

## The Nascent State of Future: Relevance of the Maternal Symbolic and Metonymic in Francesca Comencini's Cinema

With her last film *Lo spazio bianco* (2009), which won best movie and best actress (Margherita Buy) at the 2010 Italian Film Critics Award (Nastri d'Argento), the cinema of Francesca Comencini has reached a remarkable degree of complexity both in terms of theoretical contents and modalities of expression. Up to the present moment, this work represents the culmination of an intense cinematographic trajectory. Daughter of one of the key figure of the *Commedia all'italiana*, Luigi Comencini (1916-2007), Francesca Comencini began her career in 1984 when, after dropping out of University—she was a philosophy major— she shot her first feature film *Pianoforte*, an autobiographical work on drug abuse. In this early experiment a point stands out that will become a distinctive trait of her production: the investigation of the private sphere as the site for larger political conflicts. Other and most recent productions such as *Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo* (2002), *Mi piace lavorare (Mobbing)* (2004), *A casa nostra* (2006), and *In fabbrica* (2007) further explored this dimension connecting it to a wider reflection on the socio-economic condition of Italy, its transformation and the critique of its dominant ideology. But it is with *Lo spazio bianco* that Comencini refines her bottom-up perspective in a cinematically powerful narrative. The white space the title evokes is simultaneously a real dramaturgic environ, the Intensive Care Unit for premature infants around which the story revolves, as well as a theoretical dimension; for it represents the incubator of new lives or a new society albeit under extremely dangerous and monitored conditions. The white space in fact marks out the interregnum of a dense and pulsating waiting—which is neither passive nor immobile—for what will come, for the coming to being of the future.

The movie is a convincing adaptation of Valeria Parrella's homonymous novel.<sup>1</sup> It tells the story of Maria, a woman in her early forties, who teaches evenings classes for adults in Naples and who, after a brief and inconclusive romance with a younger man, gets pregnant but suffers a preterm birth. Her daughter, Irene, is only six months old and needs to spend fifty days in an incubator to have a chance to

survive. The long wait in the Intensive Care Nursery together with other mothers and their babies provides the liquid architecture for a plot in which everything seems turned upside down. *Lo spazio bianco*, in effect, raises a paradoxical question: What happens when the uterus becomes a public place so that the act of giving birth loses its usual compressed temporal span and gets prolonged and exteriorized? Moreover, because of her state, Irene embodies a rather puzzling form of subjectivity, one that is constantly in transition: never born, only nascent. Why all these uncanny torsions? Are we simply dealing with a threshold situation, one in which basic categories have come to a standstill?

The unsettling, magnetic force of *Lo spazio bianco* comes from a relatively simple intuition. Strictly speaking, the connection between the Neonatal Unit and its “allegorical” meaning is direct: the artificial white space *is* the new medical womb. Thus, the exteriorization of the uterus codes an idea that feminism has long ago unearthed: the political dimension of procreation. In short, the fact that what on the outset is conceived as something natural and most intimate is instead built on political, economic and socio-symbolic constructions. In this sense, *Lo spazio bianco* brings to maturity Comencini’s deep reflection on the maternal dimension and its existential, political and theoretical aspects. In the next pages, I will discuss this issue making reference to the feminist notions of the *maternal symbolic* and *metonymic* economy as opposed to phallogocentric thought. I will begin my study with *Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo* and *Mi piace lavorare (Mobbing)* drawing on their example in order to gain perspective on *Lo spazio bianco*.<sup>2</sup> I believe, in fact, that the three movies form a trilogy, one that explores the maternal in reverse order: death (*Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo*), life (*Mi piace lavorare*) and birth (*Lo spazio bianco*).

### ***Non-saturated Dynamic of the Maternal Symbolic***

In Comencini’s cinema issues of gender and politics are always strictly interconnected. Among her feature films, *Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo* and *Mi piace lavorare* are particularly significant for their analysis of what is commonly called by neo-feminism the *maternal symbolic*. In psychoanalytical terms, the symbolic is that

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signifying structure that refers to the phallus—what Slavoj Žižek calls the “transcendental signifier”—as the source of value for our economy of desire (130). Governed by the Oedipus complex and relying on substitution and sacrifice as its main tenets, the symbolic configures the complex architecture that regulates our social life. The articulation of the concept of the maternal symbolic signals instead the attempt to shed light on a less vertical and homogenous structure of reference, one that functioning on a different economy keeps contiguity and differentiation as its directives (Dominijanni 183).<sup>3</sup> Comencini is particularly coherent in giving cinematographic form to the criticalities, dissonances but also unexpected political possibilities that the maternal symbolic lodges.

*Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo* is an original documentary dedicated to the killing of a young activist perpetrated by the Italian police during the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. In the months following the revolt, many documentaries were produced and then shown through alternative circuits of distribution to counter the official version of Italian news networks. But with the repressive dimension of the protest gaining such inescapable prominence, these works focused mostly on documenting police’s brutalities.<sup>4</sup> The quest for truth, in other words, the search for visual evidence for the wrongdoings of the police and the responsibilities of the Italian Government was stringent and established the conceptual/emotional framework for these productions. *Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo*, however, transcends this urgency. More than the reconstruction of his homicide, the objective of this documentary is giving visual and symbolic form to Carlo “as a person.” The Italian public, in fact, had a biased knowledge of Carlo Giuliani, for the mass media reduced his identity either to that of his dead corpse—his face covered by cloth on a blot of blood—or to his (living) body in the act of throwing a fire extinguisher against the Jeep from which he was (supposedly) shot.<sup>5</sup> There was no before or in-between Giuliani’s—most likely *defensive*—act and the event of his assassination.

To offset this narrative, Comencini adopted a simple but subversive strategy. She chose to have Carlo’s mother, Haidi Giuliani, reconstruct the last 24 hours of her son’s life commenting footage shot during the marches, thus granting her with “the authorial prerogative

of presenting the point of view of the documentary” (Sassi 174). So that in her detailed account of the series of fortuities and individual choices that lead to her son’s death, Haidi produces a counter-history that disrupts the representation of Carlo as a criminal—i.e. the product of incivility and blind violence that supposedly anticapitalist rancor generates—without turning him into a political martyr. As we will see, this is a point of arrival for a differential mother-son relationship, one in which the maternal does not cast itself as a suffocating presence notwithstanding the tragedy of the events.

More to the point, Haidi’s account is not a monologue, but rather a dialogue with her absent son that unfolds in an asymmetrical way. As she speaks, Carlo surfaces both as a volatile presence, through a few sporadic pictures, and as *trace*: a non-presence that insists on the present of the official representation of the media. Comencini, in fact, uses the reading of poetic texts Carlo wrote in Latin as a counterpoint to Haidi’s account. So, apart from the rare visual representations, Carlo shifts from a voiceless image (the media representation) to a bodiless voice. The power of this voice resides in the grievous tone characterized by a premonition of death and in its origin: the *somewhere else* of its elocution. The asymmetry of this dialogue does not reinforce Haidi’s speech; rather it complicates it by inscribing the latter into Carlo’s phantasmal persistence. A key point of Comencini’s subversive strategy is in fact staging, through this elaborated juxtaposition of voices, an economy of desire that escapes typical structures of reference.

This becomes clear in the last part of the documentary, where the intimation of Carlo’s presence finally gains visual consistency as he flashes out among a crowd of militants. These rare lost images taken minutes before his killing have something miraculous about them. Shown in slow motion, with no sound, they mark out presence as such, that is, the contours of a presence that seemed to have been lost forever, but that accidentally existed as a ripple, as a point of condensation in the flux of time. The effect on this type of *representation* of Carlo is that the latter emerges not as a self-contained and compacted entity but *in difference*. It is as if the narrative, the mass-media image of Carlo’s corpse, but also the voice-over interpreting Carlo’s poems, did not match with these recovered pictures. And it is

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precisely through this misrecognition that we can feel that at a certain point in time Carlo lived. In this mismatch a void opens that generates and incredible energy: presence, the pulsating life of someone who has been alive. This life is a silent moving figure that enters the screen accidentally and quickly vanishes as the camera follows its arbitrary, elusive movement.<sup>6</sup> Therein the sequence becomes a marker of the emergence of subjectivity. It is precisely what Slavoj Žižek calls a “void of subjectivity [that] is strictly correlative to the emergence, in the Real itself, of a stain which is the subject” (33). In works of fiction the stain is usually a disturbance in the cinematic space. Here it becomes the centripetal force of the narrative as well as the theme of the documentary.

It is here that the dynamic between mother and son gets reconfigured in a critical form. The implacable force buffering the freezing of Carlo into a static figure—neither that of a criminal nor that of a political icon, neither that of a poetic voice nor that of an image—has, in fact, a deep impact on the type of mourning that sustains Haidi’s discourse. Although recalling the topical figure of the *Mater dolorosa*, who grieves the death of her son, *Carlo Giuliani, Ragazzo* stages a more complex and reflexive form of the maternal symbolic. Haidi’s speech is obviously stranded by pain, but the dignity and the strength of her words reveal a deep sense of awareness. In other words, Haidi’s discourse is not tainted by what Freud called melancholia, for in the latter those who suffered a loss know *whom* they have lost but not *what* in that person has disappeared—i.e. what content in their emotional economy went amiss. In Haidi’s mourning, on the contrary, it emerges clearly the perception of both *whom* and *what* she “has lost in him” (Freud 245). It is this critical tension that animates Carlo’s cinematic representation. It is the singular paradox of Carlo coming alive again not as a nostalgic cinematic resurrection, but rather as the re-actualization through his persistence of what has been “lost in him.”

Therein the force of the documentary and its critical capacity in escaping typical forms of closure—the most dangerous one being sublimating the lost object into some abstract ideal such as that of the political martyr. Carlo instead is simply a boy (“ragazzo”) as somebody wrote on a sign in Piazza Alimonda, the place where he was murdered

and that has now been dedicated to him. But in that simplicity resides also the strongest indictment against the forces that killed him. It is in the impersonal dimension of the definition “a boy”—a *whomever*—that the discourse of neoliberal globalization qua world democracy breaks down. The *indifference* of this subjectivity does not attest to its minority—that of a few *démodé* activists who resist progress—rather it works as the index of universality, that of a large numbers of people who do not believe in the neoliberal agenda and fight against it.

Comencini knows that the mother-child relationship has always an ambivalent nature and she is extremely coherent in her analysis. If *Carlo Giuliani, ragazzo* is an inquiry into the loss and simultaneous presence of the beloved, it is with *Mi piace lavorare* that this co-temporality gets explored further in the wake of life. *Mi piace lavorare* is a fictional story inspired by real vicissitudes experienced by workers facing the deterioration of working under neoliberal economy. The protagonist is Anna, a petty white-collar worker, who has a young daughter, Morgana, and loves her simple secretarial job. For the new management she is a dead weight and needs to be cut. Thus the firm puts in motion a series of psychological and practical measures (i.e. *mobbing*) to force her out. The movie recapitulates the prostration Anna suffers both physically and psychologically and the impact on her and Morgana’s life.<sup>7</sup> Denouncing the practice of mobbing was thus the original (didactic) objective of the movie, but as with Giuliani’s documentary things are far more complex. What is at stake again is the attempt to investigate a non-saturated form of the maternal.

To shed light on this point we need to dig further into Feminist philosophy. In the mother-daughter dimension—feminists argue—a retrospective function is at work that converts the mother in the mother of her own mother. In other words, the maternal dimension articulates a relationality for which one perceives “in the elsewhere of a new relation and time, one’s mother in the position of one’s daughter” (Gorreri 2).<sup>8</sup> Here the new mother repairs and redeems the actions and pains she suffered as a daughter projecting them on her own daughter. The threat to this structuring of the maternal is that this “bind is sustained through the search for a saturated equilibrium that does not allow for gaps, breaks and discontinuities.”<sup>9</sup> Thus what gets foreclosed

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is that “relational creativity that can produce a new compound out of the prototype of the maternal... and the not-yet-known that the new encounter between mother and daughter engenders” (Gorrieri 5).

*Mi piace lavorare* stages this new but difficult encounter. Anna’s love for Morgana follows a strict repressive maternal code, so that it will be up to Morgana to open a fissure in this suffocating pattern. The parsimony with which Anna handles any aspect of her personal life signals, in fact, a vision based on the imperative of sacrifice. Not that her condition, a single mother with a hospitalized senile father, allows for any less than a frugal conduct, but her self-imposed prohibition of any pleasure makes her a dry, almost dejected character. Anna is oppressed by the imperative to survive, which she understands as obedience to an inflexible work ethic. But this as any other obedience has also its reverse side. There is a perverse satisfaction that Anna draws while fulfilling zealously her clerical job. Anna enjoys the perfect execution of her duties and while she has sporadic relations with her colleagues during the day, she is reluctant to socialize with them outside the workplace. The call for the sparing familial routine is stronger than any other necessity.

We thus can say that Anna embodies the prototype of present Italian woman as she is caught in the precarious existential positions that neoliberal modernization reproduces. Only apparently freer because of her access to work, the woman is in fact oppressed by the higher demands that society poses on her: being a good mother as well as an efficient worker. So Anna is the carrier of a longstanding trademark of Italian patriarchy: The idea of “productive passivity” for which a woman “becomes productive inasmuch as the complete denial of her personal autonomy forces her frustration in a... kind of compulsive perfectionism in her housework,” and now also on the workplace (Dalla Costa and James 42).<sup>10</sup>

Anna projects this model on her daughter, insisting on a strict self-discipline and sacrifice even prior to the management’s decision of forcing her to resign. It is only in the true encounter with her daughter that a solution emerges allowing Anna to find a line of flight. This involves the refusal not only of the harassment of her bosses, but also of the suffocating and castrating mental pattern that is crippling her life. A defining moment in this sense is the discussion Anna has

with Morgana regarding her future. Inquired about Morgana's father, who left them years earlier, Anna provides a romantic explanation for the separation: the father wanted to be free and travel and chose that over the family. Morgana states that she too wants to see the world and doesn't care a bit for being a mother. In a patronizing tone, Anna replies that having children is the most beautiful thing in the world, and if Morgana doesn't have time she will raise them for her.

As in the typical Freudian setting, Anna here discloses her relation to origin, that primordial state in which a whole economy of desire takes place. Here the "little girl takes her mother as her first object of love and also as her privileged identificatory reference point for her ego" (Irigaray *Speculum* 66). The fulfillment of this love can happen only through the replacement of the mother with a substitute, a baby girl daughter. However, this realization is never really complete, rather it is highly unstable. For if Anna projects on her daughter her own economy of desire, Morgana on the contrary questions this process of identification. She argues that she doesn't want a child because she doesn't want to be like Anna. Therein Morgana escapes a static relation to the love object which needs to be replicated in order to be fulfilled, and marks a difference pointing to an excess that changes the circularity of the maternal relation. Her source of value indicates a desire that is not immediately related to a saturated notion of maternity. This alternative form of self-expression represents a prolepsis to the final step of liberation.

Morgana plays a key role in keeping alive that core of love, attachment to life and creativity that Anna's abnegation has severely repressed. Anna's desire to live will, in fact, re-emerge only as she is able to historicize her condition, as she looks at the vexations she suffered not as attacks on her as a person but as a worker, as a woman whose cost of productions are higher than other workers and therefore must be eliminated. Concurrently, she also begins undermining the role that the ethics of sacrifice and abnegation plays in her life. Only at this point is she able to reach out for help sewing the firm and finally realizing Morgana's desire to go on a trip. Far from being an easy escape from reality, this final act of freedom (and conflict) questions the neoliberal idea that the clash between labor and capital has extinguished. In the end, Anna's reaction strips of its meaning the



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neoliberal slogan the new manager used to illustrate the new ethos of the firm in the opening scene of the movie: “we defend jobs with more work.”

### *The Metonymic Eye: A Cinematic Philosophy*

So far we have addressed Comencini’s cinema predominantly in terms of its contents. Yet her cinematic language is equally important. There is a deeply subversive tendency in her style that goes beyond a fashionable taste for a grainy and rough visual aesthetic built on the use of hand-held camera and diegetic sounds.<sup>11</sup> The camera’s vicinity to the reality on the screen—close-ups restricting the field of vision are characteristic of her production—works as a visual counterpart to the bottom-up perspective that distinguished Comencini’s filmmaking since her beginnings. The camera dissects the minutiae of the story in order to catch a glimpse of the general socio-economic issues at stake, while the non-linear development of the plot foregrounds the role of editing. Cuts are extremely visible and only rarely masked through traditional devices. The reason for these stylistic choices transcends her clear documentary approach to reality. At a more profound level, we can detect a true cinematic philosophy that organizes Comencini’s work. This cinematic philosophy is based on a metonymic rationale.

Why does Comencini privilege metonymy to organize the visual construction of her narrative? As we know, metonymies are constructed on a principle of vicinity or attributive relationships between terms, thus they stand in opposition to metaphors, which instead involve the substitution of one term with another following a criterion of likeness.<sup>12</sup> But the difference between these tropes is not limited to their rhetorical definition. Feminists argued that this opposition reflects a shift in modalities of thought: One based on phallocentrism (metaphor), and one that mobilizes a feminine symbolics (metonym). To explain this point we have to look back again at the issue of origin and the object of love. The symbolic order organizes its field and ensures coherence through analogies, through resemblances among different objects that refer back to a common denominator: the phallus. Here the issue is exteriority. As the penis is something visible “on display, man will make an infinite number

of substitutes for it; through things that exist, things he creates, objects, women” (Irigaray *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 63). The phallus, as the source of value and desire, will thus go through a chain of replacements whose ratio, however, shall always be secured and organized in plural but consequential forms. Apparently distant things may, in fact, be linked through association, but in so doing their individuality (*that* particular woman, *that* singular experience) is blurred under the powerful reference to what makes them similar: the phallus. Hence sameness and abstraction of material specificity characterize phallogocentric formalization.

On the other hand, since women do not have the same relation to exteriority as the male, their position with regards to origin does not surrender to a metaphoric principle. Their relation with sexual organs underscores the importance of interiority and contiguity—the lips of the vagina being here the primal referent. Metonym, thus, provides a more open and differential economy one that is at work in Comencini’s narrative as well. Metonym is, in fact, “continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible,” as it follows “dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unites hardly definable as such” (Irigaray *Speculum* 111). Metonym brings together what is close, thus expressing relations, vicinities among things or facts that happen to be already there, and that are not recreated through synthesis as in metaphors. Metonyms are more horizontal and contingent, whereas metaphors are vertical and statically constructed acts.

Refining Irigaray’s interpretation of the symbolics of phallogocentrism, Luisa Muraro argued that, although widespread, metonymic processes are constantly fixated or subordinated to the hierarchical and reductive symbolism of the metaphor. More precisely, what she calls our current *hyper-metaphoric* regime “seizes things, facts, bodies and individual experiences in a system of ideal relationships defining, interpreting and regulating their combination” (85). This administration of the concrete obviously reinstates and preserves a precise social hierarchy (i.e. patriarchy). Muraro, moreover, believes that it is precisely in the expression of a metonymic symbolization that this system can be undermined. This does not involve surrendering to the empiric and unintelligible dimension of the *thing*. On the contrary,

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it implies casting light on the active role that concrete, emotional, experiences have in co-determining meaning *along* with metaphoric synthesis.

Now arguing that emotions and perhaps material instincts should break us free from oppression may seem naïve. Muraro is well aware that the media-sphere is populated by an irreflexive sollicitation of passions. But she argues that this emotionality originates from the unchecked over-growth of the symbolic, where the task of representing facts through abstract codes is disjointed by the materiality of those very facts (104-105). In particular, Muraro recalls her experience as a teacher in a poor proletarian neighborhood. Asked to write about their environment, students inevitably produced stereotypical description in which they associated the word “green” to the playground where they spent their time, even though the latter was covered only by asphalt and dirt (Muraro 87). The mass media replicate a codified framework of reference that we disingenuously adopt in our social transactions thus obscuring the materiality of our experiences. It is instead in the contiguity and plurality of our experiential dimension that a freer process of signification would emerge.<sup>13</sup>

In what sense is this insistence on material contiguity key to Comencini’s filmmaking? What’s at stake here is again the issue of the maternal. So far we explored its relation with death (the case of Haidi and Carlo) and life (the case of Anna and Morgana). To appreciate the degree to which the metonymic functions politically, it is useful to turn now to the culminating event of maternity: *birth*. Pregnancy, in fact, *seems*—Muraro notes— a privileged state one in which phallocentrism allows women a full and free expression of their emotional-sexual-physical dimension. It is the private and special place “in which she is socially and culturally authorized to activate her body, her drives exercising an active role in the social relationships” (Muraro 149). But this take on procreation raises the question of accepting maternity as the fulfillment of women’s individuality, a kind of biological destiny that for men is much less stringent. Nonetheless, even this space of hypothetical feminine authority is heavily controlled. The insistence on conceiving of childbearing as something natural, blissful and spontaneous is to say the least suspicious. There is an asymmetry in this discourse that robs women of their material and

individual experience insofar as their legitimate desire is patrolled by either idealized constructions (the blessing of birth) or the obedience to moral imperatives (procreation).<sup>14</sup> *Lo spazio bianco* redeems instead the concept of birth politicizing the need for freedom without divorcing it from the dimension of desire.

On one side, we have Maria who is an independent woman desiring a child even if her lover will not build a family with her; on the other, Irene who will be born only after a long and strenuous struggle. In the final victory of life over death one could read the reinstatement of today's ideology. But, as we will see, the final scene that merely alludes to Irene's survival is more than ambiguous and does not celebrate the miracle of life in any spiritualized form. More important than the happy end is instead the idea of Irene's *protracted gestation*. For if maternity gives access to the symbolic representation of the power of creation, the exceptionality of this representation undermines the constituencies of a standard expression of femininity. The film carries out this task by exteriorizing what is usually interior: the dark inside that the fetus abandons to come to light becomes the aseptic white space of the Intensive Care Unit. It also socialize what is supposedly private: the singular figure of the mother and the baby now multiply becoming the several figures populating the nursery thus fragmenting the traditional binary relation between the mother and the child. Furthermore, in taking literally the contiguity between the mother and child, *Lo spazio bianco* amplifies this cohabitation with all its consequences at the level of emotions, fatigues and fears. This shreds any romantic layering, any abused superimposition of images of bliss and smooth eventfulness that the narrative of the "new life" inevitably carries with it.

What's more, in the dilated version of Irene's birth, the metonymic assemblage holds sway forcing viewers to follow its throbbing rhythm. In other words, the eventfulness of birth cannot be synthesized in a specific moment—the classic take of the infant in the arms of his or her mother. On the contrary, Irene is continuously *being at birth*. She is, in other words, in a fluid (and dangerous) condition one that exceeding a resolution defies the conclusive intervention of the metaphor. The narrative is, in fact, constructed mainly via the material necessity of Irene's and Maria's little acts of endurance. Time breaks

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into fractions. There is no synthetic moment, no vertical jumps of cognition: ellipsis marks this resistance against a cohesive plot. Time becomes thick. Blots of time sutured by the blind attempt of being born. Comencini's camera reconstructs the metonymic horizontality of life.

### *The Verb of All Verbs*

This liquid form of temporality makes its appearance very early in the story. Once Maria discloses her pregnancy and her decision to raise the child alone to a friend, the consequentiality of conception, pregnancy and delivery collapses. The scene following the announcement is telling of what we could define: the porosity of time staged in *Lo spazio bianco*. Here, a close-up shows Maria washing her hands after an exam in the hospital room. The viewer assumes this to be a routine check due to her pregnancy. But as Maria enters the Intensive Care Unit the viewer realizes that we have already moved to a later time when Irene is hospitalized. Abrupt jump cuts as well as flash-forwards and flash-backwards abound in the movie. Irene's figure works as a marker for this complex non-linear temporality. She has not been born, but she has always been there or, to be more precise, *elsewhere*, that is, in the non-place of the Neonatal Unit. Irene occupies this fluid, unstable position. Chained to the coming to birth, she does not allow the present to become past. There is something radically scandalous in this situation, which involves simultaneously language and thought. Let us explore this paradox.

For a person, "dying" may involve a long process, one that can even be conceived as the consequence of being born. But, conceptually, *being born* stands out as a determined event; its temporality cannot stretch too long as the expression itself indicates. The capacity to give birth, on the other hand, sustains a different, prolonged temporality—as long as a woman is fertile she can potentially procreate. But for the subject who is coming to light, birth cannot be something potential (as death is) that may occur or keep on occurring during an indefinite lapse of time. It has to *happen*. Otherwise, common sense states, the subject wouldn't exist. "The passage of birth—Jean Luc Nancy writes—counts only as the instant of a completed rupture, beyond which the

subject makes its first appearance” (13). However, this apparently reasonable definition of birth produces a peculiar paradox. It is the implicit fact that “the child as such, the subject in its first moment, will always already have been born” (Nancy 13). There is never true genuine presence of his or her birth, since the latter is configured “as what has passed” (Nancy 23).

In effect, the condition of being born, of being in a nascent state defies the logical limits of our linguistic definition of birth. We can catch sight of it when referring to the idea of a contingent and always regenerating imminence. But applied to a subject we always conceive it linguistically as something already actualized. Such a difficulty in representing birth by Western thought is the sign of its ontological status, that is to say its functioning as the unaccountable substratum that allows thought to work. Therein Nancy calls being born “the verb of all verbs: the “in the midst of taking place” that has neither beginning nor end... the unique form and unique fundament of being” (2). The white space reconstructs this space of possibility.

Possibility does not imply freedom or security. Life always borders on the danger of death. Moreover, in the film machines, nurses, and doctors make surveillance omnipresent. The Intensive Care Unit, for instance, is constructed as a kind of high-tech factory where space is organized as in a cube farm. From a cinematic point of view, the room is usually introduced through a high angle foregrounding the grid of the various workspaces while a dreamlike music plays in the background. A dolly shot gradually takes the viewer to the level of the incubators where the mothers are attending their babies. All dressed up in sterile green cloth and masks, women resemble white collar workers operating computerized units of production.

It is the mothers’ movement and dialogue that interfering with the spectral electronic architecture of the Nursery marks a break with the invisible power of technology. A beautiful scene in this sense is one that stages a ballet. Maria is at home choosing a song for a music therapy session doctors wants to experiment on the infants. When the music begins, the scene cuts to the Nursery. As the smooth notes of *Where is My Love* by Cat Power vibrate in the air, the mothers abandon their incubators and in a languid movement began to dance. It is as if, for a moment, the mothers took over the artificial life of the place

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bending it towards the theatricality of a coordinated performance. More precisely, the mothers' movements are constructed on gestures of solidarity: they hold, support and touch each other. Hence, within the sameness of the white space—with its serial disposition of machines and sophisticated equipment—a stubborn form of vitality flourishes, one that is nourished by women.

In this sterile homogeneity the vital singularity of life protrudes although without ever being fixated on an image. Irene, for instance, is sporadically shown. We can glimpse at an arm or a foot and, in a couple of cases, at an opaque vision of her tiny body. The camera, on the other hand, gazes insistently on Maria, portraying her anxiety. Here the point of view is obliquely located between Irene and the incubator. Again, this perspective is not capable of a synthetic view because it belongs to a third dimension, which is that of wait, or duration that sustains a metonymic rhythm. As I said Irene is in a fluid, always nascent form. In this expanded dimension of time, in this recovery of a temporal dimension of birth, Maria is forced to meet her daughter. The metaphoric synthesis of an afterwards of birth, which retrospectively gives meaning to gestation, does not exist. Meaning must be assembled day by day, in the contiguity of the particulars of Irene's coming to life. What better antidote to common ideology with its cliché?

But Comencini's philosophical exercise gestures towards something more than the individual instance of Irene's birth. To the extent that it addresses birth as a theoretical dimension, *Lo spazio bianco* also designates the establishing of the conditions of possibility for the making of a new society. In other words, this gestation reflects the bringing forward of a new future for a whole society, not its symbolic realization but precisely its discontinuous, deferred and always renovating characteristic of being in a nascent form. Clues about this higher political stakes can be found in numerous narrative situations and are confirmed by the author's discussion of her work (Comencini "Interview"). In the film, one can think of Maria's constant conflict against social infrastructures and its abstract bureaucratic organization of life.<sup>15</sup> But also the significance of one particular subplot should not be underestimated. Maria's neighbor is in fact a prosecutor, Mrs. Perilli, a tough courageous woman who, after

leaving behind her three children, has come to Naples to hunt down the killers of a colleague. This is a direct homage to Italian Magistrate Ilda Boccassini, who moved to Caltanissetta to investigate the case of Prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino both killed in 1992 by the Mafia—but, as investigations are now making clear, also with the shameful complicity of part of the Italian state. Not surprisingly, given the longstanding corruption and political inanity that marked Italian history, in key moments, magistrates seem to incarnate the only hope of redemption for the country. Yet film critics disliked this reference arguing that the treatment of Perilli's character was trite and that her figure was not relevant to the story.<sup>16</sup> But the function of the magistrate may be less irrelevant than what it seems. At the end of the movie, for instance, we discover that Magistrate Perilli and her escort rescued Maria during the premature birth of Irene. Machine-guns in hand, policemen form a circle around Maria on the street while the magistrate is trying to help her. Far from suggesting any reassurance of military protection, the scene gives a sense of utter vulnerability, for the display of armed power can do little to alleviate Maria's sufferance and, least to say, save Irene.<sup>17</sup>

Yet it is the school that provides a deeper and more direct connection to the political and philosophical issue coded by Comencini's treatment of birth. As I said, Maria is a high school instructor teaching special courses for adults, both Italian and immigrants, a growing but highly marginalized area of Italian society. Here, in particular, the character of Gaetano has a central role. The latter is a former blue-collar worker who suffered an occupational accident. Gaetano is not only struggling to learn how to write with his left hand, but he is also trying to obtain a middle school diploma. Similarly to Irene, he too stands as a marker for a distorted figure of temporality. He is a middle age man whose present is that of his past: getting a basic education.

From a narrative point of view, Gaetano's final examination works also as a substitute to Irene's birth. The day doctors chose to remove the tubes from Irene to ascertain that she is able to breathe independently is the same day of his final exam. Significantly, the night before, Magistrate Perilli has been robbed of her investigation as the Constitutional Court decided to move the trial to a different court. Maria goes to the hospital, but as the wait seems apparently



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inconclusive she decides to attend the exam. Here, Gaetano is in trouble and asks for help. He says he got stuck in his essay because of a tense. He wrote about his life describing his present condition: his mutilated right hand means freedom as before the accident he was chained to work and to a life of oppression. To move one, he wants to use a “new present tense” but *cannot* come up with the proper verb. Maria hesitates. A text message arrives announcing that Irene reacted well and is finally born. Maria turns back to Gaetano and tells him to leave a blank space and fill it in later.

Comencini explains this narrative solution as a willed structural element of the movie. Both students—working adults who are pursuing a diploma—and Irene are in a similar condition, they must carry out a task that is normally considered straightforward. They must do something that has a defined temporal dimension: that of birth, that of acculturation and entrance into society as something more than a mere productive entity, in short, that of becoming citizens. The white space represents precisely this possibility: “A blank space that is not empty, but that constitutes what enables the birth of a new present.” For Irene this would mean a life, for the students the “recovering of the time knowledge” (Comencini “Interview”). For Italian society it would also mean re-opening the long, continuous struggle to transform the oppressive, unjust present into a different future.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Lo spazio bianco* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In this essay I will leave aside other important works such as the documentary *In fabbrica* and *A casa nostra*. For a study of this last movie in conjunction with *Mi piace lavorare* see my essay “Filming Contemporary Italy: the Case of Francesca Comencini through Slavoj Žižek’s Notion of *Capitalism with Italian Values*.”

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the debate between feminist and post-Lacanian interpretations of the phallus. See, for instance, Žižek’s critique in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (137-166).

<sup>4</sup> See Davide Ferrario, Director, *Le strade di Genova*, 2002; Indymedia, Director, *Genova 2001*, 2001, Paolo Pietrangeli, Roberto Giannarelli, Wilma Labate, and Francesco Martinotti, Directors, *Genova. Per noi*, 2001. For a detailed analysis of the

suspension of law that took place during the Genoa days see also Giulietto Chiesa, *G8/Genova* and Claudio Marradi and Enrico Ratto (ed.), *Da Seattle a Genova. Gli 8 non valgono una moltitudine*.

<sup>5</sup> On the difficult attempts to establish the truth of Giuliani's murder see Antonella Marrone.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian Sobchack makes a similar argument on the accidental character of documentary images referring to death (249-50). I would like to thank Mauro Sassi who pointed out this work to me. On the mournful status of the image see instead Roland Barthes.

<sup>7</sup> See Emanuele Di Nicola.

<sup>8</sup> From here on all translation from Italian are mine.

<sup>9</sup> This function is not only negative; for she can also repeat seemingly positive patterns of behavior she inherited.

<sup>10</sup> Abnegation and self-mutilation govern these processes of subjectification. In psychoanalytic terms Anna is thus properly neurotic as her compulsive inner normative law—i.e. her superego—holds too much power over the complex set of psychic mediation which is the *ego*, thus severely over-repressing basic libidinal needs of the *id*.

<sup>11</sup> See Emiliano Morreale.

<sup>12</sup> See Roman Jakobson.

<sup>13</sup> The tragedy is that today's mass culture is not simply silencing certain experiences (the fact there is no green grass but grey cement), but that it offers a mass of ready made emotional responses and feelings that complicate the situation further. The substitution of concrete facts now happens through the staging of what seem individualized life experiences that are in fact prefabricated elements detached from material conditions. Reality shows function in this way thus producing the paradoxical situation of the barbaric spectacle of contemporary technical society.

<sup>14</sup> Current hegemonic discourse in Italy tends to portray a woman who does not want to be a mother as an incomplete person or as an egoist individual interested only in her career. In TV shows and whenever the opportunity presents itself the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, encourages procreation even when it breaks its moral codes, as in the case of single mothers, as long as these births contribute to the strengthening of a normative (heterosexual/catholic) type of family.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Maria's confrontation with the Intensive Unit Care doctors. Here, as she is informed about the unpredictability of Irene's conditions, Maria claims that the doctors' discourse schizophrenically shifts from the objectivity of scientific data to the imponderable abyss of religious hope for what it cannot determine.

<sup>16</sup> The figure of the magistrate has been criticized by Micaela Veronesi.

<sup>17</sup> Shot with the usual high angle the scene recapitulates, in fact, the takes portraying the Nursery with its similar incongruity between a mechanical protection of life and life itself.

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