connection to social norms, sexuality, and performative iteration.³⁴ The rapport between the individual and identity is fundamentally gendered within the scope of Butler's work, that is to say, her interest resides in the very notion of gender performance. Gender, according to Butler, is fundamentally performative; but this performance is not a voluntary one. However, gender performativity is not exactly perfunctory, either: it is not the product or the reflection of one's selfhood, but the offspring of one's inherent adhesion to normative social influence.³⁵ Even if Butler's theoretical framework appears rooted in a discourse which is essentially anchored to gender, I propose that it can be used to discuss identity

³⁴ Butler's core argument is anchored to the notion that gender (and sexuality at large) is culturally constituted and regulated, and enforced by a process of repetition of "stylized" bodily acts. According to Butler, gender is then a fundamentally performative construct, albeit not voluntarily so. Gender is rather regulated by disciplinary regimes, which both exist and decide a priori what features and characteristics are socially acceptable in connection to it (and to sexuality, as well). Gender performativity cannot be understood as separate from the idea of iterability, which Butler defines as a ritualized production.

³⁵ In Undoing Genre, Butler argues that humanity, as an intrinsic feature, is largely dependent on one's adhesion to social norms, or what one may perceive as normality. Straying away from social norms precipitates an individual in the realm of the less-than-human (as opposed to the socially conformative human). Butler argues that paradoxically, the cultural and social conditions that need to be met for an individual to be recognized as human may in fact lead to one's dehumanization, and to a life that is for all intents and purposes unlivable.

performance as well, as I will consider it in connection to the body in my discussion of both Primo amore and All About My Mother, and also because of its undeniable influence on identity theory at large, as I will shortly establish. Whereas Butler tackles the role of the body mostly in connection to gender, sex and Feminism, I will move from her theorizations to examine the body in connection to ideas of agency, and identity reshaping: scholarship in the field of identity theory has surprisingly glossed over the role of physicality and that of the body in connection to identity, agency and performance.

Similar concerns with the nature of identity performance are also addressed by French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In Oneself as Another (1992), Ricœur discusses the nature of personal identity, and its relationship with the idea of selfhood. While much of Ricœur's study grapples with the definition of and the distinction between selfhood and sameness,³⁶ the philosopher also develops and discusses the notion of narrative identity, according to which he posits the individual as being an agent, and agency as propaedeutic to action. Ricœur's idea of narrative is, in essence, strongly historical and inclusive. A narrative may encompass a number of persons, tracing the connections that link agents, the actions performed by those agents, the results of those actions on persons affected by those actions, and the multitude of different judgments and assessments of those actions, over a certain gap of time. As he explains, "the narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character."³⁷

³⁶ Selfhood and sameness, according to Ricœur, are the two main constituents of individual identity, albeit opposing in nature. Selfhood refers to the identity that makes the self individual, and unlike any other individual's own. Sameness instead refers to a qualitative identity, such as similarity or resemblance shared with others. If someone is not the same as another, this indicates that each has a distinct, individual identity.

³⁷ Paul Ricœur, Oneself as Another (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992) 147-148.

As a byproduct, multiple and different narratives necessarily yield fluid and adaptable identities. According to the philosopher, a person is able to understand her personal identity in the same way as she would go about understanding that of a character in any narrative or, as he puts it, by telling herself a story about her own life. Much like in a novel or in a film, the interaction between different characters within the same narrative births secondary storylines, and causes one's identity to be deeply affected by these dialogical interactions. Ultimately, a person's identity remains open to revision and reassessment until her narrative ends. Whereas Ricœur moves on to discuss the role of ethics within this paradigm, for the scope of my research I intend to zero in on the theorization of self as a narrative construct, the idea that we, as humans, are essentially characters called to perform life as though it were a piece of fiction.

As I hinted above, because identity theory stems from this kind of groundwork, it is today very much concerned with issues of performance and agency; the notion of agent (or even more fittingly in the context of my project, actor) is furthermore considered the very core of role theory.³⁸ The very definition – or perhaps the nature itself – of this notion however also poses a rather interesting conundrum. As Burke and Stets put it,

[The] distinction between person and agent is central to identity theory. In identity theory, an identity is an agent. Each person has many identities, for example, friend, parent, worker, church member, and club member; and each of these identities is an agent. Part of what makes interaction and the social system work is the fact that different identities within persons engage in transactions [...] as well as different identities between persons.³⁹

In essence, identity theory tells us that in order to be social – and arguably socially fulfilled – each individual is called upon juggling a number of different identities in what

³⁸ Agency is one of the main concerns within the scope of Role Theory (Linton, Nadel), which studies the behavioral and the structural features of interaction systems, or roles.

³⁹ Peter J. Burke and Jan P. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009) 8.

may then be considered a virtuoso acting performance, or the ultimate exercise in self-fragmentation. Perhaps paradoxically, it is because of this very ability to seamlessly alternate between different roles that a person is able to craft and sustain her own personal, idiosyncratic social self construct. In a sense, we are uniquely us insofar as we are successful in portraying ourselves in such dramatically different ways, when the occasion calls for it.

The question that shall spur my investigation in this section moves to complicate this very assumption. Within this never-ending process that enables social dynamics and fosters interaction, exactly what roles are played by the body and by the self? As hinted already, the scholarship has yet to delve into the study of the body and its purpose in connection to identity and agency. Furthermore, this discussion has seemingly left the notion of self mostly stranded. How does the self position itself in this context? Is it even possible to talk about a true, unified self to start with, and what is its relationship with those agents? Simmons and McCall argue that “[one] achieves selfhood at that point at which he begins to act toward himself in more or less the fashion in which he acts towards other people.”⁴⁰ The acquisition of selfhood is then presented here as deeply dependent on the level of cohesion between how we perform with others, and how we perform with ourselves. In what may very well be seen as re-qualifying move from Butler’s ideas of performativity,⁴¹ identity theory has accepted the self as a reflexive entity, one which is fully aware of itself, to the point that not only it can perceive itself as an object, but it also can “plan accordingly, and [...] manipulate itself as an object in

⁴⁰ George J. McCall and J.L. Simmons, *Identities and Interactions* (New York, Free Press, 1978) 52.

⁴¹ At least insofar as Butler’s claim that performativity is inherently unconscious is concerned.

order to bring about future states.”⁴² It is both intriguing and telling that act would once again come to be part of the terminology used within this discussion: identity, behavior and performance seem inextricably intertwined in this dynamic. Not only do we act with others, by implementing different agents according to different circumstances, but we also act with our selves, by absorbing those agents as part of our identity makeup. This process suggests that our self-awareness is to a large degree dependent on our acting abilities. It also proposes a schism between identity and the individual⁴³ that, perhaps because of its artistic appeal, much mainstream cinema has exploited, often simplified, and even trivialized altogether.

Egregiously, the notions of identity and agency in film often come to overlap rather conveniently, or become one and the same altogether. Be it the presence of an alter ego, a character impersonating or pretending to be someone else, stealing someone else’s name, or even harboring multiple personalities, the distinction between an individual and identity can be blurred almost to the point where it ceases to be. In Plein Soleil (directed by René Clément in 1960), a French movie adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s The Talented Mr. Ripley, a con man and master impersonator murders a wealthy friend and assumes his identity by stealing his passport, and mimicking his voice, mannerisms and appearance. In Face/Off (1997) by Chinese director John Woo, a cop and a criminal switch identities after undergoing an experimental surgical procedure in which their faces are detached, and swapped around. In Victor/Victoria (1982) by Blake Edwards, a struggling soprano ends up landing a job at a nightclub as a female impersonator, dressing up as a man who dresses up as a woman. Even Richard Donner’s iconic

⁴² Burke and Stets 9.

⁴³ As linked to his body/physical boundaries and limitations.

Superman (1978) can seamlessly alternate between superhero and meek, unassuming reporter Clark Kent just by donning a pair of eyeglasses or a spandex suit.

All these instances don't necessarily speak to the quality or the critical or commercial appeal of a movie. However, they highlight a certain tendency to address individual and identity rather indiscriminately. Is it really enough to copy someone else's haircut or accent, or wear someone else's clothes to be able to claim their identity, as well? The films I briefly discussed above seem to either believe so, or to skirt the issue altogether. In my study, I argue that the relationship between the two notions is not nearly this superficial and easily negotiable. The purpose of my research is to expose how a number of Italian and European films, all differently concerned with matters of identity, self-representation, and agency, complicate and subvert the paradigms of identity theory and identity performance as accepted in much scholarship and mainstream cinema. While I do consider the notion of identity performance so widely supported by much scholarship,⁴⁴ my goal is to examine its legitimacy as presented in my selection of films, as it seems to be less of a concern for the extant scholarship. The following questions will spearhead my study of Sonia in Primo amore and Irena in La sconosciuta: does performing someone ever really come to equal being someone? What are the repercussions of a failure in agency, and the characteristics of this breakdown in interpersonal transactions? What role is played by the body in the construction and

⁴⁴ Burke and Stets 53. Current trends in identity theory have moved from the roots of symbolic interaction (which focused on actors' meanings, the study of social structure and the dichotomy between the traditional and the structural approaches, positing two essentially opposing views of the nature of the self, a fluid one and a constant one), to three main categories of study: Interactional Emphasis (McCall and Simmons), which focuses on identity as an idiosyncratic construct, Structural Emphasis (Stryker), which focuses on identity as a conventional construct, and Perceptual Emphasis (Burke), which considers identity in connection to behavior and meaning. All three approaches work off the accepted and shared idea of identity as performance.

sustenance of one's identity, and in the realm of identity performance altogether? For this purpose, I also intend to look at the way in which my characters' diegetic trajectories set out, the way in which they are represented cinematically, and the role which spectatorship and audience identification play in this process. To this point, I will rely on theories of cognitivism applied to spectatorship theory, more specifically Paul Thagard's studies on coherence (as detailed by Todd Oakley)⁴⁵ to explain how viewers relate to films, and strive to construct and derive meaning from it.

⁴⁵ Todd Oakley, Towards a General Theory of Film Spectatorship (Cleveland, Case Western Reserve University, 2009)

Chapter 2: Primo amore: Sonia, the Girlfriend

A “horror movie about desire,” as Manhola Dargis called it in her review,⁴⁶ Primo amore engages issues of agency and identity in connection to the body as a visual representation of change, and its semiotic coding as an emblem of self-fragmentation. In the movie, Sonia (Michela Cescon) meets Vittorio (Vitaliano Trevisan), an unbalanced individual with a sexual fixation with extreme, unhealthy thinness. Sonia agrees to put herself on a diet; by changing her body she wants Vittorio to desire and love her as a whole. The movie chronicles Sonia’s attempt, and then her struggle, to morph her body to appease her partner, and ultimately her failure to do so, culminating in a violent, ambiguous ending that loops the narrative around and back to the beginning. As I will point out, Sonia’s cinematic circumstances are rather idiosyncratic. On one hand, I propose to use the character as a cinematic object, to explore the ways in which the movie goes about portraying Sonia’s mutation. On the other hand, I shall consider Sonia as a vessel to analyze the message that the film construes about the far-reaching effects of body reshaping on one’s processes of self-identification, in order to complicate the ambiguous notion of agency manipulation that subtends it. Eating disorders, unlike many other conditions, are often purposely self-inflicted and self-induced: a consumed, depleted body becomes a symbol, a statement of sorts. The film complicates this model by compromising its voluntaristic nature: Sonia’s body is indeed a symbol of emotional discomfort, but not of her own: the source and nature of this discomfort will be addressed and analyzed both as indigenous and foreign in essence. Moreover, the film and the character will enable me to shed some light on the connection between body reshaping and identity reshaping, a relationship which, as previously hinted, is yet to be fully

⁴⁶ The New York Times, review published on April 2, 2005.

understood and exhausted in the realm of identity theory. I shall argue that the failure of Sonia's incarnation of agency points toward an altogether deeper failure, that of agency as a synonym for identity.

Primo amore is a liberal film adaptation of Marco Mariolini's autobiography Il cacciatore di anoressiche (1997), in which the author details in almost surgical fashion his own fetish for the female anorectic body – anorexophilia, as he labels it – alongside different sexual encounters, only some of them mutually voluntary, with women affected by the condition. Mariolini finally announces his plan to murder ex-girlfriend Monica Calò (characteristically renamed “Barbara” in the memoir), a plan that he would in fact put into motion the year following the publication of the book. Mariolini himself is a case of displaced, fragmented identity if there ever was one. Viewers of Rai Tre's Storie maledette will most likely remember his disturbing appearance in a feature interview with host Franca Leosini:⁴⁷ the right side of his head appeared meticulously shaved, while a thick dark beard and hair were left to grow on the left side, a pointed aesthetic choice supposed to “represent the dual personality that resides within each one of us.” For the murder of Calò, Mariolini was sentenced to thirty years without the possibility of parole. In both the interview and the book, Mariolini's main concern seems that to portray himself as a deeply regretful and mentally unbalanced individual, coming off as a narcissist and a megalomaniac instead.⁴⁸ The memoir itself conceals, behind the apparent

⁴⁷ The episode, filmed in the Opera penitentiary in Milan, first aired on November 11, 2001.

⁴⁸ Mariolini was examined and found of sound mind before the verdict. He tried to portray his fetish as an inherent, inescapable mental illness, but also called himself “l'unico anoressofilo al mondo,” and often appeared to rationalize and legitimize the killing of Calò as just retribution after she had abandoned and turned against him (Calò herself had previously been sentenced to one year of house arrest for attacking and wounding Mariolini with a hammer in his sleep). On July 14, 2008 Calò agreed to meet Mariolini on a beach in Intra, by the Iseo lake, thinking he would refrain from violent outbursts in a public and highly populated location. Mariolini, upon being rejected once more, stabbed the woman twenty-two times killing her, and then tried to drown himself in the sea before being rescued.

intent to detail the nature of a compulsion, the author's real and palpable fascination with himself as a case study, as a narrative object, almost as a character: "Chi di voi ha letto e conosce i primi numeri [...] del famoso fumetto Diabolik potrebbe subito notare la similitudine del rapporto tra lui e la sua complice Eva Kant con quello tra me e Barbara, che sicuramente oltre ad essere la mia donna e convivente era anche la mia complice,"⁴⁹ he notes at some point, comparing himself to the protagonist of one of Italy's most famous and iconic comics. He then continues to note that, "Sono un manipolatore, è vero: ho sempre usato la mia sincerità, la mia trasparenza totale [...], per indurre le persone [...], a fare ciò che volevo nella mia assurda ma vitale esigenza di possedere il controllo della situazione."⁵⁰

Mariolini's self-appraisal in the guise of a literary experiment is a cunning posturing, whose poorly disguised intention is at once self-apologetic and self-mythicizing. Where Mariolini's memoir fails – his disingenuous attempt to craft his words as a call for help and an impassioned act of contrition, and his poorly concealed ambition to forge a work that would converse with a legitimate literary tradition – it succeeds instead as a fictive character study, or as a piece of fiction altogether. It is however such a transparently artificial and unpleasant one at that, that the team behind the filmic adaptation (director Matteo Garrone, alongside leading actor Vitaliano Trevisan, and screenwriter Massimo Gaudioso) discarded most of the written material to reinvent the narrative anew, tracing back what Millicent Marcus called the "preliterary

⁴⁹ Marco Mariolini, *Il cacciatore di anoressiche* (Milano, Gruppo Edicom, 2001) 80-81. "Those of you who have read and are familiar with the earlier issues of the famous comic Diabolik might immediately pick up on the similarity between his relationship with his accomplice Eva Kant and my relationship with Barbara, who surely on top of being my woman and live-in partner was also my accomplice." My translation.

⁵⁰ Mariolini 81. "I'm manipulative, it's true: I've always used my sincerity, my utter transparency, to lead people to do whatever I wanted, in my absurd yet vital need to always be in control of the situation." My translation.

idea”⁵¹ at the core of Mariolini’s memoir instead. As Trevisan explained to me, “Il libro di Mariolini è stato solo uno spunto. Di fatto, ne abbiamo ricavato giusto un paio di scene. Il fatto è che Mariolini era molto antipatico, direi ripugnante. Dunque Vittorio, il protagonista, a parte l’ossessione per la magrezza, ha poco o nulla a che fare con lui.”⁵²

The purpose of the film bypassed Mariolini entirely, rather residing in mapping out “il rapporto tra creatore e creazione” which, according to Trevisan, was Garrone’s main intent.⁵³ Desire, as hinted above, plays a pivotal role in the diegesis: the desire of food, the desire to be loved, the desire to create and to mold, the desire to be other. I would indeed agree with Dargis that the movie can be labeled as a horror, not only because it carries the markers of the genre,⁵⁴ but because of how discursively akin to the book – and to Mariolini himself by extension – it in fact is.

Some of Mariolini’s stylistic features – the sparseness and the thinness of his prose, which come into direct clash with the chaotic, often shocking content; the wandering and elliptical nature of his recollections; the alarming and perennial sense of impending collapse, both mental and physical – migrated to Garrone’s auteurist vision,

⁵¹ Millicent Marcus, Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 15.

⁵² I had the opportunity to interview Primo amore’s screenwriter and leading actor Vitaliano Trevisan for my project. All quotes from Trevisan are unedited unless specified, and should be understood as part of said interview. “Mariolini’s book was only an inspiration. As a matter of fact, we only carved a couple of scenes out of it. The fact is that Mariolini was very unpleasant, repugnant even. So our protagonist Vittorio, beyond his obsession with thinness, has almost nothing to do with him.” My translation.

⁵³ “The relationship between creator and creation.” My translation. Some points of comparison may be drawn between Vittorio and Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist of Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus (Mary Shelley, 1818). However, Trevisan told me that Shelley’s novel was not used or referenced in the screenwriting process; instead, the team extensively studied Martha by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974), a film which chronicles a similar relationship of reciprocal dependency, sadism and masochism between the title character and her husband. According to Trevisan, “the relationship between creator and creation was, I believe, something Garrone himself was obsessing about” while he was personally “much more interested in the idea of a relationship based on reciprocal dependence.” My translation.

⁵⁴ Paul Wells, in The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch, argues that the genre’s constitutional markers are phobia, anxiety and the central figure of a monster. All three can be easily identified in Garrone’s film.

and are there to be picked up by the spectators. As repugnant as Mariolini surely is, Primo amore is for all intents and purposes just as markedly unpleasant as a sheer cinematic experience. This judgment does not bear upon the quality or critical merit of the film. The relationship between Garrone and Trevisan was strained (to say the least) right from the beginning,⁵⁵ and this tension definitely affected the production to an extent. I however maintain that Primo amore's unpleasantness stems mainly from the filmic presence of Sonia's deteriorating body and from the film's aesthetic approach to the character's circumstances. I propose that this unpleasantness should also explain why the film was so generally challenging for audiences,⁵⁶ and why it is currently not being studied. Sitting through the demolition of the leading character's body is disturbing enough, and most exchanges between the two main characters are imbued with a sense of dread and uneasiness. But I contend that this reaction is also engendered by the cultural landscape of Italy at the time of the film's release, and more precisely by the pornification⁵⁷ of the female body in the media during the Berlusconi era,⁵⁸ to which the movie chronologically belongs.

⁵⁵ Trevisan spoke at length about his artistic disagreements with Garrone, which mainly focused on the ending of the movie. Garrone wanted to keep it as unresolved and ambiguous as possible, whereas Trevisan wanted it to mirror more closely the denouement of Mariolini and Calò's real-life relationship. Trevisan also published a short story titled Il barilozzo di Amontillado (2009) which contains a fictionalized account of the events, also detailing his tumultuous relationship with the director on the set of the production.

⁵⁶ The movie only grossed \$472,969 in Italy. By contrast, Garrone's following film, Gomorra, grossed \$17,665,830 (boxofficemojo.com).

⁵⁷ Porn is defined as "television programs, magazines, books, etc. that are regarded as emphasizing the sensuous or sensational aspects of a non-sexual subject and stimulating a compulsive interest in their audience" by the Oxford English Dictionary.

⁵⁸ This phenomenon has been discussed not only by Lorella Zanardo, but by a number of different publications as well, including Forbes, The Huffington Post, and Time Magazine which, in a photo essay titled Silvio Berlusconi and the Politics of Sex, discusses the pointed ways in which Berlusconi reshaped Italian TV to foster a deeply sexualized commodification of the female body, as a means to further his own political career.

As recently as 2009, director/writer Lorella Zanardo set out to analyze different portrayals of the female body in Italian television throughout the past decade, with the release of the short feature film Il corpo delle donne, followed by the publication of the homonymous book in 2011. Zanardo's aim is two-fold: on the one hand, she moves to denounce the exploitation of the female body on TV, both in primetime shows and in the so-called *contenitori televisivi*, which air throughout the day and are easily accessible to all types of audiences; on the other hand, Zanardo also comes to question the reason why Italian women have not publicly rejected this idea of womanhood as an exclusively corporeal and sexual construct, instilled in the Italian cultural Ego according to what she calls "il modello maschile."⁵⁹ Zanardo argues that this unassertiveness is the product of self-unawareness: women have been conditioned to look at and perceive themselves and each other through the male gaze ("ci guardiamo l'un l'altra con occhi maschili,"⁶⁰ she posits), and understand themselves and each other accordingly.

Claire Johnston had already raised similar concerns in Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema (1975), while discussing the idea of a male gaze in the realm of classic Hollywood cinema. Johnston's approach draws on post-structuralism and semiotics: according to her, all filmic representations implicitly rely on an inherent understanding of cinematic narratives as mythic, systemic structures that familiarize a number of conventional gender dynamics. Within this rhizomatic system of conventions, woman as a symbol is not employed as a marker of female subjectivity, but merely as the passive object of male desire. Johnston further theorizes that film reduces woman to an unrealistic and overly stylized icon, debasing both itself and the ideology it sets out to

⁵⁹ "The male paradigm." My translation. These comments are taken from Zanardo voice-over commentary in her documentary.

⁶⁰ "We look at each other with male eyes." My translation.

foster, and that it has turned woman into a spectacle, but one in which not only “woman as woman is largely absent,”⁶¹ but female self-awareness in and of itself is dampened, causing women to passively come to accept themselves as that spectacle. Sonia herself, as a character, displays this very lack of self-awareness: she matters only insofar as her body is concerned, because the crafting/remodeling of her body is all that Vittorio wishes to pursue. In many instances, as I will show, Sonia does not even exist as disengaged from an external, preferably masculine, materializing gaze.

In light of this complex milieu, Sonia’s body positions itself as an eminently foreign object, one with which the spectator is not equipped to compete culturally, aesthetically or emotionally. I contend that Primo amore confronts the audience with the presence and the exhibition of an anti-body, one which is very much different from the female body as a pornified gadget so predominantly flaunted on Italian television; moreover, the film dares to assign that same, familiar sexual connotation to this anti-body (Vittorio is in fact sexually and emotionally attracted to Sonia’s gauntness) making these filmic circumstances even more baffling and arduous to accept. Sonia’s body is also often framed in all of its malnourished wholeness, which is the cause of another source of anxiety for the male spectator. In 1975’s Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,⁶² Laura Mulvey famously argued that woman as a filmic image carries a duplicitous connotation in psychoanalytical terms. It is, on the one hand, an object fed to the male spectator to appease his scopophilic needs; on the other hand, it also stands as a symbol of castration not because of the physical features it displays, but for the one physical feature it

⁶¹ Claire Johnston, Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema (Notes on Women’s Cinema, London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975) 26.

⁶² Mulvey’s famous essay uses psychoanalysis in connection to classic Hollywood cinema culture to argue that film fulfills the male spectator’s scopophilic and narcissistic needs, reducing woman to what she calls mere to-be-looked-at-ness.

genetically lacks, thus becoming that very source of anxiety. This issue, according to Mulvey, is resolved via the filmic fragmentation of the female body, which is never shown in its entirety, but rather as the sum of discrete shots of breasts, legs, hands, faces, and so on. In Primo amore, the spectator is instead constantly confronted with the totality of Sonia's nakedness in full body shots. However, I posit that a similar notion of fragmentation is not altogether abandoned by Garrone, but otherwise engaged: it is in fact the very issue that triggers Sonia's process of reshaping.

The movie opens with Sonia and Vittorio's first encounter – one could hardly call it a date – set up by the two after having found each other's personal ads. "I imagined you'd be thinner" is the first remark that comes out of Vittorio's mouth. This awkward and somewhat uncomfortable sequence is merely a taste (no pun intended) of what is to come. It is in fact at this moment that the narrative begins to establish and map out the emotional hierarchy according to which these characters relate to one another. Throughout the sequence, Sonia is introduced almost as though she is auditioning for a role, rather than just meeting a date for coffee. This idea of auditioning is worth exploring more attentively. In discussing Giuseppe Tornatore's L'uomo delle stelle (1995), Millicent Marcus pointed out that for all the aspiring actors in the poor Sicilian countryside which populate that film, an audition in and of itself "brings out [...] an idealized self-image, a cherished mythic persona often hidden from those around them."⁶³ Sonia is obviously not a struggling peasant in 1953 Sicily, but similar dynamics are nonetheless at play: she is too in a sense auditioning for a part. Sonia's joviality is in reality a posturing, as we learn early on that she is in fact very lonely and emotionally

⁶³ Millicent Marcus, After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age (Baltimore; London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 213.

unfulfilled, and it becomes apparent that she is looking for sentimental relationship to be defined as a person. Vittorio, as noted, is himself an unbalanced individual. He is equally lonely and unfulfilled, but not nearly as willing to compromise his needs and demands. He has been unsuccessful in his pursuit up to this point, and appears rather disillusioned: “C’è la testa, non c’è il corpo...se trovo il corpo, non c’è la testa,”⁶⁴ he laments to his therapist. *Testa* arguably refers to his partner’s willingness and determination to abide to his desires and his grueling diet, whereas *corpo* encompasses a biological predisposition to and/or tangible and visible physical results of thinness. No one so far has evidently been able to marry the two successfully.

Sonia is then immediately made aware that she is not suitable for the role that Vittorio is looking to cast: she is literally not quite fit to be his partner and, by extension, to fulfill that idealized self-image. Sonia’s emotional response during the date is somewhat ambiguous for the audience: she makes it clear that she hasn’t quite forgiven Vittorio for that rude remark, and she expresses the intention to cut the meeting short and leave on multiple occasions. Yet, she never does. She appears to be parsing his gestures and expressions instead, as though she would like him to ask her to stay and to tell her that she has indeed landed that role, even if just on a trial basis. “What should I do,” he inquires asking to be forgiven. Even though “Let me go” is her unconvincing answer, Sonia ends up staying, and the meeting does turn into a date that continues into the evening. This is the moment that marks the very beginning of Sonia’s agency as girlfriend, a performance of identity that shall entail a profound physical transformation to go with it. As an act of love – or perhaps it is a gesture of emotional complacency or a clumsy attempt at self-individualization – Sonia finally agrees to put herself on Vittorio’s

⁶⁴ “If the head’s there, the body isn’t...if I find the body, the head isn’t there.” My translation.

diet. By reshaping her appearance, she wants to become that perfect communion between *testa* and *corpo* or, quite literally, she wants to become the very embodiment of his desires and his needs. Sonia's transformation is conducive to the preservation of Vittorio's emotional stability: unsurprisingly, any setbacks in Sonia's process of reshaping cause Vittorio a great deal of stress, and any type of unauthorized or unsupervised eating sends him into a flying rage. One character morphs and mutates to keep the other emotionally stable. The relationship between Sonia and Vittorio thrives on two opposing but perfectly complementary perceptions and ideas of partnership: she is looking to be shaped, changed and molded into someone or something that will be desirable, lovable, while he is looking for someone who is willing to undergo a mutation for him – one that starts with the outward (Sonia's body) to then ideally extend to the inward (her identity). It is this problematic distinction between the outward and the inward, or between agency and identity (and the way it is articulated and carried out in the film) that shall spur my analysis in this chapter. Sonia's agency is coded in her physicality, but the character's performance of physicality ultimately complicates her own idea of herself, because it never comes to correspond or coincide with her identity. Moreover, Sonia's metamorphosis is framed as a narrative device to discuss the character's deeply splintered identity, and the film moves to splinter its own narrative into different fragments or episodes, methodically chronicling the character's unrelenting weight loss.

The film further mobilizes a number of techniques and visual cues to inform the spectators about the unsettling nature of this relationship. Vittorio's house is structurally designed to visually recall a prison or a keep, a large block of concrete whose front and

windows are fenced in by a set of steel bars, into which Sonia operates much like an inmate.⁶⁵ Cinematographer Marco Onorato's pointed choice of dry blue and sharp green hues to color the building is in stark contrast with the fiery yellow and red swirls that frame the opening credits, to establish both a context for Vittorio's profession as a jewelry maker/goldsmith, and a sense of foreboding for the relationship between him and Sonia, one that will incinerate both down to their minimal constituents. This nod to a feeling of imprisonment is furthered by the setting of the house in the country which is later purchased by the two characters, a small *casale* surrounded by empty land, almost suspended in time and space, which is employed both as the place of the narrative denouement and as another cinematic marker of confinement, with the camera framing Sonia much like a fairytale, secluded princess seldom peeking out of her tower window. In what can be read as a nod to her emotional displacement, Sonia's own apartment is never shown altogether, it does not exist: the character does not quite seem to belong to anyone or anywhere until she meets Vittorio, and the two of them move in together.

From a narrative standpoint, Garrone is interested in staging a number of commonplace setups, much like a walk in the park, or a romantic dinner for two – events that make up the interlocutory phase of any relationship, and would perfectly fit within the arc of a more predictable rom-com – only to complicate them more or less overtly, continuously offsetting the audience's expectations.⁶⁶ Garrone sets up this complex

⁶⁵ This interpretation is further supported by Maria Vittoria Costantini and Paola Golinelli who, in a psychopathological study of anorexia as portrayed in this film, explain that the appearance of Vittorio's house/studio represents an externalization of his mental condition. See The Anorexic Paradox: Matteo Garrone's First Love in Projected Shadows: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representation of Loss in European Cinema (edited by Andrea Sabbadini, 2007).

⁶⁶ Oakley explains that film spectatorship is a conscious activity, and that spectators adapt the same perceptive and conceptual systems used to understand reality (a three-dimensional world) in order to make sense of a filmic event (a two-dimensional realm). The same strive for coherence inherent in the decoding of everyday, real-life experiences translates onto the decoding of film, or any aesthetic

dismantling process as a counterpart to the dismantling of Sonia's body, progressively alerting the spectators about the deceitful nature of an otherwise apparently commonplace love story. During one of the couple's first outings in a grove somewhere in the countryside, Sonia is playfully hiding behind a slim, tall tree until she is spotted by Vittorio. She then sprints away laughing, appearing and disappearing as she competes for the camera's attention, weaving her path through the trees in the park. Entering Vittorio's gaze is what materializes the character, and what makes her appear to the audience as a result. Furthermore, this scene is also meant to suggest the flimsiness of Sonia's corporality throughout the rest of the film, establishing a direct comparison between her body and the narrow tree trunks behind which she vanishes, as to suggest what I would call a semi-presence in the narrative, which becomes more and more elusive as her weight starts to come off. A number of scenes further develop the elusiveness of Sonia's physicality, and they also weave in the suggestion that the cinematic loss of her body is tied to deeper issues of identity and agency.

Sonia's struggle with the fragmentation of her identity is perceptively encapsulated in a sequence that takes place very early in the proceedings. The camera pans to capture the character while she is sitting in a studio, posing entirely naked for a class of art students. She is looked at with surgical, dissecting eyes, reified into an exercise in drawing; she stares back timidly but inquisitively, possibly wondering what it is exactly that the students see. Afterwards, as a ritual of sorts, she wanders around the classroom to look intently at all the different representations of her body that were drawn

experience, be it as complex as any. The pressure to resolve this complexity into a series of logical, integrated elements within the same cognitive dimension causes spectators to craft as if psychological responses, or responses that understand film as if the events on screen were being witnessed in reality. These responses are common triggers of all aesthetic experiences, and in this case they allow the audience to bridge the gap between reality and filmic reality.

on the canvases. On a superficial – albeit not inexact – level of interpretation, one might argue that by doing this, her intent is to see if others perceive her as looking as overweight as Vittorio does. But this screening process of sorts also lends itself to an alternative type of analysis. Sonia appears rather different in each one of the drawings: she is blurry in one, more precisely contoured in another; some students have drawn her smaller, some larger; she seemed pensive to some, more alert to others. Each canvas features a different representation of the character, offering back her image as filtered by a discrete set of eyes. Sonia's annihilating lack of agency is realized by reducing the character to sheer, borrowed physicality: she is what others see her as. The narrative establishes with this scene the unbridgeable chasm between Sonia and her body, achieving the fragmentation of the character via a complex moment of filmic ekphrasis.

In positing a Lacanian reading of this sequence, I argue that the character subjects herself to a fallacious, never-ending mirror stage in which each canvas is a reflection which inevitably fails her. Sonia's Ego ideal becomes in and of itself an entirely idiosyncratic fragmentation, each piece belonging to someone else's unique take on her appearance: not only those students, but every single spectator as well, yielding a myriad of discrete, competing representations which further splinter the character. In fact, the lack of a unified reflection causes the character to continually search for herself in vain, moving from canvas to canvas, unknowingly delegating the completion of the process of her identification in a case of extreme *méconnaissance*, or *méconnaissance* to the second power. Sonia's idea of herself is as fractured as it is entirely mediated. In failing to give birth to her Lacanian self autonomously, the character relinquishes her identity and her body with it. The narrative then moves to establish Vittorio as the source of and the

reason for a cohesive, more clearly structured and unified identity for Sonia; similarly, the narrative also espouses the notion that Sonia's own attempt at agency is indeed a performative act. However, Sonia's circumstances clearly display a problematic relationship between agency and performance, and I argue that the two notions do not and cannot collide into a cohesive, structured, unified and ultimately successful act of being.

As hinted, Sonia's own body is in the film coded as a character unto itself, one that slowly carves itself a specific cinematic agency within the narrative separate from the character's own mounting defiance, if not resilience altogether. Sonia's weight loss is inversely proportional to her dedication to the diet: the more weight she appears to shed, the less she seems willing or able to stick to her diet. A number of scenes, oftentimes set in the bathroom as Vittorio bathes her or weighs her in, purposely frame Sonia's figure in unconventional, complex shapes, detailing for example the oval of her back as she hunches forward in the bathtub, exposing the spiky line of her spine caused by her protruding bones, or the acute angle between her arms and her legs as she kneels down to the ground. The narrative is hereby forgoing Sonia's body as a biological entity, changing it into an artifact – a product of artifice – instead. Vittorio is utilizing Sonia's diet as a tool, not unlike a file or a pair of pliers, to cause her to shed all superfluity and uncover her essence. He regards the implementation of her diet much like the process of crafting one of his creations, by breaking down the exterior mold to free the golden creation within. Sonia's mold, represented by her excess weight, signifies a hurdle in Vittorio's attempt to, as he says, “Togliere tutto, bruciare tutto [...] alla fine resta solo quello che conta veramente.”⁶⁷ Stuck in a relationship where she is body, or more accurately a

⁶⁷ “To strip everything away, to burn everything down [...] what's left in the end is what really matters.”

performance of body, and in which her body is being appropriated, regulated, and morphed by someone else, Sonia is denied any chance at self-actualization, either as a partner or as a woman altogether. As an artifact, her body is someone else's creation, an object over which she cannot claim any ownership.⁶⁸ Sonia's portrayal of girlfriendhood never amounts to anything more than a strained, convoluted performance, one in which she is constantly trying to keep up with her director's demands, and one in which she is never able to successfully project herself.

It is then unsurprising that Sonia's performance slowly but surely begins to acquire the appearance and the characteristics of a neurosis. In the 1930s, psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch organized the theorization of *als-ob* (as-if) personality disorder, which she further developed in 1942. According to Deutsch, people afflicted by the disorder are able to establish and maintain apparently normal social relationships, but generally leave others with an impression of inauthenticity. These people, according to Deutsch, function socially only as long as they can create a rapport of dependency with someone else, with whom they then identify, as they lack a discrete sense of identity. Deutsch explains that *als-ob* people are essentially impostors, and that "[their] apparently normal relationship to the world corresponds to a child's imitativeness and is the expression of identification with the environment, a mimicry which results in an ostensibly good adaptation to the

My translation.

⁶⁸ In the film, Vittorio goes as far as creating a line of golden trinkets inspired by Sonia (or by his own ideal of womanhood as filtered through Sonia), which resemble emaciated, skeletal figurines with thin, elongated frames. His business fails after he is unable to find buyers interested in purchasing these creations. This subplot reinforces the character's stance in relation to his girlfriend's body, and it also possibly represents a directorial nod to the process of spectatorship itself, with Garrone knowingly inferring that audiences will come to reject Sonia's physicality much like the filmic buyers did with the trinkets, which are perceived as unappealing, harsh and undesirable.

world of reality despite the absence of object cathexis.”⁶⁹ In this light, it is as though Sonia’s agency comes to collide with the development of an as-if personality, both in connection to Vittorio and in connection to her own body. Sonia’s agency as girlfriend is in fact a feat of mimicry, a clumsy imitation of an unfamiliar social convention that she struggles to uphold; by the same token, she becomes completely dependent on her body to define that agency, as I have shown, and her relationship with it becomes fundamentally anticathectic at the end. In light of this I argue that, through the character’s vicissitudes, the movie challenges the notion of agency altogether, presenting it not as a coherent realization of different social constructs, but as an act of imitation and of approximation which does not in fact come to describe or define identity or selfhood. Sonia is never girlfriend, but rather she is an actor of girlfriendhood; *girlfriend* never becomes part of her identity makeup, but it rather is a complex, manufactured undertaking that requires the character to undo and compromise her physicality via a drastic transformation, and ultimately one that is bound to flounder as a result. Sonia’s agency is moreover entirely dependent on a condition that drastically alters her body, a condition which she only develops to enhance that very undertaking.

Anorexia nervosa, from the Greek for no appetite, is a syndrome that causes the affected individual to refuse to maintain a healthy body weight, and it is often connected with an obsessive fear of gaining weight, and a cognitive bias vis-à-vis one’s own body image. Oftentimes, even terminal anorectic patients maintain that they are overweight, and physically perceive themselves as such. Albeit extensively studied, anorexia is not

⁶⁹ Helene Deutsch, Some Forms of Emotional Disturbance and Their Relationship to Schizophrenia (Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 11, 1942) 304. In psychoanalysis, cathexis is defined as the process of investment of mental or emotional energy in a person, object, or idea. Deutsch reframed her theories on as-if personality disorder in 1942, linking them to the study of schizophrenia.

yet fully understood beyond its behavioral and biological mechanics. Current studies are considering the disorder in connection to genetics, sociology, neurobiology, and psychiatry;⁷⁰ in spite of its high mortality rate, there are no approved pharmacological treatments that can treat it successfully. It especially targets adolescent girls or young women, but cases are reported that defy gender distinctions and span almost all age groups; it might be triggered by unresolved parental-filial dynamics or peer pressure, or happen as a response to certain socially-imposed or socially-promoted image standards that are perceived as alienating or antagonistic by the individual. Placing Sonia within the more conventional spectrum of this condition is not an easy task.

Sonia operates much like the starving type (as opposed to the purging type), but her diet is rigorously scheduled and enforced by someone else. She has little to no control over her eating regimen, and it is openly suggested that she would have no problem eating to her heart's content outside of the relationship with Vittorio. As a matter of fact, the film also details the character's more or less successful attempts to eat and sustain herself unbeknownst to her partner. Furthermore, Sonia becomes more and more aware of her weight loss and of the way it starts impacting her looks, and her thinness increasingly becomes a source of distress and disgust. In The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes Against the Body, Anna Motz notes that "like other manifestations of self-harm, anorexia nervosa can be seen as a communicative attempt, and as a solution, no matter how

⁷⁰ For a larger and differentiated theoretical framework for the study and the understanding of anorexia nervosa, see among others Anorexia Nervosa: A Multidimensional Perspective (Garfinkel and Garner, 1982), Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents: A Clinical Handbook (Grange and Lock, 2011), Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia and the Person Within (Bruch, 1979), Psychosomatic Families: Anorexia Nervosa in Context (Minuchin, Rosman, Baker, 1978), and Emotion Recognition and Regulation in Anorexia Nervosa (Harrison, Tchanturia, Treasure, Sullivan, 2009).

maladaptive, to a central conflict or difficulty.”⁷¹ the anorectic patient, unable to verbalize her issues, tries to convey them by changing her physical shape into one that is unfamiliar, one that lies outside the boundaries of what is considered ordinary or altogether human. Motz also argues that “(t)hrough self-starvation women can carve their bodies into objects of desire and trophies testifying to their self-control and self-sacrifice. The weapon of this act of destructive self-control is the body.”⁷²

I believe that this very act of testifying is implicitly scopophilic in nature: being looked at as non-human causes the anorectic body to become a visual testimony of non-conformity, and implicitly also a call for attention. The idea of an anorectic body being used as a vessel of testimony is central to the narrative of Primo amore, but this act is inevitably compromised by the characters’ own skewed perspectives about themselves and each other, rendering their eyes and their gaze unreliable narrators in the diegesis. Truth then is to be found elsewhere: Primo amore establishes mirrors as the only places of truth in the narrative,⁷³ a truth whose nature and scope are to foster a process of self-identification. Mirrors are objects that confront the characters with who they are and what they fail to see about themselves, and by extension they confront the characters with agency as an act of dissimulation.

Sonia doesn’t find herself in front of an actual mirror until late in the film, at which point in time her diet has already exacted a visible toll on her appearance. This scene is perceptively set in a boutique, a place intended to enhance one’s looks and

⁷¹ Anna Motz, The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes Against the Body (East Sussex, Brunner-Routledge, 2001) 192.

⁷² Motz 194.

⁷³ By establishing a link between mirrors as places of truth and the idea of the movie screen as a mirror itself, which I discussed earlier in connection to Christian Metz, Primo amore implicitly furthers a theory about film spectatorship and identification by positing the movie screen as a place of truth.

physicality, where Vittorio has taken her to shop for new clothes. Sonia walks out of the fitting room wearing a white, baggy, shapeless dress that conceals her now severely emaciated body. Sonia meekly suggests that she likes the garment while facing the mirror, before turning to face Vittorio. Sonia is exposed for the first time to her unfiltered image, as in the reflection that the mirror is sending back to her, which suddenly confronts her with the failure of her body as a visual reminder of the failure of her agency. Sonia decides she would rather conceal her figure, and keep it private, a secret between Vittorio and her that should not be exposed. Vittorio instead tells her insistently to try on a black, extremely fitted dress that exposes her gaunt silhouette rather suggestively instead. The play on black and white and the two specular outfits is obvious enough: according to Gregory Stone⁷⁴, appearance in and of itself is an actualization of one's identity, and by choosing a specific appearance, one is enacting identity on both a personal and on a social level.

However, there is something else at stake in this scene: this very sequence marks the moment in which Sonia's appearance trespasses beyond the human realm into a realm of otherness, where by otherness I propose an idea of unfamiliarity or unconventionality somewhat akin to Butler's theorization of non-humanity. While Butler talks about non-humanity in connection to deviant sexual orientation,⁷⁵ here otherness should be understood as a departure from socially accepted and acceptable standards. Stephen Asma, in On Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears (2009), talks about a comparable idea in his discussion of inhuman as a category of monstrosity, arguing that

⁷⁴ In Appearance and the Self (in Human Behavior and Social Processes, edited by Arnold Rose, 1962), Stone discusses the reflexivity and the intentionality of appearance in connection to the development and establishment of one's identity.

⁷⁵ Deviant is to be understood literally, as a departure from the norm and from accepted (not necessarily acceptable) social standards.

“an action or a person or a thing is monstrous when it can’t be processed by our rationality, and also when we cannot readily relate to the emotional range involved.”⁷⁶

Similarly, Sonia’s transformation precipitates her appearance into the realm of irrationality, of monstrosity, into an example of otherness that she would rather camouflage outside of her relationship with Vittorio. Conversely, her otherness is for Vittorio a feature that he crafted onto her, an outstanding quality he now wishes to showcase as his most successful piece of work, his greatest artifact. This sequence configures the character’s final, irrevocable reversal (if not refusal altogether) of the mirror stage she had first experienced in the art studio. Sonia is caught in between two dueling self-images: on the one hand, she faces her image in the mirror, one that is supposed to be absorbed autonomously, and evaluated as a real, accountable, accurate self-reflection; on the other hand, she also faces the image of her that Vittorio, whom the narrative also clearly employs as a mirror of sorts, is pursuing and sending back to her. She is sick and skeletal according to the former, attractive and flawless according to the latter. Unable to negotiate these two opposites, and struck with the sudden realization that she is girlfriend only insofar as she is anorectic, Sonia has a nervous breakdown in the store, in front of the same mirror in which she had located herself for the first time.

After this dramatic scene, the characters experience a filmic collapse of sorts. In perhaps the most startling sequence of the entire film, Sonia and Vittorio are framed discussing the future of their relationship on a boat out in the middle of a lake. The narrative pace of the movie has by now acquired a rather elliptical quality, and this entire sequence plays out both as chronologically and diegetically disjointed and independent

⁷⁶ Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009) 10.

from the rest of the plot: it might be a dream, or a memory, or reality. The two characters are shown completely out of focus against a crisp, clear background: the pointed use of selective focus blurs their bodies almost beyond recognition, while everything else in the frame remains perfectly sharp.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Vittorio's eyes appear hollowed out, two pitch-black holes, while Sonia's body has acquired a sheer, ghost-like quality. Vittorio is heard talking to Sonia about the importance of what they are trying to accomplish together, and then he moves on to discuss the future, projecting to a point in time where she will have reached her goal weight, his project will be completed, and the two will be able to start anew, be happy. The monologue rambles on with no rhyme or reason, and the audience comes to the realization that Vittorio does not in fact have a plan, that there is no real structure to his project, and that Sonia's metamorphosis is always going to be a work in progress: she will never be right for the part.

As the couple's dynamics implode and their relationship progressively loses its grasp on reality, the film loses the characters altogether, and so does the audience. Along with Vittorio, Sonia is ultimately dismantled for good as a cinematic object when the audience is finally deprived of her image in focus, and the sequence itself denies the spectators any coherence,⁷⁸ as there is none to be found in those circumstances anymore.

⁷⁷ Trevisan explained that this sequence was the result of a fortuitous occurrence and was entirely improvised, including Vittorio's lengthy monologue. Garrone ultimately decided to process it and include it in the film to symbolize the fact that the characters are both irremediably compromised, and that "a questo punto, nessuno dei due è presente." "By now, neither is present." My translation.

⁷⁸ Oakley classifies coherence as deductive, explanatory and deliberative. According to him, coherence is attributed to film by spectators based on the meeting of certain expectations and predictions, which are both diegetic and extra-diegetic in nature (they are based on inferences that are specific to a narrative and inferences that are based on logical outcomes). Deliberative coherence refers in particular to the ability of a narrative to meet the audience's desires and expectations, and it is the one with which mainstream cinema usually tinkers the most. Deductive coherence refers to the spectator's ability to anticipate a narrative's outcome(s), and explanatory coherence refers to the spectator's ability to make sense of and reconcile the filmic circumstances as they are actuated in the diegesis. Garrone's

As the spectators realize that Vittorio's expectations will never be possibly met by Sonia, the spectators' own expectations vis-à-vis the narrative are shattered as a result, turning Sonia into an empty signifier of purposeless change. Sonia is indeed a ghostly creature, as Metz posited, but one which the audience can no longer help, and to which no meaning can be assigned.

Unable to reconcile self and agency and to prioritize between the two, Sonia finally experiences a moment of defiance at the end of the film. Her head – as Vittorio would put it – or perhaps her basic survival instincts completely take over, and her physiological needs finally reject her transformation. In the penultimate sequence, which is set during a date at a restaurant, Sonia is quite literally unable to help or contain herself: she first takes hold of Vittorio's entrée, and then she mindlessly grabs the food in the restaurant's kitchen while Vittorio tries to drag her outside, fueled by a manic determination that causes nothing to exist outside of her hunger and her need to extinguish it. Once back home, Sonia is forced to purge all the food she violently ingested and is further humiliated by Vittorio, who strips her down naked in the basement and confronts her with her failure as a project and as a girlfriend (and by extension, her inherent failure as a character). As an admonishment, Vittorio yells at her:

Non posso lasciarti andare, Sonia. Lo capisci, che non è possibile? [...] Io non ho lasciato niente dietro di me, non ho proprio niente da perdere. Ti ricordi com'eri? Ti ricordi? [...] Sei un'altra persona, pero' non sei nemmeno un'altra persona, non sei ancora un'altra persona...non sei un cazzo, Sonia. Anch'io non sono più un cazzo se tu te ne vai. Lo capisci, questo? ⁷⁹

manipulation of the narrative in *Primo amore* fosters incoherence of all three kinds, which comes to fruition in the very scene on the boat which I analyzed.

⁷⁹ "I cannot let you go, Sonia. Do you understand that it isn't possible? [...] I have left nothing behind me, and I have absolutely nothing to lose. Do you remember the way you were? Do you? [...] You're a different person, but you're not quite a different person yet...you are nothing, Sonia. I am nothing, too, if you leave. Do you understand this?" My translation.

Sonia manages one last, almost exhausted act of rebellion, striking Vittorio on the head with a fireplace poker before making her way out of the basement onto the backyard, naked and shivering, as an unconscious Vittorio shakes and rattles on the ground, severely wounded but still alive. As a blank slate, the character is unable to decide whether to stay or to escape, as she is last seen outside of the house, lingering in doubt. The camera slowly pans away; a voice-over by Vittorio on the significance and the importance of his project loops the ending of the film back to the beginning, signifying a moment of suspension or stasis via the circularity of the narrative. Sonia is finally exposed as an aborted project, both in the context of her relationship and that of the narrative. With this ending, the film moves to establish that the failure of her agency as girlfriend points to an altogether larger failure: the alignment of agency and identity as one and the same is unequivocally negated by the narrative. Keeping this idea in mind, I will move to formulate a new working definition of identity as disengaged and independent from agency in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: All About My Mother: Agrado, the Agreeable One

Reality and fiction are indissolubly intertwined in All About My Mother (1999). The film is dedicated – and arguably intended as a tribute – to women and actresses, and director Pedro Almodóvar’s ending caption reads, “To Bette Davis, Gina Rowlands, Romy Schneider. To all actresses who have played actresses, to all women who act, to men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers, to my mother.” This thoughtful homage indirectly establishes the coexistence, or at the very least a mutual awareness of sorts, of performance and life, of acting and being as two halves of a whole. Unsurprisingly then, the interplay between authenticity and simulation, as a number of studies have noted,⁸⁰ is one of the principal narrative concerns of the film. The plot weaves together stories of women who act on and off the stage, women who are other than what they seem or what they portray, men who are women, and men who are mothers, causing the reversal or the implosion of the typical, culturally accepted male-female dyad, and that of family as a traditional structure altogether. The film also complicates the notion of identity by investigating it in existentialist terms, both in connection to the ideas of performing the self and/or being a performance, and in connection to the surgical alteration of one’s body as a performance, by calling into question the status of this performance and its authenticity in and of itself.

In the film, Manuela (Cecilia Roth) is a nurse working in Madrid and the single mother of Esteban (Eloy Azorín), a teenager who is hit and killed by a car at the

⁸⁰ These concerns, as I will show, are raised by a number of essays considered in this section, whether explicitly or implicitly: I am specifically referring to The Example of Agrado: Image, Technics and Authenticity (Wenceslao Machado de Oliveira Jr), The Body and Spain: Pedro Almodóvar’s All About My Mother (Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz), Authenticity vs Simulation in Pedro Almodóvar’s All About My Mother (Olivia Băilănescu), All About Agrado, or the Sincerity of Camp in Almodóvar’s Todo sobre mi madre (Patrick Paul Garlinger), and All About Women: Pedro Almodóvar and the Heterosocial Dynamic (Stephen Maddison).

beginning of the movie, and whose sudden death functions as the narrative impetus that sets the plot into motion. Manuela then travels to Barcelona hoping to track down Esteban's father Lola (Toni Cantó), a drug addict who had left her to become a transvestite and later a prostitute. In Barcelona, Manuela rekindles her friendship with Agrado (Antonia San Juan), a jovial transsexual hooker, and becomes involved with a number of different characters: Huma (Marisa Paredes) and Nina (Candela Peña) two actresses featured in a successful revival of Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire (the same production she had seen with her son the night of his death) who are sisters on stage and lovers in real life; Rosa (Penélope Cruz), a young nun who works with abused, addicted and battered women and is herself pregnant with Lola's child, and Rosa's parents, an elderly man with Alzheimer's disease and his doting, close-minded wife (Fernando Fernán Gómez and Rosa María Sardá). Manuela tends to Rosa during her pregnancy, complicated by the fact that she contracted AIDS from Lola, and she becomes Huma's personal assistant and confidante. After Rosa's untimely death at the end of the film, Manuela is able to locate and make amends with a terminally ailing Lola, and she becomes the adoptive mother of Rosa's infant child, himself named Esteban, in a twist that ties together the filmic events in a narrative act of recurrence. As Olivia Bălănescu puts it, "[t]he movie is all about women, women in various disguises: mothers, daughters, actresses, lesbians, whores, nuns, transsexuals who form a female cast of culturally marginalized, but 'authentic', beings."⁸¹

To further elaborate on this notion, disguise in all its forms (be it related to acting, gender, or acts of pretense) is in the movie inherently conducive to a state of authenticity,

⁸¹ Olivia Bălănescu, Authenticity vs Simulation in Pedro Almodóvar's All About My Mother (Gender Studies, 1 (9), 2010) 154.

and Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz points out that “the theatrical/media intersections in this film do not really “mediate,” because [...] the feelings are real.”⁸² However, I argue that disguise moves to characterize that very state of authenticity altogether. As a matter of fact, no character is in disguise – at least as far as her appearance is concerned – more than Agrado, the transsexual prostitute who ultimately replaces Manuela as Huma’s personal assistant; by default, this claim shall allow me to consider her as the most authentic character in the film. Moreover, Agrado is positioned by Almodóvar as the pulsating heart of All About My Mother: as the film progresses and unravels with all the twists, turns and sudden revelations so typical of the auteur’s storytelling, Agrado (which roughly translates into agreeable or pleasing) is at once a tool of comedic relief, a Greek chorus that oversees and comments on the proceedings, and a point of reference for all the other characters which inevitably gravitate around her.

It might seem as though there is a certain dose of irony in appointing a male to female transsexual prostitute as the resident voice of reason. Yet, the implication is that Agrado has really seen and experienced it all; furthermore, there is a secret understanding between Almodóvar and the audience that because of who Agrado is or better, because of who she has shaped herself into, she has gained access to a superior, special understanding of life and of the complexity of human nature. The character’s privileged status within the narrative, and its function as a bridge between the narrative itself and the spectators, shall also be considered in my argumentation. When the audience first meets Agrado, her clothes torn apart and her face bruised and bloodied after a rough confrontation with a john, one might have a hard time buying her as anything more than a

⁸² Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz, The Body and Spain: Pedro Almodóvar’s All About My Mother (Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 201 (1), 2004) 32.

wayward, damaged, diegetically peripheral presence. It is during an impromptu monologue in a theater that she finally raises a few revelatory points that break open the character, and raise a number of crucial questions for my analysis: what role does plastic surgery play in a process of identity reshaping, and how is fake a pathway to real? How believable is a profession of authenticity performed on a stage, and filmed by a camera? How may identity be defined in this context as separate from agency/performance?

I believe that, interestingly enough, the same dyad of reality and fiction that modulates the filmic dynamics of All About My Mother can be applied to the understanding and the analysis of the practice, if not of the realm itself, of plastic or cosmetic surgery altogether: a real, natural body is surgically altered, manipulated, reconstructed into one that is unreal, unnatural, counterfeit or, in Agrado's case, one that is the opposite gender. It is in this sense that I want to engage theories of body surgery in connection to the character: plastic surgery does not merely change the body, but it has moved to change the way we think about the body, and its social and cultural implication. In The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty (2012), Bernadette Wegenstein proposed the idea of a cosmetic gaze to explain the act of looking at oneself and others in ways that are trained and informed by techniques and cultural paradigms of body modification (often of the surgical kind), adding that this modification is inherently perceived also as a gateway to an improvement of one's character or to one's intrinsic quality as a human being. The context for Wegenstein's theorization is the prominent make-over discourse that characterizes today's media and popular culture, with TV shows, blogs and websites that celebrate the manipulated body as an effort towards a better self.

The possibility to alter one's own appearance, whether slightly or beyond recognition, has assigned to the body a fluid, ever-changing quality that negates its monolithic sacredness and makes it instead a locus of fluctuations and negotiations. In this light, Agrado functions as a bridge to engage theories of body modification as pertinent to her filmic trajectory in All About My Mother. According to John Jordan,

humans [have come to be defined as] surgically malleable entities – “plastic bodies” – whose corporeal identity is always in a state of potential transition. This plastic body is a rhetorically contested substance, with a variety of social agents engaged in efforts to shape its public meaning and, by extension, its corporeal form. Their messages frame contemporary debates about the human body, its entelechies, and the means by which individuals seek out and justify their desire for a “better” body.⁸³

Much scholarship has delved into the reasons and the motivations behind plastic surgery,⁸⁴ both on the end of the patient, who elects to have his clinically healthy body cut, opened, augmented or diminished in hopes of improvement or enhancement, and on that of the surgeon, whose professional and moral responsibility is that to negotiate the patient's desires and expectations and realistic, attainable results, if not the necessity to operate altogether. There are certainly a number of connections to be drawn between this radical notion of reshaping and the one subtending anorexia, which I have addressed in the previous chapter: much like the anorectic patient, the plastic surgery one is seeking a change in appearance to address issues that are not necessarily aesthetic; it is in fact this disconnect between perceived appearance and objective appearance that makes that change appear unwarranted. However, anorectic reshaping, as extreme as it may be, does

⁸³ John W. Jordan, The Rhetorical Limits of the “Plastic Body” (*Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90 (3), 2004) 327-328.

⁸⁴ See, among the others, Venus Envy: A History of Plastic Surgery (Elizabeth Haiken), Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery (Kathy Davis), In The Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification (Victoria Pitts-Taylor), and Body/Politics: Studies in Reproduction, Production and (Re)Construction (Thomas C. Shevory) for a multi-faceted perspective on the topic.

not involve methods which can be classified as artificial (to be understood in this context as the opposite of natural), or which reconfigure the body artificially. This causes two radically different responses to these two acts of reshaping: the anorectic patient is commiserated, whereas the cosmetic surgery patient is left to deal with a social stigma, which is generally enacted as a judgment on the character and persona of the surgically altered individual. This instance is similarly traceable in much scholarship about cosmetic surgery itself: whether one moves to discuss or analyze the phenomenon medically, ethically, psychologically or culturally, the patient is considered an anomaly, a case study in ego-dystonia, even a victim.⁸⁵

In some instances, this is indeed uncontestable: Jordan himself makes a compelling case about the rhetoric of the plastic body, convincingly arguing that cosmetic surgery advocacy has successfully worked off the pretense that plastic bodies are no longer a luxury but a right, and that everybody is entitled to “realize their body image ideals,”⁸⁶ implicitly suggesting that natural bodies, albeit healthy, are still fundamentally wrong and should be perceived as such by their inhabitants. This perception is further fostered by the relentless display of celebrity bodies in the media: actors, models, athletes whose appearance is routinely airbrushed, photo-shopped or surgically enhanced to appear flawless and desirable, suggesting that with a different nose, larger breasts, higher cheekbones and fuller lips anybody could become or be just

⁸⁵ In Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery (Frontiers, 26 (2), 2005) Virginia Blum essentially describes her survey sample under the same umbrella of “western woman” (104), presenting this model as a celebrity/image-obsessed individual, and she focuses specifically on polysurgical addicts. The essay does not delve into, for example, the practice of corrective plastic surgery, and it doesn’t seem to acknowledge patients who were in fact content with the results of their surgeries. Additional perspectives can be found in Jordan, Davis, and Body Images: Development, Deviance and Change (Cash, Pruzinsky), The “Insatiable” Cosmetic Surgery Patient (Knorr, Edgerton, Hoopes), and The Surgical Self: Body Alteration and Identity (Philip Auslander), among others.

⁸⁶ Jordan 328.

like that celebrity – beautiful, admired, successful, rich. Regardless, plastic surgery is – if not demonized altogether – still looked at askew, with diffidence, as a shortcut that allows the individual to surgically fix his self-discontent and his complexes, and as a vain and deviant means of “reinvention.”⁸⁷

For the purpose of my research, I intend to dwell on and investigate this very idea of reinvention both in connection to the surgically altered body and the reshaping of one’s identity, and to the character of Agrado whom, as I perhaps paradoxically already stated, I shall hold as the ultimate example of authenticity instead. Reinvention, as shown, is a key term in the rhetoric associated with cosmetic surgery: the plastic body is reconfigured, re-imagined, reinvented to right the wrong, to become aesthetically pleasing, to look better; but reinvention also refers to the idea of remodeling one’s self – to be intended in this case specifically as one’s attitude, character, personality – to reflect that external change, to start anew, to be other. Virginia Blum zooms in on the idea of otherness in connection to plastic surgery in her essay Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery,⁸⁸ in which she moves to study the underlying connection between cosmetic surgery and “the fulfillment of a certain Western female identity narrative, the relationship with the “Other Woman.””⁸⁹ Not unlike Lorella Zanardo, Blum posits that heterosexual women understand themselves and each other according to the dictates of male desire, and are compelled to alter themselves to appease that desire or, I would argue, to become it. This paradigm is however consequential and

⁸⁷ The same rhetoric of reinvention is variously employed by Blum, Jordan, Auslander, and also by the bulk of the scholarship about All About My Mother and Agrado as considered in my research (Băilescu, Machado de Oliveira Jr, Acevedo-Muñoz).

⁸⁸ By “psychic drama,” Blum specifically refers to “the ways in which the social practice of surgery participates in or even fulfills specific physical urgencies” (105). This definition, according to Blum, is based on the claim that plastic surgery must be psychically satisfying.

⁸⁹ Blum 106.

subordinate to an altogether deeper, central issue in the understanding of cosmetic surgery:

[c]osmetic surgery can be seen as a dramatization of the relationship between a woman and an imaginary Other Woman figure, the perennial rival with whom girls are taught to compete the moment they know and care about what it means to be pretty. She is the one who, because of some imaginary set of superior charms, entrances your partner away from you. She is you if you were ten pounds thinner. She is you when you have this, this, and that fixed. She eventually becomes your own lost youth and beauty. [...] the Other Woman threatens to steal women's identity in both literal and figurative ways. If she takes our husband, then she could take our bank accounts, our houses, our last names, even our children.⁹⁰

Plastic surgery, understood in such terms, becomes paradoxically a weapon of self-preservation: reinvention is not only to be understood as a means to upend the rival, but also a tool of retention of one's own perceived selfhood and with that, retention of the status quo. In this sense, Blum ultimately disengages the male gaze altogether, suggesting that,

[o]ne wonders, however, to what extent these standards are male when they are passed down from mother to daughter. The patriarchy seems to recede in favor of a rather totalitarian matriarchy; indeed when one woman becomes thin for another (among lesbians) there is an uncanny feeling of reproducing intact the daughter becoming thin for or because of her mother. Furthermore, when women prepare daughters for the beauty market in service to an assumed hetero regime (regardless of whether the daughter is, in fact, straight), we can see that men influence this narrative only insofar as they are experienced as some universal "outside," to which we all pay homage. Ultimately, it is all between women.⁹¹

In this process of self-preservation, the body is approached like an assemblage of different parts or components, not unlike a jigsaw puzzle or a machine, each one to be retooled and improved upon separately, fostering an understanding of the body as a

⁹⁰ Blum 110-111.

⁹¹ Blum 123.

fundamentally fractured, divided entity rather than a cohesive unit.⁹² The Other is however an empty signifier, an unreachable goal: even if one managed to successfully reshape herself into that mythical rival, she would ultimately have to deal with the rival's rival, or the rival's Other Woman, engaging in a never-ending process of meaningless change, and of "ongoing fragmentation and recomposition (sic) of the body."⁹³

My choice to rely on Blum's theorizations rather than scholarship that specifically targets transsexual plastic surgery or gender reassignment surgery altogether is motivated by the intention not to betray my central claim that Agrado has in fact been woman all along, even when she happened to look like a man, and even more crucially by the notion that her gender is not reassigned, but more exactly reclaimed. Judith Butler, herself drawing on Jean Baudrillard as it will soon become apparent, proposed the following in Imitation and Gender Insubordination (1993)⁹⁴ when discussing the nature of gender as a social construct:

gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself [...] That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it 'knows' its own possibility of becoming undone.⁹⁵

This claim would seem to altogether invalidate ideas of transsexualism and of gender reassignment at their very core:⁹⁶ as such, it would be complicated by the narrative

⁹² As previously mentioned, Laura Mulvey discussed similar notions of fragmentation in film in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. However, Blum specifically mentions the practice of selling beauty products, creams and make-up that specifically target one body part isolating it from the rest, or from the whole (face, neck, arms, legs products and so on) to further her argument about the cultural sectioning of the female body.

⁹³ Blum 125.

⁹⁴ This discussion is also inherently engaged by Butler in Gender Trouble, when the author discusses ideas of performativity.

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, Imitation and Gender Insubordination (The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, New York, Routledge, 1993) 313.

⁹⁶ As a matter of fact, Butler's claim that gender is the product of a sociality that has no single author

trajectory of a character like Agrado who, while certainly not engaging in an imitation of gender or in drag (which she in fact abhors as a practice, as clearly stated in the film), is regardless alarmingly aware of the disconnect between her gender and her biological appearance, so much that she is compelled to act upon it and dispel it. Butler further expanded her position on gender performativity in Undoing Gender, utilizing the case of David Reimer⁹⁷ to look at the intersex condition in the chapter titled Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality, but did so with a measure of ambiguity, suggesting that,

[...]my point in recounting this story and its appropriation for the purposes of gender theory is to suggest that the story as we have it does not supply evidence for either thesis, [...] one that neither confirms nor denies the theory of social construction, one that neither affirms nor denies gender essentialism. [...] There was an apparatus of knowledge applied to the person and body of Joan/John that is rarely, if ever, taken into account as part of what John responds to when he reports on his feelings of true gender.⁹⁸

Much like Blum's admittedly compelling argument,⁹⁹ one which calls into question the very notion of authenticity, Butler's ideas on performativity offer a challenging context for my discussion of Agrado as a transsexual character. I contend that All About My Mother, and more specifically the character of Agrado, toy with and subvert notions of otherness, gender and identity in ways that will allow me to show that

challenges in itself the very idea of authorship altogether.

⁹⁷ Reimer lost his penis at six months of age after a botched circumcision. His parents sought out the advice of John Money, a noted psychologist and scholar of gender identity. Money famously supported the theory of gender neutrality – gender being developed as a result of social learning – and persuaded David's parents to have the child undergo sex reassignment surgery, in order for the child to grow up identifying as female through therapy. However, David (then Brenda) started to identify as male around the time he turned eleven, suggesting that the reassignment surgery and ensuing treatment had not been successful. Reimer ultimately took his life at the age of 38. In his research, Money described this as the John/Joan case.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (London; New York, Routledge, 2004) 66-67.

⁹⁹ Blum also expands her argument to incorporate the mother as the primordial "Other Woman," arguing that the relationship between mother and daughter naturally informs the latter about her looks and her aesthetic inadequacies, while the mother comes to embody beauty itself.

otherness isn't necessarily an external, illusory construct, but may be understood as an internal, authentic one, and that there is in fact no reinvention at all to be found in connection to the reshaping of one's body and identity, but rather that cosmetic surgery more accurately represents an act of recognition and appropriation of one's identity via the reshaping of one's body, where identity should be understood as one's self-understanding. Like Bălănescu, who also employs the term *reinvention* in connection to both cosmetic surgery and Agrado, I shall work from Jean Baudrillard's theories on reality, symbols and simulation¹⁰⁰ in connection to the film and the character's function in it, but I move instead to look at Agrado as an exemplification of that very act of self-recognition and appropriation.

If authenticity is to be understood as the quality of being genuine, real, original, it is in philosophy a notion inextricably bound to that of existence.¹⁰¹ In this context, authenticity is explained as the conscious choice of freedom in spite or regardless of external demands or pressures. Similarly, psychology understands authenticity as the degree to which one is true to her core self,¹⁰² and as a key component of one's mental well-being, vitality and self-esteem. However, the work of Jean Baudrillard on the notion

¹⁰⁰ The main referent for my discussion is Jean Baudrillard's pivotal philosophical treatise Simulacra and Simulation (1981).

¹⁰¹ Authenticity is one of the main concerns of the Existentialism, which can be classified as both a philosophical and more broadly cultural movement which began in the 19th century and flourished after World War II. Thinkers like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky were all differently concerned with matters of reality and authenticity in their oeuvres, often in connection to deeper matters on ontology, faith and freedom. As a reference, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (plato.stanford.edu)

¹⁰² As a reference, see Hermeneutics, Authenticity and the Aims of Psychology (Charles Guignon), Positive Psychology: An Introduction (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi), The Ethics of Authenticity (Charles Taylor), and Authenticity, Social Motivation, and Psychological Adjustment (Kernis, Goldman).

of simulation “threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary.””¹⁰³ Authenticity, according to Baudrillard, is problematic because,

[t]here is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.¹⁰⁴

According to Baudrillard, society today has arrived to replace reality (and all real meaning by extension) with symbols, making life not reality but rather a simulation of reality. Because of this, symbols implicitly prove that reality itself is no longer necessary to craft an understanding of the human experience; reality and simulation thus cease to be regulated by an order of dependence. In other words, in a world where it has become increasingly challenging to discriminate between original and copy and the copy inherently represents the attempt to ameliorate the original – thus coming to epitomize the hyperreal – the reproduction is to be considered more real than the original, and the original may come to cease to have meaning, or to exist altogether. Baudrillard’s argument is especially fitting when considered in connection to a film which, as I already mentioned, is narratively embedded in the interplay between real life and staged performance, real feelings and reproduced emotions, and one which features in *Agrado* a character that could be readily interpreted as a simulacrum herself, the copy of an original.¹⁰⁵

Having laid out this theoretical background, the next step is to establish how one may talk about authenticity and simulation in All About My Mother, and whether it is

¹⁰³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994) 2.

¹⁰⁴ Baudrillard 6.

¹⁰⁵ Bănescu implicitly supports this view, as well (161).

even possible to draw a line of demarcation between the two; this will help me reframe Agrado in my discussion of body reshaping in connection to identity reshaping, to further expand upon the argument on the nature and the legitimacy itself of the notions of agency and performance that I have introduced in my discussion of Primo amore. In the film, Almodóvar summons all the main characters on stage at some point, but all are similarly portrayed while they must negotiate life's various circumstances off the stage as well¹⁰⁶. Manuela, the protagonist, is a nurse who, near the beginning of the film, is called to perform a training skit in which she plays a woman who lost her husband and is now faced with the decision to consent to have his organs donated; five minutes or so later, the film unexpectedly confronts the character with the real loss of her son and a nearly identical occurrence, and the same performance of feelings of loss, despair and mourning which she had routinely enacted on video is reenacted as a dramatic reality by her. Later on, once Nina becomes unavailable to perform her part, Manuela is asked to fill in as Stella at the last minute; Stella is a role she had once played in her youth in an amateur production of the play, and that she is now called to replicate in the same production she had seen with her son the night of the accident.

Manuela produces a performance so unrehearsed and pregnant with real-life emotions, that she becomes an overnight sensation with critics and audiences alike. Huma, the famed actress who plays Blanche DuBois on stage, leads a life that is just as dramatic and overly affected as that of her character, mostly because of her relationship with Nina, who is a drug addict and a promiscuous, abusive individual. Off stage, the two

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly enough, long shots are employed in the film to frame most scenes that find the characters acting on stage, much like the revival of the play or moments of rehearsal, as to place the audience at a distance in order to underline a perceived artificiality. Moments of confession and introspection are conversely often shot in close-ups, as to place the viewer as close to the character and her emotions as possible.

enact an affair as tempestuous as any, filled with drama, tears and sudden plot twists, which negatively affects the production of the play throughout the entire film; furthermore, Huma tends to act like and quote her stage character in real life, clouding the separation between herself, her craft, and her on-stage persona. Esteban, Manuela's son, is keen on keeping a diary for as long as he is alive, and Almodóvar captures the tip of his pencil in an extreme close-up shot as he writes, suggesting the idea of a character who is literally inscribing the reality of his life onto the lens of a movie camera.¹⁰⁷

Finally, Agrado is given the chance to address the audience from atop the stage in the second half of the film, a sequence in which – as we will see – the character offers a profession of authenticity as she lists and discusses her cosmetic surgeries, all with the command and ease of a consumed performer. This last sequence will be of particular relevance within the scope of my project, as it further elaborates on the ambiguous relationship between being and performing, sustaining my argument about the failure of agency performance as detailed in Primo amore.

All these instances clearly speak to a concerted effort to blur the distinction and the separation between reality and fiction, what is lived and what is performed, what is felt and what is acted. Going even further, I would posit that the narrative makes it possible to suggest that the copy, intended here as performance, or as an act of reproducing life on stage, is in and of itself part of the precession of simulacra theorized

¹⁰⁷ If Esteban is to be understood as a movie referent for Almodóvar himself, this metaphorical act also arguably posits the film as an autobiographical text: both Almodóvar and his character are in fact at work on texts titled Todo sobre mi madre (a film and a journal respectively). Esteban's pencil becomes the filmic stand-in for Almodóvar's camera, and the two vessels come into contact and mutual acknowledgment in this shot.

by Baudrillard, and because of this just as real as life, if not more real altogether.¹⁰⁸ By now, it should have become evident that Agrado, who is on the surface a copy of femininity achieved via the pointed reshaping, augmenting, and re-gendering of her physical attributes, is in fact a woman rather than a surgical reproduction of femininity. By the same token, it should also be clear that the reshaping of Agrado's body is not a means in the process of changing or reinventing her identity, but instead a correction intended to externalize the presence of the Other Woman. I claim that the Other Woman should be understood as the character's own and authentic understanding of womanhood and of herself, genetically hidden by a set of inaccurate features but already and always within her.

The scholarship on the film widely supports Agrado's profession of authenticity; yet, there is still a level of ambiguity in describing the nature of this perceived authenticity. For example, Patrick Paul Garlinger points out that,

Agrado takes the work of a woman – the work it takes to be a woman – and turns it into the performance of an actress. Agrado uses the work done on her body not to service her clients but to entertain the public, transforming the labor of prostitution and plastic surgery into a work of art. [...] Agrado captures this dimension of camp as a form of “play” within the labor of entertainment, for the very function of her monologue is to strip bare the process of “constructing” a female figure for the public's consumption.¹⁰⁹

After reiterating this rhetoric about performance, he then concludes that,

As much as Agrado makes fun of herself in an excessive, theatrical manner she is, in the end, profoundly *sincere*. Sincerity and authenticity are of course not precisely synonyms. [...] Nevertheless, in the context of *Todo sobre mi madre* (sic), “sincerity” and “authenticity” remain fundamentally connected: for all her humor, her avowal of sentiment about her body is sincere, and that sincerity is

¹⁰⁸ Precession is used by Baudrillard to explain that simulacra have come to precede the real not in a chronological, historical sense, but rather in the sense that simulacra have moved from signs that dissimulate the real to signs that effectively dissimulate that there is nothing.

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Paul Garlinger, *All About Agrado, or the Sincerity of Camp in Almodóvar Todo Sobre Mi Madre* (*Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 5 (1), 2004) 101.

part and parcel of her allegiance to authenticity.¹¹⁰

It seems, in other words, that Agrado's authenticity as a woman is not quite a matter of personal identity as much as it is a matter of degree of sincerity in her performance, and that this performance is so successful and entertaining because it is aware of its own artificiality, and able to acknowledge it pointedly and humorously. As I mentioned, similar concerns about Agrado's realness or authenticity are raised, directly and indirectly, by other studies: if the consensus seems to be that the character is authentic insofar as her personal manifesto is, she isn't quite woman as much as a performer whose "performance is embodied."¹¹¹

This stance is not only reductive and questionable, but I argue that it betrays both the character and Almodóvar's intentions altogether. Very little attention is paid by the scholarship to the fact that the director intentionally cast female actor Antonia San Juan to play the part¹¹² (whereas male actor Toni Cantó was selected to portray the transvestite character in the film, Lola): this pointed choice means to imply that Agrado is to be understood as unequivocally female, so much that a female actor would be needed to capture the essence of her gender identity. Within the different narrative strategies of the film, the character is also employed, as I briefly mentioned above, as a source of acceptance and understanding for the other characters, a figure that arguably embodies a sublimation of both – I would like to say all – genders into the female one to become an enlightened, enhanced presence of motherly comfort and wisdom.¹¹³ It is in this guise

¹¹⁰ Garlinger 102.

¹¹¹ Michael Sofair, *All About My Mother* (Film Quarterly, 55 (2), 2001) 45.

¹¹² San Juan's appearance raised a number of questions regarding her gender which she addressed on multiple occasions, stating she is not transsexual or transgender.

¹¹³ It should also be noted that Agrado is in the film a pre-operative transsexual, and that an overt reference is made at the end of the film to the fact that because of her prayers, little Esteban was able to

that Almodóvar places Agrado as the entry point into the narrative for the audience, fostering a process of correspondence if not identification altogether: the character is able to swiftly handle the backstage drama between Huma and Nina, help Manuela take care of Rosa and locate Lola, rationalize and comment on the different diegetic vicissitudes, consider all events from an external, almost spectatorial perspective and offer sensible advice to everybody else on behalf of the viewer. The character, much like Sonia, is also the reflection – if not the product – of the social and cultural context that surrounded and welcomed the film upon its release; but unlike Sonia, Agrado is not a symbol of fragmentation or of disavowal, but rather one of re-composition: according to Acevedo-Muñoz, All About My Mother takes upon “the task to restoring the nation’s body”¹¹⁴ in the wake of the dissolution of the Franco regime, by staging the circumstances of emotionally and geographically displaced characters who eventually find themselves and each other. Acevedo-Muñoz posits that “Agrado’s discourse about her body may also be representative of the process of reconciliation and of the settling of identity issues, since [...] transvestitism and transsexuality have been seen as a sign of the nation’s “anxiety” in Almodóvar’s films,”¹¹⁵ thus supporting my view of Agrado as a fundamentally conciliatory presence within the diegesis. The character is also the primary source of the film’s humor and comedy, because of her eminently quick wit and penchant for derision. Her monologue, which I move to analyze below, is often pinpointed as one of the film’s comedic highlights; however, humor is not the point, just a means of delivery.

miraculously neutralize the HIV virus that he had inherited from his biological parents, effectively making him a medical wonder studied by doctors across the country.

¹¹⁴ Acevedo-Muñoz 30.

¹¹⁵ Acevedo-Muñoz 30.

Agrado's monologue is staged as an impromptu replacement act on a night when Nina and Huma have fought so violently, they have sent each other to the hospital and cannot perform their roles. Faced with the need to alert the spectators who have come to watch the play, Agrado quickly resolves not to tell them the truth, immediately quipping, "I'll make something up." This statement subtly toys with our spectatorial expectations because it chronologically precedes the character's arrival on stage, anticipating Agrado's monologue about herself as made up or about something made up, fake, as though she is the lie she will feed her audience. After all, all performances – theatrical and otherwise – are in fact made up, elaborate acts of fiction, and that is what the audience has paid for and wants to see. Agrado promises to entertain the audience by telling the story of her life which, in Ricœurian terms, would appear as though the character is positing herself as a narrative object, her life being recounted as a fictive alternative to the play that will not be staged. This assumption is immediately crushed by the staging of her speech, which Acevedo-Muñoz, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, defines "para-theatrical:"¹¹⁶ a space that fosters a disengagement from the theatrical setting to promote access into a deeper, more authentic understanding of the character. It is in this light that Agrado's monologue acquires the shine of a confession, reiterating the idea that the character is so far removed from the realm of performance, that she is not in fact performing even when she is on a stage, faced by not one but two audiences.

In Agrado's case, this para-theatrical locus is specifically the forefront of the stage, from atop of which she addresses the audience; the red curtains behind her stay closed shut, a further nod to the separation between the character and that very idea of theatricality. The monologue, for the rest, contains absolutely no information about

¹¹⁶ Acevedo-Muñoz 33.

Agrado's life story; both audiences, the one that came for the play and the one that is watching the film, will leave with very little insight into Agrado's past.¹¹⁷ The monologue is instead a detailed list of all the different surgeries that were needed by the character to achieve her current appearance, followed by their cost. Finally, in an extreme close-up, the character concludes that, "one can't be stingy with these things, because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you've dreamed of being." If the speech is indeed meant to encapsulate Agrado's life experience, then the manifest suggestion is that the character didn't exist before physically transitioning, as though cosmetic surgery itself is what bore her to life.

The rhetoric about dreams in connection to plastic surgery is used by Blum in diametrically opposite terms; she posits that the pursuit of "the face and the body of her dreams"¹¹⁸ characterizes the worst kind of plastic surgery addict, the one who will never be satisfied with her appearance and will continue chasing that dream indefinitely, reinventing herself over and over and compromising her appearance beyond repair in the process. The implication of this claim is that dream is fetishized by the patient to come to represent otherness, where otherness should be interpreted as that same rival who is forever lurking and represents a menace, a Sisyphean challenge, an artificial aberration. In the film, however, the narrative embraces a radically different interpretation of the same question, proposing the notion that Agrado is in fact authentic insofar as she resembles – or better, embodies – her own dream self. I argue that the film hence posits that the other woman is then not necessarily a socially fostered, foreign, unachievable and

¹¹⁷ What is given to know about the character is that she modeled her appearance after beauty and fashion trends of the '70s, and that she has a penchant for knockoffs, the latter detail signifying the character's predilection for perceived "fakeness" even in her choice of clothing. The 1970s also locate the character as an immediate chronological answer to Franco's politics, as hinted above.

¹¹⁸ Blum 106.

unauthentic construct, but it is in fact Agrado's own idea of selfhood – a deeply personal, specific, feasible and genuine one. In this light, otherness is to be understood instead not in antagonistic terms, but as the effigy of the authentic and the essence of Agrado's self-understanding, not other from the authentic but other from the apparent. Agrado is ultimately the *agreeable one* not only insofar as she acts as a propitiatory presence within the narrative, but because as a woman she fully and exactly agrees with her own understanding of herself.

In this light, reinvention carries no meaning in connection to the character's body and identity: Agrado's body is not reinvented to craft a new identity, but corrected in an act of conformation to her own self-understanding, which I claim the film allows me to define as one's identity, as independent from agency. Whereas Sonia had intensely tried and subsequently failed to reinvent herself as girlfriend, going as far as compromising her physicality in an act of appeasement actuated through a forcibly stilted performance, Agrado never reinvents herself as a woman: she is a woman all along, and the surgical work done on her body is meant to render her self-understanding of womanhood explicit in itself. Moreover, Almodóvar suggests via the same monologue that the pursuit of that effigy is part of a larger, ethic, personal responsibility: plastic surgery, in this context, is reconfigured as a fulfillment of this very responsibility, an act which fosters authenticity and opens a pathway towards it. If Sonia is to be understood as the exemplification of the failure of agency on a broader level, and Primo amore establishes that one cannot possibly shape herself into what she is not, Agrado, in her process of physical reshaping, is to be understood as the exemplification of identity as the core self-understanding one

formulates and maintains about oneself, moving from copy to authenticity, from reproduction to incarnation.

Part 3

Motherhood, Trauma, Agency, and Self-Understanding

Tutto regolare. Non puoi farci niente.

Sono io la madre a tutti gli effetti.

Valeria, La sconosciuta

You can count on Jenny, as if she was real.

Jenny, Face to Face

Introduction

In the previous section, I discussed identity reshaping in connection to the reshaping of the cinematic body, utilizing the filmic portrayals of anorexia and plastic surgery to posit the notion that identity is not an agent or a script, and that a performance of identity does not come to constitute identity in and of itself. In Primo amore, Sonia's failed performance of anorexia ultimately thwarts her attempt at embodying girlfriendhood: feigning the former, she can only pretend to achieve the latter. In All About My Mother, Agrado's profession of artificiality exposes her profound gender authenticity, as she in fact is the character she has crafted and appears to portray via her physicality. Having laid out this theoretical background, I then showed how the study of these characters allowed me to redefine identity not as performance or agency, but as the intrinsic self-understanding that one formulates and maintains about oneself.

In this section, Motherhood, Trauma, Agency, and Self-Understanding, I will apply this new definition to two characters whose journey of reshaping does not necessarily have an immediate physical manifestation, but is rather actuated internally and concerns chiefly the character's mind and emotional realm. This process might not be as overt and immediately apparent as those I examined in the previous chapters, but it is just as drastic and powerful: the characters I will be analyzing are Irena in Giuseppe

Tornatore's La sconosciuta (2006) and Dr. Jenny Isaksson in Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face (1976). Having now established identity as that self-understanding, at stake in this section is the study in film of the dynamics that are triggered when one's self-understanding is denied by external circumstances or by internal mechanisms, and of the processes of reshaping that ensue. The notion of past – to be understood also as extra-diegetic baggage – and its influence on the process of reshaping is the common thread that ties these characters together. The two films establish the past as a time of trauma, as a spectral presence which is engaged by the characters in diametrically opposing fashion: while Irena is haunted by everything she cannot forget, Jenny is haunted by everything she had forced herself to forget. However, the entry point to my study will be the analysis of motherhood identity and of mother as a social, cultural and psychological construct as portrayed in the two films, as well as the filmic techniques in which it is represented: flashbacks, hallucinations, visions, and hypnagogic states.

Motherhood becomes a central concern in my analysis of these films because differently enacted forms of denial in regards to that specific identity – calling it role would be too ambiguous, if not altogether inexact – become preponderant factors of reshaping for the two characters in my study. Furthermore, motherhood is variously encountered and ambiguously negotiated in the two narratives: in La sconosciuta, Tea's adoptive mother does not merely function as a diegetic foil to Irena, but she is rather a fully realized character meant to expose larger concerns related to the very nature of motherhood itself; comparable concerns are also raised in Face to Face, as Jenny's non-existent relationship with her own deceased mother is diversely reproduced in the character's relationship with her own daughter and her own grandmother. Within this

narrative milieu, both characters are variously confronted by different forms of loss.

Irena, once a prostitute involved in a black-market adoption racket, was forced over the years to relinquish nine babies after giving birth to them, effectively losing all of her children and her self-understanding as mother along with them; after the death of her parents, Jenny relinquished her past and her emotional attachment to it, and in doing so she irremediably forsook the dynamics and meanings of family and daughterhood coded within it. We find both characters struggling to mourn these losses, only to realize that loss is itself re-shaping and becoming who the two characters, in fact, are altogether. There does not seem to be anything more to Irena than her frantic search for her presumed daughter, as there isn't anything more to Jenny than the aseptic, disconnected present that she passively inhabits.

In both narratives, mourning is enacted as an annihilating process not only because it entails the mere confrontation and the rationalization of a loss or of a death, but more accurately because, as I will argue, it also inevitably entails the confrontation and the rationalization of the loss of one's self-understanding as a result of that loss or death. This claim shall be informed by applying my definition of identity as self-understanding to Judith Butler's own theories on mourning and subjectivity as detailed in Precarious Life (2004). Butler's study will be the springboard to the examination of these concerns and of scholarships on mourning in the field of trauma theory, themselves reshaped by my conclusions on identity as presented in the films included in my study. Furthermore, I will show that each character's path towards self-reshaping is guided by an innate, intrinsic need to reconfigure her self-understanding anew within the act of mourning itself. In both instances, the starting point of this process causes the characters

to revisit and explore their pasts, oftentimes unwillingly, triggering repressed memories that are narratively and filmically unresolved.

In both films, any cohesive narrative access to the characters' past is at first denied and then slowly teased out, and both characters operate within a cause/effect structure in which the latter is rendered almost undecipherable by the absence of the former. Irena's initial motivation for her pursuit is completely disconnected from the ambiguous and harrowing flashbacks that populate the first half of the film, thus suggesting that the most likely reason for it is a state of emotional distress if not altogether insanity; similarly, no manifest diegetic warning precedes Jenny's breakdown, and the events that constellate it – hallucinations, nightmares, visions – precipitate the film in a narrative limbo of sorts, a place suspended between reality and dream, factual certainty and anecdotal ambiguity. In doing so, both films similarly engage narrative and genre conventions according to postmodern orthodoxy:¹¹⁹ metanarratives are shattered, chronologies are warped, facts are compromised and the search for a conclusive truth is frustrated at every turn; a family drama slowly transforms into a crime thriller, and a character study morphs into an oneiric horror film. This approach hinges in both instances on a thematic reconsideration of the mother stereotype, to be understood in this context as the differently nurturing/selfless life giver commonplace in much Italian film culture,¹²⁰ one which is here itself reshaped if not reversed altogether. In La sconosciuta, Valeria Adacher, as played by actor Claudia Gerini, is an independent and mercurial woman who belongs to the upper middle class and embraces bourgeois ideals and

¹¹⁹ See as a reference Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations (1991) by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, in which postmodern theory is discussed in connection to both filmic and literary narratives.

¹²⁰ See representations of motherhood in La ciociara (De Sica, 1960), Mamma Roma (Pasolini, 1962), Il gattopardo (Visconti, 1963), Matrimonio all'italiana (De Sica, 1964), Amarcord (Fellini, 1973), and Pasqualino Settebellezze (Wertmüller, 1975) among others.

practices; she has a profitable job (the Adachers are both goldsmiths and run their own business) and, as the film suggests, also a lover, threatening the very familiar unit which her role would instead demand she protect and foster. Irena herself, as I will point out later, is presented as a highly ambiguous mother figure, both in connection to the overarching narrative structure of the film, and to Tea, whom she mothers in rather unorthodox ways. In Face to Face, the presence of Jenny's mother is almost entirely bypassed by the diegesis, replaced – and even further distanced as a result – by that of her grandmother instead, subtly mirroring the fact that the protagonist is in turn an absent mother figure to her own daughter. Jenny's own regression, together with the volatile relationship with her grandmother, highlights the notion that she is in essence an incomplete mother because she is an incomplete daughter. Any immediate epistemological imperatives are ultimately forsaken, and both films override their initial motivating moves to erect more complex and layered narrative scaffoldings: establishing whether Irena is Tea's biological mother ultimately ceases to be the central diegetic concern, as does determining whether what is happening to Jenny is real or just a figment of her imagination.

As it might be apparent by now, notions of motherhood are in both films engaged via its denial, or its absence altogether. Interestingly enough, motherhood studies have themselves been egregiously absent from the latest developments in feminist and gender scholarship. In 1976, a forward and provocative study by Adrienne Rich, titled Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, had given way to an exuberant tradition of literature and research on the social, cultural, biological and more personal aspects of motherhood. In her work, Rich was arguably the first scholar to consider

motherhood as a dichotomic entity: on the one hand, she described it as a patriarchal establishment, a societal practice engineered to benefit men and oppress women; on the other hand, however, she also moved to consider it a social experience, focusing on its emotional and relational features. At a point in time when motherhood was situated at the wayside of feminist scholarly analysis, Rich brought the figure of a strong, rebellious, self-aware mother to the forefront, in contrast to a passive, silent, subdued one. Even more significantly, she combined feminist theories with her own personal experience as a mother to inscribe motherhood as only one facet of womanhood, a multi-dimensional construct with different, autonomous goals. Further studies followed throughout the '80s and the '90s which framed motherhood in connection to issues of race, family, lesbianism, homemaking and employment, and immigration – just to name a few – signaling an urgent and comprehensive interest in the subject matter.¹²¹

The last decade, however, was instead characterized by a noticeable dearth of study, or interest altogether, on the subject matter. As recently as 2011, Samira Kawash noted in New Directions in Motherhood Studies that the scholarship on motherhood has taken a significant step back, explaining of the latest publications on the topic that they essentially promote the notion that “no matter your age, race, income, education, or position, becoming a mother [means] a decrease in autonomy, economic security, health and happiness.”¹²² Rich’s vision of a positive, socially engaged, active and self-determined mother prototype seemingly became utopian if not altogether unfeasible over the course of the last few years during which, according to Kawash, “the deconstruction

¹²¹ For relevant studies, see Mother Reader. Essential Writings on Motherhood (edited by Moira Davey, 2001), and Mothering. Ideology, Experience and Agency (edited by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, 1994)

¹²² Samira Kawash, New Directions in Motherhood Studies (Signs, Summer 2011, Vol. 36, Issue 4) 970.

of “woman” and the poststructuralist accounts of gender and power left motherhood to the side, an embarrassing theoretical relic of an earlier naïve view of the essential woman and her shadow”.¹²³ A prime example of this tendency can be found in Radical Feminism and the Politics of Pregnancy and Birth (2006), in which Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff maps out the concerns of feminist studies vis-à-vis motherhood by discussing the experience of pregnancy as an act of “turning control of one’s body over to male institutions.”¹²⁴ Drawing on the same rhetoric highlighted by Kawash, Seelhoff describes the act of motherhood as an experience of perceived adaptation to patriarchal diktats: women passively accepting a role assigned to them by social structures imagined and enforced by men, in a sociopolitical context in which the engendering of normative values carries with it the reification of the pregnant body. Seelhoff’s account of her own experience of giving birth to her child is as affecting as it is ultimately also a synecdochic representation of a scholarly tradition that seems to demonize the dynamics of motherhood or altogether move to dismiss it. The disappearance of motherhood from mainstream and even marginal feminist studies over the last decade eventually triggered, perhaps paradoxically, what I would call the birth of a scholarship on the lack of scholarship on the subject matter: in more recent times, the interest seems to have shifted towards the study and the understanding of this lack of interest regarding motherhood in the field. Inquiries like Kawash’s matter insofar as they move to analyze the reasons for the disappearance of motherhood from feminist studies, in hopes of de-stigmatizing it by discovering new angles to approach and consider this problematic issue.

¹²³ Kawash 972.

¹²⁴ Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, Radical Feminism and the Politics of Pregnancy and Birth (*Off Our Backs*, 2006, Vol. 36, Issue 1) 44.

In this light, the most significant answer to my inquiry regarding the conundrum of motherhood's presence and legitimacy in the realm of feminist studies is to be found in Daphne de Marneffe's Maternal Desire (2004). De Marneffe's study not only tracks down the complex and ambiguous status of motherhood in modern and contemporary scholarly discourse, but it then reinforces its legitimacy by weaving in the claim that women understand themselves as mothers through the fulfilling of a desire to nurture a child as an act of self-actualization, rather than an act of forced conformation to normative social influences:

[w]hat each view eclipses is the authentic desire to mother felt by a woman herself – a desire not derived from a child's need, though responsive to it; a desire not created by a social role, though potentially supported by it; rather, a desire anchored in her experience of herself as an agent, an autonomous individual, a person.¹²⁵

As it is apparent from her appropriation of the rhetoric about agency as identity, De Marneffe's claim that motherhood is an act of actualization rather than relinquishment of the self is indebted to the same tradition of identity theory studies I have examined and qualified anew in the previous section. Still, what makes this study especially relevant and worthwhile in the context of my project is the fact that it stands as the only piece of recent scholarship on motherhood which does not immediately and only consider it as an external and artificial social construct to be variously fulfilled, but rather as a mode of personal identity in much closer connection to the notion of self-understanding which I have theorized.

De Marneffe's claim also furthers the idea that discussions of identity and gender are in fact implicitly shortchanged by the unwillingness to look at motherhood as an

¹²⁵ Daphne De Marneffe, Maternal Desire: On Children, Love and the Inner Life (New York, Back Bay Books, 2004) 4.

experience that shapes a woman's individuality as much as it affects her social status, or arguably more. This approach will be of great value when I move to discuss the ways in which the two movies portray the two characters as they go about re-organizing their self-understandings as mothers and as women. The scholarship at large might be lagging but, interestingly enough, film has not abandoned mothers: in Italy, the tradition has developed to add to the aforementioned titles portrayals of motherhood that examine it in more ambiguous terms and from a variety of perspectives, be they cultural, political, ethnic, social or affective (La sconosciuta being a particularly far-reaching example of this trend)¹²⁶ and even more titles can be found in European and world cinema at large that still variously and uniquely engage motherhood figures and issues.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Also see Dimenticare Venezia (Brusati, 1979), Mi manda Picone (Loy, 1983), Parenti serpenti (Monicelli, 1992), La stanza del figlio (Moretti, 2001), L'ora di religione (Bellocchio, 2002), Un'ora sola ti vorrei (Marazzi, 2002), La bestia nel cuore (Comencini, 2005), La terza madre (Argento, 2007, the third installment of the so called Three Mothers trilogy along with Suspiria, 1977, and Inferno, 1980), Pranzo di ferragosto (Di Gregorio, 2008), Lo spazio bianco (Comencini, 2009), Io sono l'amore (Guadagnino, 2009), La prima cosa bella (Virzì, 2010), Tutto parla di te (Marazzi, 2012) among others, on the evolution of the maternal figure in Italian film culture.

¹²⁷ As a point of reference, see Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Akerman, 1975), Ordinary People (Redford, 1980), A Cry in the Dark (Schepisi, 1988), Ladybird (Loach, 1994), The Piano Teacher (Haneke, 2001), Yesterday (Roodt, 2004), 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (Mungiu, 2007), Still Walking (Kore-eda, 2008), Animal Kingdom (Michôd, 2010), Gravity (Cuarón, 2013) and Child's Pose (Netzer, 2013). Furthermore, mothers and motherly figures have become central characters in the most recent film developments of the Korean Wave: see A Good Lawyer's Wife (Im, 2003), Bravo, My Life! (Park, 2005), Secret Sunshine (Lee, 2007), Mother (Bong, 2009), A Long Visit (Yoo, 2010), Poetry (Lee, 2010), Juvenile Offender (Kang, 2012), and The Neighbor (Kim, 2012).

Chapter 4: La sconosciuta: Irena, the mother

Already with the film's title, Giuseppe Tornatore's La sconosciuta (2005) sets out to toy with the audience's perspective and its perception of the lead character Irena (Ksenia Rappoport). When the protagonist arrives in town¹²⁸ and lands herself some menial work in an upscale residential building, her motives appear at the very least suspicious. As spectators, we do not know where she is from, what she is really looking for and, for all intents and purposes, she is completely unknown, completely *sconosciuta* to us and to the other characters as well; only her generic Eastern European accent gives up her foreignness. Through the course of the film, we learn that Irena is a former prostitute in search for the child she had with her late boyfriend Nello (Paolo Elmo), a baby girl she was forced to relinquish to an adoption black market run by her pimp Muffa (Michele Placido), and that she believes she has found the child in Tea (Clara Dossena), the adoptive daughter of Valeria and Donato Adacher (Claudia Gerini and Pierfrancesco Favino), a wealthy couple who lives in town. The choice of Russian-born actor Ksenia Rappoport as the film's leading presence, according to Giovanna Faleschini-Lerner, in itself does not simply aim to muddle the film's narrative or confront the audience with vague issues of foreignness: Rappoport is more exactly configured as "an instrument of destabilization of notions of *italianità*," whose extra-diegetic purpose is to create a form of spectatorial anxiety which "also encompasses the subversion of gender roles that the characters enact and exposes the overlap that exists between gender identity and concepts

¹²⁸ The film is set in a fictional city in northern Italy called Velarchi, even though it was shot on location in Trieste and Rome. Tornatore wanted the setting for the film to be familiar but not immediately recognizable, as a way to universalize the themes engaged by the narrative.

of otherness.”¹²⁹ In other words, Rappoport’s foreignness operates as a pointed tool in the narrative enterprise to complicate spectatorial expectations vis-à-vis both her exotic origin and her femininity, in that those expectations are often informed and shaped by pre-existing bias or stereotypical perceptions: as a transnational presence, Irena invades the filmic space much like droves of immigrants have invaded Italy’s geographical space. Moreover, Irena’s infiltration into the *italianità* monolith is rendered irreversible and thereby even more threatening by the fact that she gives birth to children who are then taken from her and anonymously given up for adoption, becoming absorbed into the social fabric of the nation in a process that legalizes and expunges their otherness. The character is then to be primarily understood as a vessel of ethnic reconfiguration, which the movie portrays as a highly problematic yet ultimately unavoidable process.

However, I posit that the film not only grapples with issues of national identity and social anxiety related to immigration, but also with issues of personal identity in connection with ideas of motherhood and performativity. I would in fact argue that Irena is as fluid a signifier for otherness as she is one for motherhood: the film slowly but methodically proceeds to dismantle or corrupt both the gender and the role expectations normatively associated with the mother ideal in ways that make the character’s foreignness but one of many facets in the process, more accurately connecting it with deeper issues related to my theorization of self-understanding which also involve, as I have already mentioned, the other mother figure in the movie, Valeria (who is in fact Italian and played by an Italian actor). By crafting these two highly ambiguous mother characters, *La sconosciuta* implicitly considers a number of questions which shall allow

¹²⁹ Giovanna Faleschini-Lerner, *Ksenia Rappoport and Transnational Stardom in Contemporary Cinema* (*Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, Vol. 1, n.1, 2013) 9.

me to further qualify the status of agency in the realm of identity theory, particularly in light of the way in which agency is connected to broader depictions of motherhood in the narrative. On a basic level, the movie sets out to investigate the heterogeneous ways in which motherhood may be readily understood, asking the audience to decide whether Irena should be considered Tea's mother regardless of the biological connection that might – or might not – link the two characters, or whether Valeria can claim motherhood rights over Tea by virtue of having adopted and raised her. These points are certainly valid and worth investigating; however, the film shall also allow me to explore the connections that are there to be drawn between motherhood and notions of identity performance. As a matter of fact, Irena's forced denial of her own self-understanding as mother does not simply call into question what it means to be a mother; I argue that it also implicates a process of self-mourning and self-reassessment that I shall analyze in connection to issues of identity reshaping, in order to understand how the film captures this process, and to show that one's identity might be negotiated in relation to one's agency but cannot be negotiated in relation to one's self-understanding which, as I have shown in the previous chapters, should not be understood as one and the same.

La sconosciuta's interest in matters of identity perception already announces itself in the opening sequence, in which Irena and two other women are shown parading in an enclosed and dingy space similar to a run-down stage, naked except for their underwear, as they are being directed and evaluated by a disembodied male voice to walk, turn around and expose themselves. Nothing differentiates the three figures, which have been effectively reduced to their lowest common denominator, as in their unmediated, undesignated, bare physicality. Each woman is wearing the same white mask featuring

bright red lips and contoured eyebrows, a generic, pedestrian imitation of femininity which at once mimics and flattens it. However, there is no transformative power associated with this grotesque masquerade in which the character is involved, nor with the mask itself: Irena is not pretending to be someone else, nor is she putting up a performance for her audience. Her ghostly, anonymous mask is instead conversant with a tradition of plain or ordinary white masks in thriller and horror film tradition,¹³⁰ which do not transform, as I mentioned, but instead erase the characters altogether, robbing those who are wearing them of their filmic identity and their humanity by extension, where humanity should be understood both as the physical quality of looking human, and as the ability to experience humanizing feelings and emotions. Similarly, this prop in the film's opening is meant to underscore that, as a *sconosciuta*, Irena not only comes from an extra-diegetic void but also comes as void herself, as though her identity has been compromised if not altogether annihilated. This ambiguous sequence is configured as a flashback, and once the audience is transported into the character's present, in which we find Irena clad in black aboard a train speeding towards a yet unknown destination, no narrative or chronological connections are offered to place her in a larger diegetic context: there is no perception of the passing of time, we do not know what was happening to the character in that flashback and what happened to her after it, and we ignore the circumstances that have now set her in motion. The programmatic narrative shrouding of the character's identity, achieved via the juxtaposition of two different yet equally enigmatic temporal planes, sets the tone of the narration and establishes the fact

¹³⁰ See for example Eyes Without a Face (Franju, 1960), The Face of Another (Teshigahara, 1966), Halloween (Carpenter, 1978), Friday the 13th (Cunningham, 1980), Scream (Craven, 1996), The Strangers (Bertino, 2008), The Skin I Live In (Almodóvar, 2011).

that Irena is from the very beginning as unknown to the audience as she is unknown – or no longer known – to herself as well.

The distribution of flashbacks throughout the entire film deliberately bisects the narrative into past and present as two realms that should be understood as distinct albeit not separate within the context of the plot.¹³¹ However, the filmic past is not arranged in a cohesive pattern until the denouement of the present events converges with it in causative fashion. According to Gilles Deleuze, flashbacks are “a multiplicity of circuits each of which goes through a zone of recollections and returns to an even deeper, even more inexorable, state of the present situation,”¹³² and flashbacks in the film are indeed employed to complicate the character’s present in ways that are distressing and even gruesome even if they are not always immediately clear. Tornatore’s use of flashbacks is in fact comparable to a string of addled vignettes or disjointed recollections, some of them involuntary on Irena’s part, which haunt the character while they progressively clue in the spectator regarding her circumstances. These flashbacks are littered with recollection-images¹³³ that offer a cursory glance into Irena’s vicissitudes (Irena’s almost compulsive consumption of strawberries being a prime example of this connective

¹³¹ Furthermore, there are two main types of flashbacks the movie in accordance to the way in which they are photographed. Irena’s experiences as a prostitute are photographed in dark, dirty and oppressive tones, whereas the flashbacks which capture Irena’s love story with Nello are bright and over-exposed (the emotional use of the camera is clearly meant as a nod to Irena’s differing disposition under those diametrically opposed circumstances). The palette of flashback lensing converges with that of the present once Irena finds Nello’s dead body in the dumpster in a flashback while Muffa’s corpse (Irena’s former pimp) is unearthed by the police in the present, settling into a grey hue which numbs and weighs down the visuals for the remainder of the film.

¹³² Deleuze’s discussion of flashbacks and their meaning is contained in the second chapter of Cinema 2: The Time-Image (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 48.

¹³³ Deleuze 50. Recollection-images, according to Deleuze, stand in relation to other images and because of this, these images are more readily interpreted as signs, or mnemo-signs as he calls them, which are summoned by actual images as witnessed in the present. Deleuze argues that a successful use of flashbacks is carried out in deterministic terms: the story must need flashbacks if its circumstances cannot be exhausted in the present, and each flashback must inform the present further on every return, and be visually linked to it.

process, as well as the brief sequence in which the act of laying out a suit and her nicest dress on her bed precipitates the character into a powerful sensory reminiscence of her times with Nello), linking her present efforts to her past struggles, suggesting that she comes from a place and time of trauma, and that this trauma informs who she presently is – or isn't – even though the narrative actively opts against showing its hand until the very end. On a more superficial level, the mystery is obviously supposed to keep the spectators guessing and engaged in the plot: La sconosciuta does, after all, begin as a character study to then transform surreptitiously into a thriller and, as such, it is supposed to meet the genre's expectations of a delayed resolution or a twist ending.¹³⁴ But as the story advances, it becomes evident that the resolution to the mystery of the identity of Tea's mother has become a secondary concern for the film, and that the journey upon which the narrative embarks to wrangle together past and present, fragmented memories and scattered sequences, a journey which ultimately allows it to reconstruct itself as a cohesive whole, perfectly mirrors Irena's own journey towards the reshaping of her own scattered, fragmented self and the reconstructing of her own self-understanding.

La sconosciuta's affinity with Deleuzian visual and diegetic theorizations of time is not strictly limited to the film's treatment of memory. In the preface to The Time-Image, Deleuze explains that post-World War II cinema has shifted to a portrayal of time that is no longer narrative but fragmented instead, in which the solitary image (the eponymous time-image, as opposed to the old movement-image of classical film) reflects a new, less rational and more contemplative relationship between time and the individual. This distortion was triggered by the changing post-war cultural and physical landscapes,

¹³⁴ Neill D. Hicks describes the genre's expectations and overarching structure at length in Writing the Thriller Film: The Terror Within (2002)

“‘any spaces whatever’, deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition and reconstruction,”¹³⁵ whose novelty was such that society at large found itself no longer equipped or able to describe, react to and interact with them. It is indeed within this a-chronological, aberrant context in which time is finally disengaged from action that a new class of characters, according to Deleuze, has slowly come to establish itself: “...in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, there were seers.”¹³⁶ Irena is obviously designed as a seer herself: the beginning of the movie strongly underlines the contemplative nature of the character, as she literally sits awake by her living room window night after night spying into the Adachers’ apartment from the opposite building, for reasons that are yet to be known. However, Irena’s own suspended, inert presence, one that is in and of itself disengaged from both chronological measures and concerns and spatial relations, makes it possible for the character herself to be read as any-space-whatever, as a filmic signifier of demolition (and later reconstruction), a fragmented entity whose hollowed-out self-understanding rests in a filmic space where not only past and present become infinitely expanded and appear unresolved in relation to each other, but larger matters of identity and narrative purpose cannot be conclusively assessed. As flashbacks and present time lose a sense of duration and connection, the film seems to lose its protagonist by establishing the fact that she has become not only *sconosciuta*/unknown but altogether unknowable, an ineffable entity which carries no meaning to the audience because it carries no meaning to herself. However, the film is not quite staging Irena’s ontological dissolution as it is instead methodically mapping out

¹³⁵ Deleuze xi.

¹³⁶ Deleuze xi.

the beginning of her reshaping process, one that will also entail a radical overhaul of the film's conventions both in terms of structure and genre association at large.

As it approaches the 30-minute mark, the narrative architecture of the film is in fact suddenly reconfigured around its protagonist. Irena, who had been up to that point linked to an obscure past of abuse and victimhood via a chaotic series of fractured, disturbing flashbacks, unexpectedly becomes herself a perpetrator of violence. After exchanging a few casual words on the stairs with Gina (Piera Degli Esposti), the nanny working for the Adacher family, Irena is informed by the woman that little Tea has a neurological disorder that numbs her reflexes and makes her incapable of physically shielding herself from harm and injuries. This piece of information, seemingly as random as any, leaves the protagonist disconcerted and triggers an unpredictable response: Irena unceremoniously trips and shoves the elderly woman down the stairwell, incapacitating her for life. This twist carries a two-fold purpose within the film: on the one hand, it conclusively designates a link between Irena and Tea, suggesting that the latter is the reason for the former's mysterious arrival into town; on the other hand, it establishes the film's broader ambivalence, if not indifference altogether, towards generic narrative conventions while undercutting – or altogether cutting across – expected viewer response.¹³⁷ Viewers are abruptly made aware of the fact that the character which functions as their entry point in the narrative is not as helpless as she appeared up to that moment, and Irena's own presence in Tea's life acquires an alarming and menacing complexion as a result. This sequence informs us that this will not be the maudlin story of a distraught mother happily reunited with her child, and that the central mother character

¹³⁷ In Toward a General Theory of Film Spectatorship (2009), Todd Oakley discusses the cognitive processes that spectators apply to film to often guess or anticipate plot twists and developments, and also the spectators' expectations towards the diegesis.

is as determined and headstrong as she is sinister and unfavorable. As a matter of fact, the film itself is altogether uninterested in staging that familiar plot in sentimental fashion, opting instead to continuously unravel or collapse the narrative in counterintuitive fashion. As Gina, an elderly, defenseless, perfectly friendly and likable woman comes crashing down the stairs, all spectatorial expectations vis-à-vis the diegesis follow suit. While La Sconosciuta might not actively set out to frustrate its spectators in the tradition of a number of unorthodox, radical dramas and thrillers more immediately concerned with issues of spectatorship perception,¹³⁸ it nonetheless works to establish a structural dissonance and a narrative incongruity whose point is to echo Irena's own tumultuous trajectory of self-resaping.

More importantly still, that unwarranted assault is the catalyzing event of a proper character overhaul: on a strictly diegetic level, it allows Irena to interview for and land the job as the new nanny to Tea left vacant by Gina, a turn of events which was the very reason for the attack in the first place. However, it also complicates the status of the character within the narrative and, as I mentioned above, that of the film itself within its genre's parameters. Irena, up to that point a seer, a passive, spectral, self-effacing presence, is reconstructed anew as an active, threatening mother figure, a designation that puts the character at oxymoronic odds with itself, and with the viewer: "[a]lthough the audience sympathizes with Irena as a victim, this empathy is countered by the ethical questionability of her actions, which place the viewer in an uncomfortable position of

¹³⁸ See 2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick, 1968), Doom Generation (Araki, 1995), Funny Games (Haneke, 1997), Fight Club (Fincher, 1999), Memories of Murder (Bong, 2003), La spettatrice (Franchi, 2004), Caché (Haneke, 2005), Certified Copy (Kiarostami, 2010), and Compliance (Zobel, 2012), among the others, as examples of filmic texts that specifically and openly aim to warp and toy with the audience's perception and involvement via pointed technical or diegetic techniques.

uncertainty,”¹³⁹ explains Faleschini-Lerner, who then adds, “[t]his uneasiness is deepened by the ambiguity of Irena’s relationship with Tea, by the uncertainty of her belonging. [...] Neither the viewer nor Irena will discover the truth until she is accused of causing the death of Tea’s mother [...] in a car accident.”¹⁴⁰ Whether directly or indirectly (Valeria is in fact killed by Muffa, who stages the accident as a set-up for the protagonist to exact revenge for his attempted murder at her hands), Irena the mother is a counterintuitive vessel of instability, permutation, mourning, and even death. While scholarly interest on the film has targeted a connection between Irena as a threat and the social coding of immigration at large as a threat,¹⁴¹ I will move to consider those aspects in connection to matters of self-reshaping and self-understanding.

“Ho fatto tanti errori, una vita non mi basta per pagarli tutti,”¹⁴² Irena briefly reflects midway through the film, as she casually reminisces about her past. This line, as self-deprecatory as it is apparently throwaway, conceals instead one of the main ideas embedded in the narrative, that of motherhood as a form of self-renewal. Feminist studies about motherhood haven’t quite explored this connection, whose social implications are as significant as those which are more immediately linked to matters of personal identity. Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton, in Kinscripts: Reflections on Family, Generations, and Culture (1994), have theorized the notion of kin-time, described as the “temporal script of families” and “the temporal sequencing of reproduction,”¹⁴³ which represents the

¹³⁹ Faleschini-Lerner 11.

¹⁴⁰ Faleschini-Lerner 11.

¹⁴¹ In her essay, Faleschini-Lerner also references *Nuovo cinema inferno: The Affect of Ambivalence* in Giuseppe Tornatore’s *La sconosciuta* (Nathan, 2010) and *Double Time: Facing the Future in Migration’s Past* (Duncan, 2011).

¹⁴² “I’ve made so many mistakes that one life isn’t enough to pay for all of them.” My translation.

¹⁴³ Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton, Kinscripts: Reflections on Family, Generations, and Culture (Mothering. Ideology, Experience, and Agency, Routledge, New York, 1994) 36-37.

chronological blueprint or layout of a family's relationships, marking essential events such as marriage and child-bearing as "rites of passage,"¹⁴⁴ mapping out the sequentiality of family relationships and examining the way in which each generation shapes them for the following one. However, even in this context the notion that bearing a child allows a mother to implicitly leave her own imprint in her family's future generations is only tangentially and indirectly addressed. In *La sconosciuta*, Irena's awareness that her life has essentially been compromised beyond redemption by her poor choices and the abuse of others is the driving force in her pursuit to track down her daughter, a pursuit that on a superficial level is supposed to afford her the chance to reclaim the child that has been taken away from her, but also afford her the chance to reclaim Tea as an extension of her own kin-time. If we take Baudrillard's theorizations about the relationship among reality, symbols and society to be as valid and relevant in this context as they were in the previous chapter, it can similarly be argued that the film is then implicitly presenting Tea as the Baudrillardian hyperreal, a copy/daughter that is more real than the original/mother, and as such an opportunity at redemption as well as a vessel of self-renewal for Irena. If, as Irena volunteers, one life is indeed not enough to pay for her mistakes, the experience of mothering Tea and her investment in the bettering of her child's life are to be understood as a motherly effort as much as an effort in self-reshaping, a process meant to expunge her past as she molds the future of someone else's, as in that of a more perfect copy of herself. In light of this, the revelation at the end of the film that Irena had been forced to give up nine children over the course of twelve years allows the narrative to establish just how irreparably removed from her kin-time, and by extension her project of self-reshaping, the protagonist really is.

¹⁴⁴ Stack and Burton 37.

To further complicate matters, much of the film's ambiguity is situated in the uncertainty regarding Tea and Irena's biological relationship, even though the spectators are pressed to immediately recognize the resemblance between the two as a marker of their kinship, since they both sport the same exact brown, curly, voluminous hair. The fact that the two characters look like mother and daughter more than Valeria and Tea do can easily be read as a directorial cue for the viewers to establish conclusively that Irena's pursuit has been successful, and that she has indeed managed to track down one of her children at last. The film however ultimately moves to debunk this assumption/expectation as well, when at the end the viewers are informed that Tea is in fact unrelated to Irena, and that Muffa had come up the adoptive family's last name he had given her by reading it off his golden necklace, evidently crafted and signed by the Adachers and pointedly shaped as a spiral that resembles a maze, a circular, labyrinthine structure that will in fact cause Irena to lose herself. By the time that revelation is offered, though, Irena and Tea have indeed formed a bond so tight and meaningful that, as the movie posits, the lack of a biological link between the two no longer matters.

In light of the idea of self-renewal I have introduced, it is not surprising that the event that jumpstarts Irena's entrance in Tea's life is Gina's revelation about the little girl's condition. Upon learning that Tea is defenseless against injury and pain, Irena cuts all pleasantries short, gets rid of Gina, and immediately sets her plan into motion, as though she perceives that condition to be some sort of inherited birth defect of which she must rid her presumed daughter. Irena, a victim of unspeakable abuse for most of her life, simply cannot stand the idea that her kin-time be defined by victimhood and defenselessness as well, and her project of re-shaping through Tea cannot subsume either.

Once Irena is able to win Tea over after some initial wariness, the protagonist engages her in a game which Tea jokingly labels *il gioco del salame*: Irena ties the little girl up with belts and straps until she is almost encased, and completely unable to move her arms. The woman then proceeds to push and shove Tea around the room, causing her to fall down on the floor (at first covered in pillows and blankets, then bare) and ordering her to pick herself back up, shoving her down again as soon as she is able to do so. The game immediately stops being fun for Tea, and the little girl screams and protests as Irena first asks her, and then yells, “Alzati! Da sola!”¹⁴⁵ with increasing urgency and anger. Incapacitated by a neurological disorder that dampens her reactions, Tea at first struggles to balance herself and get back up, but slowly and steadily learns to do so. More importantly, Tea’s instinctive slapping of Irena’s face as soon as she is free to move her hands again shows the will to fight back and stand up for herself that had always eluded Irena. In re-shaping Tea’s reaction to violence and to feelings of powerlessness, Irena begins to re-shape herself and her own past by correcting what caused it to go astray: in a significant and revelatory feat of non-linear crosscut editing, images of Tea being shoved by Irena and falling to the ground are interwoven and interspersed with random images of Irena’s past, as she is being shoved around and into the ground by Muffa or a john, naked, bruised, bleeding and, unlike Tea, unable to get back up.

Tea, who is hurt and understandably resentful and upset at first, slowly comes to appreciate or at least understand the goal of the game, and the purpose of Irena’s intentions and actions; in the face of her adoptive mother’s attitude, which seems to suggest the idea that Valeria is completely resigned to her daughter being handicapped and helpless, the little girl finds herself increasingly drawn to her nanny, whom she

¹⁴⁵ “Get back up! On your own!” My translation.

perceives as someone who believes she can overcome her disability, and who is proactively trying to help her do so. The narrative of transformation which structures La sconosciuta starts to take form at this point, once the film conclusively establishes Irena's pursuit of motherhood as a pursuit in self-reshaping, and once Tea's struggle to overcome her disorder comes to represent Irena's struggle to amend her own past.

This interest in the transformative power of motherhood falls in line with and is supported by Daphne De Marneffe's own theories on mothering, as I have mentioned above. Drawing on Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering (originally published in 1978, the revised and republished in 1999), a study that set out to explore and explain the social, political and economic reasons why women still inherit and/or assume the role of primary caretakers for their children, in Maternal Desire De Marneffe analyzes the so-called mother-infant merger phenomenon, according to which "the earliest relationship of an infant to his or her caretaker – almost always a mother – is characterized by a sense of merger or oneness."¹⁴⁶ De Marneffe argues that mother-child relationships "do not follow a linear progression from fusion to autonomy; rather, feelings of oneness and separateness oscillate through life."¹⁴⁷ This notion is further qualified and complicated through Irena, whose separateness has been coerced upon her time and time again, ultimately damaging her sense of oneness not simply in terms of her non-existent relationship with her children, but in the very ability to understand herself as complete within herself without them. In one of the film's final and most affecting scenes, Irena visits Tea in the hospital. At this point, Irena has been arrested for accidentally murdering Muffa, and Tea, differently abandoned by both her bureaucratic

¹⁴⁶ De Marneffe 67.

¹⁴⁷ De Marneffe 67.

mother and her affective one, has ended up in the hospital because of her inappetence, and she is refusing to feed herself or to be fed. Irena is brought in from jail to try to get through to the child and, in a matter of minutes after getting reacquainted she is in fact able to feed her some soup. Tea inquires about Irena's sudden departure, and Irena vaguely answers that she found a new job that will keep her away for some time. Irena then urges Tea to learn to write as soon as possible, and to write her all about "come ci si sente a diventare donne."¹⁴⁸ "Dovresti saperlo," Tea quips back. "Io sono stata troppo distratta nella mia vita, non me ne sono accorta,"¹⁴⁹ Irena explains. On the one hand, this brief exchange encapsulates Irena's expectations vis-à-vis her pursuit of Tea, which she had already confessed to Valeria: her intention was simply to be part of the child's life and to see her grow up, rather than attempt to take her away from her adoptive parents. On the other hand, Irena's comment also encapsulates her own expectations vis-à-vis her self-understanding as Tea's mother: based on that very principle of oneness, the little girl's future is supposed to fulfill what has been irreparably compromised in Irena's past, and in her path towards womanhood Tea shall set out to rectify Irena's own path, which had instead gone irreparably astray.

The separation and the difference between agency and self-understanding as I have categorized them are in the film further embodied and exemplified by the stark contrast between Valeria and Irena, and by the differing dispositions the two characters show in both the mothering of Tea and in the ways in which they perceive themselves as mothers. Valeria, as aforementioned, is a wealthy, self-employed professional with the economic and intellectual means to be completely self-sufficient. She is young, attractive

¹⁴⁸ "...what it feels like to become a woman." My translation.

¹⁴⁹ "You should know," "I've been too distracted in my life, and I didn't notice." My translation.

and stylish, and she has fashioned a seemingly well-rounded existence for herself, in which the perfunctory fulfilling of her daily activities is carried out in efficient, Tayloresque fashion, resembling a bullet point list not unlike the one she recites to Irena robotically and managerially as the two go over the latter's duties as the new nanny/housekeeper. While Valeria's core self-understanding appears to encompass her agency as an independent woman and her professional image as a jewelry maker, both of which she cultivates proficiently, it does not appear to extend to the mothering of her adoptive daughter, or to the carrying out of any motherly duties for that matter. Valeria's agency as mother goes insofar as the bureaucratic steps that had to be completed for her and her husband to be able to adopt a child, but the film purposely almost never captures the character in the company of Tea, and when it does, there is no real significance to their exchanges. The fact that Valeria could not have children in the first place seems to be a pointed, almost fatalist nod to the fact that she wasn't altogether meant to be a mother (a rather radical characterization that, as we will see, is almost perfectly reversed in the unfolding of Irena's vicissitudes¹⁵⁰). Motherhood for Valeria is indeed to be understood as nothing more than a role, or what Burke and Stetts define an agent, one which she has undertaken as a part of a larger project of self-completion perhaps because it is socially demanded and expected of her, or perhaps simply because it appears as an

¹⁵⁰ Valeria's gruesome death appears within the context of the narrative to represent a punishment of sorts for the very fact that she is an aberrant mother. Irena, herself somewhat of an aberrant mother (but not one as unredeemable as Valeria), is not killed but arguably assigned a lesser punishment by being sentenced to serve jail time at the end of the movie for reasons that are left unclear (her lawyer, played by Margherita Buy, tells her that the judge "couldn't overlook everything," even though she arguably killed Muffa in self-defense and she was never formally charged with or even found responsible for Gina's assault, leaving some ambiguity as to what "everything" might be referring). In a sense, one may even argue that such an unconventional mother character is used by Tornatore to ultimately reinforce a rather traditional and commonly accepted mother stereotype. In general, a few of Tornatore's female characters are variously punished for being aberrant or different or non-conforming (see also Beata in *L'uomo delle stelle* (1995), Malèna in *Malèna* (2000), and Claire in *La migliore offerta* (2013) as examples of this trend).

appropriate addendum to her status. However, the fact remains that Valeria is in fact never mother because she does not understand herself as one, and because she is never interested in re-structuring herself as one. As a result, the character entirely delegates the actual mothering of her daughter to her nannies, first Gina and then Irena, as she goes about furthering her business and her social and economic clout with it; when she is faced with the revelation that Irena may be Tea's biological mother towards the end of the film, Valeria has nothing to offer to the protagonist but angry threats that she is Tea's mother because all the paperwork related to the adoption is in order, which according to her makes her "la madre a tutti gli effetti."¹⁵¹ To make her point even more compelling, she confiscates all the pictures of Tea and her drawings from Irena's apartment, evidently convinced that she will be able to sever all ties between the protagonist and the little girl by removing the physical and material objects that connote their relationship, and the affection they feel for each other. In this intense and narratively loaded sequence, Valeria flaunts her daughter as her property, an item that she has lawfully purchased and thereby belongs to her, but she does not volunteer or argue for the affective, motherly bond that one would expect her to share with Tea.

Valeria's ambiguity as a destabilizing mother figure is further reinforced by the film's portrayal of her relationship with her husband Donato, who partners with her in a successful business venture which, however, does not appear to quite translate into a successful marriage. Most of the exchanges between the two characters devolve in fact into screaming matches in which neither is actively trying to listen to the other, much to Tea's chagrin. Moreover, Valeria is seen surreptitiously sneaking out at night early in the film, in a brief scene that suggests that she might be pursuing an extra-marital affair, an

¹⁵¹ "The mother to all effects and purposes." My translation.

indiscretion of which Donato appears very likely to be aware. As a vacant mother and wife, Valeria is filmically imagined as a character which functions against the stability of her family unit, making Irena by contrast an even more prominent unifying figure in the narrative.

In light of Valeria's narrative characterization, Irena stands as evidence that one's self-understanding reshapes itself to preserve and balance itself in ways that clearly disengage identity (as that self-understanding) from agency (as the various roles one is called to perform in a social context, as delineated in the previous chapter) and further substantiate the core claim of my research. Valeria's agency layout is inclusive of the mother role, but her self-understanding isn't inclusive of the mother identity – that is to say, she is socially and bureaucratically mother but she doesn't understand herself as one – and as a result, the mothering of Tea is not in any way conducive or altogether relevant to the preservation of Valeria's self-understanding: it in fact seems to matter only insofar as her social status is concerned. Irena, who instead is not mother in any socially recognized or bureaucratic terms but strongly and intimately understands herself as one, needs the experience of mothering of Tea to be able to amend and restructure her deficient self-understanding. The protagonist's sincere final admission that the ultimate purpose of her pursuit of Tea was the fulfillment of her dream to bear witness to her formative years and perhaps be an ancillary part of her life, rather than to drag her adoptive parents to court to have the adoption overturned and the child assigned back to her, ultimately exposes the fact that Irena does not perceive the meaning of motherhood in the bureaucratic sense in which Valeria does, but rather in diametrically opposite terms. Irena does not need a stack of documents to understand herself as mother, while

Valeria's status as mother is entirely bound to her legal effort and the paperwork that defines her as such. This disengagement from materialistic signifiers of motherhood is further reinforced by Irena's seemingly counterintuitive reaction to Valeria's outburst in the sequence I have analyzed above, in which Valeria's opaque anger and her instinctual reaction to deprive Irena of Tea's drawings and pictures leave Irena collectedly puzzled rather than angered or hurt. Even more significantly, by turning down a monetary deal Irena categorically demystifies Valeria's assumption that she had arrived in town seeking compensation in exchange for her silence about Tea. Motherhood is an intrinsic component of Irena's identity makeup, not a role or an agent but her self-understanding, and the film reinforces the notion that this self-understanding is not bound to or defined by objects and paper, be they money, a child's drawing or legal paperwork.

The most significant aspect of Irena's process of self-reshaping, and arguably the very impetus for it, is the way in which the character experiences mourning both on a conscious and on a subconscious level. Death and loss are presented in the film as the leitmotif of Irena's life, and variously embedded in the narrative as the murder of Nello (killed by Muffa because he wanted to marry Irena and take her away from him), but also the loss of all of her children sold to the adoption black market (rendered even more final by the fact that the strain of all those pregnancies on Irena's body has already physically reshaped the character, rendering her unable to bear any more children), and the loss and subsequent reshaping of Irena's identity within the film itself. Fittingly enough, Irena wears black throughout the entirety of the filmic events set in the present time, a pointed choice which should be taken as a visual nod to her state as a mourner, but also as a symbol of the character's inscrutability, her diegetic non-presence: "[...] gli abiti neri

[...] sono adesso una divisa di massa alla moda che rende inidentificabili, una uniforme burocratica, una garanzia d'anonimato.”¹⁵² I argue that in the film, Irena mourns the physical losses of Nello and of her children as much as she is subconsciously mourning the self that was irremediably compromised as a result of those losses, and no longer exists as it was understood before they took place. This experience of *self-mourning* is thereby an inevitable trigger of identity reshaping, in the sense that it asks of the character to reassess her self-understanding to account for those losses in order to craft a new self-understanding that is not devoid of them or altogether independent from them, but one that is informed anew by them: one may in fact never stop grieving a loss, but through the experience of mourning that loss triggers a process of identity reshaping in which it is absorbed and metabolized as part of one's renewed self-understanding makeup. My theorization about the nature of mourning and my argument regarding its role in a process of identity reshaping appear to lie outside the scope and concern of contemporary scholarship on the subject matter: in The Ends of Mourning (2003), Alessia Ricciardi explains that mourning has undergone a “radical devaluation [...] in the culture of present day.”¹⁵³ Citing Philippe Ariès, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, Ricciardi explains that mourning inhabits a peculiar and oftentimes removed place in historical and sociological discourses, as an enigma that has been excised from the public sphere and relegated to the private one as not to be dealt with, or a mystery which allows for the mapping out of “a horizon of history and political life that is reenergized rather than paralyzed”¹⁵⁴ by its exegesis. This theoretical framework has variously informed the

¹⁵² Lietta Tornabuoni, '97 al cinema (Milano, Baldini&Castoldi, 1997) 197. “Black clothes are now a fashionable, mass-produced outfit, a bureaucratic uniform, a guarantee of anonymity.” My translation.

¹⁵³ Alessia Ricciardi, The Ends of Mourning (Stanford, California University Press, 2003) 1.

¹⁵⁴ Ricciardi 12.

treatment of the subject matter in film, and in looking at the works of two of the most significant auteurs of the 20th century, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Luc Godard, Ricciardi argues that both directors experience a palpably mournful relationship with the past. Pasolini's oeuvre, according to Ricciardi, is anchored to an "unrelenting exposure of the spectrality of culture"¹⁵⁵ which isn't motivated by a postmodern form of nostalgia, but rather by an archival approach to history according to which the past still inhabits the present like a ghost. Similarly, Godard's work, Ricciardi argues, "may be seen to constitute an exemplary genealogy of contemporary culture"¹⁵⁶ in the way it engages multiple themes and techniques often in self-reflexive fashion, weaving past and memories together in a process of melancholic crystallization. Such tradition variously grapples with the cultural role of mourning, often viewed as a collective experience; however, it does not necessarily consider the nature itself of mourning and the role of the individual in the experience.

La sconosciuta's non-chronological, ahistorical treatment of its lead character and her circumstances invites instead a different reflection on the nature of mourning, one that places Irena's personal, subjective journey of reshaping and experience of grief at the forefront instead. Irena's past and her memories are certainly not fetishized in the film, nor are they a diegetic realm to which the character willfully retreats as a way to escape the present: even the character's memories of Nello have been irreparably tainted by the knowledge that she indirectly caused his death. On the contrary, Irena is actively working to undo and correct her past, and the film presents it as splintered, scattered and fractured as her reminiscing of it is; moreover, the film goes one step further in suggesting that

¹⁵⁵ Ricciardi 127.

¹⁵⁶ Ricciardi 170.

Irena's work to amend her past is indissolubly linked to the work she is doing to grapple with her grief, as the process of mourning her losses is linked to the process of reshaping herself into mother in ways that are not immediately clear, but definitely worth assessing. As suggested above, I argue that *La sconosciuta*'s treatment of mourning mobilizes an involvement of the self in the process of mourning itself in ways that the scholarship on the subject matter has not thoroughly acknowledged, with the exception of Judith Butler's own theories regarding grieving and mourning, which I shall further qualify via the application of my own theorization of identity as self-understanding. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler explains that "[p]erhaps one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever (sic)"¹⁵⁷ and furthers that when we experience mourning,

something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us [...] When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.¹⁵⁸

Implicit in this idea of going missing or losing oneself, I believe, is then a process of self-mourning and of subsequent, necessary self-reconfiguration. If, as Butler convincingly argues, "we're undone by each other,"¹⁵⁹ the loss of someone else also brings about the loss of oneself, a loss of which the subject might not be aware, but one which she mourns and subconsciously moves to absorb in a renewed self-understanding. In establishing this trajectory, I am not necessarily adopting a Freudian viewpoint concerning the interpretation of the grieving act: according to Freud, mourning is a melancholic

¹⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York, Verso, 2004) 21.

¹⁵⁸ Butler 22.

¹⁵⁹ Butler 23.

experience of which substitution and incorporation¹⁶⁰ are necessary components. As hinted above, I more accurately claim that while one might never stop mourning a specific loss, that loss is charged with a power which Butler would call “transformative”¹⁶¹ in the sense that it asks of the subject to rethink herself anew in light of the experience of losing, because what was lost was an intrinsic part of the subject’s self-understanding: one’s project of identity reshaping, as informed by mourning, cannot be successful unless the subject is able to craft a new self-understanding that is comprehensive of the loss of the object just as it once was of the existence of said object. The dynamics of this process are thoughtfully rendered in *La sconosciuta*’s closing sequence. It is fair to assume at this point that at least fifteen years have passed since the date of Irena’s imprisonment, based both on the ageing of the protagonist herself and the fact that Tea appears now to be approaching her twenties. Unsurprisingly, when we see Irena being released from jail, she is still wearing unadorned black clothes, a pointed choice aimed at suggesting that she has not finished – and probably will never finish – her experience of mourning. The appearance of an adult Tea in the distance, however, does more than simply redeem Irena for the audience in a neatly organized happy ending. Tea has grown up into a striking woman, and she has retained her uncanny resemblance to a younger Irena; moreover, she seems happy, healthy and well-adjusted. The two characters do not exchange any words, but simply nod and smile at each other, indicating the fact that the years apart have not dulled their bond. As she reciprocates Tea’s gaze

¹⁶⁰ By incorporation, Freud describes an action whereby the subject takes into and retains within himself objects from the external world. At first, Freud (in *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1917) explained that mourning comes to an end when the subject is able to cut all ties with the loss and find a new object into which invest the libido that was freed up in the process. Later (in *The Ego and the Id*, 1923) he revised his theory to explain that incorporation is an integral component of mourning, allowing for the assumption that mourning might be an endless enterprise.

¹⁶¹ Butler 21.

from a distance, Irena at once realizes that not only her mothering of Tea, as unorthodox as it might have been, was ultimately successful, but that through the person smiling back at her, almost like a mirror image, she was indeed able to wipe the slate clean and finally reclaim her own past for herself. Irena's smile, as worn out as it seems fulfilled and almost incredulous, represents the acknowledgement that the enterprise to foster her own self-understanding as mother has indeed proven more compelling than any external attempts to thwart it, and that her project of identity reshaping has also successfully reshaped her past, and possibly her future with it.

Chapter 5: Face to Face: Jenny, the daughter

If Primo amore may be labeled a horror movie about desire, Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face¹⁶² (Ansikte mot ansikte, 1976) may then arguably be labeled a horror movie about an annihilating lack of desire, or altogether a horror movie about anhedonia. Jenny Isaksson (Liv Ullman), the film's leading character, is a psychiatrist who has carved out for herself what seems to be a placid, sufficient existence. However, her life reveals itself to be more akin to a perfectly standardized and compartmentalized empty shell: she is reasonably successful and accomplished but, for all intents and purposes, she has replaced any semblance of herself with the crystallized repetition of her everyday chores and commitments instead. With her husband Erik (Sven Lindberg) – a fellow scholar – abroad for work for a few months, and her daughter Anna (Helene Friberg) off to summer camp, the protagonist moves back with her grandparents (Gunnar Björnstrand and Aino Taube) in the house where she grew up, only to suddenly experience the onset of what turns out to be a devastating mental breakdown in the form of visions, nightmares and hallucinations: a full-scale, crippling sensory collapse of sorts. The film begins moving in and out of the character's head as she disintegrates in ways that make it increasingly hard to determine what is real and what is not, what is being lived and what is being imagined, and who Jenny is altogether. After a failed suicide attempt, the protagonist is finally forced to confront all the events and the issues – the premature death of her parents

¹⁶² The story was conceived as a TV miniseries, but Bergman also edited it down for a commercial theater release. The film premiered in New York on April 5, 1976, with a total length of 136 minutes (this is the cut that is being considered in my analysis, and it makes Face to Face Bergman's longest feature film by a considerable margin) but it is also available in a 114-minute version. The miniseries premiered on Swedish television on April 28 of that same year. It is 177 minutes long and was divided in four parts for broadcasting purposes. Most of the cuts made to the 136-minute version cover Jenny's relationship with one of her patients, her recovery and the ending, in ways that make the character and the story's resolution more ambiguous and ultimately ineffable. The film edit was met with critical praise, and received two Academy Award nominations for Bergman's direction and Ullman's performance.

(Gösta Prüzeliuss and Marianne Aminoff) when she was still a little girl, the problematic relationship with her grandmother as a stern and abusive authority/maternal figure, her aseptic marriage and non-existent relationship with her own daughter, even an implicit distrust in her own abilities as a psychiatrist, or a distrust in the practice and science of psychiatry altogether – which she had refused to engage under the assumption that in doing so, she would manage to salvage and maintain her emotional well-being intact. Stanley Kauffman noted that the film is Bergman's examination on "how little psychiatry can do."¹⁶³

In actuality, the result of this experiment in self-preservation is, as I will show, the emptying of the character's own self-understanding, to the point that Jenny is no longer able to feel or be anything, having reshaped herself into something essentially shapeless in order to survive. With a compromised or denied self-understanding as mother, wife, and daughter, Jenny is left with her psychiatrist agency as the sole reminder that she is in fact a person, or that she altogether exists. Once the protagonist begins doubting her profession and the way it (re)presents her, she is suddenly and violently exposed to herself as the void that she in fact is. If Irena's reshaping was triggered by all the irrepressible events that conglomerated to deny her own understanding of herself, Jenny's reshaping is triggered by the unaddressed trauma which she herself has allowed to grow into a crippling mass of repressed memories, feelings, emotions and suggestions, which similarly catch up with the protagonist begging to be finally confronted. As the grotesque, formless, disintegrating creature at the center of the narrative, Jenny allows for Face to Face to be squarely placed within the boundaries of the paranoid woman's film, a horror sub-genre proposed by Mary Ann Doane to define a group of films all similarly

¹⁶³ Stanley Kauffmann, Face to Face (*The New Republic*, *Arts and Lives*, 1976) 22.

concerned with a central, leading (though oftentimes only in terms of screen-time) female figure plagued by feelings of hysteria/paranoia/panic/distrust until she is no longer able to function as a human being,¹⁶⁴ or more exactly within the boundaries of what I would call the paranoid woman postmodern film genre.¹⁶⁵

While Ingmar Bergman has never dabbled in the horror genre proper, the genre itself does – perhaps unsurprisingly – feature numerous narratives dealing with character deconstruction/reconstruction, be it physical or psychological or both, starting with James Whale’s quite literal take on the subject matter, Frankenstein (1931). Jenny’s circumstances, together with the film’s tone and structure, can conclusively allow for a reading of Face to Face as a horror film, albeit a somewhat unorthodox one.¹⁶⁶ However, Bergman didn’t necessarily conceive Face to Face as a horror film; in a letter sent to his cast and crew before the start of production, he instead explained that the film was to be an apologue about life, love, and death, and that he conceived the character of Jenny as a “well-adjusted, capable, and disciplined person, a highly qualified professional woman with a career, comfortably married to a gifted colleague and surrounded by what are

¹⁶⁴ See The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the “Woman’s Film” of the 1940s, where Doane theorizes the sub-genre as described above, along with its cultural and social bias and implications.

¹⁶⁵ Doane’s definition encompasses and neatly applies to a number of movies from the ‘40s and the ‘50s; however, a number of films made in the ‘60s and beyond apply a postmodern twist to many of the tenets that define Doane’s theorization, defying metanarratives, temporal and/or logical constrictions, or altogether forsaking diegetic concerns. Roman Polanski’s Repulsion (1965) is arguably the founding work of this genre, to which Face to Face belongs together with Altman’s Images (1972), Cronenberg’s The Brood (1979), Zulawski’s Possession (1981), Haynes’ Safe (1995), and Aronofsky’s Black Swan (2010) among others.

¹⁶⁶ Whereas La sconosciuta adheres to Noël Carroll’s horror complex discovery plot as described in The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart (New York, Routledge, 1990) – onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation – rather straightforwardly even if it isn’t properly a horror film, Face to Face doesn’t quite fit into that structure as snugly even if it is more readily identifiable as one. The plot jumps from a brief onset sequence (Jenny’s first hallucinatory episode shortly after having arrived at her grandparents’) straight to the confrontation stage, which takes up most of the narrative without finding an unequivocal resolution at the end.

called “the good things of life,”¹⁶⁷ who undergoes “a shockingly quick breakdown and agonizing rebirth.”¹⁶⁸ He further volunteered that the script was partially autobiographical, and that his own views vis-à-vis psychiatry and psychiatrists, whom he called “mentally illiterate,”¹⁶⁹ had inevitably informed the character, as well. While specific scenes and images – as we will see – lend themselves to more complex readings, the film as a whole may very well also be taken as a reflection on the merits and the limits of psychoanalysis, and the ways in which a person must come completely undone in a-dogmatic, un-scientific ways to then attempt to come together again.

In The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart, Noël Carroll explains that many horror narratives, both in film and in literature, are predicated upon what he defines “a narrative of renewal,”¹⁷⁰ within a diegetic structure that calls for an “unsavory past”¹⁷¹ to be relived or restaged in order for the character to overcome, or triumph, or save herself and/or others. Both these ideas of a renewal through trial and of a problematic past that needs to be conquered, which can also be variously encountered in La sconosciuta, unequivocally belong to the narrative core of Face to Face which, much like Tornatore’s film, is also concerned with matters of self-perception, self-understanding and loss of identity. While these themes are all rather predominant in the thriller/horror genre at large,¹⁷² with narratives that frame killers and/or victims struggling with identity crises, multiple or secret identities and the like, Face to Face does not connect that same

¹⁶⁷ These comments are taken from the preface of Face to Face: A Film by Ingmar Bergman (New York, Pantheon Books, 1976), which features the TV script version of the film and a letter from Bergman itself to his cast and crew as a preface. vi.

¹⁶⁸ Face to Face, vi.

¹⁶⁹ Face to Face, vii.

¹⁷⁰ Carroll 98.

¹⁷¹ Carroll 98.

¹⁷² Carroll describes the more common themes and narratives of the genre in the section called Plotting Horror.

idea of renewal to a stereotypically external, tangible threat: Jenny does not fall prey to a monster or a mad scientist, she is not tortured or chased in the woods by a serial murderer, her salvation does not depend on the gory demise of her oppressor, on an exorcism, or on her own final death. The film instead weaves a darker and more alarming premise into that narrative of renewal by positing Jenny both as the victim and as the perpetrator at once, and creating the same sense of frustration in the spectators looking for a character in which to identify which Jenny herself experiences, since she similarly is both helpless against herself and unable to identify herself. Face to Face articulates identity reshaping as a process triggered by a set of internal mechanisms rather than external circumstances, and investigates the ways in which trauma and its repression (to be understood here in psychoanalytical terms as the rejection from consciousness of painful or disagreeable ideas, memories, feelings or impulses¹⁷³) inform one's relationship with the past and with the self, ultimately overriding the sustaining of any agency one might attempt in a process of self-reshaping, which the film essentially portrays as the programmatic denial of one's self-understanding. While there are a number of thematic and diegetic points of contact between La sconosciuta and Face to Face, which shall be addressed as relevant in my conclusions, the latter grapples with the dynamics of identity reshaping in rather idiosyncratic fashion: while Irena's self-understanding struggles against a set of occurrences that aim at quelling it, Jenny's process of reshaping is in fact comparable to a self-imposed identity erasure.

This process is first and foremost actuated through the deployment of a number of filmic markers and pointed stylistic choices. One of the leitmotifs of Bergman's

¹⁷³ This definition was retrieved from Encyclopaedia Britannica at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498515/repression>.

filmography and arguably his very own auteurial signature is the use of settings, colors and objects to mirror, suggest and/or challenge his characters' dispositions, feelings and altogether inner worlds, creating complex and visually arresting cinematic landscapes – from the stark black and white tones of The Seventh Seal (1957) to the broken glass and the deserted shores of Persona (1966) to the crimson walls and layered light schemes of Cries and Whispers (1972), just to name a few. Face to Face, as I will show, similarly displays a pointed use of colors, negative spaces and sound to depict Jenny's identity collapse, and these cinematic features also stand as a marker of Bergman's unmistakable authorship. Persona in particular also anticipates many thematic concerns of Face to Face, specifically the dismantling of one's identity and the distrust towards the central figure of a caregiver (or that of a savior, were one to attempt a reading of Bergman's oeuvre in religious/theological terms) who, as it turns out, is herself in need of care. In the former, Bibi Andersson plays Alma, a young nurse who is charged with the care of a famous stage actress, Elisabet (played by Liv Ullman), who has gone inexplicably mute during one of her performances. During the course of the film, the two characters grow progressively close as Alma experiences some sort of emotional breakdown or breakthrough (itself literally inscribed in the film, which breaks apart and comes back together along with the character) and Elisabet posits herself as an increasingly centralizing figure, ultimately reaching a point where even the film itself is no longer able or interested in differentiating between the two, so much so that towards the end their faces are finally fused into one in a startling, extreme close-up. In the end, Elisabet's condition remains undiagnosed and uncured and Alma leaves her care, having been able to recognize and reclaim her own self through this process of duplication, fusion and

separation which has renewed her. In Face to Face, Ullman is entrusted with the caregiver role herself, in the guise of a medical doctor, and once again the character's identity and sanity are called into question in the diegesis as she appears unable to carry out her duties, to the point of appearing sick even to her own patients. The latter film should not be seen as a retread of the former: according to Martha P. Nochimson, "Face to Face is ahead of its time in recognizing postfeminist liminality"¹⁷⁴ in that it takes the same diegetic concerns that plagued Elisabet in Persona – namely, her "impotent rage at being relegated to an object of the gaze by patriarchal society,"¹⁷⁵ represented in the film by her decision to stop talking in the middle of a stage performance, and by the camera itself turning away from the characters to show Bergman and his crew filming the action at the end – and furthers them by staging the vicissitudes of a character that has withdrawn herself so much, she is essentially invisible. This is especially evident in the onset section, which is the only portion of the film in which the audience gets to witness Jenny actively operating within the non-existence she has created for herself. While a feminist reading of the character is certainly fascinating and worthwhile, I will discuss the character's own withdrawal in connection to the annihilation of her self-understanding.

Such issues are introduced in the opening shot, which consists of a prolonged close-up of a dark body of water, immobile and soundless, posing both as a metaphor of Jenny's inscrutable, placid existence and – in its intrinsic unnaturalness and almost imposed immobility – also as an omen of future disturbance meant to immediately alert the spectators that something is amiss. Because of its unconventional nature, Face to Face's opening relies on an atmosphere of suspicion and suggestion to stage a "phasing in

¹⁷⁴ Martha P. Nochimson, Face to Face (Cineaste, vol.37, n.1, 2011) 68.

¹⁷⁵ Nochimson 68.

the development of [the] onset movement,”¹⁷⁶ aiming to instill a feeling of uneasiness through means of visual subtraction. This unsettling sense of lack is further reinforced by Jenny’s first appearance in her deserted house as she readies herself to relocate, surrounded by emptiness and a solitary, dying plant. The character is alone – both her husband and daughter are gone for the summer – and she appears vacant and almost unaware of her surroundings. Because in Bergman’s film lexicon interiors, houses, and buildings are often an architectural representation of the people that inhabit them, the film is here not only presenting the character’s loneliness, but more exactly the idea that she herself is the void that she is inhabiting, and that her reality, much like her bare, unfurnished home, has been stripped of meaning and purpose. When we get a glimpse of her work life at the psychiatric clinic she has been appointed to run for the summer, it becomes immediately apparent that she is as prominent and respected a figure among her peers and colleagues as she is shunned and ridiculed by her patients, namely Maria (Kari Sylwan), a troubled young woman¹⁷⁷ whom Jenny is treating with no apparent improvement. While a fellow psychiatrist turns to the protagonist for comfort and advice regarding his recent separation from his wife, a conversation which Jenny engages with an opaque, collected wisdom mostly made of commonplace statements about married life and divorce, Maria – by virtue of her condition or of her systematic refusal to buy into

¹⁷⁶ Carroll 100.

¹⁷⁷ Maria is a much larger and rounded character in the TV version of the story, in which she is developed in ways that pit her against Jenny in almost adversarial terms, or developed to stand as much more of a cohesive foil to the protagonist than she is in the film edit. In her longest scene, which ended up being almost entirely cut for the film release, she continuously challenges Jenny’s pragmatism and semblance of collectedness and appears more mentally sound, and generally more present and together. The dynamics of this relationship, which is in more than one way reminiscent of Irena’s relationship with Valeria in *La sconosciuta*, are condensed in the film into a much smaller (but equally effective) scene.

her treatment, as we are led to believe – has instead gained insight into the empty space behind Jenny's façade.

As the psychiatrist unsuccessfully tries to reason with Maria, who at first is mindlessly masturbating as to try to incite a reaction of embarrassment or displeasure, the patient gets closer and closer to Jenny's face only to start listing the different parts that compose it, as though they exist as discrete elements that do not add up to a cohesive whole. This sequence draws an immediate comparison with a similar sequence in a Jean-Luc Godard French film, Le Mépris (1963), in which Brigitte Bardot's naked body is also broken down as her character, naked in bed with her husband, playfully and seductively lists her body parts for him to assess. Coming at the height of Bardot's fame as an international sex symbol, that sequence is to be taken as Godard's nod to the way film had disassembled and cannibalized the actress' body, flattening her into a bullet-point list of physical attributes whose sum/wholeness was of no diegetic interest or use. Similarly, Maria – as an embodiment of the inner chaos and irrationality that aim to antagonize Jenny's outer collectedness – breaks down Jenny's face as to suggest that the protagonist is but a clumsy assemblage of features that do not make her a person, but rather just make her look like one. "Poor Jenny," Maria concludes at last, showing the same concern or pity that her grandfather, another liminal character who is fast approaching death and has developed a similar awareness of himself and others, will show for the protagonist through the entire film. If, on a more superficial level, the film is through these two characters laying the groundwork for a critique of the effectiveness or *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis (later in the film, right before her first episode, Jenny is shown flipping through the pages of Bruce J. Ennis' Prisoners of Psychiatry), it is also focusing on the

specific circumstances of a character whose humanity is fundamentally compromised via her compromised self-understanding.

Jenny's breakdown strikes unexpectedly the first night after relocating to her grandparents' house, the place where she grew up after the untimely passing of her parents. The entire day has been spent acclimating back to her surroundings, which her doting and overzealous grandmother has recreated in the guise of Jenny's childhood by bringing in the furniture which the protagonist had back when she was a little girl. In spite of Jenny's remark that she is "comfortable wherever I am," her bedroom almost looks like that of a doll's house – the undersized desk and nightstand making her look almost like an overgrown child or a grotesque puppet – furthering my reading of the character's misplacement and dehumanization. Later that night, as the character is in bed trying to fall asleep (or perhaps, right after she has in fact fallen asleep), the clock in her bedroom stops ticking and sound altogether abandons the film just as she senses a presence in her room. Hiding in the shadows, Jenny spots an old woman (Tore Segelcke) sternly looking back at her while hiding in a corner, her right eye resting under a furrowed brow, her left eye appearing entirely blacked out. The woman stands up and starts walking toward the protagonist, seemingly intentioned to speak but unable to let any words out. Jenny erupts in a terrified, hollow scream and reaches for the light on her nightstand, as the ticking of the clock and diegetic sound are at once reintroduced. While events in the second half of the film will allow for an educated guess as to the identity of the old woman, her diegetic status shall remain unexplained for the remainder of the plot – she is not precisely a ghost, a nightmare, a vision or a hallucination, but she could be

any one of them; it is furthermore unclear whether Jenny is asleep or awake when she sees her for the first time.

This last point is however particularly interesting in the approach one may utilize to ascertain the events that follow this frightening episode, as the film allows for two very different interpretations that do not necessarily alter the nature of Jenny's breakdown as much as its context: the remainder of the film could easily be interpreted as some sort of prolonged oneiric or hypnagogic state, in which Jenny relives a number of past circumstances and comes up against a series of traumatic events before waking up again in the morning, or it could be interpreted as the distorted reality of a woman dealing with a massive nervous breakdown, which causes her (and the audience as an extension of the protagonist) to experience a number of events as though they are disengaged from temporal, causal and logical concerns. While the purpose and the goal of my study is not nested in proposing a conclusive answer to this conundrum – the film itself walks such a fine line between these two readings to suggest that both are equally acceptable and equally partial – I will discuss Jenny's circumstances as real insofar as they appear *real* to the character, or insofar as she appears to really experience them.

The study of Jenny's vicissitudes can be better assessed in light of recent scholarly reconsideration of Freud's own theories regarding trauma stemming from sexual assault, and regarding trauma triggers. In Trauma: A Genealogy (2000), Ruth Leys explains that contemporary critics and scholars of trauma theory (she specifically mentions Bessel van der Kolk, Judith Herman, and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson) have incorrectly portrayed Freud's theory of seduction as a "simple causal theory of

trauma,”¹⁷⁸ as though the act in of itself is the trauma that the patient suffers. In Face to Face, the event that seemingly propels Jenny’s breakdown past the point of no return is the rape she suffers at the hands of two strangers. After receiving a very short and vague phone call at an undetermined time – we are at this point already at a diegetic place in which the character’s reality has begun to collapse and she is no longer a reliable narrator, and the Swedish midnight sun makes it nearly impossible for the viewers to conclusively determine at what time of day/night the film’s events are taking place – Jenny senses or decides or knows to head to her empty, abandoned house. Upon her arrival, the film relinquishes for good any sense of logic and sequentiality: Jenny is seen swiftly moving through the unadorned rooms of her house as though they are seemingly interconnected (even though walls are still visible to the audience), until she finds her patient Maria lying on the ground, unconscious. Jenny traces back her steps to the adjacent room in order to use her landline phone and call an ambulance for Maria only to find a man there she had somehow not spotted just seconds before.

At this point, the screen is split into two perfect halves by the wall in between the two rooms, showing Jenny on the left and Maria, curled up in the fetal position, on the right. Both halves are then at once entered by a male – a middle aged man who engages Jenny and a shirtless young adult in his twenties who silently approaches Maria. Jenny does not seem fazed by the presence of the stranger, until he brusquely yanks the phone out of her hands; he then proceeds to give her a convoluted explanation as to their presence in her house, and as Jenny moves to leave the room, she is finally accosted by the younger man who grabs her, pins her down on the ground with the assistance of his accomplice, and tries to enter her. After a few seconds, the younger man gets back up,

¹⁷⁸ Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2000) 19.

declaring that Jenny is “too tight,” making it impossible for him to carry out the sexual act. The two men then proceed to leave the apartment as mysteriously as they appeared.

Because Jenny’s rape is then followed shortly by her suicide attempt, a superficial analysis may suggest that it is in fact the trauma stemming from being sexually attacked that pushes Jenny over the edge, a reading which however cannot quite account for the fact that Jenny herself, as she later recounts the event, expresses very ambiguous feelings about being raped, stating that “At first I was scared [...] but then I wanted him so badly to make it.” Ruth Leys explains that according to Freud’s own theory of seduction, trauma is not specific to an event but rather “constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences”¹⁷⁹ and by a latency period in between the two, at the end of which Freud placed what he called *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwordness: it is the experience of the second event, an event which might or might not be inherently traumatic, which triggers memories of the first event “which came too early in the child’s development to be understood and assimilated,”¹⁸⁰ and allows the subject to experience “a memory of the first event that only then [is] given traumatic meaning and hence repressed.”¹⁸¹ I argue that on the one hand, *Face to Face* adheres and supports the Freudian model of sexual trauma theory, in staging the rape sequence as the trigger episode for Jenny to revisit events in her childhood and elaborate them as traumatic; on the other hand, I also argue that the film complicates this model as delineated by Leys, in that it stages the sexual assault not as the event to which to assign a traumatic value, but as the catalyst to recognize as traumatic a number of childhood events that did not necessarily entail sexual abuse (in Jenny’s case, the death of her parents and a punitive act on her

¹⁷⁹ Leys 20.

¹⁸⁰ Leys 20.

¹⁸¹ Leys 20.

grandmother's part, who had once locked her up in a dark closet to discipline her). I finally propose that the film furthers a theory specific to the period of latency between the two events, equating this timeframe with that of Jenny's reshaping of her self-understanding, ultimately evidencing the memory repression phenomenon that Freud could never quite engage and resolve conclusively in his own research, which is still wildly debated in contemporary scholarship about repressed and traumatic memory.¹⁸²

While Jenny might have very well been unable to recognize those childhood events as traumatic within themselves, I propose to interpret her reshaping as an inherent reaction to them, by voiding them of meaning through the voiding of her identity. Through the staging of Jenny's reshaping as an automated but incognizant inner defense or preservation mechanism (and later through the framing of her breakdown as an equally automated but incognizant reaction to that mechanism) Face to Face illustrates at once that the self is all but dormant in Freud's latency time gap, while also positing the individuation and the confrontation of trauma as an ultimately ineluctable necessity dictated by one's core self-understanding. The film strikes a very deliberate balance in structuring the character as someone who is "firmly convinced that a cheese is a cheese, a

¹⁸² A point of contention in the scholarship regarding psychological trauma has historically been Sigmund Freud's reluctance to recognize as valid the status of the various repressed childhood memories that would surface during the therapy sessions with his patients. Freud maintained that most repressed memories of childhood events were largely if not completely fabricated, hence unreliable for the purpose of psychoanalysis (see Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, 1915). Scholars such as Daniel Goleman (Emotional Intelligence, 1996) and Elaine Showalter (Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics in Modern Culture, 1997) have gone on to argue that while the reality of child abuse is undeniable and may in fact cause the patient to selectively numb any recollection of the specific event, in general memories of abuse may present themselves in dramatically different ways, some of which are more questionable than others. Elaine Loftus, whose main field of research is memory recollection and memory reconstruction (see Remembering Dangerously, 1995 and Misinformation and Memory: The Creation of New Memories, 1989) has moved on to describe that it is in fact possible to implant false memories in individuals, compromising the validity of such recollections.

table is a table, and, *not least*, that a human being is a human being”¹⁸³ all the while her reality as she knows it is slowly but inexorably coming apart around her. Even before her mental collapse, the protagonist appears to have completely disengaged any and all appropriate emotional responses to the various circumstances in her life in favor of a detached, almost neurotic pragmatism: even the fact that she is carrying out an extra-marital affair ultimately fails to portray Jenny as a liberated, carefree individual, considering that the few interactions with her lover, which all happen over the phone, are as paralyzingly casual and stilted as the ones she shares with her relatives, coworkers and friends. “If you force things to be as usual, they’ll be as usual,” Jenny tells a friend at a party as the two discuss whether they are happy, and what happiness is altogether. Because Jenny is at that point in the early throes of her nervous breakdown, and can sense that something is about to befall her, that line also reads as the character’s attempt to reassure herself the only way she knows how to: not even the knowledge that her sanity is being threatened is enough to shake the character out of this self-imposed stupor. The events that follow, as the film shows, will prove her wrong.

In staging the dreams and the oneiric experiences that constellate Jenny’s recovery after her suicide attempt – which the character performs as methodically and collectedly as one would expect – Bergman faced a challenge as an auteur:

I am extremely suspicious of dreams, apparitions, and visions, both in literature and in films and plays. Perhaps it’s because mental excesses of this sort smack too much of being “arranged.” So when, despite my reluctance and suspicion, I go to depict a series of dreams, which moreover are not my own, I like to think of these dreams as an extension of reality. This is therefore a series of *real* events which strike the leading character during an important moment of her life. Here something remarkable occurs. Although Jenny is a psychiatrist she has never taken this extended reality seriously. [...] This last conviction is one of the things

¹⁸³ Face to Face vii.

she is forced to modify in rather a painful way when she realizes in a flash that she is a conglomeration of other people and of the whole world.¹⁸⁴

On a strictly diegetic level, the film blurs the line between reality and what Bergman called extended reality to ask the audience to consider a number of questions: is the entire film a dream? Is the portrayal of dreams a less legitimate mode of filmic address than that of reality? By the same token, is it equally effective? As I mentioned above, Jenny's dreams are to be interpreted as real if only because they incite real reactions in the character's perceived waking life, and because they also exist as a re-elaboration of a number of real events from the character's past.

However, my analysis of these experiences within Jenny's process of reshaping wants to consider the very last point brought up by Bergman in his assessment above: the idea that it is through the exposure to a fictive mode of representation that Jenny finally manages to come to the realization that she too is essentially a fictive mode of representation. When she is undoubtedly awake at the end of the film, the character is ultimately allowed to reclaim her experience as being part of a larger context of connectedness in spite of her attempts to disengage herself from the rest of the world – and reality altogether – in a way which also redeems Elisabet's downward diegetic trajectory in Persona. According to Camillo Bassotto, the film is “un condensato di un'analisi con tanto di paziente, medico, strumenti (i sogni), avvio alla guarigione, risanamento,”¹⁸⁵ but I would instead argue that the ending in and of itself offers no guarantees that Jenny will be able to maintain her new awareness, proposing instead simply the notion that she has been able to claim it for what it is. In discussing the

¹⁸⁴ Face to Face vii.

¹⁸⁵ Camillo Bassotto, Faccia a faccia (CM, n.23, 1976) 55. “A condensed version of therapy with a patient, a doctor, tools (dreams), a move towards recovery, rehabilitation.” My translation.

circumstances around the character's suicide attempt and her final awakening, Kauffmann more aptly notes that "[t]he whole point of Ullman's character is that she *seems* perfectly all right; and, not allowed to die, she ends up all right; still she genuinely wanted to end her life."¹⁸⁶ In light of this ambiguity, Bergman himself seemed unsure as to the future of his character, furthering that "[f]rankly, I don't know whether she will be able to bear her realization."¹⁸⁷ Be that as it may, those dreams and childhood recollections do work as an anti-Freudian method of analysis not on account of their level of truth, but on account of their level of veridicity.¹⁸⁸

Jenny's dreams/hallucinations cast her as a child (Ullman wears a bonnet and a little girl's coat/Sunday uniform in all of the family-themed dreams that follow her hospitalization) who, for the first time, is called to grapple with a series of events which stunted her: as an adult, she finally comes face to face with her child self. Shortly after methodically swallowing an entire bottle of prescription pills to end her life, the character is precipitated in a space of extended reality where, while running through a series of poorly lit rooms in her grandparents' house, she stumbles upon her grandmother. The equivocal status of this dream is immediately heightened by the fact that Jenny is aware that she is not awake and, even more significantly, somehow aware that her suicide attempt has been unsuccessful and that she is not dead. A jovial, bright and affable woman in real/waking life, the protagonist's grandmother appears in this sequence austere and somewhat threatening, as she sternly asks her niece to sit to listen to a

¹⁸⁶ Kauffmann 22.

¹⁸⁷ Kauffmann 22

¹⁸⁸ Veridicity is to be understood here as a "property of certain perceptions, memories and other acts of cognition which, though not in the strictest sense true – since truth is usually considered an exclusive property of propositions and judgments – tend to form true propositions," as first explained by Dagobert D. Runes in Dictionary of Philosophy (1942)

fairytale: what starts pouring out of Jenny's memories right away is a repressed sense of fear and disgust towards her grandparents, which manifests itself as Jenny imagines her grandmother's hand heavily resting on her shoulder – a gesture that is not intended to appear comforting or affective, but rather constricting and upsetting, as it suddenly turns into a choke hold which paralyzes Jenny's head. When Jenny manages to break free, she is startled to realize that the person in the room is now the old woman from her very first hallucination who, I propose, should then be read as an extended reality double for her grandmother, or some sort of psychological manifestation born out of all the overwhelmingly negative repressed memories and unpleasant feelings that Jenny harbors towards the character. It is only once Jenny herself makes this connection and comes to terms with this presence that the two characters share a brief but conciliatory moment of familiar tenderness. The protagonist then wakes up in a hospital bed, where her friend Tomas (Erland Josephson) informs her that he had found her unresponsive in her room and called an ambulance, saving her life.

The same ideas of kin-time I have applied to my analysis of Irena's relationship with Tea in *La sconosciuta* can be revisited to discuss the dynamics of Jenny's relationship with both her grandmother and her daughter, even if the former is a preponderant presence in the film and the latter is a marginal one. Kauffmann notes that,

[a]s if to underscore the way that common life digs its own pitfalls, [Bergman] includes a scene between the psychiatrist and her young daughter which ends with a strain between the two. The woman then sees herself – inexplicably – carrying on a pattern, laying the groundwork for possible future mental difficulties in her own child,¹⁸⁹

in reference to the only scene in the film in which Jenny and her daughter Anna appear together, towards the end of the film, as the girl is informed by her mother about her

¹⁸⁹ Kauffmann 22.

suicide attempt. Jenny's revelation leaves her daughter surprisingly unmoved, and further probing reveals that Anna has a fundamental distrust in her mother. The girl keeps questioning the protagonist's mental health almost in a mocking tone, and when her mother finally scolds her, she quips back, "You never liked me anyway," adding "And that's true. Don't worry, I can take care of myself" before taking her leave, having rendered her mother speechless. While Kauffmann's reading that Anna's apparent impenetrability and detachment are modeled after her mother's as some sort of inherent inheritance is rather worthwhile and suggestive, I would be however less inclined to reduce Jenny's circumstances to what he calls mental difficulties. By positing a gap or a break in Jenny's kin-time, caused by the death of her parents, one might then argue that her problematic relationship with Anna is more accurately a result of the fact that, because Jenny never had a mother and a father as a reference, even in her adult age she cannot be a mother because she has not properly finished being a daughter yet. The stark resemblance between Ullman and Helene Friberg (the young actress playing Anna) as an older and younger version of the same person seems to further this nod to Jenny's incompleteness as both a child and an adult.

In addition to that, the film stages two sequences which work to help the protagonist come to terms with the authority and family figures in her life. The first is a confrontation between Jenny and her deceased parents in one of Jenny's dreams, which serves a crucial purpose: Jenny is finally rid of her anger for being abandoned by her parents not physically after their death, but emotionally while they were still alive. "Everything had to be so proper, correct, precise and hopelessly flawless," she tells the couple, who try to evade any sort of confrontation with their daughter, and never utter a

word in response. Once the two have disappeared, the character sees herself alive in a coffin and witnesses her own burial: the Jenny inside the coffin is calling for her parents the way a scared child would, pitting her fists against the cover in an attempt to break free, while the other Jenny looks over until she finally decides to set the casket on fire in a gesture that is meant to be cleansing and final, an act of renewal. The second is perhaps the most intense section of the film, a long uninterrupted take in which Jenny addresses the audience directly from her hospital room, launching into a searing monologue in which she regresses in time and at once impersonates her child self and her own grandmother. This scene plays out like a possession of sorts, but it is this very act of profound impersonation that allows Jenny to restage and resolve many of the unaddressed issues that marred her relationship with her grandmother: through this exercise, Jenny portrays a rather shocking picture of the years spent with her grandparents after her parents' death as a time of emotional and physical abuse on her grandmother's part, during which Jenny ultimately relinquished any sense of self and any control over her own person to assuage her fears.

The film presents those years as the time that initiated Jenny's process of re-shaping, in turn exposing her grandmother's current joviality and pleasantness for what it really is: a form of emotional hegemony over the protagonist that is still looming over the character as an adult. This conflict is ultimately only resolved within Jenny herself, as the protagonist actively chooses not to confront her grandmother about any of the abuse that has transpired. And yet, the ending of the film suggests that through her experiences Jenny has acquired not only a newfound compassion towards her grandmother, but more importantly a new prospective that does not necessarily equate the promise of happiness,

but perhaps a self-awareness that is similar to that which Irena grasps upon seeing Tea as an adult at the end of La sconosciuta: for Irena it was the knowledge of having successfully reshaped her own past by having successfully shaped Tea's future; for Jenny – as she spies on her grandparents in a last moment of tenderness and affection – it is the realization that “love surrounds everything, even death,” together with a new sense of congruence and kinship.

Conclusions

The first two film characters engaged by my study – Sonia in Matteo Garrone’s Primo amore and Agrado in Pedro Almodóvar’s All About My Mother – were selected because their narratives both encompass the sustaining of what could apparently be labeled a performance: the former of anorexia, the latter of gender. From there, I moved to complicate this notion to show that ideas of identity, agency and performance are not interchangeable as the film tradition laid out in my introductory chapter might lead one to believe, but rather idiosyncratic constructs that should not be automatically taken as synonymous. In my discussion of Sonia, I utilized Mulvey, Znaniecki and Lacan to discuss how the character’s incredibly tasking performance of girlfriendhood, which is in her case inextricably bound to one of an eating disorder, is in fact rejected as agency by her identity, showing that the two are ultimately two distinct constructs. I was then tasked with the need to organize a new definition of identity as distinct from agency within the context of my study, and I utilized Agrado to define identity as the intrinsic self-understanding that one formulates and maintains about oneself. Moving from scholarship that discusses the character’s authenticity as a performance in and of itself (Garlinger, Sofair), I first mobilized theories of cosmetic surgery (Wegenstein) and then I complicated theories of body modification (Blum, Jordan) by engaging a Baudrillardian reading of the re-gendered body that allowed me to define it as authentic within itself. Agrado’s supposed reinvention isn’t in fact meant to abstract her desire to be other/fake, but it serves as an act of appropriation of her authentic/real self, as informed by the character’s self-understanding.

Relying on the distinction between agency and identity as self-understanding which I established in the previous section, the third section set out to explore the filmic dynamics that are mobilized when one's self-understanding is compromised by internal mechanisms and external circumstances, according to the vicissitudes of two characters: Irena in Giuseppe Tornatore's La sconosciuta and Jenny in Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face. More precisely, I looked at each character's relationship with her past (diegetic and extra-diegetic) to establish a common link that would code the past as a time of internalized and unresolved trauma. As I have shown, Irena is unable to forget the years of physical and emotional abuse she experienced when she worked as a prostitute for a ruthless john, and unwilling to forget the very last of many children she was forced to relinquish to an adoption racket; Jenny, on her part, is forcing upon herself an aseptic and sterile existence as a response to the loss of her parents and the problematic relationship with her grandmother during her childhood, until everything she has made herself forget causes her to experience a crippling nervous breakdown/breakthrough. Looking at these instances of self-reshaping, my intention was to clearly instantiate the argument that one's self-understanding moves to preserve and reorganize itself in ways that positively differentiate it from one's agency, and that in film this process actually often pits the two notions in adversarial terms – an idea which I had introduced and briefly mapped out at the end of my discussion in the previous section.

In order to further this study, I then connected the idea of loss (of one's children, parents, and ultimately one's self) to Judith Butler's theorizations about mourning to inscribe the process of self-reshaping within the act of mourning itself, as a transformative experience according to which the two characters mourn those losses

along with the loss of their own self-understanding as a result of those losses; it is this experience that inevitably leads to the reconfiguration of one's self-understanding as informed anew by the act of mourning itself, as both characters are called to reorganize their own ideas of themselves in light of what and whom they no longer have, as this lack inevitably informs what and who they think they are. I also engaged notions of motherhood (De Marneffe in particular) to better circumscribe the filmic portrayals of Irena and Jenny: not only both are problematic mother figures within their own narratives, but motherhood appears to be for both an intimate experience of self-actualization (or lack thereof). On the one hand, Irena cannot understand herself as complete without the experience of mothering the little girl she gave up for adoption; on the other hand, Jenny is unable to understand herself as mother because of her incomplete experience as a daughter. I then relied on Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to show that through her unorthodox mothering of the little Adacher girl, Irena is really on a quest to amend her own past as she shapes the girl's future in ways that ultimately render the uncovering of the biological link between the two pointless; I furthered this by applying Leys' reconsideration of Freud's theory of seduction to explain Jenny's childhood as traumatic within itself, and the ensuing reshaping as taking place in what Freud categorized as a period of latency.

I finally concluded that agency (as embodied in La sconosciuta by the character of Valeria, the girl's adoptive mother) and self-understanding (embodied by Irena and her experience of reshaping) cannot be understood as one and the same when discussing matters of identity: for Valeria motherhood is simply a role that she undertakes as nothing more than a performance, whereas it is for Irena a crucial component of her self-

understanding. I then read Jenny's final act of burying her childhood self and setting her casket alight as a cleansing move representative of her self-understanding reclaiming itself. In this regard, my research moved from the appraisal of current scholarships in identity theory, gender studies, psychology and philosophy, which have widely embraced theories of identity as agency and performance, to argue that the study of film gives an insight into a critical distinction between performance (as agency) and identity (as one's self-understanding) as two separate, oftentimes conflicting notions, altogether reframing the critical discourse on the subject matter. This is at once a noteworthy contribution to the field of identity theory and to the scholarship on film studies, as one which qualifies and broadens the former's scope while further legitimizing the latter, especially when considering the Metzian link between film and reality within a strongly ideological and political view of cinema.

This is also implicitly the first of a number of limitations that need to be considered within the scope of my study. This research applies a formalist approach to the study of film and film characters which also inevitably draws from apparatus theory; I consider the characters in my discussion as fictive modes of representation, and similarly consider their portrayals as they themselves are shaped by means of editing, photography, lighting, shot composition and other technical components of film. Similarly, my discussion of identity reshaping is strongly situated within the dynamics of the filmic medium, and it is within this specific context which I engage the core scholarship on identity theory, motherhood, mourning, and notions of cognitivism as applied to the act of spectatorship; a broader and more sweeping redefinition of the notion of identity could not possibly be attempted and/or organized within the confines of one dissertation and

merely through the study of film, and that is not where the ambition and interest of this study reside.

In this sense, however, my research is raising a number of questions that beg for further investigation. The most basic enterprise, obviously, would be to test how my findings hold up when the focus is shifted from an Italian and European context to an American and non-Western one: a number of US and Asian productions mentioned throughout my dissertation would appear to be ideal candidates for a similar study. By the same token, I am aware that in no way my study fully encompasses and exhausts the diverse European film tradition, and that there are a number of idiosyncratic outputs and movements that would require to be investigated from a completely different angle for a comparable research to be successfully performed: the Romanian New Wave or Dogme 95, for example, in and of themselves negate (or at the very least highly frustrate) a formalist approach to their study. Further work would also be needed to ascertain whether this same analytical paradigm can be of use in the study of identity reshaping and male film characters, as a much different political and cultural context – a privileged and dominant one, as I have characterized at the beginning of this section – would be called into play. Finally, I believe that a number of possible future studies may very well appropriate my theorization of identity as self-understanding and my conclusions about the nature of mourning and its relationship with the self and apply them outside of the confines of film studies to research in psychoanalytical theory, trauma theory and gender studies, with particular focus on the realm of queer theory, postmodernism and the anti-essentialist definition of femininity of third-wave feminism.

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Films

Ansikte mot ansikte (*Face to Face*, Ingmar Bergman, 1976, 114 min, Sweden)

Giulietta degli spiriti (*Juliet of the Spirits*, Federico Fellini, 1965, 137 min, Italy, France)

Il portiere di notte (*The Night Porter*, Liliana Cavani, 1974, 118 min, Italy)

Primo amore (*First Love*, Matteo Garrone, 2004, 100 min, Italy)

La sconosciuta (*The Unknown Woman*, Giuseppe Tornatore, 2006, 118 min, Italy)

Todo sobre mi madre (*All About My Mother*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1999, 101 min, Spain, France)

Una giornata particolare (*A Special Day*, Ettore Scola, 1977, 110 min, Italy)