Title: Blue-Haired-Girl Mnemonic: Italian Sci-Fi *Nirvana*

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 2 (2015)

Author: Roberta Tabanelli, University of Missouri-Columbia

Author Bio:
Roberta Tabanelli is Associate Professor of Italian and Film Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her research interests are in Italian contemporary cinema and literature, film studies, cultural studies, transnational cinema, and post-human theories. She has published a book on contemporary Neapolitan cinema*, I 'pori' di Napoli. Il cinema di Mario Martone, Antonio Capuano e Pappi Corsicato* (Longo Editore, 2011) and has co-authored the Film Study Program *Bianco e nero* (Edizioni Farinelli, 2013). Her articles on a number of Italian contemporary writers and filmmakers have been published in *New Cinemas, Studies in European Cinema, Italian Culture, Italica*, and *Annali d'Italianistica*, and in various volumes and collections. She is currently working on a book-length project on Italian transnational cinema.

Abstract:
This article analyzes the science fiction Italian film *Nirvana* (1997) directed by Oscar-winning Gabriele Salvatores. Specifically, Tabanelli proposes a gendered reading of the film focused on the character of Naima, a female hacker with blue hair and an implant in her forehead. The author claims that *Nirvana*'s closing scene, and in particular the last photogram, by re-configuring the characters' roles in the story, subvert the diegetic and ideological truth that the audience has believed throughout the film, until that final moment. Her interpretation of *Nirvana*'s finale assigns Naima a leading role, transforming her into a powerful female model whose posthumanity is central to the creation of her subversive subjectivity.

Blue-Haired-Girl Mnemonic: Italian Sci-Fi *Nirvana*
ROBERTA TABANELLI

> "Images don't see, You're wrong, images see
> with the eyes of those who see them."
> José Saramago, *Blindness*[1]

Introduction

This article analyzes the science fiction Italian film *Nirvana* (1997) directed by Oscar-winning Gabriele Salvatores.[2] Specifically, I will offer a gendered reading of the film focused on the character of Naima, a female hacker with blue hair and an implant in her forehead. Scholarly publications on *Nirvana*, both in Italian and in English, have offered insightful readings of the film's themes but have not much investigated the representation of Naima.[3] My goal with this article is to elaborate on the empowering possibility that *Nirvana*'s closing scene, and in particular the last photogram, give to Naima. In my reading, which offers an alternative diegetic and ideological truth to what the audience has believed throughout the film, Naima assumes a leading role and becomes a powerful female model in the usually male-centered technological world of cyberpunk narratives.

  Nirvana is Gabriele Salvatores's eighth feature film. Although different in subjects, genres and tones, Salvatores's films often deal with a journey and with the ideas of change and survival. They usually open with the sudden displacement (spatial, temporal, geographic, or situational) of the (male) protagonist, who, after leaving his ordinary and known context, reaches an elsewhere that is simultaneously fascinating and uneasy.[4] *Nirvana*'s excursion into science fiction is an alternative exploration of these tropes. As a matter of fact, the Buddhist philosophy of *nirvana* that gives title to the film revolves around the necessity of a cycle of transformations in order to achieve a happy, enlightened state of being.

  For imagery and motifs, *Nirvana* draws on the science fiction sub-genre of cyberpunk.[5] Originated in literature, with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) as the landmark of the genre,

---

[1] José Saramago, *Blindness*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997), 317.

[2] This article is a revised version of a paper with the same title delivered at 33rd Annual Film & Literature Conference, Tallahassee, FL, 2008. My analysis is based on the Italian DVD version of the film. All translations of quotes from the original Italian are mine.

[3] Articles and book chapters on *Nirvana* include Anthony Cristiano, "A Virtual Revisitation of The Relationship Between Creature and Creator in Gabriele Salvatores' *Nirvana*," *Italica* 83, no. 3-4 (2006): 583-595; William Hope, "The Cinema of Gabriele Salvatores: The Discreet Alienation of the Bourgeoisie," *Studies in European Cinema* 5, no. 1 (2008): 185-195; Luca Malavasi, *Gabriele Salvatores* (Milano: Il Castoro Cinema, 2004), 103-112; Rossana Maule, *Beyond Auteurism. New Directions in Authorial Film Practice in France, Italy and Spain since the 1980s* (Chicago: Intellect, 2008), 109-132; Fulvio Orsitto, "*Nirvana* di Gabriele Salvatores: tra Spaghetti-Sci-Fi e cinema d'autore," *NeMLA Italian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2007): 65-84; Paolo Russo, "Body vs Technology? Myths and Identity in Gabriele Salvatores' *Nirvana*," in *Italy on Screen. National Identity and Italian Imaginary*, ed. Lucy Bolton and Christina Siggers Manson (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 186-200.

[4] See Gianni Canova, *Commedia e anti-commedia nel cinema italiano contemporaneo* (Milan: Editoriale Modo, 1999), 109.

[5] For an overview of early developments of cyberpunk in Italy, see Antonio Caronia, "Digito ergo sum," *Virtual*, no. 1, September 1993. While numerous writers have produced cyberpunk fiction in Italy (including Alessandra C, Francesco Arca, Andrea Barsacchi, Giovanni De Matteo, Motor, Oscar Marchisio, Guido Mascagni, Stefano Massaron, Roberto Perego, Massimo Pietroselli, Dario Tonani, Nicoletta Vallorani, and Alessandro Vietti), cinematic incursions into the territories of cyberpunk are sparse. In addition to *Nirvana*, other Italian productions of which I am aware are *Cyborg – Il guerriero d'acciaio (Cy Warrior: Special Combat Unit*, De Rossi, 1989), *Shocking Dark (Terminator II)* (Mattei, aka Vincent Dawn, 1989), the independent short R.O.A.C.H. (Loreni, 2011), and the experimental short films by Mariano Equizzi, *Syrena* (1998), *AgentZ* (2000), and *R.A.C.H.E.* (2015). Incidentally, *R.A.C.H.E.* is based on the novels of the most famous Italian science fiction writer, Valerio Evangelisti.

cyberpunk narratives generally display dystopian visions of a corporate or governmental controlled near future populated with cyborgs, sentient programs, and oppressed, marginalized figures who inhabit a degraded and sprawling outskirt of a megalopolis. Political in its essence, cyberpunk also questions the limits of what means to be human and how technology alters the human condition. At the center of cyberpunk fiction is the struggle to access and subvert information. This hacking act is usually performed not as a collective upheaval but as the expression of an individual. In the cyberpunk universe, gender is often "fluid and ambiguous, since many characters choose to perform, define, or change their identities through technological means."[6] Naima is a product of that cyberpunk negotiation with gender; however, she also transcends some of the genre's typical tropes (e.g., role-reversals into the opposite sex, existential conflict, misogyny, etc.), showcasing a unique blend of femininity and feminism, control and generosity, domination and surrender.

My analysis of Naima's subversive subjectivity has been inspired by theories of the posthuman as elaborated, among others, by Roberto Marchesini, Robert Pepperell, and Mario Perniola, by the works of Antonio Caronia (a forerunner, in Italy, of the discussion on posthumanism and on the cyberpunk phenomenon), and by discourses that examine the interconnections between technology, feminism, and the female body, such as cyberfeminism and the works by Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. I will also argue that Naima's female posthumanity offers a valid model of subversion of the cinematic scopic pleasure that Laura Mulvey famously discussed in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."[7] In particular, with this article, I aim to continue my study of posthumanity in female characters that I presented in two essays I wrote in 2008 and 2010 on Italian contemporary writers Simona Vinci and Laura Pugno.[8] The posthuman approach in which I am interested is the "corporeal semiotics" (*semiotica corporale*)[9] that derives from body modifications, both voluntary and genetically induced. It aligns with the "synthesis with external reality"[10] that Italian philosopher Roberto Marchesini, in the Foreword to a recent collection of essays on humanity and posthumantiy in modern Italian literature and film, has called "mimesis." Mimesis, according to Marchesini, is what regulates the liminal interpenetration between human flesh and "other" by providing "access to a new existential dimension, a form of being that changes in both an ontological and an epistemological sense."[11] In my two essays herein referenced, I argued that the "elective alterity"[12] resulting from posthuman mutations/modifications endow the (post)bodies of the female fictional characters with empowering subjectivity able to defy the male universe. Similarly, in Gabriele Salvatores's *Nirvana*, the cyber body of Naima will be revealed as the "machinery" in control of the film's narrative.

---

[6] David S. Heineman, "Cyberpunk,"in *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media,* ed. Mary Kosut (Thousands Oak, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 56.

[7] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 198-209.

[8] Roberta Tabanelli, "Il post-umano (femmineo) di Simona Vinci," *Annali d'Italianistica* 26 (2008): 379-88, and Roberta Tabanelli, "Al di là del corpo: la narrativa postumana di Laura Pugno," *Italian Culture* 28, no. 1 (2010): 3-20. These two essays provide additional bibliographical references on feminism and Body Art that also inspired my discourse on posthumanity. For the posthuman in Pugno's 2007 novel *Sirene* (Sirens), see also Robert Rushing, "Sirens without Us: The Future after Humanity," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011, accessed June 7, 2015, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cc3b56b, and Valentina Fulginiti, "The Postapocalyptic Cookbook: Animality, Posthumanism, and Meat in Laura Pugno and Wu Ming," in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, ed. Deborah Amberson and Elena Past (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 159-177.

[9] Tabanelli, "Al di là del corpo: la narrativa postumana di Laura Pugno," 5-6.

[10] Roberto Marchesini, "Mimesis. The Heterospecific as Ontopoietic Epiphany," in *Thinking Italian Animals* (cit.), xiii-xxxvi.

[11] Marchesini, "Mimesis," xv.

[12] Ibid., xxviii.

Nirvana: A mind game

Three days before Christmas, in an undetermined near future in a chaotic, colorful megalopolis known as the *Agglomerati Nord*, the Northern Agglomerations, multinational company Okosama Starr is advertising their new virtual reality game "Nirvana," which will be mass-marketed for the holidays. The game will play directly into the player's mind, an off-screen advertisement voice announces at the beginning of the film. The game's designer, Jimi, is testing the product before consigning it to his bosses at Okosama Starr when he finds out that a virus has infected the game's hero, Solo, transforming him into a sentient being. If his name may be a tribute to Harrison Ford's character in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), it is the Italian meaning of *solo*, as lonely or alone, that transpires from his virtual life. Suddenly endowed with "a consciousness of his existence within a violent virtual world,"[13] Solo asks his creator to erase the game before it gets launched. Bored with his privileged but reclusive existence as a virtual maker and still suffering for the departure of his girlfriend, Lisa, a year earlier, Jimi feels sympathetic with Solo's plight and agrees to terminate him. He needs to find a powerful virus capable of breaking into the corporation's system where the hard copy of "Nirvana" is stored. He knows that he can only find such a virus in the Agglomerations' multiethnic, dangerous outskirts, where the most talented hackers hide. In his picaresque odyssey through the sprawling sectors of Marrakesh and Bombay City, Jimi finds Joystick and Naima. They are cyborg incarnations of the posthuman era that mandates the hybridization between organic and technological, metal and flesh. A former friend of Lisa, Joystick, as his nickname suggests,[14] used to be a fantastic "angel" who flew over corporations' circuits but stopped after he saw his best friend being "fried." He is almost blind because of obsolete, black-and-white optical micro-cameras implanted to replace his eyes, which he sold to organ merchants. Joystick suggests to Jimi to go find Naima, the best techno-pirate in the Agglomerations, who has a portal in her forehand through which she can read any type of digital data. In order to install her cranial computer, she had to erase most of her memory. "This way, I can understand machines better," she tells Jimi. In exchange for their help, Jimi reveals that once they hack Okosama's central system, they will also have access to the corporation's bank account. Joystick gladly realizes that he will be able to buy the new needed color eye-cameras with that money. In Bombay City, the three partners eventually find the virus. Here Jimi also finds tracks of his former girlfriend, whom, he now discovers, had died a few months earlier. The city's spiritual leader gives Jimi an Ayurvedic microchip, as the Swami calls it, containing Lisa's memories. Later Jimi will ask Naima to load the neural chip into her brain socket and access Lisa's past. Finally, in the Chelsea Hotel room 717, Jimi, Joystick, and Naima are ready to ride the net inside the Okosama corporate system and delete Nirvana's prototype. Joystick and Naima leave the room before Jimi has completed his "flight" so that they would not be caught. At the final click of the mouse that cancels Solo and the mind-game "Nirvana," the yakuza members who have been chasing Jimi on behalf of Okosama Starr are ready to enter the room. Jimi holds a gun and when he shoots, the film (fast) rewinds, crosscutting earlier scenes with close-ups of Naima's blue hair and blue eyes. *Nirvana*'s last frame shows a computer monitor with the inscription, "Naima is on line."[15]

---

[13] Hope, "The Cinema of Gabriele Salvatores," 191.

[14] A joystick is a motion controller peripheral often used in games for flight simulators.

[15] Between Salvatores's seventh fiction film, *Sud* (*South*) (1993) and the making of *Nirvana*, the director worked on the adaptation of Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995). This film has never been produced but some echoes of Ghosh's novel are undeniably present in *Nirvana*.

The diegesis in *Nirvana* is recounted as Jimi's extended flashback. The first image of the film is Lisa's close-up that addresses Jimi from a video she had recorded for him before she left. A fade-out leads to the opening credits; a male voice-over recalls that, "Lisa had left almost a year ago, and I was surfing again in a dark sea." While Jimi continues his self-reflections, the camera advances toward a black hole surrounded by brownish fog. Following the title, "Nirvana," displayed on a black background and a view of snow falling from behind a window, the camera pans to the close-up of a man wearing a virtual reality (VR) helmet. "We haven't started flying yet. Chelsea Hotel room 717, tomorrow is Christmas Eve and I can't believe that everything had begun only two days ago." A fade-out marks the transition from the prologue into the narrative, showing a segment of the videogame of which Solo is the protagonist.

Throughout the film, the videogame repeatedly crosscuts with *Nirvana*'s main story. In the intertwining between the two worlds, Jimi's quest comes to mimic his virtual character's existence. Solo, each time he "re-lives" in the game sequence, has to figure out how to avoid getting killed so that he could progress further into the plot. Similarly, Jimi, in order to advance towards his final goal, has to escape from various deadly threads, such as the yakuza members sent by his multinational company or the organ merchants who chase him in the alleys of Bombay City. Each sector of the Agglomerations' sprawl displays identifiable visual features (which are clearly *Blade Runner*-inspired) and is crowded, foreign, and dangerous, like the Shangaitown of Solo's game. In their "advancement" from Marrakesh to Bombay City, Jimi and his two friends find additional information and increased complexity, like in the subsequent levels of a videogame. The hotel room, with the jacked-in Jimi, intermittently reoccurs in the film; however, like in a videogame where we do not know what will happen in the next level until we reach it, we are not shown Joystick and Naima until Jimi meets them in his enacted flashback.[16]

Jimi's and Solo's adventures originate and multiply from centripetal, matryoshka-like structures. Jimi's journey started in the hotel *Al-Rashid* in Marrakesh, where he met Joystick. The hotel name recalls the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid, in *The Arabian Nights*, a well-known ancient narrative generator in which stories develop in a frame mechanism, one surging from within the preceding narration.[17] This capsuled construction is also how a videogame develops. In Solo's virtual world, the crossroads of wires from where the videogame stories begin and eventually terminate are hidden in a cupboard, significantly a closed container, which Jimi reveals to Solo so that he could convince the prostitute he is repeatedly visiting, Maria, of their virtual existences.

Jimi seems unable to live beyond the framing possibilities of the VR universes he creates. "It is like you entrapped me in one of your worlds," his former girlfriend Lisa laments in her video-message. In the very first image of the film, Lisa's close-up is so blown up that all we see is a bunch of little squares moving on the screen until the camera finds the correct focus. The exaggerated pixels of Lisa's face highlight her existence as a generated simulacrum, a virtual fiction imprisoned in Jimi's head. "What am I doing here? […] What does Lisa do here?" she wonders in the opening video fragment. In cyberspace, "our embodied subjectivity […] [has] been replaced by a 'terminal' identity constructed on or in the screen."[18] Lisa is in fact Jimi's figment. While he is flying over the central databank of Okosama Starr, the software generates "devils," simulacra that are dug out of Jimi's memory with the function to distract him from gaining access to the company's heart. When

---

[16] In fact, we have a hint of Joystick and Naima's presence in the hotel: we first see a blurred man in the background and, in a later scene, a woman's hands typing on a keyboard. However, we are not shown their faces until Jimi meets them in his recounting.

[17] The connection between the hotel in Marrakesh and *The Arabian Nights* is suggested in Malavasi, *Gabriele Salvatores*, 111. The story from *The Arabian Nights* with caliph al-Rashid is "The Tale of the Three Apples."

[18] Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 8.

Jimi is lingering too long with Lisa's cyber figure, Naima intervenes by getting access to Lisa's memory download and reveals Lisa's side of the story. What Jimi had believed does not match his ex girlfriend's actual, concealed thoughts that Naima expresses.

Naima: Blue-haired-girl mnemonic

Naima's brain data-jack is one type of the numerous technological enhancements (e.g., implants, prosthetics, bodily and cybernetic augmentations, etc.) that are widespread in cyberpunk narrations. Naima is a posthuman creature, for which anatomy is no longer a biological destiny but a conscious choice, a planned modification. Because of her brain implant, Naima cannot remember any event older than a year. With no recollection of her-story, hence, of her subjectivity, Naima has become the machine, a cybernetic organism in which mind, body, and tool are blurred. As Donna Haraway explains,

> It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices. […] Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. […] The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.[19]

According to Haraway, the fusion of organic and technological allows the cyborg to overcome the Cartesian dualisms that have traditionally defined humanity: mind/body, self/other, cultural/natural, male/female, subject/object, maker/made, etc. Being human necessarily excludes and repudiates the "other" (a woman cannot be a man, organic is not technological, and so forth). Being posthuman, instead, integrates duality within the same organism, and forges a utopian, irreverent new being. In the contamination between her flesh and a hi-tech apparatus, between her female body and the (phallic) penetration of the needle-shaped crystal microchip of Lisa's memories, Naima is a sibling of Haraway's cyborg.

Figure 1 – Naima's microchip.[20]

---

[19] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 35-38.
[20] Screenshot from *Nirvana*. Directed by Gabriele Salvatores, produced by Vittorio Cecchi Gori/Maurizio Totti. This image is reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion without any commercial purpose.

Naima is a machine; however, her technological construction has not suppressed her sensual body. In opposition to Lisa, who is re-presented as a memory "imprisoned" in a photograph beyond a broken glass that Jimi still keeps on his desk, Naima, who has no past, is total presence and her physical body is an intrinsic part of her being. Her body is worn out after three sleepless days driving her truck on the highways and is exposed in its physical exhaustion while her friends drag her through the alleys of Bombay City. In a cyber-postfeminist approach, in which the female cyborg is endowed with "feminine excess" and "blends sexuality with assertiveness, hyperfeminine characteristics with tough-girl strength,"[21] Naima fully displays her femaleness. She wears a miniskirt that magnifies her thin, long legs and we see her breasts when she undresses before kissing Jimi on the bed. (However, the erotic encounter occurs off screen, as it is often the case in Salvatores's cinema). The morning after, she points out to Jimi that although she now has Lisa's memories implanted in her head, he had made love to her (body) and not to Lisa. Naima confesses that she knows she had sex before but she does not remember with whom. Nonetheless, contrary to Solo, for whom each erasure within the game initiates a painful reincarnation of electric Samsara (the Hinduist/Buddhist cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth), Naima's new embodiment following each copulation enables her to enjoy the present freely and fully, blessed with the state of delight that Eastern philosophies believe to be in the present moment. She is a lone hacker, as cyberpunk iconography requires, but without the negative existentialism that often plagues cyberpunk characters.

Naima incarnates the possibility of embodied existence in the posthuman era that Sherryl Vint envisions as a renewed solution against cyber isolation and alienation: "Embodied posthumanism has the power to expand our capacity for responsibility and our connections with others. […] [It] seeks to be responsible for the social consequences of the worlds it creates."[22] In this spirit, Naima accepts to be involved in Jimi's mission because she believes in karma yoga, the practice of selfless service, or, as she defines it, the ability to do everything the best we can, even if it seems impossible. Idealistic and self-less, after she and Joystick have taken their parts from the account deposit of Okosama Starr, Naima proposes to distribute what is left to the city's population. Compassionate and generous, playful and ironic (as seen, in particular, in her hacking act of TV news on the truck), she exploits technology ethically, as Rosi Braidotti recommends women should do: "The most effective strategy remains for women to use technology in order to disengage our collective imagination from the phallus and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, ironic femininity and systematic violence."[23] Naima is the feminine but active counterpart of Jimi. By assuming ethical responsibility towards Solo and deciding to prevent his creature's commodification and his perpetual cycles of death within the game, Jimi pursues an ideology of artistic freedom.[24] Whereas for him it is a new pathway, Naima has been long feeding on the creative politics that cyberpunks usually embrace, as Timothy Leary describes:

> Cyperpunks are the inventors, innovative writers, techno-frontier artists, risk-taking film directors, icon-shifting composers, stand-up comedians, expressionist artists, free agent scientists, techno-creatives, computer visionaries, elegant hackers, bit-blithing Prolog adepts,

---

[21] Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2009), 149-150.

[22] Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, 26, 182. Before Vint, Rosi Braidotti elaborated on the "positive virtualities" of a "concretely embodied and embedded reading of the subject" in *Metamorphoses: Toward a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 211.

[23] Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," in *Feminisms*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 527.

[24] See Hope, "The Cinema of Gabriele Salvatores," 190.

> special effectives, cognitive dissidents, video wizards, neurological test pilots, media explorers—
> all of those who boldly package and steer ideas out there where no thoughts have gone before.[25]

Naima is an independent, bright, positive woman who counterbalances the virile friendship commonly at the core of Salvatores's films, of which the bonding between Jimi and Solo is another expression. Naima's identity as a cyborg fuses the cold machine (even Lisa's memories are just data, she says) with her sensual body; in her mind, the absence of mnemonic past mends with karmic intentions. As a cyborg, she has the "role of bridging powers between virtual and 'real' worlds,"[26] between life and death (through the machine in her brain, she becomes the messenger of deceased Lisa's emotions). Transient between sensory worlds, with a name that anagrams into *anima*, the Italian for "soul," Naima functions as counterpart to Joystick, Solo, Lisa, Maria, and eventually Jimi. The binary combinations that will emerge by associating Naima to each of the other characters raise important questions on the epistemology of being in the posthuman era.

First, the mirroring of Naima-without memory with Joystick-without eyes unveils the dissolution of classical subjectivity in the incapability of "re-cognizing" oneself and the world if deprived of remembrance and gaze. Secondly, the association Naima/Solo highlights the inescapable destiny of humanity: mortality. Solo, entrapped within the sophism of a life without (permanent) death, craves what exists in Naima's cyber embodiment. He wants to be deleted so that he could escape his "disembodied immortality," to use Katherine Hayles's words, and embrace and celebrate "finitude as a condition of human being."[27] Finally, the pairings between Naima and Maria and Naima and Lisa expose the end of interpersonal intimacy. Maria, the virtual prostitute who "returns" identical at each rebooting of the game, Lisa, the ex girlfriend who exists in the frozen present of recorded memories, and Naima, the blue-haired cyborg who cannot recall previous lovers or love-making, are all beings without a becoming, whose relationships with the male other (Solo and Jimi) cannot be constructed on progressive routine.

Posthumanity, without memories, without eyes, (im)mortal, and loveless, however, acquires an empowering status when embodied in the female cybernetic machine. As cyber-constructions (Maria is a VR character, Lisa exists via a recorded video and a microchip, and Naima is a cyborg), the three "nirvana girls" have absorbed the hierarchies of the binary world in Haraway's terms. Their female posthumanity is no longer a "devalorised Other"[28] that exists in linguistic derivations—wo-man, hu-man, etc. Rather, they are self-sufficient beings who have been freed from the orthodoxy of heterosexual romanticism: Lisa had left Jimi, Maria is a prostitute, and Naima has no love memories. The lines from the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* that the Australian collective VNS Matrix proposed in 1991, "We are the virus of the new world disorder rupturing the symbolic from within,"[29] offer an *apropos* description of *Nirvana*'s female triad. Outside, a virus affected the mind-game "Nirvana" and a cybernetic infection could have caused the disruption of the abnormally pixeled close-up of Lisa. Inside, the virus-manager Naima directs the rupture of the infected "symbolic order" (Naima is the one who is working on the keyboard and is manipulating the virus they are using to distract the system while Jimi is flying). As the film's last frame reveals, Naima may indeed be the true manipulator, the ultimate player.

---

25 Timothy Leary, *Cyperpunks, Cyberfreedom. Change Reality Screens* (Oakland, CA: Ronjin Publishing, 2008), 134.

26 Cristiano, "A Virtual Revisitation of the Relationship Between Creature and Creator," 83.

27 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

28 Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," 527.

29 VNS Matrix, *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, accessed January 23, 2015, http://www.sterneck.net/cyber/vns-matrix/index.php. For an overview on cyberfeminism, see Alex Galloway, "A Report of Cyberfeminism," *Switch. Electronic Gender: Art at the Interstice*, accessed January 23, 2015, http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v4n1/alex.html.

Nirvana's closing photogram shows a computer monitor with the entry, "Naima is on line." This ending completely subverts the film's logic, suggesting that *Nirvana*'s storyline could have been the virtual game of Naima-the-player. This hypothesis is further validated by an earlier event in the film in which the same imprint was specifically connected to Naima. She has just met Joystick and Jimi, they are travelling on the highways in Naima's techno-truck, and she is hacking into television news. When she logs off, she resets the screen to "Naima is on line." *Nirvana*'s final "matrix," implying that the film could have been Naima's mind-game, adds complexity to the film's central issue of the blurring borders of identities between creator and creature, game and player, viewer and character, sign and referent. The referent "Nirvana" (Salvatores's film or the videogame) eventually turns into a sign. When Jimi finally reaches the heart of Okosama Starr, he sees the word "Nirvana" written with white chalk on a school's blackboard. By erasing this sign on the board, Jimi deletes the VR images he had created. The confusion, or superimposition, in Salvatores's film of "simulacra and simulations," to borrow Baudrillard's famous pairing, was made explicit in a conversation between Solo and Maria in the second level of the game. They are in a car; Solo is driving and trying to convince her of their virtual existences. Maria is perplexed and skeptic, and her reply unveils the fluidity of reality: "Let's admit we are in a game. According to your argument, then, why couldn't they be in a game, too?" In fact, they are: all puppets in Naima's digital hands.

Naima's role as the player adds a fifth level to *Nirvana*'s nested storytelling, which so far has been developing with four narrations intersecting on different temporal planes. The first level is the present in the Chelsea Hotel, with Jimi's voice-over commenting on the film's events or poetically rumbling on existential themes. The second level is the quest for a virus in the recent past (three days earlier). The two other levels are the videogame, which appears both in the present and in the flashback, and Lisa's refracted story via the video-message and the Ayurvedic microchip. Naima's filament, which links the cohesive multiplicity of *Nirvana*'s cyber universe, is the "yarn" in Sadie Plant's metaphor of the digital network, "neither metaphorical nor literal, but quite simply material, a gathering of threads which twist and turn through the history of computing technology, the science and arts."[30] *Nirvana*'s final *coup de théâtre* subverts the logic of filmic reception (the spectator now faces the possibility of an alternative narrative) and simultaneously surpasses the misogyny that often transpires in cyberpunk narrations:[31] the powerful orchestrator of *Nirvana*'s storyline is not the male protagonist, Jimi, as it would appear on the surface, but it is the female techno-genius, Naima. In their overview of cyber-feminism, Genz and Brabon suggest that, "[t]aking into account the paradoxical and at times conflicting images of the cyborg, it seems to readily align itself with the postfeminist woman, who (in her most positive manifestations) conforms to *and* reworks patriarchal scripts from behind the mask of heteronormative, sexualized femininity."[32] The technologically savant but sensually feminine Naima embodies this subversive potential of the female cyborg.

Surprisingly, essays on and reviews of Salvatores's film have not investigated—to the best of my knowledge—the film's coda. If the analyst mentions it, it is usually not in connection with Naima. One reviewer suggests that Jimi is rewinding his own memories: "Do his fast-rewinding memories mean that he has become like Naima, a person with no past? That his existence has been absorbed by the Okasama Starr databank? […] That he has become another Solo, a videogame character? That Solo was, like Jimi, a man with flesh and bones?"[33] Another critic claims that when "Solo dies, also the gaze dies."[34] Emily Auger, in her book on the tech-noir film, argues that "Jimi's

---

[30] Sadie Plant, *Zeroes + Ones. Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 12.

[31] On misogyny in cyberpunk, see Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, 102-123.

[32] Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, 150. Emphasis (italics) is in the original.

[33] Marco Lombardi, "Nirvana," *Film* no. 26 (1997): 9.

[34] Malavasi, *Gabriele Salvatores*, 111-112.

return to an earlier point in the story variously suggests that he may be on a more intense marijuana trip than he thought; be a player in someone's else game […], he is simply confused into thinking something has happened that has not."[35] Only Italian film critic Orio Menoni seems to be in line with my hypothesis; nonetheless, he does not elaborate: "Jimi's life reboots in fast rewind, at Naima's disposal, who's on line, ready to re-launch it. It is Naima's last image, who is simultaneously character and maker of the world she has created: her eye—an eye looking at a monitor—but also the eye of God."[36] Although Menoni's understanding of "the eye of God" is up for debate, the "eye" is definitely a crucial element in Salvatores's film. Joystick's blurry, black-and-white point-of-view shots through his eye-cameras that appear a few times in the film and Naima's (final) blue eye stand at the opposite side of the spectrum. Their contraposition completes the centripetal convergence of *Nirvana*'s "players" towards Naima in the system of binary pairings that I have discussed earlier (in which Naima functions as counterpart of the other characters).

Lisa   Maria

Joystick   NAIMA   Joystick

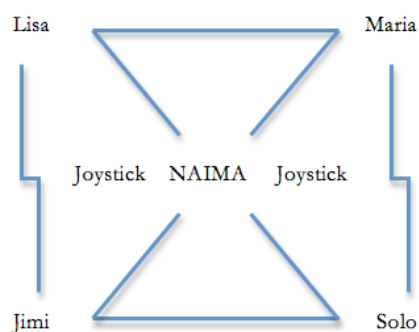Jimi   Solo

Figure 2. Binary pairings between the characters and their centripetal convergence towards Naima.

Nirvana presents a vision-centered universe of which Naima's eye in the film's closing scene is the ultimate synecdoche. Following Jimi's gunshot, a few close-ups of Naima's blue hair and blue eyes intercut with various images from the film. The interweaving of the eye with a filmmaking technique (rewinding) suggests a self-referential metaphor in which the gaze becomes the camera beyond the screen, the cinematic apparatus that rewinds to supervise the montage. The montage of Naima's eye recalls a similar editing choice in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1925), in which, about halfway into the film, a woman's eye repeatedly intercuts with shots of the city. The visual echo that the viewer may perceive between Vertov's film and *Nirvana*'s closing scene adds a powerful meta-reference for Naima-the-director.

      Similar to the Indian virus that Naima is manipulating to hack Okosama Starr and that is continuously changing form in order to confuse the system, Naima's posthuman identity is mutant. Fictional character. Female cyborg. Techno-pirate. VR player. "Zeroes and ones" filling in digital gaps.[37] The eye of the camera. From gazed (at) to gazer. Naima's shifting role from the object of the male gaze—as an attractive actress/an undressed Naima in front of Jimi—to the *deus ex machina* of *Nirvana*'s visions is the cyber, empowering answer to Laura Mulvey's influential argument on "visual pleasure and narrative cinema." Mulvey claimed that mainstream cinema suffered from a "paradox

---

[35] Emily Auger, *Tech-Noir Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 384.
[36] Orio Menoni, "Nirvana," *Segnocinema*, no. 84 (1997): 66.
[37] The reference is to Plant's eponymous book, *Zeroes + Ones*.

of phallocentrism,"[38] in that the cinematic gazes (the camera, the characters looking at one another, and the spectator) are predominantly male. Within the scopophilic regime of cinema, Mulvey argues, female characters are passive, erotic subjects to be looked at but without impact on the narrative. As I have written elsewhere, Mulvey's work,

> set the coordinates for the politics of looking in feminist film theory and in women's filmmaking practice. Specifically, Mulvey's argument that the possibility to redirect the predominately male gaze(s) of mainstream cinema is embedded in the cinematic medium is a vital recommendation for all forms of women's counter-cinema, from fiction to documentary. Mulvey's call for a politically charged film that challenges the patriarchal language of traditional cinema starts from the aesthetics, in the possibility of redirecting the gazes that define cinema.[39]

Naima, as a female director/player who intrinsically controls the (male) narrative, can be seen as an evolutionary enhancement of Mulvey's suggestions. In embodying the possibility of redirecting the gazes that define cinema, Naima is "the eye in the machine," whose cyborg hybridity between machine and organism, reality and fiction,[40] has disrupted the "ghostly" Cartesian dualism, the male-dominated technological universe, and the scopic pleasure of cinema without denying femininity as part of her female identity. Naima is an ideal post-ocular creature, able to challenge the limits and the dichotomies of posthuman, morphing visions.

Conclusions

In an article that questions the supposedly revolutionary agenda of cyberpunk, Nicola Nixon argues that William Gibson's fiction creates "not only a reassertion of male mastery but a virtual celebration of a kind of primal masculinity."[41] Naima's posthumanity subverts this masculine "celebration" by proposing an inwardly feminine and original cyber role. She acquires an empowering status not by adopting masculine roles or by being deliberately unfeminine;[42] she is not "depoliticized and sapped of any revolutionary energy," as Nixon describes two heroines of famous cyberpunk fiction;[43] and she is not a Sprawl desperado affected by destructive existentialism. Naima is an exceptionally talented hacker, confident, compassionate, optimistic, and very feminine; she is progressive and ironic (e.g., what she does to the TV news); she is the "soft" ware (because of her femininity) and the "hard" ware (as cyborg), forging her subjectivity on the corporeal semiotics of self-conscious body modifications. With Naima, the post-gender logic of cyberpunk is undermined by her "posthuman feminism,"[44] which enhances, but does not deny, humanity and gender (leading to what, earlier in this article, I called cyber-postfeminist approach). She is the complex, not fully understandable machine that Robert Pepperell describes in *The Posthuman Manifesto*: "A complex

---

[38] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 198.
[39] Roberta Tabanelli, "An Unstable Body: The Cinema of Antonietta De Lillo," *Studies in European Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2011): 96.
[40] See Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 7.
[41] Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 2 (1992): 231.
[42] For these characteristics in cyberpunk fictions, see Lauraine Leblanc, "Razor Girls: Genre and Gender in Cyberpunk Fiction," *Women and Language* 20, no. 1 (1997): 71-76.
[43] Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied," 222. The two characters are Molly in Gibson's *Johnny Mnemonic* (1981) and *Neuromancer* and Sarah in Walter Jon Williams' *Hardwired* (1986).
[44] This is also how I defined the condition of Laura Pugno's characters (Tabanelli, "Al di là del corpo: la narrativa postumana di Laura Pugno," 6.)

machine is a machine whose workings we do not fully understand or control."[45] She is the hybrid product of a post-ocular era that aims to disrupt pre-ordered systems and visions. "Naima is on line" and she can see you.

<center>*Works Cited*</center>

Amberson, Deborah, and Elena Past, eds. *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film.* New York: Palgrave, 2013.

Auger, Emily. *Tech-Noir Film.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation.* Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Braidotti, Rosi. "Cyberfeminism with a Difference." In *Feminisms*, edited by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, 520-529. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

———. *Metamorphoses: Toward a Materialist Theory of Becoming.* Malden, MA: Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

Canova, Gianni. *Commedia e anti-commedia nel cinema italiano contemporaneo.* Milan: Editoriale Modo, 1999.

Caronia, Antonio. "Digito ergo sum," *Virtual* no. 1 (1993).

———. *Cyberpunk. Istruzioni per l'uso.* Rome: Stampa Alternativa, 1995.

———. *Il corpo virtuale. Dal corpo robotizzato al corpo disseminato nelle reti.* Padua: Franco Muzzio Editore, 1996.

———. *Il cyborg. Saggio sull'uomo artificiale.* Milan: Shake, 2001.

Cristiano, Anthony. "A Virtual Revisitation of the Relationship between Creature and Creator in Gabriele Salvatores' *Nirvana.*" *Italica* 83, no. 3-4 (2006): 583-595.

Fulginiti, Valentina. "The Postapocalyptic Cookbook: Animality, Posthumanism, and Meat in Laura Pugno and Wu Ming." In *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, edited by Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, 159-177.

Galloway, Alex. "A Report of Cyberfeminism," *Switch:Electronic Gender: Art at the Interstice.* Accessed January 23, 2015. http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v4n1/alex.html.

Genz, Stéphanie, and Benjamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." In *The Haraway Reader*, 7-46. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Heineman, David S. "Cyberpunk." In *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*, edited by Mary Kosut, 56-57. Thousands Oak, CA: Sage Publications, 2012.

Hope, William. "The Cinema of Gabriele Salvatores: The Discreet Alienation of the Bourgeoisie." *Studies in European Cinema* 5, no. 1 (2008): 185-195.

Leary, Timothy. *Cyberpunks, Cyberfreedom: Change Reality Screens.* Oakland, CA: Ronin Publishing, 2008.

Leblanc, Lauraine. "Razor Girls: Genre and Gender in Cyberpunk Fiction." *Women and Language* 20, no. 1 (1997): 71-76.

Lombardi, Marco. "Nirvana," *Film* no. 26 (1997): 8-10.

Malavasi, Luca. *Gabriele Salvatores.* Milan: Il Castoro Cinema, 2004.

Marchesini, Roberto. *Post-human. Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza.* Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.

---

[45] Robert Pepperell, "General Statements," in *The Posthuman Manifesto*, accessed May 14, 2014, http://www.robertpepperell.com/Posthum/gener.htm.

———. "Mimesis. The Heterospecific as Ontopoietic Epiphany." In *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, edited by Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, xiii-xxxvi.

Maule, Rosanna. *Beyond Auteurism. New Directions in Authorial Film Practices in France, Italy and Spain since the 1980s.* Bristol, UK, and Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2008.

Menoni, Orio. "Nirvana," *Segnocinema*, no. 84 (1997): 65-67.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [1975]. In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Edited by Philip Rosen, 198-209. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Nixon, Nicola. "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 2 (1992): 219-235.

Orsitto, Fulvio. "*Nirvana* di Gabriele Salvatores: tra Spaghetti-Sci-Fi e cinema d'autore," *NeMLA Italian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2007): 65-84.

Pepperell, Robert. "The Posthuman Manifesto." In *The Post-Human Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*, 180-197. Oxford: Intellect Books, 2003.

Perniola, Mario. *Il sex-appeal dell'inorganico.* Turin: Einaudi, 1994.

Plant, Sadie. *Zeroes + Ones. Digital Women + The New Technoculture.* New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Rushing, Robert. "Sirens without Us: The Future after Humanity." *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011. Accessed May 10, 2015. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cc3b56b.

Russo, Paolo. "Body vs Technology? Myths and Identity in Gabriele Salvatores's *Nirvana*." In *Italy on Screen. National Identity and Italian Imaginary,* Edited by Lucy Bolton and Christina Siggers Manson, 186-200. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010.

Saramago, José. *Blindness.* Translated by Giovanni Pontiero. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997.

Tabanelli, Roberta. "Il post-umano (femmineo) di Simona Vinci." *Annali d'Italianistica* 26 (2008): 379-388.

———. "Al di là del corpo: la narrativa postumana di Laura Pugno." *Italian Culture* 28, no. 1 (2010): 3-20.

———. "An Unstable Body: The Cinema of Antonietta De Lillo." *Studies in European Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2011): 89-100.

Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

VNS Matrix. *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century.* Accessed January 23, 2015. http://www.sterneck.net/cyber/vns-matrix/index.php.

Filmography

Nirvana. Directed by Gabriele Salvatores. 1997. Firenze: Cecchi Gori Home Video, 2000. DVD. Region 1.

———. Directed by Gabriele Salvatores. 1997. Burbank, Ca: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD. Region 2.