ITALIAN CINEMA’S MISSING CHILDREN

Submitted by

Roger Graham Pitt

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has been previously submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

.......................................... Roger Graham Pitt
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ABSTRACT

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to analyse the range of resonances surrounding the lost or endangered child (or adolescent) in six Italian films made between 1992 and 2005. By drawing on and expanding Emma Wilson’s proposed understanding of the term ‘missing child’ in *Cinema’s Missing Children* (a transnational, cinema-based study published in 2003), this thesis will seek to open out new ways of exploring both contemporary Italian cinema and the ‘missing child’ paradigm. To this end, the following research questions are pivotal to the discursive trajectory of this thesis as a whole: What does it mean to ground contemporary Italian works which broadly correspond to the term ‘missing child’ (as proposed in *Cinema’s Missing Children*) within the specific context of Italian culture and society? How would recourse to a range of specifically Italian filmmaking, socio-cultural, or historical phenomena shape (or reshape) our understanding of this *topos*?

In order to fully engage these concerns, this thesis will begin by establishing a rigorous interdisciplinary methodology. In Chapter One, I will address questions of critical reception with particular emphasis on the possible pitfalls of conventional recourse to neorealism as a means of reading the missing child in contemporary cinema. In Chapter Two, I will extend this necessary emphasis on critical reception and related notions of possible distortion and oversimplification, to include the dialogic relation between Italian cinematic articulations of (missing) children, childhoods and the experience of (biological and non-biological) parenthood, and clusters of cultural and political concerns and anxieties. In chapters Three, Four, and Five, I will bring this interdisciplinary methodology to bear on three sets of primary sources. Whilst this close textual analysis will contend with the missing male child (in a range of guises), it will also bring to the fore new ways of thinking with and about the critically neglected female child. By moving away from more normative critical frameworks (including neorealism) this thesis will not only attempt to reset and refresh understandings of important works of the last two decades, but will also work towards a recuperation of the critically disavowed gender identity (and concomitant role and status) of ‘missing’ female children.
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INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH OF THEMissing Child

Everything before had been fantasy, a routine and frenetic mimicry of sorrow. Just before dawn he began to cry, and it was from this moment in the semi-darkness that he was able to date his time of mourning.¹

Marco Tullio Giordana’s 2005 film, Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti (hereafter, Quando sei nato), is about a missing child. Sandro (Matteo Gadola), the child in question, goes missing after falling into the Mediterranean Sea during a sailing holiday with his father, Bruno (Alessio Boni), and family friend, Popi (Rodolfo Corsato). The child’s parents believe that he is dead, swallowed by the unforgiving nighttime swell of the ocean, lost under a wave. In the aftermath of the boy’s disappearance, the film begins to sketch the contours of parental mourning; the wearying grief that spills from the site of loss, the crippling guilt, which accompanies this bitter tear in the fabric of family life and experience. At one point, the action returns to the family home. As the camera’s gaze lingers on kitchen work surfaces, our attention is drawn to discarded food and an abandoned coffee pot. These jilted items are the tangible residues of parental pain, the physical remnants of suffering. In the wake of the child’s erasure from the fold of family existence, its rites and rituals have been suspended, frozen in time.

Moving to another room, we see the boy’s mother, Lucia (Michela Cescon). Unable to respond in spoken language to the disappearance of her only child, she plays Handycam footage filmed during the calamitous maritime trip. Its images appear on a large television screen. It is to these images that her unbroken gaze is sutured. Bruno, the unwitting agent of the child’s (apparent) demise, looks on, his eyes tearing, as several seconds of footage are obsessively played and replayed, over and over. The missing child appears, only to disappear, locked in an unbroken cycle of repetition. Against this visual backdrop,

the boy’s voice, captured on the audio track of the footage, resounds throughout this newly vapid living space.

As Quando sei nato’s narrative moves towards the other stream of its action, (involving the child’s undisclosed rescue and return journey on a battered trawler loaded with illegal migrants, or so-called ‘clandestini’) our attention is drawn to the other missing child of Giordana’s film: Alina (Ester Hazan), a pre-teenage Romanian girl whom Sandro befriends on the journey home. It was Alina’s ‘brother’, Radu (Vlad Alexandru Toma), who spotted the child bobbing in the moonlit ocean, or heard his cries. It was Radu who came to his rescue, and saved him from certain drowning. Despite striking similarities in facial structure and skin tone, Radu and Alina are not siblings. Radu is a human trafficker and pimp; he is transporting Alina to Italy to work in the sex trade. The child’s grim destiny is confirmed in the film’s denouement. In this closing sequence, Sandro re-discovers his traveling companion in a disused compound in Milan’s industrial hinterland. It is here, surrounded by pedophilic filmmaking paraphernalia that the female child has been ritually abused and exploited. As Giordana’s film draws to a close, and we as an audience are left with the unsavoury tang of the pedophilic abuse scenario, we are reminded, that she, too, is a missing child.

Quando sei nato is not alone in exploring the abiding horror of child loss, or the horror inflicted on children by adult caretakers. Rather, the theme of the ‘missing child’, brought to the fore in Emma Wilson’s, Cinema’s Missing Children, a world cinema-based study published in 2003, emerges with varying inflection in a number of works within the canon of contemporary Italian cinema. The aim of the present study is to tap into this vein of filmmaking, to explore its resonances, and even, perhaps, give meaning, in Wilson’s terms, ‘to missing or endangered children’, and to ‘mourning or malign parents’, within the Italian national context. Whilst a number of films merit inclusion in this thesis, Vito e gli altri (Antonio Capuano, 1991), Birdwatchers: La terra degli uomini rossi (Marco Bechis, 2008), La ragazza del lago (Andrea Molaioli, 2007), Un giorno perfetto (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2008), Certi bambini (Andrea Frazzi, Antonio Frazzi, 2004), Saimir (Francesco Munzi, 2004), Domenica (Wilma Labate, 2001), Pianese Nunzio, 14 anni a

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3 Ibid., p. 139.
maggio (Antonio Capuano, 1996) Marianna Ucria (Roberto Faenza, 1997), Quo vadis, baby? (Gabriele Salvatores, 2005), Non ti mouvere (Sergio Castellitto, 2004), and La sconosciuta (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2006), I have chosen to limit my analysis to six films made between 1992 and 2005. The compactness of this corpus will allow rigorous, in-depth interpretation and comparative discussion. The works in question, Il ladro di bambini (Gianni Amelio, 1992), L’amore molesto (Mario Martone, 1995), La stanza del figlio (Nanni Moretti, 2001), La bestia nel cuore (Cristina Comencini, 2005), La guerra di Mario (Antonio Capuano, 2005) and Quando sei nato (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005), either traverse the dismal terrain of abuse in childhood or grapple with parental suffering in the wake of child loss. Like Giordana’s film, notable, perhaps, for straddling both formations of suffering, this hexagonal grouping, made by high-profile, socially engagé directors, is marked by its exorcisms in pain and grief, though read, in some cases, but not all, in light of other, less extant concerns.

Before turning to Cinema’s Missing Children, the study which accorded the present thesis its founding intellectual impetus and conceptual architecture, I propose a brief consideration of the term ‘missing child’ within the context that it is perhaps most familiar: as locus of substantive media scrutiny and intense moral panic. In the final part of my discussion, I will work towards a more detailed structural and methodological understanding of how the present study will unfold beyond this Introduction.

Locating the Missing Child

To speak of a ‘missing child’, is at once to speak of a profound, inexorable loss, a loss, which agitates those at the core of a voided familyscape and even those geographically distant from its detritus. In a First World, Western context, where we as global media consumers increasingly find ourselves implicated in the search for the missing child, the quest to restore what in the face of imagined inviolability has been lost, stretches far beyond an original vanishing point. To speak of a ‘missing child’, is to speak of a phenomenon, the pathology of which has become increasingly familiar, though no less unsettling to all of us. In his
study, *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child-Victims*, published in 1990, Joel Best traces the emergence of the term to 1981, the year in which the first network news story about the ‘missing child’ phenomenon was beamed into households the length and breadth of the United States. The report, the first of a ‘special assignment series’ commissioned by the television network ABC, was prompted by a series of high-publicity cases in the years spanning 1978-81, when unusually large numbers of children and adolescents were either snatched, kidnapped and/or murdered. The term, Best reminds us:

> Encompassed three familiar phenomena: runaways (children – most often adolescents – who chose to leave home and usually returned within a few days); child snatchings (noncustodial parents who illegally took their own children without the custodial parent’s permission); and abductions by strangers (who might keep, sell, ransom, molest, or kill the child).  

In the same year (1981), the U.S. senate convened to discuss the problem of missing children for the first time. In 1984, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a non-profit organization funded by the U.S. Justice Department was established by government mandate. By the middle of the decade, ‘Americans saw photographs of missing children on milk cartons and grocery bags, billboards and televised public service messages’. Within the sphere of popular culture, Stephen King’s *It*, tapped into public anxiety, taking a child-killing monster as its narrative focus. It became the bestselling novel of 1986. Similarly, *The Golden Child*, directed by Michael Ritchie and starring Eddie Murphy as Chan Chandler, a private investigator hired to track down lost and runaway children, was the eighth highest grossing film of the same year. Rob Reiner’s *Stand by Me* also released in 1986, chronicled the search for the body of a missing local child by four pre-teenage boys. The film triumphed at the box-office, winning a raft of coveted awards, including two Golden Globes.

By the middle of the decade, the concept of missing children, had, as Best suggests, ‘become common currency’. However, the ‘extraordinary visibility’ of the missing child phenomenon, did not ‘peak’ in the last two years of the decade,

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5 Ibid., p. 24.
as he predicts, neither did it remain hermetically sealed within the United States.\textsuperscript{6} High-profile cases in Europe including the Marc Dutroux case in Belgium, and the Dunblane massacre in Scotland, as well as the arrival of cyberspace, which generated a batch of new and unforeseen concerns (including the rise of child pornography and the proliferation of internet paedophile rings), ensured that any suggestion of waning media coverage during the most recent two decades, was shown to be misplaced.

The abduction of seventeen-month old Tommaso Onofri in March 2006 is one case in point. In the days and weeks that followed the snatching of the child by two masked men, who wielding knives and a replica firearm, forced their way into the family’s home on the outskirts of Parma in northern Italy, the Italian press and broadcast media devoted almost round-the-clock air time and countless column inches to the boy’s disappearance. The child’s abduction was showcased on \textit{Chi l’ha visto?}, a long-running television program on Rai Tre. Tommaso’s picture appeared on the Bambini Scomparsi website, www.troviamoibambini.it, one of several European satellites of the NCMEC. In a telegram to the Bishop of Parma, Cesare Bonicelli, Pope Benedict XVI, pledged his support to Tommaso’s parents and called for the immediate safe return of the severely epileptic toddler.

The startling news that the search for the missing toddler had been in vain, after the boy’s body was found in woodland close to the Onofri home, energised a similarly unprecedented public outpouring of emotion, as cautious optimism was replaced by outrage and consternation. The Pope once again led prayers for Tommaso, as mourners gathered in St Peter’s Square. Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, then president of the Italian Republic, deplored the crime. Other senior politicians called for the reinstatement of the death penalty. The news that the child’s kidnapping had been devised and perpetrated by a builder contracted by the Onofris to carry out repairs on their home, prompted further soul-searching and condemnation. Lurking behind the kidnap and murder of one very ordinary Italian child lay the unsettling reality that this crime could have been perpetrated against any child.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 22.
Of equal, if different interest is the case of Madeleine McCann, whose disappearance in July 2007, rapidly became (and remains) a global concern. Whilst the media storm unleashed by the abduction of Tommaso Onofri, largely remained within the confines of the Italian peninsular, the McCann case transfixed onlookers on all corners of the globe, creating what Esther Adley the journalist covering the story for the Guardian described, as ‘an international publicity hurricane of quite unprecedented scale’. She wrote of the case:

Even now, more than four years since the child vanished from her parents’ holiday villa in Portugal’s Praia da Luz, photographic and video images of her and her guilt-ravaged parents continue to circulate in a range of public media. The hope that by etching and re-etching the face of the missing toddler within the public imaginary, a memory may still be jogged, a sighting may still be reported, some glimmer of hope may still emerge, remains, undiminished by time.

The cases outlined here are of interest to the present study for several reasons. Firstly, they underscore the growing, and at times, extreme visibility of the missing child within a Western media context. By bringing to the fore and contributing to public anxiety surrounding the child as literal absence, they also highlight the ways in which this tragic and emotive figure has become an emblem for wider discourses around threats to child safety or, in more reactionary accounts, to childhood itself. The ferocity with which the media sought to dissect the McCanns’ accounts of their daughter’s disappearance overshadowed the

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search for their missing child. This unprecedented investment was not only an attempt to unravel public meaning from child loss, to excavate the psychological recesses of a bereaved caretaker, or to ponder the risks posed to children by the modern world. Rather, it also served to appraise guilt, to partition blame, and even, as their recent testimony given to the Leveson Inquiry into press standards in the United Kingdom attests, to implicate the McCann’s themselves in their own daughter’s disappearance. As the fragile distinctions between loving and malign parenthood are cruelly collapsed and exploited, the missing child becomes the nexus for a range of forcible energies and concerns, as extreme, and as obscure, perhaps, as the very experience of losing a child.

The Country of Lost Children

Scholarly work carried out within a range of humanities-based disciplines in the last two decades, suggests that the cultural reach of the missing child phenomenon, its status as a preoccupation within public discourse, extends beyond the press and broadcast media realm. In The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety, Peter Pierce examines treatments of what he terms ‘the lost child’ during two centuries of Australian cultural history. In the first half of his study, dedicated to the popular and folkloric cultural traditions of Australia’s colonial past, Pierce examines the motif of the child lost to the land, drawn to an alluring, though geographically precarious bush or outback, in painting and pantomime, fiction and photograph, and verse and fairytale, in the second half of the nineteenth century. For Pierce, the cultural significance of the lost child (whether real or imagined) in this varied succession of narrative forms, lies in its relation to the experience of colonial migration. He writes:

The forlorn girls and boys, bereft, disoriented and crying in a wilderness that is indifferent, if not actively hostile to them, stand also for the older generation, that of their parents. Symbolically, the lost child represents the anxieties of European settlers because of the ties with home which they have cut in coming to Australia, whether or not they journeyed

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here by choice. The figure of the child stands in part for the apprehensions of adults about having sought to settle in a place where they might never be at peace.\footnote{Ibid., p. xii.}

If the author attributes the loss of children in a nineteenth-century colonial context to the trackless bush, and proposes an understanding of the lost child as emblem for the anxiety of first generation, white European settler communities, then the study’s second half, spanning the decades from the 1950s to the century’s end, traverses the more harrowing ground of deliberate human involvement in child loss and suffering. From the brutality of the state (and state institutions) towards aboriginal children and their beleaguered parents (Australia’s ‘stolen children’), to representations of children as ‘abandoned, abused, abducted or murdered’, in theatre, literary fiction, and film (adaptation), the Australian imagination ‘continues to be haunted’, Pierce contends, by the figure of the lost child.\footnote{The Australian state and its institutions were also implicated in the cruel treatment of children arriving in the country from commonwealth countries as part of child migration schemes in the 1950s. The theme of forced child migration to Australia was recently explored in Oranges and Sunshine (Ken Loach, 2010).} He writes:

> In the second half of the twentieth century in Australia, the figure of the lost child is not a revenant form, or an orphan of the colonial past, but someone (or many) vividly and disquietingly presented, perhaps in an anatomy of this society (in fact or fiction or film), or in the probing of the destructive psychological maladies of individuals.\footnote{Pierce, p. 96.}

The discursive trajectory of a chapter-long reflection on filmic representations of the lost child, which tracks skillfully between John Heyer’s 1954 documentary, The Back and Beyond, and Fred Schepisi’s Evil Angels (1988), not only condenses many of the concerns brought to the fore in the first part of this discussion, but also highlights the lost child’s semantic evolution within Australian post-war culture and society. Indeed, whilst Heyer’s black and white documentary uses film as the site to recall and re-enact earlier (real and folkloric) narratives of children lost to the bush (in this case two pre-teenage girls), Schepisi’s dramatization of the real-life disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain, described by Pierce as ‘the most contentious of all lost child stories in Australian history’, works to present and analyse parental blame and, no less importantly, to indict a ‘predatory’ Australian press, hungry for rumour and intrigue.\footnote{Pierce, p. 178.} If those works
occupying the more chronologically central ground in Pierce’s chapter instantiate
an unequivocally malign understanding of adult involvement in child loss,
(Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) and Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975)
exemplify this trope), then, in Schepisi’s film, the waters are more muddied, just
as they have been in the case of Madeleine McCann in the UK. The value of Evil
Angels lies not in its capturing of modern emotional and juridical resonances of
the term ‘lost child’, or public ambivalence towards the unchecked stranger and
(more recently) parents and caretakers, but in its artistic response to parental
mourning, to what the author terms, the film’s ‘refusal of conventional modes of
response to bereavement’.\textsuperscript{15} Schepisi’s film not only constitutes a thematic
watershed by presenting the lost child in the context of contemporary Australia,
described by Pierce as ‘the place where the innocent young are most especially
in jeopardy’, but also in terms of its treatment of parental grief in the wake of child
loss, a theme which re-emerges with greater discursive significance in the film-
based study with which this discussion began, Cinema’s Missing Children, by
Emma Wilson.\textsuperscript{16}

Cinema’s Missing Children

In Cinema’s Missing Children, a study which derives at least some of its founding
scholarly impetus from Pierce’s account of lost child narratives in colonial and
post-colonial Australia and its flash of interest in modes of response to
bereavement (in film), Emma Wilson recalibrates the broad cultural (albeit
determinedly national) scope of this earlier study, to explore the persistence of
what she terms the ‘missing child topos’, in contemporary narrative cinema.\textsuperscript{17} In
contrast to Pierce’s vast chronological account, Wilson, whose scholarship
pursues a persistent interest in modes of creative response to personal loss and
suffering, examines the prevalence of this thematic in the decade spanning
1993–2003.\textsuperscript{18} Using the term ‘missing child’ (as opposed to Pierce’s ‘lost child’) to

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 178.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. xii.
\textsuperscript{17} Wilson discusses The Country of Lost Children in the ‘Conclusion’ to Cinema’s Missing
Children. See Wilson p. 156.
\textsuperscript{18} Cinema’s Missing Children forms part of a larger, ongoing project by Emma Wilson, to
investigate modes of address (and response) in visual culture (cinema and still photography) to
draw together a similar range of threats to children (and adolescents) including the experiences of ‘loss, abuse, murder, sickness and death’, in European and North American filmmaking, Cinema’s Missing Children contends, that ‘one of the central fears and compulsions explored in recent independent and art cinema is the death or loss of a child’. ‘Personal loss, individual horror and mourning intersect in a network of films haunted by the spectre of children at risk from abuse, abduction, accident and illness’, the author writes. The motivation of the missing child films in Wilson’s study, is ‘to find an adequate means to lament and mourn missing children and childhood as missing’. Finally, they are works, which ‘respond to the challenge of emotional extremes’, and which call upon the medium of film ‘as a means of artistic response to personal trauma’.

Although Wilson acknowledges the ongoing proliferation of representations of missing children within a variety of cultural domains including the presence of an ostensibly similar trend in Hollywood cinema, the distinction made between mainstream and more independent filmic production in her analysis, resides in the narrative function of the missing child in the films she illuminates. Indeed, the experiences of personal loss, trauma and mourning. In an essay published in 2004 in the edited volume, The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema, Wilson further develops her interest in the missing child (and her work on Todd Solondz’s Happiness) in relation to the (potentially) fraught dynamic of same-sex parent/child relations within the context of pedophilic abuse. See ‘Lost boys: trauma, masculinity and the missing child film’, in The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema, ed. by Phil Powrie, Ann Davies and Bruce Babington (London: Wallflower, 2004), pp. 155–162. In a later article, ‘Children, Emotion and Viewing in Contemporary European Film’, which I turn to in greater detail in my discussion of the filmic rendering of the pedophilic abuse scenario in Chapter Four, Wilson furthers this thread of research by exploring the embodied experience of abuse (by the child sex worker) in Lilya 4-Ever (Lukas Moodysson, 2002) and Martha…Martha (Sandrine Veysset, 2001). Of the tropes and devices identified in this study, particular attention is paid to questions of hapticity, to cinematic evocations of touch (tactility and contact) and the ways in which material detail in film prompt the opening up of the adult spectator to the emotions of the child on screen. See ‘Children, emotion and viewing in contemporary European film’, Screen, 46: 3 (2005), 329–340. Most recently, in Love, Mortality and the Moving Image, the author moves beyond fictional representations of individual suffering (and the missing child), to examine responses to mourning and mortality (the missing ‘other’) within moving image art and still photography. Drawing on a broad range of work by prominent artists and directors, including (but not limited to) Annie Leibovitz, Derek Jarman, Agnès Varda, Alina Marazzi and Atom Egoyan (on whose work Wilson has published a monograph, see: Atom Egoyan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009)), the author’s predominant concern (a developing focus elsewhere) largely lies in the palliative function of commemorative art within the mourning process, as art is posited as a vehicle for (palliative) absorption and distraction after or during life shattering events. This recent body of research is entwined with, and productively teases out, many of the concerns raised in earlier scholarship, including questions around the visual ordering of traumatic events, the embodied experience of affect and loss, and notions of hapticity. See Love, Mortality and the Moving Image (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Wilson, Cinema’s Missing Children, p. 3.

Ibid., p. 155. In Moretti’s La stanza del figlio, this is evidenced by Giovanni’s obsessive yet futile attempts to establish the exact cause of his son’s death during a diving accident.
missing child of independent and art-house cinema does not provide the trigger or rationale for action as it does in counterparts such as * Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *The Pledge* (Sean Penn, 2001), and *In the Bedroom* (Todd Field, 2001), but functions instead to carve out a filmic space for ‘reflection’ and ‘imaginative, emotive viewing’. The films in question, made by a slew of high-profile filmmakers including Lynne Ramsay, Lars Von Trier, Pedro Almodóvar, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Atom Egoyan and of particular interest to the present discussion, the Italian director Nanni Moretti, do not satisfy Hollywood or mainstream entertainment formulas, by refusing to offer ‘neat, redemptive endings’, or ‘normative narrative resolution’. Rather, works such as Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Three Colours Blue* (1993), Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994) and Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio* (to which I shall turn in Chapter Three of this thesis), ‘work to recall and remember the lost child, to revisit the site of loss and sift through its evidence and debris’. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, they offer, ‘no easy solutions or redemptive closure’.

Moretti’s film, carefully positioned at the tail end of the study, and read as a work ‘about the loss of a teenage son’, tries, for example, ‘to envisage [...] the possibility of moving on from such excessive grief’. It also corresponds to a collective desire to push the boundaries of artistic representation, to foster new ways of responding to grief cinematically. Similarly, in their investigation of the mess and pain of child abuse and pedophilia, Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998) and Von Trier’s *The Kingdom* (1994), not only dissipate the ‘reactionary fantasy of the normative family’, but also highlight the way in which abuse in childhood, ‘exceeds the bounds of representation’. Like the sudden death, which motors the action in Moretti’s film, child abuse is also, Wilson writes, ‘a limit subject’.

The value of *Cinema’s Missing Children* to the present study not only resides, however, in the conceptual architecture it establishes (as I absorb Wilson’s understanding of the term ‘missing child’ into my own study of films within the contemporary Italian canon), but also in its attempts to address the key question of ‘how the actuality of the theme [of the missing child] is explained within

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21 Ibid., p. 4.
22 Ibid., p. 139.
23 Ibid., p. 153.
contemporary cinema’. Although Wilson acknowledges the importance of ‘changing perceptions of and investments in childhood’, changing kinship relations and the impact of fears and dangers to real children, as well as the rise of a broader ‘testimony’ or ‘wound’ culture, the ‘real’ answer she argues, lies ‘not in society or the state of the world’, but ‘in cinema itself’. ‘The insistence of the subject in contemporary cinema comes, if anything’, Wilson concludes, in ‘the accumulation of representations and their cross-contamination’. ‘In the most direct sense’, she writes, ‘the power and emotion of films such as Three Colours: Blue or Exotica have, as in the case of The Son’s Room, influenced other directors’.24

By drawing together works from a variety of European (France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, UK, Poland) and non-European cinemas (USA, Canada), the author at once foreclosed the possibility that an over-arching, all-encompassing claim for ‘society’ can be made. The plethora of national contexts she unites frustrates the notion that these works share (or can share) a societal thematic, beyond that is, the increasing visibility of threats to the bodily and emotional integrity of children (common to virtually all Western societies). This body of work does not, ‘reflect or represent one particular national and historical fear or phobia’ as it does in Pierce’s study. Here, film form becomes the preferred or perhaps the only secure paradigm for explaining this perceived tendency, as filmmakers influenced by the power and emotion of films made by other directors (Nanni Moretti is a prime example), seek out new aesthetic challenges and in so doing ‘push’ the limits of representation. The key, it would seem, to unlocking the persistence of this trend in contemporary European and North American narrative cinema of the last two decades, is intertextuality, or in Wilson’s terms, ‘productive emeshing’.25

25 Wilson, p. 157.
Italian Cinema’s Missing Children

By proposing a missing child film genre with its own sets of narrative and aesthetic concerns, Cinema’s Missing Children yields a valuable critical platform for interrogating and expanding our understanding of the missing child topos beyond the confines of mainstream cinematic production or wider culture. Wilson’s concluding remarks also invite us both as her readers and as a film watching audience, however, to consider the implications of reaching precisely beyond the bounds that her study establishes; of examining the range of resonances surrounding missing or dead children, malign or mourning parents, or ‘disassembled families’ within a more discreet, national context, akin perhaps to Pierce’s study on the ‘lost child’ in Australian culture and history.

What would it mean, for example, to ground contemporary Italian works which broadly correspond to Wilson’s criteria, within the specific context of Italian culture and society? How would recourse to a range of specifically Italian filmmaking, socio-cultural, or historical phenomena shape (or reshape) our understanding of the missing child topos in films such as Moretti’s The Son’s Room? Accordingly, what would it mean to bring Wilson’s paradigm to bear on important works within the Italian canon for which other, more canonical filmic identities, (may) have long since crystallized? Readjusting the scope of Cinema’s Missing Children, to include films made by independent filmmakers (Moretti is an independent filmmaker par excellence) as well as works destined for a more popular audience (Cristina Comencini’s La bestia nel cuore), these are the foremost questions, the abiding concerns, which will drive my analysis of the missing child topos in six important Italian films made since 1992.

Structure and Methodology

Whilst my work on primary sources will be heavily indebted to Cinema’s Missing Children and to the theoretical framework it establishes, (as I turn, like Wilson, to the writings of Slavoj Žižek, Mieke Bal, and Cathy Caruth) this close textual analysis will also be underpinned by an interdisciplinary methodology, sensitive to the forces at work both in determining Italian cinematic articulations of the
missing child (or childhood as missing), and concurrently, in reading and attempting to tease meaning from these representations. In Chapter One, the first of two chapters dedicated to the development of this methodology, I will highlight the ways in which missing child films within the canon of contemporary Italian cinema (including the works under discussion in Chapters Three, Four, and Five of this thesis) are characteristically evaluated through the prism of Italian neorealism. Inspired by the recent polemical scholarship of the Italianist film scholars Catherine O’Rawe and Alan O’Leary, I will argue that instinctive recourse to representations of lost or suffering children within a narrow corpus of films made during the early post-war period, an approach repeated throughout discourse, not only potentially cordons off other, more productive discursive pathways, but may lead to the oversimplification of the missing child’s shifting iconographic role and status.26 My discussion will seek to complicate notions of neorealist filmmaking as the perceived ‘year zero’ for representations of missing or endangered children, advocating, instead, a broader sweep of Italian film history. I will suggest that if the initial focus of critical attention is to fall on canonical neorealist works such as *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and *Roma, città aperta* (1945), then, an understanding of this body of work as dominated by the figure of the *male* child (a sensitivity, therefore, to the filmic child’s heavily gendered status within the neorealist canon) would substantially enrich future scholarship. Furthermore, I will argue that by circumventing dominant neorealist-based approaches to contemporary cinema (where gender difference (and identity) is conspicuously denied), the crucial role and function of the critically neglected missing ‘female’ child can be restored and illuminated.

In Chapter Two, I will extend this necessary emphasis on questions of critical reception and related notions of possible distortion and oversimplification, to include the crucial dialogic relation between Italian cinematic articulations of (missing) children, childhoods and the experience of parenthood, and their counterparts in Italian culture and society. In the spirit of my earlier analysis, I will posit that if contemporary works are to be broached through the prism of the Italian social scheme, and points of contact productively mined or, where necessary, effectively discounted, then this analysis requires recourse to a broad

range of contemporary sources and debates. Framing my discussion with work carried out by Laura Rascaroli and Ewa Mazierska on the filmmaking of Nanni Moretti and Paul Sutton’s influential Screen article, ‘The bambino negato or missing child of contemporary Italian cinema’, I will argue that self-referential approaches to Italian society by scholars of film, where a small cluster of sociological tropes are harvested from the work of a single secondary source (in this case, Paul Ginsborg’s 2001 study, Italy and Its Discontents) and circulated within ‘reflectionist’ accounts of individual film texts, may run the risk of producing gaps and elisions and/or amplifying inaccuracy. At worst, film texts themselves may be called upon as reliable documents for reading the intricate fabric of Italian social life and identity. In order to create a more nuanced backdrop against which my textual analysis in Chapters Three, Four, and Five can unfold, I will propose and implement a more detailed survey of important changes (and debates) to (and around) the Italian social architecture of the last two decades. In the first phase of my discussion, I will broaden the semantic field of Wilson’s term, to include the ‘missing child’ as emblem of the Italian fertility crisis of the 1990s. Having examined the likely causes and probable effects on (largely middle-class) parent–child relations of the country’s faltering reproduction, and called into question more homogenizing accounts of Italy’s demographic profile within the film-based studies (cited above), I will argue for a more heterogeneous understanding of the categories of child, childhood, and the experience of biological and non-biological parenthood (adoption and international adoption) in contemporary Italy. Whilst my discussion will be largely energised by questions surrounding the fertility crisis of the early 1990s, I intend to dedicate the final part of my discussion to exploring far-reaching changes made to the Italian legislature in 2004. These changes have considerably restricted access to assisted reproductive technologies. This legislation (Legge 40) rapidly became (and remains) a source of public anxiety and may, like the earlier crisis surrounding Italy’s ability to reproduce its population, find possible inflection, articulation, or resonance in contemporary cinematic representations of the missing child (in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson) including those by Nanni Moretti and Marco Tullio Giordana under discussion in Chapter Three. Within this stand of my

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discussion, I will also address questions surrounding adoption and international adoption in Italy, themes which also feed into my discussion in Chapters Three and Four.

Within this frame of renewed questioning around issues of critical reception, and with a revised, though by no means exhaustive awareness of (some of) the debates and anxieties at large within the contemporary Italian imaginary, my analysis of primary sources will take place. In Chapter Three, I will explore the range of resonances surrounding the missing child in Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio* and Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato*. In the case of the former, I will suggest that whilst at the narrative level the film is marked by the death of a teenage son, and works to envisage, in Wilson’s phrasing, ‘the possibility of moving on from such excessive grief’, within a more localized context, this death (and the suffering it engenders) can be read in light of other concerns.\(^\text{28}\) By locating this work within the longer trajectory of Moretti’s corpus and drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s short, yet compelling essay, ‘Fathers, Fathers, Everywhere’, (and the suspension of the symbolic law it rehearses), I will argue, albeit with necessary caution, that the missing child *topos* (woven into the death and post-death strands of the film’s action), may ultimately correspond to Moretti’s on-screen persona’s delayed assumption of an unequivocally adult identity.\(^\text{29}\) By rooting the film within the *oeuvre* of the auteur and by flagging the persistence of the filmmaker’s interest in the middle-class (nuclear) family, I will show that these inflections (can) have significant consequences for scholarship. In the chapter’s second half, I will turn to the missing child film with which this Introduction began, *Quando sei nato*. In the spirit of my earlier analysis and drawing where necessary on the findings of Chapter Two, I will posit that whilst Giordana’s film (forged like *La stanza del figlio* in a traditional oedipal mould) has been widely read as raising the politically sensitive issue of immigration, its missing child thread may also create a discursive space for conjuring contemporary anxieties around parenthood and childrearing (within the delimited context of an affluent, northern Italian milieu) as well as questions of international adoption.

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\(^\text{28}\) Wilson, p. 151.

In Chapter Four, I will move beyond what Wilson describes as, ‘the guilt and excessive responsibility of the grieving parent’, to examine the figure of the missing child as victim of malign adult (or parental) interference. It is this troubling scenario, at once at odds with the ostensibly normative and nurturing parent–child relations in Chapter Three, which lurks at the narrative core of Gianni Amelio’s Il ladro di bambini and Antonio Capuano’s La guerra di Mario. Like their counterparts in Chapter Three (and Chapter Nine of Wilson’s study), these are works rich in the residues of abuse and child suffering, and open up a very different space for reflection, and imaginative emotive viewing. Moving beyond potentially reductive notions of the films’ perceived relation to important neorealist works of the early post-war period (a crucial element of the methodology outlined in Chapter One), I intend, in the first phase of a two-part discussion, to examine the representational economy of each work, calling attention to the foremost visual and aural devices deployed by Amelio and Capuano to give filmic articulation to the murky topos of childhood abuse. Moving on from concerns around the ethics and aesthetics of representing child suffering on screen, my discussion will examine the filmmakers’ treatment of the post-abuse scenario. I will show that despite being separated by more than a decade, the corrective function performed by replacement caretakers in both films is similarly undermined by prevailing State-maintained orthodoxies. In my discussion of La guerra di Mario, I will also highlight the ways in which the film invites questions around fosterage across social classes.

In a closing chapter (Chapter Five), and with a shift away from the male-authored works of Chapters Three and Four, I will mesh a range of contemporary (Italian) social and political concerns with an expanded understanding of the metaphor of haunting, (as developed by Emma Wilson in her work on the Dogme filmmakers Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier in Chapter Nine of Cinema’s Missing Children and by Karen Lury in her work on the J-Horror genre in Japanese cinema), to examine the return of the missing child in Cristina Comencini’s La bestia nel cuore and Mario Martone’s L’amore molesto. If the focus of my close textual analysis in Chapter Four will fall on the filmic representations of male and female child suffering within a contemporary frame,

30 Wilson, p. 9.
then my interest in this chapter will be in the legacy of child abuse; on formations of childhood trauma dislodged from contemporary adult consciousness. Following a necessary orientation towards work on the returning child phantom and, having introduced key aspects of contemporary trauma theory explicated in the writings of Cathy Caruth, Mieke Bal, Judith Lewis Herman, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, I will devote the first half of my textual analysis to exploring Comencini’s epistemology of traumatic representation in *La bestia nel cuore*. Having examined the middle-class feminist auteur’s rendering of the abuse scenario, with particular emphasis on her prolific use of the oneiric or dream house given theoretical weight in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, I will embark on comparative analysis of *L’amore molesto* and the later work directed by Comencini.\(^{32}\) Whilst both films rehearse the horror of abuse in childhood, and concurrently what Wilson describes as ‘the difficulty of reaching [and speaking] truth’ (in adulthood), I will suggest that by touching on a range of political ephemera (in a plethora of guises), the return of the missing female child in the narrative arc of *L’amore molesto* (a work which also raises important questions linked to authorship and gender) may also allow this canonical work of the New Neapolitan cinema to be read differently.\(^{33}\) Following this path, I will suggest that the return of the missing child in a range of post-traumatic phenomena, the filmmaker’s inscription of sexual trauma within the female child body, may also correspond to unresolved political trauma laid bare by the collapse of the First Italian republic in the first years of the 1990s and the political ascendancy of the New Right.

Within what are arguably complex webs of human experience and in light of a range of national and transnational phenomena and contingencies, I will attempt, in the five chapters that follow, to reach an understanding, or even perhaps distil meaning from the missing child *topos* in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson. With these aims in mind, let us move on in our discussion by addressing questions of critical reception; the foremost concerns in reading and writing the missing child in contemporary Italian cinema.


\(^{33}\) Wilson, p. 125.
CHAPTER ONE

‘AGAINST NEOREALISM’? READING (AND RE-READING) THE MISSING CHILD IN ITALIAN CINEMA

Neorealism constitutes la via maestra of Italian film […] it is the point of departure for all serious postwar cinematic practice.¹

Let us declare a moratorium on the mention of neorealism for, say, half a decade. Let us see what such a moratorium might allow us to reveal in its stead, what our silence on realism might allow us to reveal about other modes and genres.²

In the Introduction I sought to establish the founding impetus for the study of the missing child topos within the canon of contemporary Italian cinema. My discussion here, and in the chapter which follows, responds to an attendant need to bring to this analysis a rigorous interdisciplinary methodology, one which challenges accepted wisdom by means of refreshed modes of thinking and questioning with and about the missing child. Whilst my discussion in Chapter Two will argue for a more nuanced and expansive awareness of contemporary cultural and political debates surrounding children, childhoods, and the experience of parenthood, my interest here lies in a perceived tendency (within largely Anglophone discourse) to read filmic representations of missing children and childhoods against a narrow corpus of films belonging to Italian neorealism. In the pages that follow, I will suggest that this approach may perpetuate and extend oversimplification of the missing child’s shifting iconographic role, disavowing questions of gender and historical specificity. Further, this critical impulse may cordon off more fruitful or productive discursive pathways, thereby limiting the potential scope of analysis for important contemporary works, including those under discussion in the second half of this study.

I shall begin my discussion by drawing upon recent pioneering work on the privileging within Italianist critical discourse of the neorealist topos, by Catherine O’Rawe and Alan O’Leary. Against this backdrop (which will also pave the way

² Alan O’Leary and Catherine O’Rawe, p. 117.
for my analysis of primary sources from Chapter Three onwards), I shall re-examine important (neorealist) works by Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica to illustrate (some of) the ways in which the relation of this critical reflex to missing child films in the contemporary canon may be in tension with the emergence of revised understandings of the male child’s historically situated role and status. Moving on, I will call attention to the crucial, though understudied, presence of the missing child in earlier cinema. The aim of this final phase of my discussion, which will also engage the pre-neorealist cinema of Vittorio De Sica, will be to disrupt the widely held notion of neorealism as the perceived ‘year zero’ for representations of lost, suffering, or endangered children in Italian cinema.

Against Neorealism

In a pathbreaking study published in the ‘Thinking Italian Film’ edition of Italian Studies, Catherine O’Rawe addresses what she describes as ‘obsessive interest in neorealism’. Indicative of the rejuvenating atmosphere in which this special edition was forged, its determined aim ‘to raise rather than answer questions, and to provoke debate’, O’Rawe identifies ‘nostalgia for’ and the ‘enduring critical attraction’ of neorealism as the most manifest preoccupation among a cluster of key and recurring themes within Italianist critical discourse.³ ‘Criticism of all kinds’, the author contends, ‘has constantly felt obliged to account for neorealism, in the sense that neorealism dominates all accounts of Italian film history’.⁴ Having explored the ‘entrenched ideas of crisis (or of the transition from one crisis to the next), fall, decadence or afterness’, which stem from auteur-based approaches to film (and the disappearance of the so-called ‘padri e i maestri’ – the provenance of the article’s title), O’Rawe prescribes as the antidote to this assiduous and over-simplified return to the neorealist canon, a ‘rigorous and detailed attention to texts and historical contexts’. In order to uncover what she usefully describes as the ‘secret histories’ of texts (a term appropriated from

⁴ Ibid., p. 177.
earlier work by Ruth Ben Ghiat), the author recommends that Italianist scholars of film:

[…] combat the desire to return to the past, which is always a desire to erase the complexity of that past. The ambition should be to broaden our attention from the ‘padri’ and ‘maestri’ (be they neorealist or postneorealist auteurs) to the panorama of the whole field of film production, exhibition and reception in a given period, and indeed in all periods. More recently, in an essay published in the Journal of Modern Italian Studies, O’Rawe, writing with Alan O’Leary (co-editor of the earlier volume), renews this earlier opposition to more normative critical approaches to Italian cinema. This compelling and arguably seductive thesis begins by illuminating the foremost assumptions and perceptions that constitute ‘the common sense of Italian film studies’. The first of these surrounds the traditional status afforded to Italian cinema as ‘subtending’ the Italian nation. This formulation, whereby cinema is ‘perceived (or asserted) to be a key site for the elaboration of Italian nationhood and identity’, or in the phrasing of Gian Piero Brunetta, ‘lo schermo si fa specchio della vita nazionale’, rehearsed fervidly in relation to neorealism, appears throughout discourse. The perceived corollary of this tendency (exemplified in the work of important scholars such as Millicent Marcus and Peter Bondanella), is that those works belonging to genre (and sub-genre) cinema and destined therefore for a (more) popular audience (the Christmas comedy genre or cine-panettone is an example par excellence) are ‘downgraded’, critically reviled and/or shunted to the margins of scholarship. The mirror/specchio template may also veil a range of other specificities. Drawing on important work carried out by Derek Duncan on cinematic representations of recent migration to Italy, the authors argue that this critical approach, ‘implies the suppression of the particularity’ of certain trends and phenomena. Within the context of migrancy, as well as in other areas of social interest (including the concerns which will

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6 O’Rawe, p. 194.
7 O’Leary and O’Rawe, p. 107.
8 Ibid., p. 110.
propel my discussion in Chapter Two), ‘the metaphor of the mirror/specchio’, they write, ‘is a blind’.\textsuperscript{11}

Moving on from notions of the political and ideological pitfalls of the reflectionist paradigm, the scholars return to the concerns raised in O’Rawe’s earlier \textit{Italian Studies} article on the other, though, crucially related ‘tendency’ within Italian film criticism: ‘pious recourse’, to the ‘institution of neorealism’.\textsuperscript{12} This institution, namely ‘the body of critical work and discourse that constructs neorealism’ (as proposed by Christopher Wagstaff), has become ‘the ethical and aesthetic centre of Italian cinema’. Discursive recourse to this short-lived creative flourish, the critically perceived acme of Italian post-war filmmaking, is ‘the essential authorative gesture’. Concurrently, ‘failure to refer to’ it, ‘is to risk seeming ignorant, philistine and most of all politically suspect’.\textsuperscript{13} The tenacity of this common sense, which belongs to a wider privileging of the category of realism within Western culture, has had, and continues to have, like the ‘lo schermo si fa specchio’ paradigm, the deleterious effect of ‘inhibiting’ and ‘retarding’ Italian film scholarship. The essay draws to a close (in tongue in cheek, though productive fashion) by calling for a moratorium on the ‘mention’ of neorealism for ‘at least five years’: ‘Let us see what such a moratorium might allow us to reveal about other modes and genres’, the authors conclude.\textsuperscript{14}

Reading the Missing Child (of Contemporary Cinema) Against Neorealism

Whilst the present study (and discussion) constitutes a flagrant breach of the temporary silence proposed by O’Rawe and O’Leary due to its determined interest in realist, auteur-based filmmaking, the thrust of my argument in the present chapter nevertheless chimes with (and takes further), some of the concerns raised in their polemical account of the potentially thwarting impact on Italian film scholarship of the ‘essential ritual’ of recourse to socially engaged

\textsuperscript{11} O’Leary and O’Rawe, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{13} O’Leary and O’Rawe, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 117.
filmmaking of the early post-war period. Nowhere does their thesis find greater currency, or is this critical template more prevalent or pervasive, perhaps, than in readings of contemporary representations of children and childhoods on film, particularly those involving the missing child (or missing children), in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson.

Competent and engaging though it is, the work of Paul Sutton is a fine case in point. In an influential article published as part of a special edition of the film journal *Screen* (‘The Child in Film and Television’) in 2005, Sutton falls prey, as he promptly acknowledges, to precisely the sort of ‘insidious’ common sense flagged in O’Rawe and O’Leary’s study. In his article, ‘The bambino negato or missing child of Contemporary Italian Cinema’, key sections of which appear in other parts of this thesis, Sutton concedes that:

> It is difficult when one considers the child in popular Italian cinema not to be drawn, almost inevitably, to images of Enzo Staïola as Bruno in De Sica’s canonical film *Ladri di biciclette/The Bicycle Thieves* (1948); a film that casts a long shadow over a number of more contemporary Italian films concerned with representing the child cinematically.\(^\text{15}\)

In his subsequent analysis of Gabriele Salvatores’ *Io non ho paura* (2003), a work, which, in its dramatization of the kidnapping of Filippo (Mattia Di Pierro), a (missing) northern Italian child, explicitly returns to the era of Italian terrorism (known as the ‘years of lead’ or in the Italian phrasing ‘gli anni di piombo’), Sutton creates a discursive space in which the relation between Michele (Giuseppe Cristiano), the film’s child protagonist, and Bruno (Enzo Staïola), star of the De Sican masterwork referenced above, can be interrogated. As the protagonist of Salvatores’ film is read against the ubiquitous, doe-eyed child of *Ladri di biciclette*, Sutton draws on the ‘cinematic heritage of neorealism’ to shed new light or ‘unlock’ this filmic rendering of Niccolò Ammaniti’s popular tale of friendship and kidnapping in the blazing cornfields of the Italian mezzogiorno.\(^\text{16}\)

> Similarly, in a recent critique of *Anche libero va bene* (Kim Rossi Stuart, 2006), a work which explores the destabilizing impact of the sudden ignominious disappearance of a mother on a young family (the character Stefania, played by

\(^\text{15}\) Sutton, p. 354. My emphasis.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
Barbora Bobulova, leaves behind her son, daughter, and husband), Ella Ide further evidences the common sense of the discursive gesture illustrated in the work of Sutton and Carlorosi. She writes: ‘In the spirit of Italian neorealist films such as Vittorio De Sica’s classics, I bambini ci guardano/The Children are Watching Us (1944) and Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves (1948), Rossi Stuart’s Anche libero va bene examines the cataclysmic consequence of adult transgression on an innocent child’. Echoing Ide, William Hope describes the film as the ‘latest reworking of the narrative premise of inadequate parents endeavoring to set an example to children with maturity beyond their years’. Acknowledging the film’s perceived relation to De Sica’s Ladri di biciclette, Rossi Stuart’s film, Hope observes, ‘is something of a stylistic return to neorealism’.

Finally, Silvia Carlorosi frames her analysis of Antonio and Andrea Frazzi’s Certi bambini (2004) and Matteo Garrone’s much celebrated Gomorra (2008), two works which dramatise the initiation of early teenage boys into sects of the Neapolitan mafia (known as the ‘Camorra’), by highlighting what she describes as ‘the continuity between some of the recent Italian films and historical neorealism’. The most striking aspect of this continuity, Carlorosi contends, is the presence of the filmic child:

Romoletto and his friends in Roberto Rossellini’s Roma, città aperta (Rome, Open City, 1945), little Pascà of Paisà (Paisan, 1946), Giuseppe and Pasquale in Sciuscià (Shoeshine, 1946), and young Bruno in Vittorio De Sica’s Ladri di biciclette (Bicycle Thieves, 1948) find their counterparts in many child protagonists of films in Italy’s most recent cinema.

If canonical neorealist works such as Roma, città aperta, Paisà, Ladri di biciclette and the proto-neorealist I bambini ci guardano cast what Sutton helpfully describes, as ‘a long shadow over a number of more contemporary Italian films concerned with representing the child cinematically’, then this shadow also extends, it would seem, across the terrain of contemporary Italian film criticism. As this cursory orientation towards the work of Sutton, Ide, and Carlorosi

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anticipates, this instinctive return to Italian filmmaking of the early postwar period also forms the fabric of scholarship on and around the corpus of films under discussion in the second half of this study.\textsuperscript{20} It is little coincidence, perhaps, that in her earlier analysis of the Camorra-inspired \textit{Gomorra} and \textit{Certi bambini}, Silvia Carlorosi also cites Amelio’s \textit{Il ladro di bambini}, Marco Tullio Giordana’s \textit{Quando sei nato} and Antonio Capuano’s \textit{La guerra di Mario} as other contemporary works which invoke the legacy of neorealism by foregrounding lost or suffering children as their protagonists.\textsuperscript{21}

Indeed, echoing Carlorosi’s analysis of the male children in works by Matteo Garrone and the Frazzi brothers, Patrizia Bettella filters Antonio Capuano’s \textit{La guerra di Mario} through the optic of neorealism. ‘The long-lasting interest for the child as vehicle of social critique in Italian cinema from Neorealism to the present’, Bettella writes, ‘leads to some reflection on the film \textit{La guerra di Mario} (2005)’.\textsuperscript{22} Performing the essential ritual highlighted in O’Rawe and O’Leary’s admonishing critique and making an early reference to Paul Sutton’s work on the (missing) child of contemporary Italian cinema, an indication of the continuing critical reach of this special edition of \textit{Screen}, (and the emergent status of his article as critical reference point), the author, following Sutton, infuses her study of Capuano’s accomplished depiction of the fraught relationship between Mario (Marco Grieco), an abused and ‘at risk’ pre-teenage Neapolitan child and his foster mother Giulia (Valeria Golino), with the memory of foundational male-child oriented works of neorealism by Vittorio De Sica (\textit{Sciuscià, Ladri di biciclette}) and Roberto Rossellini (\textit{Roma, città aperta}, \textit{Paisà}, and \textit{Germania, anno zero} (1948)).

Glossing Sutton, these are works, the author writes, which ‘continue to influence Italian and world cinema’. The specific relevance to Capuano’s film of one of these films (\textit{Paisà}) and what Bettella describes as the filmmaker’s ‘indebtedness to the tradition of Neorealism’, is later characteristically explained as follows:


\textsuperscript{21} Carlorosi, p. 244.

\textsuperscript{22} Patrizia Bettella, ‘Adoption, Motherhood, Domestication: The Role of the Child in Antonio Capuano’s \textit{La guerra di Mario},’ \textit{Quaderni d’italianistica}, 2 (2010), 149–162 (p. 149).
La guerra di Mario [...] draws many features from neorealist cinema, particularly from Rossellini. Set in Naples and with a nine-year old boy as protagonist, La guerra di Mario calls for parallels with the third episode of Rossellini’s Paisà, where among the rubble and destruction of liberated Naples, the protagonist Pasquale, who stumbles upon an African American GI, is also a young orphan boy who, like Mario is shown, in one scene, performing for money in the streets of Naples. In neorealist fashion, Capuano draws the plot for La guerra di Mario from a true story and casts a non-professional actor (Marco Grieco) in the role of Mario.

If the critical attraction of neorealism has proved enduring in terms of the socially engaged filmmaking of Antonio Capuano who, alongside fellow Neapolitan director Mario Martone, has been described as one of ‘the children of neorealism’, (for his ‘visual vocabulary and social vision’), then this ritual has also been performed, with greater persistence perhaps, in relation to Gianni Amelio’s Il ladro di bambini.

The latter, one of a number of works deemed ‘neo-neorealist’, a category which has more recently subsumed both of the films under discussion in Carlorosi’s study, has been widely read as paying homage to the narrow corpus of recurring male child-oriented works flagged above. This dialogue established between Il ladro and its neorealist forebears, comes in spite, however, of the chilling event which lies at the heart of the film’s action: the pedophilic abuse of a pre-adolescent female child, a scenario unaccounted for in the neorealist films to which it is customarily compared.

Millicent Marcus begins her analysis of the film in After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age, for example, by acknowledging its ‘debt’ to the legacy of (De Sican) neorealism. ‘The links to neorealism’, she writes, ‘are so numerous and explicit that critics have seen in Gianni Amelio’s film a sort of “homecoming” in the sense, too, of a return to the best traditions of our cinema’. Similarly, Manuela Gieri notes that the film ‘is thoroughly indebted to the ethical paradigms of neorealism’. Peter Bondanella contends that ‘Amelio’s skill in

23 Bettella, p. 151.
obtaining masterful performances from nonprofessional child actors can only recall a similar mastery in several neorealist classics directed by Vittorio De Sica.27 Similarly, in a recent study of Il ladro’s relation to racializing discourse around the ‘Questione meridionale’, Gerardo Papalia observes that the casting process employed by the filmmaker was in the ‘neo-realist tradition’. ‘Amelio chose the main protagonists according to the criterion that they “look” like “authentic” Southerners’, he writes.28 Finally, in an Italian Studies article theoretically informed by Julia Kristeva’s extrapolation of the concept of ‘Intertextuality’ from Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on ‘dialogism’, Pauline Small examines key images from the film against those belonging to Luchino Visconti’s Rocco e i suoi fratelli (1960), and Rossellini’s Roma, città aperta.29 In terms of the latter, the author identifies a series of points of visual comparison between scenes which unfold in the Sicilian town of Noto involving the carabiniere Antonio and Luciano, (the brother of the film’s female co-protagonist Rosetta) and a parallel encounter between Francesco and Marcello in Roma, città aperta. ‘Amelio’s recall of Rossellini’s image’, Small observes, ‘offers a number of readings’, ranging from the film’s self-reflexive quality ‘wherein it considers its role as film in relation to the role of film in an earlier era’, to the focus of the films’ father–son relationship. Amelio’s ‘recalling [of] the image’ by means of a succession of glaring intertextual citations, leads to the following conclusion: Il ladro di bambini is a work ‘which takes Italian film as its theme’.30

If this brief consideration of scholarship on contemporary missing child films (including the dyad of works illuminated in Chapter Four) attests to the continuing critical lure of neorealism, its status as essential ritual or common sense gesture, it may also attest to the way in which this critical frequency or wavelength blunts more direct critical engagement with themes and concerns mobilised in contemporary socially engagè cinema. Whilst Pauline Small’s essay on Il ladro di bambini makes a valuable contribution to understanding the film’s status within

30 Ibid., p. 166.
the longer trajectory of Italian film history, her conclusion belies or underestimates perhaps, the filmmaker’s determined aim to bring the *realpolitik* of pedophilic abuse into public consciousness at a time when, as a topic, it was finding growing importance within public discourse.

Does Amelio’s film provide the clearest example yet, then, of the inhibiting and retarding impact of recourse to neorealism flagged by O’Rawe and O’Leary? Does the instinctive discursive return to a cluster of male-child oriented films belonging to the immediate post-war period explain why the filmmaker’s rendering of the pedophilic abuse scenario emerges as a critical blindspot? Is it necessary, therefore, to recast certain aspects of critical discourse, which cohere around the privileging of the neorealist *topos* in favour of a paradigm shift, which allows scholarship to be initially concerned with a range of more immediate contemporary exigencies? This sentiment, is echoed by Amelio himself, in an interview with the cinematic magazine *Cineaste*:

*Cineaste*: Some critics, in writing about the film, drew parallels between it and neorealist works, particularly because of its use of children.

Amelio: A discussion of neorealism cannot be simplified. First of all, neorealism belongs to a *very specific time in history*, and the classic period of neorealism extended from the end of the war to the end of the Fifties. When we talk about neorealism, three directors are always cited – De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti – but, personally speaking, I don’t know any directors who are *more different* than these three. Yet all of them have made so-called neorealist films, so which one is the more neorealist? [...] So I think to say that *Stolen Children* is a neorealist film *does not apply*.31

With Amelio’s comments (and the sets of questions raised above) in mind, I propose to revisit the institution of neorealism, to look again at the works whose memory continues to shadow analysis of the missing child in filmmaking of the contemporary era. Taking Amelio’s comments further, I will work towards a refreshed understanding of this narrow male-child oriented corpus, which necessarily locates this body of images within the context of world war and its aftermath and within longer filmmaking trajectories (including those of individual directors). As a platform for this analysis, I will begin this phase of my discussion by rehearsing more normative understandings of the term ‘neorealism’.

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Reading Neorealism

Within traditional film historiography, the term ‘neorealism’ is used to connote an ostensibly isolated body of work which appeared in Italy in the immediate and early post-war period (1945–1952). Most frequently, this corpus has been defined, as Peter Bondanella observes, in terms of its ‘social content, historical actuality and political commitment’; the realistic treatment, that is, of members of the (urban) proletariat in the midst of (varying degrees of) social or individual change, crisis or unrest.\(^{32}\) An awareness of the films’ moral and/or political energies (linked to the anti-fascist Resistance and the myths of national rupture and rebirth) feeds into an accompanying discourse surrounding perceived aesthetic qualities. These qualities have been used to support claims that this \textit{avant-garde} filmmaking idiom was consciously at odds with the dominant Hollywood studio film paradigm and the \textit{telefono bianco} films of fascism. These formal emphases were rapidly distilled into a discreet set of rules, which create the overall impression of a homogenous group of directors belonging to a post-fascist filmmaking ‘school’ or ‘movement’. In \textit{Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism}, Millicent Marcus, drawing on the ten points of neorealism first published in \textit{Films et documents} in March 1952, (the front cover of the journal sported the title, ‘\textit{L'ecole neorealistre Italiennne}’), identifies the filmmaking imperatives ‘governing neorealism’ as follows:

\begin{quote}
Location shooting, lengthy takes, unobtrusive editing, natural lighting, a predominance of medium and long shots, respect for the continuity of time and space, use of contemporary, true-to-life subjects, an uncontrived, open–ended plot, working-class protagonists, a nonprofessional cast, dialogue in the vernacular […]\(^{33}\)
\end{quote}

Within this corpus, the exact size of which remains an issue of ongoing critical debate, it is a cluster of seven ‘masterworks’, four of which have been cited already in this discussion, that both historically and in the contemporary era, garner the lion’s share of critical attention. In his publication \textit{Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City}, Mark Shiel names the (seven) works, which ‘critics broadly agree on’, as follows: Roberto Rossellini’s so-called war trilogy (\textit{Rome,
Open City, Paisan, Germany Year Zero), three films made by Vittorio De Sica (Shoeshine, The Bicycle Thief, Umberto D) and Luchino Visconti’s La terra trema (1948). Finally, in terms of spectatorship, Peter Bondanella maintains that neorealism ‘remained primarily an “art” cinema, never capturing the mass public it always tried to gain’.35

Woven into discourse surrounding this cluster of masterworks is the critically perceived centrality of the figure of the lost, endangered, or suffering child. Neil Sinyard begins his critique of De Sica’s Ladri di biciclette in Children in the Movies, for example, by distilling the child’s ‘important role in the films of Italian neo-realism’, to that of witness or victim ‘of adult corruption or failure’.36 Similarly, in a study which unfolds under the borrowed title of Vittorio De Sica’s much-lauded pre-war melodrama, ‘The Children are Watching us’, Bert Cadullo argues that ‘an essential theme of Neorealism was conflict between the common person and the immense societal forces that were completely external to him’. ‘The most pitiful victims of such forces’, he contends, ‘because the most innocent, are naturally children, and therefore it is no accident that important Neorealist films feature them’.37 Bolstering claims of the child’s perceived relation in Rossellini’s Roma, città aperta, to political rebirth or renewal, Mary Wood notes in her monograph, Italian Cinema, that children are important symbols ‘of national regeneration’.38 Finally, echoing Wood and with specific reference to this founding work, Bondanella writes that:

Romoletto, Marcello and the other children walk away from Don Pietro’s execution and are followed by the panning camera which sets them, Italy’s future, against the backdrop of the Dome of St Peter’s Cathedral. Out of a moment of tragic despair, Rossellini has created a vision of hope from the first of the many symbolic images of children that will characterize almost all of the great neorealist classics.39

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35 Bondanella, p. 36.
39 Bondanella, p. 42.
In recent years, however, normative understandings of neorealism have undergone a process of critical re-evaluation. Writing in the Introduction to the edited volume, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, one of two recent studies to explore the works of neorealism in light of transnational concerns, Kristi M. Wilson and Laura E Ruberto, note, for example, that ‘it is no longer shocking to say that the “neo” in neorealism was not actually anything new, but rather marked a continuation and an evolution of the Italian motion picture industry’. If in some quarters neorealism’s entrenched identification with sets of pre-prescribed technical or aesthetic criteria are being tentatively relinquished, as scholars turn instead to the ‘heteroglossia inherent in the medium of film production’, then signs also exist that its status as a ‘school’ or ‘movement’ (in the vein of the Dogme filmmaking I discuss in Chapter Five of this thesis), or as an entirely new cinematic thoroughfare, have run their course.

In terms of the latter, attention has been paid to the role played by fascist ‘cultural interventionism’ in the formation of neorealist cinema. Frustrating canonical accounts, which afford neorealism the status of creative watershed, this approach recognizes the role of Rome’s Centro Sperimentale Cinematografica, (established under fascism in 1935), and concurrently of fascist documentary filmmaking in the creative development of the ‘future protagonists of neorealism’. As ‘the myth of a rupture’ between neorealism and earlier cinema is contested, scholars such as Giuliana Bruno have also moved towards illuminating the under-explored relationship between the neorealist canon and narrative-based filmmaking during fascist Ventenino and the silent era (the focus of Bruno’s research), unsettling the neatness of teleological accounts which posit neorealism as uncontaminated by earlier aesthetic or thematic doctrine.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on cinema and childhood by Karen Lury (whose work on the J-horror genre in Japanese cinema informs key aspects of my discussion of *La bestia nel cuore* and *L’amore molesto* in Chapter Five),

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41 Ibid., p. 6.
frustrates accepted wisdom surrounding the prolific use of non-professional child actors as limited or specific to the films of neorealism. Indeed, in the final chapter of her pathbreaking monograph, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairytales*, Lury offers a powerful critique of issues around child performance (on screen) both in the context of potential child exploitation and in terms of the risk posed by child actors aesthetically or in relation to the more pragmatic concerns of a film’s production. ‘Child actors balance precariously’, Lury writes, ‘on the divide between seeming and being’. In so doing, they ‘confuse or threaten the understanding of what acting or performing is’.44

Of particular interest to the present discussion, however, is Lury’s critical engagement with Michael Kirby’s influential article, ‘On Acting and Not-Acting’ in which he explicates a series of theoretical propositions whch together provide an acting/not acting continuum in theatre.45 Reading Kirby’s study on child performance in relation to canonical works of Italian cinema, such as Luchino Visconti’s neorealist, *Bellissima* (1951), *Padre Padrone* (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 1977), and fleetingly, several other works of Italian neorealism, Lury argues that whilst the function of children on film is partly determined by the heightened sense of melodrama their presence provides, their value stems in greater measure from what she describes as their ‘apparent spontaneity’ and ‘lack of self-consciousness’. These are the qualities, which are being ‘sought out’ and ‘seemingly captured on film’. The corollary of this spontaneity, Lury suggests, is that preference for the untrained child, ‘seems to be consistent, regardless of the film’s genre or its production context’.46 Following the logic of the author’s argument, then, the widespread use of non-professional child actors in (some) of the important films of neorealism, should be read in relation to a range of other, at times practical, though frequently aesthetic concerns.

This evacuation of earlier critical emphases has encouraged, then, a corresponding reevaluation of the role and status of the filmic child (and untrained child actor), traditionally read as signifier of national regeneration and as a core, or even defining feature of the neorealist canon. Even the most cursory survey of

46 Lury, ‘The Child in Film’, p. 158.
the works collated by Shiel, shows that this normative reading, which as we know already, has been a dominant thread in accounts of the missing child in contemporary cinema, has been relatively unconcerned with questions of gender (or the ubiquitous presence of the *male* child), or other, forgotten or minimized film histories such as those of the silent era or the Ventennio of fascism. Before turning to the latter, namely the figure of the missing child in pre-neorealist cinema and children on film more generally, let us examine, albeit with necessary brevity, the gendered nature of the representation of children in the films belonging to the corpus of masterworks fore-grounded above. In order to illuminate these concerns, I will turn to the recent work by the Germanist and film scholar, Jaimey Fisher.

Re-reading the Missing Child in Neorealism

In a recent comparative study of canonical neorealism and the marginalised genre of the German Rubble Film, Jaimey Fisher circumnavigates what he describes as ‘dead-end questions about neorealist films’ overt political content or their deployment of specific techniques’, choosing instead to mesh a revised understanding of Gilles Deleuze’s work on the evolution of the cinematic image with sensitivity towards gendered aspects of key neorealist works by Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica.47 In terms of the latter, both Italian and German cinemas were concerned with what the American film theorist and historian, Kaja Silverman, terms ‘marginal males’; men, who in the aftermath of the war and the social crises it provoked, were compelled ‘to embrace lack and inadequacy’.48 At the heart of Fisher’s refiguration of the tradition masculine action image (where characters absorb situations, synthesise understanding, and act effectively) is the male child, traditionally aligned with notions of innocence, victimhood, or as the symbolically invested figure of hope. In Fisher’s analysis, which builds on earlier work on the action image by Marcia Landy, however, it is *through* the figure of the

male child that this gendered social crisis is routed.⁴⁹ Within Neorealism, Fisher observes ‘the male child plays a central role in representing the humiliated males, whose presence and fate refigure the traditional masculine action-image’. Thus, in films such as *Roma, città aperta* and *Ladri di biciclette*, we encounter ideologically fatigued and traumatized adult male figures who, in the wake of humiliating military defeat, are no longer willing (or able) to subscribe to the dominant fictions of society (such as preordained social roles). As such, they fail to re-establish social authority or agency. The presence of the male child ‘highlights the limits of the male, the horizons of his effective agency, and the twilight of his conventional role in the masculine action-image’.⁵⁰

In *Roma, città aperta*, this dismantling of ‘the “heroic” masculine center’ and the attendant diminishing of the masculine action-image, rests, Fisher contends, ‘in the oscillation between the radical activity and passivity’ of the (male) child.⁵¹ In stark contradiction to the conventional function and status attributed to the band of male children in Rossellini’s film, Fisher argues that it is in fact the children’s over-activity which proves ‘central to the negative trajectory’ of the film’s plot; it is the surprise bombing by Romoletto and his band of children, the only act of successful anti-German resistance within the course of the film’s action, which leads to the search of the apartment building and yields the round-up that kills Pina. He writes: ‘When the male children provide the motor for activity in a cinematic environment where the main male figures become increasingly marginal, their overactivity simultaneously threatens the film’s masculine figures’.⁵²

If in Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* the overactivity of the male child contributes to the dismantling of heroism (and the traditional action image as theorized by Deleuze), then in *Ladri di biciclette* male humiliation is linked to an altered system of spectatorial identification. At the heart of this reworking of the conventional specular system, whereby the heroic male figure is afforded the position of *subject* of the gaze, is what Fisher terms the ‘alternative’ or ‘objectifying gaze’ of the child. ‘By introducing the gaze of the son upon the

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⁵¹ Ibid., p. 34.
⁵² Ibid., p. 35.
father’, the author writes, ‘De Sica foregrounds the transformation of the traditional male subject of the gaze into the humiliated object of the gaze.’ As such, it is through Bruno’s recurring point of view shots, that the spectators’ identifications are routed, recasting the masculine action-image as passive observer. By addressing aspects of male lack or humiliation and the filmmaker’s re-working of the conventional specular system, Fisher sheds light on the crucially gendered role of the male child within this altered specular system.

Within the context of the present study, Fisher’s analysis raises two main points of interest: 1. The centralized relationship between men and boys within five of the seven masterworks of neorealism. 2. The role played by the pre-adolescent male child in the subversion of the traditional male subject (as hero), related to notions of the ‘marginal male’ theorized by Kaja Silverman. Fisher’s study not only illuminates the gendered nature of the representation of children in Roma, città aperta and Ladri di biciclette, but also calls attention to the way in which these representations are informed and inflected by historical specificities linked, in part, to the ideological fatigue and masculine humiliation of war and military defeat. It may be no longer adequate, therefore, for the essential ritual of recourse to this narrow body of work to be performed within the sphere of contemporary cinema, without first acknowledging the gendered and historically situated nature of these representations.

With this analysis in mind, let us respond to the concern raised earlier in my discussion surrounding the role and status of the missing child in forgotten or minimised film histories including those belonging to the silent era and the Ventennio of fascism. By highlighting the often, neglected status of the missing child in earlier cinema I intend to disrupt the perceived status within discourse of Italian neorealism as the ‘year zero’ of representations of lost, suffering, or endangered children. This is particularly pertinent, I will argue, in the filmmaking of Vittorio De Sica, for whom the lost or suffering child was also a staple within earlier cinema. Let us begin, though, with a consideration of the missing child in the cinema of the silent era, and the filmmaking of Elvira Notari.

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53 Ibid., p. 36.
54 Ibid., p. 37.
Looking Back to Look Forward: Childhood and Early Cinema

In a 2005 edition of the film journal, Screen, dedicated to the child in film and television, attention is drawn to the ubiquity, the soaring prevalence of the categories of ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ in contemporary discourse. Writing in the Introduction, the issue’s editor Karen Lury, highlights the discursive significance of the child in a range of domains, both within and beyond the sphere of popular culture. ‘In a range of contemporary discourses – medical, psychological, historical, mythical – the child’, Lury contends, ‘is the essential subject’. She continues: ‘Romanticized as innocent, as the ‘investment in our future’, or invoked as sympathetic of society’s failure, the child is at the centre of cultural and political debates’.\(^{55}\) In light of Lury’s assertion, this collection of essays: ‘offers an opportunity to address, from a fresh perspective, the differing relations of power, gender and agency within a diverse range of films and television programmes’.\(^{56}\) Engaging Lee Edelman’s provocative and influential polemic, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lury brings to the fore the ‘popular myths’ and ideological structures the child shores up. Her predominant interest, however, an interest, which ripples throughout the study (which also includes work by Emma Wilson and Paul Sutton), lies in the child’s potential as disruptive agent, and in so-called, ‘impossible, unintelligible aspects of childhood’.\(^{57}\) In the case of Wilson’s essay on the embodied experience of abject or abused childhood (‘Children, emotion and viewing in contemporary European film’) this disruptive agency derives, at least to some extent, from the ways in which the presence of the (missing) child on screen (the sex worker, Lilya) becomes part of a haptic experience, where ‘the effect of what is seen is pushed close to what is felt’.\(^{58}\)

Of particular interest to the present discussion, however, is the special issue’s opening essay, a study by Dimitris Eleftheriotis on Lumière and Company, a film made in 1995 to commemorate the centenary of the ‘birth’ of cinema. The film is made from combined footage taken by forty directors from countries

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\(^{56}\) Ibid, p. 314.

\(^{57}\) Ibid, p. 308.

\(^{58}\) Ibid, p. 309. I intend to return to Wilson’s work on cinema and hapticity in Chapter Four of this thesis.
throughout the world. The author frames his discussion by examining the film’s relation to childhood as historical metaphor and to the birth (and subsequent growth) of cinema as art from. ‘The film constructs a powerful metaphor’, Eleftheriotis writes, ‘of the early period of cinema as a form of ‘childhood’’. It is little coincidence, perhaps, that the opening sequence of *Lumière and Company* draws to a close with an extract from the 1897, *Les Premiers pas de Bébé*, directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière. The first steps of the fledgling cinematograph, find their correlate, it would seem, in the first steps of an infant child. Whilst this sequence feeds seamlessly into the delineation of childhood as historical metaphor, what it also highlights, however, is the imbrication of early cinema with the spectacle of the child. Indeed, whilst, as Karen Lury points out in her earlier introduction, the child is the central agent in a range of contemporary discourse, this cultural obsession, was very much alive in the Victorian era, and early cinema.

Moving beyond Eleftheriotis’ *Screen* essay, the recent work of Vicky Lebeau makes a further contribution to understanding the closely entwined history of the figure of the child and early cinema, and to the ways in which psychoanalytic approaches to childhood (including notions of childhood sexuality) may provide a looking glass for exploring the form and significance of cinema itself. In *Childhood and Cinema*, a study published in 2008, which draws upon a range of cinematic texts from early cinema to the contemporary period, Lebeau extends Eleftheriotis’ thesis by exploring the extent to which cinema, since its inception, ‘lays claim to the child – both on and off screen’. In an opening chapter, the author engages a number of works from the period 1895-1905, to highlight the ways in which early cinema’s fascination with the child, finds its root, or presents a logical continuation of, a Victorian ‘interest in, and commodification of, the image of the child’. Works such as the now canonical, *Repas de bébé* (1895), *Enfants aux jouets* (1896) and *A Pillow Fight* (1897), belong to an already established compulsion to ‘see and know the child’. It is little accident, Lebeau contends, that the most popular and commercially successful genres of early film was the so-called ‘Pictures of Child Life’ or ‘Child Pictures’, suggesting that the

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61 Ibid., p. 8.
contemporary proliferation of discourses on or around the child illuminated by Karen Lury, finds its precedent in early cinema.

Within the Italian context, the silent era, recognised both for its flurries of intense cinematic activity, and as a period in which the Italian film industry crumpled in the wake of war, commercial mismanagement, and the arrival of a slew of Hollywood imports, provides fertile ground for the study of (missing) children on film. However, whilst the contours of the industry’s commercial landscape have, in recent years, been meticulously mapped and surviving film texts exhumed and located within relevant cine-social and economic coordinates, the filmic child, and its attendant role and status in the cinema of this period, has been largely neglected in spite of its arguably strong presence. This critical blind-spot within traditional film historiography has been mitigated, to some degree, however, by the sustained critical attention afforded to the work of a handful of filmmakers who came to prominence in the years spanning the first three decades of the last century, all of whose work dramatizes childhood as suffering.

Most recently, the forgotten and largely fragmented filmic panorama of the Neapolitan actor-director and driving force behind Dora Film, Elvira Notari (1875–1946), has been painstakingly restored by the critic and historian cited earlier in this discussion, Giuliana Bruno. Bruno’s micro-historical study of the life and work of a largely forgotten yet formidable director and cinema impresario, which she situates within the broader frame of cultural theory and film historiography, not only illuminates the Neapolitan cinemascape of the early twentieth century, but also underscores themes and motifs which find resonance and renewal throughout Italian film history.

During her twenty-four-year career Notari was responsible for directing and producing more than sixty feature films and over one hundred shorts and documentaries, many of which were unwelcome to the censor due to their polemical focus on the female condition and its discontents. Notari’s treatment of taboo subjects such as suicide, motherhood, sexuality, and the suffering of Naples’ burgeoning population of street-children ensured that few of her films were exhibited within Italy. Whilst the title afforded to Notari by Bruno as ‘Italy’s first and most prolific woman filmmaker’ befits her prodigious output, it also
confirms her status as a director whose films and the themes they sought to address have, until recently, been the subject of substantial critical neglect.\textsuperscript{62}

Unlike mainstream studio-made historical epics, which enjoyed long runs and wide distribution, Notari’s films were firmly grounded within the realm of urban popular culture. As Bruno observes: ‘local physiognomies, non professional actors, and dialect intertitles spoke the urban text’.\textsuperscript{63} Rather than assembling sets within a studio, Notari chose to construct her films’ narrative architecture around the metropolis of Naples, its streets, its citizens and its folklore providing the canvas onto which a unique cinematic cityscape of subalternity and its hardships could be painted. The filmmaker’s emphasis on an economically deprived urban milieu, her use of non-professional actors and her eschewal of the studio, at once recalls the list of aesthetic criteria popularised by \textit{Films et documents} and later by Millicent Marcus. By placing the camera within the deprived urban spaces of Naples and utilising the silver screen as a looking glass for the exposition of the living conditions of the urban sub-proletariat,\textsuperscript{64} Notari’s work, with its emphasis on ‘the sights and sounds of the everyday’, radically undermines the originality of the Neorealist project, and its chronicling of the laboured transition from war, to post-war reconstruction.\textsuperscript{65}

Whilst Bruno’s study yields a plethora of unexplored critical pathways, it also makes a significant contribution, however, to redressing the balance between the strong presence of the filmic child in the cinema of this period and the relative lack of scholarship on it. Notari’s work is of particular value in relation to the study of lost, suffering children on film, not least because all of the feature films written and directed by her feature a serial child character, the perpetually imperiled street-urchin Gennariello, who was played by her son Edoardo. Taken from pre-filmic Neapolitan folklore and one of Antonio Gramsci’s ‘heroes of popular culture’,\textsuperscript{66} Gennariello would return as Pasquale in the Naples episode of Rossellini’s \textit{Paisà} and in the writings and cinematic oeuvre of Pier Paolo Pasolini.

\textsuperscript{62} Bruno, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{64} Bruno’s work shows that a significant number of Notari’s films were exported to New York.
\textsuperscript{65} Landy, \textit{Italian Cinema}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{66} Bruno, p. 181.
in films such as Accattone (1961) and Mamma Roma (1962). More recently, in the work of Antonio Capuano, he appears within a variety of social arenas and is abused and even murdered by the adults with whom he shares his impoverished urban milieu.

In Mandolinata a mare (1917), he is assigned the role of illegitimate child of a destitute woman and an aristocratic doctor. Having spent much of his childhood wandering the streets, the child attempts in the film’s closing sequence, to save the life of his dying mother, an attempt which ends unsuccessfully. In Ciccio il pizzaiulo del Carmine (1916), he again assumes the role of illegitimate child, but this time is offered refuge from the streets by a pizzamaker (Ciccio) and his wife. Yet, the danger-ridden urban metropolis of Naples soon proves to be a less hostile environment than that of his new home, as he falls victim to continued mistreatment at the hands of his surrogate parents. Like Mandolinata a mare, the film ends tragically with Gennariello dying after a vicious street assault.

In his multiple guises as abused orphan, street urchin, shoeshine boy, and faithful servant to the poor and needy of Naples, Gennariello arguably embodied a male child prototype which would later be plucked from a rich, albeit marginalised cinematic corpus by directors of the immediate post-war period and beyond. Bruno’s piecing together of a lost cinematic horizon thus makes visible a film child paradigm which while widely cited as born from the detritus of Fascism should clearly be situated within the silent era. Gennariello’s very on-screen presence suggests, as Marcia Landy observes, ‘that the films of Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini with their streetwise children have a precedent in earlier cinema.’

Giovanni’s Pastrone’s Cabiria (1914), the most critically applauded and commercially successful historical epic of the pre-World War I era, also takes as

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67 Pasolini’s ‘Gennariello: Un trattatello pedagogico’ was written shortly before his death in 1975 and was published as a series of articles (written in the form of letters) in Corriere della sera between March 6 and June 5, 1975. In his pedagogical treatise, Pasolini outlines his displeasure of the effects of consumerism on the subproletariat.

68 Gennariello’s adventures would later become a subgenre released by a subsidiary of Dora Film.

69 The street urchin would also endure physical suffering and death in the Notari’s war films, where he is either seriously wounded or dies, a popular hero.

70 Landy, p. 238.
its narrative focus a missing child, in this case a missing female child.\textsuperscript{71} Separated from her parents in the aftermath of a violent volcanic eruption, the Roman child Cabiria (Carolina Catena), survives a series of gruesome events which see her kidnapped by pirates, sold for sacrifice to the High Priest Karthalo (and almost burned alive in a furnace at the temple of Moloch), and latterly forced into slavery. Having survived a decade beset with perils, due mainly to timely interventions by Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano) the Herculean servant of Roman spy Fulvio Axilla (Umberto Mozzato), the stranded Cabiria is rescued in the film’s closing sequence, and the shackles of slavery removed.

Pastrone’s film, a clear attempt to mobilise public support for the country’s colonial campaign in North Africa, manifest in its moral absolutism and Manichean interface between the forces of good (the Romans) and evil (the Carthaginians), was influential both in terms of the pioneering technical innovations developed during its creation (many of which were later patented by the director), and in its showcasing of the cinematic potential of the child to enthral audiences, generate handsome box office returns and further political ends.\textsuperscript{72} In discussing the latter, Mary Wood highlights, ‘the injustice and cruelty of a city that sacrifices little girls. For an Italian audience, whose children are the sacred heart of the family, indulged and loved’, this torrid depiction of child suffering, ‘would have been an abomination’.\textsuperscript{73}

Fascism and the Cinematic Child

A survey of Italian cinematic production during the interwar period including the years, that collectively form the Ventennio of Fascism (1922–1945), yields no lesser abundance of (missing) children. Under fascist rule, Italy’s young took on a new primacy, as did the cinema, which saw a radical overhaul, both in terms of its

\textsuperscript{71} Cabiria was released in 1914 and re-released in 1931.
\textsuperscript{72} At this time cinema going has not yet become an urban leisure pursuit and was largely a pastime of the middle class.
\textsuperscript{73} Wood, p. 68. No less abominable are the images of children viewed by audiences in Alberto Traversa’s \textit{La crociata degli innocenti} (1917) which, like \textit{Cabiria}, employed poet Gabriele d’Annunzio as screenwriter. The film, a dramatization of the Children’s Crusade of 1212, also takes as its focus a group of children sold into slavery whilst on a pilgrimage to the ‘Holy Land’. However, unlike Pastrone’s \textit{Cabiria}, Traversa’s film has been largely ignored by critics in spite of the impressive creative team involved in its making. This is also true for Ubaldo Maria Del Colle’s, \textit{Figli di nessuno} (1921), a film, which showcased the plight of orphaned children.
infrastructure and in terms of its signifying practices. This restoration was necessitated both by the arrival of sound technology and the continued stranglehold on the market by well-packaged Hollywood imports. In the broadest sense, the focus of Italian commercial cinema in this period was, as film historian Jacqueline Reich observes, ‘to delight and enthrall’.74 Financially rewarding plots and storylines of the silent era were revived and recycled with the help, to a large degree, of filmmakers’ borrowing from the artistically polished Hollywood film paradigm, recognised in part for its ability to capture the ‘myth of youth’ a central ingredient of the so-called ‘American dream’, which by the 1930s was a source of intrigue for Italian audiences.

The new centrality of the cinema as a publicly consumable and much lauded manifestation of technological progress was matched by the regime’s emphasis on its young people as emblematic of this march towards modernity. In the words of one critic, Italy’s young had become ‘a magical force for social transformation’.75 Under fascism, the cult of youth became the sublime vehicle for articulating the regime’s aspirations of revolution and renewal, and the coupling of youthful vigour and modernity rapidly engendered official youth-centric meta-narratives, which exalted Italy’s children, as its future, both demographically and politically. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat asserts, ‘the government spared no resources [in creating] millions of “new men” and “new women” who would perpetuate fascist behaviours and values’.76 Unsurprisingly, the formation of a so-called ‘cult of youth’, which closely orbited the personality cult of a Maciste-inspired Mussolini, involved the proliferation of positive and appealing images of children and young people within the publications of pedagogic institutions and in the press and broadcast media. These iconic images would consolidate and strengthen other modes of mass socialisation such as the regime’s youth groups, described by historian Patrizia Dogliani, as ‘la vera e forse l’unica organizzazione di massa del

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fascismo’. Within these organisations, Italy’s boys and girls were divided by age and gender, as Dogliani explains:

Per i maschi: Figli della lupa, tra i 6 e gli 8 anni; a 8 anni si era Balilla, per essere poi promosso a Balilla moschettiere a 11 anni e passare, al compimento dei 13 anni e sino ai 18, nelle schiere degli Avanguardisti (Avanguardisti moschettieri tra i 15 e i 17). Analoga struttura era riservata alle femmine, organizzate nelle Figlie della lupa (6-8 anni), nelle Piccole italiane (8-13 anni) e nelle Giovani italiane (14-17 anni).

Within the realm of cinema a series of state orchestrated documentary films were commissioned to chronicle the numerous pastimes of the country’s boys and girls. Their purpose, as Elaine Mancini writes, was ‘to instil the Fascist spirit, to teach ideals and to enforce discipline’. A central aspect of to the inculcation of fascist doctrine, both on and off-screen, was a gender apartheid which saw male and female children and adults assigned specific roles and duties both within the microcosm of the family and the macrocosm of nation. Young men, as Vittora De Grazia asserts:

were to be moulded through the militaristic discipline of youth groups to “believe, obey, and fight” in the name of fascism’s revolution. For the same cause, young women were to be instructed to be prolific and dutiful mothers, and ardent patriots.

Thus, in spite of a large degree of stylistic borrowing from an enticing yet dauntingly omnipotent Hollywood model, there were significant departures from it in terms of theme. This included the reworking of male and female gender models and onscreen subjectivities, which in the films arriving from Hollywood, substantively departed from fascist conceptions of gender.

Marcia Landy’s pioneering work on filmmaking during the Ventennio, reveals that the cinematic child enjoyed access to a variety of social arenas, was placed within a multitude of genres and consequently appeared in a great many of the seven hundred or so films made in this period. Whilst children and adolescents

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78 Dogliani, p. 108.
79 Marcia Landy, *Italian Film*, p. 239.
were often the focus of LUCE state sponsored documentaries, they were also present, as Landy reminds us,

in comedies, adventure films, melodramas, and musicals, struggling to define themselves against traditional attitudes and behaviour. They are shown as neglected, abandoned, redeemed, as the vanguard of a new political consciousness, and as the hope for the future.\(^{81}\)

Landy's account is striking, not least, because of its consonance with much of what has been written about the filmic child in the neorealist cinema of the early postwar period. What also emerges from recent the work of film scholars (including Marcia Landy) is that whilst the regime actively sought to circulate positive images of its young people within the public domain, this was rendered problematic in commercial cinema by the intervention of other factors. The first of these factors is linked to an awareness on the part of directors sympathetic to the regime, that it was both positive images of children and also those of suffering or endangered children which could be used to mobilise support for Fascism, just as the infant Cabiria had, in the silent era, been deployed to mould public opinion in favour of the government’s colonial ambitions. By extension, those working within the feature film industry clearly acknowledged the potential of the child as a cinematic entity capable of captivating audiences and bringing in good box office returns. The second of these factors was linked to the growing unease surrounding the dictatorship felt by increasing numbers of Italians, particularly as the gap between its rhetoric of renewal and the often precarious reality of people’s everyday lives grew ever wider. We therefore find ostensibly similar child oriented tropes, such as the suffering infant child, belonging to competing and ideologically divergent schools of thought. The suffering child top is either gave legitimacy to the regime, or conversely, highlighted its failings, replacing the fictional macro-narrative of ‘nation’, with one of ‘individuals’ and their direct lived experience within the shared spaces of the home and community.

One of the most widely discussed examples of the former is *Vecchia guardia*, directed by former journalist and critic Alessandro Blasetti. By the early 1930s Blasetti had emerged as one of Italy’s most prolific directors. His open support for

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\(^{81}\) Landy, *Fascism in Film*, p. 35. (My emphasis)
the regime is wired into a number of high-profile works. Released in 1934, *Vecchia guardia*, which left audiences in no doubt as to the perils of Socialism as a system of social and political organisation, enjoyed high box office returns and was widely applauded by critics.\(^82\) In recent years, it has also been suggested that the film, like Flavio Calzavara’s *Piccoli naufraghi* (1939) (which also utilises documentary footage and expresses fascist ideals to and through young people) is one of many films considered a precursor to neorealism, due in large part to its documentary style of filmmaking.\(^83\) In the course of the film’s action, Blasetti seeks to establish a series of binary oppositions between Fascists (identified with discipline, order and the smooth running of state apparatus) and socialists (linked to notions of inefficiency and incompetence) as he chronicles the rhetorical and physical clashes between these opposing political factions. It is during one of these violent clashes that the film’s protagonist Mario (Franco Brambilla), a twelve-year-old clock enthusiast (an allusion to the ‘new time’ of fascism), is shot and killed by a socialist marksman. As Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones observe, ‘the commonplace of the defence of children provides the rationale for action’.\(^84\)

### The Sorrowing Child in Pre-neorealist De Sican Cinema

Whilst Blasetti’s treatment of a teenage boy martyred to the fascist cause fed seamlessly into official discourses surrounding the threat posed by alternative political formations and created a role-model for teenagers, and recruiting magnet for the Balilla, a cluster of films released on the cusp of and during the Second World War employ the commonplace of the defence of children to call attention to decaying or collapsing social institutions, including the family, long seen as the bedrock of fascist values and the backbone of the regime. This corpus of films, which deploy the suffering child either as the agent or mediator of the film’s action, were able to circumvent the censor by minimising conspicuous political comment, relying instead on the ostensibly insipid micro-politics of family

\(^82\) The film set box office records in Germany.  
\(^83\) See Ennio Di Nolfo’s discussion of the film in *Re-viewing Fascism* p. 100. *Piccoli naufraghi* was released in 1939.  
breakdown. One of the best-documented examples within film criticism (which I will turn to later in this chapter), is Vittorio De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano*. By the time of the film’s release in 1942, however, De Sica had already established himself as an actor and filmmaker for whom the cinematic child (in multiple guises and in a range of contexts) had proven an unceasing source of intrigue and inspiration.

De Sica began this career as a theatre actor in 1923, before diverting his creative energies and raw talent into the world of cinema with films such as the *La bellezza del mondo* (1926) and the *La compagnia dei matti* (1928), both directed by Mario Almirante. It was with the advent of sound, however, that De Sica, in the comedy films of director and trusted mentor Mario Camerini, gave the spellbinding performances which would characterise this highly successful formative phase of his acting career and provide the necessary tools and visual motifs to aid his successful passage into the realm of directing.\(^\text{85}\)

In 1940, after a decade of schooling and successful collaboration with Camerini, De Sica turned to direction, making his debut with *Rose scarlatte*, a film adaptation of Aldo De Benedetti’s *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte*. In the same year, he embraced the popular subgenre of the schoolgirl comedy with the film *Maddalena zero in condotta* (1940). The latter, one of the most popular films of the period is set in a young girls’ school.\(^\text{86}\) Although seemingly benign, the milieu of the school, a trusted setting for Italian films of the era, becomes the encoded site for the critique and articulation of wider social and political concerns, allowing questions surrounding power (and its misuse), authority (and its subversion), discipline and insubordination, and surveillance to be explored. In his film, De Sica calls attention to the antagonised interface between the stiflingly oppressive school (and its representatives) and a precocious generation of pupils frustrated by its dull and authoritarian administration. The film’s protagonist, Maddalena (Carla Del Poggio), amuses herself and her peers by disrupting lessons and incurring the wrath of her imperious teachers. This insubordination and

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\(^{85}\) Mario Camerini is often credited as a pioneer of many of the stylistic conventions associated with neorealism (such as location shooting).

\(^{86}\) The subgenre of the schoolgirl comedy was nourished by Italian cinema’s interaction with other national cinemas, most notably as those of Germany and France.
rebelliousness includes the discovery and mailing of a love letter, hidden in the desk drawer of a young female teacher, to the imaginary author of a school textbook, the Viennese Hartman (Vittorio De Sica). Maddalena’s posting of the love-letter sets in motion a chain of events, which culminate in the arrival of the real-life Austrian author and a dashing male colleague, plunging the school and its teachers into chaos. Predictably, perhaps, an intrigue ensues between Hartman and Maddalena’s young teacher and the film ends happily. As Landy observes: ‘De Sica gently satirises the institution of the school and provides a fantasy of liberation from its strictures cast in the mould of romantic comedy. Sexual fantasy provides the escape from dreary routine and repression’.87

Whilst De Sica had built a successful career (in part at least) on his ability to make his audiences roll in the aisles, playing endearing working-class characters such as Bruno Zacchi in Grandi magazzini (Mario Camerini, 1939) and Gianni Varaldo in Il Signor Max (Mario Camerini, 1937), his output both as an actor and director in the years which immediately followed the release of Maddalena zero in condotta, was decidedly more subdued and signalled a new direction in terms of tone and subject matter. Having exploited with great success the comedy potential and affective power of children and adolescents both in the white telephone films (of Camerini) and in the schoolgirl comedies of the 1930s, with the onset of war, De Sica turned his gaze to the experience of childhood in the midst of social breakdown.

This gradual shift to a more austere tone and subject matter is detectable in Teresa Venerdì (1941). Here, the familiar setting of school is replaced with state-run orphanage. Whilst Teresa Venerdì is, to all intents and purposes, a comedy, De Sica intersperses within the film’s diegesis a number of sentimental images of the orphaned children residing at the Santa Chiara orphanage. The audience’s first interior glimpse of the institution brings into focus a steady stream of girls, of all ages, trickling down an imposing staircase. Later, the director employs footage of the tiniest orphans playing giro girotondo in the orphanage garden. These images provide a sobering counterpoint to comedic episodes arising from accumulated misunderstandings and mischievous wordplay between the footloose and financially improvident pediatrician Pietro Vignali (played by De

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87 Marcia Landy, Fascism in Film, p. 52.
Sica) and an entourage of female admirers. As in earlier works, De Sica’s character is pursued by three competing female love interests, one of whom, Teresa (Adriana Benetti), is an older resident at the orphanage. Although this trusted film formula at once recalls the narrative economies of Signor Max and Gli uomini che mascalzoni, this transitional work also anticipates subsequent thematic shifts, as Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones point out:

The film has undertones of real social commentary. There is a dire depiction of Teresa working under the lustful eye of a butcher to the vapid frivolity of the rich girl aptly named Lilli Passalacqua (Lilly Passthewater), or the manner in which Teresa is spied upon by one of her fellow orphans, or the reliance as a universal cure by all the pediatricians at the orphanage on cod liver oil.

Celli and Cottino-Jones’ reading is valuable on two counts. Firstly, it brings to the fore the film’s social realist undercurrent, (De Sica uses location shooting for many of the film’s outdoor scenes). Secondly, it highlights the director’s thinly veiled criticism of Mussolini’s regime. The political significance of cod liver oil, the unpalatable liquid used by the dictator to publicly humiliate his opponents during Fascism’s revolutionary period, is called upon by the director to connote aspects of the regime and its institutions. In addition to the over-zealous application of cod liver oil for all known ailments by an unflinchingly unsympathetic and ageing doctor, the children living within the imagined safety of the orphanage are also subjected to the tyranny of its staff, including the cold-hearted signora presidente, who is unwavering in her attempts to stifle and contain their creative energies. For example, Teresa, whose parents had been theatre actors, is punished following a clandestine performance of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Whilst a captivated audience of parentless children suffer the loss of a week’s ration of fruit for their involvement in the debacle, Teresa is dispatched to the kitchen where her personal safety is undermined by the threatening presence of a butcher who regularly delivers meat to the orphanage.

It was as the Ventennio entered its final phase and Italy shuddered towards military defeat and civil war, however, that De Sica assembled, in I bambini ci guardano and in close collaboration with scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini (who had

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88 Celli and Cottino-Jones, p. 34.
also contributed the screenplays for Camerini’s *Darò un milione* and *Teresa Venerdì*), his most compelling images of imperiled childhood to date, carving out a narrative space in which the impact of Italy’s unravelling on an infant child could be documented and explored. As in his earlier work, *Maddalena zero in condotta*, the film, firmly locatable within the genre of family melodrama, also provides a powerful counter-image to hegemonic conceptions of intra-familial relations and fascist gender politics. Like his earlier schoolgirl comedy, the film, loosely based on the novel *Pricò* by Cesare Guilio Viola (who also worked on the film’s script), was able to negotiate the censor in spite of its vehement, albeit coded, criticism of a morally bankrupt and moribund regime. This anti-fascist counter-image is manifest in De Sica’s radical subversion of the formulaic roles assigned to family members, namely the father-mother-child triad, by fascism. Here, it is the mother, Dina (Isa Pola), the supposed ‘guarantor of the integrity of the family unit’, who, through an inextinguishable extra-marital affair injects a corrosive element into the nuclear family. In stark contrast to many of the family melodramas of the 1930s where the family appears, as Landy has noted, ‘as the source of continuity, nurturance, social stability’, De Sica’s sobering dramatisation of a mother trapped within the desolate terrain of an unhappy marriage affords a different perspective on this pivotal institution at a time of growing social anxiety.

With *I bambini ci guardano*, De Sica clearly sought to challenge hegemonic discourses of family life and child-rearing disseminated under fascism. Although the infant Pricò (Luciano De Ambrosis) is acted upon by a number of malevolent forces within the film (cruel, incompetent and neglectful caretakers such as his paternal grandmother), the melodramatic conflicts of adulthood are focalised and absorbed by him. This is (visually and rhetorically) cued in a famous sequence involving the dialogue between the child and his father in the aftermath of his mother’s (clandestine) liaison with Roberto during a family holiday. It is Pricò, the keeper of knowledge in the film, who bears witness to his mother’s infidelity, and his father, the un-heroic Andrea, who is rendered childlike by the exclusion precipitated by Pricò’s fidelity to his mother, a fidelity which ultimately makes him tragically complicit in his mother’s deception. Whilst at the level of narrative, De

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Sica’s missing child film explores the impact of the demise of the nuclear family on a tragically knowing child, this important pre-neorealist melodrama also functions as index for wider social and political malaise in the twilight of the fascist Ventennio. Like the missing children of neorealism, Pricò may also be read as locus, then, for a range of historical contingencies.

Towards Reading the Missing Child in Contemporary Italian Cinema

Catherine O’Rawe and Alan O’Leary end their Journal of Italian Studies article by calling (albeit in a slightly tongue in cheek fashion) for a temporary moratorium on neorealism. Here, my conclusions are more equivocal. Jaimey Fisher’s transnational study of gendered aspects of representations of the wartime and early-postwar male child (including works by Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini), makes more urgent perhaps, the need to return to neorealism, to look again at its corpus, to re-read its core motifs in light of hitherto peripheral concerns. His analysis flags the pressing need to move towards a more capacious understanding of the function and meaning of the missing male child. This approach also inadvertently calls attention, however, to the conspicuously neglected (or critically ‘missing’) female child in films of principal interest, a (critical) trope I shall return to momentarily.

Further, as silent era filmographies are compiled and film under fascism more closely scrutinised, the scholarship of film historians such as Marcia Landy and Giuliana Bruno unsettles conventional wisdom surrounding neorealism as the perceived starting point for representations of lost, endangered, or suffering children. Whilst his body of scholarship makes clear the extent to which the functions attributable to the missing filmic child are not only new, but also inflected by a range of socio-historical and political phenomena, a brief survey of pre-war De Sican cinema demonstrates that these representations also belong to the longer filmmaking trajectories of individual auteurs and to more complex evolutionary processes.

As the focus of our discussion necessarily returns to issues of content and critical reception in contemporary Italian cinema, we are left with a gnawing sense that
normative recourse to neorealism, the critical template instinctively relied upon in accounts of suffering children in contemporary cinema, may be worn with use. If the initial focus of critical attention (for contemporary works) is to fall on the neorealist canon, then it should first attend to the particularity of the representations of children and childhoods it subsumes. Similarly, dominant readings of important contemporary works, such as Il ladro di bambini and La guerra di Mario highlight the risks that this instinctive, ‘common sense’ gesture poses to more immediate engagement with the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations of individual films. If equivalence is to be drawn between contemporary and historical representations of the missing child, then, this equivalence, rich and fascinating though it may be, should not obfuscate more urgent concerns belonging to a more contemporary zeitgeist.

In light of the potential pitfalls of the (neorealist) critical framework illuminated above, and with a concomitant awareness surrounding the need to develop (and implement) a less restrictive paradigm for exploring contemporary representations of the missing male and critically neglected female child, I intend to approach the analysis of primary sources in Chapters Three, Four, and Five of this study by drawing upon a more nuanced and expansive critical apparatus, one which privileges a range of contingencies and specificities.

Tilting away from neorealism and (national film criticism), my work on this corpus of missing child texts will be informed throughout by Emma Wilson’s transnational scholarship in Cinema’s Missing Children. In Chapter Five, I will also turn to the pioneering work of Cathy Caruth, Karen Lury, and Slavoj Žižek. By addressing hitherto neglected concerns surrounding the epistemologies of traumatic representation, I will open up a discursive space in which canonical works such as Gianni Amelio’s Il ladro di bambini can be read beyond the film’s fidelity to De Sica neorealism. In the case of Amelio’s film, this approach will also privilege the hitherto critically neglected (or missing) female child, whose gender identity is disavowed by the neorealist paradigm. This determined orientation towards the role, status and functions attributable to the female child will also motor my analysis in Chapter Five, where I explore historical childhood abuse and the resonances surrounding the (post-traumatic) return of the missing child. Whilst my analysis of primary sources will be informed by recourse to
Cinema’s Missing Children, it will also be inflected, where necessary, by a crucial awareness surrounding the discursive significance of children (including the missing child or bambino negato), childhoods, and the experience of (mourning or abusive) parenthood in Italian culture. Several of these concerns (including the fertility crisis of the 1990s and attendant concerns around non-biological parenthood) will ripple through my analysis of Marco Tullio Giordana’s Quando sei nato and Moretti’s La stanza del figlio in Chapter Three. The political symbolism of the missing female child will also come to the fore in the final stage of my analysis of L’amore molesto (in Chapter Five) as I read Martone’s film as responding, at least in part, to the political ascendancy of the New Right in 1994 and its vigorous promotion of patriarchal values.
CHAPTER TWO

THE CHILD IN TIME: THE MISSING CHILD OR ‘BAMBINO NEGATO’ IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Siamo la nazione europea, tolto l’ Est, con più minori abbandonati, o in abbandono. Con più adolescenti imbottiti di psicofarmaci, con più bambini vittime di violenza, con più comunità di accoglienza, con più sentenze di affidamento e con il numero maggiore di coppie in attesa di un’ adozione internazionale.¹

Non esiste un tipo di famiglia e basta – e questa considerazione non è frutto della mia opinione, o delle mie idee o addirittura della mia ideologia. Non è la vita che ci fa vedere che esistono tanti tipi di famiglie.²

In Chapter One I suggested that in order for ‘Italian’ missing child films to achieve full (or greater) meaning, the initial focus of critical attention should fall both within and beyond the neorealist filmmaking topos; it should range across the broad spectrum of Italian film history, complicating notions of canonical works (such as *Ladri di biciclette*) as urtexts for contemporary representations of missing or endangered children. Here, my discussion corresponds to a parallel methodological awareness (raised in the work of Catherine O’Rawe and demonstrated admirably in assorted research by Italianist film scholars such as Flavia Laviosa, Áine O’Healy and Derek Duncan) of the need to combine rigorous attention to primary sources with the careful appraisal of historical contexts.

The purpose of the present chapter will be to develop a (more) detailed understanding of its socio-historical, cultural, and political debates and anxieties surrounding children, childhoods, and the experience of (mainstream and abusive) parenthood (whether biological or non-biological) within the contemporary Italian context. Whilst this analysis will provide a frame for my work on primary sources in chapters Three, Four, and Five, it also corresponds to an emergent sense that conventional film-based approaches to the categories cited above, (might) have culminated in ‘very imperfect sociologies’.³ If important works do articulate, negotiate or are inflected by pubic discourse or anxiety around

³ O’Rawe, O’Leary, p. 110.
(missing) children, childhood and the experience of parenthood (or non-parenthood), then conventional recourse to a limited body of secondary material, competent though it is, may lead (or have led) to gaps, elisions, and the proliferation of inaccuracy.

In light of these concerns, I propose to begin my discussion by examining mainstream film-based approaches to the contemporary evolution of the Italian social architecture. Having called attention to the tendency within (some) Italian film scholarship to circulate a small cluster of sociological tropes harvested from the work of a single study (in this case, Paul Ginsborg’s *Italy and Its Discontents*) I will develop a discursive space in which other neglected contemporary cultural debates can be brought to the fore. As I traverse the complex terrain of Italy’s contemporary demography, an activity which outreaches the bounds of Cinema’s *Missing Children*, and may seem more akin, perhaps, to the cultural studies bedrock of Pierce’s *The Country of Lost Children*, I intend to complement Emma Wilson’s use of the term ‘missing child’ by highlighting its relation to contemporary Italian (and in several cases non-Italian) specificities.

Reading (Missing) Children, Childhood(s) and the Experience of Parenthood in Contemporary Italian Film

In Chapter Two of *Dreams and Diaries*, a wide-ranging monograph on the work of Nanni Moretti (which also engages *La stanza del figlio*, the first of two missing child films under analysis in Chapter Three), Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli highlight the importance that children, childhood, and modes of parenting (particularly fatherhood) acquire within the filmmaker’s discourse on the family. At the centre of their argument is the notion that the persistence within Moretti’s *oeuvre* of what they term ‘the motif of family life’ offers a looking glass for discerning distinctive aspects of the contemporary evolution of Italian society.4 The works it subsumes ‘illustrate and comment on’ key trends ‘present in the Italian family life over the last twenty years’.5 In order for this rich cinematic

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5 Ibid., p. 49.
corpus to be read against perceived changes to the Italian social scheme, the authors argue for its necessary location within what they describe as, ‘the context of the recent social history of Italy’. They preface their analysis of primary sources, then, by highlighting dominant social trends (and phenomena) brought to the fore in *Italy and Its Discontents*, a universally cited volume published by Paul Ginsborg in 2001.

Having confirmed the ongoing ‘cohesiveness, stability, continuity and strength’ of the Italian family, drawing on a range of data from Ginsborg’s study, (including statistics showing low rates of divorce and the low incidence of child birth outside marriage during the 1980s), Mazierska and Rascaroli gesture towards what they consider to be the two main ‘characteristics’ of ‘the contemporary Italian family’. Following Ginsborg, they begin with the now familiar propensity for Italian families to be ‘long’. This connotes a predilection for close residential and emotional proximity between generations; the strong intra-generational solidarity, which arises from children living longer in the family home and the reciprocal involvement of successive generations in care-related activities. This vertical conception of family structure is coupled, however, with an apparent ‘thinness’. The latter stems from ‘the extremely low fertility rate of Italian women’, and the numerical diminution of children: ‘From having one of the highest birth rates in Europe, Italy now has the lowest in the whole Western world’, Rascaroli and Mazierska write. Further, drawing on Ginsborg’s popularisation of important psycho-social studies published in the early 1990s by Eugenia Scabini, Vincenzo Padiglione, and Corrado Pontalti, the authors highlight the impact of the country’s low birth rate on the dynamics of family life:

The *dominant model* of a family with only one child, one who was often born when the parents were over thirty, made the children the object of an unhealthy hyper-attention and hyper-affection on the part of their parents and grandparents, delaying the process of the child’s emancipation and largely infantilising Italian families.\(^6\)

It is against this demographic backdrop, drawn from the work of Paul Ginsborg, that analysis of Moretti’s oeuvre largely unfolds. Having called attention to the death of Michele Apicella’s mother in *La messa è finita* (1985), an event which causes the serial protagonist ‘to finally detach himself from childhood and

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\(^6\) Ibid., p. 47.

\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 48–49. My emphasis.
embrace adulthood’ (to ‘grow up’), the authors examine the filmmaker’s dramatization of intra-family relations in *Caro diario*, *Aprile*, and *La stanza del figlio*, interrogating ‘family values’, ‘new fatherhood’, and, no less importantly, ‘the infantilizing parent child relationship’ cited above.\(^8\)

It is the latter, which substantially informs their treatment of the second chapter of *Caro diario*, ‘Isole’, the episode where ‘Nanni’ and his traveling companion, Gerardo (played by Renato Carpentieri), visit Salina, one of several islands belonging to the Aeolian archipelago. During their trip, the lighthearted spirit of which seems at odds with the more subdued tenor, the jolting rawness of the chemotherapy sessions of the following chapter, ‘Medici’, that the travelers find themselves in the midst of a society populated entirely by one-child families, the dominant model introduced in the framing phase of their discussion. Nanni’s subsequent diary entry (which serves as intertitle) provides a snapshot of the travelers’ experience: ‘Da anni ormai Salina era dominata dai figli unici. Ogni famiglia aveva un figlio, un figlio solamente, cui veniva affidato il commando della situazione’. Similarly, tracking between the action summarised in the diary extract and the social theory drawn upon above, Rascaroli and Mazierska write that the island:

\[\text{[\ldots] appears to be completely, albeit subtly, dominated and paralysed by children, who on the one hand are more intelligent and sophisticated than their peers in other cultures, and on the other force the adults to behave as if they were children themselves. Moretti’s representation of the Salinians confirms the opinion formulated by the sociologists Padiglione and Pontalti that the overall result of the low fertility rate in Italy was ‘to block the generations in a sort of reciprocal protection [accudimento] which was substantially infantilizing.’}\]

If the scenes and sequences, which occur during Nanni and Gerardo’s sojourn appear to evidence earlier claims of the apparent ‘infantilization’ of the parent–child relationship within Italian families, then this episode also allows Mazierska and Rascaroli to raise a further, attendant feature of the country’s low fertility rate: ‘the missing child’ or ‘*bambino negato*’. The term, coined by Ginsborg in *Italy and its Discontents*, refers in his phrasing to the ‘clear preference’ among ‘Italians of all ages and classes’, ‘for families with two children’, but the production of ‘only

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 80.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 76.
Within the delimited context of his study, the ‘missing child’, which at once provides another slant on Peter Pierce’s ‘lost child’ of Australian culture and society and Emma Wilson’s use of the term in *Cinema’s Missing Children*, corresponds here to the desired, though ‘denied’ (and therefore absent), second child within the nuclear family. For Rascaroli and Mazierska, the Salina episode in *Caro diario*, ‘presents in a concise way typical causes and consequences of the Italian phenomenon of *il bambino negato* (the denied child)’. Further, returning to the range of hyper-energies introduced above, they contend that, ‘the scarcity of children in Salina produces a specific culture, one in which the child is the object of hyper-attention and hyper-affection and acquires significant power of over his parents and their relationship with the outside world’. Thus, ‘the situation portrayed’ during Nanni and Gerardo’s trip, ‘can be regarded as metaphorical of that in the whole of Italy’.11

This ‘reflectionist’ critique of *Caro diario* (and indeed other works within Moretti’s oeuvre), the privileging within discourse of the perceived relation of key motifs within his filmmaking corpus to the evolution of the (so-called) Italian family, is also rehearsed (as a mode of analysis) in the influential work of Paul Sutton.12 In his *Screen* article, ‘The bambino negato or missing child of contemporary Italian cinema’ (called upon in Chapter One to evidence claims of the essential ritual of recourse to the *topos* of Italian neorealism) Sutton works towards an understanding of Salvatores’ *Io no ho paura*, which allows the film to be aligned with what he terms, the ‘contemporary Italian family’. ‘To consider the child in contemporary Italian cinema’, Sutton writes, ‘is to consider also the contemporary Italian family, for it is within the context of, or in relation to, this most important of Italian institutions that the child is located’.13 Drawing on the reflectionist strategy identified in *Dreams and Diaries*, Sutton prefaces his analysis of *Io non ho paura*, by situating the film within ‘the context of debates concerning Italian society’. Following the interpretive paradigm deployed by Rascaroli and Mazierska (and

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11 Mazierska and Rascaroli, *The Cinema of Nanni Moretti*, p. 75. For Ginsborg, the ability to adequately account for or explain the ‘missing child’ is ‘the central question in Italian social history’ (p71). My emphasis.
12 Sutton’s essay is also cited in Patrizia Bettella’s article on the figure of the child in Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario*. See Bettella p. 150.
13 Sutton, p. 353.
even directly drawing on their earlier summary of the evolving demography of the Italian family), the ‘debates’ to which Sutton refers, are those popularized by *Italy and It’s Discontents*.

Having established the dominant family model, ‘as the family with only one child, one who was often born when the parents were over thirty’, Sutton calls attention to the cluster of socio-demographic and psycho-social concepts brought to the fore in Ginsborg’s study, including those applied by Mazierska and Rascaroli to the work of Moretti’s *Caro diario* (to which he refers in a footnote). ‘Over-investment in the only child’, he writes, ‘has also given rise to what the sociologists Vincenzo Padiglione and Corrado Pontalti have described as a constant “preoccupied glance”, not only from parent to child, but from child to parent’, leading ultimately to a circuit of mutual protection that is infantilizing in effects.’ Further, in attempting to account for the ‘contemporary, infantilized family’ the author observes that:

The prevalence of the one-child family has given rise also to the descriptive category of *il bambino negato*, the ‘missing’ or ‘denied’ child, a term that refers not only to the decline in the birth rate but which also takes note of the apparent statistical preference amongst Italians of all classes and ages for families with two children, despite in actuality producing only one.

Within the context of his discussion, notions of parental infantilization become relevant vis-à-vis the deleterious impact of the kidnap of the northern Italian child, Filippo, on the dynamic of intra-familial relations. Re-casting notions of the role of the male child as witness (a trope he identifies, as know already, in De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette*), Sutton argues that the film’s adult figures ‘are infantilized by their selfish and brutal behaviour’ (as witnessed by the film’s child protagonist). The figures in question, Anna (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón) and Pino (Dino Abbrescia) ‘are rendered childlike in their relationship with the children, and more specifically the child Michele’. Echoing earlier analysis of *Caro diario*, Salvatores’ film provides an index, to what the author describes as ‘the contemporary crisis in relation to the Italian family’, a crisis precipitated by Italy’s faltering reproduction and the dominance of the one child family.  

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14 Ibid., p. 354.  
15 Ibid., p. 357.
Finally, in a recent study of La guerra di Mario, which was also called upon in Chapter One to explore notions of the essential ritual of recourse to neorealism, Patrizia Bettella frames her textual analysis of the role of the child in Antonio Capuano’s rendering of a fraught adoption process by calling attention to several of the sociological tropes foregrounded in Dreams and Diaries, and in Sutton’s work on Salvatores’ Io non ho paura. Indeed, in the opening phase of her discussion, which also shows recourse to Sutton’s Screen article, the author highlights the country’s faltering reproduction. ‘In Italy we have one of the lowest birth-rates in the world’, Bettella writes.\textsuperscript{16} Whilst notions of hyper-attention and hyper-affection (the apparent corollary of the low birth rate), remain absent from her discussion, the author nevertheless taps into a vein of thought (as in the case of Rascaroli and Mazierska’s reading of Moretti’s serial protagonist, Michele Apicella), surrounding delayed transition to adulthood. In the introduction to her study, which also involves an orientation towards child-centred works belonging to neorealism, Bettella asks whether the presence of the child in Italian cinema ‘reflects the inability of Italians to grow up (Peter Pan syndrome) and therefore to more easily identify with the child figure in film?’ Although this question remains unresolved within the context of her article, notions of the so-called ‘Peter Pan syndrome’, nevertheless return in her reading of the deteriorating relations between Giulia and Sandro (Andrea Renzi) – Mario’s foster parents – in the aftermath of the child’s arrival. ‘Sandro’, the author writes, ‘seems to be affected by the Peter Pan syndrome, the condition of an adult who refuses to grow up’. For Bettella, Sandro’s corrosive impact on an always already fraught process of transition linked to Mario’s fosterage, finds its root the male adoptive parent’s ‘own coming of age’.\textsuperscript{17}

Whilst the film based studies engaged above succeed in mining perceived points of contact between important contemporary works and a cluster of socio-demographic and psycho-social phenomena (brought to the fore in Ginsborg’s account of two decades Italian social life), they may also run the risk, however, of distorting our understanding of Italy’s complex demographic panorama. Indeed, whilst they raise important questions around key sociological changes (including

\textsuperscript{16} Bettella, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 161.
those linked to the missing child and the significations it encodes beyond the realm of cinema), recourse to the work of only one secondary source, or indeed to the work of other scholars also working within the discipline of film studies (as in the case of Paul Sutton) not only delimits the potential scope of critical analysis (of primary sources) but also suppresses the particularity of the social structures in which these phenomena find expression or are inscribed. Further, this praxis of self-referentiality may also create and perpetuate a critical stasis whereby more recent, though no less significant concerns (such as Legge 40, the law introduced in 2004 for the regulation of assisted reproduction) are relegated to the margins of discourse or disappear all together. In light of these concerns and taking heed of Catherine O’Rawe’s call for rigorous attention to historical contexts, I propose in the next part of my discussion to create a revised discursive backdrop against which analysis of primary sources in the next three chapters of this thesis can unfold. It is my aim that this more detailed and expansive panorama will be less at odds with the current societal realities within Italy.

I propose to take as the starting point for this next phase of my discussion the cultural (and critical) preoccupation brought to the fore in all three of the studies illuminated above: Italy’s faltering reproduction, or in the Italian phrasing, ‘la questione demografica’.\footnote{Massimo Livi Bacci, ‘Abbondanza e scarsità: Le popolazioni d’Italia e d’Europa al passaggio del millennio, Il mulino, 374 (1990), 993–1007 (p. 993).} In the final stage of my discussion, I will argue that the offshoot of this cultural obsession with questions surrounding the missing child or bambino negato (in the demographic sense) has subdued the discursive presence of the other bambino negato: the child as victim of malign adult interference.

Italy and the Birth of the ‘questione demografica’

On April 23 1993, below the disarming caption, ‘Un futuro senza più italiani?’, the Rome-based daily La repubblica reported the findings of the annual population survey by the Istituto nazionale di statistica (Istat) to its readers.\footnote{Istat is the acronym for L’Istituto nazionale di statistica (The National Institute for Statistics).} ‘Non è uno scenario da fantascienza’, the article declared, but ‘gli italiani d’Italia sono in via di
Corriere della sera, Italy’s most widely read newspaper, shared La repubblica’s apocalyptic tone and chose to report the country’s emergent fertility crisis under the headline: ‘Italiani senza eredi destinati a sparire’. ‘Fra poco più di un secolo’, the article’s author wrote, ‘ci cercheranno col lanterino’.

This sense of impending doom, which at once recalls a similar (though spurious) preoccupation with questions of fertility under fascism, was in this case, however, far from unfounded. In the course of less than two decades Italy’s absolute fertility rate (the average number of children being born per woman) had contracted from 2.2, well above the European average of 1.98, to just 1.27, well below what demographers call ‘replacement’ fertility, the level necessary to ensure the long-term replacement of a country’s population. This sizable decrease, or even lesser, seemingly negligible fluctuations, would impact disastrously on the country’s future demographic profile. As the demographers Francesco Billari and Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna write: ‘Senza immigrazione, una popolazione nella quale la fecondità è di 1,2 figli per donna si dimezza ogni 38 anni circa; con 1,3 figli per donna si dimezza ogni 48 anni circa.’

Aside from the apocalyptic scenarios rehearsed above, Italy’s absolute fertility rate, poised at 1.27, had also afforded the country the unwelcome epithet of having the lowest absolute fertility rate in the world.

By the beginning of the 1990s, Italy had relinquished its historically high-attachment to childbearing. Like its Mediterranean neighbours, Greece, Portugal, and Spain, the growth of its population had begun to follow patterns

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24 Francesco C. Billari and Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, La rivoluzione nella culla: il declino che non c’è (Milan: Mediascan, 2008), p. 79.
25 In the early post-war era Italy enjoyed a period of booming fertility. In 1965, the total fertility rate stood at 2.66. By 1980, the country’s absolute fertility rate had dwindled to 1.64, before reaching an all time low of 1.20 in 1992. In 1995, this figure dipped further to 1.19. See Golini, p. 29.
more akin to its wealthier, northern European cousins.\textsuperscript{26} As the country worst hit by this general southern European decline (due both to the speed at which the decline occurred and the rising average life expectancy of its inhabitants), Italy’s traditional image as dominated by large families was splintering under the weight of several decades of accelerating decreases in population growth, buoyed only by waves of immigration.

As it splintered, a series of geographically distinct and localised demographic regimes emerged, operating, as can be the case within the Italian national context, along a North-South axis. Whilst the mythical ‘grande famiglia’ had not disappeared completely, it was, by the final decade of the last century, a phenomenon limited largely to the working class locales of large southern cities. In the Centre-North of the country, the southern credo of ‘almeno due figli’ was replaced in some cases, though not all, by the ‘un figlio può bastare’ paradigm, which since the 1950s had found growing acceptance.\textsuperscript{27} In terms of national statistics the Italian South, during the ‘crisis years’ of the 1990s and despite its own notable reduction in childrearing, was ‘propping up’ the country’s overall fertility rate. A noticeable degree of regional heterogeneity held sway, unsettling, perhaps, the homogenising accounts illuminated during the framing stage of this discussion surrounding the contemporary Italian family and the ‘dominant’ family model.\textsuperscript{28}

In terms of the latter, statistics published by Istat in 2008 showed that during the crisis years of the 1990s (and into the third millennium) the dominant model was the family with two children (even within central and northern areas of Italy). In 1998, only 23.8\% (rising to 30\% in the central and northern Italy) of children were without a sibling, evacuating notions of the ubiquitous ‘figlio unico’ privileged

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\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{Italy and its Discontents}, Ginsborg notes that the regions of Liguria and Emilia-Romagna registered the lowest levels of fertility. See Ginsborg p. 69.
\textsuperscript{28} Whilst Paul Sutton discusses the increasing invisibility of the ‘Italian child’ in the statistical sense, in real terms it is more helpful perhaps to think of children as constituting a continuous, if uneven presence throughout the peninsular. This view also fails to take into consideration the presence within the Italian context of immigrant children.
\end{flushleft}
in *Italy and Its Discontents.* Whilst levels of *desired fertility* are statistically accounted for in Ginsborg’s study, the perceived dominance of the one child family is bereft of such support.

Closer analysis reveals that the assumption which, since the study’s publication in 2001, has been widely circulated, derives from a simple equation: the subtraction of the county’s overall fertility rate (taken at the height of the fertility crisis of the 1990s) from levels of desired fertility recorded during the previous decade. It is from the sum of this deduction that the concept of the ‘missing child’, ‘*il bambino negato*’, as emblem of Italy’s faltering reproduction, seized upon both by Paul Sutton in his work on *Io non ho paura* (the narrative focus of which is on a family with two children and a brutalised child kidnap victim), and Rascaroli and Mazierska’s influential monograph on Nanni Moretti, appears to have been extrapolated.

Statistically speaking, however, the *bambino negato* is not only the desired second child, for the vast majority of Italian families consisted of two children, but the desired first or ‘higher order’ (i.e., second or third) child. In spite of this awareness, however, the question which drives Ginsborg’s analysis and indeed that of other scholars working within the field of population studies remained the same: How can the denied first or higher child or *bambino negato* be explained? It is to this question and related political concerns (relevant to my analysis of *La bestia nel cuore* and *L’amore molesto* in Chapter Five) that I propose to now turn.

**Italy and the Second Demographic Transition**

For a number of social historians, the first area of explanation for the *bambino negato*, at least in terms of long-term causality, is the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. It was during this period following the mass uprising of swathes of the first post-war generation (workers, students, women), the so-called ‘baby-boomers’, that long established cultural and reproductive patterns were gradually disrupted. With the onset of a convulsive and notoriously uneven

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modernisation, which led to the rapid replacement of a fledgling agrarian economy with one largely driven (for several decades at least) by industry, (precipitating the mass migration of workers from rural hinterlands to newly industrialized urban centres), long-held norms governing society and its constituent elements were painstakingly renegotiated.

Tireless protest and successful lobbying by women’s liberation groups, widely cited as the most influential and enduring agent of Italy’s cultural revolution, was instrumental in this re-working.30 As feminist activists rallied against the traditional, patriarchal iconographies of ‘woman’ and the patriarchal nuclear ‘family’ vigorously proliferated by the Catholic Church and its deeply rooted matri-focal symbology, new laws were enacted (and existing laws repealed) transforming women’s narrowly defined role as ‘biological reproducers and nurturers’, inherited (though by no means unwillingly) by the Republic of the Christian Democrats from fascism. Under the legal framework created during fascism, women, as one scholar reminds us, ‘were assigned the role of secondary citizens whose place was in the home’. The laws in question not only accorded women the status of cook and cleaner, but also exerted considerable control within the sphere of their sexuality.31 Under Title X of the 1930 Penal Code, abortion, a key policy within Mussolini’s eugenic plan, was punishable by imprisonment. A similar law on adultery tolerated the extra-marital sexual proclivities of men, but criminalised adulterous behaviour by women. Those women found to have committed the latter faced up to a year of imprisonment. In the aftermath of successive waves of feminist lobbying and activism, key elements of legislation founded on the misogynistic values of fascism were dissolved. In 1968, legislation criminalising adultery on the part of women was abolished. In 1970, divorce was legalized. Finally, in 1978, and despite vociferous opposition by the Catholic Church (which continues unabated to this day), abortion was also decriminalised.

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Whilst these changes created a crucial, if belated, separation from the symbolic position of women under fascism and its patriarchal legislative framework, they also significantly contributed to changes in fertility choices. The introduction of legalised abortion and the diffusion of contraception, meant, for example, that childrearing was no longer a given or inevitable occurrence in a woman’s life cycle. As the feminist sociologist, Eugenia Scabini, explains:

Per secoli la nascita dei figli è stata vissuta come un accadimento naturale. La possibilità di scegliere non solo di avere figli, ma anche di decidere quando e quanti averne, appare dunque come un fatto assolutamente nuovo e determinante sulla scena della nostra realtà sociale.32

Now that the role of women within Italian society was beginning to be conditioned to a lesser degree by pre-determined normative expectations surrounding biological parenthood, women began, albeit with necessary caution, to imagine themselves differently, beyond the limited roles inculcated by the Church and carried over from fascism including its matri-focal ideology.33 Despite a hostile labour market, which was, and remains to this day, largely dominated by men of middle age and older, women, in an attempt to build new social identities envisioned and embarked on career trajectories unimaginable just decades before. In preparation for this move, education careers lengthened and women gradually began to match their male counterparts in terms of university attendance. For those women able to secure meaningful employment, childrearing involved a less than desirable ‘maggiore perdita economica e di posizione sociale’.34

The privileging of autonomous development which included the nurturing of career aspirations as well as (and related to) burgeoning skepticism towards long-held tradition and its by-products was also felt (if less profoundly) by men, intensifying the overall impact on the timing and formation of kinship relations.

33 These changes, although enshrined in law, encountered varying degrees of resistance in ‘practical’ terms, depending on geographical location. More progressive attitudes towards women (and their role in society) were less diffused in areas where more traditional (patriarchal) attitudes held sway such as in rural and southern areas.
already disrupted by the modernity-related changes outlined above. Indeed, formation of the nuclear family was no longer seen as an inevitable occurrence. As Billari and Dalla Zuanna remind us, from the mid 1960s onwards, ‘non si accetta più la pressione sociale da parte di autorità esterne (siano esse i genitori, le autorità religiose, la comunità locale). In the era of what the Scandinavian demographers Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa have since termed the ‘second demographic transition’, ‘si tende a rifiutare (o per lo meno a rinviare) le scelte irreversibili o difficili da modificare’. Until the divorce law came into being in 1970, marriage was one such choice.

In response to this re-evaluation of social norms and kinship relations, men and women began to experiment with and embrace new modes of courtship, including pre-martial sexual relations, and to a far lesser extent and far later than in other countries, cohabitation and extra-marital or out-of-wedlock fertility. The result of these shifts was that the ‘Italian family’, as single entity, as a heteronormative space of parents and children, was replaced by a growing awareness of the family’s plurality in form and structure. The term ‘families’, in Paola Di Nicola’s phrasing ‘un sonstantivo plurale’, would find increasing currency in attempting to capture the richness and diversity of kinship relations within Italy.

In an important article published in 2003 on the work of Francesca Archibugi, Flavia Laviosa prefaces her analysis of what she usefully terms the Roman filmmaker’s ‘polyhedral human universe’, by bringing to the fore notions of the Italian family as a ‘complex galaxy’. ‘In order to better understand Archibugi’s cinema’, Laviosa writes that:

One must introduce the situation that characterizes the Italian family. Nowadays sociologists tend to refer more often to “families” than to family to point out the plurality of new ways of living, and family experiences. Rather than being concerned with the dissolution of the family, as the primary social cell and a place of loving and affectionate relationships, demographers use the plural form, families, to underline the profound transformations affecting this institution.

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35 Billari and Dalla Zuanna, p. 70.
37 Ibid., p. 183.
The cultural (and sexual) revolution of the 1960s and 70s and the second demographic transition it precipitated was not unique to Italy, however, nor was it felt evenly across the peninsula. The mass protest and civil unrest of the 1960s, emblematised by the student uprising of 1968, had spilled onto the streets of a number of Western countries bringing with it a decisive break in modes of socialisation, most notably perhaps in terms of gender and (in countries such as the United States) race relations. As a paradigm it goes only some way, then, to explaining Italy’s declining ability to reproduce its population as sustainable levels in the twilight of the last century. Whilst the long-term causal links between the revolution in values touched on above have been instrumental, as they have elsewhere, in paving the way for decreasing total fertility rates throughout the Western world (the USA is a rare exception), a rise in individualism (skepticism towards traditional, totalizing ideologies, and the subordination of child-rearing to career patterns) form just one (albeit vital) element of a complex system of interdependencies.

**Transitioning to ‘Adulthood’**

One factor widely cited as being both the product of and as having decisively contributed to Italy’s emergent fertility crisis is the pan-European phenomenon of delayed transition from childhood to adult life. If, until the final decades of the last century this transition had been clearly mapped out by what scholars describe as ‘well-defined markers’, occurring in a ‘clear sequence’ (completing education, entering the labour market, getting married), then, more recently these markers have been profoundly altered. As Eugenia Scabini, Elena Marta, and Margherita Lanz point out, modern lifestyle ‘allows previously made choices to be revised and reversed’. The result of this, they argue, is that the ‘most widespread model’ is now one of experimentation and reversibility.39 ‘In short’, they write, ‘the transition to adulthood is progressively breaking down into a sequence of individual transitory states based on a variety of social and temporal modes’.40 Whilst the extension of this period spanning the developmental shift from

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40 Ibid., p. xii.
childhood to adulthood is an increasingly common phenomenon within European and North American societies, the preparatory phase for adulthood (consisting of a series of micro-transitions) appears more pronounced within the context of contemporary Italy. The prevalence of this perceived ‘slowing down’ of transition to adulthood also known as ‘postponement syndrome’, famously explored (and parodied), as we know already, in the family-centred filmmaking of Nanni Moretti, is evidenced in a number of studies (and surveys) carried out during the last decade. In one such survey carried out within fifteen countries within the European Union, it was revealed, for example, that Italy is the only country where the percentage of 18–34 year olds living with their parents exceeds fifty percent. This delay in the timing and sequencing of transition to adulthood marked in theoretical terms at least, by the micro transitions touched upon above, has been largely attributed to Italy’s status as a country with strong family systems, whereby the strength of inter-generational bonds (between parents and children) coupled with the insufficiencies of the Mediterranean welfare regime exercise a decisive braking power on the timing of young people’s autonomy.

Towards an Understanding of the ‘lunga gioventù’

In order to explain the phenomenon of the ‘long adolescence’ (known in Italian as the ‘lunga gioventù’), scholars have also shown recourse to Italy’s inhospitable labour market, which is actively seen to discriminate not only against gender but also against age. As an institution, it is, the economists Tito Boeri and Vincenzo Galasso in a recent publication contend, ‘contro i giovani’. A high level of youth unemployment (exacerbated, of course, by the ‘credit crunch’ at the end of the

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41 Although the term ‘long family’ is often attributed within the Anglophone context to Paul Ginsborg, it was in fact coined much earlier than his work suggests. See for example, P. Donati ‘La “famiglia prolungata” del giovane-adulto come prodotta della società complessa: verso nuove selezioni’, Studi interdisciplinari sulla famiglia, 7 (1988), 7–19.

42 Statistics show that on average Italian men leave the parental home later than their female counterparts, although this difference in age (2.5 years) is narrower than in other countries. See Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, table p. 20.

43 Discriminatory practices surrounding age, whereby younger members of the Italian population find themselves disadvantaged and therefore under-represented also extends to the legal and political sphere. Unlike the majority of European countries where the minimum age at which a person may enter the legislative house is between eighteen and twenty-four, the minimum at which a person may be elected to the Italian Senate is forty (years of age).

last decade) has been blamed for a culture of spiraling credentialism.\textsuperscript{45} The increased financial insecurity that the additional time incurred in education brings has led to financially dependent males (and to a slightly lesser degree females) remaining longer in the family home.

There is, however, another important reason why (some) children postpone their departure from the parental home, beyond that is, their precarious economic status, compounded as it is by insufficient State support and an unyielding housing market; because they want to. Unlike the so-called ‘family-hotels’ which in recent years have gained considerable notoriety in Belgium, where post-adolescent males choose to remain within their parental home for reasons of practical comfort (washing and ironing, for example), the Italian context is underpinned by emotional as well as practical considerations. Whilst the unusually strong bond between male children and their mothers is widely recognised, less well documented, however, is the sense of abandonment felt by parents following the departure of their offspring; the emotional dependency of parents on their children. This emotional fallout (on the part of parents), a theme I shall return to in my analysis of Moretti’s \textit{La stanza del figlio} and Giordana’s \textit{Quando sei nato} is known in the Italian phrasing as ‘la sindrome del nido vuoto’.\textsuperscript{46}

In \textit{Nel nome del figlio}, co-authored by Massimo Ammaniti who teaches psychopathology at La Sapienza University in Rome and his son, Niccolò, the bestselling author, Ammaniti summarises the emotional response of patients to their child’s departure from the parental home as follows:

Può capitare che entrambi si sentano depressi, anche se spesso non se ne rendono neppure conto e manifestano frequenti mal di testa, difficoltà di concentrazione, disturbi di stomaco, difficoltà ad addomesticarsi o frequenti risvegli notturni. La vita della coppia ne risente e può inaridirsi [...].

Eager to avoid an ‘empty nest’, parents (within some sectors of society, though, not all) actively create desirable living conditions for their children, making

\textsuperscript{45} The economic dependency of young adults on their parents is also the direct result of the Mediterranean welfare system. Whilst in countries such as Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Ireland and the UK, the percentage of young people who are unemployed living solely on state subsidy is between 40 and 70\% in Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, this figure stands at less than 20\%. See Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{46} Massimo Ammaniti and Niccolò Ammaniti, \textit{Nel nome del figlio: L’adolescenza raccontata da un padre e da un figlio} (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), p. 43.
alternative housing arrangements less attractive. Leaving home in (certain parts of) Italy (and among certain social classes) has become a choice transition rather than a normative transition, as strong family systems appear to frustrate the processes leading to independent life choices, an important component of my film-based analysis in the next chapter of this thesis.

The (negative) correlation between Italy’s absolute fertility rate and the syndrome of postponement discussed above, is decidedly more complex than it may first appear. In Italy, parenthood, though widely desired, has been theorised as determined by a series of rigid, pre-established conditions. As Massimo Livi-Bacci observes: ‘Tutti sentono il desiderio di maternità e di paternità e intendono realizzarlo, ma è vero anche che ciò non avviene incondizionamente […] avere un lavoro stabile – e avere la disponibilità di un vero alloggio’.\(^\text{47}\) Childrearing, is not only approached with considerable planning, but is only embarked upon, if at all, when a series of preconditions have been adequately met. Culturally speaking, the most significant of these preconditions (even into the first decade of the new millennium) was marriage, seen as one of the final links in the conditional chain highlighted above.

The residue of many decades of Vatican involvement in affairs of the state (and its propaganda) there remains (although to a lesser degree during the first decade of the new millennium), to borrow the phrasing of Ginsborg, a ‘cultural insistence on having legitimate children’. In other words, marriage within the Italian context was (and continues to be) central to family formation.\(^\text{48}\) The steady decline of marriage and the failure of non-marital fertility to replace this decline clearly impacted on this trend. The decision to have a child, was (and remains) underpinned (among certain classes and within certain geographical areas) by a series of inter-dependent economic exigencies and moral considerations, which in general terms at least, found their origin in a desire to create the most suitable (or optimum) environment for their children, within the most socially normative (and therefore acceptable) ethical parameters, i.e., within marriage. The processes involved in arriving at this decision were prolonged and problematised, however, by the difficulties young Italians faced in transitioning to adulthood.

\(^\text{47}\) Livi Bacci, p. 1006.
\(^\text{48}\) Ginsborg, p. 71.
Micro-determinants of Low Fertility

The work of Eugenia Scabini offers another slant on the culture of excess responsibility explored above. For Scabini, a largely overlooked yet crucial determinant of Italy’s fertility crisis was linked to parent’s fear for the future of their children. Writing in the early 1990s, Scabini observes that:

Se andiamo a vedere quali-motivi le coppie italiane adducono al fatto di non avere figli e di volerne limitare il numero, osserviamo un dato sorprendente: una delle motivazioni principali è la paura del futuro, l’avvenire incerto [...] La paura che una volta era focalizzata sul ‘nemico esterno’ (i rischi della gravidanza, del parto, dell’impossibilità di venire incontro ai bisogni primari del neonato) sembra venire proiettata sul futuro dei figli, bloccando, in parte il desiderio di procreare.⁴⁹

The work of Scabini suggests that the emergence and proliferation of the small family model, the product, that is, of voluntary low-fertility, in certain regions of the peninsular by the final decades of the last century had become, as Elizabeth L. Krause and Milena Marchesi contend, ‘moral and respectable’.⁵⁰ The desire to invest as much as possible, to raise, the ‘human capital’ of a single child, had after five decades of experimentation become, in the Italian North, a common paradigm.

Within the context of the present discussion, Scabini’s work also derives its discursive significance, however, by providing a less familiar vantage point from which the Italian socio-demographic panorama can be surveyed. It also suggests, albeit implicitly, the extent to which a small cluster of cogent mainstream arguments (many of which have been introduced already) have been (perhaps too) heavily relied upon in explaining Italy’s fertility crisis, particularly in relation to critical engagement with perceived points of contact with cultural articulations of the ‘Italian family’ including those belonging to contemporary cinema.⁵¹ As these arguments and explanations have found increasing mainstream currency, other equally relevant and no less significant factors such as micro-level determinants

⁵¹ The work of Mazierska and Rascaroli, seized upon by Sutton in his article, is indicative of this trend.
of low fertility have been relegated to the margins of the debate or eclipsed entirely, particularly in Anglo scholarship.

In light of this awareness, I propose in the next phase of my discussion to turn my attention to the work of Letizia Mencarini and Maria Letizia Tanturri who, in choosing to examine micro-level determinants of reproductive behaviour in Italy, have created less familiar discursive pathways for thinking about Italy’s faltering reproduction and the missing child (or bambino negato) phenomenon.

In an article published in 2006, the authors attempt to account for developments in their country’s socio-demographic profile by bringing to the fore the data of a groundbreaking survey carried out (for the first time) in 2002. This survey, entitled ‘Troppi or nessuno’ and carried out in five urban contexts (Udine, Padua, Florence, Pesaro, and Messina), was prompted by a lack of suitable micro data surrounding the extent to which background variables explain discrepancies in fertility behaviours across the peninsular. The survey’s participants, selected at random from the council registers of the provincial capitals listed above and consisting therefore both of mothers and childless women (all belonging to the same generational cohort), were asked to respond to a series of questions surrounding their characteristics as individuals (including but not limited to, their level of education, religious practice, family background), for those women in a union, the characteristics of their partners, and finally the characteristics of the couple itself (leisure time, division of domestic tasks).

At the level of individual characteristics, the survey’s findings echo some of the observations made elsewhere in this discussion. The prolongation of women’s educational careers (and training) for example, is identified as a key variable in explaining Italy’s fertility decline. As the length of a woman’s educational career was extended, so too did her career aspirations and accordingly the opportunity cost of having a child (delayed entry into motherhood with the increased likelihood of infertility or non-parenthood being the likely outcome). The orientation towards individualism precipitated by the second demographic transition is being keenly felt here. However, religious practice

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(measured, for example, in terms of the frequency of attending mass) is also shown to play a characteristically high role in determining fertility behaviour. Whilst the data reveals that secularism is more often associated with childlessness, those women who practiced religion demonstrated higher levels of childbearing. What these findings show, then, is that at the level of individual characteristics, women ‘become more family or career-orientated according to their initial socialization process’, a fact often overlooked by researchers who have instead chosen to focus on the post-socialization or situational context.\textsuperscript{53} The early socialisation process of women and its impact on their subsequent life preferences is also conditioned to the inter-generational transmission of fertility patterns. To quote Mencarini and Tanturri: ‘fertility patterns of parents and children are positively correlated’.\textsuperscript{54} Childless women, the survey’s data showed, were most often only children, (of higher education status and secularised) whereas mothers with three children or more came from more traditional backgrounds (had shorter careers in education, practiced religion) and had a larger number of siblings. Mencarini and Tanturri’s analysis also highlights, however, the extent to which reproductive behaviour is affected not only by women’s socialisation process (which contributes to a necessary awareness of women’s heterogeneity) but also by their partner’s individual characteristics (and background), the degree of equality between them, and external factors such as women’s flexibility and stability within the labour market.\textsuperscript{55}

The decreasing absolute fertility of women should not simply be viewed, therefore, as a question of women’s ‘partial emancipation’ within the public and private sphere, but as the result of a concatenation of other factors. Individual systems of values as well as background characteristics and conjugal experiences should also be taken into account as women develop dissimilar, heterogeneous preferences for childbearing, or non-parenthood. Having examined mainstream as well as lesser-known ‘micro’ determinants of Italy’s shifting socio-demographic profile, let us now turn our attention to some of its consequences.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 392.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 393.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 397.
What, might we ask, has been the impact of Italy’s unique status as a country with ‘lowest-low fertility’ on children and indeed on the dynamics of parent-child relations?

Children, Childhoods and the *questione demografica*

The question posed above, is also addressed, albeit with considerable brevity, by Paul Ginsborg in his account of the Italian reproductive crisis of the 1990s. Qualifying his response with a necessary caveat surrounding the potential pitfalls of seeking common characteristics across the broad canvas of Italian society, Ginsborg unsettles the seemingly positive claims made earlier in this discussion surrounding questions of human capital and the rising social mobility of children. Ginsborg’s analysis, seized upon by film scholars such as Mazierska, Rascaroli and Paul Sutton, followed the logic that we as readers might expect: ‘the fewer children there were’, led to a ‘greater investment in them’.56 Children, largely geographically located we should assume, in the country’s more economically prosperous northern regions (such as the North West), where absolute fertility rates were at their lowest, were the object, he argues, of ‘hyper-attention’ and borrowing the term actually coined by Eugenia Scabini, ‘hyper-affection’ (*iperaffetto*).57

This range of ‘hyper’ energies directed towards one or (most frequently) two children, was of course, the overriding or desired outcome of the practice of voluntary low fertility, which had impacted so drastically on the country’s ability to reproduce its population at sustainable levels in the first instance. Voluntary low fertility was (and remains) a strategy for ensuring a child’s upward social mobility. As Francesco Billari and Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna remind us: ‘le coppie che limitano la fecondità possono garantire ai pochi figli già nati un’istruzione più elevata e maggiori chance di mobilità sociale ascendente. In other words, ‘le

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56 Ginsborg, p. 80. The author evidences his claim anecdotally perhaps, by bringing to mind what he describes as the ‘copious arsenal of expensive toys in an average Italian home’ as striking material evidence of this process. (Ibid).

coppie non hanno il secondo o terzo figlio perché vogliono “troppo bene” a quelli già nati.⁵⁸

These hyper-energies (and the resources with which they were accompanied), whilst ensuring a child’s human capital, can also have profoundly negative consequences including the stagnation of parent–child relations and the stifling of the child’s autonomous development (or individuation), the latter clearly manifest in the long adolescence discussed above and is a central theme in my analysis of La stanza del figlio. Scabini, whose analysis informs important parts of Ginsborg’s thesis, has called attention to the relation between excessive attention on the part of parents (belonging in this case to the educated classes) and inter-generational conflict.

Framing her thesis with the results of a survey and carried out in which eighty percent of the respondents agreed with the statement: ‘il rapporto col figlio è il legame più stretto che si può avere nella vita’, Scabini suggests that the intensity of this parent-child relationship (confirmed perhaps by the data she cites), ‘ha una contropartita’, namely, what she terms, ‘il vincolo per il figlio’. This so-called ‘vincolo’, linked to the parental over-protection and over-investment highlighted by Ginsborg, most ostensibly involved, Scabini observes, the ‘prolungamento di presenza dei genitori nella vita del figlio’, carried the potential, particularly as the children reached early adolescence, of provoking revolt and rebellion (as children felt an overwhelming sense of suffocation). The growing prevalence in the early 1990s of poor classroom behaviour (among those children belonging to the educated classes), is read by Scabini, therefore, as one possible manifestation of this growing need for a slackening of what had become in some cases stiflingly limited proximity parameters between parents and children. For Scabini, ‘la contrazione delle nascite porta con se una sorta di concentrato emozionale nella relazione genitori/figli e tende a far sbilanciare la dinamica famigliare in un impasse irrossolto’. Arguably the most disconcerting impact of this impasse, therefore, relates to the autonomous development of the child, his or her ability to ‘segna che egli è altro’.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Billari and Dalla Zuanna, p. 47.
⁵⁹ Scabini, p. 204.
To those commentators located on the margins of Italian culture and society, and to some extent even those looking from ‘within’, parent–child relations nevertheless appeared (and continue in the present day) to benefit from the range of energies and proximities engendered by the fertility regimes introduced above. Indeed, whilst there is no evidence to suggest that children are ‘loved less’ by their parents in other Western contexts, the perceived intensity of Italian parent–child relations does, however, correspond to a long-held view of Italy as a child-centred country where parent–child relations are unusually strong. In reality, with little help from the State, which in republican Italy had actively sought to distance itself in fiscal terms from the ‘family’ (despite frequent pronouncements surrounding the importance of its role in society), parents found themselves in a unique position (in a Western context) in terms of the (unusually high) level of involvement in their children’s daily lives. Italy’s institutional weakness, its status as a country with strong family systems and the continuing involvement of Roman Catholicism within the nation-state, also informed the dynamics of parent–child relations, the virtues of which are evidenced in less geographically specific terms, in a growing body of research.

In one assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in 21 economically advanced nations carried out in 2007 by the children’s charity Unicef, for example, Italy was ranked first in terms of ‘family and peer relationships’. This index was constructed on the basis of three components (family structure, family relationships, peer relationships) and three corresponding sets of indicators (including the percentage of children growing up in single parent or step families, the percentage of children who report that parents spend time ‘just talking to them’, and the percentage of children who report finding their ‘peers kind and helpful’). Of these individual sets of assessment criteria Italy scored highly (was second overall) in terms of the amount of time families devote to conversation and interaction with their children. Inextricably linked to this

61 Italy recorded the second lowest levels of single-parent family and step-family formation. See Adamson, p. 24.
latter was the country’s primacy in terms of the percentage of children who reported eating the main meal of the day with parents more than once a week.62

Childhood and Its Discontents: The ‘Other’ Missing Child or ‘bambino negato’ of Contemporary Italian Society

If this body of research coupled with Ginsborg’s notion of the missing child or bambino negato appear to evidence claims for the centrality of the (Italian) child within Italian culture, then there is, however, a conspicuously subdued discourse, profoundly at odds with this evaluation of kinship relations and the experience of childhood in Italy. Whilst the dominant analytic paradigm called upon in Dreams and Diaries and Paul Sutton’s article on Salvatores’ Io non ho paura, constructs the ‘contemporary Italian family’, at least to some degree, as a solely heteronormative space, causing the plurality of family forms and regional trends and specificities to disappear, the image of ‘Italian’ childhood circulated within mainstream sociological and film-based discourse also distorts and simplifies the experience of swathes of Italian and immigrant children, particularly those occupying society’s margins. Like the child protagonists of Gianni Amelio’s Il ladro di bambini and the Neapolitan cinema of Antonio Capuano’s (including La guerra di Mario) these are the children who bear the brunt of poverty, family breakdown, and abuse. These are the children who, in many cases, though not all, will be removed from their biological families and absorbed into the complex system of state care and protection (Il Tribunale per i minorenni), in place for their welfare, an issue I shall return to momentarily.

In terms of the incidence of child poverty, the Unicef survey cited above also revealed that of twenty-four economically advanced countries, Italy recorded the third highest level of children living in households with an income considered to be below the poverty threshold.63 The findings of another survey published to coincide with the seventeenth anniversary of Italy’s ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (‘La Convenzione Onu sui Diritti

62 Ibid., p. 23. Billari and Dalla Zuanna have cited Italy’s status as the industrialized country with the lowest rate of (despite a decreasing abortion rate), of further positive evidence of the strength of parent–child relations.
63 Adamson, p. 6. The UK and the United States were the only countries in which higher levels of children growing up in conditions of relative poverty were recorded.
dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza’) and carried out by the Italian arm of Save the Children echoed this analysis, creating a sense of national perspective. According to the study, ‘I diritti dell’infanzia e dell’adolescenza in Italia’, on January 1st 2007, twenty-four percent of the 10,089,141 children and adolescents (including 666,393 children and adolescents of non-Italian origin) were at risk of poverty. Within this body of research, staggering territorial discrepancies were revealed in terms of rates of child poverty. The number of children living in poverty in the South of Italy was five times higher than in the rest of the country, for example. Further territorial discrepancies were highlighted in an Istat report published in 2008, titled ‘La vita quotidiana di bambini e ragazzi’:

Furthermore, the earlier Unicef report also highlighted that significant numbers of children continue to fall victim to phenomena of exploitation (including but not limited to child labour, prostitution, and pedophilic abuse). Indeed, whilst the missing child or so-called bambino negato is figured in the film-based studies illuminated at the outset of my discussion as emblem of the Italian fertility crisis (during the 1990s), as catalyst that is, for hyper-energies, over-investments, and the constant preoccupied glance between parents and children (and children and parents), within the less familiar territory of non-mainstream Italian sociological discourse, the term ‘bambino negato’, also designates another reality. As such, it is accorded a very different meaning – one which profoundly disrupts the normative and no less class-driven synthesis constructed above. This primary meaning, at once akin to the range of significations attributed to the missing genre by Emma Wilson in Cinema’s Missing Children, is (also) associated with the unsettling topos of threats to the bodily and emotional integrity of children, including those brought to the fore in the Introduction. The ‘bambino negato’

within Italian society is not only the statistically invisible first or higher order child seized upon by Paul Sutton, but also, as work carried out by scholars such as Gabriella Damilano and Paolo Macario highlights, the real or actual child at risk of poverty, abuse, and maltreatment.\textsuperscript{66}

Research published in 2008 by Telefono Azzurro, a non-govermenternal organization committed to the prevention of child abuse and neglect (as expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)), shows that between 1 January and 31 August 2008, its helpline, ‘Servizio 114’, received just less than four and a half thousand calls from child and adolescent victims of abuse or maltreatment, which the report described as ‘un fenomeno sommerso e in continua crescita’. In the majority of cases (77\%) the abuse event (or events) had occurred within ‘le mure domestiche’. In 46.7\% of cases this event was perpetrated by the mother of the child (or adolescent) and in 37.3\% of all cases, by the child’s father.\textsuperscript{67}

Similarly, an article published in the\textit{ Corriere della sera} in 2008 reported the scale of childhood sexual abuse within Italy. One in six male children, it contends, has been the victim of sexual abuse perpetrated in the majority of cases by a parent or close relative.\textsuperscript{68} A more recent article (also published in the\textit{ Corriere della sera}), suggests that in the majority of cases the abuse act goes unreported (due to fear and intimidation). Pedophilia, the author writes, is ‘il grande abuso negato’. ‘La voce dei bimbi [è] soffocata da una coltre di autocolpevolizzazione, vergogna e omertà’. Whilst this article brings to public consciousness the extent to which childhood sexual abuse remains hidden from public view, shrouded as it is in ‘vergogna e omertà’, it also calls attention to the scarcity of Italian press and broadcast media coverage of abuse in childhood. Comparing levels of media interest in other countries (including the United Kingdom and the United States), Telefono Azzurro, which provided the statistical data drawn upon by the article’s


author, describes pedophilic abuse within the peninsula, the narrative motor for three of the films under discussion later in this thesis (L’amore molesto, La bestia nel cuore and Il ladro di bambini), as ‘una realtà che spaventa’.  

Mainstream accounts of the experience of ‘Italian’ childhood are further problematised, however, by Italy’s status as both a transit and destination country for human trafficking. If children born to Italian parents are increasingly at risk of poverty, abuse, and maltreatment (in a range of guises), then so too, are those children and adolescents trafficked into the country, either alone or in the company of an adult, to work in the agricultural sector, as child beggars (known as ‘bimbi-accattoni’), or, as in the case of Alina in Giordana’s Quando sei nato, the sex trade. Research published in 2009 by Save the Children reveals that the likely victims of sexual exploitation (which includes both street and ‘indoor’ prostitution) are early adolescent females trafficked either from Nigeria, Moldova, or, most frequently, Romania. The report also showed that whilst trafficked male children (from sub-suaharan African countries) face significant risk of sexual exploitation, they are most frequently forced to work either within the agricultural economy or as street beggars. Finally, an article published in La repubblica in 2005 revealed that in Lazio alone there were 8,000 ‘bimbi-accattoni’. Only 0.5% of these children (between the ages of 2 and 12), ‘costretti a chiedere l’elemosina per strada’, were of Italian origin.

Into the New Millennium

It was against this (hidden) backdrop of increasing incidence of child abuse and exploitation and amid high levels of child poverty, that on June 28th 2005 La repubblica, which little more than a decade earlier had forecast the likely demise of ‘the Italians’, reported to its readers the findings of the recently published Istat

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69 Ibid.
population survey for 2004. Under the more subdued headline ‘L’Italia torna a riempire le culle’ Maria Stella Conte, who is regularly called upon to report on socio-demographic related issues, deactivated in one sentence the alarm which, since the early 1990s, had been ringing in the ears of the peninsula’s inhabitants surrounding the growth of their population. ‘Le donne Italiane’, Conte wrote, ‘hanno ripreso a fare figli’. The country’s absolute fertility rate, now hovering at 1.33, was, as Conte reminds us, ‘il più alto registrato negli ultimi 15 anni’. Italy had relinquished its global primacy in terms of total fertility. The Czech Republic and Japan were now the ‘lowest-low fertility’ capitals of the world. This new figure was now almost identical to that of its continental neighbour, Germany.

The root cause of this increase came as a surprise. As demographers poured over the data gleaned from the Istat recorded during the course of 2004, it emerged that the recorded increase in overall population growth was the result of increased levels of child-rearing in the Centre-North of the country, ostensibly home of the one-child family and equally notorious for high levels of childlessness. Since 1991, total fertility had climbed by 36%. Despite their post-war status as sites of voluntary low fertility, regions such as Emilia Romagna, whom in the 1990s had the lowest levels of total fertility in the country, recorded increases of or above 25%. The figures for the Italian mezzogiorno told a different story. Traditional high fertility strongholds such as the Campania, Calabria and Sicily had shown decreases of between 19 and 25%.

In 2006, Maria Stella Conte followed up her earlier article with the news that the North of Italy had overtaken its southern counterpart in terms of the number of children being born per woman. ‘Alla fine è accaduto’, Conte writes, ‘è il 2005 l’anno del sorpasso, l’anno in cui il Nord passa in testa e supera il Sud su un terreno dove il meridione sembrava inattaccabile’. For the first time in Italian history the South had become, in the words of Conte, ‘la spina nel fianco della

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72 The growth forecasts for the Italian population circulated in the 1990s have been heavily criticized for underestimating the flow of immigrants to the peninsula and a gradual slowing of the old age population.
73 Anna Maria Conte, ‘Nel 2004 più nati che morti: l’ Italia torna a riempire le culle’, La repubblica, 28 June 2005, p. 11.
74 In 2005, the absolute fertility rate in the Czech Republic was 1.28. Japan recoded a slightly lower rate at 1.26. See Billari and Dalla Zuanna, p. 80.
75 This figure is made all the more impressive by the fact that it does not include immigrant births.
76 In Emilia Romagna the increase (from 1991) was 27% and 25% in the Veneto and Lombardy.
77 Stella Conte, ‘Nel 2004 più nati che morti l’ Italia torna a riempire le culle’, p. 11.
fecondità’. If in 1995, for example, 44 out of 100 births had been to mothers living in the South, by 2005, this figure stood at 36.\textsuperscript{78} In the North, the figure rose from 39 births (per hundred births) in 1995, to 45 in 2005. In cities such as Milan, Turin, and Florence the increase in absolute fertility was between 40 and 50\%.\textsuperscript{79} The question, which then looms large, is what had caused both this national increase in this rapid geographical inversion in terms of regional statistics? For Billari and Dalla Zuanna, the answer may be summarised as follows:

Si fanno più figli nelle regioni dove le donne partecipano di più al mercato del lavoro. Si fanno più figli nelle regioni più ricche. Si fanno più figli nelle regioni meno tradizionali. Si fanno più figli nelle regioni più dinamiche, che inevitabilmente registrano una quota più elevati di immigrati […] In Italia, oggi, si fanno figli dove si sta meglio.

For Billari and Dalla Zuanna, the most significant factors determining fertility in Italy in the twenty-first century (as it is elsewhere in the Western world) were women’s participation in the labour market and concurrently, levels of family income.\textsuperscript{80}

The Politics of Fertility

Having crossed the threshold of the third millennium, the anxieties which motored the debate surrounding ‘la questione demografica’ in the ‘crisis years’ of the early 1990s, many of which were brought to the fore by scholars working within the milieu of filmmaking during the framing stage of this chapter, continued unabated. In fact, existing preoccupations and anxieties were rapidly joined by a new swathe of unforeseen fertility-related issues.

This new sense of urgency largely derived from legislative developments spanning the years 2003–4, and what became the sudden politicisation of la questione demografica; of direct political interference (for the first time in the history of the Republic) in questions of national fertility. Despite an intense public


\textsuperscript{79} Billari and Dalla Zuanna, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 85. In 1996, women constituted 22\% of the workforce in Italy. A decade later this figure had more than doubled to 47\%. 

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awareness surrounding Italy’s stalling reproduction, successive Italian
governments, with the notable exception of Romano Prodi’s centre-left Ulivo
coalition (1996–2001), largely failed to successfully implement family friendly
policy geared towards the incentivisation of higher order childrearing. The so-
called ‘syndrome of lateness’, the pathological trend, widely posited as one of the
principle causes of the country’s ‘lowest-low’ fertility, had its institutional
counterpart, it would seem, in the Italian nation-state which, mindful perhaps of
Mussolini’s infamous demographic campaign during the fascist Ventennio (which
came into being in spite of sufficiently high levels of childbearing across the
peninsula), had done little to stimulate the country’s low levels of total fertility.

The Politics of Interference

Following the return to power of Silvio Berlusconi’s Casa della libertà coalition in
2001, this politics of indifference gave way to a politics of interference. In the
aftermath of this victory the State developed and implemented a pronatalist policy
agenda. The measures in question, a baby-bonus scheme and a new law to
substantially curtail existing access to assisted reproductive technologies
(including IVF), drew immediate parallels with the infamous fascist demographic
campaign recalled above, not least, because of the ‘bleak picture of woman’ it (again)
painted (and continues to paint) ‘as producer first and foremost’.81

Whilst the new law on assisted reproduction was approved by the Italian
city legislature in 2004, reproductive politics found renewed importance during the so-
called ‘post-political phase’ in Italy, the period following the break up of the Italian
party system in the wake of the Tangentopoli and Clean Hands corruption
scandals in the first years of the 1990s. It was during this period of political
uncertainty that the Roman Catholic Church re-emerged as ‘the mouthpiece for a
resurgent conservatism’. As Patrick Hanafin explains, the collapse of the First
Republic:

81 Patrick Hanafin, ‘Gender, Citizenship and Human Reproduction in Contemporary Italy’, Feminist
The ideology of Catholicism became an anchoring point particularly for the centre right, a means of piggy-backing on widely accepted values in order to win more support. The identification of the new rightist parties (including the ultra conservative secessionist Lega Nord and the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale) with the ideology of Catholicism led to the return of a hegemonic patriarchal politics. With this swing to the political right (an important theme in my reading of Mario Martone’s *L’amore molesto* in Chapter Five) came calls for a ‘narrowing of freedom in the private sphere’. This conservative ideal of Italian society, which, as Hanafin, notes, echoes ‘the restrictive views of the fascist regime’, accorded new importance to the politics of childrearing and reproduction.\(^{82}\) With the return of right-wing politics and its hetero-patriarchal narrative of family formation, the female body became, as it had in the 1960s and ‘70s, ‘the primary site in the battle for symbolic control of national identity’. By the middle of the last decade the campaign of ‘theo-conservative’ alliance had succeeded, ‘in transforming the way in which reproductive medical services are governed’.\(^{83}\)

The rightist coalition government justified its hardline position on access to reproductive medicine by calling attention to Italy’s unwanted reputation as the ‘Wild West’ of birth science.\(^{84}\) Whilst the need to regulate (and even perhaps curtail) certain practices was evident, for the rightist parties, there appeared to be another motivating force behind the legislation for which they were showing such ardent enthusiasm. Beyond the realm of Catholic doctrine, which played a decisive role in generating support for the new law, members of Berlusconi’s centre-right government as well as high-profile supporters sought to canvas support for this raft of measures by dismissing (and deriding) immigration as a viable method of kickstarting population growth. Instead they relied on discourse surrounding Italy’s viability in the global market place and what politicians, drawing on EU social strategy, referred to as ‘social cohesion’ (tenuously linked to the former). This hostility towards immigration as a possible means of ensuring population growth is illustrated in a speech given by then president of

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., p. 333.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 334.

Confindustria (and Berlusconi ally), Antonio D’Amato, to an audience of young entrepreneurs:

Non ci si può aprire all’immigrazione, come e’ stato detto nel dibattito, quasi che fosse il viagra sociale che ci fa tornare a essere giovani. Provo fastidio, quasi orrore, quando sento che questa e’ la motivazione, cioè che il nostro paese invecchia e quindi ha bisogno di ringiovanire con l’immigrazione. \(^85\)

Despite overwhelming statistical evidence in support of an influx of migrants as a reliable (and socially and culturally enriching) method of buoying contracting populations (the northern industrial triangle bears testimony to this) and in failing to take into consideration the widespread view that the small family model had become moral and respectable, the government introduced measures designed, as Krause and Marchesi write, to simultaneously incentivise and delimit child rearing to produce ‘certain kinds of families’.

The baby-bonus scheme, the first of these state-sponsored pronatalist measures, is a fine case in point. Introduced in Autumn 2003, it offered a one-off payment of 1,000 Euros to citizens who gave birth to or adopted a second child (a higher order birth). In keeping with the government’s attempt, as Marchesi and Krause contend, ‘to delimit desirable and non-desirable populations’, the baby-bonus, would only be paid to mothers satisfying rigid eligibility criteria. The most significant of these criteria related, perhaps unexpectedly, to citizenship. Despite attempts by the Alleanza Nazionale to exclude all non-Italian citizens, the baby bonus was only available to Italian or EU citizens. Non-EU citizens, despite their growing presence within the peninsula, were excluded on the grounds of their seemingly undesirable citizenship. \(^86\)

Whilst this scheme was widely regarded as having a negligible impact on the daily lives of mothers desperately in need of better public services, particularly in terms of the care of very young children, the law on medically assisted reproduction (legge 40) enacted on February 19th 2004, provoked (and continues to provoke) considerable consternation. Forged in the same crucible as the

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\(^86\) Krause and Marchesi, p. 351.
government’s pre-established campaign of limiting so-called ‘undesirable populations’ and seeking to express ‘its preferred moral orientations’, this far-reaching law sought to reproduce the Italian population within terms considered favourable both to the Roman Catholic Church and to the political parties forming Berlusconi’s Casa del popolo coalition.

Elements of the Italian press and broadcast media responded with vigour to the implementation of the new law. In the left-leaning La repubblica, Corrado Augias, for example, described the law as ‘l’esempio più grave di legge confessionale varata dal parlamento’. In an article which appeared under the headline, ‘Fecondazione Assistita, Una Legge Crudele’, another journalist decried Law 40 as ‘una legge crudele che offende ogni logico e certo non rispetta i diritti della donna e dalla coppia che desiderano un figlio.

The palpable alarm within the media derived both from the blanket ban on previously available technologies, and more importantly perhaps, from a clause which actively discriminated against certain individuals and couples seeking treatment for fecundity impairments. Indeed, legge 40 not only limits artificial fertilisation to those couples who could prove cohabitation, immediately disqualifying single women from access to fertility technologies, but in a further clause (Article 5), it is stipulated that access to reproductive medicine is also restricted to, ‘maggiorenni di sesso diverso, coniugate o conviventi, in età potenzialmente fertile’.

The law therefore limited treatment to heterosexual couples ‘genetically related to the offspring they seek to conceive’, banning single women and same-sex couples from accessing reproductive technologies even in private clinics. In addition to the ban on third-party donor assisted fertilisation, the law also outlawed cryogenic freezing, pre-implantation selection of embryos, and in a move highlighting the extent of the Church’s involvement in this raft of measures (despite Article 7 of the Italian constitution), gave the embryo equal rights to that

of the women. For those couples deemed sufficiently normative in long-term, heterosexual unions) to be allowed access to the treatment, the law also stipulated, as Sophie Arie, who covered the story for the Guardian wrote, that:

embryos may only be screened by the naked eye for genetic diseases or defects before implanting, and once implanted must be treated equally, regardless of abnormalities. Doctors face fines of up to €600,000 (£400,000) and a three-year suspension if they break the law.

The impact of the three-embryo rule was immediate. For younger women, the widely disputed clause dramatically increased the likelihood of multiple pregnancies. For those women belonging to older cohorts, the rule dramatically decreases the chance of becoming pregnant through IVF. Indeed, in the five months following the law’s enactment, the IVF success rate, fell from 1 in 4 to 1 in 9. Legge 40 and the raft of measures it contained (the most controversial being articles 6 and 14) had drastically impacted on the likelihood of fecundity impaired older couples giving birth to a child. For those couples either disqualified by the law or for whom the three-embryo rule had thwarted their chances of conceiving a child, there remained only one option ‘fertility tourism’; receiving treatment abroad. As clinics began to spring up just beyond the checkpoints of those countries with whom Italy shared her border, those couples of sufficient economic means sought help elsewhere. For the estimated 80% of infertile couples for whom the new law constituted a barrier to procreation, unable to afford the sizable fees charged by the clinics, the desire to have a child, would remain only that. Already stigmatised by a widespread social taboo surrounding infertility, the couples in question face the sobering reality that the price of biological parenthood is beyond their reach.

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90 Article 7 of the Republican Consitution states the following: ‘Lo Stato e la Chiesa cattolica sono, ciascuno nel proprio ordine, indipendenti e sovrani’. See: ‘La Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana’, <http://www.governo.it/Governo/Costituzione/principi.html>
È difficile avere un bambino: Adoption and international adoption

Nestling at the intersection between many of the issues raised during the course of this recent phase of my discussion (forms of abusive parenthood and abject childhood, immigrant children, infertility) is the question of non-biological parenthood in several guises (adoption, international adoption, fosterage). For those Italian and immigrant children at risk of maltreatment (physical and sexual violence, exploitation or neglect) at the hands of adult caretakers, fosterage (l’affidamento) and/or adoption (l’adozione) can offer refuge, protection and the potential for a degree of repair either in the long term (adoption) or short term (fosterage). Whilst in the majority of cases fosterage takes place in families where children are already present (a scenario favoured by Article 2 of Legge 184), adoption is more frequently recognized as the logical ‘next step’ for infertile couples seeking to build a nuclear family. It may be unsurprising, therefore, that increasing levels of infertility, coupled with the raft of legislation concerning procreative technologies outlined above have led to a gradual rise in the number of adoption requests (la domanda di adozione) made to the Tribunale per i Minorenni in individual cities across Italy. This increase, a reflection, perhaps, of diminishing social stigma around adoptive parenthood, as couples, ‘considerano il progetto adottivo come più “prevedibile”, socialmente accettato e percorribile’, has been accompanied, however, by a shift in emphasis away from adoption as a process largely involving imperiled infant children, to older children, and those children with a physical disability or problems relating to mental health. If the

93 Of the films under discussion in the present thesis, the question of non-biological parenthood under the guise of fosterage is explicitly addressed in Antonio Capuano’s, La guerra di Mario.
94 Article 2 states the following: ‘Il minore temporaneamente privo di un ambiente familiare idoneo, nonostante gli interventi di sostegno e aiuto disposti ai sensi dell’articolo 1, è affidato ad una famiglia, preferibilmente con figli minori, o ad una persona singola, in grado di assicurargli il mantenimento, l’educazione, l’istruzione e le relazioni affettive di cui egli ha bisogno’. See: Legge 4 maggio 1983, n. 184. (Diritto del minore ad una famiglia) <http://www.camera.it/_bicamerali/leg14/infanzia/leggi/legge184%20del%201983.htm> See also Nadia Rania and Laura Migliorini’s work on fosterage and adoption within the Italian context, in Psicologia sociale della relazioni familiari (Bari: Laterza, 2008), p. 164.
adoption process is always already profoundly complex, involving (and closely supervised by) a network of agencies and institutions, then this shift away from prioritizing the adoption of very small children has, it would seem, increased the risk of the process breaking down.\(^{96}\) As Nadia Rania and Laura Migliorini point out: ‘Questo cambiamento della popolazione dei bambini dati in adozione ha comportato un sostanziale incremento della percentuale di adozioni “fallite”.’\(^{97}\)

The adoption process is made more complex, however, by the law cited above. Indeed, if the new laws governing access to procreative technologies constitute significant barriers for biological parenthood (concerned as they are with enacting and maintaining the vigorously promoted heterosexual doctrine of Roman Catholicism), then the quest for non-biological parenthood for unmarried or same-sex couples is similarly unyielding. The legal framework surrounding adoption (enshrined in Legge 184 of 4th May, 1983, and amended in March, 2001, by Legge 149) mirrors, at least in ideological terms, the swathes of legislation touched upon in my earlier section on fertility treatments. Article 6 of the law states, for example, that adoption (of children up to the age of fourteen), ‘è consentita a coniugi uniti in matrimonio da almeno tre anni’. Further, a stability requirement built in to the clause states the following: ‘Tra i coniugi non deve sussistere e non deve avere avuto luogo negli ultimi tre anni separazione personale neppure di fatto’. The corollary of the Italian legal position, therefore, is that adoption is only permissible within a married and thus, heterosexual union.

International Adoption

Finally, I propose a brief, but necessary orientation towards the burgeoning phenomenon of international adoption in Italy, an issue brought to the fore by Marco Tullio Giordana in Quando sei nato, the second work under discussion in Chapter Three of this thesis. The change in recent decades in Italy’s historical status as country of outward to inward migration is accompanied by a significant


\(^{97}\) Migliorini and Rania, p. 165.
increase in the numbers of children being adopted by Italian parents from abroad (most frequently Russia and South American countries such as Columbia and Brazil). This increase originates in Legge 476 (enacted in 1998) when Italy became one of the signatory states of the Hague Convention (of 29 May 1993) on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. From this point onwards, couples were permitted by law to seek the adoption of children from outside of the Italic peninsula. The decision to apply for an international adoption, a seven-step process governed by Titolo iii of Legge 184, is regarded, at least in the terms of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, however, as a last resort for those foreign children at risk of abuse or the range of maltreatment highlighted elsewhere in this discussion. The Tribunale dei minori, for example, states the following:

Il principio cui si ispira la legge sull’adozione è quello della sussidiarietà: l’adozione internazionale è l’ultima strada da seguire, quando non si stato possibile aiutare il bambino all’interno della sua famiglia e del suo paese d’origine. In quest’ottica, quindi, l’adozione internazionale rappresenta un modello di società civile improntato alla solidarietà per l’infanzia abbandonata a sé stessa, piaga dei paesi più poveri del mondo.98

Nevertheless, the number of foreign children being adopted by Italian couples (the same rules apply as in the case of national adoption in terms of conjugal status) has been steadily rising. Research carried out by the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence on the ten main ‘receiving’ countries, shows that in the year 2011, Italy demonstrated the second highest rate of intercountry adoption, with 4,022 in total, rising from a figure of 3,420 in 2007.99 In France, there were 1,995 adoptions, and less than 1000 in Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands and Belgium.100

At the core of these findings, then, is a glaring paradox: Italy is a country where the rate of national adoption is markedly low. Yet, it is the second highest receiving country in terms of intercountry adoption. In light of this paradox, the following question looms large: Why are Italian couples turning to Russia and

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99 19.4% of the intercountry adoptions to Italy recorded in 2011 were from the Russian Federation.
South American countries to satisfy the wish to become parents? Does this decision finds its origin, perhaps, in the desire to adopt far younger children, or children without a physical handicap and/or mental difficulties? Is there is a growing sense among prospective adoptive parents that international adoption mitigates against some of the common risks associated with the adoption process within a national context? For a number of onlookers including La república journalist, Giampaolo Visetti, this paradox at the core of the statistical data is alarming. Reflecting the findings brought to the fore earlier on, he writes that Italy is:

Illuminating the complex cluster of adoption-related concerns raised in this final phase of my discussion, Visetti’s comments also echo the at times contradictory, and often complex nature of the Italian social scheme. Italian society, like all societies, perhaps, is one in which appearances are deceptive, and where long-held, conventional wisdom surrounding the apparent norms governing a country’s relationship to its children is subject to a broad range of energies and at times, indecipherable patterns of thought and reasoning.

Towards Writing Italian Cinema’s Missing Children

If scholars of Italian cinema are to successfully mine or effectively dismiss perceived points of contact between cinematic representations or articulations of the intricate and at times troubling dynamic of the country’s newly politicised demographic profile (including the missing child or bambino negato), it may be no longer sufficient to rehearse a small cluster of now normalised concerns teased from a limited body of secondary sources. Rather, in order to more fully explore the relation between prominent socio-demographic trends and anxieties, and

101 Visetti, p. 1.
their cinematic inflections, a more mobile and expansive approach, akin perhaps to the work of Flavia Laviossa, may be required. This bricolage would not only enhance the analysis of individual film texts, but may also mitigate against the potential for important cinematic works, such as those belonging to the oeuvre of contemporary socially-engaged auteurs (including Nanni Moretti), being cited as a reliable index for recent changes to Italian society.

Whilst these changes include dwindling levels of total fertility in the Italian South, (the result of economic underdevelopment and an unbalanced gender system), they also include the emergent status of fertility as a locus of state control, as the Italian government began in the first years of the last decade (as it had during the fascist Ventennio) to regulate reproductive rights and in so doing, inculcate, ‘the proper way to have children’. Further, the missing child or bambino negato, as proposed by Paul Ginsborg in *Italy and Its Discontents* and as seized upon by Rascaroli, Mazierska, and Paul Sutton, encodes discursive significance, which not only transcends, but is also acutely estranged from the meaning rehearsed in the film-based studies with which this discussion began.

The missing child or bambino negato of Italian society is not only the wished for, though unrealised first or higher order child, but also, more alarmingly, the lost or endangered Italian or immigrant child – the child at risk from malign adult (or parental) interference. Furthermore, these are also the children for whom the adoption process is most likely to break down. Within Italian public discourse, however, the presence of the missing child in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson, what might be considered perhaps, as the dark side of the questione demografica, remains conspicuously hidden and subdued. As public and scholarly attention repeatedly returns to the bambino negato of Italy’s middle classes and the range of hyper-energies within its orbit, concerns surrounding the rising tide of children at risk, necessarily recedes or disappears. The perceived dominance of the figlio unico, may ultimately be read as over-compensating, therefore, for the conspicuously absent ‘other’ child of Italian society.

Whilst my work on the missing middle class male child in Chapter Three will be informed, at least to some degree, by more mainstream concerns, including (some of) those raised in the course of this discussion (contemporary anxieties.

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102 Krause and Marchesi, p. 357.
around biological parenthood rearing, delayed transition to adulthood, Oedipal conflict), my work on *Il ladro di bambini* in Chapter Four, and *La bestia nel cuore* and *L’amore molesto* in Chapter Five, will engage the disquieting and no less unwieldy *topos* of child abuse and maltreatment. By breaking away from dominant modes of criticism and addressing sets of taboo issues (childhood prostitution and incestuous childhood abuse) within a contemporary frame, I intend to disrupt earlier notions surrounding the dominance of the child-centred or infantilised family milieu. This analysis will also be underpinned by recourse to a range of feminist-inspired concerns and exigencies.
CHAPTER THREE

È DIFFICILE DIVENTARE GRANDI IN ITALIA!: THE TRIALS OF BEING AND THE TRAUMAS OF BECOMING IN MARCO TULLIO GIORDANA’S QUANDO SEI NATO NON PUOI PIÙ NASCONDERTI AND NANNI MORETTI’S LA STANZA DEL FIGLIO

Perché devi diventare adulto? Non c’è motivo.¹

At first glance, Nanni Moretti’s La stanza del figlio and Marco Tullio Giordana’s Quando sei nato may seem unlikely, or even perhaps, uneasy bedfellows. Widely hailed as a ‘gripping reflection on death and grieving’,² the former, Moretti’s most critically acclaimed work to date, has also been read as a point of artistic rupture, as a film in which one of Italy’s most celebrated contemporary filmmakers ‘charts a new course’.³ Quando sei nato, unanimously accepted as a work on clandestine immigration, is also recognised for its departures from earlier filmmaking emphases, most notably perhaps, its uncharacteristically contemporary focus. What, then, allows works that manifest such diverse and intractable themes to be so readily brought together in discourse?

Within the context of the present study, the answer substantially lies in a burgeoning awareness that the central drama in both films is fuelled by the ‘missing child’ in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson in Cinema’s Missing Children.⁴ La stanza del figlio and Quando sei nato are works haunted by the spectre of children at risk. They are works, which take as their narrative focus disassembled families and bereaved caretakers. In their exploration of emotional extremes they mobilize questions about the limits of representation, about modes of response to personal trauma, about the expressivity of film as medium of grief and commemoration. Whilst this broad and multi-faceted understanding of the missing child is pivotal to Wilson’s study of this topos within contemporary narrative cinema, this will not be my only concern in the discussion that follows. Rather, in keeping with a determined aim to examine this trope within a more

¹ Nanni Moretti’s on-screen persona ‘Nanni’ in Aprile (1998).
² Bonsaver, ‘Three Colours Italian’, p. 28.
⁴ La stanza del figlio is the final missing child film illuminated in Cinema’s Missing Children.

Further, both films involve a maritime calamity - the sea functioning as the agent of disappearance.
specifically Italian context, I intend to develop a discursive awareness that the missing child in both of the works under discussion encodes significations which move beyond those posited in the final chapter of Wilson’s study. It is my contention here, that the missing middle-class child in *La stanza del figlio* and *Quando sei nato*, may also function to open up a hitherto unidentified space for reflection on the complex relation between parents (or in the case of Moretti’s film, fathers) and children whose threshold (or post-threshold) identities disrupt and destabilise the illusory certainties of parenthood.

In the case of Moretti’s film, I will also attempt to show that the film’s missing child thread also activates hitherto muted discourses within Anglophone scholarship surrounding the filmmaker’s on-screen persona’s delayed assumption of a more unequivocally ‘adult’ persona. In order to evidence the latter, I propose to situate this work within Moretti’s oeuvre, teasing out key and recurring themes, most notably, his unresolved Oedipal complex (a crucial element in my textual of the film). My discussion of Giordana’s *Quando sei nato*, will also be framed empirically, but with greater brevity.

Close textual analysis of both works will be complemented by critical engagement with Slavoj Žižek’s short, yet compelling essay, ‘Fathers, Fathers, Everywhere’ in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*. In terms of the latter, I will argue that in both *La stanza del figlio* and *Quando sei nato* a ‘reenactment’ of the suspension of the symbolic law occurs, whereby the symbolic agency (and therefore the authority) of biological fathers within conspicuously affluent milieux is momentarily (or permanently) destabilised or withdrawn.⁵

*(Inside) the Son’s Room: Oedipal Horizons in the Filmmaking of Nanni Moretti*

Despite an unrivalled ability to polarize critics, to simultaneously elicit bouts of both acerbic disregard as well as abundant adulation, Nanni Moretti’s widely held status as the ‘most important Italian film-maker of the past thirty years’ remains undiminished.⁶ For the mode of cinema he practices, built on the premise of his

chosen art as a counter-cultural (and oft counter-political) institution, finds at its core an incendiary polemic, the very purpose of which has been to kindle a necessary dialogue surrounding both the process (and status) of filmmaking, and no less importantly, the ideas and observations it is called upon to articulate. The career of Italy’s ‘last diva’, an epithet befitting the filmmaker’s ‘charismatic, star-like presence’, began amid the political upheaval of the early 1970s.7 Coming of age in a post-revolutionary atmosphere and as witness therefore to the gradual fading of the ‘left-wing’ ideals championed by the so-called ‘sessantottini’ in the face of the resurgence of a momentarily embattled (but ultimately hegemonic) Italian body politic, Moretti turned to film as the art-form with which he would attempt to capture the *zeitgeist*, to make sense of and outwardly criticise the hopes and aspirations as well as the delusions and contradictions of his shared Roman, left-wing, petit-bourgeois milieu. Breathing new life into a fading comic tradition, drawing on filmic styles from such diverse quarters as film-noir and mock-documentary, and interspersing within his oeuvre elements of the surreal and grotesque, Moretti’s ‘deeply subjective’, self-referential approach to filmmaking soon left onlookers bereft of a suitable category to which this esoteric and no less eccentric strain of filmmaking could be dispatched.8 If this determined hybridity allows his corpus to slip between the cracks of genre and even art-house production, then the homogenizing agent, the ‘glue’ which fixes these works into one coherent mass, is arguably the moral agenda underpinning them. Moretti’s films are, as one critic points out, ‘*legato a un’idea di cinema “morale”, capace di toccare e smuovere le coscienze*’.9

The trio of ‘shorts’, which together form the formative stage of the filmmaker’s career, *La sconfitta* (1973), *Pate de bourgeois* (1973), and *Come parli frate* (1974), rehearse the stylistic and thematic preoccupations that resonate throughout his oeuvre. Shot using the amateur 8mm film known as ‘Super-8’, a medium he would employ for his first feature film and later use to document his treatment for Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in the final episode of *Caro diario*, at once signified that Moretti was a filmmaker, at pains to deliver a self-sufficient,

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7 Deborah Young, ‘Me, Myself, and Italy’, *Film Comment*, (January/February 2002), p. 57.
‘autarchic’ brand of cinema. This cinema would manifest few, if any obvious ties to the so-called grand masters (the ‘maestri’ of Catherine O’Rawe’s Italian Studies article), for whom passing through the hallowed doors of Rome’s Centro Sperimentale Cinematografica had become a vital rite of passage for the fledgling auteur.

The first product of Moretti’s move to feature filmmaking was the aptly titled, *Io sono un autarchio* (1976). Like its predecessors, the film enjoyed the hospitality of Rome’s growing network of cineclubs, including the famous *Filmstudio*. Described as ‘uno degli eventi più significativi del decennio’, *Io sono un autarchio* swings between the fractious private life of the film’s protagonist Michele and a troupe of amateur performers (to which Michele also belongs) who find themselves preparing for an avant-garde theatre production, the calamitous performance of which yields the film’s closing sequence.10 In the meantime Michele undaunted by the double catastrophe of perennial unemployment and the collapse of his marriage appears woefully ill-equipped to service the practical or indeed the emotional needs of his young son, Andrea.11 The filmmaker’s unconventional use of editing (where scenes are brought to an abrupt halt with characters in the throes of speech or movement), the use of unusually long takes, and a spare, amateurish *mise-en-scène*, became emblematic of Moretti’s idiosyncratic filmic style.12 His next film, *Ecce bombo* (1978), confirmed the persistence of a trend within a six film cycle of Moretti casting himself as the serial protagonist Michele Apicella, a sometimes neurotic, often narcissistic, and at times emotionally crippled twenty-something. Charting the trials of four like-minded friends, *Ecce bombo*, which enjoyed considerable critical success, examines failed (or failing) relationships, male self-discovery, and Oedipal conflict, themes which resonate throughout the filmmaker’s corpus. In terms of the latter, Michele, who still lives at home with his parents (another leitmotif of his early corpus), finds himself unable or unwilling to arrest a cycle of interminable conflict with his father.

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11 Andrea is also the name of Moretti’s protagonist’s son in *La stanza del figlio*.
12 The film, like Moretti’s earlier shorts, was shot using Super-8, before later being converted to 16mm, a process necessary to enable the film’s distribution.
In the four films which follow *Ecce bombo*, the filmmaker continues to displace his audience, blurring the wandering boundary between infant and adult sensibilities and frustrating an unproblematic separation between his off-screen identity (as director) and the ‘alter-ego’ within his diegesis, described by Moretti not inaccurately, Bonsaver reminds us, as ‘a narcissistic parody of himself’. The puzzlement caused to critics by the filmmaker’s willful juxtaposition of two selves or personas (that of filmmaker/actor and protagonist) reaches its climax in *Sogni d’oro* (1981), a critically acclaimed but commercially doomed big-budget production in which Moretti casts Michele Apicella as a film director (made famous by his first film) in the midst of a ‘Fellinesque’ creative crisis.

Abandoning the band of students who populated his first two feature films, Moretti chose instead to tease out other elements from his two earlier works, most notably, perhaps, his character’s unresolved Oedipal crisis. This is dramatised both in Michele’s problematic (and at times violent) relationship with the mother with whom he still lives (despite now being in his late twenties) and, more explicitly, in his scripting of a new film ironically titled ‘*La mamma di Freud*’.

With *Bianca* (1984) and *La messa è finita* (1985) Moretti renewed his critique of his petit-bourgeois stratum of Roman society. In the former, a film-*noir* of sorts, Michele is cast as a teacher–serial killer, the film’s narrative tilting between the wryly named Marilyn Monroe School (the acme of social degradation) where Michele works as a hapless maths teacher, and his social milieu, where he attempts to mend the broken relationships of those in his midst. For those couples unable to live up to Michele’s idealised (and ultimately naïve) vision of human relationships, including those involved in extra-marital infidelities, Michele’s response (despite his own dysfunctional intrigue with a fellow teacher, Bianca) is one of murder. Likewise, the stalling propensity among Michele’s peers to produce children (or more than one child) also enrages Moretti’s protagonist. ‘Nessuno fa più figli’, he laments. This sentiment is reiterated when Michele, having been arrested and charged with the murder of his friends (Ignazio and Maria) and several neighbours, is bundled into a police van. ‘È triste morire senza figli’ is the film’s closing fragment of speech. Infused with a burgeoning cluster a

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14 Ibid., p. 164.
15 Moretti’s father was a professor of Classics.
obsessions, Moretti’s serial protagonist was becoming ‘il simbolo di una generazione che vive fra disagi e insofferenze’, the ‘orfana dei sogni infranti dopo gli entusiasmi di un Sessantotto ormai lontano’, or more succinctly, in the words of Milicent Marcus, ‘a social [and generational] signifier’.

In *La messa è finita* (1985), Moretti deploys the clean-shaven Michele as a local priest, Don Giulio. Distressed by his sister’s revelation that their father is having an affair with one of her friends, and her own disclosure that she is considering an abortion, Don Giulio, who like his predecessor in *Bianca* sets himself the task of reversing this perceived moral decline, retreats to the home of the parish’s former priest who, married, and now the father of an only-child, ironically presides over the sort of family he so ardently espouses, one akin that is, to the Holy family. Despite his status as a spiritual father, Don Giulio manifests a series of child-like sensibilities. As in earlier works (and up until *La stanza del figlio*) Moretti’s protagonist embraces a range of child-targeted activities from football (which he plays alone) to the slot-car racing game Scalextric. The death of the priest’s mother in the film’s denouement raises the possibility, however, that Moretti’s serial character may be forced to surrender the range of child-like sensibilities to which he so determinedly clings.

As Moretti returns in *Palombella rossa* (1989) – the final work of the Apicella cycle – to the politically inspired satire with which his career began, we are forced to acknowledge as spectators, however, that the wearisome question surrounding Michele’s transition to adulthood will remain frustratingly unresolved. Indeed, the film, whose action orbits around a seemingly interminable game of water polo, chronicles the gradual return of Moretti’s protagonist’s personal and political memory following a car accident. The apparent death of Michele combined with a radically altered political fabric, namely the ignominious collapse of the First republic and the ascendancy of a coalition of rightist political parties, appeared to arouse in Moretti the desire to embark, at least momentarily, on a more subdued,

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18 By the time of the release of *Palombella rossa* in 1989, Moretti had founded (with the help of his longtime friend Angelo Barbagallo) the production company Sacher Film. The was the first step towards allowing Moretti to exert complete creative control over his output as director, a position he would consolidate with the later creation of the Nuovo Sacher cinema, the Sacher Film Festival (which promotes emerging directors) and the Tandem distribution company (all of which are based in Rome).
even austere approach to his art; to engage more directly – to document that is –
events in the life of his country and, indeed, also those in his own life. His gaze,
as Brunetta suggests, ‘sembra acquisire progressivamente nuove profondità e
una diversa e più matura conoscenza delle cose e apertura agli altri.\(^{19}\)

Following La cosa (1990), a documentary which records the debates taking
place among grassroots members of the Italian Communist Party in the wake of
the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, and their search for a new identity (the
party was literally nameless), Moretti reappeared before the camera in the
critically acclaimed Caro diario as ‘Nanni’, an authentic or at least closer
approximation, we should assume, of the filmmaker’s ‘true’ self. Aprile, released
in 1996, constitutes the final work within this ‘documentary’ or ‘essayistic’ strand
of filmmaking, before Moretti’s return to the more familiar mode of narrative
cinema. Inspired, we may assume, by the filmmaking of Michael Moore and,
closer to home, by works such Federico Fellini’s Intervista, with whom Moretti’s
earlier critique (and caricature) of his peers has drawn obvious comparison, the
filmmaker resumes the sort of ferocious satire with which the Apicella cycle
became so closely identified.\(^{20}\) Aprile captures a series of important events in the
life of the author (the birth of his first child Pietro) and the life of the Republic (the
electoral victory of Silvio Berlusconi and later Roman Prodi), all of which appear
as a series of vital digressions from Nanni’s original expressed aim of making a
period film about Trotskyite past
\(^{21}\)”

Re-evoking the ‘autobiographical effect’
he so successfully establishes in Caro diario, the film, whose action spans the
years 1994–6, tracks between seismic political shifts and Moretti’s newly found
status as a father.\(^{22}\) In terms of the latter, many of the ideals so forcefully (and at
times aggressively) espoused by Michele Apicella are absorbed into Moretti’s
diegesis as he constructs scenes (almost entirely between ‘Nanni’ and Pietro)
striking in their harmonious cinematic rendering of a new parent bonding with his
newborn (and then infant) son. Despite Nanni’s growing awareness of the world
around him, the crucial question surrounding his leaving behind of the child-self,

\(^{19}\) Brunetta, p. 336.
\(^{20}\) Michael Moore’s Roger and Me (1989) documents both the social crisis precipitated by the
closure of the General Motors car plants in Flint, Michigan, and Moore’s attempts to secure an
interview with GM’s then CEO, Roger Smith.
\(^{21}\) This is finally realized and constitutes the film’s closing sequence.
\(^{22}\) Mazierska and Rascaroli, The Cinema of Nanni Moretti, p. 17.
his crossing of the threshold into ‘adulthood’, raised by the death of his mother in *La messa è finita* and Michele’s demise in *Palombella rossa*, is finally answered. Littered with references to the Oedipal struggle which constituted such a dominant (and at times overbearing) presence in his earlier films, his Freudian inspired, irony-induced voice-over, ‘Nanni non capiva perché il figlio volesse stare con la mamma e non con il papà’, and the diegetic presence of Moretti’s own mother Agata Apicella, Morretti’s on-screen persona continues to be thwarted by an insoluble infantilism. This is articulated in his resurgent narcissism, his phobias and obsessions (such as a recurring shoe fetish), and most importantly perhaps, the defiant inquiry: ‘perché devi diventare adulto? Non c’è motivo’.

**La stanza del figlio**

It was against this rich and illustrious backdrop that *La stanza del figlio* was unreservedly welcomed onto the international stage in 2001. Winning the Palm d’or at Cannes – the first Italian film in twenty-three years to do so – rousing its audience to six minutes of applause after its gala performance, and enjoying the sort of global distribution that eluded many of his earlier works, the film’s success confirmed Moretti’s emergent status as a cinematic presence of international standing. Widely perceived as a point of departure, as a breaking away from the earlier cycles of thematically and stylistically referential works within his oeuvre, *La stanza del figlio* has been read as a major turning point in the career of a director for whom twists and turns, creative metamorphoses, often unanticipated by critics, have become commonplace. Prefacing a *Sight and Sound* interview prior to the film’s UK release, Guido Bonsaver writes, for example, that *La stanza del figlio* is the ‘most unMorettian work’ of the filmmaker’s career. Deborah Young, in a much a cited article for the American journal *Film Comment*, follows suit. *La stanza del figlio*, she contends, ‘marks a radical break on nearly every level’.

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25 Deborah Young, ‘Me, Myself and Italy’, p. 61.
The film generated and continues to generate similar consensus in terms of the themes and concerns it has been seen to address. As we know from the Introduction, *La stanza del figlio*, orbiting as it does, around the sudden death of a teenage son, is one of a cluster of films which belong to her proposed missing child genre in contemporary narrative cinema. The film’s timely appearance, Wilson reminds us, ‘confirms the persistence of a trend of films which, in very different ways, look at missing or dead children, malign or mourning parents and disassembled families’. The film, Wilson writes, ‘allows the viewer to sense the impact as well as the continued interest of the topos of the missing child’.

Echoing Wilson’s reading of the film, Henry Taylor productively compares *La stanza del figlio* with Todd Fielding’s *In the Bedroom*. The former, he asserts, is ‘a humanist study of loss and grief in an affluent Italian family’. ‘Psychoanalytically structured’, it is ‘a story of trauma and its working through’. Finally, as the filmmaker himself, observes, *La stanza del figlio*, ‘is above all a film about life, about love, about emotions we might all feel’.

Before attempting to forge a more pluralistic filmic identity for Moretti’s film, let us first examine the ‘family trauma’ element of the film’s narrative. As I will show in the second part of my discussion, this crucial element of the film’s plot and storyline also intersects with parallel narrative concerns in Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato*.

**Entering the Son’s Room**

As the analysis offered by Taylor, Wilson, and numerous other (largely Anglophone) critics rightfully suggest, Moretti’s first foray into the field ‘of classical narrative drama’ derives its narrative impetus from the sudden disappearance from an otherwise (at least ostensibly) idyllic familyscape, of an only son, the seventeen-year-old Andrea, and the fraught attempts made by his grief-stricken parents to assuage their profound sense of loss, to somehow attempt to come to

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26 This critical consensus largely resides within a growing body of Anglo-American scholarship.
27 Wilson, p. 139.
29 Nanni Moretti, quoted in Bonsaver, ‘Three Colours Italian’, p. 28.
terms with, or in the psychoanalytic lexicon ‘work through’, their traumatic encounter with the Real.\footnote{Deborah Young, ‘First Look: The Son’s Room’, p. 14.} This always already gripping reflection on death and grieving is intensified, its dramatic impact heightened, by the bitter knowledge that the diving expedition during which Andrea drowns (having followed a fish into a cave) had replaced a planned encounter between the teenager and his father, a meeting abruptly cancelled to allow Moretti’s protagonist, a successful mid-career psychoanalyst, to undertake an impromptu visit to Oscar, a suicidal patient (played by Silvio Orlando). According to the logic of the filmmaker’s accidental universe, the maritime tragedy, which results in the death of Andrea, could have been easily avoided.

The post-death strand of the film’s narrative is made all the more relentless by the filmmaker’s earlier painstaking construction of a family portraiture read, although not unproblematically, as I will show later, by one critic, and repeatedly, if less flamboyantly by many others, as ‘one of the happiest families in screen history’. The Sermonti family, we are told, ‘makes the Cleaver family look dysfunctional’. The teenagers are ‘angelic’, ‘Andrea is one big smile’.\footnote{Ibid.} Finally, as Laura Rascaroli and Ewa Mazierska contend, Moretti has taken ‘the perfect family which in \textit{Aprile} is only being formed and now seems as solid as a rock and tests its strength and health by inflicting on it a dreadful tragedy’.\footnote{Mazierska and Rascaroli, \textit{The Cinema of Nanni Moretti}, p. 80.}

Whilst Moretti was clearly at pains to ensure that numerous scenes and sequences unfold with the Sermonti family in its entirety (the car scene in which the family sing together is a good example of this) the discourse of harmony which swirls around them, appears to largely rely for its substance, on the triangular grouping of Giovanni, Andrea, and his sibling, Irene. Returning to the earlier discourse surrounding \textit{La stanza del figlio’s} status as a moment of rupture in Moretti’s development as artist, the calculated naming of this ‘new’ onscreen persona, ‘Giovanni’, which immediately aligns him with the director (Nanni is the shortened form of Giovanni), has led (some) critics, to attempt to place this apparently ‘new’ protagonist within the continuum of Moretti’s earlier repertoire of (self-parodying) protagonists. As the logic of the film’s critical reception may lead us to expect, however, Giovanni Sermonti has been widely perceived, to borrow
phrasing cited earlier by Bonsaver, as his most ‘unMorettian’ protagonist. This judgment is based both on his ‘idyllically contented’ appearance and, as we know already, on the critically perceived health of his relations with those who surround him, most notably of course, with his children. Whilst the film’s opening sequence, which focuses on Giovanni jogging before introducing a troupe of Hare Krishna, add weight to the perception of this Arcadian fantasy, free as it is of dissonance and strife, then a brief survey of the critically acknowledged quality of family relations also chimes with this perception: Giovanni is ‘at ease in his role as father’, one critic writes. He is ‘a caring, blameless father’. Finally, crystallising the analysis of a swathe of (largely Anglo–American) critics and scholars, Paul Kemp observers, that ‘it all seems too good to be true’.33

It is unsurprising, therefore, that having assembled a pristine family milieu, the Sermonti’s post-traumatic response to the tragic death of Andrea should be one of profound suffering, of seismic grief. These are parents, who unlike their (biological) counterparts in the next chapter of this study, care deeply about their children. As the shockwaves activated by Andrea’s sudden demise ripple through the tightly interwoven fabric of intra-family relations, we as an audience encounter the sudden fraying, the troubling disintegration of this pristine structure. In an interview conducted shortly after the film’s release, Moretti makes available his view that, contrary to conventional wisdom, bereavement is a tragically solitary experience. In making La stanza del figlio, he asserts: ‘Ho voluto raccontare come il dolore divide anziché unire’.34 In the immediate aftermath of Andrea’s death, Moretti draws on this earlier perception, dispatching each of the remaining family members to different spatial zones within their substantial Anconan apartment linked to and from each other by a series of labyrinthine passageways and corridors.35 Within this carefully devised spatial economy, doorframes provide symbolic exit or entry points, thresholds to private emotional spaces or realms of individual (rather than collective) mourning.

35 During the making of the film, Moretti’s set designer removed the walls separating two neighbouring apartments in order to create this labyrinthine effect.
The protracted three-shot of the surviving members of the Sermonti family wrapped in each others arms, forming one, amalgamated whole having returned from the hospital), is the film’s only image of a family united in grief. Having crossed the threshold of the space most closely associated with the family, this momentarily unified configuration will fragment. For Paola, the marital bedroom, with its array of comforting structures (cushions, a soft mattress), becomes the site of her working through. It is here that the horror her of son’s death will be confronted. In one scene, she is shown curled up in a fetus-like position on the marital bed. Her prolonged cries ricochet from wall to wall, room to room, eventually being heard through the network of otherwise segregated spatial zones of the grandiose apartment. Irene is dispatched to the kitchen, where she attempts to initiate some semblance of normality, by resuming the norms and traditions of the family. On the morning following her brother’s death, it is she who prepares breakfast, an offering politely rejected by both of her parents. The kitchen, its surfaces loaded with cups and plates, and the table once alive with frenetic family activity will remain strikingly dormant.

As an audience already familiar with Moretti’s decidedly self-referential mode of cinematic storytelling, it is perhaps unsurprising that the predominant focus in this post-death stand of the film’s narrative falls on his protagonist, Giovanni. In contrast to Paola and Irene who are placed within familiar spaces of the home, Moretti positions Giovanni in locales beyond the confines of domestic interiors. The first of these ‘outside’ or extra-familial spaces is a fairground. Its cacophony of continuous and competing sounds and visually disorienting distractions (such as garish neon lighting) are at once at odds with the silence of the family kitchen, of the stillness of its shared space. Indeed, whilst scholars, including Emma Wilson, have called attention to the filmmaker’s foregounding of the practical rituals of bereavement – the scene involving Andrea’s coffin is exemplary in this regard – he also homes-in (as Wilson acknowledges) on ‘the mind and its suffering’, of the ‘mental sensations which accompany such swingeing grief’. The fairground sequence works, then, to provide a cinematic portal into Giovanni’s ‘interior’ landscape. Similarly, Taylor’s analysis, echoing Wilson’s interest in the ‘probable belatedness and indirectness of responses to traumatic

36 Wilson, p. 144.
loss’, addresses film’s status as a medium ably equipped to evoke the visual and aural rendering of psychic trauma. The author flags, for example, the film’s formal emphasis on non-linear repetition. Structurally, Giovanni’s traumatic response to Andrea’s death is ‘like a record stuck in a groove’, he writes. This is reflected in the wish-fulfilling, or fantasy images, which recur throughout the second and third of the film’s acts. Giovanni’s obsessive return to an extract from Michael Nyman’s Water Dances offers a powerful reminder of this tendency. As Flavio De Bernardinis explains: ‘Giovanni blocca la musica e la fa tornare indietro per cinque secondi, all’infinito. Ma la musica rimane sempre la stessa.’ Nanni’s attempt to disclose the tragic news to a family friend, Valerio, whilst in the hospital waiting room (a scene at reminiscent, perhaps, of Nanni spreading the news of Pietro’s birth in Apriile), is thwarted by the expressive void created by the event. Unable to verbalise, to put into words, the tragic news, he replaces the telephone receiver repeating the words ‘volevo dirti che, volevo dirti…’. Likewise, his repeated attempts to write to Arianna, the teenage girl with whom Andrea had enjoyed a fleeting yet highly symbolic romantic intrigue, amount to little more than false starts and doodles. Later, it is Giovanni’s consulting room, isolated from the main social hub of the family home by the network of corridors touched upon above which provides the space in which this bereaved and unremittingly self-berating father, having repeatedly albeit often temporarily secured the mental wellbeing of his many patients, unsuccessfully attempts to give expression to, to transcend the immediacy of his own profound sense of suffering. If, as Paul Kemp observes, Paola and Irene ‘externalise their grief’ (lachrymosity on the part of Paola and aggression at a basketball game on the part of Irene), Giovanni’s post-traumatic response to the loss of his son, is one of interiorisation. 

Re-entering at the Son’s Room

Having acknowledged and necessarily participated in the discursive privileging of the post-death strand of La stanza del figlio’s narrative, I now propose to make

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37 Wilson, p. 143.
38 Taylor, p. 39.
40 Kemp, p. 56.
available a further reading of Moretti’s film. The analysis which follows, may be
seen to address a gnawing sense that the filmmaker may, at least to some
degree, have duped (some of) his critics; that when situated within the broader
frame of his earlier corpus (surveyed in the first part of this chapter) and in
relation to the foremost themes and concerns present throughout his ouevre, La
stanza del figlio may be read in light of other concerns. In the discussion that
follows, I will supplement conventional wisdom, competent though it is, by
questioning whether Moretti’s ‘missing child’ may encode other, less readily
conspicuous significations. By calling attention to the work of several non-Anglo
scholars and by peeling away and ‘freely associating’, oft compartmentalised
layers of its narrative (and flagging their relation to other works) I intend to work
towards according La stanza del figlio a decidedly more nuanced filmic identity
than is currently available within Anglo discourse.

With this potentially troublesome critical stance in mind, I will begin the next
part of this discussion with the following tentative proposition: La stanza del figlio
is not only a film which (drawing on the expressivity of the medium of film)
chronicles the post-traumatic response, the ‘working through’ of an erstwhile
‘pristine’ family forced to contend with the death of a son (and brother), it is also a
film, which developing (and ultimately concluding) the thematic preoccupations
visible throughout the filmmaker’s oeuvre, may dramatise Moretti’s on-screen
persona’s failed attempts to postpone his son’s (and ultimately his own) transition
to ‘adulthood’. Giovanni’s profound psychic disturbance may also arise therefore,
from the character’s fraught awareness surrounding Andrea’s unsanctioned
crossing of a developmental threshold which will ultimately lead to the gradual
dissolution of harmonious family grouping in its child-centered configuration.

But what, might we ask, is the starting point for a thesis of this kind? What
are the traces, the fragments of evidence, which allow for the assembling of this
critical vantage point? The first stage in developing a more nuanced filmic identity
for Moretti’s work lies in fostering an awareness that it is perhaps not, after all, a
‘point of artistic rupture’ a ‘radical break on nearly every level’, but a film of
assimilation and retrospection. La stanza del figlio is a film in which those
recurring narrative elements and thematic concerns identified in Moretti’s earlier
work (unresolved Oedipal conflict, psychoanalysis, a residual infantilism or ‘long
adolescence’, the quest for the perfect family, fatherhood, the alleviation of suffering) may be seen to return.

This is illustrated, as the Italian critic Flavio De Berardinis notes, in the eclectic array of patients Giovanni encounters during his role as psychoanalyst. They are, as De Bernadinis points out:

Personaggi provenienti dai precedenti film [di Moretti]. La giovane donna paranoica delle date, dell’igiene e degli orari arriva da Bianca; il paziente che tutto rimuove e dimentica una volta entrato nello studio da Palombella rossa. Oscar malato di tumore, naturalmente, da Caro Diario; il paziente turbato, cupo, con lo sguardo smarrito da Ecce Bombo.\(^{41}\)

Likewise, Moretti himself, disrupting normative approaches to the film (within largely anglo-American criticism), manifests many of the character traits visible in the on-screen personas which precede Giovanni. Whilst we find as one critic observes, ‘il bicchiere d’acqua, le canzoni italiane, la camicia a quadri’, we also bear witness as an audience to Moretti’s protagonist’s residual shoe fetish.\(^{42}\) A latent narcissism sees him regularly overpower conversations with his wife, Paola, and his children. Further, his love of popular music leads to an uncomfortable rendition of the song that also appears at the end of La messa è finita. Finally, he responds to the death of his son in a manner which causes Laura to accuse him of cultivating ‘soltanto le proprie ossessione’. In short, Giovanni is not Moretti’s most unMorettian protagonist, but like the film itself, a synthesis of his earlier embodiments.\(^{43}\)

What interests me above all, are Giovanni’s interactions with his son, all of which occur in the film’s critically neglected ‘first act’. At odds with the widely held contention that Giovanni is ‘balanced and contented’ and that his relationship with his children is nothing less than ‘warm and relaxed’, there is some evidence to suggest that Giovanni, in keeping with the obsessive, narcissistic sensibilities adopted by Moretti’s on-screen persona in earlier works, is in fact an over-bearing and possessive father, character traits effaced or ‘camouflaged’ it would seem, by the cloak of ‘normality’ he wears in his role as psychoanalyst, the purveyor and indeed the arbiter of existential bliss.\(^{44}\) Whilst Giovanni’s

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\(^{41}\) De Bernardinis, p. 160.
\(^{42}\) This surfaces during a daydream.
\(^{43}\) De Bernardinis, p. 157.
\(^{44}\) Kemp, p. 56.
interactions with his teenage daughter Irene do provide a momentary glimpse of a seemingly more balanced or restrained father-figure, his relationship with Andrea, who at the age of seventeen tentatively occupies what might be termed a ‘threshold identity’, poised as he is between late adolescence and adulthood, is marred by interference and over-possessiveness. The latter appears to reside in the naïve desire to arrest, or least frustrate, his son’s autonomous, extra-familial development, to become in Moretti’s terms, ‘autarchic’.

This is most clearly evidenced in Giovanni’s determined aim to restrict his son’s autonomous movement within space, to limit Andrea’s physical movements to a prescribed set of spatial co-ordinates. In one of the film’s early sequences, for example, Giovanni and Andrea are seen walking together in Ancona’s historic centre before passing through a bookshop. Whilst this sequence may legitimately be read as an innocuous, even bland, weekend pastime, Moretti ensures that the physical inseparability of father and son, their umbilical connection, visually cued by Giovanni’s literal grasp of his Andrea’s arm, allows the scene to be read differently, as an encounter which may encode a more nuanced signification. Likewise, Giovanni’s attempts to prize the teenager from his friendship group on the morning of the diving accident, one of many such acts, we should assume, further evidences Giovanni’s fervent desire to keep Andrea in stiflingly close proximity to him. As one critic comments, ‘Giovanni lo esorta a rimandare l’impegno e a restare con lui per il consueto footing’.45

Over-possessiveness and over-involvement as well as a burgeoning disappointment surrounding Andrea’s lacklustre sporting performances (a lack of prowess residing as it does in his lack of competitive spirit) are the key characteristics, then, of Moretti’s father–son portraiture in the moments leading up to film’s maritime tragedy. Contrary to the opinion of those critics who argue that Moretti’s film ‘is a vacanza from social reality’, does this dynamic not represent a notable point of contact between La stanza del figlio and the middle-class stratum of society with which he has been seen to represent, theorised for parents’ propensity for exerting a braking influence on the individuation of

45 De Bernardinis, p. 150.
children in their passage to the realm of adult responsibility, or what Slavoj Žižek terms ‘the universe of social reality with its harsh demands’\(^\text{46}\)

The work of Žižek, as the quotation called upon above suggests, may provide another, albeit more theoretical, slant on this element within the father–son relationship in Moretti’s film. In his article ‘Fathers, Fathers, Everywhere’, the author, offering a compact, if compelling, reading of Lacan’s post-structuralist remodeling of Freud’s theorisation of the Oedipus complex, namely the male child’s entry into language and the Symbolic Order (which is based on language, the ‘Law of the Father’) brings together two works in which fathers suspend the agency of the symbolic law (paternal authority). The films in question, Roberto Benigni’s \textit{La vita è bella} (1997) and Thomas Vinterberg’s \textit{Celebration} (1998), address, albeit in contrasting ways, ‘what happens when the Symbolic Law loses its efficiency’, when, in the words of Žižek, ‘it no longer properly functions’. While Vintenberg deploys the sadistic figure of the rapist father, who derives perverse enjoyment from abusing his position (as father) and operating therefore ‘outside the constraints of (Symbolic) Law’, in Benigni’s dramatisation of the Holocaust, Guido, the film’s protagonist (also played by Benigni), adopts the improvised creative strategy of \textit{shielding} his son from the trauma of the concentration camp by presenting life in the \textit{Lager} as a staged, point-scoring competition. The ultimate prize of this competition, Žižek reminds us, is a tank, the child’s dream possession. Thus:

\[\ldots\] both [fathers] \textit{suspend the agency of the symbolic Law/Prohibition}, i.e., the paternal agency whose function is to introduce the child into the universe of social reality with its harsh demands, to which the child is exposed without any maternal protective shield: Benigni’s father offers the imaginary shield against the traumatic encounter of social reality, while Vinterberg’s rapist father is also a father \textit{outside the constraints of the (symbolic) Law} enjoying access to full enjoyment. The two fathers thus fit the Lacanian opposition between the Imaginary and the Real: Benigni’s as the protector of an imaginary safety, against Vintenberg’s as a definition of the brutality of the Real of lawless violence.\(^\text{47}\)

Within the context of this discussion, the question which arises, is whether a \textit{similar} suspension of the symbolic may be seen to be taking place in \textit{La stanza del figlio}, whether Giovanni, in his attempts, for example, to maintain his son’s


\(^{47}\) Žižek, \textit{The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime}, p. 31.
stiffly close spatial proximity to him, is in fact consciously (or even unconsciously) attempting to reenact this suspension of the symbolic and forestall his son’s entry into the ‘universe of social reality with its harsh demands’?\textsuperscript{48} But how could we evidence such a claim, beyond that is, the limits of the film’s spatial economy?

One answer may lie, if in characteristically hidden form, in the curious incident involving the fossil, an event, the aftershocks of which resonate throughout the film’s first act. Recasting Wilson’s claim that the fossil debacle is used by Moretti, ‘to establish Giovanni’s role as a caring, fair and non-judgmental parent’ and those readings which position this incongruous episode as a rehearsal for the greater tragedy of Andrea’s death, does this incident not also provide the clearest example yet of Giovanni’s desire to forestall Andrea’s entry into the universe of social reality, to spare his son its ‘harsh demands’?

By punctiliously attending (and jointly presiding over) the meeting held at the family home of Stefano, the pupil who accused Andrea (and his alleged accomplice Luciano) of stealing the fossil (a journey which involves the return to Spinaceto of Caro diario), Giovanni is able, in the company of the other fathers, to cast sufficient doubt on the authenticity of Stefano’s testimony, that his reliability (as witness) is called into question. Giovanni’s presence at an event which bears at least some of the hallmarks of an inquest, a ‘trial’ of sorts (he tells Paola that he is going ‘per capire che successo veramente’, and to hear ‘che dicono gli altri’), allows for the evidence given by Stefano to be rehearsed, for him, in the juridical lexicon, to be ‘cross-examined’, and ultimately discredited by this panel of judicious fathers.\textsuperscript{49} In so doing, Andrea, the real culprit of the over-zealously named ‘furto’, sees his earlier conviction overturned and his (paternally perceived) innocence restored. He will not pay the real price for this minor yet highly symbolic act of rebellion (which should be read as an attempt to claim the burgeoning agency denied him by Giovanni): direct conflict with his father and the consequent disruption of seemingly harmonious filial (and familial) relations. The agency of the Symbolic in the terms outlined by Žižek in his glossing of Lacan has, it would seem, been suspended.

\textsuperscript{48} The ultimate aim of this ‘braking’ strategy, as touched upon already, would be to freeze his family in its (current) idealised, unadulterated configuration.

\textsuperscript{49} Moretti’s protagonist dresses in a smart jacket and collared shirt and tie.
The corollary of Giovanni’s participation in the restitution of Andrea’s innocence, is not only that his son is spared the harsh demands or consequences of ‘social reality’, but that Moretti’s on-screen persona, having reasserted his role as protective agent, ensures the perpetuation of the idyllic landscape of intra-familial relations, the ‘armonia in casa’, which so eluded him in many of his earlier narrative works. As Mazierska and Rascaroli remind us: ‘The pursuit of having a ‘perfect family’ which at a certain stage simply comes to mean a ‘normal family’ is the main quest for Moretti’s males’. The ultimate aim of this ‘braking’ strategy, then, would be to enact a necessary stasis, to ‘freeze’ his family in its (current) idealised, unadulterated (and infantilized) configuration.

There is, of course, something deeply narcissistic in Giovanni’s redemptive strategy. In contrast to the protective father of Benigni’s film, who concocts the tank charade to protect his son (rather than solely himself) from certain death, are we to read Giovanni’s act of protection, as one, which in light of Andrea’s earlier admission of guilt (he later discloses to his mother that he didn’t tell his father because ‘lui era contento’), benefits only him? Are we to deduce, therefore, that Giovanni was in fact ultimately attempting to spare himself the harsh demands of social reality? Before turning to the latter, however, let us address the possible purpose of Giovanni’s braking strategy.

Andrea, as is posthumously revealed following the arrival of Arianna’s letter (and the girl herself), had, unbeknown to Giovanni, already secured an agency and autonomy of his own, symbolised by his fleeting relationship with this mythically named teenager; his umbilical connection to his father (and to his family) had already been severed. As becomes clear in the photographs posthumously viewed following Arianna’s arrival at the family home, a world separate from the nuclear family was already his. Returning to the Lacanian thread with which this part of my discussion began, all that Giovanni actually accomplishes, beyond momentarily securing his own existential bliss, we may conclude, is the work of symbolic castration (by ensuring his son’s attachment to him). Andrea’s sub-aquatic immersion in the baptismal waters of the Adriatic, his disappearance into and subsequent reappearance (in altered form) from the

50 Mazierska and Rascaroli, The Cinema of Nanni Moretti, p. 84.
womb-like structure of the grotto into which, in pursuit of an object of his desire, he so eagerly swam (as well as his bonding with a female other) come then, to symbolize this act of transition, the arrival of autonomy and with it a painful, though inevitable, separation from his father.

This analysis, informed by what might be termed the ‘free association’ of erstwhile compartmentalised elements of the film’s narrative, may be taken one step further, another possible meaning of the ‘missing child’ in Moretti’s film may have yet to be found. Indeed, returning to and addressing the tentative claim made above, that by restoring Andrea’s innocence, Giovanni may be attempting to forestall his own transition into the realm of adult responsibility and with it its ‘harsh demands’, let us expand this analysis to suggest that La stanza del figlio, may, within the context of the present discussion also be read as a film which dramatises Moretti’s on-screen persona’s fraught relinquishing of his own child/adolescent self. The latter is symbolised by Andrea who is positioned in stiflingly close, even at times inseparable proximity to him.51

Following this path, La stanza del figlio is the final, albeit delayed, rite of passage and the requiem for the child-self, which so forcefully invades both the Apicella cycle of films and mock-documentary works such as Caro diario and Aprile. As Aspesi observes: ‘la morte del figlio significherebbe che il Moretti adulto si libera definitivamente, sia pure con grande dolore, della propria adolescenza’.52 By gathering together the narrative threads, concerns, and character traits (dramatised by the motley crew of patients who pass though his practice) which peppered his earlier works, including of course a resurgent narcissism, Moretti, linking the medium of film to the process of psychoanalysis itself is able to reluctantly address, work through and ultimately purge the Oedipal tendencies to which his on-screen persona has so fervently clung throughout his earlier waves of filmmaking. It is no coincidence, I should add, that in his subsequent films Il Caimano (2006) and Habermus Papam (2011) Moretti’s protagonist is played for the first time, not by Moretti, but by someone else. Having straddled the seemingly porous border between infantilism and adulthood,

51 We are also reminded that the name of Moretti’s protagonist’s son in his first film, Io sono un autarchio, is Andrea.
52 Aspesi, p. 28.
Moretti’s on-screen persona may have finally (albeit reluctantly) accepted the mantle of a new, unequivocally ‘adult’ identity.

Whilst the crossing of this border is ultimately symbolised, as posited already, by the death of Andrea, there are, littered within the film’s diegesis, other fragments of evidence which, when excavated, add weight to this claim. Several such fragments lie in the bedroom sequence which immediately follows Giovanni’s (illusory) resolution of the fossil debacle. It is during this sequence that for the first time in Moretti’s filmmaking career his on-screen persona is shown in the throes of lovemaking. The scene in question occurs between Moretti’s protagonist and a character played by the same actress (Laura Morante) who played the role of Bianca in the eponymously titled noir of sorts. Should this scene then be read, perhaps, as signifying the belated completion of Moretti’s on-screen persona’s Oedipal trajectory, his belated bonding with a female ‘other’? Likewise, does the filmmaker’s intertextual deployment of Raymond Carver’s poem The Toes, a stanza of which is read aloud by Giovanni in the run up to his sexual liaison with Paola, also indicate that Moretti’s protagonist is aware, even subconsciously perhaps, that his adolescent zeal, championed (and guarded) so over-zealously by him, is beginning to fade? The poem’s explicit reference to dancing, one of Moretti’s on-screen persona’s most treasured pastimes (Jennifer Beals from Adrian Lyne’s Flashdance (1983) appears in Caro diario, for example), could also be seen perhaps, to bolster this claim, as this extended excerpt from the poem illustrates:

What in hell is going on?
What kind of toes are these
that nothing matters any longer?
Are these really my

What in hell is going on?
What kind of toes are these
that nothing matters any longer?
Are these really my
toes? Have they forgotten
the old days, what it was like
being alive then? Always first
on line, first onto the dance floor
when the music started.
First to kick up their heels.
Look at them. No, don’t.
You don’t want to see them,
those slugs. It’s only with pain
and difficulty they can recall
the other times, the good times.
Maybe what they really want
is to sever all connection
with the old life, start over,
go underground, live alone
in a retirement manor
somewhere in the Yakima Valley.\textsuperscript{53}

Whilst the lovemaking scene between Giovanni and Paola, and Giovanni’s reading aloud of Raymond Carver’s wistful recollection of lost youth appear to evidence the claims made above surrounding the demise of Moretti’s on-screen persona’s (oft infantilised) former self, there is, however, one other vital shard of evidence buried within the sediment of the film’s narrative which, I would argue, deserves careful analysis. The fragment in question is linked to Giovanni’s car, an object which has been widely theorised as corresponding to, and as enabling (passing as it does through a series of thresholds) the Sermonti family’s tentative working through of Andrea’s death. Although this reading is consonant with our first level of textual analysis surrounding \textit{La stanza del figlio’s} status as a story of family trauma, there is also a sense among Italian scholars that this car (and the journey to the French border it enables) may also be seen to play a decisive role in activating alternative discursive trajectories such as the one outlined above. Flavio De Bernardinis writes, for example, that: ‘su quell’automobile, in ogni modo, viaggia tutto il cinema di Nanni Moretti’.\textsuperscript{54} This observation more specifically originates in the seven letters and numerals which together form the car’s number plate: AP57AP. At first glance, we are reminded of course of the surname of Moretti’s serial protagonist Michele Apicella, a surname taken not insignificantly (in view of Michele’s erstwhile unresolved Oedipal conflict) from his own mother, Agata Apicella Moretti. Likewise, the numerals 5 and 7, which respectively constitute the number of letters required to form the forename and surname of the filmmaker, Nanni Moretti, and/or his cinematic alter-ego, Michele, combined with earlier Apicella association, confirm perhaps, the premise on which this discussion is founded: that this film, like the car which transports Giovanni (and his remaining family members) to and across the border (the

\textsuperscript{54} Bernardinis, p. 163.
threshold) of another country (the first of many such journeys in films engaged in the present thesis), is the vehicle with which Moretti, inseparable as he at times appears from the protagonists he foregrounds, has chosen to negotiate his fraught separation from a self, blighted as it was by unresolved Oedipal tendencies and insoluble infantilism. As we conclude this part of our discussion, we, as spectators, are faced with a fraught awareness that La stanza del figlio, a film which during the course of my discussion has come, perhaps, to resemble the process of psychoanalysis itself, is about a missing child, about a disassembled family and emotional extremes, but not only in the terms foregrounded in largely Anglo discourse. By examining the film in relation to Moretti’s persistent interest in the middle-class nuclear family (and his on-screen persona’s Oedipal trajectory), I have been able to shed new light on this canonical work and on the missing child paradigm.

Having examined the range of (possible) resonances surrounding the figure of the ‘missing child’ in Nanni Moretti’s La stanza del figlio, a film whose reception has been largely conditioned by the non-awareness and to a far lesser extent (in Anglophone criticism) the awareness of Morettian specificities, I will turn to Marco Tullio Giordana’s Quando sei nato. Despite being widely read as a work which engages with the sensitive issue of clandestine migrancy, it also manifests potentially productive and erstwhile untapped points of convergence with La stanza del figlio, and even perhaps with concerns and anxieties within the Italian society at large. I propose to frame this part of my discussion (as in all three of my film-based chapters) by examining Giordana’s importance within the panorama of contemporary Italian cinema before locating Quando sei nato within the longer continuum of his corpus.

Marco Tullio Giordana and the Cinema of ‘impegno civile’

Born into a middle-class Milanese family in 1950, Marco Tullio Giordana, separated in age from Moretti by the crucial margin of almost half a decade, was one of the so-called ‘fratelli maggiori’, the generation of Italians who, coming of age during the events of 1968, were able to actively participate in, to be
‘protagonists’ of, the cultural revolution that this attempted changing of the ‘old guard’ set in motion. Having forged his post-adolescent sensibilities in the politicised and at times anarchic atmosphere of protest and activism, and schooled in the cultural pronouncements (voiced in essays, journalism, poetry, and films) of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Giordana, like Moretti, turned to film as the art form through which he would attempt to channel his creative energies. Sharing with Moretti the theoretically fraught description of his filmmaking paradigm as socially and politically committed, as ‘impegnato’ to borrow the Italian rubric also used within Anglo scholarship, Giordana, despite adopting a profoundly more subdued and conventional approach to cinematic storytelling, is understood to be ‘fra i pochi contemporanei che intendono il cinema come indispensabile strumento di analisi, critica e divulgazione della storia’.\textsuperscript{55}

Having actively participated in the mass uprisings of 1968, Giordana funneled his ‘intense esperienze politiche’ into a range of film-based projects.\textsuperscript{56} His first film, \textit{Forza Italia!} (1977), jointly made with Roberto Faenza, chronicles the deleterious impact of more than two decades of Christian Democrat hegemony on the Italian post-war body politic. This low-budget production paved the way for a cinema that was not only ‘committed’ but also indebted to the political events spanning the years in which his intellectual (and creative) sensibilities were sharpened. Having alerted critics to his status as a fledgling director ‘attento alle realtà politiche sociali del suo paese’, Giordana began, like Moretti, albeit in less sardonic (and surrealist) terms, to ‘esplorare le zone oscure dei mito’ of his generation.\textsuperscript{57} His first feature film \textit{Maledetti, vi amerò} (1979), made in conjunction with Film Alpha and RAI-TV (the first of many such collaborations) dramatises the return from self-imposed exile of an ‘ex-sessantino’ (Riccardo, played by Flavio Bucci) to his drug-filled, corrupt, and aggressively consumerist Milanese social milieu. Described by one critic as an ‘amara riflessione sulla generazione del ’68 italiano, sbalestrata dalla delusione e dal terrorismo’, it is also recognised, more importantly perhaps, as ‘forse il primo film che affronti di petto il tema del terrorismo all’indomani dell’omicidio di Aldo Moro’ a theme which would resurface

\textsuperscript{55} Poppi, p. 209.  
\textsuperscript{56} Canova, p. 471.  
\textsuperscript{57} Poppi, p. 209.
more explicitly in later works. Despite this initial flurry of success, Giordana divided his critics with the reviled *La caduta degli angeli ribelli* (1981) (which also plays out against a backdrop of terrorism), and *Appuntamento a Liverpool* (1988). The latter, an acerbic account of a young woman’s torrid attempt to exact revenge on the football hooligan responsible for the murder of her father (at an infamous clash between Liverpool and Juventus in Heysel), moves between the official police investigation (into the event in question) and the female protagonist’s (played by Isabella Ferrari) private *inchiesta*.

Having developed a filmmaking praxis which not only sought to capture the socio-political fallout of 1968, but which also, as *Appuntamento a Liverpool* demonstrated, ‘si occupa della realtà, di eventi accaduta della cronaca’ Giordana, recycling the investigatory narrative strand of *Appuntamento a Liverpool*, turned with his next film to the event which more than any other, came to symbolise the ultimate demise of the revolution: the violent death of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The resulting film—*inchiesta Pasolini: Un delitto Italiano*, the first of three biographically inspired works within his oeuvre, represents the first and most explicit attempt to pay cinematic homage to the life and legacy of the intellectual with whom Giordana, like many of his contemporaries, so closely identified. Scripted by Giordana, Sandro Petraglia, and Stefano Rulli, and starring Adriana Asti, the film reconstructs of the harrowing demise of Italy’s most celebrated anti-establishment intellectual. If the tragic and unexplained death of Pier Paolo Pasolini yielded the creative impetus for Giordana’s first foray into biographically inspired filmmaking, then it would be the life and indeed mafia orchestrated death of a far lesser known, yet equally determinedly outspoken critic of the hegemonic ‘status quo’, the anti-mafia activist Peppino Impastato, murdered in 1977, and ‘esattamente uno dei di quei ragazzi del 68’, who would yield the narrative focus for his next film, the ominously titled *I cento passi* (2000). Released to considerable critical acclaim in 2001 (the film debuted at the Venice Film Festival), *I cento passi*, with its ‘sentimentalised politics’ and ‘factually rigorous’ and thus ‘compelling reportage’, as well as Giordana’s interspersing within his diegeis popular cultural forms such as the pop/rock song, allowed the director to

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58 Canova, p. 471.
bring a potent and indeed timely political message to a mass audience at a time when left-wing political activism, particularly among the younger generations, was in need, so Giordana believed, of a second wind.\textsuperscript{60}

Despite the enviable critical and commercial success afforded to \textit{I cento passi}, it was a more ambitious and demanding project, \textit{La meglio gioventù}, which catapulted the director to stratospheric national and international directorial stardom.\textsuperscript{61} Released theatrically in June 2003, the film,\textsuperscript{62} whose title derives from an eponymous anthology of poetry (written in Friulian by Pier Paolo Pasolini and published in 1954), and which is akin perhaps to works such as \textit{Novecento} (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1976) and the diary series by the Hungarian filmmaker Márta Mészáros, refracts four decades of Italian post-war history through the prism of intra-familial (or more specifically fraternal) relations. The film, re-christened ‘Nicola e i suoi fratelli’ for its similarities to Visconti’s fraternally focused family epic \textit{(Rocco e i suoi fratelli)} sought more determinedly than his earlier works to reflect ‘l’immagine nitida delle speranze, dei sogni, degli errori di una generazione’.\textsuperscript{63} Embracing, as Mary Wood reminds us, ‘melodrama and soap-opera conventions’, \textit{La meglio gioventù} confirmed Giordana’s status as a director for whom the sensitive and politically engaged cinematic probing of recent Italian history via the ‘filter of the personal’ had become a trademark.\textsuperscript{64}

For Alan O’Leary, who has written extensively on politically committed filmmaking within the Italian cinema context, it is this combination of socio-political focus and mainstream entertainment formulae which allow Giordana’s cinematographic enterprise to be afforded the title ‘impegnato’. He writes that like Visconti’s \textit{Rocco e i suoi fratelli}, \textit{La meglio gioventù} uses ‘conventions from soap opera and other television formats’. In short, O’Leary contends, that ‘the committed artist must address his or her constituency in its own language, despite the risks of the

\textsuperscript{61} In the United States, Giordana was immediately afforded the status of cult director.
\textsuperscript{62} The film was screened in two 180-minute parts over two consecutive weeks.
\textsuperscript{64} Wood, p. 78.
production of the hegemony that this mode of address implies.’ Having carved out a cinematic niche as a filmmaker for whom the retrospective cinematic reappraisal of key historical events in the life of the Republic, refracted through the prism of intrapersonal, intra-familial and in the case of *La meglio gioventù*, homo-social relationships, had become a trademark, Giordana, in a move that baffled some of his critics, chose for his next film to dirty ‘le mani nel presente’.

Indeed, *Quando sei nato*, released in 2005, and nestling therefore between the epic *La meglio gioventù* and *Sanguepazzo* (2008), a period piece which dramatizes the drug-fuelled demise of the fascist ‘divi’ Osvaldo Valenti and Luisa Ferrida, represents a momentary shift away from the annals of history yet simultaneously retains the director’s determined focus on the complex terrain of Italian politics and society. Recruiting the same industry professionals whose creative participation contributed to the success of earlier films (the screenwriters Sandro Petraglia and Stefano Rulli, director of photography Roberto Forza, and the actors Alessio Boni, Andrea Tidona, and Adriana Asti), his first unequivocally contemporary cinematic orientation towards several facets of Italy’s social and political landscape met with mixed reviews from critics, despite having received nine minutes of applause following its screening (as part of the official competition) at the Cannes Film Festival. Whilst *La repubblica* reported that Thierry Frémaux, the festival’s then organizer, had commented that Giordana’s work ‘ha superato un beniamino del pubblico Cannes come Woody Allen’.

Manohla Dargis, writing in the *New York Times*, labelled *Quando sei nato* one of the festival’s ‘gravest disappointments’.

Loosely based on Maria Ottieri Pace’s eponymous journalistic pastiche (2003) of interviews carried out with recent clandestine migrants to Italy, Giordana’s film, has, like Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio*, been read in monolithic, though largely productive terms, as a film which confronts the thorny and politically charged

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topos of clandestine immigration to Italy. Like the denouement of Moretti’s film, it is a work, which finds travel, both towards and away from Italy at its heart. Franco La Magna, writing in *Cinema sessanta*, maintains, for example, that *Quando sei nato* is a ‘faticoso tentativo di narrare la trasformazione dell’Italia in un paese multietnico’. Maurizio Porro, cinema correspondent for the *Corriere della sera*, who documented the film’s progress at the Cannes film festival, argues that ‘il film propone la versione italiana di un problema mondiale’. Similarly, in *From Terrone to Extracomunitario: New Manifestations of Racism in Contemporary Italian Cinema*, an edited volume published in 2010, Elena Benelli examines the film’s role in mobilising questions around migrancy and national identity. Finally, Áine O’Healy writes that Giordana’s film ‘offers a vivid presentation of the political and ethical dilemmas posed by mass migration and particularly by clandestine border crossings’. Establishing the film’s status as belonging to a sporadically produced, albeit growing, body of films made by directors such as Gianni Amelio, Maurizio Zaccaro, Matteo Garrone, Roberta Torre, and Francesco Munzi, which explicitly confronts the theme of immigration towards Italy, O’Healy, glossing her earlier framing statement, successfully argues that the film ‘raises several issues emblematic of the current historical juncture’. These include: ‘transnational trafficking in humans, dangerous conditions of clandestine sea crossings, the vulnerability of migrant women transported across borders for prostitution’. As such, the film attempts, although not always successfully, she contends, to ‘visualize the perilous spaces occupied by migrants attempting to enter and live in Italy illegally’.

There is overwhelming accord among critics and scholars in terms of *Quando sei nato*’s status a film which grapples with the thorny topos of clandestine immigration. Further, striking in his attention to the practical rituals and bureaucratic processes and apparatus to which clandestine immigrants are subjected, Giordana, O’Healy contends, ‘is the first Italian director to dramatize

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69 Franco La Magna, ‘*Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*’, *Cinema sessanta*, 3–4, (May–August 2005), 104.
70 Porro, p. 35.
the abject in-betweenness that characterises the experience of countless asylum seekers and economic refugees attempting to migrate to Italy while eluding the vigilant surveillance of the Navy and the police.\textsuperscript{73} The clandestini aboard the floating wreck of Quando sei nato, fail however, to elude the authorities. As such the director is able to document the events (and processes) which occur at the immigration centre (centro di accoglienza) where those resilient enough to survive the long and perilous journey have their biometric data recorded, their fingerprints taken and, for those immigrants whose true age cannot be straightforwardly established, their wrists x-rayed.

Similarly, Giordana’s decision to deploy as his film’s protagonist a male child on the cusp of adolescence, to focalise the processes and events touched upon above, the theme of Elena Benelli’s discussion also appears to support conventional wisdom that Quando sei nato is foremost a film concerned with affording a fresh, unbiased perspective on immigration, a work able to counter ‘the negative sensationalism already associated with the discourse on immigration on society’. ‘Through internal focalization’, Benelli writes, ‘spectators begin to identify the camera’s gaze with Sandro’s understanding of the world’.\textsuperscript{74} Many of the captions under which articles engaging the film appeared, are indicative of this understanding. Enzo Natta reviews the film for the monthly cinema periodical Rivista del cinema, for example, under the headline: ‘Immigrazione e pregiudizio attraverso gli occhi di un bambino’.\textsuperscript{75} A short synopsis of the film written by Claudia Morgoglione appears below the banner: ‘Gli immigrati visti con gli occhi di un bambino’. The child’s gaze, she maintains, is ‘senza pregiudizi’.

There is, then, substantive evidence to support conventional wisdom that Giordana’s film is a work which narrates the country’s transformation into a site of inward migration. The filmmaker’s attempt to visualise the perilous spaces occupied by migrants, his determined, if at times problematic orientation towards

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item O’Healy, ‘Hospitality, Humanity and the Detention Camp’, p. 71.
\item Benelli, p. 223.
\item Enzo Natta, ‘Immigrazione e pregiudizio attraverso gli occhi di un bambino. In concorso a Cannes’, Rivista del cinema, (May 2005), 61.
\end{enumerate}
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the arduous juridical processes activated by State detection, and finally, albeit no
less importantly, his deployment of a (missing) child protagonist whose
consciousness provides a filter through which these events are focalised, render
this widely held critical judgment convincing.

The question which looms large in the present discussion, however, is whether,
in the spirit of my earlier analysis of Moretti’s La stanza del figlio, the theme of
immigration, crucial though it is, has eclipsed other, ostensibly less conspicuous
elements within the film’s narrative. This is particularly pertinent in terms of the
function and status of the figure of the missing child which has been largely read
as satisfying the (neorealist) penchant for positioning the male child as witness
and judge of adult behaviour. With necessary caution, could it even be posited for
example, that Quando sei nato is a film which, in attempting to assemble an
authentic image of aspects of contemporary Italian society, has inadvertently (or
even perhaps consciously) been contaminated by other socio-demographic
preoccupations, such as those raised in Chapter Two? Further, what would it
mean to read Giordana’s film not as a work which calls upon the Italian family, on
the filter of the personal (as in other works such as La meglio gioventù and I
cento passi) as a way of exploring the politically charged topos of clandestine
immigration, but as a work in which illegal immigration is a vehicle for exploring
anxieties around (biological and non-biological) parenthood within the delimited
context of an affluent northern milieu? What would it mean to read Quando sei
nato as a work which, as Fabio Ferzetti contends, ‘parla di noi, gli italiani, non di
loro i migranti?’77 More specifically, what would it mean to explore Quando sei
nato as a missing child film, in the terms proposed by Emma Wilson, as a film
about a disassembled family, about parental mourning in the wake of child loss?

Indeed, whilst Sandro’s maritime disappearance should be read as a mishap
which at once makes available the child’s untainted gaze, (as he directly
participates in the processes of clandestine immigration), the nocturnal calamity
which sees the child accidentally fall from a yacht, chartered by his father (and
family friend Popi), into the Mediterranean Sea, also allows Giordana, like Moretti

77 Fabio Ferzetti, ‘Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti’, Il Messaggero, 6 May 2005, p. 23.
before him, to sketch the contours of the parental mourning. By affording Sandro the harrowing albeit temporary status as missing, he, like Moretti in *La stanza del figlio* is able to probe, albeit in necessarily condensed form, the post-traumatic response of his bereaved parents to the loss, in this case, of their only child.

**In Search of the Missing Child (again)**

If, in Moretti’s film, the sudden erasure from a pristine family portraiture of (an only) child is followed by waves of seismic grief and suffering, then the news of Sandro’s loss at sea is met no less bitterly. The grief we encounter as an audience in the immediate aftermath of the boy’s disappearance is made all the more harrowing, perhaps, by Giordana’s assembling of a family more deserving of the labels afforded the Sermonti’s in *La stanza del figlio*. If Moretti’s ‘too good to be true’ family portraiture faltered during my earlier analysis due to the presence of a slew of lightly camouflaged yet decidedly Morettian traits, the Lombardi family, unencumbered by the covertly obsessive *paterfamilias* we encounter in Moretti’s film (or indeed the complex interwoven history of Moretti’s filmmaking corpus), is unequivocally harmonious.

Behind the electric gates of an ultra-modern country hideaway the Lombardis enjoy a harmonious family existence. In the pockets of ‘private’ time which occur away from the busy factory owned by Bruno (which is also where his wife Lucia works as the company accountant), the family are seen embracing both the trappings of the northern prosperity which their entrepreneurial success has afforded them as well as more traditional pursuits of the family. In one of the film’s early scenes, for example, Sandro and his father are shown preparing a meal together. As ingredients are washed and chopped, father and son exchange jokes in a light, mutually rewarding atmosphere. If the atmosphere we encounter as spectators suggests an enjoyment, the authenticity of which is lacking in Moretti’s film, it is also striking for its trust and openness, reminded as we are of Andrea’s refusal to admit his involvement in the fossil debacle. Similarly, having stopped momentarily in a red light district on his way home from school (in his mother’s car), Sandro seems unperturbed when asking his father whether he had ever paid for sex. The child’s inquiry is coolly dismissed by Bruno: ‘Hai visto tuo
padre? Guardami! Da giovane le donne mi saltavano addosso!’ Likewise, Sandro’s training sessions at a local swimming club also attended by his mother, seem at odds with the sporting episodes of *La stanza del figlio*, marred as they are by Giovanni’s cloying attempts to artificially resuscitate his son’s waning competitive spirit. Made aware by Sandro’s coach that her son ‘manca la voglia di arrivare’, and appearing therefore to share with Andrea a similar sense of competitive apathy, Sandro’s mother replies ‘a me va bene così’. Responding to Sandro’s subsequent claim that his father would take delight in his achievement of sporting prowess, his mother, reaffirming her earlier position of impartiality, replies: ‘A te cosa piacerebbe?’

Whilst the parent–child relations in this early part of the film’s narrative arc create, in the terms used earlier in relation to Moretti’s film, a sense of ‘idealised domesticity’, Giordana also develops, unavoidably perhaps, the awareness that the family at the core of his film’s diegesis is profoundly child-oriented. Indeed, Sandro despite appearing dismayed by his father’s voracious consumerist tendencies has an interminable flow of objects and more importantly affection directed towards him by his parents and their childless friends Popi and Maura. A swimming pool nestles in the family’s garden. A spacious bedroom houses a plethora of toys. Further, having been picked up by his mother from school in the film’s opening sequence, Lucia makes the immediate request that her son give her a kiss. ‘Guarda che mamma che c’hai!’ Similarly, on arrival at his father’s factory, Sandro, affectionately known as ‘pulce’, is met with a warm embrace.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Bruno and Lucia’s post-traumatic response to the sudden disappearance of their only son from an erstwhile harmonious family milieu is one of swingeing grief. Indeed, whilst Bruno and Lucia’s response to their son’s maritime disappearance, an event which occurs, as we know already, during a sailing trip organised by his father, is distilled into two main sequences, the scenes we encounter afford the spectator, as in *La stanza del figlio*, a (more) momentary glimpse of the seismic emotional impact of child loss. This loss is made more corrosive by the awareness that Bruno, like Giovanni, is directly implicated in the maritime misadventure which led to his son’s disappearance.
Having discovered that Sandro’s cabin is empty, Bruno is faced with the crushing awareness that unbeknown to him (or indeed his traveling companion Popi) the boy has surreptitiously slipped into the vast waters of the Mediterranean. As Popi changes course in an attempt to retrace their earlier maritime trajectory, Bruno runs to the vessel’s bow, roaring his son’s name and gesturing to the mass of water in disbelief, his arms held out as he does so, silhouetted against an ominous, cloud-filled sky. As Enzo Natta observes: ‘Quando si accorge della sua scomparsa, il padre urla inutilmente la sua disperazione. Ogni ricerca è inutile’.\textsuperscript{78} Perilously close to falling into the water himself, it is Popi who drags him to safety. Having finally collapsed to the deck, Bruno is seen, in a combination of medium and long shots, struggling to free himself from the arms of his friend, his status as guarantor of safety and protection irrevocably destroyed. As the camera’s focus retreats, we are left as spectators with the arresting image of a father plunged into the depths of despair, as vast and as chilling as the ocean into which has his child has been fleetingly absorbed.

Whilst Giordana (like Moretti) gives cinematic articulation to the emotional fallout which immediately follows the loss of a child, he also explores, albeit momentarily, the post-traumatic response, the deleterious aftermath which accompanies the shattering realisation that an erstwhile harmonious family landscape has been irrevocably damaged. As Giordana’s camera homes-in on Bruno’s mobile phone, pulsing on a kitchen work surface, any hope of his son’s safe return having dissipated, we encounter a mise-en-scène striking in its desolation. The kitchen space, which had once provided the setting for Bruno and Sandro’s culinary adventures, is now peppered with debris and detritus. As in La stanza del figlio, the spaces most commonly associated with family activity, are abandoned and in a state of consequent dereliction. Pieces of discarded plastic and cardboard lie next to an empty wine glass. A disused coffee pot sits with its lid ajar. For now, the rituals of domesticity so celebrated in the film’s opening sequence have been arrested. As Bruno loads coffee into another coffee pot, a task he finds himself unable to complete, his wife sits motionless, her back to the camera. Lucia’s attention is held by a short segment of Handycam footage filmed by Bruno on the day of her son’s apparent drowning. This twenty-second

\textsuperscript{78} Natta, p. 61.
fragment of film, familiar to us already, shows Sandro, his head and upper-body in extreme close-up, enjoying a moment of linguistic playfulness. Throughout Giordana’s brief immersion within the spaces occupied by the family in its former configuration, the film’s soundtrack is troublingly invaded by the sound of Sandro’s voice and a compendium of ‘babbo’ related variations: ‘Babbo, babbino, babbo, babbo [...]’. Moving away from the kitchen space, Bruno finds himself irrepressibly drawn to the image to which his wife’s gaze is sutured. The footage offers him both a bleak reminder of his own fascination, his desire to record his son’s affection for him, and also, more disconcertingly perhaps, his bleak awareness of his failure to prevent (or resolve) the nocturnal maritime tragedy. As an audience, the child’s repetition of the word ‘babbo’ (and related cognates), remind us, perhaps, of the cries he makes as his father’s boat dashes away from him. Unsurprisingly, Bruno’s delicate attempt to console his wife is firmly rejected. It is he, who like Giovanni in Moretti’s film, will bear the burden of guilt for his son’s apparent demise.

By building into his diegesis the Handycam footage briefly touched upon above, Giordana also calls attention to cinema’s potential as a medium which can restore and recall. Like the wish-fulfilling images which punctuate the second act of La stanza del figlio, the footage woven into the narrative of Giordana’s film allows the missing child to be re-animated and restored. The image may provide, however illusorily, some semblance of comfort and relief. If the footage watched by Lucia allows for the reanimation of her lost son, creating as it does the momentary restitution of the Lombardi family, her rewinding, the first we should assume of many such replays, also suggests that she, like Moretti’s grieving father, is caught in a cycle of traumatic repetition. Her psychic response to the apparent death of Sandro, like Giovanni, is like a record stuck in a groove. Despite Lucia’s return to the footage, like Giovanni’s obsessive return to he same few bars of Michael Nyman’s Water Dances, the footage (and the realisation that her son has been lost) will remain the same.
The Return of the Lost Son

If Giordana affords his audience a momentary glimpse of parents in the midst of grief, then Quando sei nato also contends with the complex range of emotions which accompany the return of a missing child to a mutilated family fold, a response which, as I will show in the next phase of my discussion, finds enactment in a myriad of ways. Whilst Sandro’s unexpected return to his grief-stricken parents is celebrated in a fashion befitting his family’s elevated economic status: he is given his first motorbike by Popi and, in another episode, Bruno is seen uncorking bottles of champagne and spraying their contents into the air like a triumphant racing driver, Giordana cultivates in the immediate aftermath of his return, a discernible sense that despite being instantly re-aligned in its ‘pre-mishap’ formation, the landscape of the Lombardi family has changed, that the ground on which parent-child relations had rested, has been irreversibly loosened.

There is some evidence within the pre-maritime strand of the film’s narrative, however, to suggest that the family at the diegetic core of Giordana’s film is in the throes of change, that Sandro’s newly acquired status as teenager, and the gradual disappearance of the ‘child’ that this shift in status will summon, is eliciting parental unease. This is most apparent if we return to the car journey, which takes place in one of the film’s opening sequences. It is during this brief episode that Lucia renders visible a clear sense of regret that her son feels he is now ‘too old’ to participate in the affective rituals which have, up until this point in time we should assume, been part of the fabric of family life. ‘Tesoro, ti vergogni di dare un bacio a tua madre! Ormai sei grande’, she exclaims, rattled by Sandro’s sobering retort ‘Pensa a guidare. Tu sei pericolosa’, Sandro replies tersely, smothering her affective outpouring. Likewise, Sandro’s frank admission to Bruno, during the first phase of their sailing holiday, that he had smoked cannabis during a trip to an English language school, is similar in effect: ‘Gli spinelli? Siete scemi? Alla vostra età? Non lo fai più, vero?’, he exclaims.

There are faint yet palpable indications interspersed within the film’s narrative to indicate that the Lombardi family has much to the disappointment of Bruno and Lucia, begun to experience the gradual diminishing of its privileged status as
infantilised. The fledgling parental awareness that their family in its child-oriented configuration is at the mercy of forces beyond their control, creates a notable point of convergence with our earlier discussion surrounding Giovanni’s narcissistic yet doomed attempts to arrest (and postpone) his son’s transition to adulthood. Returning to the point with which this phase of my argument began, this shift is also hastened by the events that accompany Sandro’s near drowning during his ill-fated sailing excursion with Popi and his father.

It is this maritime calamity, an accident which both fails to be averted and which at first goes unnoticed by Sandro’s father, that, returning to Žižek’s theorisation of Lacan, brings the child into direct contact ‘with social reality and its harsh demands’. Indeed, if Andrea’s maritime disappearance may, at least on one (more abstract) level, be understood as symbolising the final, albeit fraught, rite of passage in the teenager’s transition towards a new phase in his post-adolescent development, then Sandro’s tumble into the opaque waters of the Mediterranean may be read in similar terms. As Mauro Caron writes: ‘La caduta in acqua dalla barca paterna segna una frattura irrimediabile, che ha il valore di una morte, di una rinascita e di un battesimo’.

This sense of ‘rinascita’ is visually articulated as Giordana’s camera traces Sandro’s sub-aquatic descent from the water’s surface; the child sinks into the womb-like body of water, eventually assuming a foetal position, his legs rising towards his waist, his arms suspended before him. Following this brief period of sub-aquatic immersion, Sandro, now severed from the protected childhood milieu administered by his loving parents will, at the hands of Radu, the clandestine Romanian immigrant who returns him to the water’s surface, emerge into a world riddled with human suffering and debasement, a world where the stench of death and the pangs of hunger are commonplace, where the price of fresh drinking water may be the sexual abuse of a child. Once aboard the carretta del mare, Sandro ‘non è più il figlio unico, coccolato e viziato. È uno come tanti, in lotta per la vita’.

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79 Žižek, p. 31.
80 Mauro Caron, ‘Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti’, SegnoFilm, 134 (July–August 2005), 49.
81 Ferzetti, p. 23.
Fathers, Fathers, Everywhere

If the sea functions as it does in Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio*, as the agent of disappearance, it is the Romanian immigrant Radu, the enabler of Sandro’s ‘re-birth’, who becomes the true enabler of the child’s transformation. It is Radu who brings him into contact with the Real. It is Radu, who in light of the Oedipal fracture precipitated by Sandro’s separation from ‘la barca paterna’, from ‘il padre paternistica’, becomes, as one critic perceptively suggests, ‘il capostipite di una nuova famiglia’, a replacement confirmed later in the film when Sandro, receiving a call from him on his cell-phone, sees the word ‘Papà’ on its display panel.\(^{82}\) Having failed to maintain an element of protective appearance, Bruno, who unwittingly prepared the ground for the event which has ultimately accustomed his son to life outside of the family, and who like Giovanni, accomplishes the work of symbolic castration (by separating Sandro from his mother, Lucia), will, within the film’s narrative economy be symbolically replaced by the Romanian criminal, who having orchestrated the systematic pedophilic abuse of the female child in his custody should be viewed perhaps as akin to the rapist father in Vinterberg’s *Celebration*, recognised as he is for his brutality and ‘lawless violence’. It is this lawless violence, in this case the sexual exploitation of Alina, the film’s other ‘missing child’, which in the absence of what Žižek terms a ‘maternal protective shield’ is witnessed or ‘focalised’ directly and indirectly by him, first in the troubling episode involving Radu’s injunction to Alina that she give herself sexually to one of Giordana’s problematically drawn southern skippers in return for water and later in the action which unfolds in the disused factory space on the outskirts of Milan in the film’s penultimate sequence.\(^{83}\) Working against conventional wisdom surrounding Sandro’s maritime encounter as accustoming him to (and focalising for the audience) the practical and bureaucratic hardships of clandestinity, does Sandro’s troubling encounter with the *carretta del mare* initiate him (familiar as he is with the figure of the migrant) into the horrors of illicit

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\(^{82}\) Caron, p. 49.

\(^{83}\) Žižek, *Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, p. 31.
sex? As Ferzetti reminds us: ‘Gli immigrati li conosce, a Brescia ce ne sono tanti, nella fabbricetta di papa, qualcuno è anche suo amico’.

Although Sandro’s return journey to Italy and his experiences at the hands of his temporary ‘father’, Radu, are crucial to the reading posited above, my interest also lies, however, in the filmmaker’s narrative treatment of the action that unfolds following these acts of transgression, replacement, and return. If, as I argued earlier in this discussion, Sandro’s maritime disappearance may be symbolically read as precipitating the child’s accelerated crossing of the threshold to which he had, in the first part of the film’s narrative arc been so insecurely fastened, then what does the return of the missing child, exposed as he has been to plethora of ‘adult’ horrors, mean for his erstwhile bereaved parents? Finally, if La stanza del figlio may, at least on one narrative level, be read perhaps as a film which chronicles a father’s belated and thus unsuccessful attempt to arrest his son’s crossing of a similar developmental threshold, then how does the knowledge that this threshold has, in no uncertain terms, been breached, affect the illusory certainties of parents already struggling to come to terms with Sandro’s diminishing status as ‘child’?

A tentative answer to the questions mobilised above may be found, at least to some degree, I would suggest, in the scenes and sequences which take place in the centro di accoglienza in Puglia. It is here that having completed the clandestine border crossing in the custody of the Italian coastguard, the immigrant body within which Sandro was momentarily assimilated, is unloaded and subjected to the practical and bureaucratic rituals required by the Italian state. It is also at the centro di accoglienza that the missing child is returned to his parents. Having been alerted to their son’s miraculous survival and indeed his whereabouts (the earlier call on Bruno’s mobile phone was in fact Sandro), Bruno and Lucia arrive to find their son, who having been taken under the wing of a sympathetically (although inaccurately) drawn clergyman (Don Celso), is fast asleep. Despite the immediate restoration that this reunion precipitates, a return, a reanimation so bitterly denied to Giovanni in La stanza del figlio, there is nevertheless, a palpable sense, a tacit awareness, that the affective family rituals

84 Ferzetti, p. 23.
present in the film’s opening sequences and suspended in the wake of Sandro’s disappearance, cannot be immediately or straightforwardly resumed, that despite being indistinguishable from its earlier incarnation, the Lombardi family has, despite this restitution, been somehow altered. Whilst this is verbally articulated following the family’s return to Brescia, Lucia voicing her nocturnal fear to Bruno that their son, to borrow her phrasing, ‘ha imparato a stare senza [di loro]’, it is flagged in the first instance, I would suggest, by Giordana’s careful choreographing of the action which occurs during the family’s nighttime reunion.

In contrast to Lucia and Bruno’s fervently affective interactions with their son in the film’s opening sequences, the earlier repertoire of loving gestures is, in the immediate aftermath of the family’s sudden reassembling, momentarily withdrawn. Having succumbed to the parental reflex to place a hand on her son’s head (as she had done in the in-car sequence touched upon earlier in this discussion), Lucia, obeying the injunction of her husband comes within a hair’s breadth of making contact with him before moving her hand away. Although the withdrawal of Lucia’s hand logically corresponds to the practical necessity of not disturbing the exhausted child from his slumber, the deactivation of this gesture, that is to say, Bruno and Lucia’s newly found affective hesitance, may also be read, perhaps, as instructive of the way in which their identity as parents has been profoundly disrupted by the action which unfolded in their absence, by the plethora of ‘incontri destabilizzanti’ which catalysed their son’s accelerated crossing of the developmental threshold, touched upon above, into ‘social reality’. There is both the unspoken and (later spoken) awareness that, as Ferzetti maintains, Bruno and Lucia ‘intuiscono che il figlio non è più lo stesso’ and, equally importantly, that the traditional or conventional certainties surrounding their role and status as parents has been eroded, that Sandro has, to return to Lucia’s earlier fragment of speech, ‘imparato a stare senza [di loro]’.85

If the affective reserve manifest in the reunion scene soon recedes (Sandro is subsequently seen being embraced by his father), there is, nevertheless, a residual sense, that the boy’s encounter with the horrors of clandestine immigration, his absorption into a new, albeit improvised, family structure and

85 Ferzetti, p. 23.
concurrently his fraught and highly symbolic passage into the realm of adult responsibility, has hastened the already palpable diminishing of the Lombardi family in its child-centred form and concurrently disrupted Bruno and Lucia’s role and status as its caretakers. A looming awareness that the dynamics of intra-familial relations have undergone a metamorphosis of sorts, that Sandro is no longer or can no longer be, ‘il figlio unico, coccolato e viziato’ is far from misplaced.  

In the sequence that immediately follows the family’s nocturnal reunion, we as spectators encounter the first of a series of increasingly fraught verbal exchanges between the teenager and his father, exchanges which may be read as akin perhaps, to the filial conflict Giovanni was so keen to avoid in La stanza del figlio (through his intervention in the fossil debacle). As Bruno and Lucia complete the paperwork necessary to enable their son’s return to their custody, Sandro casually, then forcibly, makes clear his determination that his parents offer their assistance to Alina and Radu. ‘Dovremmo fare qualcosa per loro’, he declares, ‘Dobbiamo tirarli fuori di qua’. Despite Bruno’s obliging offer to employ Radu in his factory, Sandro remains unsatisfied. As Bruno and Lucia consider their son’s suggestion, Sandro publicly chastises his father for his perceived hesitance: ‘Vuole dire che non ti frega niente’. Publicly scolded by his son, Bruno responds with incredulity. Sandro’s return, his re-integration into an erstwhile harmonious (and infantilised) family milieu has begun, almost immediately, to draw the hitherto missing child into open conflict with his father.

Of equal interest, however, is the question of Alina (and Radu’s) adoption. This element of the film’s narrative is vital to my discussion, not least because within the film’s narrative economy, it renders visible Sandro’s changed status within the fold of family relations. In short, Bruno and Lucia’s desire to adopt Alina (an act of transnational adoption), the younger of the two Romanian immigrants in whose company their missing child found himself, reflects an unconscious or even conscious desire to replace Sandro as the infantilised element of their family grouping. Having fleetingly considered the myriad of possibilities at their disposal, Bruno and Lucia attend a meeting with the Guidice Minorile (a role played by

86 Ibid.
Adriana Asti) during which they make clear their desire to adopt Alina, Sandro’s pre-teenage travelling companion. Having been asked to defend their wish to adopt Alina and not her older ‘brother’ Radu, the couple claim that ‘la ragazzina’, as they call her, ‘è più piccolina, è più indifesa’. She, it would seem, is more deserving (and more in need) of their care. For Ferzetti, Lucia and Bruno’s decision to attempt to adopt the younger of Sandro’s two travelling companions corresponds to their sudden re-evaluation of the system of values (linked as it is to unlimited consumerism) on which their earlier rampant consumerist lifestyle has had been founded. Having embraced the trappings of wealth, their newly-found awareness by of the true horror of clandestine immigration has awakened in this affluent couple a desire to help those less fortunate than themselves. In Ferzetti’s terms, they recognise that ‘bisogna fare qualcosa per gli altri’. This act of contrition would, as the author continues, represent, ‘un bel gesto a scaricarsi la coscienza’. Following Ferzetti, Mauro Caron suggests that ‘i genitori di Sandro per riconoscenza si offrono di adottare Radu e sua sorella Alina’.  

The question which at once looms large, however, is whether in light of their troubling awareness of their changed and arguably tarnished role as caretakers, Bruno and Lucia attempt to adopt Alina, the younger child, not as Ferzetti maintains, as ‘un bel gesto a scaricarsi la coscienza’, but as a means (as tentatively posited above) of rekindling their defunct status as the guardians of an infantilised family milieu, to restore, albeit illusorily, the traditional certainties of parenthood eroded by Sandro’s disappearance and subsequent maritime metamorphosis. Does Bruno and Lucia’s desire to adopt the missing Romanian child serve as an act of replacement, and mirror (and to some degree counteract) their earlier fleeting replacement by Radu? Does this act of seeming benevolence correspond to an unconscious desire to replace Sandro, the child-teenager for whom they are no longer able to offer protection?

This notion of renewal or replacement (within a middle-class milieux) is evidenced, at least to some degree, perhaps, by several fragments of action which occur both after and (more importantly) before the adoption-related confrontation touched upon above, before that it is, Sandro’s suggestion that his

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87 Caron, p. 49.
88 Ferzetti, p. 23.
parents adopt Alina (and Radu), is made. In the scene which follows the Lombardi family’s nocturnal reunion (and immediately precedes Sandro’s fracas with his father), Giordana’s camera looks with Lucia as she scans the children’s recreation area, her gaze bringing into view scores of playing infants before fixing on a line of slightly older girls, amongst whom is the Romanian girl. The turning of the mother’s gaze towards ‘the child’ occurs again, during Bruno and Lucia’s discussion surrounding their decision to delimit to the size of their family (to only one child), a conversation which at once echoes the regret expressed by Popi with regard to he and his partner's childlessness during the first part of their fateful maritime holiday. As the camera homes in on clusters of playing children, the bambino negato, the discursive category brought to the fore in Chapter Two, makes its presence felt, as we encounter a two-pronged desire for replacement (of the adultified child) and concurrently for the enlargement of the family grouping: ‘Perché’ non abbiamo avuto altri figli? Ci sembrava già difficile crescerne uno solo’.

Finally, albeit less covertly, when Lucia, in the process of symbolically giving Sandro’s undersized and now disused clothing to Alina, she comes upon a tiny, ginger-haired girl. As Lucia’s gaze falls upon the toddler, we as spectators become aware of the latent desire posited above, the desire that is, to restore to her jaded family its erstwhile status as infantilised. This is confirmed, I would suggest, as Lucia hopefully (and somewhat embarrassingly) asks the adolescent girl in whose custody the child finds herself, whether in fact the small girl in the company is her sister.

However, it is to Alina that Lucia’s attention is predominantly directed. This is demonstrated in no uncertain terms, when, following the Romanian immigrants impromptu arrival at their home (after their escape from the centro di accoglienza in Puglia), she reiterates her desire to adopt Alina but not her older ‘brother’: ‘Alina poteva stare qui da noi’, she declares to Bruno, before addressing the child directly: ‘Non ci vuoi stare qui con noi?’ Despite what in diegetic terms will turn out to be a fruitless attempt to absorb the Romanian child into the Lombardi family, the latent desire that her fleeting presence activates, renders visible, one of the concerns of this discussion: that the missing child, not only functions to

89 I return to the notion of adoption across social classes (and ethnicities) in more detail in my discussion of Antonio Capuano’s La guerra di Mario.
open up a discursive space for reflection on the politically sensitive issue of immigration, but also a space in which anxieties around biological (and non-biological) parenthood (within the delimited context of an affluent northern milieu) can be explored and debated.

Having been confronted with the troubling realisation that Sandro’s contact with the Real (of clandestine immigration and pedophilic abuse) has hastened his passage to the realm of adult responsibility, or what Slavoj Žižek terms ‘the universe of social reality with its harsh demands’ Lucia (and Bruno), unable to forestall this transition (as Giovanni attempts to do in Moretti’s film), embark on a strategy of replacement. As is the case in La stanza del figlio, the missing middle-class male child’s crossing of this developmental threshold (whilst at sea) profoundly unsettles the conventional certainties of parenthood (and the child-centred family). Whilst this strategy momentarily negates their contested identity as parents it ultimately fails, however, to resolve or redeem Sandro’s fraught status as ‘adultified child’.

The missing child paradigm proposed by Emma Wilson not only creates a discursive space for exploring parental responses to child loss, but also one in which the range of meaning attributable to the return of the missing child within an affluent context can be brought to the fore and examined. Here, it is precisely this element of return, which encourages the film’s alignment with clusters of recurring mainstream sociological tropes (raised in Chapter Two) as the film’s Oedipal mould taps into middle-class concerns and anxieties around parenthood (in a range of guises) and the child-centred family.
CHAPTER FOUR

ʻBAMBINI DIFFICILI?ʼ: THE AESTHETICS OF ABUSE AND THE POLITICS OF ENTRUSTMENT IN GIANNI AMELIOʼS IL LADRO DI BAMBINI AND ANTONIO CAPUANOʼS LA GUERRA DI MARIO

If Nanni Morettiʼs La stanza del figlio and Marco Tullio Giordanaʼs Quando sei nato work to explore the loss of the middle-class, male child or adolescent, whose accidental death or temporary maritime disappearance profoundly unsettles the foundations of parenthood, then the works under discussion here, Gianni Amelioʼs Il ladro di bambini (hereafter, Il ladro) and Antonio Capuanoʼs La guerra di Mario, register a determined shift away from film narratives which develop against a backdrop of ostensibly normative intra-familial relations, and the complex parental grieving processes which accompany the disruption of such relations. Rather, the missing children mobilised in the works illuminated here, carry the burden of filmic and extra-filmic histories of abuse, perpetrated in the first instance by biological caretakers. It is this malign internal agency which, by the time of the filmsʼ opening credits, has thrust these always already socially marginalised pre-teenage protagonists into the hands of agencies and institutions charged with their welfare. As such, abuse and entrustment (to the state and fosterage by a middle-class, childless couple) supply the narrative motor for films in which children, embedded within new or improvised family groupings, contend with events and experiences which have profoundly unsettled the foundations of childhood.

In the discussion that follows, I shall bring into dialogue works which foreground pre-teenage children as the sites of abuse and concurrently as ‘objects’ of entrustment. In order to afford equal attention to these interfolding narrative concerns, I propose to divide the main body of my discussion into two main sections. In the first of these, ‘The Aesthetics of Abuse’, I will attend to the representational economies of each film, calling attention to the foremost visual and aural devices deployed by Amelio and Capuano in attempting to give filmic articulation to the embodied experience of child abuse. The predominant focus of my close textual analysis here will be on the opening sequences or ‘prologues’ of each film. In a second section, ‘The Politics of Entrustment’, I shall examine the filmmakersʼ treatment of the post-abuse scenario. I intend to show that despite
being separated by more than a decade, the corrective (though, at times problematic) function performed by replacement caretakers in both films is similarly undermined by State-maintained orthodoxies. In my discussion of Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario*, I also intend, however, to foreground issues of social class, as I call attention to the ways in which the fosterage process (not dissimilar, perhaps, to the posited, though, unrealized adoption of Alina in *Quando sei nato*) involves an act of (unidirectional) exchange between (demonised) members of the urban sub-proletariat and the upper classes. Whilst I intend to read this process in a largely positive light, I will also suggest, however, that a further, more ambivalent reading of this relationship in Capuano’s film may be posited, whereby the film’s fosterage scenario potentially leads to the fetishization of Mario, the ‘missing’ male child.

Let us begin, though, by attempting to place these works within the broader frame of contemporary representations of the abused or sorrowing child.

Contemporary Italian Cinema and the Sorrowing Child

If Nanni Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio* and Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato* form part of a wider body of work which bolsters claims to the perceived centrality of care for the child (or adolescent) both within and beyond the realm of Italian cultural representation, there is also a growing corpus of films which runs counter to, is profoundly at odds that is, with this long-held and far-reaching ideological assumption. Indeed, the missing child as abused or sorrowing child, ushered in by works such as Amelio’s now canonical *Il ladro* (which I discuss below), has, in the years spanning the last two decades, emerged as an insistent theme within an already wide range of recent representations of childhood on film. Broadly speaking, two notional poles within contemporary Italian cinema’s child-film representational repertoire may be identified, as film texts cluster according to the parent–child or adult relations they manifest.

At the ‘positive’ extreme of this spectrum, are works by filmmakers such as Nanni Moretti, whose output, familiar to us already, provides the analogue to aspects of mainstream sociological discourse surrounding the perceived scarcity
value of children in light of broader demographic shifts. His '90s dyad, *Caro diario* and *Aprile*, feed seamlessly into parental discourses of caring, yielding, pristine images of the ‘New Man’ captured in all manner of good parenting poses. His later work, *La stanza del figlio*, rehearses the collapse of this ideal, as the profound weight of child loss catalyses the momentary splintering of seemingly unshakable intra-familial bonds and the demise of the family in its allegedly preferred ‘child-centered’ configuration.

In an attempt to account for what he terms ‘the emergence of the cinematic child’ in contemporary Italian cinema, Paul Sutton seizes, as I have already discussed, on Paul Ginsborg’s popularisation of the work of the Italian sociologists Vincenzo Padiglione and Corrado Pontalti. In his *Screen* article, illuminated earlier in this thesis, Italy’s faltering reproduction is the primary base on which his thesis rests. ‘The birth of fewer children’, he maintains, ‘has led to a greater investment in them’. ‘The increasing statistical invisibility of the actual Italian child’, he continues, ‘has led perhaps to the emergence of the cinematic child as a kind of excessively visible symptom, an anxiety-induced attempt to maintain the child’s presence in the face of its threatened disappearance’. ¹

Sutton proposes an innovative, if fraught, paradigm for interrogating the relationship between certain concrete (and less than concrete) aspects of Italian social life and a parallel manifestation in cinema. However, where his analysis falls short, I would suggest, is in failing to account for an emergent body of work within the Italian canon which foregrounds the ‘sorrowing’ or abused child. If, as Sutton tentatively suggests, cinematic trends provide an index to Italy’s changing demographic profile, then the birth of fewer children has, cinematically speaking, led to a greater investment in only *some* of them. To consider the other pole of the representational bipolarity introduced earlier, is to consider childhood, and the range of resonances it embodies, purged of nurturing elements, ‘over-investments’ or nostalgia, and constructed instead, either in part or in whole as malignant, as the site that is, of inimical ‘internal’ forces.

Lurking towards this murkier end of our spectrum are film texts which traverse the disquieting ground of childhood blighted, albeit to varying degrees, by chaos, danger, and insecurity. Looming large within this corpus of films, are

¹ Paul Sutton, p. 353.
the knotted threads of abuse and negligence (often) routed through the same biological caretakers whose excessive paternalism and subsequent mourning in the face of child loss, was of equal if different interest to my discussion in the last chapter of this study.

At the forefront of this determined shift away from the ideational currents which sustain well-worn, monolithic notions of the Italian (off-screen) ‘child’, is the work of a group of filmmakers who, despite sharing a notable eclecticism, appear united in their desire to afford a cinematic space to child characters in the midst of crisis or amid collapsing worlds, to peer into their consciousness, to probe their subjectivities during and in the wake of ‘difficult’ or traumatising experiences.

Of the so-called ‘women auteurs’, Francesca Archibugi has been unwavering in her focus on the condition of women and children in Italy in the postmodern era. Her work, which has enjoyed considerable success (allowing her to move into the realm of bigger budget productions), has been largely read as chronicling the twilight of the traditional family paradigm and the emergence of new forms of kinship. Although themes of physical and/or sexual abuse have remained largely absent from her oeuvre, her cinema has offered a sustained contribution to the topos of the ‘negligent parent’ as reckless biological caretakers inadvertently plunging their children’s lives into chaos and danger.

The psychological impact of dysfunctional parenthood provides the frame for *Il grande cocomero*, one of the filmmaker’s most celebrated works. Released to widespread critical acclaim in 1993, the film stars Sergio Castellitto as Arturo, a child psychiatrist whose on-screen persona was inspired by the real-life activist and pioneering practitioner of child psychiatry, Marco Lombardo Radice. As Áine O’Healy writes: ‘the film’s allusion to the corruption hidden under a façade of care-giving in the family and in the medical system may be read as a critique of conditions in Italian society at the time’.\(^2\) *L’albero delle pere*, which appeared in 1998, unfolds against a backdrop of family breakdown precipitated by a mother’s addiction to hard drugs. The already chaotic lives of the film’s young protagonists are thrown further into disarray when Domitilla (Francesca Di Giovanni), the youngest child of Silvia a heroin addict (played by Valeria Golino), pricks her finger on a used syringe she finds discarded in a handbag. Although the film

afforded a space in which questions surrounding HIV/AIDS could be mobilised at a time when the condition was becoming a growing public preoccupation, her overriding concern, as O’Healy suggests, is with ‘the cruelties endured by children’, cruelties in this case, which arise from the negligence of biological caretakers.

Children caught in the maelstrom of marital disharmony, returns as a theme in Non è giusto (2001), a film made by Antonietta De Lillo. Alongside Wilma Labatte, the Neapolitan director constitutes an important female presence within the otherwise largely male dominated ‘new Neapolitan school’. Like the earlier work of Archibugi, the film, set in Naples, explores the emotional destructiveness of conjugal crises on two pre-teenage children, who, in the midst of chaotic family scenes, find in their shared experience a common bond. In Anche libero va bene (2006), Kim Rossi Stuart offers an alternative slant on the same theme, by placing his camera within the milieu of a family, plunged into crisis by the sudden return of an absentee mother.

At the negative extreme of this representational spectrum, there is however, another sub-strand of contemporary Italian filmmaking which, despite being plagued by family breakdown and divorce, moves beyond the figure of the accidentally or incidentally negligent parent, to focus instead on more decidedly deliberate parental interference. Despite also being plagued by marital breakdown, these are works, which contend with the thorny topos of child abuse, of malign (as opposed to inadvertent or accidental) parental agency. Amelio’s Il ladro and Capuano’s La guerra di Mario are two such works. Despite being separated by more than a decade and seldom set in dialogue by critics, these are works which foreground children (belonging to the urban proletariat) whose lives are plunged into crisis not only by fraught kinship relations or severed parental ties, but also by acts of cruelty and neglect. Before exploring these missing child works in greater detail however, let us first attempt to situate them within the longer filmmaking trajectories of the directors who made them. This will allow important recurring themes and visual (and aural) motifs to be absorbed into my discussion, where it is appropriate to do so.
Ethics and Origins

Gianni Amelio and Antonio Capuano (both born in 1945 and of southern origin) are filmmakers for whom the compassionate, yet artistically diverse treatment of prickly and often taboo social issues (political corruption, immigration, child prostitution, disability, feral youth, pedophilia) has become a defining characteristic of a cinema also recognised for its ability to challenge and successfully undo familiar clichés surrounding Italian society in the contemporary era. Amelio, who began his cinematographic career working on the sets of Spaghetti Westerns and popular musical films in the early 1960s, made his name with *Colpire al cuore* (1982), a hard-hitting family drama set amid the chaos and turmoil of the anni di piombo. The film, which debuted at the Venice Film Festival, established Amelio’s reputation as a formidable auteur and ushered in an ongoing preoccupation with the complex interface between the realms of the private and the political. This meshing of spheres, as well as the themes of internal migration and emigration, the autobiographically inspired absence of biological fathers, and the shortcomings of the State, would leave a recognisable imprint on much of his subsequent work, including *Il ladro*.

Released theatrically in the spring of 1992, the film, known to English speaking audiences as *The Stolen Children*, was an unexpected box-office success. On the festival circuit, both in Italy and abroad, it met with unanimous approval, winning a raft of major awards including the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes and five David di Donatello awards. In light of this success, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the years since its release, *Il ladro*, has been the focus of substantive and largely continuous scholarly interest. This vigorous critical response was also prompted and continues to be energised in no small measure, as we know from our discussion in Chapter One, both by the neorealist inspired spirit of spontaneity in which it was made (improvised scripts, eschewal of the studio, and use of some non-professional actors), as well as the film’s glaring titular and inter-textual references to some of the great Italian cinematic accomplishments of the early post-war period. The charge that *Il ladro* bears all the hallmarks of Amelio’s indebtedness to the ethically oriented filmmaking paradigms and aesthetic regimes of his neorealist forebears, resonates widely.
within dominant discourse surrounding the film’s perceived function and status in a contemporary Italian cinema-scape.

However, of the numerous intertextual presences and at times more codified re-workings of neorealist concerns and filmmaking practices, perhaps the overarching quality which allows *Il ladro* to be so readily set in dialogue with its neorealist antecedents, is its determined engagement with the social dynamics of a contemporary Italy in the throes of crisis. Appearing at a time when the so-called ‘First’ Republic and its Christian Democrat hegemony was being dealt what would soon turn out be deathly blows by a series of highly publicised corruption scandals, Amelio’s film constitutes a timely dramatisation of the human consequences of widespread social and political malaise for those occupying Italian society’s margins at the dawn of the last decade.

Yet, despite a palpable reticence among critics whose attention has largely and quite legitimately been directed towards excavating the film’s fidelities to neorealist filmmaking of the early post-war period, its opening sequence which captures the moments leading up to the forced sexual encounter between Rosetta, the film’s eleven-year old co-protagonist, and a pedophile businessman, reminds us as spectators that *Il ladro* is a cinematic work which not only takes Italian film as its theme, but also the sexual abuse of a female child. Writing in 1993, Godfrey Cheshire, one of the few critics to explicitly address the film’s relationship to public discourses surrounding childhood sexual abuse (and one such ‘real-life’ event) conjures the ‘other’ atmosphere that the film was born into. Writing in *Film Comment* in 1993, the critic observes that Amelio’s work, ‘could be a moving story at any time but, coming at the present moment’, he writes, ‘*Il ladro di bambini* has a special force’.3

Whilst childhood sexual abuse should not be understood either as historically embedded or geographically specific as a phenomenon it had, by the early 1990s, gained considerable visibility within the Western press and broadcast media realm, not least because of the polemics of false memory, which unsettled testimonial practices and cast a shadow of uncertainty on numerous cases of traumatic recall by *adults* in the therapy relationship. However, unlike films in which traumas of childhood resurface in the lives of adult figures, including those

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works under analysis in Chapter Five, Amelio locates the abuse event at the heart of *Il ladro* firmly within the narrative present, cautiously avoiding historicisation, allowing him to circumvent debates surrounding historic cases of abuse and the contentious arguments they kindled. Rather, Amelio’s film is a contemporary critique, a cinematic exposition of the human consequences of social and political degradation in a country where the post-war, ‘choral’ values of solidarity and community, which many of the works of neorealism sought to ignite, appear eroded.

**Antonio Capuano and the New Neapolitan Street Cinema**

The filter of childhood has also been a recurring device in the work of Antonio Capuano. The director, who alongside other acclaimed Neapolitan filmmakers such as Mario Martone, Pappi Corsicato, and Giuseppe Guadino, has been widely cited as one of the principal architects of the so-called ‘new Neapolitan school’, is best known for his often low-budget and at times experimental filmic excursions into impoverished underbelly of Naples. In the course of these violent excursions, the filmmaker, eager to engage and illuminate ‘the experience of Neapolitan childhood’, has both chronicled the struggles and sought to lay bare the psyche of the street-urchins known as ‘*scugnizzi*’.4

His first feature film, the provocative *Vito e gli altri*, released in 1991 and partly funded by the then Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo (the Italian ministry of tourism and culture now known as the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali), offers a dystopic vision of the daily lives of a gang of pre-teenage boys (and girls), who, having fallen victim to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of appointed caretakers, find themselves strewn among the detritus of a Neapolitan periphery awash with drugs and child prostitution. Unjustly incarcerated in a juvenile detention centre, Vito, the film’s child protagonist, lives amongst hardened criminals who abuse him sexually, and who later initiate him into the Neapolitan mafia. This solemn act marks the beginning of the child’s rapid descent into a murky underworld where he dabbles in hard drugs and commits his first mafia-killing.

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4 Capuano is also a sculptor and film by practice professor at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples.
In *La guerra di Mario*, a film which won two David Di Donatello awards and a special mention at the Locarno film festival, the filmmaker continues his piecing together of an alternative social and cultural geography of Naples, as he places his camera within the spaces and amid the scenarios which exist and unfold beyond the tourist-inspired gaze, which has so often reduced the city’s identity to a familiar list of famous monuments and well-known folkloric traditions. As in previous works Capuano steps out of a purely fictional diegesis, choosing instead to extract his film’s subject matter from the events and experiences of those with whom he shares (and has shared) his Neapolitan home. He explains: ‘Volevo narrare una storia che fosse proprio vera. Una dei milioni di storie che vivono sepolte in questa città e di cui nessuno sa niente’. The film, he maintains:

è nato da una storia vera, accaduta a una mia amica. Lavorava come volontaria in una casa-famiglia e si è affezionata a un bambino e sembrava che anche lui si fosse affezionato. Quindi questa è realtà. Anche se poi ovviamente ci sta il mio occhio.

Having briefly explored the origins of these works, let us now turn our attention to the theme of abuse and its filmic representation.

Towards an Aesthetics of Abuse

Prevailing discourse surrounding Amelio’s *Il ladro* has largely relied on recourse to one explanatory area or reference point in particular: Italian neorealism. In the two decades since the film’s release, this brief yet privileged filmmaking moment has become increasingly integral to the identity of the work, widely cited as constituting a ‘return’, as paying considerable ‘homage’ that is, to its artistic regimes and ethical paradigms. As such, a critical meta-narrative has emerged which, despite shedding light on a plethora of formal and thematic concerns (such as the film’s journey motif), has led, inevitably perhaps, to a lack of scholarship on those elements of the film that exist outside or lie beyond the delimited parameters of this critical paradigm. One such oversight, I would suggest, has been sustained scholarly engagement with the *topos* of abuse or

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indeed the abuse event, which lurks in the murky waters of the film’s opening sequence. Whilst this event plays a crucial role within the film’s narrative economy, it also constitutes a timely response to the vexing question of how to give cinematic articulation to the abuse of a child, and concurrently to the milieu of the abject childhood, without resorting to the familiar filmic clichés of narrative excess or overt sentimentalism, qualities for which Italian cinema has often been criticized, particularly in relation to key works of neorealism which deploy (male) children as protagonists. In attempting to simultaneously fill this emergent void in scholarship, and assemble a discursive platform for my subsequent discussion of Antonio Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario*, I intend in this, the first text-based section of my discussion, to bring to the fore some of the ways in which Amelio explores the experience of childhood as abused. In light of this determined aim, let us turn to the neglected terrain of the film’s preface, the sequence in which the film’s abuse event takes place.

**Il ladro di bambini**

The abuse event at the core of *Il ladro* occurs in what has been described as the film’s ‘prologue’. This short, self-contained episode, cordoned off from the main action by title credits, is ushered in by Franco Piersanti’s bongo and flute-laced score, the sparseness of which blends with a drab *mise-en-scène*, largely glazed in de-saturated tones of gray, brown, and diluted blue. This sequence, distilled into little more than five minutes, performs three primary inter-related functions within the film’s narrative economy: It works to illuminate the conditions of possibility which have given rise to the prostitution of a pre-teenage girl by her impoverished mother; to frame subsequent action, namely the children’s protracted journey to an orphanage in the company of their police escort, Antonio (Enrico Lo Verso); and most importantly (for the purposes of this discussion), to establish an iconography of abuse and concurrently the abused childhood which the film’s subsequent journey (a recurring motif throughout this thesis), as I will show later in this chapter, works to negate.

To accomplish both the first and indeed the last of these intersecting aims, Amelio’s camera probes the inner and outer spaces of the family’s run-down apartment housed within a grim development of identical high-rise tower blocks. The apartment block is situated *somewhere* on the periphery of Milan. This is an unidentified and an unidentifiable location, bereft of the traces of community, the symbols or distinguishable landscapes we rely on as spectators, to orient ourselves within new diegetic realms. Images of shabby and cluttered interiors counterbalance decaying exteriors. Another concrete high-rise conceals all traces of the skyline and as it does so, eliminates any sense of a world beyond.

The iconography of childhood yielded by the scenes, which together form this opening sequence is no less impoverished. In the film’s opening shot a side-angle close-up introduces the first of the film’s sibling protagonists, the male child Luciano (Giuseppe Ieracitano), whose forlorn aspect and grayish skin tone readily harmonise with the concrete that surrounds him. Amelio’s representation of the child, initially the male child, is at once dissonant, perhaps, with what Paul Sutton identifies as the ‘conventions associated with representations of the child in Italian cinema’. In discussing the band of children in Gabriele Salvatore’s *Io non ho paura*, Sutton writes, for example, that the children (adhering to the conventions he proposes) ‘symbolize movement and freedom’. They demonstrate, he asserts:

> The irrepressible exuberance of youth [...] A palpable camaraderie exists amongst [them]. The children are frequently portrayed as reliant on each other and removed from the world of their parents.⁸

The conventions flagged by Sutton are clearly less straightforwardly reducible than his analysis suggests, particularly in relation to class- and gender-based representations, but these characteristics do, at the very least, yield a starting point, a contemporary reference point, against which Amelio’s filmic children, particularly in choreographical terms, may be measured. If we maintain this line of enquiry, then, none of the conventions delineated by Sutton apply. They are in fact, wholly absent. These are not ‘childlike’ images of the child, or to borrow the phrasing of Vicky Lebeau, ‘the child in all its child-likeness’.⁹

⁸ Sutton, p. 356.
⁹ Vicky Lebeau, p. 39.
In another scene, for example, as other children play football in an underground car park with the ‘exuberance’ and camaraderie delineated by Sutton, Luciano, whose slow and laborious movements are conditioned by a profound lethargy, remains apart, choosing instead to sit within the inhospitable space of the communal stairwell. Whilst the drab mise-en-scène at once invokes the high-rise of Colpire al cuore (1982), Luciano in his confinement, separation, and helplessness, is also positioned perhaps as cinematic heir to the orphaned child in Amelio’s previous film, Porte aperte (1990).

This sense of isolation is emphasised by the filmmaker’s insistence, as in other works (most notably perhaps, Colpire al cuore and Le chiavi di casa (2004)), on a geometrically constructed mise-en-scène of space. This involves the camera’s tracing of rectilinear shapes and spaces within, in this case, the urban fabric of the family’s high-rise tower block, which at times appear to ‘frame’ the male child. Whilst the ‘frames’ within the (main) frame, that result from the artistic use of the ‘in-between’ or ‘intermediate’ spaces of doorways, window frames, and other bisecting emphatic lines, invoke the sterile, architecturally prosaic concrete buildings which litter many of the film’s exterior shots both within and beyond this preface, they also form part of the filmmaker’s attempt to establish the relation between the bleak reality of the child’s existential condition and the desolate landscapes of his surroundings. Following his banishment from the family home, in anticipation of the arrival of Rosetta’s abuser, for example, Luciano, the at-times focaliser of this and an earlier interior sequence, is ‘framed’ first by the outside edges of a doorway and then again as he lingers statically behind the thin, metallic, ‘prison-like’ railings located at the top of the stairwell. In visual terms, these framings are akin perhaps to the still photograph, a recurring motif throughout Il ladro. They also work, however, to emphasise the child’s isolation and, more concretely perhaps, his ‘imprisonment’ within this depressed urban milieu. There is an obvious temptation to show recourse to Deleuze’s theorisation of the motor helplessness (of the male child) in the films of neorealism.¹⁰ Luciano’s stasis derives, I would argue, not from what he is about to see, but from what he has seen already, what he already knows and bears in solitude; that his home and the spaces it occupies will soon become the site of

his sister’s pedophilic abuse, that extreme violence will soon invade spaces deemed ‘safe’.

Although the male child provides the visual point of focus for much of this opening sequence, the primary victim within this scenario, is in fact his older sister, Rosetta (Valentina Scalici). It is she who directly bears the burden of her Sicilian parent’s corroded dream or northern prosperity having been sold sexually by her unscrupulous mother to a family ‘friend’. Departing from the suffering male child deployed in the films of neorealism to which Il ladro has been so closely aligned, it is in fact the female child, who becomes the site of suffering in Amelio’s film, it is through her that the abuse event which sets in motion the film’s action is routed.

But how, we might ask, is Rosetta’s mistreatment at the hands of her abuser visually articulated? How does Amelio attempt to solve the unwieldy dilemma of representing what might be termed the ‘unrepresentable’? How does a director balance the competing aims of protecting the integrity of his child actor whilst ensuring the dramatic impact of these scenes for his audience? One answer, I would suggest, may lie in the filmmaker’s dichotomising traces of the familiar with those of the unfamiliar; by subverting and inverting the normative or indeed conventional expectations of the spectator whereby commonplace objects and rituals are found to signify differently.

Indeed, unlike the highly stylised mise-en-scène we encounter in other contemporary Italian films in which child prostitution is depicted, such as Marco Tullio Giordana’s Quando sei nato where the child sex-worker’s makeshift bedroom is littered with pedophilic filmmaking paraphernalia (and therefore manifests all the hallmarks of the sordid activity for which it is being used), Amelio assembles a visual environment which, despite being of considerable squalor, is unrecognisable as a brothel space. This is a home and we are invited to read it as such. As the film cuts from another medium close-up of Luciano to his mother scraping food debris off plates, we are confronted with a scene of domesticity, of the rituals and residues of the everyday. Washing-up sits piled high on an overcrowded stove. Leftovers lie scattered on work-surfaces. Freshly laundered clothing has been hung to dry. This is a household, albeit one of considerable poverty, in the midst of ‘ordinary’ activity.
This sense of familiarity extends, albeit disconcertingly, to the abuse site itself. As Rosetta waits in nervous anticipation for the arrival of her ‘client’, Amelio’s camera finds her perched on the edge of her mother’s bed. As the male figure enters the room, we are directed, with a downward tilt of the camera towards her hands resting on the soft textures of a woollen blanket. Meticulous camera work ensures, however, that what we ‘see’ as spectators, is not what her abuser ‘sees’, that the child’s image is not focalized by him. Whilst the careful positioning of the camera corresponds to the filmmaker’s determined aim to desensationalise Rosetta’s abuse and avoid her commodification as its victim, what interests me here is the surface on which Rosetta finds herself. Like other traces within the film’s diegeis, the blanket offers a bleak reminder to the audience that the abuse event, sanctioned and commissioned by the child’s mother, is about to unfold within spaces and amid artifacts of the home, artifacts and spaces in this case which should denote the supply of comfort, refuge, and protection.11

In Amelio’s film, it is the collapsing of an extreme scenario and flourishes of the everyday (including the haptic resonances of the blanket foregrounded above), which makes the abuse event at the heart of Il ladro so compelling. The lingering close-up of Rosetta’s hand, for example, held by the larger hand of her abuser, whose opulent attire immediately identifies him with an affluence conspicuously absent from the lives of the family members he is ‘visiting’, aptly dramatises this ‘inversion of the familiar’, whereby our sense of logic as spectators undergoes considerable interruption. This sense of ‘visual denormalisation’ evoked though the tactile is heightened, I would argue, by a scene that unfolds on the stairwell. As Luciano moves from the metal railings to

11 We are reminded here, perhaps, of Emma Wilson’s Screen essay on the embodied experience of (childhood) sexual abuse in Lukas Moodysson’s Lilya 4-Ever and Sandrine Veyes’s Martha… Martha. Indeed, of the filmic tropes and devices identified by Wilson in her study, it is cinema’s potential for evoking touch (and the haptic), which proves pivotal to her analysis. For Wilson, the filmmakers’ emphasis on texture and touch (in Martha… Martha, Lise is frequently swaddled in blankets and in Moodysson’s film, Lilya is shown carefully wrapping and unwrapping her possessions) not only works to establish the subjectivity of the child victim, but also to link the adult audience to the very childhood experience being depicted on film. Writing about Lilya 4-Ever, the author contends, that: ‘through movement and the tactile, through the range of emotions summed, Moodysson seeks to reattach use to child experience, to make its affect and range of sensation present for us’ (p.334). ‘These mobile images’, Wilson writes, ‘refuse to let us deny our own past vulnerability as children, and the (involuntary) insistence of a child’s emotion and sensation in adult response’ (p. 335). The filmmaker’s emphasis on texture and touch may, according to the logic of Wilson’s argument, ultimately lead to a sense of (involuntary) helplessness on the part of the adult spectator.
the staircase itself, a mother and child occupy the background of the shot, climbing the communal staircase, hand in hand. Whilst the larger hand of an adult holding the smaller hand of a child should recall the protective hand of a father or caretaker (her abuser’s hand is, after all, a hand which bears a wedding ring and with it overt connotations of family and fidelity), the image of Rosetta’s hand held by her abuser connotes a very different message and at once comes to signify the pedophilic abuse scenario.

As we are quickly evacuated from the bedroom and the unsettling close-up of Rosetta’s hand, the last and lasting image of the abuse event itself, Amelio dramatises a similar ‘inversion’, a short-circuiting of the conventional meaning we attribute to familiar objects and rituals, in one of the sequences already touched upon involving Luciano. In anticipation of the arrival of Rosetta’s abuser, Signora Scavello (Maria Pia Di Giovanni) attempts to evict her young son from the family home. Having failed to move him with the aid of several barbed comments, she resorts to open bribery, forcing a thousand lire note into his hand, coupled with the injunction to buy an ice-cream. Following the arrival of Rosetta’s abuser, the film cuts from Signora Scavello counting a wad of thousand lire notes taken from an envelope, to a close-up of Luciano’s hands clasping the note thrust into his palm, just moments before. The inter-cutting of these images renders visible a perverse circularity; that the money generated by the sordid exploitation of one child is being used to pay for the pleasure of another. Yet Luciano is all too aware of this circularity and of the hollow nature of his mother’s injunction. The child, knowing victim of Signora Scavello’s rough treatment and bribery and by way of a bizarre twist of logic, complicit in his sister’s abuse (for having complied with his mother’s demand), contemplates the origin of the soiled currency and not the prospect of a treat, tarnished by its sordid association with the suffering of another child. By inscribing in an ice-cream, a symbol of frivolous enjoyment and sensorial pleasure, connotations of abuse, Amelio, as in the abuse event unfolding beyond the camera, causes the conventional circuit of association we ascribe to familiar objects and rituals to malfunction. The unsettling paradox at the core of this ‘short-circuiting’, I would suggest, is that the ‘unfamiliar’ abuse scenario is commonly rooted within the spaces, amid the artifacts deemed familiar and which connote comfort, refuge, and protection.
La guerra di Mario

Like Il ladro, Capuano’s La guerra di Mario also finds at its core a child, whose mistreatment at the hands of his biological mother has afforded him the bleak status of ‘abused’ or in Wilson’s terms, ‘missing’. However, whilst Amelio gives cinematic representation to the abuse event itself, the maternal mistreatment, which brought Mario, the child protagonist of Capuano’s film, onto the radar of the Tribunale minorile, belongs to a chronology which pre-dates the onset of the film’s action. His experiences of abuse, which in this case take the form of prolonged neglect and mistreatment, remain therefore outside of the diegesis. The film’s elliptical narrative arc, at once dissonant with the linear narrative trajectory of Amelio’s Il ladro, allows, nevertheless, missing lacunae of Mario’s abuse history to surface intermittently as the film progresses. This process of reconstruction, the gradual piecing together of the film’s ‘abuse backdrop’, is largely made possible by Mario’s return visits to his former home dotted throughout the film’s action.

During the first of these visits, the camera looks with the child as he enters the city’s easternmost quarter by bus. As it does so, it reveals clusters of triangularly arranged grey high-rise tower blocks amid sprawling urban wastegrounds. Our immediate sense as spectators of a geometrically constructed mise-en-scène of space, akin to the Milanese periphery we encounter in the opening sequence of Amelio’s film, is heightened by other square and rectangular buildings, which fill the background of the frame. As Mario alights and his bus rumbles onward, we see hovering above its windscreen the name of his chosen destination, ‘Ponticelli’, his former home. In spite of the sterile uniformity and ‘placelessness’ of the modernist-inspired suburban architecture which saturates these exterior scenes, nourishing a similar sense of anonymity ascribed to the urban landscape in Amelio’s film (a sequence which may be seen to rehearse or at least anticipate the visual environment we encounter here), Capuano immediately flags the importance, the centrality that is, of ‘place’ within the narrative and representational economies of his film. The filmmaker’s concern, as in other works, is to anchor his protagonists (and his audience) to the local, to confine his gaze to specific sites within the composite urban fabric of Naples, to
create a mosaic of differences within an oft-homogenised whole. In one sequence, we encounter scores of pre-teenage boys or *scugnizzi* playing football on rubbish-laden, sun-scorched pockets of earth. These are scenes akin perhaps to the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The ‘shushing’ sound of their Neapolitan cadences at once identifies them with a specific and easily recognisable locale.

The chaos of these exterior sequences finds its counterpart in the interiors of Mario’s former home, a tiny apartment situated on one of the uppermost levels of a high-rise tower block, overlooking Via Argine, the main artery linking Ponticelli to the city’s harbor area. It is here, during a return visit made by Mario in the company of his adoptive mother Giulia, that we gain entry to the turbulent world of the child’s birth mother Nunzia (Rosaria De Cicco), whose frenzied lifestyle has blighted her children’s lives with chaos, insecurity, and neglect.

In the first of these visits, Nunzia, wearing heavy eye make-up and taking drags from a cigarette (despite being heavily pregnant) watches her visitors arrive from the balcony of her apartment. As the camera pans clockwise, we gain a clearer sense of the vastness of this sprawling suburban expanse, a mishmash of roads, tower blocks, and factories, their chimneys poking through a skyline discolored by a noxious yellowy smog. On entering the apartment, Giulia and Mario are confronted by the sonorous presence of a television, its volume so overpowering that communication between Nunzia and her visitors is rendered fraught, at best. As her Neapolitan cadences boom alongside the sonorous onslaught of the TV set, her words discharged at a velocity not dissimilar perhaps to machine-gun fire, we hear, amid this cacophony of sound, shards of dialogue emanating from the unwatched appliance. Unlike the imported US serial in *Il ladro*, however, this is a ‘real-life’ soap opera of sorts, one of the many live, phone-in chat shows, which in recent decades have saturated the airtime of free-view satellite-television channels. The fragments of dialogue that reach us tell a familiar tale, and like the missing pieces of a jigsaw, cohere into a narrative unerring in its similarity to Nunzia’s own fractured family history.

It is during these interior sequences, that we are acquainted with a figure woefully ill-equipped (as parent) and hopelessly distracted by a destructive ‘life in the fast lane’. Pregnant for the fourth time, her bump clearly visible, Nunzia seems resigned to the fact that her unborn child, whom she later names ‘Milly’,
will share the same destiny as her other children: ‘A me il tribunale tre figli m’ha levato’, she declares, unabashed. Yet in spite of this awareness, Mario’s birth mother who, unlike Signora Scavello in *Il ladro*, constitutes a recurring presence during the course of the film’s action, appears unable to arrest the cycle of feckless parenting which led to the loss of her other children.

This is clearly evidenced as she brings Mario a tube of *Cipster*, junk food, which she nostalgically recalls having given him ‘tutti i giorni’. What seems at first to be little more than a frivolous treat, this popular potato-based snack serves as a potent symbol of the child’s neglect at the hands of his sympathetically rendered, though ultimately injurious mother. Later in the film we hear Mario tell his beloved dog, Mimmo, that before his fosterage, his diet consisted of ‘solo Cipster e Coca-Cola’. Having deposited the Cipster, Nunzia hurtles away, taking a call on her mobile phone. Whilst this disappearance, like the appearance of the crisps, may be construed as benign, with considerable economy, Capuano alludes to her distractedness, her privileging of unsuitable love-interests over her more pressing duties as parent. During Mario’s later disclosure surrounding the poverty of his diet, he also admits most disconcertingly, that his mother forced him to sleep ‘fuori al balcone, perché lei doveva dormire con gli uomini’. Seemingly harmless and arguably fleeting acts, then, serve to emblematise Mario’s mistreatment at the hands of his biological mother.

It is Nunzia’s parental negligence and mistreatment (anchored to an impoverished urban milieu), which provides the narrative motor for Capuano’s film. This shift in emphasis away from the lived, embodied experience of abuse towards its psychological legacy is signaled by the film’s early scenes or ‘preface’. Whilst Amelio employs *Il ladro*’s opening sequence to pinpoint the causes, to map the conditions of possibility, which have given rise to Rosetta’s pedophilic abuse, as well as to establish an iconography of the abused child and concurrently the abject childhood, the narrative arc or preface of Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario* immediately flags a turning from the visible, exterior surfaces of children’s suffering at the hands of biological caretakers to a more determined engagement of the inner wreckage it engenders. The film’s preface, despite lasting little more than ninety seconds, provides the first troubling glimpse, the first window of sorts, into the interior landscape of a child profoundly disturbed by the malign maternal mistreatment introduced above.
Even War is Beautiful

As the film’s opening credits subside and the white background, against which they are projected, slips seamlessly into the film’s diegesis, we see Mario straddling the outer edges of the bottom left-hand corner of the frame. He appears only to disappear. Soon, two identical pastilles are swept across a vast white space creating an intricate pattern not dissimilar, perhaps, to the work of the abstract expressionists or so-called ‘Action Painters’, whose dynamic style and vigorous, sweeping brushstrokes gained prestige and notoriety in the central decades of the last century. Mario, unlike the male child protagonist in the early stages of Amelio’s film, manifests a profound ‘exuberance’, his suffering remains hidden, concealed from view. Here, the boy’s energy is channeled into his ‘composition’, the first example and indeed the first indication of the importance that art (as practice, historiography, and appreciation) will play during the course of Capuano’s film.

The child’s pastilles travel with speed. The complex trails of colliding curving and concentric lines they leave behind seem indiscriminate, spontaneous, and may even invoke, perhaps, _La guerra di Mario_’s elliptical narrative trajectory, as lively editing rhythms cause its action to jump from place to place and flit forwards in time, compressing scenes into momentary fragments or hurried snapshots. As tones of black and white gradually lift, and the child presses flecks of pastille into the ‘gaps’ which lie at the intersections of his criss-crossing lines, we are met, in stark juxtaposition to the diluted blues and greys which glaze much of _Il ladro_, with a vivid shade of red, the intensity of which is not dissimilar, perhaps, to the colour of blood. The filmmaker’s foregrounding of red as the dominant colour within a palette, which at times also embraces a similarly vibrant shade of blue, clearly belongs to the film’s title, and the glaring presence in that title of the word ‘guerra’, ‘war’. This connection, however, remains largely dormant until the sound of the pastilles’ frenetic movement across this large white ‘canvas’ (we later learn that this surface is a wall belonging to the child’s classroom) gives way to the sound of Mario’s voice. This is the first of a cluster of five interior monologues, which rupture the film intermittently during the course of its action. The arrival of
subsequent monologic episodes is signaled both by a marked slowing of the film’s action and the seepage of color from the frame.

The child’s address however, is not to the audience. He is not the film’s narrator. Rather, these are his ‘inner’ thoughts, his recollections, his memories which, without warning, rupture his consciousness, spilling out onto the film’s soundtrack. The monologue we hear at first seems largely familiar, innocuous, consonant even with an extract (taken) from a diarised account of a child’s morning routine: ‘al mattino mia madre mi diceva di spazzare […] poi mi lavavo la faccia e andavo a scuola’. Our sense of understanding, and the reassurance that this brings is, however, short-lived. Following a brief pause, Mario’s voice returns, and as it does so, the ‘framework of the familiar’, which we as spectators had hastily erected around the first segment of speech, rapidly disintegrates, as the child’s thoughts, like the complex network of lines which are soon absorbed into a sea of red in the design he energetically works to complete, veer away from, transcend that is, a realm we readily recognise as belonging to a ‘child’, in the most conventional sense.

As the monologue splinters into two diametrically opposed segments, Mario’s first train of thought is suddenly derailed by a very different cluster of memory images: a graphic recollection of his forced recruitment to fight as a child-soldier in a gruesome civil war. His earlier reference to a mango tree, perhaps the only incongruent element of an otherwise largely innocuous extract, suggests that ‘Mario’s war’ is taking place where child soldiers constitute a common component of guerilla armies, a practice particularly prevalent in war-torn African countries that has provoked growing media coverage in recent years. This episode also includes, however, the child’s witnessing of the brutal murder of his father, and his first execution, both of which seem estranged from the familiar (and less familiar) rituals described in the first segment of the monologue. The child’s painting, now a sea of red, which he completes by smudging his hands onto the wall (like the blood stained hands we can assume he ‘sees’ in the mental image he conjures), may be seen to give artistic expression (albeit abstractly) to the scene which invades his consciousness:

Un giorno sei ribelli vennero nel nostro cortile e dissero: “Vogliamo portare un bambino come te, ci piaci”. Sentii uno sparo e vidi mio padre a terra, nella polvere, che non si alzava più. La prima volta che ho ucciso una persona, l’ufficiale mi ha detto: “Devi
uccidere a quello”, e io lo sparai nel petto. Dopo commandavo dieci ragazzi, dai dieci ai seidici anni.

In terms of content, this, the first of the film’s monologic interludes, also shares, as several critics have suggested, much in common with a mafia initiation. Fabrizio Tassi writes, for example that ‘mentre il bambino pensa al primo omicidio, al padre ammazzato, alla polvere da sparare che entra nelle vene fino al cuore – e per un po’ vivremo l’equivoco dei suoi pensieri come fossero momenti di un’iniziazione camorristica e non memorie di guerra di bambini-soldati’.

The director’s use of war as metaphor for the camorra-related violence, which in recent decades has spilled onto many of the streets housed within the eastern suburbs of Naples, turning them into a battleground, is not new. His first feature film, Vito e gli alti, for example, begins with the deafening sound of fireworks and firecrackers, an allusion both to the cold-blooded killing of Vito’s mother and sister by his father in the opening sequence, and the ‘score-settling’ executions Vito himself authors in the film’s denouement. Ponticelli, which until several months before the onset of the film’s action Mario had called ‘home’, is, like the majority of the city, a site of mafia activity, a district where the unceasing violence documented elsewhere in Capuano’s oeuvre forms part of the fabric of everyday life. However, this interior monologue and the painting, the ‘composition’ it accompanies, encode multiple significations and, like the broad canvas of the film itself (and Mario, its inscrutable child protagonist), resist unproblematic or reductive analysis.

Whilst the plethora of potential meanings distilled into this short interior monologue or indeed the four remaining ‘interludes’, which recount extreme violence of a magnitude equal to or greater than this initial extract are clearly informed and conditioned by the child’s direct or mediated witnessing of such violence (we should not dismiss the possibility that Mario’s absentee father may have been murdered by the Camorra-related feud, or that the child himself may have been groomed for a career within its ranks) the metaphor of war folds into other, intersecting traumatic experiences: (most importantly) his maltreatment at the hands of his birth mother Nunzia, the child’s experiences of abuse and upheaval within the home (the disappearance of his biological father and the

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12 Tassi, p. 22.
family breakdown this engendered, his mother’s string of turbulent unions), and even perhaps to some extent his removal, his being ‘taken away’, his separation that is from a world he knows and recognises as belonging to him by the adoption process precipitated by this earlier mistreatment.

As these traumatic events and experiences are condensed and subsequently embroidered onto the narrative which is most familiar and readily available to him, this account of extreme, unmitigated violence, like the discomforting de-normalised visual encounters of Amelio’s film, radically interrupts our sense as spectators of what the milieu of childhood should contain or in this case how it should ‘appear’ cinematically. By weaving into the already dense fabric of his film’s narrative a series of monologic elements or interludes, and by allowing the spectator direct access, a window that is, onto the interior landscape of the aftermath of abuse, we are afforded a proximity to, a privileged understanding of, a child profoundly disturbed by a plethora of ostensibly dissonant but ultimately inter-related phenomena. By giving expression to ‘the post-traumatic child’ and at the same time filling in the gaps in the child’s abuse history, Capuano creates the context, the frame, for the fraught fosterage process with which the film has been read as being predominantly preoccupied.

Towards a Politics of Entrustment

Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario* and Amelio’s *Il ladro* are film narratives that unfold not against a backdrop of normative kinship relations, or the complex parental mourning patterns which accompany the disruption of such relations, but against a backdrop of abuse, of children’s suffering at the hands of the same biological caretakers, whose excessive paternalism and subsequent mourning in the face of child loss motored my analysis in the last chapter of this study. Indeed, the children mobilised in the films illuminated here, are either unwanted (and subsequently neglected), or, in the face of diminishing economic resources, find themselves subjected to prolonged pedophilic exploitation. Whilst the first section of this chapter sought to dissect the representational strategies deployed by Amelio and Capuano to give cinematic articulation to these abuse histories or
‘backdrops’ which loom large in both works, I propose, in this, the second part/section of my discussion, to turn my attention to the directors’ treatment of what might be termed the ‘post-abuse scenario’, namely the events and experiences which develop in the aftermath of the malign adult intervention which set the films in motion.

Il ladro di bambini

The State orchestrated removal of Rosetta (and later Luciano) from the Milanese suburbs and the home which, for two years had also served as the site of the older child’s pedophilic abuse, occurs in the final moments of the film’s preface. As Signora Scavello and her daughter’s abuser are arrested and, wearing handcuffs, bundled into waiting police cars which roar away from the crime scene, their lights flashing and sirens sounding as they do so, a distraught Rosetta, subjected to the humiliating gaze of an army of stunned onlookers, is led down the stairwell by two police officers. The child, an involuntary actor in this very public spectacle, has had the shackles of sexual slavery removed, thanks we can assume, to an anonymous, albeit belated, tip-off. This final scene of the film’s opening sequence marks the children’s transference from the custody of their mother, their sole guardian, to the Tribunale minorile, the final rite of passage for a family always already on the brink of collapse.

Although this somber act of transition is confirmed by the presence of two carabinieri, drafted in to escort Rosetta and Luciano to a children’s home in Civitavecchia, it is also evidenced more bleakly perhaps, by the folder of official documents which one of the officers, Antonio, leafs through during the nighttime journey to the institution. Whilst these papers bear all the hallmarks of official State bureaucracy, the declarations, the signature of the potestà parentale, and an excessive array of stamps, they also display, more disconcertingly perhaps, the children’s photographs, the first set of a small cluster of still photographs which surface intermittently during the course of the film’s action. As Amelio’s camera homes in on the passport-sized images, we are reminded, perhaps, of Susan Sontag’s unembellished claim, that ‘to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed’. Indeed, these are children who following malign maternal
and extra-maternal agency, now belong to, have been appropriated by the state; and their diminished status as abused and orphaned is evidenced by the stamp-laden documents, which bear their solemn faces.

However, whilst these photograph-bearing documents testify to the children’s entrustment to the Tribunale minorile in juridical terms, in practice, beyond the realm of government officialdom, Rosetta and Luciano are, in the aftermath of their ordeal, deemed of sufficiently diminished status not to be ‘wanted’ by the agencies and institutions in place for their safety and well-being. They are it would seem, the ‘wrong kind’ of children. This entrustment/rejection dichotomy is first evidenced in the brief dialogue that occurs between Antonio and his colleague during the train journey from Milan to Bologna. Having been asked by Antonio why the carabinieri have been called upon to deliver the children to Civitavecchia, Grignani replies that ‘le cose che non sbrigano gli altri, le fanno fare ai carabinieri’. However, having implicitly condemned the social services for failing to honor their obligation to Rosetta and Luciano, Grignani is himself engulfed in this breaking wave of State-sanctioned indifference, as he abandons his official duties (and the children in his joint custody) to pursue a love interest in Bologna.

This spirit of apathy and unconcern for the children’s condition, whilst clearly manifest in the ostensibly benign figure of Grignani and the institutional failings his dialogue with Antonio unearths, reaches its climax as Rosetta and Luciano arrive at their programmed final destination, the children’s home in Civitavecchia. If, as a space, the institution should embody the safety and sanctity of an idealized home, a world set apart from the malevolence of the outside world, the scenes which unfold following the children’s arrival profoundly unsettle this ideal. Within moments of crossing the threshold of the institution, the refuge it had once promised dematerialises. ‘Ma come faccio io a mettere la bambina insieme agli altri?’, a senior cleric asks during a frantic call to one of his superiors. As he makes further enquiries, before finally discovering that the female child is lacking a medical certificate, a bureaucratic irregularity which adds weight to his earlier misgivings (and seals the fate of the children), Rosetta and Luciano are left to wander the corridors of this vast building.

At one point, Rosetta stands painting her fingernails, framed by the outer edges of a window as she does so. Similarly, as Luciano observes a nun giving a
lesson in a classroom filled with scores of children, their desks in neat geometric formations, he is caught in the intermediate space of a doorway. As in the film’s preface, this framing device underscores the children’s existential condition; their sense of isolation and indeed their physical separation from the other children who have been offered refuge by the institution. Indeed, as the male child drifts aimlessly through the building, Amelio’s camera detects an array of Catholic regalia within the mise-en-scène. Climbing the staircase to the building’s upper level, only to discover another vast room, this time containing a sea of empty beds, which, like the scene involving the desks, alludes to the magnitude of the hypocrisy at work in this episode, Luciano is brought into close proximity with a large effigy of Christ, its arms outstretched towards him. As in the film’s preface, however, the logic we ascribe as spectators to these objects will malfunction. This statue, despite its potent symbolism, will soon be re-inscribed with a message not of Christian benevolence, but of indifference, and most disconcertingly perhaps, of rejection. As in the film’s preface, Amelio makes familiar objects signify differently.

After being grudgingly granted one night’s stay at the orphanage, the children must resume their journey in the accidental company of their police escort, Antonio. With the dawn of a new day, the children are instructed to wait in a makeshift storage room, surrounded by broken and dilapidated furniture (which yields a visual cue to their own status as ‘damaged’ and unwanted) as they do so. As Luciano sits twirling the handles of a table football game, we see and hear other children playing noisily in the next room, a world of play both within and beyond his grasp. Likewise, already stigmatised by her growing awareness of her troubling status as a child prostitute, Rosetta appears resigned to their fate as unwanted even by the agencies and institutions in place for their safety and wellbeing.

Il ladro is, however, a film in which inversions and transformations, whether merely ephemeral or longer-lasting, are commonplace, where the regimes of logic we as spectators apply to the images we encounter, are often shown to be misplaced, or ‘short circuited’, as it were. Indeed, in the upturned moral universe of Amelio’s film, a children’s home may be synonymous with rejection, a childhood photograph may signify State appropriation, and the hand of an adult
may not be the guarantor of safety but, as in numerous pedophile awareness ad-
campaigns, of malign interference. As the film enters its second half, however, Amelio shows, albeit with necessary caution, that the opposite may also be achieved, that disequilibrium can be countered, that the upturned can be replaced, that the normative axis to which the more conventional image of childhood is pinned can, in the face of its near absolute disappearance, be made visible once more. This transformation, this brief restoration, is engendered by the journey precipitated by the children’s rejection from the religious institution near Rome, to a second orphanage in Sicily, the children’s birthplace.

Whilst the film’s southward journey has been largely read in relation to key works of neorealism, most notably perhaps, Rossellini’s neorealist *Paisan*, (where communication is built among various cultural and linguistic identities), *Il ladro* may also be seen to manifest a similarly evolutionary thematic, which is equally allegorical of the power of communication (in a range of guises) to rebuild and restore. As Rosetta, Luciano, and Antonio travel towards Sicily, Amelio dramatises the gradual dissolution of this triangular grouping of individuals, and the emergence of a family unit of sorts. Within the *mise-en-scène*, this tentative shift in ‘emotional proximity’ is visually articulated through the positioning within space of Antonio and the children, namely the reconfiguration of a three point triadic grouping, whereby characters are positioned triangularly at equal distances apart to more irregular configurations where characters share closer spatial proximities along an identical axis.

Indeed, as the travelers move further from the site of Rosetta’s abuse and closer to the children’s birthplace, Antonio’s erstwhile frustration gives way to a more compassionate engagement with their needs. By introducing a moral hierarchy, which confirms their status as children, ‘voi siete bambini’, he reminds them on several occasions, a circuit of trust begins to form. As it does so, the iconography of the abused child and concurrently the ‘abject childhood’, established in the film’s opening sequence and throughout the film’s first half, is momentarily erased. As such, the familiar objects, rituals, and haptic experiences which, in the film’s prologue were wedded to the unfamiliar abuse scenario, are re-normalised through the children’s interactions with the *carabiniere*.

Antonio’s firm and repeated attempts to encourage Luciano to eat ‘as much as he can’ uproot his mother’s hollow injunction to buy an ice-cream and the
sordid connotations of food which had so troubled the child both at Antonio’s sister’s hotel and in a train station café earlier in the film. Likewise, the consolation he offers Rosetta in Calabria, where the child is publicly exposed as the pre-teenage prostitute on the cover of a magazine, brings the child considerable relief and reassurance. By honouring her request to leave the site of her careless treatment by a pitiless family friend, the child finds in Antonio, an adult role-model in whom she can place trust for her safety, in whom the unwanted status as a child abuse victim can be eliminated, like the earlier magazine article, mentioned above, from the spaces she occupies. It is this circuit of trust, nourished by the gradual accumulation of ostensibly minor but ultimately significant gestures, which allows Rosetta and Luciano within this improvised family structure, to begin, albeit with necessary caution, to regain access to a childhood more akin to the conventions proposed by Sutton, where the eroded givens of exuberance and camaraderie and can be felt.

It is also by allowing the children privileged access to sacred elements of his own family and childhood history, embodied in the figure of Antonio’s grandmother that this momentary transformation is in part made possible. Whilst we are already familiar with the power of the photographic image to preserve, maintain, or memorialise, the treasured childhood photograph of Antonio dressed as Zorro, entrusted by his grandmother to Luciano during the brief, yet calamitous stop-off in Calabria, also suggests the power of the photograph to redeem; a redemption which takes place through the image and which despite being always already in the past, always already an historical artifact, creates not only a clear sense of what came before, but of what may be still to come. For in the photograph, Luciano, who revisits the image on several occasions, not only sees Antonio, but also himself and with it the possibility of a future as he appropriates, takes ownership, of the image.

This sense of a return, an appropriation of some of the elements of a childhood erstwhile absent from the lives of the children reaches its climax in the scenes which together form the film’s ‘holiday sequences’ in Sicily. The island’s geographical status as removed, as set apart from the Italian mainland becomes part of a necessary breach in space which allows the children to accelerate away from their experiences of abuse in more concrete terms. As in the film’s preface, Amelio immediately establishes the psychological importance of the children’s
relationship to their surroundings. In stark contrast to the stiflingly cramped, decaying structures and urban landscapes we encounter in the film’s preface, the Sicilian beach sequence yields images of vast, open spaces. If the sea functions (in part) as a threshold space in both of the works under discussion in Chapter Three, the beach space in Amelio’s film, like the childhood photograph of Antonio, also serves a quasi-baptismal function. Rosetta’s stroll along the water’s edge symbolises the purging or indeed the cleansing of those corrosive elements which had so troubled her status as ‘a child’. In one of the most emotionally charged sequences of the film, Luciano, with a newly found exuberance, conquers his inability to swim as he travels, with the aid of the carabiniere, through the waters of the ocean. Likewise, the emphatic vertical lines traced by Amelio’s camera in the film’s earlier outdoor sequences are replaced by the horizontal axis of the skyline. The horizon negated by the cluttered urban landscape of suburban Milan is restored in all its splendor. With the emergence of a new aesthetic of symmetry, Amelio, as in the earlier scenes involving the photograph, conjures a sense of the future, of a ‘new horizon’. In keeping with this emerging futurity, Rosetta declares her wish to become a hairdresser, and Luciano, clearly moved by his growing bond with Antonio, announces his wish to become a carabiniere.

At a restaurant on the beach the children satisfy their newly acquired appetites and exchange jokes in a care-free, holiday atmosphere. Luciano, the once sickly child, whose pallid complexion complemented the concrete surfaces of his Milanese home, takes on a new vitality, his skin given color by the sun. Having been reduced to silence by his troubling proximity to the abuse of his sister, his voice returns and as it does so he becomes the author of a series of jokes. Indeed, in Noto, a world of play finally falls within his grasp as he entertains his traveling companions, showing them the card trick routines from which he had earlier been excluded in Rome. Likewise, the earlier of framings of Luciano within the mise-en-scène of the decaying urban fabric of Milan and later Rome, are reconfigured, as the child, with Antonio by his side, is bordered by a series of scaffolding poles. Similarly, Rosetta, positioned at other moments in the film’s action as the object of a voyeuristic media-inspired gaze, takes on a newfound agency, as she documents the travellers’ sojourn in Noto by authoring a series of photographs. Within the Il ladro’s narrative economy, the film’s travel
motif (and indeed the Italian south) is associated with relief, repair and revitalisation.

However, these holiday sequences are just that, part of a short-lived ephemeral moment, the transience of which is brought sharply into focus by the theft of Rosetta’s camera and the chain of events this precipitates. It is Antonio’s apprehension of the camera thief that brings him into unforeseen contact with his superiors and causes the rapid demise of this redemptive moment. As the children await Antonio’s return at the police station – Luciano, awestruck by the courage with which the carabiniere accomplished this heroic deed – Antonio himself falls victim to the film’s final ‘inversion’. Within the moral economy of Amelio’s film, the positive human agency of Antonio is read by the State as riddled with misdeeds and negligence. Despite his ‘therapeutic’ interactions with the children which allow a series of objects, rituals, and haptic experiences to undergo a process of positive re-appropriation, Antonio is wrongfully accused of kidnapping the siblings and molesting Rosetta.

As Luciano pours sand from his shoe, the last remnants of the recuperative journey precipitated by the children’s earlier rejection from the children’s home in Civitavecchia, Antonio is stripped of his status as carabiniere and forced to relinquish his treasured badge. The children’s ‘accidental’ entrustment to the carabiniere and his compassionate engagement with their plight has ended in humiliation and bitter disappointment. Having been turned away once more, this time by the police officer so over-zealous in his punishing Antonio for his apparent misdeeds in relation to the children’s plight, the travelers await daybreak in a ramshackle car park in Ragusa. Whilst Antonio sleeps, Luciano, world-weary and forlorn once more, quietly returns the photograph of Zorro given to him in Calabria. However, despite the physical and emotional desolation of the scenes we encounter, there remains in this closing sequence some glimmer of hope; a residual hope that the children’s brief, yet potent encounter with Antonio cannot be so readily erased, that despite their imminent and ignominious separation, the children will to some degree retain their newly-found status as children, that the re-normalised image of childhood restored by Antonio, may still be theirs.
La guerra di Mario

Whilst Rosetta and Luciano initially find themselves in the custody of Antonio for the finite purpose of escorting them to the children’s home in Civitavecchia, and their subsequent southward journey to Sicily is merely a by-product, a necessary off-shoot of their barred entry to the institution to which had they had been officially consigned, the enthrustment of the child protagonist at the narrative core of La guerra di Mario belongs to a carefully orchestrated process of fosterage, closely monitored by a committee of powerful parties including the adoption judge, Longobardi (Lucia Ragni), and the influential child psychologist, Andrea Cutolo (Anita Caprioli). Having drifted onto the radar of the Tribunale minorile, ‘per le violenze che dovette subire’, Mario has, by the time of the film’s opening credits, been entrusted to a childless couple in Posillipo, an affluent tree-lined suburb nestling in the westernmost corner of Naples. Unlike his counterparts in Il ladro, Mario occupies the more ambivalent status of being simultaneously unwanted (by his biological mother, Nunzia) and wanted (by his adoptive parents), as he fills the void in an erstwhile childless union. The desolate terrain of a childhood blighted by neglect, has been replaced both in affective and in material terms by his foster parents, who actively assemble a world where those elements woefully absent from his earlier life are in plentiful supply.\footnote{The theme of adoption (or in the case, fosterage) of abused children belonging to the urban proletariat to middle-class (or in the case of Quando sei nato, wealthy) parents, returns with considerable inflection in Capuano’s film. Indeed, according to the logic that this and the earlier work of Tullio Giordana establishes, adoption is posited, albeit problematically, as operating along a gradient which travels up the social hierarchy, as poor and/or endangered children are absorbed into the households of the rich. Cristina Comencini’s La bestia nel cuore, disrupts this troubling analysis as the abuse scenario relocates to the setting of the bourgeois family.}

Having been forced to sleep on the balcony of Nunzia’s apartment, for example, Mario is given a bedroom space of his own, packed with electronic equipment (computer, game console) as well as objects linked to more creative endeavours (an easel and musical instruments). In keeping with the social milieu in which he finds himself, the boy is enrolled in a school where the vast majority of pristinely uniformed children, we can assume, belong to affluent parents and where cultural activities, including a trip to an English language school in Florence, are commonplace. Finally, and in stark contrast to the sibling protagonists of Amelio’s film who must rely on their therapeutic interactions with
their accidental custodian, Antonio, to rehabilitate their jaded identities as children, the first phase of Mario's integration in the household belonging to Giulia and Sandro is closely scrutinised by the child psychiatrist, Andrea Cutolo, who is tasked with judging whether his needs are being duly satisfied. The social milieu in which Mario finds himself, then, is at once dissonant with the impoverished world in which he spent the first years of his life.

In stark juxtaposition to the gritty and overpoweringly raucous urban environment we encounter during Mario's return trips to Ponticelli, Posillipo, located a mere 15km away, is by the child's own admission 'un altro pianeta'. As Capuano cuts from the desolate concrete metropolis inhabited by Nunzia, we enter a world characterised by a carefully chosen combination of aesthetically pleasing sights and sounds. The sumptuous apartment occupied by Giulia, an art historian at the Accademia di Belle Arti, and her partner, Sandro, a news anchorman for TG3, enjoys breathtaking views of an unblemished horizon. The Bay of Naples with its rich tones of blue and green displaces the greys and garish yellows and blues of Ponticelli. The apartment's interiors are decorated with stylish furniture and strategically placed paintings hang from whitewashed walls. Outside, a spacious terrace is awash with plants, many of which are in bloom. This sense of affluence and the 'separateness' or 'otherness' by which it is accompanied, is nourished by the presence of large electric gates which bar entry to the property. They serve, quite literally perhaps, as the threshold, as the gateway (or barrier) to this 'other world'. The transition between these contrasting urban spatialities is not only marked in visual terms, however, but is also indicated by the film's sound track, which oscillates from the overpowering noise of traffic or the clamor of Nunzia's television to the tranquil sounds of piano music which bring the earlier cacophony into quick relief. The mise-en-scène Capuano constructs, then, immediately establishes _La guerra di Mario's_ status as a film of 'due mondi lontanissimi che ignorano l’uno l’esistenza dell’altro', as a film rich in class discourse.14

This meeting of diverse urban topographies, also folds into the narrative itself as the filmmaker chronicles the fraught relationship between an always already marginalised child and the middle-class adoptive parents in whose custody he is

14 Tricomi, p. 25.
placed. Despite the range of emotional and material constructs which accompany Mario’s passage from the urban wastelands of Ponticelli to the seemingly idyllic surroundings of his new in Posillipo, the child, traumatised by his troubling experiences at the hands of his biological mother, soon finds himself in direct conflict with key members of the stratum of society into which he has been placed.

In stark contrast to the accelerated, albeit ephemeral, tectonic shift which occurs in the inter-personal relationships of the characters in Amelio’s Il ladro, Mario’s State implemented adoption, brings both him and his adoptive mother Giulia into direct conflict with key individuals and institutions falling within the social milieu he now occupies, suggesting, at least in part, that the fragile utopian ideal may be less easily obtained than the overwhelmingly positive narrative trajectory Amelio’s film suggests.

The impact of Mario’s status as what might be termed an ‘agent of disruption’ within social institutions is most far-reaching and pervasive, perhaps, in terms of his relationship with his foster-father Sandro, who becomes the figurehead or emblem, the spokesperson perhaps, for the social apartheid which works to maintain Naples’ two-tier society. Mario’s embedding, his presence within a seemingly robust mononuclear family, soon engenders considerable dysphoria within its ranks. Despite initial flurries of muted, yet palpable affection (sparingly directed) towards his newly fostered son (his supportive presence in the closing stages of the boy’s birthday party is one such example), the combined weight of an accumulation of seemingly minor, but ultimately significant breaches of paternal authority (and class etiquette) has a corrosive impact on Sandro’s relationship with a child unaccustomed to normative routines and daily rituals. For Mario, Sandro’s invocations to obey what he terms ‘le regole nostre’, reinforce the child’s sense of otherness, and equally importantly perhaps, have little or no meaning to him. Whilst Sandro finds himself unable and eventually unwilling to understand or make sense of his adopted son, Mario manifests a clear sense of indifference to the father figure under whose control he finds himself: ‘Sandro non è il padrone di casa’, he tells Andrea Cutolo during one of his visits. For the child, Sandro who speaks ‘come la televisione’, an allusion both to actual profession as newsreader and to his unwillingness to attempt meaningful engagement with the
child, is largely passive, shunning verbal communication and choosing instead to immerse himself in the absorbing world of video games, the monotonous sound of which bleeds into the film’s sound track. It is through this relationship, that the theme of class difference, which lies at the heart of the film’s narrative core, is most destructively played out.

The first of these ‘breaches’, the combined weight of which has disastrous consequences for this newly fragile family structure, unfolds during a mealtime episode early in the course of the film’s narrative arc. As the family settle down to dine together, Mario asks that Mimmo, the stray dog he befriended during his first return trip to Ponticelli, be allowed to eat with them ‘a tavola’. The child’s request is, however, gently denied by Sandro. For Mario, a child whose upbringing in the working class district of Ponticelli did little to prepare him for the middle-class mores so fondly (and at times uncomfortably) practiced by Sandro (in the film’s restaurant scene, he devotes considerable attention to selecting the correct wine to accompany his meal, for example), the norms of polite society simply do not exist. Mario repeatedly defies Sandro’s requests, responding instead with a series of cogent and compelling counter arguments, all of which demonstrate a keen sense of logic and agile intellect. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Sandro’s enthusiasm for the adoption process rapidly ebbs.

This receding interest in the fosterage scenario is compounded by Giulia’s reluctance to admonish Mario for his misdeeds. Rather, Giulia appears to indulge Mario’s transgressions, appropriating the child’s wayward vitality as a means of stimulating her own intellectual (and creative) instincts. Indeed, Giulia takes delight in and valorizes the child’s ‘otherness’ in a manner which feeds into her burgeoning (albeit inflated) sense of the child’s artistic capabilities, which may be read as crucial markers, perhaps, of her own elevated (and privileged) position within the Neapolitan class structure.

The accumulation of these stalled interactions and disempowering altercations as well as Giulia’s shifting hierarchy of priorities (which privilege the child), ‘è difficile avere un bambino’, she reminds him, cause Sandro, who clearly requires Giulia’s undiluted attention, to abandon both his partner and newly

15 The child’s photographing of the genitalia of his male peers whilst on a school trip is an example par excellence of this trope.
adopted son (leaving Giulia to shoulder the responsibility of parenthood alone); returning to his parental home, he himself becoming the infantilised subject within the film’s narrative economy.\textsuperscript{16} Even the mere presence of Mario, whom he repeatedly and unapologetically refers to as ‘quel bambino’, soon renders Sandro’s position within this newly established family grouping untenable. In one heated exchange with Giulia, he articulates his sense of bewilderment: ‘Non è divertente. Non mi fa piacere […] Un bambino nato a Ponticelli, con tutto il suo percorso!’

Whilst Mario’s fosterage (across social classes) catalyses the temporary collapse of Giulia and Sandro’s relationship, hastening the ultimate (perceived) failure of the process itself, the child’s presence within his new school, also situated in the affluent district of Posillipo, is similarly disruptive and destructive. Mario’s fraught interactions, both with his pristinely uniformed peers and his teachers, also appear to find their origin in Mario’s relentlessly reinforced status as ‘other’, his publicly announced conspicuity within an otherwise homogenous whole. This sense of ‘being apart’, the child’s separation from the social body with which he been brought into close daily proximity, is visually articulated in terms of the classroom seating plan. As other children share desks with a partner, Mario sits, in the furthest reaches of the classroom, alone. It is only with the arrival of Luciano (who later leaves to be in a school ‘piu vicino al suo quartiere’), a child who derives therefore from a matching stratum of society, that the empty chair is filled, and social symmetry is restored. Mario’s spatial positioning within the classroom, namely his physical distance from his teachers and indeed from the other children who surround him, finds its counterpart in the child’s distance, his estrangement from the established norms practiced by the school’s teachers and adhered to by the school’s other pupils. In one sequence, for example, the children are asked to write a short essay on the ways in which they would like to change their school. As the other children obediently set to work, the keen sense of logic which imbued Mario’s fraught interactions with Sandro remerges: ‘Ma perché devo cambiare la mia scuola? A me piace così’, he asks. His teacher’s

\textsuperscript{16} Sandro’s return to the safety of his parental home, his prolonged (or incomplete) adolescence, is redolent perhaps of the middle-class male protagonists of Moretti’s œuvre. Within the film’s narrative economy and in light of my earlier analysis of Moretti’s work, delayed transition to the realm of adult responsibility is clearly posited as a middle-class preoccupation.
hostile response, the second such retort within the space of a few seconds at once extinguishes the possibility of further probing Mario’s intellectual enquiry. Indeed, echoing Sandro’s earlier injunction to observe ‘le nostre regole’, Mario’s teacher tells him to carry out the exercise ‘come gli altri’, a phrase she uses repeatedly. Likewise, responding to Mario’s later immersion in a hand-held video game, another teacher calls attention to his status as the invited guest of a benevolent host, rather than the legitimate participant in or member of the school to which he now belongs: ‘Mario siamo tutti contenti che ce l’hai anche tu’, she asserts, admonishing him for his classroom digression. Mario, however, is always already ‘other’. The world in which he spent the first years of his life bears little or no resemblance to the world in which he now finds himself. The bitter reality at the heart of the film’s narrative, is poignantly reflected when the children are asked to write about a photograph of ‘la vostra crescita’. Like the child protagonists of Amelio’s film, Mario’s childhood was not meticulously documented by a parent eager to celebrate even the most minor rites of passage of infancy. *His* childhood has been one of movement between parents, of multiple ‘difficult’ family histories. ‘Io non tengo le foto di niente’, Mario reminds his teacher. Whilst Mario’s teachers manifest a palpable sense of contempt towards the ‘difficult’ child in their midst, a contempt which finds its most potent and steadfast incarnation in the school principal who condemns the ‘piccoli farabutti’ who ‘devono rimanere lontani dalle nostre case, famiglie e scuole’, this burgeoning contempt towards the lower classes also pervades the consciousness of the children themselves. If the school’s representatives manifest a marked reluctance to engage sympathetically with the needs of the child (or the social class he comes to represent) and, like Sandro, seem oblivious to the breadth and agility of his intellect or indeed his burgeoning creativity (which I will discuss below), some of the child’s peers also seek to publicly humiliate him. In the earlier scene involving the hand-held game console, Pier-Luigi, the child sitting directly in front of Mario, calls attention, for example, to the apparent mismatch between Mario’s social background and the value of the item in his possession. ‘Dove l’hai rubato’, Pier-Luigi, asks him. Unlike Mario, however, who is repeatedly scolded by his teachers, this publicly articulated slight goes unpunished. Having deliberately failed to admonish Pier-Luigi for his comment, Mario, always already ‘at war’ with the society in which he finds himself, responds in the way most familiar to him,
with violence. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in the sequence which immediately follows Mario’s attack on Pier-Luigi the film’s diegesis is invaded by one of the monologic interludes, introduced above, as the child absorbs the undiluted potency of the prejudice and public derision he faces:

Una volta un ragazzo se ne scappò dai ribelli ma loro lo inseguirono, lo presero un’altra volta, lo legarono mani e piedi con il filo di ferro, e mi dissero a me di ucciderlo con un bastone.

Even War is Beautiful

Scorned by the members and the institutions of an elevated stratum of society clearly at pains to maintain its status as safely apart from members of the Neapolitan underclass, it is Mario’s foster mother Giulia, who, like Antonio in Amelio’s Il ladro, is left to attempt to understand and in so doing to reverse the child’s status as abused, a task which, despite the temporary collapse of her relationship with Sandro, she approaches with considerable care and enthusiasm. Mario’s war, I would contend, beyond the film’s opening credits, becomes their war.

In attempting to restore to the child both a childhood and the sort of meaningful parent–child bond which was denied to him by Nunzia, Giulia not only furnishes her adoptive son with the objects which provide the backdrop to the sort of childhood enjoyed, by his unwelcoming middle-class peers, but with tenderness and affection. Giulia, however, not only approaches Mario’s adoption with economic and affective generosity but with an intellectual benevolence which allows her, to borrow the words of her symbolic lecture on the work of the French modernist painter Yves Klein, to move beyond the socially constructed norms and expectations which so stifled his pedagogic interactions towards ‘intuizioni non rachiudibili in formule’.

Indeed, if Sandro and the impervious representatives of the school attempt to capitalise on the child’s digressions, using them as outward and therefore easily identifiable manifestations of his class-based ‘otherness’, Giulia reads the child’s ostensibly transgressive behaviours differently. The child’s frequent unaccompanied excursions to the eastern parts of the city, for example, are seen
not as digression but as an attempt to maintain his cultural identity, as attempts to re-connect with the culture most familiar to him. The desires and impulses, which repeatedly drive a child, at once reminiscent of the street urchins we encounter in a variety of films taking Naples as their setting, to cross the physical and non-physical thresholds of the society in which he now finds himself, become part of a necessary process of climatisation, as the child attempts to carve out, to negotiate a new identity for himself, a task profoundly at odds with his already fragmentary and transitory sense of self. Likewise, in Mario’s repeated deviations from the social mores and well-established norms that govern polite society, as well as the mental agility which throws into disarray the conventional logic called upon to dictate the outcome of familiar scenarios, Giulia identifies what she deems to be an unnoticed creativity, an untapped intellect which finds expression in ways likely, perhaps, only to her.

During the course of the film’s action Capuano gradually establishes the complex relation between the child as traumatised subject and the child as creative agent, who externalises inner turmoil through the medium of art, described, tellingly perhaps, in one of Giulia’s lectures as ‘il veicolo delle grandi emozioni’. It is this encounter, the complex articulation of inner turmoil dismissed or reviled by the adults in whose presence he finds himself as merely subversive, which is brought to the fore, which is focalised and ultimately realised by Mario’s foster mother. Whilst there are numerous examples within the film’s diegesis of the medium of art (in a variety of guises) as the child’s preferred form of communication and indeed self-expression (such as his drawing a dog on the windscreen of Giulia’s car and his use of the digital camera to record or diarise his daily experiences) it is the event (or the work) with which the film begins, the child’s painting red of the walls of his school classroom, which becomes the clearest and most powerful manifestation of this crucial alignment. Having enlarged the screensaver of her computer, Caravaggio’s Martyrdom of St Matthew, to reveal the image of screaming child running from the scene of the massacre, a child whom she at once identifies as Mario, a child also fleeing extreme violence, Giulia experiences a second revelation where the intuition she had applied throughout the adoption process is shown, perhaps, to have been correct. This revelation occurs in the film’s penultimate sequence. In the moments which immediately precede the child’s adoption to another family, Giulia gives the
final of a series of Art History lectures. Standing in the darkened room, dressed entirely in a vivid shade of red, the dominant color within the film’s palette, Giulia clicks through a series of slides. As Rosa Shock appears, neatly prefaced by the statement that ‘l’unica liberata è l’intelligenza’, Giulia, like the audience, through whom her perception is routed, not only ‘sees’ the work of art, with its random lines, but the image with which the film began, Mario’s classroom composition. Her erstwhile unconscious attempts to afford Mario the tools necessary to give expression to his artistic impulses (piano, recorder, easel, camera) are shown to have been correctly judged. Indeed, Giulia, like Antonio in Amelio’s Il ladro, exerts what might be termed ‘a therapeutic influence’ over the child temporarily in her custody. This therapeutic notion is flagged in one of the film’s closing sequences, as Giulia hears Mario (as creative agent) playing a self-composed melody on the piano, not dissimilar perhaps, to the piano music which invades the soundtrack during the earlier episodes in Posilipio.

With echoes of Antonio’s admonishment in the Noto sequence of Il ladro, Giulia’s painstakingly slow, yet ostensibly redemptive role in the child’s recovery from the malign maternal agency, which brought him onto the radar of the Tribunale Minorile, will soon be rendered obsolete. Perceived by the State as flagrant digressions from the pre-prescribed orthodoxies already established by Longobardi, Giulia’s interactions with Mario, which include her seemingly nuanced and unconventional understanding of his needs, desires, and creative flourishes, will lead to her State enforced separation from him. Despite his shared status as ‘un bambino difficile’, the shards of hope we encounter in the closing sequence of Amelio’s film will remain bitterly absent.

Yet as this discussion reaches its conclusion, the question which continues to find resonance is whether, perhaps, this reading is too sympathetic; whether the decision by the Tribunale Minorile to re-home the child, adds weight to a gnawing sense that in spite of Giulia’s close affective bond with him, the fosterage process itself was undermined, at least to some degree, by her fetishization of him; by her forceful and unabashed desire to valorize his otherness (manifest in the range of transgressions touched upon above) whilst simultaneously imposing upon him, the markers of bourgeois existence (with the aim, we should assume, of reproducing in him her own social class). Indeed, one
of the risks posed for Giulia through this ostensible fetishization of the boy in her custody, is that her otherwise benevolent treatment of this arguably inscrutable child is marred by narcissism, as he is positioned (and intellectualized), unwittingly perhaps, as object of her own gratification.

Conclusion

Despite being separated by more than a decade and seldom set in dialogue by critics, Amelio’s Il ladro and Capuano’s La guerra di Mario, are works which share multiple points of contact, both thematically and in terms of the critically neglected aesthetic dilemmas they attempt to resolve. Whilst Amelio chooses to approach the thorny topos of pedophilic abuse by interspersing within his diegesis a series of ‘denormalised’ visual encounters, Capuano relies for the cinematic representation of the traumatised child psyche on the aural device of the interior monologue or voiceover. Despite this shift from the visual to the aural, both devices derive their effectiveness from disrupting the normative expectations of the spectator surrounding the milieu of childhood and the resonances conventionally perceived to exist within its orbit. In the second part of my discussion I sought to show that despite the largely therapeutic interactions between these always already missing children and the adults in whose custody they temporarily find themselves, intervention by State agencies and institutions may ultimately undermine or indeed negate (to varying degrees) this fraught and fragile, though, at times problematic, redemptive process.
CHAPTER FIVE

burying the dead: the return of the missing child in mario martone’s l’amore molesto and cristina comencini’s la bestia nel cuore

In Chapters Three and Four I sought to illuminate selected works within the contemporary Italian canon which correspond to the predominant sets of generic criteria proposed in Cinema’s Missing Children. In several cases my analysis was propelled by a revisory impulse as films were read differently or in light of influences often of minimal or peripheral scholarly concern. As we begin this final excursion into the largely male auteur-dominated body of work which Wilson’s study invites us to bring to closer critical reach, we are reminded both of the potential usefulness of the topos she has identified and that a further, hitherto unexamined filmmaking category compels our attention. The category in question encompasses works, which like those engaged in the ‘Dogme Ghosts’ chapter of Cinema’s Missing Children, employ a range of retrospective representational forms to engage the return of childhood as traumatized. These are works suffused with the psychological residues that seep from the sorts of childhood experience that so trouble our young protagonists in Il ladro and La guerra di Mario and may provide a further arena for debating ‘the treatment of abuse and abusive parenthood’.1 Here, I will interrogate two films, La bestia nel cuore and L’amore molesto, both of which resonate with the legacy of childhood abuse.2 In so doing, I will seek to examine the ways in which this dyadic grouping, made either by a prominent female (feminist) auteur (La bestia) or following considerable collaboration with a female author and screenwriter (Elena Ferrante in L’amore) dramatises the struggle on the part of the films’ protagonists to take possession of and accurately interpret traumatic episodes dislodged from contemporary consciousness. The questions which the first phase of my discussion will most centrally ask surround the cinematic representation of aesthetic and narrative formations of traumatic experience in La bestia. As my

1 Wilson, p. 123.
2 From this point onwards I will refer to L’amore molesto as ‘L’amore’ and La bestia nel cuore as ‘La bestia’.
attention turns to Martone’s *L’amore* this *topos* will take on further meaning as I probe, albeit with necessary caution, the possible intersection between unresolved personal and political trauma.

**Dogme Ghosts**

This chapter takes as its conceptual starting point Emma Wilson’s study of selected works by the Danish filmmakers Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier in Chapter 9 of *Cinema’s Missing Children*. The films in question either belong to, or are aesthetic determinants of Dogme 95, a stream of filmmaking which took root in Copenhagen the mid 1990s. This collective attempted to ‘despectacularise’ the medium of cinema by means of a ‘stripped realist aesthetic’. Bereft of conspicuous technological interference, Dogme filmmaking, echoing perhaps the thesis of the neorealist ideologue and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, works towards a (new) form of cinematic realism as ‘truth’ is teased from characters and settings. This aesthetic would be determined, and the authenticity of the films approved, by the directors’ (supposed) recourse to ten rules (‘The Rules’), outlined in a manifesto (authored by Vinterberg and Von Trier), which offers precise instructions on the use of the camera (and film) and exacting statements on sound, *mise-en-scène*, and aspects of post-production.³ But why is this vein of filmmaking of relevance to *Cinema’s Missing Children*? The answer substantially lies in the insistence in many of these works on the imbrication of this revived realist aesthetic ‘with questions of the family, abuse and truth’. More specifically, these are works, like those illuminated throughout Wilson’s study, ‘about the loss of childhood, about missing children and child abuse’.⁴

Shaking off ideas surrounding the films’ adherence to the dogmatism of ‘The Rules’, a critical strategy worn with use, Wilson instead examines the specificities of the films’ orientation towards traumatised childhood and the largely unexplored interrelation between this thematic and the formalist constraints imposed by the Dogme 95 manifesto. As such, attention is paid to the ways in which the manner

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³ Wilson, pp. 123–124.
⁴ Ibid., p. 124.
of treatment of this topos leads to an expansion of the realist aesthetic as filmmakers, working within the confines of the aesthetic criteria touched upon above, push the limits of creativity, and in so doing, foster new forms of cinematic illusion. For Wilson, considerable critical reward is to be gleaned, not from realism per se, but from those filmic moments suffused with what she terms the ‘remainders of illusion’.  

Thomas Vinterberg’s *Celebration* (1998), the first film under discussion, exemplifies the coalescence between the competing demands of film form and the missing child thematic and yields several such remainders of illusion. In terms of the former, and as elsewhere, the work should also be read, however, ‘as a crucial testing ground of paternal authority, its abuse and dismantling’. Structured around an elaborate family birthday, *Celebration* documents the repeated attempts of a grown son (Christian) to publicly denounce incestuous sexual abuse perpetrated by his father against him and his sister, Linda, whose recent suicide predates the start of the film’s action. For Wilson, ‘the constant breakdown and restructuring of the family group’ and the son’s attempts to verbalise his experience of abuse not only increasingly unsettle the foundations of paternal authority, but also disrupt, to some degree at least, the overriding aim of the Dogme collective; to return to cinema the status of truth bearing medium. As Wilson’s analysis makes clear, our attention as spectators is in fact drawn ‘to the mechanisms by which truth is denied and disavowed’, in this case by a father’s repeated attempts to disrupt the flow of his son’s abuse testimony.

Interestingly, Vinterberg’s film also dramatises the return of the abused child (Linda) as phantom, the central focus of the present chapter. The two scenes in question, which allow for the recollection of a past time (and past psychical and material reality) through Linda’s phantom presence, not only disrupt the (artificial) hegemony of the Rules (see Rule 7), but also suggest the haunting presence, the lingering impact of malign paternal interference of this (or any) kind. The phantom of Linda as abused child becomes the visual counterpart to Christian’s ‘home truth’ speech, as the insoluble remainants of suffering rupture the narrative present.

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5 Ibid., p. 125.  
6 Ibid, p. 123.  
7 Ibid., p. 125.
Moving beyond *Celebration*, Wilson continues her analysis of the return of the damaged or mournful child as spectre in the work of Lars Von Trier. Von Trier’s filmmaking, Wilson argues, manifests a persistent fascination with traumatised childhood. The author first discusses *The Element of Crime* (1984), before turning her attention to the *X-Files/Twin Peaks*-esque television mini-series, *The Kingdom*. First broadcast in 1994, the series takes place in a Copenhagen hospital, ‘The Riget’. Against an already bleak backdrop of routine surgical misdemeanors the serial is ‘haunted’ by the disquieting presence of a range of human and supernatural phenomena. Of these, it is the recurring presence of the abused (or damaged) child as phantom which furthers the thread of Wilson’s discussion. Mary, one of two such ghostly children, appears across the first five episodes of the mini-series. Brutally murdered by her father, her spectre is heard (and later seen) crying in the hospital lift shaft before finally appearing on multiple occasions to an elderly patient (Mrs Drusse) who resolves to probe the mystery surrounding her death (and the causes of her suffering).

The question which shadows Wilson’s exploration of this phenomenon, however, is how (or indeed whether) the insistent return of the damaged child as spectre is to be explained? To provide a theoretical slant on this motif, Wilson turns to the work of Slavoj Žižek, in this case to an essay entitled ‘The vicissitudes of the Lacanian Real’ (in *Looking Awry*). Beneath the subheading ‘The Return of the Living Dead’, Žižek draws together a series of examples of what he calls the ‘living dead’ from the domain of popular culture. Accelerating beyond the ghost of Hamlet’s father in Shakespeare’s eponymous play (1601), the philosopher draws together examples from the horror genre including John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1980), *The Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968), and from works such as *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and James Cameron’s sci-fi thriller, *The Terminator* (1984). In light of this body of evidence, Žižek claims that the return of the living dead, ‘the fantasy of a person who does not want to stay dead but

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8 Rule 7 states that ‘temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden’. See Wilson, p. 124.
returns again and again to pose a threat to the living’, is ‘the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture’.¹⁰

But why do the dead return? For Žižek the answer lies in the fact that the dead figures in question ‘were not properly buried i.e. because something went wrong with their obsequies’. Their return is a sign ‘of a disturbance in the symbolic rite in the process of symbolization’. They are ‘collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt’. In the case of Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet’s father returns from the grave to demand that his infamous death be avenged, and thus an ‘unpaid symbolic debt’ be settled. The examples extracted from the popular cultural realm are iterations of this. Making a ‘lightning’ leap in his analysis, Žižek also turns his attention, momentarily, to public history and to (the) two great traumatic events of the last century; the Holocaust and the gulag. These events, he maintains, are exemplary cases of the return of the living dead. ‘The shadows of their victims’, he writes, ‘will continue to chase us as ‘living dead’ until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory’, into the ‘text of tradition’.¹¹

Returning to the work of the Dogme filmmaking with which my discussion began, Mary, the abused child murdered by her father in Von Trier’s mini series, returns, according to the logic of Žižek’s theorization, for a proper burial, to find her proper place in the text of tradition. Both this burial (in the literal sense) and indeed the assembling of Mary’s abuse narrative are enabled and enacted by Mrs Drusse; it is she who investigates the circumstances surrounding the child’s death. It is she who gives the child a proper burial. Ultimately it is she who (jointly) performs the exorcism which returns the phantom child to the mother who awaits her on the other side of a wall in the hospital. As Wilson writes: ‘Mary’s story has been made a visual narrative in Mrs Drusse’s thought-patterns; now the exorcists are witnesses to her suffering and offer testimony to her fate’.¹² Similarly, Colin Davis, whose Spectres of Marx follows Jacques Derrida’s investigation of haunting (or what Derrida terms ‘hauntology’), notes that Derrida represents the ghost as ‘something that precisely cannot be spoken’. For Derrida:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 22.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Wilson, p. 131.
the ghost's secret is not [only] a puzzle to be solved [...] The secret is not unspeakable because it is taboo, but because it cannot yet be articulated in the language available to us. The ghost pushes at the boundaries of language and thought.13

The (f)act of being heard, of assembling coherent verbal and visual narratives, of giving testimony, are also bound up with notions of inscribing the phantom of traumatised childhood within the text of tradition, of engaging the process of symbolisation.

For Wilson, the phantom presence of missing and suffering children as explored in works such as Celebration and Von Trier’s mini-series, offers ‘a further instance of the return of the living dead’, as proposed by Žižek. These ghosts or phantoms are not only those understood as corresponding to representational norms or tradition typified by Von Trier’s ghostly child in The Kingdom. Rather, enlarging the range of possible representational possibilities within the orbit of this topos, the author, anchoring her discussion to concomitant societal concerns, also contends that these phantoms, situated within the framework of Žižek’s theorisation (of the return of the living dead within popular culture), are also those ‘which return between truth and fiction, in the complex cases of false memory syndrome’. They ‘are the photographic and video phantoms which haunt news reporting of missing children’. These, the author argues, ‘are the mourned and elegiac figures which return in contemporary cinema’.14

What both Wilson and Žižek touch upon, but are unable to scrutinise in detail, however, is the implied possible interrelation between the returning phantoms of contemporary cinema (or in the case of Wilson the returning child phantom) and key public societal or historical phenomena. In light of this, a question emerges: is it possible to develop an understanding of films where the returning child spectre is mobilised, which allows for a more determined orientation towards public historical events, political traumas, or indeed, to questions of national identity?

14 Wilson, p. 132.
Japanese National Identity and the J-Horror Genre

Recent work by Karen Lury suggests that considerable scope remains for addressing the question posited above. In her recent monograph, *The Child in Film: Dreams, Tears and Fairytales*, the author analyses the (returning) figure of the (ghostly) child as victim’ (defined by her as ‘dead, traumatized or abandoned’) in popular fictional narratives addressed to a Japanese audience circulated during the 1990s. Placing particular emphasis on important works belonging to the J-Horror vein of Japanese filmmaking, the author asks whether the recurring presence of ghosts of (and of) traumatised children within (and even beyond) the J-Horror genre could be a response to contemporary social and political anxieties about childhood and (Japanese) national identity. Indeed, those works destined for a Japanese audience manifest what Tomiko Yoda terms, ‘a subculturation of the national’. They are works whose content, symbols, and *mise-en-scène* are ‘recognisably local or national (Japanese)’, producing ‘a sense of visceral proximity’ for their audience. Building on the scholarship of Yoda, Lury examines the ways in which this subculturation allows for the recurring trope of traumatised childhood to be read against deteriorating social conditions (including the suffering of ‘real’ children) resulting from the collapse of the Japanese economy in the 1990s. This reading stems from an awareness of the child’s privileged status within Japanese culture; as heavily invested symbol of national identity. In terms of the post-war national project, the author notes that ‘the child provided a way in which national identity could be both essentialized (Japanese children were inseparably all “children” and all “Japanese”) and programmed (through the social organization and educational programming of actual children’). Similarly, Stefan Tanaka suggests that this ‘forms part of the effort of a nation-state to monopolize those mnemonic devices that reinforce its vision of what society should be’. Japanese schooling in the post-war era sought to create a ‘population of regulated Japanese bodies that could be put to service in

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15 Lury, p. 27.
17 Lury, p. 25.
both the production and consumption activities required by advanced capitalism’. The collapse of the Japanese economy in the 1990s, and the attendant social anxiety this engendered, disrupted the self-identity of the nation and the conception of the child ‘central to the coherence and maintenance of national identity’. In light of the privileged position occupied by ‘the child’ within the Japanese national imaginary may be unsurprising, Lury concludes, that this period of profound social (and political) crisis also saw the (re)emergence of the traumatised child as phantom within popular fictional narratives addressed to a Japanese audience. In short, the traumatised child returns in the films of J-Horror as symptom of wider social malaise.

The Return of the Missing Child in Contemporary Italian Cinema

Looking beyond this initial framing stage of my study I intend to build on the work of Wilson, Žižek, and Lury by broadening the topos of the retrospective emergence of the traumatised child(hood) to include works belonging to the canon of contemporary Italian cinema. The works in question are about the loss of childhood, about missing children and child abuse. Like their Dogme and J-Horror counterparts they employ contemporary narrative frameworks to give cinematic articulation to the retrospective emergence of childhood as abused or suffering. In so doing, they, like Vinterberg’s Celebration, provide ‘a testing ground of paternal authority’ as the torn threads of intimate family histories are (painfully) rewoven.

Where these works crucially differ from their counterparts in the strains of filmmaking illuminated above, however, is in the formations of traumatised childhood they dramatise. Indeed, unlike the supernaturally inspired ghosts found in the J-Horror and Dogme strains of filmmaking, the child phantoms we will encounter in La bestia and L’amore manifest psychically; they return to haunt their victims in nightmares, flashbacks, and other intrusive phenomena. The phantoms under analysis here should be recognised, therefore, as embedded within the domain of posttraumatic experience, as filmmakers call attention to the

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20 Ibid., p. 27.
psychic legacy for adult protagonists of the sorts of malign adult interference explored elsewhere in this thesis.

This analysis responds in part to Emma Wilson’s comments in the Conclusion of her study surrounding the potential of missing child films as a means of artistic response to personal trauma. It is the latter which will drive my analysis of Cristina Comencini’s La bestia. My discussion will also respond, however, to a gnawing sense that, as the work of Karen Lury reminds us, those missing child films, which cluster around the disquieting thematic of the retrospective emergence of (female) childhood as suffering, may encode ‘subcultural’ significations, significations which may be productively linked to the terrain of Italian social or public history. It is this abiding concern which will provide the backdrop for my analysis of Martone’s L’amore. Before turning to the texts themselves, however, and in order to adequately respond to the key discursive preoccupations brought to the fore here, I propose to absorb further theoretical elements into my discussion, those emerging from the sphere of contemporary trauma theory. It is to this critical domain that I shall now turn.

Returning (to) Trauma

Whilst the immediate impetus for this discussion derives from the pioneering work of scholars such as Emma Wilson, Slavoj Žižek, and Karen Lury whose influence will ripple throughout this chapter, a burgeoning awareness remains in terms of the possibility of drawing upon other theoretical tools to illuminate or ‘unlock’ primary sources. More specifically, this awareness surrounds the discursive significance of contemporary psychological theories of trauma and memory including those explicated by a core group of scholars working within the domain of humanities-based trauma studies. Following on from other recent film-based studies (which engage similar material), it is my contention here that work by Cathy Caruth (whose work Emma Wilson profitably engages throughout her study), Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, Mieke Bal, and Judith Lewis Herman may yield a useful theoretic starting point for addressing key and recurring themes shared by both films, and indeed other works within the contemporary Italian
canon, which dramatise the retrospective emergence of childhood as traumatised. This is particularly the case, I would argue, in relation to preliminary questions surrounding the unwieldy relation of traumatic memory to narrative, and to the complexity of the temporal structure of traumatic experience, a concern, which will reverberate (albeit intermittently) during my analysis of primary sources.

Explorations in Memory

In terms of the latter, namely trauma’s disrupting influence on the homogeneity of time and the frequent adoption in filmic articulations of trauma of retrospective narrative frameworks, Cathy Caruth writes persuasively on what she defines as the ‘belatedness’ of traumatic recall. It is to Caruth’s pathbreaking research that scholars, working within a broad range of humanities-based subjects, including the analysis of the audio-visual exposition of psychic trauma, frequently turn. In the ‘Introduction’ to Trauma: Explorations in Memory, a volume which works towards an understanding of trauma as an infliction of collective as well as individual consciousness (contributors shed light on contexts such as child abuse, AIDS, the effects of historical atrocities such as the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima in World War II), Caruth argues that the pathology of trauma consists ‘solely in the structure of its experience or reception’. The traumatic event ‘is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it’. ‘To be traumatized’, she writes, ‘is to be possessed by an image of event’. This theory, like much of Caruth’s work, is extrapolated from the writings of Sigmund Freud, namely, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (published in 1921), and his history of ancient Judaism, Moses and Monotheism (1939). In the latter, Freud employs the train collision, a scene of trauma par excellence, to illustrate the belated impact of traumatic experience on the survivor:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. It is the feature which one might term latency.  

The violence of the train collision (the original violent event) is not known in its occurrence but only belatedly, the delay functioning to carry the individual beyond the shock of the event itself. In spite of this delaying mechanism, the accident nevertheless returns to haunt the (ostensibly) unharmed survivor, Freud explains, in the form of a range of intrusive post-traumatic phenomena such as flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations; the grave psychical symptoms or ‘phantoms’ alluded to both earlier in this chapter and in the above citation. As such, the original traumatic event is not yet integrated into existing mental frameworks. It remains ‘unclaimed’, or ‘not yet fully owned’. This lack of integration profoundly problematises the relation between the original event and its experiencing and by extension, linear notions of time and historical causation. For Caruth, this unsettling temporality represents a profound crisis of history. ‘The traumatised’, she writes, ‘carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess’.

A question which soon arises in relation to the so-called ‘possession’ of the traumatised subject, however, surrounds the possibilities for claiming this ‘impossible history’; the epistemological processes which allow traumatic experience in a range of guises to be known, narrativised and even, in the phrasing of Žižek deployed earlier, given some semblance of ‘burial’. For this history to emerge as a narratisable account of past events which can be placed within conventional parameters of reality (place, time and causality), Caruth proposes an understanding of trauma that is radically ‘other’ oriented.

Indeed, in her earlier publication, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, the author turns her attention to Freud, in this case to Beyond the Pleasure Principle, one of the first works on trauma of the last century. Caruth begins by examining Freud’s use of Torquato Tasso’s romantic epic Gerusalemme liberata to illustrate ‘the way that the experience of a trauma

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25 Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory, p. 5.
repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will’. Tancred’s wounding of his beloved Clorinda, first whilst she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight and then again unknowingly when her soul is imprisoned in a tree, provides a clear dramatisation both of the concept of traumatic repetition and the way in which traumatic experience remains unknown in its occurrence. Particularly striking in Freud’s example is not just the ‘unconscious act of infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition’, but the ‘moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound’.26

The crying wound becomes a central insight into Caruth’s interpretation of Freud’s theorisation of trauma as she reads the address of the voice ‘as the way in which one’s trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound’.27 As Shoshana Felman observes, the theory Caruth draws from the work of Freud is ‘essentially a theory and practice of listening to the trauma of another’.28 Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, has also written extensively on the role of the listener, whom he refers to as ‘the witness’. In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, a volume co-authored with Felman, Laub sheds further light on the so-called claiming process. Laub writes, for example, that:

Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma–does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence […] The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to-and heard-is, therefore, the process and the place wherein cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge de novo. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

27 Ibid., p. 8.
28 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 175. Dori Laub is co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. Laub’s work has proved invaluable for understanding the process of disclosing traumatic memories.
This sense of trauma’s ‘address beyond itself’, or in Dori Laub’s phrasing ‘the blank screen’, has also been explored, however, in the work of prominent memory scholars such as Mieke Bal.  

In the much-cited (edited) volume *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, a collection of essays examining memory as a cultural (as opposed to merely social or individual) phenomenon, Bal echoes the work of Caruth and Laub by theorising acts of traumatic memory as ‘an exchange between first and second person’. It is this dynamic, he believes, that sets in motion the emergence of narrative: ‘The recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognizing the traumatized party’s predicament […]’. This ‘other’ is often a therapist, but can also be a whoever functions as the ‘second person’ before or to whom the traumatised subject can bear witness and thus integrate narratively what was until then an ‘assailing specter’. It is only then, following this process of narrative integration that the traumatic memories ‘lose their hold over the subject’ and the psychic phantoms, whose exploration haunts my discussion of films in the present Chapter, begin to disappear. Attempts to externalise, publicise, and historicise material both on the part of the individual or on the part of traumatised communities are contingent, it would seem, on the necessary presence of an ‘empathic listener’, an ‘other’ who can provide the solidarity necessary for the traumatic event to come into narrative being. We are reminded here, perhaps, of the traumatic epistemology in Von Trier’s mini-series, *The Kingdom*, and the healing intervention of Mrs Drusse.

**Betrayal Trauma**

In practice, however, and as the work of Mieke Bal suggests, this process may, in instances where drastic secrecy and anti-testimonial measures are in place and at work (the Holocaust and incest are obvious examples), be profoundly frustrated by other forces. In terms of the latter, and as touched upon in my

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29 Ibid., p. 57.
31 Ibid., p. xi.
discussion of Gianni Amelio’s *Il ladro*, attempts to claim experiences of childhood sexual abuse (as well as other threats to the bodily integrity of children), the malevolent web of experience which lurks at the narrative heart both of Martone’s *L’amore* and Comencini’s *La bestia*, have, since the early 1980s’ been mired in ongoing controversy, as the enabling role of the listener, the witness to the traumatic event *de novo*, is called into question.

As alluded to by Wilson in her Dogme Ghosts chapter, recovered memories of sexual abuse perpetrated within the domain of the family have been subject to intense media scrutiny and contestation as a slew of anti-testimonial measures attempt to render benign, social concern around this issue. This has largely been the result of well-organised campaigning and media coverage by movements such as the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the United States and parallel movements elsewhere. The recovered memories debate, described as ‘the most passionately contested battle that has ever been waged about the nature of human memory’, whilst initially located in the United States and the UK soon spread to other Western countries including Italy. The movement’s ideological opposition to what it terms the ‘therapy industry’ and the ‘recovered memory fad’ is accompanied by a rejection of all claims to the recovery of traumatic memories of sexual abuse repressed in childhood, and therefore Freud’s notion of psychical repression. Members of the movement maintain that the role of the therapist is wholly ‘destructive and malignant’ and that the narratives of traumatic experience which emerge in the therapy relationship are authored by the therapist, who ‘implants memories of abuse in vulnerable patients’. Inevitably, the recovered memories debate rapidly became, and remains, trapped within the paradigm of truth and falsehood, as opposing sides offer compelling and opposite versions of the past. The feminist response to this backlash is succinctly explained by the psychoanalytic clinician and feminist Janice Haaken:

> Because sexual violations constitute an important basis for feminist struggles against patriarchy, a commonality that appears to transcend our various differences, challenge to

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the validity of memories of sexual abuse invariably evokes a defensive response among feminists.\textsuperscript{34}

Most frequently, accused parties seize upon amnesiac elements and mistakes in memory processing. It is precisely this slippage or elision, however, which may attest to the authenticity of such events.\textsuperscript{35} For feminist trauma scholars such as Janet Walker, negative publicity surrounding the recovery of memories of childhood abuse stems in no small measure from what she laconically describes as the ‘threat posed by incest to the politics of patriarchy’.\textsuperscript{36} Similarly, in her now canonical \textit{Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror}, Judith Lewis Herman offers a compelling synthesis of the relation between the sexual abuse of women and children, and (patriarchal) political power. Glossing Walker, Herman writes that:

\begin{quote}
[\ldots] the study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

The praxis of second personhood and the potentially healing, narrative integration of traumatic memory proposed by Caruth, Laub, and Bal are potentially undermined, and the possibilities for historicising traumatic material disrupted, when we consider the pitfalls or obstacles posed for the so-called claiming process(es) documented above. This may be particularly pertinent in those cases where this attempted claiming or recovery poses a threat to the dominant power structures within which the victim (or victims) operate.

Moving on in our discussion, and with these converging streams of analysis in mind, I now propose a determined exploration of the works themselves. In the

\textsuperscript{35} The lexical vacuums caused often precipitated by traumatic experience, the gaps, elisions, and mistakes, known by experts in the field as the ‘traumatic paradox’.
\textsuperscript{36} Walker, p. xxi.
\textsuperscript{37} Judith Lewis Herman, \textit{Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror} (London: Pandora, 1992), p. 9.
interests of rigour, I shall begin this next phase of my discussion by locating primary sources within the contemporary zeitgeist and by addressing questions of critical reception.

Cristina Comencini and the Family as Crisis

Cristina Comencini, daughter of Luigi Comencini, the illustrious commedie all’italiana filmmaker of the post-war period, was born in Rome in 1956.\textsuperscript{38} A member of the so-called generazione di mezzo, she, like the (largely male) cohort of directors whose work I discuss during this study, came of age at a time of political turmoil (gli anni di piombo) and amid profound shifts to the Italian social architecture. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the director, who has also achieved international recognition as a novelist and playwright, should also belong like her sister, Francesca, to a heterogeneous set of auteur filmmakers afforded the labels ‘impegnato’ and ‘al femminile’.\textsuperscript{39} Most recently, this feminist-inspired brand of (bourgeois) impegno saw Comencini sponsor the Turin satellite of the march ‘Se non ora quando’ a nationwide protest against Silvio Berlusconi (held on 14th February, 2011). This attempt to resist an increasing tide of sexism in Italy and the lurid involvement of the prime minister in a series of high-profile sex scandals (which include paying for sex with a minor) saw over one million people take to the streets in over 230 locations across the country. In an interview with the Guardian Comencini, an official spokesperson for the protest, articulated the mounting frustration of women the length and breadth of the peninsula: ‘We want to be proud of the progress we made in history and we are tired of the representation of women as mere objects of sexual exchange that this government keeps offering us’.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} The work of Comencini signals a notable shift away from the male-authored works of earlier chapters.
\textsuperscript{39} Poppi, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{40} Anna Masera, ‘Berlusconi is not the only Headache for Italy's Women: The Gender Gap in Italy is not just Berlusconi's Fault – Sexism is Deeply Entrenched. Now a Million People have Said Basta’, Guardian, 15 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/15/berlusconi-italy-women-sexism> [accessed 24 June 2011]
In her work as writer, screenwriter, and director, Comencini’s attempts to expose and indict the reflexes of patriarchy are most commonly linked to her probing of inter-generational dynamics between female characters within a variety of framings (comedy, thriller, historical drama, children’s film).\(^{41}\) Despite an unceasing affinity towards ‘il sorriso’, inherited in no small measure, we should assume, from her decade of close collaboration with her father (1980–1989), she seems most adept at bringing to public consciousness the stories, subjectivities, and struggles of female characters across generations (as her mentor Natalia Ginzburg had done in the decades before her). If *Matrimoni* (1998) and *Liberate i pesci* (2000) provide a comedic slant on the family in crisis, then other works, such as *La bestia*, under analysis here, are more akin, perhaps, to the family as crisis, as she unmaskes patriarchy as seen through the prism of the middle-class nuclear family, as well as other, non-nuclear formations.

Comencini’s first box-office success, *Va’ dove ti porta il cuore* released in 1996, allowed the fledgling themes touched upon here to develop and crystallise. In her illuminating analysis of the film, Flavia Laviosa writes, that the director examines: ‘le verità e le menzogne, le zone d’ombra, i silenzi e le incomprensioni, i sentimenti privati, vissuti dal singolo considerato come individuo indipendente, ma anche come cellula del nucleo familiare’.\(^{42}\) Analysis of the successful, *Il più bel giorno della mia vita* (2002), which she worked on with daughter Guilia Calenda, is strikingly similar in terms of the themes it identifies. Writing in *Studies in European Cinema*, Bernadette Luciano and Susanna Scarparo observe that the film is about the lives of (female) children and grandchildren struggling ‘to make sense of their desires, sexualities and roles in the family’.\(^{43}\)

By her ninth novel, *La bestia nel cuore*, and the cinematic offshoot it inspired, Comencini’s gaze had turned to one of the most urgent and compelling ‘zone d’ombra’ within the landscape of contemporary Italian society; childhood sexual abuse. Her literary and cinematic orientation towards this murky *topos* began following an encounter (as occurred in the case of Amelio a decade before her)

\(^{41}\) Indicative, perhaps, of her privileged upbringing, the prominent foci of her attention (both as writer and director) are the travails of the middle-class family.


with precisely the sort of ‘media phantoms’ gestured towards by Emma Wilson in *Cinema’s Missing Children*; a newspaper article on the paternal abuse of a brother and sister, known simply as ‘D’ and ‘S’. However, whilst Amelio’s foremost desire had been to desensationalise the pedophilic abuse scenario, to wrench it from a hyperbolic and voyeuristic Italian media saturated with so-called *Tv-verità*, Comencini’s foremost concern, it would seem, was to bring this *topos* to as wide an audience as possible. This is manifest at the level of plot and storyline, and in terms of decisions made in the casting process. In terms of the latter, *La bestia* deploys a troupe of universally popular actors many of whom enjoy star-like status (and consequent adoration) in Italy. These include Giovanna Mezzogiorno and Luigi Lo Cascio, who play the film’s sibling protagonists Sabina and Daniele (the ‘S’ and ‘D’ of the newspaper article), and other high-profile actors such as Alessio Boni and Angela Finocchiaro. The filmmaker also adopts a narrative approach striking in its clarity and immediacy. Indeed, comparing the work to Louis Malle’s *Murmur of the Heart* (1971) and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Luna* (1979), Deborah Young writes that Comencini:

> brooks no talk of Oedipal complexes and depicts no moral ambiguity in child abuse – only psychological damage that lasts a lifetime. Viewers are never in doubt about where to place their sympathy and where to lay the blame, making "Don't Tell" both easy to digest and suitable for all audiences.44

It is perhaps unsurprising, that the female filmmaker’s clear and uncompromising orientation towards the abuse scenario within a Catholic, bourgeois Italian (nuclear) family, combined with the staging of scenes of intimacy between the same-sex couple, blind Emilia (Stefania Rocca) and Maria (Angela Finocchiaro), drew immediate criticism from the Italian Censor (*La commissione censura italiana*) which resulted in the film being banned to viewers under the age of 14. On the eve of the film’s debut at the Venice Film Festival and following a fierce rebuke by the director, the censor tempered its response and lifted the ban. With some irony, Giovanna Mezzogiorno went on to win the award for best actress (‘la Coppa Volpi’) and Comencini received the UNICEF Award for her treatment of,  

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and commitment to bringing childhood sexual abuse to wider public consciousness.

The film has been similarly polarising within the domain of criticism, attracting approval and vitriol in equal measure. Adriano De Grandis who, despite drawing attention to the film’s important relation to missing child films such as Festen and Happiness, writes that Comencini’s ‘ennesima puntata sulla disgregazione della famiglia’, ‘sembra possedere la necessità di una serata su Canale 5 o Rai Due.45

In the United States, where La bestia was nominated for an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film of 2005, the work was greeted with similar disdain. Stephen Holden, writing for the New York Times, described the work as a ‘portracted “Marnie” like detective story’. Moreover, it feels ‘quaint and overwrought’, ‘as though it had just discovered a topic that the American media have been feasting on for years’. It is ‘no better’, Holden concludes, ‘than a second-tier candidate for the Lifetime Channel’.46

Elsewhere, criticism has been more nuanced and magnanimous. Those critics who responded to La bestia with enthusiasm, credit Comencini for her commitment to exploring (and raising awareness around) the incest taboo. Pier Maria Bocchi suggests, for example, that the work is not only ‘il miglior drama “familiare” del recente panorama italiano’, but represents, ‘una scelta di campo, coraggiosa e rischiosa’.47 Diego Mondella concurs with Bocchi. Comparing the film to works by Aeschylus and Fyodor Dostoevsky, he writes that ‘apprezzabile è inoltre il coraggio con cui la Comencini ha portato al cinema temi così attuali e disturbanti come l’abuso sui minori e l’omosessualità femminile. A proposito di questa ultima questione; che ha destato scandalo facendo’.48 Finally, Alberto Pagnotta argues that La bestia ‘affronta con delicatezza e notevole profondità il tema delle molestie sui minori da parte dei genitori partendo da esso per offrire numerosisissimi spunti di riflessione’.49 In stark contrast to the views of the New York Times journalist cited above, the film may also be considered a brave and

49 Alberto Pagnotta, Filmcritica Scuola, 9: 31 (October 2005), 16.
risqué intervention in a country, which continues to be haunted by the spectre of widespread sexism.

Holden’s lament may take on further meaning, if we examine (albeit with necessary brevity) the wider socio-cultural conditions in which La bestia appeared.

Indeed, for Cristiana Paternò, the film’s treatment of the abuse scenario (a more omniscient and omnipresent cultural concern in countries such as the United States) as well as what she terms ‘figure femminili centrali, dotate di un robusto protagonismo’, may be read as signaling a tentative shift away from a cinematic culture dominated (in a variety of guises) by male self-interest. In an inspiring chapter published in La meglio gioventù: Nuovo Cinema Italiano 2000–2006, the author examines Italian feminist-inspired cinema in the first half of the last decade, contrasting this period with the final decade of the last century. Citing La bestia’s success on the international festival circuit, she writes the following:

Da allora dunque, mi pare, qualcosa è cambiato davvero se è vero che l’Italia ha schierato in campo, nella corsa all’Oscar 2006, La bestia nel cuore, film di una regista come Cristina Comencini. Film, del resto, dalla forte impronta femminile, visto che è la storia di una giovane donna che si trova ad affronta i fantasmi e gli incubi della sua infanzia.

Indeed, for Paternò, these elements constitute:

qualcosa di abbastanza inedito per il nostro cinema, cinema che ha una tradizione radicata o nella commedia di costume e nel comico oppure nell’autorialità intellettuale, ma in tutti i casi sembra muoversi su territori esclusivamente maschili, dove spesso il femminile è marginale o funzionale al racconto e dove poco e faticosamente si registrano i nuovi scenari in atto.50

The timing of the tentative shift identified by Paternò may be significant. As we know already, during the first half of the last decade, women throughout the peninsula found themselves subject to a renewed and reinvigorated anti-feminist backlash both by the second rightist government of Silvio Berlusconi and, no less significantly, by the Roman Catholic Church. In legislative terms, this was most clearly evidenced in the government’s decision to limit women’s access to

procreative technologies (legge 40), which also acknowledges the overt recognition of the rights of the foetus, a legal development examined in detail in Chapter Two. Measures to create an upsurge in women’s participation in the political arena (‘la quota rosa’) due to an entrenched gender bias, to improve women’s rights in the workplace, and to introduce civil unions for same-sex couples were overturned and shelved indefinitely. In the Global Gender Gap Index of 2005 (a body of research published annually by the World Economic Forum) examining the political empowerment, health and well-being, economic participation, economic opportunity, and educational attainment of women in 58 countries, Italy ranked 45, lower than many of the East European group, and below Latin American nations such as Costa Rica (18), Colombia (30), and Uruguay (32). Writing in the Observer, Maria Laura Rodotà, the former editor of Amica and columnist for the Corriere della sera, gives a more immediate impression of the everyday lives of what she terms the ‘average Italian women’:

Today's average Italian woman is a hybrid incomprehensible to foreigners: she's overdressed, overworked and has the lowest self-esteem in the western world. If she has a job, she has to work overtime inside and outside the home (Italian men rarely clean or cook, and spend less time looking after the children). Unwritten laws demand that she is cute, thin, elegant and well made-up. For Italian men it's normal to have a wife and a lover, which is why many have been amused by the adventures of the prime minister. The number of women in positions of power is small; in politics, almost all owe their status to men. The fear of being caricatured as a bitter feminist (who probably hasn't got a sex life) is always strong. Women who overcome that fear are often ridiculed.

In a similar article for the New York Times, Chiara Volpato, professor of social psychology at the University of Milan-Bicocca, asks why it is that women ‘put up’ with the conditions outlined by Rodotà. For Volpato, the answer is simple: ‘conservative ideas in Italy die hard’. In part ‘this is because of Italy's famously patriarchal culture’, she writes. It is also ‘because of the huge influence of the


52 Maria Laura Rodotà, ‘Italian women have to fight sexism in every aspect of their lives’, Observer, 20 September 2009, p. 28.
If anti-feminist sentiment belonging to the nexus between the Church and State together constitute a perfect storm of anti-feminist forces, then the collective self-image of women also risks degradation, humiliation, and subjugation by an Italian media (largely controlled by Silvio Berlusconi) fixated on the commodification of the female body. The most conspicuous example of this is of course the figure of the velina, the omnipresent, scantily-clad TV showgirl. Indeed, the widespread proliferation of highly sexualised imagery of young, (seemingly) sexually available women, coupled with the restrictive pronouncements of Church and State, have made more urgent the need for women to ‘kick-start’ campaigns of ‘resistance’, to bring into public consciousness the routine misogyny endemic within Italian politics and society.

If Italian television is dominated by the highly sexualised imagery of the velina, and increasing levels of state orchestrated censorship, then Cinema, it would seem, may provide a crucible in which the worst manifestations of patriarchy can be illuminated and publicly challenged. As this phase of our discussion draws to a close and we turn our attention to the regimes of representation employed by Comencini to articulate the pedophilic abuse scenario, we should keep in mind the social and political atmosphere in which this polemical work was conceived and received.

The Return of the Missing Child: La bestia nel cuore

If filmmakers such as Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier deploy the ghosts of abused or traumatised children in ways that correspond, at least in part, to understandings of haunting as a phenomenon firmly tied to the supernatural, then representation (and any attendant understanding of the representation) of this topos in La bestia involves a determined shift towards the less whimsical level of individual human psychology. Comencini’s film, like L’amore, to which I will turn in the second half of this chapter, is concerned with psychic vestiges, with the

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traumatic reminders and remainders or ghosts born out of malign childhood interference, linked (in this case, as elsewhere) to appointed care givers, a persistent trope of this study. In La bestia, Comencini affords both the incest thematic and her audience a generative filmic space; a space in which the psychological, sociological, and cultural resonances of pedophilia can be brought to the fore and examined at a time of renewed hostility (by the parties of the New Right and the Church) towards feminist concerns. Here, though, my predominant interest lies in the first of these as I pay attention to the artistic regimes and narrative strategies deployed by the director to retrospectively address this ‘limit’ subject within a conspicuously middle-class setting. In so doing, I intend to sketch new paths for a more nuanced and focused critical engagement with an arguably important, albeit (at times) disparaged work.

Comencini’s cinematic articulation of the lingering psychological impact of incest, the foremost plotline beside several ‘collateral narratives’, begins early in the film’s action.\textsuperscript{55} In contrast to Vinterberg’s Celebration, this spectral presence is figured, in part, as an unconscious presence, as a presence beyond the film’s diegesis; in the dreams (nightmares and daydreams) and hallucinations of the film’s protagonist, Sabina. The first of these, the first intimation to the film’s oblique and fragmented narrative structure and, more importantly, the first window into what the filmmaker terms ‘una casa psicica’, occurs during opening credits.\textsuperscript{56} It is here that the family as locus of trauma is interrogated, that the director will conjure the temporally disruptive psychic vestiges or ‘ghosts’ of abject childhood. Comencini’s epistemology of traumatic experience finds at it’s core, then, an oneiric house, a house which corresponds both to the inside space of a real dwelling place with what Alberto Morsiani terms, its ‘stanze di passione e di sofferenza’, as well as to the corridors of the mind, the psychic recesses of the protagonist, Sabina.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Cristina Comencini, ‘Intervista: Terapia di gruppo’, (interview with Angela Prudenzi), Rivista del cinema, (July–August 2005), 22.
This formation brings to mind Gaston Bachelard’s topoanalytic study of the sites of our intimate lives, *The Poetics of Space*. In this canonical meditation on the localisation of memory within the milieu of the house, described as ‘the human being’s first world’, Bachelard examines the experience of intimate space ‘by means of thought and dreams’, the fulcrum of my analysis here. For Bachelard, and as the citations called upon above indicate, the house is figured in part as a protective space or, in his phrasing, a ‘cradle’:

> Before he is “cast into the world”, “man is laid in the cradle of the house”. It is ‘the environment in which the protective beings live. Our daydreams carry us back to it. And the poet well knows that the house holds childhood motionless “in its arms”.

The *casa psicica* of Comencini’s film is profoundly at odds, however, with Bachelard’s seminal ode to this ‘first world’. Here, the childhood home of Sabina (and her brother Daniele) is figured not as a cradle, but as an austere, claustrophobic space, a site of menace and impending trauma.

*This* dream house is at once bleak and distorted. A single, slow-moving tracking shot draws our attention, for example, to clouds of dry ice which hover above the dust-laden contents of abruptly abandoned scenes of private life. In this early sequence, rich with the detritus of human activity, Comencini registers an absence; in this preface of sorts, domesticity has been arrested. Books sit open on a desk. Knitting lies unattended on an armchair. This backdrop, which jars so profoundly with the description of intimate domestic space called upon just moments ago, is also richly self-reflexive in its allusion to the set of a theatrical, film, or television production. This sequence not only functions to introduce the dream house *per se* and the attendant patterns of colour, editing, and *mise-en-scène* which will return throughout the film, but also the other consequent filmic device employed by the director to articulate the question of abuse; the film-within-a-film technique. It is here that Comencini will largely situate her epistemology of traumatic representation. It is here that the film’s elegiac child figures will return. It seems appropriate to ask, however, why it is that the oneiric house, the spaces of childhood as traumatised, occurs at this juncture in the life of Sabina, the film’s protagonist?

58 Bachelard, p. 7.
Within the film’s narrative economy, this return is triggered by a cluster of scenarios and memory objects. In terms of the former, the most significant of these is the death of Sabina’s mother. It is this traumatic rupture, this severance between mother and daughter, which sets in motion the film’s action and catalyses the return of the missing child.

In an opening sequence freighted with symbolism, Comencini’s camera sweeps across the rooftops of clusters of ornate marble tombs before arriving at the level of the film’s protagonist and watching her movement towards a cemetery office to complete forms and retrieve her mother’s belongings; to participate that is, in the gloomy bureaucratic rituals of death and burial. Here, though, burial and its attendant praxis are diametrically configured as signifiers of reappearance, of return. Any sense of closure that the death of Sabina’s mother should perhaps signify, is soon foiled by the fraught parallel arrival of what, within the psychoanalytic lexicon, are termed ‘demon’ or involuntary memories. These phantoms (of memory) are linked to Sabina’s abuse as a child, experience of which she has no conscious memory. This re-surfacing, which may also attest to trauma’s belated temporality, its disruptive influence on the apparent homogeneity of time and experience, is also prompted, however, by Sabina’s immersion within and contact with other objects and scenarios. Most notably, this includes her dubbing of a rape scene, an episode, which establishes a recurring point of contact with the work of Alfred Hitchcock. In an essay which filters La bestia through the prism of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, a paradigm also called upon by scholars to analyse Martone’s L’amore, Erminia Passannanti notes, that ‘the abuse re-emerges in Sabina’s consciousness as a consequence of [the] rape scene she dubs […]’ The circumstance of witnessing a fictional episode of sexual violence allows her consciousness to become absorbed in an external situation and to locate herself in it’.\(^{59}\) This is undoubtedly true. As Morsiani writes: ‘I rantoli che emana sono i rantoli di Sabina che la sta doppiando, e l’identificazione simbolica è compiuta.’\(^{60}\) Although Sabina’s simultaneous participation in and witnessing (as spectator) of the attack scenario contributes to the unwilled for return of, or ‘possession’ by the traumatised child

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\(^{59}\) Passannanti, p. 139.
\(^{60}\) Morsiani, p. 60.
victim, we should also consider the catalytic significance of memory objects, including the photograph, to this process of unconscious recall. Indeed, in the moments immediately preceding the nocturnal return of the abused child in a nightmare, Sabina is shown carefully adding the parental photographs restored to her at the cemetery to a frame. Having successfully added a photograph of her mother, her attempts to add a similar headshot of her father are profoundly frustrated. As Sabina cuts the photograph (and the image of her father – an act of symbolic violence) her attempts to place the image within the frame and thus integrate the photograph into the fabric of family life and tradition are interrupted by sudden pangs of grief. The frame and the image are returned to a draw; her father will remain outside of the frame of normative family memory. Furthermore, the earlier connotations ascribed to the ritual of burial and its status as agent of memory are reactivated.

It is with these events and memory objects in mind that in the film’s second dream sequence, which in this case is configured as a nightmare, the child as phantom returns. As the camera’s lingering gaze on the upward, counter motion of the elevator leading to the apartment intimates, Sabina’s attempts to ‘lock away’, or contain the past, are shown to have failed. Within this formation of trauma, Sabina’s life-long amnesia to the events which befell her in early childhood is beginning to subside. Unlike the first of these sequences, where the *mise-en-scène* of Comencini’s *casa psicica* appears overtly theatrical or contrived, this (belated) psychic return prompts the arrival of a *mise-en-scène* of space more akin to the cinematic thriller. As such, the director cleverly configures her film-within-a-film motif both as the set on which future action will unfold, and as a film in itself. Within this meta-filmic structure, Sabina is positioned both as adult spectator (as earlier footage from the rape footage dubbed on the previous day is folded into this action) and as child victim, as images from the attack sequence are cross cut with those belonging to the abuse scenario. Sabina assumes the role of belated witness to an abuse history she does not (yet) fully possess, as events are replayed (to her) in their undiluted horror and magnitude, profoundly jarring with Bachelard’s conceptualisation of a house which ‘shelters dreaming’, which protects the dreamer’, and allows ‘one to dream in peace’.

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61 Bachelard, p. 6.
Initially located in the corridor, the adult Sabina is soon evacuated, however, from the film-within-a-film diegesis. Despite this shift, she remains in close proximity to the screen from which the images are beamed. Her appearance at the glassy exterior of this vast television set, emphasises the fine degree of separation between her and the action unfolding before her. She is close enough to be implicated in these events; this is, after all, her story. The barrier-like surface of the screen also underscores, however, a bitter lack of agency, a profound inability to assist or protect the child from the paternal danger she faces and in so doing, re-route her destiny as victim.

As the camera’s gaze oscillates between the point of view of adult witness and child victim, we as an audience, also bear witness to the moments leading up to the child’s abuse at the hands of her father. Throughout the dream, though, careful camera work and chiaroscuro lighting ensure that her father’s identity (and the crime which he is in the throes of perpetrating) remains concealed. Like the decapitated statues, which appear in an earlier jogging sequence, his head is hidden by careful camera work. Indeed, having entered the child’s bedroom, low-angle cinematography momentarily takes hold. At this point, it is the familiar stylistic trope of the gaze of the child, which focalises the crotch of her father’s pyjamas as he approaches her. The image resonates with a rare flashback precipitated by the return of Sabina’s husband, Franco, earlier on. Both Sabina and the film’s audience must bear witness to the child’s sordid removal from the bedroom she shares with her sleeping brother, before being carried along a dimly lit corridor, another of the film’s recurring visual motifs. Moving beyond the corridor the action cuts to an image of the child sitting on her parents’ marital bed. In her work on La bestia, Passannanti links the film’s incest thematic, or more specifically the abuser, to the ‘Minotaur or the gargantuan Ogre’ for the aspects of ‘anthropological monstrosity’ they embody. Here, though, the child’s framing against the ornate backdrop of a headboard displaying a ravenous wolf brings to mind another mythology. The creature, its mouth wide open as if poised to swallow the child, may represent the ubiquitous children’s tale Little Red Riding Hood. Yet, despite the intertextual dialogue this iconography initiates, the tale written by the Brothers Grimm (a familiar feminist intertext), and the child victim of

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62 Passannanti, p. 139.
Comencini’s film differ in one crucial regard: unlike the Grimm tale, the child in *La bestia nel cuore* will not re-appear from the belly of the wolf unscathed. Rather, her very (re)appearance as assailing spectre in the nightmare attests to the profound, enduring damage caused to her by this act of paternal violence. Within Comencini’s rendering of the abuse scenario, Bachelard’s ‘protective beings’ are doubly configured as predatory beings. As Jenny Edkins, alluding both the victims of incest and to those of the Holocaust writes that:

> [...] trauma involves a “betrayal of trust”. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no a source of refuge but a site of danger.\(^\text{63}\)

These scenes, which may be read as corresponding to a process of defamiliarisation whereby Sabina’s hitherto benign memories of childhood undergo a profound overhaul, are also inflected, however, by the regimes of representation deployed to connote the abuse of children in film texts engaged elsewhere in this thesis. This is particularly the case in relation to the abuse aesthetic identified in *Il ladro*. As we know already, in Amelio’s rendering of the pedophilic abuse scenario, the conventional circuit of association we ascribe (as an audience) to familiar objects and rituals short-circuits or ‘malfunctions’. Close scrutiny of the nightmarish evocation of abuse dramatised here reveals similar strategies at work, particularly in terms of this so-called inversion of the familiar, whereby key figures, artifacts, and spaces of the home, which should denote refuge and protection, signify differently.

Linking this inversion to the Brothers Grimm tale, the child’s father, having relinquished his normative status as upholder of safety and protection, assumes the role of predator, of wolf. Furthermore, the bedroom he shares with his wife, with its flourishes of domesticity, of objects and artifacts associated with the rituals of the everyday, is transformed into a site of extreme danger. Thus, any illusion of safety rapidly disintegrates. In this sense, and echoing Edkins, Wilson writes that ‘the family does not simply claim its position as bastion or stronghold

of family protection; this unit, this structure, does not always protect its offspring; threats do not always come from outside’.  

This inversion also manifests haptically, as it does in Amelio’s work. This inversion, namely the filmmaker’s visual construction of the rival demands of nurture and protection is neatly summarized by Fabrizio Del Dongo, in his review of the film for Rivista del cinema: ‘nei sogni si vede bambina, con addosso la paura e insieme il desiderio di essere accarezzata del padre’. It is this tension between the diametrically opposed outcomes of danger and security, which characterise the scenes linked to the abuse scenario here. The child’s yearning for the reassuring touch of her father is, as Del Dongo’s analysis highlights, cruelly exploited. In the terms proposed by Žižek, and as called upon earlier in this thesis, Sabina’s father, the paterfamilias of an apparently ‘quiet and decorous’, bourgeois, Catholic household, draws obvious comparison with the father in Vinterberg’s Celebration. Comencini’s filmic father is a ‘father-of-enjoyment’. It is perhaps here that the first of a series of linkages are established between the patriarchal abuse of power not only within, but also beyond the oneiric space of the family home. By crucially affording her father of enjoyment the status of state representative in his capacity as school teacher, the filmmaker may also be seen to be creating the first of a series of contact points between the film’s abuse topos and an ever threatening Italian State, a theme I will develop further in my analysis of L’amore.

Returning, however, to the dream, if this sequence serves to illuminate the family secret, the incest thematic or hidden ‘beast’ lurking at the core of Comencini’s film for the audience, for Sabina this original abuse event remains in the earlier phrasing of Caruth, unknown in its occurrence, unavailable that is, to conscious recall. Glossing Caruth, Emma Wilson in her chapter on Lynne Ramsay’s Ratcatcher (1999), a work which also engages the pathology of traumatic experience lodged in childhood, iterates the claim that the original, traumatic event ‘is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time it occurs’. ‘There is an

64 Wilson, p. 154.
66 Passannanti, p. 134.
incompletion’, Wilson writes, ‘in knowing or seeing the event’.\textsuperscript{67} Sabina’s status as abuse victim (and her father’s status as father-of-enjoyment in the terms proposed by Žižek), remain unknown to her, beyond the dream. Yet, in spite of this, the return of the missing child, or more specifically missing children (her brother also appears in these sequences), nevertheless profoundly disrupts Sabina’s sense of self and corrodes her relationship with her husband, Franco (Alessio Boni). This becomes clear in the moments immediately following Sabina’s sudden waking from the nightmare. In its aftermath, she at once distances herself from her marital bed and her sleeping husband. Having retreated to the lounge area, a space seemingly untainted by the horrors of abuse, and in scenes which in their emotional intensity and pathos recall perhaps the grief-stricken parents in Nanni Moretti’s rendering of the post-traumatic family in \textit{La stanza del figlio}, breaks down. As the camera traces (in long-shot) the film’s lachrymose protagonist against an inert Roman skyline we are reminded of Paola in Moretti’s film: isolated, bereft, inconsolable.

Contrary to Passannanti’s claim that Sabina appears ‘distressed as if conditioned by a secret pain’ from the film’s ‘outset’, it is the returning spectre of the abused child which serves as catalyst, I would contend, for the sudden distancing on the part of Sabina from her husband, a cooling symbolically figured, perhaps, in this temporary self-erasure from the marital bed and bedroom.\textsuperscript{68} The earlier dream sequence elicits an urgent need to withdraw from the sphere of intimate human relations. Similarly, any earlier feelings of sexual desire (manifest in the sequence touched upon above) are replaced with suspicion and an impending sense, stemming in part perhaps from Maria’s account of her husband’s infidelity, that he too will embark on an extra-marital intrigue. This scenario materialises, somewhat predictably, later in the film.\textsuperscript{69} As such, intimations of desire as well as more conventional romantic gestures afforded Sabina by her husband are met with a hostility and mistrust seemingly uncharacteristic of her. In light of this, we return, then, to Passannanti’s reading of the film in relation to Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as, in the words of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[67] Wilson, p. 116.
\item[68] Passannanti, p. 136.
\item[69] This is one example of the way in which in Comencini’s film, male sexuality is problematically equated with male sexual impropriety.
\end{footnotes}
author, ‘pathological mental state in which individuals feel morally wretched and emotionally separated from the sphere of positive human relationships’.

If Sabina’s nightmare becomes the unwitting catalyst for the unraveling of her relationship with Franco, then the returning of spectre of the abused child also activates a hitherto latent desire to reconstruct her family history, to revisit her limited reserve of memories of family life against the accounts of those friends and family members who also formed part of the fabric of childhood. This process of psychological investigation prompted by a burgeoning need to adequately explain the disquieting emergence of a rival, traumatised stream of childhood recollections in the so-called ‘sogno orrendo’, begins with oral testimony supplied by her blind friend and confidante Emilia (Stefania Rocca). This account, the first of a series of examples of women narrating (stories) to each other (Maria’s chronicling of her husband’s affair story is a key example of this), is cross-cut with footage of the casa psicica, the more contrived embodiment of Sabina’s family home, as it appeared during the film’s opening credits. As occurs throughout the film, any clear sense of linearity is disrupted, as time twists and folds, shaped by the director to reflect trauma’s complex temporality. Here, this is manifest in Comencini’s use of Giovanna Mezzogiorno and Luigi Lo Cascio to play the roles of their child counterparts in Emilia’s historical account. As Emilia reacquaints Sabina with the location and disposition of family members, the camera roams the theatrical diegesis in search, perhaps, for clues, for evidence that may unlock the mystery surrounding the nightmare. Emilia’s portraiture, though, is familiar, innocuous, even clichéd. She describes, ‘una madre che prepara biscotti e latte alle cinque’ and ‘un padre severo ma gentile, sempre in ufficio’.

Following this unsuccessful attempt to read the nightmare against the accounts of family life supplied by Emilia, Sabina is drawn, as in the moments immediately preceding her earlier nightmare, to memory objects; in the case, a box of family photographs. As she trawls the photographic contents of a biscuit tin, we encounter the static visual counterparts to the benign family portraiture provided just moments before. An initial photograph shows Sabina’s parents locked in a tender embrace. Subsequent photographs show Sabina and her

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70 Ibid., p. 133.
brother as children. In one image, they themselves are shown in an affectionate pose. However, the fourth of these seemingly innocent snapshots of family life becomes the unwitting catalyst for a sudden shift in the films tenor. As Comencini’s camera homes-in on the image of Sabina dressed in a ballerina costume, the film’s protagonist, as in the earlier pre-nightmare sequence, becomes unsettled. With her gaze sutured to the image, the film’s action is again channeled through the psychic landscape of the protagonist, is flooded by a stream of memory images, echoing the aesthetic of the earlier nightmare sequence. These images, which like their earlier counterparts, recall Sabina’s childhood home and, in particular, an episode involving the child as ballerina, the likely provenance of the photograph. Having been lovingly made-up by her mother, the child is instructed to show the outfit to her father. By now the mise-en-scène is familiar to us, its desaturated palate of colour, chiaro scuro lighting, and muted dialogue. As in the earlier nightmare, however, this scenario is freighted with intimations of abuse, the likely (though as yet unknown) catalyst for Sabina’s breakdown. Having traced her tentative passage along the dimly lit corridor we encounter in the earlier dream sequence, the child knocks ominously at the opaque glass door of her father’s office the space described by Passannanti as ‘the Minotaurs lair’. It is here, we should assume, that intimacy between father and child occurs. For Sabina, who must again assume the role of witness to her own experience of abuse, this normatively nostalgic memory object triggers the psychic return of the abused child as phantom. This return makes more urgent the need to test again this disquieting cluster of early childhood recollections against the accounts of those who surrounded her as a child. This escalating need, leads Sabina, somewhat inevitably, to the other missing child mobilized within the post-traumatic phenomena that so terrify her, the only other victim of and surviving witness to the crimes perpetrated within the imagined security of the family home; her brother, Daniele.

Unlike the other protagonists of Sabina’s childhood, Daniele emigrated from Italy some years before to live (and work) in Charlottesville, Virginia, a decision rooted, we should assume, in the abuse history he shares with his sister. In order, then,
for Sabina, to unlock her past, in order for the returning spectre of the traumatised child-self to, in the words of Žižek, find its proper place ‘in the text of tradition’, to be given ‘a proper burial’, Sabina must also transcend the spatial boundaries of her country and the familiar, though newly malign, resonances of ‘home’. Within the film’s narrative economy, clarity and comprehension necessitate geographical distancing or displacement as the journey motif (or more specifically, the trope of migration), common to all of the films under discussion in the present thesis again finds resonance. This geographical shift towards North America brings a concentrated flurry of lightness and relief as the claustrophobic interiors of Rome and its so-called ‘stanze di passione e sofferenza’ are replaced with what Morsiani describes in idyllically perhaps as ‘paesaggi aperti, prati verdi, edifici neoclassici disseminati in grandi spazi’.\(^\text{72}\) This determinedly light, open, and expansive diegesis is awash, as the latter description implies, with cues to ‘another’ Italy. An early sequence filmed on the grounds of the University of Virginia campus is particularly redolent of this; the university’s neo-classical campus built by Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the new nation (after the American Revolution), includes a Rotunda modeled on the Pantheon of Rome. This architectural backdrop is accompanied by several references to Italian literature, including the reading aloud of work by great Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, and Daniele’s wife’s decision to follow a course in Italian letters. Finally, Daniele teaches Greek literature culture and civilisation. His drive to read, re-read, and make sense of the past, to generate new meaning from it, correlates visually perhaps to the university’s magnificent neo-classical architecture.

It is this milieu, rich in its allusion to Italian culture and history, which functions as the backdrop for the final, climactic stage of Sabina’s investigation. It is during her stay with Daniele and his young family in this newly open and expansive setting that she will uncover further shards of evidence or ‘clues’ which correspond to an experience of family life at odds, unfamiliar that is, with the one available to her. The first, and perhaps most telling of these, is Daniele’s terse dismissal of Sabina’s tentative inquiry regarding a possible return to Italy, in the car journey from the airport. In response to Sabina’s gentle probing, he gruffly

\(^{72}\) Morsiani, p. 66.
replies ‘mai’. Similarly, in addition to those ‘symptoms’ listed in Passannanti’s article surrounding the lingering impact for survivors of incestuous abuse (‘low self-esteem, accompanied by diminishing interest in work, emotional instability and persistent nightmares’), attributed by the author to Sabina, Daniele demonstrates a profound inability to fully engage in the haptic rituals of parenthood. Sabina bears witness, on several occasions, to his distinctly fraught physical interaction with the oldest of his two sons. He appears overtly distant, tense and bereft of emotion during his attempts to embrace the child before bed. Sabina also learns from Daniele’s wife, that her brother has undergone psychoanalysis, and that this painfully awkward father–son contact is in fact showing signs of improvement.

Yet despite Sabina’s witnessing of the fraught filial relations between Daniele and his children, and the piecing together of other key fragments of evidence, it is her disclosure surrounding the nightmare, which ultimately provides the catalyst for the unearthing of their shared abuse history. As the film’s welcome, though momentary, flashes of lightness give way to a sudden return to emotional intensity, the focus of the film’s action relocates to the neoclassical campus where Daniele works. This expansive *mise-en-scène* of space, heavily freighted with reminders of history, seems an appropriate location for this exchange. Having tentatively disclosed that she is newly pregnant, Sabina is again struck by a grief debilitating in its effects. It is during a subsequent reverse-shot sequence, traces of history again functioning as epistemological signifiers, that Sabina attempts to narrate the nightmare, the contemporary event which has so profoundly disrupted her erstwhile unproblematic relation to self and her understanding of intimate family relations. ‘Ho fatto un sogno orribile’, she tells Daniele. ‘Di me da bambina nella nostra casa. Non so cosa significa’. This sequence may at once be recognised as belonging to the radically ‘other’ oriented conception of trauma explored earlier in this chapter, namely the role of second-personhood in the claiming of traumatic experience. At this stage in the film’s action, however, this traumatic history remains inaccessible to Comencini’s protagonist; the ‘voice from the wound’ cannot yet be heard. Indeed, her attempts to narratavise the return of the traumatised child in the dream are frustrated by a communicative void, a shame-induced lexical vacuum: ‘Non posso raccontartelo’, she tells Daniele.
This desire to adequately explain the sordid events depicted in the nightmare, is also frustrated, however, by her brother’s injunction to silence: ‘È solo un sogno’, he tells her, ‘dai, non fare così’. This cinematic rendering of the claiming process, is always already arrested, then, by the silencing imperative of Daniele, revealing a further point of contact between La bestia and Vinterberg’s Celebration (in terms of Christian’s unsuccessful attempts to verbalise his abuse, and concurrently publicly indict his father; to reach truth). The question which looms large, however, surrounds the origin of this silencing reflex, or in the Italian phrasing ‘omertà’, a term more usually associated with mafia codes of conduct. How is this to be explained? The answer resides, surprisingly perhaps, in the male child’s relationship with his mother, the latter described by Morsiani as ‘zitta e complice’.73 Indeed, Daniele’s fervent need to silence his sister, to dismiss her troubling nocturnal recollection of abuse, may in this case correspond to the culture of omertà within which his own crucially remembered history of abuse is located. This culture of silence was cultivated to ensure that the father’s status as sexual predator remained concealed from public view. By threatening the potential demise of the family, the children’s mother not only sought to ensure, however, that her husband’s crimes remained out of sight, but this protective strategy also profoundly disturbed the symbolic rite in the process of symbolisation, as theorised at the outset of this chapter by Žižek. We are not only reminded at this point in our discussion of Vinterberg’s Celebration, but also then, of the filmic mothers in Capuano’s La guerra di Mario and Amelio’s Il ladro. The figure of the mother in La bestia should also be recognised as bitterly implicated in the abuse of her children. Her sudden erasure from the landscape of family relations inevitably works to subvert the culture of silencing which profoundly disrupted her children’s ability to address their father’s crimes. At this stage in the film’s action, however, it is this residual silencing imperative which frustrates Sabina’s attempts to claim her own experience of abuse, as the normative therapeutic exchange between first and second person, the so-called praxis of second-personhood illuminated earlier, collapses.

Yet despite the thwarting of Sabina’s attempts to solve the epistemological puzzle at the heart of the film’s action, her fractured account serves to preface the

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73 Ibid., p. 64.
subsequent revelation of truth surrounding her experiences in early childhood. In
the aftermath of her guarded admission surrounding the nightmare, and her
desire to delve into her brother’s recollections of family life, Daniele buckles under
the weight of responsibility that his sister’s earlier admission brings. This
coincides, symbolically, with New Year’s Eve and its attendant celebrations. In
scenes reminiscent of the fairground sequence in Moretti’s La stanza del figlio,
where the rapid and haphazard movement of neon light serves as the analogue
to Giovanni’s interior landscape, Daniele’s meltdown during the firework display
at the family home, is strikingly similar in visual terms. As the fireworks shoot into
the night sky, we are reminded again perhaps, of the fairground scenes where
Moretti draws upon the rapid, haphazard movement of light to portray the inner
turmoil of his protagonist. Here, Daniele appears in the background of the shot, in
a state of uncontrollable distress as the night sky is illuminated by the pyrotechnic
display. Before long, Sabina, disturbed by a series of suggestive remarks made
by Daniele’s wife, tussles with her brother, repeating the words, ‘salva da cosa,
salva da cosa’, before being restrained by him. The upward trajectory of the
fireworks, which echo the camera’s earlier homing in on the upward motion of the
lift, signals the ultimate surfacing, the ultimate revelation of truth surrounding the
return of the missing child in Comencini’s film.

In order for this revelation to take place, the film’s action must relocate to the
interior space of Daniele’s family home. It is here, having edged symbolically
beyond the threshold of midnight, and the arrival of a new year, a new moment in
time, that the shards of evidence, the clues gleaned by Sabina during the course
of her investigation of sorts will finally begin to coalesce, or ‘make sense’. It is
here that trauma’s so-called ‘address beyond itself’ will be heard, and the praxis
of second personhood, the exchange between first and second person explored
in the earlier part of this discussion, will be re-activated. Finally, it is here that the
culture of omertà supported by the children’s mother will be undone.

Within this formation of trauma and witnessing, Sabina is initially figured as
empathic listener (or witness) to her brother’s abuse testimony. As Daniele
recounts his experiences at the hands of their father, experience which chimes,
albeit disquietingly with those events depicted in the earlier nightmare sequence,
Sabina sits silently beside him. Daniele’s unbroken oral testimony soon finds its
visual counterpart, however, as the film’s action again tracks between memory images of the childhood home, and the narrative present. In this replay of events, however, Sabina is absent. Unusually, in the case of Italian renderings of the pedophilic abuse scenario in contemporary film, we as an audience bear witness to the story of the male child as victim of sexual abuse; at this point in the arc of the film’s action it will be through Daniele’s story, through the male figure, that the legacy of pedophilic abuse will be routed. As the abuse scenario unfolds, structured, then, around the perception of the male child, his oral testimony emerges with force and with clarity, void of the lexical vacuums which so disrupted Sabina’s unsuccessful attempt to narrate the nightmare sequence.

However, if Comencini’s filmic representation of the sorts of intrusive phenomena associated with the ‘belated’ experiencing of traumatic experience situated in early childhood experience corresponds, in aesthetic terms, to the dominant wisdom set out earlier in this discussion, then the narrative framework which surrounds the ‘claiming’ of this experience differs crucially from the theoretical propositions proffered earlier on. Indeed, Sabina’s role as empathic listener, as witness to her brother’s sordid account of mistreatment at the hands of their father soon undergoes a curious transformation. Having fulfilled her role as listener, becoming, in the phrasing of Dori Laub, ‘the blank screen’, she again assumes the role of witness to her own experience of abuse, a clear inversion of the more familiar claiming relationship. As in the earlier dream sequence, Sabina, unable to reach truth on her own, is unwittingly positioned as witness to her own narrative of abuse. Within this narrative framework the first person (victim) is assigned the role of second person (listener). In response to further probing on the part of Sabina surrounding the nightmare, which provided the founding impetus for her investigation, and disrupting the earlier injunction to silence during the visit to the university campus, Daniele discloses that on two occasions, she also fell victim to incest. Their father made this confession to Daniele as he lay dying, a death hastened by a ‘doppia dosa di morfina’ administered by Daniele. As the darkness of night is replaced by the first light of daybreak, Sabina’s status as abuse victim can, within the film’s narrative economy, finally be ‘claimed’ and the assailing specter which, since the erasure of her mother from the fabric of
family life, has so tormented her, can be confronted, or in the phrasing of Alberto Morsiani, ‘esorcizzato’.\textsuperscript{74}

This reckoning, this exorcism of sorts, symbolically occurs during the film’s holiday sequences in the southern Italian region of Puglia, a space rich in folkloric significance.\textsuperscript{75} If geographical distancing from the sites of abuse in childhood is pivotal to the narrative reintegration of Sabina’s status as victim, then her final encounter with the assailing spectre of the traumatised child is displaced both onto another (southern) territory and inextricably tied to the birth of her child, Daniele.\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, in the moments following Franco’s confession that during Sabina’s trip to Canada, he embarked on an extra-marital liaison, the film’s protagonist (in scenes deleted from the theatrical release, though included in television and DVD versions of the film) disappears from the villa she is sharing with her husband and circle of friends. She subsequently re-appears boarding a single-carriage train. It is during this journey that Sabina will experience a final return to the psychic embodiment of the oneiric house. As Sabina enters the first stage of labour the film’s action again slides between the narrative past and present as images of Sabina, in profound physical and emotional distress, are cross-cut with those depicting her former child self in the dimly lit corridor of her former home. In these scenes the child is shown opening the door to her father’s office, the so-called Minotaur’s lair. However, having entered the study, any residual sense of impending doom begins to gradually ebb and soften. The camera then homes in on an image of the father embracing, or, ‘cradling’ the child. For Passannanti, it is within this embrace that Sabina ‘reconciles herself with this shameful past’.\textsuperscript{77} More immediately, though, this mental image provides Sabina with momentary comfort as she attempts to rehabilitate her father’s sordid status as abuser, as father-of-enjoyment. Likewise, the sudden breaking of her

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 68.
\textsuperscript{75} The motif of southward travel along the vertical axis of the Italian peninsula is also crucial, of course, to the plot trajectories of Il ladro and, as I touch upon in the second half of this chapter, to Mario Martone’s, L’amore molesto. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the thematic connotations (and consequences for the films’ protagonist) are different in each case.
\textsuperscript{76} As is the case in Gianni Amelio’s Il ladro, the Italian South is afforded a degree of redemptive agency and the status as site of (partial) re-birth. In Comencini’s film, Puglia is afforded this emergent status both in the literal and figurative sense. It is in Puglia that Sabina will experience the film’s final set of flashbacks and where her baby boy, Daniele, is born. The Italian South (and the motif of southward travel) are positively correlated, then, with catharsis.
\textsuperscript{77} Passannanti, p. 144.
water during this journey soon translates, is folded into, the scenes playing out in the psychic space of the protagonist's mind. In its psychic rendering, though, this amniotic fluid is configured as a torrent which surges through the *casa psicica*. As the house floods, in scenes not dissimilar perhaps to the torrent of blood which pours from the lift space in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), the traumatised child is shown in her father's arms as they gradually sink beneath water's surface. Her mother, who stands ironing in the kitchen, is swept away and her brother, Daniele, located in the bedroom he shared with his sister, is submerged as the water gushes over him. Everything belonging to this psychic space, including the 'missing' children who have so tormented the film's protagonist, is swept away or submerged, reminding us perhaps of the primordial and purifying role of water in Amelio's *Il ladro*. It is during these moments of catharsis, of reckoning, that the abuse history lurking at the heart of Comencini's film is finally claimed. It is during these moments that the events of early childhood find, in the phrasing of Žižek, their place in the text of tradition, that the process of symbolisation is properly engaged. It is here that the missing child at the heart of Comencini's film, like Mary, the ghostly child in Von Trier's *The Kingdom*, receives amid the torrent of water, a proper burial. The flow of water is configured by the director, as one critic points out, as a 'wave from which to re-emerge reborn'.78 And this burgeoning sense of closure, linked to the submergence of the oneiric house, is ultimately confirmed by the birth of Sabina's child. As Adrian De Grandis, writing in *Rivista del Cinema*, observes: 'La nascita del bambino le darà la possibilità di riprendere a vivere con serenità, dopo aver scacciato i fantasmi di un tempo'.79 In the twilight of the film’s action, birth becomes a signifier of reckoning and submergence as the family narrative is reestablished and the futurity imperative restored. The exhumation prompted by the erasure of the mother from the landscape of the nuclear family finally finds its antidote in the appearance of the newborn (male) child.

Yet, if the filmmaker's cinematic rendering of the profound psychological impact of incest is at once accessible and compelling, it is the apparent ease with which this reckoning, this 'working through' occurs in the film’s final moments (the film

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78 Ibid., p. 143.
79 De Grandis, p. 54.
ends with a frozen image of Daniele playing freely with his young sons in Virginia), that may have prompted disengagement from scholars and vitriol among critics. It is perhaps here, at the intersection between the cinematic rendering of the legacy of child abuse, its ghosts, its phantoms, and the lived reality of such experience, that Comencini’s film potentially opens itself up to criticism and establishes a point of rupture between this rendering of the suffering of children and those articulated in works examined elsewhere in this thesis. Indeed, for the child protagonists of Amelio’s *Il ladro*, Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario*, and Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato*, moments of reprieve and redemption from the horror of abuse are at best short-lived. The endings of all three capture their child protagonists grappling with uncertainty and unease. The neatness with which the mess and pain of abuse are accounted for here, seems more akin, therefore, to the narrative economies of works such as Von Trier’s *The Kingdom*, where exorcism (in all its guises) leads to the recuperation of the family as crisis, and traumatised intra-personal histories.

Despite this accelerated return to a life seemingly uncoupled from the vestiges of the pedophilic abuse scenario and the filmmaker’s (problematic) alignment of maternity with female identity, *La bestia* should nevertheless be recognised as providing a necessary contribution to the understanding of the psychological legacy of incestuous abuse. This intervention appears timely when set against the backdrop of a contemporary Italian culture increasingly burdened by the spectre of patriarchy. Interrogation of this Comencini’s film here also constitutes an important base, however, for critical engagement with other films, which foreground as their subject the retrospective emergence of childhood as traumatised. Mario Martone’s *L’amore* is another such work, and it is to this important and widely critiqued text that I propose to dedicate the next half of this chapter.

Il primo movimento: Mario Martone and *L’amore molesto*

If notions of the phantom presence of the missing child and questions surrounding the retrospective symbolisation of childhood suffering combine to form the backbone of my analysis of *La bestia*, then my reading of *L’amore*,
draws upon, and tentatively gestures beyond, these thematic emphases. Returning to the spirit of investigation, which motored my work on *La stanza del figlio* in Chapter Three, a mode of questioning rooted in the desire to build on and transcend existing critical opinion, it is my intention here to re-read Martone’s film in relation to a series of hitherto unperceived concerns rendered visible by the missing child paradigm and its meshing with the metaphor of haunting.

Ultimately, I will attempt to open up a discursive space which tentatively allows for the possible imbrication of the routinely separated foci of historical *personal* trauma (as channeled through the figure of the missing child) and unresolved political trauma. As in my discussion of *La stanza del figlio*, this approach will necessitate an initial survey of dominant critical discourse. This will form the basis for the second segment of my discussion. Having brought to the fore dominant readings of the *L’amore* by foremost scholars, I intend to work towards an understanding of Martone’s film which places the returning specter of the missing child at its heart. Let us begin the next half of this chapter, though, by attempting to situate the film, and indeed the director, within relevant biographical and cine-historical coordinates.

Mario Martone, the *paterfamilias* of the much-lauded wave of Neapolitan filmmaking of the early-mid 1990s, was born in Naples in 1959. The director, whose innovative filmic style has drawn comparison with the modernist filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and the British director, Alfred Hitchcock, was educated at the prestigious *liceo classico* ‘Umberto I’. In the pre-World War II era, the school, located on Piazza Amendola in Naples’ bustling heartland, provided academic training to future filmmakers such as Francesco Rosi and writers and screenwriters including Rafaelle La Capria (one of Rosi’s key collaborators) and Fabrizia Ramondino, who would become a close friend and collaborator. Unlike Rosi, his illustrious predecessor, Martone’s career in the cinema would crisscross another wing of Naples’ nascent cultural scene; the theatre. The filmmaker was one of the founding members of *Falso Movimento*, an avant-garde theatre group which began in 1979. Taking its name from Wim Wenders’ 1975 film, *Wrong Move*, the group sought, as Áine O’Healy points out, to create ‘an alternative, internationally oriented cultural space’, a space, that is, removed from the prosaic resonances of the widely disseminated Neapolitan tradition. Following the 1985
production of Ritorno ad Alphaville, an homage to the French New-Wave director Jean-Luc Godard, Falso Movimento momentarily disbanded before morphing into the collective, ‘Teatri Uniti’. As it did so, it absorbed two other theatres (Teatro dei Mutamenti and Teatro Studio di Caserta) and developed a production wing which would go on to produce films by emerging directors such as Pappi Corsicato and Martone’s L’amore under analysis here. Counting within its ranks leading exponents of experimental theatre such as the actor/directors Stefano Incerti, Antonio Neiwiler, and Toni Servillo and actors Licia Maglietta and Andrea Renzi (who had also been founding members Falso Movimento), Teatri Uniti became a creative hub for promising Neapolitan actors (Anna Bonaiuto, Peppe Lanzetta, Iaia Forte) writers and screenwriters (Fabrizia Ramondino), composers, and musicians such as Daniele Segre. Having written and directed numerous acclaimed theatrical productions including the much celebrated Tango Glaciale (1982), and with a formidable reserve of creative resources at his disposal, by the end of the 1980s, Martone had made his move into cinema, taking with him much of the creative and financial infrastructure pivotal to his theatre’s success.

If Teatri Uniti and it predecessor had served as a crucible in which a refreshed theatrical culture could flourish, then the Neapolitan cinema under the auspices of Martone, and the other protagonists of the Neapolitan new wave, would undergo a similar process of close questioning and overhaul. This urgency stemmed in no small measure from a crucial awareness of the city’s recurring presence in films, paintings, and photographs. In terms of the cinema, successive generations of filmmakers had sought to impose or distil a coherent or stabilising image of the city, an image which oscillated between idealisation and vilification. As we know already, Naples found fame and notoriety in the early part of the last century in the street films of Elvira Notari, as well as in works such as Gustavo Serena’s Assunta Spina (1915).80 The early and immediate post-war era witnessed the diffusion of images of the city in canonical Neorealism cinema such as the Naples episode of Roberto Rossellini’s Paisà and Viaggio in Italia (1954). The city was also famously a breeding ground for comedy actors and a slew of highly successful comedy films such as Napoli milionaria (directed by and starring Eduardo De Filippo (1950)), as well as works by the influential comic

80 The latter would reappear in 1948 under the direction of Mario Mattoli, with Anna Magnani and Eduardo De Filippo playing the protagonists.
actor, Totò. In the 1970s and 1980s the sceneggiata, the traditional popular Neapolitan melodrama, was restored to prominence by the singers Mario Merola and Nino D'Angelo, and the bittersweet comedies of Massimo Troisi also began to attract large audiences. Running alongside this romanticised image of the city, though, were the films of socially engaged directors such as Francesco Rosi, whose leftist humanist approach to cinema sought to render visible, elements of the Neapolitan mafia and its stranglehold on the city. Rich though these veins of cinematic representation were, their cumulative impact was to reduce Naples' identity to a small cluster of enduring images, defined, as Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli write, as ‘poor, popular, superstitious albeit beautiful, short of jobs and opportunities’, and /or ‘corrupt and violent’ and ‘ruled by the camorra’.  

As he had done in the theatre, Martone would seek to reinvigorate this repertoire of images, developing a brand of cinema sensitive to the complexities of a metropolis at once set apart from the sorts of facile stereotyping, which had come to dominate its filmic representation. This process of ‘discursive recuperation’ was not only understood by the directors of this new wave as solely an act of artistic endeavour, however, but as O’Healy highlights, a ‘civic duty undertaken through the exercise of artistic imagination’.  

As such, Martone’s cinema would attempt to tease out the subtleties and symbolism of Neapolitan culture, paying attention to its regimes of spoken and gestural language, its folkloric inheritance and, no less importantly, to its history.

This focus on the city’s history, or more specifically its intellectual history, would provide the defining motor of the director’s first feature-film, Morte di un matematico napoletano (1992). The work, a rigorous biographical account of the days preceding the suicide of Neapolitan scientist Renato Caccioppoli, appeared in 1991. Co-scripted by Fabrizia Ramondino and including a cast largely populated by Teatri Uniti actors (Anna Bonaiuto, Toni Servillo, Antonio Neiwiller, Licia Maglietta, Andrea Renzi), the film went on to win the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival. This first attempt then, at reclaiming or capturing a more authentic version of Naples, as well as the circumstances surrounding the death of a much loved yet little understood Neapolitan intellectual, was a successful

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one, and bolstered Martone’s status not only as a theatre director of considerable creative flair and substance, but also as filmmaker.

*L’amore molesto: Morte di una madre napoletana*

It was the next work within this Naples-focused cycle of filmmaking which would confirm Martone’s status as a filmmaking *tour de force*, and bring him more fully to the attention of critics and audiences. Released theatrically on 12 April 1995 in Naples, and a day later in Rome, *L’amore*, based on the eponymous novel by Elena Ferrante, begins where *Morte di un matematico napoletano* ends; with, as one critic points out, ‘la morte di un personaggio amato ma non compreso’.

Having already secured a reputation within the theatre as a director ‘al femminile’, due to the skill with which he engaged female roles and actors, the novel’s account of a daughter’s search to uncover the circumstances surrounding the unexplained death of her mother, tapped into the sizeable segments of Martone’s imagination attuned to the dramatisation of the feminine. Indeed, questions around authorship and gender become important in relation to *L’amore*, not least, because significant recurring emphasis has been placed within some discourse on Ferrante’s close scrutiny of (and involvement in) the film’s development. Together with Martone, she co-wrote the film’s screenplay and collaborated closely with him on key aspects of plot and storyline.

Following its release, the film, the genesis of which began in 1992 when Martone’s friend and collaborator Fabrizia Ramondino suggested he read the eponymous novel during a trip to New York (for the premiere of *Morte di un matematico napoletano*), enjoyed considerable box-office and critical success due, in no small measure, to its visual and aural flair (the film was photographed by Luca Bigazzi) and consumate acting performances by revered veteran actors

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83 Daniela Catelli, ‘*L’amore molesto*’, *Panoramiche/Panoramiques*, (Autumn 1995), 24. Elena Ferrante is one of Italy’s most celebrated contemporary female writers. Her highly successful novel, *I giorni dell’abbandono* (2002), was adapted for film in 2005 by Roberto Faenza. In spite of her success, her true identity and whereabouts (‘Elena Ferrante’ is widely regarded as a *nome de plume*), is a closely guarded secret. Some commentators believe that ‘Elena Ferrante’ is a pseudonym used by Fabrizia Ramondino. It has also been posited, however, that the pen name belongs to literary critic Goffredo Fofi, or even Martone himself. See: Stefano Paulo, ‘Tutti gli indizi per risolvere il mistero di Elena Ferrante’, *Corriere della sera*, 14 November, 2006, p. 38.

84 *L’amore* should also be read, therefore, in light of Ferrante’s decisive (and gendered) contribution to the film’s production, as not solely (or substantively) the work of the male-auteur.
such as Angela Luce, (famous for her work with Totò), Gianni Cajafa, as well as more fledgling figures such as Anna Bonaiuto.

Research by Alex Marlow Mann sheds light on the breadth of the film’s success within Italy: it was screened on 156 consecutive days in Naples alone, was seen by a total of 343,788 spectators, and grossed more than L3,103 million on its first theatrical run. Likewise, L’amore enjoyed theatrical distribution in Europe, America, and Australia and has since been screened on terrestrial TV in the UK. On the festival circuit, Martone was awarded a David Di Donatello for his direction of Anna Bonaiuto (who also received an award for her spellbinding performance as Delia), as did Angela Luce. Despite failing to win over the panel of judges at the Cannes Film Festival, the sole Italian entry of that year, the film was nevertheless ‘applaudito a lungo, con la platea che batteva le mani ritmando la tarantella finale’.

In light of the film’s sustained financial and critical success, it is unsurprising that L’amore, widely regarded as one of the most important films of the 1990s, compels continuing scholarly attention. Since its release, scholars working both within and beyond an Anglophone context have sought to embed the work within a discreet filmmaking tradition, and thus afford it a stable meaning. Yet despite attempts by critics to accord L’amore a suitable label, it remains a moving target. It is, as Alex Marlow-Mann wisely perceives in the conclusion to a recent article on the film’s relation to the sceneggiata, ‘an open text’. Indeed, displaying points of contact with film noir, the quest narrative, and described most flamboyantly, perhaps, as a ‘una specie di ibridazione dell’antonionismo sulla sceneggiata, proprio come il jazz moderno e’ stato volentieri sposato alla nuova musica napoletana’, L’amore’s determined hybridity and consequent richness, allow it to make unexpected conceptual twists and turns and thus evade unproblematic criticism or analysis.

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87 Marlow-Mann, p. 208.
In his recent history of Italian cinema, Paolo Russo engages the first of the apppellations cited above, turning his attention to what he terms, the film’s ‘ben dosati meccanismi tipici del thriller’. These, he argues, ‘ricordano un modello alto’. For Russo, elements of plot and *mise-en-scène*, encourage comparison with those identified in works such as Hitchcock’s psychological thriller, *Marnie* (to which *La bestia* was also compared).  

Similarly, in an earlier review of the film in *Sight and Sound*, Mark Sinker flags the film’s investigative narrative structure. *L’amore* is ‘structured like a detective story, with its protagonist Delia, the baffled daughter, in search of reasons for her mother Amalia’s death’, he writes.  

Likewise, a 2010 article published in *Italica* by Rosella Riccobono which analyses ‘Martone’s potential male ‘re-appropriation’ by Delia (the narrator and main focaliser) of Elena Ferrante’s ‘perspectives and sensitivities’, proceeds in a ‘detective-like style’. This after all, the author contends, ‘is the mode that the genre of the novel and the film invites us to adopt’. As such, Riccobono’s thesis unfolds under a series of sub-headings synonymous with a murder investigation (‘the suspects’, ‘the sites’) and with the aid of ‘investigation props’, in this case, ‘psychoanalysis’ and ‘Sherlock Homes’.  

Pauline Small has further interrogated those elements of the film which prompt recourse to the *noir* thriller. Echoing Russo and Sinker, Small notes that Martone’s film ‘has the form of a quest narrative, with Delia as the agent of the search’. For Small, *L’amore* should be more precisely located within a body of work termed ‘recycled film noir’. The films in question do ‘not subvert the genre, but rather work within the tradition to offer variations on established conventions’. Martone’s use of *chiaroscuro* lighting and the presence of winding staircases and narrow corridors may evidence the latter. The most notable *departure* from the *noir* model, however, resides in the filmmaker’s deployment of a *female* protagonist to the city, a territory conventionally posited within the *noir* scenario as the domain of the male detective. As Delia traverses space conventionally

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90 Mark Sinker, ‘L’amore molesto’, *Sight and Sound*, (November 1996), 42.
91 Rossella Riccobono, ‘Fantasising the Self, Fantasising the Other: Memory and Re-visions in Mario Martone’s L’amore molesto’, *Italica*, 87: 3 (2010), 441–461 (p. 441).
92 Ibid., pp. 444–445.
94 Ibid., p. 306.
afforded masculine agency, Martone disrupts this convention as a means of probing the consciousness of the focalising female subject, around whose perception the film’s narrative is structured. Tracking between key sites in the search for clues surrounding her mother’s death, Delia re-experiences the spirit of aggression and patriarchal control, the misogynistic subtext, which prompted her earlier flight to Bologna. In Small’s reading of the text, key noir elements are summoned or repackaged as a means of offering a ‘generalized exploration of female identity’ within the context of the uninterrupted impact of patriarchal social structures. Finally, and of particular significance in relation to scholars whose work I call attention to below, Naples’ posting as a noir city, is contingent rather than strategic, Small argues. ‘The city is explored as the quintessential urban setting rather than as a particular city.’

In another article published in 1999, Áine O’Healy further develops notions of ‘the intersection of spatiality and the performance of gendered identities’ within a framework of feminist analysis. In this study, however, the city as Naples, as opposed to Naples as (the, or) any city, replaces Small’s emphasis on genre as a key mode of questioning. The city does not, O’Healy’s article suggests, function simply as a point of visual reference, but becomes a dynamic part of the film’s narrative development. Having established Martone’s decisive role in the emergence of the New Neapolitan cinema, key segments of which informed much of my earlier discussion, the author funnels her attention towards those aspects of the film which may frustrate attempts to situate this foundational work of the New Neapolitan Cinema within an arena entirely uncontaminated by those influences customarily dismissed by Martone (and his contemporaries) as worn with use. Whilst the familiar tropes of mystification and sentimentalisation may be absent from Martone’s portraiture, the theme of abjection (in relation to female sexuality), O’Healy argues, nevertheless figures strongly in the film’s narrative.

Having called valuable attention to Walter Benjamin’s influential meditation on ‘porosity’ and the ‘porous’, namely the fluid nature of the social, spatial, and temporal anatomy of Naples, a psycho-geographical conception of space, where
‘indeterminacy and ambivalence have the capacity to reveal rather than to conceal’, (a theme I shall return to later), O’Healy continues by probing the link Martone’s film establishes between the mother or more specifically the maternal body and the city (as Naples). This crucial relation between Naples and the maternal body, ‘a link of abjection’, may be seen to moor the city to a familiar conceptual domain; the female body. As spatial concerns surrounding Delia’s immersion in the womb or ‘ventre’ of Naples and her troubling experiences that this re-immersion precipitates, are cross-cut with images of her mother’s exposed abdomen, the author, drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of the French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, provides an adroit critique both of female cinematic identity as conditioned by ‘the operations of patriarchal society’ and more importantly perhaps, sheds valuable light on the mother–daughter–city triangulation which sits at the heart of the film’s narrative.

More recently, Alex Marlow-Mann has sought to broaden the critical scope of writing on Martone’s film further, by foregrounding the film’s relation to the form of popular Neapolitan melodrama known as the ‘sceneggiata’. Subverting much of the wisdom espoused in the scholarship touched upon above, Mann concentrates on the ways in which ‘the film draws heavily on the conventions of traditional Neapolitan melodrama’. These conventions, he argues, are ‘reformulated and rearticulated’. As such, Marlow-Mann, adopting a method not dissimilar to that of Small, lists the ‘numerous striking similarities’ between L’amore and the film version of the famous sceneggiata, Lacrime napulitane (Ciro Ippolito 1981), summarized as follows: both films find at their core a crisis experienced by a family comprised of a mother, father, and pre-pubescent daughter. Both films make use of the idea of emigration from Naples. The figure of the mother is presented as desirable and sexualised in both works. In addition the presence of other thematic similarities, a further conspicuous point of contact between these two works is the presence of the veteran Neapolitan actress Angela Luce (as Angela in Lacrime napulitane and as Amalia in L’amore). Likewise, the dual presence of a stairwell and cage elevator at a decisive moment

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99 Ibid., p. 241.
100 Ibid., p. 256.
101 Marlow-Mann, p. 200.
in the film’s narrative is one of several iconographic/geographical echoes, which bolster *Lacrime napulitane*’s status as a ‘legitimate intertext’, to Martone’s work.\(^{102}\)

Having identified key similarities, Mann moves on to identify those aspects of the film which may be viewed as a rejection of the perceived influence of the *sceneggiata*. The most pervasive of these departures is the apparent irresolution of the ‘epistemological puzzle’ the film dramatises. Indeed, in contrast to *Lacrime napulitane* where the threat to the patriarchal family unit is ultimately resolved leading, as in conventional melodramatic narrative structures to reconciliation and closure (thus upholding the patriarchal values that sustain it), Delia’s arrival at a series of truths in *L’amore*’s denouement, offer her, as Mann writes, ‘no real liberation’.\(^{103}\) The film may be seen as escaping, then, from ‘the ideological and emotive constraints of the traditional Neapolitan melodrama by subverting the conventions of the sceneggiata’.\(^{104}\)

Compelling though these readings (and counter readings) are, what this brief survey of dominant discourse perhaps highlights, is a noticeable lack of sustained scholarly attention surrounding Martone’s articulation of the return of childhood as traumatised, or his rendering of the extreme contours of the pedophilic abuse scenario. Let us move on in our discussion, then, by attempting redress this omission, before, in the closing stages of our understanding engaging another of the film’s neglected themes; the possible inter-relation between this phantom presence and the film’s political subtext.

**L’amore molesto**

If those scenes and sequences which work to dramatize the return of the missing child in *La bestia* are avowedly self-conscious (as the filmmaker attempts to capture the unsavoury tang of the pedophilic abuse scenario for a popular audience), then Martone’s filmic rendering of the extreme contours of abject childhood within a working-class frame is less overtly histrionic. Indeed, whilst *La

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102 Ibid., p. 203.
103 Ibid., p. 207.
bestia makes its address to a broad, mainstream audience, L’amore was destined for the more rarefied art-house or festival spectator. This is most apparent in complexities of plot and storyline, location shooting, a cast of actors known for their work in the theatre, and reliance on Neapolitan dialect (a recurring criticism among northern Italian audiences who bemoaned the film’s linguistic opacity). The latter, namely the firm eschewal of standardised Italian (an important point of departure from the source novel), appears to evidence claims that Martone’s brand of cinema is, as Pasquale Verdicchio suggests, ‘strongly anti-television’. These comments at once jar, of course, with the wisdom espoused by critics whose attention has been drawn to the apparent kinship between La bestia and the sorts of television programming most commonly found on ‘popular’ channels such as Canale 5, Rai Due, or even, if we take heed of the acerbic comments of the New York Times journalist Stephen Holden, The Lifetime Channel in the United States. Whilst this criticism appears unnecessarily strident, particularly if we consider Comencini’s successful parody (within La bestia) of the popular television serial Incantesimo, Martone’s film is, nonetheless, informed by very different artistic instincts and bears a more nuanced and sophisticated aesthetic stamp. As spectators we experience a stripping away of elaborate special effects, of complex patterns of editing, and the eschewal of a highly determined, symbolically dense mise-en-scène. Instead, we encounter a more measured aesthetic, a style of filmmaking, which conveys, as Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli observe, ‘an almost classic look’ to the film. Similarly, and in contrast to the determined aim of Comencini who, as a prominent second-wave feminist, conceived La bestia in part as vehicle for bringing childhood sexual abuse to wider public consciousness, L’amore’s abuse strand has been consciously played down as the defining motor of the film’s identity, by its creator. Attempting to distance the work from an over-facile, ‘modish sex-trauma explanation’, Martone has expressed skepticism towards over-reliance on psychoanalytic readings of the film’s ending. Discussing Delia’s belated recovery of the repressed memory of a childhood sexual violation,

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105 This is a notable departure from Ferrante’s novel.
106 Verdicchio, p. 283.
107 Mazierska and Rascaroli, From Moscow to Madrid, p. 71.
108 Sinker, p. 42.
the director comments that for him: ‘una parte difficile da affrontare era proprio la parte finale, intanto perché volevo evitare che ci fossero riferimenti astratti di tipo psicoanalitico [...]’.

Despite urging caution, then, in terms of too freely situating L’amore’s sex abuse thread within a psychoanalytic frame, as well as a slew of conspicuous stylistic departures, the catalyst for the return in the narrative present of the assailing specter of childhood as traumatised, of a psychical reality embedded in the historical past, appears nevertheless, to be the same in both works: the (sudden) demise of the (female) protagonist’s mother. Whilst the cause of death in La bestia is shunted to the margins of the film’s action, in Martone’s film, the desire to establish the precise circumstances surrounding the fate of Amalia, is regarded by some scholars as the film’s raison d’être, the key locus of its identity. Indeed, it is Amalia’s aquatic demise, her catalytic erasure from the landscape of always already fractured familial relations, which prompts Delia’s journey from Bologna, her adopted home, to Naples, the city of a childhood tainted by (male-perpetrated) violence and family breakdown. It is during this return (a further example of northward migration, followed by (returning) southward travel), and subsequent contact with the city of her past, that the missing child re-appears, disturbing linear narration and the homogeneity of time and experience with a past psychical or dream-like reality. These interruptions, these ruptures in the film’s contemporary temporality occur, as they do in La bestia, as a series of dreams and flashbacks, creating gaps and lapses in the arc of the film’s narrative.

Interestingly, it is one such dream sequence, Delia positioned like her counterpart in La bestia as the dreamer (or main focaliser), which prefaces L’amore’s action. As opening credits begin to roll, and the black background to which they are set disappears, we as spectators are plunged into a diegetic realm, reminiscent perhaps, of Morte di un matematico napoletano. The shots we encounter are, as Æine O’Healy describes, ‘overexposed, almost monochromatic’. Indeed, the half-tint colouring of the image-track, and aspects of mise-en-scène (costumes,

props, and hairstyles) at once anchor the film to a Naples of the early post-war period. It is here, within the recollected popular quarter of Gianturco, that the image of the missing child will predominantly return; that a violent upbringing and a forgotten (but ultimately remembered) act of abuse will make its hazy return to consciousness. This initial dream sequence, however, is free from intimations of domestic or sexual violence. It works instead to provide a momentary glimpse of the so-called ‘old city’ as well as to usher in regimes of focalisation and patterns of sound and colour. If sound is deployed in La guerra di Mario as a means of charting the topography of the contemporary Neapolitan urban space, to connote its compartmentalisation into discreet, class-specific locales, then here it functions to demarcate past and present temporalities. Whilst the soundtrack woven into the latter is shrill and chaotic, in no small measure, to the privileging within Daniele Sepe’s score of wind instruments and frantic percussive gestures, then the latter is distinctly more tranquil and subdued. In terms of colour, we encounter, amid the sepia tones noted above, a vivid blue, which as O’Healy notes, is fixed to key elements of costume, including most notably, a dress belonging to Delia’s mother. Throughout the contemporary strand of the film’s narrative, blue is called upon to connote linkages to this remembered past; Delia awakes from the dream wrapped in blue bed clothes, and her childhood friend Antonio is later reintroduced to her wearing a striking blue suit.

In this early flurry of shots and cuts, we are brought, as Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli write, to a ‘dream city’, altered ‘by the filter of private memory and by the lens of childhood’. Indeed, much of this action is focalised by a pre-adolescent Delia whose point of view mediates our awareness of key figures and events unfolding within locations of childhood. As the action relocates from a communal garden area, where Rosaria (a family friend or possible sister of Amalia) sits feeding Delia’s younger sister, to the interior space of the family apartment, our thoughts turn to notions of the dream house, a returning trope in my analysis of La bestia. In sharp contrast to the disembodied, garish evocation of domestic space dramatised in the nightmares and flashbacks of Sabina, the oneiric house assembled here, could be plucked from the set of a social-realist work, belonging, perhaps, to the canon of first or second wave neorealism. These

111 Mazierska and Rascaroli, From Moscow to Madrid, p. 60.
are scenes rooted not in arrested domesticity, its abandonment, its detritus or decay. Rather, these are scenes which speak of its praxis. In short, these are scenes, which dramatise action. In one room women work diligently as dressmakers, cutting material, or sitting at sewing machines, a possible biographical reference to the occupation of the filmmaker’s mother. In a neighboring room Delia’s father, an artist, adds the finishing touches to a painting, soon to be sold, we should assume, to one of the city’s tourist visitors. For Rascaroli and Mazierska, the society depicted here, in its apparent industry, is one ‘psychologically still influenced by the war and by the memory of recent poverty’.

The flurry of scenes unfolding within L’amore's oneiric house is also flooded, however, with images linked to the praxis of motherhood, a further possible point of dissonance with Comencini’s barren rendering of the dream house and its regimes of silent apathy and omertà. Indeed, if the feeding of Delia’s younger sister by Rosaria constitutes a maternal presence outside of the home, then the film’s interior sequence is soon freighted with images of what Pauline Small aptly describes as the ‘nurturing mother’, as gender roles are neatly defined and assigned by the filmmaker. Having dispensed food to her other children, Amalia is shown breastfeeding her third child. She then returns the newborn baby to a cot and resumes her work at a sewing machine. Amalia, Small writes, ‘is afforded ‘the iconic status of mother or Madonna figure’. We are (initially) reminded here, perhaps, of Bachelard’s conception of the dream house as ‘cradle’, the environment in which the protective beings live. In the ‘dream’ world conjured here, a world, that is, of domestic bustle and the absorbing hubbub of entrepreneurial activity, there is a perceptible sense of care, of safety, and in Small’s phrasing, of ‘nurture’. Children are fed and returned to sleep peacefully in cots. They are watched over with due care and diligence, a significant departure from some of the images of childrearing in works such as La guerra di Mario and Il ladro. The image of motherhood yielded in this prefacing sequence, is one of sacrifice. Unlike the biological mothers of La guerra, Il ladro, or most recently, La bestia, Amalia, the mother at the heart of Martone’s film, will not be implicated in

112 Ibid.
113 Small, ‘Desperately Seeking Delia’, p. 203.
the suffering or trauma of her children. Rather, she too, will be afforded the
dismal status of victim of male-perpetrated violence.

With the observations of Small and, indeed, the earlier citation of Mazierska and
Rascaroli’s surrounding the psychological legacy of war in mind, we should
nevertheless consider the possibility that this opening sequence registers another
meaning; one in which its iconography of nurturing motherhood, also bears the
residue of a less benign set of historical forces or concerns, a mode of analysis,
which may ultimately expose this heavily critiqued work to other possible
readings. In terms of the former, the scenes dramatised here, freighted with the
imagery of dutiful motherhood, and unfolding within a heavily gendered mise-en-
scène of space (manifest in the physical separation of male and female
characters), may be recoded, perhaps, as invoking a less wholly geographically
specific patriarchal impulse, but one also informed or inflected by the Ventennio
of fascism; its determinedly patriarchal (and misogynistic) overtones, its
emphasis on the biological destiny of women, symbolised here, by Amalia’s
Madonna status. We are at once reminded, of course, of the nuanced and
canonical account of women’s lives under fascism, by the American, feminist
historian, Victoria De Grazia. Mussolini’s regime, she writes, ‘stood for returning
women to home and hearth, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female
destiny to bearing babies’.114 The regime’s patriarchal ideology, another important
scholar of fascism writes, ‘required women to return to the kitchen and the
bedroom’.115

In this prologue, Martone not only affords his audience a series of tropes
linked to a society psychologically still influenced by the privations of war, but one
psychologically influenced, perhaps, by the memory of fascism, its discursive
regimes, its patriarchal ideology. Within the film’s narrative economy, the oneiric
house rendered visible in the dreams and flashbacks of the film’s protagonist
should also be recognised, therefore, as bearing the traces, the ‘remainders and
reminders’, of another era.

114 De Grazia, p. 1. My emphasis.
115 R. J. B. Bosworth, The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of
Returning to our textual analysis, however, it is in the dreams and flashbacks, which occur following Delia’s return to the city of her birth (and her subsequent investigation into the circumstances surrounding her mother’s death), that the specter of the missing child (as witness to violence at the hands of male figures) more fully returns. In the first of a succession of Naples-based dream sequences, Delia is seen passing through a tunnel space with her mother. If the film’s opening sequence fosters an awareness of the implicit referencing of the ideological residues of fascism, then here such referencing occurs more explicitly. Meshing with earlier news footage in the contemporary strand of the film’s action, which renders visible and audible a ‘Duce’ chanting crowd, the disappearance of Delia and Amalia beneath the bridge is preceded by an inscription, which reads ‘Saluto al Duce’. The residues or remainders of fascism are not only psychological, it would seem, but also based in material reality. This jarring, indelible inscription is not all that is ominous here, however. As Amalia and the pre-adolescent child move from the hazy, blue-tinted light of morning to the tenebrous hollow of the bridge structure, they are pursued by an older male figure. The man in question recalls Delia’s father in the contemporary strand of the film’s action. Aware that they are being followed, their pace becomes increasingly rapid until they eventually run hand in hand to the light (and apparent safety) which awaits them on the other side. By the time of their subsequent reappearance, the older man has morphed into the younger, historical incarnation of Delia’s father who lifts the crying child, deeply unsettled by the experience, to his arms.

This dream is soon followed, however, by the first of the film’s flashback sequences. Roused from the earlier dream by the ring of the telephone, Delia rushes to return a suitcase belonging to her mother’s lover, Caserta. Having careered down the winding staircase in pursuit of the grey haired figure (who features prominently in both strands of L’amore’s narrative), the film’s action clicks back to the remembered past. In this flashback, triggered either by a fleeting recollection of events unfolding at her mother’s funeral or by the arrival of her mother’s companion (the possible catalyst for earlier childhood violence), we are returned, albeit momentarily, to the oneiric house of the film’s opening sequence. It is here, as our earlier, though not unproblematic reading of the house as protective sphere or ‘cradle’ further dissipates, that male violence as
well as the ongoing threat on the part of male figures to the bodily integrity of women, the likely connotation of the earlier tunnel sequence, contaminates the diegesis.

It is during this flashback sequence that Delia is gruffly man-handled by her ‘zio Filippo’ before being issued with a sharp ‘corrective’ slap across the face. The child’s crime? Drawing unwelcome comparison between a sexually alluring gypsy woman (or whore) depicted in a painting by her artist father, and Amalia, whose identity appears always already tied to notions of dutiful motherhood. We are reminded, then, of the wisdom touched upon in my earlier survey of criticism; the imperative within what soon emerges as, in the words of one commentator, a ‘harshly patriarchal spirit of Neapolitan life’, to control, repress (and even aggressively punish) expressions of, or alignment towards female sexuality.116 We are also reminded, no less importantly, however, of our work on the film’s opening sequence, and the possible origin of this cultural conditioning; the lingering psychological residue of fascism, its pernicious emphasis on femininity as maternity, or in the scenario illuminated above, on the fecund mother. Here, the child’s unwitting dilution of the potency of Amalia’s nurturing status is treated as a potential source of social disturbance. As such, the child’s crime is punished and her mother’s status restored and ‘re-contained’. It may be little coincidence, therefore, that throughout this episode, Amalia appears in the background of the shot, carrying out domestic activities such as ironing.

The city’s harshly patriarchal spirit is iterated in scenes of escalating male aggression in two other flashbacks which figure the missing child as witness to violence performed by a male family member, in this case, Delia’s father. The first of these episodes recalls a bus journey amid the gleaming waters of the Neapolitan coastline. It is here, that the ‘strict protocol of the gaze’, the female–male gaze prohibited by the patriarchal agency of the city, is upheld.117 Already aware of the troublesome glances towards his wife by a trio of male onlookers, all of whose faces are focalised in a series of low-angle shots by Delia, the reciprocal gaze of Amalia (who turns to acknowledge a provocative complement paid by one of the men to her daughter) sparks a brutal response on the part of

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117 Ibid., p. 254.
her jealous husband. This apparent breach of protocol, like Delia’s earlier digression, is punished with a heavy ‘corrective’ slap to the face. Clearly shaken by the experience, the child holds tightly to the outer edges of her mother’s skirt. As she does so, sparks of gold rise from the surface of the ocean, the result of intense sunlight. The sublime beauty of this littoral backdrop provides momentary relief from the violence unleashed by Amalia’s ostensibly transgressive, though ultimately chaste display of public sexuality. Indeed, if paternal violence in La bestia is invisible to detection, tied as it is to regimes of camouflage and secrecy, then the public display of brutality here highlights the way in which male authority and control sprawl, unimpeded, far beyond the supposed confines of domestic space.

This seepage of authority throughout the spaces of public as well as private life is further dramatised in the second of these flashbacks. During precisely choreographed scenes, the film’s action returning, albeit momentarily, to the oneiric or dream house, Delia mistakenly discloses to her father that Amalia has embarked on an extra-marital intrigue with Caserta, an affair she claims to have witnessed at first hand. The child’s misperception, as I will show later on, finds its root in Delia’s sexual assault at the hands of the local baker. Here, Delia displaces her sense of guilt for the event (which has profoundly disrupted memory processing) onto her mother. This strategy also functions (at least in part), as Alex Marlow-Mann points out, to ‘eliminate Caserta’s interference in her familial relations’. This may include, of course, his distracting influence on Amalia’s duties as nurturing mother, her fiercely guarded status as iconic Madonna figure. In the immediate aftermath of Delia’s reported misperception, the child’s father charges into the family home where Amalia sits playing cards with a group of female friends. Having seized her and pinned her against a wall, an iron lurking symbolically in the centre of the shot, Amalia is dragged into a communal garden space where, in scenes largely hidden from the view of the audience, she is kicked and punched repeatedly, leaving her badly bloodied and bruised. As in the earlier bus sequence, this act of male aggression unfolds within public space. Yet, in spite of this, no attempts will be made to protect her or curtail her husband’s brutality; again, the patriarchal agency of the city (inflected

118 Marlow-Mann, p. 203.
perhaps by the patriarchal ideology of fascism) holds sway. It is as the action relocates to the apartment building, that Delia more fully witnesses the violence unleashed by the faulty claim surrounding her mother’s alleged infidelity. In this episode, Caserta is forcefully extracted from a neighboring apartment before having his head banged repeatedly against the floor of the building’s stairwell. As blood trickles from the site of the attack, Antonio, Caserta’s young son attempts to intervene. The child’s protective impulse is met with further violence; the child is dangled upside down from his ankles, his obvious peril enthralling hoards of neighbours, gathered in and around the stairwell, who look on aghast.

The question, which begins to loom large (as in my earlier analysis of Comencini’s La bestia), surrounds the more precise cause, or ‘trigger’, for the return of the missing child in the dreams and flashbacks that punctuate the contemporary strand of L’amore’s action. Why does the missing child return? Broadly speaking, this return is prompted by the aquatic demise of Amalia. It is this unexplained erasure from the landscape of family relations which prompts Delia’s unwished for return to Naples, and her subsequent re-acquaintance with the city of her birth. Moving beyond generic notions of the seepage of residual traces of the past into the present, though, it is the combination of the protagonist’s immersion within these locations (as well as a plethora of new and unknown urban sites across the city) with unwished for bodily interactions (including expressions of the male gaze) which appear to precipitate this lapse into memory and the return of childhood as traumatised.

The discursive significance of the body to L’amore is, as my earlier survey of criticism highlights, well established. In her reading of the text, Áine O’Healy discusses ‘the metaphorical association of parts of the city with parts of the body’. Within this Kristevian analysis (also informed by Benjamin’s work on porosity) a particular relation is drawn between the abdomen of Amalia, or in the author’s phrasing, ‘the belly of the mother’, and the belly or ‘ventre’ of Naples. In their work on L’amore, Laura Rascaroli and Ewa Mazierska tease further meaning from this metaphorical association, calling attention to Martone’s deployment of a series of cavernous spaces within the city, which they describe

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as ‘womb-like’. Here, though, our attention is drawn to the film’s articulation of the bodily interactions of Delia, and the relation of these interactions to the return of the missing child. Indeed, scrolling back to the dream and flashback sequences illuminated just moments ago, a pattern soon emerges between this tableau and key aspects of narrative framing or prefacing; all, it would seem, respond to, or are grounded in, real or perceived threats to the bodily integrity of Delia, or to a lesser extent, threats perceived by Delia to the body integrity of other women (via expressions of the male authored gaze).

Within the film’s narrative structure, the return of the missing child is triggered more specifically, however, by the performance of sexually transgressive behaviour on the part of male figures. This is evidenced in the moments immediately preceding the bus episode in the historical strand of L’amore’s action, where Amalia is caught subverting, albeit unwittingly, the strict protocol of the uni-directional male–female gaze. As the film’s action shifts from a high angle shot showing a bus leading a line of traffic, to the vehicle’s interior, Martone’s camera traces a series of scenarios involving the sexualised stare of male figures towards fellow female travelers. In the first of these, an older man examines the back and neck of the young women at his side. Gliding from left to right in a smooth, u-shaped action, the camera then settles on the face of a well-dressed, younger male passenger, whose unbroken gaze sutures to the legs and torso of a female motorist. In the third of these scenarios, Delia herself becomes the object of the gaze, a brutish adolescent staring at her with undeniable menace. The action soon cuts, however, to a low-angle, point of view headshot, mirroring the image focalised by the child in the historical bus flashback sequence.

The crucial relation between the return of missing child and sexually transgressive contact with male figures (whether real or implied) is further evidenced, albeit with greater force, in the action immediately preceding the flashback involving Amalia’s public beating for alleged sexual misconduct. The sequence in question, punctuated by Delia’s fragmented recollection of this event, unfolds in the cavernous quarters of a sauna and bathing area belonging to the hotel where a political gathering is taking place. Having moved from her

120 Mazierksa and Rascaroli, From Moscow to Madrid, p. 62.
blue-striped beach chair (the preponderance of blue is striking here), Delia is followed into a dank (and dark) sauna area by Antonio, the childhood friend dangled perilously from the staircase in the historical action, which follows. Having shed her (blue) bathrobe, L’amore’s protagonist is again positioned as the object of the gaze. Here, though, its author is not a stranger but Antonio, who has followed her into the womb-like area. As steam rises, momentarily blurring his face (which occupies almost the entire frame), at once recalling the earlier adolescent bus passenger, Antonio makes his approach. On reaching the static figure, he forcefully kisses her, Delia wriggling away from him as he does so. As the action intensifies, and Antonio eventually forces himself upon her, the image-track flickers, clicking between the scenes unfolding in the sauna and the faulty memory of Amalia locked in passionate embrace with Caserta – the explosive mental imagery, which blows apart the family in the film’s historical strand. It is this transgressive sexual encounter within the contemporary action, which prompts the (historical) return of childhood as traumatised, Delia’s body figured as the receptacle (in)to which simmering male sexual aggression is directed, the city’s patriarchal spirit imprinted.

Whilst these examples clearly work to preface or ‘trigger’ the recollected male–female violence dramatised in the film’s dream and flashback sequences, we should also recognise, albeit with necessary brevity, however, the cumulative impact of other, ostensibly unrelated instances of transgressive sexual conduct on the part of male figures during the course of the film’s action. The scenes, which unfold at Napoli Centrale, for example are particularly rich in this regard. On attempting to climb the steps leading to the station entrance, Delia, wearing the red dress belonging to her mother, is first groped and then knocked to the ground by a male passer-by. She later witnesses Caserta making thrusting motions behind a women waiting for photographs to appear from a passport photo booth.

The implication of the examples illuminated here is compelling; within the public spaces of contemporary Naples, the bodily integrity of women is threatened both in real terms, and by a sexually freighted male gaze. Within this construction, actual violence and intimations of violence appear normalised and embedded, part, that is, of accepted morality. This becomes more disquieting, however, when we couple these episodes with the lapses into memory they
engender (the historical counterparts to the contemporary scenarios illuminated above). The combined meaning of these temporally distant, though, narratively interwoven scenarios, appears to be the following: within the postmodern city the harshly patriarchal protocol so clearly at work in the early post-war period, remains intact, unchallenged, and undiminished.

With this analysis in mind, we may recall, perhaps, our first glimpse as an audience of the city within the film’s contemporary strand; L’amore’s contemporary action is prefaced with a high-angle long shot of the city’s historic centre. As an image of Delia, holding her mother’s red brassiere to her nose and mouth, dissolves, a shadow slowly passes from left to right of the frame, plunging sections of the city into semi-darkness. Can this potent visual image be read as metaphor perhaps for the persistence and pervasiveness of the city’s patriarchal imperative, which as our analysis suggests is showing few, if any, signs of diminishing? Could we even posit that this cloud and the shadow it precipitates, serve as the visual analogue for the troubling persistence of a patriarchal culture, the residual ideological legacy of which may even be inflected by the residual ideological legacy of historical fascism?

If the return of the missing child as witness to episodes of male orchestrated violence in the remembered past stems, in no small measure, from the accumulation of catalytic patriarchal or misogynistic encounters in the narrative present, then these transgressive bodily interactions ultimately precipitate the return of the missing child as victim to violence beyond, that is, the corrective slap issued by zio Filippo examined above. Indeed, during L’amore’s final flashback sequence, which serves as the film’s denouement, the missing female child disquietingly returns, as she does in Comencini’s La bestia; within the pedophilic abuse scenario.

In accordance with the narrative logic hypothesised above, this return follows transgressive bodily contact with a male figure, in this case Delia’s father, who is largely absent from the film’s contemporary action. During this brief yet fraught encounter, the first meeting between the pair for considerable time, the film’s protagonist, like her mother before her, falls victim to his undiminished vitriol and aggression. Having entered his apartment, only to discover a series of paintings depicting the same gypsy/whore who featured in the memory sequence close to
the film’s outset, Delia finds the isolated figure working in an improvised studio amid discarded bottles of alcohol and paintings stacked one behind the other. Following a torrent of verbal abuse, Delia’s father lashes out at her, before striking her and chasing her around the tiny room.

It is in response both to the violent intent of Delia’s father, and the accumulated weight of transgressive sexual encounters dotted throughout L’amore’s action, that the film’s contemporary temporality is ruptured for the final time. Here, then, and like her counterpart in La bestia, the missing child will disquietingly return as the victim of sexual abuse. Indeed, having fled from the makeshift studio, Delia is drawn, albeit unwittingly, to the site of her sexual violation, a derelict basement which once housed a pastry shop (shown in several memory sequences and frequented by her and Antonio as children). As she passes through the vaulted arches of this disused space, lighting her way with a match, our thoughts turn to the film’s predilection for womb-like interiors, of Martone’s alignment of the city along a determinedly vertical axis. Within this subterranean space, multiple references to the noir tradition also vie for our attention, as we recall earlier readings of the film in which key stylistic devices belonging to the thriller genre are brought to the fore. As her inward journey progresses, Delia is unexpectedly brought into contact, however, with a symbolic artifact belonging to her mother, in this case a woollen suit, worn by Amalia elsewhere in the film’s action. Stopping at the edge of a single bed, Delia replaces the vibrant red dress (with which her perilous journey across the city has been so closely identified) with another outfit belonging to her mother. Her body housed within the dark-blue material, resonances of the past and questions of her contested identity abound. The protagonist is also seen removing her glasses, a gesture necessary, it would seem, for her ‘to see’ her past. Now seated, Delia begins to recover her childhood violation, and with it, the knowledge that the disclosure she made surrounding her mother’s intrigue with Caserta was a mistake of memory. As the film’s action flickers, clicking again to the remembered past, the image-track characteristically hazy and monochromatic, it is, nevertheless, Caserta, who moves towards her from the outer door of the fully restored shop. Mirroring the misremembered sequence involving Amalia and Caserta’s alleged intimacy within this very location, Amalia then appears on the bed, viewed from the perspective of her lover. As Caserta steps closer towards
her, the action cuts from an image of Amalia to her pre-adolescent daughter. The earlier image of Delia wearing her mother’s dress, an item imbued with sedimentary past meaning is restored. In a moment of intersection with La bestia, Martone’s camera appears to ‘home-in’ on the torso of the approaching figure. The man, who moves towards Delia, is not her mother’s alleged lover, but the pastry shop owner. His imposing form is captured in low-angle cinematography, as the child is again positioned as witness to the events unfolding before her.

In stark juxtaposition to Comencini’s rendering of the abuse scenario which involves persistent fragmentary recourse to the symbolically freighted dream house, Martone’s dramatisation of the original abuse event is striking in its simplicity and economy. There is no elaborate camera work here. The use of special effects is minimal. The event, which haunts Delia’s return to the city of her birth, is over in the blink of an eye. Further, unlike the abuse scenario at the core of La bestia which (sordidly) unfolds within the secreted space of a parental office or bedroom, the event restored to consciousness by the protagonist’s re-immersion in the subterranean basement of the former pastry shop, follows the logic illuminated earlier in my analysis; in this city, violence sprawls well beyond the demarcated categories of public and private life. This act of patriarchal abuse par excellence took place (like other acts of violence in the film) within publicly accessible space, space frequented by members of the child’s family and community.

In spite of conspicuous departures in terms style and content (aspects of lighting are an obvious exception), the reenactment of the original abuse event here, like its analogue in the nightmares and flashbacks of La bestia, attests to Caruth’s theorisation of the belatedness of traumatic experience. It is also, however, an experience which occurs in complete solitude. As colour floods back in to the image track, Delia, isolated and bereft, attempts to come to terms with this repressed act of extreme violence and the consequent unraveling of the family it precipitated. At this point in our discussion, we are reminded perhaps of Sabina, following La bestia’s harrowing nightmare sequence. Despite the horror of her nocturnal recollection, however, Sabina is soon reunited with her brother, also a victim, also struggling to come to terms with the childhood suffering endured at the hands of their father. They will find comfort and understanding
through their shared status as incest survivors. Their trauma (ultimately) will be spoken. It will, as the film’s closing sequence highlights, and in Žižek’s earlier phrasing, find some semblance of ‘a proper burial’. Within Martone’s epistemology of traumatic representation, though, there is no second person, no confirming figure ‘before or to whom the traumatized subject can bear witness’. Unlike the family secret uncovered in La bestia, a secret which finds narrative integration through the therapeutic interactions of the film’s sibling victims, the knowledge that this experiential rupture brings, will not be spoken, cannot ‘yet’ be spoken. Though remembered, the trauma embedded at the core of Martone’s film, remains, in this reading, unresolved. There is, as Marlow-Mann writes, no ‘clear-cut psychological catharsis’.

As this chapter enters its final stage, there remains a sense, however, that our understanding of this canonical work may be incomplete; that further meaning attributable to the phantom presence of childhood as traumatised, of the return of the missing child, has yet to be found or properly ‘teased out’. In keeping with the revisory imperative of this study, I propose, in the pages that follow, to tentatively situate L’amore within another discursive context; one in which the film’s (returning) childhood abuse thematic and its recurring political citations are read not incidentally, but in a manner which allows for further interweaving and imbrication. Having called attention, albeit with necessary caution, to the possible residual ideological (and material) imprint of fascism in the film’s dream and flashback sequences, let us begin this concluding phase of our discussion by bringing to the fore those traces of ‘the political’, which infiltrate the film’s present temporality. Following this path, I will seek to pave the way for an understanding of this heavily critiqued work, which takes into account the possible interrelation between these conventionally separate discursive streams.

Saluto al Duce

Despite a recurring emphasis within discourse on the film’s unconventional visual depiction of the city, on the influence of genre (film noir, the sceneggiata), or the

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121 Alex Marlow-Mann, p. 207.
all important mother-daughter-city triangulation (including questions of gendered space, identity and authorship), this work is, nevertheless, one in which ‘the political’, with varying inflection, constitutes a significant presence. In her reading of the film, Rosella Riccobono homes in on the dominance of the colour red within key aspects of mise-en-scène such as costume; the red ‘Vossi’ dress worn by Delia is arguably the most prominent example of this. The theme of politics, she writes, ‘runs as a red thread throughout the whole film’. This is ‘symbolic both for the hope of a political as well as a sexual liberating experience’. Indeed, if a series of possible references to the ideological legacy of fascism were unearthed in my earlier analysis of the film’s memory dream and flashback sequence, then the presence of elements of the political is more explicitly evidenced, as Riccobono’s line of enquiry highlights, during the contemporary stream of L’amore’s action.

For example, in the moments immediately preceding the squalid sauna episode examined in my earlier work on the threatened female body, Delia, in the company of Antonio, fleetingly attends a gala lunch awash with local politicians and a sizable throng of favour-currying lobbyists (to which Antonio aspires to belong). Áine O’Healy, who like Rosella Riccobono is one of only a handful of scholars to highlight the overt presence of the political within L’amore’s diegesis, writes that the episode ‘suggests the longtime collusion of city government with private commercial interests’. Whilst this vignette clearly serves to illuminate the scourge of endemic corruption at the local political level, (which blights the city’s socio-economic development to this day), this sequence also resonates with political events unfolding at the level of national politics; the gestation, making of and subsequent appearance of L’amore was broadly contemporaneous with ‘Clean Hands’ and ‘Bribesville’ (‘Mani pulite’ and ‘Tangentopoli’, as they became known in the Italian phrasing), the far-reaching political scandals which led to the dissolution of the First Italian Republic in the early years of the 1990s. It was in the aftermath of this seismic, ignominious tear in the country’s political fabric that the parties of the new Italian Right came to power, filling the vacuum left by the discredited elite which had been at the

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122 Riccobono, p. 452.
country’s political helm since its liberation from fascism, more than forty years earlier.

It is also within this strand of the film’s action, that clusters of authentic or ‘non-synthetic’ political citations emerge. These citations, which should also be read as related to the political events outlined above, occur as a series of ephemera (posters, graffiti, and television footage) linked, in this case, to the Neapolitan mayoral elections of 1993. The elections, held during November, had captivated the Italian nation and by their closing stages, they were attracting record television audiences. Interestingly, the election positioning linked to this highly publicised campaign, rumbles on throughout Martone’s film. On the eve of her return to Naples to investigate her mother’s death, Delia watches Rai television news coverage of the elections from her home in Bologna. However, of the footage folded into the action here, and later on in the film’s narrative, only one mayoral candidate appears on screen; Alessandra Mussolini. Mussolini (daughter of the fourth son of Benito Mussolini) was campaigning under the banner of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano or MSI). She was eventually narrowly defeated in the election, an indication of her soaring popularity, by the left-leaning Antonio Bassolino.

The MSI, whose lineage can be directly traced to the Salò Republic, was, in the phrasing of one historian, ‘a fairly straightforward re-edition of the Fascist party’. Likewise, in an article in which he establishes the systematic presence of references to historical fascism within the party’s visual propaganda, Luciano Cheles writes, that the MSI enjoyed a ‘largely male constituency’, was ‘ultra conservative in relation to sexual mores’ and ‘bordering on the misogynistic’.

Within a year, the MSI morphed into the Alleanza Nazionale, one of three parties belonging to the rightist coalition, which rose to power in the national elections of March 1994. Despite an apparent re-branding of image led by the party leader Gianfranco Fini, and the party’s newly acquired status as ‘postfascist’, significant groups of its members remained, as John Foot has noted, ‘nostalgic for a return

to old style fascism’. In numerous Alleanza Nazionale offices ‘there were portraits of Mussolini’, Foot writes.\footnote{Foot, p. 191.}

Finally, in an article published in the *Journal of Modern History* in 1995, Ruth Ben Ghiat documents the attempts made by the party to reshape, what she terms ‘the collective memory of fascism’. Indeed, in the aftermath of its election as a governing party at a national level, the Alleanza Nazionale sought to ‘legitimize and normalize’ the memory of fascism, ‘by representing it as a patriotic movement like others in the national past’. This included a campaign to re-script the April 25 commemoration of the liberation of Italy, which, as Ben Ghiat reminds us, ‘has traditionally been an occasion to remember and honour the deeds of antifascist partisans’.\footnote{Ruth Ben-Ghiat, ‘Writing, and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930–1950’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 67: 3 (1995), 627–665 (p. 629).} In the revised version, the soldiers who fought for the Republic of Salò would be honored, placed on an even footing with the men and women who lost their lives in pursuit of the country’s liberation. The determined aim by the New Italian Right to re-historicise fascism, to create a revisionist account of the Ventennio, was further underscored by an article written for the commemoration by the newly elected Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. In this re-reading of history, Berlusconi argued that divisions between fascists and antifascists were in fact, ‘pezzi di una storia comune’. He concludes his article by urging Italians to re-imagine the holiday as ‘la data simbolica di un nuovo inizio, di una nuova fase della vita repubblicana’.\footnote{Silvio Berlusconi, ‘25 Aprile, è festa per tutti’, *La repubblica*, 17 April 1994, p. 1.} In strikingly similar fashion, Alessandra Mussolini claimed that the commemoration ‘should honor all those who, from whatever side of the barricade they chose to act, offered their lives with courage and loyalty in order to defend the honor, dignity and independence of the nation’.\footnote{Alessandra Mussolini, quote in *La repubblica*, 8 April 1994, p. 11. Trans. By Ruth Ben-Ghiat. See Ben-Ghiat, ‘Writing, and Memory’, p. 629.}

Returning, however, to the footage with which this strand of analysis began, the Duce’s granddaughter prompts both aural and visual recourse to historical fascism. The news footage, which ends with the former model and actress framed next to the Italian flag, renders audible, as we know from our earlier analysis, a ‘Duce’-chanting crowd, a sonic echo of the Ventennio. This early,
audio-visual presence, which as O’Healy contends, ‘haunts Martone’s construction of the city throughout the narrative’, is not only confined, however, to this tele-fragment borrowed from the Italian state broadcaster, Rai. Rather, Mussolini soon returns to the diegesis, following the geographic shift from Bologna (the adopted home of Delia), symbolically chosen, Rosela Riccobono contends, for its status as ‘red political capital’, as erstwhile communist stronghold, to Naples, home of a resurgent political right. On this occasion, however, Mussolini appears on the front copy of Gente, a celebrity gossip magazine which Delia reads prior to the arrival of Caserta and the tunnel dream sequence examined earlier in my discussion. The magazine’s front cover features Mussolini, who O’Healy describes as a ‘figure of patriarchal femininity par excellence’, in full shot. Beside her reads the caption ‘la mia vita in casa Mussolini’. Later in the film’s action, Martone’s lens brings into view, and lingers on, a tattered election poster. As in the initial Rai news footage, where a young female interviewee is pictured carrying a baby, the poster shows Mussolini posing with a newly born baby nestling in her arms, an image at once resonant with the images of nurturing motherhood mobilised in the film’s prologue. Onlookers have gathered at her side and in the shot’s background. Significantly, perhaps, the poster fills the frame, the viewers gaze momentarily sutured to the image. As O’Healy writes, the symbolically invested image of the newborn child both on tattered poster (and indeed the tv footage) ‘invoke the Duce’s illusory promise of phallic plenitude’.

In light of this burgeoning awareness surrounding the proliferation of elements of the political, particularly those related to fascism and neofascism (as embodied in the pervasive presence of Alessandra Mussolini), the question which arises surrounds the discursive significance of these ubiquitous political ephemera. For O’Healy, whose analysis of L’amore has proved invaluable to my own discussion, this ‘haunting’ presence serves to ‘highlight some of the conditions that prevailed in Naples during a period of political uncertainty and transition’. Those political

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131 Riccobono, p. 452. The motif of travel is not only important in relation to Delia’s movement within the Neapolitan cityspace, but also in relation to her (northern) migration to Bologna.
elements foregrounded in her study create an anchorage to a ‘precise historical juncture’, one in which the political malaise (Mani pulite and Tangentopoli) had brought not only Neapolitan politics to its knees, but the entire modern Italian state. This reading chimes with Martone’s own understanding of L’amore’s contamination by elements of the political. In an interview with Corriere della sera, the filmmaker claims that the citations or ephemera seized upon above are merely the result of location shooting: ‘Dalla parte di Bassolino e non certo di Alessandra Mussolini il cui manifesto su un muro scrostato appare nel film solo per caso, perché giravamo durante la campagna elettorale’. Their appearance, it would seem, is accidental, and should be seen as bearing minor significance to the film’s plot or storyline.

Yet, this reading, this rationale for the preponderance of traces of overtly (neo)fascist ephemera within the film’s contemporary diegesis, culminating in the recurring presence of the Duce’s granddaughter and her symbolic iterations of ‘phallic plenitude’ is undermined, at least to some extent, by a parallel awareness surrounding the possible seepage of the ideological residues of historical fascism within the film’s dream and flashback sequences. Indeed, fascism, in a plethora of guises, constitutes a pervasive presence in both strands of the film’s narrative, a fact, which may undermine the ‘per caso’ explanation put forward by L’amore’s creator.

How, then, are these residues, these citations, present in both past and present temporalities to be explained? What meaning, if any, should be attributed to them? And what relation is there, between these citations and the return of the missing child, of childhood as traumatised? In order to move closer to answering these emergent questions, and indeed, potentially exposing the film to another reading, let us return, albeit with necessary brevity, to the body of material disseminated in the framing stage of my discussion.

As our discussion begins to come full circle, let us recall, then, how this chapter began. Our thoughts turn, above all, to the writings of Karen Lury and Tomiko

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133 Ibid.
134 Manin, p. 33.
Yoda, to their pathbreaking analysis and theorisation of the child phantom in the Japanese horror genre, J-Horror. Despite glaring points of divergence between the films of J-Horror and the work of Martone, the body of work belonging to the latter not only foregrounds the returning figure of the child as traumatised (as occurs in *L’amore*), but was made following the collapse of the post-modern economic boom in the early 1990s, at a time, that is, of ‘debilitating national anxiety’. In attempting to theorise the emergence of the child as phantom in this crop of films, Lury writes, ‘that during this time of anxiety, of paralysis, of an unending, entrenched but threatened present, there is an obvious context in which ghosts – as indicators of other temporalities and as traumatic remainders or reminders – are likely to surface’. For Lury, ‘the recurring appearance of the child as ghost or demon’, in the films of J-Horror, should be understood therefore, as ‘a response to contemporary social and political anxieties’.135

Following an ostensibly unconnected, though ultimately related path, Rosalind Galt has identified and theorised the relation between national political crisis in Italy of the early 1990s, and a key cinematic trope, in this case, ‘the specificity of the landscape image’.136 In a study which analyses three successful historical melodramas belonging to an emergent heritage genre (*Cinema paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988), *Mediterraneo*, (Gabriele Salvatores, 1991) *Il postino* (Michael Radford, 1994)), Galt reads *mise-en-scène* as a staging of Italian history. This staging, Galt argues, is ‘historically punctual and politically complex’. This timeliness stems from the coincidence of these works with the collapse of the First Italian Republic. The latter may be viewed as akin perhaps to the national crisis, which befell Japan in the 1990s. For Galt, ‘the national anxiety attending the end of the First Republic forces a return to the moment of its inception’. Indeed, this period became increasingly compelling in the 1990s, as a result of this political crisis. The combination of 1945 and 1992, sets up, the author concludes, ‘a dynamic relation between past and present’.137

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135 Lury, p. 23.
137 Ibid., p. 162.
In light of this necessary return to the discursive insights delivered in the work of Lury, and our brief orientation towards Galt's *Screen* article on the specificity of the landscape image, it may be appropriate to ask whether Martone’s *L’amore* should, like the films of the Italian heritage genre, also be considered historically punctual and politically complex? This is, after all, a work, which repeatedly returns in the dreams and flashbacks of its protagonist to a moment, broadly contemporaneous, we should assume, with the inception of the First Republic. Interestingly, and in contrast to those films under analysis in Galt’s study, *L’amore* also manifests a striking fascination with the dynamics of contemporary Italian politics, including those which precipitated (and would follow) the Italian State’s calamitous demise.

Within Martone’s film the anxiety attendant to the collapse of the Republic may be cued, therefore, by the jarring visual and aural resonances of the neo-fascist Alessandra Mussolini. Her ‘haunting’ presence constitutes an obvious ‘threat’ to the (political) present, a threat ultimately realised by the political ascendancy of the New Right (including her political party, the Alleanza Nazionale) in the elections of March 1994. Her status as granddaughter of the Duce, also creates a troubling point of ancestral contact to historical fascism, the ideological reverberations of which seemingly pulse both within and beyond the film’s dream and flashback sequences. Indeed, the body of images connoting ‘phallic plenitude’, critiqued by O’Healy in the film’s contemporary news footage and elsewhere, finds its clear correlate in the scenes of infant nurturing which return in the memory sequences involving Amalia. The transgressive sexual encounters which blight Delia’s investigation into the circumstances surrounding her demise, may find their root, as numerous scholars of the film suggest, in the city’s innate misogynistic imperative. They may also be informed, as I have tentatively implied (and suggested) throughout my discussion, however, by the residual ideological legacy of the fascist *Ventennio*, and its history of patriarchy and misogyny.

With this tentative proposition in mind, and following the logic of Lury, could the return of the missing female child in Martone’s film be read as analogue to the ghost or phantom in *J-Horror*, as harbinger both of the Italian nation’s acute political anxiety (in the present) and unresolved political trauma linked to the
legacy of fascism (in the past)? Does Delia’s struggle for memory, her inability to integrate the assailing spectre of the pedophilic abuse scenario into a coherent narrative framework, mirror the struggle of the Italian nation to call to memory the events of fascism?

Within the film’s narrative economy, historical sexual abuse routed through the female child not only resurfaces as symbol of a threatened present, but to enable a dynamic relation with the past, the legacy of which, like the cloud which hovers ominously over the Naples of the New Neapolitan Cinema’s most revered work, continues to shadow Italian politics and society. In light of this tentative proposition, one of the most significant, though fleeting political citations disseminated within L’amore’s contemporary diegesis, may be the date above the door of the Vossi clothes shop where the film’s iconic red dress was purchased by Amalia. The date in question is 1948, the year of the founding of the First Republic.
ITALIAN CINEMA’S MISSING CHILDREN: CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a series of reflections on the missing child *topos* – its webs of meaning, its broad semantic field – in a cluster of overlapping contemporary and historical domains. I reflected first on the *realpolitik* of news reporting before turning to the lost (or missing) child within the cultural (and public) history of Australia, and later, to European and North American narrative cinema. From this web of public, aesthetic, and narrative threads, I created an entry point for thinking with and about the missing child in Italian, socially-engaged filmmaking of the last two decades.

For Peter Pierce, the lost or missing child registers meaning which unequivocally binds the material he engages (whether real or imagined) to its country of origin: Australia. The lost child is symbol or emblem for never fully resolved anxieties within white settler communities. Moving beyond the colonial era, the author also contends with the Aboriginal ‘lost’ or ‘stolen’ generation, European child migration in the 1940s and 1950s, and disconcerting manifestations of the ‘lost child’ in the later twentieth century, including child abduction and premeditated or habitual cruelty. At the heart of Pierce’s study is the arresting notion that Australia *is* a country of lost children. It is the place where, in the author’s phrasing, ‘the innocent young are especially in jeopardy’.¹

For Emma Wilson, whose transnational film-based study derives at least some of its critical apparatus from Pierce’s work on the lost child in Australian culture and society (particularly his interest in modes of response to parental suffering in cinema), notions of the missing child as symbol or ‘emblem’ are largely replaced by more formalist emphases. The works subsumed by the missing child genre not only share interest in the figure of the missing child (whether lost or endangered) or in malign or mourning parenthood in the thematic sense, but in the aesthetic challenges that these categories, always already steeped in horror, create for individual filmmakers. ‘The insistence of the subject in contemporary cinema, Wilson concludes, ‘comes, if anything, in the

¹ Pierce, p. xi.
accumulation of representations and their cross-contamination’. Missing child films (such as Nanni Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio*) contend as much with traumatic loss, as they do with modes of response to traumatic loss, simultaneously questioning and exploiting the expressivity of film as medium.

Against this backdrop I posited several core research questions which shadowed my analysis throughout this study: What would it mean to ground contemporary Italian works which broadly correspond to Wilson’s criteria within the specific context of Italian culture and society? How would recourse to a range of specifically Italian filmmaking, socio-cultural, or historical phenomena shape (or reshape) our understanding of the missing child *topos* in films such as Moretti’s *La stanza del figlio* or other important works within the Italian canon for which other, more canonical, filmic identities (may) have already crystallised?

In terms of the former, this thematic (largely informed by Pierce’s understanding of the term ‘lost child’ in *The Country of Lost Children*) has provided a valuable rubric for drawing together important Italian works with established (and in some cases canonical) filmic identities. This was particularly true in Chapter Three, where I set Moretti’s gripping reflection on death and grieving in dialogue with Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato*, a work widely (and legitimately) read as a film about clandestine immigration to Italy. Further, by privileging (some of) the aesthetic and narrative concerns illuminated in *Cinema’s Missing Children*, I was able to tilt gently away from initial, normative recourse to neorealism as the mainspring for representations of lost or endangered children in Italian cinema, the overriding concern of Chapter One.

By uncoupling contemporary representations of the missing child from their neorealist antecedents, and by directly addressing what I termed ‘the aesthetics of abuse’ and questions of post-traumatic representation, I was able to identify and address, for example, notions of the traumatised child as creative agent (within a wider class-based discourse) in Antonio Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario*, a theme I intend to develop further in future research. Following this path, I also shed new light on Gianni Amelio’s rendering of the pedophilic abuse scenario in the critically neglected prologue of *Il ladro* and on the epistemologies of post-traumatic representation in the female-authored *La bestia* and Martone’s filmic
adaptation of Elena Ferrante’s, *L’amore molesto*. By carefully avoiding the neorealist critical framework and the attendant recreation of the canon of the male child, I have worked towards restoring the conventionally denied gender identity of the suffering female child in all three works. In terms of the latter grouping, Wilson’s emphasis on the metaphor of haunting or ‘hauntology’ in the Dogme filmmaking of Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg (in chapter nine of *Cinema’s Missing Children*) yielded further theoretical apparatus for situating representations of unresolved childhood sexual trauma (routed through the female child) within an as yet uncharted critical terrain. It may be appropriate to consider here, therefore, what it would mean to read other works within the Italian canon which deploy retrospective narrative frameworks to engage childhood as traumatised in this way? Similar patterns of representation are at work, for example, in Gabriele Salvatores’ *Quo vadis, baby?*, Roberto Faenza’s *Marianna Ucrìa*, and Sergio Castellitto’s *Non ti muovere*.

It has also been my determined aim throughout this thesis, however, to push at the boundaries of *Cinema’s Missing Children*, to examine the Italian films this study invites us to bring to closer critical reach not only in light of a range of transnational filmmaking practices, but also within a specifically Italian context. In the first instance this involved locating individual works within the longer trajectories of individual auteurs, as I sought to tease out longstanding or recurring narrative and aesthetic preoccupations. In Chapter Three, I read the missing child in *La stanza del figlio* in light of Moretti’s persistent interest in the middle class family. The resolution of the filmmaker’s alter ego/on-screen persona’s unresolved Oedipal crisis is vital, I suggested, to a more nuanced or complete understanding of the film. My analysis of primary sources in Chapters Three, Four, and Five was also informed by a more expansive understanding of aspects of the Italian social scheme and the contemporary discursive significance of the categories of (missing) child and childhood(s), and the domain of (biological and non-biological) parenthood. In Chapter Three, this backdrop allowed me to read Giordana’s, *Quando sei nato* as a possible vehicle for articulating parental anxieties surrounding the twilight of a nuclear family in its preferred child-centred configuration (in a prosperous, northern Italian milieu) and to introduce questions of (inter)national adoption – a theme I returned to in my
work on La guerra di Mario. In my analysis of L’amore, a work which raises important questions surrounding authorship and gender (in light of Elena Ferrante’s decisive creative contribution to the film’s artistic and narrative development) I made more explicit the perceived link between questions of national identity and the missing female child as symbol. Moving on from hitherto neglected questions surrounding the filmmaker’s treatment of the abuse scenario, I posited that it may be through the female child that unresolved political trauma linked to the Ventennio of fascism (and the founding of the first Republic) is routed. This formed part of a wider discussion on the possible linkages between the returning spectre of childhood sexual abuse and the vigorous promotion of patriarchal values by the New Right.

Whilst this study attempted to restore to the missing female child the gender identity disavowed by the neorealist critical framework and in so doing offer a more adequate theorization of her complex role and status in films of the contemporary period (my work on L’amore is exemplifies this aim), this awareness has been tempered by, and has sought to render visible, albeit to a lesser extent, the status of this body of films as predominantly the work of the male auteur. In the case of Il ladro and Quando sei nato, this sense of the missing child genre in Italian film as a male-authored domain is compounded, perhaps, by the close collaboration (with Amelio and Tullio Giordana) of the familiar scriptwriting duo, Stefano Rulli and Sandro Petraglia. In Chapter Five, however, this pattern of gendered authorship was partially disrupted by the inclusion of the filmic adaption of La bestia, a novel written by, and adapted for film by Cristina Comencini (and daughter, Giulia Calenda), and L’amore. In the case of the latter, Elena Ferrante not only authored the novel on which the film is based, but also, mirroring the work of Comencini, worked closely on the film’s script and liaised with Martone on key aspects of the film’s production. In future research it may be necessary to reflect, therefore, on what it might mean for a (missing child) genre in literature dominated by women writers (Dacia Maraini, Margaret Mazzantini, are other notable examples) to be appropriated, although to a lesser extent, perhaps, than this sample of films may indicate, by male directors.
Finally, the motif of travel (in a range of guises) became a recurring trope in my analysis of all six of the missing child films under analysis. In my work on La guerra di Mario and Martone’s L’amore, the contrasting urban spatialities of Naples (and the protagonists’ movement within and across these spatialities) became useful indices for elaborating the films’ discourses on childhood trauma, cultural perceptions of gender (and the masculine agency of the city) and in the case of Capuano’s film, adoption across social classes, which the film posits as an act of unidirectional exchange from the urban proletariat to the middle classes. Indeed, in L’amore, the filmmaker’s vertical conception of the Neapolitan city-space and the attendant proliferation (along this axis) of a series of subterranean nooks and hideaways, not only drew psychoanalytic comparison with Delia’s repressed memories of childhood abuse, but also allowed the filmmaker to address questions of male authority and control as configured in or by urban space. Whilst Delia’s movement towards (and presence within) a multitude of cavernous zones feeds into a wider discourse on Naples’ crucial relation to the abject, it should also be read, then, as belonging to the film’s sex-trauma thread and patriarchal framing. In La guerra di Mario, the child’s movement across diverse urban topographies calls attention to the film’s class discourse and establishes sets of linkages with a tradition in Neapolitan cinema, in which the figure of the street urchin or scugnizzo is foregrounded. The motif of migratory travel beyond the confines of the city (or suburban locale) and the crossing of geographical borders (or boundary zones) also proved, significant, however, in my discussion of the remaining four films.

In my analysis of La stanza del figlio and Quando sei nato, maritime travel (and catastrophe) proved crucial to my reading of these works as dominated by questions of the missing middle-class child’s sudden autonomous development or ‘coming of age’ (in the absence of biological caretakers). Indeed, the sea was theorised as agent of disappearance and concurrently, as agent of transformation in both films. Notions of the sea (including the beach space) as agent of change (restoration and recuperation), found further iteration in my reading of Moretti’s La stanza del figlio. The film’s closing beach sequence (a sequence which follows a journey across the border from Italy to France – a gesture which also highlights the film’s status as a France-Italian co-production and its kinship towards Krzysztof Kieslowski’s, Three Colours: Blue) are bound up with a tentative
‘moving beyond’ the death of Andrea, or even indeed, Moretti’s protagonist’s delayed (and traumatic) assumption of an unequivocally adult identity. In terms of the former, the beachspace becomes crucial to the tentative reassembling (and reconciliation) of a family torn apart by grief, corrosive in its effects. In Il ladro and La bestia, the trope of southward travel (within Italy) are also correlated with qualities of palliation and (semi) cure, a concern more fully addressed in Wilson’s most recent study, Love, Mortality and the Moving Image. In Amelio’s film, the children’s gradual recuperation at the hands of Antonio is enmeshed with their semi-baptismal encounter with the crystalline waters of the Mediterranean. In La bestia, the folkloric spaces of Southern Italy (in this case Puglia) are also bound-up with notions of redemption, repair and catharsis. The redemptive (and/or cathartic) qualities afforded the Italian South (a trope which works against more familiar political constructions of this region as unequivocally abject or malign) are only activated, however, following Sabina’s journey beyond (or outside of) the country’s borders and her fraught, though mutually beneficial interactions with her emigrant brother, Daniele, in the United States. The palliative function of movement within and across space and the range of Italian and non-Italian spatialities brought to the fore in the course of my discussion on the missing child, also merits, as this brief summary indicates, further analysis and elaboration.

Finally, and no less importantly, we should also consider, perhaps, what compels this (directorial, critical and spectatorial) engagement with the missing child paradigm more widely. What lies behind this persistent interest in childhood loss, suffering and familial dysphoria? Why does the missing child and the range of resonances within its orbit carry such filmic potential and resonance? Does the missing child serve as emblem or reminder, perhaps, of our own precarious subjectivity, of the inevitability surrounding our ultimate relinquishing of childhood and its attendant identity formations? As the lost or suffering child is persistently evoked within a range of troubling scenarios on screen, are we reminded, perhaps, of what we as spectators have lost, or are haunted by, well beyond the often, fluid demarcations of childhood and adolescence? These are the questions which also vie for our interest as we look towards new pathways of analysis, and new modes of critical response to missing childhood on film, and its intriguing patterns of representation.
Yet in spite of the potential array of future critical pathways - the threads and linkages, summarised above - the missing child has, as tool of critical analysis, refreshed and reset our understanding of important (and in several cases canonical) Italian films made between 1992 and 2005. Bringing this *topos* to bear on works which broadly correspond to the criteria outlined in *Cinema’s Missing Children* has allowed us to see this rich and fascinating corpus as operating on a far greater canvas, as informed by far broader sets of artistic impulses and contemporary concerns. It is a curious paradox, perhaps, that by looking beyond national film criticism and turning instead to the transnational scholarship of Wilson and Pierce (albeit to a lesser degree) we have been able to map some of the ways in which Italian missing child films are inflected by sets of specifically national phenomena, including those which remain conspicuously subdued within public discourse. Here, the transnational has proven invaluable, then, for elucidating meaning from the national, for creating new streams of analysis, new ways of thinking about the missing child or the bereaved (or mourning) parent or caretaker.

The disquieting *topos* of suffering childhood is one ‘national’ phenomenon forced to the margins of public concern by more pressing middle-class preoccupations around biological parenthood, adoption and the preservation of the child-centred family. As the media continues to stir public anxiety in terms of the missing child or *bambino negato* as theorised by Paul Ginsborg (and as seized upon by scholars of Italian film, including Paul Sutton), the Italian cinema stakes its claim as a bastion for bringing to public consciousness, for engaging and debating subaltern formations of childhood, childhood blighted by danger and insecurity in multiple social, cultural, and domestic settings. Whilst anxieties around the missing child or *bambino negato* find clear resonance in several of the works under analysis in Chapter Three, we are also reminded, however, of the (at times) neglected significance of the *other* missing child of Italian cinema (and society), the child whose status as missing in the terms of Peter Pierce and drawn upon so productively by Emma Wilson, compels our interest as spectators and begs our undiluted (and unrestricted) attention as scholars.
The future of Italian cinema’s missing children may, as the final moments of Gianni Amelio’s *Il ladro* and Capuano’s *La guerra di Mario* suggest, be one of apprehension and bitter uncertainty. In light of Wilson’s proposed paradigm, the future of scholarship on Italian cinema’s missing children should, however, be one of simultaneously broad and nuanced understanding, as we think with and about the urgent and arresting figure of the missing child.
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Diary for My Father and My Mother (Márta Mészáros, 1990)
Domenica (Wilma Labate, 2001)
Ecce bombo (Nanni Moretti, 1978)
Enfants aux jouets (Louis Lumière, 1896)
Evil Angels (Fred Schepisi, 1988)
Exotica (Atom Egoyan, 1994)
Figli di nessuno (Ubaldo Maria Del Colle, 1921)
Flashdance (Adrian Lyne, 1983)
Forza Italian (Marco Tullio Giordana, 1977)
Friday the 13th (Sean Cunningham, 1980)
Germania, anno zero (Roberto Rossellini, 1948)
Gomorra (Matteo Garrone, 2008)
Grandi magazzini (Mario Camerini, 1939)
Habemus Papam (Nanni Moretti, 2011)
Halloween (John Carpenter, 1978)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998)
I bambini ci guardano (Vittorio De Sica, 1944)
I cento passi (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2000)
Il caimano (Nanni Moretti, 2006)
Il cielo cade (Andrea Frazzi, Antonio Frazzi, 2000)
Il grande coccomero (Francesco Archibugi, 1993)
Il più bel giorno della mia vita (Cristina Comencini, 2002)
Il postino (Michael Radford, 1994)
Il signor Max (Mario Camerini, 1937)
In the Bedroom (Todd Field, 2001)
Intervista (Federico Fellini, 1987)
Io non ho paura (Gabriele Salvatores, 2003)
Io sono un autarchio (Nanni Moretti, 1976)
L’albero delle pere (Francesca Archibugi, 1998)
La bellezza del mondo (Mario Almirante, 1926)
La caduta degli angeli ribelli (Marco Tullio Giordana, 1981)
La compagnia dei matti (Mario Almirante, 1928)
La cosa (Nanni Moretti, 1990)
La crociata degli innocenti (Alberto Traversa, 1917)
La meglio gioventù (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003)
La messa è finita (Nanni Moretti, 1985)
La ragazza del lago (Andrea Molaioli, 2007)
La sconfitta (Nanni Moretti, 1973)
La sconosciuta (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2006)
La terra trema (Luchino Visconti, 1948)
La vita è bella (Roberto Benigni, 1997)
Lacrime napulitane (Ciro Ippolito, 1981)
Ladri di biciclette (Vittorio De Sica, 1948)
Le chiavi di casa (Gianni Amelio, 2004)
Liberate i pesci (Cristina Comencini, 2000)
Lilya 4-Ever (Lukas Moodysson, 2002)
Luna (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1979)
Maddalena zero in condotta (Vittorio De Sica, 1940)
Maledetti, vi amerò (Marco Tullio Giordana, 1979)
Mamma Roma (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962)
Mandolinata a mare (Elvira Notari, 1917)
Marianna Ucrìa (Roberto Faenza, 1997)
Marnie (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)
Martha... Martha (Sandrine Veysset, 2001)
Matrimonio (Cristina Comencini, 1998)
Mediterraneo (Gabriele Salvatores, 1991)
Minority Report (Steven Spielberg, 2002)
Morte di un matematico napoletano (Mario Martone, 1992)
Murmur of the Heart (Louis Malle, 1971)
Napoli milionaria (Eduardo De Filippo, 1950)
Non è giusto (Antonietta De Lillo, 2001)
Non ti muovere (Sergio Castellitto, 2004)
Novecento (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1976)
Nuovo Cinema Paradiso (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988)
Oranges and Sunshine (Ken Loach, 2010)
Padre Padrone (Paolo Taviani, Vittorio Taviani, 1977)
Paisà (Roberto Rossellini, 1946)
Palombella rossa (Nanni Moretti, 1989)
Pasolini, un delitto italiano (Marco Tullio Giordana, 1995)
Pate de bourgeois (Nanni Moretti, 1973)
Pianese Nunzio, 14 anni a maggio (Antonio Capuano, 1996)
Piccoli naufraghi (Flavio Calzavara, 1939)
Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975)
A Pillow Fight (Louis Lumière, 1895)
Porte aperte (Gianni Amelio, 1990)
Premiers pas de Bébé (Louis Lumière, 1896)
Quo vadis, baby? (Gabriele Salvatores, 2005)
Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsay, 1999)
Repas de bébé (Louis Lumière, 1895)
Robocop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)
Rocco e i suoi fratelli (Luchino Visconti, 1960)
Roger and Me (Michael Moore, 1989)
Roma, città aperta (Roberto Rossellini, 1945)
Rose scarlatte (Vittorio De Sica, 1940)
Saimir (Francesco Munzi, 2004)
Sanguepazzo (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2008)
Sciùscià (Shoeshine, 1946)
Stand by Me (Rob Reiner, 1986)
Teresa Venerdì (Vittorio De Sica, 1941)
The Back and Beyond (John Heyer, 1954)
The Element of Crime (Lars Von Trier, 1984)
The Golden Child (Michael Ritchie, 1986)
The Kingdom (Lars Von Trier, 1994)
The Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968)
The Pledge (Sean Penn, 2001)
The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)
The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984)
Three Colours Blue (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993)
Umberto D (Vittorio De Sica, 1952)
Un giorno perfetto (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2008),
Va’ dove ti porta il cuore (Cristina Comencini, 1996)
Vecchia guardia (Alessandro Blasetti, 1934)
Viaggio in Italia (Roberto, Rossellini, 1954)
Vito e gli altri (Antonio Capuano, 1991)
Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971)