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*Una famiglia*. Directed by Sebastiano Riso. Screenplay by Andrea Cedrola, Stefano Grasso and Sebastiano Riso. Indiana Production and Rai Cinema, 2017. 97 minutes.

Italy is a nation devoted to the myth of motherhood. This devotion is profound: Adalgisa Giorgio writes that in Italy “[w]omanhood has been erased by motherhood.”<sup>1</sup> But Italy is also experiencing a profound crisis of motherhood, to which contemporary Italian films bear witness. Indeed, as investigated by Michelle Tarnopolsky in her compelling critical inquiry on the “dark heart of motherhood in Italy,”<sup>2</sup> the topic of a mother in crisis is a recurring trope in present-day Italian cinema. Sebastiano Riso, whose debut film—*Più buio di mezzanotte / Darker than Midnight* (2014)—dealt with queer identities, contributes to the narrative of the crisis of motherhood in his 2017 feature, *Una famiglia / A Family* (2017). The generic title seems to disclose an absent maternity. The opening scene, shot in the Roman subway, shows a couple (Micaela Ramazzotti and Patrick Bruel), a nervous woman and her detached male companion, distractedly surveying the faces of passengers on a crowded train. Maria suddenly fixes her gaze on two children riding with their parents. The children get off the train, and on a whim, Maria, too, exits to follow them. She longs for children but, as the spectator later discovers, *Una famiglia* is not a typical story of maternal desire. Riso’s film depicts procreation on an “industrial” scale. In brief, through a network of shady mediators and complacent doctors, needy couples exchange their newborns for pay. Theirs is not a *folie a deux*, an *amour fou*, but an enterprise that capitalizes on a woman’s body and her fertility. It is a dark story in a dark environment in which the color palette transitions from grey to brown, to black, and, finally, to total obscurity. The camera focuses on interiors with barred windows or exteriors in which the grid of the viaducts of the suspended Roman *sopraelevata* highway traps the city and the film’s protagonists in cement and pillars.

The name of the female protagonist is archetypal: Maria—the Italian Mary—is the quintessential mother of the Catholic faith. Yet Maria and her male counterpart are not religious: she is a lost, codependent woman, attached to her French partner Vincenzo through an extremely physical relationship. *Una famiglia* is punctuated by images of the couple—or Maria—in crisis, oftentimes in front of backgrounds that reveal the director’s sophisticated visual taste. For instance, Riso captures them in front of a wall of scratched posters that resembles Mimmo Rotella’s *decollages* and, later, frames Maria on the edge of her bathtub like an abstract Mapplethorpe. Additionally, in a scene during which Maria examines her newly inserted IUD, her reflection—evocative of a pale Mary Magdalene in a modern Georges de La Tour painting—appears in an oval mirror. Lastly, when Vincenzo discovers the secret contraceptive device, Riso spares the film viewer the anatomical display of horror of the forced IUD extraction, choosing instead to capture, via a tracking shot filmed through an apartment window, the life of a lower-class Roman neighborhood. The camera, panning in a circular motion, records fruit vendors and the interior courtyard of tall, anonymous buildings, while Vincenzo’s voice is heard shouting in French, “Why did you lie to me?” Maria, the forgotten one, appears in a reverse-tracking shot at the end of this panning sequence, literally and figuratively bringing to full circle the universal indifference to her plight.

Throughout her pregnancy, Maria becomes increasingly ill, to the extent that one of the couple’s earlier arrangements must be canceled. All the while, a doctor profiting from the aforementioned illegal adoption ring locates a gay couple that wants Maria and Vincenzo’s baby: here the movie begins to follow a different trajectory, one that conveys the subplots of the gay

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<sup>1</sup> Adalgisa Giorgio, *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (New York: Berghahn, 2002), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Tarnopolsky, “The Dark Heart of Motherhood in Italy. Maternal Ambivalence in Contemporary Italian Film,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* 7, 2 (2016): 9-24.

couple and a new love (or better business) interest for Vincenzo. Noteworthy, too, is the subplot of Stella, another lost character and victim of domestic violence, whose mistreatment inevitably recalls, and is intertwined with, the abuse of Maria. One fateful night, when Vincenzo is out with Stella, Maria goes into labor and, in a scene of primal childbirth, ends up delivering her son alone in her apartment. She sleeps with her child until Vincenzo, a sort of *Accattone* (1961) of modern Rome, finds the newborn and brings him to the gay couple. Immediately thereafter, Maria's son is treated like a discarded commodity. Diagnosed by the same doctor that arranged the under-the-table adoption as afflicted with a fatal cardiac malfunction, the infant is refused by the couple, and thereby finds himself another defenseless victim of Vincenzo. Notwithstanding the bleak nature of this situation, a now enlightened Maria actively pursues a happy ending. In a gesture that recalls Anna Magnani's character in *Bellissima* (1951), Maria holds her baby in a halo of light, crying and finally wholly embracing motherhood. This image of Maria bathed in light remedies the gloom of previous scenes, and it transforms the young woman into the living embodiment of a portrait of the Mother and Child.

The tone of the film is highly melodramatic, the pace slow, recreating the real-time malaise of a toxic relationship. Maria's body is the real protagonist of the movie: nurtured, maltreated, staged in sexual scenes dominated by her sadness or Vincenzo's repressed rage. The world of relationships that Riso depicts is one of violence and betrayal, abuse and exploitation. The theme of motherhood is pushed to the extreme, its conversion into a mechanism of capitalist enterprise: when Maria sees one of her deceased children in a funeral chamber, the spectator understands that only through death is this young mother granted the opportunity to see her child. Death and childbirth are enmeshed: the soundtrack is melancholic and somber, the handheld camera records bodies in their intimacy, and the final awakening of Maria constitutes a conclusion to the film that is relatively uplifting, though nonetheless mired in doubt and uncertainty.

The sophisticated visual style applied to this squalid plot of exploitation generates, for the spectator, a heavy-handed dose of melodrama. Maria's childbirth martyrdom recalls Rossellini's *Il miracolo* / *The Miracle* (1948). In that film, the town fool, Nanni (Anna Magnani), ends up atop a mountain where she regains her sanity by giving birth and embracing maternity. In Riso's feature, opting into motherhood similarly reveals itself to be a crucial step in the pursuit of self-realization: the halo of light references both the enlightenment that derives from dawn and Maria's rebirth. It is the happy ending of an otherwise somber story. In this way, the plot seems to hint that the only untainted form of human interaction is the exchange of gazes between a mother and her child: one of the most delicate and moving moments of *Una famiglia* depicts Maria's newborn deeply bonding with the body and the face of his mother. Maria is not the model of Motherhood: she is instead the symptom of motherhood in the age of late capitalism, where even babies are commodities to be sold for profit.

The claustrophobic cinematography and the sensation of stalking through darkness and melancholia accentuate the disenchanting message of precarious maternity put forth by Riso. Even those couples who are willing to pay for a baby seem ruthless in their determination to erase biological mothers and prohibit them from accessing a fulfilling existence. Only the gay couple appears to have an authentic, loving relationship, though they, too, ultimately take advantage of Maria. There is no space for innocence in Riso's world: it is threatened, weak, and heartsick. The message is clear: only a caring mother can save us. A courageous film with extreme touches, encompassing disturbing premises such as domestic violence and black market adoptions, *Una famiglia* resulted in a homophobic attack on the director following its debut in Italy. Yet Riso's sophomore feature is also a film full of nostalgia for a mother-son bond. In frail, fractured families, what remains is the origin, the mother. Not an ideal mother, perhaps, but the only root and means of survival: the first, and, quite possibly the last, solid human relationship.

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