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Author: Ruth Glynn

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Napoli velata. Directed by Ferzan Özpetek. Screenplay by Gianni Romoli, Valia Santella, Ferzan Ozpetek. Italy. Warner Bros. Entertainment Italia, 2017. 113 minutes.

Released in December 2017, Ferzan Özpetek's *Napoli velata/Naples in Veils* confirms the emergence of a new cinematic gaze on Naples intended to rehabilitate the image of the city and celebrate its distinctive cultural practices. Together with the Manetti Bros' *Song 'e Napule / I'm From Naples* (2013) and *Ammore e malavita / Love and Bullets* (2017), Alessandro Rak's *L'arte della felicità / The Art of Happiness* (2013) and Gianni Amelio's *La tenerezza / Tenderness* (2017), *Naples in Veils* rejects the dark hues and bleak hinterland settings of organized crime-focused productions like *Gomorra: La serie* and returns the cinematic gaze to the visual pleasures of the historic center. The result is a lush cinematic love letter to an evocative and mysterious city, extolling the beauty of the labyrinthine streets and Baroque palaces that form the melancholic backdrop to repressed family histories, lost loves and wounded psyches.

The film tells the story of Adriana (Giovanna Mezzogiorno), a forensic pathologist who embarks on a passionate affair with a young man, Andrea (Alessandro Borghi), only to find his desecrated body laid out on her autopsy table (his eyes have been removed). The police investigation arouses Adriana's latent fears and sets in motion a series of sightings of the dead Andrea. When Adriana finally confronts him, the man in question declares himself to be Andrea's long-lost twin brother Luca. Though uncertainty clouds the identity of Andrea-Luca throughout the narrative, an accomplished physical performance by Borghi provides a clear on-screen distinction between the commanding and seductive Andrea and the rather creepy Luca.

The investigation into Andrea's murder intertwines with the traumatic unfolding of Adriana's family history and with a kaleidoscopic repertoire of esoteric Neapolitan cultural practices to present a destabilizing cinematic psychogeography of Naples. For Özpetek, Adriana's mental state and the city of Naples are inextricably linked. As the director observes in the film Pressbook, "entering into Adriana's mind was like exploring a city," and that that city could only be Naples, since it "unveils its mysteries to no one." Thus, while certain events, like the appearance of cryptic numbers on her bathroom mirror, are subsequently rationalized and revealed to be projections of Adriana's delicate psychological state, others retain their mystery. The death of Adriana's uncle Pasquale (Peppe Barra), for instance, remains unresolved and potentially bound up with the illegal trade in archaeological treasures linking him and Andrea to an antiquarian lesbian couple in their social network. The final scenes of the film, set in the Capella Sansevero, not only resurrect the phantom of Luca and return to Adriana the silver eye she had given him as a keepsake but also see Adriana mysteriously disappear, the sound of her footsteps haunting an empty street. The ending thus undermines the rational explanations provided and reasserts the pre-eminence of Naples as a site of unexplained phenomena.

Allusions to vision, veiling, and blindness pervade *Naples in Veils*. The film opens with a flashback to Adriana's childhood: an establishing shot of a helicoid staircase filmed to resemble an eye precedes an extreme close-up of the eyes of the child who witnesses her mother's fatal shooting of her father. In overtly marking its indebtedness to the psychological cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and Dario Argento, the scene alerts us to the complex emotional and psychological drama about to unfold. In the subsequent scene, a private performance of the ancient homosexual fertility ritual of the *figliata dei femminielli* in an upper-middle class milieu closes with the drawing of a veil over the climax of the birth amid the narrator's declaration that "la gente non sopporta troppa verità." In this way, *Naples in Veils* makes explicit its rejection of the realist aesthetic of *Gomorra: La serie* and the New Neapolitan Cinema of the 1990s and questions the ability of the realist gaze to apprehend the

complexities of human experience in Naples. Key to the depiction of Naples as a “madre crudele” (cruel mother) is the unfolding of the psychological wounds carried not only by Adriana but also by her aunt Adele (Anna Bonaiuto), who continues to mourn her lost love, and by the widowed police officer Antonio (Biagio Forestieri), who chips away at Adriana’s psychological defenses, enabling her healing.

Naples in Veils, unique among its peers, positions itself as heritage film and commodifies Naples in accordance with the established terms of the “Made in Italy” brand. The film’s setting, amid recognized heritage sites, tourist destinations, and the rarefied spaces inhabited or frequented by the city’s social and cultural elite, combines with its rich network of allusions to cinema history to signal its address to the international art film audience. Sumptuous tracking shots along the beautifully lit nocturnal streets of the *centro storico* and a sparsely populated Piazza Gesù announce *Naples in Veils*’ adherence to the heritagefilm genre. Its privileged access to landmark sites of historic and cultural significance, including the National Archaeological Museum, the Certosa San Martino, the Cappella San Severo, and the Farmacia degli Incurabili, further supports the generic address. Even the modern settings depicted – Adriana’s minimalist apartment and the city’s metro stations – suggest that contemporary Naples, too, is a work of art. The dearth of long-shot bird’s eye views of the city and the precedence granted to interiors and underground spaces, however, signals that a closer, more intimate encounter is key to understanding Naples.

Equally important to its heritage film status is *Naples in Veils*’ presentation of distinctive Neapolitan cultural practices. Cultural set pieces – e.g., the private performance of the *figliata dei femminielli* and Adriana’s visit to a clairvoyant (scenes highly indebted to Liliana Cavani’s 1981 *La pelle*) – are repackaged as heritage along with the historic artworks showcased. The film pays particular attention to the erotic and esoteric quality of the artistic patrimony and to the art of veiling. Pasquale’s interpretation of the anatomical imagery in the Farmacia degli Incurabili, for example, associates the “veiled” uterus with the mystery of life and pre-empts the allusion to the mystery of death in the final scene’s showcasing of Giuseppe Sanmartino’s extraordinary statue of the *Cristo velato*; this, in turn, evokes the unveiling of Andrea’s body on Adriana’s autopsy table. Also exhibited for the heritage gaze is a wealth of supernatural beliefs and practices firmly rooted in Naples; beyond the *figliata* and the clairvoyant, the film abounds with references to ghosts, doubles and masks, the *smorfia* and the apotropaic eye. Completing the heritage address are Gian Filippo Corticelli’s atmospheric cinematography and Pasquale Catalano’s evocative soundtrack, the pinnacle of which is Arisa’s heart-rending cover of Enzo Gragnaniello’s “Vasame.”

The prominent positioning of the *figliata dei femminielli* at the start of the film places the city’s unique iteration of queer identity and culture at the very heart of its commodification of Neapolitan cultural practices. The casting of Peppe Barra, doyen of Neapolitan theatre, in the role of Pasquale and the prominent position he plays as the masked narrator of the *figliata* heightens the association between the city’s cultural repertoire and the construction of Naples as a privileged space for the articulation of non-normative gender identities and performances. However, the celebration of Neapolitan queer heritage in the form of the *figliata* and the casual inclusion of male homosexuality within the narrative – a hallmark of Özpetek’s cinema – contrasts sharply with the stereotyped depiction of the lesbian couple, Ludovica (Lina Sastri) and Valeria (Isabella Ferrari), as the villains of the piece. Implicated in the murders of Andrea and Pasquale, gleefully rejoicing in their underground gallery of illicit archaeological treasures and hypocritically presiding over a commemoration of Pasquale, they appear as modern-day witches, not only dissociated from the cultural heritage of the city but also inimical to it.

Napoli velata, then, is not without its flaws, which extend to include weaknesses in the storyline, unconvincing sex scenes and the improbable relationship between Adriana and Antonio. It is, however, the rarefied treatment of Naples and its popular cultural practices that has most divided

critical opinion, reviving the charge of orientalism that dogged Özpetek's early films. A comparison with the preceding *Rosso Istanbul / Red Istanbul* (2016), set in the director's native city, elucidates the more conspicuously romanticized, nostalgic and exoticizing depiction of the urban protagonist of *Naples in Veils*. Nonetheless, *Naples in Veils* is an important film: it contributes significantly to a much-needed rebalancing of screen representations of Naples in the direction of the many positive attributes of the city. It also highlights the city's value as a contact zone between the mysteries of a richly suggestive esoteric past and the mundane realities of a more rational but spiritually impoverished present.

RUTH GLYNN
University of Bristol