ADOPTION, MOTHERHOOD, DOMESTICATION:
THE ROLE OF THE CHILD IN ANTONIO CAPUANO'S
LA GUERRA DI MARIO

PATRIZIA BETTELLA

Summary. The long-lasting interest for the child as vehicle of social critique in Italian cinema from Neorealism to the present leads to some reflection on the film *La Guerra di Mario* (2005) by Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano. Capuano tackles the modern theme of the failed adoption of Mario, a boy from the poor and violent neighbourhood of Naples, who grew up in a degraded environment of parental neglect, among the daily urban war of organized crime. The prospective mother, Giulia, an educated and sensitive single woman from the bourgeoisie, struggles with the problem of accepting a difficult unruly child, without falling into the trap of domestication or assimilation. The motif of domestication is embodied in various animals that accompany Mario; a stray dog, a caged bird and a snake. Integration as domestication is dangerous and destined for failure: Mario's attempt to domesticate the stray dog leads to death, and Giulia's failed adoption of Mario marks the impossibility of integration between the middle class and underprivileged classes.

Italian directors from the post-war period to this day have shown a special interest in showcasing children, particularly boys, in their cinema. This regard for children peaks with Neorealism in films like De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano* (1942), *Sciuscià* (1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) and in Rossellini's war trilogy *Roma, città aperta* (1945), *Paisà* (1946), and *Germania, anno zero* (1948), cinematic works that continue to influence Italian and world cinema.¹ In Neorealist film the child is introduced in the story as a witness of war and of economic and social hardship. The child's point of view serves as locus for the denunciation of degraded social conditions and of a critique of adult weaknesses. The child is chosen to convey a message due to the peculiar ability of the children to speak the truth.

Special attention to children in Italian cinema persists after Neorealism. Marcia Landy observes that "dramatizing the children continues to function as a social and stylistic commentary on Italian culture in both historical and contemporary terms." (257) Critics like Paul Sutton have attributed this

¹ Other films where children play a major role and the mother-daughter relationship is explored include Visconti's *Bellissima* and De Sica's *La ciociara*.

peculiarity of Italian cinema to the distinctive attachment of the Italian people to the traditional family; Sutton's idea however contrasts with recent statistics, which reveal that in Italy we have one of the lowest birth-rates in the world as well as increases in common-law relations and single-parent families. This strong presence of children in Italian cinema is attested also in the eighties nineties and again in the new millennium.²

Is the presence of the child in Italian cinema in more recent years simply a legacy of Neorealism, or does it reflect the inability of Italians to grow up (Peter Pan syndrome) and therefore to more easily identify with the child figure in film? Or more generally, is the child still the preferred vehicle for social commentary on Italian culture? I will explore these issues by focusing on *La Guerra di Mario* (2005) a film by Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano, starring Valeria Golino as Giulia, Andrea Renzi as Sandro and Marco Grieco as the nine-year old boy Mario.

While many Italian films depict the father-son duo, *La Guerra di Mario* presents a complex triangulation which includes adoptive mother-adoptive son and biological mother. Motherhood and adoption serve as a metaphor for the social problems of integration/domestication of Naples' low/emarginated classes into the middle class. A subtext of domestication emerges in the film, as analogies are established between the child and some animals that appear in the film as possible objects of domestication or captivity: the stray dog, the caged bird and the pet snake.

Many of Capuano's films deal with the problems of children and adolescents from the underprivileged and degraded spaces of Naples' suburbs.³ Capuano made his film debut with the experimental *Vito e gli altri* (1991), "a gritty depiction of delinquent children in the poorer quarters Naples." (Moliterno, 63). His second film was the controversial *Pianese Nunzio, 14 anni a luglio* (1996), on the effects of the *camorra* and pedophilia, that was followed by *Polvere di Napoli* (1998) a film starring Silvio Orlando, partly

² O'Healy notes this in the cinema of Francesca Archibugi. Marini Maio examines the cinema of the new millennium and sees the importance of the figure of the child and adolescence as a metanarrative tool to illustrate the complexity of history and society.

³ Capuano is an artist, set designer, theater, television and film director who currently holds a chair in Scenography at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples. He first became known to the public as a member of the so-called "scuola napoletana degli anni novanta" a group of Neapolitan directors who collaborated in the film *I vesuviani* (1997) to which Capuano contributed the episode *Sofialorén*. The scuola napoletana includes Capuano, Corsicato, Incerti, De Lillo, Martone.

tribute, partly parody of De Sica's *Loro di Napoli*, and by the kitsch *Luna rossa* (2001), a parody of mafia cinema that was nominated for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. In 2005 Capuano released the 'engaged' *La guerra di Mario* (2005).⁴ In Capuano's films children and adolescents are the ones who carry the gaze into the difficult realities of Naples. The presence of the children from poor neighbourhoods, the preference for non-professional actors, and the attention to social issues reveal Capuano's indebtedness to the tradition of Neorealism. As Gian Piero Brunetta states, in Capuano we find "il soffio vitale del cinema rosselliniano." (345)

La guerra di Mario, not strictly a war movie, draws many features from neorealist cinema, particularly from Rossellini. Set in Naples and with a nine-year old boy as protagonist, *La guerra di Mario* calls for parallels with the third episode of Rossellini's *Paisà*, where among the rubble and destruction of liberated Naples, the protagonist Pasquale, who stumbles upon an African American GI, is also a young orphan boy who, like Mario is shown, in one scene, performing for money in the streets of Naples. In neorealist fashion, Capuano draws the plot for *La guerra di Mario* from a true story and casts a non-professional actor (Marco Grieco) in the role of Mario.⁵ In an interview of Ugolini for *Repubblica*, Capuano explains: "La storia di Mario è una storia vera, accaduta ad una mia amica ... che ha cercato di adottare un bambino e non ci è riuscita." Capuano also tells how he chose Marco Grieco for the role of the boy, a child with no previous experience in film, precisely because of his lack of conventional acting skills.

The child protagonist of Capuano's film is not the smart and shrewd *scugnizzo* type, as for example some of the children of the terza B in Lina Wertmüller's *Io speriamo che me la cavo* (1992), rather he is a disillusioned character, who engages the viewers in challenging institutions and conventional viewpoints.⁶

The film tells the story of Giulia De Dominicis, an unmarried art professor in a two-year relation with Sandro, a TV journalist, who is given temporary custody of nine-year-old Mario Ciotola, a difficult child from

⁴ At the moment Capuano is working on two new films *Giallo?* (2009) and *L'amore buio* (2010). This last one starring Valeria Golino and Fabrizio Gifuni premiered at the Venice Film Festival 2010.

⁵ The title of the film invites parallels with that of Fabrizio de Andre's classic song "La Guerra di Piero" on the meaninglessness of any war.

⁶ We sense at times a dialogue with/ rebuttal of Wertmüller's film, particularly in the scenes taking place at school and in the locales of the children from the poor suburbs.

Ponticelli, a poor and dangerous neighbourhood of Naples.⁷ Mario is assigned to Giulia and Sandro to save him from a degraded environment of violence and abuse and from his biological mother Nunzia, who locked him in the balcony, fed him chips and coke, while earning a living as a prostitute. Nunzia appears emotionless and perfectly comfortable with the idea of giving up her son for adoption, hoping to give him a better life with Giulia. Mario is regularly assessed by a psychologist and only after a probationary period, following a decision by doctor Longobardi, the ‘giudice minorile,’ will he be given up for adoption.⁸ Giulia, completely aware of the gap between Mario’s social background and her affluent milieu, is also very understanding and permissive with Mario. Displaced in the rich Posillipo neighborhood and school, Mario finds it difficult to cope with his new environment. For a large part of the film Mario also struggles to accept Giulia as his adoptive mother: “Mica è mamma mia. Non la conosco, non mi appartiene,” he tells some kids in Ponticelli when asked about Giulia. Often Mario isolates himself playing videogames, he feels like ShadeSky, the alien of a videogame he plays on his cellular phone. In order to ease Mario’s sense of isolation Giulia also takes him to visit his biological mother, one initiative that is disapproved of by both the child’s psychologist and the judge. At school Mario is undisciplined and restless, he attacks one child, he paints the classroom walls in red and refuses to write a composition about himself. He states he would be glad to set the school on fire. Mario befriends Luciano, the other outsider in the class, a boy who, like Mario, was transferred to Posillipo from a difficult neighbourhood and removed from his troubled family to live in the custody of his grandfather. Both children speak Neapolitan dialect and display the same disruptive behaviour at school. Mario’s best friend however is a stray dog that Mario named Mimmo. Mario claims Mimmo is the only one whose language he understands. With Mimmo Mario walks down the streets of Naples or plays at home. Mario’s

⁷ Ponticelli, an eastern suburb of Naples, has a high crime and unemployment rate and hosts some powerful clans of the mafia-type organization, the *camorra*.

⁸ The names chosen by Capuano for his characters are quite evocative: if the last name De Dominici for Giulia easily makes us think of a god-sent ange. Mario’s natural mother Nunzia alludes to that when Giulia goes to visit her with Mario and tells her she is an angel. Doctor Longobardi instead, immediately evokes strictness and coldness, whereas Mario’s last name, Ciotola, (a dish often used for dogs and other pets) contributes to the association of Mario with the dog. Luciano’s last name, Paesano, reminds us of the nickname for Italian American immigrants, while his grandfather mentions some connections of his family with the American mafia.

unruly behaviour is not disciplined by Giulia, who makes every effort to welcome the child with his weaknesses and limitations. She views his unconventional actions and impulsive reactions as normal for a child who came from such a difficult environment; she vouches for his disobedience and pranks as an the expression of spontaneity and creativity, preferable to the indifference and stiffness he finds at school, at the psychologist's and even in his contacts with Sandro. So Giulia is not too upset when she discovers that, on Luciano's suggestion, Mario skipped school in order to go play the recorder for money on the street. Mario's behaviour gets him into trouble both at school and with the kids of Ponticelli, who recognize that now he is not one of them anymore; they immediately proceed to steal the cell phone given to him by Giulia to stay in touch. The most tragic consequence of Mario's inability to follow the rules of his new social environment is the death of his dog Mimmo, who is run over by a car in order to follow Mario's order to cross a busy street without waiting for a green pedestrian light. Giulia's permissiveness and Mario's failure to adjust to his new social context, lead both psychologist and the judge to decide against the adoption. Mario was just beginning to accept Giulia as a mother but the judge assigns him to a 'real family' with father mother and other siblings. The mother- adoptive son relationship is destined to fail and Giulia, who is now pregnant with Sandro's child is set to begin a new life with her biological child, yet a child she has not planned for and is not very enthusiastic about. Mario's last words in the film are emblematic of his feelings of alienation, rejection and captivity: "Allora è meglio che ShadeSky mi viene a pigliare e mi porta con lui, perché io è da là che sono venuto. Mi ricordo che ero prigioniero".

La Guerra di Mario received positive critical reviews, was presented at various international film festivals and in 2006 received the *Premio David di Donatello* for best actress for Valeria Golino, yet it did not make it to the big audiences.⁹ It is among the films of quality that did not have much success at the box office or in terms of circulation in the movie-theatres or abroad. Jay Weissberg (*Variety* 2005) defines it "a story of class conflict writ on the micro level" an 'intimate take on the family, with the small 'f'." Paolo Mereghetti in *Corriere della sera* (March 6, 2006) talks about a private story that opens up to a social dimension to become "ritratto di una classe sociale

⁹ Alain Bichon attributes the disastrous reception of the film at the box office to lack of distribution (40). The film received the Premio Ciak d'oro 2006 for the so called "Belli e invisibili" "film che avrebbero meritato miglior fortuna, che i critici hanno amato, ma che non hanno superato la prova del botteghino" as Piera De Tassis director of *Ciak* states in the leaflet accompanying the DVD of *La guerra di Mario*.

come la borghesia napoletana, chiusa negli egoismi di un benessere che non vuole dividere con altri ...” The film shows a clash between social classes, which leads to the inevitable conclusion: the impossibility for a middle class, educated woman to adopt a child from Ponticelli.

In the film the conventional family is absent, while adults defy the traditional pattern. Typical in this respect are Mario’s biological mother Nunzia—who gives birth to children only to then give them up for adoption—and Sandro, who lives at Giulia’s and occasionally goes back to his parents’ house. He struggles with the concept of the traditional family, with his coming of age and with the difficulty of accepting a child like Mario. Sandro admits feeling awkward with Mario and would prefer traditional methods of child raising and discipline over Giulia’s permissive parenting approach, domesticating him rather than welcoming him. Sandro in fact is jealous of all the attention that Giulia devotes to Mario, a child whom she claims “mi ha rapito il cuore”.¹⁰ Sandro seems to be affected by the Peter Pan syndrome, the condition of an adult who refuses to grow up, and therefore cannot make space for a child in his relationship with Giulia, especially if this is an adoptive child from Ponticelli.

Giulia, an independent professional in her forties in a common law relationship, is always shown alone as the person solely responsible for Mario’s adoption; when questioned by the psychologist about Sandro (the prospective father figure) Mario says: “a casa mia non comanda Sandro.” At the end of the movie the ‘giudice minorile’ decides to assign Mario to a real family with other children and a traditional father-mother nucleus.¹¹ Unfortunately this happens when Mario has firmly accepted Giulia as his mother and has begun to consider theirs a normal family. “Mamma, ma noi non siamo una famiglia?” Mario asks Giulia when hearing about the judge’s decision of assigning Mario to a ‘real family.’

In the film the child embodies the otherness of that segment of the society who inhabits the margins and is avoided, ignored and feared by the middle class. Mario is attracted to various marginal figures: the stray dog

¹⁰ Throughout the film there is an Oedipal pattern of attraction developing between Mario and Giulia. Mario in fact is sensitive to Giulia’s beauty and invites her to enhance her appearance by wearing lipstick. He also tells his friend Luciano that he saw Giulia taking a shower and he finds her very attractive.

¹¹ The only vague glimpse at the traditional family is at the end of the film when, outside the office of the ‘giudice minorile’ where Giulia is forced to go by police court order to relinquish custody of Mario, we see the couple who will adopt Mario. According to the judge this traditional family with other children will better help Mario’s integration.

Mimmo, the gypsy girl Astra (her name clearly evocative of the astral universe of Mario's favourite videogame hero ShadeSky), both of whom he meets on the street, the school mate Luciano, also from a difficult family and displaced from his neighbourhood. Mario identifies with Shad-Sky, an alien from a video game he plays on his cell phone. The name Mario for the boy protagonist of course reminds us of Super Mario, the most famous video game hero, not a child himself but a character who, like Mario in the film, is constantly running an obstacle course and on the verge of being eliminated from the game. When he's at school Mario tells his teacher that he's an alien from another planet, who does not know how to read or write because he's only five years old. Both Astra and Mimmo share with Mario the same condition of marginality, and otherness but they also reflect a need for freedom and independence from the rules of society.

Otherness though, leads to the impossibility of acceptance both from a class and cultural point of view. The failed adoption of a child from the degraded Neapolitan neighbourhood of Ponticelli, marks the failure of the educated, successful middle class, and of the institutions (official pedagogical models of child-raising) to come to terms with the emarginated segment of society and with the problems of Naples' low classes. Giulia's sensitiveness and caring love, her effort to welcome Mario for who he is, are not sufficient, since the social system around her does not support her positions. Giulia's approach differs from the process of domestication or worse captivity that is evoked by animals shown in the film. The dog Mimmo, the goldfinch encaged in Luciano's grandfather's balcony and the snake chosen by Mario as a pet in the last part of the film, remind us of various models of domestication and captivity.

For the first part of the film, Mario's life is marked by the presence of the dog Mimmo and his attempt at domestication. Mimmo is a key figure in the film. He functions as a double of Mario himself, as the two like-sounding names suggest. Mario meets Mimmo in Ponticelli one day when Giulia is late in picking him up after-school and he makes his way back to Ponticelli. Mario, clearly lost and alone, finds a stray dog on the street, and immediately adopts him and begins calling him Mimmo. Among the kids of Ponticelli however the stray dog is called by a different name: "Virus." This nickname, clearly symbolic of some unwelcome, contagious disease, brought by an outsider roaming around their degraded quarters, is equally suitable to Mario himself. In the Posillipo school, in Giulia's mother's garden, as well as at Giulia's dinner table, Mimmo/Mario is not welcome, despite Mario's wish to have the dog with him in all these places.¹²

¹² It is not actually Giulia who refuses the dog at the dinner table but her partner

Mario's adoption of the stray dog parallels Giulia's attempt to adopt Mario by bringing him into her social milieu and in the world ruled by discipline. The process of adoption and domestication at play between Mario and Mimmo mirrors the one between Giulia and Mario. Mario though, does not intend to impose his power over the dog as he states "stai pensando che io vorrei essere il tuo padrone, invece non è così."

Mario's form of domestication is not based on obeying the orders of social conventions: Mario wants Mimmo to follow his transgressive behaviour; but this leads to Mimmo's death. Mario calls Mimmo to join him on the other side of the streets by stepping into chaotic traffic, deliberately when the pedestrian signal light is red. The dog hesitates, looking back at another dog resembling him, obediently staying beside his owner. Eventually Mimmo obeys his young friend's orders and is killed by a car. Mimmo's death is a warning that not complying with the conventions may be a gesture of defiance and self-assertion but it is also very dangerous. In fact such act brings Mario very close to death as well, in his desperate, suicidal move into chaotic traffic.¹³ Once killed by a car Mimmo is a dead body that, like waste, is disposed of in a garbage dumpster by the driver of the car who hit the dog.¹⁴ Crossing the streets full of loud traffic without following the rules prescribed by the red light, is a metaphor for the precarious situation of the child. "Mimmo era un cane o un bambino?" Mario asks Giulia shortly after the dog's death. Mimmo's tragic end is a premonition of the possible outcome for Mario himself and foreshadows the dangers hiding behind the process of adoption and integration/domestication. By adopting Mimmo, Mario was trying to teach his dog his unconventional rules of life, but this sort of 'reverse domestication' failed, just like Giulia's adoption is destined to fail. Giulia explains to the psychologist her

Sandro, who finds the idea of having the dog at the table unacceptable. At which point Mario decides to go and eat with Mimmo on the floor.

¹³ The relation between the boy and his stray dog evokes the one of Umberto and his dog in De Sica's *Umberto D*, where a striking resemblance between the two black-spotted white dogs can not be coincidental for a director like Capuano. Unlike Umberto's suicide attempt, where the dog practically prevents the desperate man from jumping in front of the coming train, thereby saving both their lives, Mario's lack of any survival instinct is not effectively counteracted by Mimmo, whose obedience to Mario's call to join him on the other side of the congested Neapolitan street, causes the dog's death

¹⁴ Although this film was made before the big garbage crisis and scandal in Naples, that made the headlines around the world, the dead dog as garbage material, is certainly a powerful metaphor for some Naples' social problems.

parenting approach: in her view Mario needs to be welcomed rather than educated, accepted with his unruliness and naiveté, rather than disciplined. Capuano seems to suggest that adoption, just like domestication or integration, is a very difficult and dangerous process.

As in Neorealist cinema the child is presented as a witness of and even a participant in war, be that the urban war of the *camorristi* or any other war in developing nations, where childhood is sacrificed to violence. War scenes, however, are not openly shown on the screen but only narrated by Mario.¹⁵ In order to highlight the war moments Capuano adopts an interesting technique throughout the film: Mario's voiceover recounts stories of atrocity and violence, while the image turns black and white and freezes on his face; this is "La storia di Mario." A memorial of war emerges: we hear Mario's voice describing the horror lived by boy warriors forced into committing violence, as a sort of initiation ritual of organized crime. Capuano hints at the children of Neapolitan dangerous neighbourhoods like Ponticelli, where the daily war of the *camorra* puts young boys in the front line and co-opts them to violence, but also at some non-descript war-torn area of the world, perhaps in Africa, as the music background and the tribal-type rituals seem to suggest. The experience of the children of Ponticelli is miles away from the safe and comfortable life of those who attend the school in Posillipo. In the war memorial the role of the teacher, of books and education are violated and desecrated. Mario's voice describes how children warriors are put in the front line and trained to face violence without fear; when a teacher warns them that "la guerra non è un gioco da ragazzi" the reply is violent: "lo [the teacher] buttammo a terra e lo sparammo nelle spalle" and defiant: "le pagine dei libri le abbiamo usate come la carta igienica." It's not coincidental that in one scene at the Posillipo school we see Mario's teacher in class write on the blackboard about "guerra civile." What the Posillipo school teacher and textbooks talk about is history, not the story of the daily war that happens in the Neapolitan suburbs, where children become acquainted with violence and crime. Furthermore these words written on the blackboard by the teacher function as the title for another war: the scuffle that erupts in the classroom between Mario and Pierluigi, a classmate who accuses Mario of using a stolen cellular phone to take pictures in the classroom.

¹⁵ In this film Capuano makes a very sensitive choice in avoiding to show children at war or committing violent crime, but rather introducing the audience to the problem through the technique of freezing the image in black and white on Mario, accompanied by the oral memorial of violent acts. This film is very different from the docudrama style of Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra*.

While Neorealist cinema presents the child as innocent witness/victim of violence, Capuano presents here the child as more than witness, as participant as well as victim. Such role of the child is the legacy of an artistic past that goes further back than cinematic tradition. Capuano takes pains to show such tradition when, at one point in the film, the viewer is introduced to the art of Caravaggio, a painter very sensitive to the representation of dramatic violence. When events in Mario's life take a negative turn, Mario has not come home after school, Giulia begins to sense the failure of her adoption attempt. She senses a tragic end for Mario. At this point she is shown watching saved images of an old painting on her laptop: Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, (1600) dramatizes her emotional state well. The theme of the canvas is evocative in many ways. The dark setting and the point of bright light illuminates the scene of violence in the foreground. What interests Giulia though, is not Matthew, the martyr enlightened by redemption, rather the face of the boy beside the body of the dead saint, since she zooms in on this detail: it is here that Giulia and the spectator see despair in the face and the open mouth of the boy witness of violence, a clear analogy with Mario's situation. From Baroque art to everyday life the child continues to be a witness of violence; but Mario is more than just a spectator, from the memorials of "Mario's Story" we know that the child has experienced violence first hand.

Giulia is so absorbed in her task of welcoming the new child that she jeopardizes her relationship with Sandro, who also disapproves of her permissive approach to parenthood. Furthermore the gap between Mario's social background of violence, neglect, and Giulia's willingness to indulge all of Mario's whims, results in rejection on the part of the child for part of the film.

Living with Giulia and Sandro Mario is displaced and plunged into a comfortable and safe place, but this is a world to which he does not belong, as he often says: the wealthy environment of Giulia's house, with beautiful views of Naples, is foreign to him, it is comparable to a golden cage, which limits his natural instincts. The caged bird functions as another metaphor for Mario's condition. Only with Luciano Mario seems to feel at ease. When the two boys are together they speak the same language, and understand each other very well. It is at Mario's grandfather's apartment that Mario comes in contact with caged birds. The grandfather's allusive words hint at his affiliation with the camorra family. As the man explains, the *cardillo* (goldfinch), encaged among many other birds he keeps on the balcony, was not born blind but deliberately blinded in order to make it sing better, because it is only when the goldfinch sings that the sun shines.¹⁶ The *cardil-*

¹⁶ Here of course the words are highly allusive to the language of the *camorra*,

lo possibly symbolic of Luciano, a child who is forced into another type of domestication and subjugated to the power of his criminal family. Luciano will soon return to his father and stop attending school. When Luciano leaves the Posillipo school Giulia and Mario drive around Naples to find him. Luciano and his friends are playing soccer on the street; children like Luciano are school drop-outs who place no value in going to school: “la scuola è nu’ brutto carcere e o carcere è na bella scuola” Luciano tells Mario while playing soccer. This view is shared also by Luciano’s grandfather who states: “La scuola non ti dà da campare; ti mette in fila e ti comanda; e quando sei grande è passata già tutta la meglio parte della tua vita.”¹⁷

People representing institutions (teacher, principle, psychologist, judge) and power (the *camorrista* family) want to place children in a cage, Mario’s golden cage or Luciano’s grandfather’s cage. While they appear to provide protection and guidance they are rigid, inflexible.

The gap between Mario and Giulia appears insurmountable, just like the one between Mario and Nunzia, his biological mother; as well as the rift between Giulia and her mother. Giulia’s mother who lives alone in her elegant house is so entrenched in her rigid rules that she refuses to welcome Mario’s dog in her back yard, one thing that embarrasses Giulia. Giulia resents the fact that her mother is too cold and detached to teach her the secrets of motherhood.

While Giulia is caring and permissive,¹⁸ as she perseveres in her attempt to welcome, rather than discipline and educate Mario in traditional fashion, Sandro is so far from fatherhood that he cannot even call Mario by his first name, and simply refers to him as “quel bambino.” A child like Mario destabilizes Sandro, a man whom Mario can not accept as father and accuses of speaking like they speak on TV; here Capuano takes a hit at the Italian television system, which is held responsible for the infantilization of men like Sandro and of Italian society in general.

where singing (*cantare*) also refers to the leaking of information that helps protect the gangs of organized crime.

¹⁷ When Neapolitan dialect is used Capuano adds subtitles in Italian. Capuano explains the rationale behind this choice: “La scelta di sottotitolare in italiano qualche passaggio in dialetto anche per non far perdere delle frasi che reputo molto belle come quella pronunciata da uno dei bambini del film: ‘la scuola è nu’ brutto carcere e o carcere è na bella scuola’...” Intervista ad Antonio Capuano in *Voce della Campania* Aprile 2006 quoted in http://cinemaepsicoanalisi.com/antonio_capuano_la_guerra_di_mar.htm

¹⁸ Partly reminiscent of the overindulging parents in the third episode of Nanni Moretti’s *Caro diario*.

The moment of true acceptance of Giulia as his real mother happens when Mario composes a poem praising Giulia as a mother. This hymn to motherhood, which marks a partial success of Giulia in her role as adoptive mother is soon obfuscated by the death of Mimmo and by the final decision of the judge to stop the adoption.

When the judge rules against adoption, claiming that Mario will better fit in a 'normal' family with mother, father and other siblings, Mario considers Giulia his mother and does not want to let her go. Thanks to Mario Giulia has discovered the joy of motherhood and responsibility, her femininity and her beauty. The adoptive son, difficult and 'other' is preferred by Giulia over her own child, in fact when she finds out that she is pregnant she reacts with anxiety and uneasiness. As adoptive mother she is responsible not just for raising a child but for welcoming and accepting, rather than imposing on him a rigid education or domestication. She needs to prepare Mario for a reality full of danger, that can easily overwhelm and destroy him, just like happened to his dog Mimmo.

Giulia as an adoptive mother functions as a mediator, someone who can understand what children like Mario are facing daily, and have suffered in abusive and degraded families and neighbourhoods. Although Giulia is unwilling to use conventional methods for disciplining Mario, she is the only one who, with time and patience, can establish a sincere relationship with the child, a communication based neither on violence nor on coercion or paternalism.

The last animal to appear in the film is the snake that Mario wants from the pet store, despite Giulia's perplexity. This is an unusual choice for a pet, since the animal instinctively stirs in Giulia negative feelings that border on abhorrence, when the store owner explains to her that the snake prefers to eat live hamsters. The large constrictor snake, that is placed in a glass case in Giulia's living room, also evokes Mario's Oedipal phase of sexual attraction towards Giulia. This other form of adoption in fact is the worst form of captivity; given the wildness of the reptile keeping one in an apartment seems quite unnatural. The snake in Giulia's apartment though, also hints at a particular phase in the journey towards Mario's failed domestication. This phase culminates with Mario's fake attempt to strangle Giulia with a telephone cord, and is eventually overcome when Mario states that he does not want to keep the snake as a pet anymore. A fight between Mario and Giulia ends with the breaking of a glass vase. The glass vase broken by Mario, symbolically evokes the desire of the captive snake to break free from the glass case. Captivity equals imprisonment and domination, a condition that Mario rejects.

In *La Guerra di Mario* the child embodies the young boy from the emarginated low classes and degraded neighbourhoods of Naples, that the Neapolitan middle class cannot come to terms with. The child from the underprivileged classes is not only a witness but also a participant in the acts of violence that still involve children in many neighbourhoods of Naples, like in other poor war-torn parts of the world. The child in this film carries the message of the difficulty of society, i.e. the middle class – represented by people like Sandro, Giulia’s mother—and institutions—like school and the judicial system, in understanding and accepting the underprivileged classes, the other. As the school principle states when Luciano and other street urchins appear outside the Posillipo school and steal Mario’s classmate’s cell phone: “La delinquenza delle periferie è venuta fin qui da noi, noi ci dobbiamo difendere da questi piccoli farabutti, devono restare lontani dalle nostre case, dai nostri figli”. To which Giulia answers: “Questi piccoli farabutti sono i nostri figli”. The principle does not share this view and rebuts “Quelli saranno i suoi figli”, thereby showing that she refuses to consider those children and their problems as part of the same social context, and rather prefers to maintain a barrier that separates the middle class from the underprivileged classes.

Capuano casts the child in the role of the alien of Neapolitan society, where the adoptive mother Giulia is depicted as the possible mediator, not as a domesticator. She can overcome the clash between the two worlds, the one of broken families, organized crime, children warriors of the urban battles, and the one of wealthy middle class and official institutions, entrenched in their privileged positions and incapable of accepting the world that Mario represents. Capuano is particularly critical of the middle class adult male, embodied in Giulia’s partner Sandro, who is incapable of accepting Mario as his son, because he is too preoccupied with his own coming of age, an adult suffering from the Peter Pan syndrome, and representing the obtuseness of Italian television. Giulia’s failed adoption of Mario serves as a commentary on the plights of Naples, a city that embodies the problems of all the Italian South, on the close-mindedness of the middle class, that refuses to get involved in the reality of the lower classes. The formula of integration as domestication is destined for failure, as is in the case of Mario’s failure to domesticate Mimmo and Giulia’s impossible adoption of Mario. Perhaps the most fitting description of this film is in Brunetta’s words: “storia del fallimento dell’integrazione fra due mondi.”(640)

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