

MOTHERHOOD AND THE 'NDRANGHETA IN *LA TERRA DEI SANTI*

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Abstract

Motherhood is central to the existence and continuity of the mafia due to a woman's ability to procreate and raise her offspring according to the organization's code of conduct. In the case of the 'ndrangheta, a type of Italian mafia whose structure is based on familial ties, motherhood contributes to its particular cohesive and resilient configuration. In cinematic portrayals of the mafias, scenes of mothers crying over the bodies of their dead sons are common. In Fernando Muraca's *La terra dei santi* (2015), such a scene acts as a potent reminder of the coexistence of love and death in the day-to-day life of a "mafia woman," and more so if she is a mother. This film centers on the theme of motherhood and departs from the ancillary narrative functions female characters traditionally play in movies set in mafia contexts. *La terra dei santi* joins other films in their increasing attention to women with regard to Italian organized crime. Among recent movies about the 'ndrangheta with female protagonists are *Lea* (2015) by Marco Tullio Giordana, *A Chiara* (2021) by Jonas Carpignano, and *Una femmina* (2022) by Francesco Costabile. Other films, such as Francesco Munzi's *Anime nere* (2014), Giacomo Campiotti's *Liberi di scegliere* (2019), and Enzo Monteleone's *Duisburg – linea di sangue* (2019) draw attention to family ties and women's key roles in the criminal organization. The TV series *Bang Bang Baby* (2022), directed by Michele Alhaique, Giuseppe Bonito, and Margherita Ferri, also features women as central figures in the 'ndrangheta underworld. The growing number of these female portrayals suggests an expanding interest in women and organized crime. News headlines and books on women involved in mafia activities or turning into State's witnesses are becoming increasingly common. The media's attention on this topic also seems to coincide with a greater consideration gender has received in mafia studies. Focusing on narrative strategies, aesthetic choices and the construction of characters in *La terra dei santi*, this article analyzes the theme of motherhood – seen as an institution engulfing female subjectivity in the context of the mafia – and its conflicting interaction, central to Muraca's film, with mothering – the process of caring for and protecting children like a mother.

Keywords: 'ndrangheta, women, motherhood, cinema, mafia

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Motherhood is central to the existence and continuity of the mafia due to a woman's ability to procreate and raise her offspring according to the organization's code of conduct. In the case of the 'ndrangheta, a type of Italian mafia whose structure is based on blood ties, motherhood contributes to its particularly cohesive and resilient configuration.¹ Familial ties consolidate power – for instance, through arranged marriages – and convey stability to the 'ndrangheta. In cinematic portrayals of the mafias, scenes of mothers crying over the bodies of their dead sons are common. In Fernando Muraca's *La terra dei santi* (2015), such a scene acts as a potent reminder of the coexistence of love and death in the day-to-day life of a “mafia woman,” and more so if she is a mother. This film centers on women and the theme of motherhood, and thus departs from the ancillary narrative functions female characters traditionally play in movies set in mafia contexts (in line with the men-only mafia affiliation in real life and, more generally, with the patriarchal society we live in). *La terra dei santi* joins other films of the past two decades in their increasing attention to women with regard to Italian organized crime.² This article analyzes how, in Muraca's film, motherhood – seen as an institution engulfing female subjectivity in the context of the mafia – is presented in conflicting interaction with mothering – the process of caring for and protecting children like a mother. In particular, it focuses on the narrative and aesthetic choices that underscore the construction of the main female characters in relation to that conflict.

Mafia and the Female Subject

The growing number of female portrayals (sometimes entirely fictional, other times based on true stories) with regard to Italian organized crime is

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- 1 In this article, in addition to the generic term “mafia,” I am also using the plural “mafias” to highlight the existence of a variety of Italian mafia-type organizations, with the 'ndrangheta, the Camorra, and the Sicilian mafia or Cosa Nostra being the most prominent.
 - 2 Muraca's 2008 film, *È tempo di cambiare*, also explores the theme of women and the 'ndrangheta. Among recent movies about the 'ndrangheta with female protagonists are *Lea* (2015) by Marco Tullio Giordana, *A Chiara* (2021) by Jonas Carpignano, and *Una femmina* (2022) by Francesco Costabile. Other films, such as Francesco Munzi's *Anime nere* (2014), Giacomo Campiotti's *Liberi di scegliere* (2019), and Enzo Monteleone's *Duisburg – linea di sangue* (2019) draw attention to family ties and women's key roles in the criminal organization. The TV series *Bang Bang Baby* (2022), directed by Michele Alhaique, Giuseppe Bonito, and Margherita Ferri, also features women as central figures in the 'ndrangheta underworld.

not confined to cinema and television. News headlines on women and the Italian mafias have become more common, and the media's increasing attention on this topic seems to coincide with a greater consideration gender has received in mafia studies. Starting in the 1990s, a number of authors (Renate Siebert, Anna Puglisi, Alessandra Dino, Teresa Principato, Clare Longrigg, Girolamo Lo Verso, and Innocenzo Fiore, to name some)³ have investigated the complex female role with regard to organized crime, often centering on mothers and their multifaceted function, from indoctrinators of their children to Erinyes inciting revenge in mafia feuds. Some of this research has also pointed to instances of women playing active roles in mafia business – for example, within drug trafficking or as messengers – and occupying positions of borrowed power in conjunction with the phenomenon of *pentitismo*⁴ and its destabilizing effect on the organization.

When discussing male domination over women, Deborah Cameron argues that “virtually all accounts of the origins of patriarchy suggest that a significant factor in its emergence was the desire of men to exploit and control women’s reproductive capacities.”⁵ Such instrumental use and abuse of maternity is of paramount importance for the totalitarian male-dominated mafias, where women are often treated like property and, as mothers, are in charge of the primary socialization of their children according to the organization’s rules. But it is also a double-edged sword for the organization itself, in the case of mothers who decide to flee from the day-to-day violence and death to rescue themselves and their offspring. However, in certain cases this decision leads to a separation from their children, who are sometimes used by their relatives to convince them to recant their statement. In the words of journalist Lirio Abbate, “This is the most painful wound for those women of the ’ndrangheta who decide to give evidence to the State authorities; what makes them most vulnerable is their maternal love.”⁶

3 Among the many scholars who have contributed to shed light on the role of “mafia women” are also Ombretta Ingrassi, Felia Allum, and Liliana Madeo. Several essays on this and related topics can be found in “Donne di mafia” (2011), Serenata (2014), and Fiandaca (2007).

4 The so-called “pentiti” (literally “those who repented”) are mafia members who decide to collaborate with the Italian State and thus betray the criminal organization.

5 Cameron, p. 33.

6 Abbate, p. 202. “È questa la ferita più dolorosa per le donne di ’ndrangheta che scelgono di collaborare con la giustizia, è l’amore materno che più le rende vulnerabili.” All translations from Italian into English are mine.

That same love can also be a driving force to embrace legality. Motherhood is, indeed, an important element in the fight against organized crime, as the increasing number of female witnesses from mafia families, who are oftentimes mothers, shows. The list of mothers who have rejected the 'ndrangheta and, in some cases, paid with their lives includes Giuseppina Pesce, Lea Garofalo, Maria Concetta Cacciola, Annina Lo Bianco, and many others (see Iantosca 2013, Abbate 2014, Ursetta 2016, Kahn and Véron 2017, Perry 2018, Lauricella 2019, Pickering-Iazzi 2019, Cozzi 2019, and Gigliotti 2022). These are stories of women used as bargaining chips in arranged marriages to create alliances between families and consolidate power; of domestic violence and rape; of murders (in some cases possibly disguised as suicides) in the name of family honor; of vengeance and “omertà” (the code of silence); of women who rebel and others who are complicit and loyal to the mafia/family; of parents sentencing their daughters to death and brothers killing their own sisters.⁷ As Dina Lauricella puts it, “If you are a woman of a family of the 'ndrangheta you are not allowed to make mistakes, any behavior opposed to the self-imposed parastatal rules has direct consequences on your last name. Therefore, to preserve the honor of the 'ndrina or the family (which are the same thing), they do not think twice about killing you and make your dead body disappear.”⁸

Women and Mothers in La terra dei santi

La terra dei santi is not based specifically on any of these stories, but evokes some of them by centering on the complex condition of being a mother in the 'ndrangheta. Set around 2012-2013 in Calabria, but shot in Manfredonia, Puglia, *La terra dei santi* revolves, in part, around the

7 Some women, however, actively contribute to the mafia business. In the 'ndrangheta, a woman who “distinguishes” herself in the organization’s criminal activities can receive the title of “sorella d’omertà” (sister of omertà). There are also examples of female leadership, such as that of Maria Serraino, who ran her family/clan in Milan and was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1997, or Aurora Spanò, who played a central role in the clan’s business and was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2015 (a harsher sentence than that of her husband).

8 Lauricella, p. viii. “Se sei una donna di una famiglia di 'Ndrangheta non puoi sbagliare, ogni atteggiamento contrario alle regole parastatali autoimposte ha conseguenze dirette sul cognome che porti e pertanto, al fine di salvaguardare l’onore della 'ndrina, o della famiglia, che sono la stessa cosa, non ci si pensa due volte a farti fuori e a far sparire il tuo cadavere.”

predicament of Assunta (interpreted by Daniela Marra), the 35-year-old widow of a member of the 'ndrangheta and mother of two sons. At the beginning of the film, she is forced by local boss Alfredo to marry her brother-in-law, Nando. In addition to her children – Giuseppe, 17 (who ends up joining the 'ndrangheta and getting killed in a mafia feud) and Franceschino, 5 – she gets pregnant as a result of an unwanted and violent sexual encounter with her newlywed husband. Assunta is also the younger sister of Caterina (Lorenza Indovina), the wife of Alfredo. Contrary to a common perception of wives of mafiosi as unaware of their husbands' criminal activities, Caterina actively participates in the organization's drug trafficking while her husband hides from justice in a country house and in a concealed room of the family-owned supermarket, a front for their illegal business. Both sisters contribute to the criminal enterprise, with Caterina benefitting from money, power, and respect deriving from her status of wife of a mafia boss: in one scene, Caterina gives mafia-related orders to some members of the organization and checks large quantities of drug hidden under bags of pasta; in the same scene, Assunta counts money presumably coming from drug trafficking, while indoctrinating her youngest son with her anti-law views.

Assunta and Caterina are not the only central characters of *La terra dei santi*. In what might seem a dialectic opposition, they face a female judge (interpreted by Valeria Solarino) from the north of Italy who has come to Calabria to fight the 'ndrangheta. Evoking Captain Bellodi in Leonardo Sciascia's *Il giorno della civetta* (1961) for her origins and role, determination and integrity, she resorts to the extreme measure of taking the children of the 'ndrangheta away from their families to give them a better future.⁹ This character representing legality does not have a name in the movie and gets addressed as “giudice” (judge) or “dottoressa” (meaning someone holding a university degree). However, in the film's screenplay her name is Vittoria, and in *Il cielo a metà* (2014), a novel where Monica Zapelli – screenwriter of *La terra dei santi* together with Muraca – presents a similar story, her full name is Vittoria Bollani. In this article, I will either use her first name from the screenplay or her profession.

Oppositions are not limited to the film's central characters. They can be found also in some of the film's aesthetic and narrative choices, where contrasts and, in some cases, dualism play a role at various levels: from

9 Starting in 2012, the Court of Reggio Calabria has adopted this measure in certain cases in order to distance minors from their mafia families and expose them to a culture of legality in environments outside the region of Calabria. In Carpignano's film *A Chiara*, this measure is applied to the film's protagonist.

the frequent crosscuts creating parallels between characters to the chiaroscuro of the desaturated photography underscoring the dichotomy and conflicts of the storyline, and to the succession of narrative moments with a similar *mise-en-scène* or action but opposite protagonists which establish analogies while encouraging comparisons. The concurrent use of some of these elements in *La terra dei santi* is apparent from the start and contributes to position the three central female characters in relation to each other through their differences and similarities.

The film begins with a woman jogging by the beach. The camera provides a fragmented view of her body with subsequent close-ups of her feet, legs, chest, back, and profile in motion. No frontal shot is included and the character's identity (Vittoria) is not revealed at this point. A crosscut introduces the viewer to an indoor setting where two sisters (Assunta and Caterina) discuss the imposed marriage that the younger of the two begrudgingly accepts later that day by tying the knot with the brother of her dead husband.¹⁰ Assunta only wears some lingerie in this scene while her wedding dress is displayed on a coat hanger. Her undergarments contrast with Caterina being fully dressed, visually highlighting the two sisters' conflicting position with regard to the arranged marriage: Assunta's rejection, on the one hand, and Caterina's approval, on the other.

The abrupt transition between these two initial moments – the jogging scene and the conversation between the two sisters – clearly marks a change in circumstances and contexts. However, Assunta's swift entrance into the scene from right to left creates some continuity with the previous scene where Vittoria runs in the same direction. Additionally, her dark hair similar to Vittoria's suggests a visual analogy between these two characters. Both scenes share a similar gray/bluish chromatic range in the background which aesthetically contributes to establish a parallel between them. Moreover, Assunta's partially exposed body conjures up the camera's insistence on Vittoria's body parts in the previous shots.

The beginning of the film is just one of a number of instances in which parallel editing, analogies between actions, and in some cases the whole *mise-en-scène*¹¹ encourage an initial association between characters which, however, results in highlighting their differences by inviting the spectator

10 Within the 'ndrangheta, endogamy is indeed a common practice aiming at strengthening the criminal organization (Gratteri and Nicaso p. 66).

11 E.g., a shot of Assunta in a car at the end of a scene is similar to a shot of a car with Vittoria in it at the beginning of a subsequent scene; Assunta seating at a table at the end of another scene is followed by a shot of Vittoria also seating at a table; a scene of Vittoria running on the beach suddenly cuts to Caterina working out on a treadmill.

to draw comparisons between them. In the initial sequence, for example, once the viewer realizes that the running woman is a judge and Assunta is the sister-in-law of a mafia boss, their differences – marked by their positions with regard to the law and their views on motherhood – become more apparent.

Motherhood and Mothering in Conflict

The film conveys the conflict between its central characters in a variety of ways. The recurring contrast between indoor and outdoor settings, for instance, in some of the scenes acquires significance through the opposition between the judge's free will and mobility – her running routine being an expression of the latter – and Assunta's more limited agency and domestic confinement (incidentally, the only time we see this character happy is with her two children on the same beach where Vittoria goes running). Likewise, on other occasions, crosscuts from Vittoria running on the beach to Caterina working out on a treadmill suggest the opposition between freedom and reclusion. These moments also highlight some central traits of the two characters: on the one hand, Vittoria's determination to fight the mafia is conjured by her frequent jogs on a beach that is both full of trash and along a beautiful seaside (with pollution symbolizing organized crime's devastating effects on society); on the other, Caterina's use of the treadmill can be attributed to the attention she places on her looks to please her husband.

The relationship between the central female characters encourages a comparison of their points of view on maternity in a number of scenes that are set in the judge's office and in an interrogation room. The fact that these spaces are not usually associated with such a topic serves to highlight its connection to criminality in Muraca's film. With one exception, these scenes feature judicial interventions initiated by Vittoria: in two of them, the judge summons Assunta to her office, and, on another occasion, she questions Caterina. In the very last scene of the film, which is not an interrogation but takes place once again in the judge's office, Assunta goes to Vittoria presumably to become a State witness in order to escape from her mafia family and reunite with her youngest son (who in the meantime has been taken away from her by social workers). Rather than advancing the storyline, these are moments of reflection for the viewer on the role of women as mothers and wives in the 'ndrangheta. Differently from an interrogation searching for clues related to a case, in some of these scenes,

queries and remarks move from the specific (Assunta and Caterina's circumstances) to the general (the role of mothers and wives in the mafia underworld), while also including observations about the nature of power and the meaning of love. Judicial and anthropological gazes interweave in the effort to understand womanhood within the 'ndrangheta – an organization where past and present coexist, and old practices, such as that of protecting the family honor at all costs, are found side-by-side with modernity and great adaptability when it comes to business.¹²

In these scenes, antithetical views clash and irreconcilable disagreements are foregrounded through the central characters' exchanges.¹³ A sequence of shots/reverse shots with the strong chiaroscuro characterizing the entire film photography underscores these duel-like encounters, which feature a number of medium shots, close-ups, and some extreme close-ups to convey the palpable tension. However, these scenes – and the whole film for that matter – also draw attention to something Vittoria, Assunta, and Caterina share: their being women in patriarchal systems (that of the 'ndrangheta being a more extreme expression of patriarchy than the judiciary one).

When discussing why the active role of women in the 'ndrangheta has not received attention at least up until the 1980s, Angela Iantosca draws a comparison between the mafia on the one hand and the police forces and the judicial system on the other: “the mafia is an organization of men of honor; law enforcement agencies and the judiciary are primarily composed of men. Therefore, it has been a battle among men. A war among knights who, from opposite positions, have tried to impose their own virile superiority.”¹⁴ Iantosca's analogy between “men of honor” and men of law fits *La terra dei santi*, whose audience is often reminded of gender inequality within patriarchy, from the already mentioned arranged marriages to attempted rapes – the latter a common element of the mafia movie¹⁵ – but

12 Notably, the 'ndrangheta is very active in the richest and most developed areas of the north of Italy and other parts of the world. This characteristic of the organization is not included in *La terra dei santi*, but it is present in other films, such as Renato De Maria's *Lo spietato* (2019) and the previously mentioned *Anime nere*, and *Duisburg – linea di sangue*.

13 Incidentally, on two of these occasions, both Caterina and Assunta make a remark about Vittoria, a judge from the north of Italy, not having understood anything about Calabria and the world they live in.

14 Iantosca, p. 14. “La mafia è un'organizzazione di uomini d'onore, le Forze dell'Ordine, la Magistratura sono composte per lo più da uomini. Quindi si è trattato di una battaglia tra uomini. Una guerra tra cavalieri che, da posizioni opposte, hanno tentato di affermare la propria virile superiorità.”

15 Morreale, pp. 51-52.

also through more subtle references, some of which have to do with Vittoria being a female magistrate. It is worth noticing here that the delayed attention given to the Calabrian mafia is not confined to the role of women within it. The whole organization and its expanding power were underestimated for a long time.¹⁶

The very first time Assunta and Vittoria meet in the film,¹⁷ their exchange centers on the expectations of Assunta's role as mother and her responsibility to supervise her children. Her remark in this scene, "per stare bene ci basta stare lontani degli sbirri" (to feel good we just need to stay away from the police),¹⁸ asserts her world view – antithetical to Vittoria's – where State authorities are perceived as enemies in a war-like context. Here, Assunta does not engage in the conversation around mothering and motherhood, but instead relies on an anti-State discourse often used by the mafia to legitimize itself *vis-à-vis* law-enforcing authorities which are seen as the "bad guys." It is police marshal Domenico who, soon after this encounter, brings back the topic of motherhood by warning the judge not to mess with the children of the mothers of the 'ndrangheta. What follows is a moment of reflection on why these women send their sons to die. Vittoria argues it is not just about the money, but she does not know exactly why they do so. Mothers in mafia families experience the co-existence of love and death in their daily life – "Eros against Thanatos" as Siebert puts it¹⁹ – through the feelings for their sons, on the one hand, and the constant and concurrent awareness that they will be killed sooner or later, on the other. This circumstance, however, is not a deterrent in many cases, as women typically indoctrinate their sons, educate them to worship their father as a behavioral model, and incite them to avenge close relatives when they get killed. Some mothers would rather have their sons sentenced to jail than turned into "infami" (traitors, lacking honor). In the case of women married to prominent mafiosi, their status of mother and wife often comes with privileges and wealth. This and the fear of retaliation are reasons for some women to stay loyal to the mafia. Additionally, as Siebert observes, "the birth of the male allows the woman, if only at second hand, to partic-

16 Gratteri and Nicaso observe that after the 2007 massacre of Duisburg, Germany (where six members of the 'ndrangheta were murdered in a mafia feud), international attention was given to what is now "the scariest, most powerful" of the mafias (2020, 3).

17 This occurs when Assunta goes to see her husband, Nando, who is in jail for vandalizing Vittoria's car as an act of intimidation ordered by the mafia boss.

18 "Sbirri" is a derogatory term for police officers.

19 Siebert, pp. 79-103.

ipate in the splendour of the male principle – the dominant principle of the public sphere – and, simultaneously, it gives her the opportunity to form it and bind it, to make it dependent and make it hers by proxy – in private.”²⁰

When addressing motherhood as experience and as a social institution in *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich points out to patriarchy with its exploitation of women and convenient idealization of mothers that has been internalized by women themselves: “As mothers, women have been idealized and also exploited. To affirm women’s intrinsic human value in the face of its continuing flagrant and insidious denial is no easy thing to do in steady, clear, un sentimental terms.”²¹ Rich also reflects on “the central ambiguity at the heart of patriarchy: the ideas of the sacredness of motherhood and the redemptive power of woman as means, contrasted with the degradation of women in the order created by men.”²² This is readily apparent in mafia-type organizations, where being a mother generally defines the identity of a woman and determines her subjectivity. To this point, sociologist Ombretta Ingrassi argues that, in line with the mafia’s traditional gendered model, “women are granted some importance almost exclusively for their reproductive function” and they themselves emphasize their role as mothers as they are “aware that, if separated from maternity, femininity is for the most part despised.”²³ Sexual violence and forced marriages are examples of female degradation in *La terra dei santi*, while the idealized identification of women with mothers is evident in Assunta and Caterina’s disdain toward Vittoria’s childless status.

As mothers and wives of mafia bosses, women are typically granted respect and some authority from their community, while still being subjected to a dictatorial, misogynist, and male-dominated environment. In *La terra dei santi*, Caterina is an example of this dual condition: she enjoys the power borrowed from her husband, and the privileges and wealth that come with her status as wife of a mafia boss; at the same time, and just like her younger sister, she had to endure an arranged marriage (with Alfredo) forced on her by her father with the complicity of her mother, as she reveals at the beginning of the film.²⁴ A “*donna di potere*” (a woman of power), she

20 Siebert, pp. 58-59; see also Lo Verso, 2006.

21 Rich, p. xlv.

22 Rich, p. 72.

23 Ingrassi, *Donne d'onore*, p. 13: “alle donne è attribuita una certa importanza quasi esclusivamente nella loro funzione riproduttiva”; “consapevoli che alla femminilità separata dalla maternità è riservato più che altro disprezzo.”

24 One of the shots in the scene where Caterina reveals her common fate to Assunta aesthetically creates a parallel between the two sisters by dividing the frame in

will proudly define herself later in the film, but also a victim of that same power. Differently from Caterina, Assunta might appear to be a victim *tout court*: a widow of a mafioso, she must marry against her own will her brother-in-law who is also a member of the 'ndrangheta; her oldest son is murdered and her youngest is taken by the social workers. However, the film also points out to her connivance and fair amount of responsibility as a mother: she is loyal to the family/organization, shares the same anti-State view and despises legality like her relatives, and does not object to the involvement of her older son in criminal activities.

About a third of the way into the film, Vittoria summons Assunta to her office – a scene that immediately follows Giuseppe's ritual of affiliation to the 'ndrangheta. Unlike the scenes where Vittoria's culture of legality and sense of justice produce a compelling effect against anti-State/pro-mafia positions, this encounter has an ironic outcome: Assunta mocks the judicial system for not having ink in their pens, when Vittoria unsuccessfully tries to sign the police report at the end of the scene. The conversation revolves around Assunta's position as a mother and wife in a family of the 'ndrangheta rather than on her knowledge of the criminal organization, for which she has been summoned. Like in other scenes, these two instrumental roles are central to the interaction, with that of wife generating Assunta's disdain because of her recent arranged marriage, as she reluctantly admits to be "coniugata" (formal for married) when asked to provide her marital status. Throughout the encounter, Vittoria's remarks trigger her rival's defensive reaction to what she regards as an invasion of privacy. The two women face each other at the opposite sides of a desk and similar point-of-view shots highlight their reciprocal aggressiveness and symmetrical distribution of power. Mutual dominance and centrality are even more apparent when comparing these two characters with the male figures also present in this scene – Domenico and the police officer typing the report – who, by contrast, are relegated to a secondary position.

Assunta displays the same arrogant attitude when summoned for the second time by the judge, who informs her of Nando's decision to turn

roughly two halves with the use of a mirror: a medium shot of Caterina's reflected image on the right is paired with a close-up of Assunta on the left side. While the camera focuses on Caterina, Assunta is out of focus. The shot suggests that one sister is the "mirrored" image of the other, since they both have been forced to marry men against their will, as Caterina tells Assunta at this point of the scene. However, Assunta's blurred image in contrast with Caterina's clear mirror reflection conveys also their differences and highlights the younger sister's emotional state. This is just one instance where mirrors play a part in the aesthetic choices of this film.

State's evidence and become a *pentito*. Set again in the judge's office, the mise-en-scène here is similar to that of her first interrogation. This aesthetic choice foregrounds the animosity between the two women throughout their conversation that centers once again on Assunta's responsibility as a mother to keep her children safe. The tension escalates even faster than in the first interrogation, as Vittoria openly criticizes Assunta's mothering ability and threatens to terminate her parental rights. As a reaction, Assunta asserts herself as a mother and questions Vittoria's womanhood: "Ma che femmina sei che porti via i figli alle mamme?" (What type of woman are you, taking children away from their mothers?). In response, the judge appeals again to the meaning of mothering: "E tu che madre sei che li mandi a morire ammazzati?" (And what type of mother are you who sends her own children to get killed?). While Vittoria views the conflict between mothering and motherhood in the mafia as irreconcilable, Assunta experiences the contradictions inherent in her role of a mother of *'ndranghetista*, but shows loyalty to the organization/family. Shot from the point of view of the two women and central to *La terra dei santi's* main theme of maternity in the *'ndrangheta*, this scene's relevance is also marked by its position in the middle of the film. Just like in the first interrogation scene previously analyzed, female authority and aggressiveness are additionally underscored by the marginal position of the male characters in the scene: Domenico, Nando, and a police officer typing the report are ancillary figures, as the camera focuses primarily on the two women, casting these men as observers for most of the exchange. Although the main reason for this encounter is Nando's decision to give evidence to the authorities, the animated meeting centers, as said, on mothering and the certain death that expects Assunta's sons if left in their *'ndrangheta* family. A number of images of men, however, are visible throughout the scene, from the photographs of young *'ndranghetisti* murdered or disappeared, which Vittoria relentlessly shows Assunta, to the blurred mug shots of mafiosi hanging on a board, to the crucifix and a picture of then-president of Italy Giorgio Napolitano hanging on the wall. These subtle references to male figures draw further attention to gender. The unexpected asymmetrical power distribution favoring female characters over less prominent male figures (Assunta even accuses Nando of being a "pupazzo della dottoressa" – the judge's puppet) highlights the film's dominant female gaze on a topic, motherhood, in which women occupy centrality, but over which men have historically exerted control. Additionally, Vittoria's insistence on expected mothering behaviors could be seen as a reminder of the functionality our patriarchal society, rather than just the mafia, attributes to maternity.

Although featured mostly as rivals, it is perhaps their common womanhood that leads to an emotional Vittoria hugging Assunta toward the end of the film. This binding moment follows the murder of Assunta's older son and the removal of her parental rights. Vittoria's hug is an unexpected reaction that the screenplay of *La terra dei santi* describes as "impacciata" (clumsy, awkward). This is a rare moment of "syn-pathos" between these two characters and its emotional charge evokes a previous scene where Assunta cries desperately over her dead son and hugs his body. Arguably the most moving and dramatic moment in *La terra dei santi*, the image of Assunta embracing Giuseppe provides an iconographic representation of mothering love evoking the Pietà through its mise-en-scène and context in conjunction with the idea of martyrdom suggested by the position of Giuseppe's lifeless body.²⁵ Additionally, Giuseppe gets killed in a square shaped like an amphitheater, and the passersby – among them several women – and police officers evoke the chorus of a Greek tragedy. Their astonished expressions and the nondiegetic melancholic soundtrack amplify this emotional moment.

Female Power: Authority and Vulnerability

Being the wife of a mafia boss is the central topic of an exchange between Vittoria and Caterina taking place in an interrogation room later in the film. The only scene when these two characters meet, this is also a climactic moment, in which Caterina rather than Assunta appears to be Vittoria's true antagonist. This encounter fulfils a didactic function, as Caterina summarizes what the wife of a boss is expected to do. She professes the importance of her role of wife with a mixture of pride and arrogance.

25 Religious references are common in this film. Some of them point to the Catholic and masonic elements imbuing 'ndrangheta rituals, while others have to do with the strong influence of religion in Calabria. The film's title (in English, *Land of Saints*) is a reference to the Greek Orthodox Christianity, as well as a reminder of the presence of the mafia in the region through the similarity between the terms "santi" and "santisti" (the latter a recognition given to some members of the 'ndrangheta), as pointed out in the film itself. The affiliation scene includes an image of the Archangel Michael – which is used in real life as part of the initiation ritual of new mafia members – and a statue of the archangel is also shown later in the film suggesting antithetically the triumph of good over evil. In two other scenes, the image of Saint Anthony framed by thirteen lights is a reminder of "la Tredicina", a tradition devoted to the saint protector of children. A picture of Padre Pio, a popular saint in the South of Italy, is also visible on other occasions.

Conveniently, she leaves out information about her active involvement in the organization, just like some *pentiti* have done when questioned about women's roles *vis-à-vis* the mafia. Similar to Assunta's reaction in a previous scene when she realizes Vittoria does not have children, Caterina's insolent tone while summing up her duties as a wife ("lasagne, parlare senza metter in imbarazzo il marito, crescere i figli" – lasagna, do not embarrass your husband when talking, raise your children) carries a sense of superiority *vis-à-vis* the judge's single status, which she sees as a deficiency. Being a wife and having children (first and foremost sons) confer women a place in the world of the mafia.²⁶ Caterina's married status is her source of power, and more so if her son will at some point take over as the head of the 'ndrina (the family as well as the 'ndrangheta clan). She wishes to give her son "un posto d'onore" (a place of honor) in the world of the 'ndrangheta. As mentioned, women in mafia contexts often identify with their role of "mother-institution," which includes the pedagogical part they play when raising their children according to the organization's diktats. When discussing mafia family dynamics, psychologist Innocenzo Fiore points out to "la configurazione del potere istituzionale materno" (the configuration of the maternal institutional power) which perpetuates situations where daughters in mafia families acquire the institutionalized role of mother at the expense of their subjectivity, while sons reject anything that is feminine and worship masculinity in order to secure their power as mafiosi.²⁷

Unlike the previous exchange with Assunta, here the conversation between the two rivals (the judge being a woman of power like herself, in the words of Caterina) conveys an unequal level of authority through the *mise-en-scène*: while Caterina is seated on one side of the desk, Vittoria is standing up on the opposite side. The camera angle in the shot/reverse shot alternation thus confers superiority to the judge, in line with the moral significance of the scene. However, Caterina's arrogance and confidence exuding from Lorenza Indovina's convincing acting counterbalance this effect. Like in the other interrogation scenes, the change in power distribu-

26 According to Ingrassi, "As women are appreciated by men when they give birth to boys, the latter are the reason why a woman/mother feels proud within her community" (Ingrassi, *Donne d'onore*, p. 13). ("Proprio perché la donna è apprezzata dall'uomo come generatrice di figli maschi, questi rappresentano per la donna-madre motivo d'orgoglio agli occhi della comunità.")

27 Fiore, p. 215. When discussing the hypertrophic masculinity of mafiosi, Siebert talks about "the particular staging of mafioso identity," which entails the suppression of female aspects (Siebert, pp. 22-23), while Baris Cayli looks at mafia women's performance under the influence of masculinity within Italian organized crime.

tion surfacing in moments of conflict between the female characters invites the spectator to reflect on their opposing views, rather than just embracing a priori “good” (the law) versus “evil” (crime).

Caterina’s judgmental attitude toward the unmarried status of the judge is not suggested only by her remarks. When inferring her opponent is single, she glances at her outfit and appearance. The scene here hints at the importance Caterina places on female attractiveness in a male-dominated context – a leitmotif when it comes to this character, whose vanity, jealousy for her sister’s youth, and desire to please Alfredo with her looks and sensuality are often highlighted in the film. Clothes play a significant role in underscoring differences between the female characters in this film. For instance, Caterina’s low cut and form fitting clothes and ostentatious jewelry often contrast with Vittoria’s more somber and less stereotypically feminine style.

To this point, a nude scene of Vittoria might come as a surprise in a film where her character departs from a conventional representation of femininity to embrace a role, that of a judge, traditionally played by men both in films and real life. Yet, she is the only character in *La terra dei santi* whose body is shown naked, even if just for a couple of seconds. The scene follows the last part of the conversation on Assunta’s imposed marriage which features Caterina’s closet in the background, whose mechanical curtains operated by a remote control bring to mind a stage. The nude scene starts with a medium shot of Vittoria’s naked back, while she is facing a small wardrobe to decide what to wear after a shower. Her exposed body and the narrow selection of clothes in her wardrobe are in stark contrast with Caterina’s elegantly dressed appearance and her large closet full of flashy items from the previous scene. And so is a glimpse of the judge’s naked breasts reflected in a mirror later in this scene, followed by Vittoria covering up to answer the door, only to find a mafia death threat waiting for her: a pig’s head coupled with a picture of herself running.

This voyeuristic scene might bring to mind the objectification of the female body as discussed by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, and the scopophilic instinct and male gaze central to Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” It also aligns with the camera’s attention to Vittoria’s fragmented body in the opening running scene and other recurrent similar moments. Given that the film suggests a tension between the non-traditional role that Vittoria plays as a magistrate (her gender is pointed out on more than one occasion by other characters in the film) and a conventional androcentric idea of female attractiveness, this scene seems to fall into the latter perhaps to engage the spectator gaze. Vittoria’s

naked body in this scene also seems to act as a reminder of her womanhood, as well as her fragility which is also underscored by the mafia threat that closes the scene. The combination of the pig's head and her picture (suggesting the 'ndrangheta knows her habits and can strike at any time) with the brief nude moment conveys a sense of intrusion and violation of Vittoria's intimacy. On the other hand, her status as a single and childless woman as well as her profession suggest the patriarchal obstacles she has to face. Interestingly enough, the other scenes of *La terra dei santi* that hint at nudity are those featuring Assunta's unwanted sexual intercourse with Nando and the sexual assault carried out by Alfredo. Both these moments allude to female vulnerability in relation to male dominance, as it is often the case with rape scenes.

The very last scene of the film references gender disparity through an additional dialogue between the two protagonists that closes the film abruptly. Assunta tries to negotiate her cooperation with Vittoria in the hope of getting back her youngest son and perhaps also as an act of revenge toward her sister and Alfredo.²⁸ Once again, tension in the meeting between these two very different women – both for background and beliefs – escalates, and conveys Assunta's resentment and mistrust about the judge's ability to understand her world. At the end of this interaction, the judge's scolding comment on Assunta's pregnancy – “un altro soldato per il loro esercito” (another soldier for their army) – serves as a reminder of the military configuration of the organization, the fatal destiny of mafia members, and the organization's gender exclusivity. Assunta's response and final line of the film – “se è fortunato. Altrimenti una donna” (if lucky. Otherwise a woman) – is a switch of perspective which encourages the audience to reflect once again on gender and the mafia's patriarchal system.²⁹ The director's choice to opt for an abrupt but thematically assertive ending brings to the fore one more time the film's main topic, motherhood. As Fernando Muraca explains in an interview with the author of this article, he wanted

28 In addition to the conflicts between Assunta and Vittoria, and the latter and Caterina, the storyline revolves around the antagonism between the two sisters, which becomes more apparent with Giuseppe's murder and the sexual assault by Alfredo. Caterina's selfishness, lack of empathy, and yearning for money and power (typical attributes of mafia members) mark her differences with her sister.

29 Incidentally, the screenplay of *La terra dei santi* does not finish abruptly, but instead has some sort of circular ending: Vittoria runs on the beach like in the opening scene and then takes a swim; after entering polluted waters she reaches out the clean part of the sea. Also missing in the film is the part of the story line where Assunta decides to collaborate with Vittoria, Alfredo is arrested, and Caterina deals with some mafia business and later works out on a treadmill.

to make “a film with female protagonists, not a story of transmission of power between men. A film that would go into the inner folds of these families, narrating tragically the fate of children and women. [...] *La terra dei santi* does not show the way the 'ndrangheta operates, but instead, with an anthropological approach, it asks itself what the 'ndrangheta is, what it is built on” and it finds the answer at the source, inside the family, within motherhood.³⁰ And this is precisely what *La terra dei santi* does all along: it shifts the focus from a traditional male perspective conveyed by many filmic portrayals of the mafia to a female gaze within the film itself through the interaction of its characters. Mothering and motherhood, two concepts that intuitively are perceived as complementary, are here seen in opposition within the mafia context. Muraca’s film foregrounds women and their instrumental role as mothers within the organization. This complex role – where power and submission, perpetration and victimization coexist – is marked by conflicts which *La terra dei santi* addresses at multiple levels: from its narrative strategies to its aesthetic choices and to the construction of its characters.

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30 “un film con protagoniste donne, non una storia di trasmissione di potere fra uomini. Un film che entra nelle pieghe di queste famiglie, raccontando tragicamente la sorte dei figli e delle donne. [...] *La terra dei santi* non mostra la maniera in cui opera la 'ndrangheta, ma invece, con un approccio antropologico, si domanda che cos'è la 'ndrangheta, su cosa si fonda.” Interview by author, February 8th, 2022.

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