

Fantatising the Self, Fantatising the Other: Memory and Re-visions in Mario Martone's L'amore molesto

“«Sei un fantasma» dissi alla donna nello specchio.” (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto*)

“Sin dall'inizio infatti, nel film noi dobbiamo vedere Delia.” (Martone 80)

Having worked in close collaboration with Fabrizia Ramondino on *Morte di un matematico napoletano* in 1992, and on *Terremoto con madre e figlia* in 1993, filmmaker and theatre director Mario Martone decides to work on another female issue in 1995, by re-narrating in cinematic discourse Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto*. Martone's choice to adapt *L'amore molesto* for the big screen does not simply involve re-working symbolic language into symbolic cinema. It may also involve deconstructing and reconstructing ideologies, 're-dressing'¹ the novel's female author's and first person female narrator's points of view into a male director's different ideology and sensitivity.

When a male writer takes over a female narrating voice, he defines not only her experience but his own, her experience as he perceives, understands and names it. [. . .] The female narrating voice is not totally 'other' but defined by the potentiality, the intentionality of the writing, creative self; it is enclosed, constrained by the act of writing. (Wood 89)

In writing so, Sharon Wood suggests that the very act of writing, or script writing and directing in our case, is a form of control over the narrating voice which becomes objectified. We may then proceed with an analysis of Martone's potential male 're-appropriation' of Delia's (the narrator and main focaliser) and Elena Ferrante's perspectives and sensitivities in his version of *L'amore molesto*. But we will proceed in a detective-like style, the mode that the genre of the novel and film, after all, invites us to adopt.² We shall find the elements, the suspects, the evidence, the places, that will enable us to follow the investigation and find the culprit(s), if there are any, and a solution. Mario Martone: innocent or guilty?

*The detectives**Adult Delia*

Delia returns to Naples after years of absence from her native city in a search for the causes of her mother's sudden disappearance and death. The woman who returns to Naples is a completely different person from the one who left for the capital city (Bologna in the film) many years before in order to pursue her independence and career as a cartoonist. As a good modern career woman, she has rejected her mother tongue, Neapolitan, and has transformed her appearance by wearing androgynous type clothes, by cutting her hair short, and by removing any trace of femininity. The career woman, defensive as she is, has rejected the female role which is traditionally inscribed and subdued into male domination, and has tried to step across the male-female division into the opposite role. In doing so she has in fact only reconfirmed, indeed even reinforced the male-female sex binary.

More than male-like, Delia, in fact, returns 'home' feeling like a ghost—an entity that has subconsciously set aside her 'frail' gender identity, but not been able, for obvious reasons, to fully enter the opposite role. She returns to Naples with the imagined symbolic advantage of her new more masculine, thus safer, conquered identity and self reliance; but with the disadvantage, in others' eyes, that she is still a woman and can therefore still be abused. Her superficial appearance and behaviour is an image: deep below that veneer she is still the frightened little girl she dreams of in the worst of her dreams and that the audience is introduced to in the cut from the initial credits, set in sepia colour (denoting the past), to the full colour (denoting reality contemporary to narration) scene of Delia's waking distraught eyes. Between the plenitude and innocence of the little girl's enamoured gaze on her mother—sound tracked, extradiegetically, by Alfred Schnittke's *Concerto Grosso n. 1* and, diegetically, by the background rhythmic tempo of the sewing machine—and adult Delia's wounded gaze, there lies a whole tale of hurt and abuse.

The main narrator and focaliser in *L'amore molesto* presents double layered, almost schizophrenic personalities: one that has emerged out of the patriarchal model in order to protect the frail, abused, and one removed—that of young Delia. And yet, the psychological shield does nothing else but replicate patriarchy, in a perfectly recognisable chinese-box system: the male protecting the female.

Returning home results in the operation of a final catharsis. As in any return to the mother land and language, the challenge at stake is that of self-analysis and re-discovery. As Delia follows the clues to investigate her mother's last few days of existence, she trips in a series of coincidental encounters with men belonging to her past, and with removed memories that bring her to come, instead, face to face with her-

self and to disentangle the knots of her childhood violence and sexual abuse. It is this journey through and to the self that will, in the end, empower Delia.

Mario Martone

Martone is the other detective, who alongside Delia, is conducting an investigation into Delia's past, but also, at the same time, an inquest into his mother-city, Naples, from a cultural-socio-political point of view. It will become clear that indeed Delia and Martone move together along the maze of clues and stops that will take the investigators and spectators (invited to follow their own investigation too) to the solution of the mystery.

The victims

The other

In a straightforward whodunit the pattern expected is that of the triangle detective/victim/murderer. But things are not straightforward in *L'amore molesto*. The classical pattern is displaced by the presence of yet another party: *the other*. And again this other is all but straightforward. It coincides with victims and suspects in turn, it is a *she* (the culprit, either responsible for or victim of a crime, in a patriarchal society is always female) who has to be found guilty, and who is defined by the *infid-* rooted Latin terms: *infida* and *infedele*.

Amalia

Amalia is the most complex of characters in this *noir*, and yet she is the most sober of them all. Filippo, her brother, describes her as strong, stubborn and jovial: "siamo una razza che non s'avvilisce" (Martone, *L'amore molesto*). Grown up as a seamstress, she supposedly marries very young and has three children. Being a woman, being young, beautiful, strong, stubborn and jovial are indeed her qualities, but also the reasons that make her a most suspiciously unfaithful wife and thus open to male attraction, domination and abuse. She lives in the role of mother, mistrusted wife, torn between the power of her original family—represented by her brother Filippo—the power of her husband, and the power by reflection assumed by her daughter. All want to possess her, to 'protect' her from other men, or the *other*.³ Her brother protects her for the honour of the family; her husband in the possessive and obsessive desire/fear of keeping her sexually only for himself; her daughter in the same intense fear/desire of limiting Amalia's role just to that of the mother, as shown in the synopsis scene where, as Pauline Small points out, the icon that is attached to Amalia, in Delia's imagination, is that of the nurturing mother-Madonna (302).

Amalia plays the role of the victim, but in fact she is a winner from all perspectives. She takes/gives as much as she can take from/give to her marriage and then—surprise!—she leaves her husband and chooses to carry the burden and responsibility of her three children. And by leaving she issues the patriarchal system a checkmate. Patriarchy cornered and dismissed. Choosing to live by herself with her daughters and doing without a husband in the 1950s-'60s reveal her as a self respecting, empowered woman. A pre sex-war feminist. But not an angry one, as she is portrayed from beginning to end as joyous and serene and confident of her choices. Even when her ex husband, having learnt from Caserta that he is seeing Amalia, returns to threaten her ten days before her death, her comment to neighbour De Riso is: "Chillo è carattere. Manco la vecchiaia l'ha cagnato" (Martone, *L'amore molesto*). It is never clarified during the course of *L'amore molesto* whether Amalia took her own life or drowned accidentally. Nevertheless it is very unlikely that such an empowered woman might have taken her own life: so joyous was life to her despite everything. And all we know is that the last night of her existence *was* joyful.

Young Delia

Delia appears in different roles in this investigation: investigator and victim. She is, indeed, the main victim of the tale. Delia is the victim of the removed sexual violence that, by a curious slippage of roles, in an ancestral-type, still unsevered, mother-daughter relationship, she had projected onto Amalia.

The violence was denounced, but young Delia's unbearable feeling of guilt exchanges in her imagination, like in a game, the puzzle pieces around her. In the wake of an eavesdropped conversation between her mother and some neighbours, where Amalia had mentioned Caserta's attempt to kiss her, Delia's mind fantasises a slippage of actors' roles in the theatre of the performed sexual abuse—abuse turns into betrayal; pain and guilt turn into pleasure;⁴ Caserta's father, *il vecchio*, turns into Caserta; Delia turns into Amalia. A card shuffle and the trick is made, events are rearranged, mind is appeased. If appeased is the right word.

Suspected Crimes

1. Culpable homicide.
2. Re-dressing Elena Ferrante's and Delia's gender ideologies.

Investigation props

Psychoanalysis

The use of psychoanalysis is present in the scenes of Martone's version of *L'amore molesto*, making the descent into the well of conscience

progressive and credible from beginning to end. The opening scene, explains O'Healy, has strong 'psychoanalytic allusions' (252). As Delia is gazing at her mother working away at the sewing machine, and the mother is smiling back, the curtain is caught by the wind and keeps hiding and revealing Amalia's face to Delia's gaze.

The repeated loss and retrieval of the mother by the daughter's gaze is reminiscent of what Freud described as the *fort/da* game, a game invented by a small child to assuage its fears about separation from the mother through the demonstration of its own mastery. Delia's visual memory of repeatedly losing and retrieving the mother suggests a similar anxiety and a fantasy of compensatory control. (O'Healy 252)

This scene anticipates further psychoanalytical devices employed throughout the movie, such as opening and shutting doors connected with associations and retrieving memories.⁵ Delia's visit to Naples is her *descensio ad inferos*: the *inferos* of her memories and violence, the womb of her conscience, symbolised powerfully by the final descent into the baker's basement, geographically placed in the area of the *quartieri spagnoli*, also known as *il ventre di Napoli*.⁶

Sherlock Holmes' monocle: Martone's camera and Delia's spectacles

[Lei] ha messo negli occhi di Delia uno sguardo canzonatorio, aggressivo, sessualmente disgustato o svagato, a tratti pietoso. Ma non si è fermato qui. Ha invece quasi subito oscurato i meccanismi di trama e ha individuato con grande acutezza di sguardo, fin dalle prime scene, gli snodi del rapporto madre-figlia. È questo che mi ha turbato. Non so dirle quale violento urto emotivo è stato per me lo sguardo di Delia sulla madre che allatta, il movimento di Amalia tra figli-lavoro-marito: Licia Maglietta è una perfetta *madre giovane*, di una verità lancinante. (Ferrante, *La frantumaglia* 54–55)

Elena Ferrante hits bull's eye with perfect aim: the main instrument of investigation/analysis adopted by Martone is Delia's gaze. The narrating point of view that involves the narrator/character's gaze is indeed extremely clever as it successfully collapses the distance between Delia-narrator and Delia-character returning to Naples. In this sense the narrating voice comes to coincide with the character and the impersonating actress.

We must come to terms with another gaze: Mario Martone's gaze behind the camera; the gaze that, after all, must be mostly satisfied with the strategic directing decisions. Martone's gaze is observing Delia as narrator and character: Delia's visions and re-visions are seen also through the camera by Martone. What are Martone's and Delia's gazes observing, separately and at the same time? Bodies. Amalia's body; Delia's body; peoples' bodies: bodies compressed in a cable car; bodies touching each other, with or without intention; bodies abusing

each other or other bodies; dressed bodies; naked bodies; aged bodies; dead floating bodies; bodies contracting with fear; bodies expanding with pleasure. Bodies and memories of bodies.

Central narrating symbols in Martone's *L'amore molesto* are then bodies. Central instrument: the gaze.

Both Delia's gaze and body are returned to their mother city, Naples, and they must come to terms with its reality. Through the novel and the film, Delia's body, as well as, in her memories, her mother's body, are prisoners in small, oppressed and claustrophobic spaces in a city that is mainly ruled by male bodies and power.

Cominciai a sudare. Sedevo stretta tra due vecchie signore che fissavano davanti a loro con una rigidità innaturale. [...] I passeggeri in piedi si curvavano su di noi respirandoci addosso. Le donne soffocavano tra i corpi maschili, sbuffando per quella vicinanza occasionale, fastidiosa anche se all'apparenza incolpevole. I maschi, nella ressa, si servivano delle femmine per giocare in silenzio tra sé e sé. (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 61–62)

The same type of sensation of being suffocated by people, smells, dialectal language, and sexual obscenities is evoked when she travels on the bus to the Vomero from downtown Naples. Flashbacks are evoked of another trip in the *funicolare*, one in particular where she witnesses her father's self-legitimated violence on her mother in public:

Una volta si convinse che un uomo nella ressa l'aveva toccata. La schiaffeggiò sotto gli occhi di tutti: sotto i nostri occhi. Io restai dolorosamente meravigliata. Ero certa che avrebbe ucciso quell'uomo e non capivo perché, invece, avesse preso a schiaffi lei. Anche adesso non sapevo come mai l'avesse fatto. (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 65)

Conscience is created by perception: experiential perceptions coming from the surrounding reality. Returning to Naples and re-living her youth experiences is the only way available to Delia for coming into contact with her past and lost self. Her encounter with the real city, rather than the imagined and abhorred city of her adult mind, brings her to re-visions and re-visitations of the past experiences that formed her childhood and young adult conscience of her mother and mother-city.

Martone accompanies her in a similar experience. Likewise, by re-visiting, re-experiencing, and re-observing his mother-city in all its socio-political issues, but also in its complex beauty (in a whole life-artistic context of geographical and cinematic re-visitations)⁷ Martone reunites with and detaches from Naples through his ironic gaze for a cathartic personal-artistic re-assessment and re-birth.

Delia as an adult now is able to understand her past by freeing herself from that fear, by taking an emotional distance from the reality of Naples through her gaze and irony, in solidarity with Martone's gaze: "uno sguardo che non è quello *del* personaggio, né quello *sul*

personaggio, ma quello *con* il personaggio" (De Gaetano 60). Delia's and Martone's gazes unite in solidarity for a fuller and cathartic re-experience of Naples in *L'amore molesto*.

The gaze is used from beginning to end as an instrument of research, and in the final scene in the baker's basement not only are Martone's and adult Delia's gazes united in looking and remembering, but also young Delia's gaze joins in. In this way young and adult Delia are re-united. This is possible through the device of Delia's broken spectacles. Delia's spectacles had turned into a distorting filter screen on reality and a symbol of her removed memories. Having broken that filter, Delia is now able to re-live her abuse and bring clarity on her blurred past. Both the directing camera and the narrator's spectacles (Delia's and Martone's gazes re-united) function as a Sherlock Holmes monocle of ontological investigation into Delia's present and past issues quest.

The suspects

Main suspect: Mario Martone

Is a fully homogeneous identification between Delia's and Martone's gazes always possible? Despite the fact that Delia's gaze is accompanied in solidarity by Martone's gaze, the very fact that their gazes are respectively female and male, and that the male gaze is the directing one, cannot merely indicate that the extra-diegetic gaze contains Delia's diegetic gaze—once again a replica of patriarchy?—and that Delia's body is also an objective female body seen by a male directing gaze. If Martone's gaze can be perceived as identifying with Delia's gaze, at times quite clearly the camera is actually watching Delia, and also Amalia, as a provocative woman. Delia is watching and being watched at the same time.

Martone's position here as (male) director is rather difficult and opens his narration to possible criticism, and the Neapolitan director is fully aware of that risk. In his *carteggio* with Elena Ferrante, Martone seems to be preoccupied with *his* narration of Delia as he finds himself in front of a clear difficulty: conflating a female voice, that is never described physically, into a real person (the film character, which also involves the choice of an actress) that he must place objectively on a screen:

Sto cercando di dare vita a una Delia forse diversa da quella che lei conosce: è necessario, proprio perché nel romanzo lei ha voluto velarne l'immagine. Lei ne rivela il pensiero, lancia al lettore degli appigli decisivi, ma non la descrive mai davanti ai nostri occhi con l'evidenza degli altri personaggi. Questo prodigioso procedimento di scrittura, che crea il mistero del rapporto tra Delia e Amalia, dovrà per me inevitabilmente sciogliersi per poi, spero, ricomporsi cinematograficamente: sin dall'inizio infatti, nel film noi dobbiamo vedere Delia. (Martone 80)

In cinema language there is no choice: the character must be revealed and objectified. Martone must make a compromise, find a middle ground between Delia in Ferrante's novel (in her double role of narrating voice, or linguistic phantasm, and detective/focaliser in the classical whodunit trio Delia-mother-murderer) and actress Anna Bonaiuto. There can be no way out for Martone: the phantasm has to be reincarnated into a 'watchable' body.

Delia successfully remains the narrating centre out of whose point of view reality is perceived both as a child and as an adult: Delia narrating as well as narrated; Delia seeing, but also constantly seen on the screen.

Mirrors and irony are central in film's seeing-knowing techniques. Irony which in turn is achieved through the use of distorted and oblique gaze.

Three scenes occur in the mirror, where the camera is pointed to the mirror surface and therefore observing Delia who observes in turn her reflection or her mother's reflection.

1. In Amalia's apartment when Delia is putting on her mother's make up. "Sei un fantasma. Non ti assomiglio," (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 49) comments Delia referring to herself and her mother at the same time.

2. At the Spa hotel, where she accompanies her childhood friend, Antonio, to a political meeting. In a bathroom mirror Delia looks at herself in her red dress, still wet from the summer downpour she was caught in.

3. In a scene (immediately following the scene at the hotel) re-evoking a past memory of Delia watching her mother putting on make up in the mirror.

All three scenes are filmed using side shots, revealing the oblique gaze Martone is adopting to look at Delia or Delia's mother. An oblique gaze which reveals irony. A detached, dubitative position of the observer on what is being observed.

In the first scene in the mirror, while Delia is putting on her mother's make up, the side shot puts into doubt her words: "Sei un fantasma. Non ti assomiglio" (*Ibidem*). Ironically, by the next few scenes, and indeed the end of the film, we know that Delia changes her identity progressively into Amalia's by wearing the lingerie she finds in her mother's suitcase, and finally her empty dress in the old desolated basement. In doing so, Delia not only resembles her mother more and more, but ends up inhabiting her mother's empty dress only for a few minutes: this is enough to operate the epiphany of re-surfing memories of her violence.

The Spa hotel scene in the mirror is also shot at an angle: the camera initially focuses sideways on Delia entering the hotel restroom (representing Martone's ironical gaze), then suddenly pans around to take an

angle shot in the mirror. Both the director and Delia are looking at her mirror image with an oblique gaze. Delia is even laughing at herself, her reflected image slightly distorted. For the first time her eyes gaze at herself in the red scanty dress, with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. Despite the fact that Áine O'Healy maintains that Delia's "body is never fetishized as object of the gaze" (256), there is a slight difference in the gaze on Delia before the camera pans around on the mirror image: the surprised expression caught in Delia's eyes betrays someone else's surprise, which is then rather re-dimensioned and more controlled as the camera shot changes. Surprise turned into self-irony.

Finally, the half-tint scene that follows, shows an angle shot of Amalia putting lipstick on, but also the reflected image of a preoccupied young Delia looking in disapproval at her mother making herself up. One moment later, as Delia is breaking dry pasta for lunch, she asks her mother where she is going and orders her to come home quickly. As the mother is casting her last look in the mirror and as she leaves her bedroom, the audience is shown a sketch of the dancing gypsy painting in the mirror, on the same angle where Delia was previously sitting. The oblique camera gaze, indicating irony but also suspicion about the mother's real destination, leaves the space for a question mark. Who is the dancer 'in the making'?⁸

Other suspects: Caserta and Delia's father

Both Caserta and Delia's father, as the narrative proceeds, could fit the possible murderer's role, as both are suspected of having been with Amalia on the night of her death.

Caserta brings Amalia's suitcase back to her apartment in exchange for a plastic bag containing Amalia's old underwear. Caserta, as De Riso and Antonio confirm to Delia, had recently been seeing Amalia.

Delia's father, neighbour De Riso tells Delia, had visited and threatened Amalia ten days before her disappearance.

Both could be tried for murder, perhaps? Or for collusion and complicity with patriarchy? There are no excuses for their behaviour, except for their piteous mental state: Caserta is senile and Delia's father is a lonely alcoholic, no longer representing any danger to society except for themselves.

Amalia

Amalia lived the life of a suspect and her gender was her guilt. Even after her death she is suspected by her daughter and husband of being the culprit, the only person responsible for her own misfortune. What was Amalia up to on the last night of her life? In this investigation we know (and *L'amore molesto* clears her completely) that she was above any suspicions. She is the only character that can be left to rest in peace.

*The witnesses**Antonio*

An unrecognisable Antonio, out of shape and balding, is presented to Delia at the Vossi shop where she is taking back her mother's lingerie as a pretext to find Caserta and further information on her mother. After a confrontational encounter with Antonio, likewise unknowing of Delia's identity, he follows her to the cable car station and gives her a lift to the spa hotel. During the car trip he confirms to Delia that Caserta and Amalia were seeing each other. As the typical male acting the predetermined role fit for the society in which he has grown up, the very fact that Delia had gone to the shop transmits to him that she wanted to meet him in an intimate way. He thus reacts according to the pre-established script: gives her a lift, invites her to the spa centre for a steam bath, talks to her as if she is his wife ("Antonio, per favore, non sono tua moglie. Non mi raccontare tutti i guai tuoi" Martone, *L'amore molesto*, 1995), then tries to seduce her. Antonio shows himself to be not unlike the standard mould of Neapolitan man: having grown up in a violent atmosphere he reproduces the same violence and control in an automatic unconscious way and reveals himself to be as weak and harmful as the rest of the male characters in *L'amore molesto*. Meeting Antonio is however fundamental to the progress of Delia's quest, and her act of masturbating him reveals her strength and puts her in a controlling position: after she has appeased his sexual needs, she can release him and can return to her real quest. Antonio is another of the characters of her entangled childhood, and as such he had to be met and confronted.

Zio Filippo

Zio Filippo would have been the perfect witness to call to testify. He could have told about the ongoing abuse in Delia's family; he could have even reminded Delia of her lie and perhaps helped her to find the reasons for it. He was close enough to Delia and Amalia to protect them from further abuse. In fact, due to ignorance and arrogance, and despite his blood ties with Amalia, by default he chooses to side with his brother-in-law and coherently with patriarchy.

Era suo fratello, l'aveva vista cento volte gonfia di schiaffi, di pugni, di calci; eppure non aveva mai mosso un dito per aiutarla. Da cinquant'anni seguiva a ribadire la sua solidarietà con il cognato, senza cedimenti. (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 55)

The strength of the patriarchal system is revealed in the individual silence and connivance with other individuals' violence and crimes. Thus Filippo's pseudo-strength (it is not his strength but the clique's) and cowardice prevent him from being a suitable witness. Filippo's testimony is thus dismissed, and his physical state (his disability is

highly metaphorical) aligns him with the other weak and useless male characters in *L'amore molesto*.

Elena Ferrante

'Lei ha reso visibile che l'ipotetico feticismo di Caserta non ha valore in sé ma è in realtà il motore che permette a Delia di muoversi dai suoi abiti maschili con cui giunge a Napoli a quelli femminili che con un oscuro scambio Amalia intendeva portarle in regalo, fino all'abito vuoto dello scantinato. Lei ha mostrato che gli abiti per Delia sono sempre e soltanto parvenza di corpo: il corpo di madre, corpo finalmente indossabile, corpo morto e tuttavia forse proprio per questo adesso vivo in lei per sempre, spinta alla crescita autonoma nel futuro. E nel farlo ha realizzato momenti memorabili, per me la parte veramente emozionante del film è lì: Delia che cerca l'odore della madre nell'unico indumento che aveva addosso quando è annegata, il reggiseno nuovo di zecca delle sorelle Vossi; Delia che, quando estrae dal sacchetto dei rifiuti gli indumenti di Amalia, con un gesto che mi è sembrato bellissimo si netta le mani sulla stoffa dei pantaloni; Delia che indossa gli abiti che le erano destinati scoprendo di passaggio in passaggio che sono stati già indossati da sua madre prima di morire; senza dire dell'abito rosso che Delia mette per la prima volta nel negozio delle Vossi.

Sullo schermo a quel punto esplode un'immagine straordinaria alla quale [. . .] auguro un lungo futuro. Quel corpo in rosso che conduce la sua inchiesta in una Napoli a tratti expressionista, divorato da una passione oscura e molesta, io credo che sia un momento importante per l'iconografia del corpo femminile oggi, sintesi della donna alla ricerca di sé, un movimento che per Delia va dall'algida maschilizzazione di copertura fino al recupero del corpo originario in fondo agli inferi dello scantinato, fino alla consapevolezza che l'accettazione del legame con Amalia è avvenuto, che il flusso storico di madre in figlia si è ricostituito e che intanto l'inconfessabile è stato pronunciato' (Ferrante, *La frantumaglia* 56–57).

The evidence

All the evidence we have in this investigation belongs to Amalia: Amalia's naked body clad in a red lace bra; Amalia's suitcase of provocative undersize lingerie and make up; Amalia's train tickets and hotel receipts; Amalia's blue suit.

Polarisation of guilt/innocence, patriarchal/feminine, is repeated here too, and the evidence is the indicator of the suspicion around Amalia's death (and whole life) that moves the dynamics of the whole quest from guilt to innocence, from sin to pleasure, from imprisoned to liberated body.

The evidence shows that Amalia spent the last night of her life clad in red lingerie, on a beach ("nel tratto di mare di fronte alla località che

chiamano Spaccavento, a pochi chilometri da Minturno," Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 7) where she was found drowned. The colour red in our collective imaginary is associated with sex and sin, with the theatre of objectified and consumerized womanhood that has been devised by patriarchy to keep patriarchy in place and power (be it political or sexual power). Amalia's red lingerie is automatically (and naïvely) seen by the investigators (Delia as well as the audience) as a proof of a sexually active Amalia, a proof that Delia had always been afraid to find, a proof that she rejects mentally and physically. It is easy to read Martone's choice of the colour red as sexually charged in a fetishist way, especially if the film is compared with the novel where the white lingerie suggested more virginal connotations. In fact, the red lingerie is symbolically charged by Martone of both sexual and political meaning (as will be discussed presently) in a celebrating and pleasurable liberation.

Towards the end more evidence starts to appear: a card found in the pocket of the dressing gown in the spa hotel also tells us that that lingerie was supposed to be a present for Delia's birthday and that it had been worn on a beach. The evidence found in the baker's basement, shows Delia that Amalia had dinner with someone the night she died, but that two single rooms had been paid for. The noir dynamics bring Delia to find the evidence she needed to absolve her mother and through that mother-daughter reattachment and final peaceful detachment to operate her own absolution.

By some sort of curious exchange game Amalia wore clothing destined to her daughter on the night of her death, and Delia ends up wearing her mother's suit on her symbolical re-birth day. It is exactly this clothing exchange, this re-merging of mother and daughter, which allows the fantasised swap of roles to click back in place.

The sites

*Amalia's apartment / The baker's basement*⁹

Amalia's apartment and the baker's basement are symbolical sites for Delia's entrance and descent into the *inferos* of her past. As mentioned before, the trip that Delia takes through the economy of the tale is one, directionally, downwards. Amalia's apartment, ably situated by Martone in one of the blocks of Galleria Umberto I "consente di mettere la modesta casa di Amalia al centro di un complesso formicaio umano" (Martone 88). Amalia's apartment, set in an area of Naples that, like her hairstyle, recalls the *dopoguerra* years, invites the audience to engage with the modern city in a nostalgic way, connecting the scenes of contemporary and decadent Naples and its people with past memories of art and grandeur, but also with the characters' past. This

coexistence of past and present in the chosen location echoes and complements Martone's organisation of the plot around the full colour and sepia scenes.

Sarà per me importante riprendere la 'gente' napoletana di oggi, e mi piace l'idea che questa storia abbia un centro nel cuore della città per poi espandersi verso i suoi confini e le sue periferie. Si conosce la galleria come luogo di artisti (Viviani) o per l'immagine che se ne ebbe nel dopoguerra, ma credo sia interessante tornare a raccontarla così com'è ora, inseguendo un rapporto tra il presente e il passato a cui mi invita incessantemente il suo libro. (Martone 88–89)

Located up on the third floor of a block of flats of fascist construction, run down and with interior design that has never changed through the years, Amalia's apartment still represents a step forward in her social condition of independence for her and her daughters compared to the flat where she and her husband had lived in the *quartieri spagnoli*, before she left him. Given Delia's even freer state as an adult who has escaped Naples to move to the more liberal Bologna, a return to Naples is already a step towards the door of her personal hell. Amalia's apartment represents the beginning of Delia's slow descent into her past, via the nouveaux riche Vomero area rich in illegal housing, all the way down to the spa steam rooms set in the hill caves, then to the *quartieri spagnoli* where her father still lives. And finally to the baker's basement where the act of violence was forced on young Delia, but where memorial epiphany also takes place.

In the economy of Martone's narration, at the beginning and end of the film, sepia and full colour scenes join together right there, in the baker's patisserie, in the vaguely recognisable high part of the *quartieri spagnoli*—seemingly near Piazza Carlo III—back to the area shown in the synopsis of the film, and exactly when young and adult Delia meet again, reconciled.

Naples and Bologna/Roma

Martone in approaching this work comes face to face with a need to clarify the relationship between *his* perception and experience of Naples and the one that is conveyed by the novel and the novel's narrating voice: "Ho cercato di comprendere e rispettare il libro, e al tempo stesso di filtrarlo attraverso le *mie* esperienze, i *miei* ricordi, la *mia* percezione di Napoli" (Martone 79, my italics). The result is that the encounter with Naples is Martone's as well as Delia's, making the city into a more complex reality in the film than it was in Ferrante's novel.

Delia's return to Naples is also given by Martone a stronger impact as Delia's chosen home is displaced further north in Bologna, rather than in Rome. Bologna, the red political capital is chosen symbolically

as contrasting to Naples. The political theme, as well as the colour red, runs as a red thread throughout the whole film, symbolic both for the hope of a political as well as a sexual liberating experience.¹⁰

A liberating experience has to be born out of a claustrophobic situation, and it is exactly a claustrophobic Naples that is being presented to the audience and to the detective: Naples politically and geographically representing the patriarchy-dominated society; Naples the prison-city withholding within gates of control the female counterpart of that city, representing the strong cultural richness of that city.¹¹ Indeed, Martone's scenes are full of locations restricted by bars or gates—places resembling prisons or cages: the back entrance of Amalia's block of flats where Caserta asks for the bag of underwear to be delivered and whose gates he makes sure to lock leaving Delia prisoner of the in-space; the *funicolare* gates are bars that shut remorselessly on people; the lift cage where both Amalia and Delia are shown to meet in one of Delia's visions-memories.

The contrast created by Bologna/Naples in Martone's version of the tale, is symbolically much more complex than that created in the novel by Rome/Naples. Martone's is as much a political as well as a mother-daughter war and reconciliation. And Amalia/Delia's whole story comes to coincide, in Martone's imaginary and symbolic, with the tale of a beautiful, mis-loved voluptuous Naples—its female cultural richness and sensuality restrained and suffocated,—violated by the patriarchal corrupted political system, alienated, and finally liberated.

The beach / the train

Amalia drowns in the waters at the Spaccavento beach, the same beach where the family used to go on holiday many years before "alla fine degli anni Cinquanta, quando mio padre viveva ancora con noi" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 7).¹² Amalia's return to Spaccavento is in itself a return back to when her family was whole, a demonstration of the longing to reunite with her family and past. The beach as a death site is symbolic. If Amalia's death is to coincide with Delia's re-birth, then returning to the sea to die and dissolve also anticipates future re-emerging of life. It is also symbolic of Delia's return to the beach, as an act of final farewell to the mother, on her way back to Rome/Bologna. It is on the beach that for the first time she realises that all she had fantasised her mother to be, was in fact a fantasy of her self. It is on the beach that, after years of 'smarrimento' (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 178), Delia's birth to herself takes place. Martone chooses the train as the place of Delia's rebirth. This happens during one of Delia's fantasies of her mother's dancing on the Spaccavento beach. Dancing for herself more than for Caserta, and after Caserta falls asleep, the return to the sea occurs: as Amalia (in Delia's imagination) bids her farewell to her daughter (having phoned her a final time) and to life by glancing to-

wards the land (and the camera). Then she walks into the water, and as she does so Delia (travelling in the train) is born to herself.

The scene of the identity card happens after her rebirth in Martone's film, while in the novel the rebirth is the conclusion of the last of Delia's swap games: drawing her mother's old-fashioned hairstyle on her own identity card. "Amalia c'era stata. Io ero Amalia" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 178).

Verdict

It is clear that no murder was committed, but only culpable homicide against both victims, but mainly against young Delia. Homicide also against Naples. Homicide committed by Delia, by her father, by Caserta, by Filippo, and *tout court* by the patriarchal system. Homicide committed through no premeditation, but rather as a consequence of the stifling environment and the suffered violence to her own developing joyful and wholesome self. As a consequence of mis-love and neglect.

As for what concerns Mario Martone, he has constructed a movie that avoids as much as possible sexual objectification and fetishism. Evidence shows that the director has a strong ability to penetrate female psychology: both the protagonist and narrator of the story, Delia, but also the female writer, Elena Ferrante, have been faithfully interpreted in their viewpoint. The novel *L'amore molesto* has not been stripped of its own ideology and redressed by that of the male director. Rather the director's sensitivity has penetrated the real essence of the novel and turned it into an even more powerful symbolic quest of not only mother-daughter relationship, but also of a deeply felt and suffered Naples-mother/Martone-son love/hatred relationship with an affectionate and hopefully healing twist at its tail end.

. . . But one question remains still unanswered: 'who is the dancer?'

The dancer

Ma quando c'era il marito di Amalia, dopo uno sguardo furtivo di lato, incuriosito e insieme in apprensione, abbandonava la testa sulla spalla di mio padre e pareva felice. Quel doppio movimento mi lacerava. Non sapevo dove seguire mia madre in fuga, se lungo l'asse di quello sguardo o per la parabola che la sua pettinatura disegnava verso la spalla del marito. Ero lì accanto a lei e tremavo. Persino le stelle, così fitte d'estate, mi sembravano bagliori del mio smarrimento. Ero a tal punto decisa a diventare diversa da lei, che perdevo a una a una le ragioni per assomigliarle. (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 178)

Delia's perception of her mother was always dual and lacerated. She had to process and rearrange so much confusion within the perception of the world pivoting around her family. Her mother had been labelled

as both sensual and unfaithful at the same time: all the pleasure was hers, but also she deserved the scorn and violence because pleasure is translated into sin, and sin must be punished.¹³ Amalia, as already stated, is the most sober of all characters. The perception of duality in Amalia that both Delia and her father share, is in fact a projection of their own duality, in turn projected onto them by the dual system of patriarchy. But here we are only concerned with Delia's psyche, inherited and diseased by her father's.

The event that changes the family's life is the business relationship with Caserta, the man that commissions work to Delia's father and that, together with Amalia, stops the gypsy image from being mass sold on to the market. The family fortune could have been determined by this painting, but because of Amalia's intervention in the business relationship, the deal fails.

Within the economy of *L'amore molesto*, the image of the gypsy dancer plays a centrally symbolic role. Who is the painted dancer?

In an early scene Delia is slapped by her uncle for saying that the half naked gypsy is in fact a portrait of her mother. Nothing that has openly to do with sex can ever been publicly associated with Amalia, because Amalia belongs to her husband and their sexual relationship is secretive and surrounded by an aura of sin and mystery.¹⁴ Their 'forbidden' bedroom however suddenly fills with pictures of bright-coloured gypsy dancers. In Delia's imagination, the austerity and mystery of her parents' bedroom is also inexplicably associated with dancing and pleasure. And the dancing and pleasure, in her fervid imagination, belongs to Amalia, because Amalia's body is the source and receptacle of both pleasure and sin.

Non avevo dubbi che gli schizzi col pastello riproducevano il corpo di mia madre. Mi immaginavo che la sera, quando chiudevano la porta della loro camera da letto, Amalia si togliesse i vestiti, assumesse le pose delle donne che se ne stavano nude nelle fotografie dell'armadio e dicesse: 'Disegna.' (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 141–42)

This disturbs Delia ("smaniavo nel letto senza riuscire a dormire," Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 142) to the point that the concept of her mother splits into two: on the one hand Amalia is the mother seen in everyday reassuring gestures, on the other, Amalia acts as a dancer somewhere else at the same time.

I capelli erano lunghi. Amalia non finiva mai di scioglierli e per lavarli non bastava sapone, occorreva tutto il contenitore dell'uomo che lo vendeva nell'interrato, in fondo ai gradini bianchi di cenere o di lisciva. Sospettavo che a volte mia madre, sfuggendo alla mia sorveglianza, li andasse a immergere direttamente nel bidone, col consenso dell'uomo della bottega. Poi si girava allegramente verso di me con la faccia bagnata, l'acqua che le scrosciava sulla nuca dal rubinetto di casa, le ciglia e le pupille nere, le

sopracciglia tracciate a carbonella, appena ingrignate dalla schiuma che, ad arco sulla fronte, si rompeva in gocce d'acqua e sapone. Le gocce le scivolavano giù per il naso, verso la bocca, finché lei le catturava con la lingua rossa e mi pareva che dicesse: 'Buone.'

Non sapevo come facesse a essere contemporaneamente in due spazi diversi, a entrare tutta nel bidone del sapone, lì nello scantinato, in sottoveste azzurra, i fili delle spalline che le precipitavano dalle spalle giù per le braccia; e intanto abbandonarsi all'acqua della nostra cucina che seguitava a rivestirle di una patina liquida la banda dei capelli. (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 33–34)

It is this split perception of Amalia, shared by both Delia and her father, that triggers the suspicion around her, that makes them recognise in her every gesture or laughter "la traccia del tradimento" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 126). It is because of this split perception of her mother, that the lie becomes possible for Delia to tell and for her father to believe, because in the interstices between the 'suspected' wife and mother and the joyful dancer, there is comfortable space to believe that Amalia could have an extra-marital affair.

The image of the dancer is obsessive in *L'amore molesto*, and obsessively associated with Amalia. It is developed more and more as the novel progresses, and as Delia gets closer and closer to the unveiling of her truth. And as the truth is revealed to her, as she puts the pieces back in place, the dancer also changes face, it is no longer Amalia, but Delia. Her fantasised dancer coincides with her and with the joy she should have had a right to feel, the joy and freedom she had to suffocate in order to comply with her home and society atmosphere. Only her hair is now short. She cut it short to look as different from Amalia as possible, and in destroying Amalia's resemblances from her face and body, she has only potentially operated her own *scempio*, her own self-rejection. It is in the reunion with Amalia that she is now able to detach from her, but also detach from Amalia/gypsy dancer that was rightfully Delia/dancer, as we saw earlier, in the half finished gypsy picture: Delia *in fieri*, sadly frozen by violence in that state. As catharsis occurs, Delia adds her mother's hair to herself on her identity card photo, and symbolically rejoins Amalia. The gypsy's black hair that was voluptuously the main protagonist in the many dances performed by fantasised Amalia, returns to act in the still living and liberated Delia.¹⁵

The novel and the film, read and watched and analysed comparatively, create synergies in the orchestration of the tale, which eventually develops into a dance. Martone has successfully exploited and translated into film language the many scenes of improvisation dances performed by Amalia in Delia's fantasies: the dances of life because life is far from being choreographed. If the novel shows Delia fantasising her mother as a dancer, revealing only at the end the real dancer's

identity, Martone makes the dancer image clearly and immediately coincide with Delia. As the novel reaches the end, the reader receives with shock, along with the narrator, the final epiphany “Amalia c’era stata. Io ero Amalia” (Ferrante, *L’amore molesto* 178). Contrarily to this, Martone has prepared the viewer for the truth: the aim of the cinematic text remains more with the noir and with a solution to the mystery. Delia is able to let go of her mother and any guilt feeling attached. In her last vision of Amalia, who is fantasized as dancing on the beach in a style reminiscent of Saraghina’s in Federico Fellini’s *8 e 1/2*,¹⁶ she is able to initiate her own adult dance of life.

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NOTES

¹ Bernadette Luciano proposes ‘re-dressing’ as another variant of film adaptation categories (as well as Geoffrey Wagner’s *transposition, commentary, analogy*, and Millicent Marcus’s *recreation*). By re-dressing Luciano suggests that “in the process of adaptation, the filmmaker undresses or literally strips the source text of its gendered ideology and dresses it up in such a way that it displays a transvestite gaze” (145).

² Pauline Small in her article emphasises how Martone’s adoption of the *noir* genre in his film, which traditionally offers a model based on society established patriarchal conventions, amplifies the discourse that *L’amore molesto* opens on “cultural perceptions of gender” (306). The narration is structured as a quest, but the very choice of a female detective and protagonist in this quest, Delia, offers a deviation from the traditional “hardboiled detective or glamorized hero-figure [who] promotes an ideology of masculine omnipotence and invulnerability” (306–07).

³ “Ma se la vettura era affollata, ogni godimento era precluso. Allora mi prendeva la mania di proteggere mia madre dal contatto con gli altri uomini, come avevo visto che faceva sempre mio padre in quella circostanza. [. . .] In tram quando c’era anche lui, avevamo paura. Sorvegliava soprattutto gli uomini piccoli e scuri, ricciuti, le labbra grosse. Attribuiva a quel tipo antropologico la tendenza a rapire il corpo di Amalia” (Ferrante, *L’amore molesto* 63–65).

⁴ “Avevo da qualche parte del cervello echi di frasi. Me ne era rimasta una in mente, molto nitida. Non erano nemmeno parole, non lo erano più; erano suoni compatti materializzati in immagine. Quel Caserta, diceva mia madre in un sussurro, l’aveva spinta in un angolo e aveva cercato di baciarla. Io, a sentirla, vedevo la bocca aperta di quell’uomo, con denti bianchissimi e una lingua lunga e rossa. La lingua saettava oltre le labbra e poi vi rientrava a una velocità che mi ipnotizzava. Negli anni dell’adolescenza chiudevo gli occhi apposta per riprodurre a piacimento quella scena dentro di me, e contemplarla mescolando attrazione e ripulsione. Ma lo facevo sentendomi colpevole, come se facessi una

cosa proibita. Sapevo già allora che in quell'immagine della fantasia c'era un segreto che non poteva essere svelato, non perché una parte di me non sapesse come accedervi, ma perché se l'avessi fatto l'altra parte avrebbe rifiutato di nominarlo e mi avrebbe cacciata via da sé" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 39).

⁵ Ferrante explores memory retrieval in similar ways, through the crawling actions that Delia/Amalia and Antonio/Caserta had performed along narrow and low corridors to reach the back bedroom in the basement, the site of the abuse/betrayal.

⁶ "The ancient core of Naples, where several scenes in the film take place, is historically the site of poverty and crime but also of vibrant traditions. This general area is popularly referred to as *il ventre di Napoli*, the belly—or the womb—of Naples. The metaphorical association of parts of the city with parts of the body and especially the lower body or the female body, is a discursive phenomenon with a lengthy history. It is linked to the process in the constitution of subjectivity where the self is oriented around binary axes of high and low, self and other, thus instituting maps of meaning, power and identity" (O'Healy 249–50).

⁷ As O'Healy points out, *L'amore molesto* is rich in cinematic intertexts contacts with central films of the Neorealismo directors (248–51).

⁸ The image of the dancer ties mother and daughter throughout the narration and, indeed, it is with hindsight at the end of Martone's tale, that we will be able to reconnect film and novel through the icon of the gypsy dancer. The scenes at the spa hotel are central in the dissolution of Delia's sexual tension with men, and in fact, following Delia's masturbating Antonio in the swimming pool, we follow her crossing Naples at a liberated and joyous pace soundtracked by tarantella music. "Delia's step is light, her body language is loose, or *sciolto* (deriving from Ferrante's use of *sciogliere*). The tarantella music, suggesting excitement and abandon, enhances her carefree air as she crosses the city" (Small 1999: 310).

⁹ I would like to thank my colleague Dr Claudia Rossignoli (University of St Andrews), a Neapolitan, for her extensive information on the Neapolitan locations that Martone leaves sometimes as not indicated in his interviews on *L'amore molesto*.

¹⁰ In her article O'Healy deals in depth with the political dimension in *L'amore molesto* also within the context of Martone's cinematography. "The film presents the city as a noisy, overcrowded, mismanaged metropolis. Its public transport system is fraught with problems. A scene set at a political lunch in a large new restaurant obliquely suggests the longtime collusion of city government with private commercial interests" (248).

¹¹ See O'Healy pp. 247–49, for an insightful analysis of this theme.

¹² "Proprio in quella zona, alla fine degli anni Cinquanta, quando mio padre viveva ancora con noi, d'estate affittavamo una stanza in una casa contadina e trascorrevamo il mese di luglio dormendo in cinque dentro pochi roventi metri quadri. Ogni mattina noi bambine bevevamo l'uovo fresco, tagliavamo verso il mare tra canne alte per sentieri di terra e di sabbia e andavamo a fare il bagno.

La notte in cui mia madre morì la proprietaria di quella casa, che si chiamava Rosa e aveva ormai più di settant'anni, sentì bussare alla porta ma non aprì per paura dei ladri e degli assassini" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 7).

¹³ "Forse non tolleravo che la parte più segreta di me si servisse della sua solidarietà per avvalorare un'ipotesi coltivata altrettanto segretamente: che mia madre portasse inscritta nel corpo una colpevolezza naturale, indipendente dalla sua volontà e da ciò che realmente faceva, pronta ad apparire all'occorrenza in ogni gesto, in ogni sospiro" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 55–56).

¹⁴ "Nella camera di mio padre e di mia madre era vietato entrare: lo spazio era ridottissimo" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 140). "Forse adesso ero sotto quel cavalcavia perché suoni e immagini si rapprendessero di nuovo tra le pietre e l'ombra, e di nuovo mia madre, prima che diventasse mia madre, fosse incalzata dall'uomo con cui avrebbe fatto l'amore, che l'avrebbe coperta col suo cognome, che l'avrebbe cancellata col suo alfabeto" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 138).

¹⁵ "In casa viveva dimessa e schiva, nascondendo i suoi capelli, le sue sciarpe colorate, i suoi vestiti. Ma sospettavo, proprio come mio padre, che fuori casa ridesse diversamente, orchestrasse i movimenti del corpo in modo da lasciare tutti a occhi sbarrati. Girava l'angolo ed entrava nella bottega del nonno di Antonio. Scivolava intorno al bancone, mangiava dolci e confetti argentati, zigzagava senza sporcarsi tra banchi e teglie. Poi arrivava Caserta, apriva la porticina di ferro e scendevano insieme in fondo all'interrato. Qui mia madre si scioglieva i lunghissimi capelli neri e quel movimento brusco riempiva di scintille l'aria buia che odorava di terra e di muffa. Quindi si coricavano entrambi sul pavimento a pancia sotto e strisciavano ridacchiando" (Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* 105).

¹⁶ As Amalia, in a drunken state, dances on the beach for Caserta, her resemblance to Federico Fellini's Saraghina becomes striking. The director's gaze comes once again into play here, as a Saraghina icon cannot but echo a Fellinian type of gaze behind the camera. Amalia is watched as she dances by Caserta, whose gaze is imagined by Delia as being lustful. There is a complex game of gazes here at play: Martone's gaze on Delia's fantasies of her dancing mother; Delia's gaze on both Caserta and her mother in expectation of what might happen later; Caserta's imagined lustful gaze on Amalia; and finally the audience's extradiegetic gaze, sensitive to that game of gazes, and to possible cinematic intertext(s) present therein. As well as an intertext with Fellini's *8 e 1/2*, another intertext has been pointed out by O'Healy: "The physical presence of Angela Luce, who plays Delia's elderly mother, is deployed by *L'amore molesto* in an [...] unconventional manner. A popular Neapolitan actress, Luce is known to international audiences for her role as the adulterous wife Peronella in Pasolini's *Decameron* (1971), where she appears nude in one of the most exuberantly constructed sequences in that film. In Martone's film, by contrast, her ageing, naked body, shot from behind as she makes her way unsteadily towards the sea, is rendered with a kind of pathos rarely achieved in such portrayals, while complicated and enlivened by the intertextual link to Pasolini's work" (256).

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