Indiana University Press

Chapter Title: Traffic from the East: GENDER, LABOR, AND BIOPOLITICS

Book Title: Migrant Anxieties
Book Subtitle: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame
Book Author(s): Áine O'Healy
Published by: Indiana University Press. (2019)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbnm2mx.6

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Migrant Anxieties*

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

CHAPTER 2

Traffic from the East

GENDER, LABOR, AND BIOPOLITICS

Following the initial flow of mass migration in the 1990s, migrants of diverse nationalities began to pursue economic survival with various kinds of unauthorized labor in the streets of Italian cities—as windscreen washers, unlicensed street vendors, or sex workers. Although the number of people engaged in these activities constituted a small percentage of the immigrant population as a whole, the increasing visibility of foreigners in public spaces fed into popular perceptions of the migrant as a disruptive figure perpetually engaged in intrusive or illicit activities. Reinforcing these perceptions, the Italian media began to generate sensational reports of an imputed invasion of Italy by foreign "hordes," echoing the xenophobic attitudes expressed in the pronouncements of Lega Nord and the political right.[1]

Reports on immigration were often accompanied by images of throngs of unidentified people arriving in Italian harbors or crowds of shabbily dressed men and scantily attired women, giving visual support to the claim of the country's invasion by alien masses. The widely disseminated images of the hugely overcrowded *Vlora* arriving in Bari in August 1991 were among the first photographs to function in this way, but as the years went by, the archive grew. In the meantime, particular stereotypes emerged as part of the general linguistic currency, and migrants were classified in everyday Italian speech with demeaning or negatively coded terms such as *il vu' compra'* (street vendor; literally "wanna buy?"), *il clandestino* (irregular immigrant), *lo slavo* (generic Eastern European, with sinister connotations), *il romeno* (literally Romanian, but used disparagingly to describe Roma migrants from Eastern Europe), and so on.[2] All of these terms suggested widespread Italian characterizations of newly arrived migrants

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

as untrustworthy people with shady intentions or connections and with little right to remain in Italy.

Such derogatory terms were most often directed at men, since male immigrants bore the brunt of xenophobic resentment. Occupying a different position in the Italian social imaginary, women migrants were subjected to a different set of assumptions, as is suggested in the films I discuss in this chapter. Describing Italian perceptions of female immigration, Ester Gallo and Francesca Scrinzi have observed that, in general, "migrant women tend to be represented in Italian popular culture as subaltern victims. In line with long-standing racist representations drawing from colonial history, they are stereotyped as either reproductive laborers or sexual objects."[3] More generally, they tend to be defined "by the spatial relations of their bodies with men and children or the elderly."[4]

Although anti-immigrant discourses in Italy were offset from the beginning by more thoughtful observations by Italian journalists, writers, and intellectuals, a generalized trend toward containment, control, and exclusion of the migrant population gradually became the norm. This tendency crystallized after Italy's ratification of the Schengen Agreement and the passing of a new legislation on migration, the so-called Turco-Napolitano Law, by the center-left government led by Romano Prodi in 1998, which instituted a sharp distinction between regular and irregular immigration. A pathway toward citizenship was delineated for migrants of the former category, and procedures were formulated for the possible expulsion of the latter, including the creation of processing and holding structures, popularly referred to by the initials CPT (Centri di Permanenza Temporanea), which signaled an increasingly systematic approach to controlling the influx of arrivals in line with Schengen directives.

Rebordering has been the tacit subtext of several policies enforced by the European Union since its inception. Though officially abolishing internal borders within the Schengen Area, the Schengen Agreement ultimately rendered the continent's external borders more complex, mobile, and exclusionary than ever before, replacing the traditional, linear model of the border with new, more dynamic mechanisms of control, as many social theorists have observed. The gradual intensification of external border controls that followed the ratification of the Schengen Conventions took place largely without protest from ordinary Italians, who were undoubtedly influenced by the rhetoric of "invasion" perpetuated by the national media and by the political right.[5] Similarly, no substantial public outcry followed the creation of the CPTs.[6] In fact, television reporters seemed less interested in investigating the degrading conditions and violations of human rights associated with these prisonlike institutions than in propagating the kind of negative sensationalism already associated with the discourse on immigration in Italian society.

As I have previously suggested, during the 1990s Italian directors began to make films that offered more complex depictions of immigrants than those

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

available in popular journalism. Despite their apparently well-meaning efforts, these films are often laced with competing subtexts, both resisting and reinforcing the biases of the mainstream media. One of the most memorable figures to emerge in the cinematic imaginary in the post–Cold War period was that of the young, female Eastern European migrant, articulated through the intersecting discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and reproduction. My aim in this chapter is to unpack the construction of this figure in several Italian films that weave stories of migration from the east and particularly from southeastern Europe. In investigating these narratives of encounter between Italians and Eastern European women, I am interested in the kinds of affective utility or disposability that such women came to represent in the social imagination from the 1990s onward.

Bodies from the East

The figure of the young, vulnerable woman from the former Eastern Europe, appearing for the first time in Italian cinema in the early 1990s, is usually bereft of legal immigration status, frequently involved in coerced sex work, and sometimes in need of assistance or rescue.[7] Her most crucial attribute is her body, alternately fetishized or made abject by the cinematic apparatus, which becomes a site of tension and contestation. Although this Eastern European woman is apprehended diegetically as a white body, her presence is usually coded in ways that make her immediately distinguishable from other (white) characters on screen through clues provided by clothing or posture, accented speech, or indeed lack of access to speech. Assigned to both prominent and marginal roles, this alien though ostensibly attractive figure has proved to be surprisingly resilient over the years, appearing in the work of prominent filmmakers such as Marco Tullio Giordana and Giuseppe Tornatore, as well as in comedies and less prestigious genre films. Though frequently presented as a sexualized body available for exchange on the sex market, the Eastern European woman is also occasionally configured as providing other forms of affective services, particularly in domestic settings, and is sometimes shown transiting from one to the other.

In examining the figure of the Eastern European woman migrant, I draw in part on the writings of Italian political theorist Sandro Mezzadra, whose analysis of the affective labor performed by women migrants in the global era builds on the writings of Anglophone feminists, and particularly on the important volume *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild in 2004.[8] The element in this significant study that Mezzadra responds to and develops is referenced in its subtitle—that is, the common thread linking the functions undertaken by the titular nannies, maids, and sex workers. For Mezzadra, migrations are infused with a set of subjective behaviors, needs, desires, and fantasies that structurally exceed the supposedly objective causes determining the mobility of people across

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the world, and the labor performed by migrant women as domestic employees and sex workers typically meets *affective* needs. In this way, he argues that the female migrant worker is positioned along a spectrum of feminized roles in the rapidly evolving global landscape. In an essay devoted to the foreign care worker (known as the *badante* in Italy), for example, he notes that this figure embodies affective values and services comparable to those provided by a range of other female figures from prostitutes to "good wives."[9]

Mezzadra's insistence on the productivity of migrant women's labor, and particularly unregulated or "illegal" labor, draws in turn on the insights of scholars such as Nicholas De Genova, who has argued that laws on immigration, along with the fortification of borders and the refinement of apparatuses of detention, should be understood not as an attempt to eradicate immigration but rather as a system of filters and dams that effectively produces illegality.[10] Illegality serves capital insofar as the "illegal" migrant labor force can be intimidated, abused, and exploited under conditions profitable to employers. Faced with the possibility of discovery and expulsion, irregular migrants become productive as vulnerable subjects deprived of rights. This mechanism creates a system described by Mezzadra and Brett Neilson as "differential inclusion," where irregularity ("illegality") emerges as a produced condition as well as a stake in the politics of mobility.[11]

Both the figure of the sex worker and that of the care worker (whether involved in legal or undocumented employment) are engaged in what feminist sociologists and neo-Marxist theorists, such as Mezzadra, describe as "affective labor," which is increasingly in demand in the modernized West. Defining affects as those bodily reactions and sensations implicated in power relations, Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez has shown that the categories of women's labor traditionally defined as nonproductive do in fact produce value, the value associated with their affective potential. And this value is bound up with essentializing notions of the feminine, a factor that ensures that such work will always be socially devalued and undercompensated.[12]

In bringing this discussion to bear specifically on the westward migration of women from the former Eastern bloc, I must also take into account the insights of film scholar Anca Parvulescu (whose work is briefly referenced in the analysis of *Venuto al mondo* in chapter 1), which similarly build on ideas elaborated in the work of feminist theorists and social scientists. Examining the representation of Eastern European migrant women as sex workers, trafficked women, housekeepers, nannies, or providers of other kinds of affective labor in recent European films, Parvulescu suggests that these images are not only indicative of perceptions of Eastern European women in Europe's contemporary social imaginary but are also closely bound up with the stratified forms of labor that such women are permitted to pursue. She thus argues that, since European Union

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"*enlargement* or *integration* is a process deeply invested in East European women's bodies, sexuality and labor," the project of pluralizing contemporary Europe must take into account the extent to which Europe itself is brought together by the "traffic" in Eastern European women.[13]

Referencing Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of the exchange of women as an essential foundation of culture, and the re-elaboration of this concept by Gayle Rubin and others, Parvulescu's study adopts a broad, biopolitical notion of reproduction, perceiving the latter as "invested equally in biology and political economy."[14] As she observes, "Reproduction is today in the process of being radically reconfigured through new reproductive and regenerative technologies (through the biological side) and new, post-Fordist economic realities (on the political economy side). The two faces of reproduction have also acquired a transnational dimension in the last decades. On the biological side, we speak of globalized markets for adoption, egg donation, surrogacy, stem cell tissues, and clinical trials. On the economic side we speak of a global market for domestic work, child and elder care, and sex work."[15]

She also points out that since the 1990s many EU governments have been concerned with the problem of plunging birthrates, and conservatives have been worried about Europe's inability to adequately replace the autochthonous population with further generations of *white* Europeans. Related to this concern, she suggests, is the fact that, in contemporary Europe, "the work of reproduction—biological and social—is in the process of being displaced on non-European and East European women." Parvulescu is sharply critical of the hypocrisy that marks Western attitudes toward the flow of reproductive labor from east to west, describing it as "the phenomenon that conservative commentators deplore on the biological side (genetic reproduction) but tacitly endorse on the social side (child and elder care, domestic work) with symptomatic exceptions on the biological side (organ donation, surrogacy, adoption)."[16]

The factors observed by Parvulescu in European society at large, as well as in the conditions refracted in cinematic representations of Eastern European women, certainly resonate with circumstances in Italy. Parvulescu's analysis is perhaps most useful in its broad understanding of reproductive work and the ways in which (white) Eastern European women engage with it. Indeed the reception of Eastern European women migrants in Italy, as elsewhere, is mapped out along the continuum of the types of reproductive labor they provide. The care worker, or *badante*, enjoys special status in Italy since, in the absence of suitable state-provided care for the elderly, women from the former Eastern bloc have become the preferred choice for Italian families seeking live-in assistance for aging relatives. Indeed they have long supplanted the Cape Verdean or Eritrean domestic workers who sometimes undertook this labor in the 1970s and 1980s. In recent years, foreign-born *badanti* have been offered expedited access

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to residency and work permits when needed or they have benefitted from their employer's complicity in turning a blind eye to their status where it was of mutual interest not to seek regularization.[17]

Immigrant street prostitutes, who have almost entirely replaced Italian sex workers at the lowest level of the sex industry, elicit very different reactions from the Italian public. Since the 1990s, foreign sex workers have been a prominent concern in public discourse. Assuming that there will always be a demand for paid sex, some politicians have called for the reinstitution of state-controlled brothels as a way of removing the women from the streets.[18] Supporters of the initiative generally explain their motivation in terms of a humanitarian concern for the safety of vulnerable female subjects or as a public health issue.[19] Other members of the public regard these women simply as victims in need of rescue, oblivious to the fact that some choose sex work, either assertively or reluctantly, as the initial phase of a migratory project and do not wish to be rescued.[20]

Since the early 1990s, when unprecedented numbers of women from locations beyond Italy's borders first began to work the streets of the country's largest cities, the foreign-born sex worker has appeared intermittently in Italian films, where she is frequently presented as Eastern European and rather less often as African. Although the figure of the independent yet simultaneously vulnerable *Italian* street prostitute was a staple of the heyday of the national cinema, she has almost disappeared from Italian films set in the contemporary moment, just as Italian women have largely abandoned street prostitution in order to enter more lucrative echelons of sex work.[21] In her place, the foreign woman who offers sex in exchange for money on the street and in other public places, or who is coerced into sexually compromising relationships with Italians, has emerged to the cinematic forefront. She is not, however, a symbolic substitute for the earlier figure and is constructed with very different signifying strategies.

Many of the earliest films that explore in fictionalized form the encounter between Italians and their Eastern European counterparts in the post–Cold War era construct narratives involving a young, beautiful, female migrant, almost always embodied by an alluring Slavic actress.[22] Linked to this figure are questions of power and agency that find expression through images of compromised bodily integrity and ambivalent eroticism. In short, the nexus of representational strategies recurring in films such as Carlo Mazzacurati's *Un'altra vita* (Another Life, 1992) and *Vesna va veloce* (Vesna Runs Fast, 1996), Gianluca Maria Tavarelli's *Portami via* (Take Me Away, 1994), Armando Manni's *Elvjs & Merilijn* (*Elvis and Marilyn*, 1998), Corso Salani's *Occidente* (West, 1998), Giuseppe Tornatore's *La sconosciuta* (*The Unknown Woman*, 2006), and Ivano De Matteo's *La bella gente* (Fine People, 2009) serves both to eroticize and render abject the Eastern European female migrant.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In each of these films, the female protagonist has embarked on a difficult process of uprooting and displacement, and in most cases her perilous journey is enabled at least in part by an Italian citizen, whose participation proves either futile or destructive. The ostensible perspective that dominates these narratives is well intentioned, as for the most part it refers critically to the kinds of exploitation and brutality that may confront vulnerable female migrants in unfamiliar surroundings. Simultaneously, however, the films' visual strategies are ambivalent, even contradictory, as in almost all of the films the woman is configured by the logic of the gaze as both innocent victim and alluring erotic object. The thematic element that unites these narratives is violence. Though this is an entirely plausible element in scenarios of illegal migration, it is often deployed in ways that suggest the films' complicity with the sadistic logic of the diegetically placed perpetrators. There is also an implicit suggestion in many of the films that the woman herself is at least partially compliant in her victimization.

In a groundbreaking essay written in the 1980s, Teresa de Lauretis draws on narrative semiotics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and feminist film theory to show the epistemic violence that subtends the deep structure of the oedipal narrative. Invoking Laura Mulvey's claim that "sadism demands a story," she proposes its provocative reversal, namely, that "a story demands sadism." The central point of the argument made by de Lauretis is that classical narrative conventions serve to immobilize the figure of woman as image, mute object, or terrain upon which the male protagonist is enabled to achieve fulfillment in a process that effectively occludes the possibility of female subjectivity.[23]

Italian films on female migration made in the 1990s certainly fit the paradigm described by de Lauretis. At the same time, they each offer striking images of injury or debasement enacted against the woman immigrant, whose body is ambivalently sexualized by the cinematic apparatus. Yet the violence perpetuated against this figure is carefully "justified" by the pseudo-logic of verisimilitude, ostensibly appealing to the viewer as compassionate witness to her abuse.

Un'altra vita, chronologically the first of the films listed above, was made in 1992 and recounts the relationship between Saverio (Silvio Orlando), a kind but timid Roman dentist, and Alia (Adrianna Biedrzynska), the young Russian migrant who seeks his help. In the film's opening scene, Alia shows up at Saverio's dental office late one evening pleading with him to replace the front tooth she has lost in a violent confrontation. There are traces of blood on her face, and the bleeding gap in her mouth is visible when she speaks. She is, in effect, the picture of needy abjection. The good Saverio immediately sets about healing the woman's disfiguring loss, working all night to create a dental implant that will conceal the evidence of her injury. He subsequently becomes obsessed with her and pursues her with reckless insistence even after she has tried to disappear from his life.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figure 2.1. Screen capture. Vesna counts her earnings. *Vesna va veloce* (1996)

Despite Saverio's attempt to heal all traces of her injury, she is far from healed as she is once again submitted to violence at the hands of a shady boyfriend. Saverio's efforts to rescue her from forced prostitution are doomed from the start, and the violence he seeks to protect her from is turned against him in the film's bloody concluding scene.

In *Vesna va veloce* (Vesna Runs Fast), the second of Mazzacurati's films featuring a Slavic immigrant, the protagonist is a young, educated Czech woman who arrives by bus in Trieste in northeastern Italy on a one-day excursion. At the end of the day, Vesna (Tereza Grygarová) fails to reboard the bus. Deciding to stay in Italy, she soon begins working as a street prostitute in Rimini, a popular resort on the Adriatic coast. Although she makes some money, her life is precarious. The letters she writes home are full of inventions, suggesting that she is both strong-willed and needy, independent and vulnerable. Ultimately, however, her actions remain enigmatic, inscrutable.

The real center of the film is not Vesna but Antonio (Antonio Albanese), an unemployed Italian construction worker with whom she eventually becomes involved and whose character is developed with greater consistency than Vesna's. Although she initially rejects Antonio's interest in her, she seeks out his help when assaulted and stabbed by a local pimp. Following her refusal to be treated at a hospital since she is without a passport, Antonio enlists the help of an African doctor who discreetly takes care of needy clandestine immigrants. In a crucial scene the men collaborate in treating Vesna's injury. Here, the close-up of Vesna's bleeding knife wound is framed by two pairs of hands and arms, black and white,

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

working together to heal her. The image evokes a ritual bonding between the two men in a homosocial pact, symbolically endorsing an ideal solidarity between an Italian man and an African immigrant in a demographically altered Italy, with the woman's body functioning merely as the terrain upon which their bond is sealed.

What becomes evident in these and similar films of the same period—such as Tavarelli's *Portami via* and Corso Salani's *Occidente*—is that the relationship between the putative male rescuer and the foreign female migrant is instantiated by her woundedness, generating a dynamic ambivalence in the unfolding of the narrative events. The visualization of female injury in all of these films is surprisingly consistent, making explicit the symbolic discourse of female abjection.

These images of wounded women resonate strongly with Julia Kristeva's formulation of female abjection, which describes how disgust and desire, repulsion and attraction compete with each other in delineating the borders that give the subject identity. For Kristeva, a sense of boundaries and a sense of otherness are established in infancy at the point when the child must separate from its mother. This occurs partly through feelings of revulsion toward bodily residues, which become symbols of defilement, separate from the "pure" self. The emotion evoked by bodily residues is a deep sense of repulsion. The experience of abjection, or the reliving of abjection, is connected to the trauma of separation from the mother. Furthermore, the conflicting feelings activated by the abject are easily transferred to others during childhood and later life and—as Kristeva argues—can be linked to the misogynistic effects of culture.[24]

More than any other migrant figure in Italian cinema, the figure of the Eastern European woman in Italian films released in the 1990s and early twenty-first century—and particularly the Eastern European sex worker or trafficked woman—is imbued with signifiers of abjection. Often visibly covered with bruises or blood, she also occasionally appears gagged or tied up. In other words, the young, attractive Eastern European woman has become a particularly potent terrain for explicit depictions of misogyny, xenophobia, sexual exploitation, and other traumatic abuses. In cinematic constructions of the East European woman involved in other forms of labor, traces of the abject persist as caregivers and domestic workers are often shown performing menial tasks associated with dirt or waste. While these depictions may be intended to critique demeaning social practices, they prompt a lingering ambiguity as they often align the viewers' perspective with the sadistic logic of the onscreen perpetrators.

One of the most remarkable constructions of female abjection is found in Armando Manni's *Elvjs & Merilijn*, where it is linked to the symbolic abjection of the Balkans in the Western imaginary. Here, a young Marilyn Monroe lookalike and amateur singer, Ileana (Edyta Olszówska), competes in a talent show at a Bucharest theater and wins the opportunity to perform at a nightclub in Italy.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

After an arduous journey through the desolate landscape of the former Yugoslavia in the company of Nikolai (Goran Navojec), an Elvis impersonator from Bulgaria, she discovers that the only work available for either of them in Italy is in a pornographic floorshow.

The film opens at the Bucharest theater where Nikolai and Ileana are competing in a contest organized by an Italian impresario (Giorgio Faletti). As amateur celebrity impersonators both on and off the stage, Nikolai and Ileana are living, breathing, singing, dancing simulacra, holding on for sheer life to the trappings of the invented identities that propel them forward even at the bleakest moments. In Ileana's case, this masquerade is presented as a necessity since her life in Romania is hellish in the extreme. Working in the most menial capacity at the city dump, she lives with a pathologically depressed and incontinent mother, who tells her, "You think you're different from me because you're beautiful. But you're not different; you're just the same."

Rather than contemplating her own likeness in the face of the abject Romanian mother, Ileana reconstructs herself as the glamorous Monroe, and whenever she is afraid or discouraged, she summons up an image of herself as Marilyn, gliding serenely along a white, sandy beach in a striking red ball gown. In the film's opening shots, a series of tight close-ups of Ileana's body are presented in slow motion as she sings on stage. These are intercut with traveling shots from the vantage point of a garbage truck as it moves through the filthy city streets at night. Dressed in her strapless red gown, with matching lipstick and glittering jewelry, Ileana is clearly a spectacle to be looked at, recognizable as "Marilyn" even before she is interpellated as such by the Italian host on stage (Giorgio Falletti). Throughout the sequence we see her only in isolated fragments—her full scarlet lips, blond curls, creamy shoulders, and plunging neckline—all of which are presented without diegetic sound apart from a faint echo of the clanking garbage truck outside, until Ileana's own voice filters onto the audio track in the concluding moments. Significantly, the viewer is not sutured to the spectacle of Ileana's performance through the point of view of a specific onscreen observer. The source of the gaze here must be ascribed instead to a generalized aesthetic regime internalized by Ileana herself, who submits to constant vigilance her own performance as the idealized female body—the body as a commodity constructed for others.

As neither Ileana nor Nicolai knows the other's language, they are obliged to communicate in Italian, which they have apparently picked up in the course of watching Italian television shows over the years. Here, as in Amelio's *Lamerica*, there is an implicit critique of the increasing power and reach of Italian television channels which, by the late 1990s, were available not only to Albanian audiences but also to viewers in other parts of southeastern Europe. It is clear in *Elvjs & Merilijn* that the protagonists' fascination with the popular culture of the West is

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

entirely gleaned from television, but they are crucially unaware that their points of reference are by then completely out of date.

Refusing to be deterred by a bureaucratic hitch at Bucharest airport, where Ileana's passport is confiscated, the two aspiring performers are convinced that fame and fortune await them in Italy and decide to travel there by land and sea. They thus proceed through the challenging terrain of the former Yugoslavia, partly thanks to the help of a Roma woman who enables them to pass without difficulty though an unguarded border crossing. The scene darkens progressively as they move westward through the Balkans, devastated by recent war. Frequently, however, the film cuts to an image of Ileana as the blonde Marilyn, gliding along at the water's edge on a white beach, her face radiant and smiling—a glamour shot that could have been extracted from a television commercial or music video.

The most intense sequence in the film occurs when the two stop on their journey at an isolated garrison occupied by Serbian soldiers, during which the young woman is subjected to a traumatic encounter with a reclusive, depressed, and unstable colonel. Played by Italian actor Toni Bertorelli, the colonel is presented as a sort of Dracula figure who becomes riveted by her beauty.[25] "You are too luminous," he tells her, consolidating for the film's audience the associations with the world of the vampire, and explains, "We have no use for the sun here. Those of us who have survived are only shadows." When he shoots himself to death while alone in her presence, the soldiers decide that Ileana is responsible for the loss of their beloved leader. Taking revenge, they force her to mimic fellatio with a loaded gun in her mouth and then throw her from their truck in the middle of an isolated rural landscape.

Yet this is not the end of her suffering. When Ileana and Nikolai finally manage to arrive in Italy, just in time for their scheduled audition, they find the promised land no less bleak and garbage-strewn than the scene they have left behind. The dream that sustained their struggle is quickly crushed when their performance is pronounced unappealing and dated by the ruthless, profit-driven managers of the nightclub who underwrote their journey to Italy and who now offer them the possibility of performing in an explicitly erotic show.

In the final sequence, which unfolds on a sunless Adriatic beach, the young Romanian is overcome by a suicidal despair and collapses into Nikolai's arms when he tries to restrain her, her hands bloodied from the shards of glass with which she had tried to cut her veins. The scene is pure melodrama, in which the image of Ileana as an abject, bleeding victim at the water's edge, trapped impossibly in a no-man's land, is intercut with the image of Marilyn, her own idealized incarnation. In this scenario, the woman's attractiveness and her victimization are symbiotically linked in a way that points to a similar process at work in the posthumous construction of Ileana's putative namesake, the iconic Marilyn Monroe.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The final scene of Manni's *Elvjs & Merilijn* evokes Slavoj Žižek's criticism of dominant Western representations of southeastern Europe and his concomitant critique of the universalization of the notion of the victim that has accompanied the worldwide triumph of liberal democracy.[26] For Žižek, the image of the victim, since it is presented as existing outside of ideology, exerts on the witness an immobilizing fascination, evoking compassion while thwarting the ability to act. It is precisely this kind of immobilizing fascination that the spectacle of woman-as-victim demands in the films discussed above since each of them refuses to problematize the sexual politics of its own representational strategies, attempting instead to evoke the dutifully compassionate though ultimately complicit gaze of the passive cinema spectator.

Maternal Noir: *La sconosciuta*

The opening sequence of Giuseppe Tornatore's *La sconosciuta* (2006) presents a scene of striking visual intensity, framed as a flashback. In a disused warehouse, furnished like a stage set, several masked women exhibit themselves in their underwear for the benefit of a hidden observer who, from a peephole, surveys each of them with close attention. As the women parade before him in groups of three, a train roars by, rattling the building and scattering dust everywhere. When the observer finally indicates a preference for a particular woman, a slender blonde steps forward, sheds her scant clothing, and mechanically repeats the same routine while nude. As soon as her selection is confirmed, the woman peels off her full-face mask, revealing simultaneously that all of the women had been wearing identical, flesh-colored masks. Before the scene ends, however, there are a few rapid cuts to the present, which establish the scene itself as belonging to the past. The high-key lighting, voyeuristic set-up, and uncanny implications of the women's identical masks lend an element of the surreal to the film's opening minutes, evoking the orgy scene in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1997) while also mirroring the compositional aspects of the final torture scenario in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975). With its allusive citations, noir effects, and diegetic disruptions, the sequence seems to pose self-consciously the question of genre.

At a press conference following the screening of *La sconosciuta* at Cannes in 2006, Tornatore vigorously denied that the film was as an expression of social critique, explicitly distancing himself from the many recent films attempting to expose or challenge abuses and injustices in contemporary Italy.[27] Although an element of social criticism can certainly be read into its narrative, *La sconosciuta* is for the most part a self-consciously *cinematic* project that aims at engaging a wide audience with the kind of popular audiovisual spectacle for which Tornatore is well known. Like much of the director's earlier work, it constitutes a well-crafted product that offers specific visual and aural pleasures through the use of

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figure 2.2. Screen capture. Irena removes her mask. *La sconosciuta* (2006)

striking cinematography, strong acting performances, and an intensely stirring, if not overwrought, musical score. What is new here with respect to Tornatore's earlier work is *La sconosciuta*'s deployment of noir aesthetics. Much of the dramatic force of the film comes, in fact, from its unusual admixture of conventions borrowed from different genres, specifically from horror and noir but with a significant infusion of melodrama.

Despite Tornatore's effort to disavow the element of social criticism that appears to be at work in *La sconosciuta*, it is clear that the opening sequence explicitly alludes to the reality of sex trafficking to Italy from the countries of the former Eastern bloc, a phenomenon controlled by international criminal networks and carried out under brutal, dehumanizing conditions. The narrative also references another contemporary phenomenon rarely dramatized in cinema—the use of young, *white* foreign women to supply newborn infants to the clandestine adoption market. *La sconosciuta* thus dramatizes some of the difficult circumstances experienced by vulnerable female migrants through the construction of a protagonist who has survived the trials of sex trafficking and coerced childbearing. At the same time, through the self-conscious deployment of mixed genre conventions, it demonstrates a degree of self-reflexive expressivity scarcely evidenced in earlier, more realistic dramas of female migration. It is significant, for example, that the film foregrounds the image of male voyeurism in its opening sequence, raising the issue of the filmmaker's own relationship to the spectacle of women's exploitation, a question that remains only implicit in earlier Italian films offering narratives of female migration and displacement.

At the center of *La sconosciuta* is a Ukrainian immigrant (Ksenia Rappaport), who is sold into prostitution in Italy and later obliged to surrender for sale the nine children she has borne over the course of twelve years of bondage to her pimp. The present tense of the narration follows her quest, three years after

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

her escape from a life of virtual enslavement, to track down and form a bond with the youngest of these children, whom she believes to have been adopted by the well-to-do Adacher couple in an unnamed city in northern Italy. The titular "unknown woman" is interpellated by two different names in the diegesis: Giorgia, the name assigned to her by her pimp, and Irena, the name she claims as her own, presumably an approximation of the Ukrainian Irina. Nothing is known of her life prior to her experience as a trafficked woman; no memories are associated with her native land, there is no mention of family or friends from her youth, and no explanation is given for the circumstances that brought her in contact with the world of trafficking. She has recourse to her native language only once, when she sings a lullaby to her presumed daughter, Tea Adacher, in Ukrainian. In this way, she remains to a great extent an enigma, even if the history of her abuse at the hands of her pimp and the motivations for her avenging actions are slowly revealed to the viewer up to the final scenes of the film.

Cold blue color tones signal the distance between the northern city Irena inhabits in the present and the locations in the flashbacks—presumably further to the south—where she spent her earlier years in Italy, which are shot in contrastingly golden tones. Her memories of the previous years are both painful and wistful. They are dominated on the one hand by the repulsive figure of her sadistic exploiter, Muffa (Michele Placido), who held Irena and a cluster of other young women under tight control, and on the other by a young, working-class Italian with whom she had enjoyed an idyllic if fleeting romance. The film provides brief, idealized glimpses of her stolen moments with this man, who apparently fathered the child now identified as Tea and was murdered by Muffa following the discovery of their liaison.

As events in the past and present begin to cohere for the viewer into a single narrative, explicit parallels are created on the visual track by juxtaposing Irena's experiences in the present with the haunting memories they spontaneously trigger. These parallels serve to explain the extreme measures taken by the protagonist—including injury to others—as a consequence of the many cruelties previously enacted upon her. In her quest to attain proximity to Tea, Irena is thoroughly focused and without scruple. She spies on the Adacher family, sorts through their garbage to find information about their eating habits, gains illicit access to their home, searches through their private documents, severely injures their elderly maid in order to replace this woman within the household, and lethally (if not intentionally) endangers the child's adoptive mother when the vengeful Muffa returns on the scene. All of these scenes—including several in which she is almost caught in an act of bold transgression—have a high level of dramatic tension and clearly invoke the thriller.

The tones of the thriller are also emphasized on the music track, composed by Ennio Morricone, through the use of instrumental passages dominated by

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

strings reminiscent of Bernard Herman's work for the films of Alfred Hitchcock. Also reminiscent of Hitchcock is an unsettling use of point of view, as the gaze of the camera switches the position of observer and observed, voyeur and prey, and the physical appearance of the female protagonist is radically different in the past and in the present. A second, contrasting musical motif signals the film's investment in the melodramatic mode. This passage is a sweeter, slower melody that echoes the lullaby sung by Irena to her presumed daughter in Ukrainian.

The lullaby motif is the theme that prevails on the soundtrack as the film is gradually transformed into a variant of the maternal melodrama. Irena's desperate quest to retrieve her relationship with a lost child is, in some aspects, strongly reminiscent of this subgenre of the women's films that flourished in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. Films such as John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934), King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), and Edmund Goulding's *The Great Lie* (1941) introduced female characters neglected or rejected by their children or separated from them for financial, social, or moral reasons. Though victims, these protagonists ultimately achieved heroic dignity within the narrative by sacrificing their own interests for the sake of their beloved children, often concealing their maternal identity or disappearing completely to allow the child access to a better life.

In a seminal essay of feminist film scholarship, Linda Williams uses feminist and psychoanalytic discourse to unpack the power dynamics in the classic maternal melodrama *Stella Dallas*. Williams notes that the ultimate triumph for the female protagonist in this and similar dramas lies in her voluntary victimization through self-sacrifice. It is in fact the woman's self-sacrifice that achieves the obligatory happy ending, where a sense of "too-lateness" is combined with an image of heroic suffering and moral fortitude.[28]

In the present tense of Tornatore's film, though Irena is prepared to perform a measure of self-sacrifice, she is never simply a victim. To complicate her situation further, the relationship she develops with the child she believes to be her daughter is overlaid with elements of cruelty. The scene in which she forcibly instructs Tea to defend herself, to fight back and protect herself from injury, has a disturbing intensity. Irena binds the child's arms to her body, repeatedly throws her onto the floor, and then forces her to struggle to her feet before throwing her back down again. The scene is intercut with images of Irena tied and bound by her pimp as she, too, is thrown helplessly to the floor, bloodied and beaten. The editing suggests that Irena, no longer a victim, has become a resourceful agent, teaching the child skills she was unable to mobilize within herself. This awareness fails to dispel the shocking effect attained by the spectacle of the small girl being subjected to repeated acts of violence she cannot comprehend. In a subsequent scene, however, it becomes obvious that, thanks to Irena's intervention, Tea has learned to defend herself successfully when attacked by her classmates in the school playground.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figure 2.3. Screen capture. Irena delivers tough love. *La sconosciuta* (2006)

La sconosciuta could be read as a paranoid text, reflecting a generalized anxiety about fertility, childbearing, and motherhood in a country with a declining birthrate, where many professional women entrust their child or children to the daily custody of "foreign" caretakers or babysitters. Certainly, the film's melodramatic excess unsettles any definitive reading of Irena as an entirely benevolent presence, rendering her at times as a devouring mother unhinged by the hysterical need to be reunited with her offspring. Visually, she is frequently marked with the signs of abjection—stained with blood, breast milk, and dirt from the city dump, where she digs for the body of her murdered lover. But she is ultimately undecipherable, as is suggested by her mask in the film's opening scene, as well as by her startling shifts in appearance and the presence of a Janus-faced fountain in the street near her apartment.

What marks the difference between *La sconosciuta* and the classical maternal melodrama is that Irena, when presented with DNA evidence that Tea is not her daughter, abandons her dream of recreating a spectral oedipal family and instead—as is suggested in the film's epilogue—proceeds to foster a nurturing bond with the girl, which endures throughout years of her incarceration for the crimes she has committed. The wordless concluding scene, which immediately follows the scene of Irena's entry into prison without a marked temporal parenthesis, can be read either as a straightforward narrative conclusion or a fantasy sequence. The scene's visual codes, however, are realistic. Walking through the prison gate and into the sunlight, Irena is gray-haired and somber after years of detention. Pausing at a bus stop, she appears uncertain, bewildered. Then the teenage Tea emerges into view, smiling warmly. Turning in surprise, Irena smiles back in recognition as the familiar lullaby motif swells on the soundtrack, conjuring up what is indeed an implausible happy ending. The narrative implication, however, is that Irena has maintained the promise made to Tea that she would

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

always write to her, enabling their bond to flourish despite the intervention of time and distance. In this way, the film redeems its Eastern European protagonist by exalting her capacity for affective labor, which she performed even from the solitude of her prison cell on behalf of an Italian child that she will never be able to call her own.

The Labor of Care

Over the past fifteen years, the figure of the foreign-born domestic worker or care provider has emerged with increasing frequency in Italian feature films, referencing a growing tendency among Italian families to employ immigrants to assist with the functioning of their everyday lives.[29] This phenomenon can be linked to a nexus of social and political issues that include the feminization of migration flows to Italy, the gendered and racialized hierarchies operating within Italy's contemporary workforce, the presumed emancipation of Italian women that has prompted larger numbers than before to join the formal workforce, and the corresponding material and affective gaps created within Italy's rapidly aging households. Rarely achieving prominence in the films' narrative economy, the migrant domestic worker (almost always presented as a woman) is nonetheless a crucial component of cinema's engagement with the growing presence of migrant laborers in the Italian workforce and specifically with the anxieties that have accompanied the insertion of the migrant laborer into the intimate space of Italian domestic life. Although not ostensibly driven by a commitment to political critique, such films offer complex engagements with the fraught discourses of globalization, xenophobia, and racism currently circulating in Italian society.

In his reflections on contemporary global migrations and their imbrication in the neocolonial labor market, Mezzadra notes how the figure of the migrant domestic worker or care provider is embedded in the intimate rhythms and spaces of households in the global north while she retains ties with her own family a great distance away. Enmeshed in a complicated chain of affective relations, she is subjected to competing expectations. Mezzadra argues, moreover, that the characteristics embodied in this figure are increasingly constitutive of labor more generally considered, where the boundary between labor and life, or between commodity and noncommodity, is becoming blurred.[30]

Mezzadra's observations owe much to the work of the feminist scholars already cited, including Arlie Russell Hochschild, who in 1983 proposed the term "emotional labor" to describe the work performed by service employees who are expected to facilitate a sense of emotional well-being in those they serve.[31] Developing this concept in the context of different employment sectors, Hochschild came to focus on the crucial role that emotions play in the experiences of migrant domestic workers in the globalized world. Through the labor of this

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

growing contingent of foreign-born women, she argued, care, concern, and love are being imported from the world's poorer areas to its wealthier regions and cities, with significant consequences for the families left behind in the women's home countries (a phenomenon now know as the "care chain" or the "care drain"). During the same period, other feminist scholars, such as Jacqueline Andall, Bridget Anderson, Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, began to explore in similar ways the transnational dimensions of migrant domestic work and to scrutinize its affective ramifications.[32] Published in 2000, Andall's monograph relates specifically to the Italian context, directly addressing the migration of African women to Italy for domestic work from the 1970s to the 1990s. Her research reveals how the intersecting constructs of race, class, and gender during those decades served to demean and marginalize these women at the very moment that also witnessed the rise of Italian feminism and its much-touted call for global sisterhood.

Examining a broader transnational context, Anderson highlights the ways in which the field of domestic work is shaped by social hierarchization and by more or less explicit forms of racism. Mezzadra points to Anderson's work on the global politics of domestic labor to extrapolate a compelling insight: it is not so much *time* that counts in evaluating the contribution of the domestic worker but rather the personality of the worker herself—in other words, her ability to produce and sell affects. Mezzadra further argues that specific forms of subjectivity are currently being forged in the field of tensions surrounding the foreign domestic worker, shot through with affects that run the gamut from expressions of care to racist sentiment. Traditional family roles such as those of wife and mother, he asserts, have undergone a profound shift in the process.

In light of these provocative insights, I will focus here on the cinematic construction of migrant women employed in contemporary Italian households in order to probe the tensions and contradictions underpinning such representations. Although migrant sex workers have featured in Italian films almost from the beginning of the period of mass migration to Italy, the figure of the foreign-born domestic or care worker has emerged much more gradually. The reasons for this discrepancy are easy to surmise. Whereas the life of the sex worker is often dangerous and violent in ways that lend themselves readily to melodramatic or sensationalistic representations—and in fact many European films about foreign women involved in forced prostitution are genre productions—capturing the drudgery performed by foreign women working in the privacy of Italian homes may constitute a more challenging representational endeavor.

Among the migrant domestic workers featuring in recent Italian films, the figure of the Eastern European *badante* (care worker) has a prominent place. In Italy, the demand for care of the elderly has surged in recent years to such a degree that special provisions were created by the government to provide employment

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

permits for immigrants willing to undertake this form of labor.[33] Foreign-born caregivers have thus become a familiar presence in Italy's contemporary social landscape, filling a widely acknowledged social need. Eastern European women, who constitute the majority of foreign caregivers employed in Italian households, blend in visually with the family they serve, recalling the appearance of a traditionally constituted household that is supported by extended family members.[34] Although these women may approximate or mirror the whiteness of their employers, their subaltern status belies any sense of genuine equality.

Screening the *Badante*

Accorded diverse levels of prominence and agency, the East European *badante* appears in a range of Italian feature films, including *Cose dell'altro mondo* (*Things from Another World*, Francesco Patierno, 2011), *Gianni e le donne* (*Gianni and the Women*, Gianni Di Gregorio, 2011), *Io, loro e Lara* (*Me, Them, and Lara,* Carlo Verdone, 2010), and *Mar Nero* (*Black Sea*, Federico Bondi, 2008). The scenarios constructed in these films point—whether critically or with unconscious complicity—to widely held social attitudes that construct foreign women as seductive intruders, canny exploiters, or simply as easily exploitable laborers who must be incorporated into Italian households for lack of more satisfactory solutions in an altered social landscape. As I will show, however, the construction of the migrant care worker dramatizes the ways in which the issue of labor intersects with questions of gender, race, and class.

Starring the Romanian actress Dorotheea Petre and the Italian Ilaria Occhini, *Mar Nero* is the first Italian feature film to place the caregiver in a leading role, and it is therefore worthy of particular scrutiny. Based on a script written by the director Federico Bondi in collaboration with Ugo Citi, the film was ostensibly inspired by the relationship between Bondi's own grandmother and her Romanian caregiver.[35] Although articulated as an intimate domestic drama, it is not without broader political implications as it is set mostly in the winter of 2006–7, a period that witnessed Romania's accession to the European Union. This phase of EU enlargement had, in fact, prompted widespread public anxieties about the possibility of increased migration of Romanians to Italy, often expressed in discriminatory language, including the occasional collapsing of the categories of *romeni* (Romanians) and *rom* (Romani) in everyday communication.

For most of its duration, *Mar Nero* unfolds in a small apartment in the outskirts of Florence, where the young Angela (Petre) has been summoned to take care of Gemma (Occhini), an elderly Tuscan widow. Reluctant to acknowledge her own real need for help, Gemma is still deeply resentful that her son has moved to a distant city. Venting her disappointment and rage on the defenseless Romanian caregiver, she operates under the assumption that acceptance of such treatment is

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

part of Angela's domestic duties. The film powerfully conveys the ways in which the social devaluation of domestic work is impressed on the worker's body. As Angela struggles to meet the physical demands of her job, she seeks simultaneously to cope with harsh criticism and abuse without betraying her frustration. Occupying the devalued space of racialized, feminized labor, she is initially prevented from claiming her individual identity as her employer refuses to learn her name. For the sake of convenience, Gemma interpellates her as Luda, the name of the Russian *badante* she had recently fired. Angela's eventual rejection of this name marks the beginning of a transformation in their relationship.

The film convincingly depicts the lack of respect for personal boundaries often reported in the testimony of domestic workers. Yet the affect circulating in the partnership constructed between Angela and Gemma—just as Mezzadra and others describe in their writings on this form of care work—is composed of a cluster of complex emotions ranging from frustration and resentment to homesickness and reluctant compassion, encompassing Gemma's unfinished business with her absent son, Angela's anxiety about her unresponsive husband in Romania, and her unspoken concern that she may perhaps be pregnant. *Mar Nero* further suggests that the mistreatment of the young Romanian is not limited to the confines of the apartment she shares with Gemma. In fact, Angela is repeatedly subjected to verbal abuse by another Italian woman living in the same building, who screams at her in the stairwell, calling her a *zingarona* (gypsy) and threatening to report her to the immigration authorities.

Angela also becomes the target of the woman's husband's inopportune advances. As the film implies, her very identity as an Eastern European woman already marks her as a sexually exploitable commodity according to widely held Italian perceptions. In light of these fraught experiences and encounters, the brief scene showing Angela celebrating New Year's Eve with her Romanian friends has a special poignancy. At the moment in which 2006 gives way to 2007, the revelers jubilantly exclaim, "Europeni!" (Europeans!) as though, in an era of shared Europeanness, inequalities and exploitation will dissolve.

Mar Nero's narrative arc is built on the growing bond of trust that develops between Angela and her diffident employer, who was initially obliged by her son to accept the help of a caregiver against her own wishes. For most of the film, equal attention is paid to the older woman's resentment and the younger woman's efforts to withstand the rudeness, racism, and discrimination meted out to her as a matter of course. As the women grow more trusting of each other, however, Gemma becomes more sympathetic to the viewer and eventually moves to the center of the film's narrative focus. The turning point occurs when Angela announces that she will return to Romania to locate her troubled husband, who has inexplicably gone missing. Though limited in her cultural horizons and hindered by poor physical health, the older woman spontaneously decides to

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figure 2.4. Screen capture. Angela and Gemma in Romania. *Mar Nero* (2008)

accompany Angela on her journey to Sulina in the Danube Delta. In contrast to the straightforward realism of the earlier part of the film, the concluding scenes, set in Romania, are infused with an evocative tonality.

Echoing a trope found in earlier films highlighting journeys by Italian characters to the former Eastern bloc after the fall of communism (notably Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* and Carlo Mazzacurati's *Il toro*), the Italian protagonist appears to step back into an earlier period of Italian history as she surveys her surroundings upon arrival in Romania. At first she is struck by the sight of horse-drawn carts that remind her of her Tuscan childhood, and later she appears to relish the old-fashioned attentions of an elderly man who kisses her hand and plies her with local brandy. *Mar Nero* thus builds to a conclusion that is less concerned with Angela than Gemma, whose relationship with her Romanian caregiver has been transformed into a journey that offers a new sense of energy and possibility. Although the missing Romanian husband is duly located and reunited with Angela, who then chooses to stay in Romania to take care of him, these circumstances are only schematically indicated for the viewer. As occurs in many other films featuring Italian immigrants, *Mar Nero*'s focus remains on what the Italian character has to gain from the encounter with the foreigner. For Gemma, this involves renewed vitality and autonomy, in short, a new lease on life that will certainly comprise further travel, at least within Italy (perhaps to Umbria, as she suggests). Angela's freely chosen immobility in her last scene in the film (where she declines to leave her husband's bed upon waking) offers an uncanny contrast to Gemma's newfound mobility. It is clear, however, that the young woman's fate is no longer a driving concern of the narrative. In its ultimate focus on the Italian

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

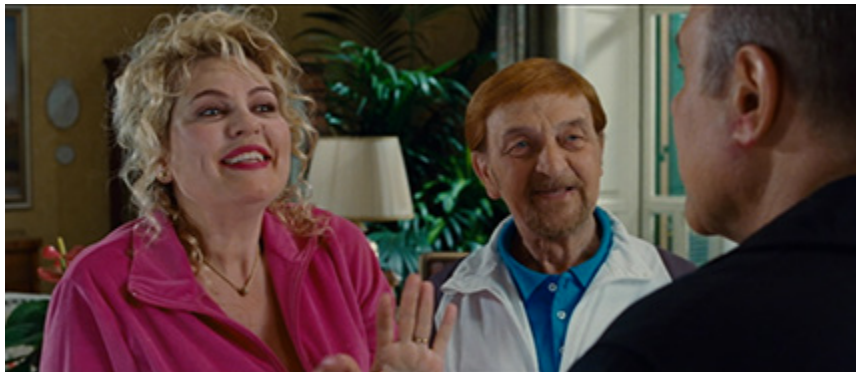

Figure 2.5. Screen capture. Carlo meets his father's wife. *Io, loro e Lara* (2009)

character's potential for transformation and redemption, the film's conclusion resonates with classical narratives of Orientalist awakening.

Though articulated in a very different comedic register, Carlo Verdone's *Io, loro e Lara* bears some comparison with Bondi's film. As in *Mar nero*, the plot involves the introduction of an Eastern European woman into an Italian household, a woman who then becomes a source of revitalization for the aging Italian entrusted to her care. In Verdone's film, Olga (Olga Balan) is a middle-aged Moldovan woman, already well settled in Italy, who has been hired to take care of Alberto (Sergio Fiorentini), the widowed patriarch of a bourgeois Roman family, who soon marries her without announcing his intention to his three adult children. The comic force of the film is unleashed by their discovery of this union. While Alberto exuberantly flaunts his happiness and renewed priapic vigor, his adult sons and daughter refuse to share his joy, appalled that their inheritance will be devoured by a woman they see as a calculating interloper. Although this Eastern European woman appears to be a regular migrant, without visa problems, she is still treated with contempt—that is, as unworthy of enjoying the status of wife in the Italian home.

In a telling scene in the early part of the film, the older son, Carlo (a sympathetic missionary priest played by Verdone himself), finds himself incapable of referring to his father's new wife by her name. Instead, he repeatedly refers to her as *la badante*, as if she were forever identified with this subaltern role. While Carlo's lapsus is presented as comedy, the viewer is simultaneously prompted to consider how the term *badante* is already inflected with derogatory or xenophobic overtones. Even if the film's overall viewpoint appears to take the side of Olga against her newfound husband's self-interested offspring, the narrative ultimately makes her pay for her unexpected good fortune by having her die of a heart attack while having vigorous sex with the Viagra-fortified Alberto. She is not

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

irreplaceable, however. In the film's final scene, the once-grieving Alberto is seen beaming with joy in the company of a new (and younger) migrant caregiver.[36]

The films I have described in this section explicitly refer to the growing reliance on migrant labor for the provision of care in Italy. Their construction of this phenomenon through the figure of the Eastern European migrant resonates to varying degrees with Pei-Chia Lan's argument—anticipated in Italian feminist writings of the early 1970s—that paid and unpaid domestic work should not be considered as two separate entities but rather as "structural continuities that characterize the feminization of domestic labor across the public and private sphere."[37] In a study of the factors implicated in the increased use of foreign caregivers in Italian households at present, Dawn Lyon has similarly noted that "the labor of migrant carers in personal services is marginalized as unproductive and is not seen as real 'work,'" just as the unpaid labor of Italian women traditionally undertaking these caretaking tasks was devalued in the past.[38] However, despite the social perception of such labor as "unproductive," the films that I have discussed strongly suggest that Eastern European women caregivers do, in fact, produce *affect* by offering the material and emotional support once provided by wives, daughters, or other family members.

By scrutinizing the unfolding of these audiovisual narratives, it is easy to discern their conservative underpinnings; their barely concealed nostalgia for the figure of the stay-at-home mother, long-lasting marriages, and extended family networks, and their perceptible ambivalence vis-à-vis the immigrants employed to make good the resulting void. At the same time, these films clearly suggest the ways in which transnational care workers operating in Italy at present are vitally imbricated in the production of cultural and social relations in the globalized arena.

Conclusion

In a range of expressive registers, the films discussed in this chapter evoke the circumstances experienced by migrant women from the former Eastern bloc who undertook the process of migration to Italy after 1989 and found themselves enmeshed in various forms of affective labor, whether forced or willingly undertaken. I do not claim that these films illuminate in a literal way the actual social conditions prevalent at the time of their production or that they present a straightforward critique of the abuses often meted out to vulnerable women who cross borders bereft of the required visas or work permits and of material and psychological support. Rather, I observe the ways in which they resonate with contemporary concerns about the reproduction of the (white) national subject. Engaging with a phenomenon that emerged in Italy after 1990, when migration from the East began to affect Italy to a substantial degree, they build scenarios

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

around the figure of the white (yet not-quite white) Eastern European woman, a figure that embodies both ambivalence and compensatory promise.

The films' collective preoccupation with the growing presence of Eastern European women engaged in various forms of affective labor points to a larger phenomenon of female migration occurring across the European continent. This phenomenon is referenced in numerous films from other European countries, which tend, however, to be more specifically concerned with issues of trafficking than with affective labor more generally. Examples include *Lilya 4-Ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002), *Svetlana's Journey* (Michael Cory Davis, 2004), *Eastern Promises* (David Cronenburg, 2007), and *Taken* (Pierre Morel, 2009).[39] In the Italian films I have discussed—which, perhaps significantly, emerged in a slightly earlier period—trafficking is not the dominant trope. Despite the occasional representation of violent and abusive practices, within the narrative economy of these films, the narrative payoff of seeing justice done in a world of brutality or exploitation is almost entirely absent. Offering more ambivalent or open-ended conclusions than the productions originating elsewhere in Europe, the Italian films collectively explore the capacity of Eastern European women to reproduce whiteness in the Italian social landscape. In other words, they posit this figure as a passable ethnoracial substitute for those native women who previously occupied such subordinate roles.

Finally, although the films I have discussed here often suggest an oblique criticism of the abuses endured by vulnerable migrant women who entered Italy in the first fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, their fascination with this wounded, often self-sacrificing female figure may, in fact, bear an inverse relationship to the image—and actual presence—of more powerful and resourceful women in contemporary Italy whose lives have been profoundly altered by the legacy of the feminist movement of the 1970s. These narratives of female migration may serve an unconscious, compensatory function through which the masochistic and sadistic mechanisms of cinematic narrative can be "logically" deployed, inadvertently revealing while simultaneously allaying the anxieties of a beleaguered Italian masculinity in the global era.

Notes

1. The image of the migrant hordes is taken up ironically by journalist Gian Antonio Stella in the title of his book *L'orda: Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi* (Milan: BUR, 2003), which translates as "The horde: When *we* were the Albanians." In response to Italy's recent migratory influx and the attendant surge in xenophobia, Stella gives an account of the massive emigration of Italians across the globe in the past, describing the ways in which they were perceived and treated in foreign lands.

2. For an exploration of the meanings and usage of such terms, see Lorenzo Guadagnucci, *Parole sporche. Clandestini, nomadi, vu cumprà: Il razzismo nei media e dentro di noi* (Milan: Altreconomia, 2010).

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

3. Ester Gallo and Francesca Scrinzi, *Migration, Masculinities and Reproductive Labour: Men of the Home* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111.

4. Manuela Coppola and Sonia Sabelli, "Not a Country for Women, nor for Blacks," in *Teaching "Race" with a Gendered Edge*, ed. Brigitte Hipfl and Kristín Loftsdóttir (Utrecht: Atgender, 2012), 147–48.

5. Lega Nord's insistence that immigrants would deprive native Italians of their employment was entirely spurious. Given the country's consistently low birthrate in recent decades, the workforce was experiencing a growing need for the infusion of laborers from abroad.

6. For a detailed denunciation of the CPT with testimonials by former detainees, see Marco Rovelli, *I lager italiani* (Rome: Biblioteca Università Rizzoli, 2006). See also Federica Sassi, *Autobiografie negate: Immigrati nei lager del presente* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2002).

7. My initial exploration of a small portion of the films discussed in this section appears in an earlier essay. See Áine O'Healy, "Border Traffic: Reimagining the Voyage to Italy," in *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, ed. Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre, and Áine O'Healy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 59–72. The current analysis, however, opens up the earlier discussion on migrant sex work, forced prostitution, and sex trafficking to include recent theoretical developments on the subject of trafficking and migrant women's labor.

8. Sandro Mezzadra, "Taking Care: Migration and the Political Economy of Affective Labor," March 16, 2005, Caring Labor: An Archive. July 29, 2010. https://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/mezzadra_taking_care.pdf (accessed July 19, 2018). Mezzadra's insights on the global caregiver are revised and updated in Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 95–111.

9. Mezzadra, "Taking Care,"

10. Nicholas De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419–47.

11. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "Borderscapes of Differential Inclusion: Subjectivity and Struggles on the Threshold of Justice's Excess," in *The Borders of Justice*, ed. Étienne Balibar, Sandro Mezzadra, and Ranabir Samaddar (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 181–203. See also Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method*, 23 and passim.

12. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, "The 'Hidden' Side of the New Economy: On Transnational Migration, Domestic Work, and Unprecedented Intimacy," *Frontiers* 28, no. 3 (2007): 73.

13. Parvulescu, *Traffic in Women's Work*, 7.

14. Parvulescu, 10.

15. Parvulescu, 10.

16. Parvulescu, 11.

17. Silvana Rugolotto, Alice Larotonda, and Sjaak van der Geest, "How Migrants Keep Italian Families Italian: Badanti and the Private Care of Older People," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 13, no. 2 (2017): 185–97, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHSC-08-2015-0027.

18. Among similar initiatives, in 2008 politician Daniela Santanché argued for a referendum to repeal the 1958 Merlin Law that had abolished Italy's state-sanctioned brothels.

19. For a discussion of the complex issues subtending sex work by migrant woman in Italy today, see Irene Peano, "Excesses and Double Standards: Migrant Prostitutes, Sovereignty and Exceptions in Contemporary Italy," *Modern Italy* 17, no. 4 (2012): 419–32.

20. Rutvica Andrijasevic, "The Difference Borders Make: (Il)legality, Migration and Trafficking in Italy among Eastern European Women in Prostitution," in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller (New York: Berg, 2003), 251–72.

21. Some of the best-known examples are found in Luigi Zampa's *La romana* (*Woman of Rome*, 1954), Antonio Pietrangeli's *Adua e le sue compagne* (*Adua and Her Friends*, 1956),

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Federico Fellini's *Notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*, 1957), Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1963), and Lina Wertmüller's *Amore e Anarchia* (*Love and Anarchy*, 1973). For a study of the representation of prostitutes in Italian cinema from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, see Danielle Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women: Gender and Prostitution in Italian Cinema, 1940–1965* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016). Hipkins's research reveals the astonishing frequency with which this figure appears in the corpus of films produced during the period examined.

22. In this period of Italian cinema, the nationality of the actress rarely coincides with the roles she plays. For example, we find a Polish actress playing the part of the Romanian Ileana in *Elvjs & Merilijn*, and another Polish actress is cast as the Russian Alia in *Un'altra vita*. Similarly, the role of an enigmatic Kosovar fugitive in Valori's *Radio West* is played by Kasia Smutniak, a Polish actress based in Italy, and the Ukrainian protagonist of *La sconosciuta* is played by Russian actress Ksenia Rappoport, who has in recent years worked frequently in Italy. While the dialogue is always in a language appropriate to the character and the specific narrative situation, knowledgeable viewers can recognize a "foreign accent" in the speech of the actors attempting to approximate their character's "native" pronunciation. Although the linguistic aspect of these films signals a shift away from the long-established Italian preference for dubbing over subtitling, little attention is paid to differences within the category of "the foreign."

23. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 132–33. The assertion that "sadism demands a story" is found in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 14.

24. Kristeva's account of abjection has had a powerful hold on an important strain of Anglophone feminist theory over the past two decades. While this model provides a convincing theorization of the origins of misogyny and related exclusionary discourses, it is nonetheless problematical insofar as it posits the positive and transgressive potentiality of encounters with the abject. As Imogen Tyler has argued, to focus on this aspect of the Kristevan paradigm risks reproducing rather than challenging discourses of violent disgust toward "abjected" bodies. Tyler boldly reorients Kristeva's theory of the abject, arguing for a social and political account of abjection rather than a purely psychoanalytical one. Specifically, Tyler's project focuses on the consequences of being abject within specific social and political contexts. See Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

25. The vampiric nuances elicited by Toni Bertolelli's performance in this film are amplified intertextually with the actor's subsequent performance as Dracula in *Zora la vampira* (Manetti Bros., 2000).

26. Slavoj Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 212–13.

27. Claudia Morgoglione, "Il mistero della Sconosciuta--Tornatore fra cronaca e noir," *La Repubblica*, October 18, 2006, http://www.repubblica.it/2006/10/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/cinema/roma/sconosciuta-tornatore/sconosciuta-tornatore/sconosciuta-tornatore.html.

28. Linda Williams, "'Something Else besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (1984): 2–27.

29. In this section I draw in part on a previously published essay: Áine O'Healy, "Bound to Care: Gender, Affect, and Immigrant Labor," in *Italian Political Cinema: Public Life, Imaginary, and Identity in Contemporary Italian Film*, ed. Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 56–67.

30. Mezzadra, "Taking Care," 1.

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

31. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1983).

32. Jacqueline Andall, *Migration and Domestic Service: The Politics of Black Women in Italy* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000); Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000); Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, "'Hidden Side' of the New Economy," 60–83; and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001).

33. Franca van Hooren, "When Families Need Immigrants: The Exceptional Position of Migrant Domestic Workers and Care Assistants in Italian Immigration," *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 2, no. 2 (2010): 21–38.

34. Francesca Bettio, Annamaria Simonazzi, and Paola Villa, "Change in Care Regimes and Female Migration: The 'Care Drain' in the Mediterranean," *Journal of European Social Policy* 16, no. 3 (2006): 271–85.

35. Bondi reveals this information in an interview provided with the extras in the DVD release of the film.

36. *Io, loro e Lara* has a plot twist that unwittingly points to the differential status of the sexual labor performed by white European women on the one hand and by African women on the other. In the course of the film, Olga's daughter (who was in any case born in Italy) is revealed to be working as a cam girl, coyly exposing her breasts while chatting with clients on the internet in order to meet her financial needs. At the same time, three African girls, whom Carlo had known during his missionary work in Africa, are engaged in street prostitution in Rome. At the film's end, Carlo "rescues" the Africans and sends them back to Africa, thus removing them permanently from Italian soil, whereas Olga's daughter finds a way to free herself from the necessity of selling sex for money, retrieves her young son from foster care, and assumes a central role in Carlo's father's household.

37. Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestics and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 13.

38. Dawn Lyon, "The Organization of Care Work in Italy: Gender and Migrant Labor in the New Economy," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 13, no. 1 (2006): 207–24.

39. For a survey of European films focused on themes of trafficking, see William Brown, Dina Iordanova, and Leshu Torshin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and Trafficking in the New Europe* (St. Andrews, UK: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2010).

This content downloaded from 149.130.13.64 on Fri, 28 Aug 2020 14:51:15 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms